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# TOLU BOMMALATA

*The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Andhra Pradesh*

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M. Nagabhushana Sarma

The Andhra shadow puppets are unique both in terms of their huge, bigger-than life figures, their complex colour scheme and their varied methods of articulation. Hailed as the earliest entertainment through coloured transfiguration, the shadow puppet theatre was, for long, the singular mode of pastime for rural masses, always combining entertainment with moral instruction.

The shadow puppet, cut from pieces of flat raw hide or stiff parchment, was a popular performer not only in Andhra Pradesh, but in Karnataka, Orissa, Kerala and Maharashtra. While the existing shadow puppets of Kerala, Orissa and Maharashtra are black and white puppets, the Karnataka and Andhra puppets are multi-coloured. They are also bigger in size, with separate pieces of various limbs stitched loosely for easy and better articulation.

Historically speaking, there seem to be two distinct shadow theatre traditions in Andhra, one probably following the other. The earlier tradition, which was already an established one by 13th Century A.D., was described vividly by Palkuriki Somanatha in his work, *Panditārādhyā Caritra*. In the first Canto, Somanatha mentions two types of puppets—those that are manipulated behind the white saree—curtains and those that are manipulated with rods. The former ones are evidently shadow puppets. This proves beyond doubt that the shadow puppet theatre was a well-established tradition in Andhra even by 13th Century, because Somanatha's description pertains to the Sivarathri festival celebrated in the Srisailam temple and no form of entertainment which was not native and which was not accepted by the tradition, would find a place in a festival of that kind.

Further, inscriptional and literary evidence shows that this was an unending tradition upto the 18th Century. However, a Telangana inscription

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(dating back to (late 18th century), popularly known as the Guduru Inscription of Warangal District, mentions the names of Sutradhari "Kommojanaha, Baraha", indicating that the inscription was ordered to be written by Sutradhari (Puppeteer) Kommoji. Similarly a Panagallu inscription contains references to one "Sutradhari" Brahmoji.

These references in late 18th century and early 19th century inscriptions bear testimony to a divided tradition in Andhra Shadow theatre art. The earlier puppeteers are of native origin and had established themselves as traditional puppeteers, hereditarily devoted to performing these shows. The references to Kommoji and Brahmoji, which are not native Telugu names suggest that the second tradition had started with the puppeteers of Maharashtrian origin. These Western performers might have migrated with the Maharashtrian kings of the Nayaka dynasty (18th century) through the Telangana region and must have settled down on the borders of Maharashtra and the Andhra areas—to be more exact, the South Indian territory around Hindupur and Bellary under the Nayaka rulers. This also substantiates the evidence available now that both a large number of Andhra puppeteers and a considerable number of Karnataka puppeteers come from Maratha origin and speak, though mutually unintelligible to the groups, a dialect of Marathi called *aare* (आरे). This point can further be testified from the fact that there are families of similar family name in both the regions. While the Telugu *aares* comprise of four different families, the Karnataka *aares* have thirteen families (which includes the Andhra four). This goes to prove that the *aare* community puppeteers, either in Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh migrated from Maharashtra either during the time of the Nayaka regime or during other conquests. The fact, however, remains, that a majority of them chose to learn Telugu or Kannada texts for their performances, but basically retained their native dialect for a more homely environment.

However, not all puppeteers now active in South India are *aare* people. The Jangams in Mysore, the Kuthubus in Bombay-Mysore border, the Kuttadis in Madhura-Tanjore area, the Balijas in Bellary, the Ete Bondilis in Vizag, and the stray golla families in Godavari delta area and Siva Jangaalu in Telangana—have all followed the puppet theatre tradition, though these families have almost ceased to perform now.

