



PROJECT MUSE®

If Gandhi Could Fly... Dilemmas and Directions in Shadow
Puppetry of India

Salil Singh

TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 43, Number 3 (T 163), Fall 1999, pp.
154-168 (Article)

Published by Cambridge University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/32958>

If Gandhi Could Fly...

Dilemmas and Directions in Shadow Puppetry of India

Salil Singh

Gandhi Falls As Hanumān Leaps

January 1996 marked an important event in the evolution of shadow puppetry in India: the National Shadow Puppetry Festival at Dharmasthala, Kārnātakā, brought together major troupes representing the six distinct styles from as many regions.¹ Within the span of a few days one could see how shadow puppetry had survived and where it seemed poised to go next. The purpose of the festival, however, went beyond these academic concerns. Jointly funded by the New Delhi-based Indian government cultural agencies Sangeet Nāṭak Akādemi and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, the festival was meant to provide a boost to practitioners of an ancient art who are struggling in the face of the modern era to remain a vital part of the cultural fabric of the nation. Thus, along with performances of works using the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, there were also premieres based on three episodes from Gandhi's life: the forcible eviction of the young Gandhi from the segregated train in South Africa, the Salt March on Dandi led by Gandhi in defiance of British laws, and the *Swādēshi* (self-reliance) agitation. Troupes from five different states were commissioned by these government agencies to develop works that would complement the ancient repertoires; Gandhi's life was viewed as a modern-day "epic" of sorts. Perhaps performing a new mythology would give an ancient art a bridge into the future.

But the result was anticlimactic. Puppeteers in whose hands shadows of mythical heroes had danced and cavorted, accompanied by passionate songs and cascading music, suddenly found themselves struggling awkwardly with bland images of a national hero, uninspired and uninspiring. They tried valiantly to fulfill their commission, yet it was apparent that the "experiment" was revealing only the futility of this attempt to take this traditional art "forward." The iconography of representation and the stylization of presentation based on the old epics dried up, as people, places, and events took on a literalness that was at war with the very soul of the medium. As one of the partici-

pating scholars, Dr. Nāgabhūshan Śarmā, put it in an open session following the performances, it was “a noble idea gone terribly wrong.”

What precisely had gone “wrong”? What was forgotten, what violated, that Gandhi could not get off the ground—whereas Hanumān in the *Rāmāyaṇa* can leap effortlessly across the Indian Ocean and burn down the golden city of Lanka? How does shadow puppetry stand in modern India as it attempts to define its place in a culture more and more dominated by mass media?

The Curse of Rāma

When asked where and how shadow puppetry began, Tyāpenāhālli Hōmbaiyāh’s 96-year-old eyes light up as if he is about to reveal to the listener a tremendously important, holy secret. He leans forward and narrates, his voice taking on the mellifluousness which has serviced, thousands of times, thousands of couplets from the epics:

When Lord Rāma was preparing to leave the earth, the ferryman Guha, who had earlier rowed their boat across the river, wept in grief. “What are we to do now, Lord? You are leaving us!” Seeing his sorrow, Rāma spoke to him thus: “Take this, my image, and with it, tell my story to others.” And with these words the god gave a shadow puppet to Guha. From that day onwards we, the descendants of Guha, have been shadow puppeteers. We *must* do it—it is the curse of Lord Rāma upon us. (Hōmbaiyāh 1996)²

Hōmbaiyāh is probably the oldest living puppeteer in the south Indian Kārnātakā style of shadow puppetry. He performed well into his eighties, his career spanning much of the 20th century. Today his name lives on in his family troupe—the Hōmbaiyāh Troupe—which is still performing around their home in the Māndya district of Kārnātakā. The epic stories Hōmbaiyāh celebrated are indistinguishable from his life, his beliefs, and his history. The shadow puppets were gifts of the gods, but they were also a kind of curse, for the community of puppeteers is bound by Rāma’s edict to repeat his epic story in perpetuity. Such is the power of the fable as the puppeteer, who is wrapped in the mythology of the story he narrates, his whole life poured into its enactment. The lack of a clear, precisely known and documented history has allowed (perhaps even required?) the myth to step in, serving as a “surrogate history.” Therein is all that is glorious as well as calamitous in Hōmbaiyāh’s career: he has never needed nor sought another justification for why his art is of consequence, nor is he likely to be able to provide one, even if its very survival depended on it. Yet, as numerous observers (such as Seltsmann 1986; Vēṇu 1986; Kṛishṇaiyāh 1988; Śarmā 1985; Blackburn 1996) have noted, audiences and patronage are rapidly drying up under the onslaught of a high-tech urban environment transforming the Indian countryside.

Neighboring Kārnātakā is the state of Āndhra Pradesh, where tōḷubōmmalātā, another style of shadow puppetry which uses puppets up to six feet tall, has evolved. Jonathan GoldbergBelle, observing performances of tōḷubōmmalātā, offered glimpses of the ways in which it has survived even as it is in decline. A selection from a transcript of a performance speaks eloquently on this topic. Two clowns—Bāngarakkā, the female flirt, and Jūttūpōḷigādu, “the hairy Pōḷigādu,” her jealous husband—exchange remarks on the state of the art:

JŪTTŪPŌḲIGĀDU: Give me a kiss, give me a kiss.

BĀNGARAKKĀ: You want a kiss, little one?

JŪTTŪPŌLIGĀDU: Yes.

BĀNGARAKKĀ: Take a kiss.

JŪTTŪPŌLIGĀDU: Please, people have asked about the history of tōlubōmmalātā.

