

Burrakatha – Telugu ART of ORAL Storytelling

Bindu Bhargavi Chandana*

Abstract

Indigenous people have developed an immeasurable treasure of traditional knowledge systems over some time. These knowledge systems are Intangible cultural heritage in the communities, are recreated continuously, and pass on from one generation to another. Preservation of this helps in the self-identification of communities and can ensure the continued existence of indigenous people. The study focuses on safeguarding the tradition of Burrakatha, the art of oral storytelling performed in the villages of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. People believe that the art played such an essential role in awakening the individuals that the British explicitly banned its performances in the Madras Presidency and the Nizam of Hyderabad prohibited it in his domain. Nowadays, very few perform this art form and an endangered traditional art aimed at the preservation, essential to save a living tradition. The study's objectives are - 1. Tracing the origins of the art form and elements associated with it, 2. Understanding the Threats and Challenges facing the community, 3. Provide recommendations for preserving this tradition's uniqueness. The expected conclusion of the study is to develop strategies to safeguard the traditional art form of Burrakatha.

Keywords: Intangible, Cultural Heritage, Oral storytelling, Folk-art form, Traditional Knowledge system

INTRODUCTION

Burrakathalu, the traditional art of storytelling thrived in India throughout the centuries, in the current scenario; it is a component of the Indian Cultural Heritage. This art form was patronized by different rulers throughout history. Burrakatha was used as a weapon for public enlightenment. It contains Navarasa Navarasa (In the scriptures refer to the nine expressions that humans often show) [1]. This art form is also known as the Musical folk art form of the Telugu nation.

It has different names, such as (Figures 1 and 2) Burrakatha, Tamburakatha, Tandanakatha, Gummetlakatha, and Jangamkatha with many regional variations. In Krishna and Guntur districts, most people do not know about Jangamkatha, in this region, it is called 'Burrakatha'. In Rayalaseema districts, no one knows what Burrakatha means [2]. There it is called 'Tandanakatha. In Telangana, it is called 'Tamburakatha', and in some parts of coastal Andhra, it is called 'Gummetlakatha'. The difference between Telangana, Andhra, and Rayalaseema is the dialect and the instrument they use. In Telangana, the tambura they use is known as 'Budige tambura' whereas in Andhra and Rayalaseema, 'Padige tambura' with a hood is used. Telangana magsman considers the tambura as the goddess Sarada, so they are called Saradagallu. They perform while sitting, in Andhra while standing. In Rayalaseema, the narrator holds a stick, and his sidekicks play tambura and drums.

*Author for Correspondence

Bindu Bhargavi Chandana
E-mail: bindubhargavi.arch@jnafau.ac.in

Conservation Architect, Department of Architecture,
Jawaharlal Nehru Architecture and Finearts University

Received Date: March 21, 2023

Accepted Date: April 04, 2023

Published Date: April 06, 2023

Citation: Bindu Bhargavi Chandana. Burrakatha – Telugu ART of ORAL Storytelling. International Journal of Architectural Heritage. 2023; 6(1): 30–38p.

This art form was spread around Andhra region when Chalukyas from the west shifted to the east during the 10th century [3]. It was introduced in the Telangana area during the Telangana People's Movement in 1946-1951. It was one of the most

influential and revolutionary struggles in the history of modern India.



Figure 1. Women' s' performing the art of 'Tamburakatha' in the Gouthapur area in the Telangana region. Instruments used are Diki and Budige tambura.



Figure 2. 'Burrakatha' in Andhra Pradesh. Instruments used are Gummeta and Pedige tambura with hood.

Initially Burrakatha started as devotional songs of nomadic people who are worshippers of Lord Shiva, over a period of time it became their occupation . During the conflict between the Saiva and Vaishnava religions, their stories used to propagate Saiva religion full of heroism. Jangam caste performs Burrakathalu which is the reason stories are also known as “Jangamkathalu”, over some time the name has changed to ‘Burrakathalu’ [4]. During the conflict between the Saiva and Vaishnava religions, they worship Lord Shiva, and their stories are used to propagate the Saiva religion full of heroism. Stories fall into three categories – Mythological, Historical, and Sociopolitical. Historical stories such as the Battle of Bobbili, the history of Palnati, and Balanagamma. Mythological Stories of Indian Ramayana such as Uttara Gograhanam, and Vamana Vijayam. Sociopolitical, the country’s leaders’ patriotic lives such as “Gandhi’s life, Alluru Sitaramaraj, Subhash Chandra Bose” and the patriots’ life stories, the hardships of life, and the success of the peasantry were preferred to perform [5]. These stories are told at idle times and during

festivals in the villages. Originally one man and his two wives performed, but three women groups came into the picture over some time. It was used as a reflection of evangelism and patriotism. This art played a vital role in conveying a sense of awakening among the people.

