

Between Art and Religion: *Bhāgavata Mēla* in Thanjavur

Takako Inoue
Daito Bunka University

Bhāgavata Mēla, which literally means “a group of *bhāgavatas*” (Brahman male actors) is a religious dance-drama in Telugu performed by *bhāgavatas*. It has been handed down as a family tradition in a few villages around Thanjavur. *Bhāgavata Mēla* enjoyed the patronage of the Nāyakas and Marāṭhās but rapidly declined after the British occupation of the area. This traditional dance-drama is said to have been performed in six villages, namely Melattūr (Mīlattur, Mērattur), Sāliyamaṅgalam, Tēpperumānallūr, Ūttukādu, Sūlamaṅgalam, and Nallūr, till the end of the 19th century. Today, it continues to be performed in three villages: Melattūr, Sāliyamaṅgalam and Tēpperumānallūr. Its decline is a common perception among scholars (e.g. Raman 1999). It has never been performed abroad, though some of the repertoire has been performed outside these villages.

Bhāgavata Mēla has not been researched intensively; although several articles are available, these only give an outline or fragmentary information.¹⁾ The most elaborate articles are written by *bhāgavatas* themselves, who may not always be objective. This paper is therefore mainly based on the findings of my field research in addition to the available written sources, including some that do not always treat *Bhāgavata Mēla* directly.²⁾

Art, Religion and Democratization

The purpose of this paper is to explore why this tradition declined and how hereditary performers struggle to continue this traditional performance despite rapid social changes. The reasons for the decline or extinction of traditional performing arts in general have yet to be clearly explained. Some say that the cause lay in social changes or the fact that a particular performing art does not accord with modern taste, whereas others argue that the aesthetic value of a certain performing art is not high enough to get public recognition. Then, what are the social changes that have an impact on it? What are the criteria of aesthetic value? Who determines the aesthetic value of tradition, and how?

Some scholars have explained that the rapid decline of *Bhāgavata Mēla* was caused by unfortunate social changes for hereditary performers, in that the rule of the Thanjavur Marāṭhās, who had patronized this tradition since the 17th century, collapsed in 1855. Tamil Nadu is today ruled by Dravidian parties characterized by an anti-Brahman tendency and Tamil nationalism, which do not promote Telugu arts and literature.³⁾ These reasons may be partially true, but I do not regard them as sufficient in themselves to explain the decline of this tradition. We must remember the fact that South Indian classical music (*Karnāṭaka* music), of which the lyrics are mostly in Telugu and many composers and performers are Brahmans, is flourishing in India at all levels even today. As *Bhāgavata Mēla* is actually a

dance-drama, understanding its language is more important than for *Karnāṭaka* music, which we can enjoy without comprehending its lyrics. On the other hand, the stories of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* are based on famous Hindu myths known to all, and we can enjoy the dance as well.

I would like to submit another interpretation in this paper, whereby the decline of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* is analyzed in terms of the delicate power balance between art and religion. The concept of an autonomous sphere of art exempt from political and social intervention was introduced by Western musicologists who studied Indian music under British rule. This concept has been widely accepted as being natural as political secularism by Indian scholars and performers since independent India started as a secular state, although Indian history suggests that music, dance and drama have been indispensable aspects of Hindu rituals and festivals, and today's traditional performing arts were mostly developed in such religious praxis.

Sruti, the South Indian music magazine, often features the question of “art and *bhakti*.” *Bhakti* means devotion, which is one of the most typical characteristics of mass Hinduism. For example, Tyāgarāja (1767-1847), one of the most famous musical composers in South India, has been deified since the temple was constructed at Tiruvaiyaru (13 km north from Thanjavur) where his *samadhi* (a tomb of a holy man) is located. Many devotees go on pilgrimage to this place in every January when the *Tyāgarāja Ārādhanā* (worship or service conducted in Hindu temples) festival is held. Typical temple rituals such as *abhiṣeka* (pouring holy water to the deity) and *ārati* or *dīpa-ārādhanā* (circling the lamp) are included in the *Tyāgarāja Ārādhanā* festival apart from music programs. The *Sruti* editorial suggests that blind devotion sometimes prevents us from truly appreciating and understanding the beauty of his compositions itself.⁴⁾ The problem is, however, that they hardly question the nature of art or artistic beauty. This shows us how deeply the concept of autonomous art is accepted in India.

A similar debate has taken place concerning *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*, as to whether *bhāgavatas* performed for art or *bhakti*.⁵⁾ Since *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* has been performed as part of the temple rituals, it might be more religiously oriented than the *Tyāgarāja Ārādhanā*. The former is performed in the temple street on a particular Hindu religious festival day, whereas musical compositions of *Tyāgarāja* are also sung on secular stages (although it must be noted that the time allotted to each performer is very limited and improvisational parts are mostly avoided on the latter occasions). Moreover, *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* is still performed only by particular families, while secular stages are open to everybody with no questions asked about qualifications such as caste, creed, gender, or nationality.

Some scholars explain the latter case as “democratization,” one of the characteristic phenomena of modern India.⁶⁾ It is essential that performances of music, dance and drama should be democratized and separated from religious praxis in order to be recognized as an autonomous art. Otherwise, they can be performed neither on secular stages nor abroad. Music, dance and drama should be taught to anybody who wants to learn; otherwise they may always face the threat of extinction. In this context, I chose *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* as an appropriate example because it has not yet been fully democratized and performers are now struggling with the continuation of their tradition. In this paper, I analyze *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*

from this point of view.

The Telugu *Yakṣagāna* Tradition in Thanjavur

Telugu culture was brought to Thanjavur, the Tamil heartland, in the Nāyaka period (1532-1676?). The first Nāyaka ruler of Thanjavur was Cevvappa who was the husband of Mūrtimāmbā, a sister of Tirumalāmbā, the wife of the Vijayanagar king, Acyutadēvarāya (reigned 1529-1542). He sent a trustful relative Cevvappa (reigned 1532-1580) to rule the southeast of his kingdom, which was in disorder owing to the Nāyakas' revolts against the Vijayanagar King. The Nāyaka dynasty began in 1532. Though Nāyakas were *vaiṣṇavāits* (devotees of the Lord Viṣṇu), they made donations to temples sacred to both Viṣṇu and Śiva, and even patronized Muslims, Buddhists, and Europeans. Most of the large Viṣṇu temples such as the Raṅganāthasvāmi temple at Srirangam and the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple at Tirupati were renovated and enlarged in this period.

Brahmans migrated to the southern area to escape from the Muslim invasion in this period. Particularly after Vijayanagar was beaten by five Muslim kingdoms of the Deccan at the battle of Talikota (Rakshasi-Tangadi) in 1565, many Brahmans came to Thanjavur to ask for protection and the Thanjavur Nāyakas gave them generous patronage. Nāyakas donated them villages or lands and there constructed *agrahāram* (Brahman residential areas). In such villages, a Viṣṇu temple was built at the west end of the main street of the *agrahāram*. Thus, the *vaiṣṇava* literatures and arts in Telugu and Sanskrit brought by Brahmans flourished in Thanjavur. Among them, Govinda Dīkṣitar served as a minister of Acyutappa (reigned 1560-1614) and Raghunātha (1600-1634) was famous for his many achievements in the cultural and social fields.⁷⁾

Not only Brahmans but also Nāyakas themselves composed several dance-dramas. Raghunātha was famous for his musical talent. He is said to have been a good *vīṇā* player and invented the *vīṇā* with 24 frets (12 frets in an octave) which developed into today's Sarasvati or Thanjavur *vīṇā* (Sundaram Aiyar and Subrahmanya Sastri 1940: 155). He wrote several theoretical treatises on performing arts and literature as well as dramas, epics and poems. The next ruler, Vijayarāghava (reigned 1633-1673), was also good at arts and literature. He is known to have composed 30 titles (Gopalan 1951: 18-9). Of these, 23 are based on the *Yakṣagāna* style characterized by the inclusion of different literary patterns: dialogues in prose, songs for dance such as *darus* and *padams*, and story-telling by the *sūtradāra* (the stage director) in verse. The stories of these dramas such as *Rukminī-kalyāṇamu*, *Satyabhāmā-vivāhamu*, and *Uṣā-pariṇayamu*,⁸⁾ mainly focus on the divine love called *madhra bhakti* (sweet devotion), which was common to *Bhāgavata Mēla* and the other dance-dramas composed in this period.

Today the word *Yakṣagāna* in its narrow sense is used as a name of the Kannada Theater, also called *Bhāgavatara-āṭa* or *Bayalāṭa*, in south Karnataka. But dramas in the *Yakṣagāna* style were composed not only in Kannada but also in Telugu, Marathi, Tamil and Sanskrit. The texts of *Bhāgavata Mēla* and *Kūcipūḍi*, a dance-drama still performed today in Andhra Pradesh, are also written in this style. Though the origin of *Yakṣagāna* is not clear, it is said that entertaining theatrical performances by a caste called *Jakkulu* (the plural

form of *Jakka* in Telugu) on the occasion of local festivals and fairs were brought to the court and developed into a sophisticated art at the time of Vijayanagar King Kṛṣṇadēvarāya (reigned 1509-1529). Since the word *yakṣa* means an actor and *gāna* means music in Sanskrit, scholars searched for its origin in Sanskrit treatises. A well-known Sanskrit scholar, V. Ragavan, finds that the word *yakṣa* appeared as a musical form in the *Saṅgītasudhā* of Govinda Dīkṣitar (17th century) and says that the word *Jakkulu* is derived from the word *yakṣa* (Raghavan 1993: 347-8, 359-60). Another scholar on the Kannada *Yakṣagāna*, K. Shivarama Karanth, finds that the word *Jakka* appeared as a local musical style in the *Saṅgīta-ratnākara* of Sārṅgadeva (13th century) and the word *Yekkaragāna* is mentioned in one of the earliest Kannada literary works (12th century) (Karanth 1997: 83).

