



The Role of Theatre Artists in the Development, Preservation, and Promotion of Telugu Theatre in Kadapa District: A Study

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KEYWORDS

Telugu Theatre, Theatre Artists, Kadapa District, Surabhi Theatre, Performing Arts, Cultural Heritage, Telugu Drama.

ABSTRACT

Theatre is one of the oldest performing arts that reflects the cultural, social, and historical identity of a society. Kadapa District (YSR District), Andhra Pradesh, has played a significant role in the development of Telugu theatre through the dedication of numerous theatre artists, drama organizations, and traditional performing groups. The district is widely recognized as the birthplace of the Surabhi Theatre movement, which has preserved mythological, historical, and social dramas for more than a century. Theatre artists from Kadapa have contributed immensely as actors, directors, playwrights, musicians, stage designers, costume designers, and cultural educators. Their efforts have promoted Telugu language, literature, and cultural heritage while inspiring future generations. However, modernization, digital entertainment, and financial challenges have adversely affected traditional theatre. This study examines the contributions of theatre artists toward the development, preservation, and promotion of Telugu theatre in Kadapa District. Using historical and descriptive research methods, the study analyzes their artistic achievements, cultural significance, institutional support, and contemporary challenges. The findings emphasize the need for documentation, digital preservation, financial assistance, and policy support to ensure the sustainability of Telugu theatre.

1. LITERATURE SURVEY

Previous studies indicate that Indian theatre has evolved from the classical traditions described in the

Natyashastra to diverse regional and folk theatre forms, making it an important medium for cultural expression and social communication. Telugu theatre has

developed through mythological, historical, social, and folk dramas, contributing significantly to the preservation of the Telugu language, literature, and regional identity. Among the various theatre traditions, Surabhi Theatre occupies a unique position as India's oldest family-based travelling theatre, renowned for its innovative stagecraft, illusion techniques, mythological productions, and intergenerational transmission of theatrical knowledge. Earlier research has primarily focused on the historical evolution, artistic excellence, and stage techniques of Surabhi Theatre, while comparatively fewer studies have examined the individual contributions of theatre artists from Kadapa District to the development and promotion of Telugu theatre. Studies on cultural heritage emphasize that performing arts are an important component of intangible cultural heritage and require systematic documentation, preservation, and institutional support for long-term sustainability. Although several scholars have discussed Indian and Telugu theatre traditions, there is a noticeable research gap concerning the role of theatre artists in preserving and promoting Telugu theatre specifically in Kadapa District. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill this gap by examining the historical, cultural, and artistic contributions of theatre artists and their role in sustaining the rich theatrical heritage of the region.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to examine the significant role of theatre artists in the development, preservation, and promotion of Telugu theatre in Kadapa District (YSR District), Andhra Pradesh. The primary objective is to explore the historical evolution of Telugu theatre in the district and understand its contribution to the cultural heritage of the Rayalaseema region. The study seeks to identify the major theatre artists and document their achievements in acting, directing, playwriting, stagecraft, and other performing arts. It also aims to analyze their contributions toward the growth and sustainability of Telugu theatre through traditional and modern theatrical practices. Another objective is to examine the role of theatre organizations, particularly the Surabhi Theatre tradition, in preserving Telugu dramatic arts and promoting cultural values. The study further investigates how theatre has contributed to language preservation, social awareness, and

community development. It identifies the present challenges faced by theatre artists, including financial constraints, declining audience interest, and the impact of digital entertainment. Additionally, the research evaluates the effectiveness of government and institutional support for theatre promotion. Finally, the study proposes practical recommendations for the preservation, documentation, promotion, and sustainable development of Telugu theatre in Kadapa District for the benefit of future generations.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a descriptive and historical research design to examine the role of theatre artists in the development, preservation, and promotion of Telugu theatre in Kadapa District (YSR District), Andhra Pradesh. The descriptive approach is used to analyze the contributions of theatre artists, while the historical method helps trace the evolution of Telugu theatre in the region. The study is primarily based on secondary data collected from books, peer-reviewed research journals, government reports, Sangeet Natak Akademi publications, newspaper archives, theatre documents, and records related to the Surabhi Theatre tradition. Wherever available, published interviews and biographical accounts of theatre artists have also been consulted to enhance the authenticity of the study. The collected information has been carefully organized and verified using reliable academic and government sources. Data analysis was carried out through historical analysis to understand the growth of theatre over time, comparative analysis to compare traditional and contemporary theatre practices, and qualitative analysis to interpret the cultural, artistic, and social contributions of theatre artists. This methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of the significance of theatre artists in preserving and promoting the rich heritage of Telugu theatre in Kadapa District.

