

Telugu Drama and Stage

B. KANAKALINGESWARA RAO

Before I venture to make a comprehensive survey of the growth and development of Telugu stage in this paper, I would like to divide my subject under various heads. Incidentally, when I begin to deal with the development of Telugu stage, I cannot afford to neglect to mention something about Telugu drama, as drama and stage go hand in hand often. In the first few pages of this paper, I shall narrate the circumstances attendant on the growth and development of Telugu drama.

Drama and Literature

In every literature existing in the world, the drama is said to be highest and the most perfect form of literature. Its effect on the people is two-fold. It is called *drisyakavya* in Sanskrit. It appeals to the ear as well as to the eye at the same time, and as such its effect is everlasting: *kavyeshu natakam namyam*. It is the beautified form of literature. The great Sanskrit poets of the past like Kalidasa, Bhavubhuti, Bhasa, Sudraka, Bhattanarayana are popular all over the civilised parts of the world because of their dramas than for their other pieces. So we can come to the conclusion that richness of the literature of any language is to be found in the dramas of that language.

Telugu Literature

It has always been the misfortune in our country in all fields that there never existed historians who could have recorded the incidents of their own time. A few manuscripts and inscriptions found in excavations are the only sources and material for the modern historians. No true record of history could be found and much is done on guess work. So is the case with the Telugu literature. During the golden age of the reign of the Chalukyas of the Vengi Empire in the Godavari Valley, Telugu literature was found in the form of *kavya*. It was in the eleventh century A.D. that Rajaraja Narendra ruled over the Vengi Empire with Rajamundry as capital. Three great scholars, Nannaya Bhat, Narayan Bhat and Vemulavada Bhimakavi lived in his time while Bilhana was their contemporary. Sanskrit was the language of the cultured and it was the privilege of a few to learn it. Telugu was the spoken language of the common man. It is quite evident that Telugu mixed with Sanskrit was the official language of the court.

Rajaraja Narendra requested Nannaya Bhat to translate Vyasa's Mahabharata into Telugu. Nannaya Bhat translated the first two parts or *parvas*, *Adi* and *Sabha*, and a portion of the third, *Aranya*. He had no confidence in himself that he could do justice to Vyasa in Telugu but the inspiration he got from his friend and colleague Narayana Bhat was such that as a Telugu man, I am proud to say that the Telugu Mahabharata is far more superior to Sanskrit

Mahabharata in all respects. The rest of the Mahabharata was finished by the great Thikkana Somayaji and Yerrapragada in the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. In one aspect these two did better justice to the Telugu language in as much as that there is less of Sanskrit and more of Telugu in their compositions.

Though there are some evidences to show that Nachana Soma existed before Nannaya, and wrote some Telugu kavyas like *Uttara Harivamsa*, it is popularly accepted that Nannaya Bhat is the first popular Telugu poet. He has been given the title of *Vaganusasana* (the supreme commander of language). In the fourteenth century, *Maha Bhagavatham* was translated by Bammara Potharaju into easy flowing Telugu language, and his verses are recited by every Telugu man and woman in every home even today. He was a devotee and was inspired by Kodanda Rama, his family deity. Mahabharatham and *Bhagavatham* are gems of Telugu literature. Potharaju's brother-in-law, Srinadha was an accomplished scholar of Telugu literature and was the supreme educational officer in the court of Anavemareddi who ruled over Kondaveedu of Guntur District. His pen wielded several forms of Telugu literature including the first street drama which was the first production of dramatic form in Telugu literature. But it was not written on the lines of Sanskrit drama and also not according to Sanskrit poetics.

Srinadha was a powerful poet and wrote several works among whom *Kasikhandam* and *Srungara Nyshadham* are the best. The golden era of Telugu literature was in the time of Shri Krishna Devaraya who ruled over the Vizayanagar Empire. Though a Kannada by birth and surroundings, he patronized Telugu literature and wrote Telugu works himself among which *Amukta Malyada* is the best. He maintained eight great Telugu poets in his court who were popularly known as *ashta dik-gajas*. Among them, Allasani Peddanna, Nandi Timmanna, Ramabhadra, Tenali Ramakrishna, Bhattumurthi, Pinagali Suranna and Dhurjata were popular. Allasani Peddanna wrote the first Telugu work on an independent subject known as *Manu Charitra*, Nandi Timmanna wrote *Parijathapaharanam*, Tenali Ramakrishna wrote *Panduranga Mahatyam*, Pingali Suranna wrote *Kalapooranodayam*, Dhurjati wrote *Sree Kalahasti Sathakam* and Bhattumoorthi wrote *Vasu Charitra*. These poets were contemporaries of Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, Beaumont and Fletcher. It is interesting to note that Pingali Suranna's *Kalapooranodayam* has almost the same subject as the *Comedy of Errors* of Shakespeare. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Bhaskara and a lay writer Molla wrote Ramayana in Telugu. A similar subject like that of *Hippolitus* of Euripedes was taken up by Kuchimanchi Timmakavi and Chemakura Venkata Kavi known as *Sarangadhara*. From tenth century A.D. till the middle of nineteenth century there existed great poets in Telugu literature and they were all scholars in Sanskrit literature. I would like to observe one mysterious fact. None of these poets took into their head to write a Telugu drama, the form of literature which brought world-wide fame to Kalidasa. There must have been certain factors prevailing to prevent a Telugu drama from being written.

