



# తెలుగు సారస్వత సాంస్కృతిక సంఘము

## Telugu Literary And Cultural Association

### Up Close and Personal with a Legend .. Meet Bapu Garu.

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I had the good fortune to meet Bapu garu not once, but two weekends in a row. The first was at the Vanguri Foundation's Telugu Sahiti Sadassu in Houston, where the award I won for my short story was handed to me by the great man himself. And the very next weekend I had the pleasure of several hours of his company when he came for the TLCA Deepavali celebration.

Bapu needs no introduction to any Telugu person. Quoting from the Wikipedia, Bapu introduced a painting style that uses simple bright colours which are easy on the eye. His unique style of economy of strokes, freehand drawing and clutter free backgrounds made the paintings simple, beautiful and popular. In fact, the phrase Bapu Bomma has become synonymous with a beautiful Telugu girl. About his movies, they say "The most notable achievement in his movie making is his success in capturing the nativity of Telugu people and translating it great on-screen visuals. His movies deal with very real familial troubles and relationships but most movies have a recurring theme of magic realism, with vignettes of mythological characters aiding in the narration". Bapu has directed about 50 movies in assorted languages, primarily Telugu and sometimes remakes of these in other languages, and is reputed to have made over 50,000 drawings.

I saw the legend for the first time at the Vanguri foundation Sahiti Sadassu. Surprisingly for such a great personality, he abhors giving speeches on a stage. During the program, the organizer announced "ఇప్పుడు బాపు గారిని రెండు



మాటలు చెప్పమని కోరుతున్నాను" whereupon Bapu stood up and said "రెండు మాటలు" and sat down! His artistic temperament requires the immediacy of personal contact and conversation. He is happy with answering questions from anyone in the audience. He deftly avoids getting pinned down by stock questions like ఇప్పడొస్తున్న హీరోలలో మీకెవరు ఇష్టము. And he never answered the perennial favourite question - who exactly is the inspiration for the Girl in Bapu Bommalu. With a disarming grin, he said " అది మీరడగకూడదు, నేం చెప్పకూడదు! ". He answered practically every question with a joke that made the audience roar with laughter. When asked "ఇక్కడ అమెరికా వాళ్ళమీద ఏమైనా కార్టూన్లు వేస్తార" he replied "అమ్మో, అన్నం పెట్టరు". But he did answer several questions, revealing, for example, that he started drawing very young (" చేతిలో బలపం పట్టుకున్నప్పట్టిం చీ "), met his partner in arts MullapUDi very young and has a wonderful relationship with him, based on mutual respect.

The next week, Bapu garu was in New York as the Chief Guest at the TLCA Deepavali function. We picked him up from an early flight into Laguardia. For one of the giants of Telugu cinema, Bapu is a surprisingly approachable, simple and friendly person. In spite of the fact that he got up at 3:00 AM to catch the flight, Bapu showed no signs of fatigue - with his characteristic grin, he was ready for action as soon as he hit the ground! It is a mark of his greatness that he felt no need to show us his greatness by being superior. Within minutes, we were chatting and joking with him like old friends.

Bapu garu is very knowledgeable about movies in general. He seems to remember practically every scene in each of his movies, and also identifies obscure details from other's movies. In person, Bapu does express opinions on current movies and stars which show a keen awareness and deep insight into the Telugu movie world. He said that he too was upset with how few Telugu stars (and even singers, and worst of all, the dubbing artists!) speak the language. He says it is the fashion now, that this "ఉత్తరాది" accent is so much in demand.

Fortunately for us, his own movies have always retained the Telugu touch (even though, as he admitted, Sneha's voice was dubbed in Radha Gopalam). Every Telugu person must be hoping they continue to do so, and remain the one ray of hope in the current Telugu movie universe.

Most people would undoubtedly agree that Mutyalamuggu is one of Bapu's best movies. As Bapu garu described it, it is a modern retelling of the LavaKusa story - parents separated because of false allegations, and then brought together by the children. Even Hanuman appears in this movie, in a delightful touch of magic realism, to cue the viewer in. Of course, the rough edges of the original story are shorn off - the story does not end in tragedy, and the parents live happily ever after with their children.

Bapu garu good naturedly answered my questions and recounted some of the

kaburlu about the movie. The thing most people immediately remember about the movie is the villain, played by Rao Gopala Rao. Bapu garu said that every word of his dialogue was scripted by Mullapudi garu first, and they were hunting around for an actor to carry it off. After looking at several would-be "contractor"s, Bapu and Ramana were giving up when they met RGR at some social event. The moment they heard him speak, they knew they had their man, and the most famous villain in Telugu movies was created. Viewers might also remember the long (about 5 minutes) love scene in the movie, with no dialogue, just music. Apparently, when they shot the scene, Bapu garu didn't realize how long it was; and later, everyone was very dismissive, saying that no one would sit still and watch such a long speech-less sequence. Well, fortunately, Bapu went with his gut feeling and the result is the masterpiece we get to see now. The contractor's house (with the rocks etc.,) was also an accident. They had booked a great set for shooting these sequences, but a week before the shoot, the owner of the properties let it out to a bigger studio for more money; Bapu and Ramana were frantically hunting around for another place to shoot, because the entire cast was going to be assembled soon and it would be a big expense to delay the shooting. While they were having tea at a Rocky Hotel, Bapu garu suddenly realized this would be the perfect place to shoot. A deal was struck immediately with the owner, and the rest is history. Bapu's style of direction was also very easygoing. Apparently, if it was a sunny day, they would shoot the outdoor sequences, and if it was a gloomy day, the indoor ones. No one knew what was going to be filmed on any given day! The cast, mostly newcomers, were also very cooperative, and never fussed about makeup etc., All this shows in the fresh and natural quality of the finished movie..

