

## A Shadow Story: In the Village Where Puppets Come Alive

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*Narration by Srijani*

I didn't expect a puppet show to stay with me this long.

A visit was organised to learn about a community that specialised in making leather puppets. It was just after sunset in Nimmalakunta. The village felt unusually quiet — like it was waiting for something. Mats were being unrolled under the open sky. A white canvas tied to bamboo poles at two ends was put up for screening backdrops. You could smell the camphor, the dust, the faint trace of chai and filter coffee in the air. Somewhere behind the screen, the muddalam gave a slow, steady beat and the sound of the harmonium followed. And then — the puppets began to move. Leather figures, lit from behind, came alive through the shadows, telling stories from the epic Ramayana. I had heard stories of such puppets in my school days but as the puppets' movement unfolded, I realized I had never envisioned an experience so unique and captivating. It was truly ecstatic. The synchronised dancing of puppets along with the rhythm of the musical instruments was extremely captivating. The whole atmosphere reverberated with joy as the storyline was narrated musically. The puppet dolls sang, complained, fought and were in continuous dialogue with each other narrating frame to frame tales.



- ≈ The most important part of puppet show being staged in front of us, that night was the cut out of the leather puppets to different characters, bedecked with beautiful colours which shimmered through tiny hand-punched holes. The scene felt so realistic, it formed an emotional connection with all the characters
- ≈ I found myself wondering who they were performing for that night?
- ≈ What was so motivational that they continued this narrative for years in this backdrop of the village?
- ≈ Who sat here before us, under this night sky, listening to the same story day after day, unfolded in a completely different time?

*Keen and restless to know the answers, I set out looking for the real people behind the puppets, the next day.*

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### **Tholu Bommalata – A living tradition of Storytelling in India**

Nimmalakunta is a small village in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, known for 'Tholu Bommalata'— a traditional form of leather shadow puppetry that has existed for centuries telling mythical stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata. The name itself translates to "dance (attam) of the leather (tholu) puppets (bommalu)."The stories, songs and craft go hand in hand and so it is a combination of both performing and visual arts.

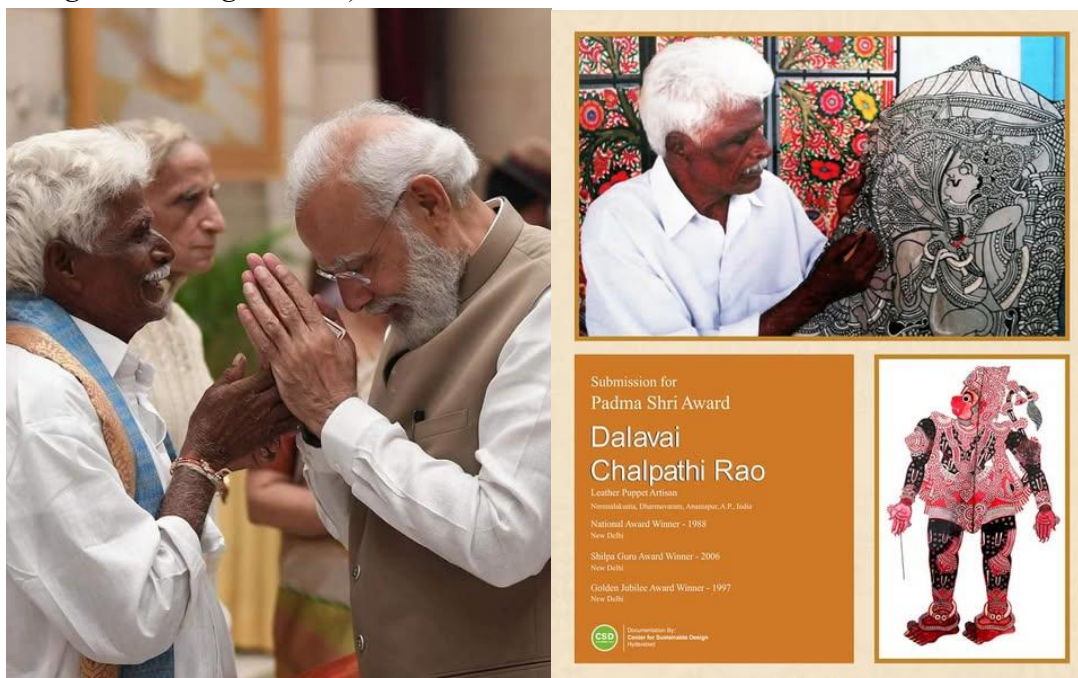
There are several stories about the origin of this craft though origins of the craft are murky — some link it to the age-old tradition of Chhaya Nataka (shadow drama), others trace it back to the Satavahana dynasty (around 200 BC). The 13th-century Telugu text *Panditaradhya Charitra* also refers to it.