Was there no Telugu drama before 1850?

There was, but in a different form. These were called Yakshaganas. They were meant for the

common folk. They consisted of songs, prose and dance and a corrupt form of Telugu was their language. These dramas were composed by second and third rate poets who never knew the poetics, and were staged by members of low strata of society like Yadavas, Yanadies and Jakkulas. These dramas appealed to the low senses of the public and were staged in the streets of villages under the patronage of the village headman. The actors never commanded any respect in the society. These conditions existed till the middle of fifteenth century. The Telugu drama was known in this form only to the common man. A venerable gentleman by the name of Siddhendra Yogi of Sringeri Mutt came to Andhra and taught a high form of Yakshagana strictly composed according to *Natyashastra* to the priest community of the village of Kuchipudi in Krishna District. The Brahmin community of the village dedicated their lives to this form of Yakshagana and won laurels from the Nawab of Golkonda and Shri Krishna Deva Raya of Vizayanagar. The rulers of Tanjore in the eighteenth century patronised these troupes, composed these dramas in large number and got them enacted in their courts. No doubt the Kuchipudi Yakshagana appealed to the elite as well as the masses and commanded better respect, but these Brahmins were ex-communicated from the Brahmin society and never commanded respect in public dinners. Thus, the dramatists and the actors were treated as condemned members of the society till 1880. This was one of the main reasons why there was no Telugu drama in literature.

The learned scholars hesitated to write the drama for the fact that it has to be staged by people from the low strata of society. Another reason for the non-production of a drama in Telugu literature is this. In the Sanskrit drama, different types of languages like Sanskrit, Prakrit, Magadhi, Paisachi and Apabramsi were used for different characters as per their status. The hero spoke Sanskrit, the heroine spoke Prakrit, the lower characters spoke Paisachi and Apabramsi. There are no such parallel language to Telugu. So the poets were perplexed regarding the suitable language for their characters. And they hesitated to write a drama, as lack of suitable language was an impediment in their way.

The third reason appears to be that there were no theatres to stage the dramas. The Yakshaganas were played in the streets. Moreover, other forms of arts like Burrakatha, Bhamakalapam and Bharatanatyam were very popular among the masses as well as the educated. The drama in Sanskrit literature was thought to be the privileged enjoyment of few scholars only. It was held in high respect. People of the calibre of Kalidasa only were allowed to attempt to write a drama. For all the above reasons there was no drama in Telugu literature until 1850. A few might have been written but they never saw the light of the day. In the early parts of the nineteenth century, great scholars existed and they wrote some dramas but these were never staged. These dramas were meant only for study but not for stage. The language was high flown and above the reach of the common audience. The printing press was not within their reach and there were only manuscripts.

In 1880-81, a Maharashtrian theatre company from Dharwar for the first time visited Andhra and erected their own pandal and staged Hindi dramas at Rajahmundry. The troupe was directed by a Hindi poet and actor, Vaman Bhat Joshi. They played twice a week. Of the

thirty odd plays they staged, *Puthra Kameshti*, which narrated the story of Rama's birth, was most popular. It was this Maharashtrian company that was responsible for infusing considerable enthusiasm for drama among the people of Andhra. The Maharashtrian company's tour had hardly come to a close before the litterateurs of Rajahmundry, Rao Bahadur Kandukuri Veeresalingam and Vaddadi Subbarayudu took into their heads to write dramas in Telugu. Shri Veerasalingam Pantulu was well versed in English literature. He was a lecturer in Telugu language in Government College. He can be said to be the pioneer in social as well as cultural reforms of Andhra. It was he who wrote the first popular drama in Telugu literature. He translated *Comedy of Errors*, *Merchant of Venice*, Sheridan's *Duenna*, Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, *Malvikagnimitram*, Harsha's *Ratnavali*, and got them staged in the Dharwar Pandal at Rajamundry with costumes and curtains. It was really a venture in those days. The educated youth took part in these dramas. Shri Vaddadi Subbarayudu translated Bhatta Narayana's *Venisamharam* and staged it in the same pandal. In fact, this Dharwar troupe was the inspiration for writing of dramas in Telugu. The people of Andhra are highly indebted to Shri Vaman Bhat Joshi, who directed the Telugu drama in his pandal. The birth place of Telugu drama was Rajahmundry on the banks of the sacred river Godavari, which inspired Bhavabhuti to write *Uttara Ramacharitam* and on whose banks the great Pandit Raya of Jehangir's Court was born. The waters of the Godavari river even today infuse the people of Andhra with eternal culture, for the best sons of the soil were born at Rajahmundry.

In the ceded districts of Andhra, you are aware of the great town of Bellary wherein lies the indomitable fort of Hyder Ali. Bellary is the seat of Telugu culture. As it was very near to the Kannada area, the Kannada drama troupes often visited Bellary and staged dramas in Kannada. The language was never a bar between the happy relationship of people in those days. There resided a lawyer by the name of Dharmavaram Krishnamacharya in 1881. He was a scholar equally well versed in Kannada and Telugu. The ceded districts of Bellary, Cuddapah, Kurnool, Chittoor and Ananthapur were under the sway of Shri Krishna Devaraya who patronised both Kannada and Telugu literatures. Since his reign this area is known as Rayalaseema even today.

