



## Yakshagana Puppets

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### *The Art*

"The wooden ones . . . . move you as only the most experienced living actors can . . . . For the imagination of the spectator plays a far greater part than the exertions of the actors", wrote George Bernard Shaw of the fantastic world of make-believe where gods and goddesses, animals and birds, mortals and demons live and make war, worship and bless, laugh and cry—all on a stage six feet long and two feet wide.

The tiny curtain moves aside and the play begins. Within a matter of minutes, the figures, barely two feet tall, seem real and lifelike, appearing to establish their identity with the spectators. The spectators are transported into the realm of chimera. Here nothing is impossible since the dramatis

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▲ *Arjuna, Subhadra and Abhimanyu*

personae are from the storehouse of myths and legends. The audiences forget their surroundings. This is the world of puppets.

The art is age-old and among the rural masses in India, it has always been extremely popular.

In India we usually find four kinds of puppets. They are the string, the rod, the shadow and the glove puppets. The *Putli Nacha* or *Kathputli* are well developed in many regions. In Bengal they are often decorated in the characteristic style of Jatra actors. In Andhra Pradesh the leather puppet play (Tholu Bommalatta) is popular. Kerala has its Tholpava Koothu. Rajasthan has its own rich tradition in this field.

The string puppet play of Karnataka (Yakshagana Style) is interesting both on account of its technique and content. The presentation is highly stylised since it has to adhere strictly to the norms and standards of Yakshagana, one of the most remarkable among the numerous arts of Karnataka. All the ritualistic rigor of the Yakshagana "human theatre" has to be observed in its original form and the adept manipulators of the puppets seem capable of making the Yakshagana puppets leap to life. At times it is difficult to tell whether what one is witnessing is a mere show of wooden puppets, inert and lifeless, or a serious performance by well-trained men and women, pouring forth in dance, song and dialogue the whole range of human emotions and passions.

These wooden puppets are about eighteen inches high. Their costumes are exactly like those worn by the characters from Yakshagana, with the same elaborate make-up, high and colourful head-gear and heavy jewellery.

The person who infuses life into the puppet and makes it come alive is the puppet master, known as the *sutradhara*. Through the language of movement he communicates a story, an idea or simply a caricature, all of which serves to entertain and educate. In Sanskrit drama the *sutradhara* is "the holder of strings". Here he is the manipulator responsible for establishing the credibility of this ancient art. His artistry goes far beyond the level of mere skill and sleight of hand. He is a sensitive musician, an imaginative story-teller and, above all, a creative thinker. He gives dramatic expressions to the most simple or the most complex situation and event through that most mute and inanimate of instruments — the puppet. In former times, the puppeteers themselves fashioned these puppets by carving them out of wood.

The content, in Yakshagana puppetry, as in every other ancient performing art, is drawn from the epics and the Bhagavata Purana. There may have been possibilities for embracing secular themes but the older tradition still persists. Yakshagana puppetry has lived through the onslaughts of social and economic ravages and now reposes safe in the hands of a handful of devoted practitioners.

## *The Artists*

The art has survived miraculously in the district of South Kanara in Karnataka State—miraculously because about twenty years ago it was all but moribund. There was just one individual in whom it still lived and he, for want of patronage and owing to his advancing years, felt obliged to retire. But, at the instance of Smt. Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya, he was persuaded to send his collection to the All India Exhibition of Handicrafts. A training centre for manufacturing puppets was also started in Coondapur. Recognition came gradually and he was encouraged to return to the field and devote his years to the revival of the art. The training centre had eventually to close down. But the encouragement he had received gave a fresh lease of life to the art, and won for him a reputation as a matchless exponent of this form. In 1966, he was honoured by the President of India during the Republic Day celebrations.

This artist's name was Devanna Padmanabha Kamath. He lived in the small yet picturesque village of Uppina Kudru near the town of Coondapur in South Kanara District. He belonged to a very famous family of artists and, in a sense, the art of puppet play was in his blood. He had a large collection of dolls, some of them made over three hundred years ago. A doll, representing the god Ganesha, the most ancient in his collection, is still intact.

