

TRADITIONAL INDIAN PUPPETRY

Its dramaturgy, styles and techniques

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Puppetry, in India, owes its origin to several modes of entertainment, prevalent several hundred years ago. As customary in religious belief, imitation of ancestors or divine personalities, through dramatics, was considered a sign of disrespect. Their depiction through pictures accompanied by song and dramatic narration, an acceptable alternative, thus became popular in India and developed in pictorial performances like the *Pad* performance of Rajasthan and the *Yampatta* of Bihar. The leather puppets of Andhra, in which the cut out figures were given interesting movements to depict some important personalities from our epics, were also an improvement on these pictorial forms. The shadows of these cut figures were thrown on a white curtain, this gradually developed into full-fledged shadow theatre plays.

Since these leather figures were flat and did not project a three-dimensional effect, they later developed into wood puppets with solid bodies to give a more realistic look. They were manipulated by strings and their movements were natural. The human drama, which came into existence in India at a later stage was but an imitation of this puppet drama. It developed into a full-fledged art-form only after the taboo on imitating divine personalities had lost its hold or was ignored. The existence of the *Sutradhar*, meaning manipulator of strings, in ancient Indian drama and many other references in Indian *shastras*, bear ample testimony to the fact that human drama, in India, developed from the puppet theatre.

Origin

The various puppet-styles prevalent in India such as the Rajasthan *Kathputli*, the *Odissi* (Orissa), the *Bommulatam* (Andhra), the *Bommalattam* of Tanjore, the Bengal puppets etc. indicates their origin which is invariably

associated with this concept in one way or the other: the Rajasthan puppeteers claim that their fore-fathers, known as *Nat Bhats*, were the originators of Indian puppets and migrated to other states, assuming different names and castes to signify their special puppet styles. This claim may not have any historical significance but puppeteers of other Indian styles do accept that their fore-fathers did migrate from North India. The principles governing all these styles have many common features.

Indian puppetry, as already stressed has a religious background and its practice is hedged around with numerous rites and taboos attached. The Rajasthan Puppeteers, for example, believe that any new theme introduced in their traditional repertoire will bring about a calamity. The *Oddissi* puppeteer also adheres to the traditional themes relating to the life of Radha & Krishna. The Bengal puppeteer is attached to the Kalimal temple, where he performs as a casual entertainer on ceremonial occasions. The Andhra puppeteers also abide by their old religious themes and believe that any change in them will be a cause of their destruction. The *Bommallattam* puppeteers of Kumbhakonam and Tanjore too have their own superstitions which they do not wish to shed. These various styles of puppet-theatre in India, though lacking in modern presentation-technique and other entertaining aspects, have maintained the best that Indian puppetry devised all these years. Let us examine their main characteristics.

Symbolism and stylisation

All Indian puppets are symbolic and stylised. Their conception and construction is not governed by human anatomy at all. Almost all modern experiments in Indian puppets these days, have failed only on account of this reason: they have unwisely been made realistic. The anatomy of the traditional Indian puppet always varies according to the character that it is supposed to depict. That is why the heroic characters such as of Bhima or Kansa, both in Andhra and *Bommallattam* puppets are shown with small heads, oversized chests, small hands and thick legs. Lord Krishna, Lord Rama and other Indian deities have pleasant faces, well-built bodies with over-sized heads to indicate their wisdom and divine powers. Evil personalities such as Duryodhana, Ravana, Shishupala, have distorted figures with clumsy hands, legs and chest. The Rajput warriors, in Rajasthan puppets, have big eyes, large heads, broad chests, big moustaches and undersized bodies as to produce fantastic effects. The evil intentioned Moghul emperors and villains in the Rajasthan puppet play *Amar Singh Rathore* have slim figures with distorted faces and disproportionate hands. The divine figures, in Andhra shadow puppets, are almost double the size of other characters and have extraordinary faces and limbs, thus making them look superior and divine.

The colours used for the puppets and their costumes are in conformity with our traditional approach as narrated in the *shastras*. All devil-like

characters are predominantly black and red. The divine characters have white, red and yellow colours elaborately used in their costumes and ornaments. Blue is specially used for the faces of gods and other divine personalities.

Celestial Beings

Indian Puppets, in almost all traditional styles, are considered divine. They are not considered replicas of human beings. They are supposed to come from some celestial world to entertain human beings on earth. That is why they are made in obscure sizes so as to look different from human beings. The over-sized Andhra Shadow puppets, known as *Tholu Bommalatam*, are made in several sizes but in no case in human sizes. All these puppets are deliberately made different to the human figure because of the concept that they do not belong to this earth. Their movements too are different from those of human beings. In a fight sequence a Rajasthan puppet is made fall on the other figure in an unrealistic but effective way. The Andhra leather puppet has to push the opposing puppets into oblivion (i.e., off the screen) in order to inflict an injury. The *Bommalatam* and Rajasthan puppets knock their heads against the floor to produce an effect of intense agony and sorrow. The frightful jumps and jerks that the heroic characters of Andhra Puppets make, are mainly for the purpose of making them appear different, exaggerated and superior to the human character.

