

## Shadow Plays in Karnataka

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Shadow Play of Leather-Puppet Play is believed to have originated in India and migrated to other countries of the world. "Hindu kings conquered Java in the first century A.D. and ruled for 1,500 years. During this long period of time Javanese life became Hinduized. Malay-Polynesian deities, which had counterparts in the Hindu pantheon, took on the corresponding Hindu names, and the shadow plays figures henceforth showed them dressed in the Indian *dhoti*. When there were no such Hindu counterparts for the Malay-Polynesian deities, these deities retained their Malay-Polynesian character and their shadow play figures continued showing them dressed in the Malay-Polynesian *sarong*. In the course of time the number of shadow play figures was increased by the addition of characters taken from Hindu mythology."<sup>1</sup> This kind of folk theatre is said to have been prevalent in India even before the beginning of the Christian era. There are said to be references to the Shadow Plays in Sanskrit as well as regional literatures. For example, there are said to be references to the Shadow Play in Kautilya's the *Artha Sastra*, Vyasa's the *Mahabharata* (1500 sloka), Harshavardhana's *Naisadha Charitre* (XVIII, 13) mentions that King Nala invited the Puppet-Players and arranged a puppet-show in the Hall of Entertainment (*Pramoda Bhavana*). Rajasekhara, a Kannada poet of 11<sup>th</sup> century mentions in the fifth Act of his play *Bala Ramayana* that there was a puppet-player, who was playing the puppet s of Sita and her maidservant Sindhurika and that Ravana mistook the puppet-Sita to be the real one and touched it only to be disappointed. Gunadhya's *Kathasaritsagara* of the 12<sup>th</sup> century mentions how Somaprabha, the daughter of Silparaja presented her friend Kalyanasena with a box of puppets. Ratnakaravarni's *Bharatesa Vaibhava* points out the presence of puppet-players among the visitors to Emperor Bharata's court. There are references to the Shadow Play in the *vacanas* of *saranas*, who lived in the twelfth century Karnataka and in the *kirtanas* of Kanakadasa in sixteenth century Karnataka. Cennabasava, one of such *saranas*, makes a reference to the Shadow Plays or Leather-Puppet plays in one of his *vacanas*. Kaliketa Bommayya, another *sarana* of the same galaxy is said to have been a *killiketa* i.e. professional shadow-play artist.

There was said to be a *virakta* called Santa, the puppet-player (Gombeyadisuva kayakada Santa) during the reign of Emperor Srikrishnadevaraya (1419-1446). Kanakadasa, one of the famous Haridasas of the same period refers to the puppet-play by saying that the whole cosmos is engaged in a puppet-play.

There is a reference to 'Kalaketa' in *Basava Purana*, which is interpreted variously by different scholars. Dr. L.Basavaraju (in his Preface to *Sivadasa Gitanjali*, p.38) opines that the Kalaketa Bommayya used to entertain the devotees by performing the role of Virabhadra and conduct the *dasoha* out of the money collected through his *kayaka*. But there is no clear reference to any Shadow Play here.

There are references to Shadow Plays in Dhanapala's *Tilaka Manjari*, Vidyanaya's *Pancadasi*, Palkurike Somanath's *Panditaradhya's Carita* and the *kirtanas* of Kanakadasa and Purandaradasa.

The Shadow Theatre enjoyed royal patronage during the reign of Rastrakutas, Kadambas, Calukyas and Hoysalas, especially that of Vijayanagara Emperors.

The Indians believe in the divine origin of all arts. In spite of such romantic belief by people in general, the scholars have continued to debate whether the Shadow Play preceded the Puppet Play or vice versa or whether the puppet theatre preceded the human theatre.

### Evolution of Shadow Theatre

Shadow Play happens to be one of the best forms of folk art. Being a professional art, it has employed all the techniques of attracting the popular attention to itself. One may notice a sort of evolution in the history of this art. Broadly speaking, two phases could be deciphered in its evolution. In the first phase, the transparent and figural cutouts were employed. Then as years went by, the cut out puppets were made to move their limbs like hands and legs. Later the theme, technique and music of *yaksagana* were incorporated into the shadow play. In the second phase, the shadow play was based on ballads (*lavanis*) and epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Both the forms of shadow play are luckily prevalent in Karnataka, although it is very difficult to decide which of them preceded the other. Whether one form was the logical consequence of the other or whether both of them grew simultaneously but independently is yet to be researched into.

