

CHAPTER - III

CHAPTER III

ETHNOGRAPHY OF BHAGAVATHA PERFORMANCES

This chapter explicate the history and origin of *bhagavatha* performances of Andhra Pradesh. It also explore the underlying performance theories in the light of Indian theatrical tradition.

3.1. INDIAN TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCES: A PROFILE

Indian traditional theatrical performances (Awasthi 1960,1974; Jain 1992) are basically non-illusionistic. It is rich, ritualistic, devotional and aesthetic in nature. It consists of various elements like dance, mime, poetry, music, graphic and plastic arts, religious and civil pageantry, and various decorative arts and crafts. It reflects the peoples beliefs, myths and lifestyle, and subsumes a multi-dimensional relationship between religion and theatre.

All over the world, primitive religions are ritual- oriented. The word 'ritual' has a great meaning and can be defined as a system of esoteric and sacrosanct rites with prescribed procedures that are observed in fairs and festivals. A ritual is to be performed to appease (Varadapande, 1981,1982,1983) the spirits to avert calamities and thus set benevolent forces into action. During this process a thin layer of theatricality can be observed in their performances. Ritual takes a form of rudimentary drama. Anthropologists believe that, "whole hunting scene is enacted as a magico-religious ritual by the primitive community to ensure favourable results in future expeditions" (Varadapande 1983:1).

A ritual is enacted at two levels. At one level, the whole community participates and at another it is entrusted to persons specially chosen for the purpose. Here, the leader is the priest. Their priests perform different roles in the ritual acts. The innermost shadow of an actor can be seen in the priest when he is in a trance. In a community, a group of persons or even individuals were bifurcated to perform the ritual and thereby the performer-audience division came into existence. A separate arena was marked out for performing the ritual that led to the origin of "Ranga Bhumi"(stage). Varadapande (Ibid.:2) writes:

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The explanatory myths generated by the rituals provided the theme for stage enactment. In the frenzied movement of the ritual performer the art of dancing originated. The gesture language adopted by priests helped the formulation of a code of acting for the stage. The priest who acted as a medium of communication with the spirit probably created the form of verbal exchange called dialogue.

Other accessories like masks, make-up and singing are common to rituals and the theatre. Primitive religion and its system of rituals gave the dramatic art many necessary ingredients to evolve itself into a separate entity.

Ritual performances include the type of complexities found in adhering specially to ritual procedures, gestures, specific texts, and choreographic dramatic technique associated with the proportion of a particular deity.

While writing on traditional Indian performances, Zarrilli opines:

All types of traditional Indian performances are suffused with religious significance and punctuated by ritual practice..., the classical theatre of India may not be discussed without taking into careful consideration its ritual and religious context and significance. In the eastern and southern region of India, "ritual performance" has played a central role in the development of some forms of scripted theatrical genres. Some genres of ritual performance and many theatrical genres enact their own versions of dramatic episodes based upon epic and mythological sources. Not surprisingly, as scripted theatrical genres emerged historically, some appropriated from ritual performances extant modes of staging and performed important scenes depicting battles between the forces of good and evil. Before turning attention to this special class of performances which we call "ritual performances", it will be helpful to describe these closely related but distinct relationships between ritual and performance in traditional Indian

performance:(1) rituals as performative, (2) rituals within a performance genre, and (3) ritual performances (1990:121).

Since times beyond the vedic period, historically, one can see how the ritual enactments were performed. The ritual of fire-sacrifice of the vedic Aryans was highly theatrical, one can even call it a rudimentary playlet. The Aryans incorporated in their execution of the ritual song, music, dialogue, symbolic language, dance, myth etc. All the above elements are present in rituals since the vedic Aryans. The significant evidence of the above lines can be seen in cave paintings.

In its true sense, theatre has its roots in religious rituals. Since ritual is a part of life, it evokes spirituality in human beings. During ritual enactment, everybody involves himself in the ceremony by playing some role such as clapping, singing, and sometimes through dance. Most devotional performances come under this school. In these performances, both the priest and the devotee involve themselves in the enactment. For instance, in traditional and folk performances, the terminology of actor-spectator relationship is irrelevant because all the spectators are participants. The performance is a ritual to adore the village deity or to appease a supernatural being. The performer possesses superhuman power and transcends it to the participants in the form of give and take policy during the performance. By this action, the performer makes spiritual and psychological transactions with the participants.

The above genres may share with each other certain marked similarities of techniques, styles, practices and even dramatic content. *Bhāgavathas* of Andhra Pradesh are the outgrowth of this convergence. It evolved from folk; from folk to traditional and traditional to classical theatres.

3.2. BACKGROUND OF BHAGAVATHA CULT

Bhḡavatism centered round the worship of Lord Vishnu or *bhḡavat* and originated from this cult in post Maurya times. Vishnu was a minor god in Vedic times. But by the 2nd century B.C, he got merged with the god called Narayana, and came to be known as Narayana

- Vishnu. Originally, Narayana was a Non-vedic tribal god. He was called *bhāgavat*.

One of the greatest influences of *bhāgavata* theatre is *Natyasastra*. According to *Natyasastra*, Bharata enumerated ten kinds of dramas. In the 22nd chapter, he says that *vritti* emanated from Vishnu and Krishna stories. Therefore the basic source of *bhāgavatha* cult is *vritti*'s. *Vritti*'s are based on Krishna themes. Hence Hari-Krishna stories are the sources of dramatic arts/theatre performances. Adya Ranga Charaya, a scholar noted that "Vritti's as singing, dancing, prose, poetry and other entertaining activities" (Varadapande 1983:79). Bharata's consideration of Krishna -Vishnu is the fundamental source for the origin of the-
atrical performances. Dhananjaya in his treatise *Dasharupaka*, elucidated an interesting analogy between Vishnu-Krishna and Bharata, According to him:

*Dasharupanukdrena yasya madyanti bhāvakāḥ Namah sarvavidc tasmai vishnave
Bharataydcha (79)*

The relationship between Vishnu's incarnations i.e Dasavatars and the kind of plays mentioned by Bharata as *Dasarupakas* are the same i.e., ten. This implied that there is a close association of the *bhāgavata* cult and its theatrical performance. Even the well known Sanskrit playwright Kalidasa referred to this mode of theatrical presentation in his play *Malavikagnimitram*. One can observe an entire episodic description of Krishna's life and his grand picnic arranged by the Yadavas at *Pindarak Tirtha* on the sea shore near Dwaraka. This entire episode is depicted in dance-dramas and mimetic of Krishna's life. Hence the *bhāgavata* cult gave a definite place to theatrical performances and their ritualistic practices.

