

## MUTUAL RESPECT: RE-EXAMINING PUPPETRY IN INDIA

Anna Sobel



“Why would someone from the U.S. come to India to study puppetry when Indians are going abroad to study it?” I am often asked. It is not a surprising question, given that India’s rich tradition of puppetry is relatively unrecognized, even within the country itself. I originally went because of an Indian marionette show I saw at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C., in July 2002. The show had me thoroughly entertained, and the puppeteer told me afterwards that back in India he also performs shows on social issues such as AIDS using a different kind of puppet. As a professional puppeteer and activist, I had been intrigued. Research at the Library of Congress turned up a yellowed pamphlet published by the Indian government with instructions on how to use puppetry to educate people in rural villages. I wondered why puppetry occurred to the Indian government as an effective medium for reform. If Indian puppeteers could hold the attention of underprivileged adults, let alone change their behavior, I wanted to know their secrets. I applied for a Fulbright grant to find

the origins of the use of hand puppetry to create social change in India.

### Why Do Indian Adults Sit Through Puppet Shows?

There is no doubt that Indians are receptive to the medium of puppetry. I have witnessed the crowd’s approval myself as, for example, during the Gujarati troupe Jeevan Dan’s performance about nutrition in an urban slum. The audience could hardly contain its excitement as the troupe tied their curtain between two poles. Two puppets dressed in traditional Gujarati garb opened the show with the folk dance, *garba*, which everyone recognized as part of the celebrations for the upcoming holiday, *Navaratri*. The main character of the show was a businessman who kept craftily trading one vegetable for a more nutritious one. Each time he asked the audience if he had made a good deal, the adults and children alike

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ANNA SOBEL, inspired by Vermont’s Bread and Puppet Theater troop, studied Indonesian puppetry and English at Wesleyan University. From 2001-2003 she worked for Blue Sky Puppet Theatre, an educational children’s theater based in Washington, D.C. In September 2003, she went to India on a nine-month Fulbright grant to study Indian puppetry and its use as a tool for effecting social change.

would boom a positive response and would join him in singing the refrain. After the show, when the puppeteers quizzed the audience to see what they had learned from the show, the audience was able to identify correctly the kinds of benefits they could get from different vegetables, such as clear eyes from carrots.

What makes an audience of uneducated adults and children sit through a puppet show, let alone change their behavior because of it? The answer is that educational puppetry in India is not a foreign concept, although the style of hand puppets may be Western. In fact, puppetry has long held a place in the temples of India, where priests found it to be a more entertaining way of imparting long religious epics, such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, than narration alone. The puppeteer thus took on the responsibility of communicating moral obligations to the public, which, I learned, included adults as well as children. In Kerala, shadow puppeteers are known as *pulavars*, or scholars. *Pulavars* such as Ramachandra begin learning the verses of the *Ramayana* at age seven and still gets up at four every morning to review the material they include in their shows. For not only does the *pulavar* have to know by heart the local version of the *Ramayana* (known there as the *Kampa Ramayana*), but he must also learn enough commentary to stretch the story out over as many as 41 full nights. In the commentary, the *pulavar* digresses from the main story to instruct the public on a range of social issues, from Ayurvedic medicine to love and marriage. For instance, *pulavars* may take the opportunity to provide an extensive commentary on the heal-

ing properties of local herbs when they come to the scene in the *Ramayana* where Hanuman searches for an herb to heal Lakshman. Given that such educational themes have already been worked into many traditional puppet shows, contemporary shows that teach about health are not so incongruous to tradition.

Puppetry can serve as an ideal medium for communication in India for several reasons. Primarily, its ideal nature lies in its adaptability. In contrast to mass media, puppet shows are live, which allows the puppeteer the advantage of being able to adapt a show to the local ambiance. Puppeteers can draw from stories, songs, and characters that the audience may recognize. In addition, the live performance of puppetry allows for the establishment of a direct rapport between the puppeteer and the audience, allowing for the audience to be involved directly in the show. That interaction may make members of the audience more likely to remember the puppeteers' messages than if they saw the program on television, for example.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, even today, many rural areas in India simply do not have access to sources of mass media, such as television and newspapers, but puppetry can reach out to even those who are "cut off" from these resources. Perhaps it is because India has a history of using puppetry as a tool for religious education that rural people of all ages respect the art of puppetry as a symbol of Indian culture and are more open to its messages. By using this trusted medium and characters that are familiar and non-threatening, performers can gently introduce a new social message and to persuade the audience to believe in it

without coercion. Although rural villages may be conservative, a puppeteer, hidden by a curtain, can feel free to make the puppet speak about subjects that would otherwise be taboo, such as family planning and AIDS prevention. What is more, the Western style of the puppets makes the shows more attractive to Indians, not less, due to a fascination with things Western.

