Chapter - 6

Religion based Folk Paintings of Andhra Pradesh

Plate No.160
Shadow puppetry is a popular tradition of Andhra Pradesh. Its performers are meandering entertainers and peddlers that pass through an Indian village, during the course of year, offering to sing ballads, tell fortunes, sell amulets, perform acrobatics, charm snakes, weave fishnets, do tattoos, mend pots. It is ancient custom for centuries before radio, movies and television- the Knowledge of Hindu epics and local folk tales, not to mention news, spread to most remote corners of the subcontinent.

“Tholu Bommalata’, literally means the dance of leather puppet. Marionette players are one of the various entertainers who perform during the whole night, performing various
stories from Hindu epics Ramayana, Mahabharata etc’.¹

**INTRODUCTION - HISTORICAL DATA**

‘Puppetry is one of the most ancient forms of entertainment in the world. Nearly every country has some kind of puppet theatre and in many it is also so ancient that its organs are often lost in hazy past. In some of the countries, it is, still a living tradition and in some, only relics remain.

‘It is known that shadow puppets existed in India as early as 6th century B.C. As is the case, with all the art forms of the ancient time, puppet theatre all over the world, however varied their traditions, might be constantly portrayed but with one theme- the theme of triumph of good over evil.

These forms thus survived both as entertainment with instruction or instruction in entertainment’.²

‘Historically speaking there are two distinctly separate shadow theatre traditions the ancient and comparatively modern.

The earliest mention of old tradition is in the 13th century poetic work Panditharadhyula Charitra, written by Palakuniki Somnath’.³
LEATHER PUPPETRY OF ANDHRA PRADESH

As early as 12th Century the art of puppetry flourished in Andhra Pradesh, narrating stories of divinity, sometimes taking the Devine dimension itself stories from great epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata were performed which went for several nights at length. Fables from Ramayana and Mahabharata that remain popular include tales of Lava Kusha, Keechaka Vadha and Rama Ravana Yuddam.

History and tradition of leather puppetry:

‘Leather shadow-based-puppetry of Andhra Pradesh is known as Tholu Bammalata (Tholu: leather, Bommanalata: puppet Dance). Two other kinds of shadow puppetry are practiced in Andhra Pradesh are the Sutram Bommalata (String puppets) and Koyya Bommalata (Wooden Puppets).

The leather puppet because of their transparency & jewel -like glow are most popular. Madhavapatnam near Kakinada, D.C.Palli in Nelore district, Nimmala Kunta in Anantapur district and Narasaraopeta in Guntur District, are the main centers for leather puppets.

There are two distinct styles recognizable in Andhra
Pradesh puppet theatre tradition. The northern style is prevalent in the districts of Visakapatnam, East and West Godavari district this is still alive in some part of coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema.¹

INTRODUCTION TO SHADOW PLAY

‘According or tradition the original Andhra Shadow dolls were simple and opaque figures, some of which has joints connected to strings. These are called Keelu Bomma, in telugu 'dolls which can be move’d. At the next stage figures of translucent hide, painted and decorated, began to be used.

In Sanskrit the term 'Chaya Nataka' is found meaning shadow-drama or shadow-play, but it also refers to a collection of dramas among which is the famous “Datamgada” written by subatha in 13th century A.D. it is not clear, however, whether the term means a shadow as such and since shadow theatre as a drama form which was not discussed in ancient Indian treatise on drama, Music and Dance, (Natyashastra) is not possible to ascertain when it was accorded the states of classical drama.⁴

PUPPET MAKING

‘One sometimes sees, the same person represented by dolls of varying size. Thus in performances in the Nellore
Districts form figures of “Monkey god Hanuman are used a giant Hanuman battles with demons, a miniature Hanuman conceals himself in Ashoka Vanam and another small Hanuman figure makes the bold jump across the strait separating Sri Lanka and India. Naturally the little figure dashing across the big empty screen creates a special effect emphasizing not only the monkey god's bravery but his isolation and perilous situation.

