

BHĀGAVATA MELA

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Background

Before discussing the Bhāgavata Mela itself, it would be of interest to relate some of the background concerning the district of Tanjore in Madras State where the dance drama was born and thrived. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Tanjore became the centre of South Indian arts, especially of music, largely due to royal patronage. It was in this district that the three famous composers of Carnatic music were born—Śyama Śāstri, Tyāgarāja and Dikṣitar.¹ The kings themselves were composers and also wrote opera and dance drama compositions—the better known being Raghunatha Nāyak, Tulaja and Shāhaji. To escape the Muslim invaders from the north, many musicians and artists migrated from Andhra Pradesh, the neighbouring state, and flocked to the court of Tanjore where they were well received. Thus many of the musical compositions even today are sung in Telugu, the language of Andhra and not Tamil the language of Madras State.

Towards the end of the 16th century Nārāyana Tīritha, a Telugu saint/composer, moved from Andhra Pradesh to the village of Varahūr in Tanjore district. He believed that perfect devotion to god could only be reached through the medium of dance drama. This saint was an adherent of bhakti belief, a more emotional form of devotion. He composed the *Kṛṣṇalīlātaraṅgiṇī*² concerning episodes from the life of Kṛṣṇa, the God. Nārāyana Tīritha also composed two dance drama with themes from the purāṇas*, Pārijātāpaharanam and Rūkmangada. The kind of troupe who enacted these religious dance dramas were known as Bhāgavata Melas.³ A Bhāgavatar is one who extols god through the medium of bhakti worship; mela means troupe or assembly, and nāṭakam dance drama. Therefore this dramatic form was known as Bhāgavata Mela Natakam. The exact date when this name was applied to these troupes, however, is not known.

*Puranas — Hindu ancient historical legends. Ref: *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*: ed. by Sir Monier Williams M.A., K.C.I.E.; Oxford, 1960.

Dance dramas were popular, and following in Nārāyaṇa's footsteps came one of his followers, Gopala Krishna Sastri, who composed *Dhruva*, *Sītā Kalyāṇam* and *Rukmīṇī Kalyāṇam*.² His son, Venkatarama Śāstri, who lived at Melattur, the village where *Bhāgavata Mela* is now performed, composed many dance dramas of great brilliance; it is to him that the present form of *Bhagavata Mela* dance dramas is attributed. He was a senior contemporary of the composer/saint Tyāgārāja (1759-1847 A.D.)³ Earlier forms however are thought to have been practiced at Melattur, for one of the Tanjore rulers, Achutappa Nāyak (1557-1614 A.D.) is said to have donated a village to some Brahmin families to keep up the tradition; this village was once known as Achyuthapuram, and after Unnathapuram, finally changing its name to Melattur.² The dance drama of Andhra Pradesh, Kuchipudi, is related to the *Bhāgavata Mela*, although the authors and compositions are distinct from each other.³

Melattur is ten miles outside the main town of Tanjore. Some of the villages in the surrounding districts were also famed for their dance dramas; these are Uttukaḍu, Śūlamangalam, Nallūr, Sāliyamangalam and Tepparumanallur. The tradition in these villages has died out, however, and indeed Melattur only gives an annual performance of *Bhāgavata Mela*. Every year during the Narasimha Jayanti Festival (at the end of May or early June) these villages would vie with each other for the best performance, which took place in front of the temples in the village streets. The temple at Melattur is called Varadarāja Perumāl.

