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Traditional Art Forms of Telangana: An Analysis of Burrakatha, Bathukamma, and Tolu Bommalata

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Abstract

This research delves into the dynamics of representational art, emphasizing its tendency to originate from one's own culture rather than another, and how it is modulated by art expertise. As a fundamental medium of human expression, art plays a crucial role in shaping a society's collective memory, capturing the essence of a particular time and space. Moreover, it serves to unite people through shared emotions, fostering cultural bonds. This study specifically explores the interplay of culture and art expertise in the social and cultural context of Telangana, focusing on three distinctive performing folk art forms—Burrakatha, Bathukamma, and Tholu Bommalata. Through a comprehensive examination of these folk art forms, the research aims to evaluate the human aesthetic experience and assess the extent to which cultural backgrounds shape these expressions, with a primary focus on socio-cultural differences. The findings underscore two key implications: first, they accentuate the regional socio-cultural appreciation, and second, they underscore the significance of these folk art forms as mediums for experiencing and propagating culturally relevant stories from history and mythology.

Keywords: Traditional Arts; Folk Arts; Burrakatha; Bathukamma; Tolu Bommalata; Oral History

1. INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that the expression and appreciation of art serve different cultural, social, religious, economic, and political functions. In terms of performing folk art, aesthetic appreciation is based on a common set of attributes such as symmetry, contrast, color, brightness, complexity, and proportion. Performing art in India embodies a rich and diverse tradition, reflecting the religious and socio-cultural complexities. Folk art is a narrative form that combines recitation, acting, dancing, and music as its essential elements, steeped in mythology and ritualistic elements. It is diverse and region-specific, reflecting the daily life, aspirations, and folklore of various communities (Blackburn, 2006). Folk art

forms in India can be traced to have their origins and settings in various sacred texts, epics, folklore through the various languages and their dialects, stylistic forms offering a kaleidoscope of human emotions and experiences, spiritual, philosophical, social, cultural insights, and a wide range of human expressions and emotions (Chakraverty, 2016). Deeply embedded in cultural fabric, folk art forms range over a wide array of genres of dance, music, poetry, and drama, reflecting the local cultures, histories, and sensibilities and varying widely in techniques, postures, emotions, ornamentation, stage, props, and even clothing. These forms, with their own distinctive subtleties in various parts of India and handed

down through generations, serve as vital expressions of India's social, religious, and cultural identity with an emphasis on social amusement. Folklore, stories, and myths, through regional song and dance customs, embody the joy, rituals, and colors of their respective regions, producing a diverse range of composite art. In India, every state and region has a unique and varied set of folk art forms. Telangana, too, has its own unique folk art forms in Burrakatha, Bathukamma, and Tolu Bommalata.

2. ORIGIN OF TRADITIONAL ART FORMS

Traditional art forms, deeply rooted in the cultural tapestry of societies, stand as enduring expressions of human creativity and heritage. Across the diverse landscapes of India, traditional art forms have flourished for centuries, embodying the rich history, beliefs, and values of different regions. These art forms, ranging from folk dances and music to narrative traditions and visual arts, serve as vibrant reflections of local cultures, histories, and social practices (Charsley & Kadekar, 2020). Passed down through generations, they carry within them the essence of collective identities and provide a timeless link to the past. This enduring legacy of traditional art not only encapsulates aesthetic beauty but also serves as a reservoir of stories, myths, and rituals, fostering a sense of continuity and community (Mandapaka, 2018). In this mosaic of artistic expressions, each form contributes to the colorful narrative of cultural diversity, offering a glimpse into the soul of a people and the spirit of their shared experiences. The State of Telangana historically possess a variety of traditional arts forms but this paper delves deeper into three folk art forms namely Burrakatha, Bathukamma and Tolu Bommalata.

2.1. Burrakatha:

The origins of Burrakatha are lost in time, but similarities in the art form are found in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala. Karnataka has an art form known as Harikathe. Tamilnadu has Haribhakti and another style known as Tanjavur Harikatha. It is surmised that Haribhakti was propagated by the Tamil Vaishnavite saints or Alwars up to the 12th century and was further carried on by the Dasakuta line of composers. There is every possibility that each style has influenced or has been influenced by the other styles to suit the need of the times and audience. Evidence points that the root of Burrakatha lies in Yakshagana as well as Jaganakatha, which were prevalent even before the 14th century CE. However, Burrakatha, in its current form, was developed in Guntur district around 1942 with the aim of propagating awareness of political ideas and social conditions among illiterate masses in villages.