Music and Words

If we turn to the dialogue and music used in Indian puppet theatre we arrive at a very interesting conclusion. Since Indian puppets are considered as representing some celestial body, they have a different language to the speech of humans. The use of a whistle-like voice in Rajasthan puppet-theatre signifies that these puppets have a different language. These whistling voices are utilised by the commentator in a very interesting varied and effective manner, thus giving a special charm to the whole show. The language and songs used by the Andhra Shadow puppeteers, though human in origin, have queer modulations and a highly stylised delivery. The songs too are sung in a different fashion. The commentary which follows after each lyrical dialogue too gives a totally different impression to human speech. The *Bommalattam* puppets of South, though they have recently taken to a realistic way of presentation, had something very unique in their original form. The original *Bommalattam* puppeteer, who did not use any curtain at all to hide himself, used to manipulate the puppet by the movements of his own body, which ultimately were conveyed to the puppet which was tied to the ring worn on his head. While moving he used to utter several sounds and shrieks along with the dialogue and songs in order to give the puppet an original character.

All these special features of Indian puppets are in full conformity with

the international principles of puppetery. The stylised and over-emphasised symbolic aspects of modern European puppets today is a creation of the modern puppeteer and his scientific outlook. Whereas the traditional European puppeteer had always adhered to realistic presentation. In contrast to this the modern enthusiasts in India, of course, are tending towards realism which is altogether a wrong step. It will not be irrelevant however, to mention here that the avant-garde European puppeteer has gone to the other extreme of making his puppet too abstract. When the Rajasthan traditional puppets were presented at the III International Festival of Puppet Theatres held in Bucharest in the year 1965, (by the Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal, Udaipur), they attracted the attention of almost all the prominent puppeteers of the world, mainly because they were presented in their original authentic style.

Dramaturgy

Like other puppet theatres of the world, the Indian puppet theatre always had its separate dramaturgy. Since mechanisation in Indian puppetry is almost nil and the complication of giving human like-movements to the puppet is minimised to its utmost the manipulator has to contribute much to the puppet to make it effective with only two or three strings. The modern puppeteer is so involved in the net-work of strings and other mechanisms of a marionette that all his attention is diverted towards the technique and the direct touch required by the puppet is totally lost. The life that percolates through the direct touch of the puppeteer to the puppet has now been replaced by mechanical and other technical methods in modern European puppetry. But in Indian puppetry this direct touch is the very life of the puppet. That is why the Rajasthan, the *Bomallattam* and *Oddissi* string puppeteers use very few strings and their length too is shortened so that the feeling of oneness with the puppet remains intact. The use of fewer threads in Indian marionettes and the non-mechanised aspect of the Andhra leather puppets may appear to a layman as elementary and undeveloped but for a puppet expert they are perfect.

Puppet styles

(1) *Rajasthan Puppets*: The marionettes which originated in Rajasthan are known as Rajasthan *Kathputli*. They are simple, stylized and symbolic string puppets. There are, at present, about 6,000 active puppeteers in Rajasthan who travel from one place to the other to entertain the villagers. Each group of Rajasthan puppeteers consist of 3 or 4 members. They perform "*Amar Singh Rathore*" a play based on the life of Amar Singh, who ruled Nagaur four hundred years ago. Even today, Raja Amar Singh is held in high esteem and is considered a near-divine personality. The play has however totally lost its thematic impact and therefore to keep the audience engaged it has to be supplemented with several unrelated acrobatic feats. The play is performed on a specially improvised stage made with cots, bamboos and a few indigenous curtains in the background.

The front proscenium known as "Taj Mahal" lends special charm to the performance. The play lasts for an-hour-and-a-half and is one of the most powerful mediums of entertainment in Indian villages today.

The Bommālattam

The *Bommālattam* puppets of Tamil Nadu too are manipulated with strings and are mainly performed in the Kumbakonam region of Southern India. They were originally performed in the Courts of the rulers of Tanjore. They are made of wood and cloth and are slightly bigger than the other marionettes of India. Originally these puppets used to perform without a stage, but now a covered stage with the manipulators hidden behind the curtain, is used. As mentioned the manipulator of *Bommālattam* puppets wears a sort of turban on his head with a ring to which the various strings connected to the different limbs of the puppets are tied. Iron rods connected with the hands of the puppet are held by the manipulator for controlling different hand-movements. The manipulator dances and jumps along with his puppet, thus giving automatic movements to it. These puppeteers also travel from village to village in search of performances to earn their livelihood. Religious functions, fairs and all other social and cultural meets are the main venue of their shows. The themes used in *Bommālattam* puppet theatre are derived mostly from the ancient Indian epics, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Bhagvat Purana*.