Other Similar Forms

Thirumala Ramachandragaru in the magazine 'Jayanti' has written that "Burrakatha is the musical art form of Telugu and there is no comparison between the Telugu-Burrakatha, the Maharashtra-Pavada and the Kannada-Lavani, except all are folk art forms." 'Pavada' is chanted and sung while standing. Heroism takes precedence in this story [6]. The sidekicks sing the verses of "Didi Didi". Kannada's 'Lavani' has been in circulation since the 17th century. In the 17th century, King Nandivarma exemplified this in his "Chandograntha". Lavani depicts the stories of rural life in different ways. These three are different in their ways.

METHODOLOGY

In order to address the research objectives, a descriptive procedure with a qualitative approach is chosen. Human beings function as a medium for research. The research consists of four stages. Literature studies are carried out in the first phase, and data on the origin and the elements associated with it is obtained from secondary sources [7]. The second stage is the site visit phase-in which Burrakatha, its procedure and threats were interviewed by artisans. Based on the interviews, the third stage is the findings and the stage of review to achieve the objectives. In order to preserve the uniqueness of this art form, the fourth stage is formulating strategies.

Origins (Kulapuranam)

"Jangam tribe people went to the forest to hunt rats. Lord Parameswara and his consort Parvati saw them. She felt sorry for their low quality of life, and requested the Lord to give them a better life [8]. Lord decided to test these men, so he became an older man, and his consort became a beautiful young woman. They both went to the men and suggested a better way of life, but the men pushed away from the older man (Lord) aside and tried to misbehave with the girl (Parvati).

The goddess became angry and cursed them to become beggars and nomads. From that time this tribe people are called the Jangam tribe" [9]. The traditional performers believed that they are the descendants of Valmiki, one who wrote Ramayana, and trained Lava and Kusha in this art of ballad recitation. The Basava of Karnataka influenced this tribe to adopt Veerashaivism. For their livelihood, they continued to beg and started Burrakathalu.

Process

The narrator begins the story by offering prayers to celestial beings. He introduces the story to the audience by establishing the setting, time period, and historical background of the action. After the Purvaranga (means introduction), the narrator develops the story through interwoven songs and speeches. Sidekicks carry two Gumeethalu and say, "Taka takki, talatakka" and "tadhiginatom" in the middle of the story [10]. According to the rhythm of the narrator, the verses play rhythmically. When the narrator narrates the story, the sidekick (Hasyam, a comedian) humorously interrogates the audience, captivating the audience with his gentle humour and driving the story forward. The humour makes the audience want to listen to the story. While the narrator is singing the story, the narrator holds a beautiful handkerchief in his hand, plays the tambura with his second hand, and swings his arms and legs. Generally, [11] the act continues for two to three hours. Suppose the act is too long then it is serialized into several consecutive shows. In the end, the narrator says the moral of the story and concludes with a prayer.

People associated with Burrakatha

Famous artists in the field were Denuvukonda Venkayamatyudu, Pendyala Venkateswarrao, Paruchuri Ramakotayya, Siriviseti Subbarao, Kosuri Punnayya, Govardhana, Kakumanu Subbarao, Davuluru, Chintalal Suryanarayana and so on [12]. Women also formed groups; for example, Moturi

Udayam, Chintala Koteswaramma, and Mahankali Lakshmi narrated Balanagama tales. In the 1940s, Praja Natya Mandali (Andhra Pradesh's version of the Indian People's Theatre Association) altered the art form. Art evolved into a medium for expressing political and social ideologies. Shaik Nazar brought Burrakatha to the stage, and he penned narratives on diverse topics, including the Bengal famine, Palnati Yuddham, and Bobbili Yuddham, among others. He received the Padma Shri award for his contributions. He is popularly known as "Father of Burrakatha."

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This art form was spread around the Andhra region when Chalukyas from the west shifted to the east during the 10th century [13]. It was introduced in the Telangana area during the Telangana People's Movement in 1946-1951. It was one of the most influential and revolutionary struggles in the history of modern India.

For the documentation of the art form "Appannapalem," a village in the district of Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh is selected. It is 55 kilometres from the district headquarters. The village's total geographical area is 148 hectares. Appannapalem has a population of 134 individuals. There are approximately 43 homes in Appannapalem [14].