In the same way the demon King Ravana represented by several figures to fit the situation for the large shadow-play figures it is necessary to use more than one piece of leather’.

**THOLU BOMMALATA**

‘It is Telugu name for leather puppetry show, making its imitation in the 3rd century, its art reached the zenith during Vijayanagara Empire, still widely prevalent in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The puppet shows had something for everyone - divine for devout and comic-relief for the distracted. These days puppetry is seen during festive occasions only.

**MAKING OF LEATHER PUPPETS:**

The leather puppetry was traditionally crafted from deer skin. After a long process of cleaning (two weeks), the skin becomes translucent and ready for the art work. As with most
works in the painting of leather puppets too, chemical colours are used these days, replacing natural dyes.

Different characters have their designated colors, blue for Rama and Krishna, green for Anjaneya, yellow for Reshis and so on.

A part from transparency and vivid colors, what gives these puppet their brilliance is the perforated design, drawn on the characters to depict the jewelry. Once surrounded by colours and viewed against light they look like glowing jewels.

The sizes vary—main character are 4 ft. x 1 ½ ft. to 6 ft. x 2 ½ ft. Smaller sized is around 1 ft. high for supporting characters. Some of the characters, (especially main ones) are made in different sizes for a sense of perspective as well as the prominence. As the characters are shown to move away, the smaller ones replace the larger one, to create the sense of movement and vice versa.

Each puppet is controlled by one person with help of a bamboo stick attached to the back and performer sings for the character as he manipulates. The movements of puppets are very intricate with larger puppets as they have different moveable body joints. Fight-scenes make the most of such complex, movements and also kept up the tempo of the performance'.

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ART & TRADITION OF LEATHER PUPPETRY

There is hardly any formal training for the puppetry in the art form. Members of the troupe gain experience through constant participation in the performance.

It was once presented by indigenous Telugu folk artists known as 'Ata Gollalu' (cow-herd players) who belong to Jangama and Balija castes. Today most of the puppeteers in Andhra live in some villages of Visakhapatnam, East Godavari, Kadappa, Nellore, Nalgonda and Guntur districts of Andhra Pradesh.

PERFORMANCE:

Traditional shadow theatre has narrative text, which is presented in poetic form. Neither narrator nor the singers are visible to the audience.

Through variations in pitch the singer gives the puppet its voice. Andhra puppeteers have unique modulation and stylized delivery that sets them apart.

A traditional puppeteer leaves spoken words to the group leader who delivers all dialogues by changing his voice. Women also lend their voice for the female characters.
There is no formal training for puppeteers in their art form. Members of the troupe gain experience through participation outside the shows, the seniors help the juniors (Ages between 4 & 6) improve their ability to read and memorize text, from hand written manuscript.

All puppeteers are adept in the folk dances of their region, as they dance with their puppets. These performers are mostly wandering troupes. They wander for at least 9 months in a year from village to village, giving performances and in return are given some money and rice for their sustenance. Whole family will usually travel as a troupe. Earlier joint families used to travel together but today nuclear family also perform, and in need may take their relatives as well as their neighbors’.

**SHADOW PUPPETS OF ANDHRA**

**Performance details:**

The performance begin with a series of song invocations and tune of ornate strikingly stylized puppets pinned overlapping on the sides of the screen. The puppets are mounted in the middle of Bamboo stick extended to form a handle used to move the body of puppets, their arms are moved with detachable sticks a small piece of string with a peg at the end, which is slipped in to the holes on hand.

Generally the puppeteer manipulates all three sticks of single puppets holding the central handle stick in one hand and arm control stick in the other. Often 2 to 3 puppeteers
operate on the screen at the same time each one delivering lines for his or her own puppet.

As the players manipulate the puppets placing them on the screen and moving them away, they create a illusion of figures suddenly materializing and then fading out.