Melattur's renown is due to the great composer mentioned above, Venkatarama Śāstri. His compositions are remarkable both for their lyrics and music, they are: *Prahlāda Caritam*, *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Hariścandra*, *Uṣā Parīṇayam*, *Rūkmāṅgada Caritam*, *Gollabhāma*, *Sītā Kalyāṇam*, *Rukmīṇī Kalyāṇam*, *Dhruva Caritam*, *Bhāmā Vijayam*, *Kaṁsa Vadha*, *Śivarātri Vaibhavam*, *Bhāmāsura Vadham*, and *Vasanta Kelikā*. The site where the composer lived can still be seen in East Street, Melattur. The *Bhāgavata Mela* took root in this village because of the popularity of Venkatarama Sastri's compositions and spread to the surrounding villages, but it is only in Melattur that a steadier tradition has been maintained, the other village performances having a somewhat erratic history.⁴

Nallūr and Saliyamangalam struggled on for a number of years keeping up scattered performances for odd religious celebrations. Śūlamangalam maintained its tradition until as recently as 1943, largely because of the musician/composer Śūlamangalam Vaidhyanatha Bhāgavata, who inspired leadership and enthusiasm to the village. After his death, however, there was no incentive to carry on. Uttukaḍu kept up their annual performance until 1940 under the inspiration of their veteran actor and leader, P.R. Krishnamoorthy, but there were no more funds to support the performances. In Tepparumanallūr it was reported that a performance of *Prahlāda Caritam*

was recently given but was discontinued the following year, and it was an isolated event after a lapse of many years.^{5b} The younger generations in these villages sought their livelihood in the towns leaving their homes to the old people.³

Melattur did not survive with a completely unbroken tradition, although it had the stimulus of such great masters as Natesa Iyer and Balu Bhagavatar to keep up the art. Natesa Iyer died in Madras in 1931, unable for financial reasons to continue living in the village. From 1932-1933 Kinjin Kothandrama Iyer tried to keep the Bhāgavata Mela alive, but a few years later it lapsed completely. In 1936 Balu Bhagavatar formed a troupe with V. Ganesa Iyer's family. This was a village family proud and faithful to its traditions. Despite the fact that many of the younger members had left the village to earn their living, they felt inspired to return every year and perform. Their influence spread to the other villagers who likewise returned to participate in Bhāgavata Mela performances. But although famous locally, the troupes did not receive much patronisation or financial aid from outside. It was in the fifties that Mr. E. Krishna Iyer revived interest in the art. He was Secretary of the Madras Sangita Nataka Sangam, a Government cultural organisation, and raised funds to support the villagers' interest in their traditional art.² It is well known that V. Ganesa Iyer sold some of his land to put money into the revival movement to get the troupes on its feet again. In 1968 Mr. V.D. Swami sponsored another troupe which performs in Melattur. He also gives financial aid to V. Ganesa Iyer's troupe.

Presentation

Prahlāda Caritam, the story of how the lion incarnation of Viṣṇu (Narasimha) appeared to redeem mankind from cruelty, is reputed to be the finest of Venkataramā Śāstri's compositions. It is traditionally enacted on the first night of the Narasimha Jayanti Festival, opposite the temple diety of Narasimha. The mask of this diety is treated with great religious awe and respect. The village devotees keep the mask in the temple throughout the year, and it is only brought out at the time of the performance. On this first night of the festival, the actors fast for they believe that the spirit of the God will indeed come into their midst.

The preliminaries (pūrvaraṅgas) of a Bhāgavata Mela performance adhere to the structure found in the older Sanskrit plays.³ The dance drama commences at about 10 p.m. and continues until 2 or 3 a.m. the next morning. Previously there was no raised stage, but now the stage is set above the level of the audience with modern trappings such as footlights, microphones, coloured spot lights and a painted canvas curtain. The stage used to measure 15' X 15' but now it is considerably larger, measuring probably about 20' X 20'.² Stage properties are few, consisting of a throne with a decorated piece behind it. The back curtain is plain blue. The more colourful, modern

innovations may be deplored by the scholar, but the family seeks to popularise the art to the surrounding village people whose taste is not sophisticated, and who favour the rather gaudy presentation of the Tamil cinema. The auditorium retains its original setting of the village street with a pandal or thatched roof supported by wooden poles to protect the spectators. The stage is set at the end of the street directly opposite the temple so that the players can always see the diety, Narasimha, decorated with fresh flowers at the open temple door presiding over the whole scene.

