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# Art of Puppetry: Exploring Its Intangible and Tangible Heritage and Musealization

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**Abstract:** *In ancient India, puppetry was a sacred storytelling method where the sutradhar or puppeteer would manipulate puppets to evocate the Gods. Puppetry, as a popular communication method, is used to convey puranic stories to the devotees in order to fulfil the phalashruti aspect of puranas. Puppetry in India consists of four basic styles namely, the marionette, rod puppetry, glove puppetry and shadow puppetry. The crafting of a shadow puppet requires hand processed leather as indicated by Tholu Bommallata of Andhra Pradesh, where leather is tinted with coloured pigments to produce an ethereal coloured light on the screen. The puppets in Ravana Chhaya, the shadow puppetry of Odisha, are made by intricately cutting thicker hides and are uncoloured. Though Ravanchhaya, evolved through space, time and as per the likes and choices of the audience, still struggles to keep its vernacular style alive. Museums as the social institutions in the service of the society can act as the vehicle for the preservation, promotion and sustainability of the tangible puppets and the intangible art form of puppetry and the present paper is an effort to deliberate the same. This paper discusses the ways and means by which a museum could support the crafting of the leather puppets and traditional puppetry styles; promotion through museum exhibitions; creating awareness through educational outreach programmes and preservation of the puppets through appropriate conservation strategies.*

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**Keywords:** Puppetry, Phalashruti, Tholu Bomallata, Ravana Chhaya, Oral Traditions, Musealization, Conservation

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## Introduction

The art of puppetry, universally, is a storytelling method in which a puppeteer utilizes articulated dolls or puppets as the characters to re-enact stories from popular mythologies, historical events or everyday lives to entertain an inquisitive crowd. The art of puppetry is a type of theatre which combines narration or storytelling, acting, mimicry, singing and even some elements of dance, all done by the puppets (Proschan 1981). The inanimate puppets come to life when the puppeteer maneuvers the puppets to mimic everyday actions, enthralling the audience of various age groups. The puppeteer or the performer has to imbibe the regular human or animal behaviour, movement, characteristics and the personality of the character being portrayed through

the puppet yet keeping the comical aspect alive, making the puppet recognizable to the audience yet unique (Proschan 1981). A puppetry performance can have some comic relief, moral lessons, awe inspiring incidents, or imaginative stories to engage its audience without requiring a major theatre or large resource.

As the common belief goes, the puppetry began as a “one man show”, wherein a single puppeteer would maneuver the puppets and narrate the story or speak out the dialogues. In due course of time, puppetry became intricate, and a small troupe of artists (musicians, singers and actors) and craftsmen (painters and carpenters) contributed their skills to give puppetry an overall theatric performance. The puppeteers have no direct connection with the audience, and it is always through the puppets. A puppeteer tries to engage the puppet with the audience and tries to gimmick the actions which cannot be played by human actors, such as decapitation, a popular trick with puppeteers (Proschan 1981).

### Tracing the Practice

Puppetry is practiced throughout the world and in some countries, puppetry was a popular public amusement in which the socio-political thoughts were represented. To cite an example at this juncture, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century in England, the parliament allowed puppetry as the only civic entertainment (Currell 1974) because the Puritan led English civil war (1642-1651) tolerated no human-based entertainment except the use of puppets. It is justifiable to say that the art of puppetry reflects the culture of the puppeteer’s country or community, for example, in Vietnamese water puppetry called as ‘*Mua roi nuoc*’, meaning puppets that dance on water, waterbodies are used as a puppetry stage (Foley 2001) such as a pond, pool or a tank for travelling puppeteers. The Vietnamese water puppetry started as an entertainment for the farmers harvesting rice in the paddy fields, the knee-deep water would form a stage while a temporary pagoda would hide the puppeteers behind the screen, both water and rice form an integral part of the Vietnamese culture, where water symbolizes rebirth and consumption of rice is vital in various ritual celebrations (Hyde 2018).

