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THE SURABHI THEATRE—AN OASIS OF TELUGU THEATRE

by

PRADEEP ASWINI GURRALA

A THESIS SUBMITTED

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

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THE SURABHI THEATRE—AN OASIS OF TELUGU THEATRE.

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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ABSTRACT

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This document is a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master of Arts degree in Theatre Arts. It is a detailed account of author Pradeep Aswini Gurralla's study of the Surabhi Theatre in Telangana, India. The thesis follows the journey of a 134-year-old theatre company in four chapters: puppet show to stage show; the evolution of the Surabhi Theatre; the decline of Surabhi Theatre; and Surabhi Theatre as a cultural heritage. Appendices and works cited are included.

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CHAPTER 1

PUPPET SHOW TO STAGE SHOW

Introduction

Contemporary people in India understand the term “theatre” as a “movie theatre” or a “cinema hall.” Most of today’s audience in India confine their awareness about the theatre only to movie entertainment but never know about the world of traditional drama. With an objective of bringing to light the history and evolution of one aspect of the Indian theatre, this study explores the origins and traditions of a touring theatre that originated in a state called Andhra Pradesh, which lies in the southern part of India. [See Appendix 1 for the geographical picture of this region on the map of India.]

The core theme of choosing this topic is to demonstrate that this theatre, called Surabhi, is the only professional touring company that is still in existence in the state of Andhra Pradesh, in spite of the emergence of various other modern entertainment sources. This study has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter provides an explanation about how this particular theatre evolved from various events that took place in 1885. The second chapter focusses on the unique features of the touring theatre, such as mythological plays with special effects, state of the art technical practices in the theatre, and details about costuming and stagecraft. The third chapter elucidates the

factors leading to the downfall of the theatre. And the fourth chapter gives an account of various measures taken for the maintenance and sustenance of this theatre's legacy.

This research has been conducted by considering various primary and secondary sources. The primary sources mainly include two people, Rakendar Nageswar Rao, the manager of the Surabhi Theatre, and Rakendar Jaya Chandra, who is an actor. The secondary sources include various theatre personnel such as professors, actors, producers, theatregoers and non-theatregoers. Efforts have been made to conscientiously devise questionnaires keeping in mind all the vital elements relating to theatre arts. The collected questionnaires have been appended to this thesis. Furthermore, there are several scholarly articles, historical research, online interviews and books that have been referenced for giving a justification and reiteration to the statements that are mentioned by the primary and secondary sources. To overcome the language barrier of the primary sources whose communication skills are confined to the vernacular medium Telugu, the official language of Andhra Pradesh, their questionnaires have been translated into English by this author for the ease of understanding to the reader. [See Appendix 20.]

Throughout this thesis, to avoid confusion between the primary source names, Rakendar Jaya Chandra Varma (the actor at the Surabhi Theatre) is referred to simply as Varma; and Rakendar Nageswar Rao (the manager at the Surabhi Theatre) is referred to as Rao.

An informative collage has been made with various images and paper cuttings of the Surabhi Theatre that were found during the research and are showcased at the end of this thesis for a visual presentation that enables the readers get a more vivid perception about the theatre discussed.

Natyashastra, a base for performing arts in India

Natyashastra, written by Bharata Muni, is the “one-stop resource” that enumerates the vast majority of detail about Sanskrit Theatre knowledge. The contemporary Indian performing arts are, in a way, connected to Natyashastra. This 36-chapter theatre encyclopedia provides categorical explanations about various elements in the theatre such as staging, scenery, acting, singing, music, stage managing, costuming, and other skills and roles related to theatre. It is to be understood that Muni is not just a forefather of Indian drama but is also a compiler of Indian performing arts, though this book’s exact publishing dates are not known to the readers. Most historians believe that he accumulated the knowledge of performing arts prevalent during the period from 200 BCE to 200 CE and compiled it as a liturgical book for Sanskrit theatre in 300 CE. The objective of this segment is to convey the significance of Natyashastra and how it is connected to the Surabhi Theatre, as well as several other theatres in India.

Berriedale Kieth, a researcher and professor at University of Edinburgh, was one of the foremost persons to study and do research about the origin of Sanskrit Theatre and its practices. One of the outcomes of his research is Sanskrit Drama, the details of which are exhaustively recounted. C. Rajendran, a professor and researcher at University of Calicut, India, has mentioned various connections between Natyashastra and Indian Theatre. The profundity of his research on Sanskrit Theatre and his insights have also been considerably useful in knowing about the origins of Sanskrit Theatre. Besides these research works, a comparative study between Aristotle’s Poetics and Muni’s Natyashastra by Zehra Haliloglu, an M.A student from Shangai Theatre Academy, has

been instrumental in connecting the dots between Natyashastra and the contemporary Indian theatre.

The difference between western and eastern theatre lies in its roots. Particularly, the roots of the Sanskrit Theatre are found in its “Vedas” and its overall anatomy lies in a holy book called Natyashastra. Vedas are the philosophical scriptures for Hinduism written in Sanskrit. There are four important Vedas in Hinduism, namely Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. These scriptures are mostly in the form of songs, dialogues and hymns. It is told that Bhrama, often referred to as the forefather of Hinduism, created drama by taking dialogue from Rigveda, music from Samaveda, acting from Yajurveda and Rasas, or sentiments, from Atharvaveda (Chettiarthodi 3). According to Berriedale, Indian tradition preserved in the Natyashastra, the oldest of the theory of the drama, claims the divine origins of drama and a close connection with the sacred Vedas themselves (12). Keith states that Sanskrit drama and religion are closely interweaved. The traces of religion are predominantly seen in Indian drama and more specifically in Surabhi Theatre. Some of the most prominent and frequently performed plays in Surabhi Theatre include *Mayabazaar* (Magic Market), *Balanagamma* (Little Snake) and *Sri Krishna leelalu* (Powers of Lord Krishna) and these dramas, which are translated from Sanskrit to the Telugu language, depict the oldest Hindu culture. [See Appendix 2 for pictures of the plays mentioned.] According to Jayachandra Varma, a fourth generation actor at the Surabhi Theatre, seventy out of seventy-two plays performed in the theatre were either translations or adaptations of Sanskrit plays.

Surabhi Theatre started with shadow puppetry and eventually transformed into stage theatre. It was performed in the southern state of India called Andhra Pradesh. The

native language of Andhra Pradesh is Telugu. The importance of shadow puppetry has to be mentioned in this context because the advent of shadow puppetry enabled the founders of the Surabhi Theatre to acquire the Sanskrit drama. The plays performed were full of divinity which was the core nature of any Sanskrit play. Rakendar Nageswar Rao, the present head of the Surabhi company, recollects the play *Keechakavadha* (Killing of the Demon) which primarily involved two characters, “Lord Krishna” and a demon named “Keechaka.” This was a short story from the epic Maharabharata. Whether the shadow puppetry in India had originated in Andhra Pradesh is not known yet and still remains an unanswered question. According to Berriedale, *Dutangada* was a shadow play performed in 1243 CE during the Chalukya dynasty (269). The Chalukyas were the rulers who occupied major portions of southern and central India including the state of Andhra Pradesh. [See Appendix 3 for a map showing the extent of the Chalukya dynasty.] The shadow puppetry is also considered to be a form of Sanskrit Theatre in Natyashastra. In Natyashastra, shadow puppetry is defined as the “*Chayanataka*” where “Chaya” refers to shadow and “nataka” refers to play. Therefore the Surabhi Theatre comes from the roots of old Sanskrit Theatre.

The major elements of acting in the Sanskrit Theatre are categorized into sentiments and emotional aspects. Sentiments are called “Rasas” and emotional states are called “Anubhavas.” In total, there are eight “Rasas” and eight “Anubhavas,” which together should create emotional impulses in the audience and that defines a great performance (Haliloglu 7). According to Chettiartodi, a close study of the Natyashastra leads to the inevitable conclusion that the deliverance of the text depended on the “Rasa” being delineated (1). The dominant use of emotions, coupled with a simple plot line, is

what makes a Sanskrit play work, as in the play *Sri Krishna Leelalu* which portrays the powers of the “Lord Sri Krishna.” This play has a central divine character called “Krishna” and the story is all about how Krishna saves people with his divine powers. The absence of subtext coupled with the deliverance of lines with superficial emotions, clearly resembling “Rasas” and “Anubhavas,” are major parts of this play. [See Appendix 4 for the picture.] This is a good example of Surabhi’s connection with Sanskrit Theatre.

The last millennium has shaped Indian art forms to a great extent. Every art form has given birth to hundreds of other performing arts, some of them have disappeared and some became stronger. For example, a famous Indian dance, “Bharatanatyam,” gave birth to “Kuchipudi” and “Odissi.” Similarly, “Thirayattam” in Kerala, gave birth to “Kathakali.” Besides these changes, technological advancements, invasions, introduction of new religions like Islam and Christianity, have all made their mark in enhancing art in India. In short, the creative coefficients of Indian art forms were the results of various civilizations and their amalgamation with existing natives.

Surabhi and its connection with epics

The birth place of the Surabhi Theatre is Surabhi, a small village in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The term Surabhi is synonymous with “fragrance” as translated from Sanskrit to English. A small team of puppeteers who desired to transform their puppetry into stage drama have named their group “Surabhi,” which was the name of a village. Since the puppeteers performed their debut production in that village, they named their touring company Surabhi. Ever since the inception of the theatre in 1885, all the way to

2020, the themes and stories adopted by the Surabhi Theatre remained mythological and more inclined towards Hinduism. The extractions of the mythological themes and stories are mostly from the two well-known epics of Hinduism, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Weaved with morals, dilemmas, predicaments and emotions, a major part of the Indian theatre is comprised with episodes from these epics. Originally written in Sanskrit, these epics have been translated into regional languages with modification based on the choices of playwrights.

The Mahabharata is a masterpiece of art written by the sage Vyasa in the fourth century BCE. It is a single poem comprised of eight volumes and known to be the longest poem ever written in the Sanskrit language. The basic plot of this epic is the war between two royal families, the “Pandavas” and the “Kauravas.” “Pandavas” refers to five brothers, whereas “Kauravas” refers to the sons of the Kuru dynasty. In a dice game between these two families, the Pandavas lose all their property to the Kauravas and, as a result, they were exiled from their own kingdom. The life of the Pandavas in exile and their efforts to return to the power by waging a war against the Kauravas is the core part of this epic. The Lord Krishna, who is considered to be the mastermind behind victory in the war, in favour of the Pandavas, is a common character and performs a vital role in many plays extracted from the Mahabharata. One of the most famous and the longest running play in Surabhi Theatre called *Sri Krishna Leelalu* (the magical powers of Lord Krishna) is a small part of this epic. The specific story revolves around various mischievous, wonderful, tactful and valiant activities of Lord Krishna and his efforts in keeping up the concept of “Dharma” (right behavior) in the whole kingdom of

Hasthinapura. In the context of large size of this epic, many playwrights adopt smaller tales from this epic.