2.2. Bathukamma:

Bathukamma is a colorful floral festival of Telangana. Bathukamma is derived from two Telugu words—Bathuku (life) and Amma (mother). Bathukamma, thus, is the life-giving mother goddess who is welcomed when the autumn harvest is ready, thanks to the bountiful rains. As the autumn crop standing in the fields is harvested, peasants offer their gratitude to the gods and celebrate the gift of life. The rite is ancient and varies across different parts of India. For the most part, it is known as Navratri for the nine nights of prayer and celebration offered to the mother goddess who has offered her bounty to men. Each culture has built around this ancient ritual a complex and richly layered body of oral and folk traditions. Durga puja of Bengal, Dussehra of Mysuru and Kullu, and Garba Dandiya of Gujarat—are celebrated widely in gratitude to the Gods and Goddess. In Telangana, the celebration of

these nine nights of celebration is Bathukamma. There are several legends around the origin of Bathukamma. The most popular one revolves around a Chola king, Dharamangada, and his wife Satyawati, who lost a hundred sons in battle and prayed to goddess Lakshmi for a daughter. The goddess not only granted their wish but herself appeared as the daughter of the royal couple. The sages Kapila, Kasyapa, Vashishtha, and others came to bless the royal couple and named the baby girl Bathukamma since she was the mother goddess herself, even though born as a baby daughter to the royal couple. This legend exemplifies the significance of Bathukamma for the mother-daughter relationship, with Bathukamma being perceived both as a mother (progenitor) and as a daughter (progeny). This relationship is mirrored in the ritual surrounding Bathukamma, where both water, as the source of all life, and flowers, as the most beautiful product of life, become the central elements of the celebration of the festival.

2.3. Tholu Bommalata:

"Tholu Bommalata" is an ancient shadow puppet theatre tradition performed with puppets created from leather hide. A form of folk and cultural expression, Tholu Bommalata, meaning "dance of leather dolls," is one of the oldest surviving shadow puppet theatres in the world and is a traditional form of shadow puppetry in Andhra Pradesh. Tholu Bommalata originated in the Andhra Pradesh region of India during the Satavahana dynasty around 200 BC and was patronized by the royal family, which helped it flourish across peninsular India, from Maharashtra to Odisha and southwards to Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. It was popular during the reigns of the Satavahanas, Pallavas, Kakatiyas, Vijayanagar kings and finally reached its zenith when Telugu naik kings ruled over Tanjore and Madura. However, over the centuries, with changes in rulers and their tastes, the art suffered and survived only in various pockets in different states. Today, the main centers of this art are located in Andhra Pradesh, though the art is also found in most other states of eastern and southern India (Sadanandam, 2008). Traditional shadow theatre exists as Togalu Gombeyata (Shadow Puppet) in Karnataka, Tholpavakoothu in Kerala, Chammadyache Bahulya in Maharashtra, and Ravana Chhaya of Odisha (Jayakumar, 2021). Though these forms have distinct regional identities, languages, and dialects in which they are performed, they share a common worldview, aesthetics, and themes. Tholu Bommalata has been used for centuries to pass the knowledge of Indian epics, folk tales, myths, and local legends through the generations.

3. THEMES OF BURRAKATHA, BATHUKAMMA AND THOLU BOMMALATA

Burrakatha is a narrative folk art form that consists of prayers, solo drama, dance, songs, poems, and humor. The themes are Hindu mythological stories from the Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and history. Popular themes from Hindu scriptures include Sri Krishnarayabharam, Prahlada Vijayam, Satya Harishchandra, and Sri Venkateswara Vaibhavam. Other folk tales used as themes are Balanagamma and Kamboja Raju Katha. Historical personalities and events like Alluri Sitaramaraju, Jhansi Laxmi Bai, and Bobbili Yuddham are some of the themes that are very popular in the performance. These themes have mass appeal.

