

## The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Andhra Pradesh

M. NAGABHUSHANA SARMA

Shadow puppetry has been popular not only in Andhra Pradesh, but in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Orissa. While the puppets of Kerala, Maharashtra, and Orissa are traditionally black-and-white, the Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra puppets are multi-coloured. They are also larger in size, with separate parts of various limbs stitched loosely for better articulation. The earliest mass medium using coloured images, the shadow-puppet theatre has always been popular among rural folk, combining entertainment with moral instruction.

Historically speaking, there are two distinct shadow-puppet traditions in Andhra Pradesh—the ancient and the comparatively modern. The earliest mention of the ancient tradition occurs in a 13th-century poetic work, *Panditaradhya Charitra*, written by Palkuriki Somanatha, a Shaiva poet. In the first canto, Somanatha mentions two types of puppets—those that are manipulated behind white curtains and those that are manipulated with rods. The former are leather puppets and the latter rod puppets. This reference proves beyond doubt that the shadow-puppet theatre had a well established tradition in the Andhra region by the 13th century: Somanatha's description pertains to a Shivaratri festival at Srisailem temple, and only an indigenous entertainment could have featured in this major religious festival.

That leather-puppet shows were exclusive to south India is borne out by the comments of Neelakantha Panditha (a 12th-century commentator on the *Mahabharata*) on a technical word, *roopopajeevanam* (*Mahabharata*, XII-CCXCV-5). According to Neelakantha, *roopopajeevanam*, popular in south India as *jāla mandapika*, was a shadow play in which leather figures were projected on a curtain in order to acquaint the people with the deeds and misdeeds of kings and ministers: "*Roopopajeevanam jāla mandapiketi dakshinatyesu prasiddham. Tatra sookshma vastram vyavadhaya charmayairakarayh rājāmatya deenam charya pradarshyate.*" In translation, this would read: "Presently [depictions of] life through characters known as *jāla mandapika* is popular in south India. It shows leather characters behind a curtain [in tales] containing the deeds of kings and ministers."



*Bhima and  
Keechaka.*

An inscription dated 1208 A.D. shows that in that year Vipparula Kondapa and Gundapa donated a village to the puppeteer Sutradhari Bommalayya. Many other inscriptions, epics and legends contain references to the existence, popularity and scholarship of puppeteers in different parts of Andhra Pradesh. A 1521 inscription shows that a group of puppeteers was honoured by royalty. A textbook of mathematics, written at the instance of a puppeteer, commended the worth of a puppeteer called Bommalata Kala who, by his sheer virtuosity in the art, had become close to Krishnadevaraya, the great south Indian king, and was honoured by him. Similarly, A.R. 316 of 1928, an inscription belonging to Cuddapah district, says that two master puppeteers—Chandramayya and Bommalata Amrita Kavi—had donated a village, Chidipirala of Kamalapuram taluk, Cuddapah district, to another puppeteer, Peda Chittayya, in order that he may continue to perform shadow plays. The puppeteers of the day were evidently rich enough to donate a village to other puppeteers for the propagation of their art.

There are many references to shadow plays in the Telugu classics. The central interest of a puppet show is the story, says a late-16th-century poetic text, *Gangavatharanam*. Another text, *Chandragada Charitra*, written about 1650, describes a whole puppet show and the different elements of a show. The curtain, the audience seated before it, the commentator behind the curtain, the lights that throw the shadows on the screen, the actors, and the puppets—these, the poet says, are the essential components of a puppet show. That puppet shows were performed all night is indicated in another text, *Panchalee Parinayamu*. References in *Bhaskara Sataka* and *Vemana Sataka* throw light on the contemporary significance of puppet shows.

