The Puppet Theatre Tradition of Karnāṭaka

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Puppetry is one of the most ancient arts of the world. Its origins are wrapped in the dim mists of history, and it is not easy to tell with any degree of certainty where precisely it was born and in what conditions. There is enough evidence, however, in favour of the view that puppetry was a well known form of entertainment in India and China thousands of years ago. There are references to the art in the earliest writings of India, including the *Mahābhārata*, proving conclusively that it was well known even in the period of the great Sanskrit epics (c.1000 B.C.?). There is mention of a shadow-puppet play organized by a Han emperor in China in 121 B.C. This is the earliest evidence of the occurrence of puppetry in that country.

The stage manager of a play in ancient India used to be known as *sūtradhāra*. The word literally means 'one who holds (and manipulates) strings'. Apparently the term has been taken from puppetry. As an art form, then, puppetry clearly precedes drama. It was patronized by the Śātavāhanas, the Pallavas, the Chālukyas, the Kākatīyas, the emperors of Vijayanagara, and the rulers of Thanjāvūr. And when the Cholas and other south Indian rulers established an overseas empire in South-east Asia, it went with them to what is now known as Indonesia (Java, Bali, etc.), Thailand, and Indochina.

There were four kinds of puppets in India—string puppets, rod puppets, leather puppets, and glove puppets. Karnāṭaka had all four kinds of puppets. These four kinds in time evolved into seven different varieties: string puppets, rod puppets, leather puppets (small-sized), leather puppets (large-sized), glove puppets, jointed puppets, and *kitli bāvalis* (i.e., puppets made of bark or paper).

Glove puppets seem to have gone out of use in Karnāṭaka at some stage as they were not durable. They used to be known as *varananji* or *tārammayya* puppets. It would appear that Killekyāta[1] women were specialists in this kind of puppetry. They would carry the puppets in their hands, each hand in control of the movements of a puppet.

Puppetry seems to have flourished in Karnāṭaka especially from 12 to 16

century A.D., for there are numerous references to it in the literature of this period, as also in epigraphic records—as, for instance, in the *Nemināthapurāṇa* (A.D. 1190). The Vīraśaiva saint Basaveśvara asks in one of his inspired utterances (around the middle of the 12th century): *"Sūtrada gombege prāṇavunṭe?"* Kumāravyāsa (in the early 15th century) too refers to it in the *Sabhāparva* of his celebrated transcreation of the *Mahābhārata* in Kannaḍa: *Karṇāṭa Bhārata Kathāmañjarī*. Puppetry was apparently very popular under the Vijayanagara emperors as well—as witness the epigraphic records of the period (from the middle of the 14th century to the middle of the 16th). A record dated A.D. 1521 says that an *agrahāra* was granted in perpetuity to a string puppeteer in appreciation of his services. The saint-poets Purandaradāsa and Kanakadāsa (in the first half of the 16th century) make frequent references to puppetry in their compositions. In the context of explaining the four-fold division of society Kanakadāsa says: *"Togalu bombegaḷante nālku bageya nirmāṇa"*—a clear indication of the existence of leather puppetry in those days. Elsewhere he says: *"Dimbadolu prāṇaviralu kāmba sūtragombeyante"*—a pointed reference to the flourishing state of string puppetry. Thus both leather puppetry and string puppetry were well established in his time.

Jointed puppets were quite well known till about the 1940s in the districts of Mysore (Maisūrā) and Tumkūr(u). Performances used to be organized at weekly fairs or during car festivals in temples. The stage was reportedly a kind of rectangular box, with the puppeteers sitting hidden under the box and holding up the puppets even as they manipulated them.

Rod puppets are played by means of two narrow but long iron rods, with strings attached to the heads of the puppeteers. This facilitates the showing of such special actions by the puppets as the lighting of a lamp, puppets garlanding each other, etc. Whether in rod puppets or string puppets or even jointed puppets, the material used is always wood.