### How?

One is curious to know as to how the Shadow Play must have come into existence in India. The picturesqueness and multicoloured nature of the Shadow Play helps us to establish some connection between the folk-paintings, which preceded this theatre. For example, in ancient India, People had the habit of getting the walls of caves and temples painted; or getting woven picturesque clothes and gifting them away to temples; or getting the pictures of favourite gods painted on wooden boards. Similarly, they had the habit of getting a series of pictures connected with a single theme drawn or painted on a roll of cloth and exhibiting them to the public on proper occasions. Such practice could be seen in Vedic, Jain and Buddhist traditions. (Chilvin Norris, a French scholar opines that 'Patakatha' or 'Canvas Story' is older than the Sanskrit Drama. A Jain *Purana* entitled *Kuvalayamala* mentions the fact that a Jain monk used to offer his religious discourses with the help of a roll of pictures. Similarly there are references to 'Patacitra' or 'Canvas Picture' in Buddhist literature and to 'Yama Pata' in Sanskrit *Puranas*.)

The Jain volume of palm leaves entitled *Mahadhavala* is modelled after the folk painting and drawing. There are references to 'citravata' (canvas of pictures) in the Old Kannada prose work, *Vaddaradhane* by Sivakotyacharya and Pampa's *Adipurana*. In the *Mahabharata* there has been a tradition for centuries of entertaining people during the Navaratri festival with the help of a canvas of pictures and to the accompaniment of *Bhagavata-Vina*. The nomadic community of Rajasthan called 'Thakurs' has cultivated this art as a hereditary one. The 'Garoda' people of Gujarat employ a scroll of pictures called 'Bapuji ki Padacitra saruli' to propagate the heroism of their kings and the greatness of the Jain *tirthankaras*. Similarly the roll of pictures measuring three feet

in width and thirty feet in length are said to be available in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh (especially Telangana area).

### Killiketas

The directors of leather-puppet plays are called 'killiketas' in Belgaum, Dharwad, Bijapur and Bellary districts and 'katabas' in Gulbarga district and 'Gomberamas' or 'Chitra Marutis' in old Mysore area. They are also called by different names like *Sillekyata*, *Katabujata*, *Kolukyata*, *Astrikyata*, *Kalikyata*, *Bundekyata*, etc. The members of *killiketa* community are the professional artists of this folk-theatre. The meaning of the word 'killiketas' is interpreted variously. Some scholars guess that it must have been directed from 'kilu katha' (vulgar story). The artists, who must be narrating low or vulgar stories originally must have later come under the influence of *Yaksagana Bayalatas* and taken to the narration of stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. H.K.Ranganath has illustrated this in his *The Karnataka Theatre*. The Puppet-Theatre is known by different names in different geographical locations of India. It is called *Kataputali* in Hindi, *Kalasutri Bihayi* in Marathi (Maharashtra), *Tolu Bommallata* in Telugu (Andhra Pradesh) *Killikyatara Ata*, *Gombi Ata* and *Gomberamara Ata* in Kannada (Old Mysore,) *Katabara Ata* in Bijapur and Gulbarga districts and as *Mandyana Ata* in some parts of Karnataka.

A correct historical picture of the tradition of Shadow Play is available in the *Gazetteer of Bombay* (Vol:XXIII) prepared in 1884, which contains some solid information about *killiketas* (Pp.196-201) According to it, *killiketas* were also called *katabas* and the ancestor of *killiketas* happened to be a *ksatriya*, who accompanied the Pandavas during the latter's exile. According to Edgar Thurston, "The *Killiketyatas* are a Marathi-speaking people, who amuse villagers with their marionette shows in the Telugu and Canarese countries" (*Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. III, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1975.P.293). As S.M.Natesa Sastri says, "Their profession is enacting religious dramas before the village public (whence their name, meaning buffoon). The black *kambli* (blanket) is their screen, and any *mandapa* or village *chavadi*, or open house is their stage. Night is the time for giving the performance. They carry with them pictures painted in colours on deer skins, which are well tanned, and made fine like parchment. The several parts of the picture representing the human or animal body are attached to each other by iron wires, and the parts are made to move by the assistance of thin bamboo splits, and thus the several actions and emotions are represented to the public, to the accompaniment of songs. Their pictures are in most cases very fairly painted, with variety and choice of colours. The stories chosen for representation are generally from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which they however call *Ravanyakatha* and *Pandavakatha* — the stories of Ravana and the Pandavas" (*Indian Review*, VII, 1906, Quoted by Thurston, P.293).). Thurston further says that the dead of these *killiketyatas* are buried in a seated posture and that some of their women are engaged as professional tattooers.

