

Fieldwork Report: Performance of the Praladha Myth in Tamilnadu

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Abstract: This essay examines the various folk theatre activities in Thanjavur district of Tamilnadu in religious contexts. One among them is the *Praladha Charithram*. The focus is on the iconography of Narasimha— history of the cult and sociological factors and its influences. The main story of the Praladha Charithram begins on the stage with the Iranian Kolu. Each lead performer enters on stage and before he begins his performance, sings Saint Thyagaraja's composition signifying the importance of devotion to the divine. The accessories and the symbolisms used to represent certain elements and moods in the *nadagam* (dramas) are quite interesting. The author also presents his theatrical experiments, the hearsay stories, and the sentiments concerned during each stage performance.

Theatre activities in the Thanjavur District in Tamilnadu gain momentum when summer peaks, around May-June. Various *Nadagams*¹ are performed in each and every village and town with significance to the temple activities of the local deity. One among them is the *Praladha Charithram*, which has a very important role in the celebration of the Narasimha Jayanthi festival on the day of the Swati star of the *Vaikasi* month in the Tamil calendar. Among more than 18 *nadagams* which are supposed to have been composed and enacted during the period of Vijaya Raghava Nayak, *Praladha Charithram's* status has been elevated such that it takes the form of worship for the deity Narasimha on his birthday. *Iranian Kadai*, *Iranian nadagam*, *Iranian vadhai nadagam*, *Irania vilasam*, and

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Bhakta Prahaladha are some of the names by which this performance is identified. The earliest reference to this story dates back to the period of the Guptas (2BC – 2AD) where the narration in *Harivamsa* gives a clear picture of the story. However, the current performance is based on the story found in the *Bhagavata Purana*. The main intention of the story is to emphasize the faith and acceptance of the Vaishnava Supreme, Narayana, generally identified by the name Hari. This is done through the child devotee Prahaladha, the son of the demon king Hiranya (identified as Iranian in Tamil). Jaya and Vijaya are the guards of Vishnu in Vaikunta, who due to a curse, are born as the demon-brothers Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu. Hiranyaksha steals the Earth from the creator Brahma during creation and imprisons her in *Narakakkottai*² under the oceans. Hari emerges from the nostrils of Brahma in the form of a wild Boar - *Varaha*, and slays Hiranyaksha and rescues the Earth. On hearing about his brother's death, Hiranyakashipu becomes wild and wants to take revenge on Hari. He performs penance and austerities and gains a boon from Brahma as that no human or animal, inside or outside, on earth or in the air, may kill him during the day or night by any weapons. Hiranya returns to his kingdom and sends his comrades comprising 3,000 *sambasoorars* to search for Hari in the entire universe and to harass and destroy all his devotees. In the absence of Hiranya, Devendra, the king of gods tries to capture Leelavathy the queen of Hiranya and destroy the child in her womb but she is rescued and sheltered by the divine sage Narada. While Leelavathy was under his care, Narada preaches the Narayana Mantra to her, which is transmitted into the mind of the baby in her womb. On his return Hiranyakashipu comes to know this and the enraged demon captures the whole world, imprisons all gods and makes them his slaves. Leelavathy delivers a male baby whom Hiranya names as Prahalada and brings him up with love and care. On the advice of sage Narada, Hiranya sends Prahaladha to school where the teacher instructs him to accept his father as the supreme. Prahaladha, being enchanted by the advice of sage Narada even when he was in the womb of his mother, sticks to his devotion towards Hari. The teacher fails to mould Prahaladha and complains about this to Hiranya. On hearing this, Hiranya becomes annoyed as his son is worshipping his foe. He summons Prahaladha and advises him, but in vain. Failing in all efforts, finally, Hiranya decides to kill his son not paying heed to Leelavathy's pleas. He summons the wrestlers Mallars and commands them to threaten Prahaladha with all their weapons and that if he does not change his mind, then he must be killed. The Mallars fail in their efforts. As a consequence Hiranya commands the Mallars to kill Prahaladha by various methods such as throwing him off a mountain (where he is received tenderly by Bhoomadevi); by digging a pit with the help of *Ottar* and *Ottichi* and lighting a pyre in

it and throwing Prahaladha into it (but he is coolly embraced with a touch of sandal by the fire); by calling the *Pidaran* to attack Prahaladha with a snake (though the poison does not affect Prahaladha); by burying Prahaladha upto the neck and making an elephant trample on his head (but the elephant bows and circumambulates him and returns); by taking Prahaladha in a boat with the help of *Odakkaran* and drowning him in the sea (but Prahaladha floats); by crushing Prahaladha in a grinding mill *Karkkanam*³ (which brakes and he is saved); by giving poison to Prahaladha (which fails to inflict death upon him); by engaging goddess Kali to kill him (but she finds her brother Hari's grace in him and spares him). Hiranya consults his ministers to get rid of his son and by their idea, he commands the god of death – Yama, to take Prahaladha's life. Yama finds that Prahaladha is protected by the *Astaksharakottai*⁴ and retreats even without informing Hiranya. Finally, the wild and furious Hiranya, without listening to the cries of Leelavathy, decides to put an end to the issue and commands Prahaladha to show him his Hari. Prahaladha says that Hari is omnipresent and he is manifested in a straw or even in a pillar. The enraged demon hits a pillar out of which Hari emerges in the half lion-half human form. After a long argument and combat, Hari slays the demon on the threshold, during twilight and over his lap with his nails. The gods are pleased and relieved and with the help of Prahaladha and Lakshmi, they calm Narasimha's anger. Narasimha crowns Prahaladha as the king and goes back to his abode. The story is a developed version of the story of Varaha and Narasimha in the *Bhagavata Purana*.

The Sanskrit presentation of *Bhagavata Purana* is the literary source of this story. There is a reference to the mighty demon Hiranya in ancient Tamil literature, *Paripaadal*. However, the earlier existence of the whole story is identified in the *Yudha Kaandam* of the *Kamba Ramayanam*. In that, Vibeshana advises Ravana about the power of Hari (Rama being his incarnation) by narrating the story of Hiranya and asking him to make peace with him. A Telugu version of the *Prahaladha Charithram* is found to have been composed by the Nayak ruler Vijaya Raghava Nayak (1631-1675 AD), as one among 18 of his compositions. The scripts used for the performance of the *nadagam* at present do not specify any name of their author, but for a mention of a name Vinaytheertha Pillai in one version. He is suspected to be the author of the script and is mentioned in the script as the disciple of Arunachalakkavi. If this proves to be true then the period of the composition might be during the reign of the Maratha ruler Shivaji II (1832-1855 AD). If the person mentioned is *Sirkali* Arunachala Kavirayar, then the period of composition might be during the reign of the Maratha ruler Tulajaji (1763-1787 AD). However, until date, the person who copies the script mentions his name and credentials in the

copied script. In that case, there could have been a script even prior to the above mentioned period.

This *nadagam* is performed in at least 12 villages around Thanjavur district. In Melattur, Salyamangalam and Thepperumanallur, the performance is in the Telugu language and is named as the *Bhagavathamela* (the festivals of Bhagavathas). In Archuttippattu, Narthevankudikkadu, Vadakku Natham, Melathirubhuvanam, Then Sarukkai Akkaraipoondi, Ayyampettai, Thirubhuvanam, Ammaiappan⁵Elamgudi, and Ammaiappan Thenkal the performance is staged using the Tamil script. Only in Archuttippattu, girls upto 10 years of age can participate in the *nadagam*, otherwise it is only the male performers who participate. The script can be classified into two categories. Previous researchers M.Sellan and Sundar Kali identify the scripts as Vinaytheertha Pillai script and Pudevai saram Somasundara Mudaliar script. Most of the verses are identical in both the versions. In the Vinaytheertha Pillai script, Chandamaruthar, the son of the Asura Guru Sukrachariar, is the teacher to whom Prahaladha is sent for learning but in the Pudevai Saram Somasundara Mudaliar version, Asura Guru Sukrachariar himself is the teacher. A few differences are identified even in the same version from one place to another. Another script has been traced by S. Krishnamoorthy in the Dharmapuri district. However, it is also in line with the above mentioned scripts.