PUPPETEERS: Ah.

JŪTTŪPŌLIGĀDU: Fifty years is a day, they say.

PUPPETEERS: Ah.

JŪTTŪPŌLIGĀDU: That they say “fifty years is a day” is true...

PUPPETEERS: Ah.

JŪTTŪPŌLIGĀDU: Once there were seven types of drama...

PUPPETEERS: Ah.

JŪTTŪPŌLIGĀDU: But cinemas, dramas, *vidhīnātakās* [street theatre], *harikathās* [religious storytelling] and such things have pushed tōlubōmmalātā aside...

PUPPETEERS: Ah.

JŪTTŪPŌLIGĀDU: Its fame is there. It’s known from here to there... (in GoldbergBelle 1984:67)

Traditionally, Indian shadow puppetry has been passed on in hereditary caste lines. Performances carry ritual significance, though the degree of significance given to this aspect varies considerably from region to region, and even from occasion to occasion. The ritual aspect of puppetry contains within it the very heart of the issues concerning the future of shadow puppetry in India: material as well as spiritual survival for performers as they practice their art; and the significance audiences ascribe to witnessing a performance. Obviously, if these wellsprings run dry, the descendants of Guha will lay down their puppets for good.

Tōgalugōmbeaṭṭa

Gods from Goatskin

The shadow puppet is more than a colored piece of leather dancing before a flame; it is the momentary appearance of the divine among humans. But how does the animal skin, “polluted by death” in Hindu cosmology and touched by the hands of low-caste puppeteers, become the conduit to the sublime world of the gods?

In tōgalugōmbeaṭṭa (leather puppet play), the rituals surrounding the making and deployment of the puppets are testimony to the elevation of the puppet characters and the spiritual significance ascribed to the event of shadow puppetry. For example, the auspicious task of creating the figures of the gods is preceded by prayers and offerings to the deities for the success of the enterprise (Helstein 1979:17; Kṛishṇaiyāh 1988:56). According to Mel Helstein, after performing prayers wishing for success in the endeavor, the puppeteer essentially “goes into seclusion” for the period of time during which the figures of the major gods are constructed and incised with their characteristic patterns (1979:13). As for demonic characters such as Rāvana, there is a ritual to ward off the potential evil effect upon the viewer of witnessing their presence (Kṛishṇaiyāh 1988:56). When a character is ready for performance, wor-

ship is conducted at which flowers and incense celebrate the metaphorical “birth” of the puppet as it takes its place in the repertory.

There is also a practice that illustrates the extraordinary link between puppets and performers, maintained over a lifetime and then passed on to their progeny. With Killekyātha, the mischievous and playful clown, generations of puppeteers express this vital link by placing a tuft of their own hair in the crop of hair which rests atop and distinguishes the puppet’s head. The puppet, handed down over generations, is alive with the hair of many generations, a literal, direct link to the past, even in the hands of the youngest performer, as he or she first lifts up the puppet at the age of nine. And, after a long life of “service,” a puppet has a unique way of “retiring” from the stage. When it is too old to withstand the rigors of performance, it is given a “water burial”—left to float away in the currents of a river, laid to rest the way Hindus disperse the ashes of the cremated into the Gangā river.

Unlike their Kerala counterparts, the tōgalugōmbeaṭṭa puppets of Kārnātakā are translucent, appearing as colored images on the cloth screen when they are held under the light. Furthermore, the performance style is based more on a single puppeteer or small ensemble of puppeteers, accompanied by one or two musicians/singers. The troupes use a small, mobile stage, moving from village to village during the performance season, performing on commission within clearly defined traditional “boundaries” which have assigned a certain number of villages to each troupe, thus resolving any territorial disputes and avoiding direct competition with other troupes. In recent years, some “border stones” have been unearthed, showing the lines of demarcation where one troupe’s sphere of operation yields to another (see Krishṇaiyāh 1988:64–66), although the mechanism by which such boundaries historically have been determined is unknown.

There are at least two major occasions for the performance of tōgalugōmbeaṭṭa, both symbolically connected to fertility. At the end of the long, dry summer, the performance of certain shadow puppet episodes is traditionally linked to the advent of rainfall. Other occasions, such as weddings, can also involve shadow puppet shows. The enactment of the epics is an auspicious blessing showered upon the bride and bridegroom.

Gundu Rāju, of the Hassan district, has 58 villages that he considers his exclusive sphere of operation. As he unveils his family collection of shadow puppets, it becomes slowly apparent that there are two kinds of puppets inhabiting the weatherworn wrappings. One type is more contemporary, with moving parts, whereas the second type belongs to the “old style” where large, colorful puppets present exquisite, dancing pictures on the screen. This older style depends on iconographic symbolism. For example, a major epic character may have a complex mosaic of geometric patterns of mythical birds or beasts associated with the deity surrounding the figure. In other instances, the puppet may represent two or more warrior figures mounted on a single chariot. Because these puppets do not have individually articulated limbs or moving parts, the puppeteer simply brings the entire image onto the screen, manipulating it as a complete scene, while songs and narrative explicate the story connected to the image.

These old puppets, meant to be seen under the enticing light of oil lamps, take on the glow of fire, making the ancient colors spring to life, even after a hundred years of use. Since the puppets themselves are so detailed with ornaments and complex, interrelated compositions, there is little need for moving limbs or individually articulated parts. Yet today’s audiences are not content—the expectations for a performance increasingly revolve around “action” and “movement” of a rather different kind, expectations born from the instant-

neous leaps in visual narratives shown with such ease in movies and television. Excerpts from an interview with Gundu Rāju reveal some of these concerns:

SINGH: Where are the old-style puppets from?

