

The Putli in Gujarat

MAHIPAT KAVI

Since the year 1963, we too have made the Kathputli our profession. When I first saw a performance of Rajasthan puppets, it must have created a great impression on me. I was only nine years old then, but the magic is still fresh in my mind.

We have chosen two fields for ourselves: puppetry for mass communication and puppetry in children's education. It has been nearly thirty years since then. I have written around a hundred and twenty-five plays and done more than sixteen hundred shows at home and abroad. I have spent a lot of money and have been through many struggles. We are still facing a lot of financial problems and will continue to face problems — that is the lot of puppeteers.

We have developed a puppet which can be used both as a string and a rod puppet. It looks like a string puppet now [*shows*]; but if you remove the upper garment and use the attachment here [*shows the rod*], then it becomes a rod puppet. Holding this rod, you turn it into a rod puppet.

DISCUSSION

Komal Kothari: What has been used to make the puppet's head?

Mahipat Kavi: It is made of papier mâché. First we make a model of the head in clay, and then prepare a mould in plaster of Paris.

Komal Kothari: Why is this black cloth draped over the puppet?

Mahipat Kavi: That relates to its function as a rod puppet.

Komal Kothari: The beard, moustache and all — what are they made of?

Mahipat Kavi: They are made of black cotton thread.

Komal Kothari: There is one thing we want to know, Mahipatbhai. You have seen our Rajasthan puppets. There are certain principles governing the making of puppets of four-footed animals. But I see that your buffalo puppet is quite differently made [and manipulated]. Why is that?

Mahipat Kavi: We first used two strings on this puppet. But the buffalo's head was moving out of control, so we added a third string. I know the Rajasthanis manage with two. I have added an extra string in some puppets only to gain more manoeuvrability. These puppets can be used both as rod and glove puppets. We have brought about these changes in our puppets keeping in view their roles and movements in our plays. But as I was saying, we have added extra strings only in some cases. With fewer strings, the puppets function better. Where there are more strings, the manipulation becomes complicated.

A voice: What urged you to use some of your puppets both as rod puppets and as string puppets?

Mahipat Kavi: Each play that we perform requires a number of puppets; there are boxes and boxes of them in our house and there is no space for us to live in. So it helps to have dual-purpose puppets. Over the years, we have acquired materials worth more than five lakh rupees. But if I take my puppets to the market, I won't even get five thousand rupees for them. Who buys puppets? So that too is a reason for making dual-function puppets . . . We insert this rod in the [string] puppet to serve as a rod puppet. You can use aluminium pipe to reduce the weight . . .

A voice: Now that you have these puppets which can be used both as string puppets and as rod puppets, where do you feel you have to use them as rod puppets and where as string puppets? Is it in terms of larger and smaller audiences? What is the deciding factor?

Mahipat Kavi: We have become professionals. So we perform in modern theatres. Yes, we use rods in theatres, where there is a large audience. Where there is a smaller audience — a birthday party, for instance, or a small gathering — we use strings. But the story enacted also changes with the technique. When we use a [string] puppet as a rod puppet, it becomes a different character; the costume too changes. As a string puppet, it is utilized differently. Much of this depends on the size of the audience.

If string puppets could be made of some other material, it would be better in terms of weight. We have this buffalo puppet here. We have stuffed its belly with cotton. But if it were made of solid wood, it would have been much heavier. If the puppets become too heavy, we can't manipulate them for the length of a whole play. We too have grown old. The lighter they are, the better.