S.2(a). Inscriptional Evidences of bhāgavatha Cult

A stone inscription (Varadapande 1983:85) of king Saranagadeva dated saka 1348 is worth mentioning. This inscription which was found at Anavada or Anahilapataka, a few miles **from Patna**, opens with a stanza from the Dashavatar Asthapadi of Jayadeva's well known Krishna opera *Geeta Govinda*. At that time, Maharajudhiraj Shri Saranagadeva of the Vaghela dynasty was the ruler of Anahilapataka. It seems that there was a temple of

Krishna at the place long before the reign of King Saranagadeva. Another one is the Bayana inscription of Chitralkha. In this inscription, the passages from *Bhāna Ubhayabhisarika* indicate the practice of staging plays at the Vishnu-Krishna temples. Inscription of Gajapati ruler Prataprudradeva (1499) was a later evidence for the *bhagavata* cult. Many similar stone inscriptions, copper plates and literary references have been found even in recent time. All the evidence indicates the long and continuous tradition of *bhagavata* theatrical performances all over the country. Therefore, *bhagavata* cult gave a great impetus to Indian traditional theatrical performance realm.

According to *bhagavat* purana, "creation, preservation and destruction" (*Srishti-Sthithi-Pralaya*) constitute an eternal cycle of existence. Hari, that is Vishnu, represents the principle of preservation and continuity of life. He is the supreme being, a sublime source of eternal bliss, the entire universe is just a manifestation of his power.

3.3. THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE: INTERCHANGEABILITY

In the realm of world performance studies, the word theatre performance has become a question mark. Hence world theatres have become world performances (Richmond, Swann and Zarilli 1990:3) clearly mentioned that the words theatre and performance are used interchangeably, one for the other, because Indian theatre is not confined to neat, narrow categories. Indeed in this book we pay considerable attention to examples of performance that would not generally be regarded as 'theatre' in the West. We note too that this effort to redefine the meaning of theatre and performance is part of a larger rewriting of the history of theatre/performance that is currently underway.

Indian performances, except those of the modern theatre, are known by "genre-specific names in their local languages - *yaksagana, rasa lila, terukkuttu, cavittu natakam-an* endless stream of names, each with its own history and reasons for having been given that name" (Ibid.:3-4). This dual understanding on Indian theatre/performance is true even in the case of *bhāgavathams-Kuchipudi bhāgavatham, Melattur bhagavata mela* (Tamil Nadu), *Toorpu*

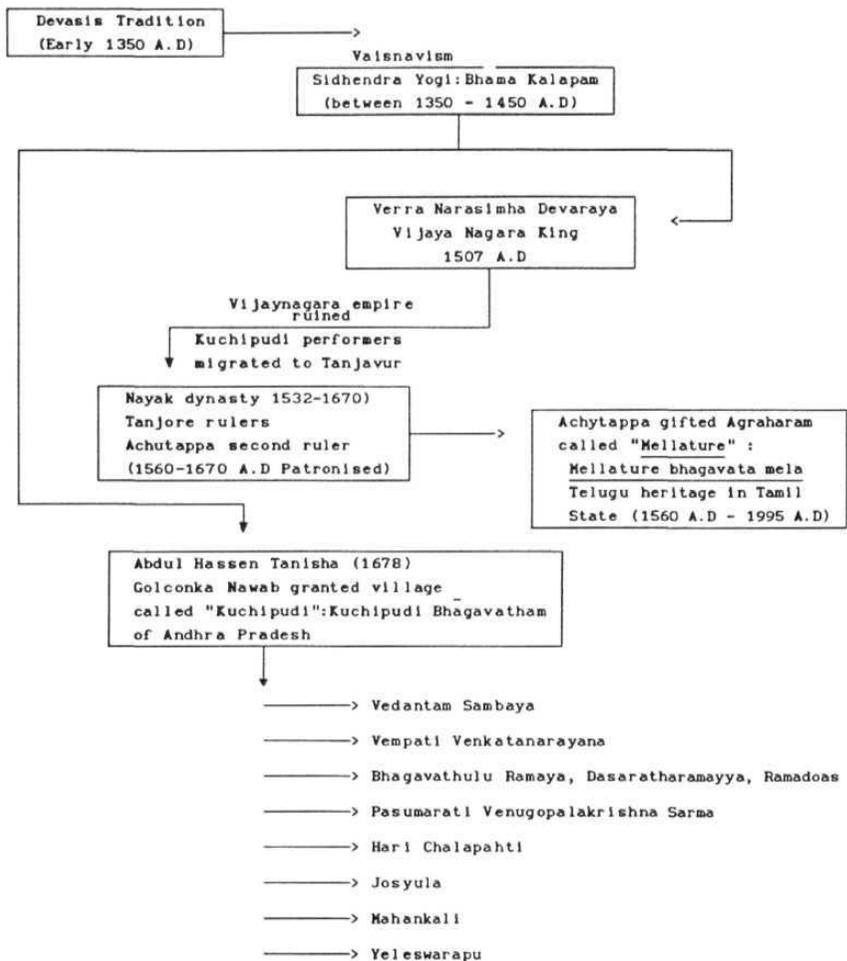


Fig. 3.2 The evolution of kuchipudi bhagavatham

bhagavatham and *Chindu bhāgavatham* of Andhra Pradesh. In the realm of traditional genres, invocations to initiate the main influence and the main performance are performed by persons of different communities. According to Ramakrishna, in Andhra Pradesh, *Kurmapulu*, *Jakkulu* (Yakshas), *Bhogam* and *devaganicas* did such invocations. *Yakshanganams* were popular even during the Buddha period. Besides, there are many other forms such as *Perani*, *Prekkhana*, *Rasaka*, *Carcari*, *Natyarasaki*, *Sivapriya*, *Chindu*, *Kuanaduaka*, *Bhandika*, *Chatisari*, *Carana*, *Bahurupa* and *Kolata* etc (personal communication). The performances of these theatre forms are not based on any written performance theory. These performances followed the oral tradition. They were more stylized than the folk tradition. They did not follow any modern theatre norms. So these theatre forms came under the shadow of traditional theatre without objecting to their original ritual and folk values. Therefore the evolution of folk, traditional and classical theatre performances of Andhra Pradesh is a product and synthesis of the ritual, folk and brahmanical forms (fig 3.1).

Indian performances evoke devotional experiences. Devotional experience arises at whichever traditional performance is seen by the audience. Most Indian performances belong to traditions of performance or performance - tradition. In other words, a performance tradition is a body of knowledge, including techniques of performance, texts, and aesthetic principles or rules or assumptions, which constitute and define a particular genre and simultaneously the process of passing on that knowledge from one generation to another. So *bhagavathams* of Andhra Pradesh can be included under this performance tradition.

3.4. CULTURAL EVOLUTION OF ANDHRA PRADESH

Because of its geographical position, Andhra Pradesh became the meeting point of different cultures (Rajagopala Rao 1983), being on the highway between North and South India. The influence of Sanskrit literature on Telugu literature is quite considerable.