Bathukamma is also known as Engili pula Bathukamma locally. Bathukamma celebrates the relationship humans share with earth and water. Worship of the Goddess and nature is the main theme

and includes singing praise of the Goddess and folk devotionals. Since the Goddess mother is viewed as the protector of life and its journey, the theme revolves around praying for physical and mental well-being, wealth, and prosperity for themselves and their families. The other theme elements during the Bathukamma Festival are nature and its beauty, women, girl child, and traditional food.

Tholu Bommalata is characterized by themes from Hindu epics and legends like Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavad Purana. The performances showcase the lives of gods and goddesses. Some of the popular narratives are Sundarkand, Lakshmana Murcha, Ravana Vadh, and Lava Kusha Katha, Sisupala Vadh, and Prahalad Katha. These performances are essentially blended with local customs and social issues.

4. FEATURES OF BURRAKATHA, BATHUKAMMA AND THOLU BOMMALATA

Originally, Burrakatha started as devotional songs of nomadic people and wandering minstrels or bards known as “Jangams” who moved from place to place, village to village, and narrated stories for pastime and recreation. Burrakatha is an oral storytelling technique that consists of prayers, solo drama, dance, songs, poems, and jokes. The topic will be either a Hindu mythological story (Jangam Katha) or a contemporary social issue. The performing troupe consists of one main performer and two co-performers who are expert drummers. The performers are men, or even an all-woman troupe, and sometimes, the main performer and his wife would be the troupe. They belong to the Telaka or Mutharasi caste.

The performers are versatile in various aspects of theatre like exposition, narration, singing, histrionics, dance, and specific musical instruments called "Burra" and "Dakki". The main performer uses the Burra, and the co-performers use the Dakki. The main performer, “kathaka,” wears small bells known as “gejjas” on his ankles and holds a pair of “talas” or metal rings on both thumbs of his hands, which create a musical tune according to the tempo of the song.

The performers wear traditional costumes that are unique to the region and art form. Usually, the costume comprises a colorful turban, local angaraksha or kurta with a jacket and a waistband, and dhoti. The style of narration is dialogue, song, short dance interspersed with musical accompaniment. The narration is in dialectical Telugu language. The performance is delivered standing, stepping front and back, and swinging either on plain ground or on stage. The audience participates in a very limited way, sometimes cheering or joining as a chorus for a couple of lines.

Bathukamma represents the cultural spirit of Telangana and is celebrated as a festival, which is a complex and richly layered body of oral and folk traditions. Bathukamma is a celebration of nature and expresses gratitude to the gods for the gift of water. It also marks the celebration of femininity, womanhood, and girl child. Bathukamma is a floral festival celebrated by the women of Telangana dedicated to the goddess of life, Bathukamma. Preparing a Bathukamma is a folk art where womenfolk prepare a shrine called Bathukamma, made of a variety of indigenous flowers and turmeric arranged in seven concentric layers tapering from bottom to top. This flower shrine represents the goddess.

The actual performance is by a group of women of the neighborhood who gather in a large circle around the flower shrine and sing folk songs while making rounds repeatedly around it. The folk songs in Telugu mainly focus on seeking physical and mental well-being, wealth, and prosperity for themselves and their families. The women are dressed in traditional wear comprising sarees and jewelry while young girls wear half-sarees or lehengani. It is celebrated over nine days during the months of September–October. On the final day, womenfolk carry Bathukamma on their heads in a procession towards a lake or tank and immerse it with devotion and gratitude to rhythmic drum beats. All the while, the womenfolk sing folklore songs in chorus.

Tholu Bommalata combines elements of performing arts and visual arts - painting, engraving, drama, acting, dance, storytelling, music, etc. and provides the performing artists complete flexibility over design, color, story narration, and movement. A puppet is constructed with joints at the head, neck, arms, torso, and legs. The various parts of the puppet are held together with strong supporting sticks and allow the puppeteer to manipulate the parts to show the movements during the performance. The puppets range from 50 to 100 cm in height. A full performance can include up to 60 figures.

Tholu Bommalata is a bi-dimensional show and takes place at night, wherein the puppets are manipulated, and all movements happen behind a white fabric which serves as the screen. A source of light throws the shadows of the puppet on the screen. During the performance, the puppeteer holds each puppet behind the curtain, skillfully moves the puppets, and also narrates or sings while at the same time producing rhythmic sounds of bells worn on the ankles and also taps on a wooden board which serves as the platform. The audience sees only the colored shadows of the puppets. The puppet shows are also accompanied by live music and songs where the musicians usually sit behind the screen. Musical instruments that are used include tabla, percussion, harmonium, cymbals, shanka (conch), and flute.

