

Sutradhar

A Unima Puppeteers Trust Publication

A Note from the Editor	02
Dramaturgy	03
Pedagogical Journey of Unima Puppeteers Trust	11
Traditions in Transition: The Folk Puppet Lab	21
The Herds Experience	31
An Exhibition at the Crafts Museum	35

1

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



Sutradhar is the only magazine devoted to the Puppet Arts in India, and it has reached an important milestone. We have inducted a phenomenal editorial board. My grateful thanks to all for having accepted to part of this journey.

The editorial board members:

Atul Sinha

Anurupa Roy

Karen Smith

Manjima Chatterjee

Shilpi Goswami

Please find their bios and details in this link. Our website also carries a special page now on the “Sutradhar”. A reminder to our readers, all the issues published since 2013 are archived on the website. Students and researchers have been finding this archive useful. It will be desirable to increase access to it by spreading the word far and wide. It is specially important in today's globalized world to be part of an international fabric, weaving our stories with those of other geographies and histories. Puppeteers the world over are connected with each other and this platform is valuable in expanding this search for connection. We have occasionally had academics and practitioners from other parts of the world contributing to Sutradhar, enriching our perspective and knowledge. We hope to strengthen this element of participation and exchange.

We have applied for a registration number with ISSN.

This issue has important articles for those interested in pedagogy. Unima Puppeteers Trust India made two major training opportunities this year for puppeteers from all over India, the Second Foundation Course and the Puppet Lab. Both had a very different approach and structure guided by the need of the traditional puppeteer community (for the Lab) and the contemporary urban puppeteer (for the Foundation Course).

The Puppet Folk Arts Lab has been very successful. It will have far-reaching ripples for some time to come. (We experienced that impact with the last Master Class with Dadi Pudumjee) The Foundation course came with its own set of learnings and challenges. It was an important step towards refining pedagogical components. Training spaces and financial resources remain the biggest challenges. We are grateful for the voluntary support of many.

It is significant to acknowledge the support from the French Institute. They made it possible for senior faculty, like Sylvie Baillon and Clement Peretjatko to support the Foundation as well as the Lab. The Puppet Folk Arts lab was hosted by Woodstock School, Centre for Imagination, Mussoorie and supported financially by Serendipity Arts Foundation. Both partnerships were invaluable.

Ranjana Pandey
Editor



PART ONE

Here's a word—dramaturgy—that frightens young (and not-so-young) puppeteers a bit. Until the 20th century, it was only used in the context of text-based theatre. It has two meanings. First, it's the study of the construction of a theatrical text, its writing, and its poetics. But it's also the study of the connection within the performance, between the text and its staging.

I had the opportunity to lead two workshops in India on this topic, exploring both meanings of the word “dramaturgy.”

In puppet theatre, this field is relatively new. In traditional puppet theatre, the manipulation technique is the key element. Puppeteers use shadow puppetry, glove puppets, string puppets, or rod puppets.

“Indian puppetry was not merely entertainment; it was the guardian of collective memory, the narrator of everyday realities, and the witness to social diversity.” says Anurupa Roy. What is recounted are epics, local legends with many unique narrative nuances.

Workshop #2: March 2025

These were students with little professional experience. The task was to represent a story (one that many people know?) through puppetry. They began with Ranjana, choosing their story and sketching it out, like a comic strip on sheets of paper.

The proposals were quite different:

- a well-known and very romantic story;
- two explorations around a theme (that was not yet very clear);
- a story, declared, “for children.”

We began by listening to the groups talk about what they had drawn and what the story was. And why the students wanted to work on this particular story and not another. Then the days unfolded like this: group work culminating in a presentation.

First, I asked them two questions:

What story does this tell?

What could this story mean?

The stories were all complicated. We had to simplify a lot. Or make choices. Making choices isn't easy.

The first question relates to the **NARRATION** or the **STORY** itself: Who are the characters? What happens? We could start with “This is the story of...”

The second question relates to the **FABLE**. It's one or two sentences, no more. And the fable is more general; it takes a step back from the story. It's important to make the distinction between the two. We worked quite a bit on this. It's important when working from a text, but also (and especially) when working from a theme. The theme, once it's been refined, can serve as a fable. It remains a form of “table work” because people don't work on stage but around a table. There are discussions, sometimes heated, to reach an agreement.

In professional theater, time is allowed for this process.

Dramaturgy also involves: the study of a text, its literary and musical references, its structure, its author (their life, their work, etc.), and all



the imaginative elements that can surround it (portraits, images, sounds, etc.). This last aspect of dramaturgy is a way to enrich one's reading of the text and to nurture the imagination surrounding the performance.

Then we need to think about the stage, about the performance. So we have a narrative and a fable. How do we translate that to a stage performance?

At least two questions arise when undertaking this transition.

Two essential questions:

What do I want to say with this? This is what I call the **DRAMATIC AXIS**. It's a combination of the fable and how we envision it on stage.

What will the staging be? That is, what story do I tell the audience so they believe in the stories: both the story of the performance (the staging) and the story of the narrative? And how do I implement the dramaturgical axis?

And then many other choices follow:



What manipulation technique(s)? Is the puppeteer hidden or revealed.

If the actors are visible manipulators: who are they?

I'm going to make some brief comments on the work I did with the students during the Foundation course and add some feedback.

Group 1

A traditional story about two villagers in different villages who want to make music. (one singing and the other playing a drum). Their practice is loud. As a result, the villagers on both sides send them far away from their villages. They both arrive in a magical forest, where they meet and decide to form a duo. In the forest lives a monster, awakened by their "music." He gives them a boon. They continue on their way and arrive near a castle. There lives a king...and so on.

The story was quite complex. There were therefore several possible interpretations. After discussions, T became very sensitive to the learning of music and the difficulty of learning it while ignoring the judgment of others. Therefore, she chose to work on the beginning of the story. As a dramatic structure, T moved from "To learn music, you have to have talent." And as long as you're not sure you have talent, well, it's best to abstain," to "To learn music, you have to work, try hard, make mistakes, and that's okay." She wanted to work with glove puppets in a puppet theater. After a few days of preparation, Anurupa suggested she work without spoken dialogue. The glove puppet has its own rhythm; it doesn't tolerate chatter very well.