Written by the sage Valmiki in fifth century BCE, the Ramayana is another epic which predominantly plays a role in traditional practices and the culture of Hinduism. It is the epic that has hundreds of versions in the different languages of India and international languages as well. Nevertheless, the basic plot line remains same in all the versions. The story revolves around the protagonist, Rama, and his war against the antagonist, Ravana, who happens to kidnap Rama's wife, Sita. Rama who was about to be crowned king was displaced from the ceremony due to the mean attitudes of the people such as jealousy, egotism and the typical family politics to make one of his younger brothers the king. Succumbing to the deceitful family politics, Rama is exiled from the kingdom for a period of fourteen years. During this exile, Sita is kidnaped by Ravana, who takes her to his kingdom of Lanka, an island. The final historic battle between Rama and Ravana to rescue and Sita from Ravana makes the climax to the epic's story.

Compared to the Mahabharata, the Ramayana is much shorter. The tales that are extracted from these two epics for performances in dramas are extensive. They are elaborately adapted to the requirements of the stage.

A famous play in the Surabhi Theatre called *Lava Kusa*, is a tale narrated by the twin sons of Rama to the entire nation, by touring from one village to another. Lava and Kusa refers to the names of the twins. After winning the war against Ravana, Rama was bothered and was doubtful about the chastity of Sita during her captivity with Ravana and banishes her from the kingdom. In fact, Rama's doubt about her character cropped up

because of the gossiping of the people in the kingdom. After Sita was banished, she gave birth to two sons and taught them the whole *Ramayana* story in the form of song. The twins thereby go on a tour from one village to another and finally reach Rama's kingdom and perform the whole story in front of Rama. After knowing that they are his own sons, the story ends with the reunion of Sita with Rama.

These two epics have a strong connection to the performing arts in India. There are dance dramas like "Kathakali" in the state of Kerala and "Bharatanatyam" in the state of Tamil Nadu. And there these epics are performed for as long as nine hours. [See Appendix 5 for the pictures of Bharatanatyam and Kathakali.] "Yakshaganam" is a form of musical theatre in the state of Maharashtra, where these epics are being performed by singing songs. [See Appendix 6 for a picture of the Yakshaganam.] The founders of the Surabhi Theatre, who were also shadow puppeteers, also have these epics as their main content. [See Appendix 7 for pictures of shadow puppetry.] Jayachandra Varma, an actor at the Surabhi theatre said, "it is difficult to see an Indian drama without the traces of Mahabharata and Ramayana." He added, "here at Surabhi Theatre, ninety percent of our plays are related to these two epics."

These epics are also reflected in Western countries. Peter Brook, a famous English director, known for his productions of *Carmen* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, did extensive research on the Mahabharata for about ten years and performed a stage version of it in the Avignon Theatre Festival in France in 1987. In an interview by Margaret Cryoden for The New York Times, Brook said, "The Mahabharata contains the most luxuriant poetic writing, and the energy of the imagery in the writing is the only

way telling the story. I had to find the appropriate form, the necessary language to tell the story.”

Soldiers to puppeteers

Transformation is a critical phenomenon in the life cycle of an individual. Most people endeavor to move up in their professional life. But in the lives of a few people, the transition takes place because of various factors such as environmental, historical, social, political, etc. The transformation of Maratha soldiers is not an exception. The transition of soldiers of a kingdom into puppeteers, involved a lot of political issues because of wars between two kingdoms, namely the Marathas and the Mughals of the present Maharashtra state. Warfare eventually led to the unemployment of the soldiers and poverty struck their families. In desperation, the miserable soldiers started their journey in search of livelihood. Some of them had migrated to the neighboring states seeking career opportunities. One such group of soldiers, who belonged to the “Aare” community, had migrated to a state called Andhra Pradesh. They settled in a place called Surabhi, in Kadapa, a district in Andhra Pradesh, and started practicing puppetry, which has ultimately become their occupation.

During the 17th century, India experienced an intense rivalry between the Muslim rulers, called Mughals, and the Hindu rulers, called Marathas. The Marathas were the Marathi speaking Hindu rulers whose jurisdiction proliferated and spread to a large part of India from the 17th to the 18th century. Their kingdom, at its peak, stretched from Tamil Nadu in the south, to Pakistan in the north. The Mughals were the Urdu speaking Muslim rulers whose kingdom extended from the Deccan region in the south, to Bangladesh in the east, Pakistan in the northwest, and to some parts of Afghanistan as

well. There were a series of wars that took place between these two empires during the 17th century in which the Marathas were led by Chatrapathi Shivaji. The Mughals were led by Aurangzeb. After the second and third Anglo-Maratha wars, in which the Mughals were allied with the English, the Marathas lost to the English and their royal authority was seized by the East India Company in 1818. During the wars, some of the Maratha soldiers, who belonged to the “Aare” community, had migrated to the southern part of the kingdom. They settled down in a small place called Kadapa, where they joined a local puppetry troop to start their new professional life. Gradually, they mastered the art as well and became proficient in the local language, Telugu, and started touring to different places giving performances. Researcher Autiero emphasizes “this Telugu tradition had been enriched by the arrival of new people from Maharashtra who eventually took over the art, so much so that in the last decades puppeteers are reported to be speaking a Marathi dialect” (1). Autiero further adds, “Younger family members are given extensive training in memorization of epic texts written in Telugu” (4). Their skill of being multi-linguists, their adaptable nature, the scarcity of career opportunities in their home state of Maharashtra, all had enabled the Marathas to adopt the Andhra Pradesh culture and, more importantly, enabled them to perform their shows in tune with the interest of the people. They gained the reputation of entertaining the multitude of people.

Hinduism is divided into various castes and sub-castes, which started with the arrival of Aryan civilization. The nomenclature of the castes were declared by the king in accordance with their respective occupations. For example, a group of priests were named as “Bhramins.” A group of businessmen were called “Vaishyas.” Furthermore,

the castes were sub-categorized into communities on the basis of the geographical region they were working in. The dominating power of each caste differs dynamically from region to region. Collective decision making and helping one another in their profession were part of their communal activities. This explains the reason why the soldiers migrated to the southern kingdom and adopted puppetry. A small part of soldiers in the southern kingdom were called the Aare community and they spoke the Aare dialect, a close version of Marathi language. According to researcher Modali Nagabhushana sarma, “whilst preserving the Aare dialect for the homely environment, these puppeteers chose to perform in Telugu, embracing the centuries old puppetry tradition they found in Andhra Pradesh” (2).

Andhra Pradesh, a Hindu majority state that has been ruled by many kings, is a treasure house for a diverse cultural and monetary source. Rich mineral rivers that flow through the state paves the way for ample opportunities in farming and animal husbandry, which, in turn, attracted many immigrants, including the British. According to a 2019 survey, Telugu is the third largest language spoken in India, ranging up to 70 million people.

Shadow puppet theatre

Puppetry is one of the ancient and the most widely performed arts in India. The art of puppet theatre is diversified and was performed in various formats throughout the country. Shadow puppetry was performed mostly by the soldiers turned puppeteers. Research articles from Durjjati Sarma and Fan Pen Chen gave support to the following claims. Research works of Serena Autiero adds more evidence to the shadow puppet

theatre in Andhra Pradesh. Autiero, a faculty research fellow at the Department of Buddhist Archaeology and Buddhist Social History, School of Sociology and Anthropology, Sun Yat-Sen University (Guangzhou, PRC) has researched extensively about the shadow puppet theatre in Andhara Pradesh.

Before the Aare community embraced shadow puppetry, the history of shadow puppet theatre was nearly as old as Sanskrit theatre. In Andhra Pradesh, it is more popularly called “*Tholu Bommalata*” (leather shadow puppetry). These leather puppets are mostly made of mountain deer’s skin. According to Durjjati Sharma, these puppets are of human size and they are translucent, to cast the colorful shadow on a white screen or white cloth (38). Many claim shadow puppet theatres were the basis of puppetry for neighboring countries like China, Indonesia and Japan. This can be exemplified by the animal-like objects found with movable heads and limbs in the Harappa excavations and this reveals the existence of puppets during the Indus valley civilization (Llewellyn 21). Autiero claims it was popular from the Satavahana (4th to 6th centuries CE), and also adds that it was from South India and later spread across East Asia (2). A brief research on shadow puppetry by Fan Pan Chen concluded that shadow theatre most likely existed in India since the first millennium BCE, and that it has probably been performed there during the sixth and seventh centuries CE (31).

Puppets are specifically divided into two categories: stick or string puppet theatre and shadow puppet theatre. The north Indian states like Rajasthan and Gujarat are famous for stick puppet theatre, whereas the southern states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are known for shadow puppet theatre. In Natyashastra,

shadow puppet theatre is referred to as *chaya nataka* (“*chaya*” means shadow and “*nataka*” means theatre).

The puppet shows were performed in Andhra Pradesh in open places for ritual occasions such as marriages, cradle ceremonies, funeral, etc. The shows were organized for religious festivals as well as national holidays. No occasion was an exception for a puppet performance (Orr 71). “The livelihood of many touring puppet theatres including *Surabhi* survived on these occasions besides the regular shows” says Jayachandra Varma. The basic resources required for these shows include a bright light source and a screen. The light source is placed far away from the puppets to cast colorful shadows on the screen from the translucent colored puppets. A white muslin cloth along with puppets of human size, which are supported by sticks, are major requirements for a shadow puppet show. The stage requisites, other than the puppets, are generally few (71). A live orchestra in front and puppeteers (less than three members in most cases), give their voice while manipulating the puppets.

The themes of shadow puppetry are highly mythological. Orr claims that throughout India, Indonesia and all of southeast Asia, the traditional repertory of the puppet theatre is still highly religious (74). Short stories from Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the major sources that are used for scripting the story boards of the play. These stories are sometimes modified, especially for the puppet shows. Sarma mentions, “as for the stories of *Ramayana* in Telugu, they rely upon Ranganath’s *Ramayana* in Telugu which was written exclusively for the puppet shows. (38).

Puppeteers to stage actors

This section enumerates various factors that enabled the puppeteers to emerge as the stage actors who have established the most well-known Surabhi Theatre. The two most important people, who are considered pioneers and played a dominant role in establishing the Surabhi Theatre, are Ramoji and Govind Rao. Ramoji was the eldest son of a landlord who was a trained puppeteer and Govind Rao was an adopted member of the family. Ramoji was well known as “Pedda Ramayya” as the villagers used to call him. A few others used to call him “Ramayya.” With a lot of eagerness and dedication, he learned the craft of puppetry and started performing in Telugu, which was challenging for a person with the Marathi language as his mother tongue. Besides playing a vital role in raising his family, he was quite instrumental in introducing a touring theatre, which subsequently gained an enormous following among the multitudes. Govind Rao came from a very poor family. His parents were laborers in the construction industry. He was so ill-fated that he became an orphan as a result of sudden demise of his parents in a fatal accident and, consequently, the poverty stricken Govind had no option other than begging for his livelihood.

The historical background about Govind Rao and the transformation from puppeteers to stage actors was acquired in an interview with Jayachandra Varma. Though it was a brief interview, it gave a vivid historical picture about the factors that led to the emergence of stage actors.

The two major influences for the transformation were: the Parsi theatres, which were Indian theatres with a strong western influence, and the “Devadasis”—a community of women whose services were dedicated to the village deity. Between the 12th and 18th

century, Devadasis were a group of women who performed dances in the temples or in king's courts.

