



PRESERVING THE LEGACY OF STRINGS AND DOLLS

With puppetry barely surviving the test of time in the modern world, meet Padmini Rangarajan, who is trying to preserve this tradition by documenting their oral literature and compositions

Apuurva Sridharan

Brightly coloured dolls attached to strings, narrating a beautiful story that leaves its watchers spellbound, transporting them to an era of kings and queens, battles fought and love lost. Though not many will be able to connect to this experience, given that puppetry as an art form has more or less faded into background, the imagery that it conjures is one of nostalgia.

Puppetry as a medium of expression has been around from time immemorial. References to marionettes can be found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Holy Bible*. Rendition of Ramayana and Mahabharata, such as those by the Ammapuram tribes in Andhra Pradesh, was very common in the past. But with time, this art form has gone majorly unnoticed.

Padmini Rangarajan, however, is on a mission. The 41-year-old, who has a master's degree in social work, is trying to keep the art of puppet-story narration alive, at least in AP. The puppeteer usually depicts social causes, such as sexual harassment, through dolls and strings.

Padmini's tryst with puppetry began when her son was two-and-a-half-years-old. "I was playing with him, and narrated a story using a monkey and a man puppet that I had made with paper mache and cloth. He, in turn, went to his nursery teacher and told her that I tell stories through puppetry. The school called me to give performances, thrice. I never thought I'd take puppetry seriously," she laughs. So how did she begin touching upon social issues? "I used to teach spoken English for adults at the Ramakrishna Mutt using puppets. One day, a representative of National Domestic Workers Movement got in touch with me, and asked me to make a presentation for domestic helps, making them aware of their rights and responsibilities. Soon, I was involved in a child labour campaign," she explains.

THE AIM OF BRINGING FOLK ART TO THE MAINSTREAM IS TO MAKE PEOPLE AWARE THAT THEY ARE OUR ROOTS. THEY IMPART VALUES AND WE MUST SEE TO IT THAT IT DOES NOT DISAPPEAR

— PADMINI



(L-R) Padmini Rangarajan, Prof Claudia and Vicky Hart

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there are two main types of puppetry — wooden string puppetry and shadow puppetry. But here, the art form usually conjures up images of *Tholu Bommalata* (shadow puppetry), but they fail to acknowledge that *Koyya Bommalata* or *Chekka Bommalata* (wooden string puppetry) also exists," she explains.

Her dedication towards the art form and social causes caught the eye of Vicky Hart, producer and founder of Hart in Media, an initiative to document real life stories promoting creative expression, and Professor Claudia Orenstein of the theatre department of Hunter College in New York. The duo is now making a film titled *Magic In Our Hands*, which will document Padmini's journey. And the makers are quite kicked about the idea. "We're basically documenting what she's doing in her community through the medium of puppetry. We want to offer westerners a unique look at Indian culture, and then use contemporary puppetry forms, such as rod puppetry to address current issues such as e-waste. We've realised that India can be seen by the western world as a dumping ground for e-waste. This is basically to make people view this issue as a global problem, rather than one that belongs just to India," explains Vicky. The producer believes that documentation could also make people realise that this precious tradition will fade in oblivion, if not preserved. "The next generation is losing sight of that culture because we're so busy striving for jobs in engineering, IT programming, and the kind. So we want to promote Indian culture, not just for Indians to remember who they are, but for westerners to really get an insight to this beautiful, rich, vibrant culture and tradition. But if it's lost, it's lost forever and the chances of you getting it back will be tough," quips Vicky.

Speaking on her decision to document Padmini's initiative, Professor Claudia says, "This struggle to survive, find a place in the new social and economic world in a way that is meaningful and that's connected to people's contemporary interests is important. Because the skills they have often take a lifetime to