



Social Relevance of Traditional Performing Folk/Art-Forms of Literature of Andhra Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

The main thrust of this paper is to analyse the traditional performing folk/art-forms of literature of Andhra Pradesh and reflect upon their losing and gaining social relevance. The focus of this study is mainly on Bardic Recitals, Yakshaganas and Street Plays. The analysis of the folk/art-forms of literature is done from the perspective developed in sociology of literature.

The main objectives of this study are- to understand the crucial role performed by these folk/art-forms of literature; to examine how they reflect the life and conditions of the people of Andhra Pradesh from time to time; and to reflect upon their present social relevance.

It is noted that these folk/art forms are progressively being displaced by the increasing penetration of the artifacts of media, especially the movie, radio, etc. One senses the advent of the era of the electronically disseminated, packed 'culture' for the 'masses'.

KEYWORDS: Bardic Recitals, Folk/Art Forms, Street Plays, Yakshaganas

Introduction

The rich variety of folk-literature in Telugu, with its distinctive literary and cultural values representing a spontaneous artistic expression of the Telugu people, is as old as the Telugu language and culture. Nannichoda (11th Century) and Palakurti (12th and 13th Centuries) refer in their poetical works, to the different kinds of folk-literature prevalent in those days (Rama Raju, 1984). Folk-literature can be broadly divided into (i) Folk-Songs - Simple songs, ballads and oral epic songs; (ii) Burrakathas and (iii) Other Folk/Art-Forms. For the purpose of this study, only the traditional performing folk/art forms of literature such as Burrakathalu (Bardic Recitals), Yakshaganas and Street Plays are considered.

1. Burrakathalu (Bardic Recitals)

Burrakatha is a traditional performing art-form of Andhra Pradesh. It has regained immense popularity after 1940s. Today, barring 'Jatra' of West Bengal and 'Nautanki' of Uttar Pradesh, perhaps no other folk-form in our country is being utilized as much for communication and propaganda purposes as 'Burrakatha' is. It accommodates any theme or idea of contemporary relevance. A perfect blending of dance, drama and music in structure, and an astonishing diversity of themes, have earned next only to cinema. A highly flexible format, coupled with the social consciousness of the performers, has made it possible for Burrakatha to accommodate any theme or idea of contemporary relevance. From family planning to intricate theories on Marxian and Gandhian ideologies, there is nothing that cannot be propagated through Burrakatha.

Scholars are of the opinion that Burrakatha has evolved from 'Yakshaganam'. According to the descriptions in Srinatha's 'Kridabhiramam', it was generally performed by women folk in 15th Century, A.D. (Das, K. K., 1980). In the early centuries, when Saivism was at its zenith, the Jangam (Saivite minstrels) roamed the countryside singing and performing Saivite themes and the art-form came to be known as 'Jangam Katha' (Ibid). The present day Burrakatha has evolved mainly from this 'Jangam Katha' with some variations, improvisations, embellishments and additions to both form and structure. It is also known as 'Dakki Katha' derived from the Telugu name of the earthen drum called Dakki (Radha Krishna Murthy, 1969) or 'Burra'. It was also called 'Tandana Katha' following the refrain 'Tandana' so frequently used in Burrakatha shows. In K. Srinivasa Rao's play 'Rama Raju Charitra' (1907) mention of 'Tandana Pata' was made and the performers were described as tandana singers.

A Burrakatha party generally consists of three persons and includes earthen or metal drums called dakki for the two side performers; a tambura and two metal rings, for the principal performer and dancing bells for all three. The costumes consist of long coloured kurtas; turbans for the head; and long coloured handkerchiefs (Das, K. K. 1980).

The principal performer, known as 'Kathakudu', dances and recites the story while the other two play the drums and provide refrains to support him. The person on the right side of the 'Kathakudu' commonly

known is 'Rajkiya' is adept in contemporary politics and social problems. The performer of the left side of 'Kathakudu' known as 'Hasyam' provides fun to the audience.