RĀJU: From my father. He was the one who made them and I have inherited them from him.

SINGH: How did you learn from him?

RĀJU: By accompanying him as he traveled to perform. As a small boy I would sit next to him behind the screen, watching him perform. Then, slowly, he began to give me little things to do, like holding the puppets ready for him. Soon, I became a part of the troupe.

SINGH: What was the style of his performances like?

RĀJU: The older puppets were harder to manipulate—they required more skill, because they had little movement built into the puppet. So, the performers had to create the sense of movement through how they handled it as a whole, and it was a more “descriptive” style. For example, a character would arrive on the screen, and the narration would comment on his magnificent appearance—his crown, his attire, his personal qualities. Then, the light of the oil lamp created a very special atmosphere. It was like a dream world, seen from a distance...a world of gods. People used to bow before the puppet figures in worship and prayer.

SINGH: How is this different today?

RĀJU: The old audiences were very informed—if we were to miss an important detail, as for instance, the sacred thread of the higher castes on his body, they would immediately notice it, and demand to know why it was not there! Today, audiences are neither so discerning nor as demanding. They want brightness and movement—more “action” from the puppets. So, our new puppets now have moving arms and other limbs.

SINGH: Are you still following the old ways of making the puppets?

RĀJU: I know the technique, but is very difficult to do that. The old method uses all vegetable colors from various herbs and flowers, mixed by hand. Up to two months are needed for making a single color. So, we now use pre-mixed paints available in the stores.

SINGH: Do you still use the old and the new puppets together in performance?

RĀJU: Yes, for example, when it comes to scenes of war, we use the old puppets showing warriors on chariots, all in one composition. At other times, the newer puppets are used. (Singh 1996a)

Also audiences have less patience with the poetic light of the oil lamps. People want to see everything, fully illuminated; this is the age of electrical floodlights, so why sit in gloomy shadows? Some of the old-style puppeteers have capitulated to such demands by bringing in newly made puppets with articulated limbs to combine with the old, and by performing under electrical lighting. Predictably, the outcome has serious drawbacks: The new puppets look like garish imitations in contemporary colors, overexposed in the wash of floodlights. The emphasis is no longer on the pictorial, visual qualities provided by the patterns and natural dyes of the old method. The new puppets cannot hold their own next to the artistry of the old ones. Meanwhile, the old puppets also seem to fade; gods and demons begin to lose their vibrancy, as if the electric light is lethal kryptonite for these superheroes of the Hindu epics.



1. Performances of *tōlpāvā* koothu are held annually in this typical koothumadām in a temple compound in Kerala. (Photo by Salil Singh)

Tōlpāvā koothu

The complex negotiation of performed ritual within ritual performance is the hallmark of traditional shadow puppetry. This aspect is best seen in the temple-theatre performances of *Tōlpāvā koothu* (*tōl* = leather, *pāvā* = puppet, and *koothu* = play). In the Palghat region of Kerala, Tamil-speaking families of shadow puppeteers have been performing for centuries exclusively in temple theatres called *koothumādams* each facing a temple of the goddess Bhagavati and resembling a rectangular brick building with one side left open for the shadow screen. All-night performances of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are staged within this modest structure as a form of prayer to the goddess for as many as 21 nights in a row. The legend of the puppet play's Kerala origin recounts that Bhagavati was away on a mission from Shiva to annihilate the demon Darika. While engaged in the fight, Bhagavati missed the epic battle between Rāma and Rāvana which ended the great war recounted in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The shadow play is performed in order for the goddess to witness the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Thus, the belief goes, Bhagavati is always present at the performance.

On the first day of the Āryankāvu temple performance a flag is hoisted to mark the beginning of the festival and, at dusk, lamps are lit around the courtyard and before the idol of the goddess. Many instruments accompany the performance, and prominent among them is the ensemble of virtuoso percussionists who pound out their intricate rhythms for hours before the performance in a ritual summoning of their audiences. The master puppeteer thrice seeks the permission of the temple authorities to begin the process of tying the cloth screen to the stage, which is a permanent architectural feature of the courtyard. Upon being granted permission, the puppeteer ties on the screen, to the accompaniment of the sounding of drums and fireworks outside. By this time a large crowd has usually gathered in eager anticipation. Around 9:00 P.M. the “oracle” of the temple emerges after his ceremonial bath, circles the temple thrice with sword in hand, and blesses the master puppeteer with the words: “I am pleased with you. Show me the *Rāmāyaṇa* story without a fault. I shall stand by you and render you all help” (Vēṇu 1986:24). Then he throws a handful of rice at the performers and others present. A flame, brought by him from a lamp burning before the idol of the goddess, is used to light the 21 lamps behind the screen. The performers