In India, the art of puppetry goes back to thousands of years when it was forbidden for a person to enact the Godly characters of the epics (Currell 1974), the puppeteer or ‘*sutradhar*’, literally the string holder, would play out the stories through the puppets. In Sanskrit theatre the central character, host or narrator of the play was called as *sutradhar*, harping its ancient tradition of puppetry.

In *Mahabharata*, sage Ved Vyas philosophically refers to puppetry by comparing the relationship between God and human, where God as the puppeteer pulls the strings of puppet, the human (Sarma and Singh 2010). Scholars of ancient India namely, Panini (Sanskrit grammarian of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and Patanjali (yoga guru of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) also mention about puppetry in their works (Kennedy 2005). Puppetry has been mentioned in *Silpadaikaram*, the Tamil classic literature, written between 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE and 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE (Swaminathan 2004).

## **The Intangibility and the Oral Tradition**

The facets of intangible cultural heritage namely festivals, traditional practices, folklore, songs and dances are very well depicted in puppetry which personifies the role of intangible heritage interwoven in the cultural facet of Indian society. The traditional or folk puppeteers use a significant part of epics and Puranas as stories or themes for the puppetry performance. Lutgendorf (1991) and Orsini (2015) have looked into the storytelling or *Katha* tradition of North India and have uncovered some interesting facts related to the retelling of the epics. In traditional Indian puppetry, the retelling of the stories from the epics or Puranas results in *phalashruti* (means “fruit of listening”). When someone undertakes activities such as listening or reciting Puranas, copying the text or making others do so, both the doer and the observer can imbibe the virtues of the Purana (Lutgendorf 1991; Orsini 2015) provided conducted with undivided attention. The puppeteer by administering the movements of puppets tries to direct the fleeting attention of the audience to focus on the puranic story. By doing so, all those who participated in the performance as an observer or performer receive the emanating benefits of the holy lore or poems. Orsini (2015) writes about the *phalashruti* stanza in Isaradas’s *satyavatikatha*, that listening to or orating the *katha* is equivalent to going on a pilgrimage or providing alms to the brahmins, such is the efficacy of listening to Puranas.

Apart from reaping the benefits of *phalashruti* action by the doer or the observer, Orsini (2015) further tried to explore the probable reasons why the puppeteers retell the Puranas? Generally, the audience is familiar with the epics either through texts or through oral traditions passed on by families or social and religious institutions. By taking advantage of the backdrop, the puppeteer anchors the performance around the known stories of the epics which add value and intensity to the performance by creating wider attention and acceptance (Orsini 2015). The acceptance and appreciation for the puppeteer’s art performance by the audience, extend a positive signal towards the possible continuity of support and patronage from the society, which plays a significant role in the sustainability of the art and the artist. To gain continuous local support, a puppeteer sometimes includes the local patrons or the audience in the stories as characters. The story narrations incorporate acts of bravery conducted by the patron, anyone from the audience or by their ancestors. This simple tactic instils a sense of pride and dignity for the entire community and thereby continues to hold the support and acceptance which in turn leads to the sustainability of the art and craft. This dimension is very much intrinsic to the *Kathputli* puppeteers of Rajasthan.

## **The Craft and Performing Art**

The puppets as three-dimensional miniaturized caricature of humans, animals, mythical creatures, or figures are used for telling stories, both fictional and real. The design of the puppet can contribute towards the success of puppetry as an art performance. The art of puppetry encompasses many facets, while designing and crafting of the puppet is one among them. In India, the regional puppeteers have

adopted an array of techniques and use various materials to create the puppets. The appearance, morphology and structure of the puppets generally do not comply to the aesthetics of classical art applied on stone or metal sculptures. In India, we can find puppets made of locally and easily available materials namely, wood, cloth, leather, and papier-Mache. These above-mentioned malleable materials require a puppeteer with skilled hands, keen perception, and innovation to prominently portray the characters on the puppets (Proschan 1981).

