

A view of the Yakshagana Seminar in session. (Left to Right): Shri K.S. Karanth, Convener, Shri Baikadi Venkata Krishna Rao, Secretary, Reception Committee, and Shri Sheshagiri Kini, President, Reception Committee

YAKSHAGANA SEMINAR

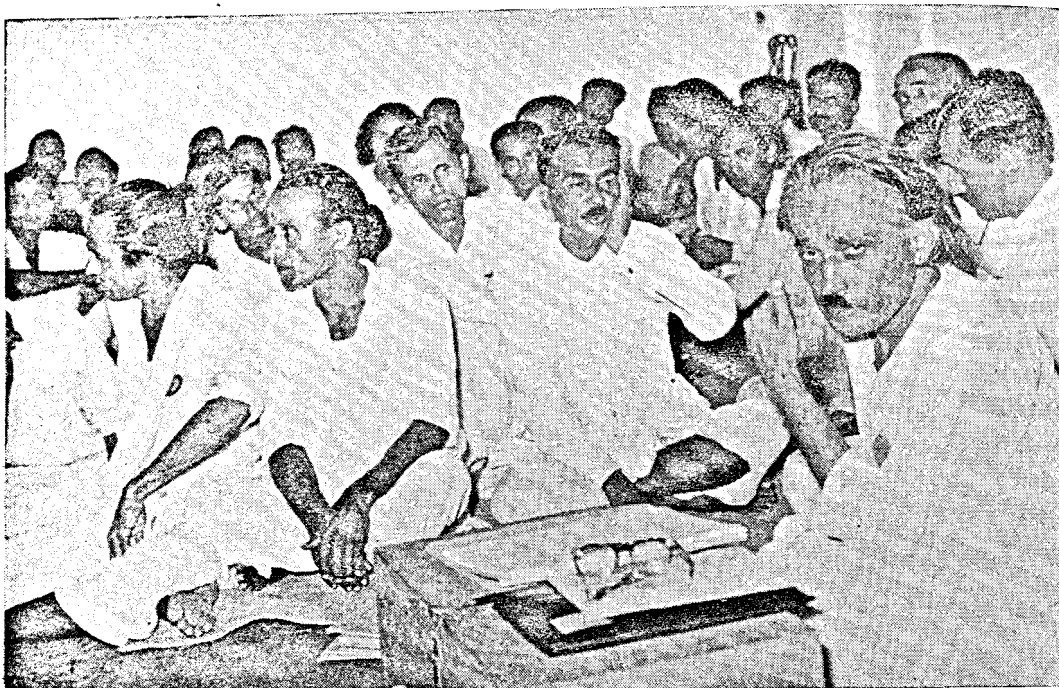
Shri K. S. Karanth's Report

A seminar on *Yakshagana*—a dance drama-art—prevailing in the Malanad area of Karnataka was organised at Brahmapur (South Kanara) from September 27 to 30, 1958, with the object of formulating a scheme for the revival and preservation of the best in the traditions of *Yakshagana*. A brief report of the same is as follows:

Invitations were sent to various drama troupes and artistes, i.e., *Bhagawaths*, drummers and dancers. All veterans, including retired artistes, were also approached. Enough publicity was given through language papers and a reception committee was formed at Brahmapur with Shri Sheshagiri Bhagawath, a veteran in the field, as the Chairman and Shri Rama Ganiga, a veteran dancer, as Vice-Chairman. All artistes intending to participate in the seminar were requested to intimate earlier about their qualifications, such as professional experience in the field of dance, music, etc.

Brahmapur was chosen as the venue of the Conference because of its historical importance to the tradition of *Yakshagana* art as well as for the fact that it lay in a centrally situated area around which many troupes flourished and many artistes practised their profession.

Shri B. V. Achar of Brahmapur took up the entire responsibility of playing the host to all the delegates coming to the seminar. The other expenses were borne by the organiser. Shri Achar's generosity made the organiser's job monetarily easy.



The Yakshagana Seminar in session

The Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, was informed of the seminar in advance and it took great interest in the same. Shri Govind Vidyarthi, Technical Officer of the Akademi, was deputed to attend the seminar and he covered the entire proceedings through the medium of film and sound.

The seminar was attended by 58 delegates who came from the districts of South and North Kanaras and Shimoga. There were ten *Bhagawaths*, eight drummers and the rest dancers, most of them aged above 35 years. One can say with confidence that the best and the most experienced in the field participated in the seminar giving the best of what each could contribute.

