



- Above are some photos of performing arts. How many of them can you identify? Write down the names below each of the photos.
- Did you see any of them being performed in your village? Share your experience in the class.

In this chapter we will read about performing *artistes* in the 20th century. By performing *artistes* we mean those who dance, sing, do plays etc. They are different from other *artistes* like painters, sculptors and writers in that their work cannot be preserved – every time they have to perform afresh.

Many of the folk arts are performed by the people themselves. Peasant and tribal women sing and dance as part of their work and also during leisure times and festivals. The *Chuttukamudu* is one of the art form of Telangana that came out of the daily labour of the peasants. Their work songs

were molded into dancing songs. Usually, they are performed by women who gathered on moonlights, sang *Chuttukamudu* songs and danced to the rhythms of clapping. Similarly, village girls hung swings on trees and sang the *Vuyyala Patalu* with devotional stories of Goddess Lakshmi and Gowri. Many other art forms are performed by special people.

- Find out from your parents and grandparents about the songs sung and dances performed by family members on special occasions. Make a chart listing them, the occasions and some sample songs. Have any changes come in these performances in recent years? Share your findings with rest of the class.
- If any of you know some of these songs and dances perform them in the class.

Down the ages, artistes like dancers, storytellers, singers, drama actors, etc. have not only entertained people and given them aesthetic experience, but also helped to communicate spiritual messages and criticise the ills of our society and suggest alternatives. Performing *artistes* could play a powerful social role by mobilising people for large social causes. *Fakeer patalu*, *Bairagi patalu*, *Dandaganam*, *Latkorusaab* etc were songs sung by travelling *fakirs* and *bairagis*. They were in Telugu and Deccani Urdu and mixed language.

Several other art forms required larger teams like in *Burrakatha* and *Golla Suddulu*. It is said that initially these Golla Suddulu were practiced by shepherds who migrated from place to place. Some of them were associated with religious groups like *Virashaivas*.



Fig 21.2: Photo of a bairagi

- Have you seen any such performances by travelling *artistes*? Tell your class mates about them, who they were, what they sang and how were they treated by the audience.
- If any such *artistes* lives nearby, meet them and find out about their lives and art.

How did the performing *artistes* earn a livelihood? Some *artistes* travelled from place to place giving their performances. Such *artistes* were patronised by the village headman or the landlord and ordinary villagers. They also collected grains from the villagers. They were highly regarded as *artistes* and were welcomed in any village for the entertainment they provided. They were an essential part of temple festivals and annual village festivals. People also organised special performances as they believed that they would help in bringing rains and ward off evil.

Many *artistes* did not travel like this but were attached to the palaces of zamindars or kings and emperors. They spent most of their time learning and teaching and performing for their patrons in courts and palaces.

We will first read about some travelling *artistes* - *Burrakatha* and *tholubommalata* performers.

Burrakatha

Burrakatha is a Telugu art of storytelling. In the coastal Andhra region *burrakatha* is called *jangam katha*; in Telangana it is also known as *tamboora katha* and in Rayalaseema it is known as *tandana katha*. The origin of



Fig 21.1: Dhimsa dance

Different forms of dances

Dhimsa :

Dhimsa dance is performed by tribal groups living in Araku valley. During the festivals and marriages Dhimsa dancers travel from village to village. Dancers are accompanied by those who play musical instruments like *Mori*, *Kiridi*, *Tudumu*, *Dappu* and *Kommulu*. There are eight different categories of dances. Boda Dhimsa, Gundevi Dhimsa, Goodi Beta Dhimsa, Potara-tola Dhimsa, Bhag Dhimsa, Natikari Dhimsa, Kunda Dhimsa, Baya Dhimsa. Natikari Dhimsa is the only dance which is not performed in group.

Gusadi :

Raj Gonds of Adilabad celebrate Deepavali in a big manner. The dance they perform during this celebrations is called 'Gusadi'. They decorate themselves in colourful costumes of peacock feather, deer horn etc. It is accompanied by musical instruments like *Dappu*, *Tudumu*, *Pipri* and *Kalikom*.