After the curtain is raised the invocatory songs begin. With the Bhāgavatar leading, the vocalists join in the Tōḍayamaṅgaḷam. They then sing a special item called Prahlāda Paṭṭabhiṣeka Śābdam. It is a lively piece interspersed with many solkaṭṭus (spoken rhythmic syllables). When it is finished the Bhāgavatar is presented with sandal paste and flowers by an elderly citizen of the village. Then a purely traditional figure, the Konnangi, appears dressed in pink robes with a gold, conical hat. He dances with a rope in his hands while the vocalists sing his entry song, or daru in Kāmbhoji rāga; the song relates his personality with many amusing twists to the lyric. (This is not the same clown that appears later throughout the drama as a separate role). The villagers told me of a legend connected with the Konnangi; the Lord Viṣṇu's weapon, the Chakra, was swallowed by Vighneśvara, Viṣṇu thereupon assumed the form of a clown or Konnangi, and performed such an amusing dance that Vighneśvara had to laugh, and as he did so the Chakra came out of his mouth. Indeed the purpose of the Konnangi's dance is to make the audience laugh and relax before the more serious theme of the drama is introduced. A distinctive characteristic of the Bhāgavata Mela performance is the lively entry songs interspersed with rhythmic passages such as jatis and solkaṭṭus, to which the characters dance and interpret according to their personality. They also have a traditional exit song.

Next to enter after the Konnangi, is the elephant-headed God, Gaṇapati; he is represented by a small boy wearing a gold elephant mask. There is a preliminary song of praise of this god who will, if pleased, remove all obstacles which might prevent a successful performance. He wriggles his fat belly in a comic dance moving his feet in time to the music. The song that accompanies him is Gaṇapati Vandanam or prayer to Gaṇapati.

Then comes the herald of Kaṭṭiyakāran, who has tremendous stage presence. He orders the audience to keep silence, shouting, "Saddu! Saddu!" for the noble actors who are about to appear. He struts about the stage with a haughty frown on his face. This is all taken in good part by the audience who are highly amused, especially when he turns round to the musicians ordering them to stop their noise! At the same time he commands respect and has an air of authority.

Some of these preliminary items such as the Konnangi, are only observed for the performance of Prahāda. Now it is time for the main artists to appear. First comes the hero, as the vocalists sing of his background. Hiranya Kaśipu is the proud and ruthless king, the father of Prahāda he dances and interprets the narration of the song which quickly establishes his personality. He pulls himself up to his full height, clenches his fists and is every inch a proud and arrogant king as he moves towards the audience in time with the rhythm of the music. He backs away with swaggering strides and stamps his foot hard on the ground to emphasize his magnificence, glaring defiantly on all sides.^{5a}

Next comes the gentle and good-natured queen. The heroine is introduced in a special manner as a small curtain is held up in front of her by two stage hands while the musicians sing her entry song (*daru*). Her feet are visible and begin to move in time to the rhythm as the curtain is lowered slightly showing her head and shoulders, while she moves her eyes and neck showing her beauty. Then she lifts the curtain from underneath and peeps at the audience, smiling daintily as she steps back and the curtain falls into place. Her innocence and virtuous nature provide a strong contrast to that of her husband.^{5a} It is a remarkable feature of the Bhagavata Mela how quickly the actors are able to leave such a strong impression on the audience of the personality of their role. (It should be mentioned that all the actors are men, no women participate in the performance).

Other characters are introduced in a similar manner. Besides the singing there are prose dialogues between the actors, and some of the principal roles have monologues. Sometimes connecting passages or *sandhivacanas* and couplets *dvipādas* are recited by a man off-stage known as the *grānthika*.²