All the *killiketas* know Kannada and have no traditional story to prove that they migrated to Karnataka from Andhra Pradesh. It, therefore, means that they had settled down in Karnataka for long. They use a mixture of Kannada and Marathi at home. They follow a rule of their community that they must tour the country at least

once in three months. However, if they cannot tour, they are expected at least to change their oven in the kitchen from one place to another. The men-folk go for fishing during the daytime, but perform the Shadow Play during the nighttime. These *killiketas* possess lands in Bagilukote, Badami, Hunagund and other places gifted to them in the past. But they do not cultivate them by themselves. After the introduction of the Law of disarmament and Prohibition against Deforestation, the people of these areas invite and hire the *killiketas* to kill the pigs, which ruin the crops in the fields. The *killiketas* have many sub-sects among them, decided by their specific professions. They follow many rituals ranging from birth to death.

An important piece of information given in the *Bombay Gazetteer* happens to be a *sannad* dated Fasali Year 930 (1520 or 1521 AD) given to the *killiketas* by the Second Sultan of Bijapur. Ismail, the Second Sultan of Adilshahi family of Bijapur is said to have ruled from 1510 to 1534 AD. These historical facts prove that the Shadow Plays used to be performed by *killiketas* by 1520 AD. Since they had land grants, they must have had good social status also. The *Gazetteer* mentions that there was no change in the life-style for the past two or three centuries. This takes their ancestry still further back.

The *Gazetteer* of Belgaum published by the Old Bombay State mentions (P.196) that *killiketas* have migrated in groups from Kolhapur and Satara of Maharashtra to Karnataka. The *Gazetteer* of Bijapur district mentions that their domestic language was Marathi with a mixture of Kannada.

The *Mysore Castes and Tribes* (1930.Pp.513-535) offers detailed information about the *killiketas*. It says that the *killiketas* used to get land grants from the rulers for their entertaining service. The book also refers to an interesting story about the ancestor of *killiketas*. The *killiketas*, so runs the story, were originally the agriculturists of Maharashtra. One of their women had maintained an illegal relation with a goldsmith called Kattare Kalachari. Even after the adultery was publicly known, she lived with him and bore seven sons to him. Consequently she was excommunicated and did not know how to earn her livelihood. The lover i.e. Kalachari, therefore, taught her the art of cutting the leather-puppets, singing and entertaining through which she could earn her livelihood. Thus they formed a caste of their own, joined in by their relatives also. Later they migrated group by group to the southern parts of the country like Karnataka.

### Ancestry/Comparative Picture

Though one may guess the ancestry of the Shadow Play with the help of the word '*killiketas*' and their autobiographical information, one cannot fix a cutout date for its ancestry. Some scholars opine that there are evidence to prove that the Shadow Theatre was prevalent in Andhra Pradesh as early as the third century BC. It had reached its height during the reign of Satavahana, Pallava, Calukya, Kakatiya dynasties and during the reign of the Kings of Vijayanagara and Tanjavuru. It travelled to South East Asia along with the Indians, who migrated to those places through the coastal cities like Kalinga, Jeemani, Korangi and Vadre. But there can be another method of deciding its ancestry by comparing it with similar art found in Siam, Indo-China, Jawa and Bali. Though such plays are performed in these countries by Muslims, the

themes happen to be Indian. This theatre must have gone there at some point of history when they were ruled by the Emperors of South India. A Chola King bearing the title 'Gangaikonda' (perhaps Rajarajendra Chola, 1012-44.A.D.) is said to have ruled over these countries when the Shadow Theatre migrated there.

Some scholars conjecture that the Shadow Theatre must have migrated from the coast of Andhra Pradesh to Southeast Asia; that the Arabs must have taken it from Jawa to Arabia; and that it must have migrated from Arabia to Syria, Turkey and North Africa. They further opine that the ancient Indian saints and philosophers must have used the Shadow Plays for the propagation of religion and moral edification. Though this art developed into a means of entertainment later, it never gave up its basic didactic purpose. (Shyam Parmar: *Traditional Folk Media in India*, 1975).