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In the string puppets of Karnāṭaka the form of the puppets, the costumes employed, the background music provided, the style of dancing used, etc. the influence of the local variation of the art of Yakṣagāna is clearly discernible. In Chitradurga, Tumkur, Bangalore (Bengalūrū), Kolar(a), Maṇḍya, and Mysore one can see that string puppetry is patterned on Mūdalapāya Yakṣagāna; in the Kannaḍa districts of the coast and in Chikkamagaḷūr(u) and Shimogā it follows the style of Paduvalapāya; and in Bijāpur(a), Belgaum, Dharwad (Dhāravāḍa), Bellary (Baḷḷāri), and other districts of north Karnāṭaka it takes after Doḍḍāṭa. As practised on the

coast it is, like the Yakṣagāna Bayalāṭa of the region, most artistic and distinctive[2].

In the same way that an artist can, by a slight variation of make-up, play diverse roles in one and the same Yakṣagāna performance, so can a puppet, by changing its heads, be made to do duty for different characters or types of character. Normally, for a performance, 20 or 25 puppets are required. There are troupes which have a hundred or more puppets.

There is a lot of difference between a Bayalāṭa stage and a puppet-play stage. For a Bayalāṭa stage four poles are stuck at given intervals to form a square. For a puppet play, the stage is covered on all sides except for the front so that only the puppets are visible to the audience. In a performance, the puppets are arranged in the required sequence so that they may be ushered in at the right time. As for the procedure followed, first the Bhāgavata and the other musicians jointly offer a prayer. Then the deities Ganeśa and Śāradā make their entry. Next in order enter the Bālagopālas. In north Karnāṭaka the Bhāgavata himself speaks to the characters upon their entry, but elsewhere this is done by the puppet representing Hanuma Nāyaka. No large piece of cloth is held from one end to the other at the time of the first formal appearance of the principal characters by way of a curtain between them and the audience: the characters come in directly. The puppeteers deliver the lines on behalf of their puppets.

Till a few years ago it was common to use lighted torches fed with castor oil or the oil of calophyllum. These torches in time gave place to gas lights. And now electric lights have taken over. The lighted torches of the earlier age were in a sense most suitable; for in their light it was easy to ensure that the strings by which the puppets were manipulated remained invisible. Now, in the glare of electric lights, everything shows up. The flood of light submerges all the suggestive touches in the make-up, the different shades of paint and colour, etc. Nothing is left to the imagination.

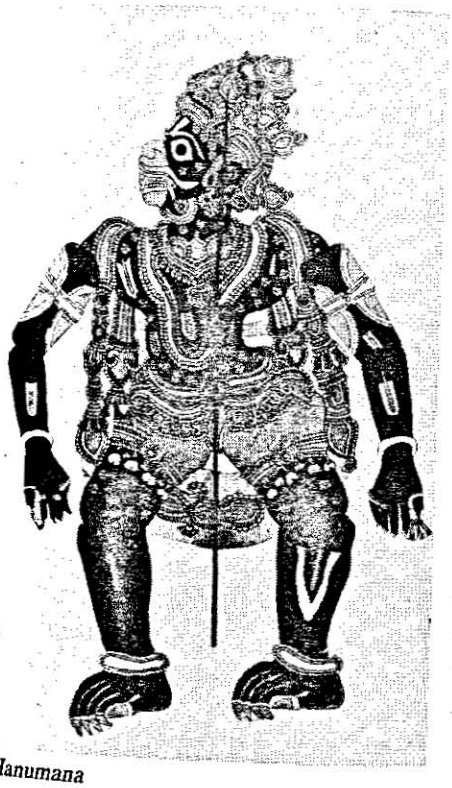
The Yakṣagāna puppet plays of the Dakṣiṇa Kannaḍa district are a highly stylized kind. Today there is only one puppet troupe regularly offering performances, the rest having wound up for want of patronage. (This is the troupe of Kogga Devaṇṇa Kāmath of Uppinakuduru.) All the conventions and practices followed in the Yakṣagāna human theatre are scrupulously follwed in the puppet theatre. The number of characters too is as large as in the human theatre. The costumes, the headgear, the jewellery, the make-up, the dances, the style of music, the flourishes of dialogue, the rigour of protocol, the themes, the texts—all are identical. In fact the puppet theatre is superior to the human theatre: the lifeless puppets perform at the same high level of artistic excellence as actors in the human theatre.