In Bellary District, both Kannada and Telugu were spoken. Kannada dramas were very popular even among Telugu people. Krishnamacharya wrote a Kannada drama *Swapna Aniruddha* in 1879 and got it staged under the banner of Sarasa Vinodhini Sabha which he established in 1878. He was himself an actor. One day, there was a challenge from his friends that the Telugu language was not suitable for writing a drama. He accepted the challenge. He wrote a Telugu drama *Nala Damayanthi* in 1881 but got it staged only in 1885. To the astonishment of his Kannada friends, the Telugu drama was more powerful than the Kannada one. Thereafter he wrote twenty Telugu dramas, some of which are being played even today. He died in the year 1912. Shri Kolachelam Srinivasarao, a colleague of Shri Krishnamachari of Bellary composed more than a dozen Telugu dramas and got them staged under the banner of Sumanorama Sabha. His best drama was a historical piece called *Fall of*

Vijayanagar. Another vakil of Bellary and a cousin of Krishnamacharya, D. Gopalacharya wrote some dramas of which *Ramadoss*, the life of an Andhra saint is the best. Kolachelam Subrahmanya Sastri of Bellary wrote *Krishnalila* and *Lava Kusa*. So these were the four pillars of the edifice of Telugu drama at Bellary. The first tragedy in Telugu literature, *Sarangadhara*, relating to the story of *Hippolitus*, was written by Shri D. Krishnamacharya. The first historical drama was composed by Shri K. Sreenivasarao of Bellary. He concentrated mostly on historical dramas. *Sultana Chand Bibi*, *Roshanara*, *Fall of Vijayanagar* were some of the historical dramas. The first drama relating to an Andhra saint was written at Bellary. So Bellary is responsible for existence of drama in the ceded districts as Rajahmundry is on the coastal area of Andhra. Coming to Rajahmundry, we find several other followers of late Shri Veeresalingam Pantulu writing dramas, among whom Shri Chilakamarthi Lakshmi Narasimham was very popular. He wrote more than thirty dramas between 1890-1900, among which *Gayopakhyanam* and *Parijathapaharanam* are popular even today.

Social Drama

Shri Kandukuri Veeresalingam, as I told you, was a great social reformer. He was an editor of a weekly and was a follower of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. He wanted to utilize the potent weapon of drama for social reform. So he wrote some pieces similar to Sheridan's rivals criticising the rigid customs of Hindu society like child marriage. He wrote social plays in an easy flowing language and got them staged. This was a novel experiment. Several eminent dramatists objected to use of drama as a vehicle of propaganda but he pursued his own way and method. To his rescue came one of the greatest social dramatists of Andhra in 1887. He was Shri Gurajada Apparao Pantulu. Inspired by Veeresalingam, patronized by Ananda Gajapathi Maharaju of Vijayanagaram, he wrote a social drama, *Kanya Sulkam*, written in spoken Telugu and condemning the practice of selling girls in marriage to old people, a custom that was prevalent then in Andhra. *Kanya Sulkam* is the first of the type and stands supreme in Telugu literature even today. It is not a drama but it is a world. We see our own images traversing the stage. We feel guilty. We try to correct ourselves. There can never be a parallel example in any literature in the world and I assure you that this statement is no exaggeration. He got it staged under his own direction at Ripon High School of Vijayanagaram. This was a novel experiment in those times. During those times, one of the great scholars of Telugu literature, Kalaprapoorna Vedam Venkataraya Sastri, who was working as a lecturer in Madras Christian College, translated some of the Sanskrit dramas. It was not these dramas that brought fame to Venkataraya Sastri. He wrote a historical drama titled *Prataparudriyam*. It is a drama of outstanding merit. He used spoken dialect of various types to suit the characters in this drama. The story relates how Prataparudra II of Kakateya Dynasty was taken a prisoner by the commanders of Allauddin Khilji. The author created the role of Yugandhara as a minister of Prataparudra. Yugandhara's name is borrowed from Bhasa's drama and from the stories *Bruhatkatha*. Though he borrowed the name and created a fictitious person, Yugandhara's name is a house-hold word in Andhra for an able minister. Even text books for children mention him as one of the ablest ministers

of Andhra though he never existed. Even historians do commit a mistake and mention him as a minister of Kakateyas. Such was the influence of the great dramatist Venkatraya Sastri. He translated *Sahityadarpana* of Viswanath from Sanskrit to Telugu. Sastri is popularly called *Abhinava Mallinadhasuri* of Telugu literature. He was a scholar of both Sanskrit and Telugu literatures. He wrote a drama on the battle of Bobbili and translated the dramas of Kalidasa and Harsha. His knowledge was profound. After 1900, eminent dramatists like Tirupathi Venkata Kavulu, and the twin poets, Balijepalli Laskhmikantha Kavi and Mutharaju Subbarao Pantulu wrote popular dramas on the subjects picked up from the Puranas. Tirupathi Venkata Kavulu converted the Mahabharata into dramatic form.