The *aares* themselves prefer to be called *balijas* or *balija* kshatriyas as they are called in Maharashtra. They are mostly wandering troupes, wandering nine months a year from village to village, resting at each place for two or three days. In recent years, however, they have settled down at different places doing odd jobs. Many of them found that they cannot earn enough through *bommalata* to sustain them and their family and so took to other jobs. The main villages where these puppeteers have chosen to have their

permanent homes are numerous—ranging from Sringavarapu kota in Vizag District to Bommalatalapalli in Bellary District. A group of about forty families belonging to the *aare* puppeteers made Madhavapatnam near Kakinada their permanent home in 1937. Families in the Southern parts of Andhra Pradesh do not have a permanent home.

The puppeteer team will usually consist of a family—the husband, the wife and children. A family may take the help of other relatives in times of emergency and give them a share of the show-money. Usually, during the tour, it is only a single family that puts up the shows.

### The Making of the Puppets

The basic material needed for the preparation of a puppet is the wet skin of a goat or deer. The ripped off skin of the animal, before it dries out, is bought and the wet skin is dipped in warm water and the inner side of it is cleaned with a sharp knife. The hair is removed and so is the sticky matter. Salt should not be applied while polishing the skin. There is no tanning process involved here. After the skin is thus cleaned and softened, it is made uniformly thin and translucent. This process takes a day. The skin is then placed on a soft, straight-levelled gunny mat and is stretched so that, when it is dried, the skin will not be stiffened or wrinkled. Four people hold the skin on four sides until it is uniformly straightened. Then it is fixed up with nails all around to keep the straightened position in tact. On the straightened, nailed skin, a thin white cloth is placed to avoid too much of heat. After a day's drying the skin is white and clearly translucent. It is about 1/32" thick and is stiff enough to stand on the screen. The parched skin is ready now for being transformed into a beautiful art piece. Three skins are needed for making a big figure, and two for a medium figure. Each medium or big puppet will have three major parts—the head, the body and the limbs, and each part is usually made of one goat or deer skin.

The first step in carving the figure out of the translucent skin is to draw an outline. Usually the outline is traced from an old puppet. The outline of the figure is drawn on the skin either with a pencil or charcoal. Sometimes, when the artist is sure of the outline, he may even trace the outline with a sharp instrument which, when traced, leaves a groove on the skin. When the old figures are not available, or when the artist wants an altogether new figure, the figure is drawn imaginatively on the skin, proportions carefully checked and the final sketch made with a sharp chisel.

Then the artist moves on to the design. The design mainly consists of jewellery and clothing. This reveals the finest aspect of the workmanship of the artist. This is done by perforating different types of small designs on the skin with the aid of sharp chisels. Circles, triangles and crosses are the usual shapes cut into the skin to indicate jewellery. But at this stage, only

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the outlines are drawn. For example, if a necklace is to be shown around a figure's neck, the artist chooses either a triangular or cross-like or circular chain. This is the rough sketch drawn by the puppet maker. At this stage, the figure is cut from the skin with a pair of sharp scissors.

The next task is punching of holes in the skin in accordance with the designs already drawn. These holes mainly represent jewellery. This is done by cutting out holes of uniform size and design. The artist alternates the design to suggest different types of ornamentation. For example, if one ornament like a chain consists of small, circular holes, another necklace will be triangular and so on. Such alternation suggests variety and adds to the beauty of the figure. When properly coloured and placed on the white screen against the background of lights falling on the figure, these holes look like finely made jewelery of different types and different colours. This involves a deft operation and fineness and depends upon the aesthetic sense of the designer.

The different parts are then hinged together by means of a strong string thickened out of ordinary thread used for stitching clothes. These strings are attached into holes perforated at different edges of the limbs for the purpose. If need be, they can very easily be untied. However the head and the body are attached by a strong bamboo stick which is fixed into loops at the central part of the figure from the head down to the lower part of the trunk.

### Colouring

The colouring of the puppets is the most elaborate process in puppet-figure preparation. Until the early years of this century, vegetable colours were used, but now the preparation was made easier by applying chemical dyes. In olden days only three basic colours were used—red, green and black—with white as a relief colour. With the easy availability of the chemical dyes, there is a growing tendency of using other available colours like yellow, violet etc. The earlier puppets indicate the use of deep colours but now the colours used are of light shades.