Seminar's Objectives

The programme did not consist of any lectures but only of discussions and demonstrations which centred round the main objectives of the seminar, viz., (1) to preserve the best in tradition of *Yakshagana* music, dance, drama and decor (2) to develop the same into an

art form having an all-India appeal. Uptil now this dance-drama, by laying much stress on language—Kannada prose—had limited its activities to the Kannada-speaking world. Because of its rich music, rhythmic dance, and delightful costumes, it has all the elements that will have a universal appeal which need not be hampered by the limitations of language.

All problems including those of economic conditions under which the artistes lived were taken up. Detailed *questionnaire* were printed and circulated to all participating delegates about a fortnight in advance. Hence everyone knew as to what was expected of him during the seminar. There were questions pertaining to music, dance, costume, training, living conditions, etc.

All delegates assembled in the Mahalingeshwar Temple at Brahmavar on the afternoon of September 27. Some persons who were interested in the seminar also came. Besides the representative from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, one from All India Radio,

Bangalore, also attended and covered the seminar. The proceedings began with a prayer at the nearby Ganesh Temple. The sessions took place in the local Shiva Temple and were largely attended by local people.

Self-Examination

To begin with, the organiser explained to the delegates the purpose of the seminar. It is very gratifying to note that during the entire proceedings all professional rivalries, jealousies, etc., were forgotten and the problems were discussed most dispassionately. Many of the points raised by the organiser were those that needed self-evaluation on the part of each artiste. The *Bhagawaths*, the drummers and others did not mind questions like "Does this display joy?" "Does it display sorrow?" "Does it display pathos?", etc. Hence it was a question of self-examination on the part of each artiste to see in what manner his dance or music really was an interpretation of the theme that he was supposed to convey or the emotion that he was supposed to express.

When problems relating to the economic and living conditions of the artistes, question of training, qualifications of tutors, etc., were taken up for discussion, the delegates were good enough to show a very dispassionate view of things and discussed the matters in an objective manner. The realisation that the artistes will rise or fall with the greatness or otherwise of their art was noticeable during all the discussions.

Since there were visitors from outside, and hundreds of people as spectators, two public performances, i.e., one *Tala Maddale* and another open-air drama, were arranged on two nights for their entertainment.

The Discussions

The work of the seminar was split up into morning and evening sessions of three hours' duration each. The matters taken up for discussion during various sessions are briefly mentioned below :

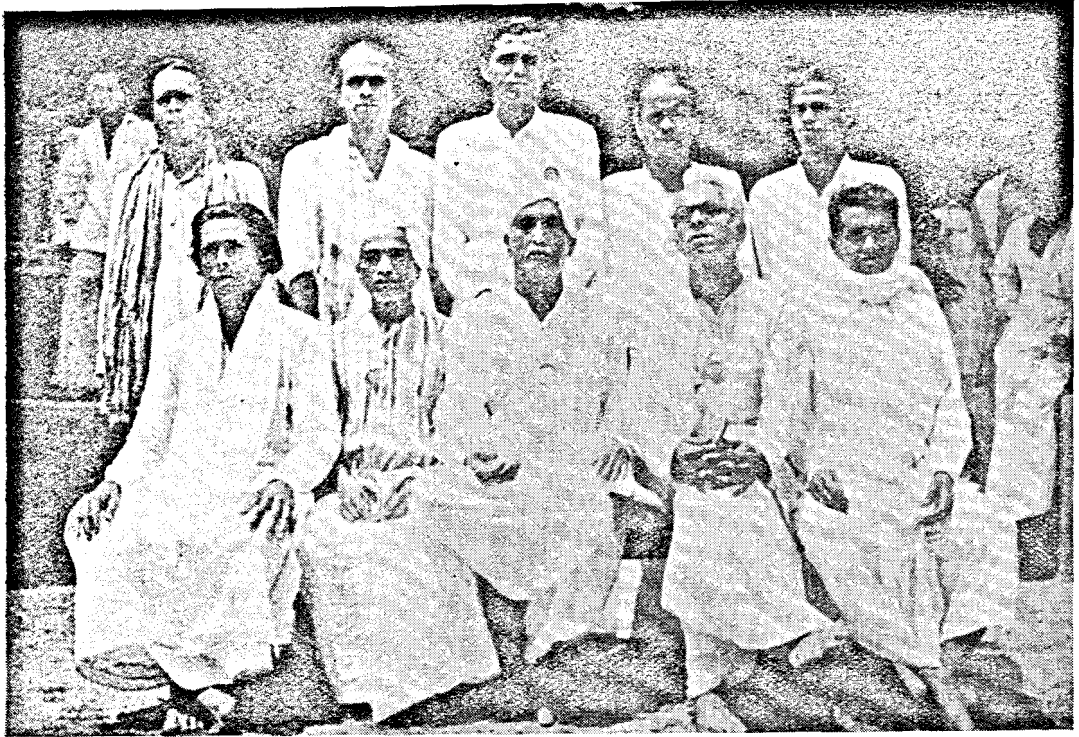
1. Two sessions were taken up in discussing the topic of *Yakshagana* music in relation to the theme and emotion conveyed in various songs. The *Bhagawaths*, who are the real directors of this dance-drama, were asked to give examples of various *Rasas* like *Vira*, *Shringara*, *Shoka*, *Bhayanaka*, *Hasya*, etc.