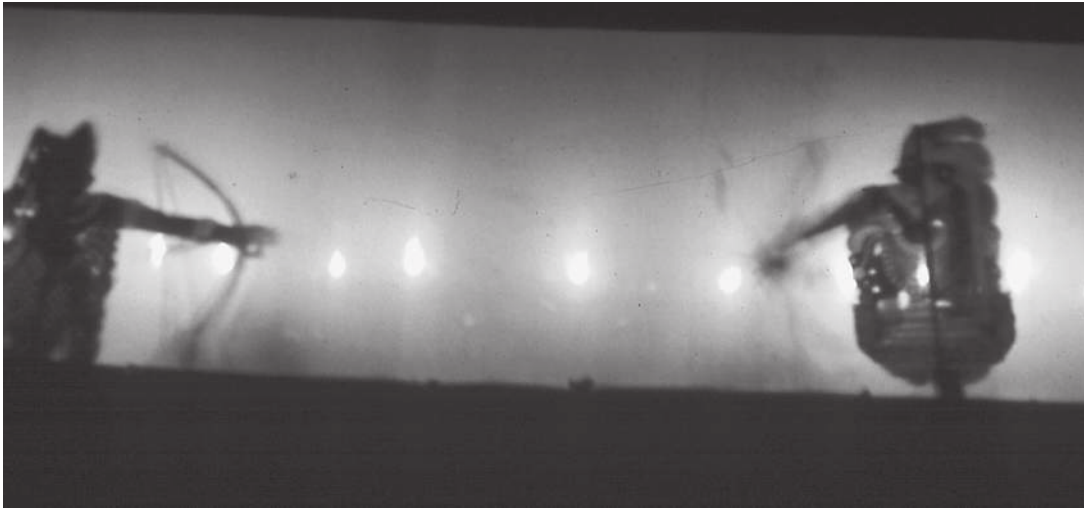
proceed to sanctify the space of performance in the ceremony called *rāṅgāpoojā* or “worship of the stage,” with offerings of coconut, rice, and flowers, which are later distributed by the head puppeteer among his troupe. Only then can the performance begin to enact the epic over the next 21 nights, from nightfall to dawn.

On the last day of the cycle, for the scene in which the victorious Rāma returns from exile for his coronation, some temples employ an elaborate ceremony in which the puppet character of Rāma’s chief general, the monkey god Hanumān, forges a curious link between the fictional life of the shadow screen and the world outside. The puppet Hanumān is carried on the back of an elephant in a ceremonial procession to a nearby river. In the preceding nights this puppet has assumed the gigantic form appropriate to a son of the wind god Vayu to crush vast armies of such elephants in the battlefield. On this day Hanumān fetches from the river holy water used in the coronation scene later that night—the puppeteers will sprinkle the water on the screen as a blessing at the moment of the coronation. When the performance is over, the screen is removed ceremoniously at the same time the flag (hoisted above the temple at the beginning of the festival) is brought down, accompanied by fireworks on a grand scale. The chief puppeteer cuts the screen into many pieces, distributing the pieces among the performers (Vēṇu 1986:24). The screen, which has borne witness to the exploits of the gods, no longer exists as a whole, but its “legacy” will be carried away by each of the performers.

Clearly, Tōlpāvā koothu is significant for patrons as well as audiences, an important form of ritual prayer that bestows blessings upon those who undertake the task of commissioning, sanctioning, contributing towards, or even simply witnessing the epic cycle. For their marathon efforts, the performers, in turn, are assured the virtue of having spent their lives reciting the sacred texts for the goddess and, according to Kṛishṇān Kutty Pulāvar, the 76-year-old

2. In a performance of *tōlpāvā koothu*, Kṛishṇān Kutty Pulāvar (in the shadows, extreme right) narrates an episode from the Rāmāyaṇa from backstage. Other puppeteers manipulate the shadow figures on the screen. (Photo by Salil Singh)





stalwart of Tōlpāvā koothu, for having “instill[ed] good deeds in the hearts of mankind” (Singh 1996b). More important, the tradition itself remains relatively insulated from the onslaught of mass media.

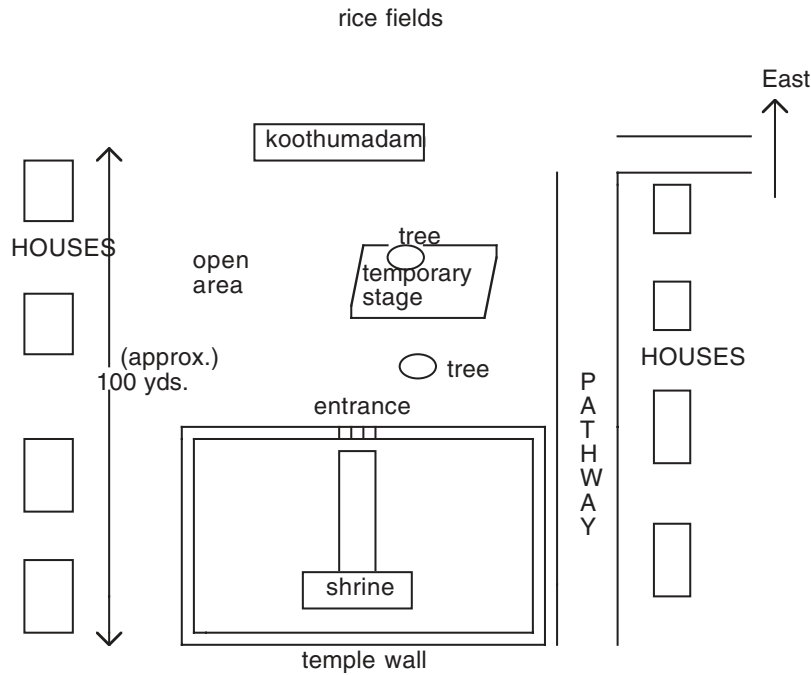
Nevertheless, even within this relatively stable and deeply tradition-bound style, several profound changes have already taken place. There are nearly 70 sites of Tōlpāvā koothu performance in central Kerala, most of them a lot less prestigious than the Āryankāvu temple, and the performances held at these temple theaters today are far from the color and pomp of the Āryankāvu performances. For example, take what I experienced on the first night of a 1998 Tōlpāvā performance marking the beginning of a 14-night cycle of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Kṛishṇān Kutty’s troupe at the Kooḷankārā Bhagavati temple theatre in Eḍapāl, a bustling trading center near the Arabian Sea in western Kerala.