The dye colouring will start after two days of the punching and perforation. The colours are mixed in water and are spread on the figure as per the design. A thick paste of the colour mixed in water is applied with a piece of cloth rolled into a lump of the colour-mixture. After a particular colour is applied, another piece of cloth is used to smoothen the colour more uniformly. This is done especially to draw the lines more sharply and the colours more aesthetically.

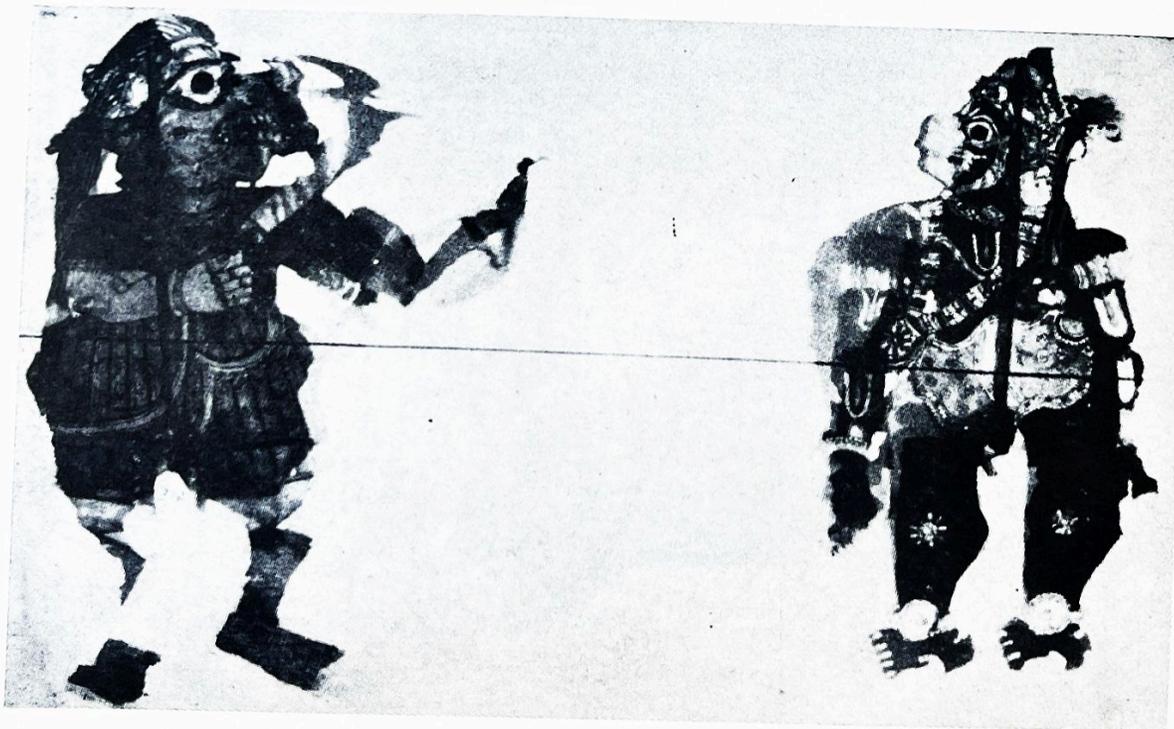
### The Size of the Puppets

The Andhra puppet figures are the largest-sized multi-coloured ones available in India today. The usual size of a puppet ranges between 5'x3'-6'x



