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“Puppetry: A Child Play than Serious Art Form”

Ms. Padmini Rangarajan

Introduction:

In the era of global technology, television is the most wanted machine of entertainment with multiple new channels emerging every day with new concept to hold the grip of the people. Even in the remote village of India. Puppet is word of disregard in present-day jargon; nevertheless, puppet performance and shows opens up a thrilling world of entertainment to children and men of all ages and countries. Although the traditional puppet performances are slowing down on one hand, on the other side noticeable emergence of the contemporary puppeteers with varied background innovative use of this art form is also seen. The utility of this art form is expanding beyond traditional puppet horizon. Now puppets are part of Classroom Education, Teaching with puppets, Health and puppets, Puppets in prison and so on. The reference of ‘Puppets’ and ‘art of Puppetry’ is as old as the civilization. Many scholars are of the opinion that India is the birthplace of puppetry. However, in the field of performing arts, it is considered as a ‘children’s art’. But in the history about puppetry-relevance of traditional puppets, that are found in different forms in most of the states in India were /are performed for all age groups. Mostly the traditional puppeteers chose interesting themes and stories from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* not only to suit children but also for grown ups.

For the present generation in India ‘puppets’ means ‘Kathputli’-the most popular traditional puppet in India. It is in the mindset of most people who think that Indian puppet means Kathputli.

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- Educational Puppeteer, Researcher and Founder of Sphoorthi Theatre for Educational Puppetry, Art & Crart- STEPARC

Brief History of Puppetry art in India:

The ancient Indus Valley civilisation of Harappa and Mohenjodaro makes significant reference of existence of this art form. The archaeological remnants of terracotta bull with detachable head with a string, terracotta monkey that slides up and down a stick are not only the evidence to prove that this performing art popularity but also adaptation of the animation technique too. In Mahabharata one can find the reference made to the art of puppetry and shadow theatre. The Ashokan rock edicts mentions about the Jambudweep as a puppet theatre. Kalidasa and Patanjali, talked about the dance drama, the puppet theatre and the musical narrative of story telling in their respective Sanskrit plays. Infact, Panini has laid *Natya Shastra* by Bharata in the second century makes evidence on puppets and its relativity to dance. The most important reference is to the *Sutradhar* who would manipulate dolls with *sutra* from inside. While *Sutradhar* in classic Sanskrit plays are the prime co-coordinator and stage manager who hold the strings of dramatic performance.

Traditional puppeteers Vs Present-day Puppeteers:

Traditional puppeteers : India is blessed with multi structured puppets from different regions to suits the regionalist and proving its uniqueness in unity in diversity. Right from glove puppets to big moving marionettes, string puppets to rod puppets and shadow puppets. Traditionally in India, puppetry was used as a popular and an inexpensive medium to transmit knowledge about Indian myths and legends.

In India, this art form is practiced by a group of families involved in folk art prevalent in villages. In traditional puppetry, different types of puppets are used in different regions of India. The differences exist in names, in form, structure, manipulation and presentation methods. The different traditional forms are glove, rod, string, and shadow puppets. Further, the regional name given to puppetry varies from state to state within India. These puppeteers are trained artist in different art forms that puppetry adapts, like: skilled in carving,

designing, stitching, colouring, scripting, narrating, dance, music and are good story tellers. Each member of the family incorporates and equips the essential skill of puppetry and is then passed on to the next generation. Most traditional puppet-shows are deep-rooted in its religious fairs and festivals, narrating stories of the gods and goddesses in order to seek blessings from the Almighty for safeguarding the village community. All puppeteers perform several ritual ceremonies before a puppet-show begins. The pre-show worship of Ganesha and his invocation, followed by performance of Purva Ranga, are all part of rituals to please the gods and it is performed on sacred ground. The performance itself is interpreted to rid the locality of its pests and pestilence, and bring peace and prosperity to all members of the audience who have respectfully watched the show. Traditional puppeteers were mostly nomadic people who moved from place to place with their shows and served as an important popular medium of mass communications. These the nomadic groups were either semiliterate who could quote from the original Ramayana and Mahabharata and illiterate. These groups belonged to various castes mostly belonging to backward or low backward caste. No festivity and ceremonial seasons in the villages are complete without their performance.

From Bommal attam or Tholu bommalatta in Andhra Pradesh, Gombe atta and Togalu gombe-atta in Karnataka, Putal-nach in Assam, Pava-kuthu -glove puppetry and Thol pavakuthu-leather puppetry in Kerala, Kalasutri Bahulya-string puppetry and chamadyache Bahulya shadow puppetry in Maharashtra, Kundhei-nach the glove -, Ravanachaya- Shadow Puppet, Kathi Kundhei- Rod Puppet and Gopalila kandhei- string all four forms in Orissa, Kathputli of Rajasthan, Bommalatam -string puppetry and Thol Bommalattam -shadow puppetry in Tamilnadu, putul nach- rod puppetry of West Bengal.

