

The Tarer Putul of West Bengal

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First of all, I would like to greet you all on behalf of the Paschim Banga Putul Natya Sangha, the only association of traditional puppeteers in West Bengal, which has a membership of about fifty marionette troupes, and rod and glove puppeteers as well. Puppet theatre in general is called Putul Nach in Bengal. Our string puppet is known as Tarer Putul. There are more than a hundred troupes in all, each comprising twelve to eighteen puppeteers, working with Tarer Putul in various districts of West Bengal. They perform for almost eight months a year over most of rural eastern India, and have more than sixty stories drawn from the Puranas, the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana in their repertoire. They also do plays based on folk tales, ballads of Bengal, as well as contemporary social, political, and historical events. These traditional puppeteers not only provide low-cost entertainment to the masses in the rural parts of eastern India, but, despite their own miserable condition, they also provide non-formal adult education.

The traditional string puppets of West Bengal are larger than any other marionette in India — larger than even the [new] Rajasthani marionettes. They are made of the pith of sola, a plant which grows in marshy land. The height of the puppets is about eighteen to twenty inches excluding the length of the traditional costume, which itself measures approximately twenty-eight inches. The puppets are well-made and are capable of animated movements. It is estimated that at present there are about five thousand traditional puppeteers in West Bengal, most of whom belong to the scheduled castes and tribes, and live below the poverty line; they are concentrated in the district of Nadia. They are mainly dependent on this traditional vocation for their livelihood. To improve the lot of these traditional puppeteers and to promote the cause of the traditional puppet theatre, the Paschim Banga Putul Natya Sangha was established in Nadia in 1982.

[Puppet-making demonstration follows, together with a brief exchange among participants in the workshop.]

DISCUSSION

Komal Kothari [to the Rajasthan puppeteers during the demonstration]: This [material] is sola. It is very soft and easy to cut. It is also used for making headdresses in marriage ceremonies. It is very light. The different parts of the puppet are made, and then they are joined together with Fevicol adhesive. The joining was done with *maida* in the old days. All these little stick-like things [, the pith from the stems,] are also joined with adhesive, making one big log-like mass. Now look, right in your presence, this log-like thing is being shaved and cut. Now they are making the face of the puppet ... Now they are making the torso *[picks up a puppet]*. Then the head is fixed on the torso of the puppet. Then the hands are



(Standing from left) Suresh Dutta, Komal Kothari, and Susanta Halder watch the making of a puppet from sola pith.

made. Two small portions of sola are used to make the hands. One must see how the hands are made in every tradition. These are the things we must learn.

Suresh Dutta: The body of the puppet is carved out of sola and coated with mud; then it is painted. The chief puppeteer, who manipulates the puppets, is called Master. They pitch tents for the show and charge a fee of one rupee each. The season for puppet shows has now begun.

[Dangling on a String, a video documentary on the traditional marionettes of Nadia, is screened.]

Susanta Haldar: This was telecast on the national network of Doordarshan a year ago.

Komal Kothari [to the Rajasthan puppeteers]: There are one or two things which you must note here. One, your strings are tied to your fingers. But in the case of these puppeteers of Bengal, the strings are attached to a [controlling device made of] bamboo which they hold in their hands. They also have a boli, did you see? The boli is tied to the ear. You also have your boli, but in your case one hand stops [manipulating] when the boli is used. Now that is something you can think about. There is another very important feature of performance for you to note. A little while ago these puppeteers had decided to do *Satyavan-Savitri*. But later, they changed their mind and decided to do the story of Raja Harishchandra. Now, to do *Raja Harishchandra*, they just changed the costumes of the puppets. They may not be able to [change characters] in every story, but they do have a fair number of puppets which can be used in more than one play. Puppets like Krishna or Shiva cannot be changed. But puppets representing other characters — ordinary humans, dancers, workers — can be changed by just changing costumes. You can come and see how they change the costumes [the technique is shown].

Suresh Dutta: There are quite a number of Tarer Putul troupes in West Bengal. Economically, they are in a very bad shape. They find it difficult to tour outside the State. This year, the number of troupes performing outside West Bengal has been smaller than in the past. And because of the downward trend in their fortunes, they are [also] not performing [at home] as much as they used to earlier. They are also not making advances technically. They just have the puppets and perform somehow. There are a number of Masters who can handle all sorts of dialogue and songs. They want some help to take their art forward. They [usually] travel for six months a year. But as there are [many] troupes, it is difficult for them all to get a chance to perform.

Each puppeteer is paid about a hundred or two hundred rupees [a month]. But the Master gets eight thousand to twelve thousand rupees. These troupes depend heavily on the Masters. If the Master really puts in a special effort and performs well, the troupe will prosper; otherwise, it may disintegrate. These puppeteers go to Bihar; the people there understand Bengali. They also go to Assam. But going to Assam these days is difficult. The roads are unsafe. So their area of operation is getting smaller and smaller. The Union and Haldarji want to help these puppeteers. They are trying to minimize the properties so that touring becomes a little easier. They have to carry everything in trucks and trains — the equipment, instruments, mike, tent and all.

You know, in West Bengal, a play can be performed for even a hundred nights running.

Each troupe has at least twenty stories in its repertoire. So they put up a notice saying that the troupe is at a particular place to do those twenty stories. And the same audience turns up again and again to see each one of the plays. They also issue tickets for the whole series. They may get twenty rupees from each member of the audience . . . There are some very good artists in these troupes. There are also people who are not very adept; they just move their puppets this way and that way.

I believe that if we can give our puppeteers some [new] stories, they will be able to do good work. When they see films that are running well, they start doing plays based on those stories . . .