

## The Puppetry of Andhra Pradesh

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I am not a traditional puppeteer. I was the headmaster of a school. After my retirement in 1987, I took up this art on a full-time basis. I am proud to say that my guru is Suresh Dutta. We went to study with him in Calcutta — my two daughters [S. Bindu Madhavi and R. Vijaya Sri], my wife [M. Rajyalakshmi] and I. I acquired the basic knowledge from him. Thereafter, I have been trying to experiment on my own.

In Andhra, the string puppet is slowly disappearing. There are a few families now in Hindupur, on the border with Karnataka. They perform only during temple festivals; they don't perform on any other occasion. There were also a few families of Andhra puppeteers who used to perform with a pair of glove puppets called Pillade Bomma and Pellikoothure Bomma — bridegroom and bride. They used to go around performing in homes, narrating stories and singing songs to earn their livelihood.

The shadow puppet theatre in Andhra is several centuries old. The puppeteers came from Maharashtra, and they are dispersed today in Karnataka, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, besides the Andhra country. In a village called Palakollu in West Godavari district, they make very large puppets called Buttabomma in Telugu; they are ten to fifteen feet high. These puppets are taken out in marriage processions and temple car festivals. The performers sit inside the Buttabommias [literally, bamboo-basket puppets], manipulating them. These puppets are very colourful and attractive.

In Ananthapuram, there is only one family of Brahmin puppeteers. They perform with string puppets in temples during festivals. Their puppets are very old; some date back to the twelfth century. These puppeteers don't want to leave their traditional practice. They perform during the Sivaratri and Gokulashtami celebrations in temples.

Puppetry in southern India attained its peak during the rule of Krishnadevaraya of the Vijayanagar empire — the empire then extended to some parts of present-day Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, besides Andhra. As a result of the linguistic division of States, many of our puppeteers now live within the borders of Karnataka. I think they have been living in the same places for the last four hundred years. There are texts in Telugu still available with them; the language is Kannada but the script is Telugu. I saw such a manuscript with Mr M.R. Ranganatha Rao, my teacher in string puppetry.

At the Hyderabad Puppet Theatre, we are trying to develop all four kinds of puppetry — glove, string, rod and shadow. I have been making string puppets recently under the guidance of Mr Ranganatha Rao . . .

The Andhra puppet is made of two kinds of wood. The arms and torso are made of *avisha* [*Agati grandiflora*], a wood which comes from a tree grown for betel-farming; it is the tree which the betel plant climbs on. After four years or so, when the trunk of the tree has grown thick, the wood is cut and dried. When the wood is dry, it becomes very light. The head and hands of the puppet are made of a wood called *palakurusha* or *palakarra*. It



M. Srinivasa Rao (*right*) and M. Rajyalakshmi demonstrate manipulation with rods and strings.

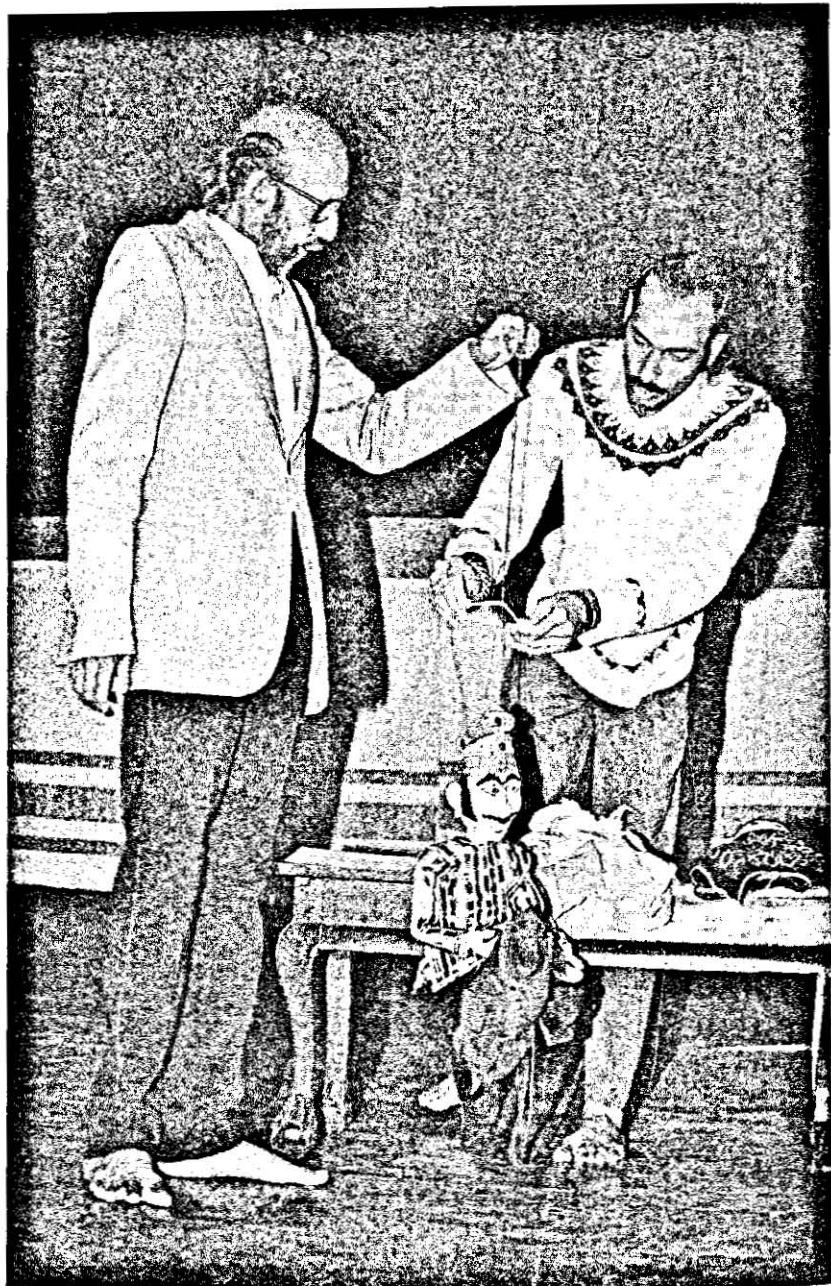
is white in colour and is mostly used for making toys. Woodcutters cut this wood from the forest together with firewood. Usually, toy-makers pick up the wood from piles of firewood.

After the head of the puppet is carved it is joined with the torso, and the torso is joined with the arms using cotton thread. The head and hands are then painted, and the puppet dressed and decorated appropriately.

During interludes in puppet shows, I take out this string puppet [*shows*] and make it dance to a Hindi film song: '*Mera joota hai Japani*'. This is just for entertainment; I play a cassette and manipulate the puppet. To move the head, there are two strings [*shows*]. In performing with all marionettes, balancing is important; it needs practice.

I have made some Rajasthani puppets too — magician, dancer, snake charmer, etc. I have also learned to make all four types of puppets in India out of sheer interest. We must utilize puppetry for social purposes such as population control, or for educating people against early marriage or the scourge of Aids. Or to tell them about the importance of protecting the environment. We can write stories on such subjects in public interest and stage them.

In the Hyderabad Puppet Theatre, we have divided up the production work among ourselves. I make the puppets, my wife writes the scripts and songs, and my daughters make the costumes. In this way, we are trying to revive and promote puppetry in Andhra Pradesh.



Mahipat Kavi (*left*) shows a puppet of his own design.