The puppeteers not only use extraordinary skill in making the puppets act in character but also display acute sensitivity and creativity. It is on their understanding and interpretation of the complexity of the various characters that the success of a play depends. Having a high sense of drama and a firm grasp of the essential nature of each play in their large repertoire, they transport the spectators to the faery world of romance. The episodes are all from the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* or the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. This means that the puppeteers need to be fully conversant with the whole range of Hindū mythology and with the significance of each god or goddess to the ancient Hindū ethos. They should be able to interpret with authority the intervention of divine beings in human affairs and expatiate on the significance of such intervention within the framework of the ancient Hindū world-view and cosmology. Other areas where they need expert knowledge include ancient Hindū concepts of warfare, principles of ancient Hindū diplomacy, *dharmaśāstra, nītiśāstra,* and so on.

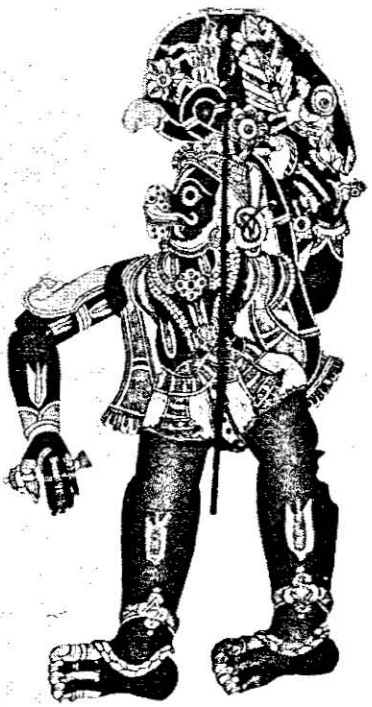
As in the Yakṣagāna human theatre, the Bhāgavata sings the cantos, and the dialogue between the various characters is improvized by the puppeteers concerned.

The chief musical instruments are the Maddaḷe (similar to the well known instrument Mṛdanga), the drone (also called Pungi), the harmonium, and the Chandé (a kind of kettle-drum used to work up the martial spirit). The puppeteers wear jingle-bells on their ankles, and, as they manipulate their puppets, they dance, thereby giving the impression that the sound of jingle-bells comes from the movements of the puppets.

The puppets are made of soft but durable wood. They differ a good deal from one region to another. They can be divided broadly into three groups. Puppets representing male characters are from 18 to 27 inches high. Female puppets are proportionately smaller and are so draped as to have even their feet covered. Puppets from Beḷḷūr(u) and Īchanūr(u) are particularly attractive. Puppets from Ichanur are not provided with feet. The puppeteers so dance while manipulating them that one mistakes their feet for the feet of the puppets themselves. A puppet representing a messenger, male or female, or Hanuma Nāyaka, is called a *nakalī* (imitation) puppet. It ranges from 18 to 22 inches in height. Puppets representing Ganeśa and Śāradā, which are played right at the start, are about 14 inches high. The face, the neck, and the hands and feet are carved with great care to look as lifelike as possible. The rest of the body is roughly carved and suitably padded at different places during the make-up process. Earlier natural dyes obtained from plants were used to paint the puppets. Now synthetic dyes are used. The characters being all from mythology, the costumes used are gorgeous and colourful. Profuse use is made of beads and pieces of glass



Hanumana



...bearing the Sanjivani mountain.

and other tinsel imitating gold jewellery. In the dim light in which the puppets perform they look resplendent. It is said that at the time of the Vijayanagara emperors the puppet-makers were so skilled as to make even the lips of the puppets tremulous; or they could make the puppets turn their eyes. Such skills are no longer available.

Each puppet has joints at the neck, the shoulders, the elbows, the hip, and the knees, and is manipulated with the help of six strings. If a puppet has to carry a torch or a mace or any other weapon, it is equipped with a seventh string.

We have no longer troupes consisting of full-time members. All artistes depend on some other occupation for their living. They only manage to take time off to participate in a performance.

Although the episodes and the literature relating to these puppet shows, as also the techniques used for the purpose, are identical all over the State, there are significant differences in the orientation of the orchestra and in the costumes. The kind of strings used is also different. If generally all over

the State the custom is for the entire orchestra to sit backstage, so as to be out of sight of the audience, in north Karnāṭaka the Maddaḷe-player takes his seat right in front of the audience. This is so because he has a role to play in teasing and provoking the comic characters and drawing them out. Yet another musician who takes his seat in front is the one who plays the Mukhavīṇā. He produces unusual, almost unique, effects with his instrument.

