

The Putul Nach of Assam

C. RAJKHOWA

I should first express my gratitude to all of you. I have not brought enough puppets for a proper lecture-demonstration. That is because of difficulties in transportation on account of] the political atmosphere prevailing in Assam, and also because of some technical difficulties. Still, I will try to present a picture of the traditional Assam puppetry before you.

In Assamese, the puppet play is called Putul Nach as in Bengal. Mahapurusha Shankaradeva employed it to propagate the new Vaishnavism in the fifteenth century. In his time the puppeteer was called *tatakiya bajikar*. In the homes of the rich, puppetry was also used in rituals. Afterwards, however, this art was neglected, and many traditional puppeteers gradually abandoned it. There are now about thirty-five traditional performing families in both Upper and Lower Assam.

I have been interested in this art since my boyhood. Later, I started thinking of ways to revive puppetry. I moved the Government in this matter and initiated discussions. In 1988, under [Assam's] Ministry of Culture, a Puppetry Wing was eventually established for the promotion of the art. We are now holding festivals with the help of all the traditional families; we also conduct workshops. We invited Suresh Dutta to Assam in 1988. He came to Guwahati and stayed with us for ten or fifteen days, and helped us find ways to develop our art.

I shall now show you some puppets from Assam. The family of traditional puppeteers from which I have borrowed the puppets is still active. But nobody talks about these artists . . . There is no caste barrier in Assam in regard to puppetry. Whoever is interested in puppetry can become a puppeteer. Among the traditional families, there are those that belong to the scheduled castes, there are also Brahmins and other castes.

When the Director of ICCR [Indian Council for Cultural Relations], Ms Veena Sikri, came to Guwahati, she said she had heard that the water puppets of Vietnam originated in Assam. She asked us to do some research to find out if this was true. Talking to elders and referring to old texts, we learned that there were indeed puppet shows on water in earlier times in the Upper Assam region. We have recently submitted a report to ICCR.

DISCUSSION

Suresh Dutta: I had surveyed the whole of Assam [in the late 1980s]. We came across references to water puppets not only in Assam but also in southern Bengal. Talking to people there, we learned that water puppets had indeed existed in those parts earlier; we might have been able to get some supporting texts if we had looked for them. We also came across some old puppets in museums. These puppets are made of bamboo root. It seems that they belong to ancient times. The link [with Vietnam] is through Burma. So if we continue looking for the sources of water puppets, perhaps we will reach some conclusions.

And as we get more material, perhaps we will be able to revive water puppets.

C. Rajkhowa: . . . The puppet of Ravana that I am presenting before you [*shows puppet*] was made in 1885. The puppeteer who made it was Kalikanta Burman. This puppet is made of sola pith, a material plentifully available in Lower Assam, West Bengal, and Tripura. But in Upper Assam, traditional puppets are not made of sola. There, puppets are made of bamboo root. Some puppeteers make the head in bamboo root, and the body with cloth. I have not brought any of these bamboo-root puppets, so I cannot show them to you.

Komal Kothari: How do you process the root to make puppets?

C. Rajkhowa: The roots are shaved and dried; then they become light and can be carved. There is another kind of wood in Upper Assam called *gamar*. I don't know its botanical name. Its roots grow in various shapes — shapes like animals and so on. It is available in areas bordering Nagaland.

Komal Kothari: Is it a tree or a shrub?

C. Rajkhowa: It is a tree, a big tree; it is very expensive . . . Some people make tables and chairs out of it, and some make puppets.

Komal Kothari: Show us the puppets you have one by one.

C. Rajkhowa: Yes. This is Mareech. It was also made in 1885.

G. Venu: What about its colouring? Is it also as old?

C. Rajkhowa: The puppet is an old one. We have tried to retain the old colour, though it is repainted now.

Komal Kothari: Will you please manipulate the puppet?

[*C. Rajkhowa demonstrates*]

Babulal Bhat: The boli is also from Assam?

Komal Kothari: Yes.