These references indicate that the art of shadow puppetry occupied an important place in rural entertainment in the Andhra country at least from the 13th century. All the instances refer to native puppeteers who, in many cases, were known by their profession—Bommalata Vallu—and sometimes carried it as their surname together with their family names. There are, however, later inscriptions of the 19th century which indicate a different set of non-Telugu people who had settled down in this part of the country and earned their livelihood by shadow-puppet performances. One gets such information, curiously enough, from a Telengana inscription recovered from Guduru in Warangal district (known as the Guduru inscription). It mentions the puppeteer's art and especially the names of "Sutradhari Kommajanaha, Baraha", indicating it is an inscription ordered to be written by Sutradhari (Puppeteer) Kommoji. Similarly the Panugallu inscription contains references to another Sutradhari Brahmoju (or Brahmoji).

These references in late-18th-century and early-19th-century inscriptions



*Dronacharya, Bhima (first and second from left), and others in Keechaka Vadha.*

bear testimony to a divided tradition in Andhra shadow puppetry. The earlier puppeteers were of native origin and had established themselves as traditional puppeteers, hereditarily devoted to the art. The references to Kommoji and Brahmoji, which are not native Telugu names, suggest that the second tradition had started with puppeteers of Maratha origin in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These 'western' performers might have migrated with the Maratha kings of the Nayaka dynasty (17th century) and settled on the borders of Maharashtra and the Andhra country—to be more exact, the territory around Hindupur and Bellary under the Nayaka rulers. This also substantiates the evidence, available now, that a large number of Andhra puppeteers and a considerable number of Karnataka puppeteers are of Maratha origin and speak, though mutually unintelligible to either group, a dialect of Marathi called Aare. Further, there are families of similar family names in both the regions. While the Telugu Aares belong to

four families, the Karnataka Aares comprise 13 families (including the four found in Andhra Pradesh). This indicates that the Aare puppeteers (either in Karnataka or Andhra) migrated from Maharashtra either during the time of the Nayakas or during other conquests. However, most of these puppeteers learnt Telugu or Kannada texts for their performance, retaining their native dialect for home.

It may also be assumed that all puppeteers now settled in Karnataka and Andhra originally gave performances in Telugu only and later on, possibly after Nayaka rule, went on to perform in two different languages. This may be deduced from the practice of the old Karnataka puppeteers singing their Ganesha *stuti*—invocation to Lord Ganesha—in Telugu.

The Aares are known as Aare Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, a name which assimilates them in Telugu society. (Kapu is the name of the Telugu agricultural community which also produced military chieftains.) They are known as Gandholis in Maharashtra, possibly after the main humorous character in the original Marathi puppet play—Gandholi or Gandholigadu.

The Aares themselves prefer to be called Balijas or Balija Kshatriyas or Bondilis as they are called in Maharashtra. They were mostly itinerant, wandering nine months a year from village to village, staying at each place for a few days. In more recent times, however, they have settled down at different places, doing odd jobs. Many of them have found that they cannot earn enough by Bommalata to provide for their families and so have taken to other work. The villages where these puppeteers have settled range from Sringavarapukota in Vishakhapatnam district to Bommalatalapalli in Bellary district. A group of about 40 Aare puppeteer families made Madhavapatnam near Kakinada their home in 1937. Families in southern Andhra Pradesh do not have a permanent home and are still itinerant.

\*

The basic material needed to make a puppet is the wet skin of a goat or deer. The skin is dipped in warm water and the inner side cleaned with a sharp knife. The hair is removed. Salt is not applied while polishing the skin as tanning is not involved here. After the skin is cleaned and softened, it is made uniformly thin and translucent. This process takes a day. The skin is then placed on a soft gunny mat and is stretched so that, when it is dry, it would not stiffen or wrinkle. Four people hold the skin on four sides to stretch it uniformly and fix it with nails all around. A thin white cloth is placed on the skin to protect it from excessive heat. After a day the skin is white and translucent. It is about 1/32 inch thick and stiff enough to stand against the screen. The parched skin is now ready to be transformed into a



puppet. Three skins are needed for a large figure, and two for a medium-size figure. Each medium or large puppet has three main parts—the head, the body, and the limbs.

The first step in cutting out a figure is to draw an outline on the skin with pencil or charcoal. Usually the outline is traced from an old puppet. Sometimes the artist may even trace the outline directly with a sharp instrument, leaving a groove in the skin. When old puppets are not available, or when the artist wants an altogether new figure, the puppet is drawn from imagination on the skin, the proportions carefully checked, and the final 'sketch' made with a sharp chisel.