The earliest manuscript of Kannada *Yakṣagāna* was written in the 16th century, and many more are available that date from the 17th century. Siddhendra Yogi (14th century?), known as the originator of *Kūcipūḍi*, is said to have stayed at the *matha* (monastery) of Madhva's (a 13th-century philosopher) school in Udipi, which has been a center of *Yakṣagāna*. He wrote his only remaining composition *Bāmā-kalāpamu* in Telugu, and this has been an important part of the *Kūcipūḍi* repertoire since then. A number of manuscripts of the Telugu *Yakṣagāna* written in the Vijayanagar period are now available at the Government Oriental Manuscript Library in Chennai.⁹⁾ The Telugu *Yakṣagāna* tradition brought to Thanjavur in the Nāyaka period continued to be patronized by Marāṭhā rulers (1676-1855), and dance-dramas in the *Yakṣagāna* style were composed not only in Telugu but in Marathi, Tamil and other languages.¹⁰⁾

Yakṣagāna was performed at court. There are several descriptions of court performances available in texts such as the *Raghunāthanāyakābyudayamu* of Vijayarāghava (1951) and the *Rājāgōpālavilāsamu* of the court poet Ceṅgalva Kalākavi (1951). N. Viswanathan, a Telugu Pandit of the Sarasvati Mahal Library in Thanjavur, says that *Naṭṭuva Mēḷa* or *Saṅgīta Mēḷa* was performed by *dēvadasīs* (dancing girls) attached to the court while *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* was performed by *bhāgavatas*. The texts of *Yakṣagāna* written by Vijayarāghava were performed by *Naṭṭuva Mēḷa* of his court (Viswanathan 1999: Mukavurai, 4-5). On the other hand, Nataraja Ramakrishna, a scholar of *Kūcipūḍi*, says that the *Śaiva* Theater was called *Nāṭya Mēḷa*, the *Vaiṣṇava* Theater was called *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*, and the solo dance by *dēvadasīs* was called *Naṭṭuva Mēḷa* (*Kuchipudi Mahotsav* 1996: 38). These opinions suggest that these terms in general were not used for denoting a particular style but originally used for classifying theatrical groups, since the repertoires of today's *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*, *Yakṣagāna*, and *Kūcipūḍi* were based on common themes. These dance-dramas must have been performed both in temples and at court, which patronized both *dēvadasīs* and *bhāgavatas*.

Prahlāda-caritamū and the Performance of Bhāgavata Mēḷa

The theme of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* is deeply connected with the *vaiṣṇava* cult, particularly with that of the Lord Narasiṃha, a man-lion who is the fourth incarnation of Viṣṇu. Around the *Narasimha Jayanti* Day (the 14th day of the white half of the lunar month *Vaiśāka*, around the first half of May), the birthday of Lord Narasiṃha, *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* is performed in

front of the deity at the temple street in the village *agrahāram*. The local Viṣṇu (Perumāḷ) temple is located at the west end of the *agrahāram* street. Before and after the performance of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*, Hindu rituals such *pūjā* (worship or service) in the local temple and *Bhajana-saṃpradāya* (group singing of religious songs) take place. This clearly demonstrates that *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* is an indispensable part of the temple rituals. Its stage equipment is as comparatively simple as the Sanskrit Theater where chairs and a temporary curtain hung by two people are used. The makeup and costumes of each character are not highly exaggerated, unlike the *Kathakali* of Kerala. Musicians consist of a few singers, the violin or flute player, the *mṛdaṅgam* player, the *naṭṭuvaṇār* who plays a pair of cymbals for dance and the *sūtradāra*, sitting on the platform placed at the right side of the stage. Songs are sung by singers, story-telling is chanted by the *sūtradāra*, and dialogues are spoken by actors. *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* is an all-male theater in which female roles are acted by men.

The most important item in the repertoire is *Prahlāda-caritam* (The Story of *Prahlāda*), which deals with the birth of the Lord Narasiṃha. The story goes as follows.¹¹

The two brothers Jaya and Vijaya served as gatekeepers of heaven. One day, a *ṛṣi* (saint) Sanandana, a son of Brahma, came to heaven with his brothers. Since they had the appearance of naked children, Jaya and Vijaya refused to allow them to enter heaven. Being angry with them, Sanandana cursed them to be born in the form of the *asuras* (demons) Hiraṇyakaśipu and Hiraṇyākṣa. But they will be able to return to their job if they are thrice killed by Viṣṇu. Hiraṇyakaśipu feels resentment for Viṣṇu as his brother Hiraṇyākṣa was killed by Varāha, the third incarnation of Viṣṇu. Swearing to revenge himself on Viṣṇu, Hiraṇyakaśipu did penance to obtain the power to kill Viṣṇu. Thanks to Brahma's favor, he finally obtained a body that could be destroyed neither inside nor outside a house, neither in the sky nor on the earth, neither at day nor at night, by any weapons, by any human beings, animals and anything created by Brahma. As he thought that even Viṣṇu could not kill him, he ordered the whole universe to cease praying to Viṣṇu and chanting the name of Viṣṇu. The gods attacked Hiraṇyakaśipu's court and Indra (the god of thunder) caught Līlāvati, a wife of Hiraṇyakaśipu. A *ṛṣi* Nārada was allowed to protect Līlāvati in his hermitage by Indra. Līlāvati was sad about the situation and Nārada preached her *bakti* to Viṣṇu. She then became pregnant. The baby in her womb was Prahlāda.

The actual drama of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* starts from here. Prahlāda was born as one of four sons of Hiraṇyakaśipu. Though Hiraṇyakaśipu hired a private teacher to teach Prahlāda to obey his father, Prahlāda rejected him as he was deeply devoted to Viṣṇu, saying that Viṣṇu alone is omnipotent and omnipresent. The angry father tortured the son by throwing him into the fire, making an elephant smash him underfoot, and making a poisonous snake bite him. But Prahlāda was able to escape since he was protected by Viṣṇu. One day Hiraṇyakaśipu asked Prahlāda to prove that Viṣṇu was omnipresent. Prahlāda said, "Viṣṇu is omnipresent, even he is in that pillar." Laughing Hiraṇyakaśipu said as beating the pillar, "Is Viṣṇu in this pillar?" Then the pillar broke into two, and from it was born Narasiṃha with a lion head and a human body. Narasiṃha dragged Hiraṇyakaśipu to the threshold of his court, put his body on his lap, tore his stomach and killed him at the twilight hour. Thus Viṣṇu could kill Hiraṇyakaśipu without losing Brahma's favor.

Narasimha is the fiercest and most terrible god among the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu. The actor playing Narasimha wears a mask for the performance. This mask is worshiped by local people as it is believed to hold mighty power. A Narasimha actor takes bath to purify his body before his performance. When he wears the mask, he goes into a trance and growls. Local people believe that this power is dangerous, and told me stories such as how an actor playing Narasimha really killed the one playing Hiranyakaśipu in Sūlamaṅgalam, a certain village in Andhra Pradesh, and how another actor playing Narasimha dragged four men onto the stage in Melattūr. This danger is the reason that this drama is only performed in a few limited areas, although the Narasimha myth is well known and the Lord is widely worshipped, particularly in Andhra Pradesh.

Of the pieces in the *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* repertoire, *Prahlāda-caritamu* may not be taken outside the village. Although today the performers accept invitations from Chennai and other cities, on such occasions they perform other pieces. *Prahlāda-caritamu* is performed on the *Narasimha Jayanti* Day at a particular venue. I was told that once *bhāgavatas* of Melattūr performed *Prahlāda-caritamu* in response to a request from outside the village. Though they made a new mask for the performance, a Hiranyakaśipu actor was seriously injured. Thereafter they have never performed it outside. *Bhāgavatas* in Tēpperumānallūr were once asked to perform *Prahlāda-caritamu* by Serfojī II, then Thanjavur Marāṭhā ruler. When they went to the court and opened the box where the Narasimha mask was kept, they found numerous scorpions inside. They gave up the court performance and returned to their village. Thereafter they have tabooed its performance elsewhere. I suppose that the existence of this taboo and belief is an important factor that has prevented the democratization of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*.

The actual drama is performed according to the following procedure, though some variations can be observed according to village traditions. It begins with a long ritualistic prologue. At the beginning, Kōṅṅi with a steeple-crowned cap, a buffoon or *vidhūśaka* in Sanskrit theater, comes onstage and dances holding a shawl up with his hands. Once Kōṅṅi played the role of quietening the audience down, but today he just dances. This role is peculiar to *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* and cannot be found in the other allied dance-dramas such as *Yakṣagāna* and *Kūcipūḍi*. Kōṅṅi realizes that next Ganapati (an elephant-head god) will appear, since the lyrics of the song for Kōṅṅi's dance include words denoting Ganapati such as *Mūśika-vāhana* (a god riding on a mouse). There is a myth to which this song refers. When Viṣṇu is looking for his missing conch, the sound of his conch is heard from Mt. Kailāsa (the abode of Śiva) because Ganapati, a son of Śiva, had swallowed it. Viṣṇu therefore dressed up as Kōṅṅi and danced with comical movements in front of Ganapati. Ganapati laughed at the dance and the conch came out of his mouth. Based on this myth, Kōṅṅi is said to be Viṣṇu himself (*Sruti* 1998: Issue 164, 32).

Then the *sūtradāra* explains the outline of the whole story, which is followed by a *tōdayamaṅgalam* (an auspicious song) and a *śabdham* (a song including lyric and *jati*, the words for dance steps) sung by musicians. Ganapati enters the stage next. He is the god who removes obstacles, and frequently appears in the prologue of any Indian performance. The role of Ganapati is often played by a small boy who wears a mask. After his dance, a priest enters the stage and does *pūjā* to Ganapati. The series of acts until Ganapati's

entrance is common to all the pieces in the repertoire.

