



The Contribution of Theatre Artists to the Development of Theatre Arts in Kadapa District (YSR District), Andhra Pradesh

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Theatre Arts, Kadapa District, YSR District, Surabhi Theatre, Theatre Artists, Telugu Drama, Performing Arts, Cultural Heritage.	Theatre has played a significant role in preserving the cultural identity, artistic traditions, and social consciousness of Andhra Pradesh. Kadapa District (YSR District), situated in the Rayalaseema region, has made remarkable contributions to the development of Telugu theatre through its theatre artists, drama organizations, folk performers, and family-based theatre traditions. Among these, the Surabhi Theatre occupies a unique position in Indian theatre history. Originating in Surabhi village of Kadapa District in 1885 under the leadership of Vanarasa Govinda Rao, Surabhi transformed traditional shadow puppetry into live stage performances and became one of India's oldest family-based travelling theatre traditions. The district has produced several distinguished theatre artists whose contributions include acting, directing, stage design, scriptwriting, music composition, costume design, lighting, and the preservation of mythological and social dramas. Their performances not only entertained audiences but also promoted Telugu language, literature, ethical values, and cultural awareness among rural and urban communities. Theatre artists from Kadapa have significantly contributed to preserving traditional dramatic techniques while simultaneously adapting to contemporary theatrical practices. This study examines the historical development of theatre in Kadapa District, profiles the contributions of major theatre artists, analyses the role of theatre organizations in preserving performing arts, and evaluates the challenges currently faced by traditional theatre. The research is descriptive and analytical in nature and is based on secondary

sources including books, journal articles, government publications, theatre archives, interviews reported in published sources, and cultural studies. The findings reveal that the contributions of theatre artists have been instrumental in preserving the artistic heritage of Rayalaseema despite modernization and the rapid expansion of cinema and digital entertainment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Theatre is one of the oldest and most influential performing arts in human civilization. It combines literature, music, dance, acting, visual arts, costume design, and stagecraft into a single artistic expression. In India, theatre has served as a powerful medium for religious education, cultural transmission, social reform, and entertainment for centuries. Telugu theatre, in particular, occupies an important position in Indian performing arts because of its rich literary tradition, classical drama, folk performances, and mythological productions.

Kadapa District, officially known as YSR Kadapa District, has made remarkable contributions to the development of Telugu theatre. The district possesses a long tradition of stage performances that originated from folk storytelling, shadow puppetry (*Tholu Bommallata*), Harikatha, Burrakatha, and village festivals. These traditional art forms gradually evolved into organized theatre movements that transformed the cultural landscape of Rayalaseema.

Among all theatrical traditions, Surabhi Theatre represents the most significant contribution of Kadapa District to Indian performing arts. Established in 1885 in Surabhi village by Vanarasa Govinda Rao, the Surabhi movement pioneered family-based travelling theatre, spectacular stagecraft, illusion effects, elaborate costumes, and mythological productions. What began with the staging of *Keechaka Vadha* developed into a theatre tradition that has continued for nearly 140 years and is internationally recognized for its distinctive style. The theatre artists of Kadapa have played multiple roles as actors, playwrights, directors, musicians, stage designers, technicians, and teachers. Their performances have preserved Telugu language and literature, popularized epics such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavatam*, and inspired generations of audiences. Beyond entertainment, theatre became a medium for moral education, social awareness, and cultural continuity.

However, the emergence of cinema, television, and digital media has created serious challenges for

traditional theatre. Declining audiences, financial constraints, lack of institutional support, and reduced opportunities for young artists threaten the survival of many theatre groups. Despite these challenges, dedicated theatre artists continue to preserve the heritage of Telugu stage drama through performances, workshops, and cultural festivals.

