

Indian Horizons

Volume 60 No. 2 April - June 2013



Indian Council for Cultural Relations

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) was founded on 9th April 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first Education Minister of independent India.

The objectives of the Council are to participate in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes relating to India's external cultural relations; to foster and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries; to promote cultural exchanges with other countries and people; to establish and develop relations with national and international organizations in the field of culture; and to take such measures as may be required to further these objectives.

The ICCR is about a communion of cultures, a creative dialogue with other nations. To facilitate this interaction with world cultures, the Council strives to articulate and demonstrate the diversity and richness of the cultures of India, both in and with other countries of the world.

The Council prides itself on being a pre-eminent institution engaged in cultural diplomacy and the sponsor of intellectual exchanges between India and partner countries. It is the Council's resolve to continue to symbolize India's great cultural and educational efflorescence in the years to come.

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Indian
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Editor
Subhra Mazumdar

Published by the Director General, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Azad Bhavan, Indraprastha Estate, New Delhi-110002. The opinions expressed or implied in this magazine do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the ICCR. No part of the magazine may be reproduced without the prior permission of the Editor.

Contributions for consideration may please be sent in duplicate – typed in double space, with a minimum of footnotes to The Editor, Indian Horizons, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Azad Bhavan, Indraprastha Estate, New Delhi-110002.

E-mail: iccr@vsnl.com
Website: www.iccrindia.net

Designed and produced by M/s Aakriti, 25/403, Eastend Apartments, Mayur Vihar Phase – 1 Extension, Delhi – 110096

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Editorial

Vibrant changes rung out of established traditions certainly throws up the genuine worth of continuity. It was this thought that crossed my mind as I read through the contributions of the puppeteers and their associates who have come forward to share their knowledge of the current state of puppetry in the country. My grateful thanks goes out to Mr Dadi Padamsee who, in the first place, guided this research into the theme of this volume and whose suggestions about contacting knowledgeable scholars on the subject has made this volume come to fruition.

As a formal curtain raiser, we introduce the volume with a life sketch of the 'father figure' of modern Indian puppetry, Suresh Dutta, in a first-hand coverage of the legend by Utpal Banerjee who has personally known the puppeteer through decades. This closeness has come off as the essential flavour of his story. While puppetry in a rudimentary definition can be dismissed as a manipulation of strings, when going through Sampa Ghosh's account of the string puppets of the eastern region, one realises that venerable practitioners of puppetry have impregnated their distinguishing individual traits into the tradition of the region.

In adjoining Odisha, there appears a prolific output of forms ably elaborated by Gouranga Dash.

Even more interesting was the discovery of the resurgence of dying forms through the crusading efforts of a handful of puppeteers who had refused to say 'die' when it came to their beloved art. Extraordinaire of the art of puppetry and of which one has come to realize through the survey of the puppetry traditions of adjoining Andhra Pradesh

ably traced by Ms Madhvilatha, is the vast world of leather puppets. She has even included the stage management of puppet performances from behind the curtain, literally and practically.

That puppetry skills have always been in the forefront of showcasing social and economic issues through their puppet creations has been brought home in the article on the Gandhian puppetry show, a project that Shri Krishnaiah was closely associated with, from its conceptual stage. His chronological study of leather puppetry and the level of maturity it has achieved today, is a road map that he has traced for us readers to envision the long legacy that has made the latest drama on Gandhiji in puppet format, become a reality.

While on the subject of heritage, one must make a mention of the Srinivas Malliah Museum of puppetry in the capital. Its current director, Ms Usha Malik, gamely came forward not just to write an account of the premises and their collection but also present a handiwork wherein she has literally handheld her reader through a guided tour of her representative treasure house of Indian puppetry.

Moving from acquisition to education one must make a special mention of the pioneering effort being made at the SNTD University Mumbai, where puppetry has been introduced as a subject for undergraduate level studies. The course director Ms Meena Naik has penned her thoughts on the uphill task of establishing this unique course which most academics had at first dismissed as maverick, but which has now proved its credentials by becoming a powerful force for societal reform on sensitive issues, such as education on

Aids prevention, or helping municipal schools cope with a multicultural student intake from migratory labour backgrounds.

Besides this varied fare, the volume has on offer its staple inclusions, namely a review of the exhibitions on view at the Azad Bhavan Gallery over the last quarter.

Through all this collection it is obvious that puppetry must needs work overtime to get its place among

the art climate of the country, but again the right responses are trickling in. Unmistakably, the demand for the rod, string, leather, stick and glove little folk is here to become a favourite for all seasons. In a bid to honour the ICCR's initiative of presenting india's multi-cultural dimensions to the world, there is a glimpse of the Europalia 2013 festivities included in this issue. The many cultural 'strings' that have been conjoined through this event make it a worthwhile inclusion in this Issue.

Happy reading.

Editor



Subhra Mazumdar

Foreword

Satish C. Mehta
Director General, Indian Council for Cultural Relations

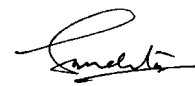
Every time an issue of Indian Horizons is being readied for the printers, the inevitable question that comes to mind is whether we have been able to give a glimpse of our cultural heritage in the right perspective. This time, the question can be confidently answered in the affirmative. Coinciding with the start of the europalia.india festival, this issue has devoted a special coverage to this major bonanza of art, music, films, literary events, a food festival and visual art projections. Their careful arrangement and presentation in the capital of the European Union and elsewhere, has been instrumental in projecting the values and the spirit of India, transcending the event from something more than just an Indian exhibition into a coming together of two multicultural societies, adding to its appreciation quotient.

Apart from this commitment of a cultural nature, the issue has continued with its established format of a themed presentation for its readership. This time, our attempt has been to acquaint readers with the changing trends in puppetry across its major centres as also the emergence of fresh trends in this traditional field. The articles have been handpicked to bring to the fore the efforts of individual groups who have striven to give the ancient form a contemporary orientation through pioneering transformations as in the adaptation of shadow puppetry to create a Gandhi biography for audiences in Zurich as well as

India. We also learnt, in the course of preparing this issue, of the laudable beginning of an undergraduate course in puppetry at Mumbai's SNDT University. Stressing on the tradition's offbeat and single-handed efforts of Odisha puppeteers as well as the trail of the string puppet tradition across various states in India, emphasized the grounded worth of this art form. Hence, a tribute to puppetry's best known contemporary master Suresh Dutta, was in keeping with our attempt to focus on the tradition's current positioning. Other essays have once again revived the charm of leather puppetry. Realising the crucial role of preservation in the upkeep of a tradition has led to the founding of a museum of puppetry in the capital, which too is given focus in our writings for the issue.

An attempt to bridge the cultural dimension between tradition and innovation, is our regular feature art exhibition reviews from the shows at ICCR's Azad Bhavan Gallery. In this segment too, the attempt has been to merge avante garde experimental works with the solidly conventional as also a sprinkling of exhibitions where India's mainstay tradition of miniatures has resurfaced in a delightful series of prints.

This exciting cache of reading material has been carefully handpicked to provide a choice for every taste among our esteemed readers.



Satish C. Mehta

europalia.india

Inauguration of 4th October 2013

Speech by **Dr. Karan Singh**, President, Indian Council for Cultural Relations



Your Majesties the King & Queen of the Belgians, Hon'ble President of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee, President of the European Council Mr. Herman Van Rompuy, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Belgium Mr Didier Reynders, Ambassador Dinkar Khullar, President Europalia International Count Jacobs de Hagen, General commissioner Baron Philippe Vlerick, Baroness Kristine De Mulder, Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I greet you all on behalf of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations which is the Indian partner in europalia-India and the main sponsor of all the rich & varied exhibitions and performances which will play out over the next few months in Brussels as well as in the other European cities.

India and Belgium, and indeed the European Union, are federal multi-cultural pluralist societies unified by a civilizational history. India's partnership with Europalia International to hold the europalia.india festival in Brussels, the capital of both Belgium and the EU, is therefore uniquely appropriate. I am delighted to be here today at the inauguration of europalia.india 2013-14, which is by any measure one of the most ambitious festivals of India to be held abroad in the recent past. For almost two years now, europalia.india has dominated our thoughts and it is gratifying to see our efforts bear fruit, bringing to Belgium and to Europe a taste of India's rich and colourful culture.

As a civilization, India goes back to at least five thousand years, and it is obviously not possible to create a comprehensive package that covers every aspect of India and its culture in a single festival. I do believe, however, that the festival programme we are

presenting, will succeed in highlighting the diversity that is India. We have a major exhibition, cultural performances, visual art projections including films, literary events, a food festival and music ranging from the classical to the contemporary and from the urban to the rural. In the process we have tried to open windows to India which we hope will leave the viewer intrigued and wanting more. The distinguished presence of both our Heads of State has added a special dimension to this occasion.

Today's inauguration itself, after the traditional and auspicious beginning by the Gundecha Brothers, will go on to present a medley of classical and folk dances and end with a major exhibition tracing the depiction of the **The Body in India Art and Thought** through antiquities, contemporary pieces, audio-visual material & specially commissioned works, many of them never exhibited abroad before.

I take this opportunity to thank all those in my country and yours who have worked so hard to bring this project to life, and commend them for their efforts. I am sure that europalia.india will succeed in illuminating the fascinating enigma that is India, and in generating deeper and more widespread interest in this ancient civilization which has contributed so much to humanity over the millennia.

I will end with a verse from the Upanishads which has come down to us through the vast and winding corridors of time. It exhorts us:

"Let us work together, let us achieve together, let us enjoy together; let there never be any hatred between us."

Au revoir et merci beaucoup

europalia.india

A significant and meaningful step towards representing India's multidisciplinary culture to the world has been at the cornerstone of ICCR's initiatives. The Europalia-2013, a festival which was inaugurated in the first week of October 2013, primarily in Belgium and neighbouring countries, comprising a grouping of artistic and cultural programmes was a significant pointer in that direction. The festival was organised by Europalia International, which has the King of the Belgians as its patron and is partly funded by both the European Union and the Belgian Government.

On this occasion, the President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, was invited to be the Guest of Honour at the inauguration, together with the King of the

Belgians. On his arrival on this prestigious occasion, the President of India was duly received by the King and Queen of the Belgians, the President of the European Union, the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Belgium, the Chairman Europalia, the General Commissioner for europalia.india and Dr Karan Singh, President ICCR.

The focus of the event was on 'Encounters' between India's culture and that of the rest of the world expressed through a variety of cultural themes comprising India's dance, music, fine art, folk traditions among others, showcased through a vast range of ideas spanning the human body, the crucial role played by water in our lives, as also living traditions,





including snippets of Bollywood. In addition, there would be more events locally organized in 150 venues in Belgium and neighbouring countries presenting different aspects of Indian culture, and addressing its geographical and historical diversity, across the entire duration of the festival till February 2014.

The curtain raiser event that captured the essence of this spectacular India show was 'Charishnu', which literally means 'the desire to move'. This spectacular dance and music presentation had dancers from various forms move in varying rhythms keeping intact their own stylized art form and yet depicting an inherent and individual freedom of expression. The selection of dances included classical, folk, martial dance forms and an ensemble of the complex art of drums from different parts of the country. The production was conceived and directed by Ms Leela Samson, while the individual dance styles were choreographed by Sadanam Balakrishnan in Kathakali and Mohini Attam, Aditi Mangaldas in

Kathak, Priti Patel in Manipuri, Imocha Singh in Thangta, Aruna Mohanty in Odissi, Leela Samson in Bharat Natyam and Umamahesh Vinayakaram in the percussion segment.

In a truly Indian makeover, the opening ceremony featured the chanting of Sanskrit shlokas in the rich tonal depths of India's leading dhrupad duo, popularly known as the Gundecha Brothers. Their selection began with an invocation to divine sound, represented through the Naad Brahma, as an unparalleled joy present in the consciousness of every living creature and the entire universe. This was followed by another verse eulogizing the power of bliss which blends all the nine emotional aspects of humankind. The concluding shloka was an invocation sung to Shiva whose body was the entire creation, whose voice all sound, and whose attire in his dance posture consisted of the moon and stars.

Another highlight of the opening ceremony at this event was the inauguration of the exhibition of Indian art titled 'Rupa-Pratirupa: the Body in Indian Art and Thought'. It has been conceptualized by Dr. Naman Ahuja and presents an overarching view of how the human body has been delineated in Indian sculpture, paintings and various multidisciplinary formats, through the ages. The exhibition managed to bring to focus how Indian art has managed to grapple with both the interior world of the body as a physical reality (birth, death, aniconism,) with the body ideal as seen through heroic, ascetic and supernatural contexts, as also the sheer rapture of experiencing the body itself, through all the senses.

Besides this landmark showing, another two exhibitions that too, were inaugurated in October were 'Water Art Walk' and 'The Splendour of India's Architecture'. Curated by Gayatri Sinha, the water exhibition was opened at the Grand Curtis, Liege, Belgium, and at various venues in different parts of the city. It is centred around the significant role of this element in Indian lives, where the seven sacred rivers has become synonymous with the life force in the Indian psyche.



Issues relating to water, from distribution to pollution and how the context of rains has influenced creativity in literature and folklore among others, were on view. The newest approach to this phenomenon, seen through its visual representation in contemporary art, was shown through a Wart Art Walk that brought together photography, video, and new works by artists in residence in the new Residence Ateliers Vivegnis International.

The rich architectural traditions of India were on view through emblematic examples ranging from Hindu architectural traditions to historic encounters such as Muslim architecture of the 12th century, British architecture of the 19th century and Modernism of the 20th century. Central to this event was the traditional Char Bagh concept of gardens and Dr. Doshi gave a talk on 'Cities' at the University of Leuven, as part of this event.

A much-awaited exhibition which will be on view in December is 'India Unveiled: The early Lensmen

(1850-1910)' curated by the Alkazi Foundation with material drawn from the Alkazi Collection of Photography in New Delhi. This vintage photographic exhibition will showcase early Wax Paper negatives, albumen prints, and postcards of similar vintage. The exhibition will bring forth the syncretic culture of India through the earliest surviving images of Taj Mahal, by Dr John Murray, the shots by Dr Alexander Greenlaw, whose takes on the Vijayanagar kingdom are historic. The exhibition in its entirety will stretch beyond Indian shores and raise important questions about the global paradigm of photography.

Another much-awaited show is the one depicting the magic of the Indian sari. Aptly termed, 'The Sari: the Magic of Indian Weaves', this display has been curated by Ms Rta Kapur Chisti and explores sari weaves and textiles in both the conventional and the traditional repertoire. Visitors will thus see this garment in the context of its history, wearing styles, and the continuing ability to recreate itself through the years. The exhibition also draws attention to the

sari weavers, who try to survive through the onslaught of the power loom and develop their craft and skills.

Of the performing arts groups at europalia.india, mention must be made of individual dance troupes who would be performing all through the period of the exhibition. In October, the contemporary dance group of Atytakalari led by Joy Chandra gave a much appreciated performance. Of the folk groups the presentation of the Siddi Goma group led by Shri Mohammadhanif Hajibhai Majgul was a huge draw. Later this year, there will be a yakshagana presentation using puppets, by a group led by Bhaskar Kogga Kamath. The Kutiyattam, a form of ancient Sanskrit drama in dance form, is also scheduled for this time. A Gujarati dance performance by the Panghat group will bring down the curtains on folk performances at this event. The classical dance performance will thereafter come into view with a performance by a Kathak dance group led by Vidha and Abhimanyu Lal. The Bharatanatyam group will be led by Ms Alarmel Valli while a colourful Kathakali performance from the Kerala Kalamandalam will be the final performance in this category.

Music lovers too, have been given a fair share of the arts through a selection of classical events from both the Carnatic and Hindustani music streams. While the Carnatic performance was kickstarted by a performance by the Carnatic artist Sudha Reghunathan, the Hindustani vocal music group under Ms Mita Pandit regaled audiences in October. Vocal groups led by Ashwini Subbarao Deshpande and Ms Vidya Shah are the much-awaited forthcoming events. The Hindustani vocal group led by Madhup Mudgal will herald in the New year at the venue.

Even instrumental music groups have been garnered in to give a well rounded presentation at this event. A Carnatic led violin and Jazz group under the guidance of Dr. L Subramaniam served as the opening concert for this segment. The sitar group led by Shujaat Husain was equally impressive as also the santoor group under the guidance of Ajay Sopori. Ustad Amjad Ali Khan is expected to lead a group of sarod players

in a forthcoming occasion as will be a sitar group under the guidance of Shubhendra Rao. The Hum Ensemble, a tabla group, will round off instrumental presentations in the last part of this year.

With Indian cinema having completed a century it was befitting that a segment of this multicultural display should feature some of our iconic masterpieces down the years. In a retrospective exhibition of Indian cinema cine buffs will get a fair mix of takes ranging from the much acclaimed *Mirch Masala* to regional favourites such as *Estapaan*, *Thayi Saheba* and *Kanathil Muthamital Est*. Following this cache of evergreens, next month viewers will be entertained to classics such as *Raja Harishchandra*, and others of that ilk. The final chunk of cinema will have a retrospective of the films by India's iconic directors Satyajit Ray and Gurudutt. Their classic works such as *Pather Panchali* and *Payasa* respectively will once again revive memories of the best in Indian cinema.

As can be seen from this formidable list of performances and displays, the europalia.india event has not been boxed into museum outlets and auditoriums. Several universities too, will be covering the event and cover the subject of India through seminars, conferences, and thematic exhibitions. Indian literature too, will have a designated platform covering all genres from prose, poetry epics and comics and will also honour several Indian writers who will be given platforms for presentations as well as residences. An exhibition titled 'Sanskrit and Indian Culture: Voyages', curated by Dr Sashibala will link together various elements of this classical language and its spread through the East and South-East Asia.

India House Leuven

Besides this mega showing of Indian culture there has also been a significant strengthening of India-Belgium ties with the establishment of the India House at Leuven. The address will serve as an India-focused platform for stimulating cultural and economic ties.. The India House Leuven is located at the Rimance Poort and is completed funded by

the city of Leuven. It was formally inaugurated by Dr Karan Singh, President ICCR, HE Mr Dinkar Khullar, Ambassador of India, along with Mr Louis Tobback, Mayor of Leuven and Prof Rik Torfs, Rector of KU Leuven, at a ceremony at the Leuven University's Ceremonial Hall. A Chair of Indian Studies was also established at the University of Leuven on this occasion.

With India being the focus of Europalia this year throughout Belgium, the city of Leuven could not have chosen a more opportune time to establish India House, with the objective of promoting better understanding and knowledge of India, and strengthening closer cultural and economic ties between both countries. Leuven is one of the oldest and most distinguished Universities in Europe and it is a pleasure to institute an academic association between it and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. We warmly commend the initiative taken jointly by the city of Leuven and the University, and express the hope that India House

will play an increasingly significant role over the years to strengthen academic/intellectual relations between India and Europe.

In 2003, Leuven University had launched a course in Modern Indian History which ICCR had supported, providing an annual grant of 6300 Euros for this purpose. Over the years, there developed mutual interest on both sides to expand the scope of India studies in the University's curriculum. Therefore, in 2010, ICCR offered to support a short term Indian Studies Chair where every year a professor from India would spend a semester in the University covering different aspect of India, providing the opportunity for informed discussions and sustained direct interaction.

All these matters came to a fulfillment by the signing of an MoU with KU Leuven in October, 2013, where courses on modern India will engage in the academic life of the university.





Speaking on the occasion, Mr. Louis Tobback said,

"As Mayor of the city of Leuven, It gives me great pleasure to inform you about our intention to found an India House in Leuven as a centre for the diffusion of Indian culture as well as a platform for stimulating civic, academic, and economic ties between our region and India. Our goal is to facilitate a greater exchange and dialogue between the nations of Belgium and India..

Leuven is a mid-range city in the heart of Belgium, but it has the features of a metropolis. It hosts global companies, including AB InBev (the largest brewery in the world) and imec (World-leading research in nano-electronics and nano-technology). The University of Leuven is the largest and most prestigious university of Belgium, and the oldest one. Leuven combines rich culture and historical heritage with vibrant city energy and creativity. Being situated thirty minutes from Brussels and only fifteen minutes from the national airport, it offers all the benefits

of a capital. However, it lacks its burdens and has countryside and lovely abbeys within less than five kilometers of the city centre. Leuven attracts more and more highly skilled employees and their employers every year. Over 700 Indian researchers, students and expats have found their way to Leuven and are living and working here today.

The plans of the city of Leuven to found an India House are aligned with the intention of the University of Leuven to establish a chair of Contemporary Indian Studies as well as with the development between for instance imec and the Bangalore region."

Rounding off the entire event is a taste of the Indian palate through its food flavours, crystallising into a food festival. Thus the Europalia.india event truly will be acknowledged as a discovery of India in a manner that will allow each participant to go back with their very own vision of India.

Suresh Dutta, the Master Puppeteer

Utpal K Banerjee

Post-Independence, India's languishing tradition of puppetry received a new boost of life from the new-found enthusiasm for the country's age-old cultural heritage. Besides the traditional puppet groups, who mostly comprised small-scale individual, family and community enterprises, many urban artists and professionals – outside the custom-bound domains of clan and community – were drawn into puppetry.

Thus, a new era of contemporary puppetry was born. Suresh Dutta was a proud product of that age.

ONE

Prior to the arrival of this master puppeteer on the national scene, these were sporadic sparks from various quarters of the country. In the early fifties, Raghunath



Awardee, 1987

Goswami in Kolkata, professionally a noted graphic designer, pioneered a puppet group in Kolkata, known as 'The Puppet', and produced on stage mainly shadow puppets (besides rod and gloves). Though self-taught, he very skillfully manipulated small-sized puppets. Later, he made a puppet film, *Hattagol Vijay*, winning the President's Award in 1961. Madhulal Master in Mumbai, originally a music-composer in silent films and a self-taught puppeteer, opened a group, also called 'The Puppet', mainly manipulating string puppets. Remarkably enough, he used blind puppeteers in his group. Devilal Samar, a school-teacher and a dance-disciple of Uday Shankar (at Almora), founded Bharatiya Lok-kala Mandal in Udaipur. Having learnt string puppetry from Rajasthan's traditional puppeteers, he organised the first-ever puppet festival in India, went abroad to perform with his troupe, established the first puppet museum and wrote books on puppetry. Lastly, Meher Rustam Contractor, the most illustrious name in puppetry in India, was a school teacher in Gujarat. She frequently travelled abroad and was groomed in puppetry in the UK. Later, she joined Darpana Academy, Ahmedabad, and worked with rod, glove and shadow puppets, her most famous shadow-plays being *Savitri* and *Sohrab-Rustam*.

A significant contributing factor to modern puppetry in this country during this time was the fact that, beginning from the late fifties, India opened up to the visits of several reputed international puppet groups who all came to this land with their famous productions. The State Central Puppet Theatre came from the then USSR under the greatest name in puppetry, Sergei Obraztsov. He produced *Unusual Concert*, threaded through by a compere and participated by singers and dancers. They were all highly articulate puppets – never seen in our country earlier – with moving eyes, trembling lips and heaving chests: smoking cigars and drinking from goblets! They opened new vistas for Indian contemporary puppeteers.

There was also the Hungarian Puppet Troupe from Budapest. Another visitor was the Tandarika Puppet Theatre from Rumania. From Australia came Tintookies.

They all brought string puppets: very colourful and with multi-hued flora and fauna. Above all, there was the visit of the outstanding string puppeteer from the USA, Bill Baird. The latter stayed in India for a long time and interacted with the puppet artists here.

Inspired by the international puppet masters and their productions, many young Indian professionals from diverse fields took to puppetry and set up their own groups. Suresh Dutta, then connected with Children's Little Theatre (CLT), Kolkata, was one of them. Along with three other artists — Sahai, Shukla Rahi and Dilip Chatterjee — Suresh Dutta was selected by the erstwhile Ministry of Education — under the enlightened guidance of Prof. Humayun Kabir — for a foreign scholarship and went to Moscow State Central Puppet Theatre to learn puppetry under the master Sergei Obraztsov for one year, in 1960-61.