Andhra Pradesh is a major Buddhist centre. Amaravati and Nagarjuna Konda especially are rich with art and architecture and have become world famous. Geographically, Andhra

Pradesh is located in hilly areas, ruled by local dynasties from their hill forts. The Kannada-speaking Chlaukyas and Tamil speaking Cholas ruled over it for several centuries. This was a remarkable period for the mingling of the Andhra culture with the Tamil and the Kanada culture. Nannaya, the first great Telugu poet, was helped by Narayana Bhattu, a Kannadiga, in his literary pursuits. Under the Cholas many Tamil scholars well versed in vedic learning settled in different parts of Andhra Pradesh. They are known as Dravida Brahmins and they played a great role in the growth of Sanskrit scholarship and Telugu literature. During the Vijayanagara regime, many Telugu scholars, poets and dancers migrated to domains in Tamil Nadu founded by the Nayakas of Tanjore and Madurai, where Telugu art and culture flourished gloriously. These scholars worked to propagate the religiosity and its necessity for everyday life. Therefore, mythology has become the basis for the movement which is found in most traditional forms of Indian theatre and it is a reflection of the symbolic relationship between Indian mythology and its performance traditions. The same thing happened even in Andhra Pradesh theatre performance tradition.

The decline of Sanskrit theatre and remarkable changes in society lead to the evolution of Vaishnavism (16 A.D). In the post-vedic period, the Aryan gods were displaced, subsumed into relative obscurity by formerly lesser gods. This period began in the 8th and 9th centuries of the Christian era and saw the emergence of a *trimurthiaavatara* of gods who constitute, a triadic Hindu godhead even today. These *thrimurtiaavatarare* Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the sustainer), and Siva (the destroyer). *Bhāgavatgita* accommodated all the three and gave the highest place to devotion. To Indians, *bhdgavatgita* is a living devotional tradition, and it is directly related to the liberation or salvation. It is to worship Vishnu and Siva, and their various incarnations are directed by the majority of modern - day Hindus. Brahma was named particularly for worship. Thus Hinduism got divided into two traditions, one is **Vaishnavism** and the other is Saivism. Vaishnavism teaches people to worship and adore particular deities- Narasimha, Rama and Krishna- to make deep religious expression as well as entertainment through theatre genres. Thus *bhdgavatha* theatre developed out of Vaisnava **devotionalism**.

Largely, Vaisnava bhakti spread in South India and reached North India. Some of the Muslim rulers who established themselves in North India were jealous and even repressive of Hindu society. Due to this reason, the spirituality and bhakti movement resulted in a great following of religion, poetry, music and art throughout the Indian sub-continent. The net result was the emergence of traditional theatre performances in 15th and 16th centuries which set their roots in Andhra Pradesh. From the south- *Kuchipudi bhagavatham* (Andhra Pradesh), *Melattur bhāgavata mela* (Tamil Nadu), *Toorpu bhagavatham* (north coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh), and *Chindu bhāgavatham* (Northern and Telengana parts of Andhra Pradesh) came to light.

Along with this development, a peculiar role was thrust on the Telugu people by their geographical position, trade, religion and their art, which drew people from other parts of India to the Telugu land. Therefore, the close contacts naturally brought out an assimilation, which has become a characteristic feature of Telugu culture since a long time. The North and South met here and Telugu people grasped this opportunity, taking the best from both cultures. This is reflected in their language, literature, habits, and even in the performing arts.

3.5. PERFORMANCE HISTORIES OF BHAGAVATHA PERFORMANCES KUCHIPUDI BHAGAVATHAM AND MELATTUR BHAGAVATHA MELA

The *bhagavatham* is a term loosely attributed to any theatrical presentation in Andhra. This term was used both for *bhagavatha purana* and for performances based on the stories from it. Truly speaking, *bhagavatham* is a form of theatrical presentation based on the legends of Krishna. From a historical point of view, these performances came into light during late 16th A.D and early 17th A.D.

3.5(a). *Kuchipudi bhāgavatham*

The word Kuchipudi bhagavatam means *bhdgavata performance group from Kuchipudi*, a village in the Krishna district (Naidu 1975; Raghavan 1981; Rajinikanta Rao 1964; Sharma 1995). The vicinity of Kuchipudi is of great historical importance in performance history. According to Rajanikanta Rao:

Divi Taluk in the Krishna District in Andhra Pradesh is well known for its hoary tradition of dance, music and drama, fostered for the last seven centuries in the villages of Kuchipudi and Movva. It is 'Divi seema', as the Taluk was called. In the 13th century (1254), the Kakatiya emperor, Ganapati Deva, discovered an orphan Brahmin boy, called Jayappa, a prodigy in dance and music and a future commander of his elephant regiment. Continuing the traditions of Bharata Muni and Matanga Muni, Jayappa Senani expounded the principles of dance and music in his three great Sanskrit treatises, *Nritta Ratnavali*, *Gita Ratnavali* and *Vadya Ratnavali*.

Divi Narasimhacharaya of Avanigadda claims that in A.D. 1350, one Gopalkrishna Saraswati of Srikakularn, a scholar in dance and music and composer of yakshaganas in Sanskrit and Telugu wrote a commentary on the *Natyasastra* of Bharata muni...About the same time or half a century later (A.D.1400), Sidedendhrayogi of seems to have organised the village theatre of Kuchipudi and ordained that every Brahmin boy of the village should dedicate himself to the arts of dance, drama and music, according to the principles of Bharata, and undergo training to enact the role of Satyabhama in his *Yakshangana* entitled **B-hama** Kalapam. The **Kaifiyath** of Machupalle mentions **Salva** Narasimharaya, the emperor of Vijanagara in the year A.D 1502, being entertained by the Bagavata Mela of Kuchipudi which performed a 'Kelika'(1969:14).