Lambadi :

Lambadi a semi-nomadic tribe in Andhra Pradesh has dances inspired by the movements associated with daily tasks like harvesting, planting and sowing. The costumes, embroidered with glass-beads and shining discs are beautiful. When they perform for festivals like Dussehra, Deepavali and Holi people pay them money.

Sadir Natyam :

A solo dance form performed for centuries by *devadasis* in temples and eventually in the royal courts of South India, especially in Tamil Nadu.

Kuravanji :

A group dance by women, interpreting literary or poetic compositions typically on the theme of fulfillment of the love of a girl for her beloved.

Kuchipudi :

A group form of dance drama from Kuchipudi, a village in Andhra Pradesh, with all roles performed by men also and themes based on mythology.



Fig 21.3: Photo of Burrakatha performance

Burrakatha is associated with *Virashaiva* movement in 12th and 13th century.

The term 'burra' refers to 'tambura' a stringed instrument worn across the right shoulder of the main performer (*kathakudu*). Usually, this art is practiced by a team of two or three people from the same family of certain castes/ tribes like *picchuguntla* or *jangalu*. In this form of narration the main storyteller tells the story while playing a *tambura* and dancing wearing *andelu* (anklets). He dances rhythmically forward and back on the stage while reciting a story. The performer also wears over his right thumb, a hollow ring, with which he beats basic tempo of the songs. One or two associates assist the main narrator with two-headed earthen drum called *dakki* or *budike*. The drummer to the right of the performer comments on contemporary political and social issues even if the story is mythological and the drummer on the left provides comic relief.

'*Vinara Bharata Veera Kumara Vijayam Manadera*', '*Tandana Tana*' is the popular refrain of the *Burrakatha*. Performance begins in the evening with

songs in praise of various gods. Then the *kathakudu* introduces the main story by giving the place, time and context of the story, while the assistants repeat the refrain of the narrative.

After the introduction, all the three performers take an active

role assuming various characters in the incidents, as well as providing narrative bridges between incidents. The *Burrakatha* has a strong narrative line while the dance, recitation, song and enactment of scenes creates further interest in the story. *Burrakatha* is generally told over 2 to 3 hours. A longer story may be told as a serial over several consecutive evenings.

Burrakatha is performed mostly during Dasara or Sankranti festival seasons. Mostly mythological stories from epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and some stories of kings like *Kambojaraju katha*, *Bobbili katha*, *Palnati katha*, *Katamaraju katha* etc. are told.

Burrakatha in our times: During the independence movement, *Burrakatha* was brought into mainstream in Andhra Pradesh and was used for political purposes. *Burrakatha* played an effective role in conveying message to people and awakening them.

The British and the Nizam governments harassed the *Burrakatha* artists as they suspected them of spreading

rebellious ideas among people. This was also to a large extent true as *Burrakatha* artistes took to new themes like nationalism and communism. *Burrakatha* of patriots like Alluri Sitaramaraju who fought against the British roused nationalistic fervour among the people.

Progressive artistes of the Communist Party set up the *Praja Natya Mandali* in 1943 and invited folk artistes who performed *Burrakatha*

One name that strikes when *Burrakatha* is mentioned is Shaik Nazar Vali who popularised the art form and in turn became popular because of it. People would travel long distances to see Nazar perform. Nazar was born into a poor family with the occupation of carding cotton in 1920. Starting with Balaratna Nataka Samajam in Tenali he performed for four decades. His *Burrakatha* stories on Andhra famine and Bengal famine of 1943 became very popular. Nazar wrote the stories as well as sang them. In the 1940s he worked for the Communist Party for spreading its message. Nazar's *Burrakatha* performances were included in several cinemas. He received several awards including the Padmasri award in 1986. His biography '*Pinjari*' narrates the poverty and problems he faced and widening of his world due to his performances for the people. Several people were inspired by Nazar in taking up *Burrakatha* as a profession. However, Nazar died in utter poverty.

etc. to spread the message of nationalism and communism in Telangana villages. Women members of the Communist Party like Moturi Udayam, Koteswaramma gave *Burrakatha* performances. Nazar performed many *Burrakathas* during the Telangana movement. His '*Moscow Polimeralona*' became very famous. The Telangana artistes also began to compose and perform new *Burrakathas* for their movement. The more notable among these were Tirunagari Ramanjaneyulus '*Telangana Veerayodhulu*', Aduri Ayodhya Rama's '*Naizam Viplavam*' S.K. Chaudhary's '*Kasim Razvi*' and Sunkara Satyanarayana's '*Kashtha Jivi*'. These *Burrakathas* focused attention on the socio-economic problems of the people and the heroic deeds of the leaders of the movement. For example, Sunkara Satyanarayana's '*Telangana*' was written in 1944, focused attention on the

heroism of Bandagi, a Muslim peasant who fought valiantly against the oppression of the feudal landlord, Visnuri Deshmukh.

