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RUNAWAY PUPPETS

Boski Jain





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Not long ago,
there was singing, dancing and
storytelling. Artisans traveled
from village to village, breathing
life into wooden puppets,
setting the stage for a magical,
entertaining time.

But this became less and less
frequent and soon long gaps filled
the performances. Then one day it
came to a complete stop.



Lying un-stringed, un-hinged, the wooden protagonists of the grand show, waited to be called on for yet another performance. But when days became weeks and then years, they thought they were forgotten.



Nobody has time for us, we are not needed anymore here.

Yes.
We can't wait forever.



LET'S LEAVE!

And so they took it upon themselves to fulfill their purpose and set out to find their audience.



While leaving the village; they meet
a bonga—the spiritual being guarding
the village who listened to them and
then warned them...

Many before you, have
left, looking for another
life but have mostly been
disappointed.

Some puppets re-thought their decision and decided
to return, while the rest continued their journey.

Further ahead, they meet a traveler, who wrote for a living. He heard their story and their quest for a new audience

Can you help us?

yes. Tell me about the place that you come from and the people there. I will write about them. I will write about your travels. Let the world know what is happening to your village and you.



They went on and met...

A documentary filmmaker

I will record your story
and what you have to
say and preserve it for
posterity. The world
will never forget you.



An Activist

Travel and search is
aimless and in vain. Let's
start a campaign. Protest
is the only way for your
voices to be heard.



A museum curator

It's a dangerous world
outside. Come Stay in here.
It's safe. No one will touch
you or damage you and you
will be well taken care of.



Research students

Wonderful! Why don't you
perform for us and we
will find your historical,
sociological, anthropological
importance. And evaluate
the changes that are now
coming into your lives.

After meeting every one who had to say so much, they bumped into one who wasn't ready to listen.

Sorry. I'm getting late. I have to go to office. But I pay taxes to him. He is powerful. He'll take care of you. Go and talk to him.

And so they approach the four headed lion.

Yes, of course. We'll make you heritage objects. But for every change there's a time and process. But you need to wait patiently for your turn.



And every time, a few of them left
the group to join the stranger.

Now, tired and weary, the remaining
puppets sit down under a tree to talk
about what had happened so far and
what should be done next.

A lot of us have left this group.
Now what can so few of us do.
We should go back.

No, our owner does not have
time. He is too busy with his
new work.

Yes, there is little
hope for us there.

There is little hope
out here too.

WE SHALL CONTINUE!
WE SHALL GO BACK!

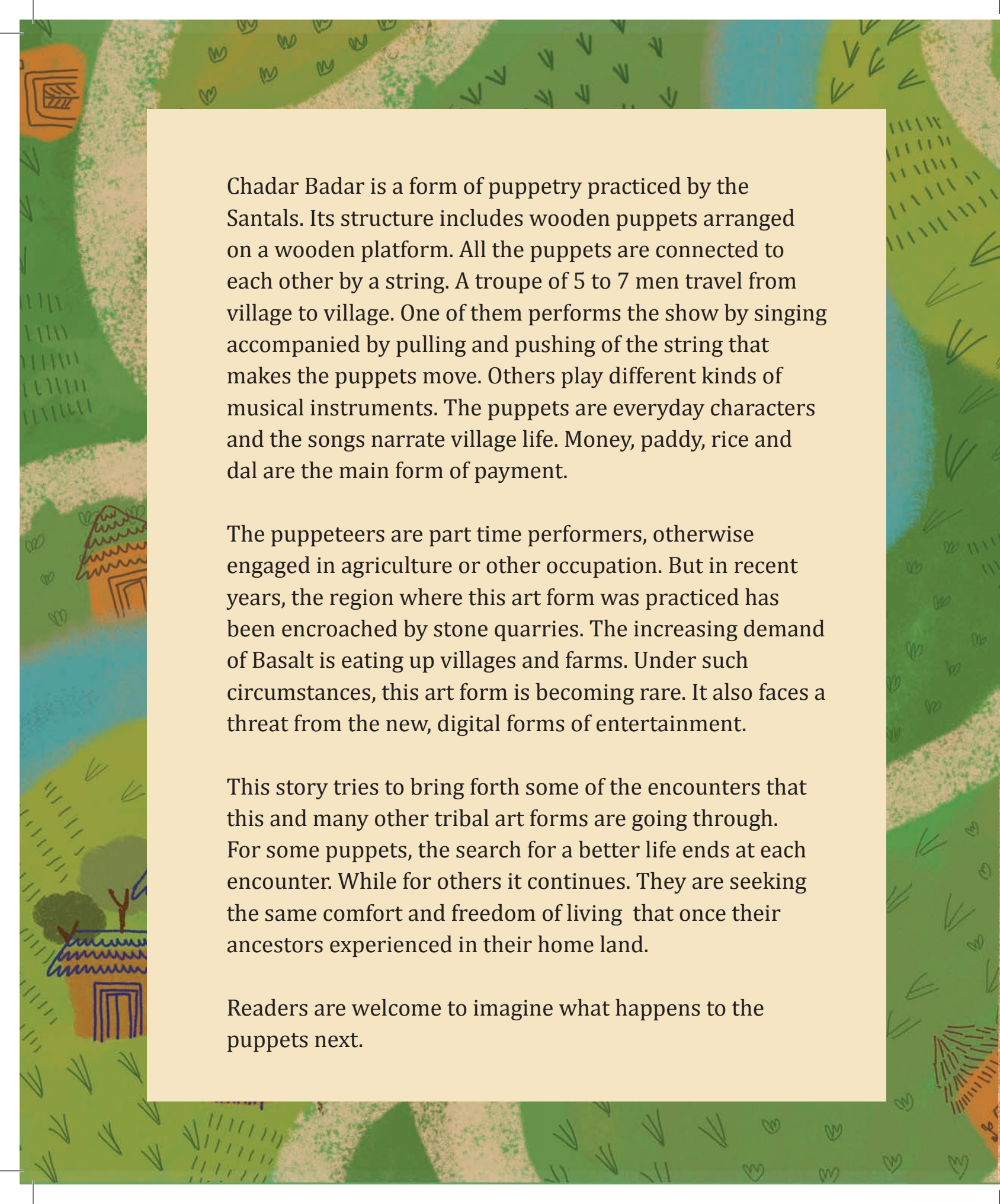


Hence from the group, half the
puppets came back home.
They waited for their next
performance to tell people what they
had experienced outside the village.



While the rest continued their journey. Yet to visit new places and meet new people.





Chadar Badar is a form of puppetry practiced by the Santals. Its structure includes wooden puppets arranged on a wooden platform. All the puppets are connected to each other by a string. A troupe of 5 to 7 men travel from village to village. One of them performs the show by singing accompanied by pulling and pushing of the string that makes the puppets move. Others play different kinds of musical instruments. The puppets are everyday characters and the songs narrate village life. Money, paddy, rice and dal are the main form of payment.

The puppeteers are part time performers, otherwise engaged in agriculture or other occupation. But in recent years, the region where this art form was practiced has been encroached by stone quarries. The increasing demand of Basalt is eating up villages and farms. Under such circumstances, this art form is becoming rare. It also faces a threat from the new, digital forms of entertainment.

This story tries to bring forth some of the encounters that this and many other tribal art forms are going through. For some puppets, the search for a better life ends at each encounter. While for others it continues. They are seeking the same comfort and freedom of living that once their ancestors experienced in their home land.

Readers are welcome to imagine what happens to the puppets next.



This book is the outcome of a student project about Chadar Badar done at IDC, IIT Bombay. November 2015.