

Sultans of string now champion the cause of Swachh Bharat

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VARIETY ADDS SPICE

Pic: Sphoorthi Theatre

Pune: Puppets bring to mind string-attached dolls in colourful costumes enacting folklore against changing backdrops. They once held sway over an audience that appreciated their entertainment value.

The dolls, now look different and are more relevant to make the connect. Clad in spotless white khadi kurta, and with a broom in hand — ‘Mr Clean’ speaks to the audience in big cities like Mumbai about a mission — Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ‘Swachh Bharat’ dream.

Puppets are no longer child’s play. Although the art form goes back in history and has been part of theatre, veteran puppetarians are now using the medium in innovative ways — in education and social work.

“Puppetry should be promoted to talk about social issues,” says Meena Naik, a senior fellow of the department of culture, ministry of human resource development. Having used a hand-puppet to anchor a programme for Doordarshan in 1975, Naik realized the impact of the dolls. She went on to create plays using shadow puppets around social themes like — child sexual abuse and child rights.

Naik shares that she also used puppets effectively as therapy for child-victims of the Gujarat riots. She is now working for the ‘Swachh Bharat Abhiyan’, using puppets to put across her point and has written a book — ‘Handbook of Puppetry’ for those who wish to learn the art.

An old man with a grey moustache, a woman in a Rajsthani attire, a bespectacled grandma and a puppy talk and move at Rajnana Kanitkar’s commands. Kanitkar has used these puppets at her NGO People’s Universal Popular Puppetry Educational Theatre (The Puppet). Set up with her late husband, Hemant Kanitkar, the NGO began with plays based on issues ailing the country at the time. A fellow with the Union

○ The differences exist not only in names, but also in form, structure, manipulation and presentation techniques

○ Puppets can be made from waste material, cloth pieces, thermocol or other packing material, socks and papier mache

➤ String puppets are popularly known as ‘katputli’ in India

➤ Shadow puppets

➤ Rod puppets/wire puppets

➤ Finger puppets

➤ Glove puppets

➤ Life-size puppets are called muppets

MAHARASHTRA'S OWN DOLLS

➤ ‘Kalasutri Bahulya’ which is string puppetry and ‘Chamadyache Bahulya’, which is shadow puppetry

➤ ‘Kalasutri Bahulya’ are small puppets without legs. Themes or episodes from Ramayana are narrated through folk tunes using these puppets

➤ ‘Chamadyache Bahulya’ are shadow puppets and do not have jointed limbs. They are delicately coloured with vegetable dyes. Episodes from Ramayana are narrated using folk tunes



Sphoorthi Theatre director Padmini R during a class and (below) Ranjana Kanitkar with her puppets



“Children are smarter and more aware. Although there is a slight change in attitudes, the art requires a little more push for better proliferation

— Mrudula Kelkar | FRIENDS PUPPET THEATRE

ministry of culture, Kanitkar explains that people do not find puppets intimidating or offensive, hence messages which cannot be said directly to the audience can be effectively put across through a play with puppets as the actors. “In many cases, it proves to be more effective than street plays and enables a two-way communication.”

Kanitkar has been using puppets for more than 30 years to reach out to rural masses, explaining complex social issues such as superstition, child marriage and sex education.

Padmini Rangarajan, founder-director of Sphoorthi Theatre, is a veteran teacher and came up with the idea of using puppets in education after she found it to be very effective in teaching spoken English and grammar.

“I now use puppets to teach children subjects like mathematics, English, science and social science and see a remarkable improvement and response in the children,” she says. An established name, she now delves in ‘educational puppetry’ and coaches aspiring theatre ac-

tors, teachers, young mothers and even corporate employees using puppets. The most common method at Sphoorthi is representing folk stories to impart life skills, managerial skills and even soft skills.

Sandhya Kalkunde, a parent of an autistic child, says she cannot stress enough the relevance of puppetry when it comes to getting through to special children. “I used this medium to explain my son a lot of concepts of daily life, as he connected to these puppets of his favourite animals.”

The fact that puppets are beginning to be taken seriously is proved by the inauguration of a puppetry course at the University of Mumbai recently. It is the only such course in India, and Naik, the mind behind this course, says that “more universities need to introduce puppeteering in their curriculum. Once trained, people will start using it to simplify and put across messages more effectively across all avenues.”

Although a puppet performance requires making the puppets, writing the

scripts, and performing with appropriate dialogue, puppetarians say that the skill can be easily learnt by anyone. “Everyone is a performer and any object in which we breathe life by movement and dialogue is a puppet,” says Sangya Ojha, of The Puppetarians, which she co-founded with Hashim Haider.

Ojha and Haider had worked on Sesame Street’s India version — Galli Galli Sim Sim, in which Ojha played Aanchoo and Elmo and Haider played the Bollywood Dude.

“There is a mind block in our country that this art form is just for entertainment. What is needed for puppetry to flourish is for all artistes and puppeteers to come together and impart the skill to people like teachers, parents, heads of learning centres, so that it can proliferate,” says Ojha.

And at the end of the day, puppets are universally relatable; they can be anyone, anywhere at any time. “Puppets rise above caste, creed, religion and are seen to fulfill communication gaps,” says Mrudula Kelkar, who has performed almost 20,000 puppet shows through her NGO Friends Puppet Theatre.

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