Presently, *Burrakatha* troupes are being patronised by the Government for creating awareness on various social issues like literacy, AIDS etc. *Burrakatha* performances are broadcast over TV. But the traditional performers have left this art form as their place has been taken over by other forms of entertainment and have no more patrons in the villages.

Tholubommalata

This is a shadow puppet show performed by travelling artistes. Puppets are made of animal skins. These hides are tanned, made translucent and cut into various shapes and sizes. The sizes of puppets range from one to six feet depending upon the age and nature of the

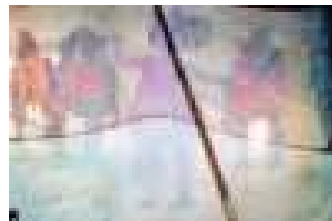


Fig 21.4: Tholubommalata

characters. The brightly painted puppets have joints at the shoulders, elbow and the hip, all secured for manipulation by a string.

Performance

Traditional shadow theatre has a narrative text, which is presented in poetic form. Neither the narrator nor the singers are visible to the audience. Through variations in pitch, the actor gives each puppet its own voice.

Performances begin at 9 p.m. and last through the night. The troupe of shadow puppeteers consists of eight to twelve artistes. The troupe will have at least two women for singing and speaking female roles, two men for male roles, three instrumentalists for playing the harmonium, *sruthi*, and cymbals and one assistant who is used for quick supply of puppets and maintenance of lamps.

They select an open place in the village for the stage, planting four-bamboo sticks to form a rectangle shape with a white cloth tied to the poles. The commentator is behind the curtain and there are a row of lights that throw the shadow on the screen.

The Themes of the plays

The performances draws from the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata and local legend with raucous humor and wisecracks about current events. For epics, the troupe uses regional versions. Very rarely, they write new stories.

Performers are mostly wandering troupes. They wander for nine months in a year from village to village giving performances in return for money and grains.

With the advent of modern means of information and entertainment like films and television people are turning away from traditional forms of performing arts. Also landlords and headmen no longer patronise artistes like in the past. As a result the folk artistes are facing a decline and crises of livelihood. Since they have been travelling artistes, they also lack modern school education and the only other profession they can adopt is one of unskilled workers.

The government has stepped in to use some of these art forms for propagation of government programmes. Many traditional troupes are now performing plays on themes like sanitation, healthcare, girl's education, family planning and environment. Such scripts are generally provided by the government that sponsors the shows.

Some families of *Tholubommalata* artistes have also opted for alternate livelihoods like production of decorative lampshades and wall hangings of leather. A co-operative puppet making center in

Anantapur district helps to promote this art form.

- Do you think it is important to preserve the folk art traditions when TV and films are becoming the dominant forms of entertainment? Give your reasons.
- What changes do you see the position of the artistes and the subject of their performances since the time of the national movement?
- Why do you think the nationalists and communists tried to revive and renew folk arts?

Bharatanatyam : Its decline and revival

A large number of classical dance forms of India trace their origin to Bharata's book '*Natyashastra*'. Today the name Bharatanatyam refers to a particular dance form of Tamil Nadu. However, a hundred

years ago the name Bharatanatyam was not in use. The classical dances that were prevalent in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh then were called *Sadir*, *Kuravanji* and *Kuchipudi*.

What we know as Bharatanatyam today springs from *Sadir Natyam*. These dances were actually performed by *devadasis* as part of temple worship. A *devadasi*, whose name means slave (*dasi*) of god (*deva*), was an artist dedicated to the services of a temple. The dance of the *devadasi* was integral to the temple ritual and worship. Young girls were dedicated by parents to temples as offerings to gods. They were not allowed to marry and were exploited by priests and influential men. Their children continued to live like them. *Devadasi* families specialised in the arts of music and dance, and with the *nattuvanars* (dance masters, who



Fig 21.6: "Dancing beggars of Southern India" an engraving from Illustrated London News, 1863

usually were male children of *devadasis*), they maintained these traditions from generation to generation.