In *Tholu Bommalatta*, the shadow puppetry of Andhra Pradesh, the puppets are made out of dried goat skin, a thin and translucent variety of leather, which permits the light provided behind the puppets to pass through during the performance (Sorensen 1975). The light catches the shades of the puppets, which are tinted with coloured pigments, and produces a coloured shadow on the front white screen producing an ethereal ambience and capturing the attention of the audience by enabling them to enjoy the immersive experience of traversing through the tales of the Gods. In *Tholu Bommalatta* the puppets are large, up to six feet in height but light in weight and translucent and the narration is based on classical literature such as the Sanskrit epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata (Bradford 2005). The puppets should have an essence of the characters that the puppeteer is aiming to show through the performance.

The crafting of the leather puppets, from the tanning of hides to cutting and decoration of the puppets, is done by the puppeteers for generations. Sudhakarudu (1979) has documented the process of making *tholu bommallata* and has elucidated the craft in detail. *Tholu bommallata* puppeteering community continued the age-old traditional practice used by their ancestors, the hide is dipped in hot water to loosen the hair follicles so as to scrape it off along with dirt and grime from the exterior part of the hide. The hide is rinsed with hot water, followed by drying and scrapping of the inside flesh. The scraping is continued with a wooden scrapper until the hide becomes uniformly thin and translucent. The cleaned hide is stretched and nailed on a soft levelled gunny mat to prevent wrinkling, covered with a thin white cloth to avoid direct sunlight. The final product looks like a parchment of amber coloured with a smooth surface to draw lines with charcoal easily. The design of the puppets is inspired by *kalamakari* paintings, a traditional Indian painting style of Andhra Pradesh where the facial features are emphasized. Lines are drawn on the surface of the puppet to provide details such as ornaments, clothes and weapons. The various limbs of the puppets are cut out with scissors and punched with holes to mimic jewels, the shoulders, elbows, wrist, palms, thighs, knees and feet are tied to the torso with knotted strings enabling the articulation of the puppets during the performance (Figure 1). The puppets in *Tholu Bommalatta* are kept in a Ganiyam, a lidded basket made of thick bamboo strips, there is no information if this traditional storage method was effective in preservation of the puppets (Sudhakarudu 1979).

The puppets in *Ravana Chhaya* were traditionally made of deer hides and after independence as per the wildlife protection act and other legislations, the puppeteers

have substituted deer hide with mountain goat leather. The puppets of *Ravanchhaya* are not tinted or painted like *Tholu Bommalata* of Andhra Pradesh but maintained the original leather colour (Figure 2) and the reason for the same is not known. However, the puppeteers cut the two-dimensional puppets with intricate designs on the body to let the light pass through, increasing the dramatic effect on the white cloth screen in front of the audience. These puppets are unarticulated, meaning no joints; their size varies from twenty to sixty centimetres (Sarma and Singh 2010); are generally stiff, mounted on a bamboo pole or stick, glued to each other with limited movements.



Figure 1: Lord Rama Puppet of *Tholu Bommalata* (Courtesy: The India Craft House)



Figure 2: A Ravana Puppet of *Ravana Chhaya* (Courtesy: The Museu do Oriente, Lisbon, Portugal and Wikimedia Commons)

Puppetry as a performing art, includes the regulation of the puppet by using strings, rods or gloves, the storytelling method such as the use of dialogues, narration or songs in sequence with musical accompaniment and light and shadow (wherever possible). In traditional folk puppetry the narration or dialogues of the characters are vocalized by one to two people in the troupe. The troupe remain small in size due to its peripatetic nature of travel from place to place and have minimal financial support (Proschan 1981). The puppeteers, apart from using their natural voice, alter their speech or use an instrument to distort their voice to vocalize the numerous puppets in a performance (Proschan 1981). In India the Rajasthani kathputli puppeteers use a

mouth instrument called as '*boli*' to alter their speech, many use whistles, swazzles, reeds of plants and pitos (an Italian voice distorting instrument) to achieve the goals of vocalizing the puppets. These mouth instruments enable the puppeteer to produce various abstract voices. In *kathputli*, the '*boli*' is held between the front teeth which limits the movement of the jaw and lip but emanates a vibration in the noise coming from the larynx (Proschan 1981). This provides the puppets with a unique buzzing voice which is different from normal human speech. The inexplicable phonetics is abridged with the gestures of the puppets manipulated by the puppeteer to create the visual effect.