### The Stage

For the preparation of the leather puppet-stage, the puppeteer requires four bamboo poles for fixing in the earth at Four Corners and four bamboo poles for connecting them at the top corners. The three sides, except the front and top, are covered with a mat or with coconut fronds. Then a black blanket and a white *dhoti* are required for the performance of leather puppets. The stage is decorated with mango leaves, which is believed to be a sign of auspicious-ness.

The stage required for the performance of small leather-puppets by the puppeteer in a sitting position is generally of six feet in height and eight feet square. The front position of the stage is fixed with an immaculately white *dhoti* of three and a half feet width for a curtain. Below the *dhoti*, a black blanket of one and a half feet width is fixed.

The puppeteers sit inside the stage behind the black blanket, but they are not visible to the audience on account of the black curtain. A wick lamp or electric lamp is hung behind the puppeteers. When they hold the leather-puppets between the lamp and the white curtain, the puppets cast wonderful multi-coloured shadows on the white curtain thereby creating a magical world for the audience. Most of the puppeteers including singers, instrumentalists and helpers belong to the same caste of *killiketas* and to the same family.

But the stage required for the performance of life-size or bigger than life-size puppets is quite different from that of small puppets and resembles almost the stage of folk-theatre (*bayalata*). Whether the puppets are big or small, the puppeteer has to be an expert in handling the leather-puppets very dexterously. On the whole, the performance of small leather-puppets is said to be far more attractive than that of big ones. Such performances are sure to capture the attention of folk audiences.

The location for the stage or performance of the leather-puppets may be any place convenient to it. Referring to *killiketas* and their performances, S.M.Natesh Shastry says, "Their profession is enacting religious dramas before the village public. The black *kambali* is their screen, and any *mandapa* or village *chavadi* or open house is their stage. They carry with them pictures painted in colours and deer skins, which are well tanned and made fine like parchments" (*Indian Review*, VIII.1906). He has also referred to the way in which the different parts of the pictures are joined with thin wire

and how the parts are made to move with the help of very thin sticks, how they exhibit their dexterity in controlling the puppets, how their singing was accompanied by instrumental music and how the themes were borrowed from epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

The maximum duration of a leather-puppet play or shadow play is of three hours. The puppeteer camps in a village for about a fortnight along with his troupe. From the first day of his camp, the people of different lanes of the village invite him (by offering him *vilya*) to perform the thematic events of their choice in the next few days. Thus both the puppeteer and the villagers schedule the calendar of performances carefully and see that there is no repetition of themes in that village. In fixing the dates of shows, both the parties take care to see that the series of performances follow some chronological order or a principle of thematic continuity. For example, the first show in a village depicts the theme of Kauravas poisoning Bhima; the second show would depict the chess play between Kauravas and Pandavas. The next show would depict the exile of Pandavas. The next show would depict the killing of the demon Kamsa and the last one would depict the war of Kuruksetra. Thus all these shows put together would offer an overview of the *Mahabharata*. Mr. Keshappa of Kakanur village of Badami *taluka* of Bagalkot district has the ability to present the main episodes of the *Mahabharata* in twenty-one shows on twenty-one nights. Each play has a patch of humour for about fifteen to twenty minutes for the entertainment of people.

The number of camping days may range from fifteen to thirty days or even to a couple of months in different villages. On the last day the puppeteer offers a free show in front of the village temple, as a mark of gratitude to his patrons, who have paid him in cash or kind for so many days. The next day he would leave the village along with his troupe for the next village.

### Preparation and Painting of Leather-Puppets

The main substance with which the leather-puppets are made is the animal hide, especially that of deer or goat. But the general opinion of these artists is that deerskin is the best suited to this purpose on account of its transparency and durability. But in the border area between Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh even buffalo-hide is used for the preparation of big size i.e. life-size puppets.

The leather-puppeteers used to get the deer skin mainly by hunting the animals. Sometimes the *gowdas* i.e. village chiefs used to hunt the animals and donate their hides to puppeteers and ask them to prepare the puppets in memory of their (donors') ancestors. Sometimes they used to buy the animals hides and donate them to the puppeteers.