Tholu Bommalata flourished under the patronage of dynasties like the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and later, the Vijayanagara Empire under Krishnadevaraya in the 16th century. Krishnadevaraya patronised the form as '*Thogulu Gombeyataa*'. It was a medium to educate people on religious myths and practised by migrant workers from Maharashtra. Practised by the Aare Kapu community, the art migrated to the southern part of India. from Maharashtra as they received patronage from the rulers. This community gradually settled across Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu.

In Andhra, it is performed in Telugu, bringing the epics — especially the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* — to life through the style of Harikatha. Shows often last through the night. On occasions like Shivaratri, Ram Navami, and other seasonal festivals.

We heard stories about how the puppets were once believed to bless villages. While having lunch at Dalavai Chalapathi Rao's home — a humble abode surrounded by mango trees — he told us how, during the drought of 1959–60, local officials requested a shadow puppetry performance. Soon after, it rained. The villagers believed the puppets had summoned the clouds and even if it was coincidence, something about that story felt real.

(Chalapathi Rao, now in his late 70s, received the Padma Shri in 2020 for his work in preserving this endangered art.)



### **Tools and Materials**

Traditionally, puppets were made from deer (divine), buffalo (demonic), and goat leather — used appropriately to depict particular emotions believed to be predominant in every

character. Nowadays the scenario has changed. the artisans mostly rely on female goat hide for its fine texture, sourced from local weekly markets.

### **Basic Toolkit**

- Pencil/charcoal for sketching
- Lekhini (bamboo pen) for inking outlines
- Paintbrushes, synthetic inks (like Camlin)
- Chisels (Cheernam), hammers (Sutti) for perforation
- Needles, scissors, flexigum, and leather strips for assembly

Earlier, natural dyes made from soot, flower extracts, and neem resin were used. These vibrant, long-lasting colours have now largely been replaced by synthetic inks for convenience and consistency.

### **Leather Cleaning Process**

1. Soaking the hide to clean and soften
2. Boiling the leather pieces to lean the hair from the skin
3. Scraping with knives
4. Rinsing and brushing for a smooth finish
5. Stretching on a frame to dry and tighten (1–3 days)

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### **The Puppet-Making Process**



1. **Scoring** – The dried leather is hand-roughened for better ink absorption

2. **Sketching** – Figures drawn freehand on both sides (*this is important as figures to be drawn on both sides require deep perception*) – Sometimes they are made on paper and then cut out on leather to avoid any wastage of leather.
3. **Inking** – Outlines traced with a Lekhini in black ink
4. **Piercing** – Needles are used for perforation in the whole leather puppet which enables passing of the light
5. **Cutting & Perforating** – Chisels add tiny patterns (stars, teardrops) to clothes and jewellery for a design.
6. **Colouring** – Inks are diluted and painted on both sides for dynamic flips during shows
7. **Assembly** – Limbs, torso, and head are joined with leather strips at joints
8. **Rod Attachment** – Bamboo rods fixed to control arms and body, with legs left to sway freely

Each puppet takes days to be made. Artisans work with incredible focus — because every curve, hole, and colour adds to how the puppet will glow and move on stage.

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### **Form and Aesthetics**

Tholu Bommalata puppets are large and majestic — some reaching 6 feet. Characters like Hanuman have versions in various poses (flying, standing, climbing), allowing seamless storytelling. Rama and Sita are depicted in different phases: royal with ornaments, or ascetic in exile. Ravana is always full-frontal and imposing.

Animals, trees, even entire battle scenes are sometimes rendered in single unjointed puppets. Traditionally, they were shown in profile with exaggerated eyes and features. Over time, proportions have become more realistic without losing their charm.

### **Colour Symbolism**



- Rama: blue
- Lakshmana: red-yellow
- Sita: copper-brown, orange

- Hanuman: green, turquoise
- Ravana: dark tones with gold accents

Originally painted with natural dyes, the colours were chosen to glow under oil lamps. Now, synthetic inks offer more variety — rani pinks, purples, bold oranges — but artisans still honour age-old iconography from the epics.