As a keen student of puppetry, Dutta was committed from the beginning to learn as much as he could in the limited period of internship in Moscow. Obraztsov was then building up the Moscow Puppet Theatre on a grand scale and Dutta threw himself wholeheartedly into the planning and design of this world-famous institution. Outside the scheduled hours of workshop and master class, he devoted himself entirely to the intricacies of puppet-making, stage-setting, back-stage facilities, lighting and hundreds of other features needed for a large-scale puppet theatre.

To recognise Obraztsov's indirect contribution to the cause of Indian puppetry, one should recall that Rahi and Sahai, on return, continued their art at the Song and Drama Division, Government of India, and Sriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra (SBKK), by adapting traditional puppetry of gloves and rods to produce many modern skits. As regards Dutta, despite tempting offers from Czechoslovakia, he chose to return to his parent organisation CLT and applied the lessons learnt under Obraztsov for incorporating the following features:

- Modernising puppets and providing them with multiple articulation points not attempted before, such as, to 'gapit' system (for moving the head



around), batting the eye-lids, the lower lip movement, finger movement, etc.;

- Novel lighting by using modern stage techniques (working with the well known lighting expert Tapas Sen);
- Using light projections at oblique angles: to enhance the viewer-perception of puppets;
- Improving the stage-opening for puppetry, proportionate to the puppet size;
- Multi-level stage setting, allowing the puppets to be always visible;
- Providing recorded music with voice-overs, so that professional voices can be utilised;
- Above all, making the presentation slick and professional, achieving a rare level of grace and grandeur: hardly expected in puppet productions.

One has to remember that, for Dutta, there was no other model available in the 1950s and 1960s. These hallmarks of quality and excellence permeated all his productions over the ensuing years.

TWO

His early beginning was modest. Dutta was born in a village of Faridpur district, in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), in the early 1930s. He and his younger brother Yogesh Dutta (now India's foremost mime artist) had no formal schooling. During Dutta's childhood, a priest used to come home annually during Durga Puja, who would make a clay model of the deities for a token immersion. Asked by his mother to watch closely the process, Dutta soon began making objects out of clay and developed a strong bond with the craft -- so much so that, even during high fever, the touch of cold clay would heal the little boy! The Ganesha idol, in particular, fascinated him the most and once, during immersion, he jumped into the river and managed to rescue just the Ganesha-head. He hid it in a bush, balanced it on a stick and used it as the main character in his first-ever, puppet show. When his mother found this out, she angrily punished him for playing with the gods!

Every year, during the Hare Krishna Festival on Janmashtami signifying Krishna's birth, his house

would become a cultural hub, as his mother would host dance-and-mime troupes from across the region. Dressing him in a *kurta* (loose shirt) and putting a *pugree* (turban) on his head, she would make him sing in front of some of the region's best singers. That was when he realised the power of melody and rhythm. He had a fine sense of drawing, too. His art teacher, a fine *Jatra* (folk-theatre) actor, asked him to observe how leaves interlaced with each other and urged him to sketch them. He also sent him out into the woods to see how a creeper twined itself around a *neem* tree. What he taught him helped him a good deal in design and puppetry.

He, however, had always a keen interest in dance and drama, obtaining a diploma in both, from the Albert League Temple of Science and School of Art, near Fort William, in 1951. This training stood him in good stead in his parallel careers in set-design and puppetry. After Art College, he learnt Bharatanatyam

and Manipuri form at Rabindra Bharati University, under the direct tutelage of Uday Shankar. He also trained in Kathakali under Guru Balakrishna Memon. For a while, he performed contemporary dance in the professional troupe set up by the famous danseuse Sadhana Bose.

THREE

Surprisingly, Dutta began his working career, not as puppeteer, but as an art director in theatre when he was very young. Taken to Utpal Dutt by the famous light-designer Tapas Sen, he was asked by the doubting thespian whether he could fit in, notwithstanding Sen's insistence to the contrary. His warship design for the play *Kallol* (Waves) – on the Naval Mutiny in Mumbai, was a huge success.

While Dutta would shortly take on his life's vocation of puppetry, his love for set-design for Kolkata's



'Sita' with troupe

commercial and group theatres continued unabated. He successfully designed stage-sets for Bidhayak Bhattacharya's *Anthony Kabial*, Soumitra Chatterjee's *Namjiban* and *Rajkumar*, Bibhas Chakrabarty's *Madhav Malanchi Kainya* and Kumar Roy's *Malini*, to name just a few.

Another parallel love of Dutta's was for large-scale stage-design. For instance, he designed the well-known Kolkata stages for Kala Mandir, Girish Mancha, Ahindra Mancha and Gyan Mancha, apart from large stages in Jamshedpur and Tripura. The series of Rabindra Bhavan stages, built around Tagore's birth centenary in 1961, came for skilled renovations de novo by him in the district towns of Darjeeling, Birbhum, Midnapore and elsewhere in Bengal, carried out over the years.

Dutta started work at CLT in 1954. He initially assisted CLT director Samar Chatterjee in producing children's plays: *Mougli*, *Jijo*, *Aban Patua* and *Mithua*: all of which were great hits. *Mougli* was based on Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*. *Aban Patua* was about the little princess who preferred learning painting pictures to having jewellery. *Mithua* was a home-bound girl – like Tagore's sick boy Amal in *Post Office* – who could only play, in her imagination, with the road side lamp-post, the letter box and the moon in the sky. Incidentally, the celebrated cine artist Sharmila Tagore – then only a young girl – danced wonderfully as the princess in *Aban Patua*, and as the moon in *Mithua*!

FOUR

After re-joining CLT on return from Moscow, Dutta came into mainstream puppetry. He began producing short skits as *Kagaj Nashta Koro Na* (Don't Waste Paper), *Mamna* (about a sheep's lamb) and *Unity* (about two monkey-babies who fought among themselves and got united later on): all three as children's morality plays imparting educational lessons. In 1962, Dutta produced the puppet-play *Gulabo-Sitabo* which was inspired by the story of Pinocchio. Dutta himself was the puppeteer Gulabo, who made the puppet Sitabo out of a magic log, eaten by a python, representing

the Chinese aggression. How the puppeteer slit open the python's stomach to retrieve Sitabo, was the story line. The puppet play was very widely appreciated and had many repeat shows.

Then came his full-fledged puppet productions, with famous, animal-based Russian fables: *Holde-Jhunti Morogti* (the Yellow-crested Hen), *Boka Hans* (the Stupid Duck) and *Dushtu Indur* (the Begging Mouse). *Morogti* was a story of three friends: the hen, the cat and the bird, where their mutual bonding was strong enough to let the cat and the bird save the hen from the clutches of a clever fox. *Hans* was about a man who let loose his pet duck in a pond and sought the audience children's help to save it from the fox while he took a nap. Children were then asked to accompany him – along with a guide hedgehog -- to the fox's home and rescue the stolen duck. Interestingly, Jogesh Dutt was then a puppeteer in CLT to manipulate the hedgehog. *Indur* was about the uncanny intelligence of the rodents. These were all crafted on Obratzsov's models and became immensely popular with children. The high point of each episode was the tremendous interest it generated in the young audience and their high level of involvement, so much so that they felt they actually were participating in the shows!

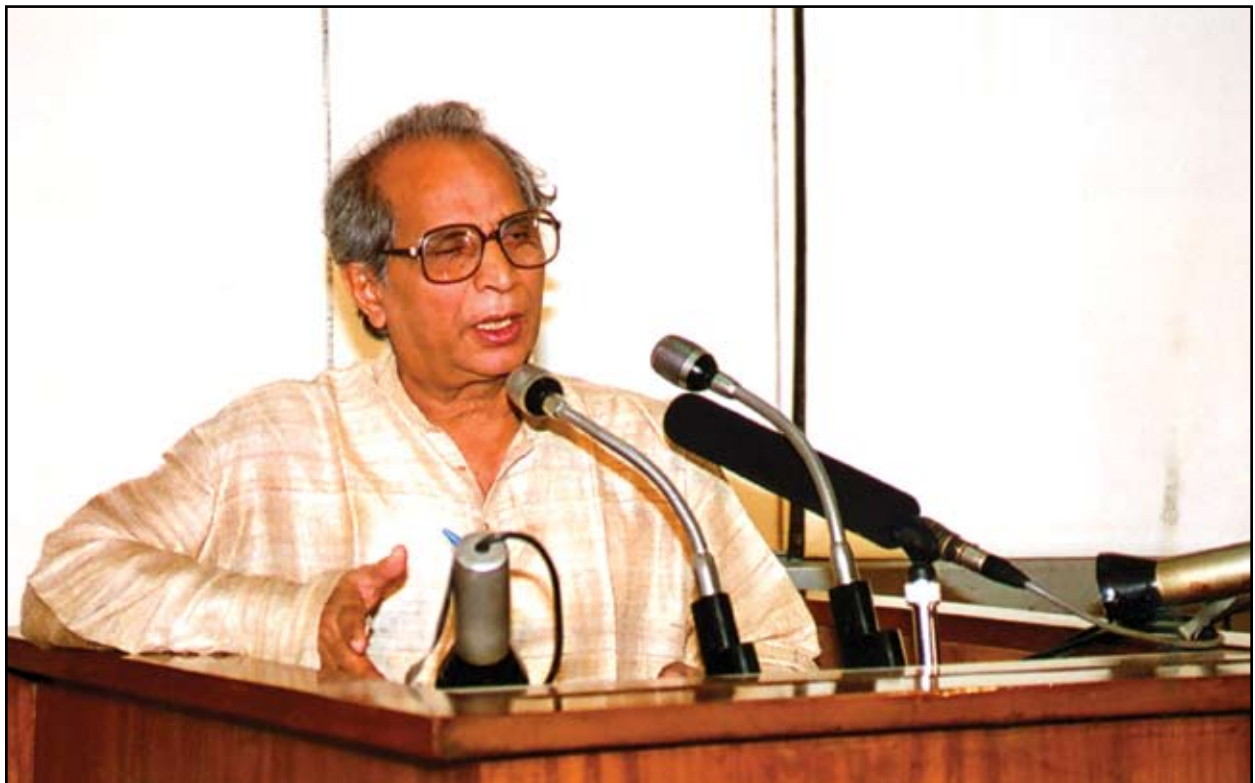
He continued for another decade in CLT till he produced his famous puppet-play *Aladin*, in 1971. Since CLT was more interested in theatrical works than in puppetry, he left CLT and formed his own troupe, Calcutta Puppet Theatre (CPT) in 1972, where he began his independent journey with *Aladin*. Based on the fascinating story from *the Arabian Nights*, this was a musical extravaganza, based on the compositions by V Balsara and lighting design by Tapas Sen. Drawing upon talents of the latter two, the puppet-play became one of the finest productions of CPT and is now a legend in the history of Indian puppetry: with a record number of shows all over the country and abroad. For two consecutive years, *Aladin* ran full-house, morning-shows at Star Theatre, Kolkata. It was adjudged among the best in the World Puppet Festival, held at Bielsko-

Biela, Poland, in 1980. *Aladin* continues to be popular, with call-shows still performed!

Right from the time of *Aladin*, Dutta showed the right intuition to get together under CPT's umbrella some of the best performing, visual and literary artists of Bengal. In that sense, his effort was comparable to that of the famous 'Bauhaus' experiment in the European continent in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when architect Gropius, painters Picasso and Kandinsky, dancer Nijinsky and other famed artists got together to produce some of the finest works of performing, visual and utilitarian arts. This was even more evident in CPT's next production of the epic, *Ramayana*, in which the script was by Mohit Chattopadhyay, art direction by Khaled Choudhury, music by V Balsara, lighting design by Tapas Sen and voice-overs by the finest theatre-persons: Soumitra Chatterjee, Satya Bandyopadhyay, Kumar Roy, Amar Ganguly, Jochhon Dastidar, Debraj Roy, Pradip Ghosh, Partha Ghosh, Gouri Ghosh, Nilima Das, Geeta Dey and others. Such

spectacular presentation and grandeur were rarely seen in a puppet production. Performed all over the country in Bengali and Hindi, the play starts with the episode of Rama's killing of demons in Vishwamitra's hermitage and ends with his return to Ayodhya, with Lakshman and Sita, after the defeat of Ravana in Lanka.

The next CPT production *Sita* was more nuanced, placing the mother and motherland as superior to heaven: the kingdom of God. The play, in fact, ended with Sita's disappearance into mother earth, with the exhortation to her sons, Lava and Kusha: "Remain firm, go ahead with your duty. Bow down your heads here and your obeisance will reach your mother's feet. Make this world generally graceful and serve for its peace and prosperity..." The play was scripted by Mohit Chattopadhyay, with music by V Balsara, art direction by Khaled Choudhury, light by Tapas Sen, and voice-overs by Soumitra Chatterjee, Bikash Roy, Partha Ghosh, Gouri Ghosh, Kaushik Sen, Jochhan Dastidar and others.



Suresh Dutta



Sita

Subsequent large puppet-plays of CPT were *Ajab Desh* about communal harmony, with principal characters as a tuft-haired Hindu priest and an orthodox Muslim Maulvi; and *Ichchapuran* (Wish Fulfillment), based on Tagore's short story, — with a father pining for childhood left behind and his son wanting to grow up fast like his father to have fun with all the world's freedom. How the Goddess of Desire granted their respective wishes — having overheard them — and how they came to huge grief, wishing to reverse their status once again, was the rest of the hilarious story.

The productions that followed were: *Kalo Hira* (Black Diamond); *Hush* (Consciousness); *Aparajita* (the Unvanquished); *Kakatua* (the Cockatoo), *Ram Katha* (Rama's Story); *Putul Bajigar* (the Puppet Magician); *Pinokiya* (Pinocchio); and others. Dutta took many of his puppet-plays abroad, notably to Poland (1980); Yugoslavia (1980); Bangladesh (1986); Nepal (1986); and the USA (1997), among others.

FIVE

In the early days of puppet plays by Dutta's CPT, it must be realised, there was little mechanism for financial support from either the government or the corporate world. CPT's large team (30-40) of paid artists had to be sustained with revenue raised from hall-shows and call-shows, and it had yet to raise enough funds for planning subsequent productions. It was, therefore, absolutely essential to attract ticket-paying audiences with elements of mass entertainment, while keeping open the scope for experimentation.

Dutta fell back on Obratzsov's famous dictum: "Puppetry is magic, wedded to poetry!" and created his own 'magic', say, in his most-successful production *Aladin* as follows:

- The boy Aladin's gigantic palace rising sky-high, from below;

- The jinn's face alone hovering in the darkness;
- The princess appearing seated on a huge elephant-back and romancing with Aladin;
- The prowling tiger gobbling up the evil magician inside the cave, clearing the chained Aladin's way to freedom.

String puppets are everywhere fairly articulated. But in rod puppetry, the idea of Obratzsov's (and Dutta's) 'magic' emanates from the general trend in the East (China and Japan), where the puppets are *articulated* and made as much life-like as possible. This, in turn, needs consummate skill in life-like puppet-making and creating realistic articulation points. In contrast, rod puppets in the West (Continental Europe and the USA) are generally *non-articulated*. The idea behind the latter trend is probably that once the objects are perceived as puppets by the spectators, articulation – to impart life – is no longer necessary.

At least in eastern India, Dutta's style of well-made and properly articulated rod puppetry has come to stay, as can be seen from the following cases:

1. The Youth Puppet Theatre, Kolkata, under Sisir Biswas and the Burdwan Puppet Theatre under Swapan Roy, — both colleagues of Dutta from his CLT days;
2. Little Puppet Theatre, Kolkata, under Sanjit Ghosh; Dolls Theatre, Kolkata, under Sudip Gupta; Mayur

Puppet Theatre, Lucknow, under Pradip Nath; and Delhi Puppet Theatre (now non-operational) under Sampa Ghosh, — all four were trained students of Dutta.

3. People's Puppet Theatre, Kolkata, under Hiren Bhattacharjee; Tripura Puppet Theatre under Haripada Das (now under his successors); puppetry unit of Assam Government under Chabin Rajkhuwa, Guwahati; and Hyderabad Puppet Theatre under Ms. Rayalakshmi, — all of them inspired and influenced by Dutta.

In the above sense, Dutta can be treated as 'the father figure of rod puppetry' in India, who has been able to establish his own school, in an unmistakable fashion.

SIX

By way of recognition, Dutta has received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and 'Padma Shri' from the President of India. He was given steadfast support by his late wife Ruby Dutta all through his life. Now an octogenarian, Dutta is using his skills and indomitable enthusiasm to evolve and establish what he calls 'the lost art of Indian water puppets' – largely modelled on Vietnamese water puppets — in the pools of Kolkata, with munificence from the government. In this brand new venture, one can only wish him good luck and Godspeed to this veteran puppet-master!

Puppetry a Common Eastern Heritage

Sampa Ghosh

Puppetry has often been the performing art that has broken religious boundaries and remove a caste barriers in rural India. Once upon a time, Kalu Mia, came from a neighbouring village of Talshahar and was the first Muslim to take up puppetry as a profession under the Brahmin Girish Acharya of the Brahmanbaria area, now in Bangladesh. Dhan Mia was the second among the Muslim puppeteers in the Brahmanbaria area to perform *Tarer Putul* (String puppet). Dhan Mia used to sing at the puppet shows for a salary of half a rupee. At 20, he formed a troupe of his own. He began using epic stories of the Ram-Ravan a fight. This troupe also performed mythological stories of *Radha-Krishna*, *Sita Haran* (Abduction of Sita), *Ram-Lakshman*, *Jai Hanuman*, etc., from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

After Dhan Mia's death, his family members took up the steering for running the company 'Royal Bina Putul Nach'. While the shows continued two content of the stories changed. Now, except for the love stories of Radha-Krishna, puppeteers do not perform other stories anymore. Stories are nowadays based on events of everyday life as well as on folk and fairy tales. There are common stories of farmers working in the fields, men fishing, women husking paddy, young girls carrying empty pitchers to the river for water and so on. Some new puppet groups are using live people in the name of puppets.

In this form, puppet-characters of Bairagi and Vaishnabi come first and dance and then start quarrelling over

the necessities of their daily lives. Bairagi starts beating Vaishnabi, but when she falls down on the stage, Bairagi affectionately raises her and fondly tends to her wounds. Among other characters are the princess who dances and sings. The role of the beautiful dancers and singers, are enacted by Milan Devi and





Parul Devi and the puppet-character of Dhan Mia, the violin player. The main puppeteer uses his own voice to imitate the tone of different puppet-characters, while simultaneously playing on a bamboo flute. The puppeteer Dhan Mia presented his shows on television and participated in three films: *Dui Rajkumar* (Two Princes), *Cholo Ghar Bandhi* (Let's Make a Home) and *Matir Putul* (Clay Dolls).

Costumes, make-up and jewellery in these shows are imitative of Jatra, the Bengali folk-play. The puppets are kept in wooden boxes, with bodies in a basket, and costumes and ornaments are kept separately. Harmonium, clarinet, cornet, nagara, cymbals, flute, *kansi* (brass-plate, struck by a wooden stick) and sometimes a violin are used to the accompaniment of folk songs and tunes of popular Bengali modern songs.

String puppets are used to present Palagan (narrative plays), usually on the stories of *Radha-Krishna* and *Ram-Sita*.

The tradition of puppetry in Bangladesh dates back at least a thousand years. The first reference to puppetry is, however, found in *Yusuf-Zulekha*, a 15th -century epic. There are three forms of puppets in Bangladesh: rod puppets, string puppets and glove puppets. *Yusuf-Zulekha* is a romantic story in verse, written in Bengali. Shah Muhammad Sagir, a court-poet of Sultan Giyasuddin Azam Shah of Gauda (1389-1410), wrote the book in the 15th century at the Sultan's command. The book upheld the teachings of religion and ethics through love stories culled from the Holy Quran, where moral teachings and the greatness of the Almighty were expressed through the love of Yusuf and Zulekha.

Side by side with the religious teachings, human sentiments as well as the greatness of Islam were depicted in the work. Interestingly, the book ends with the supernatural, inter-denominational story of love between Ibn Amin, Yusuf's brother and Bidhuprabha. Written in Payar metre (metrical couplet with lines of 14 syllables), and Tripadi (metrical triplet), the book is split into chapters narrating several events. The mention of raga and tala at the beginning of each chapter indicates that the pieces were originally meant for singing. The diction and the style of the work bear the signs of urbanity. In addition to Shah Muhammad Sagir, other poets wrote stories based on the Yusuf-Zulekha motif in the Middle Ages.

Formerly certain members of the Hindu community used to work professionally as puppeteers, wandering from village to village holding puppet shows. Later, they were joined by Muslim puppeteers. After Partition in 1947, Hindu puppeteers came to India. Muslim puppeteers were forced to stop their shows, as their stories were from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The art inevitably declined but afterwards, they

changed their story lines and started performing *Behula Lakhinder*, *Song of Bede-Bedini*, *Fight of the Tiger and Crocodile*, *Banabibi* and *Dakshinroy Pala*. The erstwhile Ram-Ravan battle became the fighting between two men. These days they perform at different agriculturals, industrial and education fairs, to earn their living.

After the Bangladesh Liberation in 1971, some puppeteers left the country for good. Some members of old troupes came forward and established new groups locally with enthusiastic young boys. But, as they were not so talented, they could not add any new story or technique. Some groups are still seen at Brahmanbaria, Barishal, Faridpur, Khulna, Kushtia and Rangpur areas in Bangladesh. There are also shows about social themes and domestic life. Now puppet shows are mostly staged to represent social awareness. Issues like education, family planning, health and hygiene are brought to the forefront by this medium.

In West Bengal, the string puppet engages a few thousand people directly or indirectly in puppetry at





Bagula and adjoining areas of Nadia and Mudagachha Colony of the North 24 Parganas district. All the puppeteers of Bagula and Mudagachha had migrated from erstwhile Pakistan in 1951, after the Partition as refugees and they re-formed their groups here. The West Bengal Government allotted them land and paddy fields. Currently, their literacy rate is not too high and most children tend to drop out before tenth examination. The troupes, comprising 6 to 12 persons, are owned by an individual or jointly owned by the puppeteers on a partnership basis. At times one person has two to three groups.

Every group has one *rom* (Music) Master, two assistants, one main puppeteer and his assistant. The Sur Master is a professional, usually appointed on a paltry salary.

All the members of the group are appointed on a monthly salary for eight months (September to April), going back to farming in the other months. The troupes are itinerant, travelling as far as Odisha, Assam, Tripura and Bihar. Some troupes have recorded music and dialogue. Then puppets are two to three feet high, made from solapith; backdrops and puppets are painted by *patuas* (folk painters). Each group has its own tents and display painted boards for every play. Each troupe has 3-4 musicians, with women also participating these days. Themes are taken from successful Jatra plays and even from popular Hindi or Bengali films.

There are usually two dancer puppets: Kananbala and Parulbala: both of whom appear in the prelude to each performance. The show begins with a special song, followed by a violin player christened Uttam Kumar after the popular hero of Bengali films! He announces the name of the play and calls for the dancers. Songs and dialogues are sung and spoken by the *Sur* Master. He changes his voice according to the character. He knows by rote all the plays, going up to as many as 30 plays at a time.

Harmonium, tabla, clarinet, flute, cornet, dhol, pakhawaj, nal, sarinda, electric banjo, cymbals and violin form the musical input of the show, with the musicians sitting on the right side of the stage. Puppets have joints made of cloth at their shoulders, elbows and rarely wrists. There are no legs and no joints at the neck. Only the female acrobat puppet Bhanumati has legs and the joker puppet has a jointed neck. Each Puppet has six strings and Bhanumati has 10 strings, for her acrobatic manipulations. They use light effects on the stage and perform two to seven ticketed shows in a fair. Each show is of 20 minutes and performances continue from morning till evening.

