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THE PAGATI VESHAALU : A LANGUISHING FOLK ART OF ANDHRA PRADESH

Abstract

An attempt is made in this paper to give an account of the Pagati Veshalu (day playlets), a languishing folk art form of Andhra Pradesh. The data have been collected from the artistes enacting their roles in Kurnool and Chittoor district of the said State. There used to be as many as 64 types of Pagati Veshalu which the nomadic or semi-nomadic artistes performed with colloquial dialects with local accent. The cognizable root of the said folk art can be traced from 15th or 16th century. At first the Brahmins of Kuchipudi of erstwhile Divi taluk of Krishna district are said to have contributed for the origin of this folk art. In course of time, people of different castes underwent training for enacting different playlets seeking patronage from the local kings and the public. Though some troupes enact only a few important episodes from the Epics and the Puranas, others enact roles of social genre for the purpose of entertainment and enlightenment.

The playlets are characterized by a generous combination of dialogue, dance, music, song, buffoonery, acting, moralizing, and prayer. Depending upon the roles the actors enact, they wear suitable costumes, artificial jewellery and apply make-up material. Place and time are suggested through gesture and dialogue. Male actors alone play various roles, even those of women. With the passage of time the powerful electronic media, especially Cinema and T.V. have had negative impact on the spread or patronage of the Pagati Veshalu.

Keywords: *Folk art forms, the Epics and the Puranas, social genre, languishing, patronage, costumes, Great and Little Traditions, electronic media.*

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Introduction

Indian folk arts have always been used for moral, religious, and socio-political ends. They have been very rarely utilised for pure entertainment alone. Indeed, they have functioned as schools of learning, courts of justice, and discussion centres for many a century. Compared to the modern mass media, the traditional media are personal, familiar, and more credible forms with which most of the literate and illiterate identify with an apparent ease.

The traditional forms of folk art come closer to the hearts and minds of the people and hence their appeal is at a personal, intimate level. Moreover, their familiar format and content, as also the colloquial dialects used significantly contribute for the maintenance of clarity in communication. The numerous and different forms available for specific homogenous groups and for specific purposes can be exploited to cater to people of different regions. Rapport is also immediate and direct, since there exists no barriers to communication.

Further, Folk media can be enjoyed by persons of all age groups – generally at a very low cost. They are very flexible to accommodate new themes. For instance, comments on everyday life can be introduced in the traditional folk arts such as the *Tamasha* (Maharashtra), the *Jatra* (Bengal and Orissa), the *Nautanki* (North India), the *Bhavai* (Gujarat), the *Therukoothu* (Tamilnadu), etc. These need not be treated as interpolations, as they are not ‘pure’ forms. As a matter of fact, Indian folk art forms have a generous combination of dialogue, dance, song, buffoonery, moralising and prayer. In addition, dramatization of important episodes from the Epics and the Puranas helps communicate the basic text of Great Tradition in such a way as to be intelligible by rural masses at the Little Traditional Level. Thus, the folk art forms play a prominent role in rural India, constituting a dimension of Indian rural culture. With this theoretical idea in mind an attempt has been made here to describe the *Pagati Veshalu* (day play-lets or enactments) which characterise the above said features of folk art. The data for writing this paper have been collected from a few professional practitioners of the said folk art belonging to Ponnapuram of erstwhile Nandyal Taluk, Kurnool district and Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh.

Origin of the *Pagati Veshalu* : The *Pagati Veshalu* constitute one of the most important folk media of entertainment in Andhra Pradesh. The first cognizable root of this popular folk form of drama or one act play can be traced from 15th or 16th century. Since then these play-lets, like other forms of folk art of A.P., such as *Yakshaganam*, *Kuchipudi* dance, *Tolu Bommalata* (Shadow Puppet show), *Burra Katha* (Balled) etc., have continued to be one of the main sources of amusement for the rural people of Andhra. The origin of these play-lets is often attributed to the practice of spying of the olden days. With the passage of time, this type of disguises paved the way for

the emergence of *Pagati Veshాలు* which were utilised to educate the rural masses by exposing social evils, superstitious beliefs, exploitation etc.