Their dramas are popular even today. The Parsi Companies visited Andhra and their influence was very great. Subjects like *Gulebakavali*, *Pasanbakavali*, *Jayanta Jayapala*, *Chandrakantha* were taken from Parsi dramas and composed in Telugu. Some Urdu dramas like *Alibaba and Forty Thieves* and *Jaffar Shah* were also staged and even these Urdu dramas were very popular. Then came the Swaraj Movement. Every effort in the country was directed to achieve the national independence and historical dramas were written. The British Government was condemned under the garb of Muslim rulers. The ideals of nationalism were propagated and people were exhorted to drive away the alien rulers. The result was that dramas like *Rana Pratap*, *Rasaputra Vijayam*, *Durgadas*, *Shivaji* were written and staged frequently. The Government banned these dramas. Several social dramas condemning the social evils were also written. Stories were taken from Marathi dramas. Murder of Peshwa Narayanarao was staged and was popular. Kallakuri Narayanarao wrote *Chintamani* condemning the evils of dancing girls and prostitutes, *Varvikrayam* condemning the system of dowry, *Madhuseva* condemning the evil of drinking, and these dramas are popular even today. There was the Home Rule Movement under the leadership of Annie Besant, Gokhale and Arundale. Political dramas were written profusely but were immediately banned. The Non-cooperation Movement created a stir in the country. There was the no-tax campaign initiated in Andhra by Desabhakta Kanda Venkatappayya Pantulu. People could not spare any time for arts. As such, excepting a few, no new dramas came to light between 1920 and 1945. Added to this, the commercial theatres were dissolved. You are well aware of the fact that the people of Andhra are very emotional. Even the women and children plunged into the struggle for independence. People had no time either to write or stage or see a drama. There was not much work done in Telugu literature from 1925 till 1947.

After the achievement of independence, people's attention was directed towards economic uplift of the country. The social injustice which was prevailing hitherto had to be rectified. Some of the writers of the young generation led by Acharya Atreya began to write plays depicting social inequalities. Competitions were held for play-writing. Though the quality was not much, the quantity was great. Many plays were written on subjects like land distribution, poor payment of wages, untouchability and inter-communal marriages. Of these authors, Acharya Atreya was a powerful writer. Two of his dramas deserve mention: *Eenadu* about the communal riots after the partition and *Non-gazetted Officer* about low standard of

living of non-gazetted officers. Among his other plays *Pragati* on banning of atomic weapons and *Viswasanthi* on universal peace also deserve mention. Another writer, Kondamudi Gopalarayasarma wrote a few plays on the life of the Buddha and on the injustices of the society. The bulk of writers translated dramas from the English language. Shaw, Ibsen, Galsworthy, and Woodhouse were their favourites. Recent dramatic literature in Telugu comprise mostly translations and not even adaptations. I believe that this is a deplorable state of affairs even though translation has its own value. I appeal to the younger generation of authors to think independently and write original plays instead of imitating or borrowing. Then only there will be a vigorous drive in literature.

Andhra Stage

Having dealt with the drama in Telugu literature, I would now like to make a survey of the Telugu stage and theatre. During the period of Yakshaganas, which were meant only for the common man, no stage was necessary. Make-shift stages were erected in street corners, while sarees borrowed from the local washermen served as curtains. They have been appropriately termed as street plays. Itinerant troupes staged these dramas during festivals and happy occasions like marriages. The season started after the harvest. The village patel collected contributions from the villagers and a sum of ten rupees was given to the party. A small pandal of palmyra leaves of four square yards was erected and two-three tables were fetched for making a platform which served as the stage. The drama started at 10 p.m. and usually ended by 5 a.m. The washerman prepared torches using waste cloth and ginger oil, which served as lights for the drama. The Sutradhara and his party who played the part of chorus offered prayers in the beginning. The orchestra included a pipe which was used as a Drone besides *Mridanga* and *Cymbals*. The beating of a drum indicated the coming of the hero. The curtain was held. Incense powder was thrown on the flame of the torch kept in front of the curtain. Costumes were elaborate resembling the present day Kathakali costumes. The crowns were inset with glass mirror pieces. The make-up consisted of yellow powder and charcoal. Sheep wool pasted with the help of the milk of Banyan tree served for moustache. For the character of rishi, jute smeared with colour was used for beard. The characters danced and sang along with the chorus waiving a wooden sword. They introduced themselves to the audience. The Sutradhara who acted as the commentator asked each character the purpose of his or her coming. Female roles were taken up by males with long natural hairs. Their head-dressing consisted of lac ornaments. In troupes consisting of Jakkulas, Yanadies and Gollas, the language was corrupt. In Kuchipudi dramas, there was much of Sanskrit and these were meant for the cultured classes too. Practically there was neither a permanent stage nor theatre in Andhra till 1885. The royalties converted their court halls into theatres for the occasion.