Shri Sheshagiri Kini

Whenever anybody strayed away from the *Yakshagana* style of singing, he was promptly reminded that the *Yakshagana* was neither *Karnatak* nor *Hindustani* music. This was often felt necessary, for among the younger generation imitation of other schools had crept in. The main purpose of the seminar was to inculcate the idea that technique lives for the sake of artistic expression.

Mere *Raga* or *Tala* by themselves do not constitute art. The *Bhagawaths* are there to express the literary content of various songs. Each *Rasa* was taken up, one by one. Each *Bhagawath* gave one or two songs that demonstrated a particular *Rasa*. Say, *Shringara Rasa* was taken up. A *Bhagawath* was asked to give its *Alapa*, *Gamaka* and *Sahitya*. He was then asked to observe whether it really



A group of Musicians who took part in the Seminar

conveyed the *Shringara Bhava*, viz., Did it show elation? Did it express love? Did it express beauty? Did it express grace? Did it convey the sense of words? All such aspects that compose the element of *Shringara* depending upon the character displaying the *Bhava* were looked into.

Musical Modes

It should be realised that the musical modes in the same *Bhava* would be different when displayed by different characters. For example, *Shringara* by Ravana would be different from that of a *Gandharva* or *Arjuna*. All *Rasas* will have to show all these details if they have to successfully communicate the emotional content of a song. The individual *tan*, *gamak*, pitch, volume, tempo, voice modulation and pronunciation, etc., count in conveying the appropriate mood by a chosen character in a particular *Bhava*. Numerous examples relating to emotions and musical ex-

pressions were demonstrated. The *Bhagawaths* were asked to think in terms of emotion or mood primarily.

Even a *Rasa* like *Hasya* giving great latitudes to the comedian can lend itself equally well in music. The idea of beauty in music would always lie in its being meaningful. With the realisation of this idea, the *Bhagawath* should always be able to discover whether the tempo, *Tala* and *Raga* would or would not suit a particular theme. These deliberations were a real affront to many *Bhagawaths* as normally they thought only in terms of *Raga* and *Tala*.

During this session one could easily discover that by discarding the traditional song forms much was lost in expression. Quite a number of songs were sung in any *Raga* that the songster fancied and thought it would be pleasing, whereas when a song is composed, its words were linked intimately with the



Shri Haradi Rama Ganiga



A veteran dancer who participated in the Seminar

musical rhythm at the time of creation. A change-over of *Raga* resulted mostly in disturbing this pattern. When an old song was sung in a new *Raga* and was found wanting, an elderly *Bhagawath* was requested to show as to how he was taught to sing by *gurus*. Many a time when the older pattern, which adhered to the composer's intention, was sung, it proved more beautiful, i.e., more meaningful.

Search for Lost 'Ragas'

2. Two sessions were taken up by the search for lost *Ragas* in *Yakshagana*. During the 11th and 12th centuries, *Yakshagana* was a developed form of court music. For reasons unknown, other schools ousted its place as court music. But the song pattern survived. In later *Yakshagana prasangas*, i.e., drama, we

find over 150 *Ragas* mentioned. Of these, about 30 names of *Ragas* are neither to be found in the present Karnatak music nor in Hindustani music. An elaborate list of all songs said to have been composed to such rare *Ragas* like the *dwijavanthee*, *panchagathee*, *mecchu*, *durdharee*, etc., was made.