Subjectwise, there are three types of Burrakathas - Mythological, Historical and Socio-political.

The first script of 'Modern Burrakatha' 'Babu Rao Burrakatha' was written by K. Subba Rao. The Burrakathas with progressive themes, mainly with the themes of Telangana Peasant Movement, started with Sunkara Satyanarayana, the Father of progressive burrakathas. He wrote 'Kastajeevi', 'Amara Yodhulu' (socio-political); 'Rudrama Devi', 'Kandukuri Viresalingam', 'Maharathi Karna' (Historical), etc, which have been performed again and again. Shaikh Nazar composed 'Palnati Yuddham', 'Bengal Karuvu', 'Alluri Sitarama Raju', 'Janaki Vanavasam', 'Rayalaseema', 'Bobili Yuddham' and 'Veera Abhimanya'. Tirunagari Ramanjaneyulu wrote 'Telangana Veera Yodhulu', 'Renigunta Poratam'. Alluri A. Ramakavi wrote 'Nizam Viplavam'.

There are many other writers who wrote Burrakathas- Jampana Chandrasekhar Rao, Nedunuri Gangadharam, Prayaga Narasimha Sastri, Lakshmi Kanta Mohan, Nadia and several others and artists have fortified Burrakatha with their innumerable works.

In the early thirties, the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA), which was closely connected with the then Communist Party of India, came into being. Communists were the first to realise the effectiveness of various folk forms as tools of mass communication. Their motivation is, to take their ideology to the rural masses, and the easiest way to do so was to rely upon the traditional folk forms that had been entertaining the rural audience for centuries and had found roots in their culture. In Andhra, credit goes to the Praja Natya Mandali, the local branch of IPTA, for reviving Burrakatha along with other folk forms and plays and for giving the rural as well as urban masses a new life and a new perspective.

Talented artists like Mikkilineni Radhakrishna Murthy, Machineni Venkateswara Rao, Nazar, Karnati Lakshmi Narasayya, Veera Machineni Sarojini, T. Annapurna, Kondapudi Radha and many others assembled under the banner of the Praja Natya Mandali and performed many Burrakathas, to provoke the rural masses against the Nizam and the landlords and also to propagate the Communist ideology.

Kajal Kumar Das has given the list of Burrakatha parties in his book "The Burrakatha of Andhra Pradesh" who were registered with the State Department of Information and Public Relation, A. P. (for about 21 parties); registered with AIR, Vijayawada (for about 33 parties); registered with the Song and Drama Division (for about 10 parties), and registered, with any official agency (for about 15 parties). The list of popular Burrakathas related to Historical themes are about 15; related to Mythological themes are 25; and related to Socio-Political themes are about 19 (Das, K. K. 1980).

Here, in this section, the burrakathas like 'Kastajeevi' written by Sunkara (1950); 'Telangana Veera Yodhulu' written by T. Ramanjaneyulu (1966); 'Nizam Viplavam' written by A. A. Ramakavi (1948) are selected for the analysis. These burrakathas portrayed the socio-economic, political and cultural aspects of the people under the Nizam's dictatorial rule. Praja Natya Mandali enacted Burrakathas in different places of Andhra to arouse people and also to make them aware of the social conditions. Sunkara's Burrakatha, 'Kastajeevi' was the first to deal with a social problem like the Telangana Peasant Movement. Earlier to him, Burrakathas confined only to historical and mythological themes.

Kastajeevi (The Labourer)

This is one of the most popular Burrakathas enacted by Praja Natya Mandali successfully. In Telangana, the living conditions of the people were very poor. Even after working day and night with all their energies they could not get their bread. In those days, none of the poor peasants and peasant labourers had proper shelter and proper food. Sunkara, in this Burrakatha depicts the sorrowful conditions of the poor peasants and portrayed the exploitations and illegal exactions of landlords.