Prahāda's strong religious and moral theme is built up as emotions intensify—the cruel acts of Hiranya Kāśipu against his son, Prahāda, are counterbalanced by the remorse and deep grief of the helpless queen as she appeals to the audience for sympathy. The patches of comedy provide a welcome relief, such as the famous school scene where the teacher, appointed by Hiranya Kaśipu tries to make Prahāda acknowledge that his father is God and not Viṣṇu. Prahāda refuses, always uttering the famous phrase 'Om Namo Nārāyanaya!' The school master tries to beat or cajole him into the worship of his father while the other members of the class point their fingers and laugh at Prahāda. The comedian dressed as a woman with a babe-in-arms comes in, picking a quarrel with the schoolmaster and contorting 'her' face, screaming at him in a high voice. This brings roars of laughter from the local audience who wait for this scene with affection, delighted to see their talented village family on the stage.^{5a}

Hiranya Kaśipu's cruelty seems to know no limits as he and his two henchmen (masked figures) try to torture Prahāda throwing him to an

angry lion, and tossing him over a steep cliff. The queen remonstrates with her husband and her distress is portrayed by some extremely moving solo dance items as she falls on her knees weeping in anguish and crying out to the Gods to have mercy on her and save her son.

The climax to all this comes as the small son stands gazing in innocent authority at his father who points to various objects round them asking if Prahlaḍa's god is in the chair, in the ceiling etc. The boy replies that Hari or Viṣṇu is everywhere. There is a rustle of excitement among the audience, as between flaming torches, the mask of Narasimha is borne through the audience onto the stage. Hiraṇya Kaśipu strikes a pillar "is your God here?" he demands, whereupon the pillar splits in two, and the figure of Narasimha with man's body and lion's head appears roaring and shaking with rage seeking vengeance against the proud and selfish king. The height of 'bhakti' or religious devotion is reached, as the actor taking the part of Narasimha becomes possessed with the spirit of the God and is seized with uncontrollable shaking fits as the other actors try to hold him down, binding him with ropes. I have seen the heroine similarly affected and other actors suddenly become stiff and faint. Many people go up and make obeisance to the "God" kissing his feet. The first time I witnessed this performance, the audience were cautioned not to stampede, and the final scene where the man-lion kills Hiraṇya Kaśipu was omitted altogether, for in the past I believe one actor had been severely injured.

The play ends as the actors, supporting 'Narasimha' go in procession down the street between the audience towards the temple. Still possessed, the actor prances round the idol of Narasimha, roaring and throwing himself around. Finally, as he becomes calmer the procession moves through the village streets back to Ganesa Iyer's house. They stand for a moment in prayer before entering and taking off their costumes where the spirit which has possessed the actors leaves, and an air of tranquility is restored to the quiet, night air.^{5a} Another eye-witness account of the ending was given from a performance some years ago: "The actor playing the role of Hiraṇya hurled invectives at him [Narasimha], his voice reaching a nervous mounting intensity as he slowly backed up the length of the pandal toward the temple steps... At the temple steps the actor playing the Avatara Narasimha finally collapsed in a state of trance, signalling the culmination of the drama."³

Apparently there are certain gods which are usually associated with imparting their spirits to human mediums, besides Narasimha, there is Hanuman, the monkey god and Śakti, the female goddess in her more terrifying aspect of Kālī.

As well as Prahlaḍa, the Bhāgavata Mela troupe still performs Rukmāṅgada, Hariścandra, Uṣāparinaym, Mārkaṇḍeya, Rukmiṇī

Kalyāṇam, Vasanta Kelikā and Dhruva. Although Prahlāda is always included, usually only three other dance dramas will be performed at one festival. Hariścandra is another favourite. Again there is a moral theme as one overwhelming event upon the other piles up against the unfortunate Hariścandra and his wife. At first a prince, he is finally degraded to the occupation of a grave-digger's assistant, for he adheres to the truth whatever the circumstances, and will not swerve from the path of Dharma. In spite of becoming separated from his wife and son, he refuses to compromise his principles for the sake of an untruth. The comedian makes an amusing grave-digger as he kicks Hariścandra around. He also plays the part of the tiresome companion earlier in the story, who accompanies Hariścandra and his wife when they are travelling through the forest after being banished from the court. This companion is sent to collect money from Hariścandra and although willing to help them at the beginning, soon proves a burden as he insists on gobbling all their food; at one stage Hariścandra has to carry him on his back when he complains of aching feet. He mocks and pesters the unfortunate couple and his cruelty is revealed when he handcuffs Lokidāsa, their son.

