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Published by Anonymous on May. 02, 1995

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Family Drama Troupe has 15th Century Roots

Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

When I was assigned to write this story, my thoughts whirled back twenty years to the day I accompanied my kid sister to enroll her in the Prabhat Dance School. I took such an instant liking to its homey, bee-hive-like feeling, I enrolled myself too. Before I knew it, I was a performing artist of Prabhat Kalavidharu. More interestingly, I soon realized I had become a part of their family.

Located in one of Bangalore's oldest neighborhoods, Prabhat is a cultural landmark and the main resource facility for the city's many theater groups, schools and cultural organizations. The maze-like Prabhat house provides costumes, sets for stage design, lights, audio systems, and more.

The uniqueness of Prabhat extends from substance to style. Hiring out audio equipment, costumes and stage sets has been family business for decades. The Prabhat Sound Studio is acclaimed for its sophisticated equipment and quality of recordings. The company's dance dramas (popularly called "ballets") play to packed houses.

Besides all these, the most amazing feature about Prabhat is their style of extended family. Relatives and members have lived together for the past four generations. The fifth line of tiny tots have just joined in. All together, with the founding brother's children and grandchildren, nearly 50 people live in this rambling house. Add workers and friends who virtually live there and the number tops 100.

Kalavidharu in Kannada means artists. Every member of the Prabhat family is one. They create, compose and perform. I remember 15 years ago a four-year-old Hema creating a scene backstage during "Karnataka Vybhava." She wanted to go on stage. Finally, before the show concluded, she did, in an overflowing colorful manipuri costume. She danced a manipuri number, to the thunderous applause of the audience. Hema, who now heads their dance school is today emerging as a heroine in Kannada films.

The still active nonagenarian uncle of the four founder brothers, Sri Venugopala Das, a distinguished Harikatha (dramatized musical rendering of mythological stories) exponent says, "Music and Harikatha flow in our blood." Forty year ago Gopanna's daughter Prabha saved the day when she stepped into the main role of Sita in their famous Sanskrit play "Sita Devi." The regular Sita went on stage with high-heeled slippers during the play and drew criticism from the local press. Feeling ashamed, she quit. No artist had the courage to accept the lengthy role for the next day's show. "I was only fourteen. Unknown to others, I had memorized the script by watching the rehearsals. I offered to take up the role. My father couldn't believe it. It took some hard convincing by Dwarki for Gopanna to agree. Before I went on stage, he told me, 'Remember you are a daughter of Prabhat. You have to bring glory to the house.' The show received a standing ovation. Many notable personalities from among the audience, moved to tears, lauded my performance. Thereafter, the role was mine," reminisces Prabha.

Prabhat Kalavidharu commenced performing 65 years ago in 1930 as "Gururaja Orchestra and Nataka Mandali." They were staging mythological plays and giving Harikatha performances.

The founders of this Nataka Mandali were four versatile brothers, Karigirachar, Gopnath Das, Jayasimha Das and Dwarkanath. They were accomplished in drama, music and harikatha. Dwarkanath, "Dwarki" as he is familiarly known, traces the origin of this cultural expression to his father Venkannadasa, a modest school teacher. "Poverty forced my father to come to Bangalore from the small town of Tumkur. He had tremendous interest in music and Harikatha, which had traditionally descended through generations. Along with eight children he struggled for many years, but did not despair. He pursued his goal to excel." Result-he emerged as a Harikatha master of repute. The four brothers composed and choreographed their own plays. The actors were family members. In 1942 the Nataka Mandali was converted to Prabhat Kalavidharu. They also started training other youngsters in dance, drama and music.

Prabhat's costume section is now a vast empire catering to hundreds of customers each day. They have tailors, experts at mask making, and costume designers working with them. Racks full of colorful sequined dresses, masks, crowns, headgear, shields and jewels help actors traverse the bygone eras of emperors and mythology.

Rajendra, 22 years-old, Dwarki's youngest son, manages the costume section. Besides this, he plays the lead role in most of their ballets. An accomplished bharatnatyam dancer, Rajendra is now learning kathak under the tutelage of renowned kathak grande dame Maya Rao.

The Prabhat Sound Studio started at a time when audio technology was a new concept. Jagannath says, "Gopanna, my uncle was unable to throw his voice to the multitude that gathered for Harikathas. It was a tremendous strain on his vocal chords. He bought the famous and expensive RCA systems with a loan. 'Don't show your poverty on stage,' Gopanna would say."

The Prabhat Sound Studio has had eminent persons like Pandit Vijaya Raghav Rao, Jesudas, Ashit Desai (of "Gandhi" fame) record for them. Today, the studio records music for their own ballets, audio cassettes and commercials. "We can do much better. There is so much more to achieve," says Jagannath.

Gopanna's involvement in the freedom movement and his burning desire to preserve Indian customs and traditions gave rise in 1946 to a kindergarten school, Prabhat Sishu Vihara. It was his dream to lay a firm foundation in the tender minds. Enrolled children were from orphanages and economically backward classes. Expenses were met by Prabhat.