Then the artist proceeds with the ornamentation of the puppet, mainly the jewellery and costume. Different types of small patterns are made on the skin with sharp chisels. Circles, triangles and crosses are the usual shapes to indicate jewellery. At this stage, only the outlines are incised. The puppet is then cut out with a pair of scissors.

The next step is perforating the patterns already made on the skin to suggest jewellery and costume. Holes of uniform size are punched but the artist often alternates the shape to suggest different kinds of ornament. For example, if one necklace has small circular holes, another will have triangular perforations, and so on. Such alternation makes for variety and adds to the beauty of a figure. When the puppet is coloured and held against the light, casting a shadow on the white screen, these holes look like fine

*Tracing, cutting, and colouring the puppets.*



jewellery of different kinds and colours.

The different parts of the puppet are then hinged together with a strong string made of ordinary thread rolled together. These strings are inserted in holes perforated at the edges of the limbs. The knots can easily be untied. However, the head and body are held together by a strong bamboo stick fitting into loops behind the puppet.

\*

The colouring of the puppets is the most elaborate process in puppet-making. Until the early years of this century vegetable dyes were used, but now chemical dyes are in vogue. In the old days only three basic colours were used—red, green and black—with white as relief. With the easy availability of chemical dyes, there is a growing tendency to use other colours like yellow, violet, etc. The earlier puppets have deep colours but now lighter shades are used.

The colouring starts two days after punching and perforation. A thick paste of colour, mixed with water, is applied with a piece of cloth rolled and soaked in the paste. After one coat of colour is applied, a fresh piece of cloth is used to spread out the colour more uniformly.

The Andhra puppets are the largest multi-coloured puppets in India. The usual size of a puppet ranges between  $5 \times 3$  to  $6 \times 3\frac{1}{2}$  feet. There are even larger figures. A *ganiyam* or puppet box usually holds 100 puppets. These hundred-odd figures are used to present both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* stories. Some characters come in several sizes, according to the needs of the story. For example, there would be at least four figures of Hanuman in a *ganiyam* ranging from a small one of  $\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2}$ -foot size to a large one of  $7\frac{1}{2}$  or  $8 \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ -foot size. These are used as the occasion demands; the largest size is used when Hanuman shows *vishwarupa* to Sita. Similarly, most of the major characters have at least two figures in different sizes.

Usually the head and body are made out of one piece of leather and the limbs from another piece. In some figures the trunk and limbs, even the feet, are separately stitched. These are the dancing puppets, known as *keelu bommalu* (also *sutram bommalu*: 'puppets with strings').

The head and body are held together with a bamboo stick so that the figure is stiff when held aloft against the screen. Since the puppet is coloured on both sides, it can be used both ways depending upon the direction of the head required to suit a scene, especially when the character is engaged in conversation.

A stage with a white screen is a prerequisite for a performance. Unlike string puppets, which are operated in front of a screen, leather puppets appear behind the screen. The entire manipulation takes place behind the screen. The white screen—usually 8×6 feet (for larger performances, it would be 10×6 feet or even 12×6 feet)—is stretched and fixed to poles on all four sides. The screen has to be stretched tightly, without creases, to afford a clear view from the other side. Usually the curtain is about 1½ feet from the ground. This portion is covered with black cloth. The curtain is fixed at a height to enable the performers to stand and operate the puppets.

The white cloth is neither too thick nor too thin. If it were too thick, the shadows would not show clearly, and if it were too thin the puppets and puppeteers would be visible across the curtain. It is customary, especially in northern Andhra, to fix the curtain at a slight tilt (about 15 degrees). This makes it easier to hold the large puppets against the screen.