The actual story begins with the entrance of Kaṭṭiyakāraṇ or Kaṭikam, also a buffoon dressed as a gatekeeper or as a messenger of the hero or anti-hero's court. As Kaṭṭiyakāraṇ is an indispensable role in *Terukkūttu*, a street theater of Tamils, *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* can be also said to be influenced by Tamil culture. Kaṭṭiyakāraṇ announces the entrance of the (anti-)hero. Of the main characters in *Prahlāda-caritamu*, Hiraṇyakaśipu enters first, followed by Līlāvati and lastly by Prahlāda. The main characters always dance first and then start their dialogues. The dance songs for their entrance, called *pātra-praveśa-daru* (entrance songs for actors), are the most important parts of their performances. Among their dances, Līlāvati's movements are the most elaborate and are based on *Bharatanāṭyam*. Whenever scenes change, the *sūtradāra* explains the next story and introduces new characters.

There is no pure tragedy in *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* like that of the Sanskrit theater. Their stories mostly have happy endings, such as the happy marriage of the hero and heroine or the victory of *dharma* (religious doctrine) or *bhakti*. Finally the hero and heroine (god and goddess) Narasiṃha and Lakṣmī, who enter the stage at the finale of *Prahlāda-caritamu*, are worshiped by the other actors, musicians, and the audience. As soon as the performance is over, actors go to the temple and worship the deity. This marks the conclusion of the performance.¹²⁾

The History of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*

The origin of the *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* in Thanjavur cannot obviously be traced in the oral tradition. In Melattūr and Sāliyamaṅgalam, it is said that Acyutappa donated some lands and houses to hundreds of *bhāgavatas* who came to ask for refuge as they were escaping from the Muslim invasion in the north. The village was therefore called Acyutapuram (or Acyutābudhi, Acyutapuri), a name derived from Acyutappa. Both villages insist that the name of village was Acyutapuram based on different grounds.

Melattūr was also called Unnathapuri, a name derived from Unnathapurīśvara, the deity of the local Śiva temple. This village is famous for producing numerous musicians. They composed many songs on Varadarāja-perumāḷ, the deity of the local Viṣṇu temple. Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha (1675-1745?), the best-known composer of *Kūcipūdi*, famous for his composition *Kṛṣṇalīlā-taraṅginī* in Sanskrit, visited this village and composed a song whose lyric included the sentence “*Śaraṇam Acyutapurānivasvāmi Varadarāja Prabhō*” (“The Lord Varadarāja at Acyutapuram, please protect me”) (Raghavan 1942). Vīrabhadrayya of Melattūr in the 18th century used Acyuta-varada and Unnathapurīśa as the *mudra* (signature) of his compositions (Raghavan 1946, 1953; Seetha 1981: 153-60). There are some difference between the detailed descriptions of the origin of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* given by performers and scholars. An article in a booklet issued by the group called the Melattur Sri Lakshmi Narasiṃha Jayanti Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam (MLBNS) states that 510 *bhāgavata* families were given land and a house with a well (MLBNS 1990: 9), whereas an article in a booklet issued by another group called the Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam (MBNVS) states that 500 or 501 *bhāgavata*

families were given this village in 1577 (MBNVS 1994; Raman 2002: 51). Arudra, a dance critic, states that among 510 divisions of land, 500 were given to *bhāgavata* families, with each family assigned one and half acres and a house with a well, and of the remaining ten, six were given to *Kōmati* (one of the Telugu castes) merchants and four to craftsmen (*Sruti* 1986: Issue 22, 19). A priest of the local Śiva temple told me that not only *bhāgavatas* but also other Brahmins who were knowledgeable about the *Veda* were given lands.

An article in a booklet issued by a Sāliyaṃgalaṃ group called the Śrī Lekṣmi Nārācīmā Pākavata Mēḷa Pakta Samājam (SPPS) states that 40 *vēli* (1 *vēli* = about 5 acres) of land were given to Brahmins and the *agrahāram* was constructed there. Haidar ‘Alī and Tipū Sultān of Mysore invaded Thanjavur in the late 18th century, however, and the Būminīla-samedha-śrīnivasā-perumāḷ temple was destroyed. Then the Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇa-perumāḷ temple was constructed and the *agrahāram* shifted to today’s location (Śrī Lakṣmi Nārācīmā Pākavata Mēḷa Pakta Samājam n.d.). S. Srinivasan, a main actor of this group, states that the *śabdham* sung before the performance of *Prahlāda-caritamu* includes the sentence, “*Tajanu tāhata tatarita kitataka, Acyutapuramanē Sāliyaṃgala Agraḥāramunaku.*” But there is no written record of the donation made by Acyutappa, and a number of villages in the territory of Vijayanagar have added “Acyuta” to their name.

Some references to those village names are available, however. For example, an inscription of the Cōḷa period (9th-13th centuries) in the Unnathapurīśvara temple says that Peru-Milaṭṭur is a part of Nittavinōta-vaḷanātu (Rangacharya 1985: Vol.2, 1362). This inscription shows us that this name has been handed down for nearly 1,000 years. However, no references to theatrical performances by Brahmins are seen in these temple inscriptions. Some references to donations to temple festivals made by Nāyakas and performances given by dancers or musicians are present in inscriptions written in the Nāyaka period.¹³⁾ As dance-dramas in this period were called *Yakṣagāna*, there is no reference to the word *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*.

There are a considerable number of references to *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* in the *modi* (Marathi scripts used for administrative writings) documents of Thanjavur Marāṭhās. The earliest reference is that Sujān Bāī, a wife of Ekojī II, created an *agrahāram* near Dīpāmbāpuram and named this new village Ekamahājendrapuram on December 30 in 1735, and 3/4 *vēli* land was given to Girirāja Kavi, a *bhāgavata*, a son of Ahobala Śāstri, a grandson of Gopāla Bhatta (Srinivasan 1984: 9-10).¹⁴⁾ More references are available after the period of Tulajā II (reigned 1763-1787). The *srotryam* (land given to learned Brahmins) was given to *bhāgavatas* of Mannārgudi in 1786 (Cupramaṇiyam 1989: Vol.1, 199 [66]). The list of land and villages for his personal use included in the treaty with the British concluded by Serfojī II in 1799 mentions those of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* (Vivekanandagopal 1999: 53 [29]). On the occasion of the performance of *Mōhinimahēśapariṇaya-nāṭaka* (the marriage of Mōhini and Mahēśa) (Ramadasī Ramachandra Bhavuswami Goswami 1932: 709-11) composed by Serfojī II in 1819, *bhāgavatas* were rewarded for their performance (Cupramaṇiyam 1989: Vol.1, 20 [99]). There is a record of 1824 written about the distribution of rewards to *bhāgavatas* Svāmi Mallār Nābhojī and his son (ibid.: 331 [146]). There is another record of 1845 listing the names of craftsmen who made costumes and

other items used for *Bhāgavata Mēla* (ibid.: Vol.3, 294 [33], 302 [54]). Visvanathan of the Sarasvati Mahal Library says that Rāma Paṇḍita, a court poetess of the 18th century, composed 13 dance-dramas that were performed at court, and the names of the *bhāgavatas* who performed them are recorded in a *modi* document (Visvanathan 1999: Mukavurai, 6).¹⁵⁾

These records show us that Telugu dance-dramas were performed in the Nāyaka period, although there is no reference to *Bhāgavata Mēla*. The written evidences suggest that the name *Bhāgavata Mēla* has been used to refer to a particular style of dance drama since the Marāṭhā period.

***Bhāgavata Mēla* in Melattūr**

Melattūr is located about 18 km northeast of Thanjavur. According to the census of 2001, the population is 7,815, and five blocks constitute a town *panchayat* (the lowest level of assembly). It has 21 streets in total; of these, there are eight streets located in its central area, and the *agrahāram* consists of three of these. The Varadarāja-perumāl temple and the Viṅeśvara (Ganapati) temple are located at the west end of the *agrahāram* and the Unnathapurīśvara temple at its east end. The *agrahāram* is divided into two by the central street; the west side is the Tamil Brahmans' residential area and the east side is that of the Telugu Brahmans.

Repertoire

The pieces in the *Bhāgavata Mēla* repertoire performed in Melattūr are all composed by Vēnkaṭarāma Śāstri (1743-1809?, 1800-1875?). All compositions are written in Telugu. The list of his compositions included in the booklet issued by MLBNS is follows (MLBNS 1990: 11):

1. *Prahlāda-caritamu*
2. *Mārkaṇḍēya-caritamu*
3. *Uṣā-pariṇayamu*
4. *Hariścandra-nāṭakamu*
5. *Rukmāṅgada-nāṭakamu*
6. *Harihara-līlā-vilāsamu*
7. *Sītā-pariṇayamu*
8. *Rukminī-vivāhamu*
9. *Kamsa-vadhamu*
10. *Druva-caritamu*
11. *Satī-sāvitri-nāṭakamu*
12. *Gōlla-bhāmā-nāṭakamu*

Of these, *Gōlla-bhāmā-nāṭakamu* has been excised from the list of *Bhāgavata Mēla Natya Natakam* issued by the same organization (MLBNS n.d.:9). S. Natarajan, a main actor of MLBNS explains that its manuscript is not available and there is no record of its performance. He also adds that *Rukmāṅgada-nāṭakamu* might not be a composition of Vēnkaṭarāma Śāstri since its literary style is different from the others, though it has been performed several times. The 33 songs included in *Prahlāda-caritamu* with notation by

renowned singer B. Krishnamurthy and an introduction by Raghavan were published by the Music Academy, Madras in 1965 (Krishnamurthy 1965). A full text of *Mārkaṇḍēya-caritamū* revised by Visvanathan and N. Srinivasan, a Sanskrit Pandit of the Sarasvati Mahal Library, was published by MBNVS in 1995 (Visvanathan 1995).

