

The Gombeatta of Karnataka

A. R. DATTATREYA

Karnataka is known for its rich cultural heritage and folk traditions. String, rod, and leather puppets have all been equally popular among the people. The Karnataka puppetry of the present day owes its existence to a temple-based puppet theatre which has flourished there for centuries.

The string puppet theatre of Karnataka is called Sutrada Gombeatta or Sutrada Putali Gombeatta. 'Sutra' means thread. The *sutradhara* is thus a contribution of puppetry to human theatre. The word 'puttali' in Sanskrit means puppet. The rod puppet play of Karnataka is called Salaki Gombeatta. 'Salaki' means rod, that is, iron rod; the puppets have two long iron rods hooked into their left and right hands. The tips of the index finger and the thumb are joined together, and the rest of the fingers are fully stretched. This is what we call the *hamsasya mudra*.

A basic understanding of music and dance is essential for the practice of our puppetry. That apart, we should know some of the literature. The music is in the traditional Karnataka style. We have to make our puppets dance to it; so we dance behind the curtain and the putali also dances with us. The literature offers us so many possibilities, like [plays based on] the *navarasa*. Yet we have certain limitations. Within those limitations, we try to express ourselves.

To make puppets, we use two kinds of wood. Nowadays, the heavy wood called *shivahonne* [*Calophyllum nophyllum*] in Kannada is costlier than sandalwood. Another is *halavana* [*Erythrina indica*], a light wood; it is [nevertheless] long-lasting.

DISCUSSION

Komal Kothari: Do you use wet wood or dry wood?

A. R. Dattatreya: Actually, Sir, to reduce the weight of our puppets, we use more than one wood [in the same puppet]. This portion, the head [*shows a rod puppet*], is made of *shivahonne*. But the torso is made of *halavana*. It is very light; it comes from the roots of the tree.

Komal Kothari: Buit do you use wet wood to make your puppets?

A.R. Dattatreya: If we use wet wood, they may develop cracks. So we use seasoned wood.

Komal Kothari: Do you season *halavana* wood also?

A.R. Dattatreya: No, not *halavana*.

Komal Kothari: *Shivahonne* is always [used] dry?

A.R. Dattatreya: Yes, it is seasoned [and used dry]. If we use wet wood, the shape of the



A.R. Dattatreya (*extreme left*) explains features of his puppets to the gathering.

puppets will change when the moisture goes out.

G. Venu: Who makes your puppets?

A.R. Dattatreya: My guru [M.R. Ranganatha Rao] makes them. We are also learning. What we have made ourselves, we don't have at present.

G. Venu: What I am asking is, traditionally, is the puppet-maker the puppeteer himself, or are they different people?

A.R. Dattatreya: Some puppeteers make their own puppets. But some families do not work with puppets; they just make them.

G. Venu: Are there traditional wood-carvers [to make puppets]? Is there a particular community for that work?

A.R. Dattatreya: Carpenters are making puppets now. But a particular community also makes puppets.

G. Venu: They are not puppeteers?

A.R. Dattatreya: No, they are not puppeteers . . . These rod puppets are manipulated even by the Brahmin community. Four hundred years ago, one Narasingha Rao, who migrated to Karnataka from Andhra, started the tradition. Afterwards, many others followed him. In Bellur we have a whole Brahmin settlement engaged in puppetry . . . The speciality of our puppets is that the puppets of humans don't have legs. The height of the puppets is three to three and a half feet.

Komal Kothari: Including the costume?

A.R. Dattatreya: Yes, including the costume . . . The body of a puppet is eight times the measure of the head [following the *ashtamsha* principle]. As you know, according to anatomy, the length of the human body is also eight times that of the head. The parts of the rod puppet are separate. The head, the torso, the hands and the neck are separate — in all, there are eight pieces. We will dismember the puppet and assemble it again to show you [*demonstrates*] . . . Here [*shows*], we have joined the head [with the torso] using a thread. Normally, cotton thread is used. In this troupe, we use plastic thread. The thread is tied here [at the top of the head]. We make a hole here [in the head], insert the thread, and connect it with the torso.