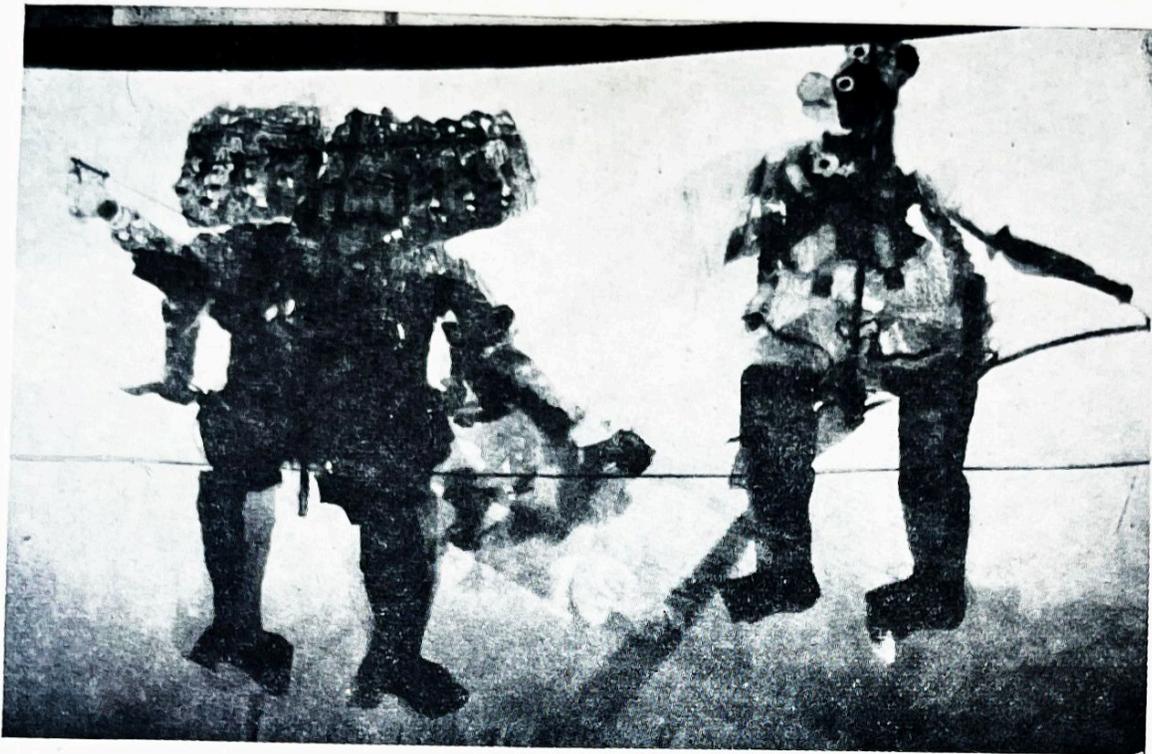
Keechaka and Bheema

Hanuman and a demon



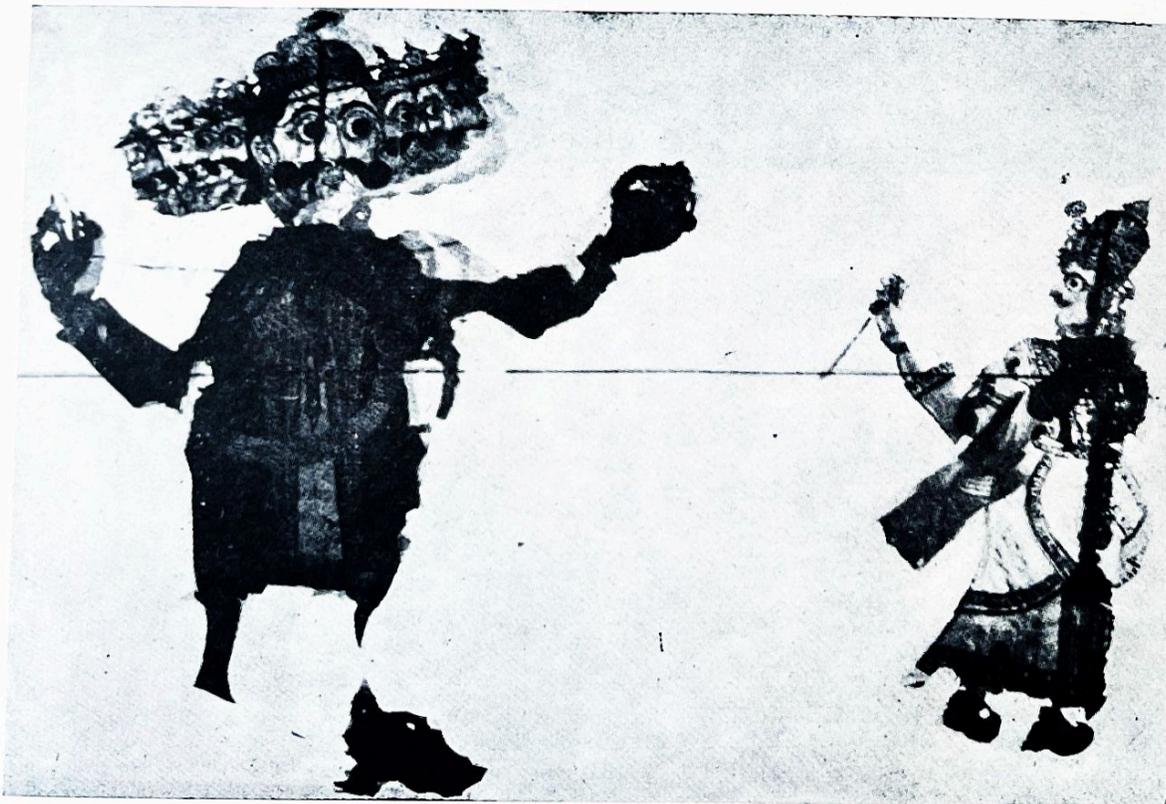


Ravana



Ravana and Anjaneya

Ravana and Mandodari





Vinayaka

Hanuman and  
two demons



3-3½'. There are figures much larger than these. A *ganiyam*, which is the case or box to keep the puppet figures, contains usually 100-110 puppet figures. These hundred and odd figures are used for performing both Ramayana and Mahabharata stories. Some character-figures are in duplicate and triplicate in different sizes, according to the needs of the different sizes in different parts of the story. For example, there will be three to four figures of Hanuman in each *ganiyam*—ranging from a very small one of ½' x ½' size to 7½' to 8' x 3½' size. These will be used as the occasion demands. The four-legged monkey-god in a small size, a two-legged one in small size are a necessity for they will be used for presenting the story of Hanuman who could change sizes as the story demands. Similarly most of the major characters will have at least two figures in different sizes. The need for projecting four or five figures on the screen at a time also necessitates the preparation of smaller figures. In some figures in addition to the head, the trunk and the limbs, even the feet are separately stitched. These are the dancing puppets known as *keelu bommalu*.

## Performing the Play

### The Stage

For a performance of a Leather Puppet Show the stage with a white screen is a prerequisite. Unlike in a doll show or a string-puppet show, wherein the dolls are operated in front of a screen, in the Leather Puppet performance, the puppets appear behind the screen. The entire manipulation is on the other side of the audience, behind the screen. The white curtain, usually 8'x6' (for the larger-performances, it would be 10'x6' or even), 12'x6' is tied tight to poles on all the four sides, on two sides as well as also upwards and downwards. The screen should be tight for mounting the puppets, so that the figures could be seen easily from the other side. Usually the curtain is fixed to bamboo poles on the top and bottom and is raised by about 1½' from the earth. A black cloth covers this portion from the earth to the bottom of the raised curtain. The curtain is raised to enable the performers to stand and operate the figures. The white cloth is neither too thick nor too thin. If it is too thick, it affects the translucency of the shadow and if it is too thin, the puppets and the performers will be seen clearly through the lighted curtain.