But according to Machupalle Kyfait, we can deduce that they were not the Kuchipudi **artists** of the Krishna district who visited the court of Narashimha Devaraya and presented

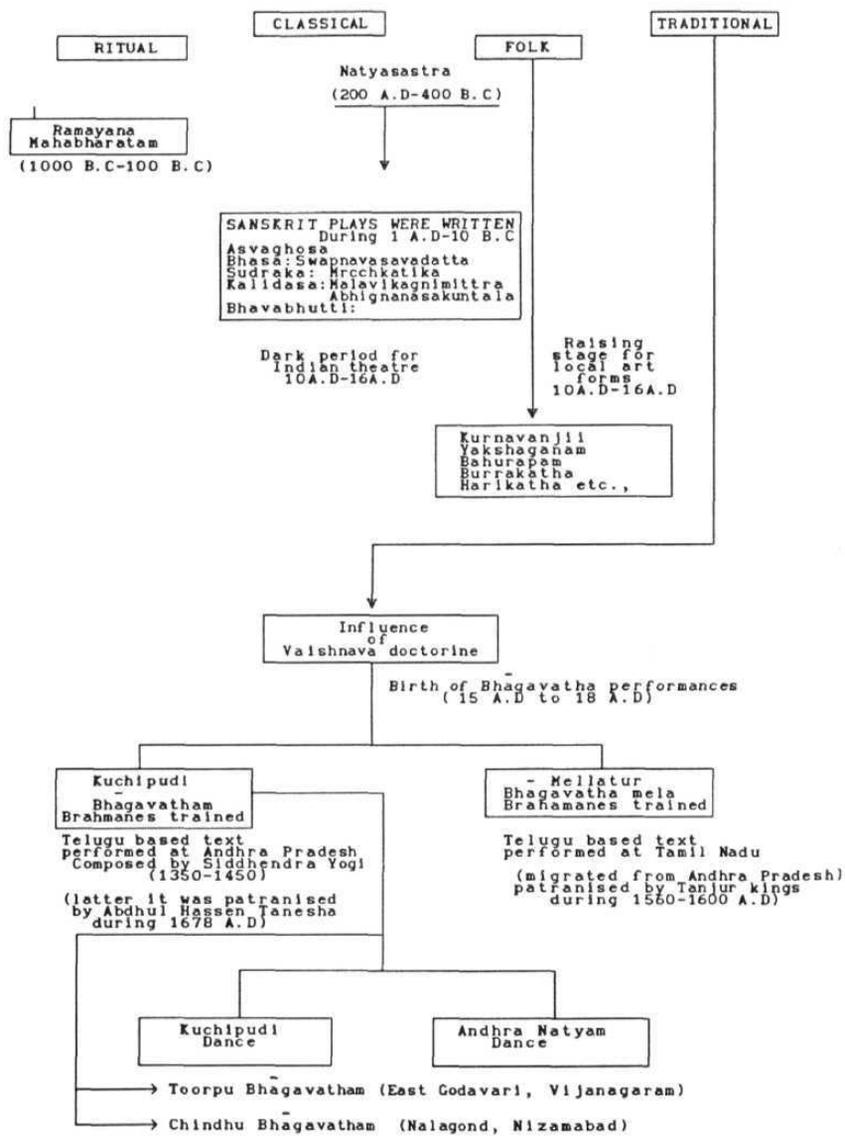


Fig. 3.1 Development of various performance genres from ritual to traditional theatres

the episode of *Sambatikuravaraja*. The troupe that visited him was from the Guntur district. It was Abdul Hassan of Golkonda who granted them an innam land in the Krishna district, impressed by their performances. This group of performers built a village and named it as Kuchipudi, the original name of their village in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. Thus, this **mela** came to be known as *Kuchipudi bhāgavatha mela*, corresponding to their place of living and dance-dramas. The origin and birth of Siddendhra Yogi, the pioneer of Kuchipudi tradition, and his compositions also became very controversial. According to Gidugu **Ramamurthy** (personal communication), opines, "based on the language used in the *Bhāmā Kalāpam* text, it can be presumed that the Siddendhra Yogi belongs to post 16th A.D. only" i.e after the grant of land by Abul Hassan to the Kuchipudi performers".

The Kuchipudi village was not only a historical place of dance-dramas but also the place for music, as is Movva, a village situated just two miles from Kuchipudi, which gave birth to Kshetraya (1600 A.D), in whose **Padams** a perfect blending of dance and musical composition offered a unique vehicle of expression for Kuchipudi dance. Saint Narayana Tirtha (1550 A.D.) enriched Kuchipudi dance - dramas through his opera called Krishna **Leela** Tarangini. Thus Kuchipudi, nurtured with dance, music and drama, flourished since the 17th century. The evolution of Kuchipudi dance - drama is illustrated in the (fig 3.2).

Siddendhra's pioneering work and his dedication to this art is the result of the *Bhāmā Kalāpam*. *Bhāmā Kalāpam* is a story based on passionate love of Krishna and **Satyambama**. **Bhāmā's** ambition was to keep Krishna in her embrace. Her passionate love is a form of devotion. Siddendhra is supposed to be the father of the Bhamā cult. He composed song after song and the whole composition was known as *Bhāmā Kalāpam*. He sang and danced his own compositions. It is said then, even the devanarthakis of that village requested him to teach *Bhāmā Kalāpam*, because the songs of the *Bhāmā Kalāpam* were sensuous love acts, but due to certain social morales, he could not give much preference to women, thinking that they demoralize the society further. Hence forth, he selected good looking **Bahrmin** boys of the village and gave the training. Thereafter, this performance tradition was confined

only to male genre rather than female genre. Hence he was called the founder of Kuchipudi School.

S.5(b). Melattur Bhagavata Mela

The *Melattur bhagavata mela* means “*Bhāgavata* performance group from Melattur”. Melattur is a medium-sized village situated in the interior of Tamil Nadu about ten miles from Tanjore (Iyer 1958, 1969, 1975; Natarajan 1993, 1995; Kothari 1979; Joga Rao, 1964). The village was gifted by “**Achutappa**” Naika, former king of Tanjore of Nayaka dynasty. **According** to Natrajan, pioneer of *bhagavata mela*:

The cholas, one of the dynasties that ruled over the South and parts of rest of India, played a very significant role in the Tamil country for four and a quarter centuries in promoting Tamil culture, especially Tamil literature, Saivite religion and temple architecture.

It is evidenced from the stone inscriptions that during the reign of “Vikrama Chola” (1125-1150 A.D) a shiva temple was built at a high-rise site where a Linga was unearthed and the Chola named the site as “Unnathapuri” and the deity in Linga form as “Unnathapureswarar”. It is thus the village Unnathapuram came into existence since the early part of the 12th century and it is this village where the Bhagavata Mela natakas are held in connection with the Narasimha Jaynati.

By the end of the 14th century, the Vijanagar empire annexed Chola mandala to its kingdom and founded the Nayakas dynasty in Thanjavur.

When the Vijayanagara empire was defeated at the hands of Muslims in 1565 A.D. in the battle at Talikotta, several families of composers, poets, vedic scholars and performing artistes from the empire migrated to Thanjavur. The second Nayak king, Achutappa (1560-1600 A.D) offered refuge to these families and settled them down at Thanjavur and nearby place (Natarajan 1993:1).

Natrajan's description gives the entire pragmatic understanding of the development of *Melattur bhdgavata mela* performances. The chronological development of *Melattur bhdgavata mela* and its Guru-Sishya parampara & contemporaries of Melattur maestros are demonstrated in fig 3.3.

