

Telugu Fine Arts Society -- Going thru the Memory Lanes

- Sankara Rao Polepalle

Life in the 1980s in New Jersey

It was January 1979, the middle of Winter, when we moved from Boston to New Jersey, since I was switching the job. We did not know anybody in NJ, except we met Seemanthini Kautha and Prabha Raghunath in 1978, when they came to Boston to accompany Ramana Murthy in a Carnatic Music concert at Boston. We used to live in Wyckoff, in Bergen County, NJ from 1979 to 1985. There were about 15 Telugu families in Bergen County, and we used to meet almost every week-end. At that time there were no video recorders, no Indian restaurants in Bergen County, and no Oaktree Road shops in Edison. Watching a Telugu movie was a far cry. There were no South-Indian temples in NJ. It used to be an annual ritual to visit the Lord Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh in one of the three day weekends in the summer of every year. We had no other family members in USA and no other avocation after the work and in the week-ends. This was true with the majority of the families. Some times we used to feel lonely. Hence there were not many other choices for the Telugu families but to meet among themselves.

That was one of the reasons, why we needed some Association for the Telugu families in the area to meet and to celebrate our festivals. The other reason is to teach and impart our culture to our children. We were all scared that our children would lose their identity without exposing them to our Telugu culture. Every Telugu family was conscious about this issue.

But the formation of the Telugu association in New York metropolitan area was necessitated to sponsor Ghantasala for his US tour, and TLCA (Telugu Literary and Cultural Association) took its birth in 1971 to bring him to US. By the time we moved to NJ, the TLCA existed as a tri-state Telugu association. They used to do two functions every year (Ugadi and Deepavali), but the programs always used to be held in Queens, NY, since majority of the Telugu families were in New York City. For the folks like us in NJ, it is a full day affair to attend the function by traveling to New York city for the TLCA program and also to buy the Indian grocery and to make a visit to Ganesha temple in Queens. The first south Indian temple came into existence in NJ in 1992.

The TLCA was mainly responsible to celebrate Ugadi and Deepavali and also used to arrange the programs with the visiting Indian artists. However, it did not fill the void to teach our children the Telugu language and about our religion. Hence, in NJ we started

a Telugu school at our home in Wyckoff in 1981 to teach Telugu for the children in Bergen County and for the children in adjacent Rockland County in New York. We used to have classes on alternate Sunday mornings, and Mani Arisetty, Adinarayana Murthy Kautha and myself used to be the teachers. The Telugu school also became the nucleus for the families in the area for local get togethers and to celebrate other festivals such as Sankranti, Vinayaka Chavithi and Navarathri. At one point, the Telugu families in NJ wanted to create a satellite for TLCA to get an official status for the local group. There was also a parallel effort in Middlesex County by conducting Telugu school and SAT classes in East Brunswick/ North Brunswick area. There were about 30 Telugu families in Middlesex and Somerset Counties who used to gather at Telugu school.

The Telugu families both in Bergen County and Middlesex county areas used to feel the TLCA is more a central organization catering the needs of the broader community but could not cater the needs of local communities. Also, traveling to New York for all the TLCA conducted functions was discouraging due to the time and cost.

Birth of TFAS

Then there was an (unfortunate) incident in 1983 that led to the creation of Telugu Fine Arts Society. In the fall of 1983, we all gathered in one of the school auditoriums in New York City to celebrate Deepavali. That was also an occasion to elect a new committee for the TLCA for the next two year term starting in January 1984. Normally there would be no elections, since the new committee is elected on a consensus basis by persuading one of the contesting candidates to withdraw and have a unanimous election. But that did not happen in 1983 elections. There were two candidates for the president position and none of them wanted to withdraw, forcing the election by secret balloting. The election results were contested by the defeated candidate and thus splitting the communities between New York and New Jersey. This incident was taken as an opportunity by the NJ Telugu families for the formation of a separate Telugu association in NJ. It was due any way because of the local needs. Telugu Fine Arts Society (a.k.a. TFAS) was formed under the leadership of Ramakrishna Jonnada as the first President of TFAS. Ramakrishna Chalikonda, DR. K.V.Rao, and Kidambi Raghunath played key roles in forming the TFAS. I had the privilege to be part of the first TFAS committee during 1984-85 and also in 1986-87. The following were the members of

the first committee of TFAS: Ramakrishna Jonnada, President; Bharathi Kondiseti, Vice President; Ram Ammanamanchi, Secretary; Muralikrishna Akkapeddi, Treasurer; Vijaya Chalikonda, Cultural; Sankara Rao Polepalle, Educational; K.V. Rao, Literary; V. Raja Rao Bandaru, Philanthropic; Jagadamba Bangaru, Social.