It is also customary, especially in the northern parts of Andhra, to keep the curtain not in right angles to the earth, but slightly (about 15°) vertically, making the top portion of the curtain tied to the bamboo fall towards the audience. This is intended to keep the large puppet intact on the curtain. If it is completely vertical in 90° right angle, this large puppet will not stay on the screen easily.

The puppet figures are mounted on such a screen from behind. In fact, the figures are operated back-stage (or back-screen, to be more exact). The

audience will never see the puppet figures as such, but will only see the shadows thrown onto the screen by a light from behind. Two lamps are fixed behind the screen at about 1½'-2' away at a height of about 6'. In the old days a row of earthenware lights were erected and placed behind the screen, the wicks therein lighted with castor oil. But since the cost of castor oil has become prohibitive the performers use petromax lights. Care is to be taken for lighting the screen uniformly so that the puppet figures glow uniformly on the stage. In recent years, however, even electric bulbs are used in order to throw light on the puppets. The old style of lighting had a sustained and more natural and uniform spreading of rays, whereas, with both the petromax and the electric bulbs, the light's diffusion is less and concentration more. This naturally disturbs the uniform lighting necessary for the show. In the latter case, there are concentric circles of light as two spots thrown onto the curtain from two areas. The lights should not be hung very high because, if they are hung so, the shadows of the manipulators fall on the screen. The old lighting system was used to such great advantage that the mild light when thrown onto the dark coloured puppets, the translucency gave a marvellous silhouette (shadow) of a multicoloured figure almost brought to life. In recent years, with the introduction of the petromax and electric bulbs, light colours are used for the puppets so that the bright lights will not vitiate the shadow. In the background of such bright lights, the old thick puppets seemed very dull. So the puppeteers have now started using light coloured puppets to suit the bright background lighting. ✓✓

### Manipulation

The animation of a puppet figure depends on the way one used the two cross sticks attached to the puppet's hands. It is indicated that the figure is kept tight by attaching a bamboo stick vertically on the puppet which runs from the top of the head to the trunk with a little stick protruding below the puppet. The puppeteer holds the puppet on the screen with this stick attached to the puppet itself. Since the puppet is coloured on both sides, the stick is used even to change the sides of the puppet.

### The Composition of the group

In the old days the puppet theatre groups were family groups. This was convenient for the troupes to travel from place to place. Until recently (1937), many of these families did not have a permanent habitat. If they were at one place for three or four days for performances, they stayed under a tree, cooked their food in the open and slept under the open sky. If, during rainy season, they could not tour, they took their shelter either in a village choultry or in some dilapidated and disband house on the outskirts of the village. Now a days, the practice of a single family troupe performing the plays is extinct and a group is made up of two or three families, mostly close relatives.

The troupe itself consists roughly of eight people. Two male and two female members are the manipulator-singers. There will be three instrumentalists who follow the singing on harmonium, mridangam and talam. In the Southern parts, *mukhaveena* is also used. There is need for one or two people to do odd things—like keeping the puppets in order, handing over the figures to the performers, to participate in the chorus etc. Their main job is keeping the *tala* (rhythm) of the song, and following, in a high-pitched chorus, a *charanam* sung by a manipulator. Harmonium is used mainly as *sruti* and it is not played. And so most of the times harmonium-tuning is done by whoever is free. In each troupe most of the male members are taught to play on the mridangam and so two or three people share the work.

### The Text

The text the puppeteers use for their performances is not a written document. It is collected from different sources at different times in the development of the tradition. For example, the text of a Ramayana story is drawn from different written and oral texts. The main-story—the narrative part—is taken from a *dwipada kavyam* called *Ranganatha Ramayanam*, said to have been written by a king, Buddha Reddi. This text is chosen partly because of its conversational idiom necessary for a theatre performance and partly because of its musicality. The poems are taken from *Molla Ramayanam* and the *daruvus* are taken from *Kuchikonda Ramayanam*. The different items are brought together appropriately and are included in the performance. At what time of the development of the art these different elements have found place in a performance is not known even to the oldest and the most knowledgeable of these puppeteers. All these go into the oral tradition and they learn the entire text by heart.

