

Puppetry – Mother of All Folk Arts

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Puppetry, progenitor of the modern dramatic art, dates back to 2000 BC. It exists in all regions of the world throughout history inclusive of the Egyptians, Greeks and the American continents. The role of puppets in spiritual and magical remedies has been part of it. Besides ancient India, China, and Babylon. Puppetry in Asia is a traditional form and is the mother of all folk-art-forms.

Etymology of Puppetry can be traced from the Old French 'Poupette', which is faring from the word 'poupée' meaning "a bird" or 'a little doll'.

Likewise, in vulgar Latin root 'Puppa'-meaning a chick or a doll. This was adapted in Middle English in the 1530s as 'Popet'-'doll'. "Doll moved by strings

or wires".

Again, this is the opinion of many historians and scientists who think that toys and dolls are the ancestors of the puppet.

As far as Puppetry is concerned, many etymologists have noted similarities in the speech and words used for dolls and creatures in several Indo-European languages.

For instance: In Kannada it is known as 'Gombeyata'. Gombe means 'doll' and 'aata' meaning play-it is dolls play. In Tamil it is called 'Bommalattam' and in Telugu 'Bommalata' and in Malayalam as 'Pavaikoothu'.

The use of puppets in pre-historic period was probably for connecting the human ancestors by casting shadows in a ritual worship. The reference of the

same is found in Indian, Chinese and Egyptian folklore.

Thus, marking the evidence that Asia as the origin of puppetry in general and the Bharat Khanda is the cradle of puppetry. Later, it travelled across the globe.

Further, scholars opine that references to different kinds of puppets are formed in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and Buddhist works.

What is a puppet? Or Puppetry?

Puppets may be defined in simple words as- "Inanimate figure/picture brought to life through manipulation to convey a message through a story".

The art of manipulation of the inanimate objects is dolled up in colourful attire. Traditional forms of Puppets all over the Earth are: shadow puppets, rod puppets, glove puppets, and string puppets.

There is a debate as to which form of the puppet is the oldest or the first-born. Is it shadow puppet or the string puppet? Interestingly, Indian folklore



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narratives have supportive tales for both forms of puppet's origin. Lord Shiva is seen as the chief manipulator 'Sutradhar' who tied 'Sutra'- meaning a 'string' to the inanimate figure and played it for his consort Goddess Parvati.

The practice and presence of the Sutradhar with Sutra-Prata (strings attached) along with Sthapaka (the stage setter) or the assisting the Sutradhar as terms employed to describe puppets in Mahabharata is still visible today in traditional puppeteer troupes.



Different folk versions state interesting stories behind the origin of Puppetry. Nevertheless, all the stories revolve around Lord Shiva and Parvati as chief Puppeteers from whom this art form has been prepared and subsequently fell out on to mankind it shadow or string puppets.

According to 'Bhats' traditional puppeteers who perform string puppets called 'Katpulti Naach Pradarshan' in Rajasthan, reason that Rajastahn is the birth place of Indian

puppets.

From Rajasthan it travelled to other parts of the country. They claim string puppet as the mother of all puppet forms.

According 'Nat Bhats' the origin of string puppetry is attributed to Brahma (the god who is delegated the role of creating the cosmos). Brahma is regarded as the 'Sutradhar'. It is stated that for the entertainment

of his consort, Saraswati, Brahma created and gave life to 'Adi', the first 'Nat Bhat'-puppeteer. And so, again, he created another figure for the Nat to manipulate and thereby entertain the goddess.

However, Brahma was not very pleased with his exertions and he, therefore, banished the puppeteer to the earth and thus was the birth of the first Bhat community which on-live as Katputlis in Rajasthan. So, Nat Bhats are the original puppeteers of this region.



According to folklorist and folk art scholar, Mahender Bhanawat: 2012, it was Lord Shiva not Brahma who created Bhat for the amusement of his consort Goddess, Parvati. It was Bhat, a great devotee of Lord Shiva, who entertained the Lord using wooden dolls singing the glory of Lord Shiva and ignoring Goddess Parvati.

