

ARE TELUGU ASSOCIATIONS TRULY SERVING THE NEEDS OF OUR COMMUNITY IN NORTH AMERICA?

- Ravindra Nath Guthikonda

Best wishes and congratulations to Telugu Fine Arts Society of New Jersey and its past and current organizers on the eve of its Silver Jubilee celebrations on May 23 – 24, 2009.

This article focuses attention on Asian Indian Associations' trials, tribulations, accomplishments and failures during the past half-a-century with special emphasis on Telugu Associations in North America.

1) Evolution of Asian Indian Associations in North America:

During the last five decades, Asian Indians have been adapting North America as a land of opportunity. In the beginning, they trickled in small numbers mainly to pursue higher education. In the decades since, they have been arriving in large numbers to seek better standard of living.

The ultimate goal, especially in unfamiliar environment, of any human being is to seek happiness with peace of mind, emanating from the opportunity to share familiar cultural values and to fulfill the basic and "desired" needs.

Consequently, small number of arriving Asian Indians in 1950's and 1960's in North America organized into broad based Associations like Indian Student Associations, India Associations, Tagore Society and Bharathi Society primarily in Metropolitan areas like New York. As more Asian Indians from different states of India started arriving in 1970s, newer associations based on each state language have been constituted in Metropolitan areas all over North America. Telugu Literary and Cultural Association of New York is one of such organizations. During this decade all such state language based associations co-operated to form National umbrella organizations. Telugu Association of North America (TANA) has been the result of such hearty co-operation among all regional Telugu organizations. From the following decade until now there has been lack of harmony and irreversible differences among the leaders compelling the formation of new regional and national umbrella organizations to appease the dissenting leaders and their supporting members of the community. Establishment of Telugu Fine Arts Society of New Jersey, two more Telugu organizations of Chicago and America Telugu Association (ATA) and a newer split in TANA into a another organization, North American Telugu Society have been the result of such turmoil.

Alas! This has been the beginning of the dissociation of our Associations.

2) Withering Aims:

Original aims of all our organizations shared mostly common goals with special emphasis on ethnic identity. Providing comfort in sharing familiar cultural values and providing community services for the welfare of the community have been the fundamental hallmarks of all organizations. Although much effort is devoted to traditional and routine programs, there have been excesses in some priorities that have very limited role in the welfare of our community. In this respect our organizers seem to pay more attention to expensive glamour than the prudent use of financial resources for the welfare of our community. Consequently organizers seem to let the original aims wither away although such decisions might have been the result of an oversight by the organizers.

3) What are Telugu Cultural Values:

While the first generation of Telugu people in North America have been facing a wide variety of challenges in practicing Telugu culture and the later generations experiencing confusion and conflict with "melting pot" culture of North America, Telugu community hopes to find our Telugu Associations take an active role in protecting Telugu cultural values thus preserving Telugu identity in North America. Our Telugu culture revolves around Telugu language, attire, food, arts, marriages, religion,

Politics and Economics & Morals:

A) Telugu Youth: Telugu youngsters are very smart and talented. Our hopes to preserve and maintain Telugu cultural values will become a reality only when the current older generation of organizers can successfully pass the baton to our youngsters. They should lead our organizations as soon as possible while the older generation is still around to guide them organizationally and financially. They do not seem to be interested in petty politics and appear to focus more on beneficial community services. They are smart enough to organize and lead Telugu organizations in right direction.

B) Telugu Language: The fundamental need for Telugu identity is to be able to speak Telugu and then read and write. While some Telugu families are deliberately conscious of speaking with their children in Telugu at home, others seem to ignore such necessary habit; yet others to leave that responsibility

to the children and to some Telugu schools if available. While such neglect is the root cause of failure for Telugu children's inability to identify themselves truly with Telugu identity, Telugu Association's neglect to support Telugu schools financially is hindering such sincere efforts to provide opportunities for Telugu children to learn Telugu. Token support has been given recently by TANA & TANA FOUNDATION for telugu classes in colleges at Madison, Wisconsin; Ann Arbor, Michigan and Stony brook, Long Island. Some enthusiasts in promoting Telugu meet in small gatherings to discuss their literary talents. Vanguri Foundation organizes periodic literary conferences.

C) Telugu Attire: In this regard our Telugu women and girls deserve accolades for their unswerving desire to maintain our cultural values. They wear flowing sarees, ornaments and thilak bringing an atmosphere of Telugu land during the festivities and parties. Except for occasional dhoti and laalchi worn by visiting elders, Telugu men do not play any role in this regard just like many educated in Andhra Pradesh.