Jayachandra Varma mentions that a wealthy landlord named Sanjeev Rao sacrificed his life for the well-being of the village leaving his wife and children destitute. The impoverished and penniless lady started wandering on the streets along with her children. They were fortunate enough to come across the Maratha puppeteers, who belonged to the same Aare community. Upon grasping wisdom from the puppeteers, the landlord's family travelled from village to village showcasing the art. As a boon, during these tours, this family happened to stumble upon an orphan child, unconsciously lying on the ground. He was none other than Govind Rao. Subsequently, they were kind and wise enough to adopt the child into their family.

Very soon after the adoption, it didn't take much time for the members to bring out the hidden talent and discover capacity in the orphan boy Govind Rao. This orphan quickly acquired skills in puppetry and continued touring along with the family for a year. Though he was active in performing the puppetry show, his conscience and self-respect could not accept the custom of begging for food after the performance. This type of begging is synonymous with that of street circus. The underprivileged castes in India give open performances on the street for their livelihood. Instead of a ticket system, these street performers beg for money after the performance. This system of begging made Govind Rao feel a sense of shame and his self-respect was hurt. Moreover, during this tour, Govind Rao was quite fascinated with the Parsi Theatre, professional theatre troupes that visited from Bombay, India. The 12-year-old Govind Rao was so inspired by the Parsi Theatre concepts that he quit puppetry and launched into stage acting so that he

could earn money through a ticketing system rather than begging. He put the proposal of his professional transition before his family members for approval but it was in vain. The disapproval from the family made him slip away from the house and join a prostitute run theatre called “Nelluru Jyothi Subbiah Company.” This theatre was run by women known as Devadasis, and they also played male characters. This theatre showed Govind the techniques of makeup and costumes for the stage.

After two years journeying with them, Govind reunited with the landlord’s family after an agreement to perform on stage and not behind white muslin. Soon after the reunion, opportunity for their debut stage performance knocked on their door in 1885, when two rich people, Chenna Reddy and Ram Reddy, invited Konark Pedda Ramayya, the head of the puppet show theatre, to give a performance for the wedding of one of their daughters. Entertaining performances like dances, singing and stand-up comedians are seen in Indian weddings even today. It is a belief that performances like these drives away the evil eye from the newlywed couple.

With the help of a playwright SubbaDasu, Govind Rao made changes to the puppet play called *Keechakavadha* and created a stage version. *Keechakavadha*, which translates to “demon killing,” is the first show that was performed without the puppets. It is a tale from the Indian epic, The Mahabharata. With a phenomenal debut stage performance, they became quite popular and started getting offers from villages all around. Since then, they have never looked back.

CHAPTER 2

THE EVOLUTION OF THE SURABHI THEATRE

This chapter gives an overview of the various aspects that are being adopted by the puppeteers which led them to success, both financially and artistically. It is not the intention to describe its success, but to focus on the changes that have been made to the Sanskrit drama that brought about uniqueness to their company, which in 1900s was never seen in the state of Andhra Pradesh. It was in this century that the glorification of theatre started to take shape in Andhra Pradesh as well as in India as a whole. Whether it is social theatre or mythological theatre, the approach towards the theatre has enormously changed, due to various factors that are mentioned below.

The first five decades of 20th century, which saw the final stages of British Colonization, have largely contributed to the Indian theatre that exists today. This chapter provides an illustration as to how the Surabhi Theatre group has utilized the concepts of western theatre to create their own form of theatre. Technicalities such as pyrotechnics, lighting, sound and other special effects using mechanical equipment, were all developed in the last five decades of 20th century. A detailed description of advancements in their styles and usage will be mentioned throughout this chapter.

The interviews of Rakendar Nageswar Rao (head of Surabhi Theatre) and Jaya Chandra Varma (an actor) are mentioned to support the observations wherever necessary.

[See Appendix 20.] As historical documentation has never been made on the Surabhi Theatre, the historical aspects, as narrated by Rao and Varma, are primary sources, since it was their own family run theatre for the last 135 years.

Ticketless theatre to ticketed theatre

Though the journey of Surabhi Theatre started in 1885, it took five years for Peda Ramayya, the founder of Surabhi Theatre, to introduce the first ticketed show. This landmark started the modern Telugu Theatre in Andhra Pradesh. Ticket systems had not been in the state of Andhra Pradesh before this. For this research, a personal interview with Murali Basa, a theatre faculty member at the Assam University in India, and a video documentary about the Surabhi Theatre, produced by Mojo media house, have been consulted. A supporting article on Indian theatre written by Girish Karnard, a theatre artist and a Rhodes Scholar recipient at Oxford University in London, has also been examined. Additionally, an unpublished research work on Surabhi Theatre by Modali Nagabhusa Sarma, an MFA graduate from the University of Illinois, has been cited as it is the only available resource that describes the history of this touring theatre. Sarma has published books on “Kurchipudi,” a well-known traditional dance in the state of Andhra Pradesh and about Folk Performing Arts of the region.

Rao, the present manager of The Surabhi Theatre, credits Ram Reddy and Chenna Reddy as two people who supported The Surabhi Theatre both financially and morally during their journey. [See Appendix 20.] After their successful first staged performance at a wedding, Rao describes huge support from all sections of society, which included the donation of housing facilities that the artists could use as their regular residence and

rehearsal halls. He adds, “as a memoir, a portion of sand from the place where their first play was performed has been collected and was given a holy respect as well as offered prayers to the sand every morning.” After five-years of long practice and with some experimentation, in 1890, Surabhi Theatre sold its first ticket for the play *Keechaka Vadha*, that was directed by Balaji Dasu.

The process of selling tickets for theatrical performances had not been in practice in Andhra Pradesh until the 1880s. It was with the advent of Parsi touring theatres, that selling tickets for performances had been started. Modali’s research mentions that since 1879, Parsi touring theatres had been continually visiting Madras city in southern India, which was in close proximity to the Surabhi village. Before the coming of the Parsi touring companies, the folk theatre in Andhra Pradesh was full of dances and narration. This style of theatre is called “Veedhi Natakam” (street theatre), which was the only stage performance prevalent in the 1880s. As the name indicates, it is performed on streets with one actor performing and another performer playing music in the background. [See Appendix 8 for an image of street theatre]. The minimalism in the costumes and absence of sets were due to the socio and economic conditions of the performers.

In a personal interview, Basa was asked about the history of ticketed systems in Andhra Pradesh and he answered that the economic condition of the performers was poor and pathetic because of the social conditions prevalent during 19th century. The majority of performers belonged to the lower caste, who made their livelihood out of post-performance begging as their regular practice. The family members of The Surabhi Theatre belong to one such lower caste group called “Aare” and similarly made money as

the street theatres did. Since plays were performed in temple premises and village centers, people were used to watching plays in open theatres and thus money payment became voluntary instead of mandatory. Basa has mentioned in the interview that, instead of money, a few concerned people offered food and clothes to the artists.

Interpreting this as a disgrace for performers, Vanarasa Govind Rao, an orphan who was adopted into the Surabhi family, rebelled against the age-old custom of running the theatre on alms. [See Appendix 9 for the picture of the Govind Rao family.] His self-respect made him start charging a price for the performances instead of begging and this pricing concept was akin to that of urban theatre companies. This idea has not only changed the lives of Surabhi Theatre performers but also increased financial stability of many actors and artists. The number of theatre goers had increased and the audience was separated from the regular people. This ticketing system has highly changed the perception of the audience towards the theatre in India. Famous theatre artist Girish Karnad says, “Since it had no financial stake in the show, the audience were willing to take a risk where the performance itself is concerned” (335).

This ticket system has largely influenced Surabhi’s long journey. Jaya Chandra Varma, a fourth generation artist at Surabhi, has mentioned that the very first show in 1890 collected a sum of one hundred rupees, which was considered a huge amount and a box office hit in those days. This inspiration boosted the confidence in the Surabhi family and subsequently led to the formation of a touring theatre. “Open theatre” has become “closed theatre,” temporary stages, lights, makeup, costumes have been upgraded with the monetary success of the touring. It can be said that the ticket system has given a financial stability to Surabhi artists. Rao recollects, when there is no cinema, Surabhi

gave the experience of spectacle with various technological improvements, which was the first of its kind in Andhra Pradesh. He further adds, “(ticket system) has improved our respect in the society.” As of today, in 2020, this 135-year old theatre offers tickets for 25 rupees (approximately \$0.35). It took decades for the people to consider the theatre artists as “professionals” and a ticketless theatre to emerge as a ticketed theatre.

Touring theatres

The popularity of the Surabhi Theatre was growing so widely and exponentially that it spread its art to various other places in the state. Consequently, the family members of Surabhi initiated touring theatre similar to the Parsi touring companies. The touring theatre performances continued for about a decade from 1901 to 1910 in various parts of Andhra Pradesh. During these tours, the family members improved their skills and talents that subsequently resulted in their long run. A personal book, “The Real Life Drama of The Surabhi,” on the evolution of the Surabhi Theatre written by Rakendar Bharani Prasad, who served as a technician in Surabhi Theatre for more than 60 years, is a primary reference for this information. Prasad is a third-generation technician in the Surabhi Theatre. His father and grandfather had served the same theatre until their last days. A supporting article on touring theatre published in The Historical Journal, written by Tobias Becker, a professor from University of Berlin, Germany, has also been a resource. Additionally, insights from the book, The Stages of Life, written by Kathryn Hansen, a professor at The University of Texas, Austin, have been cited.

The colonial British rule in India contributed greatly to the modern Indian theatre. The international companies from London toured the major colonial cities in India where

large English-speaking people were dwelling. These performances by the British touring companies reached not only the European diaspora, but the elite of the indigenous society as well (Becker 709). The wealthy Parsi community in Bombay and college students in Calcutta are among the Indian native population. The people in big cities, particularly in Bombay, became obsessed about such theatre. By the 1960s, there were twenty Parsi theatre companies (Hansen 8). Hansen mentioned in her book,

It can be dated in 1868 when Grant Road Theatre, the only theatre in Bombay, was flooded with bookings by various theatre companies in city. The increasing craze for the theatre performance resulted to substantial competition among the theatre companies. The competition had grown to such an extent that the demand for the theatre performances had exponentially increased as a result of which the theatres had to face the problem of slots scarcity for each repertoire. As an alternative method of earning revenue companies began touring outside the city. (11)

These tours by Parsi theatre companies majorly influenced the establishment of the Surabhi touring theatre.

With successful shows running and money steadily flowing, family members started touring in the surrounding villages within the same district. Rakendar Bharani Prasad who has extensively written on Surabhi history, mentions in his book, “By 1901, a 40-member crew started touring in different districts in Andhra Pradesh resulting to enormous popularity. As it was a ticket drama, the stage was strongly erected and all the four sides of the theatre used to be enclosed with surfaces made with jute” (30). Though they confined their touring to towns within the district, they later spread their horizons to

other districts and, by 1905, they had toured in big colonial cities like Madras and Bombay.