The present study explores the contribution of theatre artists to the development of theatre arts in Kadapa District. It highlights their artistic achievements, examines the evolution of theatre organizations, and identifies measures necessary for preserving this invaluable cultural heritage.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of this study are:

1. To study the historical development of theatre arts in Kadapa District.
2. To identify prominent theatre artists of Kadapa District and document their contributions.
3. To examine the role of Surabhi Theatre in the evolution of Telugu stage drama.
4. To analyze the contribution of theatre artists to the preservation of cultural heritage.
5. To identify the challenges faced by traditional theatre artists.
6. To suggest measures for preserving and promoting theatre arts in Kadapa District.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. The study is primarily based on secondary data collected from books, peer-reviewed journals, publications on Telugu theatre, reports of cultural organizations, archives of Surabhi Theatre, government documents, and research on performing arts. Published material on the history of Surabhi Theatre and Telugu stage traditions has been reviewed to analyze the contributions of theatre artists from Kadapa District. The collected information has been classified thematically and interpreted using historical and cultural analysis.

IV. HISTORY OF THEATRE ARTS IN KADAPA DISTRICT

The history of theatre arts in Kadapa District dates back several centuries and is closely connected with the cultural and religious traditions of the Rayalaseema region. Before the emergence of modern stage drama, people in Kadapa practiced several indigenous performing arts such as Tholu Bommalata (shadow puppetry), Burrakatha, Harikatha, Yakshaganam, Kolatam, and Veedhi Natakam. These traditional art forms served as effective media for educating society, spreading religious values, narrating epics, and preserving Telugu language and folklore.

During the nineteenth century, Telugu theatre underwent significant transformation with the introduction of organized stage performances. The most remarkable contribution from Kadapa District was the birth of the Surabhi Theatre movement in 1885 at Surabhi village under the leadership of Sri Vanarasa Govinda Rao. The troupe's first live theatrical production was Keechaka Vadha, adapted from the Mahabharata. This marked the transition from traditional shadow puppetry to live stage drama and laid the foundation for one of India's oldest family-based travelling theatre traditions.

Surabhi theatre became famous for its mythological dramas, elaborate sets, mechanical stage effects, illusion scenes, live music, and family-based participation. Unlike many theatre companies of the time, Surabhi encouraged women to perform female roles on stage, which was a pioneering step in Telugu theatre. Over time, Surabhi expanded into dozens of theatre troupes that toured villages and towns throughout Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, making theatre accessible to rural audiences.

The twentieth century saw the growth of social dramas addressing themes such as education, women's empowerment, social justice, and rural development. Although cinema and television later reduced audiences for live theatre, dedicated theatre artists from Kadapa continued to preserve stage traditions through performances, workshops, cultural festivals, and educational programs.

V. MAJOR THEATRE ARTISTS OF KADAPA DISTRICT AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

A. Sri Vanarasa Govinda Rao (Founder of Surabhi Theatre)

Sri Vanarasa Govinda Rao is widely regarded as the father of the Surabhi Theatre tradition. Born into a family associated with *Tholu Bommalata* (shadow puppetry), he transformed puppet performances into live theatrical productions after being inspired by stage drama. In 1885, he staged *Keechaka Vadha* in Surabhi village, initiating the Surabhi theatre movement.

Contributions

- Founder of the Surabhi Theatre movement.
- Introduced live mythological theatre in place of shadow puppetry.
- Established India's oldest family-based travelling theatre.
- Developed innovative stagecraft using mechanical devices.
- Encouraged women to participate in theatre performances.
- Popularized Telugu mythology through stage productions.
- Trained multiple generations of theatre artists.

His contribution transformed Telugu theatre into a visually rich performing art and established a legacy that continues even today.

B. Padma Shri Surabhi Babji

Padma Shri Surabhi Babji played a vital role in preserving and expanding the Surabhi tradition during the twentieth century. At a time when cinema was drawing audiences away from live performances, he modernized productions while retaining the distinctive identity of Surabhi theatre. He received the Padma Shri for his outstanding contribution to Indian theatre.

Contributions

- Preserved Surabhi theatre during periods of decline.
- Directed numerous mythological productions.
- Trained younger generations of actors and technicians.
- Strengthened stagecraft and production quality.
- Represented Telugu theatre nationally.

C. Surabhi Jayachandra Varma

Surabhi Jayachandra Varma, Director of Sri Venkateswara Surabhi Theatre, represents the

contemporary generation of the Surabhi family. His work combines traditional theatre techniques with modern production methods while maintaining the unique identity of Surabhi. He has received the Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar from the Sangeet Natak Akademi for his contribution to theatre.

