

Design Resource

History of Puppetry in India

Theater Art

by

Rajiv Sarkar and Prof. Ravi Poovaiah

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://www.dsource.in/resource/history-puppetry-india>



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Introduction

Puppetry has been one of the most vibrant and long thriving theatrical forms in India. A puppet may be defined as any inanimate figure given life by the will and the spirit of man and this whole act is known as puppetry.

“As such, there are twin levels of performance where the puppeteer at first conceptualizes and internalizes the set of roles to be enacted and subsequently transfers them upon the “inanimate” puppets. Thereby, the audience is confronted with a dual presence – the “omnipresent” puppeteer/ master performer sharing the space with the “animated” puppets which play into the hands of the puppeteer. An important task of the puppeteer is to transform the puppet from being a mere “figure” towards embodying a distinct character.

For this, the puppeteer applies the various techniques of manipulation and the various types of puppet forms corresponding to the demands of the character”.

The word puppet comes from the French word ‘Poupee’ or the Latin ‘Pupa’, both meaning ‘dolls’. In Sanskrit, puppets are termed ‘Putrika’, Putraka’or ‘ Puttalika’, all of which are derived from the root Putta equivalent to Putra (son). It is derived from ancient Indian thoughts that puppets have life.

Telling a story is at the crux of this form of art and it is also a great way to entertain and engage the audience too. The storytelling concept is very much woven into this art form. Puppetry largely depends on the visuals and the acting through the voice of the puppeteer. Even when the language becomes a barrier the visual storytelling prevails and one could understand and extract some meaning through them.

The puppeteers in India extract their materials from their own tradition and also apply their own creativity in order to transform the appearance and functionality of the puppets. Creativity is highly needed in order to make the puppet come alive on stage. However, the tradition that the puppeteer is carrying and manipulates is also crucial. The kind of stories that are performed throughout India ranges from heroic tales of heroes and legends and reinvention of epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Origin of Puppetry

Every region and religion all over the world has its own origin stories of this art form but they all have something in common and that is they all originated from ancient times dating back to the caveman period. In India, it has been found that puppetry may even be a 4000 years old cultural art form.

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The origin of puppetry is still not very clear, Ancient Hindu philosophers have paid the greatest tribute to puppeteers. They have likened God Almighty to a puppeteer and the entire universe to a puppet stage. Srimad Bhagavata, the great epic depicting the story of Lord Krishna in his childhood says that with three strings-Satta, Raja and Tama, God manipulates each object in the universe as a marionette.

“Shadow puppetry is one of the oldest forms of puppetry, an ingenious technology of animating pictures, developed centuries before the advent of cinema, and dating back at least 3,000 years. In Asia, unlike Europe, puppet theatre is still largely a living folk tradition. Puppet performances in Asian villages are usually informal, though often lengthy open-air affairs (India, Indonesia, Japan). Marriages, as well as births and funerals, religious as well as national holidays, all, can become the occasion for a puppet performance. Frequently the performance takes place in a shrine or in the temple courtyard (India, Japan, Thailand). Puppet performance is thought by simple village folk to be “auspicious, effective in warding off evil spirits and epidemics, avoiding drought and bringing rain”.

Puppetry has been part of the sacred rituals which were performed to propitiate the gods and spirits. This tradition continues even to this day. It is believed that commissioning a puppet performance is equivalent to an act of divine service. The puppet plays are staged or commissioned to cure and eradicate diseases of men and animals, to ensure fertility of a woman as well as of the fields, to invoke the rain gods to procure rain, or to free a person from an evil spirit's possession. In Karnataka, the episode of ‘Virataparva’ from Mahabharata is performed through puppet plays to appease the rain god”.



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Mapping on a Timeline

2000 - 2500 B.C

“Despite its present-day variety and widespread use, we know little about the origin of the Asian puppet theatre and we can only speculate about the cultural and social circumstances that first occasioned it. Of this much we can be certain: As long as man exists, that long he has fashioned images of himself, be it for purposes of religious worship, that is, as idols, or be it as toys to amuse himself and his children. We have an archeological proof for a number of prehistoric civilizations of terracotta dolls and for some of them we have evidence of dolls with moveable limbs (“mechanical dolls”). For instance, a toy cow with a moveable head was found at the Harappa site of the ancient Indus valley civilization (2500 B.C.)”.

“Small ivory mechanical figurines, thought to be from about 2000 B.C. were found in an Egyptian tomb. Human and animal figures manipulated by strings (marionettes) were found in Thebes and Memphis. The famed monstrous gods of ancient Egypt were moved by concealed mechanisms. During the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2030–1650 BCE), evidence suggests that Egyptians crafted automatons made out of wood. Operated by strings, these puppet prototypes simulated everyday activities, like the act of preparing dough for bread”.



