

ELEMENTS OF THE CARNIVALESQUE: THE SHADOW PUPPET THEATRE OF ANDHRA PRADESH

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Abstract: This paper presents the study of folk humour in the shadow puppetry tradition of Andhra Pradesh, India. The article is based on the recording of a shadow puppet show of the *Sundarakanda* of the Telugu *Ranganatha Ramayanamu*. It explores the carnivalesque environment that folk humour brings to the epic theme of the *Ramayana* and studies the grammar of shadow puppetry, which localises classical themes like the *Ramayana* in an entirely unsophisticated and uncouth carnivalesque environment. This, indeed, is the credit of such street performances like the shadow puppet theatre, which release these classical themes from their pious setting.

Keywords: shadow puppetry, folk humour, elements of the carnivalesque, street performances, *Sundarakanda*.

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Introduction

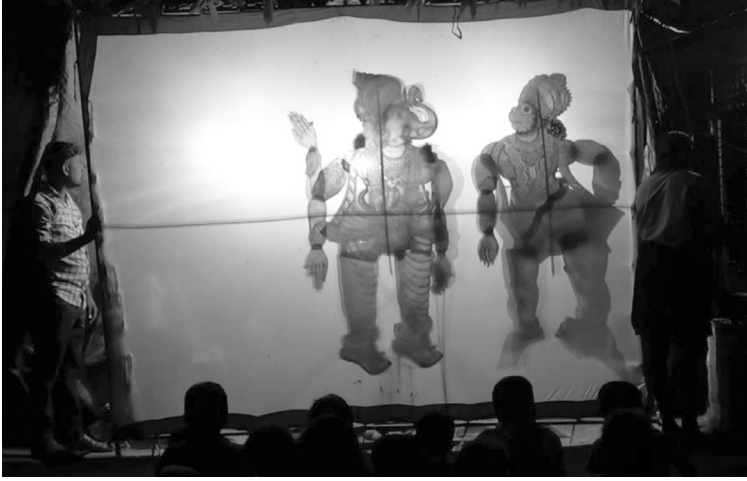
The paper proposes to study elements of the carnivalesque in the shadow puppetry tradition of Andhra Pradesh. The paper is based on an oral performance of the *Sundarakanda* from the *Ranganatha Ramayanamu*, one of the *Rmayanas* available in Telugu language. The shadow puppeteers perform the *Ramayana* in seven episodes lasting for 5-6 hours each. They are *Sundarakanda*, *Sati Sulochana*, *Lakshmana Murcha*, *Mairavana Charitra*, *Kishkindha Kanda*, *Indrajit Yudhamu*, and *Ravana Vadha*. However, for the present purpose I have recorded the most popular and auspicious *Sundarakanda*. The recording of the performance was done on the eve of the new year 2023. Generally these shows are performed in villages on Hindu festive occasions or on special occasions like weddings and naming ceremonies and so on. *Sundarakanda* is an episode which deals with Rama's search for Sita after her abduction from the forest dwelling by Ravana.

The *Ramayana* is the sacred text of the Hindus and is quite serious in its theme and intent. Shadow puppetry as a performative art breaks free from all the conservative practices associated with the literary traditions. The legacy of the *Ramayana* in oral form – like songs, plays, and even in the written text – has been quite serious and sober. The singing of the *Ramayana* before it was textualized had been the practice in temples and other religious sites in India. The shadow puppetry performance breaks free of the seriousness of the religious tradition and brings it closer to commoners who generally are the spectators to the puppetry performance in villages. Most often it is performed in villages in front of the temple of the local deities like Maremma, Gangamma or Peddamma or in the marketplace. For the present purpose the show was performed in front yard of the village goddess Peddamma temple in V. Kothakota village of Anantapur district which is a kilometre from Nimmalakuunta, the native village of the puppeteers.

Manifestations of the folk humour can be found in the interludes which are introduced as a comic relief to the audience from the serious and sober theme of the *Sundarakanda*. The five-hour long performance has about three long breaks which involve humorous conversations between characters of Bangarakka and Juttupoligadu, and Thippadu and Lankhini. There are three comic interludes in the entire episode of *Sundarakanda*. They share the performance time of at least an hour. The whole rendition of the episode is interspersed with comic interludes involving characters called Bangarakka, Juttupoligadu, Thippadu, Lankhini and Hanuman (he is a monkey god and not one of the comic characters). Their role in the entire performance as well as their characterisation including clothing, language and humour will be studied in this paper as elements of the carnivalesque.