For illumination, two lamps are placed a couple of feet behind the screen at a height of about six feet. In the old days a row of earthenware lamps were used, lit with castor oil. But since castor oil is now too expensive the performers use petromax lamps, even electric lights. Care has to be taken to light up the screen uniformly so that the puppets glow uniformly on the screen. The old style of lighting achieved a more natural and uniform illumination while with the aid of petromax and electric bulbs, the light is less diffused and more concentrated. When the old lighting style was in vogue, the mild light on the dark puppets gave them a marvellous translucence and an almost lifelike silhouette. In recent years, with the introduction of petromax and electric lamps, light colours have come to be used for the puppets: against such bright lights, the dark colours of the old puppets would seem very dull.

\*

The manipulation of the puppets is intricate and subtle. The free-moving limbs have to be manipulated simultaneously; the one-piece figures without joints are more easily managed. The manipulation must achieve a stylized effect while retaining the realistic visual impact made by the puppet. The important thing is to achieve the right posture of the character concerned.

The nature of a character is often indicated by its entrance. As in Yakshagana and Veethinatakam, in Bommalata also a major character's entrance is indicated by a *pravesa daruvu* (entrance song) which mentions his name, fame, purpose, etc. The uses of the entrance song are multiple. In the first place, it establishes his identity. It also brings back to the audience the original character in the epic and enables the audience to follow the story better.





*Manipulation of puppets: the screen is at a tilt.*

The Andhra puppets are especially arresting because of their colour scheme and size. Dramatic colour contrast is achieved in the presentation. For example, the scenes in which Ravana and Rama or Ravana and Anjaneya appear on the screen may be visualized: while Anjaneya is coloured green, Rama is blue and Ravana red. The relative variations of size are also dramatic—some characters look more imposing than others by their sheer height and width. Thus Ravana, Keechaka, Bheema, Anjaneya, and Rama are larger than all other characters.

Action and gesture accompanying the entrance song have considerable dramatic value. For example, Anjaneya always comes on the screen with acrobatic feats. Similarly Jattivadu (a boxing champion) in *Keechaka Vadha* makes an entry with great pomp and noise. Among gestures, that of keeping a hand on the moustache is a sign of valour. Such gestures and movements abound in Andhra puppet shows.

The battle scenes and fights (including duels) are absorbing. The important episodes are built around such fights to hold the attention of the audience. A wordy duel and exchange of blows, followed with a fight with bows and arrows—such is the usual order of confrontations. During a fight the entire manipulation style changes. At the climax the puppets are not manipulated with sticks. Both the warring puppets are held by one manipulator who achieves a simulation of a fight by thrusting one puppet

against the other. The dramatic impact is further enhanced by background sound effects and the beating of the Mridangam at its loudest. Two instruments are specially used by the puppeteers when a fight is shown. One is the Pavada, a hollow bone of a goat, which produces a sound resembling a bugle or Sankham, signalling the start of war. The second 'instrument' is two long pieces of wood, placed one over the other. These pieces are an inch thick, six to eight inches wide, and two feet long. By clamping one's foot on the upper piece a clapping sound simulating an exchange of blows is produced, adding to the furore and noisy chaos expected of a bitter fight. All the other puppeteers backstage send out ear-splitting cries of "Abba-amma-chavu-chachanu".

As earlier mentioned, the major characters come in several sizes, which are changed as the story requires. For example, Anjaneya first appears as a small monkey on all fours, hopping up and down. When Rama entrusts him with the task of looking for Sita, he grows into a two-footed, but still small, creature. When he goes near the sea his friends remind him of his greatness and he swells into a super-size figure. The *vishwarupa* he assumes when Sita asks him for identification is the largest figure used by the puppeteers. On the other hand, in *Sundarakanda*, Anjaneya becomes a tiny creature when he goes into the mouth of the demon and comes out killing her. (In the puppets of demons, there is often a joint between the upper and lower jaw which helps the mouth to open wide, permitting feats like Hanuman's.) The *keelu bommalu* have changeable heads. Certain demons too have disengageable heads, cut off during a battle.

The 'text' the puppeteers use for their performance is not a written document. It is collected (and orally transmitted) from different sources at different times in the development of the art. For example, the *Ramayana* story is drawn from different written and oral texts. The narrative part comes from the *Ranganatha Ramayanam*, said to have been written by a king, Budha Reddi. The text is chosen partly because of its conversational idiom, necessary for a theatre performance, and partly because of its musicality. The poems are taken from the *Molla Ramayanam* and the *daruvus* from the *Kuchikonda Ramayanam*. The different components are put together appropriately in a performance. It is not known when these different textual elements came to be assimilated in Andhra puppetry. The puppeteers learn the text by rote.

