

DISCUSSION

The Rajasthan Puppeteer on the Ground

Komal Kothari: Babulal [Bhat] has mentioned that when our puppeteers get an assignment from an institution, they are told not to stray from their tradition and introduce new features. We want to know if that is actually happening. I shall invite Harji Ram [Bhat] and ask him about his experience in work connected with family planning, or banking, or insurance, or whatever, on behalf of institutions. After all, it is institutions that give our puppeteers an opportunity to work, and to think of new ways of doing things, using their own traditional puppets . . . So, Harji Ram, have you done any work apart from *Amar Singh Rathore*; if so, what kind of work?

Harji Ram Bhat: I did something for Jan Chetna [, a Delhi-based NGO]. I had to make new puppets for a programme connected with antigenic vaccines, and then I worked in a campaign against child marriage, a savings campaign, a campaign for education . . .

Komal Kothari: All right, let us talk about your work on [the campaign promoting] antigenic vaccines. Did you make any new puppets for the campaign, or did you work with the old puppets?

Harji Ram Bhat: I slightly modified the old puppets. In some cases, I extended the length of the hands. I added legs.

Komal Kothari: And to administer the vaccines?

Harji Ram Bhat: I made a lady doctor puppet. I wrapped a white cloth around the head of another puppet and changed the puppet into a nurse. Then I created a teacher who tells the villagers about the vaccines and . . .

Komal Kothari: You took an old puppet and tied a white cloth around its head and presented it as a nurse. But you didn't create a new puppet?

Harji Ram Bhat: No.

Komal Kothari: So you used the old puppets and made them say something new. Did you have to do anything about the strings? You had to arrange them differently? [*Harji Ram Bhat's reply is not audible.*] So you had to connect the strings differently. Of course, you also had to paint the puppets. And the costumes?

Harji Ram Bhat: I had to change them. In some cases, I had to add a moustache. Where there was a babu, or a doctor, I clothed him in a suit and tie.

Komal Kothari: All right, that is what you did in the vaccination campaign. What did you do in the campaign for the Small Savings Scheme?

Harji Ram Bhat: I created two farmers.

Komal Kothari: Tell us the story you enacted.

Harji Ram Bhat: One farmer asks another farmer, 'Premji, where have you been? Where are you coming from?' The second farmer replies, 'I went to get an Indira Vikas Patra.' The first farmer asks him, 'What is that?' The second replies, 'Your money gets doubled in five and a half years if you buy this Vikas Patra.' Then he also tells the other villagers. It goes on like that.

Komal Kothari: So what you did was, you conveyed the message through dialogue. The puppet had nothing more to do than just wave its hands.

Harji Ram Bhat: No, it had to perform some action as well.

Komal Kothari: What kind of action?

Harji Ram Bhat: Dadi Pudumjee suggested that we should add legs to the puppets and make them move . . . So I tried to make the legs move.

Komal Kothari: Apart from this play, have you done anything based on a story?

Harji Ram Bhat: No.

Komal Kothari: Has it ever struck you, Harji, that you should do something new and tell a story? You have been a puppeteer all these years. Have you never felt the need to work on some story?

Harji Ram Bhat: I feel like giving up puppeteering itself.

Komal Kothari: Have you heard of some incident, some story, that you would like to tell through your puppets?

Harji Ram Bhat: Everyone wants to do something . . . I want to have a folding stage. Add lighting. But where will it all come from?

Komal Kothari: Why has it not come to you?

Harji Ram Bhat: Because I never got a programme of that kind.

Komal Kothari: Forget it. If you wait for a programme to come your way, it never will. Think of doing something without a programme coming to you.

Harji Ram Bhat: I did a Ghoomar dance. I added a *jadugar*. What else could I do?