Literature Review

The performance tradition of *tholubommatala* predates the Sanskrit drama. By the time of Patanjali's *Mahabhashya* (ca. 140 BC) was written, the practice of showmen carrying pictures to narrate stories of the Krishna legend was prevalent in India. The picture showmen were called Saubhikas (Coomaraswamy, 1929). Existing research on puppet theatre of Andhra Pradesh focusses on its history and the making of the puppets and leather technology as well as with the purpose of fashion technology studies and so on. Scholars like Nagabhushana Sharma (Sharma, 1985) and Anandita Dixit have worked on various different aspects of the puppet theatre like the history of the puppeteers to the leather technology of the puppet production (Dixit, 2022). The elements of the carnivalesque is the least explored area in the puppetry performances as the spotlight has always been on the more appealing dynamics of the puppet making technology, the manipulation of the puppets and music (Sharma, 1985). However, some scholarly articles have been written on the internet on the comic episodes which are termed as "skits" which study some themes of the comic episodes (Serena Aurio, 2018). There hasn't been a full-fledged attempt to study the comic interludes as part of an organic culture that is so rooted in the rural ecosystem of Andhra Pradesh even to this day. Therefore, the present study attempts to understand the puppetry performance as something that constantly traverses between the two cultural backdrops of the classical and the folk while even the classical is a folk rendition of itself.



The beginning of the Tholubommalata performance-invocation
 Source: *Andhra Cultural Portal*, Available at: <https://andhrportal.org/folk-arts-tolu-bommalata/>
 (Accessed: 13 November 2025)

Definition of the carnivalesque

The Bakhtinian theory of the carnivalesque will help us understand the grammar of folk performances and the elements of humour in the European context which could be extended to understand alternative traditions like the shadow puppetry performance in India. Folk humour is a strong element of the puppet theatre. In fact, Bakhtin argues that the whole gamut of the comic and the grotesque imagery in European literature itself is derived from the book of Indian Wonders which was in circulation since the 10th Century in Europe. There are three principal categories of folk humour according to Bakhtin:

1. Ritual Spectacles: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. Comic Verbal compositions: parodies of both oral and written, in Latin and in vernacular.
3. Various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 5)

Let us examine each of these elements in the context of the shadow puppetry performance.

In addition, in Indian performatory traditions like plays or *prahasanas* comic relief is provided by a character named as *vidusaka* who is treated as an embodiment of *hasya rasa*. The *Natyasastra* refers to a word – *krīdanīyaka* – in order to establish a relation between laughter and *nātya* (Geetha, 2019). Bharata

in his *Natyasastra* defines that the *vidusaka* contributes to three kinds of *hasyays*: *sareerahasya*, *kavyahasya*, and *vesahasya*.

A dwarf or hunchback with awkward countenance and protruding teeth, bald head and tawny eyes is the example of *sarirahasya*. He is expected to indulge in incoherent and ludicrous expressions involving an element of humour. At times he could be vulgar and ribald which contributes to *kavyahasya*. He wears old and ugly clothes and carries a stick and this is called *vesahasya*. (Bharata, 1996, p. 116)

In Sanskrit drama *vidusaka* is a Brahmin but in the street play the comedian is a “low caste” men and women. Orphaned and physically challenged is the main comic character.

Unlike the main episodes of the puppet show for which the theme is taken from the *Ramayana* like *Sundarakanda*, the comic episodes don't have any fixed theme but since they are entertaining in nature, the puppeteers generally choose themes of adultery, sexual encounters and adulterous relationships involving local characters and the narration is loosely structured around these themes, catering to the tastes of the public. We get to see an example of such conversations in the verbal compositions, in the dressing and the whole presentation of the comic characters.

A. Comic verbal compositions

Language and humour are interconnected in creating a grammar of its own kind. Humour evolves out of the spectacle that is presented and the language that the puppet/puppeteers use. The profane and the mundane themes are discussed in these conversations and not serious issues bothering the world. In fact the comic characters are introduced by a mock prayer and with the offering of stale boiled grains and *palleru* thorns.