After acquiring the animal hide, the puppeteer has to take the responsibility of seasoning it, cutting it into required shapes and sizes and painting them appropriately. He has to follow a very careful method of seasoning the animal hide in order to make it transparent as well as durable. He would first soak the hide in water, then scrape off the hairs and sundry it. Now the hide looks like a transparent paper or glass. Then he would carve the outline of the required picture on it with a sharp bodkin-like instrument and cuts it off separately.

There are two types of leather-puppets: one, comprehensive puppets containing the figures of man, chariot, charioteer and weapons; two, individual puppets whose hands, trunks, legs and hands are prepared separately and joined together to facilitate the easy movements of limbs.

Whether the puppets are comprehensive or individual, the method of preparing them is the same. The puppeteer has to carve the outlines very carefully and pierce tiny or relatively big holes to create the impression of ornaments (including even crests).

The next stage is of painting the puppets. The paints are also prepared by the puppeteers themselves. In the earlier days, such paints were prepared out of roots, leaves, barks and fruits of trees. But later, paints had to be bought from shops. The puppeteers have to select only the prominent and durable colours, which are bewitching to the eyes. The colours like red, black and yellow are used prominently. Though such colours painted on the leather-puppets may look rather dull, they look very attractive when they are held against the light. The painted puppets are dried the shade and never in the sunlight lest the colour should fade.

In the earlier days, the entire puppets used to be sewed to small bamboo sticks with the help of which the puppeteers used to play them. Here the entire puppets were to dance. The movement of limbs was not possible. But later more flexibility was introduced into the preparation of leather-puppets. Three parts of the body like neck; chest and waist are sewn to a bamboo stick to make them look erect. Then head, hands, thighs and legs are sewn with a string separately thereby facilitating their movements. If the puppets are small, the puppeteer has to sit behind the curtain and perform the play. If the puppets are of life-size, then he has to stand upright to perform the play.

The time when such flexible puppets came into existence is not known precisely. But it seems possible that there was some influence of string-puppets upon them. But these things cannot be proved on account of lack of evidence.

The neat preservation of these leather-puppets is also an art. The puppeteer has to see that the puppets do not grow dry or brittle. He has, therefore, to apply to them some kind of liquid prepared by him out of roots and leaves. If properly preserved like this, the leather-puppets may last for more than hundred years. After the performance is over, the puppeteer keeps the puppets neatly arranged in a bamboo box called '*bavali*', which is held in high reverence by him.

The preparation of new leather-puppets is not an easy task. First of all it is a very costly affair and the artists, who can paint these puppets, are not easily available. Therefore, the old puppets have to be used for the old themes. This is the opinion of Kakappa of Kakanur.

### **Text and Performance**

There are no written texts for the leather-puppet performances. The themes are orally transmitted from generation to generation. These artists have a reverential attitude towards their art. Every New Moon Day and Full Moon Day, they offer *pūja* to

the leather-puppets. Similarly at the beginning of each play they offer prayers to Lord Ganesa and the village deity. After the prayer is over, the puppeteer explains the theme of the play briefly and prays to Lord Ganesa to ward off all the possible hindrances for the performance. (One may easily see the parallels between the leather-puppet shows and the *bayalatas*.) Then he thanks and praises all the people of the lane and their leaders, who have arranged the show with contributions from among themselves.

The literature of leather-puppet theatre is transmitted orally and hardly reduced to the written text. It consists of both prose and poetry. The puppeteer, who is a professional artist, knows his prose dialogues by heart. His eloquence is highly appreciable. His mastery over his voice, his ability to produce a variety of tones is remarkable. He cannot achieve originality in his prose dialogues every day. The songs sung by him are mostly composed by others and borrowed by him to suit the needs of the theme. But he goes on adding to the humour of the play by learning new jokes, proverbs and sentences after the gap of a few months.

### Sentiments

The sentiments of heroism (*vira*), pathos (*karuna*) and humour (*hasya*) are commonly depicted by the leather-puppet theatre. Whenever the feelings of the characters reach high intensity, the prose dialogues culminate into beautiful songs sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments thereby capturing the hearts of the audience. The humorous element is depicted through ironical and satirical remarks and sometimes through absurd combination of thought and rhymes. Introducing humorous interludes right in the midst of the main theme is a characteristic feature of the leather-puppet performances. The humorous dialogues between the *killiketa* and his coquettish beloved, Bangarakka entertain the audience. Many times humour is tintured with obscenity. The puppet, i.e. *killiketa* attracts the attention of the audience with his peculiar shape, black complexion, snub-nose, thick lips, potbelly and crooked hands and legs

