

Introduction

Between 1992 and 1998, Sangeet Natak Akademi had planned and organized a series of six workshops focused on Indian puppet theatre. Covering every type and form of puppetry in the country, these events involved puppeteers from every part of India, as well as workers in the cause of puppetry across the land. Each workshop was held in conjunction with a festival of puppet theatre, the performances serving to illuminate the discussions in the workshops. Taken together, these workshops and festivals have helped to broaden the understanding of India's varied puppetry among participants and audiences, and to identify the core issues in the practice of the art. They have also helped to create a larger, pan-Indian community of puppeteers and promoters of puppetry, facilitating exchanges in the years since then. I count it a privilege to have participated in some of these events, held in Udaipur (November 1992), Guwahati (March 1994), Udupi (November 1994), Dharmasthala (January 1996), Diamond Harbour (January 1997), and Delhi (March 1998).

Presented in this issue of *Sangeet Natak* is a record of the first workshop in the series, organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi in association with the Rajasthan Sangeet Natak Akademi and the West Zone Cultural Centre; the Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal of Udaipur provided the venue for the event. Shri Komal Kothari, who has long served the cause of Rajasthan's culture, was the Convener of the workshop, and ably steered the discussions to questions of practice of traditional puppetry in our changed times. Shri Venkat Swaminathan, who made the presentation in the workshop on behalf of the puppeteers of Tamil Nadu, also drafted the proceedings on which this issue is based.

To my mind, the interest of this record lies in the picture it supplies of the state of traditional puppetry in several locations, principally in Rajasthan where the event was held. This focus brings forward a range of issues connected with the survival of the art; and in the discussions published here, useful strategies are also indicated for accommodation of the present pressures on the art. The record thus also holds a mirror to the social and economic reality of puppetry in India, and shows up in sharp contrast the vastly different worlds that the rural and the urban puppeteer in India inhabit. Here, perhaps for the first time in print, the rural Indian puppeteer speaks; and even though his speech is rendered in another tongue, his words have the ring of truth. This is the discourse of age-old custom, in contradistinction with the rationality in the utterances of our innovative urban puppeteers recorded here.

This issue of *Sangeet Natak* does not purport to be anything like a reference work on the marionettes of India (as had originally been envisaged), but it does tell us something about the *character* of puppetry as it has been traditionally practiced in the country. In doing so, it also indicates the way this character is changing, and may be changing yet further in the years to come. An incipient realism surfaces in this documentation, manifesting in a realm of the imagination heretofore free even of the unities of time, place, and action; and as we progress through these pages, we also see some evidence of our puppetry moving in the

direction of the proscenium theatre.

A word about the preparation of the text. Shri Venkat Swaminathan's draft of the proceedings was a piece of painstaking work, based on his notes made on the spot and on recordings made by the Akademi. The transcription (and in places translation) prepared by him from these sources is detailed documentation running into more than two hundred pages. This material has been condensed into half as many pages in print, and has been rewritten in part for the sake of clarity. The edited version has been seen by most of the participants, and I am assured that nothing essential has been omitted in the condensation. In the case of participants from Rajasthan who do not read English, the relevant portions of the text have been cleared by Shri Komal Kothari; Shrimati Sudha Rajhans has supplied the information for the brief notes on these caste puppeteers appearing after the main text in this issue. Researchers who are interested in the technical details of puppetry, as well as those who wish to follow the presentations and exchanges in entirety, are referred to the video of the workshop in the archive of Sangeet Natak Akademi. The library of the Akademi holds a copy of the documentation prepared by Shri Venkat Swaminathan.

Despite every care taken in the preparation of this text, errors of fact or details cannot be ruled out; I, and the Akademi, would like to be informed of any such mistake in this record, in the interest of its further work in the field of puppetry. For any error of interpretation seen in my editorial interpolations, which are indicated by square brackets wherever possible, I alone am to blame. In the interest of preserving the spontaneity of the exchanges, I have been tolerant with the grammatical and idiomatic 'errors' of Indian English, and have not been harsh on the ramblings of our native speech. The occasional metaphorical aside in Marwari or Hindi has been rendered as well as possible in English. I regret that not all the voices heard in the various sessions have been identified in the present text.

Despite these lacunae, I trust that this issue of *Sangeet Natak* will be found useful not only by students of Indian puppet theatre, but by all those who are committed to the cause of the traditional arts. Editing the issue has been an educative experience, and I am grateful to Sangeet Natak Akademi for entrusting me with the task.

S. A. Krishnaiah
Guest Editor