C. Rajkhowa: When the puppet makes its entry, instruments are played . . . [*demonstrates entry of Mareech*]. It was a human form earlier. Slowly it changes into Mayamriga.

G. Venu [admiringly]: Did you note the transformation technique?

C. Rajkhowa: Mareech takes the form of a deer and makes his exit. Then, from the other end, the deer comes in again.

Komal Kothari [pointing to the voice modulator]: What do you call this?

C. Rajkhowa: We call it *peppa*.

Komal Kothari [to the Rajasthan puppeteers]: Look, this is made of a strip of bamboo. The strip is folded and a plantain leaf is placed within the folds . . . But you have to change it quite often. It will get wet with saliva.

C. Rajkhowa: This *peppa* is used only by the *sutradhara*. In Rajasthan he is at the back of the stage, but in Assam he stands in front. He narrates the story and also delivers the speech of the puppets through the *peppa*. The language of the *sutradhara* is for some reason closer to Brajabhasha.

The puppets have three to five strings — they represent *satva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Nowadays,

though, we see three, five, seven, and sometimes even eleven strings on puppets. We also have shadow puppets in Assam.

Suresh Dutta: There are numerous *satras* established by Shankaradeva in Assam. Boys are dedicated at these *satras* at a young age and they live on there as monks. I have seen many beautiful puppets in the *satras*. The head of a *satra* gave me a puppet of Ram. It was so beautiful, all blue. During festivities in the *satras*, all the boys wear masks and they stage plays. Please tell us something about that.

C. Rajkhowa: Shankaradeva established hundreds of *satras* — monasteries — where *bhaktas*, right from their childhood, live. The guru is called *Satradhikar*. Each *satra* has around five to six hundred resident *bhaktas*. In the centre is the *namghar* or *kirtanghar*. There the *Satradhikar* presides. Monks assemble there at a certain hour and pray.

Once a year, they perform a puppet play based on the *Ramayana*, and sometimes the *Mahabharata* — *Keechakavadha* from the *Virat Parva* used to be performed in shadow form. There are [also] big puppets, sometimes ten or eleven feet high. The performer manipulates them with strings from below.

G. Venu: Only one man manipulates a puppet?

C. Rajkhowa: Yes, just one man. The puppeteer is not seen. The puppet's garments cover him. You have these big puppets in the monasteries of Majuli island. One has to obtain special permission to go there. But we have made arrangements for outsiders and tourists; the Department of Culture secures a special permit from the *Satradhikars* for visiting the *satras*. . . . The [satra] troupes mainly perform plays based on the *Ramayana* — *Jatayu Vadha*, *Ravana Vadha*, *Sita Vanavas*, *Lava-Kusha*, etc.

Now even the *Bihu* dance is performed by traditional puppeteers [*sings a Bihu song and demonstrates*]. So here are puppets doing *Bihu*. . . . In the old days, the stage was made with bamboo poles. Sometimes, in the villages, they used a charpoy, covering it with cloth. But now we have given a shape to the stage, which is ten feet in length, and eight feet high. The proscenium is about three and a half feet wide. Here, we perform with string puppets.

Komal Kothari: Will you show me the *Bihu* dance puppet? [*Inspecting it*] This has four strings; one is attached slightly below the head, at the back [of the neck]. Two are connected to the hands. The fourth . . .

A.R. Dattatreya: Is this a new puppet?

C. Rajkhowa: Yes, it is a new one.

Komal Kothari: Who makes puppets in Assam?

C. Rajkhowa: The puppeteers themselves make their puppets.

Komal Kothari: The painting is also done by them?

C. Rajkhowa: Yes.

Komal Kothari: Do you have any animal puppets?

C. Rajkhowa: Yes, I will show you the snake and deer puppets.

Komal Kothari: Is there a stage for traditional puppet shows?

C. Rajkhowa: No, there was no stage as such earlier. Puppeteers used to improvise a stage

of some sort with the materials available. They would often use charpoys.

G. Venu: How do you make a stage with charpoys?

Komal Kothari: You stand two charpoys on their heads a few feet from each other and hang a curtain between them. The puppeteer will stand behind the curtain and perform.