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100 - 1300 A.D

“Throughout India, Indonesia, and all of Southeast Asia the traditional repertory of the puppet theatre is still largely religious. It is based on Indian mythological tales and legends, principally, however, on the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. In Indonesia, and the peninsular countries of Southeast Asia, which all share a common stock of Proto-Malay myths and rituals (dating back to 2000 B.C.), folk theatre tied to animistic worship and community rites, such as the rice harvest festivals, did not simply disappear upon the arrival of more developed techniques and repertoires coming from India (from approximately 100 A.D.-1000 A.D.). But, rather, these new forms were altered and acculturated to the existing, indigenous ones. Development from the ritualistic-religious use of puppetry to the secular”.



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“The development in Asia (as elsewhere) has been from the ritualistic-religious use of puppetry to the secular. Various types of secular repertoires, such as royal genealogies, romances, the heroic epos, and the fairy tales have been added as have also technical improvement (e.g., the 15th century abstract and stylized shape of the Javanese wayang kulit or shadow puppets is due to Islamic influence). From approximately 1300 A.D. onward the Javanese wayang kulit cyclic puppet repertoire developed a number of subtypes with largely secularized repertoires and some of them with dolls. From among all of these only the wayang kulit (or wayang purwo) with its repertoire from Mahabharata and Ramayana remained popular throughout Southeast Asia. Wayang golek is popular in south-central Java, the others having largely remained court productions. Other forms have developed recently from the Wayang tradition, for instance, the wayang suluh of the guerillas or freedom fighters. Outside the Indonesian Wayang, tradition stands the 20th century imported Do-the-hi. Chinese-clad glove puppets perform from Chinese folktale repertoires for the Chinese Buddhist communities on Java”.

1900 - 1950

Whatever might be their political role in ancient times, it's now only in the last few decades that the puppet theatre has been mobilized systematically in the war of propaganda by several Asian governments.

“Puppets also played their part in the Indonesian independence struggle. They were not so used in India where the British colonial master allowed ample freedom of expression, unlike the Dutch rulers of Indonesia, who strictly controlled the radio, press, and cinema during the years of the Revolution from 1945 to 1949. While the Dutch controlled the cities, student-guerillas slipped out to the villages with short puppet plays about the exploits of their nationalist leaders and guerillas in the fight for independence. This new puppet theatre was known as the wayang suluh (the torch or information puppet theatre). The Dutch went out of their way to search and destroy several hundred of these puppets.

In addition to its efforts to preserve and improve existing forms of the puppet theatre, the Government of India and several of its state governments after the model of communist state use of the puppet theatre are producing and distributing plays and skits in order to promote village development schemes.” However, India being a free country, it is possible to mind her words of caution about the dangers inherent in government manipulation of folk art”.

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Types of Puppetry in India

- **Shadow Puppets** are flat and transparent leather or paper cut-outs, fastened to one supporting stick, and manipulated by at least two other thin sticks or rods. Shadow puppets are popular in South India, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and China. Perhaps one of the oldest forms of puppetry, shadow puppets are found in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Orissa and Tamil Nadu. Ravan Chhaya from Orissa and Tholpavai Koothu from Kerala are the two prominent shadow puppet theatre traditions of India.

- **String Puppets** or marionettes have spread throughout Asia (as also into Europe), presumably with nomadic gypsies whose ancestral home was in Northwest and North Central India. This puppet tradition is prevalent in Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Sakhi kundhei (companion doll) also known as sakhi nata, is Orissa's string puppet. The puppets are made of wood and the long flowing decorative skirts hide the legs. A puppet is manipulated by the strings (usually five to seven) attached to a triangular wooden control. In Orissa, the ends of the strings are tied to a triangular wooden frame or to a horizontal bar. In Rajasthan, they are simply looped around the puppeteer's fingers. String puppets are assumed to predate the Indian classical theatre. Their first mention is in the Mahabharata of the fourth century B.C.

- **Rod Puppets** are supported and manipulated by sticks or thin metal rods. This technique, as mentioned above, is commonly employed for shadow puppets. But it is also used for the round or doll-type puppet. The most primitive rod puppet is the puppet whose trunk is formed by a stick, the lower extension of which is the handle for its manipulation. In its primitive form, the stick puppet goes back to prehistoric times and is indigenous to all Asian peoples. The puppets are about 60 centimeters in height; their heads are carved out of wood and are painted. Bengal's tradition of rod puppet performance is known as Daanger Putul Nach. The themes of this performance are derived from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas and jatras.

- **Hand or Glove Puppets** are also considered to be among the earliest puppets. Because of their simplicity in form and manipulation, they are known all over Asia. This is a type of puppetry where the puppeteer's hand is slipped inside the puppet and its movements are acted out by his fingers. Usually, the forefinger becomes the head of the puppet, and the thumb and the third finger act as its two hands. Hand/glove puppetry is quite prevalent in Orissa, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. A popular glove puppet plays in Kerala known as Pava Kathakali uses puppets that are carved delicately in wood, painted, gilded, and decorated by transparent coral and peacock feathers. The puppets are carved in the manner of Kathakali actors with their headdresses and costumes.