Even though we thought all is well in forming the TFAS, we found it with surprise that was not so. A segment of the community in NJ viewed us as rebels forming a separate association breaking away from TLCA. This notion of this rebellious organization slowly disappeared, since the needs of the community were meticulously served by TFAS.

TFAS in 1980's and Early 1990's

TFAS, even though was a NJ based organization, had many members in other states, and had widespread support from some prominent community members (Dr. K.V. Rao, Mahesh Saladi, Dama Venkayya to name a few) in New York city. TFAS also had members in India and Canada.

In spite of forming TFAS, the local groups that were operating with the Telugu schools as the nucleus continued to flourish as Telugu Cultural Center (TCC) in the Middlesex/Somerset counties, and North Jersey-Hudson Valley Telugu School in the Bergen county area until late 1980's. Once the children from these schools graduated and started moving into higher education, the prominence of the local groups is diminished and most of these families became part of TFAS. These defunct organizations still exist reminiscing the old glory.

In the 1980's and 1990's, TFAS played very important role in the lives of the Telugu families in NJ. The role of TFAS got expanded to not only to include cultural and literary, but also to include community services, and to recognize eminent Telugu persons.

Cultural

We used to look forward for Deepavali and Ugadi celebrations. The festivals were filled with music, dance and stage plays, and, of course, good food, including youth participation. The good food was cooked by the participating families. We used to take pride in owning and contributing to TFAS and never felt as a burden. Most of the programs used to be in Piscataway area.

Before coming to USA, we used to live in Bhilai (Bhilai Steel Plant, MP, India) and used to participate in Telugu drama competitions in Bilaspur, Tatanagar, etc. I was even awarded the best supporting actor in Chillarakottu Chittemma in 1972 at Telugu Drama competitions at Bhilai by Mikkilineni. Vijaya Chalikonda also had interest in staging Telugu dramas. We both joined together to stage some Telugu dramas in mid 1980's: Athidhi Devullu (Deepavali 1984);

Wanted Fathers (Ugadi 1985); Sundari Subbarao; Intlo Poru Veedhilo Horu (first play in NJ with all women); Madatha Kurchi (children's play); Dasavatharalu (children's play).

These were directed by Vijaya Chalikonda and me. Of course, the early 1990's saw a greater influx of Telugu families and the veterans like Yerraguntla Raghunadha Rao and Appajosyula Sathyanarayana took over the mantle to produce some of the best Telugu dramas. Their productions were very popular and the attendance to the programs was significantly higher when their programs were part of the celebrations. We used to refer to these productions as Telugu Broadway!

TFAS also sponsored many music and dance performances with artists visiting from India. Music: Mandolin Srinivas, Vedavathi Prabhakar, Dwaram Manorama, Nookala Chinna-Aatyanarayana, S. P. Balasubrahmanyam - Sailaja; Dance: Dr. Vempati Chinna Satyam group, Shobha Naidu, Alekhya Punjala, to name a few. Raghunath Kidambi, Dr. K.V. Rao and Ramakrishna Chalikonda should be credited for arranging these programs in the 1980's. They used to maintain very close relationship with these artists.

My family, especially my children Sunitha and Sapan Kumar got enormously benefited from TFAS to maintain the continuity of our culture in my family. They participated in numerous cultural functions organized by TFAS. Now the children of our children (the third generation) are becoming the part of TFAS. It is really heart warming to see the recent participation and awards to Supriya Makam, our grand daughter, Anjali Chenna pragada, grand daughter of the Bhavarajus, and Anjali Akula, grand daughter of the Dayanidhis at the Sankranthi children competitions in 2009. This is a clear indication how TFAS served the last three generations to inculcate the Telugu culture and to maintain the traditions.

