

# TOWARDS AN INSTANT THEATRE

## *Fragmentation and Functionalism in Folk Theatre Forms*

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One way of categorizing genres in folk arts is by applying the norm of sensory perception. All art forms, in such a case, could be divided into three areas: (i) auditory, (ii) auditory visual and (iii) visual. There are very few pure visual forms in folk arts (such as mime, folk painting etc.) Further, one may find that the auditory-visual forms take a precedence over the mere auditory ones. That the visual forms are more effective with the audience, especially the unlettered village folk, needs no emphasizing here since even the communication experts lay greater emphasis on the visual than on the mere auditory. While such an insistence on the relatively greater impact of the visual form is based on the experience of audiences over centuries, a close scrutiny of the folk theatre forms reveals that they have consistently failed to keep their forms and content intact and continuous changes are brought into them to keep pace with audience response. Since change is fundamental to all folklore, this in itself is not a serious case for study; but what makes these changes especially noticeable are their fragmentation and the performer's functional approach that necessitated such fragmentation.

By 'fragmentation', I mean any shortening of an existing content component; or, by extension, any concise capsuling of a possibly lengthier episode/episodes to suit audience acceptance. This fragmentation, I believe, is necessitated either due to the performer's awareness of the utility of the changed, fragmented form or, negatively speaking, their awareness of the futility of the old forms to achieve a predetermined goal. Either way it is the functional necessity that must have prompted the performers to seek, and establish new forms. That the folk artists are very conscious of the perceptible changes in audience responses is evident from their contemporizing the forms from time to time, incorporating and interpolating new references or episodes of topical interest. In a genre study of the folk theatre forms, this fragmentation of the episodes and their functional importance

should be taken into consideration, especially while dealing with the sub-forms of a particular genre.

Calling out an episode from any traditional myth or legend and, either presenting the episode independently or mixing it up with other folk forms in order to bring home a metaphysical truth or a political expediency is common in all the countries. The *ludruk*, a Japanese folk show of Surabaja incorporates elements of traditional Japanese shadow plays, Madurese legends, welding these and other elements into a five hour show featuring skits, dances, songs and drama. By a regrouping method the Japanese performers, in the *ludruk* show, reassemble fragments of different folk items in order to entertain a present day audience. The variations brought upon *Jatra* performances for political ends is by now a common experience. There are other varieties, which, without changing substantially, incorporate new elements. But the two most common elements seen in such remodelling attempts are: fragmentation and functionalism.

The form chosen here for substantiation is an interesting Telugu folk theatre form called *Pagati Vesham*. It must have emerged, in the form it stands today, in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, though it has many suggested antecedents.

Vesham in Telugu means costume; by extension of meaning, it would suggest 'behaving in a way that you hide your natural self.' Suppose you say '*Nāku Teliyadu* : I do not know (What you are asking)', I might reply '*Antā Vēsham*' : it is false; you are feigning; you have put on another's role; and so on. If we extend the same terms to theatre terminology, we can say:

He has taken up a *Vēsham* (role) in that play  
(*Vādu Vēsham Vēstunnādu*)

I did not like his *Vēsham* (role; role-playing)  
(*Vādi Vēsham nāku nachalēdu*)

The second sentence—*Vādi Vēsham nāku nachalēdu*—in day to day conversation, would mean that I did not like his peculiar behaviour; or his role-playing.

So *Vēsham* means role or role-playing; to assume another's role, hiding your own.

*Pagati* means 'during the daytime' (from *pagalu*:day)

*Pagati Vēsham*, then, would mean a person assuming another's role during daytime'. *Vesham* is a near equivalent of *bhumika* and it can be safely assumed that this role-playing is not substantially different from the

same man's role-playing in a traditional drama during the night time. Looking at the term from a traditional performance point of view, it sounds a paradox since theatrical role-playing is ever envisaged during the day time and, conversely, no entertainment shown during the day time could be termed as role-playing. However, the term not only defines the form but also suggests its prominent connotations.

It is interesting to note that the form is usually referred to in its plural—*Pagati Veshalu*, because it is not a single performance, but a series of performances, consecutively presented for a number of days, depending upon the repertoire of a particular actor/troupe and/or the response of a village. Two or three actors take up different roles each day and present their 'show' at the doorsteps of every house in a village. On the last day, they resume their original *Vesham*, go to each house for collecting suitable remuneration. The performance may extend to its full duration—which is a half hour—or, it may end abruptly on the summarily summoned orders of a not-to-enthusiastic lord of the house:

The performance will be repeated at each house and the entire household becomes the audience, with the wayfarers occasionally intruding into the exclusive performance, a rare privilege for the village folk.

