

Vanishing Tradition of Puppetry in India

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Abstract

Puppetry, as a traditional art form, was once famous for entertaining the villagers, especially children, or its visuals, motions, and mastery of storytelling. Stories adapted from puranic literature, local myths, and legends usually form the content of traditional puppet theatre in India. Earlier, Puppetry helped the students to develop their mental and physical faculties. Various awareness programs related to society, gender, culture, and nature have proved successful. The aesthetic pleasures derived from visualizing the puppet shows connect us to our deep emotions. However, this form of art is fading away. The lack of patronization and modernism are some of the reasons behind it. The advancement in technology made people ignorant of the art. The popularity of Puppetry is visibly shrunk in India. In the past, there was a lot of demand for the shows, but today Puppetry is losing its importance. The Puppeteers are not in a healthy condition to continue their art. Poverty and lack of proper support from the Government, local governing bodies, and NGOs have led them to think carefully about the art of Puppetry. Knowledge about this traditional form has been limited to a small group, and it is through accessibility it can be popularized. This paper aims to highlight the problems in Puppetry that are leading toward the vanishing point at present and in the coming future.

Keywords: Puppetry, Tradition, vanishing, Puppets, Government

Introduction

India is a land of the rich traditional heritage of different cultures, folk, and tribal arts. The days of the remote past mark the diverse forms of art that include drawings, paintings, embroideries, carvings, weaving saris, handicrafts, and Puppetry. These art forms played an essential role in national integrity, and communal harmony, enhancing the value system and promoting the elements of humanizing and creating awareness among the country's people.

Puppetry as an art form has been critical in traditional entertainment throughout the ages. With progress in technology, cinema, videos, and computers, Puppetry's long tradition is vanishing daily and is on the verge of total extinction. The novel Pandemic hit the livelihood of the artisans drastically. Different parts of India and the country show their respective identities through the medium of Puppetry. Puppets could be any figure like human, animal, gods,

goddesses, or abstract forms. They are moved by human hands rather than mechanical aid. It is an age-old practice of storytelling by applying indicators to move the puppets along with musical and sound effects. This art form is not confined to galleries, theatres, and cinemas.

It originated from the rural village to the urban cities in the different states of India. Puppetry has been represented in front of royalty and ordinary people. Puppetry has many other forms where puppets are made of many materials. The making of the puppets is complex and time-consuming and require lots of complex work and patience. Different forms of Puppetry are glove, shadow, rod, and string. Puppetry varies from region to region and state to state. Various types of puppetries are in dire need of protection and conservation. Such as Kathputli, Yakshagana Gombeyata, Tarer Putul Nach, Kalasutri Bahulya, Bommallattam, NoolPavakoothu, Gopalila Kundhei, Tholu Bommallata, Togalu Gombeyatta, Ravan Chhaya, Pavakoothu, Pava Kathakali, Benir Putul, Sakhi Kundhei, Gulabo -Sitabo, Putul Nautch or Putul Nach, Kathi Kundhei Nacha, Yampuri etc. They are moved to create the illusion of moving figures on a screen. This form thrives in Orissa, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu. Glove Puppetry is done by inserting the hands into the puppets' heads and arms cavity to run them. States like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Kerala, and Orissa are famous for glove puppetry. Rod puppets are enormous, supported, and moved by rods from below. This form of Puppetry is now found mainly in West Bengal and Orissa. The traditional rod puppet form of West Bengal is called "Dang Putul Nach."

In an interview for 'The Indian Express,' according to Dadi Pudumjee, one of India's best-known puppeteers, "Puppetry is important to evolve. Otherwise, it will go into a museum. India has traditional puppet theatre in seven or eight states. It is on the brink. It is either going to disappear soon or going to change into something else. Whenever a puppet show calls for children has a poor response, the show that calls for adults and children gets better audiences. The great change in different traditional forms- dance, music, and theatre is changing. Lots of things are getting lost, for better or worse. The traditional essence of Puppetry has changed due to the advancement of technology. The source of income and the financial success are not constant as the big event of Puppetry is rare, once in two or three years. The puppeteers have to make their way. It isn't easy to stay firm in this art form because it is not easy compared to other art forms. To keep the tradition of Puppetry on the wheel, the puppeteers must find a way to develop their art form. Otherwise, today's audience will never go to see the art form. They are at continuous risk of representing something new; otherwise, this art form will be diminished. Very few puppeteers are ready to take on the challenges of representing and providing newness in Puppetry. An honest enthusiast of Puppetry needs to stay focused and find more possibilities of always bringing some new and developed form of puppetry".

