Puppetry in Sri Lanka

The puppetry is popular in Sri Lanka, as a kind of rural drama. This can be considered as an identical rural communication media which is salient in the traditional folk art heritage. The English word “puppet” is used as “Rukada” in Sinhala language. There are several definitions for the term Rukada or puppet. According to Sri Sumangala dictionary, Rukada means pictures of human beings and other similar things made from wood. The term “Ru” denotes a picture and the term “Kada” gives the meaning of half or Ardha. Then the meaning of “Rukada” can be considered as half of a picture. The rest is the contribution made by puppet artist.

History

The historical sources and some other literature witness that puppetry had been in the primary era of the country as a basic folk art. However, it is believed that this item of art became popular in the country 300 years ago. The subject specialists are of the view that the puppetry came to Sri Lanka with the influence of Indian art of puppet and it became so popular with the mix of tradition of Nadagam. There are some evidences for the influences on puppetry from the Asian countries such as China, Malaysia and Japan. It is also apparent that the European countries like German, Chekoslovenia and Russia made influences on puppetry in Sri Lanka. However, it is commonly believed that the puppetry has been existing in the country with the influence from South India, with unique features identical to the domestic society. The country is so famous for puppetry which exhibits puppets (or characters) that are very close to a person in standard size. At present, Ambalangoda and Balapitiya are the areas where the traditional puppetry has been specialized. Potti Sirina Gurunnanse who lived in Kanegoda is believed as the pioneer of traditional puppetry. The children and grand children of him are still engaged in puppetry in these areas. The relatives of these families are living in some other parts of the country (Colombo, Kandy and Gampaha) and they are also engaged in this traditional art, adhering to its’ traditional features and values.

With the influence of Asian and European countries and America, non – traditional puppetry has spread in the country since latter part of the 20th century. The academicians of the universities have also contributed to popularize the non – traditional puppetry throughout the country. Professor Jayadeva Thilakari of the University of Peradeniya is one of them. This has been popular in all parts of the country with the involvement of young groups who are applying new themes and directions. At present, the artists, engaged in puppetry belongs to two streams namely traditional and non – traditional schools.

Types of puppets and creations

There are several types of puppets in Sri Lanka. This classification is made in terms of the media and the nature of playing. Among the different types of puppets, Thread puppet (Nool rukada), Club puppet (Riti rukada), Shadow puppet (Sevaneli rukada), Hand puppet (Ath rukada) and Finger puppet (Angili rukada) are very famous. They can be classified as two – dimensional and three – dimensional in terms of their visual angle. The classification of puppet is mainly dependent on the versatility of the artist or player.

According to tradition, when creating wooden puppets, the tree of Kaduru or Rukattthana is used and the form of the puppet is created after making proper treatments for dried parts of the timber. In the creation of human characters, the standard size of the man is taken. In addition, the other two methods called “Prathima Ka la” and “Bali Kala” are also used in creating different types of characters in relation to puppets. When decorating the puppet characters, flexible points of organs are taken into consideration, and they are dressed properly and operated with the assistance of key boards connected with thread. The players/artists are to operate the puppets of different characters and other supportive services such as lighting the stage, making dialogue, supplying music and decorating the stage need to be undertaken in coherent manner.

Finally it can be concluded that the puppetry in Sri Lanka has been developed to the present status with the influence of South Indian, Asian and Western traditions while conserving the values and traditions which are identical to domestic culture. Therefore, it is very important to popularize the puppetry among new generations, since it is traditional form of folk art that can be appreciated by the people belong to any age category from child to adult.
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Last Updated on Thursday, 04 June 2015 06:00

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