In the theatre performance of Melattur and Salyamangalam even though the rituals and practices have a folk orientation, the performance of the *nadagam* uses classical music and dance pattern performed by the Vadamal Iyer community. Different communities with different occupations and living styles have adopted this practice of worship. In Thepperumanallur, the Ashtasahasram Iyer community performs the *nadagam*. Most of the present generation performers have migrated to cities and foreign countries for their jobs, professions, and come to their village only for this ritualistic performance. The Kallar communities of Archuttippattu, Narthevankudikkadu, Vadakku Natham, and the Moopanar community of Mela Thirubhuvanam are farmers by profession. The village lies in the fertile area of the Cauvery delta connected by road, from Thanjavur and Thiruvaroor depending upon the river irrigation. Paddy, sugarcane, groundnuts and various other food crops are their produce. The roads connecting Papanasam and Sadayar Koil link the four villages. Flanked by agricultural fields all along, the entire landscape is a spectacular sight if rains are favourable. The village Panayakkottai, from where a palm leaf script is supposed to have been copied by other villages, lies adjacent to Vadakku Natham. A group consisting of 18 of these villages is collectively identified as *Kuzanthaivala Nadu* (could be the transformation of Kundavai Valanadu of the Chola Kingdom).

However, except the linking buses, tractors, and lorry traffic, the villages are calm and unpolluted by the urban atmosphere. People are mostly busy in the fields round the year and some of their family members have migrated to cities for occupation. Every village has a Mariamman temple identified with a prefix such as Poomariamman, Muthumariamman, etc., and temples of Ayyanar, Karuppusamy, Veeran and other local deities. Various festivals such as *Pandakkachi* and *Sivaratri* are celebrated among which the Mariamman festival forms an important community festival. The *Iranian Nadagam* is connected with the Mariamman temple festival. In Archuttippattu, the practice of performing the *Iranian Nadagam* has recently made them construct a Lakshminarasimhaswamy temple. The *Narasimha Siras* (Mask of Narasimha) shared by the four villages of Narthevankudikadu, Mela Thirubuvanam, Vadakku Natham and Archuttippattu is housed in that temple. A unique feature about the performances in these villages is that, two sets of performers appear simultaneously on the stage as two Iranians, two Leelavathys, two Prahaladhans, and perform the same scene simultaneously, though there is only one Narasimha performer. Though this theatre can be found extensively in the Thanjavur district, we are able to find traces of its previous existence in northern Tamilnadu where the *Narasimha Siras* is still in worship in some *bhajanai koils*. The *nadagam* is also performed in Pagathur village in Coimbatore district, where not only the Narasimha performer but also the Iranian performer wears a mask.

Ayyampettai is a town situated on the Thanjavur-Kumbakonam road. Two more set of performers are in Ammaiappan Elangudi and Ammaiappan Thenkal situated 6km from Thiruvarur on the Thanjavur-Thiruvarur road. The performers of the above three places belong to the Sourashtra community who claim their origin from Sourashtra in Gujarat, having migrated from there during the invasion of Mohammad Gazani during 1000-1025 AD. The community has merged with Tamil culture. But for the Sourashtra language which is still their mother tongue, their lifestyle and practices are identical to the local Tamil people they live with. Silk sari weaving is the major occupation of this community and most of their houses have a loom or two installed and operated by the male members of the family. Two or three saris a month are the anticipated produce of an individual and the marketing of these products are at times, done directly by the individuals or by small or big establishments run by the people of the same community or through co-operative societies. The life and activities of the community is centred around the *Bhagavata* tradition. Apart from the regular temples, there are many *bhajanai koils* in places where these communities live and most of the male members gather regularly for the daily or weekly *bhajanai*, seasonal festivals and celebrations. Due to differences in individual capacities

and efficiencies, the economic status of the community is non-uniform. Many of the people have started shifting from their traditional occupation to get employment according to their qualification. Their literacy level and educational qualifications need more development. However, the *bhajanai* tradition and communal activities such as the *Iranian Nadagam* performance, *Gokulashtami* celebration, Govinda worship in the month of *Purattasi*, *Marghazhi Bhajanai*, and Vekatramana Bhagavathar festival keep the differences off and, equal participation by all members are experienced. The persons who perform well as a *Bhagavatha* is respected more and honoured for his piety. Ayyampettai being the birth place of Sri Venkatramana Bhagavathar, the senior disciple and scribe of the great composer Saint Thyagaraja, houses many musicians and Bhagavatas⁶ following the *Dakshina Bhajanai Sampradayam*.

Then Sarukkai Akkaraipoondi⁷ is a small village situated 2km from Kabisthalam on the banks of the Cauvery river. The village is connected by the Papanasam-Kabisthalam road to the Thanjavur-Kumbakonam road. From Papanasam, we cross the bridges across Arasalaru, Kudamurutti and Thirumalairayan Aru and travel along the banks of Cauvery to reach Then Sarukkai Akkaraipoondi. The Moopanar community forms the majority of Akkaraipoondi's population along with Agamudaiar, and Naidu. Akkaraipoondi is a small hamlet with four major streets forming a square, housing the Muthumariamman Koil, Sivan Koil and a Vinayagar Koil. A temple complex marks the end of the village for Kamatchiamman, Veeran, Karuppusamy and various local deities. Irrigated by the Cauvery, the lands are fertile and the main occupation of the people here is farming. A street links Akkaraipoondi with Sarukkai where there is a village school and a Panchayat board office. A Krishnan Koil in ruins, and a Draupadi amman koil are found in Sarukkai and the boundary of Sarukkai is marked by an Ayyanar temple which also houses the Pathinettupadi Karuppusamy shrine. The youth of the village in recent years have started an organization by the name of *Rama Mandram* for which a hall has been built in recent years adjacent to the Muthumariamman temple. The Mandram celebrates the Rama Navami festival when discourses of Kamba Ramayanam and performances of Rama Nadagam and Seetha Kalyanam are conducted. The *Iranian Nadagam* performance troupe, which was previously *Bhaktha Prahaladha*, is now renamed as *Narasimha Mandram* which gathers on *Kruthigai* star of every month and does the *Purattasi Mandagappadi*⁸ performance and the annual *Iranian Nadagam* performance.

The *Iranian Nadagam* is a community theatre performance, preceded and followed by rituals and practices. The performers are the local people of the community and not professional performers. The participation in

the *nadagam* is highly sentimental with devotion and faith, at times even for the fulfilling of a vow. The worship of Narasimha is very popular among various communities in the Thanjavur District. Many temples of various forms of Narasimha are found from Central Andhra to South of Tamilnadu and even in southern districts of Orissa. The *Prahaladha Varada Narasimha* in the Badami caves marks the importance of the deity during the Chalukya period. Narasimha has been the name of two Pallava rulers and the cave temples like the Singaperumal Koil in Chengelpet district and the Anamalai YogaNarasimha temple in Madurai district are the evidences of development of the cult during the Pallava and Pandiya periods. The rulers of the Vijayanagara kingdom have played a great part in spreading Narasimha as a cult deity. The massive monolith of Yogalakshmi Narasimha in Hampi stands testimony for their faith and, many temples including those at Ahobilam have been built or improved by these rulers. The worship of Narasimha as a tribal cult image by the Motadi Kappus and the Chenchus are mentioned by Sontheimer in his essay *The Folk Deities of the Vijayanagara Kingdom*. Following the Vijayanagara rulers, the Nayaks continued the tradition, which the Marathas took over in the Thanjavur District. The Vennathangarai Yoga Narasimha temple and the Thanjavur Lakshmi Narasimha temple still stand as proof of their patronage.