Devanna Kamath's uncles had initiated him into the art. He held his uncle Nagappa Bhagavatha and his grandfather Lakshmana Bhagavatha in great reverence. He used to recall that one of the favourite feats of his uncle consisted in setting up a pillar at a considerable distance from the stage and making a large bird, a puppet Garuda, swoop down on a puppet snake on the stage and carry it off—all this in the twinkling of an eye.

Devanna Kamath initiated his son, Kogga Kamath, and a few of his fellow villagers, into the art before he breathed his last on 20th July 1971, truly satisfied that the inheritance of the puppets together with his art of manipulation rested safe in the hands of his son.

Kogga Kamath has justified the trust placed on him by his father. He earned high praise for his presentation of puppet plays at the Sangeet Natak Akademi festival at New Delhi in 1972 and at the International Ramayana Seminar held at New Delhi under the auspices of the Central Sahitya Akademi in December 1975.

## *The Performance*

In a Yakshagana puppet show, the Bhagavathar sings his songs in metre and also provides the background music. The *maddale* (a variation of the mridangam) and the *shruti* provide the accompaniment. At times, particularly in the war scenes, there is the beating of the *chande* (a high pitched drum) which gives a martial rhythm: it is played by a fourth artist.

The dialogue is delivered by two or three other accompanists. When the Bhagavathar sings, the puppets are manipulated by the puppeteers with rhythmic movements and gestures. The conversation in prose starts in the background, after the singing of the canto stops, thus developing the story as defined in the singing, and the puppets respond by way of movements of hands etc.

### *On the Stage*

The puppet stage consists of a raised platform roughly 12 feet by 8 feet in size at a height of at least 6 feet from the ground level. Generally this stage is erected temporarily on a normal drama stage. An upright wooden frame, with an opening of 102 inches by 32 inches (having either one or two curtains which can be rolled) is fixed up in front. The outer area of the frame is covered by cloth or other opaque material. Behind the frame, at a distance of 4 feet, a wooden stand 12 feet in length and 42 inches in height is kept covered with a black cloth, acting as a back drop. The puppeteers stand behind it, manipulating the puppets and also making them 'enter' and 'exit' from the sides of the stage. The Bhagavathar and the accompanists stand on one side, near the puppeteers, and watch the scene for the purpose of synchronisation of puppet movements.

Traditional stage light for the puppet show is from an oil-wick country lamp, which sheds a dim, orange-coloured light. Since the revival of this art, electricity has come into vogue in the shape of low-voltage bulbs which provide the same kind of diffused light. The lights are switched off when a 'demon' enters the stage, holding burning torches.