Both in north Karnāṭaka and elsewhere the most popular *prasangas* (episodes) are *Draupadīswayamvara*, *Virāṭaparva*, *Uttaragograhaṇa*, *Kṛṣnasandhāna*, *Droṇaparva*, *Karṇārjunakāḷaga*, *Abhimanyukāḷaga*, *Sītāswayamvara*, Lankādahana, and *Rāvaṇasamhāra*. in south Karnāṭaka the cantos, the dialogues, etc. are all in accordance with the scenario drawn up by the poet, but in Dakṣiṇa Kannaḍa the cantos alone are the work of the poet; the dialogues and the rest are improvized during the actual performance.

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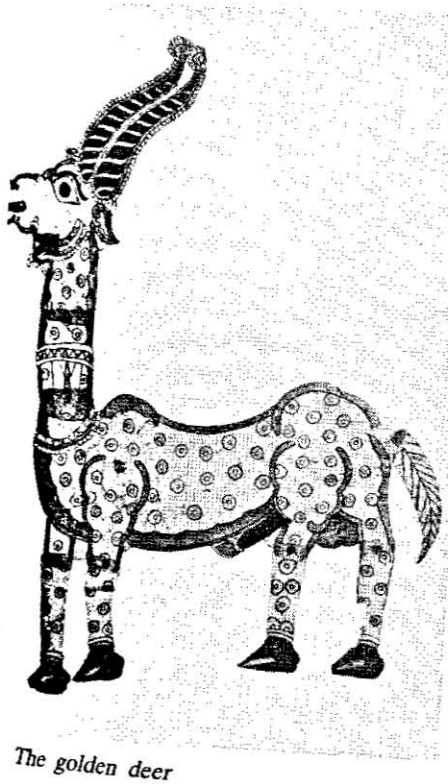
Leather puppetry is even more popular than string puppetry in Karnāṭaka. It is much more a part of everyday life. Unlike string puppetry, which is not identified with any particular community, leather puppetry is associated especially with the Kiḷḷekyāta community.

The Kiḷḷekyātas are a Maraṭhi-speaking people who seem to have migrated to Karnāṭaka centuries ago and brought this art along with them[3]. The word *kiḷḷekyāta* means an ill-shaped man with a lean and hungry look. In Karnāṭaka's leather puppetry too there is a character going by that name. Generally it is a wild, unkempt, foul-mouthed ragamuffin type[4]. He has an equally coarse, garrulous wanton for his mistress. The two come in on and off at different stages of the puppet play and regale the audience with their smutty exchanges.

There is a belief that Guha, the man who ferried Śrī Rāma across the Gangā when he set out for the forests, is the one who gave the Kiḷḷekyātas the art of puppetry. Guha had it from Śrī Rāma himself as a reward for his loyalty. Significantly, each family generally names its first son Rāma or Rāmayya. The art itself is known widely as Gomberāmarāṭa[5]. The Kiḷḷekyāta people have a martial tradition too. They were, besides, skilled in the sport of hunting.

There is no clue as to when these people migrated to Karnāṭaka. As they still speak a kind of corrupt Maraṭhi among themselves, it is clear that they are immigrants[6]. They have imbibed the Karnāṭaka culture and folk traditions and assimilated them so well that we cannot tell them from the



The golden deer

Garuda

native people. They are an integral part of the cultural scene in Karnāṭaka.

The census held by the Government of Bombay in 1885 describes the Kiḷḷekyātas as "puppeteers, fishermen, Chatris [Kshatriyas]". The census of 1901 calls them a wandering tribe "like the Jogis". A *sanad* granted to the Kiḷḷekyātas by the Sultan of Bijapur in 1520 shows that they were frequently honoured for their role in providing entertainment. So does the Mysore Revenue Manual. A Kiḷḷekyāta troupe attached to a Hanumān temple near Belgaum is still in possession of land granted to it by the Government.