As per the report of BBC News, "Almost 3000 puppeteers live with their families in Delhi's colony where they have been told to relocate a colony for building the residential complex and shopping mall. The houses of the puppeteers are not in good condition, having so many illegal electricity connections and water supply, open sewage drains, and children playing barefoot in the narrow lanes. Many puppeteers are forced to leave the profession as they find it difficult to make ends meet. For them, Puppetry is not only a profession but also sentiment and emotion. There is a continuous demand for the welfare of puppeteers. They are

valued more abroad than in India. They represent Indian culture and act as a safeguard to the heritage and tradition while remaining ignored in their very own country”.

In West Bengal, a rod puppet in a dance pose is on the verge of extinction. Today it exists mainly in the south 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. Besides this, organizing the show of string puppetry is exceptionally costly. Due to the loss incurred; professional puppeteers were forced to look for alternative sources of income. Thus, in the 1990s, the 50 groups who had managed to fight against all the problems have shrunk to only two to three groups today.

The puppeteers of the rural areas are struggling to keep the art form alive. Lack of research in Puppetry is forcing the puppeteers to call it a dying art form". Shoba Saxena, consultant of Puppetry at the sangeet Natak Akademi expressed her concern that language and knowledge limitations act as a barrier to preventing the upliftment of traditional puppeteers. "There are few puppeteers left in the country, and those who still practice the art are from the states like Odisha, West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura refuse to come and perform in New Delhi."

The artists are also affected by the rising number of new artists who pursue Puppetry as a passion while living their livelihood through another profession. The impact of the funding organization is limited to specific individuals, which creates a sense of rivalry and isolation among the community members. Earlier, Kathputli was in demand for shows, but they are rarely called for occasions like birthday parties or some traditional fair. But, after the partition, puppet artists, mostly Hindus, left the country, drastically changing the puppet industry. Currently, there are only 50 -60 puppet teams in the country

The tribe of women leather puppeteers is fast vanishing in the East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. About 400 families settled in Madhavapatnam Panchayat of Samalkot Mandal in 1980. Given the grisly Covid-19, their lives are shattered, and they are on the brink of starvation. There is no security to the tools and equipment of the puppet show—their equipment dates to the 18th century. Their precious old means of entertainment will be lost forever if no protection is provided. As many as 14 women puppeteers have passed away since 1980. A few female singers remained to need to train more to pass on the skill to future generations. To continue this mode of entertainment, they need a separate school with the help of government funds.

Rajeswari, a puppeteer from Andhra Pradesh, said there was a training center with 30 students with government funds in the past. Unfortunately, the Government abandoned the proposal and discontinued the training center. 'The Hans India' spoke to organizers of the puppet show at Madhavapatnam of Samalkot Mandal.

T Bala Krishna, a puppeteer from Andhra Pradesh, described his pathetic plight given the lack of support from the local organization and the Government. They have diverted themselves to Christian songs and stories through puppets to escape hunger. For one program, they get a small amount of Rs 11,200 from the central Government, which is insufficient to run

the family and maintain the art of Puppetry. He urged the Government to arrange their puppet shows through Door darshan and other visual media. Given the newly proposed Godavari Kala Kshetram (GKK) in Kakinada with bright city funds, The puppeteers demanded the allotment of one permanent room to run their programs continuously. Through this, they believe the danger of the vanishing the ancient art could be avoided”.

Tholpavakoothu (thol: leather, Pava: Puppeteer, Koothu: Performance) is the traditional art form of shadow leather puppetry practiced in Kerala that is believed to be more than a thousand years old. The fifteenth generation in a family of Tholpavakoothu artists, Vishwanatha Pulavar, established the Tholpavakoothu Sangam based in Palakkad, Kerala, an Institute for the research, training, and performance of this art all over the world. Once performed widely across Kerala, at present, it is being practiced only in 70 temples in the state. A few Pulavar families whose hereditary ritualistic art performers of shadow puppetry dedicated to Bhadrakali, the mother goddess.

This traditional art form of shadow puppetry is fast vanishing from Kerala. Today's generation is taking it as boring, without newness to it. This art form's focus has been shifted to cultural events, such as weddings and shows abroad. Through this, art needs much time; the community wants to revive the tradition and carry it forward in the future. All have other professions besides Puppetry, but there are still some who are dependent on Puppetry.

Conclusion

The Puppeteers, the artists involved with the art, have been starving for want of employment and opportunities. Their skills in spreading social messages in the most robust possible way through entertainment remain untapped by authorities. The governments can do a lot by involving them in the campaign for government welfare schemes and programs, feel the artists. The Government should incentivize the Puppet artists to help the craft survive and grow.

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