In Ayyampettai, the sons of Kuppal Thiru Verayya Bhagavathar have inherited the performance from their father and this year (2005) they have celebrated 51 years of the Narasimha Jayanthi festival. Kuppal Shri Krishnamoorthy, the eldest of the sons, drives down to Sulamangalam and brings down the *Narasimha Siras* from there before dawn. When we reached their home by 10.30 AM, the preparation had just started for their three-day-long festival. The first day the *Narasimha Siras* is kept and worshipped. The *Iranian nadagam* is performed here in the name *Bhakta Prahaladha*. Here the performance is done by the Kuppal family with some friends and relatives as the participants. The drawing room of the Kuppal house is busy on the first day of the celebrations. Though usually the *nadagam* is performed on the night of Narasimha Jayanthi festival, the Kuppal family does not hesitate to adjust the dates to a week before or after the day, according to their convenience. The delay in the arrival of flowers for decoration and rituals had made the activities to gain momentum only around 10.30 AM. The *Siras* is mounted on a stand and positioned on a platform. An arch - made of cane and decorated with flowers - frames the mask; strands of flowers are hung as a backdrop, and the mask is garlanded and decorated with flowers. The family deity Lakshmi Narasimha, worshipped in the form of a 'Thanjavur' painting, is also placed along the mask with a woodcarving sculpture of Ganesha. Meanwhile in the adjacent room, a *Kuthuvilakku* is lit and Kuppal Shri

Govindaraman and his wife are engaged in the *Sankalpa* rituals guided by the Bhattacharya, as a vow to perform that day's event. Friends and relatives from near and far start gathering in the house for the event. Bhagavathas settle in parallel rows in front of the mask accompanied by a harmonium, mrudangam, cymbals and a pitch. The rituals start with the *Sankalpam* followed by the *Sahasranamavali* pooja for the mask. The Bhagavathas continue with the *Divya nama Bhajanai* which goes on for about two to three hours. Cooked rice, spread on a plantain leaf along with fruits and other delicacies is offered to the deity, followed by the *Mangalaharti*⁹. The morning event concludes with the offering of *Panagam*¹⁰ to the deity and distributing the same among the Bhagavatas and other guests followed by lunch for them. During the *Mangalaharti*, one of the senior persons was possessed and the Bhagavatas prostrated in front of him for blessings. The *Divya nama Bhajanai* goes on in the evening and the next day noon. Similar preliminary rituals take place in Archuttippattu and Narthevankudikadu also where both the villages share a single mask. The villagers fix the festival of Mariamman koil for the month of May or June with a mutual understanding between both the villages. The estimated expenses for the performance of the *nadagam* are calculated and the amount is divided and collected from the performers as a *Vari* (tax) for participating in the *nadagam*. However a portion of the expenses may be, at times, collected from local sponsors. Thiru Veeraraghavan Naidu, the Narasimha performer of Narthevankudikadu, has a personal attachment to the mask and enjoys the privilege of taking it to his place and worshipping the same at any time he wishes.

The Radhakrishnan Scene Dress Company of Needamangalam, enjoys the sole monopoly to supply stage and makeup service for almost all the performances in Thanjavur District. As far as the backdrop is concerned, only one or two scenes are used throughout the play and the background often does not have any relevance with the scene presented. The costumes are usually of bright colours studded with glittering sequins and fake pearls. The facial makeup is done with natural mineral and vegetable pigments in the old traditional style but the colours used for the characters do not bear any significance to the character portrayed, but is chosen according to the makeup man or the performer (for example, in Ayyampettai, Prahaladha is pink but in Akkaraipoondi the makeup is in blue). The glittering embroidery shines much in lighting on the stage and hides the flaws in the costumes. In Ammaiappan Elangudi and Thenkal, the performers being silk weavers, wear a costlier silk sari as a *panchakacham*¹¹ for the bottom but the costume company provides the jackets and kurtas. Some regular performers of Archuttippattu say that they have a private collection of the costumes they wear in the show.

The theatre in the Thanjavur district is in the form of *Isai Nadagam* (music drama) and the stage is rectangular to serve this purpose. In the *Therukkoothu* of northern Tamil Nadu, the stage is a circular ground in the open air but here the performance is linear and to help the performers to move in a linear pattern a rectangular stage is made. In Ayyampettai, the stage is erected in the middle of Mettutheru, half-way between the entrance arch and the Thillaikkaliamman Koil, in front of the old Kuppal house. In Ammaiappan Thenkal, it is in front of the Kodandaramaswami temple and in Ammaiappan Elangidi, the stage is in front of the Rajagopalaswami temple. In Salyamangalam, the stage is put up in one end of the Agraharam. The stage is an elevated platform more than 4ft high but, as mentioned by M. Sellan, previously it was not more than 1½ft high as in Salyamangalam and Archuttippattu at present. The stage is approximately a 10ft by 20ft rectangle and is at a height of more than 12ft. The stage is covered on the sides and top with coconut-palm thatches. Four or five steps are made in front and the back for people to climb up and down. A red colour cloth screen is hung in front as a curtain and is pulled and covered horizontally at the indication by the blow of a whistle. An extended covered room with thatches behind the stage forms the green room but in Ayyampettai the Kuppal family uses their old house adjacent to the stage as their green room.

In Ayyampettai, around 9.30 PM, the makeup starts while on the stage the curtain is raised and the welcome address and speeches are delivered by the chief guests and the organizers. The entire street is flanked with tube lights on both sides and the audience begin to settle down. The street is swept and cleaned in the evening and blankets are spread on the street for the audience to sit on. Kuppal Shri Tulasiraman may be found running around catering to the needs and demands of the occasion. After he comes down the stage, and after performing the role of Ganesha, he does the event management as well. Pre-recorded film songs or devotional songs are played through loudspeakers to entertain the people gathered for the show. Most of the people prefer watching the performance from the *thinnai*¹² outside their houses. The makeup for the performers is done in the order of their appearance on stage: first for the buffoons, Hiranyan and Hiranyakshan and later on for Leelavathy, Narada, and Prahaladhan, and since more than one performer does the same role, they do the makeup only prior to their appearance. The playback singers settle on the left side of the stage. A Harmonium player, a Mirudangam player who also plays a Dolak in turns, and the singers with cymbals form the orchestra. The instrument players are hired but the playback singers are elderly performers of earlier days who are well versed in the script, and the current performers who are off the stage before or after their role is performed. Usually the *pinpattu* singers stand

in-between the instrument players and view the stage while singing along with the performers. However, if they are old people then they sit on a chair behind the instrument players and sing along. Usually the *pinpattu* is sung in chorus. On the right side of the stage, the *koothu vadhyar* or a senior performer holds a copy of the script in his hand, keeps a watch on the show, and prompts as and when required.

