

Father of Modern Harikatha

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How many among Tanjorians know that their town has gifted to the world Krishna Bhagavata, the father of Harikatha Kalakshepam in Tamil?

Of the nine types of bhakti recommended in Srimad Bhagavatam, *shravanam* (hearing the stories of God and His auspicious qualities) and *kirtanam* (singing His praise) have been given the first and second places as they are within easy reach of all, from the lettered to the unlettered. It is to spread these easy forms of *katha shravanam* (listening to the discourses of Ramayana and other puranas) and bhajans have long been in vogue in this part of the country.

In the earlier decades, *pravachanams* (religious discourses) by eminent scholars were of a serious type almost like class teaching and were confined to limited audiences. As time passed, those with a gifted voice sang verses in different ragas and added simple anecdotes to offset boredom. How, in the hands of Krishna Bhagavata this type of *pravachanam*, the music of bhajans and other histrionic talents combined to give birth to a new way of storytelling called Harikatha Kalakshepam is an interesting story.

Perianna, a retired minister of the Maratha court, was a versatile scholar and patron of fine arts. Impressed by the technique of the Maratha Harikatha, he wished to incorporate some of its features in the local pattern. During the Maratha rule at Thanjavur, streams of Bhavas kept flowing in to spread the bhakti cult of saints Ramadas, Tukaram and Namdev. They were supported by an orchestra of vocal and instrumental music. Their discourse with the use of a variety of musical tit-bits like *saki*, *dandi*, *ovi*, *abhanga*, *lavani*, *dhrupad* and *thumri* and dance sequences were not only

attractive but also provided sumptuous entertainment besides instruction.

While Perianna's thoughts were running along these lines, he spotted a youth gifted with a handsome appearance and charming voice, who never missed a gathering, religious or musical. Taking poor Krishnan and his widowed mother under his protection, he had a band of teachers to teach the boy Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Kannada, and Hindi besides music and dance. There was a physical training instructor too, to take care of his physique.

After six years of rigorous studies, Perianna himself began to train him in storytelling in the pattern of his conception. For Krishnan's maiden performance, the subject was Radha Kalyanam. He prepared the entire material (*nirupanam*) - invocation, introduction, story and conclusion - with passages of prose and poetry, songs and apt quotations from different languages. He also provided the paraphernalia of cymbals (*jalar*) castanets (*chapla*) and back ground orchestra of vocal and instrumental music.

On the appointed day during the festival with the clang of cymbals the curtain went up and young Krishnan appeared on the stage in elegant Bhagavata's dress-*panchakacham* and *angavastram*, a necklace of *rudraksham*, sandal tilak, a pair of castanets in his right hand and jingling anklets for his feet.

In the four-hour recital, the young Bhagavata made the elite of Thanjavur spell-bound by the crisp and lively narration of the story, marked by eloquence and felicity of expression and fascinating music combined with dancing and acting at appropriate places. With his *arangetram* was born the art of Harikatha, making a reality of Perianna's dream.

Krishna Bhagavata built the edifice of his art on the foundation laid by Perianna. He selected well known themes from the epics and puranas for his performances. As days passed, he gave up the theatre set-up and reduced the number of his troupe to the minimum.

What he required was a bench between himself and his co-singers. One playing the cymbals and the other the *tambura*. On either end of the bench sat the *mridangam* and *violin* players. He had some space in front of him for his dance movements.

Krishna Bhagavata was a veritable genius. His contribution to music was not confined to Harikatha. As a veteran of his days, he salvaged Tyagaraja's kritis and gave them a new lustre. He was as proficient in acting as he was in music. He could play a dozen roles with the swiftness of lightning and sweep the audience through a series of emotions.

Once the subject of his performance was Bhakta Kabir. Kabir's story touched on a Muslim prayer in a mosque. Bhagavata portrayed the scene through a song he had composed in Urdu.

It was so realistic that a leading performer belonging to the Muslim community raised himself to his knees, turned to the west and began to do *Namaz*. He rushed home and returned with a box of perfume and a costly shawl.

On another occasion, it was Prahlada charithram. Bhagavata portrayed the fierce outburst of Hiranyakasipu so well that the Lord, whose ways are inscrutable, instead of appearing from the split pillar, chose to reveal Himself in the person of a devotee, who roared like a lion and made a rush at the Bhagavata with gnashing teeth and clenched fists.

It was Draupadi Manasamrakshanam another day. He was beautifully dramatising the happenings in the durbar hall of Dhritrashtra - the inaction of the elders, the plight of the Pandavas, Dussasana dragging Draupadi to the court and laying his hand on her sari. When his narration touched Dussasana's part, a police officer was so excited that he shouted for the rogue's arrest for indecent assault !

The novelty of Krishna Bhagavata's technique and success inspired many aspirants to take to this art and the result was a galaxy of Harikatha exponents like Pundit Lakshmanachar of Tiruvaiyaru, Tirupazhanam Panchapagesa Sastri, Mangudi Chidambara Bhagavata, Harikesanallur Muthia Bhagavata and Saraswati Bai.

When we think of Krishna Bhagavata we cannot but remember Perianna. Even today we can see the big portrait of Lord Krishna - the finest piece of Thanjavur art - adorning the beautiful bhajan hall of his mansion in Manojiappa Street at Thanjavur, where the art of Harikatha was born.

Perianna, who made a (family) trust of his large landed property in the name of this portrait, stipulated that the trustees should pay their prime attention to daily bhajan and pooja to this portrait by a Bhagavata and Gokulashtami celebration for 10 days in which only Harikatha Kalakshepam should be arranged.

Once Madurai Mani Iyer was present in the town at the time of the festival. When his concert was suggested, the trustees pointed to the aims and objects of the trust. However, pressed by friends, he had this concert as the second item to follow a Harikatha Kalakshepam.

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