When I arrived, the Kooḷankārā Bhagavati temple was freshly painted and decorated with festive pennants hanging from a long rope extended across the gigantic trees encircling the courtyard. On each banner was a representation of Bhagavati in red and black, fluttering in the brisk evening breeze. The beginning of the annual Pooram festival was marked with the raising of the ceremonial flag before the temple. Across from the temple, virtually in the middle of a recently harvested rice field, sat the koothumādam, framed by a picturesque backdrop of palm trees extending as far as the eye could see.

Several points are worth noting about the physical relationship of structures to each other in the temple compound and vicinity. First, the koothumādam is not part of the formal confines of the temple itself, but a separate structure facing it. This bears testimony to the fact that while the shadow play is still connected to the location and orientation of the shrine, it is not directly a part of temple ritual or practice. Such an arrangement is typical in Kerala; historically, the main reason for this has been the access to the performance this grants all people, irrespective of caste. Second, the spot where the koothumādam sits today is not the original site of the structure. The old structure was located directly across from the main entrance to the temple, in the open area adjacent to where the temporary stage is now erected every year (plate 1). According to Bālan Nāir, ex-secretary of the Temple Committee in Eḍapāl, due to increasing pressure from the local citizens, in 1991, the old koothumādam was torn down and shifted further back, to make room for the temporary stage at each year’s festival. This was done primarily to accommo-

3. Kṛishṇān Kutty
Palāvar’s troupe performs a pivotal battle scene from the Rāmāyaṇa. Rāma’s brother, Lakshmana (left), and the demon Indrajit, are facing each other on the battlefield. (Photo by Salil Singh)

4. This plan of the Koolankārā Temple in Eḍapāl shows the relationship of the koothumādam and temporary stage to the shrine. All dimensions are approximate and not to scale. (Graphics by Salil Singh)



date the large numbers of people who gather for some of the events organized on that stage during the fortnight of the festival; these events range from classical dances to contemporary dance-dramas on religious themes, in addition to glitzy entertainments like magic shows (Singh 1997a).

The result of all this has been a curious spatial symbolism (which none of the people I spoke to seemed aware of): the koothumādam has been pushed back and a temporary stage erected between it and the shrine, obstructing the view of the shadow play. Furthermore, the sightlines from the koothumādam to the idol of Bhagavati within the shrine are now terrible. On the temporary stage (resembling a gigantic television set), every local version of modern entertainment (dance-dramas and magic shows) is played out night after night, using all the available technology of theatrical lighting, amplified sound, and scenery. Meanwhile, the permanent koothumādam sits in the background, with puppeteers waiting patiently for these modern shows to wind up so that they may begin their performance with the aid of oil lamps in the dead of the night.

Heightening the irony, within the cozy living room of one of the houses adjacent to the temple compound a rerun of an old Hindi disaster-blockbuster, *The Burning Train*, was being enthusiastically watched on television by the residents. As I waited outside in the temple compound I was invited in for a cup of tea. Mr. Sreedharan, the old patriarch of the family, urged me to join him for the movie, but to his puzzled disappointment, I declined politely, drawn outside by sounds emanating from the temple. Even though he could witness the puppet play virtually from his living room window, Mr. Sreedharan felt no compulsion to watch anything other than his cable-connected color TV screen.

At approximately 6:00 P.M., the priest of the temple lit the ceremonial bronze lamps leading up to the main entrance of the shrine. An ensemble of musicians playing on drums and an oboe-like instrument called the *nādas-waram* began playing around these lamps, as if serenading the Bhagavati deity. At 8:00 P.M. a five-member *chenda* drum ensemble took over with explosive,

energetic bursts of rhythm. The puppeteers, meanwhile, had arrived by bus and taken a simple evening meal at the home of the family who sponsored the first night's events. Soon thereafter, they made themselves at home in the empty koothumādam, laying out the puppets needed for the opening.

At approximately 8:45, Lakshman, the youngest son of Kṛishṇān Kutty Pulāvar, as representative of the troupe, entered the temple. The oracle of the temple brought out a piece of cloth which had been provided by the sponsor, and held it out to Lakshman, along with a ladle-like blackened iron utensil (*tooku vilakku*) which held a flame lit from lamps within the shrine. Lakshman quickly prostrated himself on the floor in obeisance, received the cloth and the flame and brought them out to the koothumādam. There, the flame was hung from a hook on the roof just outside the front facade of the koothumādam. Inside, the troupe began to stretch the cloth screen across the opening of the theatre, pinning it to the edges with long thorns (*karas*) they collect from a particular bush growing wild in the Kerala countryside. Next, several puppets were taken out and also pinned to the cloth forming the opening tableau for the night's episode: *The Mutilation of Soorpanakhā*, featuring Rāma, Lakshmana, Seetā, and the demon Sambhukumāra in the forest. (Of course, none of these puppets was yet visible from outside the koothumādam, since there was no illumination from the inside to cast their shadows on the screen.) Once this was accomplished the entire troupe of five quietly stretched out inside the theatre and went to sleep.