Vēnkaṭarāma Śāstri is the most important composer of *Bhāgavata Mēla*, but his life is not well known today. He is said to have been born and brought up in Melattūr. Raghavan has tried to reconstruct his life. According to his study, Vēnkaṭarāma was a Telugu *Vaidiki* (vedic) Velanādu (central Andhra) Brahman, Śrīvatsa-gotra, a son of Gōpālakṛṣṇārya, and a disciple of Lakṣmanārya. He was said to be an expert on the Devī and the Narasiṃha cult (Raghavan 1946). MLBNS stated that his father was a disciple of Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha and his guru was a disciple of Vīrabhadrayya (MLBNS n.d.: 3, 21). The tune of *svarajati* (a musical form for dance consisting of a combination of lyrics, notes and *jati*) in Useni *rāga*, a well-known composition of Vīrabhadrayya of Melattūr, was repeatedly used by other composers with different lyrics. Vēnkaṭarāma also composed a new lyric for this tune, which is dedicated to Mallārjī, a son of Dattārjī, a foreign minister of the Serfojīll's (Dīkṣitulu 1904: Part I, 624-7). Tyāgarāja is said to have composed his opera *Prahlāda-bhakti-vijayamū* inspired by *Prahlāda-caritamū* of Vēnkaṭarāma (Kuppuswamy and Hariharan 1995). Based on his investigation, Raghavan suggests that Vēnkaṭarāma was younger than Vīrabhadrayya and elder than Tyāgarāja.

The booklet issued by MLBNS in 1990 states that Vēnkaṭarāma lived from the period of Serfojī II to Śivājī II (reigned 1833-1855), whereas the other booklet stated that he lived from 1722 to 1809 and his father from 1720 to 1775. This information is based on one of the *bhāgavatas* of MLBNS, Kanakangi Srinivasa Josyar (1887-1966). According to his statement, his grandfather was present at Vēnkaṭarāma's death and was asked to continue his performances. This was in 1809, when he was 66 years old and lived by himself in the house near the local Śiva temple (MLBNS n.d.: 3, 12, 21). Visvanathan of the Sarasvati Mahal Library states that Vēnkaṭarāma lived roughly from 1800 to 1875, for the following reasons. First, Śivājī II's name is referred in *Mārkaṇḍēya-caritramū*; second, the date of the original manuscript of *Hariścandra-nāṭakamū* is August 30, 1824; and third, the *Saṅgīta-sampradāya-pradarśini* (Handbook of Musical Tradition) of Subbarāma Dīkṣitar (1839-1906) stated that Vēnkaṭarāma was active in the period of Serfojī II and Śivājī II (Visvanathan 1995: vi). Thus he must have been almost a contemporary of Tyāgarāja.

Vēnkaṭarāma recruited actors from each Brahman family of Melattūr and performed his compositions in front of the Varadarāja-perumāḷ temple. His group also performed in other villages such as Tirucirāppalli and Mannārgudi. MBNVS and Visvanathan state that his compositions were also performed at court, because his compositions include praises of the Marāṭhā rulers (Visvanathan 1995: vi; Raman 2002: 62), although Natarajan of MLBNS insists that he never performed at court.¹⁶ This statement reminds me that famous composers of *Karnāṭaka* music are often described as saintly figures. As Vēnkaṭarāma received the Marāṭhā's patronage, it is appropriate to suppose that his compositions were performed at court.

As I have already mentioned, there are two groups of *Bhāgavata Mēla* in Melattūr, MLBNS and MBNVS. I shall now explain how the two groups were founded and describe

the history of *Bhāgavata Mēla* in Melattūr.

History

According to Natarajan of the MLBNS, the Brahmans who migrated to Melattūr were from Appillai (a part of Andra), Pishwati (near Vijayawada), Kumandur (near Nellore), Paravakarai, Manangorai, and Palliagraharam (all of these are near Thanjavur). Natarajan himself is actually a Tamil Smārta Brahman;¹⁷ however, his family is said to have migrated from Kumandur. He says that Telugus and Tamils have mingled each other for many years and cannot obviously be distinguished today. In the period of Tulajā I (1729-1735), Brahmans from Attigiri (near Kanchipuram) came to take shelter in Melattūr with the Varadarāja idol on the advice of Śaṅkaracārya (a head of the Śaṅkara Math), and the temple was constructed there. In the period of Pratāp Simha (1739-1763), two tanks, Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) Tīrtha and Garuḍa (a legendary bird, a vehicle of Viṣṇu) Tīrtha, a small shrine of Narasiṃha in *yoga* pose near the former tank, and the *gāt* (bathing place) on the bank of the river Vettar were constructed. The Narasiṃha idol is said to have been made in the 12th century. The Narasiṃha mask used for the performance was made later. At first, it was kept in the house of Appillai, the family of a cousin of Natarajan's grandfather; however, it is kept in the temple today since this family left the village.

After the collapse of the Marāṭhās, *bhāgavatas* lost patronage and found it difficult to continue their performances. They finally stopped in 1882. The direct cause of this complete cessation is unknown. Telugu *bhāgavata* families gradually left the village so that today most of the *bhāgavatas* are Tamil Smārta Brahmans. In 1895, Bharatam Natesa Iyer (1865-1935), a *bhāgavata* of the Attigiri family, revived the performance of *Prahlāda-caritamu*. He learned the dance techniques by himself and trained many actors such as Bharatam Nallur Narayanaswami Iyer, who gave a lecture on the relationship between *Bharatanāṭyam* and *Bhāgavata Mēla* at the Music Academy, Madras (*The Journal of the Music Academy, Madras* 1935-7: 176-8). In 1922, the idols of Narasiṃha and Āñjaneya were installed at the Varadarāja-perumāḷ temple. Natesa Iyer also taught dance to *dēvadāsīs* to extricate himself from financial difficulties. After he fell sick and left the village in 1931, the performances again stopped.

In 1938, V. Ganesa Iyer (1896-1989), Natarajan's grandfather, who then a village officer, tried to revive the tradition with Natesa Iyer's disciples in cooperation with Balu Bhagavata (1897-1985), a Sanskrit scholar and a descendent of a *bhāgavata* family whose members were disciples of Tyāgarāja. He founded MLBNS and 15 actors were trained for two years. From 1938 to 1940, Tamil versions of *Mārkaṇḍēya-caritamu* and *Uṣā-pariṇayamu* of Vēṅkaṭarāma, translated by V. Ganesa Iyer in cooperation with Telugu Brahmans and choreographed and directed by Balu Bhagavata, were performed in front of the Vigneśvara temple constructed by Natarajan's great-grandfather. In 1940, *Prahlāda-caritamu* was performed in front of the Varadarāja-perumāḷ temple. The tradition was thus formally revived. Since then several reforms have been implemented. On the dramatic side, the dialogue between the *sūtradāra* and the (anti-)hero in Tamil, which explained the outline at the beginning, was deleted since this part did not exist in the original text. On the musical side, the flute was used as an accompanying instrument instead of the harmonium

to make the music more classical. This was implemented by P. K. Subbier, a well-known musician and an uncle of Bharatam R. Mahalingam, a main actor of MBNVS.

By 1951, a total of five compositions of Vēṅkaṭarāma – *Prahlāda-caritamū*, *Mārkaṇḍēya-caritamū*, *Uṣā-pariṇayamū*, *Hariścandra-nāṭakamū*, and *Rukmāṅgadanāṭakamū* – had been revived. In that year E. Krishna Iyer (1897-1968), who had studied dance with Natesa Iyer, then Secretary of the Music Academy, Madras, visited Melattūr and advised the *bhāgavatas* to reform their costumes and makeup, stage equipment, music, and dance technique to improve the performance's artistic sophistication. He wrote articles on *Bhāgavata Mēla* to popularize it as a classical art (Iyer 1966) and managed to get financial support from the Sangeet Natak Akademi (the national academy for music and drama) in New Delhi.

In 1962, V. D. Swami, an entrepreneur hailing from Melattūr who lived in Madras, came home to watch a performance of *Bhāgavata Mēla*. His interest was aroused, and he founded MBNVS in 1964 for the purpose of continuing and developing the tradition. He purchased two and half acres of land near the Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha located at the west side of the village for the purpose of constructing a permanent theater. The performance took place there that year. Mahalingam says that the Narasiṃha shrine was once located there. Conflict between Ganesa Iyer and Balu Bhagavata, however, meant that MBNVS could not hold the *Narasimha Jayanti* Day performance in 1965. Instead, Ganesa Iyer and MLBNS conducted the performance in front of the Varadarāja-perumāl temple as before. Balu Bhagavata and Subbier left MLBNS, and this group was thereafter led by Ganesa Iyer's son, G. Swaminathan, and his grandson, Natarajan. In 1967 another group called MBNVS led by Balu Bhagavata and Subbier restarted the performance at the venue donated by V. D. Swami. These two rival groups have co-existed ever since. Of about 30 Brahman families in this village, six families belong to MLBNS and three to MBNVS.

This split is said to stem from a difference of opinion on the proper venue for the performance of *Bhāgavata Mēla*. MLBNS insists that it should be conducted in front of the Varadarāja-perumāl temple and MBNVS insists on the venue donated by Swami where the Narasiṃha shrine was once located. B. M. Sundaram, a music scholar, points out the existence of ego among *bhāgavatas*, giving several reasons in his article (*Sruti* 1994: Issue 118, 11), while Natarajan refutes this article (*Sruti* 1995: Issue 125, 5-7) though nobody denies the contribution of Swami. The two groups have somehow to use the same single Narasiṃha mask on the same day. Today, MBNVS uses it first, followed by MLBNS, and the two groups give their performances at different times. Executive visitors who come to watch the performance sometimes give speeches appealing to the two groups to unite.¹⁸⁾ Though no solution has as yet been found, the positive aspect is that the two rival groups must strive to continue the performance and to improve their technique despite financial difficulties. Today, the existence of such competition is resulting in a new golden era of *Bhāgavata Mēla* second only to the Marāṭhā period. It is not yet completely safe, however. The continuance of the performance still relies on the personal efforts of particular *bhāgavatas* themselves.