Bapu's long partnership with Mullapudi Ramana has resulted in some of the best loved movies in Telugu history. He had known Ramana since they were children together, and they have great respect for each other. Apparently, Mullapudi writes every word of the dialogue, well before the movie shooting begins. They then look for the cast, and finish the shooting relatively quickly. Bapu prefers lesser known stars, whom he then moulds into greatness.



After movies, (or maybe even more than movies), Bapu is best known for his drawings and paintings. His artwork wonderfully evokes the essence of Telugudanam. His paintings of girls - the famous Bapu Bommalu - are especially well known and memorable. Here's one lyrical description by a fan Prabha Subbarao  
"చెంపకు చేరడేసి కళ్ళు ..

ఆ కళ్ళల్లో కొంటితనం .. తీర్చిదిద్దిన కాటికా .. చెవులపక్కన వంకీలు .. అవలోకగా ఊగే లోలకులు .. తీర్చిదిద్దిన ముక్కు .. ఆ ముక్కుకో తళుక్కుమనే ముక్కుపుడక .. చిలిపినవ్వుల ఎర్రటి పెదవులు .. పిరుదులు దాటిన జడ .. జడచివ్వర కుచ్చులు .. సన్నని పిల్లకాలువ వంపులాంటి నడుము .. ఆ నడుముకో వడ్డాణం .. అరచేతిలో తీర్చిదిద్దిన గోరింటాకు .. ముంజేతివరకూ గలగలమనే గాజులు .. ఒంపుసొంపుల హరివిల్లె మెరిసే వర్ణం .. ఇదేమన బాపుగారి రమణీయమైన బొమ్మరూపం"

Bapu is also famous for his delightful cartoons. In one simple frame, he manages to deftly tell a whole story, making you laugh as well as appreciate some hitherto hidden truth. I asked him again the question that was asked in Houston, if he was going to be doing any cartoons about his experiences in the US. He said that visually, there aren't that many differences between the people here and in India, to make specifically distinctive cartoons. As an artist, he needs to get the widest possible input, with different experiences. And someday, something from this visit might show up in some work of his. He is familiar with most of the popular cartoonists here, and mentioned Dilbert, the Far Side etc., He said he admires the work of Charles Addams (best known as the creator of the Addams family, but apparently his other cartoons appeared in the New Yorker a lot). He also likes comedy shows, and his favourite comedian, he said, was Stan Laurel (the thin guy on Laurel and Hardy). He also finds the Marx brothers, and the TV show Three's Company very funny. Bapu is a big fan of P.G.Wodehouse, and, recalling that Wodehouse had lived in Long Island before he died, wanted to find the site. (Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful in this). He quoted Wodehouse's famous dedication of one of his books to his daughter "without whose never-failing sympathy and encouragement this book would have been finished in half time."

Bapu garu immerses himself in his work. He gets up early, goes for a long walk and then sits down to draw. He cannot draw without music in the background. (to quote him, నాకు పుస్తకాల పిచ్చి, సినిమాల పిచ్చి, పాటల పిచ్చి). He typically listens to hindustani vocal music, or Ghazals. He met a famous Urdu Ghazal singer once in Pakistan, and told him that he enjoyed his songs very much. The Ghazal singer was happy, but startled to learn that Bapu did not understand one word of Urdu! Even though the lyrics in Ghazals are more important than the music, Bapu loved them! Bapu's other favourite types of music are light instrumental, fusion and of course, movie songs. This passion of Bapu for music is also a good thing for us - almost all of the songs in his movies are beautiful, with traditional tunes and meaningful lyrics. Anyway, he then spends most of the day drawing, breaking just for meals. He makes multiple sketches before finding the perfect one. For coloring, he works mainly with water colors. He even draws sketches of each scene in his movies to get the composition he wants.

Wherever he visited in the US, Bapu garu's priority was visiting the used books stores. By the time he reached New York, he had already collected about 60 pounds of books. He likes to acquire old humor and cartoon books, and even

videotapes. I had the good fortune to take him around the used book stores in Long Island, looking for anything to his taste. Driving with Bapu is another great experience, because he keeps you entertained in conversation with a steady supply of riotously funny jokes. Arudra: "కవితకి వయసంటూ లేదు. మంచి కవితైతే అది ఎన్నేళ్ళైన గుర్తుంటుంది. నేను 40 యేళ్ళకృతం ఒక కవిత వ్రాసాను". listener: "ఏం కవితో కొంచం వినిపిస్తార" Arudra: "గుర్తు లేదండీ " (అంటే మంచి కవిత కాదనమాట!)

All in all, it was a wonderful day for me, and I must thank whoever is watching over me from above for giving me this great opportunity. The program the next day was a grand success, and the audience got a glimpse of Bapu gari humor and personality in the question/answer session. With any luck, he will visit us again soon, and allow us to enjoy his presence once again.

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