### Themes

Generally mythological themes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata* and other narratives are selected for leather-puppet performances. But nowadays even historical and social themes are depicted. The stories connected with mythical heroes and events like Vira Abhimanyu, Babhruvahana, Kichakavadha, Dashavatara, Parijata, Bhasmasura, Yayati, Rati-Kalyana, Girija-Kalyana, Sita-Swayanvara and Bhishma Vijaya etc are depicted by the Shadow Plays. There is a common habit of exchanging themes between Shadow Plays and *Baayalata* folk plays. Some adventurous troupes have been able to present Shadow Play performances on the lives of Basaveswara and Mahatma Gandhi.

Nowadays Shadow-Theatre is used by the Government of Karnataka for propagandistic purpose of popularizing the Government politics and projects like literacy campaign, green revolution, health education, family planning and awareness about AIDS.



## Language

The language employed by the puppeteer is neither the standard one nor the folk one, but a golden mean between the two. It is occasionally peppered with descriptive patches and figures of speech. The puppeteer does not care for the purity of language or thought. On the contrary he can mix the profound with the profane, the ancient with the modern, the classical with the realistic, Sanskrit with English and so on for the sole purpose of entertaining the audience. The abundant use of abusive words like whoreson, son of a bitch, curses and proverbs are the common features of the language of Shadow Plays.

A distinct feature of the Shadow Plays of Hyderabad-Karnataka happens to be the regional variety of language used in them. The major language employed in them is Kannada, but it is always mixed with either Telugu or Marathi or even Urdu in order to attract the audiences of the border areas of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

## Dialogues

The chief value of a leather-puppeteer lies in his (mono-actor like) ability to utter a variety of dialogues of different characters by producing a variety of tones according to the situation. The audience think that the dialogues of different characters are spoken by different people, but the fact is that it is only the puppeteer sitting behind the curtain, who produces a variety of sounds and tones — like the heroic and the pathetic, the turbulent and the serene, the male and the female, the written and the colloquial, the old and the young.

While the puppeteer is speaking the dialogues from behind the curtain, the *tabla* (vertical drum) player sitting outside the curtain, will be responding to the former with his affirmative tags like 'yes, 'yes' and interrogative tags like 'What happened next?' and 'Is that so?'

## Music

Music is an inevitable part of puppet theatre. But there cannot be a simple answer to the question as to what kind of music is employed in this theatre. On the whole, three kinds of music are employed by different troupes. Some troupes employ purely folk music; some, semi-folk music and some others, standard (or classical) music. In the early days, the members of back-chorus used to play *dholu* or *dholak*, but later *dholu* was replaced by the horizontal drum called *maddale* due to the influence of *bayalata* theatre. Similarly in the early days, they used to employ a drone-box called '*pavari*', but later on it was replaced by the harmonium. But cymbals have continued to be employed in the present as in the past. A majority of puppeteers and members of back-choruses cannot afford to learn music systematically and rigorously due to their crushing poverty.

## Superstitions

There are many religious, cultural and social superstitions attached to the leather-puppet theatre of Karnataka. Some people believe that they can get rains for their village by arranging a performance of the leather-puppet play. Some others

believe that they can have the disease of their cattle cured by arranging a performance of such plays. Sometimes people used to get the leather-puppets of Rama, Sita or Krisna prepared and donate them to the director of puppet-theatre in memory of their elders or ancestors. The open praise of such donors by the director would elicit further donations by other donors.

### Geographical Variations

The leather-puppet theatre is found in every part of Karnataka except the coastal and rainy belt of the State. It is a domestic art and the puppets are multi-coloured. But the puppets of other States are only black and white.

The leather-puppets of northern Karnataka are not very big. They measure one and a half or two feet in height. The heroes represented by these puppets wear a cap, have a beard, hold a sword in hand and ride elephants or horses. There seems to have been the Muslim influence on the making of these puppets. The legs of these puppets are not flexible but immovable. The entire puppets are made to dance. The puppet player sits behind the curtain whereas the interpreter sits outside and interprets the story to the audience. Women join as back-chorus to the other male singers.