Under British rule, propaganda prevailed against Indian art, misrepresenting it as crude, immoral, and inferior to the concepts of Western civilisation. Many educated Indians were influenced by these ideas and looked down upon arts like *sadir*. The association of *devadasi* community with prostitution also contributed to its diminished reputation. Even the terms by which the dance was known – *Sadir*, *Nautch*, *Dasi Attam*, and so on – took on derogatory connotations. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, social reformers like Kandukuri Veeresalingam launched Anti-*Nautch* and anti-*devadasi* campaign to eradicate not only the prostitution that had come to be associated with *devadasis*, but the art itself, condemning it as a social evil. A law ending the *devadasi* system (of dedicating girls to temples) was enacted between 1934 and

1947 in Bombay and Madras Presidency. Bhagya Reddy Varma led a campaign against it in Hyderabad state and persuaded the Nizam to end the *devadasi* system in the state.

Under the sustained pressure of the movement for abolition of *devadasi* system, the classical dance of South India was almost wiped out by the first quarter of the 20th century, even in Tamil Nadu. With complete loss of employment and patronage *devadasi* artistes had to undergo a lot of trial and tribulation.

- Imagine a debate between those defending the *Devadasi* system and those opposing it. Give arguments which would have been given by both the sides. Prepare a short skit of the debate.
- Imagine the plight of a young *devadasi* girl who does not want to live the life of a *devadasi*. Describe her feelings in an imaginary letter written by her to her friend.



Fig 21.5: A performing art form of Andhra Pradesh (Oggu katha)

Revival

Against all odds, a few families preserved the knowledge of this dance and music tradition. Its revival involved individuals from disparate backgrounds: Indian freedom fighters, Westerners interested in Indian arts, people outside the *devadasi* class who learnt Bharatanatyam, and *devadasis* themselves. Everyone working with classical Indian dance today owes a debt of gratitude to these individuals, without whose efforts Bharatanatyam may have been lost.

E. Krishna Iyer was freedom fighter and lawyer who also had learnt Bharatanatyam. He would perform it in female costume to remove the stigma associated with the dance, and campaigned to raise public interest in the art. He also played a role in founding the Music Academy in Madras (now Chennai), and used its platform to present Bharatanatyam performances by *devadasis*. The public controversy caused by the first such event made the second one a great success, and the art gained respect due to its acceptance on the Music Academy stage.

Bharatanatyam now attracted young *artistes* from respectable families. Initially met with shock, their participation ultimately helped to shift public opinion in favour of reviving the art. Also during this time, Western *artistes* like the ballerina Anna Pavlova were taking interest in the artistic heritage of India, while the spiritual heritage of India was being promoted by Westerners in the Theosophical movement.



Fig 21.7: Rukmini Devi

Rukmini Devi had trained in ballet under a pupil of Anna Pavlova's, but Pavlova advised Rukmini Devi to learn Indian classical dance instead. Raised in a Theosophist family, Rukmini Devi's unique background equipped her to reform the existing Bharatanatyam to emphasise its spirituality.

An association of *devadasis* joined the effort to revive Bharatanatyam. Its ranks included a teacher of Rukmini Devi as well as *artistes* like Bangalore Nagaratnamma and the legendary dancer Balasaraswati. They advocated preserving the tradition, and also keeping it in the hands of the *devadasi* community. Their argument was that the art would die if separated from the community, while advocates for Bharatanatyam from the educated community argued that the art had to be transferred to respectable hands to be saved. Ultimately, both communities carried on with the dance. It was, after all, the *devadasis* and *nattuvanars* that trained the new dancers from other castes.

Rukmini Devi's debut performance in 1935 was a milestone. Her efforts won over much of the orthodox community of Madras. Her reforms of costume, stage setting, repertoire, musical accompaniment, and thematic content overcame the objections of conservatives that Bharatanatyam was vulgar. She went on to found the Kalakshetra institute, to which she attracted many great *artistes* and musicians, with whom she trained generations of dancers. Kalakshetra is a modern institution which employs *artistes* to teach and perform and conducts degree and certificate courses. Any student whether they were of dancers family or not can learn dance there.