### **Where Did Styrofoam Hand Puppets Come From?**

There is a tradition of using what are known as glove puppets in India, but when I saw the traditional puppets in Kerala, Bengal, and Orissa, I was surprised to see that they look nothing like the hand puppets that are normally used in the genre of social awareness. The traditional puppets have very long skirts so they appear to stand on the ground when the puppeteers squat, in full view, to perform with them. In contrast, contemporary puppeteers stand behind a curtain, so their hand puppets need only a short black skirt to cover their wrists. The traditional puppets have wooden heads, whereas the modern hand puppets have styrofoam heads covered in paper maché or cloth. Both kinds of puppets might be wearing Indian dress, but their construction and manipulation technique makes it easy to distinguish between the old and new styles. The reason for this disparity, I discovered, is that the modern style was brought to India by foreign influences.

While in India, I encountered three figures that stand out as having had a significant modernizing influence on Indian puppetry. In Ahmedabad, Meher Contractor is remembered as the mother of educational puppetry.

Initially an artist, after completing her degree in art teaching in London, she went to Czechoslovakia in 1958 on a scholarship to visit schools which used puppetry.<sup>2</sup> Upon her return, Contractor brought a style of puppet making that was simple enough for children to learn. Using inexpensive materials like foam packing (known in India as “thermocool”), she taught her students to make a puppet that was lightweight and easy to manipulate. She went on to train many groups of Gujarati puppeteers who, in turn, went on to form their own troupes.

In 1958 at the International Puppetry Festival in Bucharest, Contractor met the woman she calls her guru, Dr. Marjorie Batchelder McPharlin, who encouraged Meher to use more puppetry in schools and helped her create a course in puppetry.<sup>3</sup> McPharlin, a resident of Sante Fe, New Mexico, came to India on a Fulbright grant in 1964 to promote the use of puppetry in education, which had been her interest for the previous thirty years.

While she was there, the Institute of Audio-Visual Education invited McPharlin to a series of meetings to discuss the future of puppetry and asked her to formulate a long-term strategy to expand puppetry into the field of development communication.

Then there is Mrs. Welthy Fisher, an elderly American philanthropist who built the Literacy House in Lucknow in 1956 and started a hand puppet troupe that would travel to villages to perform shows for illiterate adults in order to encourage them to learn to read.<sup>4</sup> In one such

show, which the troupe still performs, a literate man reads an illiterate man's love letter aloud to him. The audience, embarrassed that illiteracy could lead to sharing such private information, realizes the importance of reading. Additionally, if Fisher discovered any kind of social issues that she felt needed to be addressed, she would write a puppet show to address that particular issue. Some shows emphasized the need for smallpox vaccine, women's education, and family plan-

### **Puppetry has long held a place in the temples of India.**

The shows were a success; rural-based audiences would rush up to her afterwards to thank her for opening their minds to ways they could improve their lives. Following one performance about how drinking leads to domestic violence, one of Fisher's former performing partners recalls how one woman from the audience came backstage and wept as she revealed her own bruises where her husband had beaten her. Such was the power of the new kind of hand puppet.

### **Does a Modern Message Require a Western Puppet?**

I salute the many Indian people who have taken up thermocol hand puppetry to increase awareness of a social issue, and I recognize them for their success.

The trouble is, the public likes their shows so much, I fear for the old style of puppetry. The challenge facing this medium now is that even traditional puppeteers think they have to utilize Western-style hand

puppets if they want to do an educational show. I don't argue that traditional puppeteers should continue doing the same old show the same old way, but I respect Indian puppetry and believe that any adaptation of the form for today's audience should be done with care. Elements of Indian puppets such as costumes have meaning and reflect years of tradition; it would be a mistake to make any change without good reason.

