The Puppet Theatre

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The art of puppetry in Sri Lanka has a long tradition. The mechanics of the art were known and practised in the 13th century AD. as is recorded in the Chronicle of Culavamsa, but the manipulation of figures resembling gods and goddesses, animals and birds, and diverse mythical creatures through the use and contrivance of machines was known very much earlier. In India marionettes and shadow puppet plays existed from very early times, and if artists and artisans migrated to the island of Lanka, it is only to be expected that puppeteers came too. The reference in the Chronicle is very clear. The occasion was a visit of the reigning king, Parakrama Bahu II of Dambadeniya, to his birthplace, a town named Sirivaddhana a few miles away, to install relics of the Buddha in a new monastery and its attendant shrine he had erected there. The vihara was richly decorated with banners and pennons and costly stuff, with floral arches and jewelled halls and also ” …. with rows of figures of Brahma, that danced in line holding white umbrellas and were beautiful because they were worked with a mechanism, with diverse-hued mechanical figures of the gods which moved to and fro with hands folded before the brows – with rows of mechanical figures of horses which ran hither and thither and possessed the grace of rows of raging waves of the sea, with elephants which were likewise mechanical figures feigning to be clouds descended to the earth…

From the stories that in the 12th century, when King Parakrama Bahu I sought to subvert his cousin’s power in the north, this ingenuous prince used puppeteers as spies in the villages round Polonnaruwa, it shows that puppets and puppetry were favoured by the people and itinerant puppeteers were made welcome among them. Amongst the many Damilas and others he (King Parakrama Bahu) made such as we practised in dance and song appear as people who played with leather dolls and the like. (Culavamsa)

It is evident that many of these puppeteers were “damilas” (Tamils from South India) and that the puppets they carried about to entertain the people were made of

leather as well as wood. Both leather and wood are still used to make puppets and even today puppetry largely remains a folk art used in village entertainment at functions of all kinds. The traditional wood used to cut out puppets of all sizes is the soft and carefully planed “kaduru” which grows along the banks and bunds of paddy-fields and in marshy areas and swamps in the western and southern lagoons. Naturally the art of puppetry is therefore more to be found in these provinces, though up to a decade or so ago it flourished also in the north and north-western region, from where it reached the rest of the country centuries ago.

During the week or so of celebration of the Vesak festival – the full moon night in the month of May on which is commemorated the birth, death and enlightenment of the Buddha. – puppet shows are brought to the people and enacted even at busy junctions and on the “des in the city where makeshift stages are erected. Crowds gather to watch the puppets perform and adept indeed are the puppeteers depicting through these figures, flat though they are, scenes from the life of the Bodhisattva as related in the Jataka Tales. Heroic stories from the history of the island are also recreated very vividly, as are popular folk tales.

While puppet shows date back to ancient and medieval times, puppet plays are a later innovation and also entered this country through South India. Nadagam or folk drama, which was extremely popular both in rural and suburban areas up to about fifty years or so ago, when supplanted by the cinema and the live theatre or stage, was Tamil in origin but soon caught on here and acquired a local flavour, slightly risque but nevertheless enthusiastically received. It was the Nadagam players who turned to creating and presenting puppet plays and the dramatic form reached its heights in the first quarter of the century, though some went on till the 1940s and 1950s and can yet be put across by puppeteers in the southern coastal town of Ambalangoda and its environs, in Piliyandala off the Dehiwela-Ratmalana area near Colombo, in Negombo and the western coastal belt and even in the hinterland of Kandy. The demand for these plays is very much less now, especially with the introduction of electronic entertainment devices like television and video.

A living tradition in puppetry, however, are the “Pasku” performances or Passion Plays of the West Coast region. Plays such as this enacting the drama of the Passion of Jesus Christ are believed to have been introduced by the Portuguese in the 16th and 17th centuries. Puppets were used for such characters as Christ himself, the Blessed Virgin (his Mother), Mary Magdalene, Saint John and Veronica. These were either marionettes manipulated skilfully or puppets carried about by live actors. In some of the Passion Plays put on today both puppets and live actors take part, and

for certain scenes like the Crucifixion and Resurrection puppets are used. Even today, at Duwa especially, a small hamlet off Negombo on the West Coast, the Passion Play with both puppets and live actors is performed annually on Good Friday.

Some of the perennially popular puppet plays are the stories of the last king of Kandy, Sri Wickrema Rajasingha, and his Court; the tragedy of the Ehelapola family of Kandy (where the mother was forced to kill her own children); the Vidura Jataka and others. The puppets are designed to resemble popular as well as mythical characters, and though tragedies find a ready audience, the most popular are the comedies depicting everyday life and its humour by means of puppets. In the past decade or two several new groups of puppeteers have emerged creating new styles altogether and new characters based on the current scene and modem lifestyle. An impetus has been given to these groups by experts in the art from Eastern Europe who have been brought over here by the Arts Council and the Cultural Ministry to provide modem know-how and expertise to our own exponents of the art. Successful shows and plays have been put across with a variety of remarkable “puppet-characters”. A new role is also envisaged for puppeteers who engage in educational puppetry and puppetry as creative drama. Introducing the art into schools and educational establishments could create a deeper interest in the art and enhance its entertainment value once it is known and familiar to a new generation.

A scene from a Buddhist Jataka tale settling a dispute. Courtesy: The Island.