Tholu Bommalata requires a group effort. The troupes are family-based, and the profession and art are passed on from father to son. There may be members from the extended family of the troupe head. The troupe consists of both male and female members. Troupe size varies from five to ten members. Each puppeteer is well-versed in manipulation techniques, singing, playing some instrument, and recitation. These shows have been performed outdoors in the villages where they were the main means of entertainment and education for the masses. They were performed near the temples during the Maha Shivaratri festival which lasted nine consecutive nights.

The shows last from 2 hours to 8 hours. It is performed at night such that colored shadows of the puppets are visible on the white screen which is mounted outdoors. In the village shows, the audience sits on the ground in front of the screen. Presently in decline, Tholu Bommalata can only be seen during specific events like cultural festivals or foreign show tours. Such shows are performed on the stage in a theater.

5. OCCASIONS OF BURRAKATHA, BATHUKAMMA AND THOLU BOMMALATA

Burrakatha is frequently showcased during festivals, weddings, social gatherings, and special occasions. Rooted in the oral storytelling tradition, Burra Katha originally found its stage in

village centers, serving as a source of entertainment and education by narrating sacred and historical events. However, in contemporary times, it has evolved into a tool for raising awareness among rural communities about injustices perpetrated by rulers and unpopular government policies. The government has also harnessed this traditional art form to disseminate information on various social and health-related issues to the rural masses.

Bathukamma, a distinctive floral festival, is observed once a year at the conclusion of the monsoon season, typically in September–October. Commencing on Mahalaya Amavasya, the festival spans nine days and is celebrated both in homes and public spaces. Acknowledged as the official festival of Telangana state, Bathukamma is actively endorsed and celebrated by the government.

Puppetry, encompassing elements of both performing and visual arts, was historically a favored form of entertainment and communication. While it enjoyed patronage from kings and the affluent and resonated deeply with the masses, the advent of television and the internet in recent times has relegated it to the sidelines, pushing it almost into obscurity. Tholu Bommalata, once a fixture during festivals, fairs, and cultural events, is now predominantly performed in cultural and special events when foreigners visit Telangana.

6. SOCIO-CULTURAL RELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL ARTS FORMS

A crucial aspect of this study involves understanding how Burrakatha, Bathukamma, and Tholu Bommalata have impacted and been impacted by society, culture, and traditions. In this context, we examine various factors such as Oral Tradition, Cultural Identity and Memory, Social Norms and Values, Expression of Beliefs, Community Cohesion, Evolution, Adaptation, and Globalization.

Burrakatha, as an oral storytelling folk art, relies entirely on the spoken word and repeated hearings of the narrative. Popular mythological stories from the Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and history were adapted into native language dialects and narrated to audiences in rural areas. The time period, location, narrative story, extent of adaptation of language, level of imaginative depiction of the characters, wit, and humor to keep the audience engaged were the deciding factors in the popularity of the folk artist. With no rigid performing standards, Burrakatha has adapted itself over the centuries and also included secular content as per the need. Burrakatha served as one of the folk mediums for spreading information, communicating, and entertaining. In terms of information and knowledge, it has a dual characteristic, using information from history, society, and circumstances for its content. This special feature makes it a channel of communication that influences social and cultural perception, awareness, understanding, and behavior, being instrumental in reinforcing, preserving, and continuing cultural memory and identity, morals, ethics, and influencing and reinforcing social norms, values, behavior, cohesiveness, and unity.

Bathukamma, a religio-cultural festival, conforms to a commonly accepted set of ritualistic parameters that have more or less remained the same over centuries. Notably, Bathukamma is not confined to a particular sect of performers but to the local womenfolk who have continued the tradition over generations. What distinguishes Bathukamma is that it occurs once a year,

performed by womenfolk across the state in the same period. It is not a performance for an audience but a performance by the audience themselves. It requires no special setting or location; just any place where a group of women can gather is all that is required. Passed through generations as a ritualistic activity by the participants themselves, Bathukamma does not serve the purposes of information, communication, or entertainment but exclusively as a festival of womenfolk celebrating gratitude to the Goddess and nature, preserving the cultural identity of the people of Telangana. Bathukamma brings about unity among womenfolk celebrating the festival, reinforcing social norms and values through a shared cultural experience.