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Indian People in Puppetry



Dadi Pudumjee



Anupama Roy



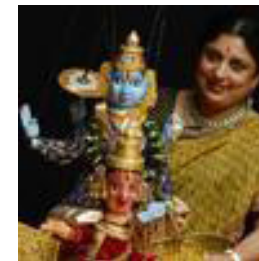
Suresh Dutta



Maguni Charan Kuanr



Puran Bhaat



Anupama Hoskere

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Dadi Pudumjee

Dadi D. Pudumjee is one of India's modern creative puppet artists and directors. Starting puppetry as a hobby in his hometown of Pune, India, he graduated in economics and later joined the NID-National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India, in the department of Visual Communication. In Ahmedabad, he joined the puppetry section run by the late Meher R. Contractor of the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, where he developed his hobby of puppet theatre and made it his professional practice. In 1972 he attended the international world puppet festival in Charleville Mézières and also the UNIMA congress. This brought him into contact with many puppeteers and their art, a legacy that he carries forward to this day. In 1976 he received a UNIMA Sweden and Swedish Institute scholarship to be a guest student at the Marionette Theatre Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, under Michael Meschke. Whilst there, he also participated in a training workshop in Bunraku puppetry/manipulation under the guidance of master puppeteer Sennosuke Yoshida, from Osaka in Japan.

He is the Managing Trustee and Artistic Director of The Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust. He is also the President of Union Internationale de la Marionette (UNIMA) (World Puppet Organisation). In 1980, he set up the Sutradhar Puppet Theatre at the Shri Ram Centre for Art and Culture, New Delhi, India's first contemporary puppet theatre repertory company and was its Artistic Director till 1986. Dadi set up the Ishara Puppet Theatre, in 1986, which is one of India's leading modern puppet theatre groups, working with puppets, actors, and dancers, creating a style that is a synthesis between the East and the West. He was awarded by Sangeet Natak Academy, the National Award, for his work on puppetry. Besides directing performances for Ishara, Dadi conducts workshops on puppetry and allied arts for various agencies, schools, and institutions in India and abroad.



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Anupama Roy

“Anurupa Roy is recognized as a major creative force in Indian Puppet Theatre. She received professional training in the art of puppetry from Dramatiska Institute at the University of Stockholm. She also holds a diploma in the Guaratelle, a tradition of glove puppetry, from the Scuola Della Guaratelle in Naples, Italy. In 1998 she established her troupe, “Kat Katha”, and has worked with many mediums of expression including dance and music”.

Ever since her first exposure to the many Ramayanas of India, Anurupa discovered that the story of the Ramayana is the thread running through some 15 of the 22 traditional puppet theatre forms in different parts of the country. Her exposure to the many Southeast Asian versions of the Ramayana at the Asia-Pacific Artists Exchange Program in Bali also led her to think of developing a production that explored the many versions of the Ramayana, both as an oral tradition and a visual art form. Vishal K. Dar, a media artist who was also part of the exchange program, was equally fascinated by the departures from the Ramayana story familiar to him. He felt that his and Anupama's backgrounds in animation and puppetry respectively could be brought together to create a fresh experience of this immortal tale. The collaboration led to the creation of a short experimental piece. Since then the piece has been subjected to consistent development and experimentation”.



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Suresh Dutta

Indian puppeteer, director, Suresh Dutta studies art, classical Indian dance (including Kathakali, Bharatanatyam, and Manipuri), as well as music with various renowned teachers in West Bengal, the region where he was born. In the years 1961-1962, he had the opportunity, through the Ministry of Education, to obtain a scholarship from the Indian government to go to Moscow to learn the art of puppetry from the master worldwide. Recognized Sergei Obrastsov. This training and new experience allowed Suresh Dutta to develop a lasting passion for the rod puppet style.

Returning to India in 1963, he worked as a dance director, costume designer, and puppet theater director at the Children's Little Theater (CLT). This company produces pieces like Mowgli (from Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Book) and Mithua (1955). Shri Suresh Dutta has been engaged in puppet theatre for the past three decades, first as puppetry director of Children's Little Theatre Calcutta, and later from 1972 as the founder-director of Calcutta Puppet Theatre. Among his outstanding productions are Aladeen, Ramayan, and Sita which have won wide popularity at home and abroad. He has served as Vice-President of the Indian chapter of UNIMA, the international union of puppeteers. For his eminence in puppet theatre and his contribution to its enrichment, Shri Suresh Dutta received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for puppetry.