Broadly speaking, the performance as such centres round a particular character type and includes the costume, make-up, speech and mannerisms of that type, always adding such sly humour against the type, which would go a long way to make the whole show a skit.

A tentative list of the most celebrated *Veshams* included in the repertoire of the different groups would indicate its catholicity and variety. About sixty common *Veshams* are noted, out of which the following are more prominent:

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|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Bairagi                | 15. Pathan                       |
| 2. Budabukkala            | 16. Komati                       |
| 3. Somayajulu-Somidevamma | 17. Paduchu Pellam Musali Mogudu |
| 4. Dhashtikam Pantulu     | 18. Gayyali Pellam               |
| 5. Dasari                 | 19. Revenue Inspector            |
| 6. Tahsildar              | 20. Atta-Kodalla Samvadham       |
| 7. Bogam                  | 21. Lambadi                      |
| 8. Pamulavadu             | 22. Gollabhama                   |
| 9. Erukala                | 23. Mandula Vesham               |
| 10. Dommara               | 24. Bhatraju                     |
| 11. Koya                  | 25. Linga Balija                 |
| 12. Fakir                 | 26. Shakti                       |
| 13. Jarpama               | 27. Dudinamma                    |
| 14. Satani                | 28. Ardha-nareesvara             |

A thematic categorization of these character—types would yield a three-fold division: (i) Those based on traditional mythical/legendary types (such as Ardhanareeswara, Bhethala, Shakti etc.), (ii) character-types based on contemporary caste-clan-social position (majority of these come under this group), (iii) Types of pure farcical interest (Mondibanda Vallu, & Singi Singadu etc.).

The second group, as I just mentioned, is the most prominent one. The characters portrayed here are of contemporary relevance. The performers go to these communities and show a portrayal of their own character-types, which indicates that the types are drawn so broadly and so genially that even those that are directly affected by it would not take it amiss. In fact, the people of the Communities honour the performers for their careful understanding and flawless imitation.

The list of the character-types would also exemplify three major aspects of fragmentation, especially if we compare the characters and their style of rendering with the traditional dramatic forms:

- (1) As against the development of a plot with different characters seen in the traditional forms, this form endeavours to present an in-depth character study of a particular type.
- (2) As against a full night's performance (roughly about eight hours, sometimes extendable to several nights), a single *Pagati Vesham* 'Performance' will not exceed half hour. But if we take into account the continuous process of its repetitive performances, moving from house to house, the total time that will be taken by the performers to cover a fairly large village of about five hundred houses would be four to five hours.
- (3) As against numerous characters required in a full length folk theatre presentation, this performance usually needs one or two characters, accompanied, occasionally, by a harmonist and a percussionist.

Such single actor's performances are not altogether absent in ancient Andhra folk tradition. Palkuriki Somanatha's mention of such role-playing, disguised in the characters of Gandharvas, Yakshas and Vidyadharas is one of the earliest references to a single person's multiple role-playing. But that is a night performance and in the precincts of a temple during a festival and so is occasioned by a ritual; whereas no ritualistic background necessitates a *Pagati-Vesham* performance.

Three different ancient forms seem to be akin to *Pagati Vesham* : viz: *Bahurupam*, *Kalāpam*, and *Vālakam*.

*Bahurūpam*: As the word indicates, Bahurūpam is a form in which a single actor takes up the roles of different people at different times. In later years, this is described as a *nritya* form which indicates extempore action, speech and costume.

Kalāpam is a dance form in which a single actor's predicament is exposed through songs, dance and expressive emotions. Bhamakalapam is one such. But there are other Kalapams such as Chodigani kalapam and singi—singadu which reveal a greater sense of realism both in content and form.

Yet another folk form which goes nearer in presentation is *Valākam*, a one-man's extempore exposition of a matter of topical interest, mainly presented on ritual days.

*Pagati Vesham* has something of all these forms in it, but it is basically different from others since it is a diurnal performance and not a nocturnal one. It is more realistic than *Kalapam* and less ritualistic than *Valākam*.

It may safely be surmised here that in spite of a variety of ancient forms which have resemblances to *Pagati-Vesham* either in form or content, it has a unique originality of its own. As no other theatrical form has envisaged to do, the *Pagati-Vesham* is presented only during the daytime. As the wandering minstrels go from door to door singing ballads of Yore, these performers go from door to door presenting a dramatic 'item', which consists of characters in action and a 'plot' through which the characters are interpreted to us.

