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THE LEATHER PUPPETRY OF ANDHRA PRADESH: AN ENDANGERING ART FORM

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes the details of a unique traditional art form Leather Puppetry from the state of Andhra Pradesh. It is discussed from origin to the contemporary situation and rise and fall of the leather puppetry. The leather puppetry of Andhra Pradesh is most successful than the other puppetry in India. There was a particular village name popularly known as Bommalata Palli which is said to be origin for this craft. These artisans are migrants from Maharashtra and later settle down in the borders of Andhra Karnataka area. The basic theme served from Ranganatha Ramayana. It also includes several art forms such as Drawing, Painting, Music, Dance, and Poetry and enriched with theatrical props during the show. The paper also discusses the preparatory methods and play and its role in freedoms fight also. The technological innovation of film production by Lumier brothers, the popularity of the puppetry is diminished. But craftsmen adopted the social, economic situations, started to use new material in spite of some restriction and loss of popularity. Still they are in the state of struggle for existence. Artisans started creating decorative and craft items.
KEY WORDS: *Puppetry, craft, leather, Ramayana, freedom fight, promotion*

INTRODUCTION

Puppetry is the most popular folk theatrical art form of India which involves combination of both Visual and Performing Arts. The origin was traced in India and other places across the world found 3000 BCE ago. The Egyptian script *"Hieroglyphics"* on the Egyptian tablets described as "*walking statues"* were being used in Egyptian religious dramas. In the primitive period of the human society, the Puppetry was used to drive away the evil spirits or to cure the patient's mental depression (Sampa Ghosh & Utpal Kumar Benerjee, 1985) we have archaeological evidences for numbers of prehistoric civilizations of terracotta dolls and for some of them we have evidence of dolls with movable limbs (Mechanic Dolls). For instance a toy cow with movable head was found at the Harappa site of ancient Indus valley Civilization (2500 BCE. (Basham AL 1959) According Contractor (1983), the use of puppets seen in church in most of the European countries. (Michel R Mulkin (1977) mentioned that the puppetry was quite popular but the opposition of religious leaders banished the Puppets from the Church because of its acquisition of witchcraft quality. According to Indian legend that the origin of the puppetry is attributed to Brahma the creator of the Universe, created the first puppeteer Nat, then he created puppet and again he created Bhutt to manipulate for the entertainment of his consort Saraswathi.


Fig.1. line drawing on purified leather for puppet

According to Coomaraswamy, Panini, the Sanskrit poet and grammarian of 4th century BCE and Patanjali the author of yoga sutra dated 2nd century BCE. It was also discussed in Natyasastra by Bharathamuni. The Kama sutra of Vatsayana has discussed various types of Puppets. Vatsayana also mentioned for the first time about the manipulation of the puppets not only by strings but also by "yanthras". The puppetry was cited in great epic Mahabharata. The great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa had discussed of Puppets in his Abhignana Shakuntalam[4]. The Bala Ramayana by Rajasekhara around 10th century CE mentioned two wooden puppets of Rama, Sita. The famous King Bhoja whose throne carried by 32 statues of wooden dolls resembles the Puppets.

The Puppeteer does not have any restriction on impersonating a member of any caste, culls from the general characteristics with adoption of the immediate surroundings. Depends upon the context and availability of material. The puppets can be classified into four types. They are 1. Glove Puppet 2. Rod Puppet 3.String Puppet 4. Shadow Puppet. As per the context, the paper is aimed at shadow puppetry of Andhra Pradesh only.

Puppetry of Andhra Pradesh

The traditional shadow puppet theatre is chiefly concentrated in the States of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, Orissa, and Maharashtra. It works on the base of image behind the illuminated screen. The head and body are held together with a bamboo stick. So that figure is stiff when placed against the screen. The entire manipulation runs behind the white screen. A white cloth is stretched in four sides which is about 8X6 feet or 12X8 feet. For the illumination of the screen, lamps are placed

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at two feet distance at a height of six feet. In Olden days a row of earthen castor oil lamps were used. Later they used petro max light and electric light so on. Care was taken to spread the light on the screen evenly. Manipulation of puppet is intricate and subtle. Free moving limbs have to be moved according to narration.

