

# Lunacy and the Shadow Puppetry Tradition in Orissa

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In the age of direct-to-home entertainment that offers viewers the choice of watching nail-biting finishes in the Indian Premier League beamed from South Africa; the unbelievable talents of towering champs in the National Basketball Association matches televised from North America; world cinema thrillers, that can satiate the needs of viewers for action-adventure-romance-comedy-suspense; 24 x 7 reportage of the latest-latest by teams of breaking news, the efforts of Gourang Charan Das in an obscure village in eastern India, is likely to be regarded as definite manifestations of lunacy.

What Gouranga Das, whose doctoral thesis on traditional puppetry goes far beyond the dictates of academic interest, is attempting to do is to resuscitate a tradition gasping for breath. A tradition has value only when it is living. Bereft of breath it rots and begins to resemble a corpse. A few years ago, Ramani, a young film-maker travelled through several parts of India, documenting the slow demise of communities that had once entertained large numbers of people with puppets of various kinds - glove puppets, stick and rod puppets, string puppets, shadow puppets.

Like many of the traditional arts, puppetry is a community endeavour. It calls for the talents of musicians who can sing, play the harmonium, tabla or dholaks, cymbals, the tambourine; it calls for the talents of visual artists who can shape leather and carve wood in an amazing variety of ways to create a stunning range of puppets; it calls for the talents of puppeteers adept at manipulating these puppets; it calls for the talents of writers and directors who can dramatize a script.

Sitting under the banyan tree, in a patch of land that goes by the name of Anant Ashram, Gourang Das attempts to breathe life into this corpse-like tradition - an act that points to a madness of sorts. Shadow puppetry in Orissa, is called as Ravanchhaya (the shadow of Ravana). Symbolically this nomenclature is suggestive of the power of the arts in dispelling the shadows of Ravan (ignorance). Drawn to this ancient art by his wife, Sabitri Devi who spent much time in the Ashram that the two of them started at Khamar, Das had to overcome resistance from puppeters who saw him as a threat. Soon, they could see that he meant well for he spoke of collaboration and not just competition. He told them the truth - that unless they organised themselves there was little chance of the traditional arts in their villages, surviving the onslaught of the global-village. As a stark testimony, satellite dishes that appeared outside some of the huts and houses in and around Khamar, spoke of the presence of the invisible enemy that was omnipresent.

Colonisation as a physical phenomena belonged to the age of modernity. In the post-modern era, colonisation was virtual. No longer did the colonisers belong to any single powerful nation - that was the old version. In the new version, multi-nationals made it difficult to distinguish between friend and foe. The colonisation was not just outward and economic; instead it had turned within, and seized on the domain of the mind. The post-modern people exhibited behaviour that may be described as virtual; that is to say, they lived almost entirely within the mind - their outlooks, emotions and attitudes could be altered by the passage of media and electrons, cabled through networks and computer disks.

In a festival of shadow puppetry, spread over three days in the sweltering heat of May, Gourang Das sits amidst a community of puppeteers under a glorious banyan tree. Together they analyse the shortcomings of the performances in the previous night. Some writer friends who are attending the session, point out that the tales told by the puppeteers have nothing new to offer audiences that are far more sophisticated. The gyrations and the antics of the puppets often imitate crude television shows and it is clear that the puppeteers have done little to examine their own failings. The puppeteers protest, saying that the state has done little to help. Gourang cites the puppeteers of neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, where the State has extend help, once the community was willing to organize itself better. The debate goes on for several hours and somewhat tired, there is a suggestion for music.

Each of the puppetry-groups that have gathered at Anant Ashram, Khamar, have a musician. Most of them are old though some are young and some very young. As they take their turns under the graceful banyan, the love for music is evident. As the fingers of the singer dance across the harmonium, a tambourine appears out of nowhere. Then comes a gini (tiny cymbals). The grand daughter of one of the musicians sits next to this motley bunch, listening in rapt attention and keeping tune with the dholak. These simple folk, who have so little and for whom living has often been from hand to mouth, when they sit and sing, it is almost like there exists little else beside their music. Seated behind them, in a row of ugly plastic chairs that are perhaps one of the lasting contributions of the post-modern age, are a medley of puppets. To the left is ten-armed Durga, followed by a tribal-looking fellow and felli; then there are some commoners and at the extreme right is a king. Blue-faced, silent, watching with some consternation at the group assembled under a benevolent banyan in Anant ashram on a summer day.