### **The *Ravana Chhaya***

Shadow puppetry is prevalent in the southern and southeastern states of India namely Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka and Odisha. In Odisha, the art of shadow puppetry is called *Ravana Chhaya* or the shadow of Ravan, a villain from the epic Ramayana. The Bhat community of Odisha were the traditional performers of *Ravana Chhaya* and in the past had received the patronage of the feudal kings through land grants (Sarma and Singh 2010). The narration in *Ravana Chhaya* is taken from a regional version of the epic *Ramayana* called as *Bichitra Ramayana*, meaning the bizarre or peculiar story of Ram, written by Biswanath Khuntia, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Odiya poet (Dash 2020). It is unconventional that the puppeteers named the shadow puppetry after the villain rather than the hero or protagonist, Lord Ram. As per popular belief, Lord Ram is considered as the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who is the metaphysical force of the universe and the source of light and shadowless. Also, Lord Ram is seraphic and illuminated and cannot be used to cast a shadow (Sarma and Singh 2010). An interesting folk tale connected with the name *Ravana Chhaya*, reflects the individual interaction between Sita and Ravan. To keep up the promise of matrimonial sanctity, Sita never had laid eyes upon Ravana, after she was abducted by him. Therefore, Sita always looked at the shadow of Ravana during conversations. The *Ravana Chhaya*, the shadow puppetry is a unique way of reminding Sita's chastity to the audience.

Pani (1990) mentions the use of 700 puppets in one *Ravana Chhaya* performance wherein one character is represented in 6 to 7 puppets depicting varying postures. Pani further notes that, to achieve the cinematographic effect for the performance, the sets are also specifically carved for specific scenes thereby increasing the immersive quality of the play. To demonstrate the abduction of Sita, the scene of the forest is usually created with the puppets carved as trees, animals, rivers, mountains, and huts, and as the play proceeds the setting changes with new puppets to appropriate the scene (Figure 3).

The performance is accompanied by vernacular musicians and singers sitting ahead of the screen or further back of the stage playing Odiya folk musical instruments namely, *khanjani* (musical percussion instrument), *daskathia* (a pair of hard wood pieces clashed together), *ginni* (small cymbals) and *mridangam* (drum) (Dash 2020) and the singer recite the poem from the *Bichitra Ramayana* (Dash 2020). Earlier this was a 21-day

affair but of late reduced to an hour. The traditional art performances have evolved through space and time also kept improvising by incorporating new themes as per the needs of the audience. *Ravana Chhaya* has unfolded itself differently over the time and to illustrate the same with an example, Ravan Chhaya Natya Sansada, an organization which supports Ravana Chhaya puppetry shows, has a website and based on the needs of the modern audience, supports the curated performances on contemporary themes such as the menace of wine addiction, *swachh Bharat Abhiyan* and Gandhiji's salt satyagraha. The modern trend highlights that the theme of the stories in *Ravana Chhaya*, no longer remains as a pursuit of *phalashruti* alone. The present puppeteers of Ravan Chhaya prefer to reach out to a broader audience and have understood to appropriate the theme, content and context as per the present-day to keep the relevance of the art and the performance.