Such changes are not unpredictable in folk tradition. Change is the surviving principle in all folk forms. As they cater to the entertainment needs of the common folk, the artists will have to supply such ingredients as the people like, though, strictly within the framework of the tradition. Thus we find that the slow rendering of a song is replaced by a faster rendering, the deep colours of the old puppets being replaced by light colours of multiple shades. Similarly, there are changes that can be found even in the text. This is more prevalent when the puppeteers take their shows to the villages. The change is in including popular film songs or at least new songs based on popular tunes written by a local hack-writer.

The main aspect of improvisation concerns the humorous interludes which do not depend upon any text and are often impromptu renderings. In fact audiences await the arrival of the comic characters of Bangarakka and Kethigadu. Through these characters and through the common gossip and revelry they indulge in, the puppeteers bring a native element to the tradition. In course of time, there are duets specially written for these two characters

and these characters have become synonymous with folk humour. The familial mirth attached to the relationship between a young man and his maternal aunt has been exploited completely by these two characters.

Though these humorous characters and their escapades occupy a relatively minor role in the whole gamut of a puppet performance, they have remained the delightful memories of spectators, generation after generation, and, in the days when the puppet performances were very popular, the relative merits of the puppet theatre groups were decided on their improvisations of these humorous characters.

### Characteristics of a Performance

The Andhra puppets, because of their multi-coloured nature and human-like height, are fascinatingly articulate. The dramatic contrast of the characters is achieved, first of all, visually. For example, the differences in the figures of Ravana and Rama or Ravana and Anjaneya are brought into focus through the contrasts in colour. While the Anjaneya figure is coloured in green, Rama's blue and Ravana's red—the contrast when presented on the white screen against the background of white light falling on them is obvious and unique.

Another characteristic feature of the figures is their relative variations in height. Dramatic propriety is achieved by making certain figures look more prominent than the others by their sheer height and width. Thus, the figures of Ravana, Keechaka, Bheema, Anjaneya and Rama are larger than the other figures. This visual establishment of the relative supremacy of the figures is achieved as soon as they are mounted on the screen.

The dramatic nature of the characters is intensified in the entrances and the accompanying "entrance songs". For example the character of Anjaneya always enters the screen with a few acrobatic feats. Similarly the figure of Jattivadu (a boxing champion) in *Keechaka Vadh* enters with great pomp and noise.

The battle scenes in the Andhra Puppet show are the most dramatic ones. The important episodes that these shows present centre round such fights so that they will attract the attention of the audience. The wordy duel, followed by a few exchanges of blows with hands, then bows and arrows—followed by a duel—this is the usual order of the fights. During the fights, the entire manipulation style changes. At the height of the fight, usually a duel resembling boxing, the puppet figures are not manipulated any more by sticks. They are not even manipulated by two different men as they usually do. Both of them are taken by one manipulator and by thrusting one on the other, by striking one figure against the other, the simulation of a fight is achieved. This is further accentuated by the background noise and the beating

of the mridangam at its highest. There are two other instruments that are used by the puppeteers only when a fight is shown. One is called *pavada*, a hollow bone of a goat, dried and cleaned, which is blown during the fights. The blowing sound resembles that of a bugle or a *sankham* which is an indication of war. The second one is by making rhythmic sounds by thumping two long pieces of wood, placed one on the other. The wooden pieces will be 1" thick, about 6 to 8" wide and 2 feet long. By thumping one's foot on the two wooden bars a noise similar to that of exchanging blows emanates and that adds to the furore and noisy chaos that is expected of a bitter fight. All the other men and women send cries of *abba - amma - chavu - chachanu* - which rend the sky. The entire fighting scene thus gives a heightened sense of dramatic activity.