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Maguni Charan Kuanr

Born in 1937 in Keonjhar in Orissa, Shri Maguni Charan Kuanr belongs to a family of traditional puppeteers. He was initiated into the art of Kandhei Nach, which employs rod puppets, by his father Shri Baishnab Charan Kuanr. He has also learned sculpture in clay, stone, and wood from Shri Bhagaban Jena, a traditional sculptor. Shri Maguni Charan Kuanr has excelled in his vocation as a puppeteer and has contributed to the recognition of Kandhei Nach beyond Orissa. He has established a troupe of his own, the Utkal Vishwakarma Kalakunja Kandhei Nach, based in Keonjhar. Like many traditional puppeteers, he is the creator of his own puppets, the designer of costumes, and the narrator of the plays performed. To propagate his art, Shri Kuanr has participated in camps and workshops organized by Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi and other institutions. His work has been documented by various agencies in India and abroad. Among other honors, Shri Kuanr has received awards from the Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi and the North Orissa University. Shri Maguni Charan Kuanr receives the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for his contribution to the traditional puppetry of Orissa.



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Puran Bhaat

Puran Bhaat is a traditional puppeteer and contemporary theatre artist in Delhi, India. He is also the recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Puppetry, Rajasthan that was presented to him by the President of India, Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam in New Delhi on 26 October 2004. Originally from Rajasthan, his father moved to Delhi almost fifty years ago. Since then the puppeteer family has been living in the Kathputli Colony, an artist community of Delhi. Surprisingly Puran Bhat is not just a puppet master but became known as an activist of Kathputli Colony who bravely stood up against the government of Delhi and Raheja Developer, the real estate shark from consuming the Kathputli Colony in the name of redevelopment.

Aakaar Puppet Theatre group's Dhola Maru and Swagat performances are quite popular not just in the country but abroad too. These are performed in the kathputli (means a puppet made of wood), a form of string puppetry from Rajasthan, which then migrated across the region. This puppetry is performed by the Bhat community from Nagaur in the Marwar region.



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Anupama Hoskere

“Anupama Hoskere is a master puppeteer and the Founder-Director of the Dhaatu Puppet Theater, Bengaluru, India. She is the recipient of the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Puraskar, the highest Indian recognition given to practicing artists. She has wide experience in every facet of the composite art form of puppetry including performance, puppet making, puppet theater proscenium design, scriptwriting for puppet plays, music and song composition for puppet plays, lighting, and sound effects in puppet theater”.

She has created to date, 14 one-hour-long puppet productions and 8 short puppet performances including several productions which include dance and puppetry combined in absolutely endearing proportions. A careful and detailed study of the Natyashastra provided Anupama much impetus to expand the intricacies and intellectual merit of her productions. Anupama received the Senior Research Fellowship from the Ministry of Culture which gave her an opportunity to redesign the old puppet theater into a more complex layered theater - combining dance, theater, and puppetry into one Broadway scale performance of about 80 minutes. The Dhaatu Puppet Theater has been invited to perform at prestigious International Festivals in France, Belgium, Morocco, the USA, and China apart from several platforms within India where Anupama Hoskere's genius received its due recognition. Anupama is also the Festival Director of the Dhaatu International Puppet Festival – an annual festival in Bengaluru. Dhaatu has, over time, developed to become India's first puppetry brand name that catapulted puppetry into being recognized as a respected and classical art form of India.



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Media, Materials, and Stories

In India, there are twenty living traditions of shadow puppetry, string puppetry, rod puppetry, and glove puppetry. But they all share some similarities with each other even when they belong from different regions and are performed in different languages and dialects. The similarity includes the context of stories for the play, the central figure of the narrator or singer, dance, music, and the structure of the performance. The social and economical context of traditional artists, visuals, and aesthetics somehow are also shared within the realm of theaters. Their worldview along with the moral content is linked with the religion, and these religions could include cults of local divinity such as Hindu Shaivism, Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, and Islam.

There are strong connections between the Indian puppetry genre from different regions and traditional actor theater forms. The ritual of preparations is very much similar. Sutradhar (the one who holds the string) and Vidushaka (a comic relief) appear taking different forms and names on the opening of the show. The interplay between rasa (sentiment) and bhava (emotional state) along with song, text, rhythm, and movement are elements that connect it with the Sanskrit theater strongly. There are scholars who believe that the foundation of regional forms in the local language is very much linked with the Sanskrit drama. Although traditional puppeteers don't share the aesthetic terms used in Natyasastra ('Book of Drama' written between 200 B.C.E - 200 C.E).

There are many parallels between puppetry and traditional dance-drama. Karnataka's yakshagana and yakshagana gombeyata string puppetry, Kerala's kathakali and puvakathakali glove puppetry, West Bengal's jatra and danger putul nach rod puppetry, and Assam's bhaona and putala nach string puppets are interrelated. There are similarities in the visual style also, may it be the costumes, headgear, jewelry, make-up, even sometimes character-type also matches. These similarities make the puppet play look like a miniature theater performance. Since the rhythm and dance are essentially permanent elements in both. The puppeteers wearing ankle bells dance backstage while their puppets dance on the stage along with drummers and musicians beating their bols (drum syllables), matching the puppeteer's steps.