**Inspiration and adaptation from different designs** Much of the design comes from the 16th-century Lepakshi Temple. Floral borders, divine motifs, ornaments — all echo its carvings. There have been impact in the drawings and design with each passing era. Turkish influences entered during the Bahmani Sultanate era (long beards, rich robes), while British-era puppets sometimes had pocket watches or police badges.

Today, the same artistry has also found its presence in lamps, wall clocks, and keychains. Kalamkari motifs like elephants, peacocks, and fish are also found in the designs.

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### **Backstage: Setting the Stage**



A few hours before the showtime, the troupe begins to assemble. A metal or bamboo frame is erected. A white cloth — sometimes a sari — is stretched across it, about 1.5 metres above the ground. Lights are tested, instruments tuned, puppets laid out.

The screen, often 3–6 metres wide, is backlit. Traditionally, this was done with rows of castor oil lamps. Today, electric bulbs are used, though their harsher light means colours on puppets are adjusted to avoid overpowering glow.

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### **Music: The Pulse of the Performance**

Music breathes life into the shadows. *All the was as can be experienced though the composition in varied swar a and lay a patterns.* The overpowering Music bridges language barriers. Performed live, it blends classical ragas and folk rhythms.

#### **Instruments include:**

- Muddalam and mridangam (percussion)

- Cymbals (for rhythm)
- Harmonium (melody)
- Mukhaveena (reed pipe) for melody
- Shankha (conch) for announcements, to seek attention and sometimes to showcase change of scenes.

Musicians — often younger troupe members — sit behind the puppeteers. Gulusu (anklets) are worn by puppeteers, their tapping creating a continuous rhythm. Musical cues accompany the entry of each puppet. There are solo vocals, character songs, and rich choir for storytelling.

Puppeteers modulate voices of different characters — While Rama has a calm and gentle voice, Ravana has an authoritative and loud voice. Sita naturally has a soft and melodic voice. Comic characters have a high-pitched, mischievous tone. Comic relief comes from jesters like Bangarakka or Ketigadu, who break the fourth wall with local jokes and observations. Their humour, once bawdy, has mellowed over time but still connects the crowd to the action.

### **The Main Performance**

The show begins. Puppets enter from designated directions — gods from the right, demons from above. Lighting and sound amplify every moment. Puppeteers control them using rods, manipulating up to 13 joints. Movements are sharp or fluid depending on the scene — walking, flying, dancing, even fighting.

Epic scenes like *Sundara Kanda*, *Keechaka Vadha*, and *Rama-Ravana Yuddham* are crowd favourites. The shows are staged overnight, but sometimes they last for 1–2 hours. The puppeteers informed that sometimes there are so puppetry to stage the whole story.

### **& After the Shadows Fade**

The last thing I remember from that night was the silence after the performance ended. It was not empty silence a mind enriched with but fulfilment and static with the magical experience. but the full kind — it was so realistic with the lingering presence of gods and demons who had just walked among us through shadow and light.

In a world that often feels fragmented and out of one's control, there's something radical about slowing down enough to watch shadows dance. There is a mysticism and delight about trusting that our traditional epics still have a great impact on our thought processes about believing that gathering together to share tales is still, somehow, sacred.

The artisans of Nimmalakunta understand They're not just keeping a craft alive — they're keeping alive a way of being human that we risk losing.

*Narration by Srijani*

### **Design – a non verbal communication: Bridging the Ancient and the contemporary Art**

For us, as communication design students, the visit sparked ideas on how design can preserve, reinterpret, and share cultural heritage. Whether through visual narratives, digital experiences, or modern brand storytelling, the essence lies in creating work that connects people — just as these leather puppets have done for generations. We identified several design opportunities to amplify Tholu Bommalata's outreach while treating its cultural

integrity with reverence. We created business cards and collaterals for artisans, featuring perforation-inspired patterns with bilingual contact details. It helped the visitors to navigate the narrow lanes of the village to locate artisan workshops. Our marketing materials included collectible performance tickets, bus stop advertisements for urban audiences, event posters, and informational brochures. We explored packaging design solutions for contemporary products lamps, puppets, jewellery that communicated the heritage value of each piece. These design interventions demonstrated how thoughtful marketing can create sustainable income streams for traditional artisans. The goal wasn't to change Tholu Bommalata, but to create a positive pathway for people to discover, appreciate, and support this incredible art form.

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