D) Telugu Food: Telugu food seems to have found a special place in every Telugu household. All Telugu Associations are also making special effort to provide Telugu food at almost all programs. Availability of raw materials is also helping the situation quite easily.

E) Telugu Arts: Most of the effort to maintain Telugu Arts is focused on performing arts, mostly dancing and singing. Kuchipudi and Bharatha Natyam are patronized mostly by Telugu girls. Classical and folk singing are being patronized by both boys and girls.

All Telugu organizations provide opportunities to these enthusiastic artists in all regular meetings. However, on special occasions, organizers seem to give more importance to artists visiting from India thus discouraging our local talent which is superior to the imported talent. Very little help is being provided by Telugu Associations to promote these dance forms directly to the schools. Art forms like Burrakatha, Budabukkala katha, Harikatha, folk songs like Bathukamma songs becoming extinct rapidly even in India are not being encouraged by our associations, which are paying more attention to unnecessary glamour with movie entertainment.

F) Marriages: In the prevailing "melting pot" culture, matrimonial alliances are becoming more global although a few weddings are occurring among Telugu couples. In some cases irreconcilable differences seem to surface because of clash of

cultures, lack of compromise, adjustment and accommodation. In some cases there appear to be strains of relationship among generations resulting in uncomfortable life. It is disheartening to note that many Telugu families are concerned about the marriages of their children who are remaining unmarried into late thirties and forties seemingly in search of dream partners for life. It is equally sad to note that separations and divorces are occurring not only among the children but also in the first generation Telugu people. Associations do not seem to provide any help with counseling and comfort.

G) Religion: Fortunately there are many places of worship spread all over North America for Telugu people to practice their religions. Devotees are certainly enjoying peace of mind and comfort at least at the places of worship. Mostly umbrella Telugu Associations are attracting spiritual leaders to preach positive aspects of religion. These spiritual leaders are also propagating their messages in smaller gatherings across North America.

H) Festivals: Almost all Telugu Associations are observing three or four festivals like Sankranti. Harvest festival, Ugadi, Telugu NewYear, Deepavali, festival of lights and Ganesh Chaturdhi, Dasserah etc. Many Telugu women and families are religiously performing Vratams, determined resolutions. Although a few families have forgotten to observe festivals, majority of Telugu people seem to religiously follow them. While these observances have become mechanical, little attention is paid to teach the importance and significance of the festival to the children, young and old.

I) Politics: Lately, leaders of many Telugu Associations seem to give little importance to inclusiveness rather than decision thus uprooting the very foundations on which these associations have been originally established. The recent turmoil in TANA leading to the formation of a rival group, North America Telugu Society (NATS) is the latest example of the dissociation of our associations because of rigid behavior of few political leaders while silent majority of Telugu people have reduced to mere helpless spectators. So long as these clashes continue, resorting to expensive unnecessary litigations, the purpose of these associations may be diminished to total uselessness. Unnecessary vanity, egos and import of petty politics from India seem to be the root causes for this self-destruction of our Associations. Rarely, Telugu people like NJ State assemblyman Chivukula Upendra seem to be interested in North American politics. More recently, it is sad to here that some

organizers seem to be facing rumors of accusations that they have intentions of using their positions for personal benefit now or in future. Perception of such suspicious and/or proven behavior may be construed as the root cause for the improprieties in membership at the time of elections.

J) Economics and Morals: Most of Telugu people are professionals with good earnings. However, recent economic down turn greatly affected their fortunes. Many lost jobs, others are displaced unexpectedly to other are seriously disturbing children's education. Telugu Associations do not seem to address these calamities by providing net-working facilities, aiding Telugus without earnings. Telugu Associations are wasting resources in defending unnecessary litigations by disgruntled leaders who do not seem to worry about throwing away money to fulfill their ambitions. It is high time for all Telugus to rise to the occasion to elect the leaders who are truly committed to the welfare of the community rather than electing blindly because of friendships and relationships alone. Morals seemed to have deteriorated to the extent that the Telugu Associations become dysfunctional.

4) Community Services:

While the cultural values are maintained by individuals, issues pertinent to Telugu people like Health, Education, Welfare and Communications need to be addressed by Telugu Associations. As of now very little attention is contemplated by Telugu Associations in these areas.

A) Health: Many members of Telugu families do not have health and long term care insurance. Changes in the social environment loss of jobs and neglect of health are bound to surmount helplessness leading to psychological distresses. Telugu Associations need to take a proactive role in providing basic healthcare for Telugu people who cannot afford it. Physicians in Telugu community may be willing to help.

