



Sutradhar

A Unima Puppeteers Trust Publication

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For most Puppeteers it is important to create performances and entertain audiences. But there is another path, a few tread. This path focuses not on a universal large audience but on the individual, not on the mainstream but the excluded and the marginalised. For this growing band of practitioners the goal is also to educate and open hearts and minds by plumbing the depths of Puppetry.

In this issue we bring the journey of such practitioners. The Arts have the power to heal. We know it intuitively. But when someone shares their own experience, it becomes a powerful narrative. A puppeteer, the experience of a healer, explorations in Puppetry in education, and an arts-based therapist who talks about healing.

We also try to demystify the term “Applied Puppetry”.

In the last year, the global community of Puppeteers has found comfort in online communication, training and even performance.

World Puppetry Day Celebrations this year saw far greater participation from the world over; with online sharing of video clips, whatsapp communities buzzing with activity and sharing. It filled the absence of performances.

In the last few months, a trickle of normalcy is encouraging both audience and performer to return to the stage. Let us all hope for a return to better times.

Ranjana Pandey
Editor

By Ranjana Pandey



Applied Puppetry is an umbrella term. I have tried to demystify this term by sharing experiences in this field. It is a growing field populated by serious practitioners plumbing the depths of the arts in education and therapy. You might ask, “Puppetry in education”- is it the same as education through puppetry? Or puppetry in educational spaces? Both. Confusion is caused by labels and terminology...

A wonderful new publication answers all our questions. *Applied Puppetry in Education, Development and Therapy; Theory and Practice* is published by UNIMA’s Commission of Education Development and Therapy and edited by Livijia Kroflin.

It is a collection of 16 articles by well known practitioners from different parts of the world. The valuable articles are based on personal experiences. But as happens often with such international publications they represent mostly the West (West of India). The Indian perspective is missing. This issue of the Sutradhar will try to fill this lacunae.

Since the 1970’s, puppeteers in many parts of India have done pioneering work using puppetry for education and development communication. Some of their experiences were written about in Sutradhar issues no. 8 and 10.

A variety of serious and excellent work has been growing since the 1970’s in this country.

To draw parallels with the West, Europe had a head-start. I quote from Dr. Matt Smith’s article *Applied Puppetry-Principles and Practices* in the above mentioned publication:

“The idea of applied puppetry has been around for quite a while. The establishment of the educational puppetry association in the

British context in 1943 is evidence of this. The idea of puppetry with a social purpose. For some puppeteers, a performance or workshop in a school is no more than a useful source of income; for others it is a conscious choice to work in education. Since training to be a puppeteer at Central School of Speech and Drama I wandered through lots of work that was applied.”

The intention to do more than just entertain is what sets this work apart. The Puppeteers in India too plunged bravely from proscenium to class rooms, care homes, station platforms, youth clubs, prisons, special needs groups, museums, village squares, community centers, health networks, environmental projects and schools.

My personal work resonates with similar journeys made by puppeteers in UK, India and undoubtedly in many other countries.

I found that the distance between the audience and the Puppeteer had collapsed. It is literally, intimate. The puppet is hugged, kissed, cradled, beaten (yes!) pulled, stolen (yes that too). The Puppet becomes a metaphor, a symbol and also becomes Real...with a life of its own complete with friends, family, a character, habits, traits... All imagined or actually scripted.

The identity of the puppets grows in stature and spills out of the framework of the “performance”. In this situation it was natural for me to be baptised as the “Mother” of C and P the 2 protagonists of a series I took to special schools over 10 years. That became my identity for decades as the puppets lived on in the memory of the challenged children I worked with. In all these contexts I have witnessed (as, I am sure, has the entire Puppeteering Community) the unlimited potential of the puppet.



“We discovered that telling their own stories and being listened to was a valuable and empowering experience for people whose lives had been narrowed down physically and socially. The extraordinary outcomes of our work could not have been planned. We offered creative experiences and entertainment to the best of our ability, and were delighted and enthralled by the responses and stories of the audiences and participants”, says Meg Amsden, director of Nutmeg Puppet Company (UK), in her article, *The Value of Practical Experience Working with Elders and Puppets over 30 Years*.

I experienced this specially with challenged persons who did not have language to express

themselves-the puppets provided a bridge and an astounding opportunity for behaviour modification and development. I had to learn to Trust in their ability to Create their own narrative to grow in confidence and find their voice

The arena for applied puppetry then becomes the community hall, the classroom, the penitentiary, the juvenile home, the monastery, the hospital, the hospice, the village square, the road side...not the proscenium.

To work in such a variety of circumstances requires the puppeteer and his team to be open and flexible. You have to adapt to unforeseen circumstances like having the curtain blown away

by a gust of wind! Excited children pushing the stage screen onto you, everything collapsing in a heap! Or intervening physically in the show and taking charge of the story, changing the narrative. The prized (real birthday cake) blown at by 30 enthusiastic children-blown down on the ground! Oh those eyes filled with tragic disappointment! None of these are disasters. They are an invitation to think and act on your feet-to build up your arsenal of tricks. You have to be ready to listen, react, improvise, change track and allow the audience room to participate authentically...and all this with laughter and enjoyment.

While designing a syllabus and a foundation course for Puppeteers, I wondered, “can this be taught?” How do you deal with the distrust from a teacher filling you with apprehension before a classroom workshop begins? How do you

dissipate it? When the children are shrieking and inattentive what do you do? When the audience is scattered and distracted? When there is complete silence and you wonder...is it getting through? When the school teacher shouts mid-performance “the bus is leaving” and the entire child audience runs out, while your puppets are still in mid-flow...