The comic double entendres and the sarcasm becomes evident in the introductory song of Bangarakka itself. The images and the similes used for descriptions of her character are totally antithetical to those used for the description of a character like Sita. She is from the family of Sāke and she is the daughter-in-law of Duddulollu, she comes from the eastern region. She has combed her hair neatly wearing flowers in it, she arrives without a care in the world. And she is introduced in a song expressing the sexual desire of Bangarakka who is separated from her husband. After that follows a humorous situation between Bangarakka and the local men like Thippudu and Hanumanthu. She scratches her ass and

the male puppet Thippudu asks her, “aren’t you ashamed of scratching in front of children, elders and women?” He meant the audience as well as the public space inside the performance. She replies nonchalantly, “What is this water of Kothakota, it causes severe itching...”



The Comic Characters Thippadu

Source: *Andhra Cultural Portal*, Available at: <https://andhraportal.org/folk-arts-tolu-bommalata/>
(Accessed: 13 November 2025)

She converses with Thippadu who comes and makes provocative and sexually coloured comments on her social status, appearance and her marital status. She asks him for his name and in return he asks for her name and she says, “if he gave her his hand in return she would perhaps consider revealing her name.” Then he replies to her: “Sister, you are another man’s woman *para stree*, and I am a another woman’s man *para purusudu* and day in and day out I spend my time here in this Kothakota village and in front of these gathered audiences if I offer you my hand is there anything left for anyone’s guesses?” Then she replies by saying, “treat me as a sister in your thoughts and deeds and I’ll treat you as a brother and then you can easily offer me your hand.” He says, “if you suppose so, then I’ll place my hand in yours.” He pretends to offer her his hand but actually doesn’t and continues to say that “those men who evade debts, who defecate in drinking water, who don’t keep up promises made to poor people like us on the pretext that we have more than him, and someone who ill treats and calls us *ore gire* such men must come and scratch your bum and drink waters of your flower. Anyway tell me your name sister-“. She replies, “My name is that which remains golden if you sweep, turn it away, it is golden, or spoil it is golden, turn it around it is golden, if you take a sieve and remove the chaff it is golden and she is Bangari at home as well as in the garden. For this Kothakota village itself Bangari is an ornament.” Thippadu continues his revile, “Oh ho ho for this golden girl it seems at the bottom is attached with hard silver and like coconut shell we have brought a heavy hammer from Madras to break the bottom. Narasmihulu and I have come” and he says “Basha didn’t come as he’s on on his job”. Narasimhulu asks her “why are you humouring that boy?” She responds by saying that “my husband felt that there is no point if my body is full of gold and just to add a bit of adulteration, he’s gone to Dharmavaram to bring a kilogram of silver and to place an order for anklets and the waist band.” “Why did he go to Dharmavaram, it was available in the ponds near Cheepireddipalli,” informs the narrator. The narrator in the meanwhile distracts her on behalf of the audience and says, “the president of the village, the valmikis of the village and sakali chettis, nababulu of the village have been enquiring after you and want to see your husband. Wherever he is, bring him over. So all the villagers think this little lass is as beautiful as the full moon and how handsome might be her husband and so they want to see my husband is it?” Continues a dialogue between her and the narrator.



Bangarakka

Source: *Andhra Cultural Portal*, Available at: <https://andhrportal.org/folk-arts-tolu-bommalata/>
(Accessed: 13 November 2025)

“Then what...? He’s gone for collections to Kothakota.” “Your husband will reappear as soon as he hears your cuckoo’s voice.” He replies “he’s not gone anywhere, he must gone to Madamgaru for collections, call out for him.” And the narrator calls out for Juttupoligadu... and introduce the image thus. She calls out to her husband without the usual reverential terms but calls out to him like “*rara rara Juttupoliga*” which is the way men in the village would address each other in jest. He responds to her by hurling abuses at her again in a humorous way saying, “oh wait *nee yakka*, wait I am coming.” *Nee yakka* is an abusive saying commonly used in almost all funny conversations in all contexts of rural life in Andhra. In the background the puppeteers break into a song. Thippadu who is physically challenged and cannot stand on two legs again censures Juttupoligadu for dancing fast for the tunes of the song. He complains, “why cannot you go slow boy, I don’t have the waist how I will dance so fast?” Juttupoligadu objects to being addressed thus and warns Thippadu to address him respectfully. But Thippadu doesn’t care a bit, he yells out to Juttupoligadu, “Hey, where have you been, I have been all over the village looking for you. Where have you been, you son of a bitch! Everyone has assembled here.” But Juttupoligadu’s response is equally cool and asks Thippadu to offer *namaskaram* to the “Sarpanch, to the reddis and redemmas, and to valmikis, sakalis and to madam guru and sirs who have come from Anantapuramu.”