A voice: Do they perform a Vandana before starting their show?

C. Rajkhowa: They do a Guru Vandana. Like Mangalacharan. As for rhythm, just as you have Dholak, we have the Khol. It is slightly different from the Manipuri Khol. The Khol-player stations himself in front of the stage with the other musicians and the sutradhara. The singers and instrumentalists are called *gayan* and *bayan*.

Komal Kothari: The thirty-five traditional troupes you mentioned — do they include the satra troupes?

C. Rajkhowa: No, they are different. The satra puppeteers cannot put up shows outside their monasteries.

Komal Kothari: The puppeteers in the satras, do they make their own puppets?

C. Rajkhowa: Yes.

Komal Kothari: How does one get to be a member of a satra?

C. Rajkhowa: Only when one's parents decide to gift their son to a satra.

Komal Kothari: I see; he can't marry then.

C. Rajkhowa: If he wants to marry, he has to leave the satra.

Komal Kothari: The puppeteers in a satra — are they taught puppetry within the monastery?

C. Rajkhowa: Yes.

A voice: The puppet shows there — are they an offering to the gods?

C. Rajkhowa: Performances inside a satra are both an offering to the gods as well as entertainment for the residents of the satra — not for those outside it. Also, the performances are not for any pecuniary purpose.

Komal Kothari: Is the Vaishnavism of Assam connected with Krishna or Rama?

C. Rajkhowa: Krishna . . . the *lilas* of the child Krishna are taken up in the shadow puppet theatre.

Komal Kothari: Is that also confined to the satras?

C. Rajkhowa: No, it is performed outside the satras too.

A voice: In the puppet shows inside the satras, how many puppeteers perform and how many musicians?

C. Rajkhowa: In each group there are six or seven puppeteers. Then we have the Khol and cymbal players, and the sutradhara.

Komal Kothari: The sutradhara doesn't play the Khol?

C. Rajkhowa: No.

A voice: Is the dialogue rendered only by the sutradhara? Or do others also speak the lines?

C. Rajkhowa: The dialogue is conducted between the sutradhara and the main manipulator who uses the peppa.

A voice: What is the text used by the sutradhara?

C. Rajkhowa: There is no written text; it is improvised.

A voice: Is there a regional variation of Ramayana? What is its name?

C. Rajkhowa: Kandali Ramayana.

A.R. Dattatreya: What are the ragas used in the accompanying songs?

C. Rajkhowa: Only *satriya* ragas are used in traditional [satra] performances. Actually, these are compositions sung in Vaishnava worship, and not ragas as such.

Komal Kothari: Who sings the songs? The cymbalist or the Khol-player?

C. Rajkhowa: The Khol-player. Sometimes they sing together; sometimes it's only the Khol-player. But the songs are always begun by the sutradhara. These others follow him — the bayan and gayan.

A.R. Dattatreya: How do you close the shows?

C. Rajkhowa: The sutradhara says 'Samapti'. There is a song for it.

[*Puppets of animals are brought in.*]

Komal Kothari: See, with two strings they are manipulating a snake puppet . . . good movement!

A.R. Dattatreya: It is made of cotton and cloth?

C. Rajkhowa: Yes.

Komal Kothari: The head is made of wood, and sola is also used. Where do you put them in your shows?

C. Rajkhowa: When Sita is in exile in the forest, all these snakes come out.

Komal Kothari: Are there *bajikars* now?

C. Rajkhowa: Yes . . . in rural areas, people say, 'Here comes a *putula bajikar*'.

Babulal Bhar: Do they have homes or do they keep travelling?

C. Rajkhowa: They have their homes.

Komal Kothari: They live in their villages and go around performing — is that so?

C. Rajkhowa: Yes.

Komal Kothari: That is very interesting. It needs to be looked into. [*To the Rajasthan puppeteers*] He says they go and perform when they are invited. They are not itinerant puppeteers . . .



G. Venu shows a rare puppet.