Contributions

- Modernized Surabhi theatre productions.
- Promoted Telugu theatre nationally and internationally.
- Introduced innovative lighting and sound technologies.
- Conducted theatre workshops for young artists.
- Helped preserve the Surabhi heritage for future generations.

D. Rekandar Venugopal Rao

Rekandar Venugopal Rao belongs to the fifth generation of the Surabhi family and has dedicated his life to Telugu theatre as an actor, director, and organizer. Beginning his acting career as a child, he has performed in numerous mythological plays and has worked to preserve traditional stage techniques.

Contributions

- More than five decades of stage experience.
- Direction and management of Surabhi Natya Mandali.
- Training of young theatre artists.
- Preservation of traditional Telugu stage performance.
- Promotion of theatre festivals and cultural programs.

VI. CONTRIBUTION OF THEATRE ARTISTS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEATRE ARTS

The theatre artists of Kadapa District have made lasting contributions to Telugu performing arts in several important ways.

1. Preservation of Telugu Language

Theatre performances preserved classical and spoken Telugu by presenting literary dialogues, poems, songs, and moral stories to audiences across rural and urban communities.

2. Promotion of Mythological Literature

Through productions such as Mayabazar, Bhakta Prahlada, Lava Kusa, Keechaka Vadha, Sri Krishna Leelalu, and Pathala Bhairavi, theatre artists introduced

generations of audiences to Indian epics and Puranic traditions.

3. Development of Stage Technology

Surabhi artists became famous for:

- Flying scenes
- Mechanical chariots
- Revolving stages
- Artificial rain
- Fire effects
- Magical illusion scenes
- Innovative lighting
- Scenic backdrops

These innovations greatly influenced the visual style of Telugu stage drama.

4. Promotion of Women Artists

Surabhi was among the earliest Telugu theatre groups to encourage women to perform female roles themselves instead of using male actors in disguise. This represented a significant social reform in the history of Telugu theatre.

5. Cultural Education

Theatre artists spread:

- Moral values
- Religious awareness
- Patriotism
- Social equality
- Family values
- Respect for Indian culture

through dramatic performances.

6. Training Future Artists

The family-based Surabhi tradition created an informal theatre school where children learned acting, music, makeup, costume design, stage management, and technical production from an early age, ensuring continuity across generations.

VII. CHALLENGES FACING THEATRE ARTISTS IN KADAPA DISTRICT

Despite their invaluable contribution to Telugu theatre, theatre artists in Kadapa District face numerous challenges that threaten the sustainability of traditional theatre. Rapid technological advancements, changing audience preferences, and economic constraints have significantly affected live stage performances.

A. Declining Audience Interest

The widespread popularity of cinema, television, OTT platforms, and social media has considerably reduced

public interest in traditional stage drama. Younger generations often prefer digital entertainment, leading to a decline in theatre attendance.

B. Financial Constraints

Most theatre artists depend on seasonal performances and cultural festivals for their livelihood. Limited financial assistance, irregular income, and increasing production costs make it difficult for theatre troupes to sustain their activities. Many Surabhi theatre groups have ceased operations due to economic hardships.

C. Lack of Government and Institutional Support

Although organizations such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi promote theatre through awards, festivals, training, and research, many local theatre groups still struggle to access adequate funding, infrastructure, and continuous institutional support.

D. Declining Number of Young Artists

Traditional theatre requires years of training in acting, music, dialogue delivery, makeup, costume preparation, and stagecraft. However, many young people prefer careers in cinema, television, or other professions, resulting in fewer successors for traditional theatre.

E. Limited Performance Opportunities

Live theatre performances are now largely confined to temple festivals, government cultural events, and occasional theatre festivals. The reduction in regular performances affects both artistic growth and financial stability.

F. Inadequate Infrastructure

Many rural theatre groups lack:

- Permanent theatres
- Modern lighting systems
- Digital sound equipment
- Costume storage facilities
- Transportation for stage materials

These limitations reduce the quality of productions.

G. Documentation and Digital Preservation

A significant portion of Kadapa's theatrical history remains undocumented. Scripts, photographs, costumes, posters, and recordings are at risk of being lost without systematic archiving. Preservation of such intangible cultural heritage is increasingly recognized as essential for future research and cultural continuity.