Each one of us who chose this work was thrown in at the deep end. There was no certification in art-based therapy or formal training in India in the 70's. Therapy was intuitive, heartfelt. Empathy, intuition, Experience were the pillars which held up this work.

Working in Schools

Most Puppeteers work sporadically with schools. Arts integration in school curriculum is supposed to be a reality. It has become the byword now. The new education policy and the syllabi





developed by NCERT recommend making space for the arts in the classroom. Educational Institutions are open to Puppetry, and there might even be a budget set aside for the same. This is reflected at the State level as well. Teacher Training Workshops are part of the Training programs, in B.Ed. courses as in in-service training programs. Thousands of Government school teachers throng to CCRT's annual training in puppetry. Other State-level bodies like CIET, NCERT and SNA also follow suit.

The Ministry of Culture recognises Puppetry in Education and may offer grants, stipends and research projects as well. All this is excellent. But as we all know it is an uphill task to impart creativity and an open attitude to teachers who themselves have emerged from a didactic

education and strict upbringing. No wonder teachers feel overwhelmed and inadequate. The change is very slow.

Undoubtedly Schools are an important arena. They welcome you, even pay you, but they may not understand the work you do. For most, the product is more important than the process. The "show" for parents day, the school function, competition is what propels them to seek puppetry as something different. This is contrary to therapy and development which focuses on the individual growth and development wherein a careful nurturing of the process is important. These are challenges indeed.

Development Communication

The Government of India introduced traditional puppeteers to development communication

in the 1960's, giving them propaganda scripts and expecting change to happen. The topic was *Family Planning*. The superficial approach proved ineffective and a waste of precious resources. The idea was good but the methodology was poor. When Mass Communication and good creative puppetry met the Social Development sector, the NGO sector to be precise, a different outcome proved the potential of Puppetry in social communication.

The Development Sector gave the artist the freedom to experiment and explore. They embraced a collaboration model in which the community worker and the puppeteers partnered. One took over where the other left off. The results were magical. What was deemed a taboo or difficult like alcohol abuse, or sex education (for example), could now be talked about openly...by riotous stubborn hilarious puppets. Puppets clearly had an advantage over street theatre, posters, PPT's dry government documentaries and other DAVP style communications.

There was no judgement. It was inclusive. Even obscenities were forgiven and laughed at. After all it was just a puppet. Not a human being, not

the community worker-not even the puppeteer. Puppets can make biting comments on obvious situations and get away with it. My experience has shown that puppets can change personal habits like getting children to brush their teeth, wash their hands... personal hygiene improved dramatically among the children of that particular slum.

There have been sterling examples of Community Puppetry like in Tillonia (in Rajasthan) and Literacy House (Lucknow) who could share hundreds of success stories. Today's needs are new, different and dynamic. The small screen has penetrated the rural abyss and the blue light of the cell phone dots the countryside. Information travels the speed of light. But attitudes remain frozen. The Puppet has the power to unlock those frozen narratives, to hold up a mirror and to catalyze change.

Matthew Bernier and Judith O'Hare, in their jointly edited *Puppetry in Education and Therapy: Unlocking Doors to the Mind and Heart*, say wonderfully what so many practitioners have experienced, and as I did too:

"Puppets protect: what is expressed can be denied and blamed on the puppet, so that inner worlds are revealed in non-threatening ways. Puppets can do things and change things in ways people can't. This transformational quality is also what puppets offer to people: they can help people do things they can't do unaided in self-exploration, self-expression, and individual or social change. Puppets enable access – access to one's inner life, thought processes, creativity and social change; language is extended."

Environmental issues, the urgency of climate change, once used plastic- the scourge of the



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SEXUALITY AND GENDER THROUGH PUPPETRY

By Varun Narain



SUTRADHAR

planet all beg to be addressed. Maybe Puppetry and puppets can help us to think differently and change our habits.

The sooner we realise this the better. To quote Bernier and O'Hare:

“Puppetry by challenged themselves In art therapy, the clients are engaged in their own puppet making and the puppets are then used in structured or spontaneous puppet play activities designed to meet specific therapeutic goals. Essential to this approach is the idea that puppets can be made as an extension or representation of the self, parts of self or aspects of others or of the environment.”

Meg Amsden’s advice is valuable. She writes in *The Value of Practical Experience working with Elders and Puppets over 30 years*:

“As an artist you must also leave time for your own work, to refresh and recharge yourself.”

More advice for artists on how to deal with the emotional effects of working in therapeutic settings, how to protect and pace yourself, is essential. Working with people in difficulty can cause a burn out in the puppeteer, communicator. The helplessness of the community can affect your sensitive nature. You have to find your own strategies for dealing with it and protecting yourself.



Ranjana Pandey has been working in Puppetry for Development Communication, Puppetry for Special Children, and Puppetry for Education (Applied Puppetry) since 1983. She is one of the Founders of Jan Madhyam (an NGO) and teaches Puppetry.