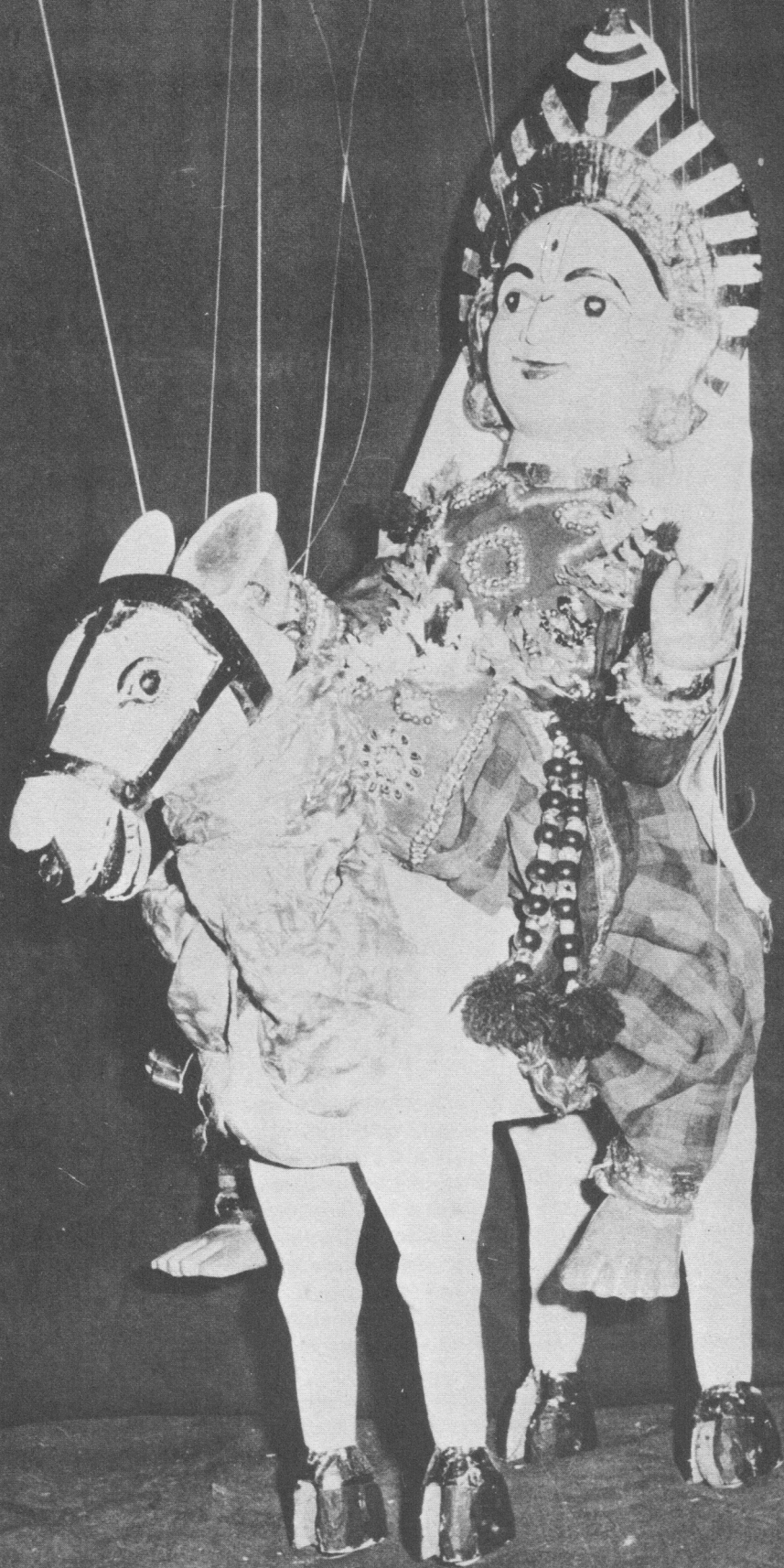
The puppets are kept hanging on a stand some distance behind the back drop, and a dim light is kept there to help identification.

The best results can be obtained in a puppet show if the seating arrangement is not too close to the stage. A distance of at least 20 feet should separate the stage from the first row of the audience. The auditorium should preferably be a closed one. When the show begins, the lights in the auditorium should be switched off.

### *The Puppets*

The Yakshagana puppets are manufactured out of light wood, capable of smooth surfacing. The face with head-gear, including the neck, is carved artistically and so are the hands and the feet. Rough carving is resorted to for the chest as also the abdomen and hips, the hands from the shoulder to the wrist and the legs from the hip to the foot. The roughly carved portions are later given a proper shape by cloth padding inside. Rich costumes and appropriate jewellery enhance the attraction of a puppet's appearance.

The wooden skeleton of the puppet has joints at the neck, shoulders, elbows, hips and knees. The neck is inserted into the chest loosely and in



part, and tied with country twine at two or three points to enable vertical and horizontal manipulation. At the shoulder point, the joint is a simple one capable of moving only up and down. Because the joint is kept a little loose, it also gives some more freedom of movement in other directions. The elbow and the palm are of one piece with the palm fashioned carefully. The elbow joint is also kept loose, allowing for free movement.

There are two separate joints at the hip and knee. These are loose joints intended to permit manipulation of rhythmic movements. At the top of the foot is a cup-shaped cavity for inserting the 'metatarsal' portion of the leg at the ankle joint. The leg is covered by the dress and the ankle joint by jingle-bells (*gejje*). The feet, which would be visible to the audience, are properly fashioned and painted.