In doing so, the form has to obey certain self-imposed rules. These rules go a long way to categorize the form as 'dramatic'; they are costume, make-up, speech and mannerisms that would befit the character-types. Great care is to be taken in costumes and make-up since it is a daytime performance. The actual likeness of the roles is to be established, firstly through *āhārya*.

Secondly, since these *Veshams* are all character portrayals of contemporary people who form a part of the audience to which the show is presented, the performer's 'characterization' should be realistic. The performers take a considerable amount of care to achieve this character identification, not only by *aharya*, but also by *Vachika*. The speech rhythm and dialect variations are so minute from one caste character to the other that the performers must carefully incorporate them in their presentation of the characters.

Many items of the repertoire lay emphasis on the *aharya* and *Vachika*

aspects of *abhinaya* alone. In a few of them *augika* is predominant (Bhetala, Shakti etc.) and rarely do we come across a Vesham, in which *sattvika* is dominant. There is only one Vesham which insists on such emotive expressions—the *ardha-nareesvara Vesham* originally presented only by the Kuchipudi performers.

The absence of *Sattvika* aspect of *abhinaya* in the presentation of the *Veshas* is an indication of the form's reliance on a realistic interpretation of character, for, in the stylized theatre forms in India—both classical and traditional, *sattvika* plays a dominant role in symbolising the characters, which, in turn, leads to universalization. In *Pagati Vesham* the insistence is more on particularizing the character, though there is a limited attempt at universalizing it to be a type. *Sattvika*'s absence in *Pagati Vesham* is also necessitated for two other reasons: through the *sattvika bhavas* presented in the *abhinaya* of stylized characters in regular folk performances, aesthetic distance is maintained between the actor and his audience. Since such distance is not maintained in *Pagati Vesham* performances due to the character's physical nearness to the audience and the realistic style of presentation chosen, only such portrayals are selected which do not need much of emotive expression for a proper interpretation of character. This is perhaps so, since the presentations are required to be understood even by common, not very literate, folk who would have found the intricate gesture-language difficult to follow.

Realistic interpretation of character, as against the stylised symbolism of the traditional dramatic forms, is the first prerequisite of the *Pagati Vesham* performers' functionalist approach to dramatic forms, for this takes the form nearer to common people. Making it as less intricate stylistically as possible is the second step in this direction. Selection of realistic character-types is the third major feature in bringing the performances nearer the audience. Choice of themes is the fourth one. Except the traditional characters, which are very few, all the others are topical; and a serious portrayal of such characters could be seen in contemporary dramatic literature. Orthodox brahmin and his relentless wife, the unfortunate widow indulging in some fortunate escapades, the drunken, prestige-conscious, impertinent village Alderman (Dhastikam Pantulu), the prostitute-dancer (bogam), Komati (the 'Banya' with his cunning parsimonious habits), the wayward Reddy, the all pleasing Bhattu, the Diwan both docile and ferocious by turns, the Revenue Inspector and his secretive functioning—such is a large gallery of character-types which are distinguished from one another by a queer addition of mannerisms relevant to each one.

Another characteristic that specifically helps the *Pagati-Vesham* to gain currency among the village folk is its unbiased approach, to each character type. This is done by giving a sly, humorous turn to the sketch,

taking the one from the broad behavioural peculiarities of each type. Humour, in fact, is the real sustaining principle in all these performances; humour, both in *angika* and *Vachika*. The performer goes to the extent of mildly reprimanding some of the characteristics of these character-types. In this way they serve as great correctives. Good humour without a stink of malice is responsible for the genial response this form gets from people.

It is in this context that fragmentation becomes a meaningful tool in the hands of the performers, for this half humorous, half satirical/critical approach is directly borrowed from the traditional performances themselves. In the traditional performances, such critical-humorous comments are a part of the dramatic interludes, during which time established humorous characters come up to the stage, indulge in name-calling and also foolish prattle. This is the usual comic relief in a traditional play: Kethigadu and Bangaracka in the Shadow puppet plays, Singi-Singadu in Yakshaganam and Kuravangi, the fortune-tellers in these and other forms, the Vidushaka himself, sometimes on his own and sometimes in the role of Sutradhara—are all character from the traditional folk theatre forms who indulge in good-intentioned, if not always good-humoured criticism of topical events. The content of these interludes, taken out of the main performances, forms the basis of *Pagati Vesham's* tone and its main social intent.