"Puppet making is routinely related to the visual art tradition of the region. Consider similarities in the treatment of eyes in 16th-century Lepakshi temple murals of Andhra Pradesh and the shadow puppets of the region, the patachitras (iconic paintings on walls, cloth, palm leaves, scrolls) and gopalila kundhei puppets of Orissa, and the patas (paintings, painted scrolls) and danger putul nach rod puppets of West Bengal. References to these picture scrolls can be found from the 2nd century BCE and, for example, a 3rd-century text Bhagavati Sutra relates that the great Jain teacher Mankhali Gosala was the son of a picture showman. Buddhist literature mentions charana chitta (mobile paintings) of the punishments of hell, commonly called yama pata (scrolls of the god Yama, ruler of the underworld): even today we find Bengali performers who play hell scenes called yam pot, and contemporary Gujarati panels may show the Lord of Death (Yama) dealing out punishments. These picture narratives are performed with music and movement that reminds us that puppetry and performers and painters often come from the same groups as puppeteers".

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History of Puppetry in India

Theater Art

by

Rajiv Sarkar and Prof. Ravi Poovaiah

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://www.dsource.in/resource/history-puppetry-india/media-materials-and-stories>



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Putul Naach
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Chammadyache Bahulya
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Source:

<https://www.dsource.in/resource/history-puppetry-india/major-puppetry-traditions-indian-states/tholu-bommalata-shadow>

Tholu Bommalata (Shadow Puppet)

“Andhra Pradesh’s famous leather puppets are large in their make and made from translucent goatskin. The distinctive details are painted in bright colors, and perforations are later added to these striking puppets. Traditionally used as shadow puppets, the leather puppet theatre, or Tolu bommalata as it is locally called, was developed in the 16th century under the patronage of Vijayanagara rulers. A fine white cloth measuring 12x9 ft lit from the back with a bulb or oil lamp functions as a screen. Both sides of the puppet are painted by us to enhance the projection of the figure. The puppet is then inserted in between two bamboo splits for stiffness, and movement. They can range from 3 to 6 ft in size”.

“Tholu Bommalaata is generally practiced by a troupe whose members belong to the same family, with the art being passed down orally from one generation to the next. The artists have their own narrative explaining the origin of their art form, as is common in all oral traditions, and often trace their lineage back to a super-devotee mentioned in the scriptures. These legends, which differ in detail from region to region, stress the divine origin of the art form and grant divine status to the artists’ ancestors”.



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<https://www.dsource.in/resource/history-puppetry-india/major-puppetry-traditions-indian-states/koyya-bommalata-string>

Koyya Bommalata (String Puppet)



The puppets with their wooden torsos sculpted from a single piece of wood have joints at the shoulders and hips. They dance but normally have no legs. The puppets' clothes that appear to float from the body accentuate the movement conveyed by the manipulation of the two strings affixed to the head, the two strings at the hips, and the two strings attached to the hands. The six strings are tied to a triangular-shaped control. The puppeteer, holding the control and bending over the puppets, is hidden behind a dark curtain that conceals him either partially or fully. While the puppets are comparatively small, no more than 40 centimeters tall, their very long arms hang almost to the ground. The arms are painted, like the face, with vegetable colors.

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<https://www.dsource.in/resource/history-puppetry-india/major-puppetry-traditions-indian-states/putul-naach-rod-puppet>

Putul Naach (Rod Puppet)

“Western Bengal daanger putul nach puppets are composed of a wooden body and face covered by a cloth soaked in dry clay that is then painted. The design of the features as well as the primary colors that are used recall the patas (drawings, scroll paintings) by street storytellers. The shining puppet’s face is varnished at least once a year. The wooden hands, pierced with a hole in the palm, can hold a bow, an arrow, a spear, or a sword. In the body of each puppet, several removable heads can be alternately inserted, allowing for a change of many characters. The left arm of the puppet is usually not articulated but the right arm has an elbow and sometimes a wrist. The dancing puppets are articulated at the hip and at both wrists. The character of Krishna (an avatar of god Vishnu) has a right leg whereas all other puppets do not”.



“Each ensemble is composed of twenty to twenty-five puppet bodies that can be multiplied by a factor of at least three, thanks to the interchangeable heads, to make up the total number of characters. Some of these heads can also represent animals, such as a lion or a monkey. The puppet, when its costume is fully spread out, can measure up to 1 meter high and weigh between 5 and 15 kilograms so that not even a strong man can hold and fully handle a figure of this weight. The stage, made of bamboo posts and fabric, can be as high as 3 meters, forcing the spectators to tilt their heads way back to look at the puppets. The stage, measuring 6.5 by 3.5 meters, is closed off on three sides and covered by a cloth roof. The painted backdrops represent a palace, a forest, or a cremation ground, and can be changed two or three times during a show”.