With the visit of the Dharwar troupe, great enthusiasm was created for theatre. The Dharwar troupe erected their own pandal and brought curtains along with them. Shows

were held twice a week. Entrance was by tickets, ranging from two anna to one rupee. The total collection was about two to three hundred rupees. Moving curtains first introduced by the Dharwar party was a mysterious thing for the Telugu audience. Characters of gods like Ganesa and Gowri were brought on to the stage and the leader of the chorus prostrated before them and sought their blessings for the smooth completion of the drama. The Dharwar troupe staged about thirty dramas and all of them were in Hindi. *Putra Kameshti* was very popular. Though the language was not understood, people in large numbers went to see these plays. Invariably, Chintamani Bhattar played the hero's role and Haripanth that of the heroine. Narayan Bhat impersonated the rishi while Bhimarao was the comedian. The Dharwar pandal served as the first theatre of the Andhra. In the same pandal, the first Telugu dramas were staged under the able guidance of Shri Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu and Shri Vaddadi Subbarayudu. Their troupe consisting of the literates of the town and students of the local college was called Hindu Natakojjivak Samaj. Both the authors were directors too and their popular dramas were *Veni Samharam* and *Harischandra*. Shri Veeresalingam Pantulu in addition to Puranic dramas wrote social satires, *Kyavahara Dharma Bodhini* and *Brahmo Marriage*, and got them staged in 1881. A Pandit called Kondubhotla Subrahmanyasastry from Panchayappa College of Madras wrote twelve dramas in prose for the people of Guntoor town. *Yugandhra Vijayam* was his best. In 1885, a deputy collector, Mudumbi Ramanujacharyulu wrote and staged *Harishchandra* under the banner of Bala Tripura Sundari Company. In 1885, in Kakinada, a leading gentleman, Dinavahi Hanumantharao got curtains painted, prepared rich costumes and started a troupe known as Kakinada First Company.

The Dharwar Troupe laid the seeds of theatre in every town of Andhra. Officials cooperated with the authors and took part in dramas. Among them Vizarusu Apparao, Valluri Suryaprakasarao and Kanchi Anandarao were prominent. The Dharwar troupe broke up in 1885 after Shri Vaman Bhat Joshi was removed from the managership. Joshi organized his own troupe with a band of Telugu actors and ventured to play both Telugu and Hindi dramas. In 1889, Hindu Theatrical Company was set up at Rajahmundry. Immaneni Hanumantharao Naidu was the hero. Chilakamarthi Lakshmi Narasimham, one of the most popular authors, was the manager.

The National Theatre was started at Masulipatam in 1885. From 1881 to 1900, several troupes were set up in every town of Andhra. Tiled theatre houses were built everywhere. Curtains were painted. The Maharaja of Jeyapore started a theatre at Vizagapatam under the banner of Jaganmitra Samaj. He was himself a playwright and the conductor of his troupe. Ananda Gajapathi Maharaj of Vizayanagar, a Sanskrit scholar, staged Sanskrit dramas with the help of pandits, himself impersonating the role of Dushyantha. At Bellary, the leading lawyers organized three or four dramatic troupes among whom Sarasavinodhini Sabha and Sumanorama Sabha were very prominent. Some peculiar characteristics of these theatres were: (1) all the actors were from the cultured class of the society, (2) the authors took part in the plays, (3) they were amateurs, (4) officials encouraged these troupes, (5) the cos-

tumes etc. were on the lines of Dharwar troupe, and (6) theatre going became a mania with the people. These conditions existed till 1900.

In 1900, Poona Balwantarao Company and Shangli Company visited Andhra. Balwantarao Company was responsible for starting the Surabhi family theatres in Andhra. The Surabhi people were Maharashtrians who migrated to Andhra and were practitioners of shadow puppetry. They came to a village called Surabhi in Cuddapah District. The local Sub-Magistrate encouraged them to give up puppet shows and take to drama. They were taught good Telugu. The wives, daughters and daughters-in-law played female characters while the husbands, brothers and sons-in-law took up the male characters. For the first time in 1901, ladies were brought to the stage. These Surabhi family theatres were touring troupes and are existing even today. They carry their own pandal and settings from place to place.

In 1902, the Baliwala Theatre visited Andhra. They had the latest equipment and big lustre lights which were considered to be a great change in lighting. Elaborate costumes were used. Group dances were introduced. Harmonium was brought in and songs were used profusely. Telugu dramas also copied these methods to some extent. The first Telugu harmonium player was Shri K. Subbarao of Masulipatam. The first Commercial Theatre in Andhra was started at Rajahmundry by Shri D. Durayya in 1906. This theatre employed actors on salary basis and conducted it on commercial lines. One fact I would like to point out is that the Baliwala Company created interest in Andhra for Hindi dramas. During this period, hundreds of Hindi and Urdu dramas were staged at Masulipatam. The leading actor was Shri Evani Lakshmanaswamy and a popular play was *Peshwa Narayanarao* about the murder of Narayanarao. He taught Hindi to the youth and sometimes extempore speeches were delivered on the stage. They were very popular and it was a fashion to stage a Hindi drama. The Muslims of Masulipatam staged Urdu dramas. Their popular plays were *Matme Jaffar*, *Alibaba*, *Allauddin*, *Inder Sabha* and *Gulebakavali*.

