

## **LEATHER PUPPETRY: THE ART AND TRADITION IN ANDHRA PRADESH**

Dr. Mallikarjuna Chiruthoti

Centre for Folk Culture Studies, University of Hyderabad

### **INTRODUCTION**

Leather puppetry is called 'tolubommalata' in Telugu. The word 'tholu' means leather and 'bommalta', playing with leather dolls or figurines. It was once presented by indigenous Telugu folk artistes known as 'ata gollalu' (cowherds players) who belong to the Jangama (Saivite mendicants), and Baliya castes. Today, most puppet players in Andhra live in some villages of Vishakhapatnam, East Godavari, Ananthapur, Cuddapah, Nellore, Nalgonda and Guntur.

Puppets are made of deer, goat, calf or buffalo skins. These hides are tanned, made translucent and cut into various shapes and sizes. The sizes of puppets range from one to six feet depending upon the age and nature of the characters. Three skins are needed for making big figures and two for medium figures. First, the artiste draws an outline with pencil or charcoal, often tracing an old puppet. For jewellery, they punch holes in the skin. Colouring of puppets is an elaborate process. Vegetable colours were used till the middle of the 20th century, but now chemical dyes are favoured for being cost-effective and easily available. The brightly painted puppets have joints at the shoulders, elbow and the hip, all secured for manipulation by a string. The female puppets have joints at the waist and neck for greater mobility during dance movements.

There are two distinct styles recognizable in the Andhra Pradesh puppet theatre tradition. The northern style is prevalent in the districts of Vishakhapatnam, East Godavari, West Godavari, Krishna and Guntur. The puppet's normal size is five feet and is sometimes human size. The southern style exists in the entire Rayalaseema region, especially in the districts of Ananthapur and Kurnool. Here, puppets are smaller and are around four feet. The northern performance style is more dramatic, the southern more narrative.

### **PERFORMANCE**

Traditional shadow theatre has a narrative text, which is presented in poetic form. Neither the narrator nor the singers are visible to the audience. Through variations in pitch, the actor gives the puppet its own voice. Andhra puppeteers have unique modulation and stylized delivery that sets them apart. Traditional puppeteers leave spoken words to the group leader who delivers all dialogue by changing his voice. Women, too, can lend voice for female characters. Puppet movements have their own characteristics, like peculiar jerks that heroic characters show, aimed at making them appear superior to human beings. Striking their heads against the ground shows intense agony and frustration.

Performances begin at 9 p.m. and can conclude at 5 a.m. Before the play, performers conduct ritualistic worship to Lord Vinayaka and Saraswathi. The troupe of shadow puppeteers consists of eight to twelve artistes. The troupe will have at least two women for singing and speaking female roles, two men for male roles, three instrumentalists for playing the harmonium, sruthi, and cymbals and one assistant who is used for quick supply of puppets and maintenance of lamps. They select an open place in the village for the stage, planting four-bamboo sticks to form a rectangle shape with a white cloth tied to the poles. The commentator is behind the curtain and there are a row of the lights that throw the shadow on the screen.

### **THE THEMES OF THE PLAYS**

The performance draws from the epics and local legend with raucous humor and wisecracks about current events. For epics, the troupe uses regional versions of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Very rarely, they write new stories. Many traditional troupes are now performing plays on social problems like sanitation, healthcare, girl's education, family planning and environment. Such scripts are generally provided by organizations (or the government) that sponsors the shows.

The scripts are usually memorized. Characters in traditional shows are recognized by voice, make-up and costume, which remain unchanged. Comic characters are present in all traditional plays. These characters sing and dance humorous songs bordering on the obscene. They occasionally participate in the narrative as secondary characters - servants in the king's courts, attendants to king or confidantes.

### **PERFORMERS**

There is hardly any formal training for the puppeteers in their art form. Members of the troupe gain experience through participation in the performances. It is not uncommon for infants and toddlers to be present backstage during performances and providing assistance from the age of 4 or 5. Outside shows, seniors help juniors improve their ability to read and memorize texts, often from handwritten manuscripts. All puppeteers are adept in the folk dances of their region, as they

often dance with their puppets. Performers are mostly wandering troupes. They wander for nine months in a year from village to village giving performances. The whole family will travel from village to village. The villagers give some money and rice to the puppeteers.

The art is alive in some parts of the Costal Andhra and Rayalaseema districts like Ananthapur (Nimmalakunta). Earlier, joint families used to travel together but today nuclear families are also performing. Sometimes they take their relatives or their neighbours with them. There are families that have also opted for alternate livelihoods like production of decorative lampshades and wall hangings of leather. A co-operative puppet-making center in Ananthapur district helps to promote this art form.

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