According to Krishna Iyer (1975:84), "The Bhagavata Mela Dance-Drama tradition seems to have been in vogue in this country from the 11th century A.D. if not earlier. It is known to have come into prominence in South India from the time of Thirthanarayana Yogi, the author of *Krishna Leela Tharangini* who migrated from Andhra Desa, lived and died at Varahur in the Tanjore District about 300 years ago. According to him and his followers, devotion to God through the fine arts became perfect only when it was expressed through the combination of music, dance and abhinaya in drama, expounding the philosophic truths of the *bhāgavatalore*. Among his followers of later generations, Venkatrama Sastriar was a great composer, who lived at Melattur about 150 years ago, as a senior contemporary of Saint Thyagaraja and he wrote about 12 dance-dramas of high artistry". Therefore Gopalakrishna Sastry's son **Venkarama** Sastry is the playwright of the great *Melattur bhdgavata mela natakas*. His excellence in *Vedas, Sastras, Upanishads, Puranas* and expertise in *Kavya, Natakas* and *Alankaras*, and scholarship in Telugu, Sanskrit, music, dance and drama brought a new era to *bhdgavata mela* dance-dramas of Melattur.

S.5(c) *Toorpu bhāgavatham*

When *Kuchipudi bhdgavatham* attained maturity and gained as a classical theatre, the *Toorpu bhdgavatham* (Ramakrishna 1975; Sharma 1995) had taken root as a traditional theatrical form in northern parts of Andhrapradesh- Vishakapatnam, Vijayanagaram and **Srikakulam**. *Toorpu bhdgavatham* means *Bhdgavatham of eastern style*. Strictly speaking, the origin and birth of this theatre is unknown. Nevertheless, it got influence from classical theatre - *Kuchipudi bhdgavatham*. Nataraja Ramakrishna, who popularized this form, opines: "It is vaisnavism that influenced the semi - urban people during the 17th A.D. along with other traditional theatre forms. Therefore it stands as traditional theatre form of Andhra

Pradesh" (personal communication). *Toorpu bhagavatham* performers belong to all sections of castes unlike in *Kuchipudi bhagavatham*.

S.5(d) Chindu bhagavatham

Chindu bhagavatham is popular in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh. Chindu means 'dance-step'. But later *Chindu* became part of the performers' social life and their *bhdgavathams* came to be known as *Chindu bhāgavathams*. This *bhagavata* group socially belongs to the downtrodden in society. All the performers are harijans (schedule caste). The origin and birth of these performances are also unknown, but one can predict that this tradition followed the same path as *Toorpu bhagavatham*. Natraja Ramakrishna highly promoted this art form and took it into urban society. *Chindu bhdgavathams* are still popular in the rural parts of Telangana of Andhra Pradesh.

3.6. COMPOSITION OF BHAGVATAMS

S.6(a). Kuchipudi bhagavatham

It is believed that primarily the composition of *Kuchipudi bhagavatham* text was done by Siddendhra Yogi. It was *Bhāmā Kaldpam*, and later other compositions such as *Parijatham* and *Golla Kalāpam* were added to their repertoire.

Siddendhra Yogi's pioneer work and his dedication to this art was the result of the *Bhdmd Kaldpam*. He is called the father of the *Bhdmd* cult. It is a story based on Krishna's and Satyabhama's passionate love. Satyabhama's ambition was to keep Krishna in her embrace. Her passionate love is a form of devotion. This whole composition is known as *Bhdmd Kaldpam*. It is in the form of dance and drama. *Golla Kaldpam* is a metaphysical dance - drama. It describes the genesis of the world and humankind thorough dance and songs. The story starts with the birth of the universe and the process of the birth of a child. And it elaborately described the difference between a brahmin and a *gollabhdmd* (milk maid). *Golla Kaldpam* is a philosophic song discourse. The discourse is between a brahmin and a

milk-maid. The milk-maid declares that all human beings are equal and devotion is the only way to attain salvation.

During later stages, many other texts were included in the Kuchipudi repertoire. They are *Prahalada Charitra*, *Rukminikalyanam*, *Harischandra*, *Usha Parinayam*, *Geya Natakam* and *Rama Natakam*, taking themes from Hindu scriptures - *Bhāgavatham*, *puranas*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatam* etc.

Subsequently, the other exponents of *Kuchipudi bhāgavatham* added Nritya to the performance tradition. These are known as *Sabdams*. *Sabdams* are compositions of a rhythmic character around the lyrics of the performance. These serve to praise the patrons and also narrate incidents from the puranas. One such *sabdam* is *Dasavatara Sabdam*. It depicts the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, composed by Siddhabattula *Ragadas* and other poets. Another one is *Manduka Sabdam*, a composition by Melattur Kasinathayya. The *Prahalada Sabdam*, composed by Melattur Venkarama Sastry, relates to the story of Prahalada taken from *Mahabhdgavatam*. Likewise, many other *sabdams* came to light. They are *Tulaja Sabdam*, *Sivaji Sabdam*, *Thadhi Sabdam*, etc, found in the Kuchipudi school (Kanakalingeshwara Rao 1968). In addition to the dance-dramas and *Sabdams* they have expertise in *Tarangams* Narayana *Tirtha*'s, *Tarangam*, (*Krishnalila Tarangam*) and to the *Padams* (Kshetraya) (Ibid.:27).

S.6(b). Melattur Bhagavata Mela

Bhagavata mela natakas of Melattur consist of those composed by Melattur Venkatarama Sastry. He composed many nrtyanatakas and there are at least twelve natakas to his credit. Out of them, eleven natakas are authentically confirmed. The themes of *Melattru bhdgavata mela* are chosen from the popular puranic tales found in *Srimad bhdgavatham*. The Natakas are *Prhalada Charitamu*, *Markandeya Natakamu*, *Harischandra Natakam*, *Usha Parinayamu*, *Rukmaangadha*, *Hari Hara Leela Vilasamu*, *Kamsa Charita Natakam*, *Seeta Parinayam*, *Rukmani Kalyanam*, *Dhruva Charitamu* and *Sati Savitri Natakamu*. All the

above compositions are highly influenced by bhakti. Therefore, bhakti is the driving force in all his compositions. Sastry's compositions connote the beautiful and are dedicated to Lord Varadaraja, the presiding deity of Melattur village. His compositions also include *Churnikas*, *Champakamalas*, *Daruvus*, *Dwipadas*, *Kandams*, *Kandharthas*, *Padas*, *Pada - varnas*, *Padyams*, *Sandhi vachanas*, *Vachanas*, *Sis a ms* and *thillans* (Natrajan 1993:1). All these compositions are in Telugu language only. In his composition of daruvus, he has employed all the kinds of daruvus like *Pravesa daruvu*, *Samvada daru*, *Uttara-Pratyuttra daruvu* as found in Bharata's stage. "A beautiful 'Chindu' also finds a place in the pravesa daru for the character, 'Matangakanni' in the play **Harischandra**" (Ibid.:1).