Unlike Parsi touring companies, which came with all the technical equipment, the Surabhi touring company upgraded while touring to each town. According to Varma, “these tours shaped Surabhi in all crafts involved in theatre. Inclusion of new musical instruments, upgrading of technical equipment, addition of new scripts and strengthening of vocal and dance pedagogy, developed in the time of touring.” Rakendar mentions that Kottaya Devara, one of the most famous violinists in Bandar, a small town in the Krishna District of Andhra Pradesh, agreed to teach the children at the request of Surabhi family members while the Surabhi company was touring in that district. Similarly, tabla and clarinet were added with the help of professionals from the village in which they were touring. Other technical elements, like replacing kerosene lamps with petromax bulbs, the addition of stage curtains, stage decorations (such as backdrop scenery paintings) were developed during the tours. Over a decade of touring, family members reached back to the village from which they had started and they decided to expand exponentially in the form of “Samajam”-branch theatres.

Samajam (a branched theatre)

The Surabhi Theatre’s stage performances were not confined to one single village. By 1915, they started widening their horizons by performing in multiple villages simultaneously. The growth of the popularity along with the spike in family members led to the formation of “Samajam” which means theatre branching. This idea of branching is similar to that of the Parsi Theatre groups that existed in India between 1875 and 1930.

Kathryn Hansen, a professor in the department of Asian studies at The University of Texas (Austin), has extensively researched and translated books related to South Asian theatre. In this context, Hansen's research article on Parsi theatre which was published by Sangeet Natak Academy (Music Drama Academy) in 2001, is taken as a reference to support the answers given by Nageswar Rao and Jaya Chandra Varma.

The word "Parsi" refers to a community of people who migrated from Persia during the 7th century CE. During the 1840s, a group of businessmen and intellectuals in Bombay who belong to Parsi community, started multiple theatre companies there under the name "Parsi Theatre Corps." Hansen says, "The phrase 'Parsi Theatre' signifies the playhouses built and operated by the Parsi community, along with Parsi playwrights, Parsi dramas, Parsi stages, Parsi actors, Parsi directors and so on" (9). The popularity of this organization opened the door for the non-Parsi Theatre companies to use an extension "of Bombay," which refers to Parsi Theatre companies. The Jubilee Imperial Theatrical Company of Bombay is a company that originated in a state called Uttar Pradesh in Northern India. [See Appendix 1 for the location of Uttar Pradesh.] Its owners added "of Bombay" to connect it to the Bombay companies, hoping to make a greater profit by using this association (9). This same concept of adding an extension was used by the Surabhi Theatre to enhance their growing popularity.

From 1885-1910, over the course of twenty-five years, many changes had given rise to the expansion of the Surabhi Theatre. From the very beginning of this theatre, it was known as a family run theatre rather than a hiring repertoire company. According to Varma, "Till today, jobs were catered depending upon availability of the family members during the specific genre play. If the show required only women, the men acted as a

backstage crew for scene changes. Instead of hiring other people, the family members occupied most of the jobs on and off the stage.” This is evidence enough to justify the similarities of the Parsi Theatre and the Surabhi Theatre. The Parsi idea of community theatre is adopted in the form of family theatre by Surabhi family members. While answering to the questions about the branching of the Surabhi Theatre, Rao says

...women in family gave birth to at least ten people. At a certain period, our women continuously gave birth in a sense to be called as large theatre. Everything went on well with the increase in the Surabhi family population and certainly it had enabled the Surabhi Theatre to acquire its talent sources that helped them open their branch theatres throughout the state. Contrarily, over a decade period, the deliberate hike in the population of Surabhi Theatre family turned out to be a serious problem for the elderly people to maintain the theatre and pay the families.

This exponential increase caused the theatre to break down into small groups called “Samajam.” The family divided into three groups. Each new branch theatre continued to work under the same name, Surabhi, with their own individual company brand name added along side. Similar to the “of Bombay” extension, here members of the family added the extension “Surabhi” at the end. For example, Rakendar Nageswar Rao, manager for the Surabhi Theatre in the city of Hyderabad, has a sub-name for his theatre called “Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali.” [See Appendix 10 for a sample picture of Rao’s theatre branch]. While Varma recollects the existence of more than sixty such branches by 1980, that had dropped down to a negligible five branches by the year 2000. Rao stated that “Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali” has been the only branch with a

permanent stage since the early 2000s, and the rest of the branches disappeared after the year 2000.

Women run the theatre

Ever since the inception of the Surabhi Theatre, it was run by women. It was their job to manage all the roles behind the stage including technical and non-technical jobs. Though the managers of the branch theatres were men, women were seen as more instrumental in getting the job done actively in all the departments. In a country like India, where women were confined mostly to domestic work, it is important to understand the quality of women in the Surabhi Theatre and their laudable contribution to the success of the theatre. Modali Nagabhushana Sarma's research on Surabhi and Rakendar Bharani Prasad's manuscript on Surabhi are primary sources. An article on women in theatre by R.G. Mahapati gives supporting information about women in the Surabhi Theatre. An article on the challenges faced by female playwrights, by Indu Pandey, a research student at Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies at University of Delhi, also gives insight.

The status of women in the performing arts both, pre and post-colonial rule, hadn't changed until 1970. Women in theatre was not a respectable job like it is today. In the pre-colonial rule, women in theatre consisted of those who danced in the name of deity. They were called as "Devadasis" and, later, such women were considered prostitutes. Mahapati says, "Indian women theatre artists and personalities are less recognized. They were neglected for they were all from the community of prostitutes, singers and harlots" (109). Indu Pandey says, "males ruled the female performers who

generally came from courtesans and prostitute classes. In male theatrical domain, women were forced to perform roles assigned to them by male practitioners” (47). By contrast, this wasn’t the case with Surabhi women. Varma says, “women were trained like warriors and young men were pampered like women.” He also adds, “to tackle the indecent crowds and acrid comments, women were trained harshly during their early days.”

Since the debut play, *Keechaka vadha* in 1885, women were seen on the stage. Papa Bhai from Surabhi Theatre was the first women artist in Andhra Pradesh who earned a respectable image among the other women artists. Sarma states, “In an era when men alone were playing the female roles and female impersonation was a rule rather than an exception, the Surabhi people’s age-old custom of having ‘men for male roles (puppets)’ and ‘women for female roles (puppets)’ dictum in their puppet shows, was continued” (45). It didn’t stop with Papa Bhai; the next three generations of women of Surabhi were involved in the theatre for their entire lives. It was not only on stage, they were actively involved in off-stage roles such as the costumer in-charge, make-up in-charge, stage managers and backstage crew. Mahapati, in comparing Surabhi women with other state women artists says, “Surabhi was full of highly talented women artists. Especially Vanarasa Govind Rao’s wives Lakshamma, Subbamma and many others enriched the theatre with their astounding contributions. Of course, they enhanced the cultural history of the Andhra theatre” (110). These statements validates the support and efforts by women of Surabhi that continues to this date. Even today women in Surabhi are paid on par with the men and it is the only professional company in India to do so, as mentioned by Varma.

Mayabazaar

Mayabazaar is an iconic play performed by the Surabhi Theatre. It is extracted from The Mahabharata, an Indian epic that has not only gained renown in India but also has a widespread recognition throughout the world. The play has created the most prestigious milestone for the team of the Surabhi theatre in its 135-year long journey. Though played many, many times, the theatre-lovers can never get enough of it. The purpose of mentioning this play among the 72 plays they have performed, is due to the high technicalities that they have applied and the creativity that they have exhibited through astounding visual wonders on the stage.

The characters and relationships from The Mahabharata were wisely and tactfully exploited and the story was accordingly scripted and developed, tuning it to the taste of audience and, thus, the Surabhi could engage them in the theatre giving them high quality entertainment. Though the acts of characters, like displaying the power of God, may show the mythological aspect of the play, the true underlying objective of the play was an absolute entertainment which was uncommon in the Surabhi's plays. The story is about the marriage of Sasirekha and Abhimanyu and the twists and turns that make it possible, despite all odds. King Balarama wishes to give his daughter's (Sasirekha) hand to his nephew, Abhimanyu, the son of Subhadra and Arjuna. But his wife, Revathi, misled by Narada, was reluctant to do this. She persistently pestered Balarama to arrange their daughter's marriage with Lakshmana Kumara, the son of King Duryodhana, and Balarama finally gives in. Heart-broken Abhimanyu heads to the forest, along with his mother, to meet his father, Arjuna, who is in exile. On their way they meet

Ghatothkacha, the Demon King, who is Abhimanyu's cousin. He promises to fix Abhimanyu's problems. With the support of Abhimanyu's uncle, the Lord Krishna, and using his own magical powers, Gatothkacha disguises himself as Sasirekha and marries Lakshmana Kumara. Soon, Sasirekha's parents regret their decision of marrying their daughter to Lakshmana Kumara, but on realizing the truth, they happily agree to Sasirekha and Abhimanyu's wedding.

Besides the alluring storyline, the mesmerizing professional skills of Surabhi technicians have equally contributed in turning the play into a masterpiece. In fact, the on stage performance created more than enough laughter that entertained the audience and made them spellbound and glued to their seats in the theatre. The performers work in diverse capacities both as technicians and actors. They not only act on stage but also are involved in backstage preparations, like painting the scenery, arranging set properties, sewing the costumes, doing the lighting and other works. Almost all the members the theatre team perform many tasks.

Mayabazar is a spectacle of illusions and wonders. The elaborate stage setups, brilliant set designs, lighting and special effects create wonderful illusions and appeals to all kinds of audience regardless of age and gender. The techniques used in the scenes, such as Narada descending on stage from the heavens, Gatothkacha eating incredible amounts of food, etc., enralls the audience, and recreates the mythical era to perfection. The distinctive glittery costumes, striking makeup, live music, fantastic sets, special effects and the earnest performance of the actors all together keep the audience glued to their seats. Despite the budget constraints the endeavors to bring out the best quality

performance in every scene is unparalleled and thus the Surabhi Theatre proved itself to be unique and gained a monopoly brand-image with the theatre audience.

Lighting and special effects

On stage performance of the artist alone in the theatre would not be sufficient for audience satisfaction. Additionally, stage decorations, settings and other technicalities also play a vital role in attracting the audience and making them stay glued to their seats in front of the stage. All fabrications on the stage can be justified only when the audience believe it to be true. Suspending the audience's beliefs and taking them into the fictional world of the theatre requires special effects to play an important role, especially, in mythological dramas. In fact, mere action by the artists without any special effects would be a vainglorious attempt to impress the audience, particularly in dramas with mythological themes. Lighting and special effects play a significant role in creating the spectacle on the stage. The mythological plays in Surabhi Theatre are seen to have more light cues and special effects than the plays with social themes.

Rao, with a vast experience of more than sixty years in theatre, asserts that, "nowhere in Andhra Pradesh is there a professional theatre with as many special effects as the Surabhi has." Varma mentions that some audiences used to come to the theatre exclusively for experiencing the special effects that were displayed in the play and, more specifically, this was witnessed in the case of the play *Mayabazaar*. It is not an exaggeration to say that behind today's rich technical standards, there are strong foundations laid by the beginners of Surabhi.