The play starts with the music of the instruments, invocation, and *thirai virutham*¹³. A whistle is used as a signal to drop and remove the screen. The curtain rises and the *Peria Bhagavathar* performs the *Vinayagar thuthi*. The curtain drops and when it rises again, it is the turn of the Buffoon. The *Kattiakkaran* role in the *Koothu* performance is played by the Buffoon, or the *Konangidasar* in the Thanjavur *nadagams*. One or more buffoons appear on the stage and between humorous dialogues with reference to today's social life, they speak of the might and valour of Narasimha and the heroic talents of Iranian and thus introduce the play. In Ayyampettai, the role of the buffoon was just to give an introduction to the play but in Ammaiappan, the story of Hiranyaksha and Varaha is also told in-between the comical presentations. The Buffoons also deliver the welcome address in the form of a song in which all participants and the audience of the show are welcomed. The performers in the scene settle on the stage before the curtain is opened and sing the *Thirai virutham* and warm themselves up and signal for the curtain to be pulled. The lyrics are sung as the performance opens. As soon as the buffoons finish their presentation, the whistle is sounded and the curtain is dropped. The instruments are played while the performers settle for the next scene. A chair is positioned on the stage for Iranian Kolu. A cut-out arch decorated with gold-coloured paper is placed behind the chair to make it look like an ornamental throne. In places like Archuttippattu, Narthevankudikadu, etc., they practice the old tradition of placing a grinding stone on a wooden bench (*Visuppalakai*) to serve as the throne. Since there will be two Iranians playing at the same time, the wooden bench will be a long platform with two grinding stones on top. People of the place recall from their memories when two benches were put one on top of another and the Iranian performers pounce forward, dance and jump up the throne and sit – *Retta bench Attam*. Speaking about the throne, only Iranian has the right to sit on it and other characters including Leelavathy perform standing or occasionally by sitting down by his side. Only in the end, Narasimha captures Iranian and sits on the throne signifying the triumph of good over evil. In Ammaiappan, the arch backdrop is removed to signify that it is no more the throne and is used to seat Sukrachariar, Narada, etc., also.

The main story of the Prahaladha Charithram begins on the stage with the *Iranian Kolu*. Each lead performer enters on stage and before

he begins his performance, he sings Saint Thyagaraga's composition signifying the importance of devotion to the divine. The song begins as *Nee bhakti bagya sudha* set to Jayamanohari *ragam* and *Roopaka talam*:

*Swim in your devotion similar to the sea of nectar...
Born as gods or as Brahmins, those who do not
Swim in your devotion similar to the sea of nectar,
Are just a burden to earth.
The duties specified in the Vedas repeatedly creates
Nothing but pain, hence 'O' god in the form of music
Thyagaraja's lord who is beyond dimensions, always (I wish to)
Swim in the devotion similar to the sea of nectar.*

Iranian is the most powerful role in the *nadagam* and his entry is in a very commanding form, the *thirai virutham* describes his bravery and valour. As the curtain rises Iranian sings that he, the King of Kings has come on to his court –

*'Rajaraja Maha Rajan Iranian, Rajan Koluvinil nan vandhenee...'
King of kings king Iranian in my court I have come
I the king of vidharba and various other countries , emperors surround me
Bow to me with their crowned heads, women dance along, as I come....*

The sequence of the presentation goes as the *Virutham*¹⁴ first and then it is followed by the *Dharu* and elaborated with dialogues. When the *nadagam* is to be shortened, the dialogues are curtailed. Usually, every line of the *dharu* is repeated upto even four times with the *pinpattu* following the performer. When the time is short, the *dharu* is sung once or twice only.

Iranian in his *Kolu* summons his wife Leelavathy. In Ayyampettai Leelavathy's entry on stage is in her chamber where the messenger comes and informs her of Iranian's call. But in Ammaiappan, Leelavathy is introduced in the Iranian *darbar* itself. Krishna Senthil, the Leelavathy role performer in Ayyampettai comes on stage with an *Adavu*¹⁵ singing '*Vandhal Leelavathy pennaal ...*' (Here comes the damsel Leelavathy...), but the performers in Ammaiappan enter into Iranian's *Durbar* and before singing the *Dharu* the performer sings '*Nee bhakti bhagya sudh....*' Facing the audience and bowing to the *Koothuvadhyar* and orchestra, they turn towards Iranian and sing the *Dharu* '*Charanam charanam pranesa, deva nin padam charanam....*' in a sitting posture and bow before the Iranian performer who now sits on his throne.

Iranian declares his wish to go into exile for performing austerities to gain more power to take revenge on Hari. Leelavathy is disturbed about a dream she had and informs Iranian about it. Iranian invites his Guru Sukracharia who declares that the dream predicts that Leelavathy shall

deliver a baby and other things are the secrets of the gods. Leelavathy is satisfied and bids Iranian to go for doing penance.

The characters in the *nadagam* have diversified qualities. They can be classified into three categories. The characters of the regular social setup such as the Buffoon, *Maruthuvachi* (mid-wife), *Ottar* (one who digs wells and pits), *Mallar* (wrestlers), *Odakkaran* (boatman), *Pidaran* (snake charmer), etc. These characters are introduced to the audience by the *Konangi* (buffoons) and their entry is usually humorous such as the debate between the king's men and *Ottar* where the *Ottar* suspects the king's men of swindling a commission from the amount to be received by him and so on. They are just a part and parcel of our daily life and the dialogues are of a day-to-day nature bringing into conversation the current affairs as well. In some performance, we can also see the characters going into the audience and instigating them to take part in the conversation. The next grade of characters are the serious roles of the *nadagam*: Iranian, Leelavathy, Prahaladha, Naradha, Devendran, Indirani, etc. These characters have a much-respected place on the stage and are neither spoken of sarcastically nor do they have casual talks in their dialogues and scripts. The script is considered sacred and the performers do not change any lines of the script while singing. Iranian is the supreme character and most of the scenes are based on either Iranian or Prahaladha or both of them together. Iranian is all-powerful throughout the play and all characters are at his service or under his control. The other grade of characters are of celestial quality and the audiences have a great faith and reverence for them. Pillayar, Varaha, Kali, Yama and Narasimha come under this category. Such characters have a very ceremonial entry on the stage and are deities of worship who receive prayers and offerings from the public. Most of these characters wear a mask, which is also an object of worship even off the stage. At first Pillayar (Ganesha) appears on the stage with a mask as the show starts and is ceremonially welcomed by the *koothuvadhyar* or any senior performer accompanied by other performers with prayers and *Mangalaharti*. Varaha enters ferociously with a mask and at times goes into a trance. Kali is worshipped with *Mangalaharti* by the Prahaladha performer himself. Yama has a mask and a buffalo head worn around the hip for his vehicle and there are masks for his retinue also. The whole *nadagam* is a ritualistic worship of Narasimha and the *Avatharam* (incarnation) forms the climax of the play. The whole village or the community gather for this worship of Narasimha during the *avatharam*. Women worship with *Mavilakku* offerings and special prayers are made for want of any boons or to fulfil any previous vows. The streets are washed and decorated with *kolams*¹⁶ and all gather to receive Narasimha. In places like Salyamangalam, Archuttippattu etc., the *avatharam* is performed off the stage but in Ammaiappan, Ayyampettai,

etc., it is performed on the stage only. In recent days in Ammaiappan Thenkal, a performer paints his face like a lion, wears a wig and beard and performs the role. In Ammaiappan Elangudi there is no Narasimha performer or mask and an ambience is created by the verses sung by the performers. In Ayyampettai, Salyamangalam, Narthevankudikadu etc., the Narasimha performer goes down the streets in procession to bless the people.

The *Narasimha Siras* or the mask is a face made from the wood of a fig tree, wrapped with cloth, and plastered with lime. Glass cut stones of red and green, and mirrors are studded in the crown. The lion face is 1½ft wide and the face with the crown measures up to approximately 2ft high. The mask is gilded with gold foil and painted. The colour of the Narasimha face differs from one place to another. In Archuttippattu it is in red; in Ayyampettai the face is yellow; in Akkaraipoondi it is painted pink; in Salyamangalam it is painted white and so on. The *Siras* is stored in a wooden box and is usually kept in the Mariamman temple. In Archuttippattu the *Siras* is kept in the recently built Lakshminarasimhaswamy temple, the temple also houses another new mask which is not in use for some sentimental reasons. In Melattur and Salyamangalam, the *Siras* is housed in the private possession of one of the residents. People have a great faith and revere the *Siras* with devotion and fear.