Three families in the village are associated with the Burrakatha. (Figures 3 and 4) Due to constraints, one family with six people and the family's primary occupation is this art form is chosen. A. Babu Rao is the head of the family, who is around 60 years old and belongs to the Jangam clan. This art form has been passed to him by his father, and he has passed it to his children. Stories for the act are mainly Mythological and Historical stories [15]. They perform during the festivals, especially Dusserrah and Sankranthi and in the flea fairs which happen two times a year at the time of harvest.



Figure 3. India map highlighted the state of Andhra Pradesh.



Figure 4. Map of Andhra Pradesh highlighted the village of Appannapalem.

1. *Characteristics of the People:* They may not have access to formal education and are not aware of the knowledge they possess. Generally, the knowledge system is known to their families and remains solely within them. It is transmitted through generations and continuously recreated by communities.
2. *Characteristics of the Burrakatha:* Usually, (Figure 8) three people from the same family of a particular caste known as ‘Jangalu’ in Andhra Pradesh and ‘Saradakandru’ in Telangana perform this. Originally one man and his two wives performed, but three women groups came into the picture over some time. It was used as a reflection of evangelism and patriotism [16]. This art played a vital role in conveying a sense of awakening among the people.
3. *Associated Tangible and Intangible Elements:* It is performed in the Andhra costume with a plumed turban, a long flowing top with a tight waist and a loose bottom and anklet bells (Gajalu) to the legs. The Kathakudu (one who narrates the story) holds an instrument named ‘Tambura’, (Figure 7) wears a pair of metal rings on his hand fingers known as (Figure 6) ‘Andellu’ [17]. There are different ways to play andellu; the standard method is to place one ring of the andellu over the left hand’s thumb while another ring is on other fingers. They are then struck together to get rhythmic sounds. Another technique is to slip both over the thumb and strike them with fingers. Kathakudu stands in the middle and sings so dramatically. Whenever he sings a song he starts with the phrase “Vinara Veera kumara Veera gadha vinara”. One or two of his companions assist him throughout the play, playing the drums named ‘Gummeta’ (Figure 5) and encouraging him by saying the phrases “Tandana tane Tandana na”. So, it is known as “Tandanakatha”. Gummeta, also known as Diki, Daki and Budugey is hung around the neck, typically struck with the right hand while the left alternatively closes and opens the opening at the small side [18]. The sidekick on the right side of Kathakudu is called ‘Rajkiya’ (means political) and explains the song to the audience. He comments on contemporary political and social issues even if the story is about mythology. The third companion is known as ‘Hasyam’ (means humour) acts like a comedian cracking jokes and provides comic relief. They dance while narrating the story in rhythmic movements.



Figure 5. Gummata.



Figure 6. Andellu.



Figure 7. Tambura.



Figure 8. Attire of the Burrakatha Performers.

THREATS AND CHALLENGES

With the increasing urbanization, culture and tradition are disintegrating. Boosting the cost of living and desire for a comfortable life brings the rural population to the towns. Artists from villages migrate to cities because of the lack of recognition of the art form and searching for high-paying jobs. Nobody is left to practice the art form back in the village. Traditional art forms are not being practiced as a full-time profession as these art forms are not fulfilling their aspirations of life [19]. Communities who still practice the art form it is a part-time job. Although there are several efforts made, communities are slowly moving away from these art forms. There is no proper promotion and availability of resources for the art form, attracting young generations to learn more about it. Very few are interested in watching the art form nowadays, having less support from the people with the growing modern forms. Few artists are willing to share their knowledge, which leads to exploitation and given rise to concern, although the original artists have not acquired any benefit, the exploiters have benefited from the knowledge. The art forms are not only a reflection of the culture; they are the indigenous skill transmitted through generations. With the loss of the art form and artist, the fundamental knowledge has vanished. Hence they are needed to be conserved.

STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS

1. Micro-Level

The folk artists are mainly from rural communities. So, interventions at the community level are needed to preserve, promote, and disseminate the art form. It can be done as community organizations in the private domain and through local Panchayats in the public domain.

A. Community-based Organizations

Community-based organizations are more powerful in providing community-based development.

The establishment of these organisations is essential for improving the socioeconomic standing of the community. If they are already present, it is necessary to educate them on the significance of the

art form. Formation of the Self-help group within the community to help the artists is needed. Organizations provide a platform where the members of the Self-help group can perform. Capacity building programs for the self-help groups, in which past and the present performers of art form impart training to the members interested in performing in the future. Concurrently, the young generation will make the current performers understand the socio-cultural trend of modern society, which will help the past performers to amalgamate their art form to stand up with the expectations of the modern generation. Meticulous documentation of the entire process should be done and preserved in the resource centre for future usage.

B. Local Panchayats

The Local Panchayats should organize cultural festivals and competitions, to provide a platform for the artists to showcase their form in the presence of a large audience. Helps in increasing the demand for the form. Government schemes and subsidies to the artisans have to be allotted.