Such assimilation is common enough in folk performances. Change is the survival principle of these arts. As they cater to changing entertainment needs, the artistes have to put in ingredients people like, keeping within the framework of the tradition. Thus we find that the slow rendering of a song is replaced by a fast rendering, the deep colours of the old puppets are

replaced by light colours of multiple shades, etc. There are changes in the text as well. Popular film songs or new songs based on popular tunes are often incorporated.

Verbal improvisation mainly occurs during the humorous interludes which do not depend upon any text. Audiences eagerly await the arrival of the comic characters Bangarakka and Kethigadu. Through these characters—the common gossip and revelry they indulge in—the puppeteers bring relief to the moral tone of the story. There are duets specially written for these two characters who have become synonymous with folk humour in the Andhra country. Though they occupy a relatively minor role in the entire performance, they are recalled with delight by the spectators. In the old days the relative merits of puppeteers were decided on the basis of their improvisations with these comic characters.

Music is the soul of a puppet show. The dances, conversations, fights, descriptions, and even humorous episodes come to life through appropriate songs and poems, recited in the proper *raga*. The popular saying 'Adi Nata, antya Surati' ('The beginning in Nata *raga* and the ending in Surati') holds good for a puppet show: its invocation is often in Nata *raga* and its *mangalam* in Surati. The other *ragas* used by the puppeteers are Mukhari, Sivaranjani, Sriragam, Khamachi, Anandabhairavi, etc.

These classical *ragas* are, however, rendered by the puppeteers in a *desi* or folk style. The songs are given a great deal of modulation to heighten dramatic effect. Besides the *vanta*, the choric singing of the *pallavi*, the performers also intone *ragas* in between two stretches of manipulation. This happens especially when one incident is over and the puppets for the next episode are being mounted. As the song moves on the tempo pick up, climaxing in a *tirmanam* (*ta dhai tah*).

In the old days the puppeteers' groups were family groups that travelled from place to place. Records show that till 1937 many of these families did not have permanent homes. When they were at a place for a few days they set up home in the shade of a tree. When they could not travel during the rainy season, they took shelter in a village *choultry* or in some abandoned house on the outskirts of a village. Today the one-family troupe is extinct and a group is made up of two or three families, mostly related.

The performers in a group are about eight. Two male and two female members are the manipulator-singers. Three instrumentalists accompany the songs on the harmonium, Mridangam and Talam. In southern Andhra Pradesh, the Mukhavina is also used. One or two people are needed for miscellaneous duties like keeping the puppets in order, passing them on to the performers during a show, joining in the chorus, etc. Their main job is keeping the *tala* (rhythm) of a song and following, in a high-pitched refrain,