4. HISTORY OF TELUGU THEATRE IN KADAPA DISTRICT

The history of Telugu theatre in Kadapa District is deeply rooted in the rich cultural and folk traditions of the Rayalaseema region. In the early period, people expressed their social, religious, and cultural values through folk theatre forms such as Burrakatha, Harikatha, Veedhi Natakam, Yakshaganam, and Tholu

Bommalata (Shadow Puppetry). These traditional performances served as important means of educating the public, preserving Telugu language and literature, and spreading moral and spiritual values. During the late nineteenth century, Telugu theatre in Kadapa entered a new phase with the establishment of the Surabhi Theatre in 1885 at Surabhi village under the leadership of Sri Vanarasa Govinda Rao. Surabhi introduced live stage performances featuring mythological dramas, innovative stagecraft, elaborate costumes, and mechanical special effects, gaining recognition across India. Over the years, Kadapa became an important centre for Telugu theatre, producing several distinguished theatre artists and drama organizations. In the modern era, theatre artists have continued to preserve and promote Telugu theatre through cultural festivals, educational institutions, drama competitions, and community performances. Although cinema, television, and digital media have reduced the popularity of live theatre, the dedication of theatre artists and organizations has ensured that the rich theatrical heritage of Kadapa District continues to survive and inspire future generations.

5. MAJOR THEATRE ARTISTS OF KADAPA DISTRICT

Kadapa District has produced several distinguished theatre artists who have made remarkable contributions to the development and preservation of Telugu theatre. Among them, Sri Vanarasa Govinda Rao, the founder of the Surabhi Theatre movement, is recognized for establishing one of India's oldest family-based theatre traditions in 1885. Padma Shri Surabhi Babji played a vital role in preserving traditional Telugu theatre through innovative stage productions and artist training. Surabhi Jayachandra Varma has successfully modernized Surabhi theatre by combining traditional performances with contemporary stage technology and has received national recognition for his contributions. Rekandar Venugopal Rao has significantly contributed as an actor, director, and theatre organizer, ensuring the continuity of the Surabhi tradition. In addition to these eminent personalities, many senior local theatre artists have promoted Telugu drama through acting, directing, and playwriting at district and state levels. Women theatre artists have made valuable contributions by performing lead roles, preserving traditional

performance practices, and encouraging greater participation of women in theatre. Folk drama artists have sustained indigenous art forms such as Burrakatha, Harikatha, Veedhi Natakam, Yakshaganam, and Tholu Bommalata, thereby preserving the cultural heritage of the Rayalaseema region. Collectively, these theatre artists have strengthened Telugu theatre through artistic excellence, cultural preservation, and the transmission of theatrical knowledge to future generations. Their contributions continue to inspire the growth and sustainability of Telugu theatre in Kadapa District.

6. ROLE OF THEATRE ARTISTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TELUGU THEATRE

Theatre artists have played a crucial role in the development of Telugu theatre through their excellence in acting, direction, playwriting, music, stage design, costume design, makeup, and technical innovation. Their creative performances and well-planned productions have enriched Telugu drama and attracted audiences across generations. They have also trained young artists, organized theatre workshops, and promoted community theatre to preserve traditional performing arts. Through mythological, historical, and social dramas, they have strengthened Telugu language, literature, and cultural values. Their continuous dedication has significantly contributed to the growth, preservation, and promotion of Telugu theatre in Kadapa District and Andhra Pradesh.

7. ROLE IN PRESERVATION

Theatre artists have played a vital role in preserving mythological stories, Telugu language, traditional acting techniques, and folk theatre traditions through their stage performances. They have safeguarded the rich cultural identity of Kadapa District by presenting epics, historical dramas, and socially relevant plays to successive generations. The family-based Surabhi Theatre tradition has ensured the continuous transfer of theatrical knowledge, skills, and values from one generation to another. Theatre artists have also preserved oral history, local customs, and indigenous performance practices through live performances and cultural festivals. Furthermore, efforts to document scripts, photographs, costumes, and recorded performances have contributed significantly to archiving

and protecting the heritage of Telugu theatre for future generations.

8. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that theatre artists have played a vital role in the development, preservation, and promotion of Telugu theatre in Kadapa District. Their contributions in acting, direction, playwriting, music, stagecraft, and technical innovation have enriched the cultural heritage of the region. The Surabhi Theatre tradition has become a symbol of Telugu theatre and continues to preserve mythological and social dramas for future generations. Theatre artists have also promoted the Telugu language, literature, moral values, and folk traditions through their performances. Despite challenges such as declining audiences, financial difficulties, and the influence of modern entertainment, they remain committed to protecting this valuable art form. The study highlights the need for proper documentation, digital archiving, government support, and theatre education to sustain traditional theatre. Organizing theatre festivals, workshops, and awareness programmes can encourage youth participation and public appreciation. Collaborative efforts by cultural organizations, educational institutions, and government agencies are essential for preserving Telugu theatre. Protecting the legacy of theatre artists will strengthen the cultural identity of Kadapa District and ensure the continuity of its rich theatrical heritage. Therefore, preserving Telugu theatre is not only a cultural responsibility but also an important step toward safeguarding India's artistic traditions for future generations.

Conflict of interest statement

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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