In Assam, the village Utmari in Kalaigaon (Darang district) has a concentration of dozens of teams of puppeteers who have achieved a high degree of

prosperity through puppetry. A group from Nadia is believed to have come here and initiated the formation of local groups. These puppeteers use Karbi and Assamese songs and find patronage among the residents Bengali-speaking areas of the district. Some Assamese people have also started similar groups in the seventies. 2nd their construct, these puppets strongly resemble the puppets of Nadia, West Bengal.

In Tripura, most of the puppeteers came from Comilla, Mymensing and Sylhet districts of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after Partition. They had witnessed puppet shows or were attached to puppet theatre there. They used to make puppets: either from wood or from paper-pulp, as solapith the common material for puppet making traditionally in these part is not easily available here. They perform mythological stories like *Nauka Vilas*, *Nemai Sanyas*, *Harishchandra*, *Ravan Badh*, etc. The shows are ticketed and use local dialect. Each performance begins with *Nam Sankirtan* supported by an instrumental ensemble of palm-leaf *pyapya* (whistle), dholak, harmonium and *kartal* (cymbals).



The puppeteers of Tripura depict cartoon-like tales of a folk character, called *Mona* (dear chap), in a series called *News*. The latter are tales describing the various misfortunes and misadventures of *Mona* during fishing, hunting, rowing, etc. A popular version of news is: *Mona* going to the river for fishing. The singer outside the stage tells him not to go there because of a lurking crocodile that could surface any moment. *Mona* does not listen and ultimately the crocodile gobbles him up. A similar incident happens in the forest, where the tiger attacks and eats *Mona*. The puppeteers also perform some humorous *News* on *Vaishnab-Vaishnabi*, *Jagai-Madhai Uddhar*, etc., with folk music. It is said that Vengu Das from Nabinagar, Brahmanberia, Bangladesh, had first initiated the *News* series in these parts.

In Bangladesh, the *News* tradition is still going on. A three day Puppet Dance Festival was held at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy in 2012. eight puppet troupes were selected out of 55 troupes from across



the country. Royal Bina Putul Nach from Brahmanbaria (Dhan Mia's original group) presented *Khanda Khanda Galpo* (Fragmented Tales), comprising 12 short stories. One of the stories featured the bane of greed, through the narrative of a rural boy, who could not remain satisfied even after catching a big fish. His wail for catching more fish resulted in a tragic death: from an attack by a crocodile.

In Manipur, there is a strong link with Nadia, West Bengal, the birth place of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a 15th century savant and devotee of Lord Krishna. Nadia is the main centre of string puppets, as the puppeteers from East Pakistan mainly settled here. Mahaprabhu, who sang the praise of God and propagated Bhakti Yoga, is revered by many Hindus in west Bengal and Manipur, as a reincarnation of Lord Vishnu. So the string puppet tradition of Manipur is an offshoot that took of from the puppet theatre of Nadia.

The traditional string puppet of Manipur is known as Hang-Lai Jagoi. The themes of these puppet shows are based on the stories of Radha and Lord Krishna. In Manipur, the puppeteer plays the *mridanga* and

khon-pung: forms of drums. The delivery of dialogue, the movements of puppets and the musicians are very well synchronised. String puppetry, resembling human or divine figures, is performed at *Rasleela* (Radha-Krishna's love-play), whereas puppet-shows with animal and demonic forms are performed during *Gostha Leela*. It is said that the art of puppetry was introduced in Manipur during the reign of Maharaj Chandrakriti Singh (1850-1886) in *Goura-Leela* under the supervision of Oja N. Mala Singh of Uripok, Imphal. In a typical performance once the puppeteers sit on an elevated platform and a black screen is hung from the floor of the platform to the stage where the puppets are put. The puppets are lowered on to the stage and moved around with the aid of black strings which are not visible due to the black screen in the background.

In sum, the tradition of string puppet has common roots and similar development patterns all over eastern India and Bangladesh. The heritage is still clearly discernible in the scores of puppet groups that operate in this region and provide mass entertainment to thousands of rural viewers.

Gandhiji and Puppetry

Prof. S. A. Krishnaiah

Puppetry is an art, which develops the skill of animation, and morphing, with suitable dramatized characters. It enhances the creativity of an artist. Each puppetry presentation, highlighted with music, and dialogues motivates the artists, and entertains and educates the audience. Children grasp the message of a puppetry show very quickly. Keeping this aspect in mind, the Karnataka Folklore University, in the Gotgody Havery District of Karnataka, has come forward to introduce puppetry as a part of the school curriculum in the district. Rather than concentrating on the show aspect of this art, more emphasis has been given in the curriculum.

Perhaps it might not be an exaggeration to conclude that every child in south India has at some time or

other been exposed to the unique theatre form of a Shadow Puppet Show (Leather Puppets Play). In the local Kannada dialect, this form of puppetry is known as Togalu Gombeyaata. Numerous references to this form in earlier writings and varied performances suggests that leather puppetry has been in vogue in the region since historic times. The Neminatha Purana, a well-known Kannada epic of the tenth-eleventh century, in its eighth canto, mentions the word *togal pave*, which means leather puppet. This clearly indicates that puppetry was known in Karnataka during the said period. A further term of reference is found in one of Basavanna's *Vachanas* of the twelfth century which suggests clearly that Basavanna was acquainted with string puppets, as he puts forth the



Shadow play in Zurich - Gandhi



question: "*Suutrada gombege praanavunte*" (does a string puppet have life)? An inscription of 1521 found in Kolar, written in Telugu, mentions the gift of an Agrahara, (a colony of houses), to a string puppeteer. During the Vijayanagara rule also, puppet play received patronage and the artistes of puppetry were granted land and houses. A noteworthy literary reference to puppetry can be found in the works of poets such as Kanakadasa. He lived in the 16th century A. D. and belonged to the Haridasa Bhakti cult. In his work, *Haribhakti Saara*, there is a line "*Togalu bombegalante naalku bageya nirmana*," and the line makes a reference to leather puppets. Kanakadasa has in fact used this reference to leather puppets to denote the four major Varnas: the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.

Today, leather puppetry is called by different names: Killekyaata, Sillekyaata and Katubujyaata. Certain nomadic tribes specialize in this form of puppetry. They are scattered all over the state of Karnataka and other South Indian States. There are other names associated with these tribes: In North Karnataka,

they are called, Katubus; in Shimoga and Shikaripura areas, Bundeekyaata (fish catchers); in Mudabidri area (South Canara), Kichilikyaatas and in Hassan, Gomberaamaru. The terms *killekyaata* or *sillekyaata* have come into vogue from the character of the clown who bears the same name.

The prevalence of puppetry during colonial times lacks historical accuracy. While in 1933, historian Winteraitz, in the book, *History of Indian Literature*, wrote, "Shadow figures as we know them from Java, China, Egypt and Turkey have not been found in India," an Italian traveller, Pierto Della Velle, wrote a letter dated 22-11-1627 from Ikkeri (Shimoga district) in which he mentioned a festival in which transparent figures of elephants and horse riders were shown. This indicates that Pierto Della Velle had perhaps witnessed a shadow leather puppet play, in Karnataka.

On the other hand it is historically proven that puppetry had a spiritual underbelly during those times. According to some scholars, Puppetry was once

a sacred ritual undertaken to propitiate supernatural beings. Puppeteers were looked upon with great respect. Commissioning a puppet show (based on mythological episodes) was almost like a religious activity, a form of divine art. Through literature, music, dialogues and riddles, puppeteers disseminated messages to the people like religious teachers.

A question is often asked: Which art form came into existence first - puppetry or live theatre? Dramatization of religious and ethical themes was made originally in the form of puppet shows or pictorial narrations. Initially the man perhaps hesitated to play god or goddess and it was considered a sin to play the role of God on the stage. Hence he represented gods and goddesses in puppets or masked figures. Even today in villages, the shadow puppet play is performed in the temple premises of the goddess, Bhagavati or Kali. This practice still continues in Kerala where the show is performed in front of the Bhagavati temple. It was only at a much later stage that the performer put on the makeup and appeared on the stage playing the role of God.

There is evidence in some tribal areas and among certain tribal regions that certain communities used to present stories of cultural heroes of the region through dolls and paintings. These mediums are still prevalent in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Royal families never allowed these artisans into the heart

of the city to put up a show. So a special stage was erected outside the village or town and the shows were staged after the harvest. In Maharashtra shadow puppets are performed in the paddy fields as an offering to appease the presiding spirit or deity to reap bumper crop.

But all is not hunky dory for these traditional entertainers. Despite being such a popular medium of entertainment among both young and old, the form faces stiff competition from other folk art forms as well as modern forms of entertainment like the cinema, television and internet. The advent of technological innovations into the field of performance based art forms, the exposure of audiences to traditional art forms is gradually decreasing. The report of the ethnographic survey, 1988, (S. A. Krishnaiah) mentions 145 traditional leather puppet troupes in Karnataka. However the ethnographic survey of 2002 revealed the existence of only 60 leather puppeteers and in 2013 the number is reduced to just twelve to fifteen troupes.

Despite this blurring of its future prospects, puppet theatre has not sung its swan song as India has had a rich tradition of cultural dissemination, especially through the performing arts, such as puppetry. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata provide innumerable opportunities for this form of cultural communication. The people's familiarity with their



Gandhi shadow puppets play scene-Belagalveeranna-Manukula Ashrama



themes can be taken for granted as there are bards and mendicants who sing songs based on the epics. People express themselves through folk games, paintings, puppetry, and magic. On the whole, the puppeteers generally present puppet shows based on traditional mythological themes. It was Belgallu Veeranna and the artistes of the Manukula Ashrama of Sindhanur village, Rayachur, Karnataka who experimented with new themes like puppet shows on Basaveshvar, Mahatma Gandhi (Bapu Katha), the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, Kanakadasa and so on.

The ashram is a charitable trust situated at Sindhanur, in the Rayachur district. Known as 'Gurukula' or Centre for Folk-Artiste Children's Residential School' it runs workshops, conducts seminars and teaches puppet making. It is a residential school, and also a home for the rehabilitation of elderly people. Guest artists are invited to teach traditional art forms. The Manukula Ashrama is managed by B.V.Mallikarjuna (Trustee and President). He is the son of the reputed puppeteer Balagallu Veeranna. Taking the art of puppetry on to the next stage, this pioneering institution is planning to establish a regular puppetry school at Bellary and Sindhanur of Rayachur district to teach puppet making and craftsmanship, Its concept of a puppetry

museum has already borne fruit and the work of the museum is in progress, looked after by the research director, Prof. S. A. Krishnaiah.

In a typical performance of traditional puppetry the place of instrumentation has a crucial role to play. Musical instruments in puppetry produce different notes. In the last century puppet theatres used *shruti vaadyas* -- *tanige shruti* and *taali* or *gangaala shruti*. A typical instrumental arrangement used in puppetry contained two parts - an inverted thin bronze bowl (like a dinner plate) on which a wooden stick was fixed by means of bee wax. When the musician struck the stick with the fingers of both hands alternatively, the striking produced vibrations in the bronze plate and a continuous drone was produced. Today this instrument is not used but puppeteers from Maharashtra (Pinguli region) still use the same instrument and they call it 'waata' and the stick, *bhendi*. Today most of the puppeteers use the harmonium in puppetry shows. According to Tyapenahalli Hombaiah, a leather puppet artist, the harmonium has been in use since 1910 A.D.

A common instrument in use is the *Paavari* or *Burburi*. This is a very small flute-like instrument. It is an eight-inch long hollow bamboo pipe, open at both the ends. In the middle, a finger-size hole is made

and the border of the hole is lined with bee wax. A thin diaphragm, traditionally made of the wax tissue of the hornet, and now a piece of plastic, is fixed on the wax to cover the hole. The tissue produces sound when air is blown into the pipe. The musician blows air into the pipe and produces various notes.

The other traditional carry-over in the art of puppetry has been the craft of puppet making. Here too, the current picture is dim. The art of tanning leather into parchment, an essential ingredient in the making of the puppets, has been almost lost among puppeteers. The art is still prevalent in Nagamangal taluk (of Mandya district), Kolar and Bellary districts of Karnataka. Most of the present-day puppeteers make new puppets by copying designs of earlier puppets. Very few know the art of making figures of mythological characters from leather parchments. Traditionally, the puppets were made out of deer skin. Now artistes use the hide of sheep or goats. It is to be noted that the hides should not be mixed with salt. Such hides cannot be used for the parchment

process. It is advisable to procure untreated raw hide for the purpose.

The process of tanning the raw hide is as follows. The raw hide of sheep or goats is immersed in hot water of 100 degree F and is allowed to remain for a few seconds. When it is ready, the puppeteer takes out the leather and scrapes the inner and outer surfaces, using a sharp knife and washes it in flowing water. It is placed on a quilt or spread on the ground. It is smoothly stretched and held in position by weights placed on the four corners. It is covered with a white piece of cloth to absorb the moisture and the hide will have dried and the parchment leather would be further smoothed with the help of a knife. The leather is then stocked away for puppet making.

After marking the desired shape on the leather with a sharp needle, the artist draws the outline of the shape with black ink. Then the inner parts, like the eye, the nose, the chin, the chest, the waist, limbs and legs etc., are marked. An expert puppeteer does not need any scale; he uses his hands and fingers as



his measuring instrument. For the purpose of making designs like squares, triangles, stars, crescent shape or punch etc., they use traditional tools called '*cheeru*' and '*manaali*'. Both are iron instruments with wooden handles. The '*cheeru*' has a tip in the shape of a 'U' or 'V'. The tip of the '*manaali*' has a sharp circular edge. While punching the leather, the '*manaali*' is used along with a wooden hammer.

While traditional theatre has continued to draw an audience, it would be incorrect to presume that puppeteers have remained confined to their roots. Attempts to innovate and update their repertoire in keeping with contemporary themes has been undertaken off and on. One of the most successful of such innovations has been the presentation of a shadow play on Gandhiji. Yet this show too, had its precedents. The first attempt at staging puppet shows on national leaders was made by Belgal Veeranna. The concept was first mooted by the then Secretary of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), Dr. Kapila Vatsayan, in 1991. It was supported by Dr. N. Radhakrishnan, Director of the Gandhi Smriti and Gandhi Darshan Samiti (GSDS), Shobana Radha Krishnan, a Bharata Natyam dancer and former in-charge of puppetry wing of IGNCA, and S.A.Krishnaiah, research scholar in folkloristic history.

Till then no national leader had figured as a full scale performance with leather puppets..

Before launching the project on depicting the life of Mahatma Gandhi through puppet shows, Mrs Shobana Radha Krishna came to Udupi, for consultation with the Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts, and S. A. Krishnaiah had rendered all the help needed. He introduced her to Belagallu Veeranna. The project was finalized in Bangalore in 1991. Within a span of three months, a puppetry show on Mahatma Gandhi, 'Bapu Katha' (Story of Father of Nation : Mahatma Gandhi) became a reality.

In the Bapu Katha Puppetry show, Mahatma Gandhi and Kasturba Gandhi are shown in the shadow, using the cut outs (not painted leather). Shadows on Gandhiji's personal belongings: his reading glasses, *chappals*, the three monkey motifs and utensils are effectively used. The background musical score is created with popular patriotic tunes as such '*Vaishnava janato..*' '*Raghupati raaghava raajaram...*' '*Saare jahaan se achcha...*' '*Saabaramatike santa.*' The first show was staged in New Delhi on 2nd October 1991, at the Rashtrapathi Bhavan. The President of India R. Venkataraman, who witnessed the show, was all praise for the artistes. He wrote a letter of appreciation to Smt Kapila Vatsayamn.





This new puppetry show is aimed at highlighting the facets of Gandhiji's epic struggle: removing social inequalities, promoting communal harmony, and achieving freedom. A few episodes of his life in South Africa are also shown in the puppetry show.

Gandhiyana (Gandhiji's Freedom Struggle)

Bapu Katha: (The Story of the Father of the Nation)

Introduction

Understanding the traditional puppetry form and passing on the message of Mahatma Gandhi through puppetry to the world is a new innovation, and it has already begun. The credit for this credit goes to IGNC. (Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts-New Delhi). An experimental show — Gandhi lore in shadow puppetry – was initiated by Balagallu Veeranna. The show has been staged more than 1000 times. After Veeranna, his son Mallikarjuna. B.V. has continued the tradition.

The shadow puppet play *Gandhiji* highlights the Gandhian philosophy, especially Gandhiji's principle of non-violence.

- 1 Scene-Narrator / Puppeteer: Listen, dear children, there was a boy. His name was Mohan. His full name was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. He won the hearts of people by his simple living and high thinking. He fought against communal hatred and spread the message of tolerance and love for all human beings.
- 2 Scene –Narrator / Puppeteer: As a traveller trying to board a train in South Africa Gandhi is humiliated by a British Officer. The Police insult him. Gandhi objects to the racial discrimination.
- 3 Scene: Narrator / Puppeteer: Gandhi decides to fight all such injustices with the weapon of Truth. In South Africa he starts a new movement called Satyagraha to assert his rights as a citizen and to demand justice. In a meeting of Indians in Pretoria, he calls upon the people to fight against injustice, without resorting to violence.
- 4 Scene: Entry of Indians: After the train incident more and more people seek his advice and help. After his three-year stay in South Africa he returns to India in 1896.



- 5 Scene: Narrator / Puppeteer: In India, he speaks to people about the plight of Indians in South Africa. After two decades again Gandhi takes up the cause of the people and launches the freedom movement.
- 6 Scene: Champaran Incident: In Bihar, cultivators are forced by European planters to grow indigo. In 1917, Gandhi goes to Champaran to help peasants. The European District Magistrate orders Gandhi to leave the district. Gandhi refuses to oblige. This is the first instance of Satyagraha in India.
- 7 Scene: Gandhi travels all over India and sees the terrible poverty of the people. He fully supports peasant life. His message for them is self-help.
- 8 Scene- Narrator / Puppeteer: As a part of the Satyagraha Movement a big bonfire of more than two thousand permits is raised. Gandhi and many of his colleagues are imprisoned several times in the course of this struggle. He gives up his practice as a lawyer and devotes all his time to the cause of freedom. He starts on a life of austerity and simplicity.
- 9 Scene: Narrator / Puppeteer: The Non Co-operation movement begins. Gandhi mesmerizes 30 crore Indians by means of the Satyagraha Movement. He launches a programme of Non-co-operation and the Civil Disobedience Movement.
- 10 Scene: Dandi March: On 30th March 1930. Gandhi leads people on a march to Dandi in Gujarat, to make salt on the seashore and break the rule of salt tax. The civil Disobedience Movement of huge proportions starts.
- 11 Scene: Quit India Movement (Do or Die): Gandhiji issues a call to the British to Quit India! At the Congress Committee meeting in Bombay, on August 8, 1942, it is resolved that the British rule in India must end at once.
- 12 Scene: Arrest of freedom fighters: The Government arrests Gandhiji and other leaders overnight. People, now leaderless, chant the 'Do or Die' mantra. There is an outburst of violence everywhere. The Government lets loose a reign of terror. Huge bonfires are organized to burn foreign cloth.
- 13 Scene: Partition of the country: All through his life Gandhi has worked for Hindu - Muslim unity,

yet it is a big challenge. The Muslim League with Mr. Jinnah demands a separate Muslim state called Pakistan. In support of this demand, the Muslim League observes a Direct Action Day in August. Riots break out. Widespread communal riots follow.

14 Scene: Narrator/Puppeteer: Song Vaishnava janato. The play transmits the message of Sathya and Ahimsa which Gandhiji the Father of the Indian Nation has left for us: 'Ishwar Alla Teere Naam Sabuko sanmati thee Bhagavaan' Dhun (tune) was always liked by Gandhiji.

15 Last Scene: On 30-1-1948, Gandhiji comes to his prayer meeting at five in the evening. Suddenly a young man pretending to seek his blessings shoots at him thrice in quick succession. All the bullets hit Gandhiji. Gandhiji falls uttering "Ram! Ram!" He is dead. The scene ends with 'Raghupati Raghava RajaramIshwar Alla Teere Naam Sabako Sanmati de Bhagavaan' Dhun (tune).

Puppeteers' Narration: The whole world is stunned at the death of Gandhiji. The whole world mourns his death, pays him glowing tributes and hails him as one who will never die. Albert Einstein, one of the world's

greatest scientists, paid a tribute to Gandhiji in these words: "*Generations to come, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.*"

The main creator of this show was Nadoja Belagallu Veeranna. He was born on 02nd March-1935. His ancestors were also great artists. His father, Late Hanumanthappa was a famous violinist and a theatrical artist who used to enact female roles. Veeranna started taking part in dramas and participated in the singing of Bhajans, singing in and around his village. Late Sri Joladaraashi Doddana Gauda, a well-known Gamaka Artiste praised Veeranna's dramatic skill and the texture of his voice. Late Chandayya Swamy motivated young Veeranna to join his drama company.

Belagallu Veeranna, is now a director, and drama artiste. He is a leading exponent of the art of leather puppetry. Under the guidance of Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, he developed the traditional art of leather puppetry further and adopted historical and contemporary themes in puppetry. The members of his troupe are his relatives and thus one of the main features of the puppetry tradition has been kept alive.



In 1980, he presented traditional puppetry in Bangalore where his talent was noticed and he received high appreciation. Further he received full support to continue the traditional puppetry form from the Department of Kannada and Culture. He was supported by the then President of Central Music and Drama Academy, Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. When Sri Girish Karnad a great dramatist, was the President of Kendra Sangeeta Naataka Academy, he helped Veeranna to stage "Bharata Swathantra Sangraama".

The best known puppetry presentation of Veeranna is Gandhiyana (Bapu Katha). In the initial years S. A. Krishnaiah contributed significantly to the conceptualization of Gandhiyana.

Veeranna was invited by the Rietberg Museum, Zurich, Switzerland, on the occasion of the 60th India and Swiss Anniversary. S. A. Krishnaiah and Smt. Amrita Lahari worked as the coordinators for a programme at Zurich as part of the India Festival held on 24 June, 2008, to 7 July, 2008. Director, Dr. Albert Lutz, former director, Prof Fisher, the executive members of the Zurich Reitberg Museum and Johannes Beltz (Museum Curator of Zurich) sponsored the program. Veeranna's troupe presented the Panchavati's episode 'Seethaapaharana', a theme from the Ramayana. He also presented 'Mahatma Gandhi' puppet show and

it brought him name and fame. He and his troupe were invited by the Linden Museum, Stuttgart, Germany, in October 2011, on the occasion of the Centenary celebration of the museum. With the collaboration of an Indo-German Society, he staged many performances in other states of Germany -- Nuremberg, Koln, and Mainz.

Over two decades 70,000 people have witnessed the Gandhiyan Show

Veeranna is now doing regular puppetry shows on behalf of the Government of Karnataka and the Central Government and continued it through the Manukula Ashrama artist group. He has already organized more than 1000 puppetry shows. He has performed. From 1991 to 2012 and more than 70,000 people have attended his shows. He recalls an incident that occurred at a puppetry show organized in an open field at Basavana Bhagevadi of Bijapur district. There was overcrowding of people where the puppetry show on Gandhiji was organized and to control the crowd police had to use force!

Conclusion:

Mrs Meher Contractor (*MARG* June 1968), says puppetry is like poetry. It sustains the cultural tradition. It is known as the language mime, gesture, or expression. The story that a puppetry tells can be





understood by all irrespective of language. Puppetry is itself a universal heritage.

In the traditional shadow puppetry show one single person could present the show for the whole night. Today the traditional style has become extinct. Presentation of modern puppetry plays through the medium of shadow puppetry requires proper lighting arrangements. The performer should play appropriate music for each character and manipulate

the characters accordingly. This itself is a unique art. The shadow puppetry medium can be used in a multicultural context to present moral tales and to bring about social awareness. The puppetry show on Mahatma Gandhi is the best example at informal education. It is a revolutionary movement. Besides I thoroughly support the view that the puppetry mode of transmission of information and message must be introduced in our schools and colleges as a part of the curricula.