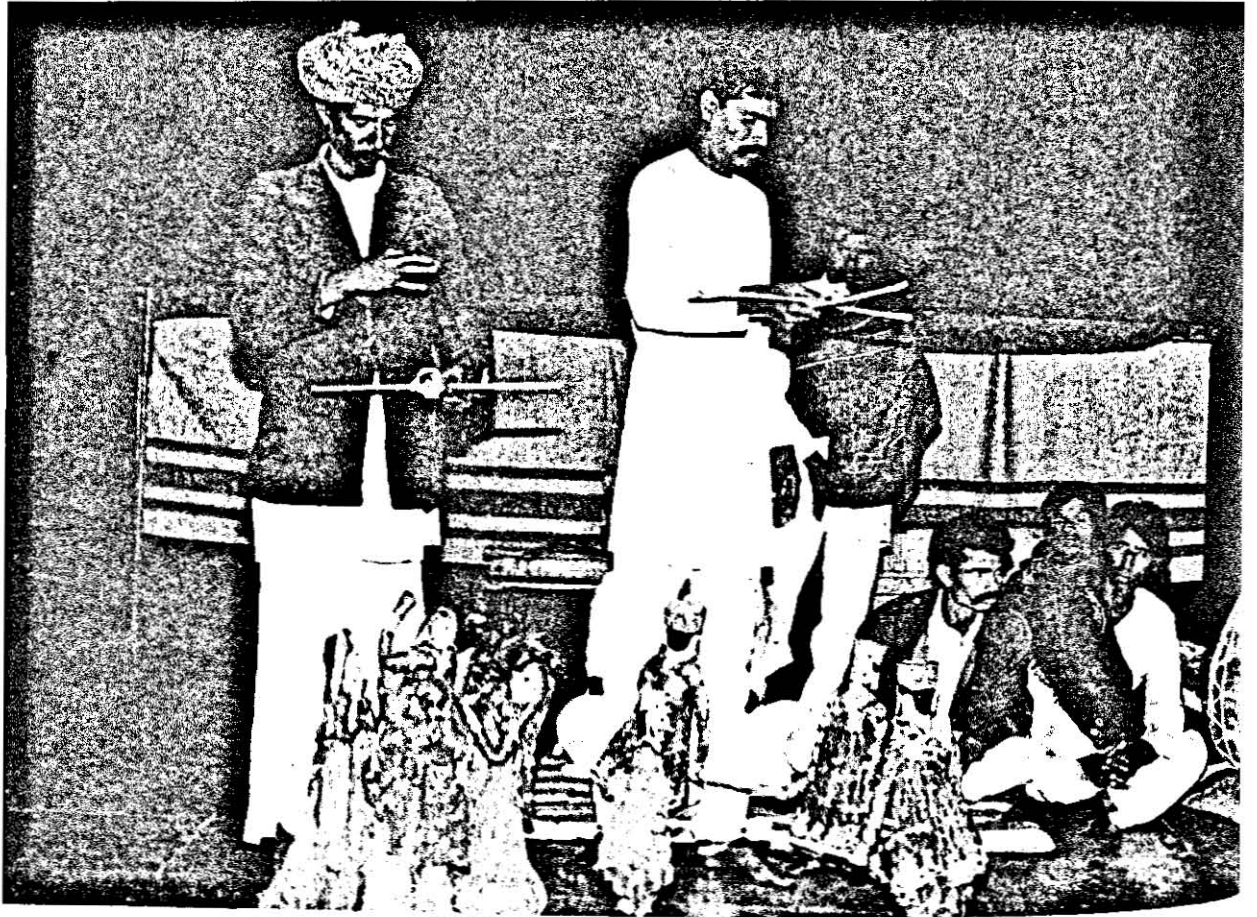
Komal Kothari: Of course you made money?

Harji Ram Bhat: No, I didn't make any money.

Komal Kothari: All right, Gulabji, you tell me what you have been doing . . .