Lighting is an important aspect which sets the mood of the play. While describing his first modern theatre experience, Girish Karnad, a theatre playwright, director, and actor said, “the plays were staged in semi-permanent structures on proscenium stages, with side wings and drop curtains and were illuminated by the petromax lamps” (332). Karnad was referring to a performance in the state of Karnataka, which shares the border with Andhra Pradesh, and the year he mentioned was 1940. [See Appendix 1 for the location.] However, Surabhi started using dynamo lights by 1926. (Sarma 122). “We started with hand torches, moved to kerosene lights, then petromax lights and finally Dynamo lights by 1926,” says Rao. The Surabhi Theatre adopted the changes in technology faster than its contemporaries.

The unique feature of Surabhi is its versatility as it’s a family run theatre with all the multitasking actors who take-up technical jobs behind the stage when required and at times technicians also are trained to play any role. [See Appendix 10 for the family picture of the Surabhi company.] These technical and onstage performance skills that were inherited over generations is not only confined to a single family, but they shared their wisdom with the community, colleges and universities. Padma Priya, an assistant professor in Theatre Department at the Potti Sreeramulu University in Andhra Pradesh, has mentioned the Surabhi’s technical skills in an interview on the Mojo media channel. Priya said, “Many youth from Surabhi are invited to give guest lectures to students as well as employed on a contract basis for the university productions.” It should be noted that most of the Parsi theatres were run by the educated people and scholars from different universities (Hansen 5), whereas no one in Surabhi had any college education until the end of the 20th century. For the Surabhi crew, creativity never fell asleep despite

their illiteracy, poverty and social status. Through their unprecedented lighting skills and creative adaptation of the script, Surabhi's lighting techniques stand a step above their contemporaries.

By 1960s, footlights, top lights, convex lights, halogens, spotlights and projectors were part of the theatre. A scene from *Mayabazaar*, would exemplify the astounding performance of the technicians. The scene highlights Sasirekha, the princess of the Magadha kingdom, who worries about her fiancée and stays awake throughout the night. The transition of time from the night until the dawn is shown in this play. [See Appendix 11 for the image from *Mayabazaar*.] The sunrays on Sasirekha's face on stage left, the half-moon with glowing stars on the stage right, and the space between these two lights is filled with darkness at the stage center. Similar to this scene, there are hundreds of light transitions in *Mayabazaar*. These were specifically designed and produced by the family members themselves. Narrating the memories of the journey from hand torches to light projectors, Rao recalls his first encounter with the light bulb. He said that in the early years, a small bulb attached on the top of a tall tower kind of pole and that was used as a signal for the commencement of the show. In the evenings, people gathered when the light was kept on and it is switched off once the show begins. This pole was so tall that people in the village from 2 kilometers away could see the light.

Whether it's a scene where the throne emerges from the ground or when the rain showers upon character's prayers, everything needs to be believable on stage. Besides an actor's undeniable performance, without the special effects, one might not earn the audience's attention and admiration. Thus, it leads modern directors to employ special

effects not as an option but as a necessity. Surabhi was no different from this rule and undoubtedly they were the pioneers in Andhra Pradesh.

When it comes to mythological plays, the majority of the characters portray larger than life characteristics. For example, a character named Krishna, who is regarded as a God in all the plays in Surabhi, is seen revealing his magical powers in the form of good deeds. [See Appendix 4 for the image of Krishna in Surabhi plays.] Similarly, special effects using the set properties behave beyond reality—a flying mat, a throne that rises from ground, rain that starts pouring from the clouds hit by an arrow, the fire that rises from the ground—and many more tricks draw people into the play. Magic, juggling, and sorcery tricks add additional spectacle on stage. [See Appendix 12 for the image showing the special effect of a flying mattress.] Varma says that, “even though we live under shattered roofs, our stage depicts actors enjoying the royal meal.”

Make-up and costumes

However beautiful an actor is, an additional glow on his or her face is inevitable to appear more attractive and please the audience. This is possible by a grooming process called using make-up, which is one of the most important aspects of presenting art on stage, especially for a mythological drama. It not only helps in catching the audience’s eyes but also helps the actor to look and feel lively in the character and it makes the artist more involved in the character.

Unlike in the movies, Surabhi actors do their own make-up. Heavy makeup, coupled with shiny costumes, makes the characters strikingly different from the regular people. [See Appendix 13 for the picture of a character in Surabhi play.] The

mythological characters in epics stand in stark contrast to the regular characters seen in social themed plays. Protagonists are often seen with single shade of color covering their body. For example, the character “Lord Krishna” in the play *Mayabazaar*, appears with an applied layer of sky-blue paint on his body. Jaya Chandra Varma, a primary source of this thesis, says he has played the Krishna’s character since his childhood. [See Appendix 14 for the picture of Varma in the Krishna character.] A video documentary by a media channel called Chai-bisket has covered the lives of the Surabhi people. In this documentary, talking about the makeup practices, Rao mentions that in the beginning days of theatre, limited colors like orange, yellow and black, mixed with oil, were painted on puppets and were used as makeup. Later, they started using white zinc powder mixed with coconut oil and other chemicals for make-up, despite knowing that such chemicals were toxic. Rao mentions in this documentary that even though the Zinc caused inflammation of the skin, they continued using it until the year 2000. After the year 2000, actors shifted to modern practices in makeup like using face powder and creams.

“For a dramatic stage, a very neat make-up is not necessary. As it is not clearly visible beyond twenty feet in the blazing lights of the Surabhi stage” says Varma. From the production photos provided by the primary sources, it is understood that the make-up for the antagonist characters require a meticulous skill when compared to that for a protagonist. For example, a character named Gatotkacha (the hefty one) in the play *Mayabazar* has a complex make-up on the face when compared to the Krishna character in *Mayabazar*. The forehead covered with thick black lines which represent the eyebrows, a wide mustache that covers the lower jaw, a combination of white and black

designs on the cheeks, make the character appear as a demon. [See Appendix 15 for the picture of Gatotkacha from the Surabhi's production.]

Costumes are paramount among other visual elements in a theatre. They help in establishing the social milieu and in making both the audience and the actors get into the spirit of the character. Selection of an appropriate costume for a particular actor in a specific scene is absolutely challenging. For a theatre like Surabhi, costumes give the most details about the character. At Surabhi, they design and tailor their own costumes. Their costumes mainly include sarees, dhotis, etc. made of shiny and glittery cloths. Since most of the plays involve kings and queens, the ornaments and the color combinations of costumes reflect the social status of the characters. For example, *Sri Krishna Leelalu* (magical powers of Krishna) is a play from the epic The Mahabharata and the plot of the play is the power politics between two royal families called "Pandavas" and "Kauravas." [See Appendix 16 for the picture from the Surabhi's production *Sri Krishna Leelalu*.] The costumes for the actors in this include glittery-colorful sarees and dhotis and heavy ornaments that appear like gold and diamonds.

CHAPTER 3

THE DECLINE OF SURABHI THEATRE

By 1970, with a workforce of two thousand artists in sixty different branched theatres, theatre performances in the state of Andhra Pradesh were seen under one name—"Surabhi." In Rao's words, "it was the golden era for both modern Telugu theatre as well as Surabhi." From sixty branched theatres in 1970 to one branched theatre in 2000, the journey of the Surabhi Theatre, from riches to rags, is explored in this chapter. Some of the reasons for the downslide came from society and some were due to the internal problems related to the organization. As a part of this research, reasons stated by primary sources, Rakendar Nageswar Rao and Jaya Chandra Varma, are placed into the discussion with various other people. Some of the participants in this discussion are very involved in the entertainment industry and have adequate knowledge about the theatre and some participants include the non-theatre audience. The description about the participants is mentioned within the topics. Additional to the personal interviews, two books are taken into consideration. Modali Nagabhushana Sarma's complete research on Surabhi Theatre and a book on the history of Surabhi written by Rakendar Bharani Prasad. Comments from Girish Karnard, playwright and actor, are also take into consideration.

Rise of film and electronic entertainment

Electronic entertainment in this context refers to motion pictures and television. Both the movie and television industry played an important role in enhancing the reach of entertainment from theatre to individual doorsteps. After the post-colonial rule, the government in India took many initiatives for the development of the Indian movie industry, which indirectly resulted in the downfall of professional theatres. In a personal interview, Varma mentioned that during the decade from 1970 to 1980, the Surabhi organization witnessed the decline in branched theatres and it was directly due to television sets and movies. An investigation into the Indian government initiatives after post-colonial rule adds weight to Varma's comments. Amit Channa, a mass communication researcher from Assam University, stated, "The Indian government had established a Films Division by 1948 which eventually became one of the largest documentary film producers in the world with an annual production of over 200 short documentaries, each released in 18 languages with 9000 prints for permanent film theaters (cinema halls) across the country" (21). In addition to this, a federal division called "Ministry of Information and Broadcasting" was established in 1975. According to the Indian government website, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's primary objective is the planning, organizing and development of Indian Film Industry. Similarly, "The Sangeet Natak Academy," an Indian government division for the development of music, dance and theatre, was established in 1961. Under this governing body, only one institution, named the "National School of Drama" was established to promote the performing arts. This was far less support by the government towards the

performing arts. These initiatives show the undermining of theatrical arts by the Indian government.

Another initiative by government which dropped the ticket sales of theatre was the establishment of a government funded television channel called “Door Darshan” (Far View). This channel showcased the two important epics of India, Mahabharata and Ramayana, in the form of a television series. This was the time, in 1980, when ninety percent of the Indian population had the opportunity to see television (Press Information Bureau of India 2017). A statistical analysis by the magazine “India Today” states, “In 1982, television transmitters jumped from 35 to 100, by 1990, the figure was getting ready to cross the 400 mark” (1). This television viewership has drastically cut the audience of traditional drama theatres like Surabhi which survived on mythological plays. As mentioned on news channel, Republic World, “The popularity of ‘Ramayana’ is clearly seen in 2020 when this T.V series has a rerun in Door Darshan and it tops the viewership charts in India” (April 2020).

Similarly, movies related to the epics flooded the regional language movie industries like the Telugu movie industry and gained massive popularity with its elaborate sets and costumes. The Telugu movie industry is the regional movie industry of the Andhra Pradesh state. On the other hand, the film versions of Surabhi’s plays started to appear on screens. Plays like *Shakuntala*, *Harischandra*, *Mayabazaar* and *Sri Krishna Leelalu* came out as film versions in Andhra Pradesh. The film version of Surabhi’s iconic play, *Mayabazaar*, appeared in 1957 and was voted as the greatest Indian film by the news channel CNN-IBN in 2013.

These films were pervasive all over India. Karnard says, “regional theatres like Marathi, Bengali and Kannada theatre have sustained in spite of Hindi cinema domination. But in case of television, it can be said that its impact was huge on theatre.” (337). As the ministry of broadcasting in India privatized the broadcasting rights to entrepreneurs, television was flooded with different channels. Television and film are clearly part of the reason for the downslide of the Surabhi Theatre.

Artist migration

Artist migration became a major drawback for not only for Surabhi, but for most of the theatres in the India. With consumerism at its peaks, movie and television has created high paid jobs for various artists, resulting in employees escaping from low paid theatre jobs and migrating to other entertainment industries. The amateur artists who played a significant role in popularizing the social awareness plays, were no longer interested after the post-colonial period. It became harder for the touring theatre to survive on the ticket income. With no option for advertising in theatre, theatre suffered drastically since 1980s. In case of Surabhi, this became more critical for their touring theatres. In the span 10 years, from 1970 to 1980, Surabhi branched theatres have dropped from 60 to 5 according to Varma. Investments in film and television created more for jobs for actors and theatre technicians. This resulted in the migration of artists to the electronic entertainment industry.