At Rajahmundry, the second commercial theatre, the Chintamani Theatre, was started with good investment from Messrs S. Guneswara Rao and Nageshwararao. A pucca hall was erected and the famous painter Ruma was brought from Bombay. This theatre enjoyed great popularity, employed many popular actors on salary basis and continued till 1922. Another commercial theatre called Mylavaram Bala Bharathi Samajam was started in 1916 at Bezvada. Between 1906 and 1914, many Parsi theatres visited Andhra; these include Jamkhandi Company, Rippon Theatre, Dhadhabhai Tunthi Theatre, Surviya Company, Dhorabji and Shorabji Company, Khatau Theatre and the theatre of Shorab Modi. The Mylavaram Theatre borrowed the techniques of changing scenes from Parsi theatre. Parsi tunes were adopted in Telugu music. Electric lights were introduced. Mylavaram Theatre was popular for its productions like *Savitri*, *Droupadi* and *Shakuntala*. Yedavalli Suryanarayana was the hero. Uppuluri Sanjeevarao and Parupalli Subbarao played the roles of heroines. Guraja Naidu, Addanki, Jonnavithula, Dhaitha Gopalam and Gaggaiyah were other favourite actors. I forgot to mention about Shri Hari Prasadarao, who was one of the famous actors of the past. He was the pioneer of verse reading on the stage. He was

from Guntoor. Many actors were proud to imitate him. Along with him, Balijepalli brothers were also favourites. Kipalle Hanumantharao was another well known heroine. The Guntoor theatres contributed much to our dramas. The Chintamani Theatre, the Mylavaram Theatre and the Seetaramanjany Natak Samaj gave Telugu theatre a commercially successful footing. Before these commercial theatres came into being, there were small troupes in the villages. The best actors of these troupes were invited to the commercial theatres, with the result that these small theatre groups faced a natural extinction. Thus, while the commercial theatres did some good, these were also responsible for the extinction of amateur theatres and introducing professionalism. However, soon many of these commercial theatres, barring those ran by actors themselves, were to die. Among those which survived, the Indian Dramatic Company of Shri D.V. Subbarao enjoyed supreme popularity.

Raghava Era

1921 saw the start of a golden era of acting in Telugu theatre. Rao Bahadur T. Raghavachary was the Public Prosecutor of Bellary. He knew English, Telugu, Kannada, Hindi and Tamil and staged dramas in all these languages. He revolutionized the art of acting. His gestures were few, but effective; his silence was more eloquent than his speech; and his looks pierced through the hardest of hearts. He was particularly effective in the portrayal of conflict of emotions. He played the roles of Hamlet, Othello and Sylock in English. In Telugu his famous roles were father of Prahlada, Pathan Rustam, Ramadoss and Chanakya. Shri P.V. Rajamannar, the present Chairman of Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Chief Justice of Madras High Court, was a close friend of Shri Raghava and wrote a Telugu social play, *Whose Mistake*, specially for him. Raghava visited England and won the appreciation of Bernard Shaw. Tagore hailed him as the best actor in India. He brought a new era to the Andhra stage. After he came on to the Telugu stage, music ceased to be the main feature of drama. Many youths, including my humble self, were inspired by his presence, and I had the good fortune of working with him in about 20 to 30 plays. Again, amateur groups had come in and educated people entered the stage. The Ramavilasa Sabha was started at Tenali. Dr G.V. Subbarao, T. Chelapathirao, Madhavapeddi and the great Sthanam Narasimharao were the prominent members. Their best productions were *Prataparudriyam*, *Kanya Sulkam* and *Bobbili*. *Roshanara* was their masterpiece. Sthanam Narasimharao rose to a new height in his role as Roshanara and stands unchallenged even today. He was awarded Padma Shri recently by the President of India.

There was a movement for Children's Theatre in 1920. Children's theatres were organized at Guntoor and Kakinada. Boys were freely fed and educated. Two or three of these theatres are worth mentioning: Andhra Seva Sangham, Youngmen's Happy Club of Kakinada and Bal Mitra Sabha of Guntoor. Their productions were excellent but they suffered from ill-management. Exclusively ladies' theatres like Navala Natak Samaj were started and enjoyed popularity. You know what their fate would be if men managed them. The Indian Dramatic Company of Shri D.V. Subbarao, Raja Rajeshwari Natyamandali of Shri Suri Babu, Prabhat Theatres ran by myself are the only professional theatres now in Andhra. The Indian

Dramatic Company of Masulipatam has almost stopped functioning and the other two are struggling for existence. Actors are into freelancing, thereby leaving no room for new experiments. Added to this, all the theatres have been converted into cinema houses. The future of the professional theatre is very gloomy. No capitalist comes forward to invest in the construction of a theatre for dramas. There is no shortage of actors nor is the quality of acting is lacking but the quantity is scattered. At this stage, the Andhra Natak Kala Parishad, a central organization for theatres, was started. It conducts annual drama competitions and awards prizes but much has to be done on the creative side. The Andhra University is blessed with a Registrar, Shri K.V. Gopalaswamy, who takes keen interest in theatre. He conducts inter-collegiate drama competitions and explores acting talent among students. Some efforts are being made for the promotion of theatre in Andhra from all sides. The Andhra Government exempted theatre from Entertainment Tax. The Dramatic Art Revival Committee sponsored by the Government has prepared an exhaustive report but little action has been taken on this.

Exclusive theatres for dramas have to be built on modern lines by the local bodies with contributions from Central government. Dramatics must become a part of education and mass culture. Degree courses in dramatics must be introduced in universities. Private institutions for teaching dramatics must be encouraged by the State. Rural open-air theatres must be built at least in community project areas. Cooperative system must be introduced to start professional theatres. We lack good books on theatre. These are not problems only for Andhra but for the entire country. Let us discuss under the banner of Sangeet Natak Akademi and work in a united manner for the revival of drama as a potent medium of culture in India.