Reading an article with this title may be an experience some of us would prefer to keep private. The word ‘sexuality’ after all comes with a whole range of patriarchal baggage reeking of guilt and shame. I hope however that this article becomes the starting point for dialogue. A desperately needed one. Human theatre has articulated sexuality in many ways, as has film and even in the rare instance television; but none of them have been spared the barometers of judgement and censorship no matter how noble their intention. By the time the content reaches audiences, it has been overshadowed by various systems that allow or disallow its communication and dissemination. This is perhaps where puppetry has diligently and silently yet successfully influenced change and acceptance keeping it’s systems and mechanism concealed yet it’s viewers attention in focus. Puppetry is perceived as non-threatening therefore sexuality related content is accepted. This has been seen as a world-wide phenomenon specially in the late 80’s through the 90’s when communication related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic was being explored.

In the advanced society of today, with broadband and WIFI and all its periodically updated versions, one would expect sexuality education to have refined itself to a level where it was accessible to everyone – but sadly this is far from true. Today there is high quality free flowing sexual content freely available, but the visuals reinforce the most regressive stereotypes contributing to misinformation rather than responsibility. The viewer perceives a flat surface of illumined pixels that hypnotize, titillate and seduce. The dimensions of factual information and the right to make an informed choice are completely absent. The access to sexual content is limited only to private and isolated experiences – which defeats

the very purpose of sexuality education. If I am learning to discover my feelings or my gender in ‘secret’ spaces like these then have I been equipped to accept myself as I am? How do I identify or create a trusting space? What are my parameters of responsibility? The very media that should be giving me this information is ignoring it completely. It is designed to be ‘flawless’, commercially viable and exclusive.

The internet and the devices encourage isolation under the illusion of privacy. How much of what I receive becomes information I can use, and how much becomes information that I misuse? How much information contributes to my existing insecurities and how much of this information creates new insecurities? Who do I turn into? Why then do we continue to be horrified at the frequency of sexual abuse and violation prevalent around us even today?

There is no denying the fact that with the advancement in technological development and new systems of education an extremely large section of people in many societies are being left behind. With our understanding, experience and knowledge of puppetry I strongly feel that these issues, concerns and realities could be addressed and altered. We understand, agree and experience puppetry as a profoundly powerful medium, which is perhaps why this living art still excites us. Through time, as film, television and then the world of computers has invented and re-invented the entertainment, education and interactive space, the simple art of puppetry has not lost its relevance. As a live medium it cannot be replaced and it rules both the formal and non-formal spaces of three dimension, being both interactive or not, as per design. It can arrest the attention of a thronging crowd as well as unassumingly enter the private intimate space



of a school class room, small group, a therapy space and a one on one space - all without losing it's 'power'. The power to communicate convincingly, without drawing unnecessary attention to the mechanics that facilitates that communication. It is this quality that has made puppetry a powerful developmental tool in the area of Gender and Sexuality education. In the 1990's puppetry in India stepped out of the closet into a world of secrets that could get ordinary innocent people into serious trouble. There were hushed references to Aids, or the 'gay' disease. Puppetry was discovering its power as a tool to deal with a daunting reality of misinformation, blame, morality and prejudice that labelled many communities and individuals, some of whom were facing horrifying persecution.

In New Delhi, India in 1993 UNESCO set up the HIV/AIDS cell at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences which encouraged the use to puppetry to disseminate facts and correct information. It was becoming important to talk about sex and sexuality to throw light on the dignity of life and the freedom of choice. NGO's would involve

puppeteers in their work or then train their workers as puppeteers and puppet shows in the community would be followed by a distribution of pamphlets that provided detailed information with telephone numbers for help lines.

The spectators could see that the inanimate puppet was being manipulated, yet a suspension of disbelief enabled them to identify with the puppet characters. Some of them nodded and some answered back arguing. Some even moved away disapprovingly. Puppetry as a live interactive medium, in it's true spirit, was contributing to society by creating acceptance and collective confidence in the midst of a changing time.

Some of us in New Delhi went to market squares with large puppet characters and interacted with the general public as it went shopping while some designed performances and went into different communities where sustained work led to change. I remember how some puppetry students at the Mass Communication Research Centre of Jamia University designed a shadow puppet show on understanding and accepting the Menstrual cycle. This performance was shown to the families of the migrant workers who were then building the Nehru Place flyover.

As a young puppeteer I followed the fascinating work of Jan Madhyam - one of Delhi's oldest NGO's known for its pioneering work with puppetry and disability - both physical and mental. Over the 70's,80's and 90's Jan Madhyam's serialized live puppetry performances/interactions in various communities in and around Delhi NCR created an awareness around the issues of disability and stressing on inclusive realities where families were encouraged to accept with dignity members who were mentally and/or physically

challenged. Along with this, on hygiene, pregnancy and other health related issues were presented to mesmerized audiences in the bastis around Delhi. These puppets were very carefully designed to represent the audience, rather than stand out as flashy characters. The scripts were diligently researched, written and re-written over a period of time to ensure that there was no accidental mis communication. It was common to see one or two hesitant audience members approach the puppeteers after the show to ask for a clarification or for advice and help. These performances were hand in glove with programmes to educate and empower people with disabilities. After each performance the puppeteers would debrief and understand how that particular show had worked and which

areas needed strengthening. The subsequent performances would also undergo the same treatment. The idea of 'final performance' - and 'no more changes' did not exist as when one talks about sensitive society related issues with the intention of positively influencing that society, one moves with diligence rather than confidence; one performs with intention rather than pride.