Shadow puppetry of Andhra Pradesh is most popular from the ancient times. In Andhra Pradesh, appearance of this art form can be traced from 12th century CE. The famous Telugu poet Palkuriki Somanatha cited about this in his classical work "Panditharaadhya Charitha (Ellora (1960). The Somanatha cited two kinds of traditions in that. The former is "manipulation of Leather Puppets behind the illuminated white screen" the latter are rod puppets. But the later with fusion of the two a different style was evolved. Further Palkuriki cited in his Panditharaadhya that these puppetry shows are vogue in Srisailam during Shivarathri celebrations

Chief Centers: This art form flourished in Costal Andhra Rayaseema regions of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. In Costal Andhra we find traces at Dharma Rao Cheruvupalli, Singarayakonda in Nellore District, Narasarao Peta in Guntur District, Shrigavarapu Kota, Kallepalli Agraharam and sarvassiddhi in Visakhapatnam, and Madhavapatnam at Kakinada. Tanuku, Angara, Elamanchili in Godavari district. In Rayalaseema zone traces of puppetry can be witnessed at Chadiparala taluk of Kamalapuram, Porumamilla of Cuddapah district, Rayadurgam, Belagallu of Kurnool district, Kadamalakuntla, Jarutla Ramapuram, Nimmalakunta of Anantapur district, Madhavapatnam in Kakinada, Bommalata Palli at Bellari District in Karnataka. In Telangana, Panagallu and Gudur of Warangal were the chief centers. Chiefly Rayalaseema was served as cradle for these puppetry shows than other area in Andhra Pradesh. According Chaganti Seshaih , an epigraphically evidence states that Chadipirala village of Kamalapuram taluk in Kadapa district was donated to puppetry artist Peda Chitteyya by Bommalata Chandraiah and Bommalata Amrutha kavi. (Mikkilineni 1992)


Fig.2. A leather Puppet of Hanuman , Nimmalakunta

The roots of the Puppetry of Andhra Pradesh can be traced from Maharashtra. In Maharashtra, puppetry lost the popularity, patronization. Due to this reason, the puppeteer community was migrated to the borders of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Some scholars stated that this art of puppetry migrated from Karnataka. Because it flourished both in Karnataka and Maharashtra in the same time. But it was that migrants are Maharashtrians which was supported by the language they used to speak in Marathi and their names are also similar to Maharashtrians. Even their facial features also had resemblance to the Maharashtrians. These people settled in the southern Andhra Pradesh, continued their practice of Puppetry. In result, the place where they settled down was named as "Bommalata palli" village. Soon they became popular with their performances. These people are known as Balatas or Balija Kshatriyas or "Bondili kshathriyas". (Mrutyunjaya Rao K 2023).

Themes: mostly themes for puppetry serves from narrative episodes from Ramayana, Mahabharata, and famous folk tales. They are "Lanka Dahana", "Myravana Story" " Death of Indrajit" "Yayati Story",'prahlada charithra" Draupadi Vasthrapaharanam, keechaka vadha", Dussasana Vadha" and stories from Ranganatha Ramayanam and folk tales of Desinga Raju story, Palnati Veeracharithra, Kumara Rama Story etc. As for their performances they based on ' Ranganath Ramayanam of the 16th century CE which was exclusively written for their puppet shows. The conversation ideology and poem particularly taken from Molla Ramayanam.

They revered the puppets and even shared the puppetry as the inherited property from their ancestors. The puppeteers have a family tradition to practice in this art form. The elder member of the family train their children to acquire the skill of making and manipulating puppets. They have good voice which comes through hereditary. Mostly they sing in "Mukhari raga." For a performance nearly eight members are required. Two male and two female are the manipulators and singers. Three instrumentalists accompany the songs on harmonium, midrange and cybals. Most probably they belongs to one family. In these families, the male puppeteer will have two wives who helps him in the performance. So, intentionally the polygamy custom was prevalent in their families. There is no need of formal education for these puppeteers. They just need to memorize the dialogues. The puppet shows were organized during the different seasons and these puppets were transferred from generation to generation.

The deer skin and wild goat's skin were used for preparation of puppets. They registered general conventions in using the materials. The rare availability, and it role in mythology of deer skin has was attributed as a sacred, was used to prepare divine pictures. Whereas goat skin was used to design the demonic images. A kind of imitation group was started from the Godavari basin of Andhra Pradesh to gain fame and money like the traditional migrant puppeteers. But due to the lack of imaginative skills, a strong musical back ground, soon they disappear from the screen of puppetry tradition it was told the failure of the pseudo group was happened because of their unconventional methods they followed in preparation of puppets. Unlike migrants they used buffalo skin to make the puppets which caused to get effect the wrath of Gods. Because buffalo skin was non - auspicious, used in making of foot ware was a staunch belief in those times (Mrutyunjaya Rao K 2011).

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Fig.3. Leather Puppet from Nimmalakunta

Stylistics Features of the Puppets

The puppets of Andhra Pradesh are largest in size. The size of the puppets will be 5X3 feet, 7X3.5 feet. They are colored on both sides based upon the direction of the head to suits for a scene, especially when the character engage in conversation. The leather puppets of Andhra Pradesh are the largest among those while separate parts of limbs are loosely attached for profound articulation. Any folk art form owes it origin at the royal court of the state. Similarly craft men of puppet has created a kind of visual language with the blend of features from Lepakshi murals. The historical evidences supported this hypothesis.