A puppeteer family manages its presentation with a little, mobile convertible state, which has a cloth backdrop and a curtain casually decorated in cut and patchwork or hand-printed cloth. The puppets are carved from a variety of local woods. Cloth and natural colours are used a make over. The lighting

comes from oil lamps, this is insufficient light, and it helps the performance by creating strange atmosphere and hiding the strings. The manipulations are carried over by the male members of the family, singing, dialogue and the female members of the family provide narrations.

Present-day Puppeteers : The last half century has given rise to the emergence of present-day puppet theatre, groups and puppeteers who were the people been attracted to the art form completely from outside and do not belong to the traditional families of puppeteers. This include persons from various art forms, from diverse disciplines like graphics, commercial arts, dance, music and even science and technology, to educationist and environmentalist adopting the tool of puppetry in multiple way to uphold the magnitude of this performing art.

What has happened as a result, a completely new creative process has been set in motion, with experiments and innovations found aplenty. This is where *contemporary puppetry* as it is been popularly known has extended its dominion, over and above traditional puppetry. Present-day puppeteers can be any one who is interested in promoting and preserving this art form.

‘Building Healthy Relationship’ through Puppetry:

As puppetry takes in elements of from all art forms such as literature, painting, sculpture, music, dance, drama and enables one to have essences of all art forms in one. It has unveils the mysterious art to develop ones creative abilities. Puppetry is a dynamic art form that appeals to all age groups; this medium of communication has been selected to serve as an aid for imparting education in schools.

In the 21st century, the world opened up to use of modern technology in every field. The whole world is now a global village, — a prime example of which is the reach of television in almost every village and video parlours in every remote area. In order not to fall behind, puppetry needs modern technology as a tool with wider application to reach the widest possible masses

and achieve its educational, socio-psychological, health, communication and entertainment goals.

In this regard, a puppet presentation was conducted followed by open forum discussions in Engineering and Degree colleges of Hyderabad city. Three colleges were chosen for this study on building healthy relationship. Two Engineering colleges namely, CSE Department of Chaitanya Bharathi Institute of Technology-CBIT, Gandipet, Hyderabad, Sphoorthy Engineering College, Vanasthalipura, Hyderabad, and B.Sc final of Bhavan's New Science College, Hyderabad. Around 300 students volunteered in giving positive feed back response about puppet presentation and open forum discussions.

❖ **Background and objectives :**

College students in India are sandwiched between high competition, high expectations from family side and creamy layer of adolescents. They are expressing high stress level one side and are exposed to western culture, western way of life. Right from fashion industry to latest trend, language usage and various 'Day Celebrations', are forcing to ape the western culture and to be accepted by the group. This glittery attraction is forcing most of the youth and causing distractions. The present study states the intervention of puppetry in building healthy relationship with co-college mates and family. It also addresses factual problems faced by college students and ways to cope up with them.

* Help of eminent Psychologists of the city taken in conducting Open forum to know more about stress, psychological health, and presence of suicidal ideas in college students and to find out better solution for better life and livelihood.

❖ **The following were the objectives of the study :**

- To address the Socio-psychological needs through puppetry;
- To use puppetry in midst of prevailing modern technologies of entertainment and awareness building at higher level.

- To determine puppetry as 'child's play' that is easy to adopt and play.
- To assess improvements and benefits on personal level as a outcome of puppet presentation.
- Further to identify application of puppetry as a tool for education and social communication for the masses chronic health, mental health and as a reform therapy .

❖ **Why puppetry is a child's play?**

Most our traditional puppets of different regions of India follow their own unique procedure in making of puppets. They are time consuming and needs specialized skill and one has to undergo training to carve puppets. One finds use of modern technology in performing arts today. Most of the contemporary theatre, dance and dance-drama are using sophisticated lighting design, slide projection, video-clipping, film-based projection and Dolby stereo sound using multi-track music. Even the rehearsal process also uses video-recordings. So is with the modern puppet theatre.