Although the world has moved on with digital technologies in the same areas- all that these great technological advancements seem to have produced are debates about words that could or should be used to label the identified 'target group', elite debates about 'political correctness' and impossible systems to evaluate and measure the 'progress'. The Actual education of the





audience or group is not a priority and neither is there any work on the sensitivity to local customs, mannerisms, dress and dialect. All these complex interconnected physical-emotional realities are essential for sexuality education and are always articulated and addressed in the process of creating a puppet show or any live community-based performance for that matter. What is achieved by live interactive puppetry paired with the synchronised work of a field worker has not been replaced by any technology. Of course it is unfair to ignore the contribution of digital media – it makes it possible to document processes as well as disseminate data – however the role of “hands-on” puppetry and field workers in communication with the specific

target “audience” members, their parents, their employers, their loved ones is irreplaceable.

In Jan Madhyam today, puppetry and field work has evolved to address issues around disability paired with the issues of masculinity and femininity. Some boys for example grown into men over the years qualified to work as shop or office assistants but began to face issues at the work place that revolved around appropriate behaviour. Their looks and hand gestures specifically around the opposite gender created alarm and mistrust. I should clarify here that a sixteen year old boy with a mental disability may appear to look like a man with facial hair however may have the behavioural coherence of

an eight year old person. Realities of girls/women and disability become even more complicated and daunting. The world of gender-sexuality and disability is complicated, vulnerable and multi-faceted. It is a world that desperately needs protection. It is a world that is constantly violated and abused by the surrounding ‘non-disabled’ world. The ‘non-disabled’ world is both physical and virtual. For a disabled person, needless to say this ‘non-disabled’ world is a daunting environment called reality.

Specific sessions designed separately to include male and female adult puppets fabricated with genitals enable crucial communication and discussions with the intention of empowering the groups. Vigilance and awareness about moving one’s body in untrusting spaces, or then avoiding certain kinds of touch become the focus of the interactions.

Puppet performances and interactions on Sexuality education have the ability to be specifically designed for closed groups. They are able to articulate issues around sexual expression, sexual choice, sexual pleasure as well as sexual abuse and violence. The puppet characters have the flexibility to look masculine while behave feminine – or vice versa breaking stereotypes and presenting an environment where different types of individuals are included.

Creating content on sexuality education comes with an underlined recognition of the fact that there will be a range of sexual preferences and gender identities in every audience irrespective of class or cast or any other artificially created human category that exists. The greatest strength of content created with puppets is that moral judgement and prejudice can be challenged at every step in a non-threatening way.

The puppet characters of the designed show can move beyond the performance space – maybe into small group discussions in a subsequent session if required. Relating to the puppet characters, both young people and adults are able to share without guilt–personal situations both pleasant and unpleasant. They begin the complex process of accepting themselves without guilt. And so begins the first tiny, yet profoundly important step to self-validation and healing. These sessions are intense and invariably require a follow up.

What I have learnt about puppetry and sexuality education is that the first interaction/performance begins a chain reaction with many questions that arise in the audience – a chain reaction that the puppet performer needs to repeatedly address with a follow up or many follow ups if necessary. A trusted field worker is indispensable and a valued asset to the process and helps bridge the gaps in the audience understanding and the way they have related or identified with the performance.

While there are several fascinating intricacies to using puppetry for sexuality education, there are simpler questions as to why one should want to do so in the first place. We may justify that puppetry has always challenged existing boundaries. It is precisely with that spirit and intention that I feel we need to continue. It is important not to confuse the sensitive nature of an issue by completely ignoring it. Most performance artists too were at some point outcasts – not accepted as equals in society. Some of us know similar challenges and we continue to face them even today. Does evolving beyond that mean that we inherit and adopt the defined patriarchal perception, play by the rules and shrug off the “what isn’t

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THERAPEUTIC PURPOSES WITH THEATRE OF MATERIALS

By Vikramjeet Sinha



comfortable anymore”? or does it mean we rise above it responsibly, alter mainstream perceptions and give meaning to the real and invisible world?



Varun Narain is a Delhi-based Puppeteer who believes in blurring boundaries. He tells stories about queerness and colonial history through the eyes of spices and other plants. Among other things Varun Narain teaches and gives workshops on gender and sexuality using puppetry to raise issues about stereotypes and prejudices.

Stories and their dramatization through play are the core of human happiness and the continuing development of children, young people and adults, indeed are universally important for the welfare of all children. It's a connection to a vital source of pleasure, transformation and a revitalisation of energy. Material theatre or playing with objects, or creating story maps, with installations of polystyrene (thermocoll), figurines made of newspapers, creates new pathways and new ideas, which are generated as the Arts based therapist in me continuously works with children within various institutions.

Tactile work invokes the kinaesthetic intelligence of a child and with the use of materials, there is a reworking of our senses, and as soon as that happens there is a reassessment of memories. Let's understand this by understanding what's the nature of institutions for children, be it a juvenile home, a school in a militarised zone, a monastery, a school in deep suburbs. I have worked as an arts-based practitioner facilitating safe spaces for children to be held by some form of an arts practice.

We will explore in this article, how the play space and creative groupwork becomes a powerful empowering space for children and gives them a voice to express, specially when they start working with tactile materials which give shape to the stories they carry in their inner world. All institutions often generate discipline and punishment - which brings about alienation. Even though all institutions don't bring cruelty or harshness they do breed a space of disconnection from the outside world. If there is an atmosphere of harsh discipline particularly with children who have been left in its care, the child will experience entrapment. The Arts practice enables movement and gives personal freedom as fantasies become tactile and in "total institutions" they become more "visible" not only

to themselves but also to the others . To explain ; total institutions are those institutions that do not give space for individual identities to flourish and are controlling in nature .