They were chosen from *prasangas* that are still played and the participants were requested to sing such of them that they knew well. This deliberation was assisted by a competent Hindustani musician, Shri K.V. Naik, and Karnatak musician, Shri Srinivasa Udupa. Wherever the chosen songs showed the known pattern of any *Raga* of the southern or northern style of music, someone else was asked to sing the song if he knew any other variations. Many of the listed *Ragas* could not be discovered at all. But one is happy to note

that seven *Ragas* viz., *navarasa*, *dhawa ara*, *mechali*, *panchagathi*, *thujavanthi*, *ghantarava* and *madhu madhavi* came to light. The *arohans* and *avarohans* were noted, special *sancharas* were analysed and deviations from other schools noted. Finally, a small feature was recorded showing those seven *Ragas* sung by the various musicians most successfully.

It was felt that by a more patient and exhaustive research work, a richer repertoire of *Yakshagana* music could be made. This work needs immediate attention as it could be done only with the co-operation of the older generation of *Bhagawaths* now living. It is also felt necessary that the entire *Yakshagana* style needs analysis and standardisation so that future students may inherit the traditions in all its purity.

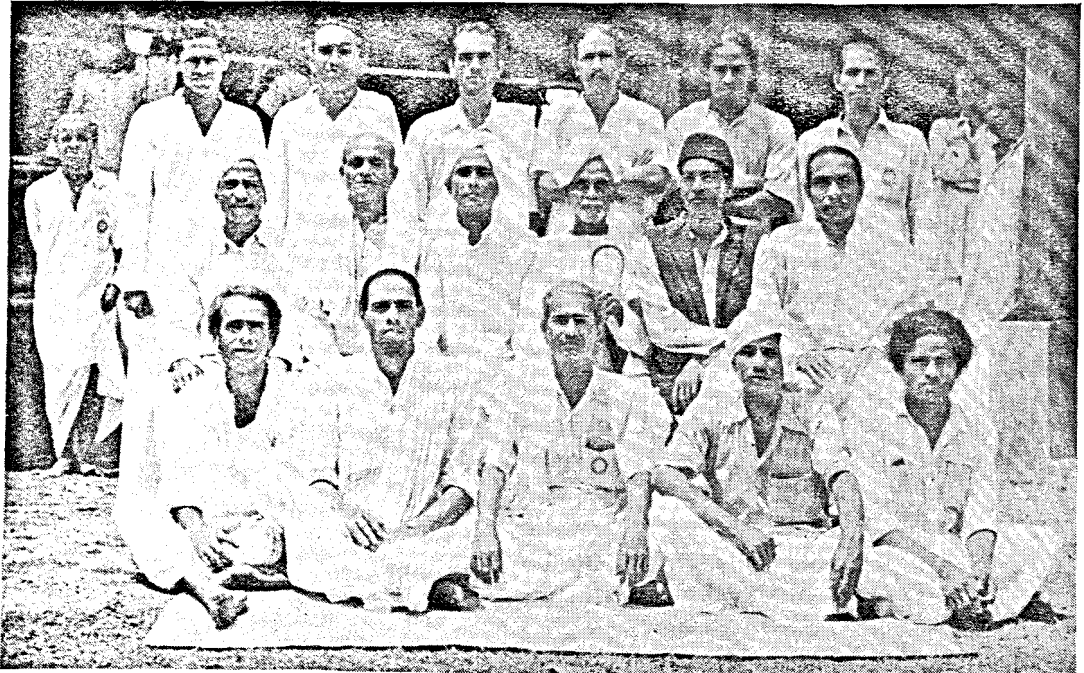
'Rasabhava'