They also course the figures to walk, sway, hop and fly through air. The degrees of skill they display in animating the dancers, is astonishing. They can swivel a dancer’s detachable head and manipulate her hand while keeping her hips swaying to create a remarkable illusion of twirling.

The puppeteer accompany all the characters, the speeches with animated movements of arms and hand which they flip over to create a three dimensional effect. The swaying of freely dangling legs also adds the feeling of animation.

When several puppets are stationary on the screen at the same time they are pinned to the screen with date palm thorns.

A puppet would be rapidly pinned with one or two of the lone thin thorns passed throw perforation in the head dress of shoulder ornaments such puppets are still able to engage in animated conversation by means of sticks, moving their hands.

Characters that are engaged in rough fighting such as monkey king Hanuman or Jester are often held from the tip enabling them to be moved with greater control then by the cen-
Making of leather puppet:

In Andhra, are found the world’s largest and most mobile shadow marionettes. In order to achieve this characteristic mobility, the various parts of body are cut out separately. The leather is spread out on wood board and with very simple metal points the outline of the figure is marked with a firm-hand, leader of troupe Suthra-dhar draws the contours of the doll without a template or pattern, as though his memory is propelled with shadows pictures nearly waiting to be on the out stretched leather he and his helpers need only five or six different tools namely markers, scissors, punch and knife for most figures. The trunk and head are cut in one piece, the hands, upper arms and lower arms, feet upper legs and lower legs separately.

The head and neck of the important persons is a separate unit, being connected in a simple but effective way to the body to give extra mobility. This neck articulation is peculiar to Andhra shadow-puppets. It confers life and elegance of the play and employed to a great effect in battle scene or dance, the puppeteer can. Instead of turning whole figure merely turn the head, a deception which is accepted, indeed hardly noticed, a skillful manipulator gives the impression of the figures constantly twisting and turning, whereas, in the faces to be cut in the profile is practiced in the neighboring state of Karnataka.
The middle one of Ravana’s ten heads is seen frontally, while the other are seen more in profile until the profile effect is complete.

The contours and especially physiognomy, are an expression of the character of the doll. Body build and attitude, details of costume, headdress and other ornament indicate who is being portrayed and the ability to characterize with the aid of scorer and knife is the measure of skill of the village artists.

Heroes are furnished with long almond shaped eyes, noble brows, straight noses and thin lips whereas demons have protruding eyes, thick noses and thick lips, mouths full of long and sharp teeth, and massive, cumbersome and aggressive bodies.

Spiritual and physical power, refinement and vulgarity are contrasted in a simple but sophisticated, manner. More important than the drawn patterns and lines is the effect produced by perforation of leather. The Andhra Pradesh puppets do not cast massive shadows but when most artistically made a delicate tracery formed by allowing light to pass through thousands of openings in this play of light and shade carried in to detail lies much of the super natural and dream like effect of shadow-play. 

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PRESENTATION OF PUPPET SHOW

‘Approximately 10 persons are required to stage a puppet show. The troupe consists of puppet manipulators, instrument players, musicians, and Bhagavathar who is chief musician followed by few performers that assist him in the background depending on the story, the artists use about 15 to 20 puppets of different sizes in one show.

The puppets perform against a black back drop on one control and manipulate by black strings. The puppets are suspended from above and played by puppeteers who rest their hands on a long wooden pole called “Manthu”.

The puppeteers of Karnataka perform the dual role of a narrator and operator simultaneously.

They, not only manipulate the puppets behind the curtains, but also conduct the dialogues. The puppet operator wears anklets and dance along with puppets but such actions are not visible to the audience. The puppets are an average 3 ft. high, with fully articulated arms and hands. In some of the marionette puppets of Karnataka the hands, the eyes and eye brows move up and down and even move to the sides.

The master puppeteer controls the head trunk and arm. Coordination with other puppeteers is a skill for any puppeteer
to master. The discipline of movement is extraordinary and the puppets move, dance and enact their roles that provide perfectly balanced spectacle. The show varies from 6 to 8 hours’. 