Most of the touring companies were closed due to financial issues and the artist migrations. Rao states, “it was due to immense poverty and lack of support from

audiences, artists in Surabhi found alternative career options. Younger generations from 1980s, no longer came to see plays as much as they saw the movies.”

To verify the truth in Rao’s statement about the artist migration in Andhra Pradesh, an interview session was carried out with ten people. [See Appendix 19.] This interview session included theatre actors, film actors, film producers, software professionals, retired employees and older folk. Out of ten people in the interview who are have background in theatre and film, only two members have seen a play of Surabhi Theatre in Hyderabad, capital city of Andhra Pradesh. Murali Basa, a theatre professor at Assam University, was one of them. Basa recollects, “when I was doing my Master of Fine Arts at Hyderabad Central University, I saw Surabhi plays. Until then, I have only heard of them. It was because they disappeared from the villages after 1990.” Talking about the artist migration, Basa responds as follows, “Theatre in Andhra Pradesh is no longer a profession. It acts as a medium to learn acting but it doesn’t feed anymore.”

Gireesh Raj, a theatre actor in Hyderabad, states, “I migrated to the film industry because passion for theatre no longer weighs before my daughters’ school fees,” and also adds, “In an auditorium with 500 seats, I have rarely seen a Telugu play with more than 50 seats occupied.” Before shifting to film, Gireesh took part in a translated version of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in Telugu and Hindi. Another Hyderabad-based actor, Sai Teja Sannidhi, who migrated from theatre, explains, “As an actor, I work for recognition from all sections of the audience. Here in Hyderabad, Telugu plays are seen only by age-old theatre goers. This was one of the reasons I shifted to film.” Sai Teja worked on the productions related to Telugu folklore. [See Appendix 17 for a production photo of Sai Teja on stage]. Anusha Nuthala, a theatre graduate from Hyderabad Central University,

is working as a technical support for film since she was unable to find a minimum paying job in theatre. Anusha acted in Anton Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard* in a Hyderabad Central University production. [See Appendix 18 for the production photo of Anusha in *The Cherry Orchard*]. Out of the six people with theatre background that were interviewed, none continued theatre as a profession. "Theatre is just a hobby now. Something that we practice during weekends," says Anusha.

It was not only the case for these six people, the same scenario is faced by renowned theatre artists in India. Theatre actors like Naseerudin Shah, Ratna Pathak Shah, Anupam Kher, Girish Karnard run their own theatres with money they earn from film. Girish Karnard's theatre is named "Yayati." Naseerudin Shah runs a theatre with his wife, Ratna Patak, under the name "Motley." Karnard says in his book, "Most questions about the future of theatre pale before the specter of uncontrollable expansion of video network across the country. Yet I cannot help worrying about the theatre." (351). These answers reflect Rao's statement and artist migration can be considered as one of the major reason for the downfall of Surabhi. At the end, one might raise a question, As artists from fifty-nine branched theatres shifted to other professions, why didn't the artists in the last existing branched theatre shift? Varma replied, "it is a tradition we are continuing, and we would like to die on stage while performing like my grandfather, rather than running for money."

Financial crisis

Revenue has been the major problem for many theatres in India. Surabhi was one of them. With the collapse of fifty-five branched theatres spread across the state,

remaining touring theatres moved to the urban areas as the response from the villages was low. Out of the remaining five theatres, Sri Venkateswara Natya Kala Mandali, which is located in Hyderabad, has been the house for more than sixty artists. These sixty people together belong to one family and they are of different ages. This institution was run by Rakendar Nageswar Rao, who is mentioned multiple times throughout this paper. Jaya Chandra Varma, who is also been mentioned, is the grandson of Nageswar Rao, who desires to carry the legacy of the Surabhi family. According to both Varma and Rao, revenue decreases have been seen in Surabhi Theatre since 1980.

This monetary issue can be seen in two different ways: first, the motion picture revolution, which has been discussed before; and second, the lack of people's interest. An example of this reason was explained by Gireesh Raj, theatre actor in Hyderabad, from his experience. The Indian version of Arthur Miller's *The Death of Salesman* cost them around 200,000 rupees (approximately \$3,000) without any artist remuneration. It resulted in a way that the cost of production of the play has never been recovered and, in fact, it added up more debt for the producer. The low turnout of the crowd and insufficient sponsorship made it harder for the producers to come up with new plays. This was the same problem with Surabhi too. Varma explains that to create a new play, there are a lot of production costs involved and having been living on donations, it is hard even to think about a new production. Also, high-end proscenium theatres like "Ravindra Bharathi" and "Lalitha Kala Thoranam" in Hyderabad, which were once housed many plays, now charged a staggering amount of fifty thousand rupees (approximately \$900) for a one-night run. Sai Teja, who shifted to movie industry says that the people's attendance for shows has been drastically low even on the opening nights. Except for the

families of the artists, common people attendance was completely low. The same issue has been addressed by Nagewar Rao, “that there were days where there are four people in the seating and 60 people working on the stage.”

By 1996, Surabhi was almost bankrupt until the entry of B.V. Karanth. Karanth worked as the director of the National School of Drama (NSD) in New Delhi, from 1977 to 1986. It is a federal government run theatre institution. Rao asserts, “Karanth was the reason for the Surabhi’s existence today.” Having seen the plays accidentally, Karanth took the initiative to save the art form. With help of Karanth and the Human Resource ministry, Surabhi artists get salaries as pension every month, starting in 1998. Varma specifies, “from that day, we started eating three times a day.” Besides the pensions, Karanth upgraded all of the lighting and sound equipment the Surabhi have and given them national recognition by placing them in different theatre festivals throughout India. Though the pension suffices their basic needs, the lack of financial support to create plays still exists.

Lack of adaptability

Among the reasons for the downfall of the Surabhi, lack of adaptability to the changing tastes of the middle-class is seen as a primary factor. During the interview, Rao comments, “The rise in the television programs had refrained audience from coming to the theatre. Creative programs glued the households, especially women and kids, to the television.”

The entertainment industry in the 1980s saw a bigger leap with India liberalizing its economic policies. Aravind Panagariya, an economics professor at The University of

Maryland, has mentioned that the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of India has increased 5.6 percent annually from 1981-1991 (10). This increased growth in the economy led to an increase of the middle class population in India. As a result of these changes, the perspective of the middle class towards entertainment was no longer the same. The expectation of variety and diversity in entertainment became a common requirement among the bourgeoisie. The rise in the sales of color television sets, the creative programs related to sports, music and drama on the government run “Door Darshan” channel and diverse genre films reflect the middle-class mindset during the 1980s. Masulamani, a commerce graduate from Sri Venkateswara University, Andhra Pradesh, gives a statistical report about the TV sales:

The number of CTVs produced in 1986 and 1987 were 0.85 million and 1.10 million, respectively, and rose to 1.3 million in 1988. Around 35 per cent growth rate was witnessed when the CTV broadcasting network was undergoing rapid expansion, “by setting up Door Darshan Kendras (Stations) in many parts of the country.” (9)

These statistics might be in favour of Rao’s observations but those comments stand in contrast when seen from the audience perspective. The viewership of television was increased due to its diversity in programming whereas Surabhi, in the 1980s, continued with the same age-old mythological and social plays which no longer were of interest to the audience. According to Rao, Surabhi performances, as of 2020, include the same mythological plays which were created between 1885 to 1955. In the constantly changing entertainment industry, the sustenance of a theatre or television channel depends highly on its creativity and diversity. Rather creative measures were taken to attract young

audiences. The linear idea of continuing the Surabhi Theatre as a tradition caused more damage rather than using it as hereditary creative medium to create new plays. This can be seen as the major creative flaw in the Surabhi Theatre.

Girish Raj, theatre artist in Hyderabad, participates in budding theatre groups which focus mostly on contemporary genres and mentions that most of the crowd were young working professionals. Also, budding Hyderabad based theatres like “Kissago” and “Suthradhar” perform plays like *Oleanna* and *Death of Salesman* in regional languages like Hindi and Telugu which pull larger audiences. Whereas Surabhi still performs plays which their grandfathers have performed and the result is low ticket sales. As a constructive suggestion to Surabhi, Girish proposed, “Surabhi might attract more audience if they had adopted different genre plays while showcasing mythologicals once in every month.” This suggestion was put as a question to Varma, and he replied, “famous playwright, B.V. Karanth, taught us a play called *Bhishma* in 1996 which got an enormous response from theatre critics whereas as common people didn’t like the play. As we experienced it multiple times, we abandoned the idea of trying new themes.” Varma’s intention to carry forward the Surabhi Tradition is a good sign for Telugu theatre but the theatre progress varies accordingly with the times.

Unknown to Millennials

The education system in Andhra Pradesh is more inclined towards science and technology when compared with theatre education. The absence of any theatre curriculum from the primary school level decreased the younger generation’s acquaintance with theatre. Indian government initiatives to boost the technical education

combined with the middle class people's mindset on theatre lead to this scenario. The comments made by Madhusudhan Rao, a doctoral candidate from Acharya Nagarjuna University, Andhra Pradesh, gives an idea about the existing education system in India. In his dissertation on engineering education, Rao says:

There is a high level of demand for engineering education in the country as a result of increase in enrolments at the school level and rising aspirations of the middle class, who see engineering education as a means of upward social mobility and economic security. This demand has its roots both in family values where education in science and technology has received considerable emphasis and in the expected high-income profile of engineering graduates relative to expected incomes from other higher education streams. (17)

These comments give some idea about the domination of engineering education in India. Kumara Swamy, a theatre graduate from University of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, has done extensive research on theatre education in the universities in India. Talking about the theatre arts in universities, Swamy says:

Among the most neglected areas of culture is art (referring to theatre arts) education. Two aspects involved in this respect are: education in art through the educational system, and the deepening of art awareness and taste among the people through non-formal communication. Most institutions do not include art in their curriculum, and when they do, there are inadequate facilities for its practice and

training. A small number of universities and colleges offer courses in art, generally seem to follow worn out academic formula. (78)

Madhusudhan and Swamy's comments give a clear picture about the theatre education in India. When it comes to Andhra Pradesh, there are four universities that offer theatre education and there are twenty nine universities with seven hundred and fifty affiliated engineering colleges that offer science and technical education.

In a random questionnaire with ten engineering students from different parts of Andhra Pradesh, nine people were unaware about the existence of a theatre called "Surabhi." When these ten people were asked their opinion about the theatre, all ten referred to it as a cinema hall. Satya Tekumudi, an engineering student from Andhra Pradesh said, "I have never seen a play and I heard 'Surabhi' as a drama company from my grandfather."

In conclusion, without the theatre happening outside and the fact that it has not been taught at all in the schools, the chance of theatre recognition becomes impossible for millennials. Varma stresses that unless a non-profit organizations take an initiative to bring the youth to theatre, there might be extinction of youth knowing about any theatre at all.