For example, Andhra Pradesh's last remaining troupe of *koya bommalata*, or "large wooden marionettes," have adopted Western dress. It is traditional for the puppeteers to add a new sari on top of the old one every year to show the puppet's age, and the puppeteers have kept up that tradition. But the lavishly decorated puppets now don baseball caps to perform a contemporary story about how Hyderabad was constructed. "It's time to change," the puppeteers note.<sup>5</sup> To my eye, the incongruous baseball caps look ridiculous combined with the rich silk saris. This cheap addition is so obviously foreign to the art form that it is jarring. The troupe explained that this stylistic choice was made because they thought a Western look would generate more money at their performances. Before the puppeteers added new hats and new stories, they had few opportunities to take their puppets out of their storage boxes. Now, they claim, villagers would rather come to see a puppet show than a movie. For the performers, any show is better than no show, but I think modern elements could be more tastefully incorporated.

There are some traditional puppeteers who are more hesitant to

use their traditional-style puppets to promote “modern” ideas. The renowned puppeteer of Bangalore, Dattatreya Aralikatte (known as “Datta”), usually performs his shows using a traditional Karnatic style of wooden marionette with a loop around the puppeteer’s head to support the weight. When members of a family planning program approached him to perform a show, he switched to a Western style of hand puppet, as he thought it would be too difficult to adapt the traditional puppets to the progressive message of family planning. “By doing that, we’ll be hampering the traditionality of the puppets,” he observes. In this regard Datta’s sentiments were a departure from those of the Andhra Pradesh puppeteers I had met.

When he performs with his traditional marionettes, Datta has no problem drawing a crowd. I found his show to be as much fun as an amusement park ride, and the rest of the audience seemed to concur. While Datta wants to preserve tradition, that doesn’t mean his shows lack innovation. He tells the love story of Shiva and Parvati with pizzazz. During the *rakshasa* Taraksura’s unflappable meditation on Shiva, Datta dashes furiously around his puppeteers spraying water out of a perforated plastic bottle, scattering dry leaves and flickering lights for a storm. Nor is he afraid to play with fire. At the opening, he has the actual marionette perform *aarti* using lit candles on a brass holder wired into both the puppet’s hands. At the gods’ wedding, Brahmin puppets spoon real *ghee* onto a flaming sacred fire. And best of all, Datta makes use of fireworks. These tricks may seem simple, but combined

with a pre-recorded sound track, hands that can pick up objects by means of a trigger control mechanism, and excellent manipulation skills, the result is magical. At the end of the show, the audience excitedly flooded backstage to see how it all worked.

Datta believes that it is essential to put on a show that is as attractive as possible because puppeteers have to compete with the lure of television. “We have to run with the modern world without giving up tradition,” he said. I appreciate the organic way Datta has incorporated modern elements in his traditional work. By putting on an unforgettable live show, a traditional tale with uniquely Indian special effects, I believe he has succeeded in embodying a Gandhian ideal of modernization without Westernization.

### Final Reflections

Indian puppetry is an art form that should be respected. In 1971, Sangeet Natak Akademy, an organization founded by the government to document and preserve Indian puppetry, discovered the Orissan form of shadow puppetry, *ravana chaya*, in a remote village. The only puppeteer who still practiced the art form, Kathinanda Das, was reported as being “one of the most neglected persons in the village” and when the villagers saw the *Sangeet Natak* crew filming, photographing, and tape-recording his performance “they were amazed.” What amazes me is how a village with such a strong tradition of puppetry, that is centuries-old, can think it has nothing special to offer. Equally distressing was how during my travels throughout India, was that is was I who was asked to teach and share

what I know about puppetry, even though I have only been in this field for several years, whereas traditional Indian puppeteers who have focused their lives on perfecting their art form are rarely given the same level of respect. Indeed, I was surprised that many people I met did not value India's puppetry the way Westerners do.