B) Education: Most of the first generation Telugus arrived as highly educated and had furthered education and benefited by finding high paying jobs. In the current recession, Telugu youngsters may be facing financial hardships to attend colleges. Our youngsters are very bright and talented. They will benefit immensely if a helping hand can be provided. Telugu Associations can take pride in helping rather than wasting valuable funds on litigations to resolve political crises. In this regard, token help is being provided by TANA Foundation, Houston Telugu Association and others.

C) Welfare: Emergency help to any Telugu person in distress must be the duty of all Telugu Associations. Loss of job, house and life, and unexpected events leading to distress in Telugu families should be addressed timely by Telugu Associations to relieve pain and suffering. Fortunately, TANA has taken an active role to address the needs of five deaths in Telugu community recently. TANA Foundation also has token endowments to address welfare needs in Telugu community.

D) Communications: All Telugu Associations have periodic publications like Telugu Jyothi, Telugu Velugu, TANA Pathrika etc. Because most of the children do not read Telugu, many pages of these publications are in English with a few pages devoted to Telugu. No publication seems to devote any space for teaching Telugu language on a continuous basis. Unfortunately many Programs including Conferences are conducted in English. Even Program agendas are printed mostly in English. No net-working facilities are provided to connect the Telugu residents of North America. Because of lack of funds no permanent offices are in existence to seek help with available community services. Very few people seem to be voluntarily coming forward to donate funds because of fear that these donations may be abused by leaders to resolve disputes and litigations. Many a time, arm twisting by organizers seems to extract some desperately needed funds to organize functions.

5) Suggestions to Telugu Associations to improve community services:

A) All not-for-profit organizations are served by volunteers. Honesty, sincerity, commitment and transparency are the hallmarks of true volunteerism. Do not let it be tarnished by ego, and perception of control of power and personal benefit.

B) Make sure that the organizational responsibility is completely passed on to the younger generation, born and raised in North America. That is the only way we can ensure that petty politics do not creep up into the organizations whose main goal is to protect and preserve Telugu cultural values perpetually.

C) Financially support Telugu schools locally and in colleges. Continuously publish Telugu lessons in all associations' newsletters and websites. This will remind Telugu parents of their responsibility to preserve Telugu culture in North America

D) Focus on accomplishing at least one or two goals. In the current recession, some areas needing attention are (a) helping desperately needy Telugu families without jobs, (b) aiding Telugu children with

financing for higher education, (c) assisting Telugu people in psychological distress, and (d) reacting quickly to help Telugu people in emergencies.

E) Telugu people in North America are accomplished and talented professionals in the fields of Arts, Education, Health, Sciences, Engineering, Business, etc. Our organizations should recognize their talents at our meetings, conferences and programs rather than giving priority to Indian politicians and movie entertainers. Our financial resources should be spent more on our community needs than paying expenses for people visiting from India unless we can benefit from their talents and in return we can offer something useful to India.

F) If our organizations are enthusiastic in organizing cultural programs in India, we should encourage Telugu artists from here to perform in India to show to India that we are preserving our cultural heritage here. In this respect, cultural exchange programs would be mutually beneficial.

G) Long term survival of non-profit organizations does not depend on leaders who are hypocrites, non-working position fillers, and ego-centrists. Visionaries

who commit themselves to the 3 W's (Work, Wisdom, and Wealth) can ensure perpetuity of these organizations that will preserve our cultural values. Do not be swayed by international and domestic political affiliations which deliberately target disruption of unity.

In conclusion, if this article inspires anyone who becomes a selfless dedicated and committed leader, it may have served its purpose. *****

Guthikonda Ravindranath, Ph.D. lives in Edison, NJ with wife Padmavathy and son Kiron. He retired from Merck Research Laboratories. Dr. Guthikonda has made extensive contributions to cultural and philanthropic activities: The convener for the First Telugu Conference in New York in 1977 that led to the creation of TANA; Chairman-TANA Foundation (1999-01); Chairman-Constitution & Bylaws Committee (1992-04); Past Secretary-Vice President-President-TLCA (1973-77).

Dr. Guthikonda established endowment research grants, scholarships and awards in educational institutions and funded significant village development activities in India.



PARKWAY SUNOCO

Complete

Auto Repair.... Brakes

Exhaust

Electrical

Tune-Ups

Front End

Transmission

Engine Overall

Trans Tune-Ups

Diagnostic Work

Air Conditioning Service

Ram

401 North Avenue

Cranford, New Jersey 07016

Tel: (908) 931-1313

Cell: (732) 670-7453

Fax: (908) 276-6503

10% Discount over \$300 repair with this Ad.
Free - Diagnosis (Check engine light) and Estimates

Rambabu Dronavalli