T has a very practical mind. She needs to build and work little by little to get things going. But

she can make choices. That's what working on dramaturgy allows. With puppetry, even something as "raw" as a glove puppet, you need a guide to make choices. Regarding the script breakdown, T's approach was very clear. Afterward, she worked with her stage partner on the acting and its variations. She was on solid ground: the dramaturgy of storytelling and fable. And the dramaturgy of the performance: how not to go too far so as not to destabilize the show, that moment when the audience thinks, "This is nonsense, I don't understand anything."

And in fact, T was talking about what was happening in their own journey: they were learning how to make glove puppets, where trials and repetition are very important.

Group 2

A story invented on the spot, but which started from a children's story (?). A little boy is left alone at home. He is scared. To pass the time, he watches TV, but gets bored. He starts to play with his toys, and they begin to take on a life of their own.

The fable revolved around the child's loneliness: how to fill it? How to also dispel the fear of being alone?

There was a set: a wall at the back, a bed-chair, two shelves, one stage space left and one stage space to the right, and some toys. The chosen puppet form was a Bunraku puppet, performed by two actors instead of three.

The dramatic structure shifted throughout the performance.

- 1: Through play, the toys gained autonomy. This created a reverie around the power of play.
- 2: The toys were immediately "magical" and

surpassed the child's understanding.

3: One of the toys was a dinosaur that laid an egg. This egg would disappear, and the child would find it.

Initially, we see the two puppeteers playing the parents saying goodbye to the child. The variations in the performance were sometimes interesting.

There was a lot of clutter on the stage and in the thought process. The gamble of a set design occupying a large part of the stage was risky. But when you put actors in full view, it's essential that the stage be quite large. To what extent do you replicate reality to convey meaning? This was a crucial question posed by this work. I often say that with puppetry, you can only be in the theater. By that, I mean there's no point in worrying about realism. But the question remains: what am I going to put on stage so that the audience understands it's a child's bedroom, and what I put there should n't hinder the puppet's manipulation or the unfolding of the story? The other risky aspect was that we only saw one puppet being manipulated, the rest being objects (playing) or actors. This could have gone in different directions, but it was necessary to establish a single, strong dramatic focus. This choice can also be influenced by the idea one has of the audience one is addressing.

Group 3

There were at least two different stories. One was about a garden, dew, and mourning. The other was about a city that experienced perpetual happiness, visited by two children, a boy and a girl, on the boy's birthday. They explored the city and discovered that it thrived thanks to a child, imprisoned underground, who, by operating a machine under terrible conditions, fed and brought happiness to the city's inhabitants.

The student couldn't make a choice anywhere, in either story. No fable. Just a desire to work with 2D elements, i.e., drawing, silhouette, and shadow. But in her staging proposals, it was clear that many things were left unaddressed and the message wasn't clear. This put the student in a difficult position.

Why make choices? Because you can't say everything at once in theater. Nor can you in a story. The time frame of storytelling is not the same as that of theater. In performance, things are revealed that cannot be spoken. I will return, for example, to the choice of construction methods for the puppets, the materials chosen





for their construction, their shape, their height, and the interplay between the puppet and the puppeteer.

Choosing is not abandoning, it's pruning. Everything we haven't chosen will be for another time. This is how a French director can stage the same text three times, at three different stages of his life, and each time, the result is a different show. Even if some elements are repeated, of course.

Choosing means taking responsibility for what we say to the audience. We bear that responsibility. It means paying attention to every question that arises, to the smallest detail. And puppet theater is a demanding art form in this respect.

PART TWO

For this second part, I will use photos from three of my shows and offer dramaturgical commentary on the choices I made.

Photos 1 and 2: God is absent from the battlefields.

Based on "The Severed Hand" by Blaise Cendrars and poems by Guillaume Apollinaire.

Narrative: A retelling of memories of the First World War.

Fable: Foreigners and artists volunteered: why?
Dramaturgical axis: Two gardeners of memory perform a ritual in remembrance of intellectuals and artists who came to die defending France against Germany.

The two puppeteers: guardians of memory, performing a funeral rite. This is why they are clean-shaven, wear overalls (garden attire), and are covered in sand (this erases their skin color). The puppets: made of garden wire mesh, because



wire mesh, under the lighting, evokes blood veins. They wear bandages in different places, distinguishing them from one another. Thus,

they are all identical yet differentiated. They are a maximum of 60 cm tall. Some are smaller. Handling them is not always easy: they can sometimes be difficult to manipulate.

The set design: a garden (of memory). A sandbox: it symbolizes a pause, a moment captured, a moment in history. It is filled with sand that has been thoroughly raked, like a Zen garden. It is impossible to take a step without leaving one's mark (a work on memory).

A large jar: the beginning of the ritual. The puppet of Blaise Cendrars is placed inside.

An iron tree: it plays an important role in the narrative, but it also provides a vertical element.

In the front stage right: an alarm clock enclosed in a birdcage (a poetic, almost surreal image—an artistic movement that emerged after the war). In the front stage right: a flat stone or a millstone. The music: electroacoustic music based on a female voice; the women remained in the background.

The lighting: divided horizontally. Blue at the top and chocolate brown at the bottom, to highlight the sand and the tracks. And to illuminate the puppets, of course.

Photos 3, 4, 5: The Patriotic Saw

Text by Nicole Caligaris

Adapted from a novel (with cuts in the text).

Story: A squad of soldiers awaits the battle they were promised. But they can't find it. So, they have to find something to occupy themselves. Even resorting to rape as a weapon of war when they encounter a young woman.

Fable: War is a way of telling the story of how the world is presented to us. And here, this world is portrayed as a battle: it must be sought, conquered, even if it means inventing enemies. Bodies and minds are weary of being constantly on high alert. That way, we can no longer challenge the status quo.

Dramaturgical axis: A nightmare experienced by the squad's priest, who tries to recount it in order to make sense of it?

The Manipulator and the Dancer: Bodies are dislocated. That's why I had the actor deliver the text, while the dancer (Butoh dance, Japanese dance) conveyed the physical sensations. Both would "manipulate" certain puppets. The actor circled the plastic surface except for the end. Butoh dance explores "the despair of the body" in relation to the dramatic structure.

In one of the photos, you can see one of the possibilities at play with the puppet: the actor and the puppet embody the same character. The latter lends its physical appearance, and the former lends its voice.

The puppets: the main characters (the officers) are taller than the soldiers, echoing a very old code where higher-ranking people are taller. Only the tall ones are manipulable; the others are not. It's quite jarring to see unmanipulated puppets: it illustrates how this system drains us of all energy. The puppets are made of butcher paper (the kind of paper a butcher uses to wrap meat). A puppet, made like a wax doll, is manipulated by the dancer.