Tholu Bommalata is a specialized folk art form involving an elaborate set of activities, from choosing a theme to developing the content and script, making puppets and props, stage setting, and performance. Unlike Bathukamma and Burrakatha, Tholu Bommalata is not a flexible folk art; only trained and expert members perform it. Due to its script and content, Tholu Bommalata enables the preservation of cultural memory and identity. Since its main themes are mostly based on epics and legends, this art form reflects the historical, cultural, and political situation of the society at that point in time. It also mirrors the social norms and values, subtly highlighting what is important, moral, ethical, or acceptable behavior within the culture. As a visual and performing art form, over the centuries, Tholu Bommalata has played a crucial role in preserving, influencing, and reinforcing social norms, values, behavior, cohesiveness, and unity.

7. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF TRADITIONAL ART FORMS

Traditional folk arts, exemplified by Burrakatha, Bathukamma, and Tholu Bommalata, confront a myriad of challenges that imperil their survival and flourishing. Firstly, these art forms suffer from limited visibility and recognition, with sporadic performances contributing to their diminished presence. The pervasive impact of modernization, characterized by changing lifestyles and a digital shift, threatens the relevance of these traditional expressions, particularly among younger generations more attuned to contemporary entertainment mediums.

Moreover, the declining presence of artisan communities poses a tangible threat to the preservation of specialized skills, as seen prominently in the intricate craftsmanship required for Tholu Bommalata. Financial strain further compounds the challenges faced by traditional folk artists, with economic hardships stemming from limited performances, a dearth of patronage, and insufficient financial support. The technological onslaught, marked by the prevalence of digital media, presents stiff competition, overshadowing the appeal of live traditional performances.

Institutional support, or the lack thereof, is another critical challenge. While successful government initiatives like the promotion of Bathukamma in Telangana showcase the positive impact of institutional backing, many traditional folk arts languish without similar support. Striking a delicate balance between cultural authenticity and adaptation to shifting societal norms proves to be a formidable challenge, potentially leading to the dilution of these art forms.

Educational gaps exacerbate the predicament, with the limited integration of traditional folk arts into formal education

contributing to a lack of awareness among younger generations. The overarching risk of extinction looms, particularly for Burrakatha and Tholu Bommalata, as neglect and disinterest threaten to consign these art forms to oblivion. Finally, as societies undergo cultural homogenization, there is a palpable risk of losing the distinctiveness and diversity embodied in traditional folk arts, constituting a profound cultural loss.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges necessitates a concerted effort from both governmental and societal stakeholders. Financial support, educational initiatives, and dedicated platforms are essential components of a comprehensive strategy to ensure the sustained visibility, appreciation, and preservation of these invaluable traditional folk arts.

8. CONCLUSION

The provided overview is necessarily concise due to the broad and diverse nature of the traditional folk art forms, yet it effectively communicates the fundamental understanding of these folk art forms. Traditional Folk Theatre serves as a unique mode of communication, transmitting a rich cultural heritage. Burrakatha, Bathukamma, and Tholu Bommalata have functioned as conduits for conveying the socio-cultural fabric of society, fostering a shared sense of experience, community, and belonging. These art forms have exhibited adaptability and evolution over time, mirroring shifts in societal dynamics, community values, cultural traditions, and beliefs. They have sustained relevance by actively engaging with the evolving values and beliefs of the societies in which they originated and flourished.

Collectively, they create a captivating mosaic of cultural expressions, each fragment narrating stories of a civilization that has thrived for centuries, captivating and inspiring audiences in Telangana. However, with the exception of Bathukamma, Burrakatha, and particularly Tholu Bommalata, faces a dwindling presence, with sparse performances. The changing times and the onslaught of modernization and the internet have taken a toll on these art forms. Without intervention, there is a looming risk of these folk art forms fading into extinction, resulting in the loss of a remarkable cultural heritage. Therefore, urgent measures are imperative to preserve and propagate these art forms, akin to the proactive steps taken by the Government of Telangana in the case of Bathukamma. The responsibility for this preservation rests with both the government and the broader society, collectively ensuring the safeguarding of these invaluable cultural treasures.

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