According to Somasekhara Sarma et al (1961:914-16), the *Pagati Veshాలు* are also known as *Bahurupalu*. Since they are exhibited or enacted at day time, they came to be known as *Pagati Veshాలు*. At first the Brahmins of Kuchipudi of erstwhile Divi Taluk, Krishna District are said to have contributed for the origin of this folk art. Later Kakaraparru, a village in erstwhile Tanuku taluk of West Godavari District became the seat of learning of *Pagati Veshాలు*. In course of time, people of different castes underwent training at these two places and they in turn enacted different play-lets throughout Andhra Pradesh seeking patronage from the public as well as the local kings. Historical evidence reveals that even the Sultans of Golkonda (1512-1687), who ruled almost the entire Andhra Pradesh, donated lands to the artistes of the *Pagati Veshాలు*, especially those of Gaddipadu. The semi-nomadic or nomadic artistes used to present as many as 64 *Pagati Veshాలు* at different places with colloquial dialects combined with local accent. Though some troupes used to enact only a few important episodes of the Mahabharata and the Mahabagavata for 10 days enacting each one per day, some others enacted roles of social genre too which include *Bairagi* (monk), *Komati* (Vaisya), *Somayajulu-Somidevi*, *Jangam*, *Linga Balija*, *Chodigadu*, *Pittaladora*, *Sarada Kandru*, *Madiga*, *Marati*, *Patthan*, *Haridasu*, *Dasari*, *Singi-Singadu*, *Avadhani*, *Kasiprayanam*, *Devarapette* (Fig. 1. a box containing the image of a local goddess), *Bodi Bapanamma*, *Sode*, *Budabukkala vesham*, *Diwan*, *Jangamadevara*, *Gayyal Pellam*, *Sathani*, *Vanamma*, *Erukala Vesham*, *Koya Vesham*, *Dommara Vesham*, *Pamulavadu*, *Bethaludi Vesham*, *Vaishnava Veshalu*, *Panthula Veshalu*, *Janthara Pette*, *Dadinamma Vesham*, *Mondivadu*, etc. By enacting some of these roles the artistes humorously exposed the dubious habits of monks, the exploiting tendency of the Vaisyas with sugar-coated words, the superstitious beliefs of the then Hindu society, money-making methods of Patthan by procuring women for brothel houses, etc. However, according to Kurma Rao (2005: 20, 25, 39), the day play lets of Somayaji – Somidevamma, Chodigadu and Pittaladora were mainly meant for entertainment.

Fig. No.1: Artistes Carrying Devarapette



Source: Prathap Reddy, Gurram. (2006), *Pagati Veshalu: Pradarsana Reethulu*. p.12

Present Position : In Kurnool District of A.P., The *Pagati Veshalu* are at present enacted for entertainment alone. It is stated that there are as many as 32 play-lets which are of mythological, social, and folk genre. The mythologicals are the well-known episodes derived from the Epics and the Puranas. They are : *Satya Harischandra* (the story of king Harishcandra who stood for the truth), *Ramalakshmanulu*, *Lavakusa* (the story of Lord Rama's sons – Lava and Kusa), *Ramanjaneya Yuddham* (the battle between Rama and His devotee, Anjaneya), *Surpanakha Mukku Chevulu Koyuta* (the severing of the ears and nose of Surpanakha by Lakshman), *Sri Krishna Jambhavanthula Yuddham* (the battle between Lord Krishna and Jambhavantha), *Sri Krishna Tulabharam* (the weighing of Lord Krishna in a balance), *Pandavula Agnatavasam* (the episode of disguising by Pandavas for one year), *Veerabhimanyu* (the valour of Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna), *Arthanareeswara* (the episode of Lord Siva becoming semi-female (figs. 2, 3 & 4) to kill the demons), etc. On the other hand, the social play lets include dhobi (the story of deserting Sita by Lord Rama on hearing the humiliating words of a dhobi, washerman), *Vadde Varu* (the story of a mason caste), *Panthulu* (teacher), Reddy (Village Munsiff), Police, *Bairagi*, Kaasi Brahmanulu, Budabukkala Varu (enacting the role of a begging caste), Sugali (imitation of the dress and speech pattern of a tribal community), etc. Finally, of all these pagati veshalu the story of Balanagamma is the most popular one-act folk play enacted by the artistes.