TFAS also started conducting the Trimurthi Day celebrations since 1987 honoring Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar, and Syama Sastry. Prabha and Raghunath Kidambi, Seemanthini Kautha, K.V.R. Chari, Laxminarayana Thangirala and myself used to take the responsibility to organize this function until early 1990's. It provided an opportunity for us to motivate our children and for them to display their talents in Carnatic music. Even though very few Telugu families had interest in the classical music at that time, it became a very prestigious event organized by TFAS that involved the members of all south Indian states. We used to get artists from neighboring cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington for the main

concert on this occasion. This tradition to organize the Trimurthi Day still continues even today.

Literary

Publication of Telugu Jyothi monthly with readers in 20 states, Canada, Australia, and India. Conducted short story competitions in India starting in 1984, and every year since, through Andhra Jyothi Weekly and gave cash awards. Started cartoon competitions as well. Contributions from local writers have increased. The magazine also served the purpose as a communication vehicle among the Trustees and members.

Mentioning the literary aspect of TFAS is incomplete without mentioning the name of Raghunath Kidambi who tirelessly worked for publishing Telugu Jyothi since 1984 for almost 20 years until he passed away in 2003. He was ably supported by K.V.R Chary, Bharathi and Bhavaraju Murty, Radhika Sastry, Syamala Dasika, and several others. I remember couple of times, Raghunath came to my home to give me some copies for posting in India to save the postal charges. Bhavaraju Murty is the current editor and publisher of this magazine.

TFAS in the Mid to Late 1990's

TFAS saw the declining support during the mid to late 1990's. The attendance dwindled to around 200 people for some of the programs. TFAS was at cross roads. I could see a few reasons:

1. The needs of the first generation members changed since most of their children are in the colleges, and now have extended families (brothers and sisters). The family activities pretty much consumed the spare time.
2. New temples are built and they started duplicating some of the cultural activities previously conducted by TFAS. TFAS could not compete with them.
3. TFAS did not actively pursue and recruit new members who came during the IT boom, and also the type of activities did not attract them to be part of TFAS.

It was even difficult to find the members who will shoulder the responsibility of TFAS. TFAS was running under loss, since the reduced revenues were not enough to support Telugu Jyothi publication. Some community members were questioning the need for this magazine and even for the organization.

Home for TFAS

Most of TFAS programs are held in some school auditoriums. Over a period of time, some schools started refusing to give the school for our programs and hence it was becoming difficult to find a place for our get-

togethers. Some key members floated the idea to construct a building for our activities and Dr. K.V. Rao even contributed a large sum to initiate this effort. However, the concept never materialized since it required lot more funding and it did not take lot of time to recognize the fact that community preferred to donate to the temples, but not to the cultural and community organizations. Hence, the task took a seat on the back burner.

TFAS in the 2000's

The turn around was seen in the early 2000's, with the active recruitment of new families and bring them into the TFAS fold. This credit should go to Janani Krishna and her team who turned the TFAS into a viable organization again. New initiatives were taken to reduce the expenses by informing the members through email, creating a website, and publishing the Telugu Jyothi as a bi-monthly magazine, etc.

We also see the new trends in organizing the programs by bringing the movie actors and paid artists for the conventional programs like Ugadi and Deepavali. The food is no longer cooked by the members at large but is provided by the caterers. The sponsors are found to offset the expenses.

TFAS started conducting the annual children competitions for the children and the attendance of the children surged close to 500 in 2009 competitions. This is an incredible turn around. I have only kudos for all the committee members in the past 8 years who were able to make these changes.

Also, I was part of the TFAS election committee in 2008 with Rajarao Bandaru as the chair and Dr. Sathyaveni Rao as another member. It is really heart warming to see several members in the community wanted to be part of the committee. This is indeed a good sign.

One interesting observation: We had four presidents with the name Ramakrishna (Jonnada, Chalikonda, Seethala, and Eleswarapu). They pretty much were at the helm for almost 50% of the time. If you want to become a president you may have better luck by changing your name to Ramakrishna.