The Performance of MLBNS

MLBNS holds the *Narasimha Jayanti Bhāgavata Mēla* festival in an elaborate manner over a period of about ten days, setting up a temporary stage in the temple street. On the first day of the festival, an opening ceremony is held with a few invited well-known artists, scholars, or politicians. The festival program includes not only *Bhāgavata Mēla* but also other allied performances such as *Bharatanāṭyam*, *Terukūttu*, *Kūcipūḍi*, and *Harikathā* (religious discourses with music). Thus the structure of their program is similar to other music and dance festivals held in India. The last day of the festival ends with the *Āñjaneya Utsavam* (the service done by a divine monkey who followed Rāma, namely the festival of devotees), in which auspicious music is played by the *nāgasvaram* group in the Varadarāja-perumāḷ temple and a procession with the idol on a palanquin is held through the *agrahāram* streets. Natarajan explains that the reason for his introduction of such an elaborate program was to gain recognition for *Bhāgavata Mēla* as a classical art like other forms of dance and music. He also plans to open a school at the village to train his successors after his retirement. He has already obtained the land for this purpose. He thus emphasizes the artistic value of *Bhāgavata Mēla*, although he added that while the school will be open to everybody the *bhāgavatas* should be male Brahmans; this implies that he is negative toward the democratization of *Bhāgavata Mēla*.

Today, the main actors of MLBNS are descendents of Ganesa Iyer. Natarajan, who mainly plays the roles of heroines such as Līlāvati, is the eldest of five brothers. The third brother is S. Kumar, who is good at hero roles such as Hiranyakaśipu. The members of *Arakkoṇṭu* (those who received the *arakku*, a seal of donation from a king), that is those whose families were donated land by Acyutappa, are hereditary *bhāgavatas* playing special



Plate 1 Varadarāja-perumāḷ on the palanquin in front of the Varadarāja-perumāḷ temple in Melattūr



Plate 2 The ending scene of *Prahlāda-caritamū* performed by the Melattur Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Jayanti Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam



Plate 3 Natarajan in trance in front of the shrine of Svāminātha-svāmi, Melattūr

roles such as Narasimha and Kaṭṭiyakāraṇ. Today the members of the *Piswati* of Andhra *Tallāvajjhala* (Brahmans who undertake ascetic practice and lead their lives as pilgrims) come under this category. Natarajan sends young actors to train under famous *Bharatanāṭyam* dancers, since this dance technique is indispensable for mastering the elaborate dances of female roles. Musicians are almost always hired from the area outside

the village around Thanjavur. Only one of the three singers is a villager.

All of the today's *bhāgavatas* are amateurs engaged in different jobs. Natarajan is an engineer by profession and works in Dubai, Kumar works in Bangalore, and the other brothers also live outside the village. Their house in the village is usually vacant; however, the family members come together to rehearse the repertoire for about one month before the festival. According to Natarajan, the expenses of the festival were managed by six members of MLBNS who paid 100 rupees each; however, this amount was so little that Ganesa Iyer had to sell his property. Since Natarajan found employment in Dubai in 1978, their life has been stable. Today, almost all the costs of the festival conducted by MLBNS are paid from Natarajan's personal funds though there are small subsidies from the Sangeet Natak Akademi and elsewhere. Because of this total dependence on Natarajan alone, if he is so busy that he cannot leave Dubai, the festival cannot always be conducted according to the Hindu calendar. He also feeds both artists and guests during the festival.

Natarajan tried to revive all the dramas composed by Vēṅkaṭarāma. First, he decided to stop performing *Rukmāṅgada-nāṭakamu* since it is possible that it was not one of Vēṅkaṭarāma's compositions. In 1989 *Harihara-līlā-vilāsamu* and *Sītā-pariṇayamu* were revived, and in the next year, MLBNS celebrated the Golden Jubilee by performing six compositions. By 1994, a total of nine compositions had been revived, and in 2003 the tenth one, *Druva-caritamamu*, was performed. *Vaḷḷi-tīrmāṇam*, a well-known Tamil drama, has also been performed by them every year. This is the story of Vaḷḷi's successful love for the Lord Murukaṅ, in the Kuṛavañci style in which a tribal woman fortune-teller called Kuṛava predicts the heroine's destiny. Natarajan says that this drama has been added to their repertoire to entertain villagers who do not understand Telugu.

The simple temporary stage is set up in the middle of the street, facing the temple. The stage is constructed according to the description in *Nāṭya-śāstra* (a treatise on performing arts written about the 3rd-5th centuries), with the greenroom placed behind the stage and entrances on both sides.¹⁹⁾ *Bhāgavatas* take a bath to purify their body before the performance and then start to put on their makeup. The actual performance begins at around 9 P. M. and ends at midnight. The duration of compositions is mostly 3-4 hours, with the exception of *Hariścandra-nāṭakamu*, which takes all night long. Today this drama is performed in two parts. The audience usually numbers several hundreds, although when *Vaḷḷi-tīrmāṇam* is performed it obtains a larger audience that fills the street. On the *Narasimha Jayanti* Day only, the idol of Varadarāja-perumāḷ is taken out of the temple to be brought in front of the stage and then back to the temple. Following the idol procession, *Prahlāda-caritamamu* is performed. After the performance, all the *bhāgavatas* and the audience go to worship the temple deity. The *bhāgavatas* then go to the shrine of Svāmīnātha-svāmī (the Lord Murukaṅ who is Natarajan's family god). The women of his family, who wait for them in front of the shrine, cut coconuts and pour out their water to the *bhāgavatas* in the same way as they do to the deity. At this moment, either Natarajan or Kumar always goes into a trance. Those who performed the Lord should be possessed and blessed. This praxis concludes each performance.

The Performance of MBNVS

The *Narasimha Jayanti Bhāgavata Mēḷa* festival held by MBNVS is less elaborate than that of MLBNS. The duration of the festival is three or four days, during which their repertoire of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* alone, *Prahlāda-caritamu*, *Mārkaṇḍēya-caritamu*, *Uṣā-pariṇayamu*, *Hariścandra-nāṭakamu*, and *Rukmiṇī-vivāhamu* is performed. The group has not as yet made the effort to revive all the compositions of Vēṅkaṭarāma. A temporary stage facing east is set up at the venue donated by Swami. The size of the stage is bigger than that of MLBNS and the greenroom is attached to the right side of the stage. Though the stage equipment is as simple as that of MLBNS, the curtain is attached to the stage itself. Every day before the performance starts, either the idol of Varadarāja-perumāḷ or the Narasiṃha mask put on the palanquin is brought to the venue, led by *nāgasvaram* music. It is placed at the opposite side of the venue to face the stage and a priest does *pūjā* to the deity. On the first day of the festival, the opening ceremony is held with a few invited guests in the same way as that of MLBNS.

All the *bhāgavatas* of MBNVS live in and around Melattūr. Mahalingam, one of the main actors of this group, is a village officer and S. Gopalakrishnan, the Secretary of MBNVS, quit his job and undertakes all the management. Musicians are hired from outside the village and one of the Pandits of the Sarasvati Mahal Library, Srinivasan or Visvanathan, plays the role of *sūtradāra*. Because of the lack of proper patronage MBNVS is facing financial problems, although it receives a small subsidy from the Sangeet Natak Akademi. MBNVS always opens its final accounts to the public and calls for donations.²⁰⁾ As all the stage equipment and costumes were burned because of an electrical fault just



Plate 4 A scene from *Śakuntarā* performed by the Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam

before the festival in 2000, MBNVS could not conduct the festival on the *Narasimha Jayanti* Day. Nalli Kuppuswami Chetti, the President of Nalli, one of the major saree companies in Chennai, made a donation to MBNVS to enable it to recover from this loss. As a result, the festival was postponed to July.

In 1992, MBNVS performed *Rukminī-vivāhamu* at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Mumbai. Watching this performance, Indu Raman, a dancer-cum-composer and the managing trustee of the Rangshree Trust, became interested and visited Melattūr. She offered to collaborate with them and became the President of MBNVS. In 1994, a *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* festival was successfully held for five days in Mumbai (*Sruti* 1994: Issue 114, 12). In 1995, she turned her attention to dramas in Marathi available in the Sarasvati Mahal Library and decided to revive them in the *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* style. She chose *Śakuntarā* composed by Ekojī II (reigned 1735-1736)²¹⁾ since the story was popular.

At first this offer perplexed the members of MBNVS since they are all amateur actors who perform a limited repertoire in the way they learned from their elders, having no experience of performing other compositions. They decided to try it, however, to improve their popularity and raise funds. In 2002, the first Marathi *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*, *Śakuntarā*, was performed in the Mumbai festival. This performance was bitterly criticised as it was no longer *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* but something else. The newly composed music with some folk elements introduced by a Mumbai composer, accompanied by a *tablā* (north Indian drums) player, was totally different from that of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*, which is based on classical *Karnāṭaka* music. Important roles such as the *sūtradāra* and the *vidūśaka* were performed by Mumbai actors. As a result, Indu Raman resigned as president and has never returned.²²⁾ The current president is Kuppuswami Chetti.

Criticism of the Mumbai performance was mostly concerned with the relationship between art and *bhakti*. First, to change the performance in accordance with urban tastes would not be useful for the continuance of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa*. Second, *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* performed by amateur actors as a religious practice, namely *bhakti*, should not be regarded as art by professional artists. Third, the changes were made in too simple a manner. After all, the newly produced *Śakuntarā* is a manifestation not of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* but of the artistic ego of Indu Raman (*Sruti* 2002: Issue 212, 14-7). On the other hand, Raman insisted that all Indian art derives from *bhakti*, any form of art should be regarded as a national heritage, and *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* should go out from the village. In 2003, MBNVS added a reduced-dialogue version of *Śakuntarā* to their program as the group members do not understand Marāṭhī well; this has also been criticized in terms of questioning the meaning of such a performance in Melattūr rather than Mumbai (*Sruti* 2003: Issue 228, 39).

It is generally recognized that the performance by MLBNS is more artistic than that of MBNVS, which is still oriented toward religious duty. Natarajan of MLBNS actively emphasizes its artistic value, and a few young actors sent to well-known dancers for training have achieved an almost professional level. On the other hand, the actors of MBNVS seem to be bewildered by the outsiders' view, since they perform in exactly the same way as they had been taught. Mahalingam emphasizes the importance of preserving the tradition.

Bhāgavata Mēḷa in Other Villages

There are two other villages where *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* is still performed, namely Sāliyamaṅgalam and Tēpperumānallūr. Their manners of performance, compositions, financial conditions and other factors are different from those of Melattūr. In this section, I will first describe their respective characteristics. There are a few villages where *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* is said to have been performed for some time after the British occupation. I will also refer to the traceable tradition of their performances and the cause of their extinction.