The faces of male and female characters were portrayed in half profile figuration with two eyes exclude the character of Ravana which is shown in frontal. Some of them are shown in full profile with one eye visible. The frontal torso and profile legs are main feature of this craft form. Bulging eyes, sharp nose, titled body to the back resembles the style of Lepakshi murals. Attires and accessories and other decorations are akin to the Yaksha gana style. Embellished jewelry has been cleverly presented by the craftsman by creating square and round hole along the line of jewelry through which light passes give the glittering effect of jewellary. Movable parts are joined with strong strings or leather strips. In most cases the upper part of the bodies is shown in frontal position while the feel are directed or pointed to sideways. This is the most remarkable feature of leather puppet of Andhra Pradesh. This kind of attention on jewellery can be noticed from the south Indian murals. There are three styles of figures. First category figures are highly artistic composition with beautiful effects by the perforations.


Fig.4. Prepared Leather Puppet from Nimmalakunta

The puppets of Hanuman and king Ravana seems larger. They believe size of the puppet indicates rank of social status. The holy figure are always shown in larger size. Due to the size in largest and moving limbs soon they became popular among the rest of traditions. Physical features of the puppets follow some strict conventions like female figures are shorter than the male with slim waists and broad hips. Bulging eyes, profile face and frontal torso, heavy decoration might take from tradition of south Indian murals.


Fig.5. Performance of Leather Puppetry show Image courtesy: Lakshmi Prabhala 2009

Coloring of the puppets was given with the natural dyes but later ages they just using synthetic colors the colours which are applied to the faces, costumes of the puppets gives special quality. Devils are painted in black and red whereas the divine pictures are given white and yellow or blue. This aspects of colour choice can be witnessed in kathakali dance form from Kerala. For example, the faces of Rama and Krishna were drawn in pleasant, with well-structured bodies. But heads are oversized which signifies the divinity. The evil character like Ravana from Ramayana, Dhuryodhana from Mahabharata were portrayed in distorted faces and clumsy limbs. Demonic characters are usually portrait with huge shoulders and big swords. Their articulations also shown with jerky and intense anguish were symbolically represented by striking their heads against the ground. Voices of the puppets will be changed according to the situations. The Brahmin depicted in thick twist of hair. Kings and queens or other royal characters are easily identified with certain motifs like elephants, horse, and palanquin, flanked by the attendants. Even the entry of the puppets on the stage follows some general conventions like Divine characters enter from the right side of the stage where as the other images from the left side of the stage and demonic figures enters usually from the top of the stage[7]. As a theatrical prop, these characters are made to carry burning torches, sprinkled with resin dust to create sudden flame. Such techniques allow the puppeteers to create the sense of awesome among the audience.

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CONCLUSION

From the 12th century CE to 16th century CE, the puppetry played pivotal role in preserving the Indian culture by portraying the characters from the epics amongst the folk. Even contributed a lot to the freedom struggle. The puppeteers acted like an informers to the freedom fighters. They also served as intelligence to the kings. Due to the advent of modern technology in theatre arts, the technological innovation of film production by Lumier brothers the popularity of the puppetry is diminished. Signs of change and decline of the puppet theatre as a folk art tradition are present everywhere as a result of western education, modern norms of entertainments, chiefly movies and Television. But still it is playing nominal role in promoting the govt. schemes and giving the awareness about the social and contemporary issues through the means of voluntary organization.


Fig. 6. Padmasri Dalavai Chalapathi Rao, Puppetry artisan, Nimmalakunta

As a living tradition it led to the idea of animation industry as 2D and 3D images. The innovation of 20th century CE invention of "Robot" has been taken from these age old Puppets. The introduction of Wild life act has shown much influence on this art form. It restricted the creative activity of the puppeteer. Thus, puppeteer or craft men adopted the alternative materials like use of plastic films in the place of deer, goat, and buffalo leathers. The cost of preparation has also shackled the hands of the craftsman. On the other hand many activities are being taken by the NGOs to get survive this great art form; they formed cooperative societies themselves and doing export to the foreign countries. The puppets are now adorning the wall of the rich and corporate offices. Artists being honored by inviting to the cultural event by NRI organizations.


Fig.7 . Leather Puppetry images (image coutesy :Ekabhishek)

This great art form is now struggling for existence and the limited group of people are practicing this art form with passion. But most of the families left this art, scattered for livelihood. It is very sad to know that there is no specific script to preserve the methods of manufacturing, indigenous techniques involved during the in preparation of puppet and puppets shows. There is a necessity to carry forward this art form as the legacy of Indian tradition. The NGOs and university departments and academies should strive hard to revive this great art form for future generations.

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