These tests of Hariścandra's character are all sent by the sage Vivamitra, and his spokesmen who can be recognised throughout the drama as they have black hair like their master. The climax of the drama is reached when Hariścandra is about to kill his wife for the sake of truth, his son having already died of a snake bite. Viśvamisra and other gods, Śiva, Parvati etc. intervene and restore Hariścandra to his rightful position as prince, bringing the son back to life. Here again there was evidence of bhakti, for the actor playing the part of Viśvamisra became stiff and fainted at the end of the performance.

Actors and Dance

Since Bhāgavata Mela literally means the troupe of the Bhāgavata it is he who controls and guides the proceedings. He is also largely responsible for training the troupe and recites the dance steps as well as leading the vocalists, who augment his singing. Balu Bhagavata is the present living master, but has recently broken away from V. Ganesa Iyer's family as a result of a dispute. Sri G. Krishnamoorthy is the present Bhagavata with the veteran dance-master or naṭṭuvanār Ramani Iyer to assist him. Some of the names of the actors are given below: Sri G. Krishnamoorthy is accompanied by vocalists P.K. Subbu Iyer and K. Subramaniam. V. Ganesa Iyer's son, G. Swaminathan, takes the part of the hero, whilst his grandson, S. Natarajan, is the heroine. Sundaram takes the role of the versatile and quick-witted Viḍūṣaka or comedian. Ganesan is the second female lead, and others in the cast are Kodavasa Natarajan, A.N. Subramaniam, and the composer's namesake, Venkatarāma Śāstri. Most of the actors are descended from the original Bhāgavata Mela families of the village.^{6b}

Dance technique is based on the old Sadir Natya, the predecessor of Bharata Nāṭyam, the present-day classical dance of South India. Through lack of practice, however, the dancing has become little more than moving the feet in time to the rhythm, with a few basic dance steps thrown in. Abhinaya, interpretation through hand gestures and facial expression, is also limited. Most of the gestures are natural, and only a few stylised mudrās (hand gestures) are used. This is also partly due to the fact that Balu Bhāgavatar no longer teaches the troupe. In fact he has started his own troupe in an open-air auditorium sponsored by some wealthy businessmen and has trained actors from the town of Tanjore. For the same reason the standard of singing is not what it might be.⁵

Costume and Make-up

Costumes are hired from Tanjore as also the jewelry, though some items of the latter come from Bombay. The apparel resembles that of many other traditional Tamil dramas. The hero's costume consists of silk dhotis of rich and bright colours which blend with his jacket. The jacket is loose but has fitted shoulders and long sleeves with gold braid decorations on the wrists and upper arms. Over this he wears another short red jacket with cap sleeves, heavily embroidered. Round the jacket a gold belt is worn. The hero also wears numerous necklaces and earrings, and always appears with a garland of flowers round his neck. He has Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava marks on his forehead depending on the character he is playing. He wears an impressive, black moustache and his eyebrows are touched up with black collyrium; the lips are outlined in red.

The heroine (played by a man) wears many jewels similar to those worn by the Bharata Nāṭyam dancers. She has a false braid of fresh flowers, mostly jasmine. The most spectacular part of this costume is the rich, temple sari heavily interwoven with delicate patterns in gold; it lends dignity and a sense of wealth to the heroine. Of course, the costume will vary, and if removed to poverty, the heroine will wear plain cotton. Her sari is worn after the manner of dancers forming trouser drapes round her legs with a pleated fringe in front which fans out with her movements. The sari border goes across her chest and is secured round the waist with a gold belt. Under this she wears a blouse and false breasts. Both hero and heroine wear loose cotton pyjama trousers and bells round their ankles. Make-up is natural for both parts. The small boy wears a similar version of his father's dress, but his arms are bare.