CHAPTER 4

SURABHI THEATRE AS A CULTURAL HERITAGE

Unlike the western theatre, private Indian theatre companies receive none or minimal support from the public or government in the form of grants or donations. A contemporary to Surabhi Theatre, a private theatre company called “Gubbi Company,” has vanished in the course of time owing to heavy losses. Surabhi Theatre has alone survived in this process due to family support. Jaya Chandra Varma said, “the year 1990 to 1995 was the hardest time in the family. Most of the days in those years were spent taking a single meal a day.” Despite those hardships, Surabhi Theatre continued to perform over the years. The last remaining branched theatre in Hyderabad is the only existing Surabhi theatre as of 2020. Though the families of fifty-nine branched theatres opted to go on to alternative careers, the family members of “Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali” continued their tradition. The measures taken by the Indian government and Nageswar Rao, in co-operation with family members, showed adequate results in saving this traditional theatre. V.C. Santhi Lakshmi, an English literature graduate from University of Madras, in her extensive research on modern Indian theatre states, “The family unity, though often threatened by internal dissensions and external attractions, is the one reason that sustained Surabhi and made it, perhaps, the only professional family theatre in the world to function for 130 years” (194). This chapter deals with various

initiatives taken by both the federal and local governments to save the declining Surabhi Theatre. This chapter also shows the recognitions and achievements by the Surabhi Theatre under the leadership of Nageswar Rao. Rakendar Bharani Prasad's book on Surabhi and Modali Nagabhushana research document is used as a reference.

B.V. Karanth—A savior for Surabhi

It was only with the help of B.V. Karanth, that the Surabhi Theatre was introduced to national attention. Karanth is the former director at the National School of Drama, New Delhi, and a “Padma Shri” recipient, one of the highest civilian honors of India. On a visit to Andhra Pradesh, Karanth happened to watch performance of the Surabhi troupe and felt the dire need for supporting it, as it upheld so many aspects of the dying ancient theatre practices. He introduced them to the National School of Drama, one of the foremost theatre training institutions in India. Karanth has taken two initiatives primarily, one initiative is to provide them with a monthly pension from the central government to meet their daily needs and, second, to upgrade the existing performances. Three consecutive workshops were conducted by Karanth each year from 1996-1998 to teach Surabhi artists three new plays. *Bhishma* (a character in the Mahabharata), a social play, in 1996; *Chandipriya* (Goddess Priya), a folk drama in 1997; and *Basthidevatha Yadamma* (Street Goddess named Yadamma), a folk drama in 1998. *Basthidevatha Yadamma* is the Telugu version of Bertolt Brecht's *A Good Woman of Setzuan* (Rakendar 255). Karanth also helped Surabhi artists participate in various theatre festivals in India. Participation in national and international festivals provided Surabhi an opportunity to interact with practitioners of various theatre forms (Lakshmi

196). Though Karanth's plays were abandoned by Surabhi, his technical suggestions about acting were taken into consideration.

K.V. Ramanachary—backbone support for Surabhi

K.V. Ramanachary, a theatre enthusiast and a well-wisher of Surabhi, helped Surabhi families to get financial support from the local government. Ramanachary worked as an I.A.S (Indian Administrative Services) officer for the Indian Government. I.A.S officers are the most educated candidates appointed by the federal government to look after various administrative departments in the states. Ramanachary headed the Department of Cultural Arts in Andhra Pradesh from 1995 to 2012. Under his leadership, many financial grants from local governments were provided to Surabhi. In the late 1990s, Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandli, one of the major surviving Surabhi groups, was granted permission by the State Government to erect their stage at “Lalita Kala Thoranam” (name of a park) in Hyderabad (Lakshmi 196). Until 1995, Surabhi continued to tour in different parts of the state and, upon Ramanachary's suggestion, Surabhi established a permanent theatre in Hyderabad city in Andhra Pradesh. Ramanachary also helped in granting an amount of one million rupees (approximately \$14,000) of annual funding to Surabhi and its other four branched theatres. Ramanachary motivated them to perform shows not just in villages but also in cities to attain a bigger audience.

Public and media support

One of the major sources of revenue for Surabhi is through donations. Rao's decision to establish a permanent theatre in Hyderabad city, capital of Andhra Pradesh state, has opened doors to various groups of the population. Among the donors are the common people who donate out of love and concern for the dying theatre arts. Certain banks and business organizations contributed either in the form of funds or other sorts of benefits. In 2013, Surabhi received an opportunity to perform at a theatre festival in France called "Passages." Andhra Bank donated five hundred thousand Rupees (approximately \$7,000) to the artists who were invited to France to perform. For the same tour, Air India Airlines exempted all the taxes on their ticket expenses. As Varma says, "certain multinational companies like L&T, Infosys, Mahindra Satyam are encouraging their employees to watch Surabhi's plays in the theatre. Donations from these employees helped towards the kids education in Surabhi families." There are also a few non-profit organizations spreading awareness about theatre arts and encouraging people to buy tickets to the shows. Artists from some micro-theatre groups like "Sutradhar" and "Kissago" are also contributing by donating small amounts of money and by spreading word about Surabhi. Potti Sriramulu University and the University of Hyderabad invite Surabhi artists to perform in their respective theatre departments annually.

Of late, there is a great support extended from media who are publishing and documenting about the Surabhi Theatre, to spread awareness in the society about the extinguishing regional art form. Digital channels in Telugu, namely Chaibasket and Mojo

TV, made documentaries about the Surabhi Theatre and helped in popularizing the theatre.

National and international recognition

Surabhi's fame rose to the national level with the intervention of B.V. Karanth. He dedicated a couple of months to travel with the troupe and understanding their style. His efforts to make Surabhi recognized by the government and various other national organizations are unforgettable. The Surabhi troupe misses no chance to exhibit their talent, especially where there are theatre festivals conducted by different states in India. Surabhi's participation in the Goa Theatre Festival, the Assam Theatre Festival and the Karnataka Theatre Festival is seen every year.

The Indian government has recognized the exceptional contribution of the Surabhi family towards theatre arts over five generations and honoured the Head of Surabhi Theatre, Rekandar Nagesawara Rao with the "Padma Shri," the fourth highest civilian honours of India for distinguished service, in 2013. In the same year, the Surabhi troupe made their first ever performance in Paris. They performed in France for the "Passage 2013 Festival," with the help of Alliance Franchise. Of the sixty-five members of Surabhi, forty-five travelled to France to perform.

Cultural Heritage status

Classical art forms which are on the verge of extinction are to be protected and promoted as they reflect a culture's beliefs. They are to be passed on to the future

generations because they help the new ones in understanding the previous generations and the history from which they come.

Traditional performing art forms such as, “Yakshaganam,” “Harikatha,” “Burrakatha,” “Veedhi Natakam,” “Nautanki,” “Tamasha,” “Ramleela,” and “Teyyum,” from the various states of India, that reflect the regional identity, are on the brink of extinction. “Surabhi,” a company which showcases the Sanskrit and modern drama culture of the Telugu states of India, is struggling hard to bring back its withered eminence to life.

In a fast-growing country like India, where the struggle to survive is daunting, people are chasing modern career options for a better life. In such an intimidating scenario, the Surabhi family has strongly devoted themselves to their hereditary profession for over five generations, from its inception, no matter how bad the financial crisis may be. For all the struggles and efforts they have put into preserving the art, it is high time they deserve huge support from the society. Surabhi Theatre is “the only last professional Telugu theatre” in existence. Considering it to be a Cultural Heritage and taking steps to preserve it is the only possible way of paying it back for its decades of service and love to the community.

APPENDIX 1



India Map. Web. 4 Apr. 202

APPENDIX 2



A. Production photo from the play *Mayabazaar*. Picture courtesy: Jaya Chandra Varma



B. Production photo from the play *Sri Krishna Leelalu*. Picture courtesy: Jaya Chandra
Varma

APPENDIX 3



The highlighted area with the pointer shows the Chalukya Dynasty. Web. 4 Apr. 2020.

APPENDIX 4



Padmaja in the role of “Lord Krishna” in *Sri Krishna Leelalu*. Picture Courtest: Jaya

Chandra Varma

APPENDIX 5



A. Kuchipudi Dance form. Web. 4 Apr. 2020



B. Bharata Natyam Dance form. Web. 4 Apr. 2020

APPENDIX 6



Yakshaganam Dance form. Web. 4 Apr. 2020

APPENDIX 7



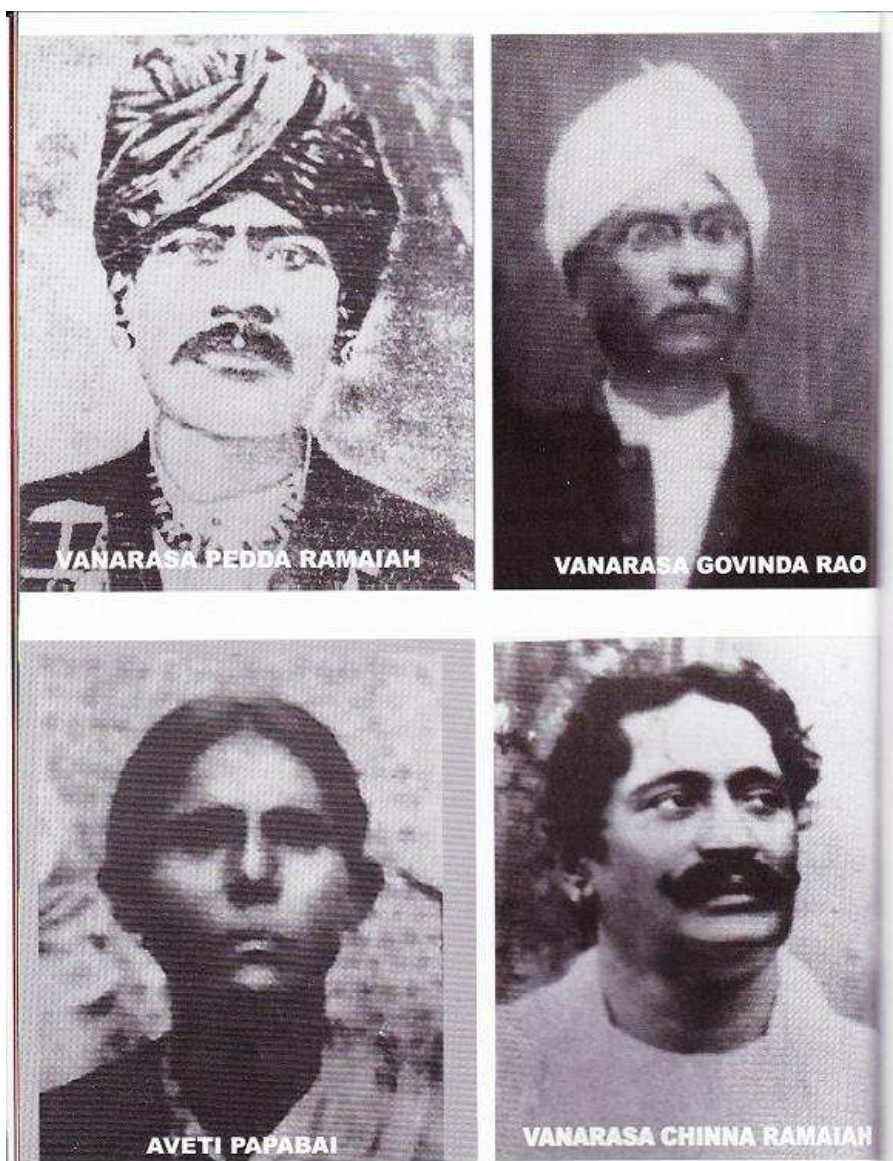
Shadow Puppets in the play *Ramayana*. Web. 4 Apr. 2020

APPENDIX 8



Street Theatres in Village. Web. 4 Apr.2020

APPENDIX 9



Founding members of Surabhi. Picture Courtesy: Jaya Chandra Varma.