**PUPPETEERS AND THEIR TRAINING**

‘Main group of puppeteers now in Andhra Pradesh is ‘Marata’ the remaining are part timers and they take this profession as secondary activity. There are sub castes in marata community such as Jyothi Phir Marata, Darjee, Bandi Giri Rangaraju Marata.

In some areas of Andhra Pradesh they are called ‘Buda Bukkala’. Jyothi Phir Marata are a type of hunting Class. They go for hunting pigeons with the help of their cows. Darjee, Bandi Giri and Rangaraju communities follow the tradition both in profession and social life.

The puppeteers provide training to their children beginning with Telugu alphabets and words the names of the Telugu years, Vemana Satakam Sumathi Satakam, Narasimha Satakam and Amara Kosham are being taught later. They also learn harmonium and Mridangam, texts prepared from Neethi Shastras & Satakas.

The puppeteers give practical training during per-
formance (Puppet shows). Some take responsibility of other children of their community. The leader must gather a group of 6 to 8 members per performance. 4 members are required for operation of instruments like Mridangam, Harmonium, Dappu, or empty Tin. Two members are essential in the main process to conduct the performance. It is always better if these two must be one male and one female. They give full analysis with meaning for the verses and action too.

Women always use to sing for female characters and men for male characters. They sing main ragas like Mohana, Bhairavi, Devagandhari, Todi, Nata Arabhi, Kambhoji, Mukhari, Malkause, Bilahari, Kalyani, Kapi etc. Depending on the sequence the raga changes. Different ragas for different moods. They perform daily shows for 3-6 hours. If they want to conclude the show, they remove or omit, some portions, of some minor characters, or cut down stories. They take 10 performances to complete Mahabarata or Ramayana and three for Bhagavatham. They complete one event for one day. They perform only during the nights.

They utilize the day for other requirements, like, repair of puppets, cattle feeding or raising grass for their animals. If they move themselves for the performance without any invitation, then they use to ask for financial help by way of donations. If village invites them, they come forward for a fixed amount
without much rigidity. In the olden days they carried their belongings including puppets on the donkeys or on cows from village to village. Some of them have carts, so they carried their belonging on the carts.

Puppets are their main property. They share their puppets among their sons during their separation from the main family. They won’t give these puppets to their daughters as dowry even. It can also be seen, the selling and buying of the puppets in large quantities, whenever the performer will join with small troupe for further performances.8

THEATRICS AND PUPPETRY

‘About five minutes throughout the action will be broken by the episodes of broad comic relief, from the jesters speaking in a slangy, quickie style and engaging in slap sticks antics. Some of these depended on a strong dose of scatological humor or pun.

Except for certain commonly used expletives their language is not obscene, though sequences are bawdy to a degree, not observed in other popular forms of entertainment.

Interspersed with spoken dialogue, verses, passages
in literary Telugu, even occasional Sanskrit are songs accompanied by music. The players serve as their own musicians and all members of the troupe know music that accompany various passages.

**Musical Instruments and Singing:**

The musical instruments consists of harmonium, portable key-board (organ), that sometimes serve as a drone, along with two headed South Indian Mridangam with tapering ends, strings of bells worn on ankles and wrists and pairs of finger cymbals. The singing style and conversations for the play closely resemble the form of singing in the old fashioned drama, genre known as “Satya Bhama Kalapam” accompanied only by the drum and finger cymbals’.

**CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS OF LEATHER PUPPETS**

Shadow-play was, but one incarnation, one set of techniques for dramatizing, the vastly rich Hindu epics. It is superseded by Motion Picture and Television, which have reinvigorated for the electronic age, but the shadow-play was a brilliant incarnation, whose, visual artifacts holds clues, to the history of south – Asian art & drama, deserve to be preserved for the delight of generation to come.

