

## **Puppetry in India – An Ancient Performing Art**

By

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### **Abstract**

Art is an aesthetic expression of all characteristics of the human mind. Puppetry is an ancient form of narrative theatre that has always sparked curiosity from an audience of all ages. The art of puppetry in India like all other art forms is rooted in the traditions of the country. Puppetry is a form of theatre that involves the manipulation of puppets – inanimate objects. A fascinating art form that showcases the representation of graphic stories utilizing puppets, live music, narrations, and gesture taken from dance. Like traditional theatre, themes for puppet shows are mostly based on epics and legends. Puppets from different parts of India have their own identity. Regional styles of paintings are often reflected in them.

### **Keywords**

Puppets, String puppets, rod puppets, shadow puppets, glove puppets, epics, music, dance

### **Introduction**

India is a powerhouse of performing arts. Puppetry is one of the oldest forms of entertainment in India and forms an integral part of the culture of performance in the country. Puppetry art is a mixture of many arts such as writing, theatrical art, painting, costume designing, sculpture, woodwork, music, dance, etc.

It is an ancient theatrical performance art in which scenes of life are expressed and staged by dolls made of wood, thread, plastic, or plaster of Paris. It involves the manipulation of puppets – inanimate objects that often have a resemblance to a human or animal figure

manipulated by a human called a puppeteer who uses movements of hands and arms to control devices such as strings or rods to move the body of the puppet. The puppeteer moves the body, limbs, and in some cases mouth and eyes of the puppet. Sometimes the puppeteer speaks in the voice of the character of the puppet while at other times they use a recorded soundtrack while performing. The script of a puppet production (puppet performance) is called a puppet play.

### **Puppetry in India**

The puppets show gods and heroic figures through epic poetry, theatrics, and storytelling. They fulfill educational and entertainment functions. It was present throughout India as a popular medium of performance. Unfortunately, in modern times this art form is not getting due importance as people have other sources of entertainment.

There is a variety of puppetry traditions in India. The local language, music, and culture play an important part in determining types of puppetry. Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas are the most popular narratives told using puppetry.

Puppets come in many shapes and forms in India. The backbone of the craftsmanship is a glove, shadow, rod, and string puppetry although styles differ in the country from region to state. Various materials are used to make puppets. In the Northern state of Bihar, the puppets are virtually life-size and in Bengal, they are huge and weigh up to almost 10 kilos. Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh puppets are paper-thin. The puppets manufacturers use wood in Rajasthan, leather in Tamil Nadu, and terracotta in Bengal. Like Rajasthan, the puppets in Odisha are made from wood.

### **String Puppets**

String puppetry is the most frequent and most expressive type of puppetry in India. This type of puppetry uses cords tied to the limbs and heads of the puppets. The cords are tugged from behind the screen by the Sutradhar and the dolls dance and follow his orders. The more the strings the more difficult and intricate is the performance.

In Rajasthan, the string puppets are decorated with tinsel and are called kathputli. They dance to the native music. In Bengal, the puppets are named Putul and the performance is based on the local stories of Durga's courage.

Odisha string puppets - gopalila kundhei portray the narrative stories of Lord Krishna. In Maharashtra string puppets Kalasutri Bahulya depicts episodes of Ramayana with cymbals and drums on the stage. Separate variants of string puppets are also used in Puppetry performances in Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu

### **Shadow Puppets**

Shadow puppetry is the most fascinating form of puppetry as it uses two-dimensional and flat puppets. The puppets used are often made from animal leather, first processed and later painted with natural colors and with traditional motifs. They depict the most popular legends like Ravana, Rama, Surpanakha, and Mahabharata.

In Karnataka, the puppets are constructed with one large piece of leather but in Maharashtra, they are made with joined pieces of leather. The joints give them a lot of flexibility to move more quickly and gracefully. The performing shadow puppetry art is accompanied by traditional folk tunes to the beats of mridangam and cymbal and the sutradhar brings the stories live on the stage.

In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Tholu Bommalata puppets perform mostly after sunset with light, sound, and visuals working together to create a fascinating performance. Odisha's shadow puppets are made of deer skin and they are smaller in size.

### **Glove Puppets**

A small movement of the hand can bring life to an otherwise mute limp doll. This is beautifully demonstrated by the Glove puppets performance. The puppeteer places his hands into the head and arms of the puppet and manipulates the scene. Glove puppets are used in Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Odisha, and Bengal. Gulabo-Sitabo puppets in Uttar Pradesh mainly play social subjects in a comic style. In Odisha, they narrate the story of Radha and Krishna.

The enormous kathakali-like dolls, Pavakoothu of Kerala are very captivating. Intricate wooden faces and garments in the fabric of these puppets depict stories from epics and dance to local music.

### **Rod Puppets**

The rod puppets are extensions of glove puppets but they are much larger than the glove puppets and are manipulated from below by using one or more rods or sticks of different sizes. These puppets are usually made of three joints. The main rod supports the head and is joined at the neck. Both the hands of the puppet are attached to the rods at the shoulder. The hands are manipulated by the puppeteer. There are no legs for the puppet. The body and hands are made of bamboo, rice husk, and hay. The puppets are draped in saree or dhoti according to the character played by them.

Rod puppetry is practiced in Bengal and the most notable form is Putul Nach. These puppets sometimes weigh up to 10 kilos. The puppets are decorated in the local painting style and the costumes are decorated beautifully.

In Odisha, rod puppetry is known as Kathi Kandhe. The puppets are much smaller in size as compared to those of Bengal. Generally, medieval songs like bhajans, Champu, and Koili are played during performances.

The rod puppetry practiced in Bihar is known as Yampuri and is very different from that of Bengal and Odisha. The rod puppets are made of wood and the puppets do not have joints.

### **Conclusion**

The rich cultural heritage of various art forms especially puppetry is a great means of entertainment that also gives an insight into our epics and various stories associated with our Gods and Goddesses. Puppets from different parts of India have their own identity and we must try to conserve this art form.

The growth of electronic media and other modes of entertainment and western influence has greatly impacted puppetry art in India. The lack of patronage of this art has also given a blow to this old traditional art form. The Government and non-government organizations must give patronage and promote it as a means of entertainment to retain this traditional performing art form. Puppeteers must be encouraged to take up social issues to attract the audience.

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## About the Author

Dr. Aparna Pradhan, a doctorate in Zoology, is an artist, freelance writer, author, and poetess. She is a bilingual writer. She has authored two books and has contributed to more than 35 anthologies. She has published articles in leading newspapers and magazines. Her poems have been published in International and National magazines, and Hindi and English anthologies.