The set design: inspired by the Serbian painter Vladimir Veličković. A (nearly square) ice surface, a toilet in the forecourt, topped with a showerhead. In the far center, a door with butcher's hooks.



The electroacoustic music is based on repeated and distorted patriotic songs. The lighting, apart from specific points (shadows on the “door,” for example), was the exact opposite of *God Is Absent from the Battlefields*: blue below and orange above, like the lights at home in winter.

Photos 6 and 7: A Spot on the Butterfly’s Wing

Text by Alain Cofino Gomez

Text written for me

Story: In a hospital room, a psychotic child maintains a friendly relationship with his hallucination: a soldier from all wars. A doctor tries to understand his problem. Suddenly, the building collapses and access to the child’s room is blocked.

Fable: War is presented to us as permanent. There are no longer enemies fighting on a battlefield, but we have become potential targets of an invisible “enemy.”

Dramaturgical approach: The aim is to confront the audience with the unease felt by virtual representations that we take for realities.

The manipulators: There are three of them. Sometimes they are actors for certain characters (the doctor and the nurse). Sometimes they are manipulators (hidden by a costume).

The puppets: There are two of them (the boy and the little girl) in human scale. “Realistic.” The third is the soldier’s hallucination. It’s an “augmented” puppet, because I was looking for another kind of presence (the doctor, the nurse, and the little girl can’t see it). It’s a projection of a 3D image onto a screen-puppet. The image



and the screen-puppet are synchronized in movement.

The set design: a hospital bed and screens that are invisible (backstage, frontstage, floor). The projections blur the lines between reality and reality. They also explore the idea that we are targets and everything that watches us: surveillance camera images, drone footage, etc. They also highlight the fact that we are aiming at the center of the target: the bed is at the center of the stage.

The lighting in the first part is done only with video projectors. In the second part, with theater spotlights.

The music: in the first part, it’s a (musical) drone. In the second part, there is electroacoustic music created from the sounds of mineral collapse.

These are three shows whose common theme is war. I hope this is clear from the presentation. Puppetry is an art of dramaturgy every minute. Choices must be made constantly, and that is also what makes it demanding and beautiful. One might wonder if this is necessary in traditional puppetry. I would say yes. The dramaturgy of these shows is so ancient that

it is implicit; that is to say, the same questions are there, but we have forgotten them. Or when it emerged (over several years), the questions weren't posed in this way. Dramaturgies also take into account the way stories are told, and depending on the period, they are not told in the same way. Today, they are influenced by cinema, television, etc. The manipulation techniques were already established, and these techniques also produced their own dramaturgy. It's clear that the approach differs depending on whether you use shadow puppets or hand puppets. I'd even say that sometimes you can discern the dramatic style of a particular troupe leader... But perhaps I'm exaggerating.

So yes, I think it would be wonderful if traditional actors were familiar with this dramatic vocabulary: they could share their knowledge in a different way. They could also work with people other than those who know it by heart. And then, perhaps they would move towards

greater autonomy? Or slightly different forms of expression?

Sylvie Baillon is director of the Compagnie Ches Panses Vertes and director of the 'Tas de Sable' - Ches Panses Vertes. She practices a "theatre of texts, images, actors and figures". For Sylvie, text is at the heart of her work. She places at the heart of her work. Most of her creations are commissions with living authors.

On the stage, she explores multiple languages through the puppet and the actor and blends other artistic disciplines such as photo, video, music, dance... In addition she attaches great importance to transmission and mentoring. Member of the pedagogical council of the École Supérieure Nationale des Arts de la Marionnette de Charleville - Mézières (ESNAM), Sylvie taught dramaturgy and stage craft until 2014. She also gives training in the art of puppetry with various Institutions such as National Education or the Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional d'Amiens where she established and heads the Puppet Arts class (CPES).

Sylvie has given Master Classes in Dramaturgy in India, the most recent being during Unima India's 2nd Foundation Course, 2025.



3

PEDAGOGICAL JOURNEY OF UNIMA PUPPETEERS TRUST

By Ranjana Pandey



Why UNIMA (India) chose to run a Foundation Course for Puppeteers

While India has a three thousand year old tradition of puppetry, there has never been a formal training program in the country. In the past, short courses and sporadic workshops have been organised from time to time. Puppeteers also interned with each other to learn. But there has been no consistent pedagogic systems that have evolved. This meant that there was no serious training for those interested in becoming puppeteers. Those who really wanted to and could afford it, went abroad for training.

Most professional puppeteers in the country are from the traditional forms and have trained within their family. The traditional puppeteer still has her/his catchment audience, namely the various village circuits their ancestors performed in, or a traditional patron like the local temple. Today the traditional puppeteers complain that audience expectations have changed and

markets for puppetry are fast changing. They are at sea.

Non-traditional puppeteers have been creating their own markets, in the cities. Development communication is a major new market for puppeteers across India. Educational Institutions and NGO's offer many opportunities for applied puppetry.

Post independence, steadily, the government has replaced the traditional patronage. The focus of the patronage is guided by the official culture policy which is not informed enough about the status and the needs of the Puppeteer community. The knee-jerk approach has had a serious impact specially on the traditional puppeteer communities. The lack of discourse and interest in the Government corridors has led to an absence of meaningful support.

For Puppetry to flourish, a professional training for puppeteers was deemed important. A training



which will provide traditional puppeteers a bridge to new narratives and contemporary idioms, for urban puppeteers it would build a cadre of well trained puppeteers who can satisfy the expectations of a changing audience.

UNIMA India has been working on a pedagogy for training puppeteers in India since 2014. In the last 10 years UNIMA has run masterclasses and has organised training residencies and mentorship with Indian puppet masters and European experts. The success of these training modules led to the creation of the first Foundation Program in 2019. It was followed by the second Foundation course in January 2025. In addition during the second foundation course emphasis was added on





a. DRAMATURGY

What is Dramaturgy in puppet theatre? What does the audience see and perceive, what does a puppeteer communicate by the artistic choices s/he makes in puppet theatre?

b. SCENOGRAPHY and INTERPRETATION

Puppets, Masks, Props, Sets, Lights, Sound, Architecture, Spatial Relationship. The relationship of the bodies on stage (Body of the puppet and the puppeteer) How are these related to text and content? These include fabrication- Construction of puppets, Proportion, Materials, Anatomy.

c. MENTORING

Periodic meeting with mentors in individual sessions.

d. MASTER CLASS

with Master Puppeteer Gunduraju in Hassan, Karnataka. To learn Togalu Gombeyatta -from



making leather, to making puppets, learning manipulation, singing and performing to village audiences.

e. PERFORMANCE MAKING

- Dramaturgy Sessions- With Sylvie Baillon, to arrive at a script for the final show
- Mentor sessions to guide progress
- Making a solo/two person performance

The participants

Designed to nurture emerging talent, the course shortlisted five candidates nationwide.