The second frame of the show goes on as Devendran captures Leelavathy and Sage Narada rescues her and keeps her under his care. The main essence of the *nadagam* is conveyed through Narada's preaching to Leelavathy in the verse '*Vedanta Marga Rahasiyam sollkiren kelai penne kelai...*' (Dear lady, listen to the secret of the Vedanta Marga as I say...). Leelavathy falls asleep and Prahaladha, from his mother's womb, hears this. The feeling and experiences of Leelavathy in her period of pregnancy are told in the song which is addressed to the *Thozhi* (friend), *Thadhi* (maid) and *Maruthuvachi* (mid wife). The queen speaks to three people of different social status. One is the *Maruthuvachi* who is brought on stage as "hunch backed as a camel comes the mid wife, holding a staff in one hand come the blind eye mid wife..." and the other is the *Thozhi* or the queen's friend and the *Thadhi*, the queen's maid. The *Maruthuvachi* attends to Leelavathy and Prahaladhan is born.

Usually the *nadagam* is said to have been performed for three nights. The first night's events end with the birth of Prahaladha. On the second night, Iranian comes back after penance with more power, conquers the whole world, enslaves the gods and puts them under his services. He sends his army of *Sambasoorars* to search for Hari to avenge his brother's death. Iranian sends his son Prahaladha to his Guru for learning and

becomes wild when the Guru laments that his son is adamant on Hari's devotion and rejects Iranian's supremacy. Iranian commands Prahaladha to accept him as the lord of the universe and Prahaladha is stubborn in his devotion to Hari. Finally, Iranian goes to the extreme and summons the wrestlers *Mallars* to kill his son Prahaladha. Leelavathy pleads to Iranian but he does not care to listen. On the third day, Iranian tries to kill Prahaladha by various *Akkinai* (death sentences/ execution orders). In all cases, Hari rescues him. Finally, Iranian himself decides to kill his son and after an elaborate argument commands him to show the Hari if someone of that sort exists. Prahaladha points a pillar, which Iranian hits and Narasimha emerges out of it. The *Irania Samharam*, *Prahaladha Pattabishekam* and the procession around the streets ends the show. Now-a-days due to lack of availability of time, funds etc. the play is conducted for two days or one day or at times even just for a few hours only. In case the funds position is not very favourable, the play shall only be sung by the participants in front of the *Narasimha Siras* in the form of a *Mandagappadi*.

During the Nayak's rule, there had been an insecure status in the social setup in all places since the Muslim kings were becoming a menace to the local chiefs by waging wars, demolishing and destructing the temples and looting people who did not accept their supremacy and forcing the people to embrace Islam. A similar status had earlier existed during the invasion of Muhammad Ghazni during which the people from Sourashtra claim to have migrated. The Nayaks had adopted the Vaishnava sect and the boar incarnation of Vishnu helped in keeping the Muslims away and the omni-powerful Narasimha helped in developing the hopes and sentiments of the local folk. There is a regular repetition of the name 'Achuta' in the script. Among the 12 important names of Vishnu, this forms the first one and this might also be with reference to Achuthappa Nayak also. The people of Salyamangalam claim that their village is a grant given to them by Achuthappa Nayak (1590-1600 AD) and that it is named Achuthapuram. The script, in certain *viruthams*, mentions *Achuthane Mayavane*, *Achuthane En Kone* that is, Achutha, my king, etc. In the southern districts of Tamilnadu, the Nayaks have played a vital role in protecting the temples and culture and have reconstructed various temples that were demolished by the Delhi Sultanate and local rulers following the Vijayanagara kings, who were their predecessors. The requirement of protection of saints and temples is insisted in the script. Iranian, as an evil doer for the gods, commands his army of *Sambasooras* to go around all the 14 worlds, harass all the people performing *Yagna*, and destroy all temples of gods and force people to accept him as the supreme. However, even after a change in situation, the play still goes on since it has got moulded into a ritual of Narasimha worship among various communities around the Thanjavur district.

As soon as Prahaladha is born, the baby is taken around to get the blessings of all people available. In Ayyampettai, the birth of Prahaladha is marked by an infant's cry behind the screen. In Ammaiappan Thenkal, a baby doll is wrapped and kept in a plate and is lulled by Leelavathy and in Elangudi, it is just a twisted towel which symbolizes the bonny baby. The *Thozhi* and *Thadi* take the baby first to the *Koothuvadhyar* who blesses the child. Then the performers on the stage bless the child further and afterwards it is taken around the audience for their blessings. The stage is now extended and the audience also become an active part of the events and the entire place is symbolized as the *Vidharbadesa*.¹⁷ People bless the baby with money (ranging from Re.1/- to Rs.10/- or a little more) and with that the first day's play comes to an end.

On the second night, the beginning of the programme is the same as on the first day. The stage is opened with the entry of the buffoon and *Vandanam* song is sung. Iranian re-enters the stage singing '*Adhika veera parakrama alavattam paravikkrama thudikka verar dushtar nirkave vedikkaiaaga...*' and now it is a different actor performing the role of Iranian.

*More powerful and mighty, being worshipped with fans
By demon warriors standing by the side, joyfully comes Iranian the brave.
The studded golden crown that glitters,
Flower like garments shines and glitters
Lightening flash like sound that splatters, joyfully comes Iranian the brave
The god of rain sprinkles rose water
The army of gods come and worship
The creator carries the royal umbrella, joyfully comes Iranian the brave.*

Narada comes on stage and advises Iranian to send his children to school. Iranian summons Leelavathy and Prahaladha to the *darbar*. The *Bala Prahaladhan* (child Prahaladha) performer comes on stage with the song '*Vandhan Prahaladhan thanthaiar munne...*'. Iranian hugs and cuddles his son and makes him sit on his lap as a loving father. The scene is very subtle and makes the situation emotional. The *Bala Prahaladhan* role is usually done by boys below 10 years of age. As per the story Prahaladhan is a five year old child. However since the script demands great expertise to perform, the performers of the role are usually the senior performers when compared to the other role performers but for Iranian role. Iranian consults Leelavathy and summons the Guru to send Prahaladhan for schooling. Though the Guru is a serious and revered character, he is given a comic appearance to make the situation humorous rather than a very serious one. In the Vinaytheertha Pillai version, the Guru is Chandamaruthar - the son of the Asura Guru Sukracharia. But in the Puduvaisaram Somasundara Mudaliar version, Sukracharia himself is the Guru.

*My salutations to Irania, salutations lord Irania,
 Bowing to the king of demons, the teacher Sukra appears.
 Wearing a saffron dhoti, using a tiger skin for seat
 The apt and majestic demon guru comes.
 With Daruppai grass and twigs, shaft and the flask
 Books under his arms and holding a bejewelled umbrella*

Bowing to the king of demons, the teacher Sukracharia appears – as it goes in Pudukkottai saram Somasundaramudaliar version as sung in Ayyampettai, Ammaiappan etc.

In Archuttippattu, Akkaraipoondi etc., the Guru is Chandamaruthar who comes as a very strict school teacher.

*Chandamaruthar comes, the one who is very adamant
 He comes like a sun's ray here.
 The school children have seen him, who has come to
 Mend their mind and mould their ways...*

Prahaladhan is sent with the teacher and in the next scene the *Vidhyarambham* takes place. The first part of the scene is the dialogue between the Guru and Prahaladha where Prahaladha establishes his knowledge in various fields and declares that he will always be a devotee of Hari and would never accept his father as the supreme being, inspite of various threats and strict instructions by the Guru. In the next part the master goes out and the children play all pranks amidst which Prahaladha preaches them the significance of Hari. The Prahaladhan *Pallikkoodam* (school) scene is a very intricate presentation where the participation of the audience is also sought for. Some children from the audience are called on to the stage to create an atmosphere of a *Gurukulam*, the elders on the stage also assemble along with the children. The *Koothuvadhyar* himself performs the role of the Guru or he sits alongside with the Guru and all performers playing Prahaladhan sit in front of the Guru. The *Vidhyarambam* and *Aksharabhyasam* are done ceremoniously.