2. Macro-Level

A. Media

The press should be encouraged to cover the topics on the art form emphasizing its significance. It has to be published so that the ordinary people are aware of the situation, [20] to make public opinion in favour of the conservation and promotion of our indigenous cultural heritage. Other media should provide a platform for the artists to showcase their talent in front of the national and international audience, grab the attention and subsequently draw towards the art form.

B. Resource Center

Resource centers for different communities have to be set up to study literature and preserve the documents related in their languages.

C. Bilateral Agencies

The bilateral agencies should encourage artists to participate in cultural festivals around the world, allowing them to showcase their skills to a diverse population.

Recommendations

Traditional art forms need to be conserved traditionally; the Indian government has started giving GI tagging to traditional forms that enhance their value. It has to be linked with granting copyrights to a particular geographical area to prevent intellectual property theft. Rural development has to promote these forms in an area-based approach and provide a better income for an artist, which prevents them from giving up their profession. Training has to be given to artists to compete with modern forms and allowance as a scheme under rural development planning for the economically weaker artisans section. The art form presentation should be modified, making them more vibrant so that it appeals to the present generation. Conservation of their core ideology is essential. Active publicity may attract a considerable population towards the art form.

CONCLUSION

Burrakatha and all other forms are significant for the development of society and culture. Mostly, the play's stories are preserved orally, which results in massive revisions over some time. This art form is suppressed under social and economic pressures. The protection of this art form is the ultimate necessity. Artisans should upgrade themselves with the current trends, which helps ensure the sustainability of the art form. We should not let our art forms perish.

REFERENCES

1. Manohar Laxman Varadpande (1992), History of Indian Theatre: Lokaranga Panorama of Indian folk Theatre Volume 2, Abhinav Publications.
2. Aruna Bommareddi (2019), Narrative Traditions of a Telugu Epic: Palnativirula Katha, Notion

- Press.
3. Dr.Mikilaneni Radhakrishnamurthy (1992), Telugu vari janapada kalarupalu, Telugu viswavidhayalam publications.
 4. Sreenivasarao Vepachedu (2002), Burrakatha, National institute of health, Researchgate.net/publication.
 5. Martin Banham (1995). The Cambridge Guide to Theatre. Cambridge University Press.
 6. UNESCO, Identifying and Inventorying Intangible Cultural Heritage.
 7. Srividhya Ragavan(2001), Protection of Traditional Knowledge, 2 MINN. INTELL. PROP. REV.1.
 8. Bruce M. Sullivan (2009), How Does One Study a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity"?Ethnographic Reflections on Kerala's "Kūṭiyāṭṭam",Method & Theory in the Study of Religion, Vol. 21, No. 1, Special Issue on Contemporary Ethnography and the Study of Religion ,pp. 78-86, Brill publications.
 9. Zhang Boyu, Yao Hui and Huib Schippers (2015), The Rise and Implementation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection for Music in China, The World of Music, new series, Vol. 4, No. 1, Sound Futures: Exploring Contexts for Music Sustainability, pp. 45 - 59, Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung publications.
 10. World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) (2017), Documenting Traditional Knowledge – A Toolkit. WIPO: Geneva.
 11. Guidance note for inventorying intangible cultural heritage (2017), Under the 2003 convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage.
 12. Katerina Teaiwa and Colin Mercer (2011), Pacific cultural mapping, planning and policy toolkit, Secretariat of the pacific community publications.
 13. Gramin Vikas Seva Sanshtha, Evaluation study of tribal/folk arts and Culture in West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Bihar.
 14. Rui Oliveria Lopes (2016), A new light on the shadows of heavenly bodies Indian shadow puppets: from still painting to motion pictures, Religion and the Art 20,pp 160 – 196, Brill publications.
 15. Casati Roberto (2004), “Methodological issues in the study of the depiction of cast shadows: a case study in the relationships between art and cognition”, Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism 62.2, pp 163-174.
 16. Finnegan Ruth (1977), Oral poetry, Cambridge University press.
 17. Modali Nagabhushana Sharma (1995), Folk performing arts of Andhra Pradesh, Telugu University, Hyderabad.G.S.Mohan (1979), Folk arts of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka (Bilingual district).
 18. B.Ramaraju (1997), Folklore of Andhra Pradesh, National Book Trust, India.
 19. Padmini Rangarajan(2012),Endangering orality in performing folk art forms, Oral and written forms: The Literary tradition in India.
 20. <https://villageinfo.in/andhra-pradesh/east-godavari/rajavommangi/appannapalem.html>