Nevertheless, modern contemporary puppeteers and puppets theatres use most sophisticated techniques in designing the puppets and stage, like use of a variety of light effects, black lamp, sound effects and use of first quality foam, fiberglass, etc. this goes well for live and one show performances. Most of such puppet groups work in a group like traditional theaters and each member of the group has a specify role to play and work assigned. Further, most of the themes go well with all age groups. (Unless, it is specified for particular group).After a detail study on various technologies and specialized way of designing puppets adopted by various puppeteers, the focus for choosing basic material for making puppets was thought of. In order to put the readily available materials mostly termed as 'waste materials' into best use and to fill the gap between sophisticated techniques and simpler techniques, the 'waste materials' formed

the basic raw materials in designing the puppets. Besides, specific advantages are that it depends on one's imagination in designing puppets according to the need with available things around. Further, it is a matter of time as simpler the technique more eagerness to learn is seen. A warm welcome is extended for fun way learning process. Therefore, to speak about the technique, the designing process should have less of input materials and more of concrete output. Again, lot of creativity, innovation, exploration, and capable of using things available in one's vicinity is required while teaching children to make puppets during workshops.

For this specific study due to time constraints, puppets were made with a short notice of one day. Here again, the appealing factor was given the importance so that the students could associate with them. Again, to make it aware that puppets can be made with all the available things under the sun and need not necessarily be traditional kind. It just needs the inquisitive to know about our folklore, traditionally prevailing arts that are fading away from the limelight.

❖ **Puppet Designing and Setting:**

Keeping the above things in mind, the simple puppets were made. *Simple Glove Puppets* made using materials like: newspapers, balloons, papier-mâché's, foam, bottles, balls, paper bags, tetra packs, thermo-coal and anything and everything under the sun that can be put to best use. To dress up either colour paper or plain cloths like using old dupattas, sari, or any available printed cloths. As foam and thermo-coal are light materials, are easy to carry and makes traveling comfortable.

This being classroom puppet presentation modern technical gadgets were not used. Most of the shows were arranged either in the classroom or in college auditorium that could easily accommodate around 80-100 students. Simple stage setting was used. Except in CBIT, it was presented in the auditorium stage.

As most of the things like Podium, chairs, tables, rod, mud pot, strings, sutali, other stationeries are readily available in the colleges.

❖ **Presentation Tools**

Excepting mikes, no other special tools were used. Again, it was one puppeteer wearing all the caps of performers. Questionnaires were given to collect feedback about the puppetry art, puppet presentation, healthy relations and what insight is gained through the presentation.

❖ **Discussion and Findings:**

In most of the presentations, even puppeteer is seen along with puppets. Here puppeteer also plays a character and it gives better dialogue exchange and helps in involving the audience group too.

The Study through puppet presentation helped to assess the problems that college students face in dealing with various areas of their life. The following are the issues stated by the students after the presentation during open forum discussion.

❖ **Findings about Traditional art and Puppetry**

Out of Three Hundred (300) students' universal sample, two hundred-forty students (80%) were watching puppet presentations for the first time. Around one hundred-sixty (60%) students were from rural background and had watched puppet shows in villages during childhood. They also had a hazy recollection of the same. Around sixty-seventy-five, students (20-25%) had no idea about our folklore, folk dance and traditional puppetry; few had no exposure to villages and were brought in urban setting and as most of them moved to from remote villages and moved to towns for better educations. For around two hundred-ten students (70%), Puppetry means Kathputli of Rajasthan. About one hundred-eighty to two hundred students (60-69%) were unaware of Rich Andhra Pradesh Traditional Leather Puppet. About Thirty students (10%)

mistook puppetry as cartoons and it was something exclusively for kids and not for grown ups.

❖ Findings on Puppet Presentations

Around two hundred-forty to two hundred sixty students (80-89%) were convinced with the presentation and as a safe media of entertainment. About two hundred (70%) of students could identify themselves and similar situations with friends, classmates and about interpersonal relationship. Around twelve-fifteen (4-5%) of students encountered problems like irrational fear, suicidal tendency, stress, emotional disturbances. Around sixty-ninety (20-29%) of students were in confused state about the kind of relationship they had with their friends and classmate. Around eighteen-twenty-five, students (6-8%) expressed about the kind of emotional insecurity expressed by parents. Almost cent percent (90-98%) welcomed puppet presentation and open forum discussion as a good psychological help. Around six-seven students (2%) gave general opinion and did not answer to the questions.

❖ Conclusion:

- The study reports less of exposure about traditional Indian arts and more so about performing arts among modern youth of today. These youths are in high state of confusion about relationship and other aspects, which is quite alarming. This confusion state and psychological ill feelings significantly links with the feeling of 'life as a load' and symptoms of suicidal tendencies. This art form surely can explore, provoke, and assist the youth to handle socio-psychological problems well. Also, the study highlights the need for strong relationship parents and children for better psychological health. Taken together, the findings strongly emphasize the need of regular assessment of mental health of students in order to identify psychological, behavioral and relationship-related issues among students and involvement of college authorities and staffs as effective interventional to sought out the problems of the students.

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