It was now past 9:00 P.M. and, at first, this seemed like a curiously laid-back approach to an opening night. It was as if the puppeteers had spun a fragile cocoon within which they now rested, insulated from the world outside except for the pounding sounds of the drums filtering through the thin cotton of the cloth screen. Later, when their actual performance began—no sooner than 2:25 A.M.—I understood this lack of urgency. At about 9:30 the drummers emerged from the temple, led by the temple oracle, now in his full regalia, carrying the sickle-shaped sword which is his ceremonial prop and wearing brass anklets with bells that punctuated his every step.³ After a few minutes of intense drumming in the courtyard, as the oracle paced back and forth before the ensemble, the drums stopped and a smaller procession broke off; a single drummer and a young boy carrying a flaming torch to show the way through the dark followed the oracle to the koothumādam. Inside the koothumādam some hundred yards from the temple, Kṛishṇān Kutty heard the procession approach and emerged to stand before it. The oracle, in his role as the representative of Bhagavati, approached Kṛishṇān Kutty and quietly touched his bowed head with his sword, blessing him and granting him permission to tell the *Rāmāyana* for the goddess. The oracle wore a garland of flowers from the shrine; he took it from around his neck and handed it to Kṛishṇān Kutty as a final symbolic blessing from the goddess to the performers.

The procession returned to the temple and everything was quiet for a moment. Impatient for the puppet play to begin, I had spread out my straw mat in the field before the koothumādam, armed with my notebook and a flashlight. Yet, the preliminary events of the night were far from over: a performance of *Kṛishṇāttam*—one of the forms of classical Indian theatre enacting legends of the god Krishna—now began on the temporary stage closer to the temple. It was performed by a famed Kṛishṇāttam troupe from the Guruvāyoor Temple, the holiest Hindu shrine in Kerala, just an hour to the south of Eḍapāl. It was 2:00 A.M. when all outside activity finally ceased and the puppeteers arose to commence drumming within the koothumādam, announcing the formal beginning of the Tōlpāvā koothu.

The flame hanging outside the front facade was now taken inside, and at 2:25 A.M. Kṛishṇān Kutty honored the stage with a small *pooja* (ritual cer-

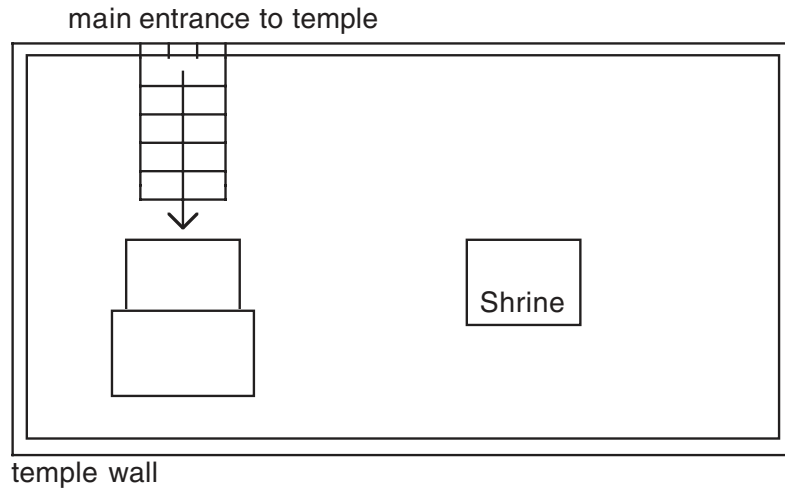
emony) in the koothumādam to make it ready for the performance. He also offered blessings to the sponsor and his family, who had made an appearance within the theatre and were standing by respectfully. The male head of this family (an electrical engineer), his wife, and their adult daughter all stayed for the few minutes it took to complete the ceremony, and then quietly returned to their house, which was adjacent to the temple compound. Finally, the puppet play began as the flame from the temple was used to light a series of oil lamps mounted on a strip of bamboo, thus illuminating the puppets on screen for the viewers outside.

Perhaps I should say viewer, since I realized with a rather unsettling awareness that with the departure of the sponsoring family, I now sat all alone in the middle of that rice field, and was consequently the sole spectator for the night's performance. All those who had made it to the end of the Kṛishṇāttam had by now gone home. Aside from the swaying palms above me and the rustling of leaves from the gigantic banyan tree sheltering the koothumādam, not a single sign of life remained outside. Inside the koothumādam, in the gentle flickering light of a row of oil lamps, the soft opening invocation chant was being sung by the puppeteers, paying homage to the god Ganapati and the long line of ancestral Tōlpāvā artists and teachers who had preceded them in this enterprise. I remember standing up in a mixture of disbelief and alarm: it was a moment of true existential anguish. I was sitting alone in the middle of the night in an open field in a strange town, very far from anyone I knew except for five performers who were invisible behind a cloth screen inside a small building before me. I realized that even if I were to get up and leave or perchance fall asleep on my straw mat, most likely the performers would not know it, for I was as invisible to them as they were to me. The performance would go on uninterrupted. And, if it did, was this an act of theatre?

A Question of Audience

These troubling issues had also been raised by Stuart Blackburn who, upon emerging from the koothumādam at that same venue in Eḍapāl 12 years earlier, realized that the oral recitation he had been zealously recording from within, had gone unheard by anyone else outside the theatre. This necessitated a retheorizing of what was happening. While Blackburn observed that: "the goddess Bhagavati, as host of the temple, is considered the ritual audience for the performance" (1996:12), he also theorized an "internal audience" wherein the puppeteers perform for each other, serving as both doers and receivers of the ritual show. I think Blackburn's first supposition is closer to the truth. The puppeteers would not perform unless they believed there was the palpable presence of the goddess surrounding the koothumādam, witnessing the play, and that dire consequences would follow if they were to compromise on their performance. Irrespective of the "internal audience" they provide for each other, the central fact of the event revolves around an "imagined audience" at best, not the "absent" one which Blackburn defines. Viewed in this way, the event is just as much a theatrical form as any with a live audience in attendance.