Sāliyamaṅgalam

Sāliyamaṅgalam is located about 15 km east of Thanjavur on the main road between Tiruchi and Nagapattinam. As there is also a railway station, the village is today developing considerably. The *agrahāram* of the village is located on the north side of the main road, a little distant from the main bazaar area. Only one *agrahāram* street running from north to south is different from the usual location observed in the other villages. The concrete platform used for the stage is located at the north end, and the temples are located slightly to the north of the *agrahāram* street; first is the Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇa temple, then the shrine of Āñjaneya, and finally the Śiva temple. All temples face east as usual, though few houses are located around the temples. There is a big tank behind the temples. As I mentioned earlier, Acyutappa is said to have donated 40 vēli of land to six *bhāgavata* families; however, the Būminīla-samedha-śrīnivasa-perumāḷ temple was destroyed by the Mysore kingdom. The *agrahāram* was then moved to its present location. As the Lakṣmi-nārāyaṇa temple was newly constructed, the Śrīnivasa-perumāḷ became the idol used for procession. Four of the six families have either moved away or died out, and only two remain there today (SPPS n.d.).

The dance-drama performed in Sāliyamaṅgalam is not one composed by Vēṅkaṭarāma but by Bharatam Pañcanāda Bhāgavatalu. According to the booklet issued by MLBNS, Pañcanāda was a contemporary of Vīrabhadrayya and a disciple of Bharatam Kāśinātha (1690-1764? 1676-1740?) (MLBNS 1990: 67; MLBNS n.d.: 20). The word *Bharatam* added to their names means “those who are experts of *Nāṭya-śāstra*.” Pañcanāda’s life is almost unknown; however, his guru Kāśinātha’s compositions were revised and published by the Sarasvati Mahal Library. According to their revisor Visvanathan, Kāśinātha is said to have been born and brought up in Melattūr because words such as Acyuta, Varadarāja, Melattūr and Unnathapurīśa are found in his compositions (Visvanathan 1985: 166-8). Raghavan collected manuscripts of 40 *śabdams* in Melattūr, of which 13 compositions are Kāśinātha’s (Raghavan 1943). His compositions are mostly written in praise of the Lord though there are songs on Marāṭhā rulers of the period from Śāhajī (reigned 1684-1711) to Pratāp Simha. Kāśinātha might therefore have lived in this period.

On the other hand, Srinivasan, one of the leading actors of SPPS, insists that Pañcanāda was older than Kāśinātha. In Sāliyamaṅgalam, it is said that the tradition of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* has been continued since 1645 and the *Prahlāda-caritamu* composed by Pañcanāda is a revised version of that of Vijayarāgava, then the Nayāka ruler (Sastri 1933: 219-21). He also conjectures that Kāśinātha possibly hailed from Sāliyamaṅgalam. As I

mentioned before, the *śabdham* sung before the performance of *Prahlāda-caritamū*, which included the name of this village, was composed by Kāśinātha. It is not strange for one composer to praise several deities of different villages. There are five compositions in Telugu known to be Pañcanāda's: *Prahlāda-caritamū*, *Rukminī-kalyāṇamū*, *Sītā-pariṇayamū*, *Vipranārāyaṇa-nāṭakamū*, and *Rukmāṅgada-nāṭakamū*. Only *Prahlāda-caritamū* has been performed without break. According to the booklet issued by SPPS, the *Narasimha Jayanti* festival, also called the *Vasantōtsavam* (spring festival), had been held for five days until the early 1930s; *Prahlāda-caritamū* was performed on the first day, *Vipranārāyaṇa-nāṭakamū* on the second, *Rukmāṅgada-nāṭakamū* on the third, *Rukminī-kalyāṇamū* on the fourth, and Rukminī's marriage procession was reproduced by children on the last day. *Sītā-pariṇayamū* had been also performed on the *Rāmanavamī* festival (the birth celebration of the Lord Rāma on the 9th day of the black half of the lunar month Caitra, around late March or early April). The *Rāmanavamī* is a festival of Kodaṅḍarāma (Rāma with bow), a family god of the *bhāgavatas*. After the renovation of the temple in 1932, the group's performance repertoire decreased as a result of a serious incident that happened in the village.

The *Narasimha* mask and the idol of Kodaṅḍarāma were kept by particular *bhāgavata* families: in the house of Vādhūla *gotra* for four years and in that of Ātreya *gotra*, the mother's side of the same family, for one year after *pūjā* and *ārādhana* were performed to the mask on the occasion of the *Narasimha Jayanti* festival. This practice was observed so that the festival could be continued by one of these families should the other die out. In 1934, the family of Vādhūla *gotra* had gone to Nagapattinam without handing over the *Narasimha* mask and the idol of Kodaṅḍarāma to the family of Ātreya *gotra*. The villagers were afraid that the village might meet with disaster. Taking the advice of A. Veeriya Vandayar, famous as a founder of the A. Veeriya Vandayar Memorial Sri Pushpam College and the landlord of Pundi (located directly to the west of the village), all the Brahmans in the *agrahāram* cooperated together to conduct the festival. The following year, the festival was held with a new mask and a new idol, which were to be kept in the house of Ātreya *gotra*. After this incident, they stopped performing on the *Rāmanavamī* Day. As a *pūjā* hall for the *Narasimha* mask was constructed recently, it is kept there now.

In the early 1960s, Ganesa Iyer of Melattūr visited Sāliyamaṅgalam and choreographed *Vipranārāyaṇa-nāṭakamū* and *Rukminī-kalyāṇamū*. Three compositions had been performed till 1968; however, only two compositions, *Prahlāda-caritamū* and *Rukminī-kalyāṇamū*, have been performed during the past 20 years.

In 1976, SPPS was founded for the purpose of training young actors and holding the festival. The family of Srinivasan, one of the leading actors of SPPS, has handed down the role of *Narasimha* as well as other important roles such as Līlāvati. The *Narasimha Jayanti* festival is held by about 10 Brahman families living at the village *agrahāram*. Only one Telugu family among them belongs to *Vaidiki Vēṅginādu* and six of the other Tamil families are Smārta. Those who live elsewhere always return home during the festival season. The *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* of this village has been never performed elsewhere, with the exception of a single occasion when Srinivasan gave a demonstration in Delhi.



Plate 5 Śrīnivasa-perumāḷ on the palanquin in Sāliyamaṅgalam.



Plate 6 Narasiṃha of *Prahlāda-caritam* performed by the Śrī Lekṣmi Naracimma Pākavata Mēḷa Pakta Samājam, Sāliyamaṅgalam

The reason they have been able to continue the performance, even though the number of compositions performed has been decreasing, is their patronage by the Vandayars. This family is powerful in this area politically and socially. K. Thulasiah Vandayar, who today runs the College, was appointed to a member of the Raja Sabha (Upper House) in 1991. The large-scale religious feeding of the public is the most prominent characteristic of the

festival, which is reliant on his patronage. The total expense of the festival is less than that of Melattūr since its duration is comparatively shorter. The small subsidy from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, advertising fees received from some companies, and the Vandayars' patronage are sufficient for them to hold the festival once a year. Such a relationship between *bhāgavatas* and patrons reminds us of the time when the court patronized performing arts.

The temporary stage is constructed on a concrete platform. One of the *bhāgavatas'* houses is used as a greenroom. Before the performance begins, the idol of Śrīnivasa-perumāḷ and his consorts, Śrīdevi and Bhūdevi, are placed on a Garuda-shaped palanquin and brought in front of the stage. The 3-day festival is conducted with elaborate rituals. In the night of the day before *Narasimha Jayanti*, the power of the Narasimha mask is passed into sacred water and the mask is washed. On the evening of the festival day, the mask is newly painted and *pūjā* is done for it. After the procession of the deity, ritual feeding of every visitor takes place at one of the *bhāgavatas'* houses. Many people from within and outside the village come to eat and to watch the performance; about 2,000 people gathered in 2003.

The performance starts late at night and lasts until the early morning. In the actual performance of *Prahlāda-caritamū*, several songs of different composers other than Pañcanāda are sung: a *śabdham* of Kāsinātha before the story begins; a *Stamba-stotram* (song for the pillar) of Vēnkata Kavi, a younger brother of Tyāgarāja's ancestor Girirāja Kavi, at the scene of the birth of Narasimha; and a song composed by Bodhendra (17th century), the 59th Śāṅkaracārya of Kanchi Math, at the epilogue. The most characteristic feature of the performance at Sāliyamaṅgalam is the long and elaborate scene in which Narasimha is born, fights with Hiranyakaśipu, tears his body and eats his flesh. Since scenes depicting cruelty are usually avoided among Brahmans, in the other villages it finishes very soon or is symbolized solely by the appearance of Narasimha. In Sāliyamaṅgalam, Hiranyakaśipu and Prahlāda come down into the street from the stage and dispute with each other in an elaborate dialogue, while a pillar is installed at the opposite end of the street. The birth of Narasimha is celebrated with fireworks and firecrackers. The fight between Hiranyakaśipu and Narasimha, supported by a few men, is performed using the whole street as a stage. The Narasimha actor is in a trance at this moment. The scene in which Narasimha eats Hiranyakaśipu's flesh is expressed by putting red cloth on the mouth of the Narasimha mask. After the death of Hiranyakaśipu, Lakṣmi approaches Narasimha and the audience scramble to touch their feet one after another. Then Lakṣmi and Narasimha process to the end of the street. After the performance is over, actors, musicians, and devotees assemble in the *pūjā* hall. The Narasimha mask is taken off and worshipped again. On the next night *Rukminī-kalyāṇamu* is performed until the early morning and then Rukminī's marriage procession reproduced by children is held. The *Āñjaneya Utsavam* is the conclusion of this festival. Thus the *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* of Sāliyamaṅgalam is dominated by rituals. The *bhāgavatas*, as well as their patrons, the Vandayars, are determined to carry out their religious duty.