The puppets of southern Karnataka are slightly bigger than those of the north (yet of middling size). The main feature of these puppets happens to be that the legs and hands of these puppets are flexible or movable. Therefore, the movements of such puppets are more dexterous and attractive than those of the immovable ones. Even the difficult actions like cutting the throat or other limbs (especially legs and hands) of the enemy can be shown through these puppets.

The leather-puppet theatre tradition of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka border is very different from that of interior Karnataka, in that the puppets of the former are of life-size in height and multi-coloured. This naturally requires a big stage and a good deal of ability on the part of the director, who cannot sit but has got to stand and control the puppets.

### Troupes

Dr. Shivaram Karanth suspected that there might not be more than four or five troupes of *killiteta* performers. But recent facts discovered by the folk scholars show that there are a number of troupes in Karnataka, which are not properly discovered, counted and recorded. According to present calculation, there are said to be about 300 troupes of leather-puppet performers and about twenty-five troupes of string-puppet performers in Karnataka.

Some of the troupes of leather-puppet performers are said to be found in the villages like Akkihebbala, Tyapenahalli (near Nagamangala), Kadabahalli (near Bellur), Markonahalli, Ketuhalli (near Ramanagar), Mudugere, Bommalatapuram, Belagallu (Bellary district) and Binkadakatti and some villages of Belgaum, Dharwad, Hassan, Mandya, Mysore and Gadag districts etc.

We may have a glimpse at some well-known leaders of leather-puppet troupes in order to know the variety of methods and manners of performances. For example, Gomberama Hombayya has a repertoire of more than thirty-three '*prasangas*' (thematic

units or events') connected with the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. His troupe takes a series of five nights for the performance of a few select events of the *Mahabharata* story.

His troupe has about five hundred leather-puppets equally divided by his four sons. All the members of the family except children know the dialogues of all the characters to speak according to the contexts. They have got to get a curtain cloth of nine elbows-length only through begging. They decide the direction of the stage according to the astral time (*tithi*) and the theme of the play. Whenever the elderly man in the family cannot earn enough through such performances, his sons separate from him and start earning their own livelihood from their own independent performances. This is how the tradition has been kept up.

There is a family of *killiketas* in Gosabala village of Belgaum district, who have a land grant in recognition of their profession. They perform a leather-puppet play about the Pandavas on the day of Kartik.

Bharamappa and his family from Yadramanahalli gave a performance of an event of the *Ramayana* at the Kannada Department of Karnatak University, Dharwad in October 1984. The performance began with a praise of Lord Ganesha and Goddess Sharada followed by the meeting between Golla (milkman) and Gollati (milkmaid). This is the influence of the *sannata* (small-play) entitled *Sri Krisna Parijata*. There are also traces of the influence of the Jaina *Ramayana*. Bharamappa's domestic language is Marathi. He learnt the art from his maternal grandfather, maternal grandmother and uncle, Basappa of Morageri. He used to employ the leather-puppets belonging to his ancestors. The *shanubhoga* of the village had offered him a land grant in recognition of his art.

Bharamappa offers his own interpretation of the folk-myth of Jokumaraswami. According to him, Kyatappa is born earlier than Jokumara. His wife Bangarakka is naked. Kyatappa has a tuft of hair on his head and is a hero in the village. *Killiketa* is a director. Bharamappa has a right to perform his puppet-shows in thirty-three villages. He gets his gifts from the villagers during the harvesting season. While receiving these gifts from the farmers, he utters the good wishes in a set poetic style.

According to Bharamappa, *killiketas* are of two kinds: one, domestic and two, fishermen. They worship the domestic deities like Huligemma, Yallamma, Kolashanta, Tipperudraswami, Kotturesha, Maddanaswami and Goni Basappa etc. They worship the leather-puppets on the festival days of Dasara and Ugadi. According to Bharamappa, the troupes of leather-puppets are available in villages like Odakalagi (Kudligi taluka), Garaga (near Maremmanahalli), Anakunti (Ranebennur taluka) and Hatti (Mulgund taluka). Once Bharamappa visited Russia for arranging performances by his troupe.

The parents and grandparents of Sayabanna Satabara of Gulbarga used to perform leather-puppet plays, though he has not learnt this art formally. But he has donated more than a hundred leather-puppets to Gulbarga University for preservation in the folk museum. Sayabanna's ancestors hailed from Devanagaon of Bijapur district.