Gulab Bhat: I have been doing *Amar Singh Rathore*. Some people say, 'Do something new.' Others say, 'Don't give up the traditional play.' I performed in some villages in Jodhpur at the time of Holi . . . [*continues in Marwari*]

Komal Kothari: He says he has started using some other musical instruments. He has also made changes in the dancer puppet! . . . Actually, though, the dancer puppet in Rajasthan has remained much the same. Only the things it carries on its head have started changing. First the puppeteers started placing a pot on the head of the puppet; then they added a second pot over the first. Sometimes, there is fire in the pot . . . Other forms of dance have also started coming into Rajasthan's puppetry . . . So, if you look into the recent work of our puppeteers, you will find that they have only been adding more and more details to their old



Gulab Bhat and Sadhu Ram Bhat show the dancers grouping.

puppets. And when they get assignments of any kind, they have been altering the details as required. [To Gulab Bhat] Have you ever worked with an institution? Has any institution ever asked you to do a play?

Gulab Bhat: I worked on a project explaining traffic rules and regulations; it was to instruct children in these rules. I made a puppet representing a teacher. I made some puppets representing schoolchildren.

Komal Kothari: Have you worked with any institution which asked you to do a story?

Gulab Bhat: I worked for a government department . . . there was something I did on the environment, and something else on insurance, and then I did a play on family planning. I was required to do something new, but I had no [new] puppets. So I changed some of the old puppets according to these new demands . . . Then I did a Rajasthani marriage. The *barat* comes, the Dhol is beaten . . .

Komal Kothari: Show them that item.

[*Demonstration follows — a dance item with two sticks in the hands of each puppet.*]

G. Venu: Is this a new item, Komalda?

Komal Kothari: Yes, it is new.

A.R. Dattatreya: We have a dance like that in Karnataka puppetry, called Kollattam. The technique is the same. But three puppets dance at a time, and they go round and round.

Komal Kothari: Folk dances all over the country move in circles. [To Gulab Bhat] Now make them dance again [*Gulab Bhat demonstrates*]. Make them reassemble [*Gulab Bhat demonstrates*]. Now, put two puppets in each group [*Gulab Bhat demonstrates*].

Now I will ask [the Rajasthan puppeteers] a question . . . You saw the Bengal puppets dancing. To make the puppets go round in circles, what did these puppeteers do?

Sadhu Ram Bhat: They turned the control around.

Komal Kothari: If you have to make your puppets go round in circles, what will you do?

Sadhu Ram Bhat: I will show you [*demonstrates*].

Komal Kothari [to the gathering]: See how they can adapt a technique from another form of puppetry . . . He will be able to add more movement, provided he works on the same principle . . . Dandiya, Ghoomar — the movement is the same. If you see the way their mind works, any kind of movement demanded in dance, they grasp it immediately and are able to reduce it to technical principles. They can go into any detail in that respect.

A participant: Yes, they are able to do anything in terms of technique. The only shortcomings are in dialogue and scripts. How can we help them in these areas of work?

A local expert: I go around with them putting up shows in villages. They still draw crowds; there is no problem. The children start asking, 'Is it a dance party?' Because these people play the Dhol very well. Once they start playing the Dhol, within fifteen minutes, the whole village collects. The roads are blocked. People stand on rooftops; you see some perched even on treetops. The children's response is terrific. I am a theatre man myself and I can say that their impact is tremendous.

Komal Kothari: Dattatreya, you have given some performances in our villages recently. What has been the response to the shows you have put up?

A.R. Dattatreya: Yesterday and the day before, on Saturday, we went to some villages. Typically, there was a *chabutra* — a raised platform — available, and there was a tree in the middle. There was no canopy or stage whatsoever. I had taken the folding stage which I showed you yesterday. When we reached the village, there was nobody around. Within ten minutes, a huge crowd had collected.