### The Repertoire

Almost all the puppet teams have a fairly large number of plays in their repertoire. These plays are based on either the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*. Two or three stories from each of these epics are more popular than the others, firstly because of the 'dramatic' element in them, and secondly because they are better rehearsed in the sense that they are performed more often than the other plays. Both "Sundara Kanda" and "Yuddha Kanda" from *Ramayana* are the inevitable choice of the audience. In "Yuddha Kanda" alone there are 4 major stories and each one would form the theme for a full-length puppet show. They are : "The Death of Indrajit," (Indrajit Vadha), Laxmana's fainting (Laxmana Murcha), "Myravana" (Mahiravana) and the final battle between Rama and Ravana ("Rama-Ravana Yuddham"). In addition to these, the repertoire also consists of "Lava-Kusa" from the *Ramayana*.

In the *Mahabharata*, the four stories that are popular are : "Keechaka Vadha", "Virata Parvam", which is an extension of the first story, "Sasirekha Parinayam" and "Padmavyuham". "Padmavyuham" is the most intricate of all the plays the puppeteers perform. In order to show the different battles fought the performers prepare not one screen, but two, one on the other. Thus it requires two shows to be shown simultaneously on the two screens, with two sets of accompanying instruments, two sets of puppeteers and two sets of puppets.

"Padmavyuham" will be performed for three nights. The battle scenes divided into two—those that are fought inside the Padmavyuham and those that are fought outside. Abhimanyu from among the Pandavas is the only one that has an entry into the Padmavyuham (an army designed in the form of a Lotus Flower), with all the leading Kaurava kings fighting against him. On the other screen is shown the battle between the Pandava leaders except Arjuna and Krishna fighting with less important Kaurava leaders, outside the Padmavyuham.

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In order to perform this play (performances of this are very rare), the puppeteers need about two hundred puppets and fourteen to fifteen puppeteers with two mridangam players and two harmonists.

The shadow puppet theatre was for long the only entertainment for the villagers. The puppeteers themselves have depended upon it for their bread for long, developing a large number of plays in their repertoire. The very fact that every one in the team knows the entire text and can operate any puppet proves their professional interest in it. But things have changed in the last seventy to eighty years. The art, which flourished at one time without any rivalry, is in its extinction.

The present social position and economic conditions of these people are deplorable. Except one or two, who were frugal and careful in their spending, others retained the same old habits of the wandering days even after they chose to settle down at a place. The elders invariably take to drinking and spend whatever little they could afford to earn. The main reason for their poor condition now is that they have relied upon a drying up milch cow too long and by the time they realized that they should not depend upon the hereditary *bommalata*, they are already past any resurrection. They are slightly better now because many of them took to other professions, performing *bommalata* more as a hobby than a profession.

The other full-time profession they have all undertaken now is the vendor's. They exchange plastic and stainless steel utensils for old clothes. This is a more lucrative job than puppetry, according to them. This job involves going round the villages and towns, procure old clothes, mend them and sell them again to the lower class people in the towns nearby. While the more able-bodied go in search of collecting clothes, the old people stay at home, look after the children and mend the clothes already got. While the ladies do the wandering job, the men set up small street corner shops, from where they sell the clothes. There are others, especially in the southern Andhra region, who work as agricultural labour. There are still other groups which stick to the age-old tradition of wandering from place to place, giving performances wherever they can.

The elder members of the established community at Madhavapatnam, near Kakinada, East Godavari District, are not very happy with this situation. They want minimum educational facilities for their children.

It is distressing to find a decreasing interest among the members of the young generation in making puppet performances a profession. They think that it is not enough paying. They also say that due to the impact of the movies, their type of entertainment has become outmoded. As one finds cinema halls, at least touring halls, even in the villages, the people had ceased to take any interest in, and so pay for, the puppet performances.

Though it is only natural that these people choose a profession which gives them bread, it is the Government that should come forward and do something urgently to safeguard the interests of the puppeteering teams and see that the great tradition of puppet performances will not vanish from the land where it flourished so long and with such unstinting patronage.