The Puppet Art of Odisha

Gouranga Dash

In the world of puppet art, the Odia speaking tract bears a distinct place where all forms of puppetry are still in practice. They are known by strange nomenclatures, such as, Shakhi Kandhei Nata (glove puppet), Ravana Chhaya (shadow puppet), Gopalila Kandhei Nata (string puppet), Ramalila Kandhei Nata (rod puppet) and ventriloquism. I have heard a lot about the practice of ventriloquism among the tribal people which has been used for protecting the corn fields from wild animals and birds. Ample evidence is also available in ancient and medieval literatures to establish its centuries long bond with the people. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration if this art is addressed as the citadel of puppet art.

Shakhi Kandhei Nata

The other name of glove puppet play in Odisha is Shakhi Kandhei Nata. The term 'Shakhi' is loosely translated into playmate that doubles as a confidante to the protagonist. She, therefore, enjoys a degree of intimacy not privileged to others. In the *Vaishnava* tradition, Radha and Krishna are conceived as *prakriti* (the female principle) and *purusha* (the male principle) while the rest of the universe represents femininity. These women function as sakhis between the two. Shakhi Kandhei Nata is so called, because it narrates the role these sakhis play in resolving all kinds of emotional or sentimental discord that arises between the two primal lovers. They also deeply savour the union of Radha and Krishna and delight in bliss.

Ahira Gouda, a breakaway group of the *Kela* community, a type of nomadic tribal people, has been carrying on this tradition of presenting glove puppets since long. They identify themselves as *Vaishnavites* and claim Krishna is their *Adipurusha*. To substantiate this claim they describe a story of a love affair between Krishna and Radha. The story is as follows:

There was a small kingdom named Gopa, rich with forests, hillocks, stretches of grazing field, flora and fauna. The river Jamuna was flowing nearby. Nanda was the head among the people. He had a son, Krishna. All the inhabitants were mesmerized by the charismatic personality of this boy. The *gopis* (milkmaids) fell in love with him and among them Radha, wife of Chandrasena, was the dearest. They were regularly meeting with each other either in the forests or river bank. In course of time, while wandering in the forests, there allegedly developed a relationship between Krishna and Brinda, one of the milkmaids of Gopa. Radha got an inkling of this affair and became worried. One day her suspicion deepened not finding Krishna in her *kunja*, their meeting place, in time. Time ran ahead. However, he reached there late, almost in the dawn hours and Radha discovered marks of coitus on his body. This made her furious. She took a vow then and there not to see the face of a deceiver anymore and left the *kunja*. Radha's discontentment made Krishna's life miserable. He tried to prove his innocence but could not stand the frustration of being able to please the beloved. Then he planned on ways to tame Radha's anger. And, in the end, met her time and again in the

guise of a snake-charmer, a bangle-seller, a barber's wife, a lady florist. One day, the most awaited time arrived. Radha found the barber's wife decorating her lotus feet mixed with tears rolling down from her eyes. She was stirred by the subtle touch of her finger on the feet and sensed Krishna's presence in disguise. Her feet set back in shame. All her *abhiman* (anger) vanished. The divine duo found themselves in *kunja* in time.

Next day Krishna found the snake-charmer, his other 'self' standing before him with folded hands and asking how he should earn his livelihood. Krishna advised him to meet the need of life by presenting puppet shows based on his divine deeds, especially the love affairs between Radha and the milkmaids and in public places. The divine wish was carried out. And, it is worth mentioning that this wish of the *Adipurusha* has been witnessed for generations. They used to move from village to village carrying their puppet ware in sling

bags, together with a dholak, snakes in baskets and presenting puppet shows and dealing with poisonous snakes much to the entertainment of the locals. However, they are now a settled community and are mostly seen in Medinapur districts of West Bengal and Cuttack, Jagatsinghpur, Dhenkanal and Kendrapada districts of Odisha. But this settled people's mindset has greatly affected their traditional lifestyle. The first victims of their displeasure have been the puppets. For they have taken the art of puppetry as a disrespectful profession and therefore puppet-performers, once dearest to them, were confined to in the junk tin-boxes. A recent survey reveals that this tradition has been restricted to only one village, Mantripada of Kendrapada district.

Characters in glove puppet plays are confined from two to five puppets, one male (Krishna) and others female (Radha and milkmaids). Their sizes are small,



Scene from Chandalika by Rabindranath Tagore



Radha

but the look is beautiful. They are configured from only three pieces of light-wood of different sizes and shapes. The bigger one is used for making the head and the rest for two palms. Their eyes, lips, cheek, ears, nose and neck are elaborately carved and then are properly painted and costumed. Holes are also drilled in the middle of the lowest part of the neck and two palms to the size of the fingers of the manipulator. Inserting, big and middle fingers on the holes of the neck and palms respectively, the manipulator instills life in them in synchronization with the music, songs and dialogues. A long skirt is hung from the neck of the puppet downward and two palms are tightly fixed in certain patches which help the artist to transform this to a complete-figured character during the performances. Usually they are kept in the artists' sling bags folded almost to the shape of a ball.

Shakhi Kandhei Nata is a one-man show. The artists sit anywhere in an open space, bring out the puppets

from the sling bag, fasten a string of twinkling small bells round the big finger, insert three fingers in the holes drilled on two palms and bottom part of the neck and hold the puppet straight, keep the *dholak* under the knee and then the play begins. He plays many roles — a *dholak* player, a singer and dialogue-renderer and manipulator. Usually, he plays with the *dholak* in one hand and manipulates the puppet with the other. But what is amazing to watch is that, at times, keeping two puppets on both the hands he beats the *dholak* with the help of the palms of the puppets, rhythmically. The characters are also seen kissing, embracing, quarrelling with each other; dancing and moving elegantly to the tune of the music and dialogue. They are so amazingly manipulated that they hold the audience spellbound.

It must be mentioned that the earlier texts of the play have not yet been explored. Those might be affiliated with the contemporary religious traits. However, towards the end of the 16th century A.D., the themes



Krishna with milkmaids

on the Vaishnab faith, especially Krishna's miraculous activities and love affairs with Radha and other milkmaids, got prominence. For during those days, the Vaishnab faith pervaded over the socio-cultural milieu of the Odia speaking tract. As a result, the artists choose certain excerpts from the *kavyas* and short narratives of lyrical style of eminent poets like Dinakrushna Das, Abhimanyu Samantsinghar, Banamali, Gopalkrishna and others to reach out to the village folk. But interestingly, artists also incorporate certain themes during the shows that have great resemblance to the rural way of life. For example, when gazing at the *dibyalila* of Radha and Krishna, quite unexpectedly the audience finds their 'selves' overtly exposed in the street. They see Jatila and Kutila, the mother-in-law and sister-in-law of Radha respectively rebuking and at times scolding her for her alleged relation with Krishna. Strangely enough Krishna also advises *gopikas* to be faithful to certain moral and social ethics.

One of the finest examples may be cited here. One day, Krishna sees some *gopikas* taking their bath in the nude, keeping their clothing on the bank of the Jamuna. He takes away all their clothing through Maruta, the Wind-God and keeps them on the branches of the *Kadamba* tree nearby. After a pleasant bath, the *gopikas* slowly come out of the water to put on their clothing. But they don't find them in place. Awestruck, they look around and find them on the branches of the tree and Krishna's notorious eyes gazing at their nude beauty. With a deep sense of shame and anger, they rush into the Jamuna's water and pray to Krishna not to be cruel of their love. But Krishna advises that those who take a bath without clothes commit sin. The *gopikas* pay heed to his advice and smile back at him. They get back all their clothing and put them on. But soon after coming out of the water, they accuse Krishna of watching a woman's body while taking bath as being an inexcusable offence never expected from a person in a normal state.

Here the innocent artist plays a dual role. They inflame the sense of freedom and divine pleasure in the human mind and at the same time leave them to think (make

them conscious) of how to lead a normal life within the existing social norms. They send the message that an extramarital relationship of either a man or woman is a sin. Disrespecting the social norms however cruel they may be, would never be acceptable even for a person at the helm of affairs. All kinds of carnal desire must be suppressed for a better living. But on how to live a liberated life is a big question that they always put to the audience through Radha and Krishna.

These traditional artists have a sense of humour, a way of looking into human behaviour and social phenomenon from the spiritual standpoint and courageously critiquing them for better living. The required art to transform the divine characters into contemporary human beings of any status and exquisite style of communicating human emotion and problems through music, song, dialogue and puppets are the secrets that invite the audience to watch the shows.

Ravana Chhaya

The shadow theatre of Odisha is known as Ravana Chhaya. In other parts of India this form of puppet play is called as *Chamada* (leather) *Kandhei* (puppet) *Nata* (play). These nomenclatures in the Odia speaking tract seem unusual. Scholars say that this form of puppet art might have originated somewhere in countries like India, China or Greece in the fifth century B.C. In spite of a difference of opinion among the scholars, India's importance as its origin can never be negated, for a lot of evidence is available in the works of Vyasa (the Mahabharata: 6th Century B.C.), Patanjali (Mahavashya: 4th century B.C.) and Koutilya (Arthashastra: 3rd century B.C.).

The tradition of shadow play in the state of Odisha is shrouded in mystery. Some scholars go back to the third century B.C. to trace its origin. They refer to (i) the fresco in Sitabenga in South Kosal (present-day Chhattisgarh) where Konow, the German scholar, sees the pictures of groves as the representation of shadows of similar design on canvas, and the fresco in Sitabinjhi in the district in Keonjhar in Odisha, called

Ravana Chhaya, by the local people. This was painted in the 4th or 5th century A.D. by King Disa Bhanja. But this was a royal procession. Further, while searching for the genesis of shadow theatre in India, scholars turn to south-east Asian countries, particularly Bali, Java and Malaysia, where this theatrical form, known as Wayang-Kulit, has immensely influenced the socio-religious and cultural life of the people. They say that Kalinga, known as Kun-Lun, Ku-Lung, Ho-Ling in Java and Bali, had built up a great overseas empire and spread its colonies as far as the Philippines in the east, and far south into the islands of the Indian Archipelago. As the influence of Kalingan creativity is evident in the language, literature, architecture, performing arts of the population of this region, the shadow play must have made its journey from Kalinga and subsequently flourished there. But scholars like D.G.H. Hall and Ward Kellar have rejected this proposition. They have propounded that this form very much existed in Java during the 1st and 2nd century A.D. However, witnessing the shadow play of India and Indonesia, in whatever name they might be called, one will honestly acknowledge that Wayang-Kulit cannot be a slavish imitation of the master's work, but rather the expression of a distinct artistic taste and tradition.

It is worth mentioning that there is no reference of the term Ravana Chhaya anywhere in Odia literary texts or in religious and historical works. However a lot of evidence concerning chaya natak is available in the Mahabharata of Sarala Das (15th century A.D.), Balam Das 16th Century A.D.) and in the Kavyas of Dinakrushna Das, Upendra Bhanja, Abhimanyu Samantasinghar of the 17th and 18th century. Words like chitrapata (photograph), patachitra (painting on canvas/cloth) and bimba (shadow) have been used in these texts as synonymous with shadow theatre.

There have been many arguments in support of the name Ravana Chhaya as a form of chhayanatak. The most sound opinion could be that the hero of the nata is not Rama, one of the incarnations of the Parambrahma, the Almighty, but Ravana, the mighty demon king of Lanka. In his previous birth he was Jaya, the gatekeeper of the Lord who had been cursed by Laxmi for no fault of his own. Parambrahma had taken birth in human form to liberate Jaya and set the example of an ideal husband, son, king, brother, love and compassion. Secondly, Rama is conceived as Parambrahma, a bodiless entity that is also shadow-less. Therefore, it would be improper to use the term



Rama, Lakshmana and Sita on a moonlit night



Ravana kidnaping Sita

Rama Chhaya for an entity having no shadow, even symbolically. The third argument is a profound one. The artists opine that one day on request of the *sakhis* (the companions) Sita drew the figure of Ravana on the floor. The lively picture of the demon king made the *shakhis* curious to know how Sita could see Ravana. Sita naively confessed that when she was abducted by Ravana and was being taken by the *puspaka vimana* (a chariot) in the sky over the seas, she had seen the shadow of Ravana in the water. Even an innocuous sight of Ravana's shadow in the sea was tantamount to Sita being unchaste, foretelling the tragic future of Maa Sitadevi. And, this ultimately proved the triumph of truth over falsehood and deceit and good over evil. The fourth hypothesis is that since the word shadow symbolizes deceit, evil, and falsehood, the use of this in the context of Parambrahma would be improper and so the name Ravana chhaya is used instead.

The themes of Ravana chhaya are drawn from stories related to Lord Rama, but it is hard to conclude exactly which text was used in the distant past. Currently, Vichitra Ramayana of Biswanth Khuntia, an ornate poet of the 1st half of the eighteenth century AD. is taken as the source book of the play. The entire text has been composed in various *ragas* and *raginis*, such as Ahari, Kousiki, Chokhi, Kamodi, Pahadia-kedar, Rasakulya, Bangalashree, Malashree and so on. But they are sung in *desi* (native) style. Also, the whole *kavya* was composed in such a way as to be enacted within a span of twenty-one days. Therefore, in all probability and fairness, we may associate the renaissance of Ravana Chhaya to the eighteenth century AD.

The puppets used in Ravana Chhaya are made of untanned deer, sambar and mountain-goat hide. These puppets are flat plate, without any joints. They are linear-cut into varied shapes and sizes and,

manipulated by the manipulators with the help of bamboo sticks attached to the bottom. Usually singers and musicians sit either in the front or behind the stage with the following musical instruments, such as, tambourine, *mrudangam*, *daskathi* (two flat pieces of wooden board) and small cymbals. While the artists manipulate their puppets behind the screen in front of the light source, the shadows in silhouettes move on the screen rhythmically to the tune of music and song. They are so skillfully manipulated that the audience feel as if the dramatic characters, be they social, mythological or historical, are descending from the world of illusion.

The stage used in Ravana Chhaya is similar to any other stage made for a shadow play throughout the world. It is cube shaped, with each side about eight to ten feet long. Strong wooden poles or iron pipes of one-inch diameter are used as the supporting bars to hold the covering of thick blue or black cloth on three sides as well as the bottom part of the front, which faces the audience. The upper part (almost half the total size) in front, above the thick coloured cloth, measuring approximately eight feet long and four feet height (width) is covered by a white cloth which is the screen on which the shadows of the puppets are projected. The bottom part of the front is covered by a thick mat which is eight feet long and three feet wide. The puppets which are used less are kept fixed on this mat-mesh, and whenever the puppeteers feel the need for a particular puppet, they retrieve it from the group. This mattress serves as a stand, leaning on which the puppet artistes take rest. In the middle of the stage, a light source is kept in such a way that the audience does not see its flame. As the audience sits in complete darkness, it can only see the screen and the action of the characters in front of them.

Today, Ravana Chhaya exists as an art form mainly in the villages of Odisha and Kutarimunda of Angul district. However, its birthplace is impossible to trace with any certainty. Some researchers trace its origin to some place in Jajpur and Puri areas of the state, whereas it was a popular folk theatre in the areas

of Talacher and Dhenkanal districts towards the end of the nineteenth century. During those days, this theatrical form was presented by the Bhatas (bard) of the Charan community. These people were nomadic tribesmen who earned their livelihood by singing songs in praise of kings, landlords and headmen of the villages. At times, they used to present their shows on the occasion of childbirth, marriage or on request of any household. But no evidence is found that this form was associated with temple rituals, as is true of the shadow play in the whole of the Deccan. It is on record that the king of Talcher was fascinated by this form. He was so enamoured by this form that he had settled the artists with gifts of land in the village Shipur in his kingdom. These bards of Shipur had migrated to Athamallick, Bhaluki and Odisha villages in later years. In the 1970s, Ravana Chhaya remained as a form of entertainment in the adjacent village. In the 1980s, Odisha remained the only village that hosted this art form. Artists like Baishnab Charan Das of Shipur, with a few art lovers as patrons were the people responsible for the survival of this art form. Kathinanda, an artist par excellence, was honoured by the President of India in 1978. Unfortunately, Kathinanda and Baishnab are no more. The art of bards has become an idle pastime of other classes.

One of the major challenges in today's world is preserving as well as modernizing various ancient and esoteric art forms which rely more upon human creative ingenuity than on technological props. With this mission on view, for two organizations, Ravana Chhaya Natya Sangha (1978) and Srirama Institute of Shadow Theatre (1995) were commissioned at Odisha and Kutarimunda villages. Srirama Institute of Shadow Theatre tries to provide a platform to connoisseurs, researchers and performing artists alike, enabling them to mingle and contribute to the culture of Ravana Chhaya. This institute has choreographed many programmes, namely, Shrikshetra O Bapu, Visit of A Legend (two facets of Gandhi's life), Jawahar: Apostle of Peace, I am the Tree (Brukshoaham), Tale of a Beating Pot, Mahalaxmi Katha and Vande Mataram, along with various episodes of Ravana Chhaya in

traditional style. All the major leading lights associated with the conception and functioning of these institutes are not only experts in the field, but also perform who appreciate the nuances and skills required for propagating this art form. Of particular note are eminent professors, scholars, puppet historians, and performers, including compositions and renderings, by Gouranga Charan Dash, Prahallad Behera, Kolha Charan Sahoo and Khegeswar Pradhan, the disciples of Kathinanda Das, the legendary puppeteer.

Gopalila Kandhei Nata

The tradition of Gopalila Kandhei Nata is centuries old in Odisha. This nomenclature has emerged from the introduction of themes of the play on Krishna's *lilas* (activities) in Gopa whereas in other parts in India, it is the manipulation technique that is all important. Therefore, one can safely conclude that much before the advent of the Vaishnava faith (6th century AD.), this traditional performing art was most popular in Odia speaking tracts. The upsurge of this new faith

has inspired the traditional artists and preachers of the faith to endear the art for their self-interest. But in which name this form was known earlier is difficult to ascertain. However, its archaic form can be linked with the history of puppet play in India, in the sixth century BC. In the distant past, the practitioners of this were the Ahiragoudas, a breakaway group of the Kela community, the nomadic tribe. Presently, they are no more seen in the cultural scenario of the state.

However, this form has a recorded history of more than six hundred years. Sarala Das (15th century AD.) and Balaram Das have used the word *suti kandhei* in their works, i.e. the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, respectively. Jagannath Das a saint-poet of the 16th century A.D. has distinctly mentioned about the manipulation technique of string puppets in the Bhagabat Mahapurana. Debadurllav Das (17th Century AD.) has also provided a fascinating story about the birth of puppets in his *Kavya Rahasyamanjari*. In medieval literatures there are seen vivid descriptions



Scene from Chandalika by Rabindranath Tagore



Maguni Charan Kuanr

of the birth of puppets, their beauty, manipulation technique and affinity with human beings. It is also worth mentioning texts like Kalabati, Purnottama Chadrodaya (Brundabati Dasi: 17th Century), Chata Ichhabati (Banamali Das: 16th Century), Rasakallola (Dinakrushna Das :17th Century), Baidehisa Vilasha, Subhadra Parinaya, Lavanyabati Upendra Bhanja : 17th and 18th Century), Bidagdha Chintamani Abhimanyu Samantasinghar : 18th Century) and many more. There have been three words profusely used as synonyms of puppet , i.e. pratima, putula and sareni. Ahiragoudas are also praised in nineteenth century periodicals for their amazing performances in both rural and urban areas.

The renaissance of this marionette took place in the forties of the last century in south Odisha, particularly in the Badakodanda village of Ganjam district. The history has been built up from Kaibalya Sahoo's family. As per hearsay, Kaibalya and his brothers had learnt this art from a sadhu of north India, who adhered to puppetry as a profession, earned fame and became

rich. Prosperity of this family has influenced many art lovers of adjacent villages. The Sahoo brothers, with great love, taught them all about puppet art. Further, when touring in other parts of Odisha, few villagers of Raidihi, Dhenkanal district, fell in love with the marionette. Kaibalya also included them into the art form. And, in later years, the artists of Badakodanda and Raidihi have played a pivotal role in disseminating the art of marionettes in all other districts in Odisha. As a result, towards the end of the eighties, a small state like this could see about hundreds of professional troupes touring with their puppet-artists along with a big contingent of their artist friends.

The emergence of more and more professional troupes has brought about variations in every aspect of marionettes present. In the fifties, fascinating episodes of the *puranas* (Harivansa Purana, Nrusingh Purana) and *Mahakavyas* (the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagabata Mahapurana) have been incorporated with traditional Gopalila stories composed in ballet



Old lady in anger

style by eminent playwrights. This trend has continued for about four decades. In the eighties, when the small enclosure of a playhouse looked grim with thinning audiences, the troupe-owners thought of alternatives to invite new audiences. As a result, they had chosen the plays of sensuous themes of love, betrayal, murder, violence as seen in a *yatra* pandal. Initially, this effort bore good results. But it did not take much time to invite deadlock. There also was seen an increase in

the numbers of puppets having proper configurations, costumes, as per story demands. Musical instruments like flute, *shehnai*, clarinet, trango, cassio, *dubi-tabla* were also incorporated in the orchestra. Today the size of drama-houses has become larger and the manipulation technique has become more intricate and meaningful. But these attempts have failed to invite even a minimum number of audiences to meet the needs for running a troupe. A recent survey reveals that nowadays only six to eight marionette troupes are touring in and outside the state round the year.

Ramalila Kandhei Nata

Ramalila Kandhei Nata is a composite form of puppet art. Here puppets are manipulated by both rod and strings attached to the bottom part and both the hands of the puppet. The manipulation technique is also intricate in comparison to other forms. Therefore, the birth of this developed form would be traced to the latter years when all other forms, glove, shadow and marionette gained the audiences huge appreciation. It is also not easy to provide a conclusive history of this form since no evidence is available in ancient and medieval literatures and books of philosophy and dramaturgy.

However, an attempt has been made to construct its history relying upon hearsay and the socio-cultural phenomenon of the past.

Oral history finds its genesis in the tribal imagination. In part this form was in practice among the Santal and Bhuyan tribe, the inhabitants of a vast region spreading over from Pallahada subdivision of Angul district of Odisha to the Chhotanagpur area of Bihar and Purulia of West Bengal. Its aryanization took place during the



Scene from Ramayana

16th & 17th century A.D. when the Vaishnav faith was in its full flow in the eastern part of India. The propagators of this faith, in the course of their sojourn, came in touch with this fantastic form of performing arts. They took up this form as one of the mediums of propagating the faith among the natives. Purposefully they went for certain episodes from the Bhagabata Mahapurana and the Ramayana.

As we know, Vaishnavs had discordant views on the caste structure of Indian social orders. They had a liberal mindset which greatly impressed itself on the people of subaltern communities. As a result, hundreds of them were initiated into this new faith and identified themselves as Vaishnav. They, too, learnt this art of puppetry and started propagating the basics of the faith more intensively. The Jhara of Keonjhar was one of such communities among them.

Jhara was a clan of the fisherman community. Fishing and collecting gold dust from the bed of river Samakoi

in summer was the means of their subsistence. They used to present puppet shows in the evening hours or during festive occasions regularly, for the entertainment of the locals. And, the troupes mostly consisted of family members.

Eventually, in the sixties of the twentieth century, the audience witnessed Ramalila puppets in a rural setting with fresh zeal, relinquishing their erstwhile sectarian bondage. In their size and shape, action, dialogue-rendering, costume, singing and dancing, there was no sign of crudeness and exaggeration. People looked around to locate the real manipulator and came across Maguni Charan Kuanra, a young man of the Kshyatriya caste, leading a big contingent of artists. Well-wishers, kith and kin advised him to keep himself away from the *dalit* profession. But he did not respond, and remained adamant. This uncompromising attitude made many of his kith and kin unhappy and resulted in his being treated as a social outcast. But the threat carried no result for him. In course of time, this young man's

conviction for achieving certain ends has transformed the entire art form.