The two sages white-beard and black-beard, are also dressed much as they are in Tamil dramas. The upper parts of their bodies bear Vaiṣṇava or Śaiva marks in sandal wood paste. Their white dhotis are pleated in orthodox fashion and an upper cloth or aṅgavastram is slung over one shoulder. A distinguishing feature is the small gourd-shaped water pot which

they carry in one hand and the rod or dander in the other. This rod has an arm rest at one end; often they assume a pose with one end of the rod on their body and the other supporting their upper arm. They wear beards round their neck and wrists of brown and gold.^{5a}

The Konnangi wears a traditional dress of vivid pink with a loose shirt over a dhoti. He wears a white beard and moustache with his hair loose, and carries a white rope in his hand. The comic role of Vidūṣaka, appearing throughout the play has no distinctive costume.

All gods wear spectacular costumes. Indra wears a silver crown with a long, white plume and a light blue jacket of satin. He has an orange dhoti and a striking black moustache with Vaiṣṇava marks on his forehead. Śiva has a magnificent robe of tiger skin, a black moustache and, of course, Śaiva ash or vibhūti marks on his forehead and arms. He carries a trident of gold and black stripes and wears heavy gold necklaces and ornaments on his upper arms and wrists. Heavy, scented garlands of flowers hang round his neck, and his hair is drawn up to a high peak and surrounded with a ring of flowers. Śiva always strikes a proud and fiery pose, instilling awe into all who look at him.^{5a}

Other characters wear a variation of those costumes described above or a slightly more elaborate theatrical edition of clothes worn in everyday Indian life. Make-up is of cosmetic creams, but most of them have the red dot of kum-kum powder as worn by most pious Indians on their foreheads.

Music

The right-hand side of the stage is filled with musicians. Besides the Bhāgavatar there are two other main vocalists, a mṛdaṅgam (drum) player, a violinist, flutist and maybe vīṇā or ghaṭam (pot percussion instrument) players. The vocalists provide quite a powerful accompaniment with one taking over from the other or singing together in some of the more lengthy passages. They rap out the rhythm with a small pair of metal cymbals as do the Bhāgavatar and naṭṭuvanār.^{5a}

The music consists of classical forms such as padyas, cūṇikas, darus, jatis, sokattus etc. Jatis and solkattus are tala mnemonics which, interspersed in the serious, emotional music provide a pleasing and balanced contrast.² During a performance the jatis occur at the beginning of a piece to mark the entry of a character—mukha jati, and also when they exit—antya jati. They punctuate various sequences during the dance drama usually to mark the end of one episode and before proceeding to another. Below are some examples of antya jatis. A distinctive characteristic of Bhagavata Mela jatis is that they are sung on one note at a high pitch-top Sa, or in

Western music C major above middle C. This makes them all the more penetrating and exciting.⁷

- (i) Diku Taka Tadinginatom
- (ii) Takajonu Tadinginatom
- (iii) Talangutoka Tokitaku Tadinginatom
- (iv) Dittalangu Takadhimi Tadhiniginatom Ta
- (v) *Chapu tala*: Tajjana taka/janutata/tai:ti/takitatadingina/tom.
- (vi) Dittalangu/tadhimi ta ta/ tai: taka/tadhingina tom/7 & 6

Besides the classical forms of of Bharata Nāṭyam dances, a form of dance called Mei is performed between the entry and exit of each character, and after the praveśika daru or introductory song. The Mei brings the dancer out and sets the right mood, developing emotions and setting the tone of the piece about to be enacted.

