

ART & CULTURE

Preserving Tradition:

The enduring legacy of Smt. Seethalakshmi and her family's art of leather puppetry





“raso vai sah” – Taittiriya Upanisad 2.7

Anubhavam of the Supreme, is the Eternal Truth. It is described as Satchitananda in experience. This experience can be accessed in the here and now through the Arts. It is the noble goal of the Arts.

Starting from Upanishads, to Yogasastra to Natyasastra, the Indian ethos and especially aesthetics is filled with ideas of experience or anubhavam. The rasa from the experience or anubhava teaches us how to handle ourselves and our relationships as we cross the ocean of Life. It is no wonder

then that our puranas and itihisas are abound with stories and messages to foster healthy living. And these are conveyed through performances and festivals that have transmitted our value systems through the years - Every performance is a Veritable Celebration of Life.

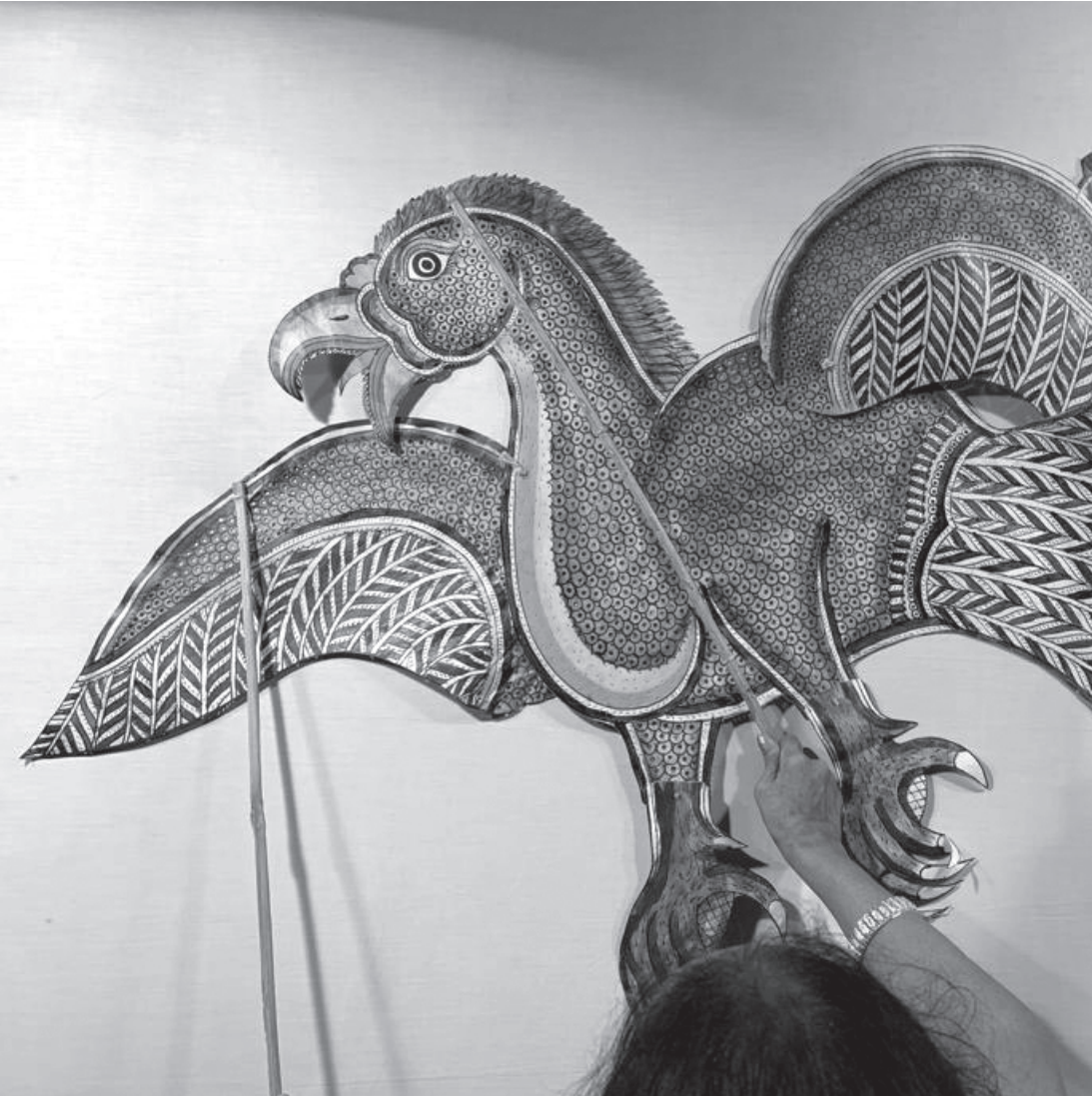
Story telling through puppetry is one such medium of expression that exists in all parts of India, in the rural as well as the urban centers. Puppetry exists in every culture. Craft and a passion for storytelling are a heady combination and these come alive in Smt. Seethalakshmi. Not just her, but her

entire family, is involved. They are three generations of puppeteers devoted to keeping alive a tradition that is fast fading. Though her children all have their own professions, they find their joy in live performances, in the dexterous handling of life-size leather puppets, weaving magic into the stories of Mahabharatha and Ramayana. In recent years with the evolving times, they have included stories from Panchatantra, stories with social messages like family-planning, and prevention of animal cruelty to their repertoire.