Fig. Nos. 2, 3 & 4 : (Arthanareeswara) artistes with the make-up of half male and half female appearance of Lord Siva.

In Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh, many families of Jangam caste inhabiting various hamlets such as Urumapuram, Masu Palli, Kondamampalli, and Ponnapuram of erstwhile Nandyal Taluk, Erra Gudur and Banakacherla of erstwhile Atmakur taluk, Mallela, Kondapakaturu, Lakshmapuram and Bijivemula of erstwhile Nandikotkur taluk, Kallur of erstwhile Kurnool taluk etc., professionally depend upon the enactment of various play lets the performance of which occurs throughout the year. The practitioners are expected to move about and seek patronage from those villages which fall within the boundary of their respective native taluks only. Thus, arrangement has been made by the artistes themselves to lessen the degree of competition

among them and to have better patronage from the patrons. In each of the said hamlets the artistes form themselves into a few troupes each consisting of five to ten members. At each camp, the troupe goes to few nearby villages where they enact different play lets in front of each household for about 15 days. After completion of the exhibition of the most desired and popular playlets, they go to each household for donations which include not only money ranging from Rs.50/- to Rs.516/- but also old clothes and provisions such as rice, pulses, tamarind, chillies and salt. It is informed that at the end of each camp, each one in the troupe usually gets not less than Rs. 2000/-. The troupe usually goes to its native village once or twice a month.

In Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh, the artistes belonging to Ballari region of Karnataka State mainly depend on their traditional occupation of performing day playlets for their livelihood during the past two decades. They usually perform the roles from the Epics and the Puranas such as Lord Eswar, Mohini Bhasmasura, Tilotthama, Jatasura, Narada, Rama, Ravana, Lakshmana, Anjaneya, Surpanakha, Viswamitra, Vasishtha, Lord Krishna, Dharmaraju, Bheema, Arjuna, Draupathi, etc. (figs. 5 & 6). Now and then they also perform the roles of social themes such as dhobi, Aggiramudu, Musamma, Siddi Sab, Chindura-Lakshmana, etc.



Fig. No.5 : Bheema's role performer **Fig.No.6: Lord Krishna's role performer**

The patrons often encourage the artistes to perform the playlets in a full-fledged manner. But whenever the artistes go for begging alms, they cannot spare time to perform the said roles in a full-fledged way except reciting a few stanzas in a rhythmic way. The semi-nomadic artistes of Rayachur region of Karnataka State perform the day playlet of Chindura – Lakshmana in Kannada only. On the other hand, the same playlet is performed in Telugu by the artistes of Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh (Brahmananda Reddy 2020 : 119-33). Further, Chittoor district is known for the performance of the playlet of Mondibandavallu. The performers mainly depend on begging for the livelihood. They visit the farming families during harvesting season. In course of time, some of them have taken up wage labour as their profession.

The *Pagati Veshaalu* are performed on an open space in front of every house-hold. This cultural performance brings together an improvised dance and the classical literary forms – prose, stanza, music and drama. The semi-nomadic artistes embellish in narrating the episodes of the Epics with suitable songs,¹ stanza in various metres,² descriptive passages, and narrative links in prose passages and the actors also resort to some sort of *abhinaya* (acting) in course of their performance. According to Prathap Reddy (2006 : 12), the artistes enact their respective roles after acquiring proficiency in local dialects and slangs along with familiarity with local customs and traditions of the people concerned.

Music is also of prime importance in this folk drama form, for it gives the pace and tempo required. The main musical instruments used are the tabla, harmonium, cymbals, etc. As an opera the dialogues are sung to popular folk melodies, but now, even to film tunes. Singing interludes by the chorus; loud and high pitched acting characterise the form.