Leather puppetry consists in creating a world of colour from behind a white screen. As we know, in the case of string puppets, we can see them directly and they are as such too clear to view and too tangible for our enjoyment. This is not the case with leather puppets. Their shadows on the white screen captivate us as nothing else can. In most parts of north and south Karnāṭaka they are comparatively small-sized—from one foot to four feet in height. In the Tumkur, Bellary, Kolar, and Bangalore districts, as also in the areas bordering Andhra Pradesh, they are taller—as tall as five

feet or even taller. In the areas bordering Andhra Pradesh the dialogue is generally in Telugu. Puppets of great age are sometimes found to be in use. Those which are a hundred years old, or even two hundred years, are big and broad and attractive. Puppets of recent make are rather pedestrian both in design and execution. On the other hand we have small puppets of exquisite workmanship. They are made of deerskin or goatskin and are delicately crafted. While the puppets of north Karnāṭaka emphasize tradition, those of south Karnāṭaka put a premium on beauty of form. Consequently they are superbly crafted.

Song and dialogue go on alternately from about ten in the night to sunrise. The music provided by the orchestra bears the distinctive influence of Doḍḍāṭa in north Karnāṭaka, and of Mūdalapāya in south Karnāṭaka. One can also notice the influence of Hindustānī classical music and of the airs characteristic of the stage in south Karnāṭaka. Even popular film tunes have managed to find a toe-hold.

The musical instruments used in leather puppetry include the Droṇi, the Pungi, the Ektārī, the flute, and the Dhol. Mention should also be made of an especially rich sound produced by thrumming a *jowār* stem placed in a vessel half filled with water. Then there are the instruments known as Tāli and Gangāḷa (also called Taṇige Shruti and Uppanga), besides the Tantuṇi (or Chauḍike) and the Pāvari (or Burburi), the Mukhavīṇa and the Tāḷa (or cymbals). The Mukhavīṇā is clearly an import from Mūdalapāya. Recently, thanks to the increasing popularity of the professional theatre, the harmonium too has gained a place for itself.

Neither the puppeteers nor the members of the orchestra are visible to the audience. If the puppets are small, the puppeteers can manipulate them while sitting. If they are big, the puppeteers are obliged to keep standing. Below the white screen on which the puppets cast their shadows it is customary to hang thick black rugs or cloth so that none of the people sitting around the screen can be seen by the audience. The lighting is so arranged that the screen carries just the shadows cast by the puppets and nothing else.

If string puppetry is merely a means of entertainment, leather puppetry is part of popular life and is directly related to the traditions and culture of the people. A shadow-puppet performance can have several ends in view. It may be aimed at propitiating the gods for rains, for children, for the eradication of disease among men and animals, and so on.

At the time of harvesting, the chief of a Kiḷḷekyāta troupe approaches the notables of a village or a town and requests an opportunity to perform. One who agrees to play host gives him a quantity of oil (for lamps), a supply of grain, and a fee as an earnest for the evening's entertainment. He also

keeps a fast. A fowl is sacrificed at the time of putting up posts for the erection of a tent; and a sheep is sacrificed at the slaying of evil characters like Rāvaṇa, Chaṇḍa-Muṇḍa, *et al.* In fact the fasts and sacrifices lift the entire proceedings out of the secular environment and invest them with the aura of a mystic ritual.

Leather puppetry depends a good deal on sleight of hand. A man manipulates two puppets at a time, one with each hand. An entire family participates in the manipulation of puppets. Male and female voices mingle as the cantos are recited. This invests the singing with a peculiar charm. Opportunities are found to refer to some incident or occurrence of current importance, as also to praise and celebrate the generosity of the man who has organized the show.

There was a time when the puppeteers themselves used to handcraft puppets. Now they do not any longer. Once a puppet is damaged, the puppeteer feels lost. He changes his style of life—he takes up some other occupation. As we have pointed out already, deerskin was the favourite material for long centuries: it was transparent and also long-lasting. The puppeteers were good huntsmen themselves. They would carefully tan the deerskin needed for their puppets. Now they no longer hunt on a large scale. And they have found a comparatively cheap substitute in goatskin. In fact the big puppets one comes across on the Andhra-Karnāṭaka borders are all made of buffalo-skin. Such is the degeneration. It must, however, be said that the Kiḷḷekyātas make puppets representing female characters extremely attractive and even artistic. One can easily discern the influence of the famous sculptures of Karnāṭaka.