APPENDIX 10



SRI VENKATESWRA NATYAMANDALI STAFF

An old photo of Surabhi family. Picture courtesy: Surabhi Theatre

APPENDIX 11



Production photo from the play *Mayabazaar*. Picture courtesy: Jaya Chandra

Varma

APPENDIX 12



Flying mattress in the play *Mayabazaar*. Pic courtesy: Jaya Chandra Varma.



Makeup and Costumes of an antagonist in a Surabhi Play. Pic courtesy: Jaya Chandra

Varma

APPENDIX 14



Jaya Chandra Varma on right side as “Lord Krishna”. Pic courtesy: Jaya Chandra Varma.



Picture of “Gototkhacha” from the play *Mayabazaar*. Picture Courtesy: Jaya Chandra

Varma.

APPENDIX 16



Picture from the play *Sri Krishna Leelalu*. Pic Courtesy: Jaya Chandra Varma.

APPENDIX 17



Picture from the play *Being Eunuch*. Picture courtesy: Sannidhi Sai Teja.



Picture from the play *The Cherry Orchard*. Picture Courtesy: Anusha Nuthala.

APPENDIX 19

QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction: The following questionnaire is divided into two parts. Please select the following options or answer the questions descriptively.

Name of the interviewee: Satya Deep Tekumudi

E-mail address: Satyadeep.tekumudi@gmail.com

Part-A

1). Please select your status below.

- a) Student – (Yes)
- b) Working professional
- c) Retired from profession

2) Select if you are connected to one of these

- a) Theatre
- b) Film
- c) Music and dance
- d) None – (Yes)

3) What is your view on performing arts in Andhra Pradesh?

A) I'm an IT student and I didn't have much knowledge about performing arts.

4). What exactly the word "Theatre" means to you?

A). A Movie theatre

5) Have seen any play till today? If yes, share your experience.

A) No.

6) If you are a theatre performer or technician, mention the productions you were part of or still part of?

A) None

7) Do you do theatre as a profession or hobby?

A) None

8) If theatre is your profession, explain the difficulties faced by theatre artists in Andhra Pradesh.

A) None.

9) If you shifted to other profession from theatre, explain the reason behind your shift.

A) None.

Part-B

1) Do you know about a theatre named “Surabhi”? If yes, explain how did you know about it?

A) Yes, I have heard it from my grandfather.

2) Have you ever seen a play in Surabhi Theatre? If yes, share your experience about the play.

A) No. I have no idea where they perform.

3) If you are a frequent theatre goer to Surabhi, which is your favourite play and explain the reason behind your choice.

A) None.

4) What is your opinion on Surabhi's struggles in their day to day life?

A) None.

5) Any constructive suggestion for Surabhi to improve?

A) They might need to advertise more to reach the common audience.

APPENDIX 20**TRANSCRIPTS.****Jaya Chandra Varma**

1) Hello! I'm Pradeep Aswini Gurralla. As a part of my research on Surabhi Theatre, I would like to take an interview from you. Would you like to be part of it?

A) Yes.

2) How do you see the first play *Keechaka Vadha*?

A) the very first show in 1890 collected a sum of one hundred rupees, which was considered a huge amount and a box office hit in those days.

3) Could you tell me the real story behind the first stage production.

A) A wealthy landlord named Sanjeev Rao sacrificed his life for the well-being of the village leaving his wife and children destitute. The impoverished and penniless lady started wandering on the streets along with her children. They were fortunate enough to come across the Maratha puppeteers, who belonged to the same Aare community. Upon grasping wisdom from the puppeteers, the landlord's family travelled from village to village showcasing the art. As a boon, during these tours, this family happened to stumble upon an orphan child, unconsciously lying on the ground. He was none other than Govind Rao. Subsequently, they were kind and wise enough to adopt the child into their family.

Very soon after the adoption, it didn't take much time for the members to bring out the hidden talent and discover capacity in the orphan boy Govind Rao. This orphan quickly acquired skills in puppetry and continued touring along with the family for a year. Though he was active in performing the puppetry show, his conscience and self-respect could not accept the custom of begging for food after the performance. This type of begging is synonymous with that of street circus. The underprivileged castes in India give open performances on the street for their livelihood. Instead of a ticket system, these street performers beg for money after the performance. This system of begging made Govind Rao feel a sense of shame and his self-respect was hurt. Moreover, during this tour, Govind Rao was quite fascinated with the Parsi Theatre, professional theatre troupes that visited from Bombay, India. The 12-year-old Govind Rao was so inspired by the Parsi Theatre concepts that he quit puppetry and launched into stage acting so that he could earn money through a ticketing system rather than begging. He put the proposal of his professional transition before his family members for approval but it was in vain. The disapproval from the family made him slip away from the house and join a prostitute run theatre called "Nelluru Jyothi Subbiah Company." This theatre was run by women known as Devadasis, and they also played male characters. This theatre showed Govind the techniques of makeup and costumes for the stage.

After two years journeying with them, Govind reunited with the landlord's family after an agreement to perform on stage and not behind white muslin. Soon after the reunion, opportunity for their debut stage performance knocked on their door in 1885, when two rich people, Chenna Reddy and Ram Reddy, invited Konark Pedda

Ramayya, the head of the puppet show theatre, to give a performance for the wedding of one of their daughters. Entertaining performances like dances, singing and stand-up comedians are seen in Indian weddings even today. It is a belief that performances like these drives away the evil eye from the newlywed couple.

4) How does the family theatre work?

A) Every artist in Surabhi is capable of doing any job in the theatre. Beyond gender, people work in Surabhi. Men and women are treated equally. Till today, jobs were catered depending upon availability of the family members during the specific genre play. If the show required only women, the men acted as a backstage crew for scene changes. Instead of hiring other people, the family members occupied most of the jobs on and off the stage.

5) Describe about the Samajam (Theatre branching).

A) Samajam refers to individual theatres similar to franchise. Here we don't charge anything from them. We only sensor the plays and give training assistance to different branches. There used to be 60 branches in 1980 and now we have only one left in Hyderabad.

6) Tell us about the women participation in theatre?

A) The way women are treated in Surabhi is very special. They are respected at most and paid equally to men. Women were trained like warriors and young men were pampered like women. To tackle the indecent crowds and acrid comments, women were trained harshly during their early days.

7) Describe about the special effects in Surabhi.

- A) Some audiences used to come to the theatre exclusively for experiencing the special effects that were displayed in the play and, more specifically, this was witnessed in the case of the play *Mayabazaar*. One can only experience our effect and explain is difficult to me. Even though we live under shattered roofs, our stage depicts actors enjoying the royal meal. We never compromise in our standards.
- 8) Can you describe about the makeup and costumes?
- A) For a dramatic stage, a very neat make-up is not necessary. As it is not clearly visible beyond twenty feet in the blazing lights of the Surabhi stage.
- 9) What do you think reasons for the downfall of Surabhi Theatre?
- A) It all started during the decade from 1970 to 1980. The Surabhi organization witnessed the decline in branched theatres and it was directly due to television sets and movies. The rise in the television programs had refrained audience from coming to the theatre. Creative programs glued the households, especially women and kids, to the television.
- 10) There is a comment that you are not creating new plays. Is that true? If yes, could you explain us why?
- A) Yes, its true. Since we are financially weak, we cannot afford to start a new production. We don't want to create a play that is of less spectacle. So, to create a play similar to *Mayabazaar*, we need a huge investment. With the existing theatre's monetary condition, we might not think of it.
- 11) Could you tell me about the struggles in Surabhi?
- A) Surabhi always had struggles. Now we got used to it. To my knowledge, the year 1990 to 1995 was the hardest time in the family. Most of the days in those years were

spent taking a single meal a day. All the theatre branches of Surabhi are getting closed and public response was down drastically.

12) How do you see the support from the government, public and media?

A) B.V. Karanth helped us from the very beginning he saw us. With the help Karanth we are able to eat three times a day. He helped us in getting many benefits from the central government. K.V. Krinshanamachary also helped us in many ways.

Krishnamachary interference with state government of Andhra Pradesh helped helped us get new housing. Krishnamachary wrote a letter to state government to provide an yearly fund of ten lakh rupees. When it comes to public, certain multinational companies like L&T, Infosys, Mahindra Satyam are encouraging their employees to watch Surabhi's plays in the theatre. Donations from these employees helped towards the kids education in Surabhi families. Mainstream media and Social are played vital roles in creating documentaries about Surabhi.

Rakendar Nageswar Rao

1) Hello! I'm Pradeep Aswini Gurrula. As a part of my research on Surabhi Theatre, I would like to take an interview from you. Would you like to be part of it?

A) Yes.

2) How did the Surabhi Theatre started?

A) Ram Reddy and Chenna Reddy are the two people who supported the Surabhi Theatre from the beginning. Ram Reddy invited us to his daughter's wedding ceremony to perform a puppet show. Instead of puppets, we decided to present actors on stage.

- 3) According to your father, how was the response for the first play?
- A) Many people were attracted by seeing the play *Keechaka Vadha*. The mouth talk has spread over the village within days. Many more people came forward to invite us to their ceremonies. As a memoir, a portion of sand from the place where their first play was performed has been collected and was given a holy respect as well as offered prayers to the sand every morning.
- 4) Describe the initial days of Surabhi.
- A) It was bright and good. Initially, common audience's only place for entertainment was theatre. Surabhi Theatre was people's first choice in Andhra Pradesh. All sections of society treated us very well. Also, with ticket system, we earned money and also respect in society. We were when there is no cinema, Surabhi gave the experience of spectacle with various technological improvements, which was the first of its kind in Andhra Pradesh.
- 5) Describe about the special effects in Surabhi.
- A) In the early years, a small bulb attached on the top of a tall tower kind of pole and that was used as a signal for the commencement of the show. In the evenings, people gathered when the light was kept on and it is switched off once the show begins. This pole was so tall that people in the village from 2 kilometers away could see the light. Later on Surabhi transformed with various special effects by constant improvement in technology. Nowhere in Andhra Pradesh there is a professional theatre with as many special effects as the Surabhi has. We started with hand torches, moved to kerosene lights, then petromax lights and Dynamo lights by 1926. Now we do have adequate lighting equipment sufficient for existing special effects.

6) What according to you is the reason for the downfall?

A) It was due to immense poverty and lack of support from audiences, artists in Surabhi found alternative career options. Younger generations from 1980s, no longer came to see plays as much as they saw the movies.

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