We aged with the TFAS for the past 25 years, and when I look back into the past I have only good memories of the TFAS, without which our lives would have been void. I would say I am fortunate to be associated with the early pioneers of this great institution. I salute all the committee members and numerous unsung volunteers since 1984 to 2009 for rendering a selfless service to the community.

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A Sense of Community

- Vasudha Bhatnagar

I recently met up with a high school classmate who relocated from Parsippany, NJ to Phoenix, where my family and I live now. We met over coffee and while reminiscing about growing up, she remembered that I used to have all these places to go to over the weekends - family parties in Morristown, Indian functions in Piscataway, and a variety of other events that required dressing up in Indian clothes and heading out for the day. She was intrigued by my mysterious “double life” of being a local American kid during the weekdays, and an Indian kid on the weekends, a set-up very common amongst my Indo-American generation.

As the conversation drifted from where we were then to where we are now, she asked me if my family was involved in the Indian community in Phoenix. I paused and said with some degree of embarrassment, “Not really...”. I suppose I could have made up some excuse like our lives are too busy or the Indian community in Phoenix is not that visible or their activities are not very accessible, but none of that is correct; the truth is, that since I did not grow up here, I did not feel the same natural sense of belonging to the Indian community as I would have if we lived in NJ. One force behind that earlier feeling of community came from our involvement in the Telugu Fine Arts Society.

When I was younger, I probably did not fully realize the importance of TFAS, an organization with a goal to preserve Indian culture in America. My sense of belonging to a Telugu community was strengthened through the events that TFAS organized. There were the holiday celebrations like Ugadi and Deepavali showcasing local talent and food from the “Telugu Aunty Network”. I recall the professional musicians and dancers that came from India to perform. I especially remember an entire dance troupe that stayed in our house around the time of their show - I admittedly had a difficult time sharing that experience with my classmates on Monday morning, but it proved to be a unique one! Then there was published literature in Telugu Jyothi, and once in a while when the mood struck, our family would contribute our own writings, often our personal reflections of Indians in America.

With family and a close circle of friends that were strongly involved in TFAS from its inception, the opportunity to be a part of it all and to passively soak in the culture seemed effortless. This fact I am appreciating many years later, on the other side of the country, where I have to actively seek out what is

going on in the surrounding Telugu community, rather than it being constant in my environment.

I would like to congratulate TFAS on 25 years of building a strong Telugu community and creating a solid foundation for future generations. You have provided a venue to celebrate the fine arts and have encouraged involvement from members of all ages. Good luck over the next 25 years!

Vasudha Bhatnagar was born and raised as a “Bhavaraju” in Parsippany, New Jersey. After college and medical school in Pennsylvania, she headed out west to Phoenix, Arizona and is currently a Pediatrician. She lives with her husband, Anuj, and two children Kishan, 3, and Kalyani, 1.

Vasudha has contributed articles to Telugu Jyothi for many years including to the “Step in Right Direction” youth section.

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I wish the future generations to keep this trend to preserve our culture and traditions.

Note: You may see more details of TFAS in the 1980’s compared to the 1990’s and 2000’s. The reason is two fold: Not many people who came during the influx in 1990’s would know how this organization came into existence. The intent is to give some glimpses of the initial years. The second reason is my association was curtailed in the 1990’s since most my time during that period was spent as a trustee of Sri Venkateswara Temple, Bridgewater, NJ.

Sankara Rao hails from Kadapa district in Andhra Pradesh. After doing BE (Electrical) he joined Bhilai Steel Plant as a Construction Engineer in 1965. He was married to Madhavi, from Madras, in 1966 and migrated to USA in 1974. They have a daughter, Sunitha, and a son, Sapan Kumar, both physicians and settled in upstate New York. . He is fond of Carnatic music, played veena and produced and acted in Telugu stage dramas.

He initiated a Telugu school in 1981 in Bergen County. Sankara Rao was the member of the first TFAS committee, one of the founding trustees of the Sri Venkateswara Temple, in Bridgewater and served as the cultural chair person.

Sankara Rao and Madhavi started the HELP Foundation (www.helpfoundation.org) in 1994 and have been serving 125 orphan and destitute children since then in India. After working for twenty years at AT&T, he retired in 2006 and spends most of his time with the HELP Foundation now. He can be contacted at polepalle@yahoo.com