Leather puppetry in the Bijapur and Gulbargā districts is known as Kaṭabarāṭa; in the Bellary and Dharwad districts, Kiḷḷekyātarāṭa; and in the Bangalore and Kolar districts, with man-size puppets as in Andhra Pradesh, Togalugombeyāṭa. Although the regional variants may look different on a superficial view, they are in fact essentially the same form of puppetry.

It is also necessary to add that, in addition to episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, folk-tales are enacted on account of their widespread appeal.

Puppetry is a dying art. It cannot compete with modern forms of mass entertainment such as films. Those who have carried on so far are not likely to keep up the fight. One by one the troupes have disbanded, most members taking up fishing and other, more lucrative, occupations. They feel, and rightly, that, art or no art, life must go on. The census of 1971 gives the total number of Kiḷḷekyātas as 14,921. The number must have dwindled further during the last 20 years. Unless the Government and others concerned wake up in time and initiate plans to revive the art and to support artistes, it is clear that it will perish for ever. □

NOTES

1. See *infra* for details.

2. Once the makers of string puppets were all members of the Viśvakarma community. They were known as *gudigāras*. Now the art is no longer the exclusive preserve of any particular caste or community. The style characteristic of Belgaum, Ranebennur (Ranebennūru), and Māgadi, and of the coast, is now being followed by others, including Brāhmaṇas. In the old princely state of Mysore it was common to present what were called Aḷḷāchārī couples. These couples, represented as childless, indulged in amorous antics, apparently to provide amusement to the audience. The Aḷḷācharīs were typical members of the Viśvakarma community. This is proof that the art belonged at one time to that community.

3. The word *kiḷḷekyāta*, according to some people, denotes a tribe or people of humble origin who make a living by narrating coarse or vulgar stories. There is indeed a good deal of room for ribaldry in their art; so much so that the Government of Bombay fairly early banned public exhibition of the art, according to the District Gazetteer of Dharwad.

4. This character makes his entry after the propitiation of the deities Ganeśa and Śāradā. There is a belief that owing to the curse of one of the *saptakanyaka* or seven holy maidens Srī Kṛṣṇa himself animates the nude form of the Kiḷḷekyāta. We may note here that at one time the Kiḷḷekyāta used to be invariably a nude figures. At present, of course, the nude figure is omitted.

5. Yet another legend says that there was once a man called Kattāré Kāḷāchārī. Kāḷāchārī developed illicit relations with a Marathi-speaking woman and was cast out of the community. He had seven sons by his mistress. He trained them all in different kinds of crafts, all bearing on the art of puppetry. Together, then, they fostered the art of puppetry.

6. According to one theory, the Kiḷḷekyātas in their present occupation go back to the tenth or ninth century or even earlier when Kannaḍa rulers, especially the Raṣṭrakūṭas and the Western Chālukyas, ruled up to the Godāvarī in the north. (In the seventh century Chālukya Pulakesin II, as we know, defeated king Harṣa of Kanauj, not once but twice, in fierce battles fought on the banks of the Narmadā. Harṣa put all he had into the contest so that he might win the title of Chakravartī, but in vain.) Many Maraṭhi-speaking areas were part of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa empire. Nṛpatunga, a ninth-century Raṣṭrakūṭa emperor, composed a famous work of prosody called *Kavirājamārga* in Kannaḍa. The work shows that Kannaḍa was then an advanced language already with a well developed literature capable of furnishing models of literary beauty, excellence, and power, and supplying examples of an astonishing variety of metres and figures of speech. The Kiḷḷekyātas must have attached themselves to the court in those days and migrated subsequently to the south of the Godāvarī and the Kṛṣnā to continue their hereditary occupation. They must have interacted with the practitioners of Yakṣagāna Bayalāṭa and benefitted from the world of colour and dance that was Yakṣagāna. But this is still a theory. The Belgaum District Gazetteer simply says that the Kiḷḷekyātas seem originally to have come from the region of Kolhāpur and Satārā. It leaves untouched the question why and wherefore.