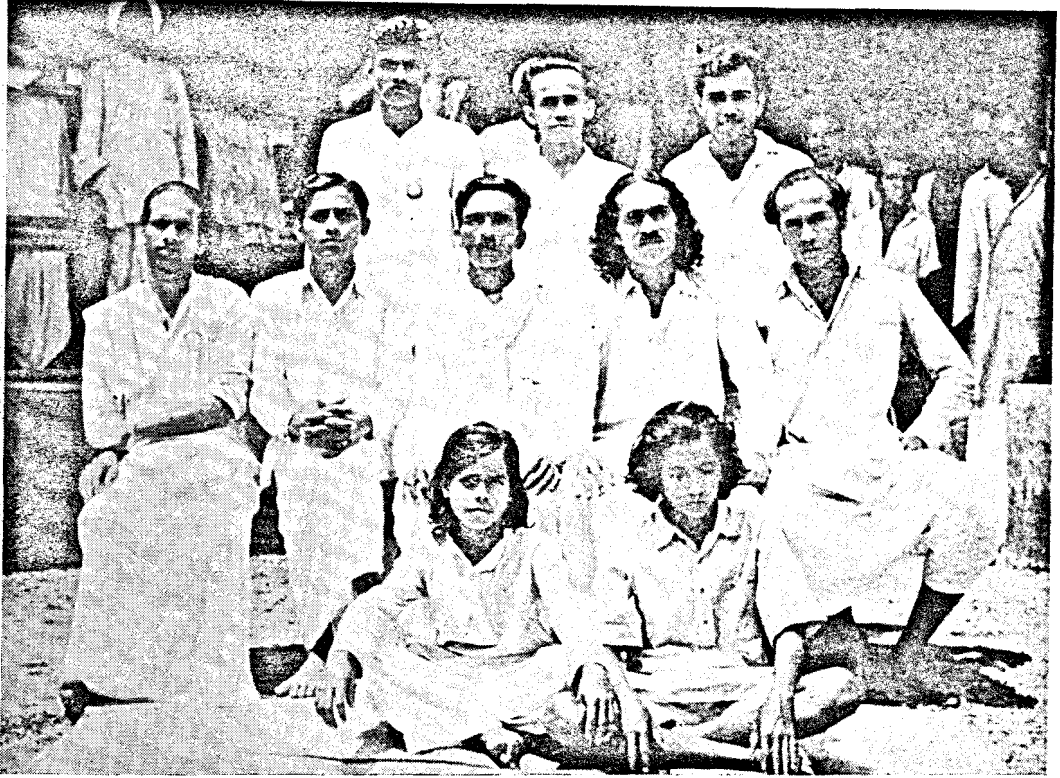
3. One session was taken up by the subject, *Rasabhava* and instrumental music (*pakka vadhya*). *Yakshagana* is usually not accompanied by an instrument like violin or *sarangi*.

Only a drone accompanies this singer. In former days, they used to have the *pungi* which has now been displaced by the harmonium *sruthi*. The seminar had invited Shri Ganapathi Giriyan, of Gokarn, a lone violinist who has cultivated *Yakshagana* music. He could show that to the accompaniment of the violin this music would be richer.

4. During the present session, three types of *maddale* and one of *chande*, which normally are used by our drummers, were displayed. Each one was asked to play one *Tala* separately so that its individual sound effect could be sensed. After this they were asked to accompany songs pertaining to various *Rasabhavas*. And then they were made to realise that a drummer is not merely a keeper of time but also an accompanying artiste who has the duty of conveying a *Bhava* too. So, besides technical skill, he has to create an emotional mood that a song or dance may require during the play. When a drummer can think only in these terms, he can suitably accompany a song. Rhythmic patterns of sound cannot be uniformly the same for various *Rasas*. Sounds for joy, sorrow, heroism, etc., would all