S.6(c). *Toorpu Bhāgavatham*

Truly speaking, the original composition in the repertoire is *Bhāmā Kalapam* like in *Kuchipudi bhāgavatham*. But today, the text followed by them is a different text prepared for their own troupe's consumption. Fortunately *Bhama Kalapam* gained popularity both in performer and audience, because the main story centered around the love/quarrel/reunion sequences of Krishna and his consort Satyabhama. The villagers' major interest of the text is *Savutula Kayyam*, the wordy-duel between the two co-wives of Krishna, Satyabhama and Rukmini. In an earlier version the quarrel was between Satyabhama and Rukmini, but very soon Radha replaced Rukmini because the Telugu psyche finds it unpalatable to have the good-natured Rukmini getting into a quarrel with Satyabharna (Sharma 1995:96).

The entire story goes on between Rukmini and Satybhama and Krishna and the play concludes with a happy end. Music predominates these performances. Ragas used in it are desi. the performance begins with *Nata-raga* and closes with *Surathi*. Writing on ragas, Sharma (1995:96) observes, ragas such as Hayiri *Mukhari* and *Yadukulakhamboji* are also rendered in desi style. The *raga-prasthara* and the *gamakas*, while enunciating the raga, followed the folk conventions. Starting the song in the madhyamakala, the raga reaches the high pitch with the chorus. This of course does not look innocuous, since the entire tradition is built up on this high note. Essentially an open air performance, it usually caters to a

crowd of 5 to 10 thousand at a time. The only way to project the sound was the use of the human vocal chords. Several desi metres form a part of the musical text: *Kandaradham*, a half poem or a half song, *ragada*, *padyam* (the metrical stanza) *dwipada* etc., have all been used appropriately.

The mridangam plays an important role during the performance. It functions as in Tandava style with complete enunciation of broad rhythm to compensate the dance movements of actors and to draw perfect attention of the audience. Usually the mridangam player has one of the important key roles in the troupe. For instance, Ramavaram of Vijanagaram *Toorpu bhāgavatha mela* always booked Dupama Suryalingam (fig.3.4). His excellence in playing and fame demanded to be hired for all their performances during season times (personal communication).

3.6(d). *Chindu bhagavatham*

The most important composition in *Chindu bhāgavatham* composition is *Jamba Purana*. It is a cast-myth performed as dance-drama. It is about their ancestor jambhavan who was a king, and his wife, Neelarukanya. Jambavan goes through many intrigues of his enemies and ultimately rules over the country forever with the blessings of Yellamma. This performance is called *Kula puranam*. It is evident from their cast-myth that Vaishnavism has greatly influenced their performance tradition. All plays start with the dance of child Krishna and are followed by Radha. After this, the main episode starts with the appearance of the King and the queen and other characters. In this performance tradition, it is observed that the entrance-song is only for the king and the queen but not for other characters.

Besides Jamba puranam, their repertoire consists of other plays such as *Satya Harischandra*, *Chenchu Lakshmi*, *Veerabhimanya*, *Ganga-Gauri samvadam*, *Sati Savitri*, *Bhakata Prahalada*. All these themes are drawn from Mahabharatam, Ramayanam and *bhagavatham*.

3.7. THE PERFORMANCE STRUCTURE

S.7(a). *Kuchipudi bhagavatham*

The *Bhṛmḍ Kalāpam* of *Kuchipudi bhagavatham* performance is noteworthy. The performance begins with a recital of extracts from the four vedas from where the *rig veda* (text), *yajur veda* (histrionic expression), *sama veda* (vocal music) *atharvana veda* (sentiment or rasa), are borrowed. These four vedas symbolize the composition of the *Naty veda*. Group dancers appear on the stage and consecrate the stage by sprinkling holy water. This ritual act is known as *Punyavachana*. It is followed by *Rangalankarana* i.e., the decoration of the stage with colored powders (traditional performances). A bunch of 58 lights are offered to the *Ranga Adhidvata*, the stage god. It precedes the offering of flowers to the audience by way of invoking their blessings. Afterwards, the flag staff of India is set upon the stage. After this, Lord Ganesa appears and blesses the artistes. It is believed that by doing this **ritual**, the performance cannot be disturbed. Then the main character Sutradhra (stage manager) appears on the stage and sings *Amba Prarthana* and *Guru Parthana* along with his three or four of his colleagues. Then *Nandi Sthotra* follows.

The Sutradhar stands up with his curved stick (fig 3.5). It is believed that this curved stick was presented to Bharata by Lord Brahma, according to the *Natya Sastra*. It is named *Kutilika*. Sutradhara offers prayer to his guru and welcomes the audience and narrates the story line. Sutradhara himself portrays *Vidushaka's* (buffoon's) role. The *Vidushaka* provides humor by gestures and dialogues and gives relief to the audience. Wherever there is a song for introducing a new character, he starts off with a parody of the song by mentioning ridiculous things to create comic for relief to the audience. Then follows the major episodes. The performance begins with a curtain held by two stage-persons and the main character, *Satya Bhāmā*, stands behind the curtain (figs 3.6 and 3.6a). Her dance to *Pravēshika daruvu* is sung by the *Vidushaka*. The songs are entirely in *Karnatic* music and *mridangam* supplies the rhythm for her dance. Even *jatis* are also orally recited and they inspire the performer in his rhythmic patterns of dance and footwork. Through *abhinaya*, the performer interprets the

songs. For more entertainment and for putting across the ideas more effectively, Vidushaka interviews the main performer. It is in a form of dialogue or an argument among themselves.

For instance in *Golla Kalapam*. it is a dialogue which the chief character, as represented by a milk maid (*gollabhama*), carries on with the Brahman, and so it is called Kalapam. "The golla always scores, she cross-examines the Brahman as to his real brahmanhood and expatiates on what a real brahman is according to the sastras and in the torrent of her questions and several Sanskrit quotations on several matters, the poor brahman become breathless" (Rahgavan 1981:246).

Besides *Bhāmā Kalapam*, *Kuchipudi bhdgavatha mela* also enacts *Prahalada Charitam* - dance-drama. The proceedings of this dance-drama are the same as the *Bhdmd Kalapam*. A distinguishable element in the dance-drama is the involvement of a large number of performers. Outward structure of *Prahalada Charitam* of Kuchipudi is the same as *Prahalada Charithamoi Melattur bhdgavatha mela*, except for its variation in the pattern of hand movements, gestures, foot work, costumes and make - up. Otherwise, it is similar to the *Melattur bhdgavata mela*.