It is to be pointed out here, during the days of the movement, the burrakathas attracted innumerable people because of the interesting way of the narration that pierces into the hearts of the common people. The Andhra Maha Sabha and the Communist Party leaders used to educate the poor peasants to unite them together to fight against the landlords. Thus, this burrakatha clearly depicts the circumstances leading to the people's revolt.

This burrakatha of Sunkara Satyanarayana was first of its kind that portrayed the socio-economic and political conditions of that genre. It was enacted by Praja Natya Mandali and attracted the attention of several people. It clearly reflected the then society by portraying the atrocities and exploitations of the landlords; it also showed lucidly how people slowly gain their consciousness and how they can successfully revolt against the landlord and his henchmen.

Telangana Veerayodhulu (Telangana Heroic Warriors)

This burrakatha is the life story of a Guerilla leader, Rami Reddy. In the history of Telangana Peasant Movement, there are so many fighters who sacrificed their lives for the sake of people and also for the Communist Party. Ramanjaneyulu depicts the miserable social conditions led by the people in general and service castes in particular through his Burrakatha.

Nizam Viplavam (Nizam Revolution)

In this Burrakatha, it can be found that the writer extols the 'Ahimsa' path and the greatness of the Congress movement. At the same time he criticizes the acts of the Communists and says that the state Congress Movement is a very responsible movement and hence he asks the people to support it.

Even today, the participants, sympathisers, workers, singers or actors for popularising the Separate Telangana Movement among the masses are utilizing Burrakathas as medium of affective communication. Prominent among them is Gaddar.

2. Yakshaganams

There are many other folk/art forms like Yakshaganamulu, Veedhi Bhagavatalu, Golla Sudhulu, Jamukula Kathalu, Pichhigunta Kathalu, etc. These forms attract the masses to a great extent and make them aware of the socio-economic, political and cultural conditions and mobilize them to fight for their just rights. Most of these folk-forms as other folk-songs and ballads, have originated from long back. But, the progressive writers utilized these folk-forms to propagate their ideology and also, to motivate the social consciousness to stand and fight against the age-old traditions and norms, just by changing the traditional themes of these folk-forms and introducing the progressive themes accordingly.

The Yakshagana dance-drama developed into distinct school during the early centuries of the Christian era. Yakshagana suggests that it was once a recitation of desi music by a Yeksha or Yakshini, which later evolved as a narration of episodes involving more than one character and which finally developed into an opera with different kinds of songs, dialogues and numerous characters. The original tribals of the state like Nagas, Kuravanjis, Jakkulas and the Yanadis during their festivals

staged their own tribal dances for the amusement of the community. Whether or not guided by set compositions, they sang and danced spontaneously. The earliest of such dances is the 'Garuda Chala Yakshagana' (11th Century) (Jagadeshan, T. D. 1969). This was very popular among the rural masses. Later Yakshaganas developed many nuances and adopted some of the features of classical Sanskrit drama. The Tanjore Naik period was the golden age of the Yakshagana in composition as well as production. During the 16th Century Kundukuri Rudra Kavi wrote a Yakshagana, 'Sugriva Vijayam' (1568). 'Vipranarayana' (1545) was another Yakshagana also written during the 16th Century,

Yakshagana may be described as an operatic ballet interspersed with songs of varying rhythms, to effectively convey the moods of the episodic situation. The subjects' chosen are mostly from puranic lore, but with an eye to popular appeal. The structure of the playlet is always simple. Occasionally, a local incident is woven into the dialogue. The earlier Yakshagana themes centered on the Gods, but since the Tanjore Naik period successful attempts have been made to write plays on contemporary subjects as well. More than 500 Yakshaganas are available in print and an equal number or more are yet to see the light of day (Rama Raju, B., 1984).

There came many Yakshaganas during the time of Telangana armed struggle and enacted successfully. But, now there are very few available in printed form. The most popular among them are Veerabhadram's Bhuswami (1981) and Ranga Rao's Andhra Pita Maha Jeevita Charitra (1982).