The arts with their skill building, generates imagination and the will to deal with the outside world . It helps in preparation for the outside world and also brings values in narratives that provide an antidote to the suffering and a dissatisfaction that follow all human beings , especially when they live in a total institution. Here they are just another roll number and therefore have no personal identity except of being a part of a collective identity. The work is about wresting personal stories or the collective voice out of the totalising identities generated by the institution.

The clients/participants can see their own reflection in the art sculptures, like the reflection of their desires, their anger, their pain, their joy. They get a chance to have an artistic distance and an ability to witness their lives. The artistic expressions of the children creates a landscape firstly of their wounded metaphors and then the safe space or the "container" facilitates the metaphor and its movement that work as an antidote to the wounded metaphors. We will further address what we mean by the "container" later on in this paper as we understand the therapeutic purpose and how is this kind of process different from any other art or puppetry workshop with children.

Let's us further unpack the word "therapeutic purpose", it's the intentionality behind the work which is about creating spaces of safety, where the stories of their own lives can come out in a safe manner and be held by the "container". The container is a facilitated space of emotional safety where the embodied stories made by tactile materials, be it paper theatre,



newspaper sculptures , thermal structures with stick paper puppets or objects , all bring up a “narrative capability”. The therapeutic value is in the performance of the narrative and how the community of children view this performance.

Buddhist Monastery experience

Methodology

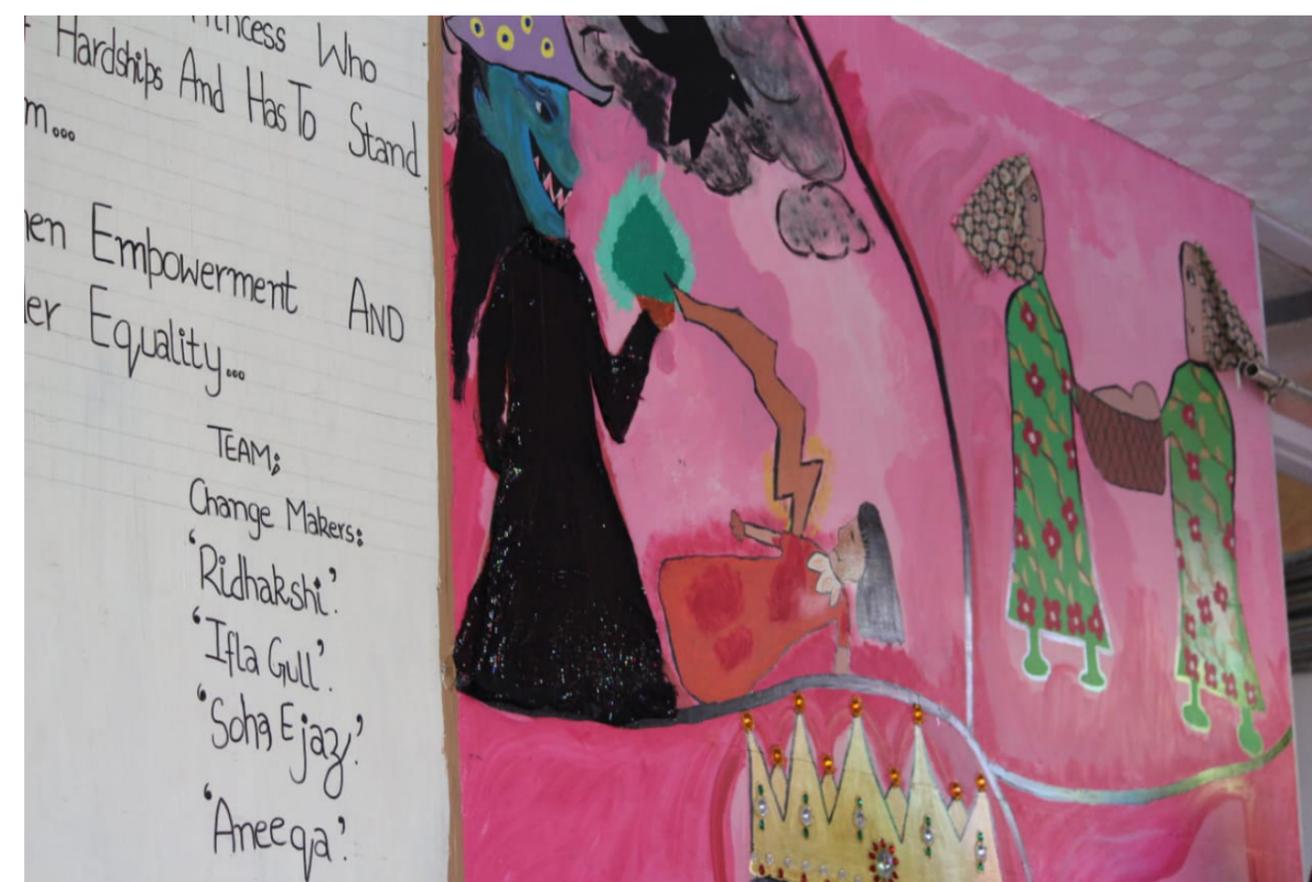
I worked recently in a Buddhist monastic school, the female figurines were getting killed .Then we introduced a story that creates kindness and compassion as transformation .The story becomes a story medicine that has to be created through tactile material. Be it *tsampa* (dough), polystyrene, straw, wool or any other material.