The character of Juttupoligadu places the performance in context by briefly providing the historical time of the shadow puppet performances from the times of the Vijayanagar emperor of Sri Krishnadevarayalu. Madam (the patron) wants everyone to see and hear the performance of the *Ramayana*. Therefore her name must be announced before the show begins. Today, we are going to play an episode from the *Ranganatha Ramayanamu*. This play must be watched by children and adults alike to attain wealth, health and all prosperity. Even while exiting, Thippadu taunts Bangarakka using abusive language and refers to her as someone on the heat and always roaming around lifting her skirts up. And he strongly hits on her bottom. Thippadu advises her to offer *namaskarams* to everyone who have come to see the performance: “All the patrons and also those who offer gifts of cash. Let us exit now as we have to return to screen as the show is going to be on the whole night until morning.” And then immediately Thippadu comes and comments that she is beautiful and as bright as the full moon. “Familiar and free interaction between people: carnival often brought the unlikeliest of people together, those ordinarily separated by impenetrable socio-hierarchical barriers. The suspension of distance between people encouraged free interaction and free individual expression.” (The characters in the performance interact as though they have known people and gods all along). These comic characters’ non-conformity to the accepted classical literary tradition in which the *Ramayana* is typically rendered adds to the appeal of the puppet performance.

B. Ritual spectacle

Ritual spectacle includes processions, plays and liturgical celebrations. (Handelman, 2010). Some characteristics of the ritual spectacle of the performance are discussed here. The performance of the shadow puppetry indeed can be put up in anywhere like a market place or in the open air village squares. Thus it gets the permission to use the language and the spectacle that they present. It gives the comic characters a protection from being censured for taking liberties with the accepted morals and norms of the society and religion. The performance begins with an announcement and an advisory that shadow puppetry must be watched even by walking a distance of ninety *amadas* and invites children, elders of the village and women for that night's show. *Tholubommalāta* is performed for house warming, consecration of temples, marriages and it is auspicious and equal to have honoured ten million brahmins. Goddess Saraswati comes to enlighten the children of the village. Lord Ganesha who is invoked in all auspicious events in Hindu religion is invoked at the beginning of the show.

The puppets' visual features such as their clothes, colours, and the artistry of their making are strikingly attractive and draw the spectator's attention, especially with the garish tones used for the women's costumes. While the men are presented as low caste men in dark, earthy shades. Thippadu, one of the buffoons is orphaned and handicapped. He's presented as someone with a contorted body, debilitated below the waist. He fits into the Bharata's description of *sarirahasya*. As soon as he enters the stage there is laughter resulted from looking at his distorted body. The second character, Juttupoligadu is dressed like any other "low" caste, peasant of the region. He is dark-complexioned unlike *neelameghashyama* Rama. Both are dark yet Juttupoligadu is more earthy, while Rama's complexion is elevated. The third and the female character Bangarakka is definitely not dressed like the peasant women of the region. She looks and talks like them but her dressing panders to the tastes of the gallery audiences. She talks like them because one of the village women is lending voice for the puppet called Bangarakka. The characters are totally irreverent to each other and in a way bring in the worldly wisdom of their own everyday affairs to the performance.

In describing the legacy of the grotesque in the European context Bakhtin observers that,

They were closely related to all the forms of degradation inherited from grotesque realism; they belonged to the popular-festive travesties of carnival, to the images of the diableries, of the underworld, of the *soties*. This is why abusive language played an important part in Rabelais' novel. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 28)

Thus these comic puppet characters serve as a total anti-thesis to the classical characters of Sita, Rama and Soumitri. Their dressing is also what is considered improper for presentation of a high theme like the *Ramayana*. The puppeteers make the familiar theme of the *Ramayana* enjoyable, indulgent and at the same time irreverent.