The Prahaladhan *Pallikkoodam* scene is a miniature presentation of the training programme for the *nadagam* performance. The community gathers and decides the date of the festivals and the *nadagam* well in advance. Usually the rehearsals go around for a month but the senior performers need minimum number of rehearsals. The rehearsal date is announced and the participants gather and the *Koothuvadhyar* (teacher) guides the performers in practicing their roles and directs them as how to present it on stage. Since every year there will be new performers to fulfil any vow taken by them in previous years, the rehearsal has to be given more importance for the new entrants.

In the next scene, the guru admits his inability to mould Prahaladhan and hands him over to Iranian. The play takes on a different tempo from this instance. A new ambience is felt on the stage and among the audience. A very serious participation is exhibited by both the performers and the audience.

Iranian tries his best to win over his son's devotion, but feels depressed over his defeat. After deep thinking, he summons the *Mallars* (wrestlers) to kill his son who is worshipping his enemy. He commands the *Mallars* to take away Prahaladha and threaten him with all the 32 weapons they have. From then on the *nadagam* goes on a cyclic format. Iranian delivers a sentence; Leelavathy pleads to spare her son; *Mallars* bring the concerned persons to accomplish Iranian's sentence; Prahaladha prays to Hari and he is rescued and Iranian becomes more and more furious. This format is repeated for all sentences of *Akkinai* (commands) issued by Iranian. The cyclic performance of *Akkinai* is much admired and watched by the audience. The *Ottan Ottichi*, *Pidaran*, *Odakkaran* are characters who have a humorous conversation with the messengers (played by the buffoon performers) of Iranian. Leelavathy pleads with the *Mallars* to spare her son and later cries and wails to Iranian but he does not listen to her.

'Ayya Entha ulagathil inda kodumaigal erkumo en swami.....'
Where in the world, such an intolerable event to happen
Is it right to have such a great anger on your own son, my lord?
An infant he is, not knowing even that he should obey your commands
Having come in the line of the patrons of justice
Is it not an evil act to do unjust, my lord? ...

The accessories and the symbolisms used to represent certain elements and moods in the *nadagam* are quite interesting. The scene is identified with the verses and activities instead of the physical ambience. A rolled up towel placed on a plate symbolizes the infant. The Leelavathy performers hold a strand of flowers in their hand and beat it on their chest when they sing in grief. The flowers scatter to symbolize that the jewels scatter when Leelavathy cries in grief. A small trough or a basin with burning coal is used to represent a pit of fire into which Prahaladha is to be thrown. At times, there may be a backdrop of a mountain but, usually, the event is stylized only by the dialogues and verses in the script. In some performances, the small grinding stone forms the *Karkkanam*. However in many places today it is replaced with a cardboard cut-out.

The entry of Yamadharmaraja, the god of death, is very ceremonious in Ammaiappan Elangudi and Thenkal. The entire village forms the stage in which the event is performed. The Yamadharmaraja's mask is

kept and worshipped at the southern end of the village in the Veera Anjaneyaswami koil. The mask used in Thenkal is the one, which was previously used in the *Markandeya Nadagam* in a nearby village. Similar to the *poikkaal kudhirai attam*¹⁸, a buffalo head mask is tied to a bamboo structure and is hung from the shoulders of the performer and fastened to his waist and covered with a black cloth to form the vehicle of the performer. The *kinkaras*—the soldiers of Yama also wear masks or paint their faces with horns fixed to their head. After the preliminary prayers for the mask, it is fixed on the face of the performer with much reverence. In Thenkal the performer also wore the *Bhujakkattai*¹⁹. A wooden sword is held in the hands and the procession starts with howls and sounds led by a *Parai Maelam*²⁰. Blowing out fire and firing torches accompanied by the sounds of the youth and children of the village on the street makes the late night ambience (3 o'clock) become fully awake and active. The procession goes around the dark streets, which are eager to receive the god of death to get his blessings for a longer life. People clean and decorate the front of their houses with *kolam* and wait with flowers, *Mangalaharti* and milk to be offered to the god of death. In both these places they do not use any mask for Narasimha due to sentimental reasons and only the Yamadharmaraja mask is kept along with a picture of a Balakrishna in Thenkal and a Lakshminarasimha in Elangudi, inside the greenroom and is worshipped with *Maavuvilakku* during the avatharam scene.

As far as the sentiments about the *Narasimha Nadagam* are concerned, there is a hearsay story throughout the state and in the adjacent states where this theatre form exists. In some places, the story goes that the Narasimha performer got possessed and enraged and tore the Iranian performer to death during the *samharam* scene. Another form of the same story is that while the Iranian performer was humming his stanzas, bathing in a canal, the Narasimha performer on the other banks got possessed, dived into the water and went to the other bank and killed the Iranian performer who was taken by surprise. The most interesting hearsay story is that during the British rule when such an event happened the performer who killed his opponent was tried in the court. The judge told the performer to prove that he really had got involved in the character in such an intense manner. Further he was asked to enact the role of Dasaratha from the Ramayana. On doing so, when the scene of sending Rama to exile was to be performed, the performer who was doing the role of Dasaratha got involved and actually died on the spot due to intense grief. The hearsay story is so powerful and widespread that it is spoken about even when this play is conducted as a contemporary stage play. A recent Tamil movie *Avatharam* this concept has been developed and the hero, a performer, revenges the villain, another performer, with the concept of this hearsay story.

The cyclic performance of the Iranian *Akkinai*, Leelavathy's plead, *Mallars* entry, Prahaladhan's prayers and the rescue is elaborated and curtailed according to the time availability. The participation of Leelavathy performer between *akkinais* is at times restricted to only one time on summoning the *Mallars*. In Ammaiappan Elangudi, the Leelavathy performer finishes his role on stage and hurries to take over the role of Yamadharmaraja. The performing of important roles is considered a privilege and improves the status of the performer in the society and hence they would not give up doing the role to others easily when the *nadagam* is fixed. In Ayyampettai, another *Akkinai* of Iranian commanding Leelavathy to feed Prahaladha a glass of poisoned milk is enacted, in which Leelavathy assumes that the fainted Prahaladha is dead and sings an *oppari* also. An announcement is made about the event of *Avatharam* to come and people get ready to watch and worship Narasimha during the event. In Ammaiappan and Narthevankudikadu, the people say that the women folk leave home at 3 o'clock in the morning, have a bath and grind rice flour for making the *Mavuvilakku*²¹. The people belonging to *Simha lagnam* also go home by then, plug their ears so as to not to hear any sound of the music, and sleep inside, since they are afraid that they may get possessed during the *avatharam*.

Among various *nadagams* performed in the Thanjavur area, there is a unique similarity. Most of the *nadagams* have a child character as a governing role and the child being put to death or being commanded to be killed by his father is found in all. In the *Siruthondar Nadagam* popularly known as *Sriyala Charithram*, the five year old child is beheaded and cooked to be offered on request to Shiva who comes in the guise of Sivanadiyar. Finally the child is brought back to life and the Sivanadiar blesses the couple in the form of Karikaalamurti²². This *nadagam* is performed as a community theatre in the Mariamman Koil and Orathanadu of the Thanjavur district during April-May. In the *Rukmangatha Charithram*, King Rukmangatha is challenged by Vishnu who plays as his mistress Mohini to kill his five year old son. Finally the faith of Rukmangatha in the *Ekadasi Viradham*²³ triumphs when Hari blesses him and the child. The *nadagam* is almost extinct in the area but for the singing of the verses during the night of *Vaikunta Ekadasi*²⁴ in Manambuchavadi of Thanjavur. In *Manuneethi Cholan Nadagam* the king sentences his son to be crushed under the wheels of a chariot to provide justice to the cow whose calf has been killed by the prince accidentally. Shiva is pleased with the just ruler and restores both the prince and the calf. This *nadagam* is said to have been enacted in and around Thiruvaroor, which is the homeland of this event. In the *Markandeya Nadagam* the 16 year old Markandeya is to die as his fate demands but his faith in Shiva makes him live for ever. Now this *nadagam* is not performed in totality. In the *Harischandra*

Nadagam, his father sells prince Logidasan along with his mother. He dies of snakebite as a test to Harischandra's adamant attitude towards truth. The child is brought back to life successfully in due course. This is one of the *nadagams* in the regular agenda of the commercial performers. In the *Rama Nadagam*, the *Uthara Ramayanam* is the story where Rama goes on war against his sons Lava and Kusha. The enactment of this *nadagam* also can not be seen now in this district but traces are available down South in the districts adjacent to Madurai. Similarly in the *Iranian Nadagam* the event of the son being sentenced by father exists and this particular *nadagam* unlike the other *nadagams*, has gained popularity in Thanjavur district and is performed with pomp and gaiety at present.