Figure 3: *Ravana Chhaya* Performance (Courtesy: Sankara, Blog, Be on the Road)

Contemporary Indian puppeteers like Shri Dadi D. Pudumjee, a Padma Shree award winner, uses life size or larger than human scale puppets along with various props such as daily use objects like umbrellas, shoes, gloves or its enlarged versions to tell his stories (Pudumjee et al. 2006), Padmini Rangarajaran, the founder of Sphoorthi Theatre for Educational Puppetry, Art and Craft (STEPARC) in Hyderabad chooses unconventional themes such as everyday electronic waste (Orenstein Claudia, 2015) both of them effectively convey messages on modern-day issues through puppeteering.

## Musealization of Puppetry

Due to modernization, industrialization and technological innovations, the majority of the traditional art forms in India are on the verge of extinction. The narration during the puppetry performance is an active part of the art and therefore, the choice of and use of proper language is very important. Also, the mannerism of the puppet, the costumes and the narrative story become relatable to the audience only when the environment portrayed in the puppetry performance is convincing, communicative and understandable. For an uninformed audience, the puppeteer alone cannot interpret the art. The small peripatetic troupe of puppeteers with meagre financial resources and minimal interpretative skill could not match the possibilities of outreach and awareness that a museum could do to promote and propagate the puppetry and save the material heritage. Museums are interactive spaces where material culture interacts with the public to make the cultural experience of the visitor educative and entertaining, whereas, puppetry is fundamentally community-based interactivity (Sherzer and Sherzer 1987).

To revitalize puppetry and make it relevant and sustainable, museums, galleries, interpretation centres and other cultural institutions play a vital role in making this traditional art survive by showcasing puppets and every aspect of puppetry, interpreting the structured narration of the art form, and generating awareness through programs. The visitor to the museum can become an informed audience and in turn, will be in a position to correlate intangible and tangible dimensions of the puppetry. Museums could showcase the material culture by acquiring materials associated with the puppetry, folk stories and oral traditions associated with it. A museum with a display of puppets could encompass all dimensions of the art such as the origin of the puppetry, narration, storyline, mannerism of the puppets, the folklore, the oral history associated with the craft, materials used in puppet making, musical instruments associated with the performance, design of the set and the information about the community of puppeteers and so forth. To cite an example, British Museum held a well-received exhibition of shadow puppets from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, belonging to Raffles Collection (assigned to 1800 CE) from September 2016-January 2017 (Figure 4).

By developing effective communication and properly interpreted exhibits, appropriate use of digital applications to have interactive kiosk, augmented realities along with live demonstrations and performances in museums, the outreach will be immense in contributing to the sustainability of the art. Puppetry as a storytelling method could easily explain contemporary relevant themes for the benefit of the society.

Among the many measures, a museum could adopt or apply for attracting the visitor, the engagement of the visitor to the object is highly significant. Many museums around the world have exhibits based on '*sensescape*' surfaces, where the exhibit has instructions for visitors as 'Please touch' or 'Please sit' signs (Classen and Howes 2006). The traditional museum practice of *don't touch* when changed to "*please do touch*" will



provide the visitor with an opportunity to get closer to the object. The museums can develop puppet exhibits on the idea of *sensescape* which will allow the visitors to touch and feel the puppets. As touch and feel could make a tremendous impact on the visitor, this will unknot the nuances of meanings and understanding of the puppet and the puppetry. Chances of immersive interaction and interpretation will help in increasing the patronage for the art, helping the puppeteers continue the tradition without any hindrance.



Figure 4: Exhibition of Shadow Puppets (Courtesy: British Museum)

All segments of the society from the school going children to the senior citizens could make use of the museum collection and the display to have edutainment. Education activities, such as conduction of workshops pertaining to the art, craft and performance of puppetry, talks pertaining to the folk, historic, economic and social significance; puppetry demonstration to understand the performance, craft, the maker and the performer behind it can create impetus among visitors. Collaborative and co-curative efforts between the museums and the puppeteers can provide the puppeteers with an opportunity to increase awareness about their practice among the museum visitors. The variety of experiences provided by the museums can boost this struggling folk art form into a more popular, enjoyable, understandable, sustainable and revenue generative one. The education department of museums (if any) through its outreach

programmes can liaison with schools and various organizations to increase the puppetry audience. Museums can act as the space for visitor interaction and dialogue with the puppeteer as a craftsman and as an artist. For the special segment of the society, i.e., people with physical disabilities, visual impairment, and mental health issues, the museum could create customized programmes related to puppetry so as to make them inclusive and provide them also a chance to enjoy the same.