While all the puppets present a visual spectacle to the audience in the oil lamp projections on the screen, the spectacle of the puppet called Lankhini is a visual treat. The puppet Lankhini's is presented as a huge puppet. As she is a female asura, her breasts are exposed, she is larger than life in size though not in stature. She wears a large nose ring and wields a short sword in her hand and comes to prevent Hanuman from entering Lanka. The marionettes properly place her on the screen for the audience to size her up, before slowly bringing her into action. When she is on the screen, the audiences doubts are reflected in the characters of the Thippadu. He looks at her in awe and takes a look at each of her body parts and makes rude comments on her. Her hair, her skirt, her waist which is visible as it is left exposed and not covered with a sari. He obliquely refers to her breasts by saying how many litres of milk one could extract from such a large woman? Someone from the audience fills in the gap by saying, "look, look at her breasts, you probably forgot to do so," and the rest of the audience falls into a loud laughter. It brings humans and gods together even though momentarily.

The characters' references to caste jokes obviously include jokes to appeal to the groundlings almost bordering on the vulgar and the obscene. They call out to each other using expletives in Telugu language like *nee yakkaa* or *lanja koduka* or even referring to each other as *emi oy*. While referring to women, the only woman comic characters is Bangarakka, they call her *donga munda*. Their language is the language of the puppeteers. The puppeteers are "lower" caste peasants.

Therefore, the language used for comic characters is not high and elevated like the other characters Rama and Sita or even for Ravana though he is the anti-hero of the episode. For the conversation of the classical characters poetry or singing is employed. The comic puppets make the spectators indulgent. As a result, the audience feel connected to the characters represented by the puppets and start a dialogic conversation as a counter to the bawdy humour that the puppets share on screen amongst themselves as well as with the audience. It breaks the barriers between the high and the low, performer and the audience. The performance is done in an open environment. Therefore, the audience feel free to exchange a couple of vulgar jokes with the comic characters for whom the voices are lent by the puppeteers and therefore the jokes exchanged are between two peasants through the medium of the puppets. This environment not only democratises art but also liberates the human spirit from the confines of the narrow and the accepted norms of morality, decency and decorum.

C. Various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons

The comic characters' references to caste and jokes obviously include jokes to appeal to the groundlings almost bordering on the vulgar and the obscene. Words like *nee yakkaa* or *lanja koduka*. Their language is the language of the puppeteers. They don't speak in high and elevated language like the epic characters of Rama and Sita or even like Ravana though he is the anti-hero of the episode. What may be repulsive to the elite is accepted without any bitterness by these audiences as that is everyday affair in the village. Bakhtin comments that folk humour indeed demands from the spectator a complete shift in the aesthetic values to understand it:

To be understood he requires an essential reconstruction of our entire artistic, ideological perception, the renunciation of many deeply rooted demands of literary taste, and the revision of many concepts. Above all he requires an exploration in depth of a sphere as yet little and superficially studied, the tradition of folk humour. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 4)

Folk humour borders on the margins of what is accepted and what is prohibited in the realm of sensibilities.

Conclusion

The comic relief stands as a bridge between the past and the present. The way people spoke and lived for a thousand years and what is going to come. The environment of the carnival erases the distinction between the audience and the artists in this case the images. Hence, hierarchy is abandoned in favour of camaraderie and natural humour. The comic characters make the spectators indulgent. They feel connected to the characters represented by the puppets and start a dialogic conversation as a counter to the bawdy humour that the puppets share on screen. It breaks the barriers between the high and the low, performer and the audience. The performance is done in an open environment. There are no designated seats for the audience. They are seated on all three sides around the screen, in open spaces in front of the performance. Therefore, the audience feel free to exchange a couple vulgar jokes with the characters. The official hierarchies of caste, gender, profession and age are erased in the audience. "It was a consecration of inequality." (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10)

Such performance reinvoles the freedom of the carnival spirit. The two categories of the rank and file merged during the carnival atmosphere even though temporarily, which is otherwise missing in everyday life. Rank is evident during the classical and the official feasts or traditions. These comic characters are from the

fringes of society. They are not the traditional householders, but they are part of a larger village world. Bangarakka is not a woman with children but is considered somebody of loose character who can be taken for a ride occasionally. That's why men like Thippadu and others freely exchange vulgar and suggestive jokes with her. They are people of/from the lower rungs of society. These comedians make the main character of the epic human and bring them closer to the nativity of village or region.

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