The stage gets filled during the *avatharam* scene. The Iranian performer tries to keep himself calm under hard circumstances. The word 'Hari Hari' is chanted often at an interval and is very provocative in inducing a trance in the Iranian performer and also in the sensitive audience. A long debate ensues between Iranian and Prahaladha. Iranian is held back by some non-performers with a twisted dhoti or two tied round his waist to stop him from pouncing on Prahaladha. However, in Thenkal, the Iranian performer goes wild and by mistaking the *mallar* performer for Prahaladha, he hits him on the head which makes the turban roll down and the other people on the stage intervene to solve the situation. In Elangudi the Iranian performer gets stuck up and collapses in possession. To create a very provocative ambience the dialogues of Iranian are fast and furious but those of Prahaladha are slow and calm.

DHARU (Introductory song) : *Who is the one that creates and destroy the worlds*

Iranian : *But for me is it anyone else, o my son
Look the Creator, sustainer and destroyer and all
Come and bow to me haven't you seen my son.*

Prahaladhan : *Father is it you who has created the entire universe?*

Iranian : *Yes you silly fellow.*

DHARU : *In every world and in every living being*

Prahaladhan : *he is omnipresent oh my king
As is oil in the sesame seeds
So does he exist well blended the Hari Hari
Oh my king.*

Iranian : *Hey silly fellow, is he filled everywhere?*

Prahaladhan : *Of course he is filled, my lord.*

DHARU : *If the supreme that is filled everywhere is that Hari*

Iranian : then will you show him to me oh my son?

Prahaladhan : To see by my eyes he exists everywhere
But I doubt if you can see him, my king

Iranian : You silly fellow, do you mean that I cannot see him?

Prahaladhan : You cannot, my lord.

DHARU : Only if I can see him your words come true

Iranian : Why are you bluffing my son.

Prahaladhan : Father, am I bluffing you mean?

Iranian : Yes you silly fellow.

DHARU : You think I am bluffing and you say so

Prahaladhan : In those words he does exist, my king.

Iranian : You silly fellow do you mean he is in my words?

Prahaladhan : He is in your words my lord.

DHARU : If he can be in words does your Hari exist

Iranian : inseparably in this pillar, my son.

Prahaladhan : In the Pillar and even in a straw also
Inseparably does exist Hari even in your words, my king.

Iranian : You silly fellow, do you mean he exists in this pillar?

Prahaladhan : Yes the Hari will be seen in this pillar, my lord.

By the time, the *nadagam* nears the climax the Iranian performer is almost out of control. He is totally possessed and the script is sung only by the *pinpattu* performers as Iranian declines. Once the Narasimha performer emerges out of the pillar, the persons, who hold and assist the Iranian performer, pull his crown little by little and remove it. The Narasimha performer also enters into a trance and is held with twisted dhotis wound around the waist in order to avoid the clash between Iranian and Narasimha. Once the crown is removed, the Iranian performer completes performing his role. Water is then sprinkled on his face, and he is brought back to his senses. Meanwhile a flower garland is given in the hands of Narasimha performer, which he tears and throws at the audience. This is to symbolize Narasimha tearing the stomach and intestines of Iranian and slaying him and drinking his blood. Prahaladha performs the *Mangalaharti* and prays to Narasimha to calm his anger. In places like Salyamangalam, this event is performed on the street diagonal to the stage where Iranian stands on the side of the stage and Narasimha emerges out of a pillar

about 30ft away from the stage. In the climax, Iranian hits the pillar and Narasimha emerges very ceremoniously. Iranian and Narasimha have a very elaborate argument and finally the *samharam* takes place. Here Iranian is placed on Narasimha's lap and a red cloth is fastened to Narasimha's mouth to enliven the scene. Finally *Panagam* is offered to Narasimha to make him cool and Prahaladha and Lakshmi cool him down. In Narthevankudikkadu, a circular cane structure is prepared and wrapped with paper to represent the pillar. In Ayyampettai, the scene is set with pillar painted on it over the stage to serve the purpose.

In Ayyampettai all artistes and accompanists are honoured before the *avatharam* scene. Kuppal Shri Krishnamoorthy, while honouring the Mrudanga Vidwan Kodaidi Nimmal Krishnamoorthy, said that the latter along with his wife worshipped Narasimha with *mavilakku* during the *avatharam* for want of a male child after 16 years of his marriage and in the subsequent year they were gifted with a male child – Nimmal Krishna Senthil who performs as Leelavathy in the show. Further Senthil's one year old child Krishnan was also introduced on the stage as baby Prahaladhan this year (ironically, the father and the child are cast as the mother and the child). The Pillayar role performer Kuppal Shri Tulasiraman's son K.T.Ramkumar performed the role of *Bala* Prahaladhan – the next generation.

In the final climax Iranian is enraged when Narasimha laughs from the pillar and drags him to a combat calling '*Arada nakaithavan thoonil angenna engae vada...*' (who is it that laughs hiding in the pillar, what is there come out here...). Iranian hits the pillar and Narasimha emerges out and is greeted by all the gods in the story and the entire attending public of the show. The *virutham*, an extract from the Kamba Ramayanam, goes on as:

*'The pillar exploded, there was born the lion,
later it magnified, the eight directions and the entire cosmos
it measured, what happened later who can narrate?
Got provoked, the cosmic egg tore, down and up.'*

And this is followed by the *avatharam* Dharu.

*The entire cosmos shook and the seven continents quaked
The seven celestial worlds shook and thus joyously came
Narasimham
The shoulders that measured to eight directions, the favourite
foot with anklets
And with sixteen hands with weapons thus joyously came
Narasimham.*

In the script of the climax, we note a dialogue between Iranian and Narasimha where there is a debate having a leaning towards the *Rama*

Nadagam. In the climax of the *Karna Moksham Koothu* in the northern Tamilnadu, we can find a similar mention of the *Siru Thondar Nadagam* within the dialogue between Krishna and Karna. In it, Karna says that in the time of his ultimate moment he has a grievance that as he is known for his generosity he has done all *dana*²⁵ except the *annadana*. Then Krishna blesses him that in his next birth he shall be born as Paranjothi and the whole of his life he may spend in doing *annadanam* along with his wife and son. We can find a similar situation here when Iranian asks Narasimha why he has come in such an untruthful form with many hands and shoulders to fight with him though he (Narasimha) has only two. Narasimha then says that in his next birth Iranian shall be born as Ravana with ten heads and twenty shoulders and hands and shall fight with Hari who shall be in the form of a simple human being.

The verses in which the demon argues and is slain, is termed by the performers as *Tharkkam* and *Samharam Dharu*. The elaboration of this also differs from place to place. The *dharu* here is in the form of a conversation between Iranian and Narasimha.