That was the fifties of the nineteenth century when hundreds of troupes, both professional and amateur, were presenting *lilanatak* in almost all the regions of the state. There were a few Ramalila troupes in Keonjhar, close to Maguni's home. He had enjoyed the privilege of witnessing the performances when a school-going boy and had fallen in love with the art. He started sitting during rehearsals in the evening hours without fail. Longing for acquiring basic knowledge in different aspects of theatre became his passion. He started singing traditional music, rendering dialogues, playing the cymbal and big-drum etc. and acting in different roles. Proficiency in various aspects of theatre facilitated him to become a member of the village Ramalila troupe. But the ever insatiable artist's soul in him never allowed him to rest at home. One day he was stunned to see a magnificent wood carving of Dasarathi Maharana, a carpenter. He started sitting with him and mastered the art of carpentry within a few months. In later years he also developed craftsmanship in stone-carving and making clay images and painting and decorating them. Thus in no time he

was able to establish himself as an actor, painter, and sculptor of repute.

Maguni's sojourn as an artist took a dramatic turn after watching puppet shows of Makaradwaja Jhara of the fishermen community living in the suburbs of Keonjhar. The puppets' enigmatic activities mesmerized him. On request, Makaradwaja initiated him into the art of puppetry. Longing for exhibiting the creativity of a young artist, in the end, he reached upon a definite space, the puppet theatre. He accepted puppetry as a profession, a challenging one during those days and set up his own troupe in the name of Shri Viswakarma Kalakunja, and started moving with a truck-load of articles, puppet boxes along with a big contingent of ten to twelve artists as friends. He toured different parts of his own state and border areas of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal. Odisha Sangeet Natak Academy, Kendra Sangeet Natak Academy and many more cultural organizations honoured him for his outstanding contribution to the art of puppetry. But his affiliation with this traditional performing art form brought about a mixed effect, painful and pleasant; painful, because the traditional artists could not withstand Maguni's phenomenal personality which



Scene from the Ramayana

forced them to dig their own grave and gradually the Jharas went out of sight; pleasant, for this artist's endeavour has become instrumental in providing fresh impetus to the tradition that has made history.

Maguni's versatile mind has renewed the tradition of his own style. The puppets are now bigger and varied in shape and size than in the past, elaborately carved and painted, dressed up with proper costumes in keeping with the mindset and status of the dramatic characters. The stage is perfectly designed and shaped and manipulation space is widened. Painted back drapes featuring jungles, sea, township, and village site, courtyard etc, are hung to create a proper dramatic ambiance resembling the proscenium theatre. The show hours are expanded from one-and-half hours to more than three hours in order to allow rural audiences to enjoy the performance from late night till daybreaks. Puppets now act live and in synchronization with song, music and dialogue. Musical instruments, such as, harmonium, flute, clarinet, *mrudanga*, *pakhauja*, big-drum, *manjira* are introduced replacing the small *dholak* and cymbal. Song and music are properly tuned. Characters are vocal and express their feelings in appropriate and thought-provoking style and tone.

New *puranic* stories of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Harivansa, and the Bhagabata Mahapuram

along with historical events, are incorporated. They are penned by eminent theatre personalities like Baishnab Pani, Balakrishna Mohanty, Gopal Chotroy and composed in ballet style. Scripts, other than puranic, are not entertained, unlike marionette shows. The play is begun with an invocation to Devi Durga killing Mahisasura, the demon king. However, themes on contemporary socio-political crisis and disharmony like caste-wars, dowry system, impact of narcotics, of modern education etc, are portrayed in a humourous style. Duta, as the voice of the audience, is profusely used for unveiling social realities and the individual's mindset.

It is noteworthy here that the audience has immensely acknowledged Maguni's sense of humour. Therefore, there is every reason for praising Maguni, the progenitor of a poor man's art, the puppet art. For he knows, like any classical artist, that theatre is not meant for mere entertainment; rather it is a space for taming the audience with divergent mindsets and providing alternatives for better living during hard times.

Maguni is a versatile genius, a great teacher. His personality has influenced many young stars to adhere to puppetry as their profession. But it is left to time to see who would be the real inheritor of the tradition he has set up.

Puppets Collection of the SMM Theatre Crafts Museum, New Delhi

Usha Malik

Srinivas Malliah Memorial Trust was established in 1968 by the late Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, in memory of her colleague U. Srinivas Malliah, an eminent national leader, deeply involved in rural arts and crafts. A crusader for the arts, she dedicated her life to work my for social reform, women's welfare, handicrafts and theatre. Kamaladevi founded and headed the Bharatiya Natya Sangh for several years and was the Vice-President of the International Theatre Institute, affiliated to UNESCO as also the Chairman of the Sangeet NatakAkademi (the National Academy for Music, Dance and Drama) from 1977-1982. She initiated the first surveys to document and collect masks, costumes, ornaments, etc connected with different traditions of regional theatre and puppets in 1958, conducted by the Bharatiya Natya Sangh through the All India Handicrafts Board while she was its Chairman, from 1952 to 1972.

The collection covering several states was later housed in the Srinivas Malliah Memorial Theatre Crafts Museum set up by the Trust. A part of the collection of masks and puppets was sent to the Akademi of which she was the Vice-Chairman from 1953-58 and again from 1958-61 and some masks, puppets and Bhuta figures from coastal Karnataka, to the Crafts Museum.

Looking through the old records of the Museum and my interactions with puppeteers during my stint

in the Akademi, I find that Kamaladevi's farsighted intervention was not restricted to collection only but was permeated with deep empathy and humane understanding of the problems that confronted the communities of rural artists and specially, puppeteers. The puppeteers across the country, held tremendous regard and affection for this extraordinary legendary lady, who pitched in where necessary, breathing life into dying forms to preserve this rich heritage for posterity.

The Museum has about 5000 objects, some of them, rare examples of puppets, masks, theatre costumes and jewellery collected from all over the country, specially, rural areas. The collection is representative of the great variety of theatre forms in the regions and materials and techniques of crafting their accessories. The collection includes a few films, audiotapes, photographs and transparencies of rare archival value.

The collection of over 400 puppets has string puppets from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Odisha, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu and leather shadow puppets from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala illustrating the stories from the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, Puranas and local tales. It also includes tribal puppets of Jharkhand (then Bihar), glove puppets of Kerala and Tamilnadu and rod puppets of West Bengal besides a few puppets from other countries.

The following account of the Museum collection is based on references to old records and notes, stock and accession registers, institutional memory, relevant books and interactions with puppeteers and resource persons in the field and it may be considered as work in progress.

Andhra Pradesh

There are several historical references to string and shadow puppetry in the region going back to the twelfth century. Following are some puppets of these traditions in the Museum collection.

Bommalata — String Puppets

1. One of the finest acquisitions of the Museum is a set of five string and rod puppets of Nayika (heroine), Nayak(hero) and others in December 1959, discovered by Kamaladevi in the basement of the Lepakshi temple near Hindupur in the Anantpur District of A.P. bordering Karnataka. The owner was an old daughter of the player who had died several years back and there was no one to manipulate them anymore. The puppets listed as Krida Parikaralu in the records, are beautifully bejeweled with glass pieces on wood ornaments and clothed in jackets and long skirts. The Nayika's face is amazingly expressive with eyes that can move sideways as in certain dance forms. The head is carved in wood, covered with cloth, on which the ground layer is painted and then varnished. Both head and body are hollowed out and are of very light wood. There are joints at the neck, shoulders, elbows and wrists connected with thread. They are up to one metre high.

The puppets are manipulated by strings tied to its ears and the centre of the head and at the upper end attached to a cane coil placed on the head of the puppeteer, thus enabling the puppet to follow its movement. The puppeteer can also move the puppet from above with rods tied to its hands.

2. The Museum also has a set of 34 string puppets of approximately the same height listed as 'old Andhra

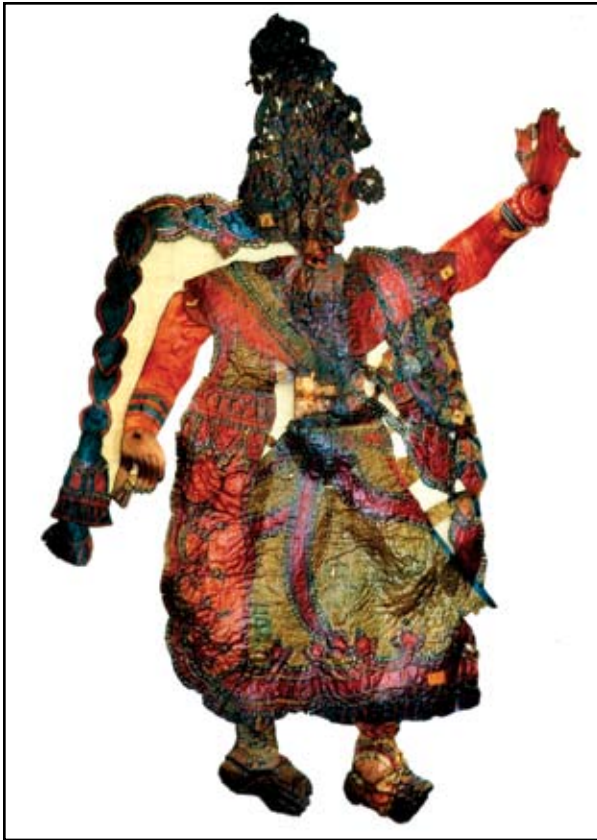
puppets' acquired in December 1963 in a poor state of preservation with the paint peeling off and clothes in tatters. It is a matter of satisfaction that the Ministry of Culture has come forward to save the Museum material through the National Research Laboratory for Conservation of Cultural Property, Lucknow. It is only now that one can see the original paints and ornaments and get an idea of the fragile inner structure of pith, which has been strengthened by their team of conservationists.

The characters are from the Ramayana like Dashrath and his three wives Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi, the four brothers Rama, Lakshmana, Shatrughna and Bharat, the wily Manthra, the powerful demon king Ravana and several others. While few faces made in wood are finely carved and painted with a deep understanding of the characters they play, the others are made of pith stems. The rest of the body is made with pith stems held together with a piece of cloth and covered with a jacket and a long flowing skirt, which makes them fairly light to handle. Glass pieces are used for ornamentation. The headgears are quite unique with painted crowns, caps and turbans, specially, of Dashrath, which is reminiscent of those worn by the Maratha kings of Thanjavur.

3. There is also a set of eight well crafted string puppets from the Ramayana story and Narasingh with head, bodies, legs and feet carved in very heavy wood acquired in 1959-60. Male characters have bare torsos, bulging stomachs and painted crowns and chest ornaments. Narasingh and Ravana are painted red Rama is blue, Hanuman, green and Sita, yellow. They have joints at neck, shoulders, knees and hips and are up to 83 cms high .

Tolu Bommalata — Leather Puppets

Certain tribes of leather shadow puppeteers — Killikyetas — migrated from Maharashtra to where the borders of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh meet. Thus a common tradition of shadow puppetry with regional variations evolved in these areas and extended to Tamil Nadu. The puppeteers integrated



Sita- Leather Puppet, Andhra Pradesh

with the host regions, learnt their texts, and spoke the local language in their performances. The leather puppeteers of Andhra are all over but are largely concentrated in Anantpur, Nellore, East Godavari and Guntur districts.

The puppets in the collection acquired at different times from 1959 to 1962, are mainly from the Ramayana story as the themes of most of the Andhra puppet plays are taken from the Telugu Ranganatha Ramayana. The Mahabharata plays are based on the Andhra Yakshagāna texts.

Traditionally, the performance was held during the Shivaratri festival outside Shiva temples for nine nights. After invocations to Ganesh and Saraswati and the Sabha Vandanam, the theme is introduced by the Sutradhara. The puppet characters Kethigadu and his wife Bangarakka provide comic relief. The puppeteers, while standing, speak, sing and dance for

the characters they manipulate and keep rhythm and produce sound effects by their feet stamping on two wooden planks, one upon another. Generally, it is a six-to seven-member group with two or three women. The singers are accompanied by the maddalam (drum), harmonium, and two to three pairs of talam (cymbals).

The large Andhra shadow puppets are usually made from goat hide up to 1.8 metres high. After making it translucent, it is cut into figures, incised, and then coloured with dyes. Puppets are in profile except the ten-headed Ravana who faces frontally. Tight coats, stockings and shoes have been added to the traditional dress of the puppets. They have joints at the head, neck, shoulders, elbows and wrists, and some even at the knees. The central bamboo stick for the head and the two sticks attached to the hands of the puppet are used for manipulation by the puppeteers. The puppets in the collection which include a powerful Ravana, a delicate Sita and a frisky Hanuman are all painted in organic colours and not acrylic paints as is being done at present.

Conservation of all 150 leather puppets was carried out by the Indian National Trust for Arts and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) a few years back. They will be checked again to see if further treatment is required as they tend to dry and become brittle.

Karnataka

Yakshagāna Gombeyata — String Puppets

The five string puppets of Yakshagana tradition (Badagatittu) of different character types were gifted to Kamaladevi by Kogga Kamath from a traditional family of puppeteers of Uppinakuduru village near Kundapur in Udupi District, a coastal district of Karnataka. His father Devanna Kamath had stopped performing for lack of patronage and was persuaded by her and her associate Sanjeeva Prabhu to revive his art. It is heartening to note that the tradition was carried on successfully by his son Kogga Kamath and is now continued by the grandson Bhaskar Kamath, the sixth generation in the line.

Yakshagāna Gombeyata, the puppet play is quite similar to the Yakshagāna theatre performance, especially in regard to its themes from the epics and Puranas, the structure of performance, music, character types, costumes and make-up. It closely follows the theatre in the preliminaries of Purvaranga, the clowning scenes and the invocation to Ganesh. The Prasanga, or the main episode, begins with an Oddolaga, the court scene of a king or god where the characters are introduced from behind the curtain.

The headgear, costume and ornaments transform the puppets into character types, ranging from heroes, demons, hunters to forest dwellers. The wood ornaments are embellished with glass pieces and golden paper.

The puppets are shaped out of light and durable varieties of wood. They are carved according to fixed measurements and precise proportions for head, chest, legs etc.



Bannada Vesha- String Puppets, Karnataka

Though male characters are 72 centimetres high, the demons (Bannada Vesha) have different proportions. There are neck, shoulder, elbow, hip, knee and ankle joints, which enable the puppets to perform several dance movements.

The puppet is manipulated with six black strings, two each attached to the ears, knee joints, and hands. These pairs are tied to three wooden sticks, held in the hands of the manipulator who also sings for the character he manipulates. The musicians are the Bhagvatar, who sings with the tala (cymbal), and others with the Maddale and Chende (drums) and harmonium or the Mukhaveene (small pipe).

Togalu Gombeyata — Leather Puppets

There are local variants of size of puppets and stylistic devices in different regions of Karnataka, which are influenced by the prevailing styles of architecture, dress, jewellery etc. of the last few hundred years. The placing of two eyes in a profile, as found in the Lepakshi temple murals, is one such example of stylistic similarities between the visual and performing art forms.

The 30 or so puppets acquired by the Museum include the episodes of Sita Haran with Ravana driving off with Sita in a chariot; Lakshman Murchha has the unconscious Lakshman with Rama and several small monkeys look on, while Hanuman brings the entire mountain with herbs to revive him; Dashratha is there with all his three wives in a pavilion, thus compressing the narrative in a composite arrangement.

The puppets are largely made of goat skin, up to 1.2 metres and are crafted by the puppeteers themselves who are mostly concentrated in Mandya, Bellary, Bijapur, Hassan and Kolar areas. The art of making puppets or tanning the leather into parchment has almost been lost according to S. A. Krishnaiah, a scholar of Karnatak puppetry. The puppeteers either use puppets handed down to them or make replicas of earlier designs. The large-sized puppets, about

1.8 metres high, can be seen in the areas adjoining Andhra Pradesh.

Performances of Togalu Gombeyata are held on an enclosed stage outside the village, or in the temple courtyard of the village goddess. While the large-sized puppets are manipulated standing up, the small-sized ones are shown by the puppeteers sitting on the floor. The small-sized puppets have a unique mobile stage which can be put up anywhere by the puppeteers, who travel from place to place.

The repertoire of Togalu Gombeyata is replete with stories from the Kannada Thorave Ramayan, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavat Purana, as well as local tales. The performance opens with the appearance of Ganapati on the screen amongst a tree, a cock, peacocks, parrots, Shārada, and the clowns Killikyeta and his wife Bangarakka. After the invocation to Ganapati and Shārada, the chosen episode is enacted. The musical instruments used for accompaniment are Maddalam, Tala and Gejje, the ankle bells.



Sita Haran - Leather Puppets, Karnataka

Kerala

Pavakathakali — Glove Puppets

Pavakathakali, the glove puppet play of Palakkad district of Kerala, developed into its present form in the eighteenth century when the puppeteers of the Andi Pandaran community adapted the stories of Kathakali, the dance-theatre form of Kerala, after they settled in the region. They possibly migrated to Kerala from Andhra Pradesh, as they speak Telugu at home. Pavakathakali flourished until about fifty years ago, but with the passing away of some fine and popular artists, the form was on the verge of extinction.

Subsequently, the story of Pavakathakali is that of a revival of a tradition in the 1980s by Sri G.Venu of Irinjalakuda, Kerala, who, besides writing about it, worked with the artists to enrich its repertoire and presentation. He presented a set of Pavakathakali puppets to Kamaladevi for the Museum in 1984, who had given invaluable support for its revival.

The puppets include the Pacha (hero) and Chuvanna Tadi (red beard-violent) character types of Kathakali, as the conventions of its character types in respect of costumes, headgear, jewellery, make-up and colour are followed in the glove puppet tradition. The Museum puppets crafted several years back, are simply costumed and decorated compared to the gorgeously costumed and ornamented puppets made now.

The Pavakathakali puppets with the head and arms carved out of wood are between thirty and sixty centimetres high. While the head is manipulated by the index finger, the hands are moved by the thumb and the middle finger.

The musical instruments are also the same as in Kathakali. The lively puppets seem to be acting as in Kathakali, when the eloquent eyes of the puppeteer enliven the eyes of the puppet. A magical transference!



Rama - Leather Puppets, Kerala

Tolpava Kúthu — Leather Puppet Play

The theme of Tolpava Kúthu is the story of Rama based on selected verses from the *Kamba Ramayana*, written by the ninth century Tamil poet Kamban from his birth to his coronation. It is traditionally performed from seven to twenty-one nights on a permanent stage, the Kuthumadam, built opposite goddess Bhadrakali's image in the temple. The ritual performance is believed to be for Bhadrakali as she missed watching the defeat of Ravana by Rama, busy as she was killing the demon Darikasura.

The Kuthumadam is the only type of permanent puppet stage in the country as the art was patronized by the temples. The screen in front is a twelve-metre-

long thin white curtain and the light is provided by twenty-one lamps made of halved coconuts with cotton wicks, and filled with coconut oil, placed behind the screen on a sliced bamboo or a long wooden beam. Special fire effects are also created with a powder made from a local resin.

At least five artists are required to manipulate puppets to cover the twelve-metre-long screen. The leather puppets made from deer skin are almost opaque and range from about 48 to 80 cms high. Almost one hundred and sixty puppets are needed for the entire story to represent seventy-one characters in sitting, standing, walking and fighting positions besides those for trees, mountains, battle scenes and processions.

The performers are known as Pulavars – scholars or poets. The lead performers are trained in the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and even Ayurveda to enable them to convey complex social and philosophical concepts, often relevant to the times, in their improvisations and life is infused in to puppets by the eloquence of the puppeteers. The verses provide a take-off point to the narrator to expand on the subject. The powerful musical accompaniment is provided by the Ezhupara (drum) and Illataram (cymbals). Chenda and Maddalam (drums) and Kurumkuzhal (pipe) are also used with other instruments for effect.

The Museum acquired its collection of twenty-six beautifully crafted puppets of Rama, Sita, Ravana, Vibhishana and others from Krishnankutty Pulavar, an eminent puppeteer of his time, from Koonathara village in Palakkad District in 1964. According to his son, Ramchandra Pulavar, who visited the Museum in 2009, these puppets were crafted by his grandfather, Lakshman Pulavar. He also mentioned that the Pulavars introduced the character Kodakaran, the equivalent of Vidushak in their performance, who does not feature in the original text. The extraordinary iconography, where even the perforation marks on costumes are of distinct and specific types for different characters is truly amazing.

Odisha

Gopalilā –String Puppet Performance

Gopalilā is an almost vanished tradition of string puppetry of Odisha. In a recent interaction with Odisha puppeteers, it emerged that the tradition which was alive in the 1960s in the Jajpur area has hardly any practitioners left. Lack of patronage and the impact of mass media have almost destroyed the form.

It is fortunate that the Museum collection of about hundred puppets acquired in 1964, is from Jajpur. They have recently been conserved and it is exciting to see the brilliance of pigments and the stylization of expression after removal of years of grime and dust.

With the spread of Vaishnavism and the consequent growth of devotional poetry in the Oriya language, the themes of the string puppet theatre, Gopalila, revolved round the stories of Srimadbhagwat narrating the childhood Līlās of Krishna in Vrindavan and Mathura. Some of the puppets in this group in

the Museum are from episodes relating to the infant Krishna being taken by his father Vasudev across the Yamuna river to Vrindavan to be left with Nand and Yashoda, Raslila, Krishna's lifting of the Goverdhan Hill and Indra's anger, Krishna's encounters with Putana and his evil uncle Kansa and his wrestlers, and subsequent killing of Kansa himself. These stories are sung, interspersed with improvised dialogues. The lyrics are from the repertoire of Oriya devotional poetry, specially, Mathura Mangal by Bhakta Charan Das and the music is largely based on tunes of the region. The musicians are the narrator-singers with cymbals and a Dholak player.

The heads and torsos of the puppets are carved in wood and appropriate headgear and jewellery of the character painted. The chest and arms are also painted, as if clothed, with textile motifs and designs. The puppets, about fifty centimetres high, wear long skirts. Women characters have a flowing oval stole on the back, pinned at the shoulders or on top of the head. The straight wooden arms have joints at the



Vasudev, Nand, Yashoda - String Puppets, Odisha

shoulders and sometimes at the elbows as well. The puppeteer manipulates a triangular wooden device with three strings attached to the top of the head and the wrists of the puppet. A panel of peacock feathers formed the backdrop of a performance.

Rajasthan

Kathputli — String Puppet (lit. — puppet made of kath — wood)

The Rajasthan puppeteers are Nats or Bhaats, a wandering community at one time, who performed during their travels in the dry season and returned to their villages to cultivate their fields after the rains. A migrant group of Kathputli players who came to Delhi lived in tented colonies in available open spaces and were eventually settled in the local Shadipur area.

A long standing relationship was built between these Kathputli players and Naika, a theatre crafts centre established by the Bhartiya Natya Sangh in 1962 and later, with the SMM Theatre Crafts Museum. Initially, the Kathputli players, specially, Maluram, his extended family, Naurang Bhaat and others were encouraged by Naika to carve puppets as gift items and souvenirs to augment their meager earnings. In fact, a master-craftsman, Sridhar Mahapatra from Odisha was deputed by the All India Handicrafts Board to teach them the use of improved tools and techniques.

The Bharatiya Natya Sangh also undertook the revival of Rajasthan puppetry in 1962 with the Delhi-based artists at Kamaladevi's initiative. Their presentation was edited to suit different audiences. Later, they were trained by Dr. (Mrs.) M. McPharlin, a puppet expert, in 1963, and soon after Sri Habib Tanvir, the theatre director was asked to work with them on their traditional story of Amar Singh Rathore, so that they could develop a plot for a play. Next, the issue of family planning was taken up and puppeteers gave several performances combining traditional elements with a modern theme.

