

“The art of Harikatha”

Dr.(Smt) Praniila Gulumurthy, Dept. of Music, Madras University, gave an enlightening lecture demonstration on 'The Harikatha' on Saturday, Jan.19, at the one-day Seminar ('The Art Heritage of Thanjavur') organised by the C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Institute of Indological Research, Madras-18.

Points: 'The art of narration is quite ancient and serves as a communication-medium to convey moral instruction to the lay-people through chosen episodes from our epics and puranas.

'Harikatha Kalakshepam (etymologically meaning 'spending time in listening to stories of Lord Hari') or kirtan was introduced in Thanjavur around the 17th century by the then Maratha - Bhojale rulers who extended their patronage to 'kirtankars' to popularise this traditional art widely.

The kirtankar takes up an episode from the wealth of puranic lore and narrates it with histrionics, dance and music in all of which he is well-versed. This art-form was used as an integrating force to promote bhakti and to fight proselytisation.

The celebrated Panduranga Vithala temple at Pandharpur was the centre for this perform-

ing art and has inspired many a saint like Tukaram, Ekanatha, Jnanesvar, Samarth Ramadas, Sakkubai etc., who, by themselves, were expert-performers and propagated the art of Harikatha-kirtan during their pilgrimages.

The 'Naradiya-kirtan' - believed to have originated from sage Narada - and the Varkaru sampradaya were adopted. The former comprises the *Purvaranga* of the Naradiya style (in which the *pancapati* - invocatory verses praising Lords Ganesa, Vishnu, Anjaneya, Guru and Goddess Sarasvati - are sung along with the *Pradana pada* (primary song) and the *Uttara ranga* embellishing the chosen narrative with musical forms as 'Saki, Pinidi, Ovi, Arya, Pada, Abhanga, Khadga' etc.

In the Varkariya mode, there is no 'Akhyana' (story narration) but the kirtankar sings compositions like the *Abhangas* and explains at great length their true meaning quoting relevant religious texts. The listeners are also invited to participate in the *nama sankirtan* ('*Kalau Nama Sankirtanam*' - for in the iron-age, Kaliyuga, singing of the glory of the Lord's myriad names is the best means of salvation). This is

an emotional and ennobling experience immersing the devout participant in the blissful ocean of Bhakti.

Thanjavur Krishna Bhagavathar (1847-1903) is hailed as the father of the Thanjavur Harikatha Bani (style) - a blend of the best of both the traditions. A veritable treasure-house of story-themes - Prahlada Charitram, Rukmini Kalyanam, Sita Kalyanam, Usha Parinayam, Rukmangada Charitram, Gaja-Gauri Vratam, Kuchelopakhyanam - enriched this noble art. Classical, light-classical and folk varieties of both Hindusthani and Carnatic music in several Indian languages lent further charm. Specific *talas* - the three beat (*Mundati*), five-beat (*Indadi*) and the seven-beat (*Eghadi*) are harmoniously reckoned on the *Chipla* and *Jalara*.

Thiruppazhanam Panchapakesa Sastri, Embar Vijayaraghavachariar, Sulamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, Mangudi Chidambara Bhagavathar, Smt. C. Saraswati Bai, Smt. C. Banni Bai (now a septuagenarian) were all, in their heydays, some of the most accomplished exponents of this traditional and noble art that has seen better days and sorely needs to be revived now.