The functional approach to drama is a two way approach: the performers' need to present items that go well with the audiences of different strata of people, different castes and creeds so that their bread is taken care of. Similarly the audience's expectations of seeing a 'limited' performance within the temporal and spatial realities of life are met with by these performers. Viewed from this point, *Pagati Vesham* is easily the most popular, 'concise' performing art form that is welcomed by the audience.

Finally, the most important functional aspect of *Pagati Vesham* is its ready availability to the audience at their own door-steps. Instead of the entire family making a trip to the central place of the village during the night time, inconveniencing themselves, it is the capsuled form that is presented to them; and those few minutes they are the royal guests in their own homes.

Further, such a form becomes 'instant' theatre, because when once the *Vesham* is on, speech befitting the character comes to the performer automatically and those four or five hours, he lives in the role; most often he does not come out of his role until the complete 'dramatic' tour of the village is over.

It becomes 'instant' theatre because the form is presented, not on an



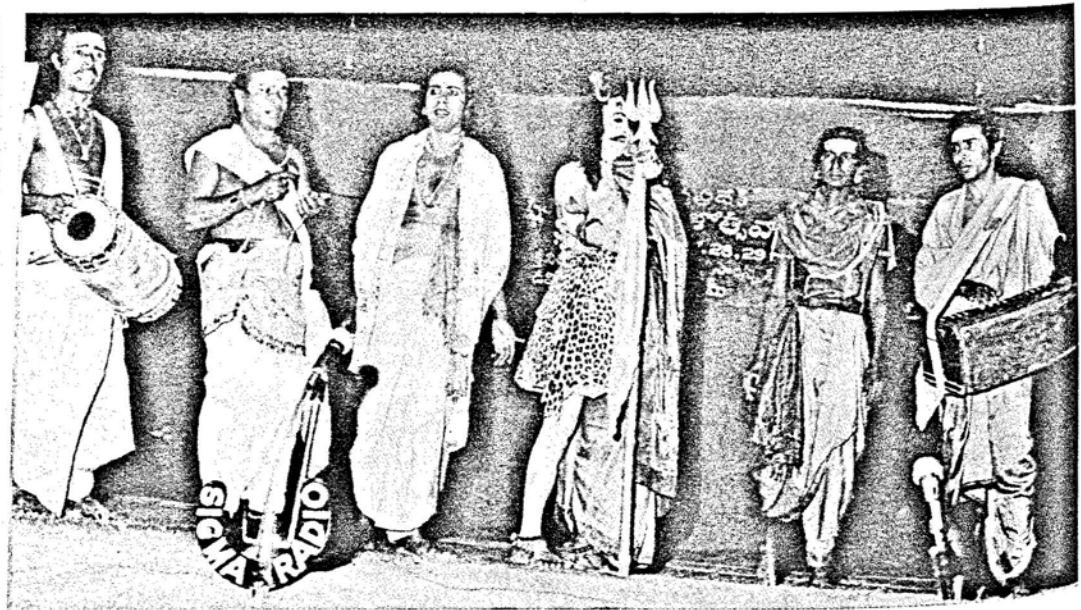
Mandula Vallu : Quacks (Vibhuti Bhavani Lingam and Party. Rajamundry)



Somayajulu—Somi Devi (The Orthodox Brahmin and his Wife with their disciples),



Arthanareeswara : Parvati



Arthanareeswara : Shiva (The same person takes the roles of both Shiva and Parvati)



Saataani



Shakti

improvised stage as a traditional drama is enacted, but in the wide courtyards of the rich people, in the wide open places where four roads meet, on the muddy roads, narrow by-lanes, in short, wherever the folk audiences are found.

Such presentations are almost 'instant' because they start off as vigorously as they are put off, almost suddenly, according to the demands of an environment. They are 'instant' in yet another sense. They get to the content of the performance directly without elaborate preliminaries as seen in the traditional folk theatre forms.

Finally, the functional importance of *Pagati Vesham* topsyturves the entire performer-audience relationship. While the traditional dramatic forms are performance oriented (that is to say the performance is the fixed entity and all requirements such as audiences, content, style of presentation etc. are to be geared to promote such a performance), the *Pagati Vesham* is receiver oriented.

Thus fragmentation of the form, of the thematic variations viable with different sets of audiences and fragmentation in time have become necessary for the performers to launch almost a new form which takes drama to the door steps of the common people by very innovative and wandering theatre groups.

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