Formerly the puppets used to be fashioned with locally available materials. A kind of glue used to be applied over the dried paint to provide a glossy appearance in the hazy, yellow light. At present, ready-mixed paints, said to be more lasting, are used. While primary colours are mainly applied, green, violet, pink and orange hues are also sparingly used in a complementary capacity. The painted portion of the puppet consists of only the face, the palms and the feet.

The head-gear, the costumes and the ornaments are designed in matching colours. The blending of the colours for the face, the costumes, the jewellery and the head-gear is fixed by tradition.

### *The Art of Manipulation*

Normally each puppet is manipulated with six strings. An additional string is added if the puppet holds any instrument like a mace, a sword or a burning torch. The strings, dyed black, were formerly made of a fibre extracted from a local plant. At present, nylon thread is used because of its strength and thinner girth. Dyed black, it is almost invisible in the diffused light, thus imparting a natural style to the manipulation in the dancing and to the 'conversation' of the puppets.

Of the six strings, two (about two to three feet in length) are fixed behind the ears of each puppet, with the other end attached to a horizontal bamboo stick, which is about six inches long. This helps the puppeteer to produce rhythmic movements of the head and the neck by holding the stick in one hand. Two more strings are fixed at the elbow points and are tied to another cross stick six inches long. Holding the cross stick in the other hand, the puppeteer is able to manipulate the hands of the puppet, upto the shoulder. The strings-and-stick method is also repeated at the knee joint. Generally by manipulating the cross bamboo sticks, a symmetrical movement of the legs, the hands and the face is made possible.

The puppeteer can manipulate any two cross sticks at a time with his hands. The third stick, though it often remains 'idle', is also used



*Simhamukhi pleads with Mairida and Dvividha to avenge her husband's death.*

dexterously in intermittent 'beats' to create a mental image of natural and simultaneous movement of head, hands and legs in the minds of the audience.

The seventh string attached to the 'instruments' held by the puppet is separately manipulated by the puppeteer at the appropriate time.

There are moments in a play which call for conjoint action by two puppeteers. If a warrior rides a horse to the battle field, the galloping of the horse is controlled by one puppeteer and the action of the warrior by another. The mounting of the horse by the warrior is a swift action manipulated by the two puppeteers in unison. Two puppeteers may have to manipulate simultaneously (and this requires much training and practice) during the appearance of two damsels (*Stree Veshas*) at the beginning of the show.

The puppeteers, always on the alert, totally identify themselves with the puppets. During the singing by the Bhagavathar they not only manipulate the puppets, but also keep step, and in order to make the action quite realistic, they tie the *gejje* to their own ankles. The *gejje* sound, which makes the puppet-dance so alive to the audience, can only be produced if the puppeteers themselves dance to the *tala* and *laya*. This also unleashes the necessary emotion or inspiration to bring about a similar action in the puppets through the simultaneous manipulation of the strings which they hold in their hands. Only intensive training and constant practice can ensure these results. At times, the puppeteers sing portions of songs or utter catch words, thus infusing 'life' into the puppets and creating a thrill among the spectators.

### *In Performance*

The Yakshagana puppet show portrays themes from the epics. Performances touching on historical or contemporary events have so far not been included in their repertoire. The themes, the costumes and the jewellery are still patterned after the traditional style. The puppets commonly used belong to seven categories:

#### 1. *Stree Vesha* (The female role):

The total height of this puppet is 22 inches, of which the face is 5 inches, the chest and abdomen 7 inches and the legs from the hip 10 inches.

The hair is parted in the middle in the traditional style and tied into a bun, bedecked by flowers. A real sari in miniature and a *choli* to match, both made of handloom cloth and of suitable colour and pattern, cover the puppet. *Vadyana* (a waist band), *Kaikattu* (bangles), a necklace, an ornament on the forehead and *Karnabharana* (ear jewels) are worn by this puppet. The ornaments are made of beads and strips of light wood suitably coloured or covered with gilt paper.