The selected participants were from different parts of the country and with varying puppetry experiences. All of them had exposure to a previous short training or workshops .

Deepali Tiwari (Allahabad), Ridhi Aggarwal , Kuldeep Kannoja (Lucknow), Sakhi Upadhyaya (New Delhi), and Tandra Kundu (Bardhaman).

The course was spread over 8 months.

The Highlight was the two-week residency with Master Puppeteer Togalu Gombeyatta, Gunduraju, in Hassan, Karnataka. The students



started with preparing raw leather for making leather shadow puppets, drawing, cutting, colouring, then learning manipulating and setting up basic shadow performance stage. The exposure to live performances came in very dynamically, with a ground level dynamic experience in Hassan, with Gunduraju's community performances (both traditional and contemporary) . The students got an opportunity to participate, observe at close quarters a Master Puppeteer at work.

On their return to Delhi, they switched to contemporary shadow techniques using multiple light sources. They learnt to build narratives. The first performance was an exercise in shadow puppetry.

It was followed by a music and soundscape workshop, lighting, writing workshop. This was followed by intensive Dramaturgy sessions with Sylvie Baillon.

Mentoring and staying the course till the end of the preparation (making rehearsing and performing) for their final performance

The course

As all the students were taking time off from their work/study to take part in the foundation course, we had to make it accessible and comfortable for them . This is why the foundation course was hybrid, combining intensive offline sessions with



online lectures and practical internships. The curriculum designed to provide a holistic approach to puppetry, covered sketching, anatomy, scale, perspective, design, colour, clay modelling, making a mould for papier mache heads, making a glove puppet, construction of a table top Bunraku puppet, carving wood and thermocol, movement, manipulation techniques and improvisations.

The focus was on Gloves, Bunraku and Shadow Puppetry. Once again we consciously chose to leave out String puppets and Rod Puppets.

This was followed by narrative building, script

writing, lighting, sound, and more manipulation Focus then shifted to dramaturgy, and performance design.

A strong exposure to Dramaturgy put this second course apart from the first one.

Also acknowledging the growing exposure and access to the Internet, the hours spent on World Traditions and Indian Traditions of Puppetry (performances and live sessions with Masters) was also reduced to online library of films, videos and lectures shared with the students.

The world puppetry exposure came with volunteering at the Ishara Festival. Watching performances from different parts of the world,



every night was an additional bonus.

Challenges and Collaborations

Adapting the schedules, time tables to the faculty's availability, the space availability, it is a complex organizational task.

Katkatha studio premises were a boon, to house the students as well as for the dramaturgical exercises and final performance preparation. Without this support and collaboration we could not have managed within our minimal budget. Transport and hospitality are expensive elements.

Support also came from the French Institute, who brought in Sylvie Baillon for Dramaturgy.

Ishara Festival opened its doors to the students. The students volunteered at the Festival and in exchange got valuable exposure to World Class Puppet Performances.

The Crafts Museum hosted the first part of the course. The living craft and folk performances at the Crafts Museum provided a vibrant context to the Puppetry Course. The students were able to imbibe the connection between different regional aesthetics and the similar language in dance, murals, temple sculpture, folk theatre and puppetry.

The Crafts Museum also hosted the final performances for an invited audience. The students were able to exhibit their puppets



at the Crafts Museum where the course was being hosted.

One of the shows also featured at the India International Centre, Delhi during the Puppet-O-Scope Festival. Participating in this festival the students got an additional exposure to films on Puppetry, a seminar and many discussions. They also witnessed some fantastic traditional shadow plays as well as an all-night performance of Togalu Gombeyatta. The rich exposure was possible because of pre-planning and support from the Puppetry Community.

The Final Chapter

Internships and personal feedback

Students moved to Internships and individual

projects (April-July 2025) to gain hands-on experience. The course organizers issued a Call for Internship Offers inviting professional puppetry groups, freelance practitioners, and schools to collaborate.

The internships were as follows:

Tandra Kundu

A puppeteer from Burdaman, West Bengal, she needed a scholarship to attend the course. This put extra responsibility on her to give her best. During the course itself she received a second scholarship from CCRT and following that her internship was supported by Devi Art Foundation. The internship was an applied puppetry project spread over 5 months, in a Government School for Girls.

In her words:

I thought Glove Puppetry was easy. During the course, I realized that I knew very little. For example I knew nothing at all about gaze and breath. Glove puppets are actually very difficult and I need to practise a great deal.

I was afraid of the word Dramaturgy. But now I want to keep seeking the answer to 'But Why'? I want to keep trying to understand Dramaturgy better.

Tandra made a successful final Glove Puppet performance "Frozen Melody". She has performed it many times already. Tandra grew a lot not only because of her hard work, and application, but also because she was open to taking risks to break free of her previous learning blocks.

Ridhi Aggarwal

Ridhi is from the Development sector and has been applying Puppetry in her development work in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.



As part of her internship Ridhi chose to enlarge her knowledge of some Puppet Traditions.

“The time spent at Hassan with Gunduraju ji made me realise that there is so much to know about the traditional forms of puppetry which I haven’t explored because as a puppeteer I feel I need to have my style but history and tradition are the soul of a culture and to explore

a particular form of art means to know the culture and the context in which it has grown. So to understand the traditional puppetry of the region I work in – Uttar Pradesh, I went looking for the last traditional glove puppeteer of U.P; Raees Ahmed ji. “I feel that my puppetry journey has just begun”.

Ridhi also visited West Bengal, “The Puppeteers” of Burdhaman hosted her search for local Traditional Puppeteers.

“After exploring three puppet forms, I feel drawn to Glove Puppetry. It’s a form which can be performed anywhere with any audience, with just one or two puppets you can tell many tales. I would want to make glove puppets my travelling partner as wherever I go I could carry a glove puppet in my back pack and have the flexibility to perform anywhere. With fewer resources, a single puppeteer can do a lot by herself.