The nineteen puppets listed as acquired in 1961 have been collected and crafted by this group of

Rajasthan puppeteers. The puppets in the collection are characters from the story of Amar Singh Rathore, the ruler of Nagaur in the seventeenth century from where the community claims its origin. He was a great hero whose deeds and death are sung and enacted. The puppet performance as of now is limited to his appearance at the court of the Badshah (Shahjehan according to the late Komal Kothari and Akbar as per tradition), along with other Hindu rajas and Muslim nawabs, the two communities distinct by their beards, moustaches and headgears.

The collection includes the Badshah, the sly wazier Salawat Khan, Amar Singh Rathore, his wife Hadi Rani, Raja Mansingh and others. Puran Bhaat, a leading puppeteer of the community recently revived the entire Amar Singh Rathore story with the young of his community, who were no longer familiar with it, in a workshop organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi at the Museum.

Puran Bhaat places these puppets in two distinct periods according to the styles of carving, painting of face and structure. He places the first lot in the 19th century, as carved by Karma and Dharma, which were collected by his father during his travels in Rajasthan. According to him, the second lot, were mostly crafted by Fajjoo and his uncle, the late master-craftsman Naurang Bhaat and others at Naika, the theatre crafts centre.

The Kathputlis' heads and headgear are carved from mango wood with large stylized eyes. They are up to sixty centimetres tall, costumed in the period Rajasthani style with a jacket and from waist down, a long pleated skirt of light material, which are stitched by the women of the family. Their bodies are made of cloth and stuffed rags.

The puppeteer speaks for the characters in a squeaky voice with a bamboo whistle known as, Boli. The Dholak player (drummer) converses with the puppets so that the audience can follow the course of the play. This 'dialogue' is interspersed with songs sung by women relatives.



Kathputlis - String Puppets, Rajasthan

Most kathputlis are manipulated with only one string, one end of which is attached to the kathputli's head and the other to its back. The string is looped around the puppeteers' fingers and all movements are generated by a series of jerks on either end. A bracelet of bells, 'Ghungrus', are worn by the puppeteer on his wrists.

Tamil Nadu

Bommalattam — String Puppets

Bommalatam was performed in villages and temples, sometimes to ensure rain, as well as to propitiate deities to prevent outbreak of disease. Along with music and dance, the rulers of Thanjavur patronized puppetry, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

1. The elegant string puppets from Tamil Nadu acquired in 1959-60 are Krishna, Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjun and Dropadi, the characters from Mahabharata. They have papier-mâché heads, cloth bodies, hands and feet and joints at neck, shoulders, elbows, hips and knees. The males are fully clothed in a dhoti and full sleeved tunics with arm and wrist ornaments and velvet belts embroidered in zari. The crowns are painted.

2. The two beautifully carved, small dancer puppets about 44 cms high, listed as from Tamil Nadu, were acquired in 1964. They are entirely made of wood with hollowed out body and joints at neck, shoulders, elbows, hips and ankles enabling execution of complex dance movements. Ornaments are incised covered with golden paper. Strings are tied to their ears and fists are lightly closed.

Valli Thirumanam — Glove puppets

Kamaladevi had found these set of puppets resembling the Kerala glove puppets in the Thiruchendur area in 1965. According to her, the base is clay, rice husk and paper and the head is covered with several types of paper, including gold and silver paper, and coconut husk fibre to give it strength. They are listed in the records as Valli Thirumanam which is about the episode of the marriage of Valli with Lord Subrahmanya. The singer-narrator keeps rhythm with the cymbals and a drummer plays the Udduki. The performance ends with a Kummi, a group dance, accompanied by vigorous music, leading to a crescendo.

West Bengal

Rod Puppets — Dānger Putul

The Museum has a collection of 21 rod puppets known as Dānger Putul from West Bengal acquired in 1958-59. Most of the characters are from Ramayana relating to the story of Sitar Banabas (exile of Sita), a few from Mahabharata besides the goddess Monasa and Shiva as Ramayana and other popular social and historical plays of Jātrā and regional tales form the traditional repertoire of Dānger Putul Nāch.

The puppets are up to 1.25 metres high and weigh about five to ten kilograms each. They are carved from wood with clay and cloth layer on the face. The

torso is hollow, through which a bamboo rod passes holding up the head. The other end, covered with a long skirt, rests in the Kenre, the bamboo cup tied to the puppeteer's waist. There is a shorter bamboo rod to manipulate the head. The shoulder joints are connected with strings from inside the torso, which are pulled by the puppeteer for arm movements. Some puppets have joints in the right elbows to enable them gesticulate while articulating their dialogues. Most puppets are costumed in zari crowns, velvet jackets and long flowing skirts.

The puppeteers are mainly from the south of West Bengal. The group comprises up to eighteen members with one main singer. Khol (drum), cymbals, nagara and some other instruments provide the accompanying rhythm to Dānger Putul Nāch performances. The singing is operatic and delivery of dialogue, broad and declamatory.

Other puppets in the Museum are the tribal rod puppets from Jharkhand, Radha-Krishna string puppets, possibly from Orissa and string puppets with flat tin plate bodies. There are a few Wayang Golek (rod puppets) and Wayang Kulit (leather puppets) from Indonesia and a few puppets each from Malaysia, Thailand and Mexico, gifted to Kamaladevi during her visits abroad.

All in all, the Museum gives a glimpse of the rich variety of puppet traditions across the country.

Note

a. Details about certain forms have been quoted from the author's text for the brochure for Putul Yatra, an exhibition of puppets organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi from 21 March-4 April, 2003 at Rabindra Bhavan, New Delhi.

b. The puppet collection is currently not on display as it is in the process of conservation. It is hoped that a fully renovated Puppet Museum will be ready in the near future.

Paraprayuktaha pursho vicheshtahate, sootraprota dasamayeeh yoshaa

Meena Naik

Just as a puppet makes movements as per the manipulator's wish, so does man make movements as per God's wish.

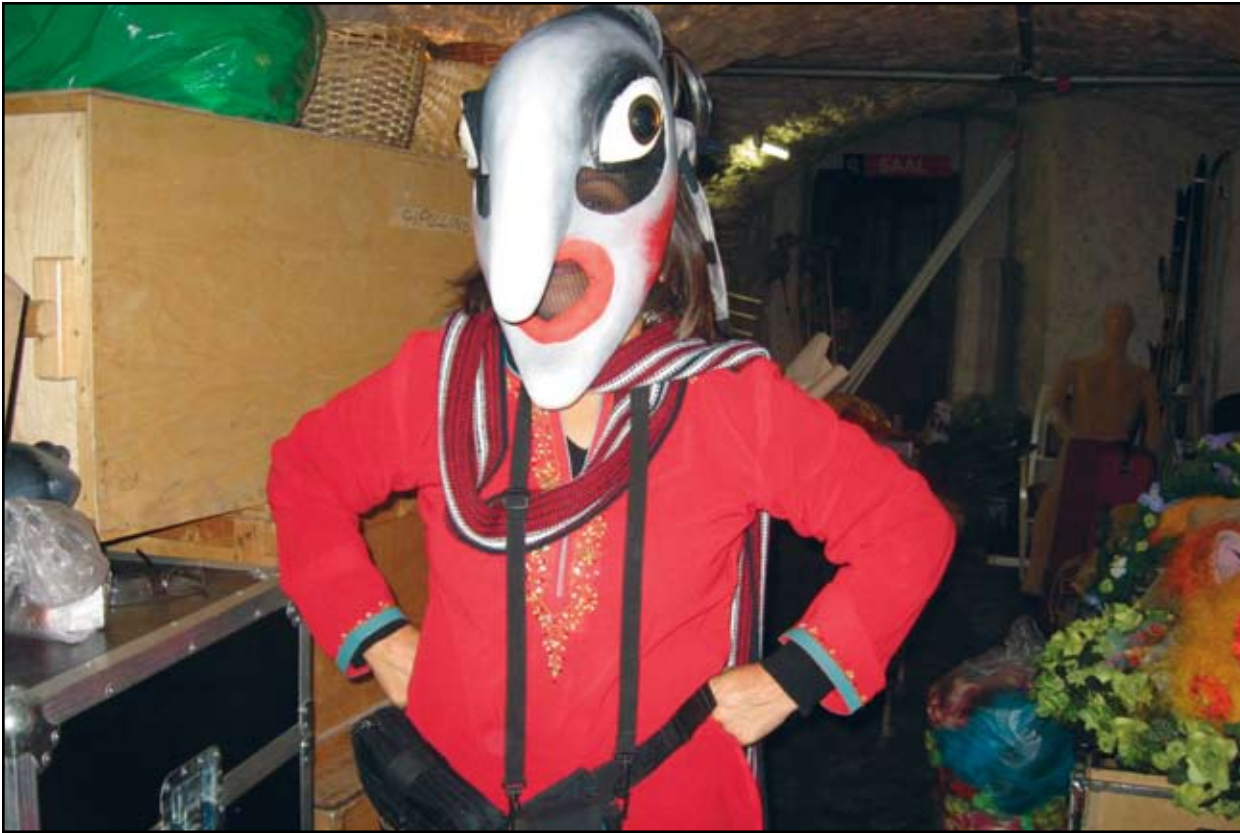
The above quote is taken from the Mahabharata and going by that surmise one can safely conclude that puppetry, contrary to popular belief, has been more than just an entertainment tool for children, in India. Recent adaptations of this craft form has proved that the puppeteer can be a huge catalyst for change in the social, economic and cultural landscape of the country. The recently instituted Department of Puppetry at the SNDT University, Mumbai, is a fitting start point for bringing home this fact.

In an exercise at cultural underpinning, one discovers that puppetry in India has always been accepted as serious creative involvement. It is mentioned that the art of puppetry is one of the sixty-four arts mentioned in ancient Indian literature. References to puppetry even occur in representative treatises on governance such as the *Kautilya Arthashastra* (fourth century B.C.). This volume makes a mention of two wandering communities, Plabaka and Kuhaka, who were known for their skill in puppetry and had earned distinction for performance of their puppet shows. In Pali literature, scholars have discovered that the word *kasthya-patrika* signifies *kathputli* (puppet made of wood) which is made to dance by the *suthadhar*. The Marathi saint poets Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram and

Namdev refer to *saikhadyancha khel*. It believed that Vishnudas Bhave, the pioneer of modern Marathi theatre, was initially a puppeteer.

While the more scholarly interest in puppetry acquired a bleak character over the centuries, in the world of the child it has continued to hold its own in a parallel makeover. References to puppetry are traceable to the Panchatantra, where the term *kashtha-chitra-kridan* suggests a triple combination of *kashtha* or wood, *chitra* or picture and *kreedan* or play used as an entertainment device for children. Similarly, the term *Yantra-putrak-leela* is also mentioned. *Yantra* is a machine or device, *putraka* is a boy or a girl and *leela* is play. Another valuable source about the importance of puppetry in a child's world of yore is the *Kathasaritsagar* which relates a tale of a princess who goes to meet another princess and takes with her four 'key-dolls' as a present.

Despite its universal acceptance, this enlightening and glorious tradition has found more vigorous acceptance elsewhere in recent times. It is countries like Japan, Russia, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, England to name a few, where the art has been adapted to local conditions and found ready acceptance as an entertainment medium. The only saving grace was that Indian puppetry did not sing its swan song and today, with the commitment of a visionary handful, the art of puppetry is emerging as a form of empowerment



among those segments of society where change is a priority for survival. Under these conditions, the puppeteer becomes the provider of a support system, a framework that serves in a dual role of entertainer at the superficial level and as a real life educator through its format of succinct messaging. In fact puppetry despite earning fame as children's theatre, has always been the Theatre of the People and this journey of puppetry's recovery of lost ground was made by Kamaldevi Chattopadhyay whose pioneering work in the Crafts Council is now acknowledged as an enormous missionary undertaking, on hindsight. She traced traditional puppeteers from small villages and promoted their skills by giving them national awards and thus kept the art alive.

This process of revival went beyond her lifetime as it galvanised the craft into the seeding of other alternatives. Before long, Indian puppetry had reached dimensions that invaded the urban theatre. A puppet performance had ceased to be a rural makeshift

plaything and had begun to involve a whole company of workers, technicians, musicians, costume designers and stage-hands, besides manipulators, artists, sculptors, carpenters and script writers. The very definition of a puppet as a *kashtha-chitra-kridan* of the Panchatantra was now given life, with the help of movement and sound, by a human agency.

Alongside, priorities and strategies also were needed to suit this rapidly changing scenario. No longer were the ballads of wandering minstrels or mythological regurgitations of much used. A schism between the lifestyles of the rural and the urban Indian had made their worlds come apart and the contemporary puppeteer needed to have a pulse on the changing priorities. One of the first experiments that created a favourable wedge in this situation was the Language Development Project funded by the Ford Foundation in India, in 1976-78. In a study conducted on school drop outs from municipal schools in Mumbai it was unearthed that the prime cause behind this occurrence



was the lack of a cohesive language of communication among the children. 'My study had revealed that since the metropolis has a large population of migrants from various regions of India, the child at school is bewildered by the babel of tongues at school. He is unable to comprehend the teacher's instructions in Marathi or Hindi or even English and feels frustrated.' This situation becomes fertile ground for mass absenteeism and frustration. The use of puppets as a teaching tool proved the ideal solution.

'As the director of this project, I had to make a review of my assets and tailor them to my requirements. Instead of using the traditional costumes of the professional entertainer, I resorted to making the puppets with recycled material. The children became enthusiastic makers of their educational tool and the physical appearance of their puppets duplicated their own, to a striking level. They were no longer kings and queens of fantasy land, but uniform wearing boys and girls pitted against a society that spoke in an alien

tongue. The exploits of these characters mirrored their personal pitfalls and thus endeared them to their child hearts. The word soon spread and attendance at school showed an upward graph. Before long, the children were providing inputs for a relevant storyline for enactment based on their personal experiences and the most shy and withdrawn among them too, began to react and inhibitions soon sloughed off. Lessons took on a playway mode as games were innovated and puppet characters addressed the children's concerns in a candid manner.'

Having developed a momentum and foci of one's own, the efficacy of puppetry to resolve and educate the adult community was the next challenge ahead. A groundbreaking project was the use of puppetry to educate the commercial sex workers of Mumbai on health matters and the spreads of AIDS. Again the same methodology was adopted and puppets were 'dressed' as nurses, doctors, traffickers and workers. As the conversation between the puppets unearthed the factual position of the workers, the audience lost their inhibitions and openly aired their miserable plight. In turn they were made aware of the health hazards they were confronted with, thereby weaving together a two-way network of mutual benefits that ultimately would bring about change in the community.'

More recently, in 2004, the puppet orientation became the rage among the youth with the staging of a trendy act titled *Dil Maange More*. Responding to the youth beat, this show was focused on the three norms of A for accident, B for behavioural change and C for condom usage. The AIDs message was thus explained to the vulnerable segment, couching the awareness message in palatable yet clear-cut terms. 'It was a take off from the earlier programme with the sex workers, wherein the audience were passive spectators. In the current showing, the second half of the show incorporated theatre techniques. The audience were invited to directly participate in the proceedings thereby enlarging the cultural ambit of puppetry.' The litmus test of its success came

about when the show was invited to Toronto for an enactment and even today, the puppet-based youth programme has seen no abatement.

Currently, the subject matter of the plays have been enlarged to include concerns such as tobacco control, so that fresh markets and a steady demand for such relevant applications of puppetry are kept alive and thriving. Having come to stay as an educating tool through an effective, ambivalent approach, the issues being thrown up before the puppetry team bear a social agenda. Scripts and volunteers for the performance arrive readily as fresh avenues keep opening with the unraveling of evolving social concerns.

Having established the efficacy of puppetry in perpetrating a social message, it was not long before institutions of social science research recruited the services of these modern-day puppeteers to put forth their concerns. Once again, it was the child who was central to the message and the mode. Stark realities such as the problem of alcoholic parents, family tensions and the like became the theme for the puppet presenters and as these concerns were made public the afflicted children found the puppet drama a perfect outlet to air their concerns.

Even the city of Mumbai reverberated to the dance of the puppets, when a show was created out of the experiences of the affected community during the Mumbai riots. The inmates of specially created camps made public their sufferings when they found the puppets became their mouthpieces. The data collected through this exercise was so engaging that the team members of my organization were able to create a documentary film on the subject, which has been shown worldwide.

But the crowning glory of puppetry in its new avatar was yet to be revealed. That momentous hour dawned when the SNDT University of Mumbai decided to make puppetry a subject option for undergraduates at the university. Puppetry had thus ceased to be a loose-knit craft pursuit being nurtured by traditional families and had now emerged as a curriculum of

study with a dedicated syllabus incorporating both theoretical and practical aspects of puppetry. With this certificate course in puppetry we intend teach the making various types of puppets, subjects of puppet shows, write appropriate scripts based on a story or issue, design sets, staging techniques, give voices, compose music, design lights, use traditional and modern techniques of manipulation and use them effectively.

Having entered the area of education, puppetry has entered an era of significant transformation. Despite this significance, the initial intake on the course consisted of just five students, of which three were social workers, one a senior citizen and one A regular student. The staff, for the course were drawn from both the segment of traditional puppeteers as well as trained personnel who had worked with me on my shows and elsewhere.

These change makers are not inquisitive busybodies who have joined the course for the experience. They have had hands-on experience in the field having been involved with my work and have thus acquired knowledge and skills that will help to make a valuable turnaround to this traditional form. Their inputs have gone a long way in developing course material and the modular curriculum for the course. Books and references have been drawn from sources indigenous and international.

To supplement study material, puppets are now being designed to fit the bill. They are now designed, constructed and mechanically kitted so as to be operated by human beings. Unlike the traditional diktat of making puppets according to family heritage, it is now universally accepted that puppets can be anything their creators desire. They can take on forms such as people, animals, insects, air, vitamins, heavenly bodies or even purely imaginative forms. Thus, objects ordinarily inanimate may become very animated on the puppet stage. In fact, one of the most delightful aspects of puppetry is the mixture of the real and imaginary which is always handy when one is dealing

with real life situations. The physical appearance of the puppet can be whatever his creator can imagine and as long as it is well designed it is acceptable to the audience, however far from the usual order of things it may be.

In making the course a holistic approach to the serious business of puppetry, the methodology of puppet making has been freed from the shackles of rigid tradition. They are now being carved not in wood but from thermocole or foam, throw-away cardboard boxes, rubber or plastic, or modeled in papier-mâché, cut out of paper or stitched out of discarded socks and stuffed with rags. The main tools for puppet making are the hands and imagination of its makers. It is the suggestion of form and character which is important rather than the realistic details. Proportion too, has been shorn off reality and a mouse puppet

can be bigger than man, or lions can be the size of men. Such transpositions are the very core of fantasy and exaggeration can be the ideal ingredients to instill humour into the proceedings.

Even the spaces for holding these shows has undergone a change. Modern puppeteers are getting rid of their one time small portable theatres and as time goes on, they seem to be growing larger and larger in size, so that they are stepping out of their once restricted area of the puppet frame and moving on to bigger stages, as large as the human theatre or out into the open air.

A significant fallout of the course oriented approach to Indian puppetry has been the advantage of interaction with puppet organizations internationally. With seminars and conferences serving as platforms





to focus and showcase the newest trends in puppetry, the Indian puppeteer armed with a degree, is expected to take his or her stand among the world comity. These young people are respectful of their own traditional baggage but at the same time are aware of the fact that puppets and puppet theatres throughout the world are achieving new grounds in artistry and skills. The great consciousness and evolution in this art has grown entirely through worldwide efforts of UNIMA (Union International de la Marionette).

Keeping in mind that merely educating youngsters in the art form would be a fractured approach, I have ensured that avenues of employment are also kept in readiness for the batch of graduates who will pass out in due course of time. Besides working on socially relevant projects where puppetry has established a commendable niche for itself, they are being equipped to launch themselves as independent puppeteers. With teaching aids still at a nascent and largely improvisational level, they have tremendous scope to prove their metal therein. Others with an

entrepreneurial streak can even contemplate the possibilities of film making using puppet characters. Teaching tools for the sector also would prove a worthwhile avenue for exploration.

As books and manuals are in short supply I myself undertook a work on puppetry in Marathi and then in English and Hindi — *A Handbook of Puppetry* — in 2001. Such volumes need constant updating and need supplementary material flooding in from all corners.

Currently, the opinion among seasoned puppeteers is that people have now become curious and inquisitive about puppets. It was a dead art about forty years ago. Though this situation has changed a bit, people do not know how to use it. The infant steps to codify traditional knowledge in the form of a graduate course is just a drop in an ocean. The take-off point is in readiness and further research to contextualise this product of craftsmanship from our shores is an imperative need of the future.

Flexibility and Adaptation in Puppetry

Madhavalatha Ganji

Puppetry has been in existence from 2nd Century BC in India. The art whose primary origins are in the Asian continent, travelled across the world along with the civilisational journey and made its presence in European states in the beginning of the previous millennium. Then as the European civilization seeds spread to the American continent with modernity, the art form too might have become part of migration alongside European Protestantism's

journey to the North American continent. Thus by the 10th Century the art had made its universal presence as a performing art form. But over the last one thousand years, puppetry de-linked its origins from ritual theatre in India and evolved as a form of social entertainment. This evolution can be traced from the literary references beginning from Bharat Muni's *Natya Shastra* to Palkurki Somnatha's *Basava Puranam* and *Panditaradhya Charitram*, which are dated 13th





Century AD. From the references in *Panditaradhya Charitramm* it is evident that in the medieval Indian context, the art of puppetry was a popular form of public entertainment. Cultural historians also believe that Bharat Muni's reference to Sutradhaara in his epic *Natya Shashtra* is nothing but the reference about the existence of puppetry during that period! It is a matter of fact that any cultural reference that used to be incorporated into any form of expression, be it the writing of an individual or inscriptions, would find its way into recorded literature only after it was in use for a considerable time in the public domain.

Puppetry has traversed a long path in its continuous adaptations. These adaptations got enriched when it invoked the regional variations in the cultural lives, resulting in rainbow cultural practices in India. Puppetry has such internal flexibility that it can be adopted to suit any situation by using the traditional

characteristics itself. This is one of the reasons for its evergreen survivability. This kind of adaptation gave a new fillip for continuous efforts in contemporarisation of the art form. The adaptation efforts in the West basically focused on the craft side contribution of the art form whereas the adaptation in the Orient cling to the texture and literature of puppets. That is why we are able to find versatility of performance with the similar themes in the East, while the performances in the West reflect a versatility of modules. Despite the never-ending adaptations, puppetry can be broadly classified into four categories. They are rod, glove, leather and marionettes. Of late, imitating the tendency towards microcosms, finger puppets, popularly known as muppets, are also being used for customized shows.