The *Pagati Veshaalu* do not require either elaborate acting or costumes and place and time are suggested through gestures and dialogue. Depending upon the role the actors enact, they wear suitable costumes, artificial jewellery, and apply make-up material. Male artistes alone play various roles, even those of women. The female role-enacting artistes wear six-yard Andhra Saree of loud colours, and the males wear shirt and dhoti. Generally men of Jangam caste alone practise the enactment of the said art form which they have learnt under the guidance of their parents or fellow caste people.

Now-a-days, the more sophisticated, glamorous and very powerful electronic media, especially cinema and T.V. have had negative impact on the spread or patronage of the *Pagati Veshaalu*. The spread of film culture has forced the present day practitioners of the day play-lets to learn record dances.³ They also do not miss to enact or exhibit the most desired playlet viz., women to cater to the changing tastes of the rural masses, especially the youth.⁴ In addition, the professional artistes have started languishing for want of sufficient patronage which in turn led to their economic depression. These changed circumstances have already compelled some of them to seek better means of livelihood such as agriculture, wage labour, opening of provision stores, educating their children with a hope of getting government jobs, etc.

Suggestions for Improvement: Under these dissatisfactory conditions, it is disheartening to note that the age-old folk art like the *Pagati Veshaalu* have almost disappeared in the sands of time. Hence, there is an imperative need to preserve the original form of the *Pagati Veshaalu* and continue to make their head-way especially by the National School of Drama, Telugu film-directors, and those of IPTA (Indian People's Theater Association). Also the Government, philanthropists, voluntary organisations etc., are to make special efforts to provide fillip to day play-lets' culture and encourage the artistes of the said art form in all possible ways.

Furthermore, the *Pagati Veshaalu* as one of the popular folk media of entertainment can be employed as a powerful agent of social change, as the modern mass media have yet to penetrate most of the villages in the country. In this context, the Directorate of Field Publicity as also its sister organisation, the Song and Drama Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the regional offices of these organisations have to work in collaboration with Mandal Parishat Development Officer, Village Development Officers and other local people of prominence to use the medium of *Pagati Veshaalu* with great effectiveness in order to arouse the interests of the rural folk in development programmes, to bring about an awareness about environmental balance, family planning methods, organic farming, alcoholism, negative consequences of social evils, and to cultivate the habit of saving and adopt L.I.C., policies. To materialise these ends the Government has to make use of only the local practitioners of the said folk art for achieving effective communicability.

Conclusions

- 1) Though small audiences watch the *Pagati Veshaalu* at a time, the effects of the latter on the former are at a much deeper level. The folk art satisfies the innate desire for self-expression and fulfills man's need for the expression of dramatic and lyrical wishes. It also helps preserve and disseminate in a lively manner the cultural legacy of our forefathers.
- 2) Dramatization of important episodes from the Epics serves as one of the media which helps to communicate and transmit the Vedic lore and the religious and ethical instruction to the common folk. The folk arts like the *Pagati Veshaalu* perform a social function by interpreting the basic text of Great Tradition in such a way as to be intelligible by the rural masses at the Little Traditional level.
- 3) It can be pointed out that the said folk art is not only a means of recreation but also an agent of social awakening.
- 4) Above all, though the modern mass media are expanding continuously and the literacy and the economic development of rural areas are proceeding, the age-old folk art like the *Pagati Veshaalu* will continue to influence the rural A.P. and the electronic media may not completely replace the traditional media.

Notes

1. The songs are set to various ragas like Todi, Udaya, Bilhari, Kalyani, Bhyravi, Sivaranjani, Mohanam, Sankarabharanam, Savari, etc.
2. The stanzas are composed with popular literary forms such as *Seesa Padyam*, *Sardulam*, *Kandapadyam*, *Champakamala*, *Dwipada*, etc.
3. It is an improvised dance form performed by a male artist, while recorded film-

songs etc. being played on a gramophone.

4. To enact this new play let, a young boy disguises himself like a woman and dances, while film-songs are sung by the co-artistes to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

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