

PUPPETRY IN BELLARY

Until March 2009, I am employed by a Swiss Museum called the Museum Rietberg, in Zurich. They house collections of art from Asia, Africa and the Americas. Though it is a visual arts museum, they have an active performing arts program. I facilitate programs for the Indian exhibitions until March 2009, particularly an upcoming exhibition of Siva sculptures to happen in Zurich from Nov 2008 to March 2009. As a part of this project, I had to meet a group of puppeteers in Bellary in connection to a Ramayana exhibition that will happen in Zurich this summer.

It is remarkable how works of great artistic expression can be found in even small dusty towns in India! Bellary is one such town, and is home to the remarkable puppetry troupe of Bellagalu Veerana, a 74-year old man with unusual green-grey eyes and a warm welcoming manner.

It is not an easily accessible town! From Chennai I took a train to Guntakal Junction, which is an overnight journey. (Although my ticket was still wait listed in Chennai, I got on the train and pleaded and argued with the ticket checker to give me a berth!) The train stops for 20 minutes in Guntakal on route from Chennai to Mumbai. When I got off at Guntakal in the morning, I saw an elderly gentleman in a silk kurta and dhoti holding a placard with my name on it. This is Bellagalu Veerana, who currently directs the puppetry troupe in Bellary. With him at the station was another elderly gentleman Raghavendra Rao, who assists with scripts for the puppet shows. Raghavendra Rao welcomed me with a bouquet.

The three of us got into the taxi that had brought the elderly gentlemen to Guntakal and set out on the dusty bumpy road back to Bellary. Because Mr. Veerana speaks no English and only a bit of accented Hindi, most of my conversation during the car ride was with Raghavendra Rao who speaks English. Their languages are Kannada and Telugu, as Bellary is in northern Karnataka, bordering Andhra Pradesh. We traveled by road for two and a half hours to Bellary, where I checked into the hotel, which was

unfortunately next to the old bus stand (imagine the roar of those old bus engines all night).

Bellagalu Veerana insisted that we all have lunch at his home. His wife and daughter in laws had cooked, while the sons and grandchildren served us many delicious courses of typical food of Karnataka.

The puppeteers were rehearsing that evening. After lunch we went to a government owned community centre of sorts called 'Gandhi Bhavan' to watch a rehearsal. The first piece they rehearsed was 'Panchavati' from the Ramayana. It used the largest size of leather puppets, to depict the traditional story of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita in the forest, and the ultimate abduction of Sita.

There are many details of the Ramayana which are beautifully rendered through puppetry- the mutilation of Surpanaka, Rama's attempt to catch the golden deer for Sita, and Ravana's disguised abduction of Sita. As puppetry is a folk form, there are elements of the Ramayana story in this performance that one does not commonly see in other forms, as for example Rama's killing of Surpanakha's son, and her sadness due to the loss. This is the reason that she goes to the forest of Panchavati to try to seduce Rama, in order to kill him. This is one of the folk versions of the story. The music is inspired by classical Indian ragas. The puppets are large and lively.

The second piece that was presented was a contemporary puppetry play on Gandhi, featuring his life story, his experiences of racism and oppression, and his role as the leader of India's non-violent freedom struggle. The puppets of Gandhi ji and some of his symbols- the spinning wheel, his glasses, walking stick, sandals- are very effective. The illustration of Gandhi ji being thrown out of the train for being 'brown', British soldiers' oppression of Indian people, and other such injustices were shown in the piece as well.

The next piece was a one man show in the traditional style, performed by Lingappa. He

performs the Ramayana alone, in a stage constructed from wood rods and rope, with a white cloth stretched as the screen for the puppet play. This stage is smaller than that of the Panchavati or Gandhi piece, but it is lit by an oil lamp, which gives it an exquisite glow and dramatic shadows. Lingappa uses the older puppets some of which are nearly 300 years old. These are smaller than the puppets in 'Panchavati'. They are ornately made. Each puppet is a work of art in itself. It is interesting to see Lingappa's traditional performance to understand how the form was used earlier, and how Bellagalu Veerana and troupe have developed the form to make pieces like 'Panchavati' and 'Gandhi ji' which are more appealing to contemporary audiences.

Throughout the year, Bellagalu Veerana tours the Karnataka countryside with his troupe. They perform not only Ramayana and other mythical stories, but have also created works with important social themes. One of these works uses puppets of mosquitoes to show how they are vectors for deadly diseases like chikungunya and dengue fever, and how to prevent these. Another explains the AIDS virus. The Karnataka state government has recognized the impact of these puppet shows in spreading important social messages, and promotes Bellagalu Veerana's performances in villages around Bellary.

Bellagalu Veerana's troupe is composed mainly of his family and a few other traditional puppeteers. They have never traveled out of India nor have they performed very frequently in large cities in India.

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