“A big challenge for me was Dramaturgy. While preparing for the final performance, we were pushed to find answers to Sylvie’s persistent “but why” was challenging as initially I did not understand how to link different elements. For the first time I have begun to understand the nuances of dramaturgy. But this is something I will keep exploring and making sense of it with time.

“My individual project for the completion of the Foundation Course is an individual performance (currently in process) using a bicycle and its parts as objects. The narrative focuses on celebrating freedom and a bicycle gives freedom by its very nature -of movement and mobility”.

Deepali Tiwari

When asked ‘What have been your areas of



growth post/ during the course?’ She said “I have developed a maker’s perspective. Now, when I look at a performance, I examine the technical aspects of it, identifying what is working and why. I have also begun observing the dramaturgical choices and working towards developing my own vocabulary.”

Deepali was accepted for a residency with *Herds*, an unusual international arts project starting from South Africa. (see article). Unfortunately she had to drop out of the course due to ill health.

Kuldeep

Also from the Development sector in Lucknow, he is new to Puppetry. Narrative building and Dramaturgy have given me the confidence I lacked. I am a confident puppet builder, but I need to learn the other elements.

I learnt to be more specific....what does my story say? What do I need to show to the audience? Who is speaking? Do you need dialogues at all? What is the first and last image you give your audience?

In fact I have started visiting all our old shows and trying to make the visual strong so that we don’t need words to express our thoughts. I have stopped relying on storybooks for ideas of puppet shows and will switch to everyday stories.”

Kuldeep has discovered the rhythm, energy and humour of Glove Puppetry. It resonates with his personality. He has yet to create individual performances. That is his challenge.

Sakhi

Her internship was with a young group of Puppeteers. Her role was to build puppets. Although she had previous experience of

narrative building and dramaturgy, she had not delved in the making aspect. Sakhi discovered her deep interest in working with her hands and learnt to enjoy building puppets, both two dimensional and three. Many new skills will give her many choices for applying what she has learnt in her pedagogical journey.

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.

4

TRADITIONS IN TRANSITION: THE FOLK PUPPET LAB

By V. Aarti



SUTRADHAR

Organized by UNIMA India. Supported by Serendipity Arts Festival, Woodstock School & the French Institute

On 1st September 2025, nine traditional puppeteers from six different states arrived at Woodstock School in Mussoorie for a 2 week residential Lab organized by UNIMA Puppeteers' Trust. The lab was made possible with the support of the Serendipity Arts Festival and the Centre for Imagination at Woodstock School. For many participants, this was their first exposure to any form of training outside their inherited tradition.

It is important to understand the context of the lab to understand why it was necessary at all. I ask a different version of the same question that Dadi Pudumjee asked before a puppetry masterclass for traditional puppeteers: Why is this a lab and not a masterclass? For one, the lab never set out to 'teach' puppetry. These are

traditional artists who learnt it at their mother's lap and have been a part of the entourage since they were born, nobody needed to teach them how to perform. However, while the tradition has just about managed to survive (or has become a 'dying art', as a lot of people like to say), the world has changed drastically. I will not argue for the necessity of the lab. I conducted interviews with the participants at various stages of the lab, and I'm presenting some snippets from the interviews of 3 participants:

M Kalimuthu

I am a 5th-generation leather shadow puppeteer from Tamil Nadu. I have been a puppeteer for as long as I can remember. Some of my earliest memories are of watching my grandfather perform, laughing at the comedy scenes and





getting scared of the fight scenes. Our family travelled place to place, putting on puppet shows. Once people lost interest, we started singing and dancing. Now people aren't interested in that either. We live in Theni now, and my brother and I take turns travelling to sell plastic wares and staying home taking care of our parents and children. This is the first time I've attended any kind of training.

I've come here because I don't want to leave my tradition behind; all our relatives have already stopped performing puppetry, and we are the last ones left. Nowadays, people watch TV and

cinema, nobody is interested in our puppet shows. But I want to try something new to bring audiences back. Maybe a collaboration with the Kerala and Karnataka shadow puppets? I really loved the Rajasthani music, and I want to try making my puppets dance to it. But it is difficult, I can learn here, but after I go back, I'll have to start travelling for work again--there's no time to practice or apply what I learn.

Tapas Roy

I am a 2nd generation Tarer Putul puppeteer from West Bengal. I started performing when I was 17-18. I continued for 6-7 years, and stopped.



I've just gotten back to it 2-3 years ago. Actually, when I got the call for this workshop, I was only 2-3 days away from submitting my passport to go to work in Malaysia. I actually never wanted to be a puppeteer, it was my father who kept pushing me to it. We put all our money into this and had huge losses, that's why I took up the job in Malaysia. Once I paid off all the debt, I felt like I could come back and do something else.

But now my thoughts are changing. I'm feeling like I was wrong earlier, and that I should stick to puppetry. I never thought I'd get to work with such big people. I love the idea of storyboarding,

how one drawing can say so much. And thinking of a story, and learning other forms of string puppetry, and I love shadow puppetry! I didn't even know what shadow puppetry was, I had to call my father and ask what it was. The thing is, back home there's no rehearsal or new shows. People are performing the same stories over and over, so the audience is also bored. And there's not much money in it, except for Durga Puja, so they all do other work and don't have time to practice or think of something new. Here, we learn something new every day. There's a new challenge every day. Last night I couldn't sleep at all, I kept thinking of what story to do. And I felt

so shy, because people could see me, otherwise we're usually behind a screen. But now I feel like I can do it, and that I can make something new.

Balkrishna Masge

I am a Kalsutri Bahulye puppeteer from Pinguli, Maharashtra. I have been a puppeteer for as long as I can remember, in fact my first toy was also a puppet. I come from the Thakar community, and we have 12 performing art forms. Out of these, 3 are performing arts, string puppetry, leather shadow puppetry, and glove puppetry. My family has been performing puppetry for many generations, and I learnt by watching my father and brother perform and rehearse.

Puppetry didn't earn us enough money to survive, so we performed when we could and my father did a lot of other jobs to get by. I was good at drawing as a child, so I went to JJ School of Art in Mumbai to learn art. I got more opportunities there, and got into art design. It became an income source, and I kept working in Mumbai after getting my degree. I had a lot of plans in my head, but they were just plans until I came home and the COVID lockdown started, so I had to stay home. My family was in the middle of reconstructing the little museum that my father built. Once I got into it, I decided I wanted to stay back and get involved in puppetry again. My brother always wanted that I get some training, which is what I'm doing here. And I don't know how to make a new story, or do shows with very less dialogues, and our traditional puppets have very little movement, so learning different kinds of puppetry is also important for me. Many years ago I saw Feathers of Fire on Youtube, and I loved their shadow puppets but I never dared to try anything like that. Yesterday I tried and I was so happy that I could do it. I have a lot of plans for our museum, and for the next show we want

to make, and I will definitely go back and use everything I learn here in our next show.

