SURABHI THEATRES: A LEGACY TO CONTINUE

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Surabhi is the only theatre group hailing from a single family. According to oral history, the origins of the group are dated to 1860 AD in Maharashtra. The ancestors of the Surabhi family were associated with King Sivaji’s court. Some families migrated to Andhra. It is said that the family of Vanarasa Govinda Rao selected the Sorugu village as their temporary resort and changed its name to Surabhi in 1885. Govinda Rao, a leather puppeteer, set up a travelling theatre group and named it after the village. Over more than a century, Surabhi’s unique family tradition lives on.

All roles are played by members of the Rao’s family who belong to the Maharashtrian lineage and share the four family names Vanarasa, Aveti, Aatok and Sindhe. Govinda Rao’s 13 children and grandchildren formed their own troupes. In its heyday around 1972, Surabhi had 2,000 artistes and 46 troupes. Lean times followed as Telugu cinema and television weaned audiences away. Today, 200 artistes and four active troupes - Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandal, Sharada Vijaya Natya Mandal, Bhanodaya Natya Mandal, Vinayaka Natya Mandal - remain. The mythological forms the staple of their repertory, with Lav Kush, Maya Bazaar and Bala Nagamma being perennial favorites. Rural audiences throng the theatres where Rs. 20 fetches a chair seat and half the sum a spot on the floor. Ghatotkacha swallowing laddus that come flying towards him, Ganga springing up from the ground, Narada descending from the skies, arrows flying in the air and lamps lit by the them and a large white key making its way across the stage on its own to reach the lock on the prison door are among the special effects that Surabhi’s innumerable theatre technicians have produced.

Behind the proscenium curtain, acts and scenes are set up like a deck of cards. Each scene within an act materializes by dropping curtains with distinctive painted locales that descend vertically or are flown down from the flies onto the stage. The generalized backdrops include forest, garden, street, palace or durbar, antapura (women’s quarters), perhaps a cave scene (Specially for Surabhi’s enormously popular ‘Mayabazaar’), and heaven. Curtains answering to current performances have more parks (for “love scenes”) and streets with modern buildings in perspective painting. The narrative is grounded by the atmosphere produced by the curtains and, on the other hand, the world of romance and dream is released, indeed made practicable, only through their presence.

For all its attractions, Surabhi was beginning to bore the audiences. There was nothing new in their repertoire to offer and, most often, other groups has extensively hired their technicians and over-used the Surabhi masterpieces in many historical verse and dance dramas in the country.

Just when it seemed that Surabhi’s disbanding was imminent, cultural enthusiasts like Garimmella Ramamurthy and Ramanachari pitched in and tried to find help from different sources. National School of Drama asked acclaimed musician-director B.V. Karanth to invigorate Surabhi with new theatre techniques.

Karanth realized the only way to salvage the group’s tradition was to put it in sync with contemporary reality, blending the old with the new. In his own words, “Typical characteristics like bright costumes, glittering
crowns and artistic cut-outs will, however, remain." (Director’s note for Chandi Priya). Unfazed by the tepid response to earlier attempt ‘Bhishma’, Karanth next produced Chandi Priya in 1997, dealing with female infanticide. In 1998, third production ‘Basti Devata Yadamma’, an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s ‘The Good Woman of Setzuan’, ran to a packed auditorium in Hyderabad. It did not do well with the rural audiences though. The Surabhi Paparos play on Shridi Sai Baba was thriving with many shows and touring extensively across the Telugu-speaking region.

Rising costs threaten the very existence of the troupes. Government repertory grants and accommodation at the artist’s colony has not made the performer’s life smooth. They are paid a paltry Rs 1,500 to 2,000 a month. But the plays go on. The fact that Surabhi has survived for so long speaks volumes for the resilience of Govinda Rao’s successors. The members of the group hope to regain its former glory and keep that leather puppeteer’s legacy alive.

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