It is an interesting fact that every time the art of puppetry is reinvented after a considerable



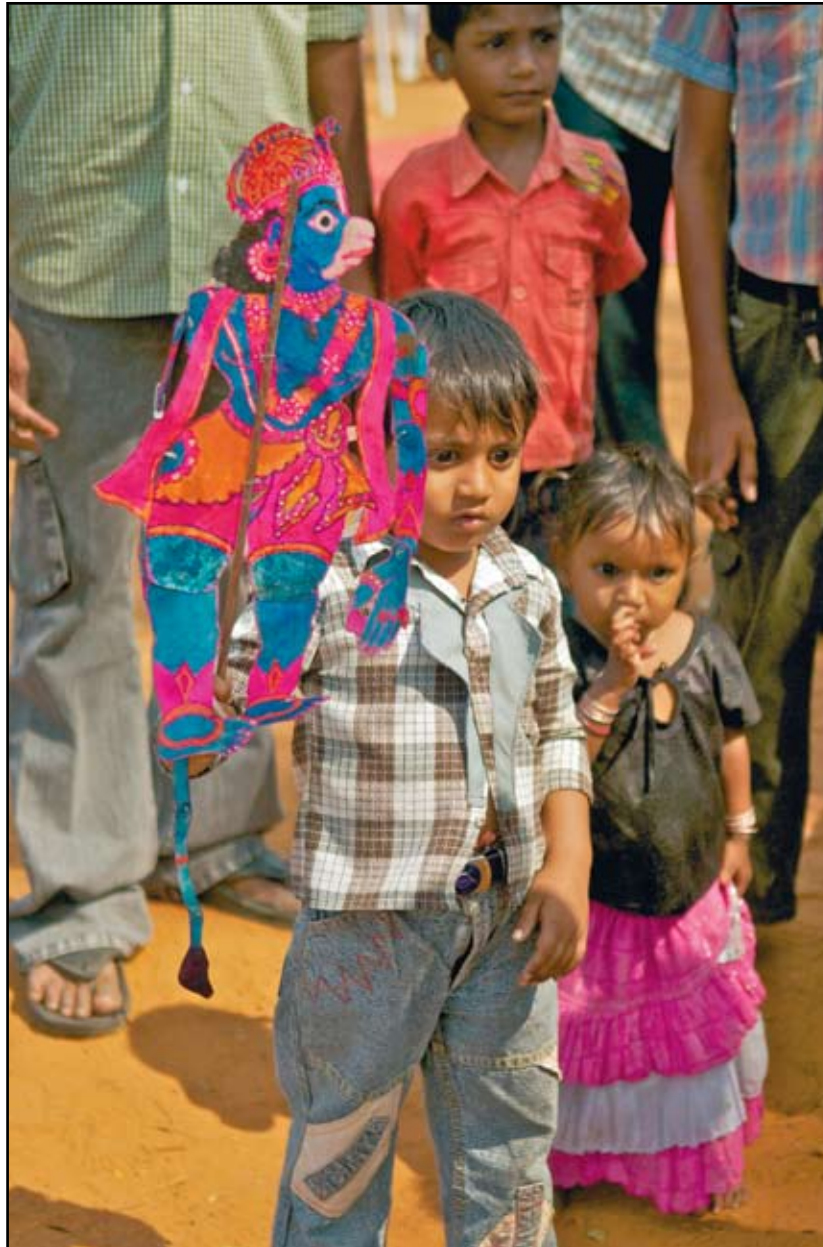
historical break, it turns out to be an enriched form of performance which simultaneously reflects versatility as well as historical continuity. Despite this historical continuity and ancient presence, the art of puppetry has its own origins in modern Indian history. As it is presently known, the modern day's performances of the art of puppetry have their origins somewhere in the 17th century in today's Maharashtra from where a family's migration spread this art form into peninsular India. Within no time, during the 17th and 18th centuries puppetry became a popular art form. The investigations into history of puppetry belie a comprehensive understanding of the form as the strands of history are disconnected for about a thousand years! Thus huge gaps appear in the chronology. Perhaps the further readings into the historiography of this period will shed some new and more light that can enable us to acquire a better understanding about the conditions of civic life and the consequential cultural advancements made during the said period.

Similar to that of language, culture and the other ingredients of culture, i.e. art forms particularly, kept travelling along with civilization. The best example of this is that Puppetry was introduced in to today's American continent during some time in the middle of the 16th century by the migrant populations from Europe during the struggle between the Catholic Church and Protestantism. Similarly, under the influence of colonial rule in Asia, puppetry travelled to South East Asia, though the countries have their own fables about the origins of puppetry in these countries. Nevertheless it is well known that puppetry has had a predominant influence from India, both in shapes, texts and colours. These examples refer the cross border spread of the art of puppetry. Similarly we have the best example that confirms that similar spread also took place within these countries. For example, in India, as per the commonly held belief and also from the available recorded evidence, it is found that today's puppetry in South India has its roots in the migrant family from Maharashtra of the

16th or 17th centuries. That means, lakhs of performing puppeteers are having their ancestral links to a specific time and place and a group of persons. That might be the reason why we find commonness of family names among the puppeteers in Andhra Pradesh and other states and also within the state of Andhra Pradesh, despite their geographical differences and distances.

Another aspect also needs some focus. That is about the adaptability of puppetry. Different regions facilitated versatile adoptions in the art of puppetry. In the Eastern countries the art is confined to texture and the practices of modern puppetry in these countries are of recent origin. The structure of leather puppetry has inbuilt limitations to the adaptations, as the characters designed are specific to the theme of the performance. Unlike leather puppetry, other forms of puppetry such as glove, or rod, makes it easy to use the same puppets for any kind of versatile situations and performances. Such adaptations by leather puppetry are difficult as it involves creative minds to design the puppets to suit modern adaptations and also the acceptability by the public. This obviously involves huge investments which the traditional leather puppetry artists are unable to opt for. This can be termed as a primary reason for the West claiming the verity of puppets over those of Eastern practitioners despite the fact that puppetry primarily has an Oriental origin.

Another aspect that merits attention here is the dialectical relationship between tradition and



modernity as regards puppetry. The dialectical relationship is between the existing texts of performances and newly emerging community of performers. As it is commonly agreed, puppetry is basically rooted in tradition, culturally and biologically. That is why the traditional performances are common across the regions in India. At the same time, as the generations progress, these traditions are not staying intact though the basic theme of tradition is continue uninterruptedly. The newly emerging

group of artists, both traditional and otherwise are, after gauging today's needs and also the means of public support for the art, are continuously trying to modernize their performances within the traditional mould as well as beyond traditionalism. This effort gives rise to the emergence of modern performances of puppetry resulting in the post-modern trends of puppetry typically, a performance of this kind of takes a mythological story out of its original genre and adopts it to the modern proscenium and other stage applications, such as modern lighting and sound systems, and presents a performance to the new generations that can withhold them as a captive audience.

Coming to the conditions of artists, despite the above mentioned flexibility in the structure of puppetry, today's puppeteers are facing enormous problems in terms of acceptability of their art and are in search of alternate livelihoods. The adaptations that are coming to the fore are being done by the highly educated

dramaturgies who are able to attract the educated audiences or committed audiences. They are also commanding vast resources of sponsorship which the traditional artists are unable to command due to their backwardness and inaccessibility to the modern forms of support systems. For example the Ishara Puppetry Festival held annually is able to command support and sponsorship both from governmental agencies as well as non-governmental agencies under the tag of corporate social responsibility whereas the traditional performers and the organizations that are working for them are still far beyond the radar of corporate social responsibility.

Also, the livelihoods of traditional performers are at stake given the fact that their livelihoods are linked with the level of acceptability of their performance in particular and also the art form to which they are clinging to, in general. As is widely known, it is hard to find a suitable support for the traditional art forms because of their limited reach, and role in social





life. This results in the loss of livelihood to those artists and they are forced to search for new ways of earning a livelihood. This effort has also resulted in transforming the art form to made it suitable for adaptations, by enhancing their livelihood options. This can be confirmed from the versatility of the performances that belong to a single genre.

This lack of a secured livelihood option has left the artists and performers in disarray. That is the main reason for the gradual disinterestedness in this art form even among those who are born into the traditional artists' families. The new generations, finding it difficult to eke out change for the family needs, are forced to look for alternative livelihood options, such as becoming daily wage labourers, merchants, migrant labor, street vendors and a number of options. This search for a livelihood also provoked them to look for innovative methods in order to reach out to the distancing audience and also to ensure their meager livelihoods. In this process of dialectical interaction, the art form has kept on

surviving even in this age of globalised means of culture and entertainment.

The usual puppets stand from two to three metres height, and are brightly coloured. They are made originally with vegetable and mineral dyes and later with chemicals. Initially deer skin was used for the characters of divinities and lamb or buffalo skin for the others. The skin is tanned to a transparently thin quality. It takes thirty to fifty days to make a life-size leather puppet. During the festivals of mother goddesses, the skins of sacrificial lambs used to be donated to puppeteers by individuals to make specific characters of their choice in their name as a ritual offerings. Nowadays the village ceremonies such as these have dwindled and the puppeteers are forced to travel far to collect suitable quality skins.

After tanning, artisans of three different skills collectively work on each puppet. Image drawing and cutting is the foremost, bringing out the personality that depicts the caricature of the role that it is meant



for. Every figure is cut into several parts such as head, torso, hip, legs, and hands. This helps the artists to keep it safe as well as transport easily wherever they go to present a performance. Each limb is sliced into three at the joints, to facilitate movements. This drawing and cutting is done by the senior craftsmen from amongst the clan. The second skill is ornamentation and dressing, by perforating countless tiny holes that let light through to the screen in the shape and design of costumes and jewellery. The third skill is to fill in colours according to traditional patterns. Then all the parts are loosely tied, allowing free movement at each joint. Three stitched bamboo sticks make the puppet workable. One vertical stick, runs from head to hip; also used to hold the figure straight, and the others connected to the forearms. With this, the part the of craftsmen comes to end leaving space for the role of manipulators.

Manipulators are those who actually control the movements of the puppets as per the story line. Compared to the craft that moulds the puppet,

the manipulation is considered secondary, because everybody in the team ranging from children to the aged, knows how to man a puppet. But only the seniors know how to make them. The first-grade puppet-makers of the traditional style are nearly all gone. Since each leather puppet survives for an average 100-150 years, because of this longevity very few puppeteers have really bothered to learn puppet-making. Practically every child is taught the manipulation and singing in Yakshaganam style.

At a show, eight to ten members stand behind a huge white screen about 5m wide and 2-3m high to manipulate the figures. The screen is erected very tight, without any folds, but kept slightly slanted from top to bottom, leaning a little to the inside so that slight errors in the fall of the image can be covered. Erecting a stage with the screen is one of the most technical tasks during a performance. Traditionally, castor-oil torches illuminated the puppets behind the screen to give off a soft and red light. These days, Petromax pressure lamps or red electrical bulbs are

used. Each puppet is held almost touching the screen from behind, keeping the manipulators' body away. Generally, each puppeteer handles one character at a time, singing and talking suitably while making special sound effects. As puppetry's prospects as an important source of livelihood has dwindled, the number of performing puppeteers also followed thus, forcing the available puppeteers to play with multiple puppets and also, variety of roles, interchanging between the scenes in each theme.

Before the show commences, the puppets of the god Ganesh, a Dishtibomma i.e. `evil chaser`, and the comedian Juttupoligadu i.e. `erect-tuft fellow` are displayed. The performance begins with a prayer to Ganesh, generally in Raga Todi, followed by the Sabha varnana in which the artists verbally comment on the combination of the gathering assembled there on that day. This is a song praising the audience and welcoming the chief guests. The actual play always starts with Raga Nata and closes with Surati. Musical instruments such as mridangam, harmonium, and cymbals provide the music. Nowadays, as the cost of the play is going up, the artists are trying to use synchronized cassette players to play the music, or the tape recorder with pre-recorded audio tapes. All artists sing at a very high pitch to reach out to the thousands of spectators.

The main attraction is three types of comedians who appear in all texts. The first is the husband and wife,

Juttupoligadu and Bangarakka i.e. `golden girl`, who always quarrel, irrespective of the play. The show starts with this couple, who also interrupt the proceedings many times with typical jokes, sometimes connected to the story but mostly on topical issues. The second type of comedian is called Allatappa, whose wit proves superior to the earlier pair's. He always provokes the wife against her husband to instigate the quarrel further. The third is known as Ketigadu or 'intruder'. This is a tiny puppet, which jumps between everybody and everything even when the screen is full with a dozen characters. Depending on the team's taste, the comedy turns vulgar sometimes, but tradition has designed this bunch of comedians as an integral part of the show. That is why, it is interesting to find that similar characters are available across the themes that are being played by puppeteers, irrespective of the regional variations in the state. Since no separate script is written for puppetry, the creation of these jesters could be taken the puppeteers as special genius.

All said and done, the limited scope of creativity and innovative ability is due to the lack of a formal education. Also, the governments of the day are not keen in developing, promoting the traditional art forms on a sustained basis. Both the insecurity of the art form as a source of livelihood as well as the artist's inability to innovate and move with up the times are





interlinked to each other. The root cause of the fall is lack of proper support in terms of providing the puppeteers educational opportunities on a priority basis and ensuring that the government programmes co-opt this art form into promote and sustain the same.

Thus, it is found that there is an urgency of classifying them as part of a social category, preferably as either Scheduled Tribe or backward classes as their profession is occupational. This classification of this group into Scheduled Tribe or backward community will help them at least in the future to earn a respectable livelihood and also encourage them to pursue the art form, making it into a sustainable art form, thus keeping the continuity of its cultural strands. Also the government can devise schemes that can use puppetry as a means of edutainment in the promotion of tourism by giving them opportunities for providing continuous performances on a commercial basis in

the tourist hubs such as Shilparamam, Golkonda, Salar Jung Museum, Tirupati, Srisailam, Annavam, Basara etc. Also, in places where the government organizes or facilitates religious festivals, they can give scope for puppetry performances, which can in turn enhance the livelihood potential of the art form. Similar efforts from the government will also ensure that the art form can be introduced to the future generations thereby giving scope for recreating the new talents in an effort of sustaining the art form.

Lastly it is pertinent to mention that along with the efforts of sustaining the glory of the age-old art form, festivals of puppetry at regular intervals, involving the artists, and their family members, in the public arena unlike in closed-door events, will definitely help the artists who are keeping up the tradition and also the modernists who are trying to invent, innovate and modernize the art of puppetry.

Art Reviews: Azad Bhavan Gallery

In the experience of viewing an art show one comes across a three-pronged approach to art. This mechanism is what makes art metamorphose into a unique bond of silent communication, involving all the five senses for its participants. The artist creator who conceives and presents his innermost thoughts through the medium of art materials is the key performer in this chain. The viewer of his finished product, who is privy to a look at these creations when they are displayed on the walls of a gallery, forms its next link. While these two individuals are physical and tangible aspects of the art triangle, the third link is born of aesthetics and beauty that is a surreal sixth sense, and which provides that essential tool for understanding art as a creation of beauty and novelty. Thus it is a three-pronged exercise of performer, patron and perspective, that has made the exhibitions held at the Azad Bhavan Gallery during the quarter under review, a vibrant experience for both artist and viewer.

Another link that is seldom recalled when viewing an exhibition of contemporary art is the links it has to



both the rural traditions and the contemporary life all around. Many a time artists turn to their natural surroundings with portrayals of flora and fauna in a highly imaginative way. Others draw succour from mythological writings and practices that are commonly favoured as sources for the varied forms and ideas portrayed on the canvas. Apart from such orthodox tastes there are artists who find inspiration from issues that excite and inspire the public imagination in our times. These issues, though transitory in public life, becoming embedded in the imagination when an artist chooses to take up the cause. He has an uncanny knack of assessing those aspects of permanency that surround public issues and immortalize them through their art. Thus viewing an art exhibition at the Azad Bhavan Gallery becomes a unique voyage of discovery for its viewers who begin to discover hidden aspects of both traditional and contemporary inputs in our lives, by making them accents of art in the works on display at this gallery.

Human reactions to pleasantries like balmy weather conditions, is a foregone conclusion. When an artist begins to analyse this feeling, there appear stunning outpourings in the form of art, as is evident in the artworks of **Anuradha Rishi**. Her show, titled 'Colours in Life', examined the life of the rural folk in their natural setting, homing her attention to the tribal folk of the Jammu hills. Choosing a colourful brush and an almost photogenic approach to the impact of the surroundings provides the visual spark to her art. Her take on a forest scene on a sunny morning, leaps from being a childlike excitement at the play of sunshine and shadow to that of a mature mystique where every twist along the forest stream palpates with a spiritual underbelly. The juxtaposition of the linear height of imposing full-grown trees against the rocky undergrowth hugging the ground in the forest, tease the mind's eye into a voyage of exploration, to discover what lies behind the craggy mountains in the distance and the undulating meadows closer afoot.

Besides panoramic spreads the artist has also utilized concentrations of floral studies to make known



Ladakh, oil on canvas: 91.44x76.2 cm

her love of nature. A lotus in full bloom, above the pond waters, on the lines of a still life painting, bear testimony to her expertise. An even richer experience for her viewers is provided by this colourist in the work titled 'A lady sailing (with flowers)' where the angle of interest is directed to the blossoming of spring in a forest setting. Blooms in canary then shuffle out the grey-green to vie for attention, even as the fresh greens of new foliage and the outbreak of pristine white blossoms and blue buds round up the scenario befittingly. When more stark and severe weather enters the seasonal calendar, this artist dips her brush into a study of a pair of horses in their stalls their contours so factual that they seem to be holding a tete-a-tete with the viewer at the gallery.

Another aspect of this colourist is her command over art techniques. Her innate understanding of the presence of light in her works make her a modern-day Impressionist who can evoke a myriad moods through her light touches. They are the stirring mood reflectors on the canvas space and provide the life force of her nature studies. They represent a plethora of sensations ranging from movement, fulfillment, warmth, introspection, mellowness, harmony exuberance, a celebration of life, indeed the *joie de vivre*, making her art step beyond the photogenic to a strata that lies midway between fact and its mental form.



A. Rani

Places around art have a certain aura of artistry that is easily recognizable. Their settings are conducive to art making by and large and the inmates of these institutions are ever willing to have onlookers peer over their shoulders as they remain engrossed in their preoccupations. The halls and spaces around these campuses are evidences of their creative strengths and visitors can often be seen standing engrossed by these sights. But the institution Bindu Art School is a school with a difference. Located at Bharatapuram, amidst the leprosy colonies it is the first art school for people crippled by Hansen's Disease. Its main purpose is to restore respect and dignity to the stricken leprosy patients by enabling them to express their innermost feelings through the medium of art. Founded by Werner Dornik an Austrian multimedia artist and curator and Padma Venkatraman, a social activist, the school tries to portray the artistic qualities in the people afflicted by leprosy who are encouraged to portray the reality of their lives through their works that are then exhibited before a wider audience. By bringing such

an exhibition into the confines of the Azad Bhavan Gallery, the organizers not only provided a glimpse into spontaneous art creativity but also made viewers realize how art can be an outlet for human sensibilities in the most telling ways.

At first glimpse these colourful works defy their being categorized as amateur attempts at art and wear a certain attention to detail and colour applications that are seen in works by a trained eye. An overlay of folk themes and styles expresses the social backgrounds of its producers for several of them are drawn from rustic societies where the divisions between everyday living and artistic pursuits is not tight compartmented into different segments. Thus the motifs chosen in the works of A Rani is a tapestry of woven symmetry Making the composition bloom and come into its own. The geometric huts placed at the lower end of the space wear a childlike joyousness in the many colours that mark its geometric proportions. Similarly, the village landscape depicted by K Munuswami has tinges of

realism and chooses telltale forms of village situations, such as the sprawling banyan tree, belles carrying pots of water, and a palanquin with a bridal inmate to add drama to the setting. The entire portrayal simulates a performing abhinaya, wherein the balladeer seems to be recounting an iconic tale through the medium of the artist's brush. In the work of **P Subramani**, there is recall of the mandala concept in his guiding format. But the similarity seems to end there for within the circular framework, the artist has implanted colourful miniatures of doll-like figures, animals, birds, flowers, and just sheer blobs of patterns that make the work exude a rhythmic imagery in a shared space. Colour again works as a strong binding principle in this work and gives the viewer a glimpse of hope and spontaneity suggesting thereby that all is not lost, despite the odds. Pattern play, a strong element of folk creations comes to the fore in the Gond inspired work of artist **V Godavari**, whose work depicts a menagerie of jungle life ranging from agile deer to reptilian forms

to prehistoric-looking avians, and predators. The repetitive use of dots, dashes, or stripes fills in the graphic outlines of the forms, as they are seen to leap, run, crawl and stop in their tracks across the canvas space. The hillock in the foreground sprouts fresh grass suggesting a season when the forest awakes to new life and new possibilities in life's journey onwards. Also, the work of **P Vadivel**, another participant, embraces the lifestyle of village India where the farmer is seen relaxing under the shady banyan, while the other forms in the backdrop serve as explorative nuances of the chosen theme. The use of a felt-tipped pen to cover the surface with wavy lines in meticulous detail illuminate the story angle of the painting further. Rounding up the exhibition's thematic appeal were a few photographs of the inmates where each face was etched in infectious smiles so that viewer and maker of the exhibits enjoyed a fleeting moment of happy togetherness at this show.



V. Godavari



The Power of Life, acrylic on canvas: 36x72 inches



The Tree of Life_05, oil on canvas: 36x72 inches

Among the crop of solo shows chosen for this quarter, one which received wide acclaim from viewers was the solo exhibit by **Parthasarathy Pal** titled 'Mindscape'. Taking the feminine form as his leit motif, he suffuses



Eternal Love, acrylic on canvas: 42x42 inches

his canvases with an intrinsic variety that only a studied and mature artist would be adept at producing. They range from being brooding suffused beauties half seen through a misty haze to those defined by strong graphic lines, their angular sharpness ornamented with a magical play of light as in the work titled, 'Eternal Love'. Elsewhere the figure loses its feminine characteristics as it becomes metamorphosed into the



The Tree of Life_04, acrylic on canvas: 36x42 inches

branches and roots of mythical tree forms, bearing in its makeover a plethora of seed-like forms enmeshed into the defining contour. The even more mystical depictions of the fertility theme is ringed by a leafy arbour to exude a meta-narrative of its own. Even the work titled 'Mother' transmits an aura through a clever device of patterning in wavy line work surrounding half hidden facial features signaling the far-fetched influences of this being over the human race. The musical expletive 'Parthasarathy' bears the author's own namesake much like composers and lyricists of yore who managed to sign their compositions by weaving their names into the words of the lyric they wrote.

Despite the many-sided approach to womankind that this artist has touched upon, in his art, he has managed to maintain a thread of continuity and togetherness by his symbolic references to the power of womankind. These touches in his art make it a visual narrative that transcends beyond the obvious into the realm of



Parthasarathy, oil on canvas: 36x42 inches

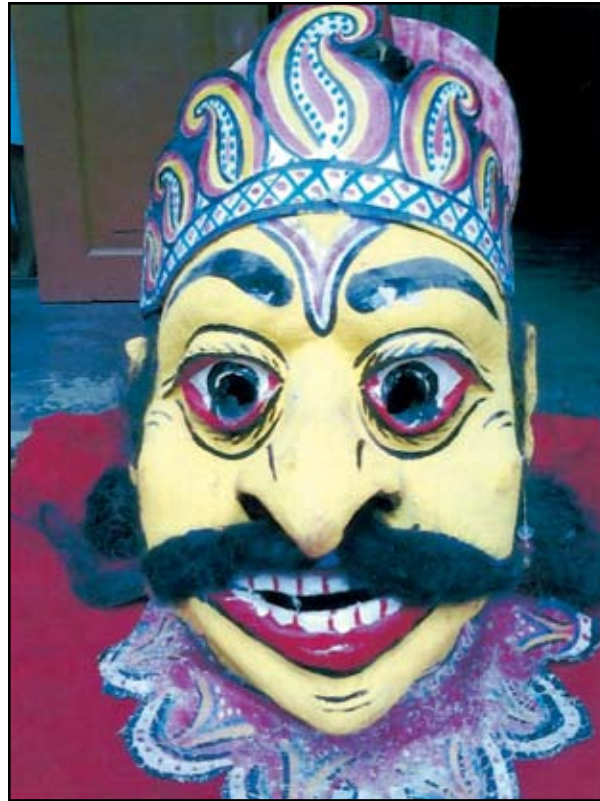
deep thinking making his art a muted conversation on the topic of 'woman', between artist and his viewer. Unlike most established artists, this artist has not foregone the joys of colour and its possibilities in his works. Instead of a definitive palette of chosen hues, he exploits this medium through its translucent strong points to its solidity in primary hues. On the other hand, the lines in his art have a free flowing character giving his works a bridge-like effect linking the mystical with the actual. There is a rhythm running through these creations that examine the theme of womanhood through all its facets.