Shankara is a '*kataba*' from Uduchana village of Afzalpur taluka of Gulbarga district. He performs the leather-puppet plays like his father and uncle. His relatives stay in Salotagi village of Bijapur district and have thousands of leather-puppets in their possession

Bhimappa of Bommanakheda village of Chincholi taluka, Babu Kshetri and his son Rachu Kshetri and Maruti Uppar of Maindaragi village and Ramachandra of Karur village of Alanda taluka are well-known leather-puppet players.

Rachu Kshetri and Maruti Uppar of Maindaragi village have written a *sannata* (small-play) entitled *Arabara Ata*. Both of them happened to be good leather-puppet performers also. Whereas Rachu was an expert in singing, Maruti was an expert in playing *dappu* (small flat drum). They were also known for their creativity in adapting the *Arabara Ata* (A Play about Arabs) to the leather-puppet theatre and achieved great popularity by giving performances of the same play in villages and towns like Madana-Hipparagi, Nimbaragi, Akkalakot and Maindaragi. Later the same theme was adapted to the *Gondaligya* narrative performances also. Both of them happened to be disciples of a Muslim saint called Gaibi Pir.

Once upon a time Raichur district was known for leather-puppet theatre. Krishnappa of Kurdi village of Manvi taluka was an expert leather-puppet performer. He is known as Sillikyata Krishnappa. Even in his advanced age, he has been performing and teaching his art to a number of disciples. In 1986, he was honoured with an Award by the Janapada and Yakshagana Academy of the Government of Karnataka

Similarly Doddabalappa of Moranalli village of Koppala district and Doddabharamappa of Yadravi village of Hagaribommanahalli taluka of Bellary district were also honoured with Awards by the Janapada and Yakshagana Academy of the Government of Karnataka. It is a matter of pride for India that Doddabharamappa visited Germany and earned the appreciation of the German audience for his leather-puppet shows.

Belagallu Viranna happens to be an important shadow-puppeteer, who has settled in Bellary and who has continued this art through his family tradition. He has been awarded the Karnataka Rajyotsava Prasasti, Karnataka Janapada Academy Prasasti and Janapadasri Prasasti in recognition of his excellent performances of leather puppets all over Karnataka and even beyond the State.

Gunduraj is another leather-puppeteer, who has settled in Huvinahalli Kavali in Hassan district. He has been engaged in the preparation of puppets, singing in the back-chorus and playing the puppets in collaboration with his father Gombe Ramayya right from his fifth year. He has been giving thousands of performances of other arts like playing on the harmonium, *Harikatha* and *Bhagavata* recitals. He has been honoured with the Karnataka Janapada Academy Award and many awards from many cultural associations. He has leather-puppets in his possession, which are about three hundred years old.

These artists, Belagallu Viranna and Gunduraj have been performing inside as well as outside Karnataka. The leather-puppets prepared by these artists have been exported to many foreign countries like Italy, England, America, Africa and Korea.

The Puppet Land of Bangalore and Ranga Putthali employ the puppets for the expression of dream element. Putthalika troupe of Kolkatta has adapted *Ali Baba and Hundred Thieves* to leather-puppet theatre.

### Need for Modernization

The leather-puppet theatre is neglected these days because of the onslaught of modern technological means of entertainment like film, television, radio, audio and video shows etc. The villagers, who have come under the influence of such modern media, do not show much interest in inviting the leather-puppet troupes to their villages. Some of the puppeteers have,, therefore, been directing their art to propagandist programmes of the Government of Karnataka like family planning, pulse polio removal AIDs and cancer, rural development, national pension scheme and literacy etc. On the whole, the leather-puppet theatre is on the verge of death. The precious art can be preserved only with the entry of educated people into the world of folk art, encouragement by organizations dedicated to folklore and the public patronage for the folk-artists.

### Encouragement

It is a matter of satisfaction to note that the Government of Karnataka has been recognizing the talent of leather-puppet performers and encouraging them with prestigious awards. The five major Universities in Karnataka (at Dharwad, Gulbarga, Mysore, Mangalore and Bangalore) have been showing keen interest in the folklore studies. But the urgent need of the hour seems to be a willingness to introduce the practical training about the leather-puppet performance as a separate course in the post-graduate departments by appointing well-known artists in the field as it is done in the Universities of England, America, Canada and other European countries. Similarly the Department of Kannada and Culture should create and maintain a database of all the artists (living and dead), their troupes and tools for the encouragement of further research in the field.

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