Some prominent and popular dramatists of the Telugu stage are: Kundukuri Veeresalingam, Dr. Krishnamachary, Vedam Venkata Raya Sastry, Gurajada Apparaao, Vilijepalli Kashmi Kantham, Vaddadi Subbbarayudu, Chilakamarthi Lakshmi Narasimham, Tirupathi Venkata Kavulu, Kallakuri Narayanrao, and Kolchalam Srinivasarao. Some prominent actors are Rao Bahadur T. Raghava, Hari Prasadaraao, Yedavalli Suryanarayana, Muppidi Jaggaraju, Kopalle Hanumantharao, Munjuluri Kristnarao, Nellore Nagarajarao, Nellore Doraiswami, P. Ramachandra Reddy, Evani Lakshmanaswamy, and some prominent troupes are Chintamani Theatre, Mylavaram Balabharati Samajam, Mothey Seetarama Anjneya Theatre, Ramavilas Sabha, Hindu Theatre, and Sarasa Vinodini Sabha.

DISCUSSION

Kanakalingeswara Rao: Bellary Raghavachari has created a cultured style of acting in Andhra and after that commercial theatres began to decay. This happened in 1930. The same circumstances which happened in Maharashtra happened in Andhra also. There was no permanent professional company except two or three.

Sachin Sengupta: Do you have any permanent stage, theatre or a hall?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: Yes, we do have. There were twenty-five stages. And of these, eleven were converted into cinema houses. The professional theatres are of two kinds in Andhra. One is the type of theatre which we are running. We stage shows here and there. Another type which is still functioning as family units. The wife plays the heroine, the husband the hero, the father-in-law the villain and so on. All characters are played by members of the family. Even the children of these families are introduced to the stage from the age of five onwards. There are about half a dozen such families. They travel with the sets and curtains from village to village.

Sachin Sengupta: How they travel with their packed theatres?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: They carry the load on four or five trucks.

Sachin Sengupta: Then they have got temporary stages.

Kanakalingeswara Rao: They go to a village and settle there for about twenty days and perform a new drama each night. In a village, their income from these dramas will be between five to six hundred rupees. So they stage fifteen or twenty dramas continuously and then move to some other place. They have set types of dramas. We can call them travelling theatres. The other type has fallen into the hands of contractors. There are advantages as well as disadvantages of this system. The actors are hired, they get only one hundred rupees salary, are unable to maintain themselves and many of them have lost jobs in commercial companies. After the advent of this contract system, the actor is paid Rs 100 per night. Some people get Rs 300/- per performance for the night and there will be at least ten to twelve dramas in a month. Thus during a season the actors earn enough.

Artistic quality of the professional theatre has thus suffered and how to reconstruct the professional theatre is a problem for us. On the other hand, we have the amateur groups which came into existence after 1930. We have a central organization for them which has been existing for the last twentyfive years. There are about one hundred and twenty amateur theatre groups in Andhra and they stage about seventy new plays in a year. They survive on subscriptions; about six competitions and festivals are conducted every year, where prizes are awarded. The university union also holds a festival of drama in the month of December as an inter-collegiate drama competition. There is an experimental theatre in Andhra University.

Sachin Sengupta: These dramas are written by whom?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: By local Andhra teachers and others.

Sachin Sengupta: And not adapted from the European stage?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: Most of these are adaptations from foreign languages and we have been warning against this trend.

Sachin Sengupta: Are they listening?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: Some are and some are not. We have six or seven permanent halls. They are well equipped and there is an agitation for the construction of more halls by

municipalities. Day-before-yesterday, I received a telegram from two municipalities to send them plans for the construction of one open-air theatre and another closed theatre. These municipalities, half a dozen in number, have resolved to construct open-air theatres and closed theatres too. That is in progress now. We have also some private halls. In my place, there is a hall called Youngmen Hindu Association Hall which is managed by a trust. It is equipped to some extent with curtains, settings and furniture, and the hall is rent out for staging drama for Rs 40 per show. On the other side of the hall is an open space where we have constructed an open-air theatre which is given on rent for Rs 10 per show. So the amateur movement is on the rise in Andhra, but our problem is how to reconstruct the professional theatre. That is a problem which can be solved by experiments alone.

Mulk Raj Anand: Is there any school where acting classes are being held?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: There is no school where acting is taught. I conducted a school in 1939 only for a period of about three months. I got only six students. The Government of Andhra has constituted a committee to enquire into the revival of the stage.

A Delegate: In this connection, I would request the Seminar to prepare some plan for open-air theatres.