G. Venu: Is there a nail [on the head]?

A.R. Dattatreya: There is no need of a nail. The thread holds the puppet together . . . On almost all our puppets, there are three hooks. Strings [through the hooks] are connected to a ring [which is placed on the puppeteer's head to manipulate the puppet]. So the entire pull of the puppet is taken by the puppeteer's head.

Komal Kothari: Will you remove the head of the puppet, separate all the parts, and show us how they are all joined together? [*To the Rajasthan puppeteers*] One of you, come here and see this.

A.R. Dattatreya: They are all connected by thread. If you remove the thread [*shows*], the parts come apart.

G. Venu: I have a question. At one time, your puppets too had legs. Later, because of

difficulties in manipulation, you removed the legs, isn't that so?

A.R. Dattatreya: I will tell you why that happened. This rod puppet weighs around six to eight kilos. Rakshasa characters can even be ten kilos. If the weight goes up any more with legs added, it will not be possible to manipulate the puppets. That is why, in order to keep the weight down, the legs have been eliminated.

G.Venu: In Kumbhakonam, they use the same technique as you do. But there, I have seen some very old puppets with legs. They don't use them now. Maybe at one time you also . . .

A.R. Dattatreya: I don't know. In humans, we don't have legs. In Jambavan, Hanuman, and animal characters in human form, we do have legs . . . Now we are going to dress this puppet in a sari. These are artificial ornaments [*shows*]. Real ones would be very costly. This is called *oddiyana* [worn around the waist to hold the sari intact]. These are [*shows the fixed ornaments on the head and the chest*] made of wood and then fixed with *vajra* [calcium, jaggery, etc.]. These are wooden rings. We paste them on with golden paper. Next, the colours. We know that every colour has its own meaning. Some of the characters — for example, Rama, Krishna, Shiva — will be bluish in colour . . . Seeing Krishna, many of you may have thought it resembles the Statue of Liberty. Actually, the crown does resemble Liberty's. I don't know why and how this has happened. No other Krishna wears a crown like that. But this is a replica of the original puppet. The colour of the puppet indicates that it is Lord Krishna . . . All the costumes, decorations, etc., are traditional. The costumes are of silk. We only use silk saris. This is a *karnakundala* [earring]; this is *kasu malai* [golden necklace].

. . . Now we shall go on to the demonstration. As I told you, a basic understanding of music and dance is essential to this art. That apart, we should be able to understand the literary part of the drama . . . For dancing, these are the traditional *gajje* [anklets] worn on the ankles.

[*Demonstration of a traditional dance number of the puppets*]

Komal Kothari: Suppose we want to see the neck movements? Keep the hands straight and show us only the neck movements [*A.R. Dattatreya demonstrates*] . . . also, you showed us a garlanding scene . . .

A.R. Dattatreya: . . . yesterday. Garlanding, *pradakshina*, *namaskara* — all that we showed you. We will do it here again. Yesterday it was Ganesha-vandana. Today, instead of Ganesha, we have Krishna here [*demonstrates Satyabhama garlanding Krishna*]. In the temple we do *pradakshina* [circumambulation] and then do *namaskara* [prostration before the idol]. We are doing the same thing here. This is the *arati*.

. . . The important change we have introduced is in the stage. Formerly, the stage was made with bamboo poles. This one is completely made with wooden bars. Actually, it is a miniature version of what you saw yesterday. The same stage is now miniaturized.

Komal Kothari: Earlier you had a ten-by-eight [foot] stage?

A.R. Dattatreya: Formerly, there was no particular stage measurement at all. Whatever bamboo poles one could get, the puppeteers used for the stage and performed. But this stage

... we have ourselves designed.

A voice: Don't you feel that the stage is a little too low for your puppets?

A.R. Dattatreya: I agree with that. But if we raise the height of the stage, our legs or hands will show. That is why we have reduced the height.

Bhanu Bharati: Can we reduce the size of the puppets?