The preservation, upkeep, maintenance and storing of the leather puppets is a challenging task. Being organic in nature, the puppets can deteriorate due to the effect of the environment and its use. Skin products, like leather puppets, are hygroscopic and acidic in nature and easily get deteriorated by microbic infestation, especially by mould, fungi and bacteria. If the relative humidity goes above 60% and the temperature above 30 degrees Celsius, there is the possibility of the leather puppet releasing organic acids and enzymes which in turn will cause deterioration (National Parks and Services 1996). The traditional shadow puppeteers of India being perennial travellers, visiting various villages or towns throughout the year, the hygroscopic nature of leather puppets stimulates the absorption of atmospheric moisture resulting in distortion of its morphology and mould growth. Most of the shadow puppets, during a performance, are exposed to light continuously through a traditional oil lamp or an incandescent bulb, this light is more than 50 lux and contains traces of UV rays, the heat of high intensity light may produce a warping effect, fade the leather and make it brittle (Soest et al. 1984). The appropriate conditions in a museum gallery display or in storage space could arrest the above-mentioned deterioration. The temperature within a museum is maintained at 18 to 22 degrees Celsius, Relative Humidity of 30-45% and the air is free of suspended particulate matter, these conditions prevent the growth of micro-organisms (Agrawal 1993). The museums maintain a UV Filtered light source below 50 lux for all organic materials which prevent the problem of fading, embrittlement and warping.

A traditional or folk shadow puppeteer would normally handle the leather puppets bare hand and may store it in a metal box, increasing the chances of the leather puppet catching dirt, dust, and rust. Museums could help the puppeteers by providing guidelines to practice, like following basic preservation measures by using a dry, lint-free, non-acidic, cotton glove which will prohibit the leather puppet from coming in contact with oil, dust and grime of human fingers so as to handle and preserve their puppets. The museum could offer the best care of these art objects to increase the longevity and thereby the puppets can be passed on to the successive generations. The museums could make provisions for providing the proper storage facilities for the puppets by providing proper mount and cover to support and maintain the shape, morphology and the material thereby extending the longevity of the puppets.

## **Conclusion**

The traditional Indian puppetry is changing with the needs of the audience, however, still continues to retain the regional styles and diversity alive and are rich examples of

intangible heritage through the tangible puppets. Of late, the traditional puppeteers are facing survival threats in this modern digital entertainment era and also competition from contemporary puppeteering artists. The cosmopolitan city audience may not take up the *phalashruti* aspect of the Puranas seriously which is the intrinsic part of making folk or traditional puppetry more spiritually inclined. The present audience is more interested in current issues such as global warming, electronic waste, addiction in juveniles, etc. and finds the contemporary puppeteers more relevant. In this current scenario, proper documentation, preservation of the traditional performances and their sustainability is a responsibility of all and the museums could play a vital role. Sangeet Natak Academy's endeavours to protect the art of puppetry through its Puppetry Festivals, Preservation and Promotion of Indian Puppetry and occasional puppetry exhibitions (Snodgrass 2002) are worth mentioning efforts for the sustainability of the art and craft of puppetry. As far as traditional Indian puppetry is concerned, the materials used, the stories, the stylistic approach and even the cinematography of the play have been continued as practised by the puppeteer's forefathers with simple changes in the style or storyline. Museums could document the intangible dimensions of puppetry and also display the tangible artefacts to connect the art with society. By this, the vernacular art will remain undiluted and continue to attract the audience. The museum can further contribute to the preservation of the leather and cloth puppets providing them with better housing and storage so as to make the rare and unique old traditional puppets to sustain for the benefit of the posterity.

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