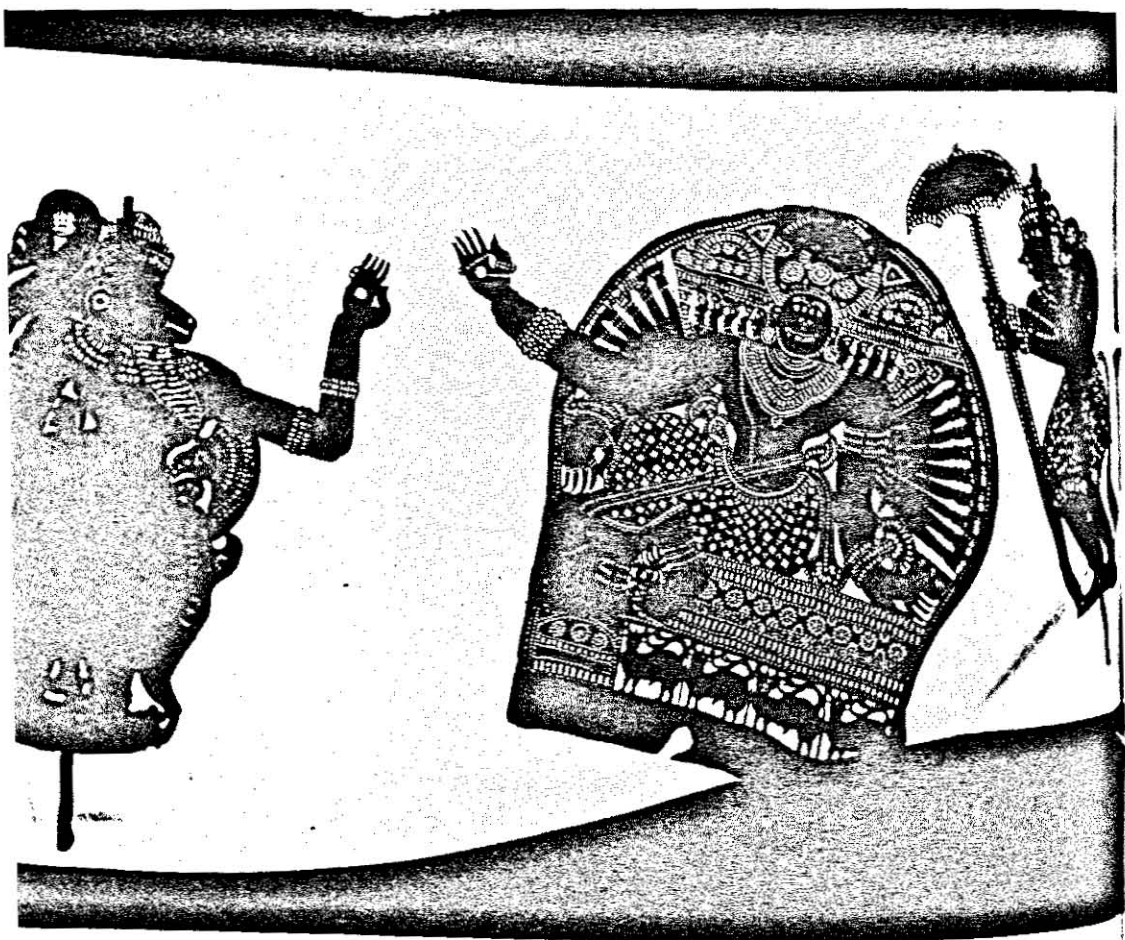
the *charanam* sung by the manipulator. The harmonium is used mainly for tuning and so it is handled most of the time by whoever is free. Most of the male members in a troupe are taught to play the Mridangam and so two or three people share the work.

\*

Almost all the puppeteers' teams have a fairly large number of plays in their repertoire. These plays are based on either the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*. A few stories from these epics are always more popular than others. *Sundarakanda* and *Yuddhakanda* from the *Ramayana* are the inevitable choice of audiences. In *Yuddhakanda* alone there are four major stories for full-length puppet plays: *Indrajit Vadha* (The Death of Indrajit), *Laxmana Murcha* (Laxmana's Fainting), *Mahiravana*, and *Rama-Ravana Yuddham* (The Battle of Rama and Ravana).

Four popular stories from the *Mahabharata* are *Keechaka Vadha*, *Virata Parvam*—a sequel to *Keechaka Vadha*—*Sasirekha Parinayam*, and *Padmavyuham*. *Padmavyuham* is the most intricate of all the plays put up by the puppeteers. To show the various battles two screens are set up, one above the other. The play thus requires two sets of puppets and accompanying instruments, as well as two groups of puppeteers. To present the play—performances are rare—some 200 puppets and 15 puppeteers are needed, together with two Mridangam players and two harmonium players.

The shadow-puppet theatre was for long the chief entertainment of the village folk of Andhra Pradesh. The puppeteers practised the art professionally, and had no other source of livelihood. Thus the repertoire and technique developed steadily over a course of centuries. But things have changed in the last 70 or 80 years. The flourishing art of puppetry is now almost on the path of extinction. □



*Hanumana in Ravana's court.*