Hailing from Andhra and especially from a family of artists, Seethalakshmi was educated in all the fine arts from childhood. This included music, dance, art and craft. As the family made a modest living from the family’s traditional profession, she was inclined to being hardworking and taking the lead, learning all advanced lessons by simply watching the older children and emulating them. “I was a quick-learner!” she chimes delightfully. She now works in CLRI, Chennai and is involved in developing leather technology alongside scientists and leather professionals. “I have been doing this for the last 50 years and it all began with my teacher Acharya Sri M V Ramanamurthy, an extraordinary teacher and puppeteer of his time.”

An invitation to perform at the Island Grounds in Chennai brought the entire troupe including musicians and their families to the city. In those days, the music was live during a performance. They travelled like a family and participated in every aspect of the production. After the 5-day performance, her family continued to live on in Chennai, travelling to all the southern states initially. The then Director of CLRI, Sri Naidu approached and offered to support them in return for traditional knowledge on leather and leather craft. Dr. YGP of Padma Seshadri group of schools played a huge part in finding them opportunities to perform. This was during the early 1970s. Young Seethalakshmi performed for dignitaries and charmed them with her talent. And there was no looking back. She got the first opportunity to perform at the International Puppet Festival. With recognition and popularity came opportunities to travel and perform at cultural shows and festivals in North India and around the world.

Seethalakshmi is widely travelled -Japan, Singapore, Europe, Australia and New Zealand and the Americas. Her son Srinivasu who travels and performs with her is quick to add that leather puppetry is almost always



based on Ramayana and Mahabharata indicating that the origins of this craft must have been in Asia. Even troupes from Spain perform from the Ramayana. Only their puppets look Spanish, he smiles. They have performed to esteemed audiences like country leaders, at Museums, in countries like Iran and Turkey with all their cultural rules and regulations and also at competitions where they have won titles and awards. But it is the friendship and love of the audiences that they hold close to their hearts. There are different types of puppetries,

including rod puppets, glove puppets, string puppets and shadow puppets. While in the first three the dolls are visible to the audience in all their finery, Seethalakshmi's family specializes in shadow puppetry, using life-size, leather puppets. The challenge is to create puppets that cast colorful shadows. It involves curing of the leather to translucence, designing and cutting them into shapes of the characters, coloring them with bright vegetable dyes and punching holes in various patterns to depict the jewelry. "You must see it live to understand.

The play of colour and light emerging from the holes brings out the brilliance of the jewelry", she says with her eyes twinkling. These are then assembled in moving body parts and hoisted onto rods and wielded between screen and light source in such a way that they cast colorful shadows on the white screen in front. She is involved in every aspect of designing, creating and hosting the plays, having watched and learnt all the nuances from her teacher. Now the whole family sits together and adoringly creates puppets for every performance.

The material and craft have evolved with the times. In the beginning performances were with oil lamps, then hurricane lanterns on to tube-lights and today with LED lights. Depending on the progression of the character say from childhood to adulthood in case of Hanuman, or the different parvams of the characters, from asceticism to royalty, some characters in one performance may need up to 10 puppets. Some performances require up to 90 puppets. No matter what, Seethalakshmi says emphatically that, the script is provided only by Harikatha exponents- here alone the bani or style of storytelling has not changed. She values this greatly. With performances in various cities in and outside India, there came a time when they began using recordings, mastered to perfection in the best of studios. She excitedly mentions that on one occasion, when she was forced to travel alone to a prestigious performance abroad, she collaborated with a Russian lady, and that despite communication challenges, the performance was applauded greatly. She holds all these friends and collaborators with great regard as they stood by her giving her confidence.

In their travels, the one truth they have learnt is about the abiding love for Ramayana. Be it an opportunity to perform at Pakistan, which came to naught due to the plague, be it the audience chanting "Hare Ram" during the performance at Iran, the struggle between good and evil and the triumph

of good over evil has universal appeal. An everlasting rasanubhavam!!

Seethalakshmi with her sprightliness quickly ticks off the story of Vali-Sugriva, story of Hanuman, the spiting of Surpanaka by Lakshmana as her favorite. Her son proposes Keechakavadam as his favorite. Seetha says the deft handling of the heavy dolls and props to produce the required effect and the shouts of approval or gasps of disgust from the audience beyond the white screen still gives her goose bumps. Though every act is special, every scene is special and the performance is tiring, the anticipation of a 3-day event and 5-day event still gives her immense joy and excitement. For her hard work and unshakable love for her craft, Smt. Seethalakshmi has been decorated with awards like the Kalaimamani and the Kalabharathi.

Cut to the present, puppetry is a forgotten medium holding on gracefully to its place through the hard work of people like Seethalakshmi and her inspiring family. They hold down lucrative jobs that give them their income. And they spend to pursue their passion that is puppetry. But other than this, puppetry is not economically viable as a profession. There is a wing of the Sahitya Natya Nataka Kala Akademi that hosts shows regularly and has tie-ups with cultural institutions abroad. Elite families afford puppetry shows as part of family gatherings and weddings. There are short-term courses and programmes hosted by Kalakshetra too. Seethalakshmi started a school of puppetry on her own but it did not last long.

As a discipline among the Arts, puppetry is yet to find its place in Universities and Art Foundations, and performers continue to struggle to find a stage. Even as a form of entertainment it competes with multiplexes with the latter being the draw more often than not. Smt Seethalakshmi and her family vow to hold on and keep the craft alive till it finds its rightful place.

By Aruna Suresh