I was astonished to see there were so many people in that small village. I performed in Kannada; I don't know Hindi. I said something at the start in my pidgin Hindi — that was all the story I gave them. But they were able to follow the story from the action of the puppets, if not the dialogue. After the show, they all came to congratulate me. They were so enthusiastic and appreciative! They asked me, 'Why don't you also show this play to people in other villages?' I never expected such a response. I have seen such crowds in my own town, but there they know the story and are familiar with our work. [In this village,] the whole ground in front was filled with people. There were some lorries parked on the roadside, and people were standing on them. Some people were perched on the top of a bus. It was a very rewarding experience. I never expected it.

Komal Kothari [to the Rajasthan puppeteers]: Dattatreya's experience tells us that people are ready to accept you as a puppeteer even if they don't understand your language, and even if your story is not familiar to them. You must understand you have an art within you; even if you go to Karnataka, you will be well received. You must understand that you have talent; and if you can use that talent, you don't even have to worry about language. But you need to do your work well.

A participant: They have such a wonderful art. But so far as dialogue, script, and presentation are concerned, or new themes, what is to be done? We are prepared to work with them and help them.

Komal Kothari [interprets the suggestion for the Rajasthan puppeteers]: . . . So what should be done to help you? There are institutions concerned with the problems you face, and these institutions can render all the help you want. Not in the sense of getting you an assignment to do twenty programmes, but in terms of making available to you a script — a good story — so that you can put the techniques you already have to good use. What do you feel about this offer — where can institutions be of help to you? How can they help you further your art, remove your shortcomings such as paucity of themes? What should be done to help you in that respect? Also, tell us in which direction you want to proceed.

A Rajasthan puppeteer: Madam said we have the art. Yes, we have the art. She said we need scripts. True, but only those people who are involved in this art, those who are knowledgeable about it, can work with us. If you tell us to work with any Tom, Dick or Harry, we can't do it.

G. Venu: You are traditional artists. You have a good technique. But from the theatrical point of view, your performance is found lacking. I will give you a suggestion. Suppose we do a new production. Someone knowledgeable in puppetry will work with you. You will be given a script. You will compose the music. You will be doing the manipulation. But you

will be under somebody's direction. Will that suit you? Do you want to work along these lines?

A participant: We did attempt such a thing last year. Working with them, we felt that these puppeteers have a lot of talent and creativity. They have their own music. They have the will to work. The problem lies in giving their work a finish. They have to be trained in matters of detail for ten to fifteen days. They get totally confused — not knowing what they should do. I don't bother at all how the puppets are made or manipulated. How all the inputs can be synchronized and the show be given a good finish is the main question. Their dialogue delivery needs to be improved. If some expert could be attached to them, I feel he will be able to help them.

A.R. Dattatreya: That is what we have done in our region. In the old, archaic language, it was not possible to convey the meaning. So we changed over to the colloquial language. That is why it is possible for us to go to different places.

B.R. Bhargava: This point can be elaborated through the example of Suresh Dutta's work. For his play *Ramayana*, Suresh asked Mohit Chattopadhyaya, the well-known Bengali playwright, to do the script. He engaged the services of Tapas Sen for the lighting . . . Sureshda, would you like to say something about this?

Suresh Dutta: Why did I invite the artists you have mentioned to work on my show? Because I wanted them to contribute in various ways to make *Ramayana* a good production. The approach should be — who will do a particular piece of work best? We deal with various kinds of narrative — fantasy, religious tale, a modern story. We have to consider who will do the best script for a particular story. Who will do the lighting best — give life to the characters through his lighting. Similarly, the music.

I respect all the people who have contributed to my productions. After each show, I send them all [a token fee of] a hundred rupees. Why? Because they have worked for me; it is because of them that I am getting my money. If I don't pay them, why should they work with me? V. Balsara, my music director, tells me, 'I have worked in Bombay in big studios, but when I get a cheque from you at the end of the month, I feel gratified. Even the films I have worked in haven't given me the same satisfaction.'

