

Report on “Bommalata Utsavam” at Warangal
Jan 18-24, 2008

The Bommalata Utsavam conducted by the Sangeeta Nataka Akademi, New Delhi served as a fact-finding mission to know about the status of puppetry in Andhra at the present time and also to take a stock of the needs of the different puppet groups for fresh inputs to enliven the art practice and to help the puppeteers to continue their vocation.

By and large, the festival was a success, looking at the large number of puppet groups that participated and also the sustained artistry of the puppet groups.

Festival Participants:

There were 53 groups that participated from all the parts of Andhra Pradesh – i.e., from East Godavari to Chittoor in coastal northern and southern Andhra and from Khammam, Nalgonda and Warangal in southern and northern Telangana. Well-represented, though a major number of teams came from three important district areas:

1. Dharmavaram and Ananthapur areas
2. Addanki, Narasaraopet etc. in Guntur district and the adjacent areas in Prakasam district.
3. Madhavapatnam and neighbouring areas in East-Godavari district.

A fourth area of settlement that occurred recently is in West Godavari district, especially in Narasapur – Yelamanchili belt of northern West Godavari.

The Festival also showcased some old shadow puppet troupes from Telangana, especially from Nalgonda district.

Besides the Leather Puppet Groups, there was a Koyya Bommalata troupe, the only one in Andhra which is active.

Some allied ‘Bomma’ (puppet) forms also found a place. The Butta Bommalu – the “Basket Puppets” at the inaugural session and the Manda Hechu’s “Doll Narrative performance”, on the last day.

The festival highlighted the present status of the art of Puppetry in Andhra and the Rescue, rehabilitation and resurgence work that is to be undertaken in this direction. The following are some general observations and recommendations:

Observations:

The twin arts of leather and wooden Puppet traditions are in a deplorably neglected condition. The scattered nature of their habitation, the apathy towards puppetry as an art form in the rural areas which sustained until recently and the lack of awareness among the puppeteers themselves to their own functional and artistic needs are the major reasons for the present state of affairs. This area can be called the “Unorganized Art zone”, such zones existing all over the country, where the artists are only “receivers” of patronage.

Many puppeteers take up other jobs like farming and sheep-rearing. A large number of them are farm labour and others are petty traders. While the elders do both their business and also perform puppetry when need be, the youngsters take up an easier profession of trading or farming because Puppetry needs a variety of artistic inputs.

So in a generation or two, the art may be wiped out completely from at least 90% of the families.

There are still a handful of “old time” puppeteers who are good in the art and also love to see their children take up this profession.

In order to continue this family tradition, there are two important areas that should draw our attention:

- a) Their minimum financial needs are to be met
- b) Their artistic inputs are to be strengthened

In a frank “open session” conducted on the last day on 24th Jan, 2008, a large number of the puppeteers spoke on their needs.

Every one of them felt that their art is dying because there are hardly any performances coming their way.

Their second observation is about the training programmes to revitalise the younger generation.

The third need is assistance to be extended to some puppeteers to strengthen their “puppet-kits”.

In this connection, special attention is to be given to the Telangana groups from Nalgonda district since poverty and lack of inclination stalled the growth of these teams.

A special package may be thought of to at least one team which is in indigent circumstances.

Puppets of these teams are also very old and must be replaced.

While leather Puppetry is in a state of extinction, the state of *Wooden Puppetry* is much worse. About five years ago there were 3 teams, but today there is only “active” team performing. There is also another team near Tirupathi but that also is wound up due to lack of patronage.

With regard to the only wooden Puppet team: presently the team contains 8 people all ranging between 55 to 75 years. We tried to find youngsters to be trained in this area, but unless some financial assistance to the learners also is offered, there seems to be no scope of its revival.

A strong training programme is the need of the hour.

There are also allied doll performances like the Mandahechu. Unfortunately these teams (except one performance on the last day) are not involved in the festival. They are also dolls and the doll performers narrate stories of caste history.

I term them “Doll Narratives”.

As an allied form of strong ritual base, this can also considered for assistance.

Recommendations:

In the above observations, there are four areas recognized as possible areas of special attention.

- 1) the doll puppets of two kinds
 - a) Mandalechu (wooden dolls used for narration)
 - b) Koyyabommalata (wooden Puppets used for dramatic performance)

Since these can be easily selected as there are very few two teams may be selected for assistance in the Gurukula training Programme.

These teams are:

- a) Mote Jagannatham : Koyyabommalata
Ammapuram village
Nermetta Mandal
Warangal district.

b) Mandalechu :Doll Theatre

(2) Ten teams from among the 53 leather Puppet teams may be selected for financial assistance –i.e., for the upkeep of their puppets, making new puppets and training at least 3 youngsters.

The ten teams chosen for assistance are already given in Smt.Usha Malik's report. The list is prepared by both of us together.

Imparting proper training and disseminating the art to the next generation is the most crucial aspect. For this it is proposed to have 4 or 5 Gurus selected and around them a Gurukula is to be built up.

The places might be selected on 2 counts:

- a) The need of a number of teams
- b) The number of youngsters

Willing to learn in a cluster of villages and within a radius of 10 to 15kms.

The places and personnel may be selected from among these.

- 1) Dharamavaram, Ananthapur Dt.
- 2) Kattubadivari Palem / Narasaraopet Guntur Dt.
- 3) Madhavapatnam, Kakinada, East Godavari Dt.
- 4) D.C Palli, Nellore Dt.
- 5) Ramulapenta, Nalgonda Dt.

The assistance for the present may be for two years with proper monitoring. A Guru and a mridangist may be given salary and a minimum of 5 students may be selected for scholarship

Proper recognition to the Gurus by considering them for Akademi awards and other honours might go a long way for revitalising the form.