The Lab

On the first day of the lab, the Center for Imagination opened its doors to a small crowd of students, who walked in and were immediately captivated by the puppets occupying every surface of the space. They were laid out on the table, hanging from the railing of the staircase, seated on the chairs. Anywhere you looked, a puppet looked back at you. The children wandered in with their backpacks still on, instinctively gravitating toward the puppets. Once the teachers shepherded them to sit for the performance, the Lab began in earnest.

We opened with short performances by traditional puppeteers. Even though they were faced with an international group of children from completely different cultural backgrounds, the puppeteers had them instantly captivated. Despite the language barrier and being far removed from their usual performance contexts, they adapted effortlessly: ad-libbing dialogue with English words, emphasising movement and sound over dense narrative, and pulling out special instruments and tricks to delight the young audience. One of the Lab's core objectives was already unfolding—the artists were instinctively improvising and adapting to suit their audience.

And the children responded with equal spontaneity, whether it was middle schoolers spilling into the performance area to get a closer look, toddlers watching upside down with their feet in the air or seemingly disinterested teenagers who leapt up at the chance to try their hand at the puppets. The performers had captured their attention completely.



None of this came as a surprise. Coming from long lineages of performers, the participants had been refining their repertoire since childhood. So the question naturally emerged:

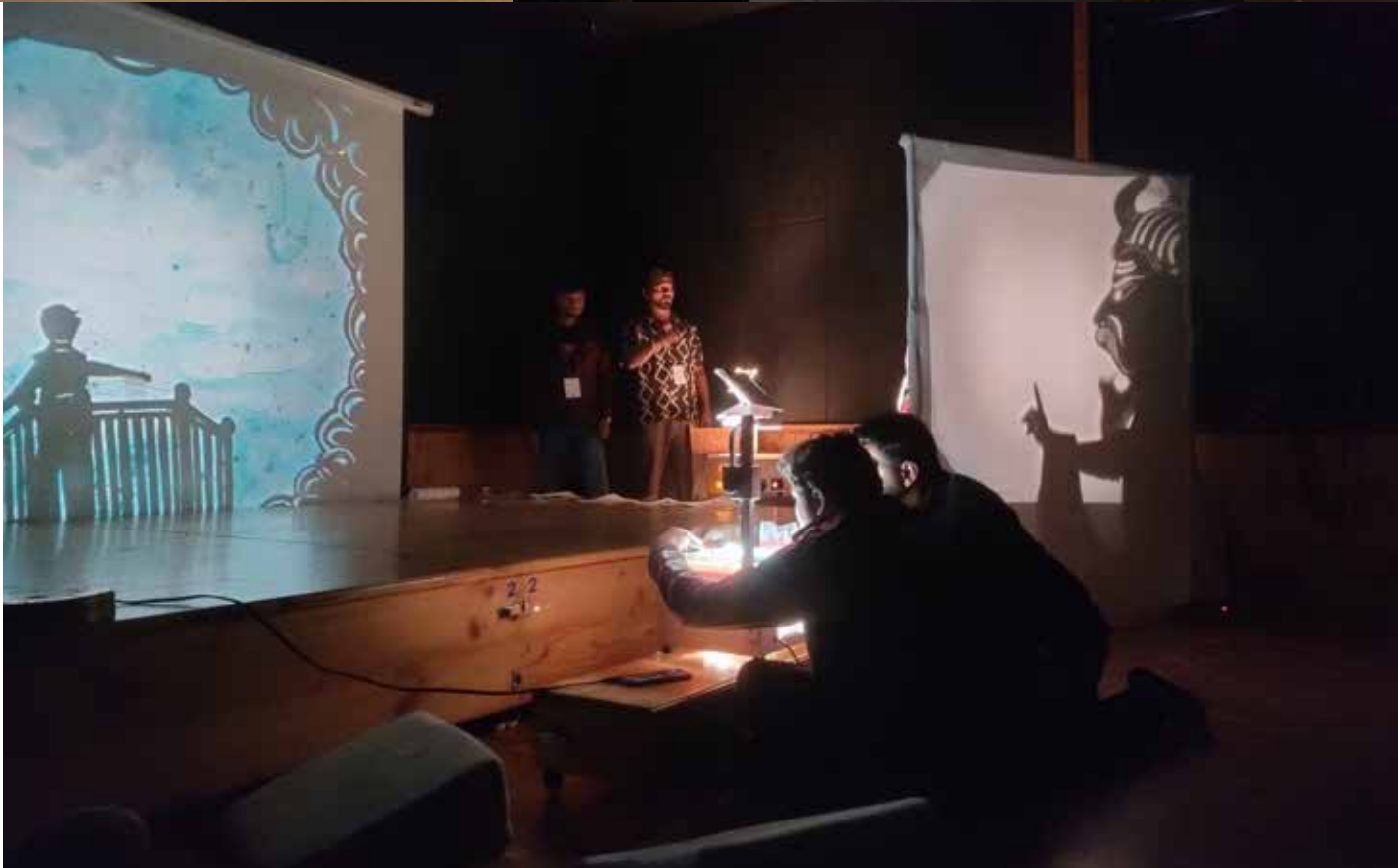
What could a space like this offer artists who are already experts?

Puppetry in India has a history spanning over 3,000 years, with more than 23 distinct living traditions. Yet those who have inherited these forms are struggling today. Despite the visceral quality of their shows, the high level of skill, and rich repertoires of stories, traditional performances are failing to draw audiences.

The challenge is clear:

how do we revitalise these art forms, encourage the next generation of puppeteers to continue the practice, expand their skills, and connect with new audiences?

There is no simple answer to these questions, and anyone who thinks that a small group of people can solve the problems of traditional puppetry in 2 weeks is kidding themselves. What it can do, however, is create a rare space, one where traditional puppeteers can pause, experiment, and imagine new possibilities without the pressure of performance or survival. It can plant seeds. Shift perspectives. Become a space for making friends.