The Chalice of Life, oil on canvas: 36x36 inches

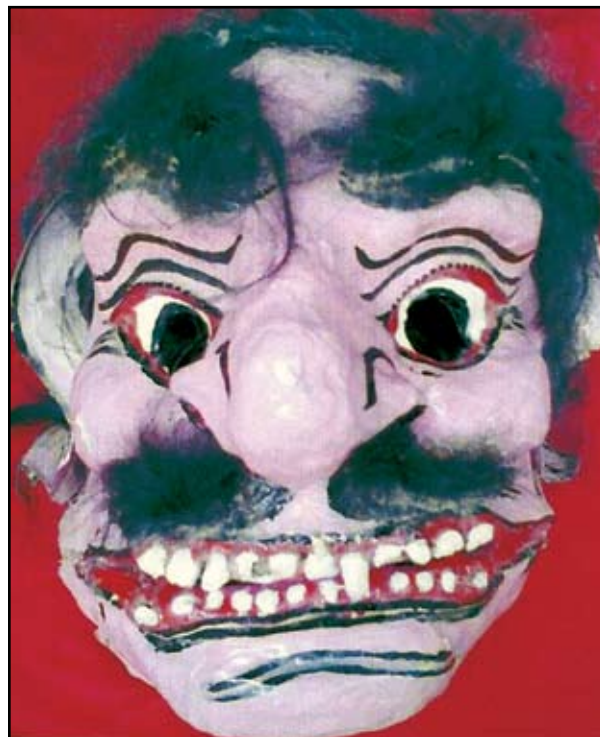


Hironyakashipu



Indrajit

Veering from the domain of scholarly art into a mid-level art initiative such as mask making, was the exhibition titled 'Mask Art of Assam', featuring the works of the **Pratishruti Foundation**. Founded in 2008, its prime role has been to take forward the teachings of Shrimanta Shankardev through a cultural expose featuring dances, lecture-demonstrations, and the grooming and encouraging of young artistic talent, as its guru founder had profusely utilized masks in his one-act plays called Ankiya Bhaona. Bamboo was the medium used and the tradition rolls on in a father-to-son linearity keeping alive a vibrant art. Highly expressive facial coverings, these masks are utilitarian stage props on the one hand and artistic creations on the other. Being linked to a need-based outlet has kept the tradition innovative as newer plays demand complimentary masks to express their story content. Also, the masks vary in their sizes ranging from small mouse masks to giant demon ones and even full body masks for characters such as Ravana



Demon Marich



Framework of Mask



Narasimha Masks

and Bakasur. Interesting engineering techniques have even introduced snake masks where the wriggling movement of these creatures is reproduced with telling reality.

Beyond the finished product, even the rudiments of construction, through the different stages of mask

making were part of this exhibition, giving the viewer a hands-on understanding of what goes into the making of this fascinating craft. The bamboo framework of a realistic horse figurine, woven in a fine mesh of bamboo crossings, has its contours so well matched that viewers get the feel of its fierceness by just one look at this skeletal framework. The task of painting in the details and the elaborate ornamentation, particularly in the case of full-body masks is another look at the methodology that brings about perfection into every execution of its artisans. Many of these masks are made special by their colouring and their gaping openings for the eyes and mouth. Instead of leaving a hollow mouth piece, there are details like protruding teeth to complete the aura. By creating masks of well known mythical characters, the work remains rooted to Indian culture and forms a bond of recognition amidst all sections of society.



Illusions at Rest-2, oil and acrylic on canvas: 36"x48" 2011

Perhaps the most exciting part of viewing an art exhibition is when one finds the exhibiting artist consciously evolving into a new phase of creativity evident in a fresh set of works on display. Visitors to exhibition by **Renuka Sondhi Gulati**, titled 'The Divine Grace', were given just such an opportunity for her recent series on the theme of illusions showed a strategic shift as also a sense of incorporation of plant life with her human forms. What was appealing is the artist's grasp of muscle and sinew, in her figures and that is what helps in depicting the graceful movement of the limbs. In line with her painting skills is her adeptness with sculpture where strong lines, volume and innate grace help to create an imagery of fragility that become powerful vehicles of communication with her viewer.

Part of the perceptive lucidity of her art is also due to her judicious use of the colour palette, which at all



Graceful Stripes, oil and acrylic on canvas: 24"x34" 2012

times is kept to the minimum. Thus her canvases seem to breathe and suffuse the space with a rare pristine vibe. The graphic surety of her forms and the attendant surrounds serve to define her thoughts with specificity. The artist appears sure of her strokes and the cues to her memory behind the figures as they pose in reclining postures, or in arched stretches initiating a journey of interpretation that is launched upon by viewer and artist together, in front of his canvases. The subtle colour applications, in contrast to robust layering, reads as a way of coaxing memory to give off some of its secrets plumbing the depths of personal tales.



Togetherness, Bronze: 23.5"x10.5"x9.5'



Graceful Stripes, Bronze: 15"x8"x8" 2012



Illusions at Rest-1, Oil and acrylic on canvas: 36"x48"



Eve Next to Sea by Arturas Savickas (2008) Lithuania



Angel on the shore by Tiina Tuurna (2002) Finland

From far off shores this quarter, came a fascinating exhibition by the Lithuanian artists who have painted the region of Nida, a unique meeting place of sand, sea, and sky. The Nida symposia of artists hail from different countries and their works were brought together by Saulius Kruopis, the chairman of the Nida 'Bridge' heralded as the soul behind the Nida Art Symposia. Being a well known painter, photo-artist, and a reputed modeler of cities in miniature form, his interest in India has resulted in a close rapport between the art initiatives of the two nations. Besides exhibiting in India on two previous occasions, he has also been interested in Indian culture and philosophy making him the best choice for choosing the kind of work that would appeal to art lovers in India. Thus the works on display were of European make, the



Storm is Coming by Linas Gelumauskas (2011) Lithuania



"Ships onshore" by Karin Zimmermann (2006) Germany

abundant use of blues and oinks, the fresh greens and the panoramic views captured in the spaces, made it a highly appealing display for the art-inclined.

As most of the works were depictions of the landscape of this region, their beauty seemed to mesmerize the viewers. The layered effect of the knife in the work

titled 'Eve Next to Sea' by Arturas Savickas, was a feisty palette, a choreographed drama of the delights of the outdoors. The painting titled 'Angel on the shore', gave voice to abstract landscapes with its brooding dark tones of browns contrasting with the deeper hues of a twilight hour by the seaside. The pristine presence centre stage imparts a sense of mystique to the work, leaving the reader with a chance to hold a soliloquy with the figure. The harbour scene on the other hand, in the work titled 'Ships onshore', is a tentative quayside scene using an imaginative conglomeration of forms, thereby providing room for variant musings. In contrast the work 'Sailing ships' is a controlled essay into the pomp and showmanship that accompanies a fleet's departure for distant shores. The receding shoreline, the changing hues of the waters and the uniformity of the sailing exercise, captures that significant moment of time that bridges between the passing of ships from the security of an anchorhold into the adventure of the open sea, creating a meta narrative of contrasts and possibilities.

Speaking of confluences as opposed to departures one is drawn to the works of artist **Susmita Banerjee** whose exhibition titled 'Steel Life', was just that. Using the unusual medium of steel, she creates an abstract narrative of forms, flowing lines and colour contrasts, in a refreshing format that totally ousts the concept that art is a matter of paints and brushes linked through a thought process. An enamalist who

has earned encomiums from fellow artists the world over, Susmita brought her works to the gallery after highly successful tours at the Bristol School of Art Media and Design at the University of West England and Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan.

Not just the novelty of her medium, but the expressive content of her art is what makes Susmita



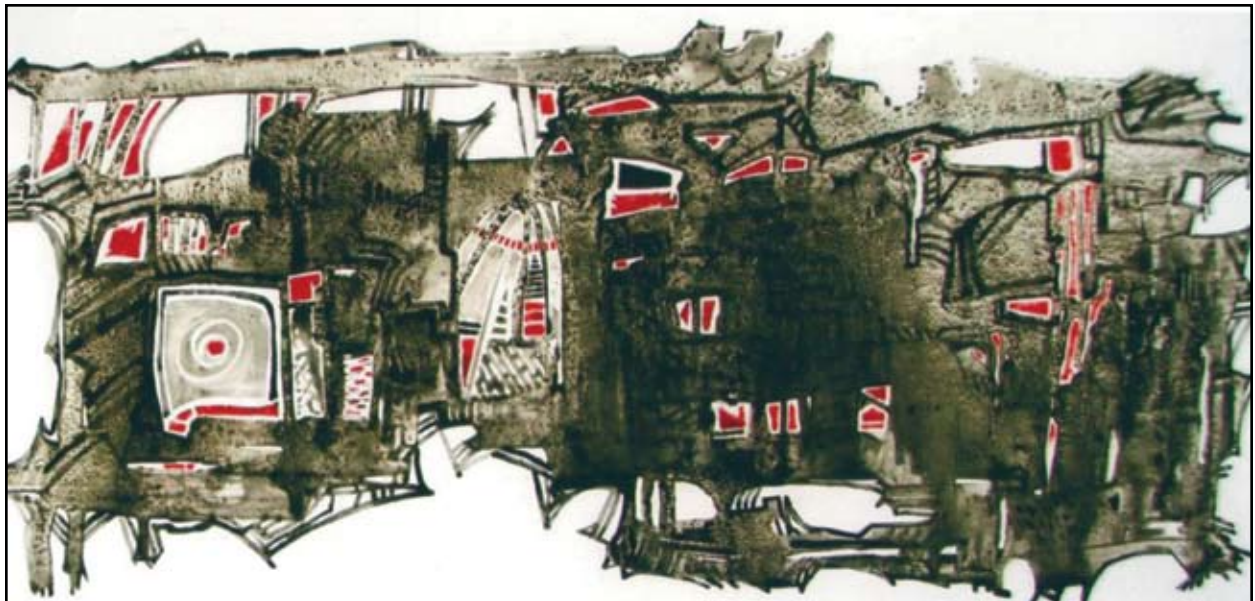
Nature II, on steel: 24x12 inches



Couch, on steel: 12x12 inches



City III, on steel: 12x12 inches



Abstract Composition, on steel: 24x12 inches



City, on steel: 9x9 inches

stand out as a master, among the medley. Making use of a palette of primary colours, her work 'Conch' rings out the sounds of the oceans in their foamy layers simulating the shores of beaches where nature is left untouched and where the sun-kissed waves leave behind a rainbow trail before our senses. The blurred outlines of her cityscape in contrast wear a mantle

of smog and heat, verily justifying the use of greys, blacks and reds to ring out her dire message. The geometric symmetry of high-rise structures hogging the skyline ring out the message of degradation in their pertinent colour choice. The contrasting faces of an urban setting also gets her attention in yet another city study, where the division of her space into exacting rectangles, carries an undercurrent of rigidity reminiscent of the regulatory nature of city living.

On the other hand, her depiction of birdsong, captures the highs and lows of their chirping through bands of colour that conjoin only to disseminate afar, leaving passersby galvanized by the sheer joy of its tonal variations and with no desire to spot the songster hiding in the bushes or perhaps the branches of an old tree. A significant deviation from the city-centric works on display is the patterned composition depicting a face. The graphic lines of cobalt against the cold grey of steel make a striking visual contrast while the lines defining the facial features, define an irregular calligraphy of receding and continuing strokes.



The art of miniature painting is now considered to be an Indian heritage although many of the works, particularly those executed during the Mughal period, by the schools of painting located in Rajasthan and Delhi, owe their styles to links with the Persian form. In fact, it is reputed that the works of the Babur Nama, which were primarily done by Indian artists who were exposed to schools of art prevalent at that time in the region of Iran. At that time, the cities of Samarkand, Tabriz, Shiraz, were the chief centres of this art form and during the time of the Timurid reign in India, under Babur, artists were specially trained in miniature art for illustrating the manuscripts of the Mughal court. The exhibition of prints taken from the manuscript of Babur Nama, therefore is an eye opener for all artists and art lovers.



Art Collector Pravesh Kumar Sahni, who has been instrumental in bringing together a range of photographic reproductions of the original miniatures of the Babur Nama currently being housed at the British Museum, London, has done yeoman service by this effort. The handpicked reproductions depict a complete account of the life and timers of the Mughal court during the Emperor Babur's reign. There are vivid portrayals of jousts and tournaments in the open countryside. The agility of the horses, the true aim of the swordsman, the agony of the stricken and fallen on the battleground are a lifelike account of a medieval battleground. In contrast, the calm setting of a gathering of scholars within a forest setting palpates



with heightened appeal as they are gathered within a forest or garden enclosure by nighttime, where the stillness of the setting provides the vocabulary to express the dignity of scholarly pursuits so aptly underlined by such a setting. The burdens of courtly duties, which consists of such unpleasant tasks as punishing the offender irrespective of his age or stature is also made the subject matter of this art. The humble posture of the accused, held down by the guards, and the surrounding ring of nobles and elders stand decorously, all ears to the pleas of the accused, relives the drama of official disbursement customarily practised in the medieval era.

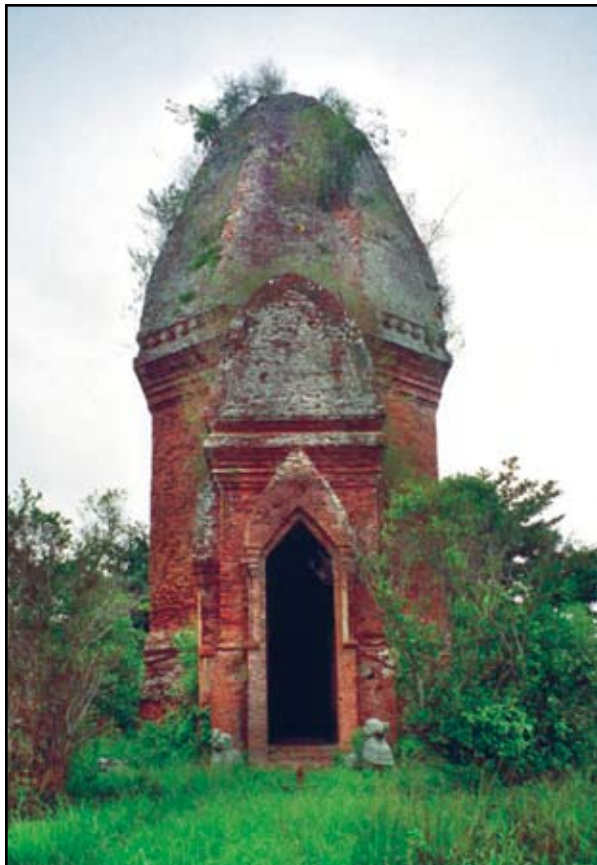


Shivling at Chien Dan complex, 11th-12th century

Besides the subject matter, it is the technique of their execution that holds tremendous interest to the art lover even today. The space is a busy canvas with every inch of the surface made vocal through

the depiction of some aspect of courtly life. Even the outdoors is not left sparse and unadorned as flowers are made to spring up in bushes and groves and rivers intertwine past the scene of action. Verses in boxed spaces included at the top, justify the works with telling narration. The treatment given to colour tints such as blue, exudes a freshness that makes dating farcical as they appear to have dabbed on the surface just yesterday. The colourful robes, the earthy browns of the landscape and the subtle use of white in beards and turbans, speak of master artists who were the upholders of a rich treasure trove of art practices.

Like all other times, every quarterly display of art at the gallery, the photographic input this time was a series of telling works that traced the links with Indian culture in the ruined monasteries and temples



Bang An Tower or Linga Parmesvara, Front View, 10th century



Royal Linga at My Son - A World Cultural Heritage, 10th Century

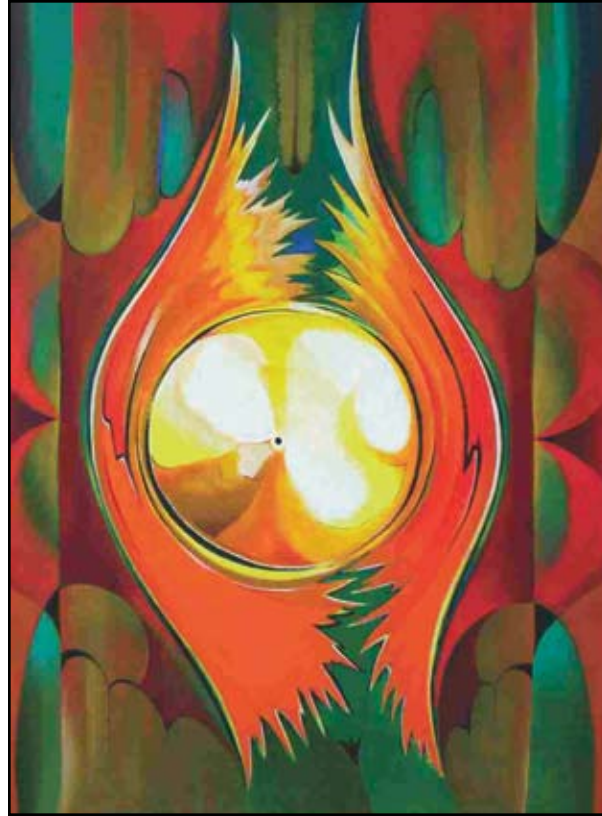
Committee, has been collating photographic data on the theme over four decades. This rich experience has yielded some rare finds such as the Banh It Tower Group dating back to the 11th century establishing the ancient links between our two countries. Not just monumental structures but also images of deities and symbols such as the Linga at the My Son Sanctuary, from the 10th century, strengthen the belief that the bonds of friendship between the two nations were established centuries before our time.



Temple Tower under restoration, My son, 7th-10th century

dotting Vietnam. Photographer **Geetesh Sharma**, who is also the president of the Indo-Vietnam Solidarity

The photographer in his maiden showing at the gallery has proved that his lens eye is also a sensitive technical tool. All the shots bring out the best angle of the image. The play of greens against the rusted ruins of brick and mildew clinging to the walls, have a strong evocative appeal. Located against the backdrop of low lying hills of dense undergrowth, the works have an artistic underbelly that is more akin to the painter's palette. The many images of deities like Shiva, Brahma and Indra, bring alive the ancient lore of the region as also the fact that contact between these countries with South Asia was a vibrant two way channel of diversified communication. A maiden venture on the part of the artist for Delhi's art lovers, the exhibition received a positive response from several quarters.



The distinct inclination of artist **Sunil Kumar (Suke)** to work in a decisive graphic style makes sense of the variant ways in which he cues various categories of relationships both human and spiritual. Thus his vocabulary in art wears a definitive overlay but encompasses an untold spiritual human journey

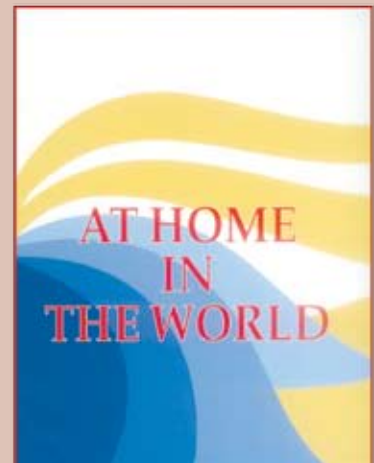
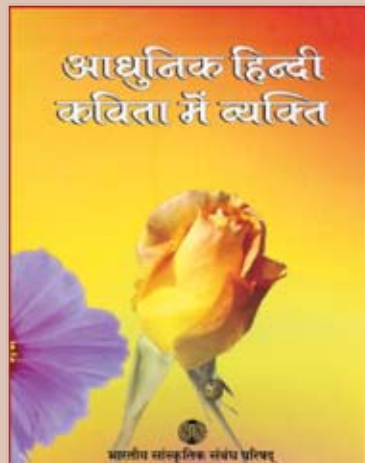
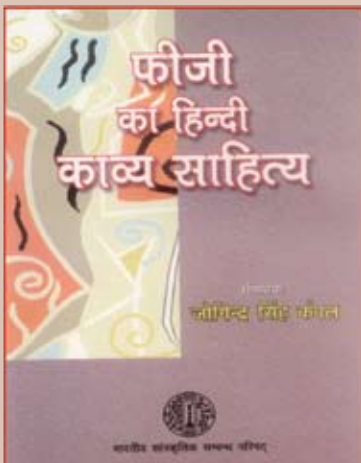
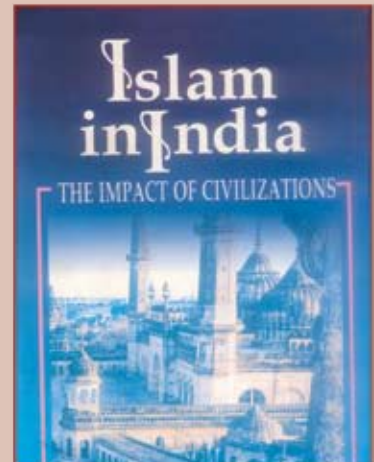
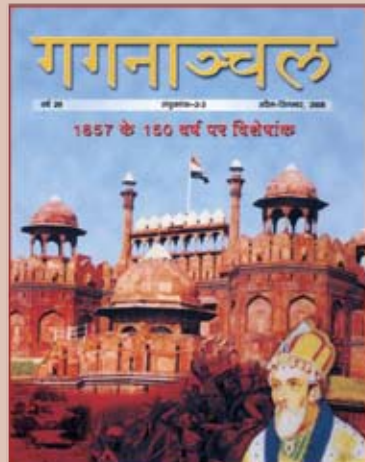
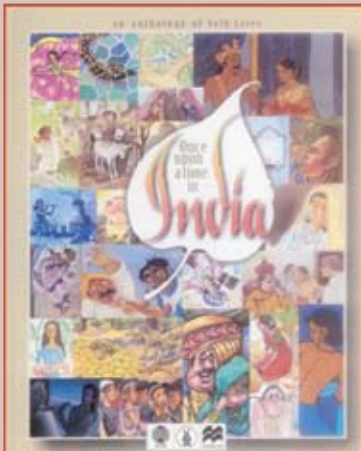


dramatized through his graphic strokes. If it is the Shiva-Parvati conjoining, instead of the Shiva form, he has a specific trident in place illuminated with the deity's powerful radiance, while the equally vibrant Gauri embraces this symbol with matching grace. In yet another conjoining, it is the Krishna lore that fills the canvas space. Instead of the legendary form of the Lord, there is just his humble flute, adorned with a single feather, enchanting the gopis, who are mesmerized in a swirl by the magical flute.

Besides a graphical sharpness, the works also display a strong geometrical veracity. It is not a simplistic division of spaces into boxed in squares or triangles and circles, using the principles of art,

but a remarkable juxtaposition of them within the designated space. It all begins from a central point, much like the eye of a storm, but reverberates into a burst of configurations, this initiating the artistic journey of reinterpretation of the artist's concepts. To further his point of view the artist takes recourse to a brilliant palette of colours making every inch of his canvas wear a celebratory air. Delving deeper into the works, the painting narrates a contemporary feel as for instance in the work portraying Durga, in place of the iconic figure, one is faced with an urban matron, who holds the traditional weapons in hands that provide the backdrop of the works. There is thus a deep abstraction to be seen from behind the colour and graphic play in the works of this artist.





Registered with the Registrar of Newspapers of India:
Regd. No. 14377/57

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Karan Singh

Gouranga Dash

Madhavalatha Ganji

Meena Naik

Prof. S. A. Krishnaiah

Sampa Ghosh

Satish C. Mehta

Usha Mailk

Utpal K Banerjee



Indian Council for Cultural Relations

भारतीय सांस्कृतिक सम्बंध परिषद्

Phone: 91-11-23379309, 23379310, 23379314, 23379930

Fax: 91-11-23378639, 23378647, 23370732, 23378783, 23378830

E-mail: iccr@vsnl.com

Web Site: www.iccrindia.net