Balasaraswati promoted the traditional art of the *devadasis*, maintaining that reforms were unnecessary and detracted from the art. Staying true to her *devadasi* lineage, she achieved recognition for her excellence.

The renewed awareness of Bharatanatyam in Indian society allowed many *nattuvanars* to resume their training activities, and many *artists* to enter the field of classical dance. A diversity of styles like Pandanallur, Vazhuvar, and Thanjavur, named after the villages from which the *nattuvanars* came, became recognised. Bharatanatyam soon became the most widespread and popular of the Indian classical dance forms. It wasn't long before it achieved international recognition as one of India's treasures.

- Why do you think it became important for other caste to take over the dance in order to revive it?

- What kind of changes do you think they would have made to the dance to make it respectable?
- On the one hand the traditional custodians of the dance were not allowed to practice it and on the other hand other caste people took over the dance to make it respectable. Do you think there is some thing unjust about this development?

Bharatanatyam today

In the vital decades after its revival, Bharatanatyam achieved such esteem that by the late 20th century, the demand for learning Bharatanatyam exceeded the infrastructure to support the art and maintain its standards. Today, it is the demand for learning it, rather than a growth in its audience or sponsorship, that fuels the spread of Bharatanatyam.

Dancers, rather than the *nattuvanars*, have become the custodians of the art form. The generation of *nattuvanars* that trained dancers during the revival period was the last generation of exclusive *nattuvanars*. Due to sheer numbers of aspiring dancers, *nattuvanars* no longer are the only trainers. In institutions like Kalakshetra, experienced dancers trained as teachers educate the next generation. But even more students now learn privately from individual dancers. The role of the *nattuvanars* during performances is taken by dancers or musicians with special training.

Many are forced to use recorded music in dance performances to keep costs down. Dancers today usually can't make a living



Fig 21.8: Balasaraswati

by performing. With a few exceptions, Bharatanatyam is today a secondary career, or a profession for those with family support. Few dancers can devote their entire lives to training and developing as dancers. To earn money, dancers start teaching early in their careers. This affects the quality of their dance and also their teaching.

Without *nattuvanars*, and with more and more dancers becoming teachers, the unbroken lineage of instruction that maintained the integrity of the dance form has been lost. In the hands of many dancers rather than a few trainers, Bharatanatyam is now subject to numerous innovations.

While this has been the experience of Bharatanatyam, many other dance forms like *Kathakali*, *Yakshagana*, *Odisi*,

Manipuri and *Kathak* went through similar experience and struggles. Try to find out about them too.

- What was the special role of the *nattuvanars*? What impact do you think it will have on the dance if they are replaced by dancers themselves?
- In what way do you think the establishment of modern institutions like Kalakshetra influenced the art and *artistes*?
- In what way has the immense popularity of Bharatanatyam helped it. Has it also created some problems?

Key words		
1. Cymbals	2. Anklets	3. Alms
4. Mime	5. Tarangam	

Improve your learning

- Correct the false statements:
 - All dance forms emerged as part of devotion.
 - Historically *artistes* were supported by big Zamindars.
 - Burra-katha* was adopted to mobilise people.
 - Today Bharatanatyam is largely taught by *nattuvanars*.
- Discuss the changes that have come about in the lives of folk *artistes* during the last 50 years.
- Do you think folk arts are declining? What loss do you think it will cause to our culture?
- Is it possible to orient folk arts to new requirements of modern life and revive them?
- What are the major changes that have taken place in Bharatanatyam dance since the days of *Sadir*?
- Who among the following were the supporters of *devadasi* system and those who opposed it and those who wanted to reform it: Balasaraswati, Rukmini Devi, Veeresalingam, Bhagya Reddy Varma, Krishna Iyer, Bangalore Nagaratnamma.
- Why has it always been difficult for *artistes* to earn their livelihood by practicing their art? How can *artistes* be supported to stand on their own feet?
- Do you think institutions like Kalakshetra can help to revive folk arts too?