According to Vedantham Satyanaryan Sharma, "there are two temples in Kuchipudi vilage. One is **Ramalingeshawara** temple (fig 3.7), the other is Lord Krishna where Siddendhra Yogi worshipped. There is a rectangular stage on the outside of the temple. In olden days there were regular performances at the temple premises" (personal communication). "Since about middle of fifties, the stage has been demolished" (Khokar 1988:74-81). Kuchipudi performances were patronized by the temples, local rulers and zamindars etc.

S.7(b). Melattur Bhāgavata Mela

For instance, *Prahalada Charitham* of *Melattur bhdvatha mela* performance structure is as follows. The performance begins with the appearance of the first character Konangi (buffon) (fig 3.8). He appear on the stage and dances for about fifteen minutes in a humorous manner. He then requests the audience to watch the play in silence and quits the stage. Then there is

a group of musicians who sing the invocating song called *Thodaymangalam*. It contains many sweet tunes including *Sabdhas* and *Sollukkattus*, interesting to the audience. *Thodaya* or *Jaya* which is from the *Bhajana Sampradaya* of the *South* is introduced as a invocatory song, followed by *Naandi Dwipadha* and a *Sabdam* - narration of theme in a nutshell. The *sabdam*, called *Prahalada Pattabhisheka Sabdam*, unfolds into excellent *sollukkattus* in different *gatis* followed by a *Kavutuvu*s and a *Jaggini daruvu* in praise of Lord Vigneswara. This concept of *Katha Sangraha* is absent in Sanskrit drama (Natrajan 1993:2). It follows the *Poorva ranga*, Lord Vigneswara character (fig 3.9) enters the stage with *pravesa daruvu* with graceful dance. He comes to the stage and blesses the audience and then exits. After this, the main play begins with the introduction of the chief characters by themselves, one by one, through *pravesa daruvu*, and the introduction is called *Patra Pravesam* After the introduction of the chief characters, the main story follows scene by scene.

As the performance proceeds, a variety of *daruvus*, soliloquies in classical music of Carnatic tradition and dialogues in poetic diction blend at every stage with dance and *abhinaya* according to *Natya Sastra* and other treatises. With the significant hand gestures and facial expressions, the interpretation of speech and songs gives meaning to the story. There is a remarkable synchronization of music, speech, dance and *abhinaya* rendering high aesthetic appeal which leads to *rasa*.

3.8. PRELIMINARIES OF BHAGVATAMS

In *bhdgavata melas* (Kuchipudi and Melattur), ritual preliminaries have much importance. These performances begin with the worship of Lord Ganesha and an invocatory song is sung by the musicians in chorus. In both performances, the ritual starts in the greenroom itself after the completion of make-up, with certain religious rites and prayers. For instance, in *Melattur bhāgavata mela*, performances take place only in the festival season. Therefore it is necessary to go through the ritual acts. The *bhdgavata mela* is held in front of the local Sri Varadaraja Perumal temple at Melattur on the occasion of Narahimaha Jayanti. The Jayanti continues for 12 days in the village. All the *bhdgavata mela* performers start their

ritual practices in front of the Temple in the morning before enacting the plays. In this ritual, all performers go to the temple to worship Lord Narashima and offer yagnas etc. "Venkatarama Sastry recruited his players from each Brahmin family and enacted the plays in the Varadaraja Perumal Sannidhi (Propylaeum) before the decorative Utsav Vighras or Processional deities (Natarajan 1993:3). The same night they perform *Prahalada Charitam*. The major ritual within the play starts with the *Apurva raga* adopted by Venkatarama Sastry. Immediately after the *Apurva raga*, Lord Vigneswara enters the stage dancing beautifully with a *pravesa daruvu* and blesses the audience, musicians on the stage, and then exits (figs 3.9 and 3.9a). This entire ritual act is performed with devotion. Natarajan (1995:11) proclaims that:

At the end of this performance, the actors and personating the gods and demigods, the protagonists climb down the stage, walk through the passage to the temple with the *Bhāgavata* chanting Hari Bhajans to offer worship and *Deeparathana* to the deities inside. Later, the ensemble continues the procession towards another temple maintained by the patron. As it walks through the streets of the villages, the villagers, offer *arathi* to the actors and the actors offer prayers followed by recitation of benedictory verses, only then the *natakam* of the day is said to be complete. This is one of the fascinating spectacle of our living theatre

Natarajan's description clarifies the ritual importance in the performance.(figs 3.10 and 3.10a). Even today this ritual can be seen in Melattur. This kind of intensive ritual enactment is not visible in *Prahalada Charitam* of *Kuchipudi bhāgavatham*. But according to the Vedanta Satyanaryan Sarma, "it existed during olden days. As days passed on this ritual enactment slowly vanished" (personal communication). But *Kuchipudi bhāgavatham* is enriched with stage rituals (fig 3.9). As Padma Subramanyam pointed out in one of her lecture - demonstrations: "The Bharata tradition is clearly seen in the preliminaries of Terukkuttu in which they have a fairly elaborate puja. Lord Ganesha is worshipped in the form of a lump of turmeric pulp - there is kottu (beating of drums) for a long time in the form of announcement. After that, invocatory songs in praise of Lord Ganesha, Saraswathy, **Ellama**

and their Guru are sung and then the Kattiyankaran enters.... These are all part of the **Natyadaharmi** mode of expressions which is typical of all these traditional theatre" (Venu-gopal 1992:10). She also pointed out "that here are other dramatic forms which are close to Bharata's *Natya sastra* in their conception if not in their technique. The Terukuutu and Bhagavata *mela* of Tamil Nadu, and Kudiattam and Cakkuyarkuttu of Kerala, the Bhagavata *atta* of Kuchipudi and of other similar villages of Andhra, and the yakshagana of Karnataka are some of the theatrical forms which show an interlying unity in their format in spite of their linguistic diversity. All these forms are descendants of Bharata's *Natyasastra* and hence all the four *Abhinayas* play an equal role in them" (Ibid.: 10). Common characteristic features of *bhāgavthams* are illustrated in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2.

3.9. CONCLUDING NOTE

Traditional Indian theatre is identified under three categories: one, classical Sanskrit theatre drawing its attention from works such as *Natya Sastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Sangita Ratnakara*, etc.; two, ritual theatre covers a wide range of castes and communities; and last one i.e., semi-classical and folk theatre, which is equally diversified and often secular in spirit.

Indian traditional theatre is the amlagam of *Natyadharmi* (stylistic acting) and *Lokadharmi* (realistic acting). The use of *touryatrikam* (singing, dancing, and instrumental music) increases the *natyadharmi* mode. The text of the plays are so composed as to provide enough scope to explore the music and dancing resources of the performers. The four types of *abhinaya* (*angika*, *vacika*, *aharya* and *satvika*) help to suggest that there is no attempt to represent external reality through the performance of the play. The *Ekaharya* or *Pakarnnattam* style of rendering, where the same actor impersonates different characters without change of make-up or costumes, also destroys the impressions of realism aimed at in illusionistic drama. The tendency is to improvise for hours together without any textual support during the performance (see chapter iv). Skill of a gifted actor his *manodharma* or free play of imagination, is another factor that emphasizes the absence of illusionism in Indian theatre.