Infuriated Shiva expelled the Bhat puppeteer to earth.

However, Bhat with the wooden dolls started entertaining common masses by narrating the glory of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, thus establishing the Bhat-Puppeteer Community in Rajasthan.

Yet, another tale from the same region evolves when

celestial, God and Goddesses visited Bhuloka. There lived a carpenter by name Sevakram who made beautiful wooden dolls with leftover wooden pieces.

The dolls made by him were so beautiful and lively that no two dolls differed in appearances and they looked alike. Nevertheless, every day he felt that his dolls though beautiful, remain lifeless and he was unable to pour life into them.

This thought bothered him a lot. One day when Shiva and Parvati on their visit to Bhuloka, Parvati came across the beautifully carved dolls and wished they sang and danced too. Parvati requested Shiva to pour life into the lifeless dolls. Initially Shiva ignored her wish, but her persistence pressurised Shiva to fulfil her wish.

Within no time, all the dolls played, danced and sang all around. Sevakram who returned home from his work was amused to watch all his dolls moving around singing and dancing. He clasped all his dolls with

happiness all the dolls fell lifeless with the result which left him crying.

By then there was a celestial announcement from the sky, 'Sevakram, your dolls remain lifeless and will come to life by tying strings'. Sevakram, tied strings and manipulated them with his fingers and entertained the mass.

According to Rangarajan 2014 'Once in Kailasa Parvati and Parameshwara were engaged in a chat and then came devotees of Shiva who wanted his help to protect them from the troubling demons. In order to fulfil his devotees' request, Shiva left Kailasa on Nandi Vahana. Parvathi, being left alone, complained the same to Lord Shiva.

In deferece to make her feel



happy, Shiva created some dolls and asked them to entertain Parvati and obey her till his coming back. While all the dolls obeyed the order of lord Shiva and started performing, Parvathi who watched them for some time; started thinking of Lord Shiva.

Meanwhile all the dolls were playing all around her. She grew crazy and shouted at them "can't you be silent for some time'. Obeying her order all the dolls kept quiet. After sometime Parvati realised her mistake and asked them to perform again. But the dolls did not move an inch. She requested them, yet they did not act.

By then Lord Shiva returned and enquired about the doll play. Parvati narrated the whole story and asked lord Shiva to request them to play.

Lord Shiva replied that "The dolls are obedient servants and they obey whatever their master or mistress say. Nevertheless, their task is to entertain and not to cause inconvenience. Even so, I can still make them play and execute for you'.

So saying, Lord Shiva tied strings called "Sutra" and asked Parvati to manipulate them. So, she became the 'Sutradhari'. That's how the origin of 'Sutradhar'-Puppets originated.

Another folk story in support to the above with slight variation mentions that when Shiva came back and found the dolls remaining still, said that henceforth they would never speak, sing or dance or entertain on their own. Parvati felt sorry for her ridiculous act and requested Lord Shiva to pardon her and bring back life into the dolls. For which Lord Shiva assured that the dolls would come back to life and sing and dance by a 'Manipulator' and not on their own. Thus emerged 'Sutra-string' tied to the dolls and 'Sutradhar- manipulator'.

Well, the folk story that claims Shadow puppets as the mother of puppetry goes like this: 'once Lord Shiva and Parvati in disguise came down to Bhuloka to test their real devotees.

Then they came across a man remembering the lord's name all

the time lived in utter poverty with not a single grain in his house.

He even welcomed the couple with a smile on his face and spread his torn rags for them to sit.

To test his devotion, Lord Shiva asked him to entertain them with some new and unique art form which was never discovered or tried before.

At once the man ripped out the hide from his thighs and trimmed it out into a figure and attached it to some dried twigs. Then he held the figure against the dim lit earthen lamp. The reflection of the figure that fell along the walls entertained Lord Shiva and Parvati.

The dancing figure was moved by his devotional songs. Moved with his art, Lord Shiva blessed him with wealth and prosperity.

This set the origin of Shadow-leather puppetry. This appears to be the root of man's effort to repair and rejuvenate toys according to his own vision.