But what do the puppeteers think? They do not conceive of the goddess as present in any literal sense, as if she were residing in the idol within the inner sanctum of the temple and watching through the doors of the temple facing the koothumādam. Indeed, every night the play was enacted in Eḍapāl the priest of the temple was usually long gone by the time the play began, leaving behind him a locked temple compound with the inner sanctum firmly sealed off to the outside. As such, the idol of the goddess would be completely closed off to the koothumādam. It is not the *murthi* (idol) but the fire from the temple that is understood to represent her presence (Singh 1997b).



audience
area

P
T
h
e
p
e
t
r
e

5. A plan of the temple complex at Chāliṣṣēry shows the perpendicular orientation of the koothumādam with respect to the shrine. (Graphics by Salil Singh)

In other (rare) instances, as in the temple at Chāliṣṣēry, the koothumādam itself is situated not facing the shrine of the goddess, but at right angles to it, as seen in plate 5.⁴ When asked about this unusual arrangement, and how one could expect the goddess to properly “view” the shadow play, given this orientation of the koothumādam, Kṛishṇān Kutty Pulāvar replied with characteristic philosophical calm: “The goddess is everywhere. She is *śakti* [energy]. She does not reside in any one place, nor in any one thing” (Singh 1997c). It appears that there is no problem of sightlines after all!

It is worth noting that Kṛishṇān Kutty’s troupe, which represented the Kerala style at the National Festival in Dharmasthala, was the only one that did not take up the Gandhi commission even though they had been offered a considerable sum of money as incentive. Instead his troupe chose to perform a condensed version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* with oil lamps—a detail that set it apart from all the other troupes who, without exception, used the convenience of electric floodlights to present their excerpts.

Why Gandhi Couldn’t Fly...

If the intent of the Gandhi commission was to give traditional shadow theatre and its practitioners a subject capable and worthy of being adapted into a contemporary play using the resources of their ancient art, the request was on the surface not far off the mark. After all, here was the story of a larger-than-life national saint and hero full of highly dramatic events and images to draw from. The award of money gave the puppeteers the luxury of creating without scraping the bottom of the pot of their own dwindling resources. However, Gandhi proved far too rooted in contemporary history, too close to the *real* to

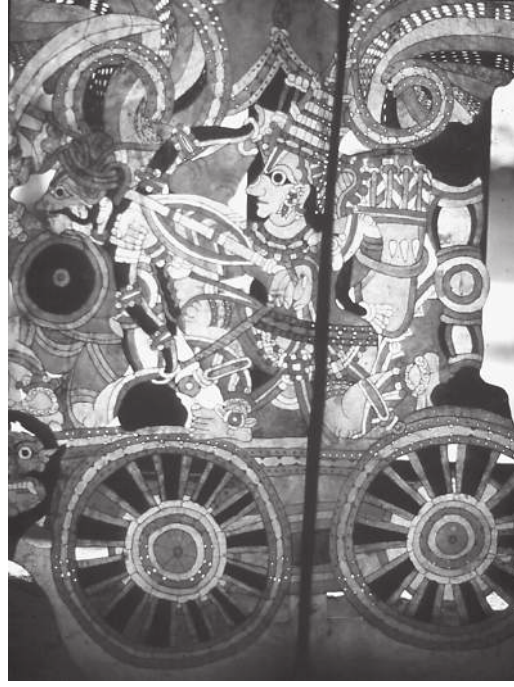
be mythologized. In the commissioned shadow shows, the entire iconography of Gandhi's story was constrained by photographic images of him, and this resulted in literal re-enactments of his life-events: puppeteers were unable to find ways to use the traditional stylization which allows the epics to live in the realm of the fantastic. Perhaps the most dismaying instance of this was the scene in which Gandhi boards the train at a small station in South Africa. In the performance by Murugan Rāo, a shadow puppeteer from Tamil Nādu, the name of the station was written on a small banner to indicate place (a practice alien to shadow puppetry in India), but the banner was unreadable because it appeared on the screen backwards. Murugan Rāo, I realized, did not know or understand a word of English. Someone had hastily put the banner together for him as a way of representing an otherwise unknown place, and he was simply doing the best he could with it. In that performance, it seemed that as Gandhi fell from the train, so did Murugan's confidence and facility with his own art—a sad spectacle to behold from one who is otherwise an expert, virtuoso solo performer capable of enacting entire epic stories single-handedly.

For the current generation of puppeteers, even Gandhi's life is already a distant, faded event in the long history of their country. Nineteen-year-old Venkatēsh Kumār, who performed in a version of the story by the troupe of his father Veeranna, confessed as much publicly in the discussions that followed the festival. "Does this story have roots in our culture like the *Rāmāyaṇa* does? How could we be expected to succeed with it?" he asked, not without anguish, as scholars and organizers listened in silence.

Lacking any significant roots in the cultural traditions of the puppeteers, Gandhi's story left the puppeteers with no contact with the surrounding preliminaries, which sanctify and elevate the puppets for an enactment of the epics, nor was there any great *reason* to engage in them. They assumed a guarded solemnity of tone and were eager not to be seen introducing "irreverent" elements into the story of a founding father of modern India. Few clowns dared appear, and even when they did, they could not construe events as a gleeful dance of bawdy frivolity, connecting the "here and now" of the audience to the "then" of the narrative. Finally, and most importantly, the Gandhi episodes did not have the resonance of myth.

