

[Flash! Prahlad Freed from Fiendish Father by Lord Vishnu](#)

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Men of Melattur Hamlet Near Madras Mount a Musical Masque Every Spring that is Simply Divine

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Touched by divine frenzy, in transports of wrath, Narasimha, the Man-Lion Avatar of Vishnu, is held back with difficulty by a team of straining men. Among them is a priest, there to continue the daily worship of the actor's sacred mask of Narasimha enshrined most of the year in the local Vishnu temple.

The scene is in Melattur, a village in Tamil Nadu, India, 180 miles from Madras. The occasion is the Bhagavata Mela, an annual festival of dance dramas designed to propitiate the fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, "imperious lion, of gleaming fangs, blazing eyes and grisly mouth gaping," as one saint sang.

It is lively theatre. Last year I was told, the lionlike marvel of supranatural ecstasy tore away and leapt off the stage in pursuit of his archfoe Hiranya who had sought safety in the audience. Fortunately, he froze and was implored back on to the stage. It is not only Narasimha who has to be trammelled; Hiranya, spoiling for a showdown and too mad to be conscious of the peril he is courting, is also controlled by a team of robust men even as he sails into his divine adversary with a torrent of choice Telugu invectives.

Originally the performers all resided in Melattur, and sons continued in the roles of their fathers. Now these amateur artists, whose versatility and effortless elan

excite even the respect of seasoned pros, gather just a month before the mela in their ancestral home to don the roles their fathers and forefathers donned in their times.

They come from all walks of life -an electrical engineer from Dubai in the Middle East, a research assistant from the Atomic Research Station at Kalpakkam near Madras, an officer in the personnel department of a leading Indian English daily, a bus conductor, a professor of physical education, a retired 70-year-old headmaster of a school, a superintendent in a telegraph office. All of them, as they have been doing for many, many years now, throng Melattur for rehearsal and preparation for staging the plays a month prior to the birthday festival of Narasimha.

Mani (age 29), who works in the personnel department of the Indian Express, plays Narasimha, as did his father and his grandfather. He says, "The moment I clap on the Lion Mask I am different. I lose my awareness and identity. In a word, I cease to be Venkata Subramani."

S. Natarajan, rightly adored by his co-artists as a paradigm of histrionic talent to be emulated, plays (lives?) the role of Leelavathy, the wife of Hiranya and mother of Prahlada. He mirrors poignantly the tussle between maternal love and absolute wifely fidelity. Dr. K. Murugesan, a professor at Tamil University, Tanjavur, commented on this role of Natarajan, "Unable to detest her monster of a husband, supremely fond of her angel of a son, Leelavathy is compelled by her husband to proffer the poisoned chalice to her own son! When we witness Leelavathy's foment, we are hardly aware that we are beholding a male actor in the disguise of a woman; we are not aware that the sad songs of lament that gush out of her are in incomprehensible Telugu; we are not even aware we are witnessing a fascinating opera. We weep with Leelavathy and are transported to a different clime and age."

The all-male cast ranges from Sriram, 15, who plays Prahlada, to 70-year-old Krishnamurthy Sarma of Bombay who plays King Janaka, Sita's aged father. As in the Elizabethan English stage, males play the roles of females. Originally most of the players came from the Telugu-speaking brahmin families of the village. But now Tamil smarta brahmin families supply most of the artists. However, significant roles have been given to outsiders, who must be brahmin males proficient in bharata natyam. The actors do not sing. The music is in the hands of a team of seasoned pros.

What is to be appreciated most about these operas is that they are, as tersely summed up by a veteran actor, "worship first and art second." He stated emphatically, "Even though visitors from outside are most welcome to Melattur to admire the tradition, we don't want to turn Narasimha Jayanthi and the Bhagavata Mela plays into tourist attractions. They are much too sacred for it. First and foremost they are religious rituals."

This mela takes place in commemoration of the Man-Lion incarnation of Vishnu which falls on the 14th day of the bright lunar fortnight of Vaisakha (May/June). It was on this day, Vaishnavites believe, that eons ago Vishnu as a stupendous synthesis of Man and Lion, roared out of a pillar in the court of the Asura king Hiranya to save His boy devotee Prahlada. Among the other stories told during the mela are that of Markandeya, whose devotion to Lord Siva defeated the God of Death, the marriages of Rukmini and Sita, the story of Dhruva and of Bhasmasura. Most are drawn from the Srimad Bhagavata, a vast compendium of Vaishnavite lore.