Most of the above characteristic features can be found in all *bhāgavathams*, thus they are more common in the *Kuchipudi bhdgavatham* and *Melattur bhagavata mela*, whereas *Toorpu bhdgavatham* and *Chindu bhdgavatham* are dilute in their structure and concept, since they are considered as traditional and folk theatre of Andhra prades. To sum up, the three main types of traditional Indian theatre share common features with the diverse experiments that have tried to take European theatre away from its post-Renaissance theatre experiments and **their** parallel in three forms of traditional Indian theatre classial, semi-classical/folk , and **ritual** theatre. The bhagavathams are the best examples to identify the features common to experimental theatre in the West and traditional Indian theatre. It also explicates the performance theory of Westerners, specifically Schechner's Performance theory and Environmental theatre theory. The next chapter explicates text and space and its linkages between the Westernen as well as *bhdgavatham* performances.

Table 3.1: Characteristic features of *Kuchipudi bhagavatham* and Melattur bhagavatha mela

| Characters | <i>Kuchipudi bhagavatham</i> | <i>Melattur bhagavata mela</i> |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Word Meaning | <i>Bhagavata</i> performance of brahmin artists from Kuchipudi village | <i>Bhagavata</i> Performers (from Mellatur) |
| Evolution | From Yakshaganam later Veedhi bhagavatham | From Yakshaganama later Veddhi bhagavatham |
| Place of Enactment | Outside temple near chariots | Outside temple near chariots |
| Time | Night | Night |
| Nature and Function | Aesthetic | Aesthetic and devotional based |
| Theme or Subject | Enactment of Telug Plays on Vaishnavism <i>Bhāmā Kalapam</i> and <i>Prahaladacharitam</i> etc. | Enactment of Telugu Plays on Vaishnavism <i>Prahaladacharitam</i> etc. |
| Make-up | Special Make-up for major Charectars Colorful Mask Head-gear Rude Make-up (olden days) made with Haridalam Termaric and Charcolate | Special Make-up for major Charectars Colorful Mask Head-gear Rude Make-up (olden days) made with Haridalam Termaric and Charcolate |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Action | <p>Non-stylized attempt will be made for executing four modes of Abhinayas</p> <p>Stress on Vachikabhinaya <i>Lokadharmi</i></p> | <p>Non-stylized attempt will be made for executing four modes of Abhinays but natural way of expression is more</p> <p>More stress on Vachikabhinaya <i>Lokadharmi</i></p> |
| Lighting | <p>Petromax lights for traditional enactment sometimes electrical lights Sun light</p> | <p>Petromax lights for traditional enactment sometimes electrical light Sun light</p> |
| Text rendering | <p>All characters speak their local language play backsingers also take part in the performace Singers follow folk-tunes sometimes classical ragas</p> | <p>All characters speak their local language play backsingers also take part in the performance Singers follow only folktones</p> |
| Music | <p>Mridangam, Symbols and Hormoniam</p> | <p>Mridangam, Symbols and Hormoniam</p> |
| Performer training | <p>No special training</p> | <p>No special training</p> |
| Performance score | <p>Not controlled by Natyasastra Individual actor can create his own score</p> | <p>Not controlled by Natyasastra Individual actor can create his own score</p> |
| Transmission of performative Knowledge | <p>By oral tradition and written records</p> | <p>By oral tradition and written records</p> |
| Cast of the Performers | <p>Any caste in the village No female performer</p> | <p>Low-caste (Madigas) female performers</p> |
| Occasion of performance | <p>Some festival times</p> | <p>Any time</p> |

Table.3.2: Characteristic features of Toorpu bhagavatham and Chindu bhagavatham

| Characters | <i>Toorpu bhagavatham</i> | <i>Chindu bhagavatham</i> |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Word Meaning | Eastern <i>bhāgavata</i> performers from Andhra Pradesh (Vizaq, Vijayanagaram and Srikakulam) | grigorious <i>bhāgavatam</i> performance from Andhra Pradesh (Nizamabad, Armoor) |
| Evolution | Yakshaganam and Veedhibhagavatham | Yakshaganam and Veedhibhagavatham |
| Place of enactment | Outside temple four corners of the road | Outside temple four corners of the road |
| Time | Night | Day |
| Nature and Function | Ritual and aesthetic | more ritual and aesthetic |
| Theme and subject | Plays from Hindu Mythologies | Plays from Hindu Mythologies other historical plays |
| Make-up | No stylized make-up Head-gear No mask | No stylized make-up Head-gear some times mask |
| Costume | Colorful dress Traditional ornaments (self-made) | Colorful dress Traditional ornaments (self-made) |

| | | |
|----------------|---|---|
| Costume | Colorful silk cloth | Colorful silk cloth |
| Action | Four modes of Abhinaya as <i>Aharya</i> , <i>Vacchika</i> , <i>Satvikka</i> and <i>Angika</i> with histrionic expression (Natyadharmi) | Four modes of Abhinaya as <i>Aharya</i> , <i>Vacchika</i> , <i>Satvikka</i> and <i>Angika</i> with histrionic expression (Natyadharmi) |
| Mudras | Hand Mudras and gestures | Hand Mudras and gestures |
| Lighting | Electrical Lights Petromax light, coke and wood (lattuka) (olden days) | Electrical Lights Petromax light, coke and wood (lattuka)(olden days) |
| Text Rentering | All characters speak background singers (Vocalist) All characters sing for themselves (olden days) All characters deliver their dialogue | All characters speak and background singers (Vocalist) All characters sing themselves (olden days) All character deliver their dialogue |
| Orchestra | Mukha veena, Symbols, Sruthi, Violin, Harmonium, Flute (later added) | Mukha veena, Symbols, Sruti Violin, Harmonium, Flute (later added) |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Performer Training | Systematic Training Childhood onwards with body exercise and rythematic movements | Systematic Training Childhood onwards with body exercise and rythematic movement |
| Performance Score | Individual actor can create their own score controlled by <i>Natyadharmi</i> | Individual actor can create their own score controlled by <i>Natyadharmi</i> |
| Transmission of Performative Knowledge | Generation to generation by oral transmission written text Systematic approach | Generation to generation by oral transmission written text Systematic approach |
| Cast of the Performers | Only brahmins All cast people take part (current) No female Performer for Traditional enactment Now female performers emerged (current) | Only brahmins Strictly male performers for traditional enactment |
| Occasion of performance | Nomadic performers Performance all seasons except rain season Even festival occasions (For livelihood) | Festival occasions (For tradition) Lakshmi Narasimha jayanthi |