It might be of interest to examine one of Venkatarāma Śāstri's compositions from the musical point of view. Uṣāpariṇayam (the marriage of Uṣā) describes the love of Uṣā for Kṛṣṇa's son, Anirudha, whom her father has refused for betrothal to his daughter. The entry song, or praveśika daru, of Uṣā and her maidservant Citralekha, is "Mitruralanidala" sung in Atana ragā, tripura tala. The music is refined and of a highly classical structure. Uṣā expresses her love for Anirudha in the same rāga using a Telugu verse form called Sisapadya; the song is "Pulati Janmambuga". Uṣā goes on to describe a dream she has had about her beloved one in Mohana rāga, addressing her maidservant; this is called "Kandardha Kalakantinamma". Next is an example of a conversational song between Uṣā and Citralekha; this form is Saṁvāda daru. Then Uṣā gives full vent to her feelings and passionate distress at her unfulfilled love in a song called "Elāgu Tāludunamma" sung in Ānandabhairavī rāga, ādi tala. This music is remarkable for its structure and expression. There are different rhythmical passages in this song so that each mood can be enhanced to the full. The descriptive passages, caranas, include more than three or four sections, each of which have different musical melodies to suit the subtle shades of varying emotional feeling. Every stanza is concluded by a return to the pallavi or refrain. The piece illustrates the deep, sensitive expression of the composer as well as his competent grasp of musical forms.⁶

Conclusion

Bhagavata Mela performances appeared to have changed considerably since the time of the revival in Melattur to 1967 when I attended the Festival. Talking to people who came every year, I gathered that the standards of singing and dancing had declined due to changing social circumstances, for many actors were employed outside Melattur and only returned 10 days before the performance to rehearse together. The only qualified teacher was Balu Bhagavata, but the old man had quarrelled with the family who performed, and refused to teach. Thus the tradition mainly survived due to

the determination and leadership of V. Ganesa Iyer, and although the artistic technique suffered a decline, the spirit of devotion was kept sufficiently alive to inspire the actors to return to Melattur every year and perform.

Mr. V.D. Swami, a native of Melattur who had been associated with Bhagavata Mela performances in his youth, was interested in promoting the dance drama outside the village. He felt that the temple street was too confining, and if the performances were held in a more open space, it would enable a larger audience to attend, he felt also that this would be a step towards breaking with the traditional bonds of religion, a step necessary to the survival of Bhagavata Mela.

Accordingly in 1965 a new association was established—Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidhya Sangam—sponsored by Mr. V.D. Swami who formed a troupe with different actors and strived to improve the art and technique of performance besides moving it to a more open place. The actors were taken from the village—at one time the troupes were going to join and perform together, but Sri V. Ganesa Iyer decided that the traditional location should be kept and moved his troupe back. Thus two troupes came into being—Mr. V.D. Swami's Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidhya Sangam performing in the open grounds and Lakshmi Jayanthi Natya Natak Sangam which performs in the street opposite the temple under the guidance of Sri V. Ganesa Iyer.⁹

Although this is regrettable there is a striving towards unity. Mr. Swami is indirectly supporting the other troupe and with the element of competition both troupes are now concentrating on improving standards of performance in dance and music. The Sangeet Natak Akademi also recognises and lends its support so there does not seem to be much doubt that there is a promising future for the dance-drama and it will not die out through lack of support and inspiration.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

1. P. Sambamoorthy. *History of Indian Music*: India Publishing House, 1960: p. 135.
2. E. Krishna Iyer. *Classical Bhagavata Mela Dance Drama*. Bombay "Marg" magazine, Vol. XIX, no. 2 : 1966.
3. Clifford R. Jones. *Bhāgavata Mēla Nāṭakam: a traditional dance-drama form*. The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. XXII, no. 2, 1963.
4. Mohan Khokar. *The Melāttur Bhagavata Mela*. "The Illustrated Weekly of India" Vol. LXXXVIII, 6, 1967, p. 36.
5. (a) Eye-witness account by author.
(b) Verbal information imparted to the author by the Melattur villagers.
6. Miss S. Seetha Ph.D., Lecturer at the University of Madras, Music Department. Information and comments on hearing a tape recording of a live performance of Bhāgavata Mela at the Sangita Nataka Sangam.
7. P. Sambamoorthy. *South Indian Music Book IV*: India Publishing House; 1963: pp. 208-213.
8. Sanskrit transliterations are by Mrs. P. Sarasvati Mohan Ph.D., currently Assistant Professor of Music, Wesleyan University,