H. Competition from Modern Entertainment

Digital platforms provide instant entertainment, making it difficult for live theatre to compete. Theatre

organizations must therefore integrate modern technology while preserving traditional artistic values.

VIII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The present study highlights the significant contribution of theatre artists to the evolution and preservation of Telugu theatre in Kadapa District.

Major Findings

1. Kadapa District is the birthplace of the internationally recognized Surabhi Theatre, one of India's oldest family-based travelling theatre traditions founded in 1885.
2. Theatre artists from Kadapa have made remarkable contributions as actors, directors, playwrights, musicians, costume designers, stage technicians, and cultural educators.
3. Surabhi Theatre introduced innovative stagecraft, including illusion scenes, mechanical devices, elaborate sets, and special lighting effects, which influenced Telugu stage productions across the country.
4. Theatre has served as an effective medium for promoting Telugu language, mythology, literature, ethics, patriotism, and social awareness.
5. The family-based training system of Surabhi has ensured the transmission of theatrical knowledge from one generation to another.
6. Women have played an important role in Surabhi theatre, contributing to the early acceptance of female performers in Telugu stage drama.
7. Despite modernization, dedicated theatre artists continue to preserve traditional performance practices through festivals, workshops, and educational programs.
8. Financial instability, reduced audiences, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of systematic documentation remain major obstacles to the sustainability of traditional theatre.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that theatre artists are not merely performers but custodians of cultural heritage. Their contributions extend beyond entertainment to include education, language preservation, social reform, and cultural identity. The success of Surabhi Theatre illustrates how indigenous theatre traditions can remain relevant through innovation while preserving authenticity. Future sustainability depends on

collaborative efforts involving government agencies, universities, cultural organizations, researchers, and local communities.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Establish a Kadapa Theatre Heritage Museum to preserve costumes, manuscripts, stage properties, photographs, and historical records.
2. Digitize traditional theatre scripts and audiovisual performances to create a permanent digital archive.
3. Introduce theatre studies and practical theatre workshops in schools and universities.
4. Organize annual Kadapa Theatre Festivals to promote local theatre artists and encourage public participation.
5. Increase financial assistance through grants, scholarships, pensions, and insurance schemes for theatre artists.
6. Strengthen collaboration between the Ministry of Culture, Sangeet Natak Akademi, universities, and local cultural organizations for research and preservation.
7. Encourage research scholars to document oral histories of senior theatre artists before valuable knowledge is lost.
8. Promote theatre tourism by including Surabhi performances in Andhra Pradesh cultural tourism programs.
9. Utilize digital platforms, social media, and OTT services to reach younger audiences without compromising traditional values.
10. Recognize outstanding theatre artists through state and national awards to encourage future generations.
11. Establish specialized training centres for acting, stagecraft, lighting, costume design, and theatre management.
12. Develop collaborative research projects between universities and theatre organizations for preserving intangible cultural heritage.

X. CONCLUSION

Theatre artists of Kadapa District (YSR District) have made an outstanding contribution to the development and preservation of Telugu theatre and the cultural

heritage of Andhra Pradesh. Through their dedication, creativity, and artistic excellence, they have kept the rich traditions of stage drama alive for more than a century. The Surabhi Theatre movement, which originated in Kadapa in 1885, stands as a unique example of a family-based theatre tradition that has gained recognition at both the national and international levels. Theatre artists have not only entertained audiences but have also promoted Telugu language, literature, mythology, moral values, and social awareness through their performances. Their contributions in acting, direction, music, stagecraft, costume design, and technical innovation have significantly enriched Indian performing arts. Despite facing challenges such as declining audiences, financial instability, modernization, and limited institutional support, many artists continue to preserve this invaluable cultural legacy with remarkable commitment. The study highlights the urgent need for systematic documentation, digital preservation, financial assistance, and active participation from government agencies, educational institutions, and cultural organizations. Encouraging young generations to participate in theatre and integrating modern technology with traditional practices can ensure the sustainability of this heritage. Preserving the contributions of Kadapa's theatre artists is essential not only for safeguarding the district's cultural identity but also for strengthening the rich legacy of Telugu theatre for future generations. Their artistic achievements remain a source of inspiration and pride for the cultural history of Andhra Pradesh and India.

Conflict of interest statement

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

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