Kanakalingeswara Rao: I do not know whether it is a right step. We do not wait for good theatres. We go to villages. I have myself staged more than three to four hundred dramas in villages. The average collection in a village is about Rs 1,000 to Rs 2,000 per night [applause]. The maximum collection can go upto Rs 8,000. Tickets range from Re 1 to Rs 4 and the collections are very promising. The Central Government has granted Rs 50,000 to three colleges in Andhra to construct well-equipped theatres and Yellore is one of the places selected. We are going to have one more. That is a relieving feature

I have already told you about the translation. There is too much of that from Western stage. Now I want to tell my friend, Mr Balraj Sahni something about our cinema actors. Most of the cinema actors in Telugu are from the stage. There are at least six actors who give Rs 500 towards prizes to be given to the best theatre group. Thus we get Rs 3,000 from cinema actors. From cinema houses we get about Rs 3,000. Comedians give Rs 500 each to be awarded to the best Comedian from stage. So the cinema actors have something to spare from their income for the promotion of theatre in Andhra [applause]. They also come and stay sometimes with us. Secondly, many of the actors who worked in commercial theatres are now begging on the streets. There was an agitation to create a trust and give donations to these poor actors. I would also request this seminar to take a note of it and create a trust on an All-India basis for helping poor actors. Some donations are given to authors by our Education Department but for the actors we should create a trust and see that something, at least say, Rs 20 per month is given to a poor actor. I cannot convince my Government or the Centre. I have sent so many applications to the Centre. However, I am happy to tell you that I have been helping these actors every month by giving them Rs 15 each. I have also started a Golden Shield competition. This shield is worth about Rs 1,500. The competition is to be conducted among amateur troupes and no professional troupe is allowed to take part in it. I have also instituted a prize of Rs 1,000, the Madras Golden Jubilee prize, to be given to the best drama production among college teams. So I believe that we professional actors of

Andhra are doing something for the promotion of amateur theatres. Such shall be the attitude of all professional actors of the stage. I wish to request the professional actors and actresses to spare at least 5 per cent of their income for the promotion of the amateur stage, because we benefit from the experiments the amateurs stage carries out. We professional stage and cinema actors must do something for the promotion of amateur theatre. Whenever an amateur theatre comes to me, I give something to help them.

Another point is that the drama which wins the first prize may not be staged on a commercial basis. It may not be commercially successful. But the results of the experiment may be exploited by the professional theatre.

Adya Rangacharya: Was the Kanniah drama successful?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: It was successful from 1920 to 1928. It was no doubt a commercial success.

Adya Ranchacharya: In our language also it was successful.

Kanakalingeswara Rao: Professional theatres are not very happy. There are only two or three professional theatres.

Ahindra Choudhuri: Who are happy then? Are the amateurs happy?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: To some extent they are very happy. The professional theatre is to be reconstructed. My request to the Seminar is that before constructing new halls, we should take a survey of the existing theatres in India and renovate them with a grant of Rs 10,000 each. Instead of constructing a theatre at the Centre at a cost of Rs 5,00,000, you can renovate existing theatres. We are sure that this way there will be at least five good halls at our disposal at a cost of Rs one lakh.

Mulk Raj Anand: I would like to hear something from Kanakalingeswara Rao about professional acting.

Kanakalingeswara Rao: I have seen Marathi stage. I do not profess to have seen all the Hindi and Tamil dramas staged.

Mulk Raj Anand: This is a very important question. These reports are more or less factual. In my opinion, definite standards have been set by Bengal professional actors, and in their terms, we can measure the calibre of each professional stage in India.

Kanakalingeswara Rao: The question of comparison cannot be answered. What I can do at the most is to compare with European countries as they are not here.

K. Narain Kale: What type is it? Is it naturalistic?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: Natural style of acting is very high with the amateurs. In the professional stage, we have to see that we satisfy the audience. Music plays a predominant part in Telugu drama.

Mulk Raj Anand: Have there been some translations into Telugu of dramas from other languages?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: Marathi dramas have been translated. Yakshpallas and other dramas have been translated. They were played between 1920 and 1930. The man who impersonated Dushyanta has died and no one can take up that role. In spite of my best attempts, I had doubts about the actor doing full justice to Shakuntala and so I left it. Every actor has certain standard for his role.

Its popularity is so much that every temple has amassed at least a lakh of rupees now. This is due to Kuchipudi dramas that are attracting huge gatherings in every temple. They charge rupees twenty or so. The temple authorities have, therefore, refused to invite these shows. For the revival of these dramas, it is necessary to encourage them.

Sachin Sengupta: Suppose if Dina Pathak goes to Andhra to give performance of Bhavai.

Ahindra Choudhuri: Then she will get only Rs 20. For puppet show, they pay only Rs 20.

Dina Pathak: What do they do with all that fund? Why cannot they make use of it?

Kanakalingeswara Rao: It has become an impossibility for a professional theatre to be run by a producer. But because I am an actor-producer and also a hero-producer, I may be able to conduct such a theatre.

Mulk Raj Anand: Throughout the discussion on language papers, ignorance of most of us about these regions is patent. This can be removed if an annual festival could be held where delegates of this Seminar and some other people could be invited and they could stay there for a week and exchange ideas. This will incidentally save us the expenses of going to distant places all over the country. Such exchanges should be encouraged and got about if possible.

Kanakalingeswara Rao: On every seventeenth day of the month, a festival is held there.

Dina Pathak: If an artists' special train could go round the whole of India, then the people would know exactly what the artists are after.

Kanakalingeswara Rao: I would like the Akademi to sent at least ten delegates to see what is going on in all parts of the country.

Mulk Raj Anand: It is a very good suggestion but not all things are changing. I went once before and my expenses ran to Rs 3,000. I do not know how it happened. I think we should give serious thought to this sort of exchange of ideas by the gathering of all language groups at one place in an annual festival. Adequate thought should be given to the time and place where the festival is going to be held. It should be held every five years.