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Yampuri (Rod Puppet)



The puppets employed in this art form are made of wood and manipulated by strings. Unlike other traditional rod puppets of West Bengal and Orissa, these puppets are in one piece and have no joints. Rod puppetry is similar to glove puppetry but the puppets are larger in size than that of the latter and are manipulated by rods. A wheeled platform that has a height of about three feet from the ground is set up for the show. The puppeteers and the musicians position themselves near the stage. The classical and folk music of the region serves as the background score during the performance. Curtains act as a backdrop for the enactment of various scenes.

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Gomba Atta (String Puppet)



“Traditional string puppet theatre of Karnataka in south-west India. String puppets have different names in Karnataka depending on the region. In the southern part of Mysore, they are called sutrada gombeyata (sutra: string, gombeyata: dance), whereas the term yakshagana (chant of celestial beings) is used in the northern style, yakshagana gombeyata. They present little difference in terms of costumes, make-up, repertory themes, performance structure and music. Sutrada gombeyata puppets are one metre high and weigh between 6 and 8 kilograms. They are carved by sculptors from light rot-resistant wood. Unlike yakshagana gombeyata puppets, which have legs and are articulated at the knees and ankles, sutrada gombeyata puppets are legless with long dresses floating under their upper torso. The puppeteers make each puppet play multiple roles and transform them during the performance. Their round faces painted in blue, red, and yellow can change into a hero or a demon, a hunter, or a forest hermit. The stage, whose dimensions vary depending on the region, is usually set up outside the temple of Kali. The visible part measures about 180 centimeters by 120 centimeters with a depth of 75 centimeters. The rest of the stage is covered by dark cloth in order to hide the puppeteers. Each puppet, suspended by six black strings (two tied to the ears, two to the hands, and two to the hips), is handled by the puppeteer who directs its movements with his two hands as he talks and sings”.

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Togalu (Shadow Puppet)



“Traditional shadow theatre from Karnataka in south-west India. Togalu signifies “leather” and gombeyata “figure, doll, dance, and performance”. There are two distinct types of togalu gombeyata based on the size of the figures. Chikka theatre uses smaller figures (between 20 to 30 centimeters high) and dodda theatre uses larger-sized figures (between 30 to 120 centimeters in height). Togalu gombeyata performances take place in a reserved space outside the village and also in the courtyard of certain temples. The colored and transparent shadow figures are seen from behind a rectangular white cotton fabric screen stretched between two poles. The lighting source – in olden days an oil lamp, later a hurricane lamp, and nowadays a neon – is placed between the puppeteer and the leather figures”.

“These puppet showmen travel about with their own portable puppet stage that can be disassembled and reset up consisting of twelve bamboo poles, a long rope, and a length of white cloth that can be mounted on three or four sides. There are often two puppeteers who set themselves up, to manipulate the shadow figures from inside this box, but without being seen by the audience. The musicians, composed of a singer, a maddalam (horizontal two-skinned drum) player, a tala (cymbal) player, and a harmonium player, sit or stand on the sides. They all wear gejje, metal anklet bells around their legs. The shadow figure is attached and held by a bamboo rod that runs through it vertically. Another much thinner bamboo rod manipulates the only movable member, most often an arm but sometimes the head or the leg. The large figures are animated by puppeteers behind the screen who hold them at arm's length 1.8 meters high. In the past, figures used to be carved from doeskin but now goatskin is used. Performances are held during religious and secular celebrations in the Mysore, Mandya, and Bellary regions and a few other villages of Karnataka”.

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Tholpavakoothu (Shadow Puppet)



Tholpavakoothu is shadow puppetry from Kerala. It is a ritualistic art form that has been a part of Kerala's culture and originated in the 18th century is also known as pavakoothu (puppet play) or nizhalattam (shadow play). This entertainment art is performed on a special stage called koothumadam in the temple courtyard. Puppets (pavakal), usually representing four characters from the Ramayana, are arranged behind a long white screen, in front of bright wick lamps.

Tholpavakoothu puppets are made of deerskin. While formerly the puppets were made out of deerskin, the use of buffalo and ox skin is now commonly used. The puppets are held by a thin stick in one hand while the limbs are manipulated by a thinner stick held in another hand of the puppeteer. The figures are drawn on the skin, cut out, and embellished with dots, lines, and holes. When the skin is completely dehumidified all the hair on it is removed by scraping the surface with a sharp-edged piece of bamboo. Then the puppet figure is drawn clearly on it and cut out with a fine chisel. The eyes, noses, and lips are also drawn on the puppet, and cut-out ornaments and dress are drawn by drilling different kinds of holes in the skin for which special pointed chisels are used.

Puppets are painted with different colors, the original method of making natural colors was by boiling the wooden pieces of different woods, the result was good, strong, and lasting, these become very attractive when shades of other colors merge in them, Deerskin is used to make the puppets as it is considered sacred and divine while making the puppets the hair of the skin is removed and the outline of the puppets is drawn over it. Then it will be cut carefully to size for setting proper facial expression with decorations to the puppets the different types of chisels are used, this being a dedicated job. It should be done with utmost care. Then flexible hands made of deer skins are attached to the puppet. A bamboo stick is fixed vertically along with the puppet and lay holding this stick, movement of the play will be controlled according to the circumstances. There must be above 150 puppets made in different positions standing, fighting, sitting and lying, etc to conduct this play based on "Kamba Ramayana".