The plays begin only after the entire troupe of 25 men offer homage to Lord Varadarajar at the Vishnu temple in the forenoon of the jayanthi day. They bring the temple bell to the stage. The bell is carried back to the temple at the end of the show. This ritual is repeated every day right through the mela.

The opera begins with the appearance of konangi (the jester) who is regarded as an aspect of Vishnu. The chanting of slokas follows. Then Lord Ganesha appears and is worshiped with the camphor light. He blesses one and all. Then follows a synopsis of the day's programs and the characters of the play are introduced. This tradition has been carried on for 300 years.

Melattur dates back to the 12th century, the days of the Chola kings. But the beginning of the festival here was a direct result of the fall of the South Indian empire of Vijayanagar in the 16th century. One of the Telugu kings, Achuttappa Nayak, moved 510 Telegu Brahmin Vaishnavite families to this village. Later it became a great center of dance and drama. It was Venkatrama Sastry in the 17th century who wrote the plays now the staple of the mela. The players were recruited from the local brahmin community. The mela's popularity has since waxed and waned. It stopped completely in 1937-a result of lack of interest among the English-educated younger generation.

It was at this critical moment that V. Ganesa Iyer (grandfather of Sri Natarajan) revived the mela. He presented Markandeya in 1938 in the local Ganesha temple and followed it with Usha Parinayam (the wedding of Usha) the following year. In 1940 they shifted to the traditional venue of Varadaraja. Support has only grown since those days and now the mela is famous across India.

Wherever they may be, however big or small they are, these descendants of Sastry converge on the village to pay homage to the master and the rapturous musical spirit that suffuses his operas and casts a spell of enchantment on audiences centuries after they were first enacted. When the show is over, they might say with Shakespeare's Prospero: "Our revels now are ended. These actors are melted into their air and like this insubstantial pageant fade." Melattur once again creeps back to serene slumber. But embedded in that slumber are the balmy dramas for the following year's merry mela.

The Audience Could Not Remain Silent

Vyayanthimala Bali, Member of Parliament, a famous actress and dancer celebrated for her resplendent beauty, and chief guest at this year's inaugural evening: "Our greatest legacy is bhakti. These plays glow with devotion. They are not merely superb entertainments. They testify that our roots are strong. Venkatrama Sastry, the founder, could not have bargained for anything more."

Mohan Khokar, a scholar who has done research in Indian dances, especially Bharata Natyam: "I first came to this mela in 1953. Those days there were no electric lights. I have been watching three generations of artists. We have reason to thank the Almighty for Swaminathan, Shri Natarajan's father and Natarajan. But somehow I don't hold with the modern illumination. It takes the edge off the pristine innocence of the divine operas. Wide publicity only tones down the sacredness of these plays. I am against taking these dramas out of Melattur. They can never be the same elsewhere."

Smt. Uma Rama Rao, head of the department of dance, Telugu University, Hyderabad: "This is not just a captivating entertainment. It is a lot more than that. It is cathartic as we witness Harischandra, the apostle of truth, be made to suffer; and his wife Chandramati harried to distraction."

Smt. Alessandra Iyer (age 28), an Italian lady married to a Hindu doing research on the iconography of dance: "The mela with its conspicuous devotional approach reminds me of the dance dramas of Bali. The characters do not so much act as they go into a trance like ecstasy. If Natarajan aims to stage these plays in the West, where I dare say they will be received well, he should make it a point to enlighten the audiences about the story and the characters before the play unfold so that they'll be able to enjoy and appreciate them better. For lack of such illuminating synopsis the Ram Leela group of Delhi was unable to impress audiences when it performed in London.

Mrs. Srikala Bharat (32), a dancer by profession: "I am stunned by the elegance of Leelavathy (wife of the demon Hiranya portrayed by Natarajan). The subtle variations of emotion of Hiranya is as fascinating as the ferocity of Narasimha is scary. If Natarajan's Chandramati tugs at your heartstrings with her excruciatingly tragic lot, his Yosadha [as Krishna's mother in Kamsa Charitram] is a triumph of blissful maternity. The supremely happy mother absorbed with her divine child forever; driven to despair this minute, to transports of rapture the very next by her son who is the embodiment of delectable mischief. The real Yasodha cannot have been more loving, more tormented and delighted alternately by her son's naughtiness. I am so glad to be here."