Bhuswami (Landlord)

It is actually a political Veedhi Bhagavatam and also named as Yakshaganam. The author in this Yakshaganam portrays the political set up and exploitations of the landlords in the contemporary scene.

Andhra Pita Maha Jeevita Charitra (Life history of Father of Andhra)

Sri Madapati Hanumanta Rao was hailed as Andhra Pita Maha. The author portrays the biography of Madapati Hanumanta Rao. He was a leading person in establishing and developing the Andhra Maha Sabha. He brought unity among Telugu people and worked for the development of Telugu language and Telugu culture.

The author depicts the social conditions of the people in Telangana under the rule of Nizam Nawab. Madapati Hanumanta Rao started 'Grandhalayodyamam' to develop Telugu language and Telugu culture. Madapati Hanumanta Rao became the Charioteer for many other associations. The author compared his life history with the history of Telangana Peasant Movement.

3. Veedhi Bhagavatalu (Street Plays)

It is an open-air drama performance different from its namesake, 'Veedhi', (Street), one of the ten types of Sanskrit plays. This type of play introduced by the Saivites with missionary zeal, one drew its subject matter from the epics. But now it also covers more mundane, contemporary subjects. History records those performances from the 15th Century onwards. The Vijayanagara emperors patronized this art, which is still the most popular theatre art in India in general and Andhra Pradesh in particular.

The folk lore of any culture reflects a mirror image of the governing ideals, values, beliefs and prejudices of the people consciously verbalized through folk-songs and other folk-forms. Andhra Praja Natya Mandali enacted the folk-form, Veedhi Bhagavatam, to bring socio-economic and political consciousness among the masses and also used this folk form to propagate the Communist ideology. Veedhi Bhagavatam is an interesting folk-form with an active participation of characters.

Ramakotayya, V, (1977) in 'Nehru Veedhi Bhagavatam' depicted the then class struggle of the Congress government and about the union military which subsidized the peoples' revolt in Telangana through Nehru. There are some more important Veedhi Bhagavatams came like 'Hitler Bhagavatam' and 'Badmash Padusha' both written by Nazari; 'Sangharshana' written by Ayyapu Krishnayya; 'Kshira Sagara Madhanam' and 'Poddupodupu' by Ramabhatla Krishna Murti etc.

Concluding Reflections

The foregoing material represents a small fragment of the vast material that was in actual circulation among the people during the torbu-

lent years of social formations and transformations. And in the larger context of the oral folk traditions of creative expression and aesthetic performance, which have circulated among the people of the region, it constitutes a marginal portion, both in terms of quantity as well as quality.

Nevertheless, the material is sufficient for making a number of points. First, on the eve of a major reshuffle of social order, the folk-forms have invariably taken on an additional load of social function related to the articulation of socially shared dreams/vision of the 'possible/ desirable' future, thus indirectly adding up to a powerful critique, though oblique, of the existing order of things. This latter function is pursued in more direct modes, too, when the present condition and its inhumanity becomes the focal theme. Secondly, these folk-forms perform the crucial role of enlivening, rejuvenating and energizing the entire crea-

tive praxis of 'high' literature, when it suddenly expands and deepens its horizon, and seeks to relate itself directly with the life and condition of the people, which can be reached only through the 'forms' already embedded and active amidst their consciousness. In this respect, they constitute a synapse between the masses and the classes. Finally, it must be noted that these folk-forms are progressively being displaced by the increasing penetration of the artificats of media, especially the movie and radio. One senses the advent of the era of the electronically disseminated, packed 'culture' for the 'masses'. The materials that have escaped this onslaught are thus fast acquiring the status of items for the collection of museums-anthropological or cultural. We have, thus, made acquaintance with forms in their actual historical location, in the real life context of the peasants' struggles, perhaps for the last time. Or are we being too pessimistic?

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