It's important that there is a **facilitation for the**

narratives to shift in the child . It often happens that in the first round we experience what is already in the child and then facilitate a space so that the narratives can shift around. To give the opportunity for expression and then the opportunity to rework the narratives with similar themes. The facilitation takes place with this keen observation of what stories are being seen on the first few days of contact with the children and then to be aware of what can be introduced that provides a reworking of pain, pathologies, and vulnerabilities within the given narratives. Material becomes the language through which the children can speak with the outer world.

Let's explore what we understand by my understanding of **material theatre**.

Material theatre can also be the movement of



materials which entails visuals , sounds , and tactile experience , therefore in some ways its involving all the five senses. What is this Material, we are talking about , so material can be unformed like paper or can be formed like a puppet or a object, it's a dead material that we bring alive and we project our own feelings over it through the stories we tell. The “undead” therefore brings out the “unsaid” , its therapeutic as through a nonverbal way, intense stories can come out in a safe manner and hold a mirror to the players and the audience .

The container gets activated with a structure .First there is a warm up , a pre improvisational space , or a pre creative facilitative space. A certain process takes place in the structure. First

Through the warm up an opening, a connection creates the container. Then the creative or the developmental space is created where the actual theme gets unfolded through the activity, then a closure takes place. Often these spaces are marked with an opening ritual and a closing ritual, this is to demarcate time symbolically between a play space and the daily space. A little bit about what happened in the monasteries, to illustrate what did we understand of the communities living within monastic institutions and how exactly did the interventions take place. These monasteries are in the eastern Himalayas and often the young monks come from Nepalis Hindu background and are initiated in the Buddhist faiths, most of



the reasons for this that the monasteries need the monks to carry out the faith as the families are too poor to keep the children and they want the children to be well fed and looked after by the institutions. The metaphors the monks often were brought from local sub-cultures. They are often violent and misogynist. The symbols are of guns, bombs, robbery, unrequited love, demons, rakshas, chudail, curses, Shiva, atman, bhagvan all influenced in all likelihood by television which breeds a popular culture. The younger children are very restless and violent, fights break off in the middle of group work. The Buddhist values

are missing in their narratives (which speak of violence) even if the monastery is Buddhist. There was a lot of conversation about love and the betrayal of love.

Working in two different monasteries brought out different variation. Where children had been exposed to violent games on play stations, television and popular culture, it influenced their imagination. Those who had a calmer environment with no mobile phones etc. had a different variation.



Material and group work

The use of creative skills to build these stories help in creating antidotes to the wound of oppression, desire that often afflicts these young minds contrary to the values the (monastic) robes hold .

We used thermacol to bring about group work and bring about the therapeutic objective of interdependence and interconnection. They provided themselves more of an inner sacred structure. In which they are in charge of these structures that give shape to the reflection of the kind of life's they live. It's like they are birthing their own structures, their own rules which helps them express their own minds desires and their own value system within the Buddhist paradigm.

The stories then are created within these structures of wisdom to reveal the victimhood. The facilitation is about bringing stories from within these structures and reflective questions that are asked after a story has been performed. For example Once the monasteries were built by the young monks, they were asked to build stick paper puppets to build stories. In order to build the stories some interesting narrative provoking objects were given...like a



drum, a movable hand, small animals, things that can tell a story through projections. Only few students decided to express...most of them were really shy.

Then they were asked to represent their groups. They did manage to tell some stories, but were inhibited. After much coaxing four stories came about from the monastic structures.

The first story was on unrequited love.

The second story was on a drunk young monk beaten by the teachers who took to the bottle and was further beaten.

The third story was about a bunch of monks mauled by a tiger in the forest. Some survived the attack and they waited patiently for their friends to get better. The tiger in improvisational play is brought into the monastery.

The fourth story was about a dead tiger who was brought to live by the monks and one ran away before the soul was put into the tiger but the others waited and were killed by the tiger.

The moral of the story; was about wisdom versus foolish courage.

The reflection exercise revealed what they loved about the workshop.

The young monks said they learned how to build stories and how they could talk of their own life story and connect it to the story of the monks in the monastery, including the story with alcohol and the story broken hearts coming from unrequited love.

As we can see that a narrative contains a lot of the unsaid and as soon as the space gets created, then there is trust and that's part of the intentionality of creating a container, to create space for disclosure without imposing it and without a inquisition.

As an arts-based therapist we remain within the realms of the metaphor and stay with it, or stay with the theme that the story invokes unless and until they share on their own. Its often seen

that in institutions like a juvenile home long term interventions produce a significant change in behaviours.

Kashmir

Sometimes formed material like a puppet becomes a perfect vehicle to talk of taboo topics like death, violence or sex. In the militarised zones of Kashmir a teacher had lost a son at a young age through sudden illness. It had been seven years and she has not been able to grieve completely.

In a workshop called the 'inner child', two small bunraku puppets are used, one elderly male puppet and another young boy puppet. All they had to do in groups of three was to use the puppets, to move them from one end to another, and get the two to meet each other.

When this teacher used the young boy bunraku puppet and made it sit on her lap and made him move, it invoked the memory of the long gone son, and she felt he was there with her and that she had never left him. In fact as she mentioned later on, she felt him saying in her mind, "I have never left you" and this brought deep acceptance. It brought about a completion of her grieving process.