Even in the 1990s, Prabhat continues as a joint family. "It was my mother's wish that we live together. Given a choice between jewelry for herself and a house for the future, she opted for the latter. This house was my parents' first investment," says Dwarki.

"The old house had two big halls, two rooms, two kitchens, a cowshed on one

side and open space in front. There were about 50 of us in the family. But at any time there could be about 150 people in the house-friends, artists and workers," recalls Veda, daughter of Gopanna.

As the children grew, the old house extended to every vacant space on the plot. With three floors and a basement it houses the costume section, sound studio, equipment room and dance school. It's a vertical maze.

Echoing similar sentiments Jagannatha and Srini Sayk said, "We would respect and obey all elders equally. We never differentiated between uncles and parents, cousins and siblings. There was a feeling of oneness. We don't remember any occasion when we cousins have fought. We have had heated arguments on worldly matters, but never have we descended to a personal level."

How did the daughters-in-law adapt themselves to the joint family? "I was only sixteen when I was married 30 years ago. The rules of the family and the crowd did not unnerve me. It was not difficult to adjust, because we never felt dominated. We never questioned anyone, including our husbands. Everyone was so affectionate that we felt privileged to be here," notes Mrs. Sudha Venkatesh, daughter-in-law of Gopanna. The womenfolk at Prabhat live amicably, belying any myths of the quarrelsome nature of women.

Cooking for so many people is a herculean task. Recollecting the past, Raghavendra says, "My aunt along with my mother and Dwarki's wife did all the cooking. Being the senior-most lady, she was in charge of the kitchen and made the decisions. On many occasions she would bathe at one in the morning, cook and serve food for the artists and workers returning from a performance."

Now, they have a professional cook who attends to the kitchen. It is a pleasure to be in Prabhat at lunchtime. The spacious dining hall is full, young and old all eating together. The dining room is open to all who are at Prabhat. Little children eat without any pampering from their mothers.

Prabhat is an orthodox Madhwa Brahmin family who strictly abide by the

Vyasaraja Peetham traditions. The elders performed sandhyavandana thrice a day. The older men and women fasted on ekadasi, sustained on only a spoonful of theertha (holy water) in the morning. The ladies enter the kitchen only after a bath. The elder ladies would not touch a meal until they had served food to everyone. They were always the last ones to eat.

In the center of the house is an imposing temple-like puja room with ancient idols of Lord Krishna and Yoga Anjaneya. The saligramas along with their family deity Yoga Narasimha adorn the sacred place.

Raghavendra spends an hour performing puja and abhisheka everyday. On festive occasions the entire family partakes in elaborate puja, homa and other rituals.

Much of the orthodoxy of the past is gone. Due to pressures of modern living, the younger members are unable to keep up these. "Only my mother fasts on ekadasi. We pray briefly everyday and do sandhavandana on festival days," confesses Srinivas, Dwarki's son.

Competition is unknown to Prabhat, either with the outside world or within the family. Ego is a word that does not exist with them. They are well-meaning people dedicated to the promotion of art and culture. Their goal is to uphold the rich tradition handed over by their forefathers. They are a living example of harmony and peace.

Sidebar: Drama in their DNA

HT: How do you play the part of God?

Satya: All of my co-artists, they are of the same opinion. They forget who they are. Lakshmi forgets that she is Lakshmi, Sashikala forgets she is Sashikala, and Narayan forgets he is Narayan. They think as if they are Rama, they are Basmasura,

they are Sita. So they get themselves completely immersed with the role they are doing so that whatever personal identities are there, they will not come in the way of expressing themselves.

Narayan: While doing the role of God, just as we enter the stage, we forget the idea that I am doing the role. We just forget everything. We are like a puppet. He'll do all the work. He'll act that role.

Sashikala: First of all, dance is very good exercise for the body, for physical purposes. Then through dance, we can express our inner feelings to whatever purpose is there. We can express our feelings through dance. On our own experience we can dance very well, on the stage. We'll forget the other things. And through dance we can spread our beautiful culture to other parts of the country and other parts of the world, so easily that everyone can understand dance movement without any words.

HT: What is it you have to do as a dancer to make a performance come alive?

Shantala: Encouragement of the audience.

Narayanan: Dedication and involvement of the artist is most important. The audience can be of any type, but you have to give much preference for our involvement. That is a basic thing. You have to think the message has reached the audience easily, without any problem.

HT: Anything special about your own training?

Raghavendra: While rehearsing Harikatha, I lost my voice. I underwent an operation also, but I wanted to continue the family tradition. Music is the backbone of Harikatha, so I can't sing-even though I learned karnatic music, so I concentrate on other things like dance or drama.

Sidebar: Family Drama

By Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

My first visit to Prabhat in my teens is still etched in my memory. From outside, this complex building looked more like a godown-with wooden planks, boxes and pipes flung around. No colorful walls, no compound, no gates and no greenery. There was just enough space for a minitruck. Colorful grills on the balconies of the two stories made the place look enclosed. Nothing has changed ever since.