#### 2. *Purusha Vesha* (The role of Arjuna):

Arjuna and other heroic characters wear the *Kedige Mundale* as head-gear. It is a turban, shaped like the *Kedige* flower. On the border of the turban (where it covers the forehead) is a small ornament about half an inch broad called the *Mundale chinna*. The head-gear rises about 5 inches in height above the forehead. The total height of the puppet (including the head-gear) is 28 inches, of which the headgear is 5 inches, the face 5 inches, the abdomen including chest and hips 7 inches and the legs from the hips 11 inches. The girth of the waist including the dress is 14 inches.

The dress consists of handloom cloth with square bands. The colour of the cloth is one of the primary colours. The draping is in the *Veera-kashe* style. The shirt (*Dagla*) has long sleeves and is red in colour. The *Veera-kashe* is worn over the loose ends of the *Dagla*. The jewellery consists of *Karnakundala* over the ears, *Kaikattu* at the elbows and wrist, *Yadekattu*





*Krishna, Pradyumna and Satyaki*

to cover the chest, *Bhujakeerti* on the shoulders, the *Vadyana* etc. The puppet carries bow and arrows.

### 3. Krishna:

Since Krishna's role is unique, his make-up is in a different style. The face is coloured in light blue. The headgear, the dress and the jewellery are similar to that of the *Purusha Vesha*. The colour of the cloth is yellow (*peetambara*) and the dress style is *Neri Udige* instead of *Veera-kashe*. The dance is also unique. The puppet, with pleasing features and with a soft, pleasant smile, carries a discus (*Chakra*) in one hand.

### 4. *Bannada Vesha* (Demon—Villain):

The headgear itself is elaborate and in tune with the fierce look of the puppet. The *Kireeta* (crown) is proportionately huge. At the back of the crown is a circular and colourful *Thatti*, imparting a huge dimension to the headgear and breadth to the puppet. The face is made up with thick eye-brows, broad moustaches drawn to the ears, slightly protruding canine

teeth, a bulging nose and fierce eyes. All these contribute to the ferocious appearance of the demon-puppet and keep the audience spellbound. The hoarse cry at the entry and the burning torches in his hand add to the effect. For his first appearance, even the diffused stage light is put off for better effect. The height including the headgear is 32 inches. The face is 5 inches, the headgear 8 inches, the chest and abdomen 8 inches and the legs 11 inches. The jewellery is similar in design to that of the *Purusha Vesha* but larger in proportion.

5. *Kireeta Vesha* (King):

This is a male character. Instead of a *Kedige Mundale*, a crown is worn.

*Narakasura*



#### 6. *Hasya* (Comedian or Servant):

This is a simple puppet, without any jewellery except a simple *Vanti* at the ear-lobe. *Kulayee* (a conical-shaped cap), *Dagla* and *Challana* (pyjama) with a shawl tied around the waist comprise the dress. The total height (face 4 inches, chest-hips 6 inches, legs 9 inches and the cap 5 inches) is 24 inches.

#### 7. *Muni* (Sage):

A simple puppet 27 inches high of which the face is 5 inches, the chest and abdomen 8 inches and the legs 11 inches. The hair on the head is formed into a *Jade* which is 3 inches in height. A long beard and whiskers, an orange coloured dhoti in *Shatpucha* style and a loose saffron-coloured *Dagla*, distinguish the puppet, which holds a *Danda* in one hand and a *Rudrakshamala* in the other.

There are various other puppets, including Hanuman, Garuda, Ganesha etc. These are some of the important varieties of puppets. The troupe of Kogga Kamath has, at present, about 40 puppets. There was a time, when his ancestors owned over 300 puppets.

Today the main problem is whether this art can, without losing any of its traditional ingredients like the costumes, the rich colours, the jewellery, the dance and the background music, still be improved. This question arises because puppetry has made great strides in all the advanced countries of the world, where it is being employed as a medium of recreation and audio-visual education for children.

Without sacrificing any of its traditional qualities, improvements in the art are possible on the following lines.