In the same exercise another group, where a young male teacher was working with the elderly looking puppet. He was playing it as a father to the child puppet, and at first we see the elderly looking puppet offering namaz and then as soon as that gets over, the man slaps the child puppet without any reason. This shows the violence the teacher has gone through as a child. It is clearly reflected in his little improvisation. It brought up a facilitative space for discussion on how teachers often indulge in corporal punishment as they believe that nothing works, other than beating a child and how violence against children is actually a transmission of trauma from one

generation to another.

In conflict areas the level of violence works at many levels, not only at the state level, but also at the personal level. Here the use of materials formed or unformed in role plays brings out the unsaid and allows the communities, to act and to reflect on the stories created.

On the outskirts of Srinagar (Kashmir) on a cold January afternoon, many teenagers and social workers had gathered in a rough-looking house with minimal furnishing.

One of the teenagers had his face harmed by an exploding tear shell. When we worked with the paper story that is to tell stories using paper, he built baskets, flowers and protest banners out of two sheets of paper.

He said this representation is his journey of protests, his story, with a self-conscious smile, because his teeth were wired together because of the effect of the tear gas shell. What he loved was working was with his hands. The world of material and tactile intelligence speaks of interconnections between varied objects which weave a story, bringing self-expression, empowerment, and finally a voice and visibility making communities living on the margins visible. Skills and vulnerability work together to bring about a transformation of belief systems that often because of discipline and punishment in militarised zones, rob communities of a voice. This in turn brings about a dark future, futile and foreboding.

Its either through skills or through vulnerability that we enter the inner world and project that world through paper, or any other material to bring about a story that could not be told, but now can be shown. And they (the stories) can be seen even in an unfriendly even where the barbed wires (in Kashmir with its vigilante culture) have turned an entire state into a juvenile home. This visibility of the individual and the collective brings



about a joy within, and it is as if the inner doors of creativity open up. It is this that makes us want to express more. This can happen through a safe container (space) that brings up more reflection and insight into our inner worlds. It is with therapeutic intentionality that the container holds difficult emotions and allows us to reflect on it. It is this reflection that leads children living on the margins to have a macro view and to have collective self-reflection within totalising institutions. The self-reflection helps further in preparing the children for a larger world, and takes them out of the eye of collective trauma, to a larger view. Storytelling, story building using material, objects and puppets has a strong role to play.

Children or young people have embodied wisdom (life lessons) that comes from the stories brought alive by an interplay of their various creative intelligences.

Vikram is an Arts-Based Therapist and a theatre director. He uses puppetry and material and objects frequently in his work. In the last decades he has worked in conflict militarised zones and 26 years in the development sector and juvenile institutions.



Puppetry, as we all know, is a fascinating medium of artistic expression which flowed down the ages and generations, creating its own Tradition while expressing the desired emotions as well as educating the mass through centuries, from time immemorial.

Modern puppetry is an extension of the same with modern thoughts, techniques, materials and addressing the need of the hour.

I took to puppetry when I was only 17. It began when I saw puppets lying on a divan, in a friends' house. I was fascinated, and mesmerized. This experience propelled me to take up puppetry as a serious hobby which turned into sheer passion, eventually.

Let me share a funny, yet relevant experience that might find a common thread with you. I'm a self-taught puppeteer with no formal training in any of the department of puppetry. On one Sunday morning in 1973, I was given the task of making puppet characters to be used in a story, to be written by my father, based on the puppets made. I had no experience of sculpting then. With sheer zeal and false confidence, I tried out my first puppet head (of a little boy-which I thought to be the easiest) with paper pulp on a T. T. ball. It worked absolutely fine, except it looked rather like a ghost instead of a boy! My father encouraged me to try once more. Another trial and this time again I made a puppet which looked like a ghost!!

"No worries!" The loving father said. And he wrote a hilarious script on how 2 ghosts fled from their beloved haunted house chased by a little boy. The boy puppet was made from a plastic doll's head. Our show gained unconditional appreciation, good enough to boost our morale, from the local audience and our journey started

as a family puppet team.

My toying with puppets became a serious exploration of different aspects of puppetry; Its design, its craft, its art, its various forms and moreover its power to communicate with ease. And above all, its non-threatening neutral behaviour in reaching out to people with poise and dignity.

By now, we have worked with almost all the prevailing available forms of puppets, (gloves, rod, shadow, marionettes, bunraku) along with a few unconventional and innovative techniques to accomplish our goal.

During my intimate journey with puppets, I came across personalities who shaped my growth, to name a few, Mr. Raghunath Goswami of "The Puppets" / Mr. Hiren Bhattacharya of "People's Puppet Theatre" / Padmashree Suresh Dutta of "Calcutta Puppet Theatre" / Mr. Saila Chakraborty of "Putul Rangam" / Mr. Chandi Lahiri (an eminent cartoonist), who enriched my thoughts and understanding of what Puppetry is all about. But, that Puppetry is not for Entertainment and Art alone was injected in me by Mr. Raghunath Goswami. The idea that Puppetry has many other purposes to serve in the hands of a serious and thoughtful puppeteer for the society at large, gained validity only when I chanced upon the book "Puppetry for the mentally handicapped people", written by Caroline Astel Burt.

Not to undermine the value of entertainment, each facet of puppetry is associated primarily with entertainment, with only exception being its approach towards its execution.