The Shadow Puppets of Andhra

The Andhra Shadow Puppets, popularly known as *Tholu Bommālattam* were first practiced in Maharashtra, the central west part of India, from where they migrated under patronage of Andhra Kings. The Andhra shadow puppets, as already mentioned, have their own characteristics. They are now performed and practiced mostly by the Bondiliya and Bondilikshatrya communities of the Andhra State, as their traditional hereditary art. They wander from village to village and perform throughout the night.

These puppets are made mostly of goat-leather. The method of dyeing, processing, colouring and cutting is still a secret, because these communities consider it a bad omen to teach it to others. The puppets are made translucent so that light can pass through them and a technicolour effect is produced on the curtain. The performance is held in any open space. A big tent with a cloth proscenium is erected. The back portion is completely covered so that no external light can pass through. A big oil lamp, a petromax or an electric lamp is lighted at the back for casting shadows on the curtain. The manipulators stand just near the curtain and manipulate their puppets with the help of sticks. Big drums and flutes are used for musical accompaniment, and the singing and speaking is done in the background in a very shrill manner.

The themes, generally used in the Andhra shadow puppets, are based on Indian epics and have a powerful impact on the audience. Usually an

average Indian puppet-performance lasts for about an-hour-and-a-half, but the Andhra shadow puppets have broken all the records and perform almost throughout the night.

Odissi Puppets

The *Odissi* Marionettes of the Orissa State are manipulated with strings. Their average height is not more than 1½ feet. They are not very different from Rajasthan puppets, except in the themes they enact. The themes are based mostly on the life of Krishna and Radha. Any episode from popular legends or folklore can also form a part of the story and becomes a supplementary theme to make the show more fascinating. The *Odissi* traditional puppeteers are known as *Sakhi* and *Kanhai Nats* and have many common features with *Kathputli Nats* of Rajasthan.

Odissi puppets too have stylised feature and are symbolic and fantastic. Their manipulation is in line with the dramaturgy of Indian Puppetry. The performance is on an improvised stage like that of the puppets of Rajasthan and they are taken from one place to another for the entertainment of the village folk. The *Odissi* puppets are the most unfortunate victims of the modern modes of entertainment today, and are finding it difficult to compete with them. There are about 5 persons in an *Odissi* puppet-troupe, consisting of two puppet manipulators, two singers and one drummer. These puppeteers are too conservative and have not been able to adapt at all to modern times. That is why their performance-tours are confined mostly to the State of Orissa and those too during fairs, festivals and religious functions only.

Other Styles

There are a few more varieties of Indian puppets such as the Bengal Rod Puppets the *Gulabo Sutabo* puppets of Uttar Pradesh, the *Lalua* finger puppets of Rajasthan and the *Pavai Kuthu* shadow puppets of Malabar. The Bengal puppets are confined to the temple of the Goddess Kali of Calcutta and are performed only on special religious occasions. They are hung on the top of a stick which when given jerks produces several types of movements. The *Gulabo Sutabo* puppets of U.P. never gained popularity because of their limited scope. The form has no theme and the puppets are used by a class of people whose profession is begging. They are used in the form of gloves and are made to converse with each other in a fantastic and jocular manner. It is only a one-man show and no formal stage is required for it.

Another interesting puppet style almost extinct now, is that of *Lalua* puppets. These puppets are used by the *Bhavai* dancers of Rajasthan. The *Lalua* is composed of a head and four limbs which are worn on the fingers of the manipulator. The head is worn on the middle finger and the other four limbs on the rest of the four fingers. A cloth or a kerchief is

placed in the palm of the manipulator to cover the joints of the puppet and to give the resemblance of a body. The limbs when moved in a particular manner give an effect of a crying child. Interesting monologue accompanies the movements, creating a lot of fun for the audience. The *Bhavai* is an interesting community living in the State of Rajasthan and Gujarat, whose main profession is to dance and entertain their patrons. The *Bhavai* performance does not require any raised platform and therefore the *Lalua* puppet too is performed without a stage. The performer moves round the arena to show his *Lalua* to the audience.

Another interesting style of shadow puppetry which has practically died out now is the *Pavai Kuthu* of Malabar. The puppets are cut from a piece of leather with several holes pierced all over it to pass light through them. These figures are permanently struck to a thin cloth. They do not make any movement but give very fascinating impressions of movement when the curtain is moved in a rhythmic manner, to the accompaniment of drums and songs.

The Traditional Indian Puppet Theatre, thus, is still found in its folk form and provides powerful entertainment to the masses even today. The modern puppet enthusiasts in India do not seem to derive their inspiration from this rich heritage, whereas in Europe and other countries Asian puppetry particularly that of India is looked upon as an art of great potentiality. India, therefore, enjoys a very advantageous position by having one of the oldest and most varied traditions of puppetry in the World.

A revival movement has already started in India and it is to be hoped that work in the few experimental centres will be successful in revitalising this fascinating and valuable art.