And it began from the first session itself. As we started working on narrative and script, we were faced with the first challenge. Even though oral narratives change constantly as they are passed down, the participants were used to performing their inherited versions of the traditional stories. So when the participants were asked to create new narratives, they found it unexpectedly difficult. When asked to imagine the same story from a different perspective, one participant declared that it just wouldn't be his story anymore!

Despite the initial resistance, the mentors kept pushing the participants gently but persistently. The intention wasn't to force a breakthrough, it was to create the conditions for discovery and curiosity. And soon, we started to see a lot more risk-taking, both with the style and usage of puppetry, and in concept and dramaturgy.

We saw a mixture of modern glove puppetry and Thol Bommalatam, Togalu Gombeyatta puppets used on the overhead projector, a depiction of a Kathputliwala who slowly loses his audience but the strings beckon him back, a meditation of the conflict in Ram's mind depicted with a mixture of shadow puppets and Kalsutri Bahulye puppets, the puppeteer as an active participant within the frame of traditional puppetry, etc.

As Dadi Pudumjee recounted the words of his mentor Michael Meschke, the participants had begun to understand that '**...puppets are not the be-all and end-all of puppetry**'. There was a shift in perspective as they started to see it as a theatre of dead material, where anything and everything could be used. They started using the human body in shadow, the puppeteers became

actors working in collaboration with the puppet, they started merging forms. Once the spark was lit, there was no stopping it.

One of these experiments even ended up as one of the grantees! Tapas Roy, a Tarer Putul practitioner from West Bengal improvised the story of a haunted chair and a puppet who was trying to sit in the chair. Including the chair as an object with his traditional puppet brought a new edge to his performance, and he had us falling off our seats laughing with his possessed, unwilling chair. He is now developing his project with Clément Peretjatko's mentorship.

But it wasn't all successes in the lab. The participants constantly failed, made mistakes, came up short, or overextended themselves. But these failures ended up being the most important part of the lab. As Anurupa kept emphasizing, this was the only place where they could dare to take a risk, and fail, and still have something else to try their hand at tomorrow. Soon, the failures started paying off, and became turning points, both for the individual and for the group collectively.

A particularly important realization came through in a discussion with Anurupa, Ranjana and Dadi. The participants were finally able to articulate their discomfort with experimentation. There was a sense of unmalleability within the tradition, a fear that trying something new might mean letting go of their roots. Together, we arrived at an understanding that, in the context of puppetry, tradition is not something that sits in a museum unchanged, gathering dust. Puppetry is a **living tradition**, and like any living thing, its lifeblood is change and evolution. It has survived for centuries precisely because generations of artists have adapted, improvised, and reinvented it.



Innovation is not a betrayal of tradition, it is instead, its continuation. Once this realisation settled in, the participants began approaching their experiments with a lot more confidence and enthusiasm, opening themselves to new possibilities and finding new ways of connecting with their audience without letting go of their tradition.

Everyone had the chance to explore a new kind of puppetry when they explored modern shadow puppetry with Asha. Taking forward the stories



they had worked on with Ranjana and me, they created shadow puppet shows, which were performed for the students of Woodstock School. One experiment stood out in this exercise: a piece exploring the idea of good and evil through a courtroom set in the afterlife by Balkrishna Masge, Vinay Bhaat and Darshan HG. They pushed the form technically by using multiple screens, actors in shadow and masked shadow puppets, in addition to the techniques they had learned from Asha. Other groups had similar

moments of innovation, and some had an equally important realization of what they lacked and needed to work on.

By the time they started working with Anurupa on two core concepts of manipulation - breath and gaze, the experimentation was in full swing. There was no pushing needed this time, each participant very willingly created tight, often hysterical pieces with a Bunraku style puppet, with the puppeteer as an active presence. Through these exercises, they deepened their understanding of anatomy, movement, and the puppeteer's invisibility, exploring how presence and absence can work together to animate the inanimate. They then tried to apply these principles to their own puppets.

Each time there was a deadline, whether it was a sharing of their experiments with the overhead projector, or their shows at the final pitch, everyone turned into a child on the last day of summer vacation, working day and night to finish their projects. There was a real sense of camaraderie within the group, and everyone pitched in and helped each other.

There was no grand moment that announced this shift and no exercise to build to it. Yet, a core objectives of the lab was achieved quietly and organically, without any mentor directing it: the participants became friends. They began trusting one another, helping without being asked, and asking for help without hesitation.

For an artist, having a network to lean on (even if the only help available is a kind word over the phone) can make a big difference. It has been two years since the lab that I was part of, and the friendships forged there continue to sustain me to this day.

The selected grantees will continue into Stage Two, receiving further guidance and technical support before their premieres at the Serendipity Arts Festival 2025.

As the Lab came to an end, it was clear that transformation doesn't always arrive with fireworks. It can begin as a quiet shift, a new way of stringing a puppet, a moment of improvisation or even just a question they had never asked before. After the end of the lab, 4 of the participants went on to receive grants to create their projects, and I'm sure that some will continue making new work regardless of the grant. What the lab is aiming at is not the production of new shows, but new ways of seeing.

And perhaps that is what a space like this can offer: that tradition is not merely preserved, but continuously reimagined by those who carry it forward.

Participants:

1. Sajeesh Pulavar (Tholpavakoothu, Kerala)
2. M Kalimuthu (Tolu Bommalatam, Tamil Nadu)
3. Balkrishna Masge (Kalsutri Bahuliya, Maharashtra)
4. Pramod Tulshidas Masge (Kalsutri Bahuliya, Maharashtra)
5. Tapas Roy (Taarer Putul, West Bengal)
6. Alak Ghorai (Benir Putul, West Bengal)
7. Darshan H G (Togalu Gombeyatta, Karnataka)
8. Vinay Bhaat (Kathputli, Rajasthan/New Delhi)
9. Deepali Bhatt (Kathputli, Rajasthan/New Delhi)

Mentors: Ranjana Pandey, Anurupa Roy, Clément Peretjatko

Facilitators: Dadi Pudumjee, V Aarti, Asha, Madhur Padwal



Grantees:

1. Balkrishna Masge & Pramod Masge
2. Sajeesh Pulavar
3. Vinay Bhaat
4. Tapas Roy & Alak Ghorai (Joint Grantees)

V Aarti is a shadow puppeteer, writer and a PhD scholar at Ambedkar University. She was a participant at the first Puppet Lab by Katkatha & Goethe Institut, where she created 'Zig Zags to Earth' with Ankit Ravani and Adheep Das. She is fascinated by the moment a puppet 'comes alive' through the imagination of the audience and the manipulation of the puppeteer, and explores this transference through practice-based research.