#### *Manufacture of Puppets*

It is easy to provide ball and socket joints at the appropriate points to facilitate more flexible and natural movements. The *Bannada Veshha* can be made to open its mouth, by providing it with two separate jaws suitably joined at the back. The jaws can be manipulated with strings. This would give added ferocity to the role of the *Rakshasa*. The eye-balls can be provided with small red electric bulbs, lit by battery cells.

Simultaneous action in one puppet, of its legs, hands and the face, can be ensured if two puppeteers could, by the conjoint dexterity of hands, manipulate it. Through such action, the dance technique of the puppets can be perfected and brought to the level of a human dance performance.

#### *Background Action and Scenes*

The puppet-shows display themes from the epics and those unacquainted with some of the epics find it difficult to follow the story. A scene-

by-scene synopsis can be printed and circulated; but then since there is no light in the auditorium, the spectator cannot read the text when the show is on. Alternatively, a scene-by-scene commentary is possible but that means an interruption in play. This style demands a continuous process of singing followed by conversation. A scene in the background might help to provide a better understanding of the story. It is possible to arrange this by fixing suitably painted curtains which can be placed very close to and/or in place of the backdrop. These curtains should not be drawn in bright or gorgeous colours for then they will overshadow the grandeur of the puppets.

### *Dimensional Stage*

A projection to the upright wooden frame on all four sides of the opening of the stage, in funnel-like formation, pointing towards the audience, should be added. A dark blue-black screen, suspended at the broad opening of the "funnel", with the entire stage-front covered (also in dark blue-back), could thus create a projected opening, that is if the stage-lights do not pierce out of the curtain or the cover. This would have a pleasant visual effect on the spectator by giving an added dimension to the stage.

A thin, transparent screen, capable of being rolled sideways when necessary, could be suspended at the inner opening, ensuring a more effective play of some scenes from behind. And, if the black backdrop fitted on the wooden stand could be arranged to move backwards or forwards, the stage would gain additional depth. This, in turn, would help an in-depth manipulation of puppets from several different points instead of the present "single line" arrangement. With proper control of lighting, many scenes can then become more impressive and powerful emotions can be roused in the minds of spectators.

To create a natural background dimension to the stage, a net screen between the backdrop and the front opening could be provided, with separate light arrangements. In appropriate scenes, puppets can play simultaneously in the open front and also behind the net screen.

### *Two Stages*

If background curtains are to be provided, an interval between scenes may be needed if they are going to be changed. The audience would then get restive because of the time-lag between every scene. To avoid this, there could be two puppet stages erected side by side, both facing the audience. When the play is being enacted on one stage, scenic arrangements can be changed in another and vice versa. The puppet stage is only 10 feet in length and 3½ feet in height. Two such stages can easily be provided on the acting arena of the normal stage (25 feet by 18 feet). To execute this idea, there is no need for extra background artistes, except for one or two puppeteers to man the second stage.

### *Lighting*

Appropriate changes in lighting go a long way to define the mood of a scene. The lighting should generally be diffused and hazy. Instead of exhibiting the entire show in the same hue, it has been found that a change in the colour of lights and in voltage creates a better impression. Scenes performed in the traditional wicklight leave a deep imprint on spectators' minds. A 'dimmer' arrangement, for regulating the intensity of lights, would help to achieve the requisite effects.

Depending on the requirements of the scene, changes could be introduced in "pure black and white colour lights" and also in the lights from the top, the floor and from all the sides.

### *Conclusion*

The Yakshagana type of puppetry is unique in many respects. The themes are drawn from mythology. The puppets, the costumes and the jewellery are made of locally available and cheap materials. The traditional colour scheme is remarkable in that it never fails to impress the audience. The puppets act, dance and respond to the conversation in perfect rhythm. The dance of the puppets (which involves the movement of their feet and hands, according to the *tala* and *laya*) is probably the finest aspect of this art. The music, the instruments, and the dialogue, though drawn from the folk tradition, are quite sophisticated and complex.

This art, if properly encouraged, can rank as one of the best on the puppet stage.