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<https://www.dsource.in/resource/history-puppetry-india/major-puppetry-traditions-indian-states/kalasutri-bahulya-string>

Kalasutri Bahulya (String Puppet)



Traditional string puppet theatre from Maharashtra in south-west India. The performers of kalasutri bahulya (kalasutri, string, and bahulya, puppet), descendants of families of puppeteers that originally came from Rajasthan and Gujarat, are today very few in number. Their performances center on the many episodes of the Ramayana, beginning with the accounts of the birth of Rama and ending with the killing of Ravana. The small puppets, finely sculpted from wood, wear elaborate headdresses, turbans, and ornaments. Articulated at the shoulders and knees, the puppets do not have strings attached to their feet, which remain free. A string attached to the head joins one connecting to the back and two others extending from the hands. A single musician sings the text and alternately, in turn, plays the tabla and the cymbals.

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Chammadyache Bahulya (Shadow Puppet)



The shadow puppetry tradition in Maharashtra state is known as Chammadyache Bahulya. In Maharashtra it is practiced by the Thakar community. Though these forms have distinct regional identities, languages, and dialects in which they are performed, they share a common worldview, aesthetics, and themes. The narratives are mainly based on the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, Puranas, local myths, and tales. Besides being a form of entertainment, they also communicate significant messages to the rural community. The performance begins with an invocation on a ritually set up stage in a village square or a temple courtyard. Stock characters provide comic relief. A sense of rhythm and dance is inherent in all the traditions, across regions. The puppets are crafted from either goat or deerskin. They are manipulated from behind the screen, where lighting is provided to cast shadows. Puppet performances are a part of festivals, celebrations of special occasions and rituals, and sometimes staged to ward off evil spirits and to invoke the rain gods in times of drought in rural areas.

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History of Puppetry in India

Theater Art

by

Rajiv Sarkar and Prof. Ravi Poovaiah

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://www.dsource.in/resource/history-puppetry-india/major-puppetry-traditions-indian-states/rabana-chaya-shadow-puppet>

Rabana Chaya (Shadow Puppet)



Ravana Chhaya, literally 'the shadow of Ravana', is a 6000-year-old shadow puppet show of Odisha, which starts at night with the auspicious tradition of breaking the coconut and singing hymns to the Lord Ganesha and Rama. The show follows the Odia poetry collection, Vichitra Ramayana written by Vishwanath Khuntia, a seventeenth-century poet. The puppets used are a single-piece structure with no joints and no colors. They throw opaque shadows on the screen, and their manipulation requires great dexterity. They are made up of deerskin and are conceived in bold, dramatic poses. Apart from human and animal characters, many props such as trees, mountains, chariots, etc., are also used. Although the Ravana Chhaya puppets are smaller in size, ranging from six inches to two feet, and have no jointed limbs, the use of poetic language, music, and narration of religious themes creates a spectacular and sensitive show.

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<https://www.dsource.in/resource/history-puppetry-india/major-puppetry-traditions-indian-states/kathputli-string-puppet>

Kathputli (String Puppet)



Traditional string puppet plays from Rajasthan in north-west India. The Bhat and Nat communities of Rajasthan, most originating from the Nagaur district, traditionally nomadic but today more or less sedentary, would travel with family throughout the Thar Desert and Nagaur regions practicing the profession of putliwallah (puppeteer) and genealogists. As genealogists, they kept the family histories of important people in the villages and towns in Rajasthan where they themselves came from. For their own local rulers, for instance, thrice a day in the square they would recite the family histories, the events in the lives of the rulers' ancestors.

As puppeteers (kathputliwallah or kathputli kalākāra, “artist”), they perform the kathputli ka khel (“kathputli play”). The kathputli performers claim that their ancestors had performed for royal families and had received great honour and prestige from the rulers of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Punjab. Indeed, they mostly performed in other states, not only in Rajasthan. They traveled to Uttar Pradesh and other areas that were Hindi and Urdu (or Hindustani) speaking, thus the language of the kathputli ka khel – for both songs and dialogues – was a blend of these two languages. The kathputli puppets (putli meaning doll and kath, wood) are sculpted and painted by the puppeteers themselves and are composed of a head inserted on a short, thin torso of wood.

The arms, made of wood or cloth stuffed with cotton, articulated at the elbow and wrist, hang and move freely on both sides of the body. Since most of the kathputli do not have legs, the puppets' long, ground-length cotton voile skirts twirl about when in motion. Two strings, one attached around the puppet's waist, the other to the top of its head, are connected to a loop that the puppeteer manipulates directly between his fingers or lifts to make the puppets dance.