Iranian: *All these days fearing me where were you hiding you thief?
My son has caught and dragged you here, you wait.*

Narasimham: *Saints, Preachers, and noble ones were troubled by you
I have come to stab and pull out your intestines and give to
Yama, you Devil!*

.....
Description: *Like the lord of the doom the demon dragged, smashed and
swirled Narasimham. As he struck the lord on his crown the great Meru shook.
When struck, the lord swirled the demon like the potter's wheel. As the
demon was hit on the cosmic wall all the eight mountains shook*

.....
*Dragged to the threshold during the twilight
Placed the demon on his lap and tore his stomach apart*

Iranian: *How may shoulders, how many hands for you and how many
of those Hands so fearful.
Taken such a truthless form you have come
For war against me, why is it so?*

Narasimham: *Having incarnated in this birth of yours, changing the
Same is impossible
In your next birth, with twenty shoulders you
Shall be born with twenty hands*

.....
 Description: *Having told this, the very moment the lion God slit the stomach of the demon drank the blood that gushed out and wore his intestines as a garland*

Apart from the *nadagam* performance in the Then Sarukkai Akkaraipoondi, the script is sung on every Saturday during *Purattasi* month of the Tamil calendar. The script is divided into four or five parts and sung on Saturday nights. On the last Saturday night of the month, the *Avatharam* and *Samharam* songs are sung and the story is concluded. This is called as *Purattasi Mandagappadi*. The village is geographically divided into four segments and such a segment is called a *karai*. Each programme on the Saturdays of a month is sponsored by a *karai*. The *Narasimha Siras* is placed on a platform and worshipped and *pallayam* (cooked rice spread on plantain leaf with curd, jaggery and bananas) is offered on every Saturday.

Some activities and practices, which go on during the performance, do not disturb the local audience from the mainstream but any outsider may be distracted by such activities. Since the performance is a community theatre and the performers are not professional actors, we can often see them going and peeping into the script casually during the performance or people by side. At times even the audience, prompting or correcting the performer is also a common sight. In Elangudi the Prahaladha performer did not hesitate to wear his spectacles and have the script in hand along with his costume. In the same performance, Thiru Kalyanaraman (a senior Iranian Performer) who was singing the *pinpattu* during *samharam*, got possessed and sang a wrong song and he was corrected by the entire lot of people on the stage. Similarly, a single performer coming in for many roles and the same role being performed by various performers are quite casual. Friends and relatives of the performers walk straight towards them during the performance on the stage and garland them as a token of honour. A female role performer receives the garland in hand and wears it himself. The reason is that though he is a man, the character which he enacts is something that is to be considered more. In Ammaiappan, a single pattern of garland is only permitted on the stage to avoid difference of opinions among the performers, the same set of garland is circulated for many rounds, and the money thus collected out of the garland sale is used to balance the expenses of putting on the show. The performers do not hesitate to refresh or quench their thirst on stage in between performances. In the Prahaladhan *Pallikkoodam* scene, the Prahaladhan performer had a sip every time before his verses began as the Bhagavathars in the Carnatic music concerts or the Harikatha performers do.

Younger generations participate actively in the performance. However, the main events of the show are entrusted with well-experienced performers only. The audience identifies the performers as the people of their kith and kin and as the characters in the play. They casually garland the performers on stage as their friends and the performers pull in the audience into their conversations while doing the role of buffoons and conversing with *Ottar*, *Mallar*, *Pidaran* etc. The audience are very casual and even settle down to sleep when night progresses in between the show. The arena extends up to the *thinnaï* of the adjacent houses from where the local household watches the show. The audience follows the Yamadharmaraja's procession and wails and howls along with the performers and also pulls their friends out of their sleep and threatens them, thus participating in the *nadagam* itself. The women folk have a very important role to play in the rituals by preparing the *mavuvilakku*. Further, when the Narasimha performer comes in procession down the roads along with his retinue, it is the women of the house who wash his feet and circumambulate him along with their family and pay their respects to the deity. During the *avatharam* scene, the audience eagerly stand and patiently wait to worship Narasimha and get his blessings. By the time the *samharam* scene goes on, the boundary between the stage and the audience does not remain anymore as it seems that they surpassed the interim space between Narasimha and themselves, and the entire zone is blended as the play in reality and reality in the play. As told by Sundar Kali, in a lecture 'Iranian creates his own space and does not allow any intruder into it. As the *nadagam* goes on, Iranian creates more space for him by chasing away any character who comes near him and through this, the circumference of the stage is widened and the audience also retreats. After the *avatharam* the gathering encroaches into Iranian's space and both the stage and the audience mingle as the theatre and the society blend. The space gradually closes in little by little and when Narasimha slays Iranian and sits on his throne the entire area is captured by the society. Iranian goes off; Narasimha goes away and what remains is just the society.' The event is concluded with an intention that the play is going to be conducted again in future; the Pillayar song which was sung first is again performed. In places like Akkaraipoondi, Iranian comes back on stage and sings 'King of Kings king Iranian, in my court I have come...'

Notes

¹ Nadagam—Theatre in Thanjavur district in the form of a music drama on stage.

² Narakakkottai—The fort of the hell.

³ Karkkanam—Grinding mill made of stone to crush oil seeds to extract oil.

⁴ Astakshrakkottai—The fortification crated by chanting of the eight lettered mantra Om Namō Narayanaya.

⁵ A part of the previous Thanjavur district has been divided into Thiruvarur district and Ammaiappan now lies in Thiruvarur district.

⁶ Bhagavatas—The sect of people who have vowed to worship the divine and spread the importance of chanting his name (nama parayanam) through devotional songs of various languages molded into a tradition 'Dakshina Bhajanai Sampradhayam' in south India with its origin at the Bhodendral Madam in Govindapuram and a parallel tradition formed in Marudanallur of the Thanjavur District.

⁷ The performance viewed in Then Sarukkai Akkaraipoondi on 2, 9 & 16.5.2004 in Ayyampettai was on 19.5.2005 and 20.5.2005. In Ammayappan Thenkal on 22.5.2005 and 23.5.2005 In Salyamangalam on 23.5.2005 In Ammaiappan Elanguudi on 11.6.2005 and 12.6.2006.

⁸ Mandagappadi—Hosting of an event of worship.

⁹ Mangalaharti is the conclusion of prayers by burning camphor.

¹⁰ Panagam is a summer drink made of tamarind and jaggery flavoured with cardamom and dry ginger.

¹¹ Panchakacham—A traditional way of wearing the dhoti found in many parts of the Country.

¹² Thinnai—An elevated portion with a canopy in the facade of the house.

¹³ Thirai Virutham—Singing virutham to indicate the forthcoming scene by the performers who warm up themselves before the curtain is raised.

¹⁴ Virutham—Poem set to a melody not bound by rhythm.

¹⁵ Adavu—The fundamental exercises, steps and movements which every student of dance learns at the commencement. These Correspond to the vocalises in musical study.

¹⁶ Kolam—Floor decoration done usually with rice flour or powder meant for the purpose.

¹⁷ Vidharbadesa—The land spreading from south of the Vindhya to Shipranadi in the East and River Narmada's origin in the west. This place is supposed to be the Kingdom of Iranian as per the story.

¹⁸ Poikkaal Kudhirai Attam—A form of folk dance with tall wooden shoes wearing a dummy horse arrangement to resemble a horse rider, also called Puravi natanam.

¹⁹ Bhujakkattai—The shoulder decorations worn by koothu and Nadagam performers.

²⁰ Parai Maelam—A folk percussion instrument.

²¹ Mavuvilakku—Lighting of lamp over a preparation of frice powder and jaggery. The same is eaten after the rituals of worship are fulfilled.

²² Karikaalamurti—A form of Shiva in which he appears with a bag of bones on his shoulders and begging bowl and small drum in the fore arms.

²³ Ekadasi Viradham—The vow of fasting on Ekadasi, the eleventh day after no-moon or new moon as a practice of worship of Vishnu the god of sustenance.

²⁴ Vaikunta Ekadasi—The ekadasi that comes in the month of Margazi (Dec-Jan) month of the Tamil calendar.

²⁵ Dana - giving of alms.

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