Shadow-play was ingenious technology of animated picture developed centuries before the advent of motion picture
industries. Here 4 or 5 people to bring hundred or more colorful mythological characters to life in the most ingenious way, in the most remote villages, all accompanied by virtuoso singing in contagious rhythms and dramatic sound effects. And how elaborate the characters' costumes were with swirling sashes and ornate necklaces and garlands all cut to points of light vision in intricate pattern.

Today the puppet industry has diversified into different products using the same craft as the puppet shows, are not, any more the main-stream modicum of entrainment.

The puppet theatre is evolving with times, and epics getting interwoven with popular myths and tales. Performances that would go for six nights for Ramayana for 18 nights for Mahabharata, now reduced to just few hours of show.

Bright electrical lighting has replaced earthen lamps, but still magical glow of characters and their narratives still transport the viewers to the surreal world of sages.

**Other leather artifacts:**

Apart from leather puppetry, leather lamp shades are the other manifestation of brilliant leather artistry of Andhra. Creation of lamp shades require moulds over which the leather is stitched. Charming designs which often include mythologi-
cal figures, are drawn on them.

Lamp shades are finally painted with vivid colors which impart an elegant and gorgeous look. Besides many more attractive paintings and purses and other items of interest are made and marketed to the tourists, for their sustenance’. 9

**THOLU BOMMALATA - Field work:**

Kattubadivari palem (Yakkalavari Palem) is about 20 KM from Narasarapet on the way to Kottappa Konda, a popular Shiva Kshetra of Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh.

I have gone along with an associate in a car on the very hot day of November. We reached the place around 3’o clock in the afternoon, we found the place quite uninhabited and nobody came to our rescue in spotting where leather puppetry activity would take place. With difficulty we reached the spot and aptly found some people gathered on a small stage, involved in training youngsters of the traditions of Tholu Bommalata.

As soon as they learnt that we are from Hyderabad, they left their work and gathered around us with lot of enthusiasm and anticipation. Probably they thought that we are from Govt. body, which would support them through its multifarious activities. They told us, that in the recent past that govt. of A.P is organizing few of their performances in big cities like
Hyderabad, Visakapatnam and Thirupathi.

We clarified their queries that we are students of art doing research on the folk arts of Andhra Pradesh; hence we are here to know more about the dying art and craft of leather puppetry.

Sri Hannumnath Rao S/o Dasu who maintains troupe called “Kanaka Durga Tholu Bommalata Brundam” is the senior most among the artisans. He informed us that government is taking extraordinary care in sustaining the craft of leather puppetry in the state. It seems around 150 families right now are involved in performance of Tholu Bommalata in the village. He informed that government is providing opportunity for their performance whenever there is a cultural event occurs, they all seem very contented and so also their families. Their enthusiasm did not stop there, but instantly brought out their treasured works showing them and explaining the process and functionalities

They proudly displayed their works of different characters and their significance. They narrated the stories in a peculiar slang which is mixture of Telugu & Marathi (in folk style) their fore-father’s have migrated centuries back from Maharashtra via- Telangana to coastal Andhra. They still speak the language not totally Marathi not totally Telugu.
They started to show the process of getting perfect hides with translucency which is a pre requisite for the craft of puppetry. They have different hides of different levels of attaining the final product. We stayed that night late to see the actual performance of puppetry. It was a thrilling experience though done up hurriedly and haphazardly. The folks were so animated and took up their relative roles. Though not a full-fledged narration they added music and theatrics to the event.

There are number of such family-troupes consisting of 5 to 7 people to mention few such:

1. Maha Laxmi Leather Puppetry Show & Party of V.Venkata Ratnam
3. Sri Thrikottishwara Leather Puppetry Show Unit of Venkatesh.

The children attend nearby schools and in their leisure time, get trained in the craft of puppetry by the seniors of the family or by the senior most in the community in developing skills of drawing, music & narration. The children also lend their hand at performance. We were thoroughly pleased with the on-
going activity in such a remote village, unknown to the outer world, quietly involved with their tradition and living with it and by it.

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