The Herds is an art project where life-size animal puppets took a 20,000 km long journey, starting from Kinshasa, Congo Basin, to Nordkapp in the Arctic Circle. It is a one-of-a-kind public art project brought to life by the production team behind Little Amal (The Walks Productions from London) and Ukwanda Puppets and Design Art Collective from South Africa. The puppets were made by a team of talented designers, puppet makers and storytellers, almost entirely from cardboard.

The material was chosen to make a statement about fragility of the environment and also the importance of recycling. It is a huge project to bring awareness about climate change. I was in the second phase of the foundation

course on Puppetry organized by UNIMA India when I first came across their open call. I was searching for internship opportunities, as we were required to finish an internship with a puppetry-related organization towards the completion of the foundation course. I made my application without any expectations; it was a wild proposition that this art collective was putting forward, and I kind of felt this couldn't really be done, but the thrill-seeking side of me wanted to be a witness to this madness, and madness it was.

When I told my mentors Anurupa Roy and Ranjana Pandey about the selection, they were as excited as me. I was given all cautionary advice before I went on this journey; as artists who



have done extensive touring with shows, they knew how hard touring life could be. Even the director of The Herds, Nizar, almost threatened me into declining the offer during the interview, reiterating how hard it would get, but no amount of caution could have prepared me for the experience which awaited me.

Nizar was right; it was bloody tiring, and there were moments when I cursed my past self who very enthusiastically signed up for it. But then there were also such moments where life felt unreal: when our giraffe interacted with an old man on his balcony on the streets of Copenhagen; when people were in tears after

our gorilla stopped breathing in Arles; when kids followed singing behind our lioness in Trondheim; when I walked my lone vervet monkey on a melting glacier.

We were forty-two puppeteers from nineteen countries, and by the end of the two months, we were a big family. We supported and picked up each other through tiring training sessions and even more tiring bus journeys, loud hostels, and bus breakdowns, while also enjoying late night dance jams, sauna evenings, and a plunge in the water wherever we got a chance. We collaborated with dancers, live musicians, musical singers, actors, opera singers, bikers, circus artists, and graffiti artists. Every event was one-of-a-kind.

One of the most emotional moments in the journey was the day we hiked up to Jostedalsglacier in Norway (one of the biggest glaciers in mainland Europe, which is melting at a troubling speed). We climbed, carrying our puppets in stretchers, and finally reached the base camp after several rests and having to cross a melted snow bridge barefoot, only to be welcomed by heavy rainstorms on the top. At first, we ran to save our cardboard and plywood puppets with tarps, but moments later we were running to save ourselves, hiding underneath the same puppets. I was under Elle, our elephant, huddled with four other puppeteers. We heard other puppeteers singing as everyone was scared for their lives. I felt a kind of camaraderie I will never forget. We had to go down to safety the moment the rain subsided a bit, leaving our puppets to the mercy of nature. I witnessed several friends breaking down that day. Only half of us chose to climb back again the next day. I was pretty sure that we were just going to bring our puppets back, given



THE HERDS are arriving in
AARHUS, DENMARK next - find us

the weather forecast was worse than the day before, but the clouds parted, and we walked our weather-beaten puppets to the glacier, tied to each other. Since both my team members on Lioness could not make it to the glacier, I was left with a little vervet monkey (single one-puppeteer puppet in *The Herds*). It was shaking under my shaking hands; it was scared and alone in an unknown landscape with nowhere to go. When we made it down the mountain, each and every one of us cried. They were tears of joy, tears of being humbled by nature, and tears of the profound peace that comes with such journeys, the ones which show us our smallness and that human connection is the only real currency that we have.

The Herds gave me many lessons not just on



puppetry and public art, but also on human connection and the power of collaboration, and most importantly, on the importance of being mad as an artist. These forty-two people from all over the world (along with the production team, the puppet doctors, the mentors, and our artistic director Nizar), every single one of them, I believe, were a little crack in their heads, and that is how you allow yourself to dream the impossible and then gather enough like-minded people to get it done.

*Deepali Tiwari is an artist-researcher currently struggling to finish her PhD as she keeps getting distracted by amazing projects such as *The Herds*. She is also a wannabe puppeteer she has received her training from UNIMA India and Katkatha Puppetry Arts Trust.*

5

AN EXHIBITION AT
THE CRAFTS MUSEUM

By Ranjana Pandey



SUTRADHAR



The National Crafts Museum, Delhi, hosted both Unima India's Foundation Courses in 2018 and 2025.

This year they also opened their collection of traditional puppets to Unima India.

Unima proposed the setting up of an exhibition of puppets at the Museum. To make it more inclusive, besides the museum collection, contemporary puppets from Ishara Trust, Kat Katha and the Foundation Course were also exhibited.

A small exhibition space was prepared for this. Special repainting of walls, appropriate lighting,

hanging systems for string puppets, light boxes for shadow puppets were all handled by the Crafts Museum with our expertise and guidance.

The important aspect of this collaboration was the restoration and repair of the puppets which was entrusted to Unima. We were able to bring the expertise required to identify the form and restore the puppets which were in bad shape. The skill of a traditional puppeteer was required to string the puppets afresh, repair, dress and clean them. This was done in collaboration with the conservation staff of the Crafts Museum. There are only a few such collections in Delhi, and each one is valuable. IGNCA, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Kamla Devi Srinivas Malliah Trust



Museum, and O.P. Jain's collection in Sanskriti are the better known such collections.

The exhibition displayed shadow puppets, rare rod and string puppets and a very unique form, Salakhi Gombeyatta from South India.

The exhibition opened in mid-February. It was planned to run for only 15 days. But the number of footfalls was so encouraging that the exhibition was extended twice and remained open through the Ishara Festival and World Puppetry Day, both of which gave it a very relevant context and brought visiting puppeteers from different countries to see the puppets. This was Unima's World Puppetry Day contribution!!

It was clear from the number of footfalls and the excitement of the visitors that this kind of exhibition is valuable in promoting interest in the Puppet Arts.

The final performances (of the Foundation Course) were also hosted by Crafts Museum. We performed to an overflowing hall. Another pointer to the growing interest and following of Puppetry.

It is valuable to bring the work of Puppeteers to urban spaces and publicize Puppetry events of all dimensions and kinds in-order to grow an audience.



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.



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