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The dancer puppet, called Anarkali, however, is a more complex puppet, having around six strings. Traditional kathputli string puppets do not have controls. It is a very simple manipulation technique, yet the result is heightened by the fast movements from above and by the number of puppets assembled on the brightly colored cloth puppet stage representing a palace.

Today, the vitality of the kathputli ka khel does not seem to be waning. Many groups of puppeteers crisscross Rajasthan as well as other northern Indian states, particularly since the 1960s “Green Revolution” when an irrigation policy allowed farmers several harvests per year, giving landowning villagers the occasion to give thanks to the gods by celebrating feasts to which they invited troubadours and puppeteers. Often accompanied by Bhopa-Bhopi storytellers from the Bhil group who base their own stories, music, and dances on gigantic comic strip-like painted scrolls (phad or path), the kathputliwallahs’ most intense period of activity is during the dry season. Since 1980, several kathputli troupes travel the world over, invited by institutions and festivals.



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Bommalattam (String Puppet)

The history of Bommalattam puppetry dates back to India's medieval period as far as the 10th century when most of the Bommalattam performances were based on tales of spirituality and mythology. Bommalattam, narrates the traditional legends and myths such as Valli Kalyanam (Valli's marriage), Harichandra, Lava Kusa, Nallatungal Kathai, and Markadeyan Kathai. Bommalattam was also used during the freedom struggle to promote nationalistic zeal. Bommalattam combines the techniques of both rod and string puppets. They are made of wood and the strings for manipulation are tied to an iron ring which the puppeteer wears like a crown on his head.

A few puppets have jointed arms and hands, which are manipulated by rods. The Bommalattam puppets are the largest, heaviest, and the most articulate of all traditional Indian marionettes. A puppet may be as big as 4.5 feet in height weighing about ten kilograms. Bommalattam theatre has elaborate preliminaries which are divided into four parts – Vinayak Puja, Komali, Amanattam, and Pusenkanattam. In Bommalattam puppetry, the puppets are made out of cloth, wood, leather, or other materials. The strings or wires are used to control the puppets, whose hands and legs were tied up to the strings. There are 5 to 8 members in the puppet show troupe. A single puppeteer presents the entire puppet show. The Bommalattam finger puppet dance begins with an homage to God and continues with humorous stories. There is a character of buffoon which is extremely hilarious that displays fun and frolic.



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Kandei Nach (Glove Puppet)



Traditional rod puppet theatre from the state of Odisha located in the east of India. The puppets of kathi kundhei nacha (“wooden-rod puppet dance”, also called kandhei nach or kandhei nata) are manipulated by a kathi, or wooden rod. The traditional performance, an amalgam of dance, drama and songs, begins with an invocation (stuti), followed by the sutradhara (stage director/narrator) introducing the episode to be enacted from the epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, or from the Puranas. Puppets are up to 60 centimetres in height, carved, painted, and costumed in the Orissa style of jatra (operatic theatre), with full skirts and shirts. The puppets are joined at the shoulders, and the shoulder joints are connected with strings inside the torso of the puppet to two rings, which are pulled to move the characters’ arms. The rod holds up the head, which is carved in wood and painted. Puppeteers sit on the ground behind a screen. Musicians play drums, cymbals, and reed instruments, including the Indian clarinet and flute, and more recently a harmonium, while a multi-person group manipulates. Today, the staging can be more elaborate, performed in a booth stage with a curtain and painted backdrops, similar to the West Bengal danger putul nach stage.

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Conclusion

Puppetry is a folk art form that has existed for a long time and spread all over the world. There many types of puppets and their forms all over the world but the principles remain the same. Although there are several traditional puppet genres in India and the overview provided here cannot be all-inclusive as the topic is wide and diverse, it conveys the main features of this theatre form. Puppetry in India has been a means to provide entertainment and to take forward the culture and religion. But in order to thrive in the modern era, this art form needs to adapt itself and somehow build an economy where new and reformed ideas can be developed. One such example can be in the educational sector. Puppetry can help children by making them understand the world through stories.

The use of puppet show as a means of education and communication through the indirect expressions of the puppets gives the puppeteer an opportunity to spread political and religious ideas and also a critique of the same. A puppet show's inherent freedom for improvisation permits reference to present facts and events and a chance to make satirical comments and thus puppets are often represented as bold critics of the society.

As stated by Kamaladari Chattopadhyay in her book "handicrafts of India", "As a medium, however, puppetry has a few equals and scores many advantages over human performances in moving and holding audiences. It suggests rather than instructs because of an innate subtlety. IT can indulge in exaggerations or distortions without being coarse or vulgar".

Today, while puppetry has made its way into the cities, traditional puppetry is dying a slow death. Modern puppetry, on the other hand, is gaining momentum, albeit slowly, and is often used as a tool for imparting social messages. Puppeteers now tell stories on everything from medieval kings, Phulan-Devi, Aladin', Tejimala', Witch-Craft' to AIDS because to survive in this digital world, the revolution has become a necessary component for this centuries-old craft.



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