Most Indians are generally only familiar with *kathputli*, the Rajasthani style of puppets, since those puppeteers are nomadic and perform in many states throughout India. Their repertoire is generally limited to one show about a *raja* called Amar Singh Rathore, of which the quality can admittedly vary. Thus Indians, having seen one show, tend to dismiss the whole art form. Yet I laughed my heart out when I first saw *kathputli* performed by an accomplished Rajasthani puppeteer by the name of Puran Bhatt at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington D.C. Mr. Bhatt leads annual workshops in Udaipur and in France which are both eagerly attended by non-Indians. But for Puran, gaining respect abroad has "not led to an improvement in [his] environment or quality of life"<sup>8</sup> at home. He finds that his art is much less appreciated where he lives in Delhi's Kathputli Colony at Shadipur Depot, a slum area occupied by puppeteers from Rajasthan. Health conditions there are terrible, with sick children covered with flies wandering across open gutters. The dwellings serve as makeshift factories, as many of the puppeteers have turned to woodcarving or making puppets for sale, if they have not yet turned to drinking. Babu Lal Bhatt, another Kathputli Colony resident, said, "Artists are like cultural ambassadors. In other coun-

tries like Russia, France, Canada, etc., they are being treated as very important persons. This sense of respect is totally absent in our country. We also want to be loved and respected."<sup>9</sup> It is time for the Indian government and its citizens to start treating puppeteers as artists and not as puppet-making machines. That means paying them fairly, not only for creating puppets, but also for putting on performances. With decent payment for puppet shows and a boost in self-respect, traditional puppeteers can live with dignity.

As I traveled through India meeting puppeteers, I met many who impressed me with their talent and artistic skill. As Dattatreya's example proves, a good Indian puppet show can attract audiences by incorporating modern elements that are entirely Indian. Performing arts are not static, and traditional puppeteers know they must change with the times or relegate their puppets to a museum, but progress does not require that they ape the West. The role of puppets in teaching issues such as health and morals has deep roots in India, so I do not believe one has to switch to a Western style of puppet to tackle a modern message of social awareness. I've found that people love a new story, and a modern message can be sufficient to attract an audience without Westernizing the puppets' appearance. The puppets can be modernized in other ways, with new controls that allow them to pick up objects or move in ways not previously possible. Another tactic would be to draw from India's treasury of instructive tales, including not only *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, but the animal fables of the *Panchatantra*, as some puppet theatres are already

doing, and highlight the morals of the stories while introducing a social theme.

If we fail to encourage multicultural arts education in America, through activities like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, international public health and other social awareness organizations may never become aware of the educative power that traditional puppetry might afford them in rural India. Beyond its educational or entertainment value, traditional Indian puppeteering is a livelihood for a rapidly-dwindling group of artists who, as the residents of Kathputhli Colony point out, should be afforded them more respect for their craft. This respect can only come through greater recognition, maybe even by the South Asian American community, that puppeteering is as worthy a craft as painting or dance, maybe even moreso due to its powerful ability to carry a social message to those who otherwise would be forgotten by the mass media culture.

Cultural heritage is an intangible but fundamental part of any community, and, as I found through my research and travels, an ancient part of Indian culture. To allow traditional forms and artists to get "squeezed out" by Western modes of puppeteering, without at least trying to learn and understand their traditional cultural value, would be tragically irresponsible. During my visit, I did my best to demonstrate my respect for Indian puppeteers and thoroughly document the puppetry I witnessed. In this way I tried to do my part to re-balance the scale of respect that seems right now to be tilted so strongly toward Western expertise, and to uncover, for Indians and non-Indians alike the rare jewel that is Indian tradi-

tional puppetry. I hope my admiration helped Indian puppeteers realize that their art form is every bit as worthwhile as Western puppetry.



1. Usha Rani. *Folk Media for Development*. Bangalore: Karnataka Book Publishers, 1996.
2. Dadi Pudumjee. "In Memory of a Great: Meher Rustom Contractor." *National Puppet Theatre Festival*, Calcutta, 1998.
3. Meher Contractor. *Creative Drama in Education*, National Book Trust, India, 1984.
4. Ed. Mahendrajit Singh, J.C. Mathur, et. al. *Abhinandan*. Lucknow: *Literacy House*, 1980.
5. Koya Bommalata Troupe, interview at the Puppet Resource Center, *Literacy House*, Hyderabad, Jan. 20, 2004
6. Interview with Dattatreya Aralikatte at his home, Bangalore, Jan 27, 2004
7. *Sangeet Natak Akademy Journal*, June 1975.
8. *National Theatre Festival*, Calcutta 1998.
9. *National Capitol Region Tribune*, April 1, 2003