A group of dancers who took part in the Seminar



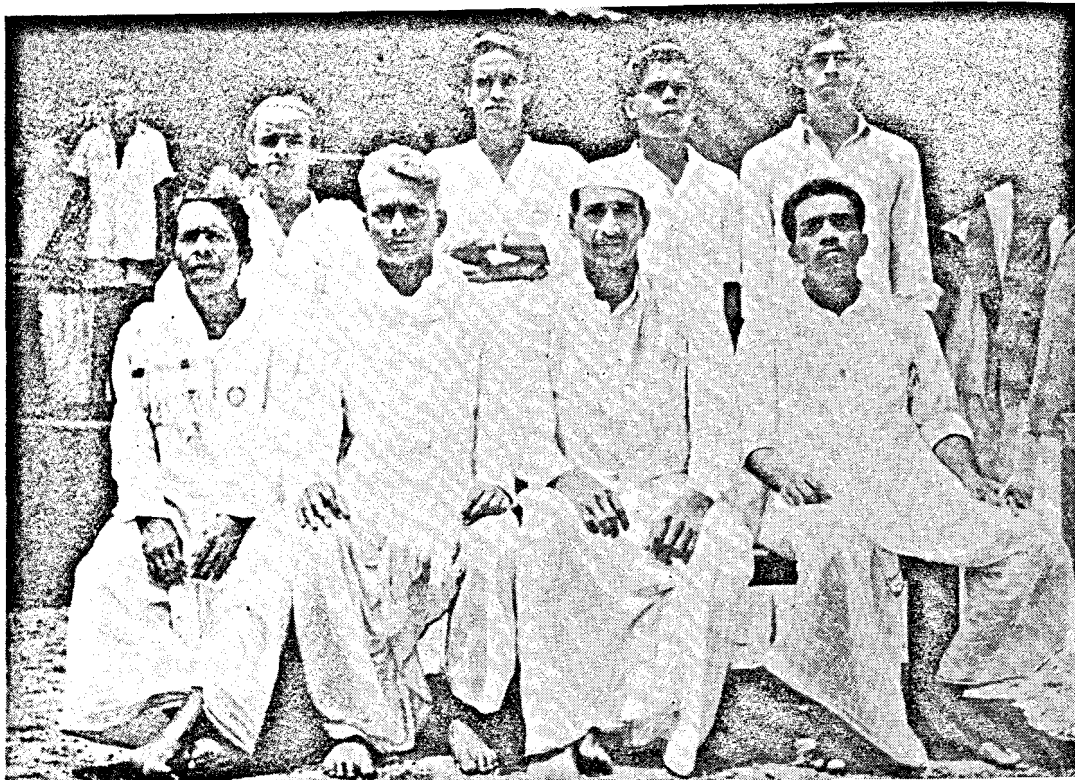


Another group of dancers who participated in the Seminar

vary from one another. Even the display of the sound of cymbals by the *Bhagawath* will have to be related to the contents of songs.

There were at least two drummers who could sense the importance of this angle of outlook. They were asked to follow carefully the rhythmic patterns shown to them by the conductor's hand and finger movements; instances were pointed out to them, for example, a hero is moving to the battlefield—the movement of the chariot wheels and the trot of the horses were suggested to be visualised. The conductor's hand-moves showed as to how the chariot sped and finally halted in the battlefield. Once the drummer understood the import of the idea with the technical knowledge of which he is a master, he could easily convey this idea in his drum-work. Experiments then and there were conducted whereof drums of various pitches could be harmonised and add to the richness of the *Yakshagana* orchestra.

One session, which was closed to onlookers and open only to the dancers, was taken up for the demonstration of *Ragabhava* and dance. Here, excepting two dancers the others stood rather shy to display their own technique or skill. The organiser, taking the audience into confidence, demonstrated how their dance consisting mainly of *nritya* could convey emotions and meaning of the various themes that they had to display. Here, rhythm was the main element (that helps the dancer) as apart from *natya* as is displayed by other schools like Bharata Natyam or Kathakali. Uptil now they *Yakshagana* dancer took shelter under *vachika* or the spoken word. This would be sufficient so far as his own Kannada-speaking world was concerned, but he has in him a greater instrument, viz., dance and music which could help him to communicate emotions in a style across the boundaries set up by language.



A group of drummers

After all the deliberations concerning art and expressions were over, two sessions were devoted to the topics concerning the economic conditions under which the artistes lived. The experiences of the elderly artistes were recounted by the veterans. All details were taken up, one after the other, as per the two elaborate *questionnaire* that had been circulated to them. Questions of patronage, recognition of merit, forms of training, qualifications of tutors, necessity for training, schools, refresher courses, etc., were taken up and discussed in an objective manner.

In conclusion, it may be said that the house felt that unless something was done immediately to save the future of *Yakshagana* dance-drama, the future was dark. The existence of *Yakshagana* troupes was becoming more and more risky and, moreover, respect for tradition was getting lost. Newer generation is un-

willing to come forward as there is no economic incentive to the profession.

After a four-day session, the delegates, one and all, felt that they had not wasted their time and hoped that in the near future their art could find a place, a deserving place, in the cultural renaissance of India.

Good Co-operation

The organiser thanked all the participants, volunteers, helpers and the host for their wonderful co-operation in making the seminar a success. Special mention was made of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, and A.I.R. for the interest shown by them towards the seminar.