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RICH IN ART, POOR IN LIFE

THE folk artistes of Thanjavur who have been practising their spectacular profession generation after generation have been lately in the grip of poverty and are now trying to find alternative jobs to keep the wolf away.

There are more than 200 families settled down around this erstwhile Chola capital. Even to this day they are practising poikkalkudhirai, kollattam, mayilattam, kummi, naiyandimelam, kavadiattam and the like. But their income is meagre.

According to A.Selvaraj, a resident Keezha Veedhi who is grateful to the TN Government for giving him an opportunity to perform near Karandhai as part of the millennial celebrations. He proved his mettle and one of the spectators gave him an attractive gift.

However, Selvaraj says, "I have been performing poikkalkudhirai for 30 years now. I have done several programmes in rural areas. There are 16 members in my family who

perform poikkalkudhirai, kummiattam, mayilattam and nadhaswaram.

"If the chances for folk arts are bleak, then I will switch to nadhaswaram which I learnt from Sriniwasan. I was brought up in Ilayangudi Keeranur in Sivaganga district. I learnt poikkalkudhirai from Rasu. His training fetched me chances in films like Giri, Vallal, Run and Thavasi".

Selvaraj has also performed in Meghalaya, Tripura, Agartala, Andaman and Kolkata. He is proud of numerous certificates issued under the seal of various governments. His daughters and son are also interested in folk arts. His daughters Madhubala, Mekala and Panchavarnam are great performers of karagam. His another daughter Seenammal is a rustic singer.

"My daughters have no source of permanent income. Whenever they are not in demand they work in the fields on daily wages. However, financially we are sound only during

the months of Panguni, Chithirai and Aani".

Out of the families, 150 families are domiciled in Reddypalayam, while the others are residing in Keezhavasal. They occupied certain stretch of poromboke land and put up huts. They had never missed to pay tax in the last 35 years. "We will be happy if pattas are issued to us in Nagarajapuram. We have nothing to put by so far in our lives though we have performed thousands of times.

"We will also be very grateful to the government if it arranges loans at low interest. The money will help us repair our dummy horses, dummy peacocks and our other paraphernalia. We need more than a lakh for the purpose", Selvaraj. Even as Selvaraj was chatting with 'Expresso', another naiyandimelam artiste A.Paul Raj alias Puliyur Balu joined the conversation and reiterated the plea for government assistance.

— NT Rajan



The magic of nine -2010



mycity mystory

Mangaiyarkarasi Govindarajan walks down her memory lane, along the shores of river Cauvery and relives the precious moments of her life

GREEN AND GREEN EVERYWHERE

I was born and raised in Umbalapaadi, a small village bound by the Kollidam and Manniar, one of the branches of the Cauvery, in the North and Kongan, a small canal in the South. It is near Kabisthalam and 6 km from Papanasam in Thanjavur district.

Umbalapaadi is mentioned in an inscription of Paranthaka Chola I during his 19th regnal year, 926 A.D. found at Alandurai Temple at Kezhapazhur. Kandi Adigal, a hermit from Umbalapaadi, is said to have donated 90 goats to maintain a lamp at the Sivan Temple of Keezhapazhur. Umbalapaadi was referred to be situated at Virai Nadu (An administrative or revenue taluk of the early Cholas). Once the village had long stretches of paddy fields, considered as valuable as emerald fields and three ponds filled with lotus flowers. Lanky trees of all kind dotted the place and were home for a variety of birds.

I was born in 1940 as the eldest of the nine children to my parents. I lived in a joint family with my two uncles and their families. The total children of the three families numbered 20. At the age of four, I was first enrolled in a primary school at Kabisthalam and later from the Sixth Form at the Board High School (previously known as Victoria High School), Papanasam. My school had to be reached by crossing four rivers — the Cauvery, Arasalar, Thirumalairajan and Kudamurutti, the latter three being distributaries of the Cauvery.

In those days, none of these four rivers had bridges. Since my father was a school teacher, he used to take me along and we had to cross the Cauvery and Kudamurutti in coracle boats saddled with cattle, goats, farm workers, hay-stack, grass bundles and school children. Arasalar had to be crossed in a raft as the volume, speed and depth of the water was high. Two bamboo poles were tied at the end of either bank in the place oars. The boatmen would navigate the raft by holding on to the ropes tied at the poles to the raft.

The Thirumalairajan had to be crossed by getting into the river and walking past carrying my books and tiffin-box on my head. I had two spare clothes stocked at my school and changed before attending my

class. During the monsoon, I stayed at my headmaster's house, a friend of my father, who saved me from the trouble of crossing the rivers which were in full spate. Since we did not have clocks we knew the time, particularly during the monsoon, from the blossoming of peerkampoo in the morning and anjumanipoo in the evening. Electricity came to my village only during 1963-64 and we used lanterns until then. Festivals like Pongal were important occasions that renewed hopes for every household for the following year.

Aadi Peruku was also celebrated with great enthusiasm. The taste of pulisadam given at the local Perumal Temple every Saturday during the month of Purattasi still lingers. Thulasnamam was kept the entire month of Aipasi and bathing in the Kollidam by 6 am was mandatory. Theemidhi festival was held every Chithirai at the Draupadi Amman Temple. Each household used to have a minimum of 15 guests, their kith and kin, for the thiruvizha. Together we listened to stories from the Mahabharatham from 8 pm to midnight seated on

mats spread across the nearby fields.

In the month of Margazhi each household displayed beautiful kolam at the entrance and every girl and woman worked hard to outdo the other in a healthy way.

Thaadhan, a man believed to ward off evil, blew the conch and sang to the beat of thappu at every house during this month. This belief had entrenched in the women and my mother even persuaded him to blow the conch at the avarai pandal at the backyard in the belief that it would ward off pest attack. Thaadhan was offered paddy, vegetables, sugarcane and jaggery at the end of the month by every household. The ominous words of kudukuddupakaran also had sway over the people. Seasonal fruits such as ilandhai and navazhal pazham were shared among friends and neighbours.

I have traversed a long way in my life since I had left my village after my marriage. Still it is my village that gives me immense happiness. Memories may not be as brilliant as hope, but they are likely to be wonderful and thousand times true.

(Mangaiyarkarasi Govindarajan is homemaker)

—As told to Sukanya Chellappa