The serene surroundings of the narrow road are accentuated by the Jain temple opposite Prabhat. Yet the road is busy, with most of the vehicles heading towards Prabhat.

When I first saw the place, I could not believe that this house accommodated so many people along with the different studies and art sections. Dwarki was at the entrance. He guided me to a big hall on the left side where the dance classes were going. Today, this big hall also houses a small office and a double cot indicative of its conversion into a bedroom at night. It was in this hall I began my first steps in dance. As I shed my inhibitions and grew familiar with the surroundings, I realized that this godown was a spacious, massive house, full of warmth.

The dance hall is detached from the main house. Going up a few steps we enter an awkward shaped verandah with two sofas to accommodate visitors. Two small rooms open into this verandah. The next room we enter is the drawing room, called 'hall' in local parlance. This is the favorite place of many, and has been the most important place of the house ever since it was built. This hall is furnished with an assorted mix of plush velvet sofas, divans and chairs. A television in one corner is always on. Blown up photos of their ballets and the founder brothers adorn the walls. This hall is always filled with people, friends, family members and artists-some watching TV at full blast, some involved in an animated discussion, some moving in and out, and often someone relaxing on the divan in spite of all the noise.

The hall opens into a spacious dining room that runs the entire breadth of the house. I have a special liking for this dining hall. It resembles the one in my ancestral home bringing back memories of my childhood days. The scene is just typical, either full of people enjoying their meal or cleaning heaps of vegetable for the next meal. Glancing up, one finds rows of clothes hung for drying just inches below the ceiling. Let me assure you, spreading clothes on this high line needs the skill and patience of a rope-trick artist.

The food in Prabhat is strictly vegetarian (no onions, garlic and certainly not eggs) Mysorean style: neither too spicy nor bland. Meals are a rather quiet affair with minimum talk, including children maintaining silence.

A spacious kitchen, a bathroom and the puja room abut this dining room. The puja room with icons is prominently visible from the veranda.

The first time I ventured onto the first floor I was confused. I ran into a virtual maze with many small rooms. The rooms are unevenly located indicating haphazard, ad hoc additions to cater to the requirements of a growing family. An arrow signboard "costume section" helps direct lost customers. This costume section is busy throughout the day with anxious people trying out and choosing different outfits.

You climb yet another flight of narrow winding stairs to reach the Sound Studio on the second floor. Often the music from the studio guides you. A portion of the open terrace here is now covered with garish blue fiberglass sheets converting it to a stretched out space. It is here that the artists and the studio crew relax over a bite of iddli and a cup of tea.

The former cowshed of the house has converted to a store room. The cows were given away many years ago. The cottage at the rear remains the same and continues to accommodate a few family members. Every couple gets their own room. Though small, the rooms are pleasantly furnished with almirahs, cots and a chair or two. Some couples have a stove on a table which makes a table kitchenette for them to try out new fancy recipes.

The Prabhat house is always noisy, bubbling with activity. Music and recorded voices from the studio fill the air. Another distinctive feature about this house is the doors are always open and there is no watchman to guard the place. The children of Prabhat are a lovely bunch, playful and chirpy. I've yet to see a child misbehave or throw tantrums. No, they are not at all spoiled. They're on their own, contented and happy, whether or not their mothers are around. The ladies often keep to themselves, but are very friendly. None of them are employed. Always clad in saris, they are neither too traditional nor modern. They spend most of their time in household chores and looking after children. When they are free, they love to watch television. None of them performs in Prabhat ballet, except dewy-eyed Shakuntala, Raghavendra's wife. She was a senior artist of Prabhat before she married Raghavendra.

People outside are amazed how so many in Prabhat have been able to live together. In this metropolitan city, extended families disintegrated more than two decades ago. Living together in a joint family meant a great deal of patience and making compromises in terms of privacy and independence. Young couples moved out of the big units to live on their own. So the fact that the Prabhat family still lives together is viewed with admiration and awe.

The Prabhat ballet troupe consists of over 40 artists, and only four or five of them belong to the family. Only a few senior artists are paid. The others are students of their dance school. Only those students who perform well and are willing to travel are chosen for the ballet. Yes, they do charge for coaching in dance.

The Prabhat Sishu Vihara, though started in the house, was later shifted to a building in Gandhibazar. They run classes one to seven, and give prominence to dramatics, dance and music in the school's curriculum.

The informal atmosphere in Prabhat makes everyone feel at home. Often artists stay over at Prabhat when they return late night from a show. There is no special room to accommodate the artists. The men sleep in the hall on the sofas and carpet. Once when we returned late from Shimoga, we girls just walked into a room that was free, occupied the cots, and used the blankets, without inhibition. I recall we never bothered to seek permission or even think if we had dislodged anyone from the room. This just about sums up the friendly freedom one enjoys at Prabhat.