Komal Kothari [in response to some inaudible questions raised by participants]: The questions you are raising, and others too raised, relate to abstract ideas. In such abstract matters, you cannot hope to get a response from our puppeteers. If you talk to them about the structure of their puppets, the interrelatedness of the structures of different puppets, or theoretical concepts and formulations, these people will not be able to contribute anything. They can't discuss such matters. So I want to bring the discussion back to a context where they can participate and talk. A question we have been discussing is of opportunities. The fact is, we have not given them any opportunity. We just talk a lot. Opportunities come to them from the banks, from companies. And they work, they break their heads on such assignments. This patronage may be good or bad. But the point is, it gives them a chance to work. Though we talk so much, can we give them the opportunities they get from LIC [Life Insurance Corporation]? Or which the banks give them? Which the Family Planning Department gives them? We must give them opportunities for the work we want them to

do.

Let us open out to them and let them open out to us. Bansi [Bhat] is present in this gathering. He has made a new puppet called Lucky Banjara. Vilas [Janhve of the West Zone Cultural Centre] too has worked with these puppeteers at the dramatic level. Shyam Mali of Udaipur has worked with them, making puppets. He is a puppeteer himself . . . Bansi has manipulated the puppets himself. What has been your experience, Bansi?

Bansi Bhat: There were nine people in that group. To manipulate Lucky Banjara, etc., not more than two people are needed, but you gave us nine people. Vilasji and Shyamji were with us too. For fifteen days we tried to work on the play. Komaldada had also come. The music was worked out, but we couldn't do the rest of the work. We thought if this play was successful, it would create a big impact.

Bhanu Bharati: Why did it not work out? Tell us why.

Komal Kothari: He said there were nine people in the group. And that created problems.

Kherati Ram Bhat: Why couldn't nine people work together? I will tell you. I am from Jaisalmer. So, after some time, I left for Jaisalmer. Bansi is from Jodhpur; he went off to Jodhpur. Another man proceeded to Jaipur.

Komal Kothari: The straight answer is — they all have their rooted interests in a town or city. They can't work outside it. Any group that is formed — the members should all belong to that city . . .

Vilasji worked with this group; he gave the puppeteers a story. Finally, they were asked to add one more entry in the play. Vilasji worked out a way to do that [difficult] entry. It is another question, though, whether it was really needed — whether it was being thrust on the puppeteers . . .

We now have a new play called *Roothi Rani*. To make the sullen queen laugh, there is a magic show, there is a dance show, and so on. It's engaging, but we haven't really created a story there. We have just given a new name to something we already had with us — the *Amar Singh Rathore* format. Then there was Lucky Banjara. In that show, so many situations were created in order to use the puppets we already had! What I mean to say is this — if you have created a Lucky Banjara, then let it remain Lucky Banjara and nothing else. Don't mix it up with anything else . . .

There is no problem in providing good voices. You can pay a few hundred rupees to a person who lends his voice. The puppeteers will manipulate the puppets and this person will speak the parts. But then, the difference between the human theatre and the puppet theatre will get smaller and smaller. One day this trend [towards specialization] will finish off the puppet theatre altogether. The puppet will no longer be alive — if you start working towards a dialogue-oriented puppet theatre. You will have to strike a balance somewhere between these two forms of theatre . . .

As for music, we have a wealth of traditional melodies and rhythms. We have to create new songs to fit the melodies. All the composition that is needed [for new plays] can easily be done within the present framework of *talas* and melodies. The puppeteers are actually doing that even now. They have dances to *dadra*, even cabaret dances . . .

Much can be done using the available resources, even with respect to new writing. Now

we have Sadhu Ram here. He composes poetry and writes plays. The dialogue you heard yesterday was written by him. If you just give the dialogue a finishing touch, it will work very well at the humorous level. So if we look for talented people like Sadhu Ram — if we get even four or five persons like him — we can train them to write scripts. We should give them material to read. We could give them some training in acting as well.

G. Venu: Yes, we can give them some sort of exposure.