Tēpperumānallūr

Tēpperumānallūr is located about 7 km east of Kumbakkonam, on the south side of Tirunageshwara railway station. Once this village consisted of large *ināms* (tax-free lands given to temples and others) attached to the east side of the *agrahāram*. Lakṣmi-nārāyaṇa-perumāḷ Temple is located at the west end of the *agrahāram* street, with a tank behind it. Two different legends of the origin of this village and the temple have been handed down. The village was once called Nallūr (“good village” in Tamil). According to the first version, the box where the Narasiṃha mask was kept was filled with scorpions when they were about to perform *Prahlāda-caritamu* in the court; thereafter, the deity was called *tēḷ* (scorpion)-*perumāḷ* and the word *tēpperu* was added to the village name. According to the second version, as Narasiṃha lost control in his excitement after killing Hiraṇyakaśipu, gods and humans were afraid of him. Asked to subdue him, Śiva incarnated as Śarabha, a monster with a beast’s head and a bird’s body, and chased Narasiṃha about. Bewildered (*tikaippu*), Narasiṃha ran away from Śarabha to reach this village. Thereafter the village was called Tikaippu-perumāḷ-nallūr and then Tēpperumānallūr. The Narasiṃha mask is usually kept in the temple.

Today, Kannan and Bhaskar, landlord and business brothers who run a sugar mill in Pondichery and a packaging factory in this village, take responsibility for the sponsorship and supervision of the *Narasiṃha Jayanti* festival. All the expenses of the festival are paid from their personal funds so that they neither receive any financial support from outside nor consider obtaining any.²³ As no booklet or invitation card is issued, outside visitors are rare. They told me that it is just their religious duty to conduct the festival. The one-day festival therefore is the smallest of those of the three villages.

According to Kannan, the performance of *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* has continued since 100 Brahman families were given lands by Serfojī II. In 1941, a Brahman family belonging to Aṣṭasahasram, one of the subdivisions of Tamil Smārta, migrated from Chidambaram; thereafter, all ten compositions of Vēṅkaṭarāma were performed. Natesa Bhagavatar, one of the leading actors in this family, is said to have been able to act any roles. Forty to fifty families took part in the festival, which until 1950 lasted several weeks. The descendents of the Marāthā rulers patronized them in the 1940s. Since the *inām* was requisitioned by the Government in 1968, Brahman families have left the village one after another and the duration of the festival has become shorter and shorter. Kannan and Bhaskar’s father Venkatarama Iyer (1918-1992) took over sponsorship in 1970, and *Prahlāda-caritamu* alone has been continuously performed. In 1974 and 1975 Mohan Kokar, a scholar of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, visited the village and ten young actors were selected as scholarship students to train in *Bharatanāṭyam*. In 1975, *Rukminī-vivāhamu* and *Hariścandra-nāṭakamu* were revived. In spite of this effort, three compositions were performed for no more than two years. Only *Prahlāda-caritamu* is still performed today.

Today about 20 Brahman families still live in the village, but there are no Telugu Brahmans. Kannan and Bhaskar have been responsible for all the expenses and preparations since 1999. They belong to Tamil Smārta Vadama, while all the actors belong to Aṣṭasahasram. Such an allotment based on the Brahmans’ subdivision is not found in the other villages. Most of the musicians are villagers, with the exception of a *tablā* player and



Plate 7 Lying Viṣṇu (middle), and Jaya and Vijaya, a scene from *Prahlāda-caritam* performed in Tēpperumānallūr



Plate 8 Narasiṃha goes to the Lekṣmi-nārāyaṇa-perumāḷ temple in Tēpperumānallūr

a harmonium player hired from elsewhere.

The calendar issued by the Kanchi Śaṅkara Math is widely used among Tamil Smārtas. The *Narasimha Jayanti* festival in Melattūr and Sāliyamaṅalam is celebrated according to this calendar, while in Tēpperumānallūr the *vaiṣṇava* calendar, in which the *Narasimha Jayanti* is a full moon day (15th of the white half) is adopted. In the evening of the festival

day, musicians assemble together at Kannan and Bhaskar's house to do *Bhajana-sampradāya*, group singing of religious songs in a systematic manner. The brothers join in and sing along with the musicians. Some songs in *Prahlāda-caritamu* are included in this program, which is a means for the musicians to rehearse. Followed by auspicious music of the *nāgasvaram* group, all the musicians, including the brothers, go to the temple singing religious songs. Then the performance of *Prahlāda-caritamu* starts in the temple street. It lasts till the early morning. Unlike in the other villages, a temporary stage is not raised; instead, a jute carpet is put on the street and a tent set up. Musicians sit on the veranda of a house instead of the raised platform, and the brothers' house is used as a greenroom.

The most characteristic feature of the performance in Tēpperumānallūr is that the scene of Jaya and Vijaya, a story that took place before Prahlāda was born, is performed. There is also a scene in which Prahlāda explains the 9 types of *bhakti* to Viṣṇu in detail. These scenes do not exist in Vēṅkaṭarāma's script. In Tēpperumānallūr, different languages are used for the performance: Vēṅkaṭarāma's composition in Telugu, story-telling in Sanskrit verse, and comments in Tamil prose. The Tamil portion is said to have been added by Natesa Bhagavata to allow villagers who do not understand Telugu to appreciate the story. They perform it in quite an informal manner. In addition to North Indian musical instruments such as the *tablā* and harmonium, Western musical instruments such as an electronic keyboard are also used. Three actors – a child, a boy and an adult – successively perform the role of Prahlāda to show his growth, and the eldest actor among them explains *bhakti* to Viṣṇu. The young actors sometimes enter with veterans who instruct them during the performance. Whenever they forget their lines, the *sūtradāra* shows them a script. Once a real snake was used in the scene in which Hiranyakaśipu makes a snake bite Prahlāda; however, a fake snake is used today to avoid danger. After the short fighting scene between Narasiṃha and Hiranyakaśipu is over, they immediately go to the temple with Narasiṃha, the mask is taken off, and *pūjā* is performed there.

Other Villages

Ūttukādu is located on the north bank of the river Vettar, 13 km southwest of Kumbakkonam. This village is famous for a saint-musician of the 18th century, Ūttukādu Vēṅkaṭa Kavi (Oothukadu Venkatakavi Trust n.d.). His compositions are mostly on the *Kāliṅga-nartana-perumāḷ* (dancing Kṛṣṇa), the deity of the local Viṣṇu temple which is located at the west end of the *agrahāram* street. Unlike the other villages, where Viṣṇu temples were constructed in the Nāyaka or Marāṭhā periods, this temple is said to have been in existence for more than 1,000 years. *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* used to be performed in front of the Vēṅkaṭa Kavi's house at that time and the *Narasimha Jayanti* festival, alternatively called *Vasantōtsavam*, lasted three days. *Rukmāṅgada-nāṭakamu* was performed on the first day, *Prahlāda-caritamu* on the second, and a drama selected from among Vēṅkaṭarāma's compositions at the request of the audience on the third. In 1931, the *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* of this village was performed in Madras at the invitation of Krishna Iyer; however, P. R. Krishnamurthi Iyer, a leading *bhāgavata*, became blind and the limbs of another *bhāgavata* were paralyzed soon after the performance. The village therefore stopped performing elsewhere. *Bhāgavata Mēḷa* continued to be performed until 1946. Today, only two

Brahman families in the village remember the performance. The Narasiṃha mask is still kept in the temple. MLBNS of Melattūr visited this village to perform twice in the 1990s.

Sūlamaṅgalam is located to the northeast of Thanjavur, between Tiruvaiyaru and Papanasam. The local Viṣṇu temple is located at the west end of the *agrahāram* street and the Śiva temple to the north of the *agrahāram*. According to the villagers, the *Narasimha Jayanti* festival was held in a grand manner when 100 Brahman families migrated to this place in the 19th century. A leading *bhāgavata* of this village in the first half of the 20th century was Vaidhyanatha Bhagavata, who also contributed to conducting *Tyāgarāja Ārādhanā*. His compositions are said to have been sung during the festival. After he passed away in 1943, the festival gradually declined. The large-scale religious feeding of 2,000 people during the festival was exposed by a tax collector in 1946, leading to a court case. As a result the performance was prohibited for four years. After the judgment in 1950, Radhakrishna, a son of Vaidhyanatha, tried to revive the performance but in vain. He gave a lecture-demonstration of *Bhāgavata Mēla* in Madras in 1984 and died the following year. Thereafter nobody has tried to revive the performance. The Narasiṃha mask is still kept in the temple. MLBNS of Melattūr visited this village to perform in 1994.

The tradition of *Bhāgavata Mēla* is not traceable in Nallūr, located to the east of Papanasam. It is one of the old sacred places of which the famous *śaiva* saint Campantar sang in the 7th century, and contains a beautiful Śiva temple constructed in the Cōla period. The village *agrahāram* is located on the south side of the Śiva temple and the Ādi-keśava-perumāḷ temple at the west end of the *agrahāram* street. There are only two Brahman families there, neither of which has ever watched *Bhāgavata Mēla*. The tradition is said to have been extinct by the end of the 19th century. Even the Narasiṃha mask is not kept today. It is debatable whether *Bhāgavata Mēla* was actually handed down in this village. First, some scholars refer to Muvvanallūr instead of Nallūr (Natarajan 1988: 213; Seetha 1981: 30). Tēpperumānallūr was also once called Nallūr. Thus, there are many villages whose names include this word. Second, Bharatam Nallur Narayanaswami Iyer, a famous *bhāgavata* who gave a lecture-demonstration in the Music Academy, Madras in 1936 (*The Journal of the Music Academy, Madras* 1935-7: 176-8) and cooperated with the research carried out by Raghavan, hailed from Nallūr but performed in Melattūr. There was certainly no performance in Nallūr during his time. Third, the village name Nallūr is not found in *modi* manuscripts. Hence it is difficult to confirm the tradition in this village.