The contemporary puppeteer is torn between two alternatives: either to abandon precedent expediently, without recourse to an equally powerful aesthetic which could propel the art into the future; or to repeat tradition without adapting it to today's cultural realities. In the first alternative, as in Kārnātakā's tōgalugōmbeaṭṭa, puppeteers struggle to retain the integrity of their art while trying to keep their audiences entertained. The second alternative, as we have seen in the Tōlpāvā koothu of Kerala, slowly pushes puppeteers and their art into an all but abandoned ritual performed in the solitude of the night without a human audience. Does not the art of shadows, which has survived for over two thousand years, contain within it the seeds of tenacious adaptability which will allow it to rejuvenate itself from the ashes every time the lamps are lit again?

The path followed by Bēlagallu Veeranna's troupe, in the Bellāry region of Kārnātakā, may lead to an answer. Rather than bow to popular demands and attempt to create a hasty hybrid that would be neither effective nor true to itself, Veeranna has concentrated on celebrating in his art a contemporaneous mythology along with the ancient. So his troupe performs stories of such famous historical figures as Shivāji, the 17th-century Marāthā warrior-king who took up arms against the Moghul invaders, organized bands of horsemen, and successfully declared his independence. These performances successfully create an updated folklore outside of the ancient epics, yet not as contemporary as the Gandhi episodes. Veeranna's figures, inspired by the old puppets, still



manage to find a stylized integrity, which makes them appear both familiar and exotic; real as well as full of fantasy. They move when necessary, dance when needed, yet are able to present a visual richness of detail that allows them to function as iconic landmarks in the narrative, representing places, palaces, and landscapes. Veeranna's stories are not as familiar as those of the epics, yet they are just the kinds of stories that children grow up with and adults never tire of telling. Although based in the heart of the Carnātic (South Indian) music tradition, Veeranna's narrative freely incorporates motifs of North Indian classical music, and one of his sons, Venkatēśh Kumār, has even gone on to become a well-known exponent of that style. Such eclecticism gives the Veeranna troupe a firm ground from which to step forward. Judging from the relative success this troupe seems to be enjoying, audiences have found that their work fulfills a need not addressed by television or film, yet without the elaborate rituals and religious connotations that define the Kerala style. Whatever happens to Indian puppet theatres will emerge from within. Outsiders, however well intentioned, can only step back and watch, hoping that another Hanumān will leap, yet again, across the ocean.

6. & 7. Old-style
tōgalugōmbeṭṭa puppets
from Gundu Raju's reper-
toire. In plate 6, Arjuna,
from the Mahābhārata,
rides his chariot with
Krishna as charioteer and
guide. (Photos by Salil
Singh)

Notes

1. The National Shadow Puppetry festival was held at Dharmasthala, Kārnātakā, from 23 to 28 January 1996, under the auspices of the Sangeet Nāṭak Akādemi, Indira Gandhi Center for the Arts, and the Regional Resource Center for Folk and Performing Arts. Nineteen different puppet troupes were invited from six different regions of India to participate, representing all the regions which have developed and retained distinct styles of shadow puppetry. These were, namely: Orissa and Āndhra Pradesh in south-eastern India; Māhārāshṭra in the southwest; and Kārnātakā, Tamil Nādu, and Kerala in the deep south.
2. Rāma, an incarnation of Vishnu in Hindu mythology, is the hero of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, which is one of the major stories performed in shadow puppetry all over India and southeast Asia.

3. Bhadrakālī is usually depicted carrying such a sword, in her warlike mode.
4. Chāliṣṣēry is located just off the major highway connecting Shōranūr and Pattāmbi, towards the western regions of the Tōlpāvā territory.

References

- Blackburn, Stuart
1996 *Inside the Drama House: Rama Stories and Shadow Puppets in South India*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- GoldbergBelle, Jonathan
1984 "The Performance Poetics of Tōḷubōmmalātā: South Indian Shadow Puppets." PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- Helstein, Mel., et al.
1979 *Asian Puppets: Wall of the World*. Los Angeles: UCLA Museum of Cultural History.
- Hōbaiyāh, Tyāpenāhālli
1996 Videotaped interview with author. 28 January, Dharmasthala.
- Kṛishṇaiāh, S.A.
1988 *Karnataka Puppetry*. Udupi: Manipal.
- Ṣarmā, Nāgabhūshan
1985 *Tolubommallata: Shadow Puppet Tradition of Andhra Pradesh*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi.
- Selmann, Friedrich
1986 *Schattenspiel in Kerala: Sakrales Theater in Sud-Indien*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Singh, Salil
1996a Interview with Gundu Raju. 24 July, Hāssan.
1996b Interview with Kṛishṇān Kutty Pulāvar. 24 July, Koonatharā.
1997a Interview with Bālan Nāir. 17 January, Eḍapāl.
1997b Interview with Bālan Nāir. 11 December, Eḍapāl.
1997c Interview with Kṛishṇān Kutty Pulāvar. 12 December, Koonatharā.
- Venu, G.
1990 *Tolpava Koothu: Shadow Puppets of Kerala*. New Delhi: Thomson Press.

Salil Singh is a playwright, director, and actor who has several years of professional puppetry experience. His productions have ranged from opera to new plays and puppet theatre. Most recently, he has finished his dissertation on the performer's art in Tōlpāvā koothu, and, at the University of Texas, codirected the documentary film *Borrowed Fire* (1998) about the shadow puppetry of Kerala, India. He has taught at the University of Texas and Ripon College in Wisconsin.