An Important Milestone

In the early years, I had to use puppets and allied materials for my younger son, who was then a slow learner. Trying with odds and ends, I found it to be an effective tool in encouraging my child to grow from within. A mouth-puppet of mine encouraged him to write and even comprehend a passage from his textbook. I gained immense joy and confidence with this "home experience". I was convinced that I could use Puppetry for a purpose. Thence only, my journey with Applied Puppetry started.



To me, Applied Puppetry, as the name suggests, is when Puppetry is used for a purpose-for the well being of the people, or to put it simply, "A Puppet in Need".

I took to teaching **puppetry in school** to develop the innate qualities in each student, the power to imagine and imagine weirdly. They were never judged at any point of time, instead was asked to think differently. That gave very positive results. They developed the capability to be flexible and creative, adapting to facilities available to them. They explored fearlessly. I too grew with them. And that was my incentive, apart from my earning.

We developed a style of work in which, during workshops, taken by our group - (**Tal-Betal Puppet Theatre**), none of our co-trainers / helpers were allowed to edit or alter any drawings or objects made by the participating children. We helped them only in areas that are prone to injuries, without altering any part of their drawing or objects to be cut and joined. The spontaneity of thought was never tampered to give it a so-called finesse. This approach ensured a moral boost and gave confidence to each child and participant.

Working with the Development Sector

Working with NGOs for Red-light area children, the Platform children, Girl child, Special children, and many others, has educated me to understand their needs from close quarters.

Let me share one interesting story. It was not a direct intervention with puppets but with allied arts. I was commissioned by an NGO to work with homeless children living on the Railway Platforms of Malda station. It was a 21 day residential workshop using therapeutic means to help



children give up drugs. The first two days were engaged in developing a relationship with them. Most of them were adolescents. When they felt comfortable with me, they started sharing their problems, their dreams, their strengths and weaknesses pretty honestly. We started some yoga and meditation sessions in the first hour with a lady instructor. Then we moved on to create some dramatic exercises and moments based on their daily life. After an hour of practice, I noticed almost a regular absence of 2-3 participants in turns. As the session progressed, they would slip off to take drugs. Each day I had to pose that I was giving up on them and returning home. This worked like a miracle. They promised me of giving up drugs



forever. After a fortnight, 18 out of 21 children gave up drugs. It was an incredible experience not only for me but the organizers as well. The play that was developed from the workshop and presented was “Swapnon ki Railgadi” based on their life and dreams, scripted by me from the workshops itself. It was performed with Masks and Costumes. There was a huge gathering to watch the performance on the final day at the Malda station arena, with lots of applause! Of course, I do not know, how long these youngsters refrained from drugs. But I did learn, that creative engagement and mutual respect can do wonders. It was a perfect therapy.

Once I advised an NGO to form a ‘Health Brigade’ so that the sessions on common diseases taken by the attending Doctor, be spread through Puppet plays that will visit other NGOs to put across the words of the Doctor without any ambiguity. It was designed to enrich others as well and be multiplied naturally through multiple performances. This advice was taken seriously and puppet performances were produced entirely by the children from scripting, puppet making to final production. It was entirely done in the Glove puppet format and reached out to several other NGOs. The process being democratic, the understandings and methodology were clear to them. I just helped them technically in the making of the puppets and a few suggestions here and there in script and sets etc.

I was invited to an International Conference on “Puppetry in Health & Therapy”, organized by “London School of Puppetry” in 1994, wherein I performed 2 of my non-verbal sketches to transport the audience into a tension free zone, at least for the time being. The audience present (all being puppeteers from around the world),



expressed it to be highly therapeutic in nature. The Report published, too ratified it.

Later, in 1999, I was awarded “Senior Fellowship” by Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India in Puppetry in Education. My confidence in sharing and growing with puppets, urged me to leave my secure corporate job halfway and plunge into puppetry as a freelance artist.

Working with teachers

The many workshops and interactions with primary school teachers of different schools (Private; Govt; Govt-aided; Schools run by NGOs) I had, including CCRT workshops and training programmes, opened my eyes in many ways. Many of the teachers were very

Workshops with Primary school teachers of different schools, children and online programmes with families and children during the lockdown period on developing “Animated Story Books”, has given me a different insight to my experience.

As each and every venture calls upon new approaches, thoughts and execution, it is an everlasting challenge, joyful experience, never leaving one tired or exhausted. There is much greater intimacy in these interactions as compared to stage performances. It’s never a one-way-traffic and always poses new challenges, no matter how experienced we are, and this is what keeps us fresh and energized.

All said and done, we all need to unite and work

for a greater cause for posterity—A Holistic Education and not Academics ONLY.

My observations on Applied Puppetry, till date.

That it:

- *Releases tension
- *Overcomes trauma
- *Removes depression
- *Diffuses aggression
- *Serves the desired purpose
- *Ignites imagination
- *Creates congenial atmosphere
- *Helps in better understanding
- *Promotes democracy
- *Invites friendly interaction
- *Encourages joyful learning

I'd like to invite a critical review, debate and or more of such articles on this issue, to enrich myself and my team.

Subhasis Sen is the Founder and Director of Tal- Betal Puppet Theatre, Calcutta. On his 26-year journey in Applied Puppetry as a puppeteer, he has explored various dimensions of Applied Puppetry with success.



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For further details contact Ms. Garima Arya (Secretary - Unima Puppeteers Trust)
puppeteerstrust@gmail.com +91 9654584898 (Ms. Garima Arya) & +91 7382225424 (Maneesh Pachiaru)

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