Concluding Remarks

Why has the tradition of *Bhāgavata Mēla* declined since the collapse of the Thanjavur Marāṭhā? The most important reason, of course, is that *Bhāgavata Mēla* lost the patronage of Marāṭhās. Under British rule, the self-consciousness of Tamils prompted by the rediscovery of ancient Tamil literature and the Dravidian movement characterized by anti-Brahman and pro-Tamil attitudes were disadvantageous to *Bhāgavata Mēla*. The continuation of these conditions prevents *Bhāgavata Mēla* from obtaining financial support from the Tamil Nadu Government. But this factor by itself is insufficient to explain its decline.

First, as *Bhāgavata Mēla* is a performance that integrates music, dance, and drama, these social conditions had a severe impact. Tyāgarāja's compositions have been highly regarded as music; *Bharatanāṭyam* and *Kūcipūḍi*²⁴⁾ have been praised as dance. If we want to enjoy South Indian classical music and dance, it is not necessary to choose *Bhāgavata Mēla*, with its music based on *Karnāṭaka* music and dance derived from *Bharatanāṭyam*. If we want to enjoy *Bhāgavata Mēla* as drama, understanding the Telugu language in which the story is written is indispensable. The fact that *Bhāgavata Mēla* is a Telugu drama handed down in a Tamil-speaking area is at a greater disadvantage than are other allied dance-dramas such as *Terukkūttu* in Tamil Nadu, *Kūcipūḍi Yakṣagāna* in Andhra Pradesh, and *Yakṣagāna* in Karnataka.

Second, an even more disadvantageous condition than the language problem is the fact that *Bhāgavata Mēla* is performed only by male Brahmans. We should remind ourselves of the case of *Kūcipūḍi*, which had been performed by *bhāgavatas* until the mid-20th century. When *Kūcipūḍi* came to the critical moment for its continuation, some *bhāgavatas* came to Madras to open dance schools that accepted anybody who wanted to learn dance, and started to choreograph film dances that were performed by any of the chosen dancers. This decision was inspired by *Bharatanāṭyam*, which since the democratization of both its dancers and patrons in the 1930s has become a popular art, taught to anybody and appearing on-screen. Democratization of both performers and patrons was thus the key to *Kūcipūḍi*'s survival. Not only these dance forms, but also other world-renowned Indian performing arts have been democratized so that even foreigners can learn them. If the *bhāgavatas* continue to reject democratization, it will probably not be possible for *Bhāgavata Mēla* to be widely recognized in the same way as *Kūcipūḍi* now is. Why are the *bhāgavatas* so particular about the traditional qualification, that of being male Brahmans?

In connection with this point, we should note the context of "art versus *bhakti*." Most *bhāgavatas* continue to perform *Bhāgavata Mēla* not to obtain artistic status but to carry out their religious duty. In this context, the necessity of democratization of performers never crosses their mind. The approach of MLBNS is ambiguous, however, standing in between art and religion. MLBNS is trying to popularize *Bhāgavata Mēla* in order to obtain public recognition as art, by such means as making their performing techniques more sophisticated, performing outside their village, and including other performing arts in the festival. On the other hand, members cannot give up their customary right to carry out their religious duty. The ambiguity of their approach is demonstrated in their interpretation of the calamities with which they met when they took the Narasiṃha mask out of the village. Of course the possibility of democratization will increase when Natarajan opens the school there.

In fact, no contradiction or conflict between art and *bhakti* was even perceived until the modern era. The narrow perception of autonomous art was a production of European musicology in the 19th century. At that time, European scholars studied the performing arts of India solely in this context. Musicologists took an interest in the tonal system of Indian music, not considering the social or cultural context that affected it, while scholars of dance paid attention to its movement. When theatrical performances were studied, dance and

music were separated from the dramatic side and the scripts were examined as literature.²⁵⁾ Today, it seems that the audience, scholars, and performers of India share the perception of autonomous art and differentiate it from *bhakti*, which remains a religious concept.

It is also important that the *bhāgavatas* of Melattūr are particularly concerned with writing their own history of *Bhāgavata Mēla*. For it to obtain public recognition as one of the traditional heritages of India, its origin and historical development must be reconstructed. In India, performing arts have usually been handed down from a guru to disciples as an oral tradition, and are therefore short on written materials. We have to rely greatly on the memories and testimonies of hereditary performers and other custodians to reconstruct the history of *Bhāgavata Mēla*. In this context, the continuity of their performance itself should be recognized as a kind of testimony. The attempt by the *bhāgavatas* of Melattūr themselves to write and publish articles on their tradition is in itself a kind of experiment to change “memories” to “records.” Those who do not share the same time and space as *Bhāgavata Mēla* may be able to recognize it as a traditional heritage of India when its history is reconstructed properly. In other words, it is important for obtaining such a status that the flow of time in a particular space be shared by those who live in the extended space. Consequently the *bhāgavatas* wish to democratize their patrons, while the performance should be kept by male Brahmins.

Notes

- 1) References to *Bhāgavata Mēla* can be found in some books on performing arts of India (Natarajan 1988; Sambamurthy 1963: 208-13; Seetha 1981; Vatsyayan 1980: 48-64). Short articles on the form have also been published (Raghavan 1993: 377-81; Iyer 1966; Khokar 1957, 1966; Ranganathan 1982).
- 2) This paper is based on Chapter 7 of my book (Inoue 2006). My first visit to Melattūr was in 1987, but I started to do my research on *Bhāgavata Mēla* in 1997. Thereafter I conducted my field work in 1997 and 1998. One-year intensive field research was conducted from April 2003 to March 2004. The Sangeet Natak Akademi with the Sruti Foundation began a project to document *Bhāgavata Mēla* in 1985, with the participation of music critics like Arudra and Manna Srinivasan, and R. Kausalya, then Principal of the Government Music College, Tiruvaiyaru (*Sruti* 1986: Issue 22, 28). In addition to the hereditary performers of *Bhāgavata Mēla*, my paper is deeply indebted to their cooperation.
- 3) During my field work, I discussed this matter with a number of scholars from various institutions such as the University of Madras, the Sruti Foundation, the Government Music College Tiruvaiyaru, and the Tamil University.
- 4) This discussion lasted for some years. See the following articles in *Sruti* (1993: Issue 116, 4-5; 1994: Issue 123, 6; 1995: Issue 126, 3-4; Issue 127, 41-42; Issue 129/130, 4; Issue 131, 3; 1996: Issue 141, 7-9; Issue 143, 4; Issue 145, 17-18; Issue 147, 8; Issue 149, 4; Issue 152, 22-3; Issue 167, 5).
- 5) See *Sruti* (1994: Issue 118, 15; Issue 120, 6; Issue 122, 3).
- 6) As early as 1929, the word “democratization” appeared in the report of a meeting held at the Music Academy, Madras (*Sruti* 1984: Issue 6, 11-3; Parthasarathy 1978:379). One of the leading

- Indian ethnomusicologists, S. A. K. Durga, says that both performers and patrons are democratized and that the free and individual expression of each performer can be also regarded as democratization. See Durga (1998, Chapter 1).
- 7) The work by Vriddhagirisan (1942) is the earliest and elaborate study on the history of the Nāyakas of Thanjavur.
 - 8) The words *kalyāṇamu*, *vivāhamu* and *pariṇayamu* mean marriage.
 - 9) The catalogue of Telugu manuscripts includes 137 manuscripts of 68 titles (Subramanya Sastri 1941).
 - 10) The Marāṭhā rulers of Thanjavur also wrote such dance-dramas. On the history of the Marāṭhās, see Bhosale (1999) and Vēnkaṭarāmaiṃyā (1984) among others.
 - 11) The following story was reconstructed by the author according to the *Bhāgavata Mēla* performance. It is found in *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and other sources. The summary of the story is given by Subramaniam (1979). The details are, however, different according to sources. On the comparative study of the story, see Soifer (1991: 73-111).
 - 12) This description of their performance is reconstructed by the author based on her field observation carried in 1999 and 2003.
 - 13) A list of inscriptions of the Nāyaka period is available in Karashima (2002: 87-212). Among these inscriptions, donations to temple festivals are referred to in Nos. 0015, 0132, 0172, 0222, 0458, 0721, 0731 and 0750. Dancers and musicians are referred in Nos. 0048, 0357, 0411, 0455, 0524, 0548, 0617, 0675, 0711 and 0885.
 - 14) This document was owned by V. Narayaswami Iyer, a lawyer. The discovery of this document was also reported in newspapers.
 - 15) *Modi* documents preserved in the Tamil University were all published in Tamil, but those of the Sarasvati Mahal Library are still in print with the exception of volume 1.
 - 16) This information is based on my interview with Natarajan in May 2003.
 - 17) There are two main sects of Tamil Brahman, Smārta and Śrī-vaiṣṇava. The former is followers of the Śaṅkara's doctrine (7th century) and the latter is *vaiṣṇavas*. There are several subdivisions of both Smārta and Śrī-vaiṣṇava. See Thurston and Rangachari (1909: 267-396).
 - 18) For example, Padma Subramanyam, a dancer, gave an emotional speech with tears on her face to appeal them to unite on occasion of the festival in 2003.
 - 19) Kulkarni (1994) describes the stage structure of Sanskrit Theater.
 - 20) According to the invitation letter of MBNVS, the total cost of the festival is about 100,000 rupees including expenses for printing, stage settings, PA, fees for musicians, accommodation for guests and fees for temple rituals.
 - 21) The manuscripts of Marathi dramas including *Śakuntarā* preserved in the Sarasvati Mahal Library were partially published as *The Five Marathi Dance Dramas of Thanjavur Kings* (1989).
 - 22) There has also been some trouble between the Rangree Trust and MBNVS that aroused distrust of her among the member of MBNVS (*Sruti* 2002: Issue 214, 29-31).
 - 23) An interview with Kannan and Baskar in 2003. But they faced the financial trouble in 2005 and then stopped supporting the festival. Today *bhāgavatas* collect donations and conduct *Bhāgavata Mēla*.
 - 24) Solo dances have been developed since the mid-20th century. Today when we use the word *Kūcipūḍi*, it includes both *Yakṣagāna* and the solo dance repertoire.

25) I have already discussed this matter in detail elsewhere (Inoue 2006, Part 1).

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