Komal Kothari: Can we reduce the size of the puppets by four or six inches?

A.R. Dattatreya: Then we will lose all proportion. We will have to reduce everything.

Komal Kothari: I think we will have to discuss that later. There is an interrelationship between the size of the stage and the puppets. A new relationship can of course be built up, but there would be problems in the way.

G.Venu: We used to perform in the temple precincts. Did you have such a stage?

A.R. Dattatreya: Wherever we went, we would take these bamboo poles. It used to take a lot of time to erect the stage earlier. Now it is enough if we have fifteen minutes. Not only to erect the stage, but even to get ready for the performance.

G.Venu: Are your songs from any dance drama? Who wrote the songs?

A.R. Dattatreya: My guru wrote them. I write some of the scripts myself. I am an M.A. in psychology.

G.Venu: What about the traditional plays? For instance, the *Krishna Parijata* episode. Who wrote the script?

A.R. Dattatreya: My guru.

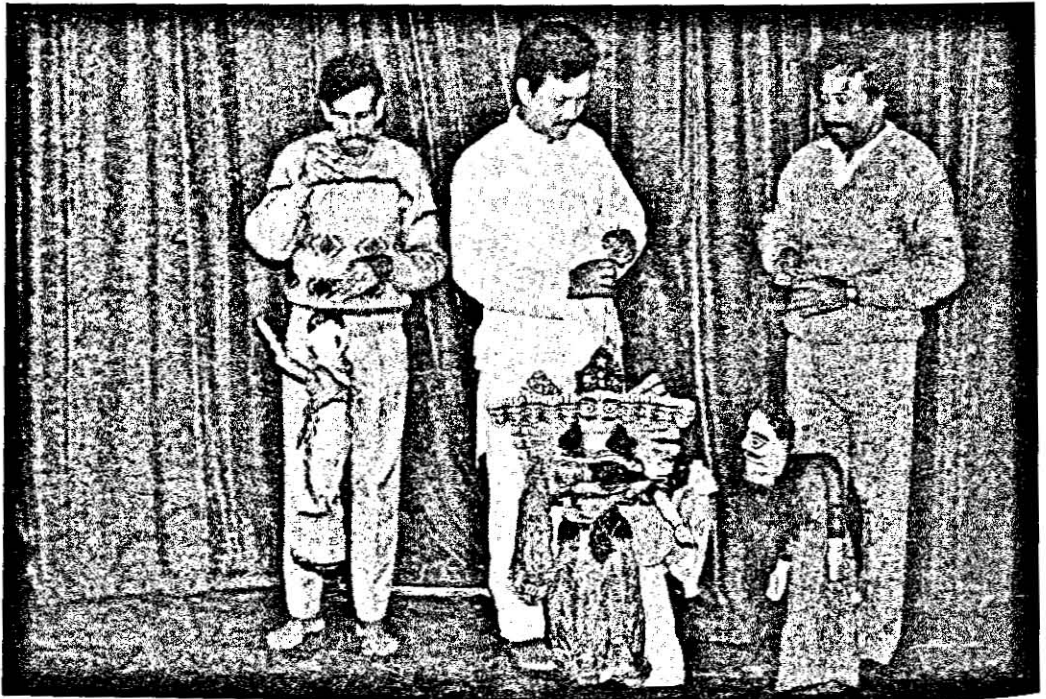
G.Venu: What about the earlier scripts?

A.R. Dattatreya: We are retaining the story from the old scripts, but it is not possible to retain the language; people won't understand the older language nowadays.

Dadi Pudumjee: You have learned your art from a guru, and your family has now adopted puppetry as a profession — is that right?

A.R. Dattatreya: Long ago, our ancestors were in the profession. But they couldn't make a living out of it.

Dadi Pudumjee: I am not being negative about this. All that I am saying is that you have learned puppetry from a traditional artist. Now you have formed your own family troupe. That makes things more clear . . .



C. Rajkhowa (*centre*) shows his Ravana puppet: Sita is held in Ravana's arms.