



# Sutradhar

A UNIMA India Publication

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR	02
SITUATING THE SHIFTS IN INDIAN PUPPETRY TRADITIONS	03
THE MASTER SPEAKS- DADI PUDUMJEE	10
MASTERCLASSES A JOURNEY OF PEDAGOGIC POSSIBILITIES	12
OBSERVATIONS	18
TROUBLED WATERS	20

# A Note from the Editor

This issue of Sutradhar is largely dedicated to the Fifth Master Class organised by Unima India and the ideas thrown up during its course.

This time a contemporary Master (Dadi Pudumjee) taught a selected group of generational puppeteers from the various traditions of Indian Puppetry: Togalu Gombeyatta (shadow puppetry of Karnataka), Thol Pava Koothu (shadow puppetry of Kerala), Kala Sutri Bahulye, (string puppetry of Maharashtra), Tarer Putul (string puppetry of West Bengal) and Pavai Kathakali (glove puppetry of Kerala).

Being our first experience with traditional puppeteers, this Master Class provided an opportunity to compare both (traditional and contemporary puppeteers) groups and whet our perceptions of emerging methodologies. There are many challenges in creating one pedagogical structure for both groups in India. Dadi's Master Class has been a valuable resource in our search for a pedagogy. We are learning deeply from this rich experience.

The Master Class was held in Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur. The building designed by celebrated architect Charles Correa provided inspiring spaces for every aspect of the Master Class experience, from the daily exercises to the deep discussions and final performances. The project being housed in this wonderful space dedicated to the Arts was in itself an acknowledgement of the growing space being accorded to the Puppet Arts. The workshop material, warm hospitality and infrastructure support contributed to the success of the Master Class. We felt enabled and nurtured! Our sincere thanks to the entire JKK team.

The intersection between tradition and modernity, transmission of traditional knowledge have emerged as absorbing themes for discussion, research and writing even on International Platforms. The Puppetry International Publication (this year) is bringing writings from the world on this subject.

The next issue planned will reconstruct the beginnings of Contemporary Puppetry in India.

## Ranjana Pandey

*President*  
Unima-India

*This project is a result of a grant from India Foundation for the Arts and has been fully underwritten with support from Tata Steel.*

# 1 Situating the Shifts in Indian Puppetry Traditions

Documentation of UNIMA-India Masterclass with Dadi Pudumjee | Sammitha Sreevathsa



## Contextualizing the Masterclass

Many puppetry traditions across the country are undergoing changes, changes that are driven by market forces, state funding and audience demands. While change is natural to traditions that are alive and flowing, there appears to be a diminishing involvement of puppeteers themselves in making active and aware decisions regarding their own performative traditions. These decisions could range from being ethical, political and social to decisions regarding the aesthetic, narrative or performative aspects of their tradition. What can be done so that the puppeteers become stakeholders in the change that their tradition undergoes? How can Dadi Pudumjee and UNIMA – India, as outsiders to the traditional puppetry, facilitate this process of enabling them to take responsibility towards changes in their own tradition? As an outsider documenting the process I confront similar questions of how to experience and observe the workshop with eyes unclouded by ideologies and assumptions? As a person living in an urban Indian context how should I locate myself as a documentarian in relation to the traditional puppeteers? How am I different from the policy makers and funding bodies in conceptualizing their position in society? How to conceptualize identities without blowing their traditional backgrounds out of proportion as exotic or pitiful?

The participants who had travelled to Jaipur for the Master class were rooted in different traditions of puppetry and hence had come from different geographical, linguistic and historical contexts. The Masterclass had an assembly of two shadow puppeteers from Karnataka, one shadow puppeteer from Kerala, one Pavakathakali puppeteer from Kerala, one shadow and string puppeteer from Maharashtra and a string puppeteer from Bengal. Travelling to Jaipur, they seemed to feel disembodied and uprooted from their home. For some of them this was their symbolic first time trip where they had travelled alone, away from home. In the first few days of the Masterclass, the participants hovered close to their own linguistic counterparts, trying to absorb the environment and the new people. However, as we delved deeper into the process a sense of a shared context (of living and learning together at JKK) emerged. Moreover, there was a realization of a shared suffering as they got to know that all their traditions grappled, in their own unique ways, the difficulties of the fast changing reality.

During the course of the Masterclass we realized that the Masterclass was pre-emptively addressing this gap in decision making as the traditional puppeteers were learning in a pedagogical context where they were taking decisions and making choices at every step with very less scope for direct imitation.





*Having come from traditional contexts where learning happened organically, this was an unfamiliar kind of pedagogical context for the participants.* Dadi, with his rich experience in design was able to begin the Masterclass from a deconstructed place and hence encourage them to make aware decision about every aspect of the show they were building. Each of them made themselves available to Dadi's pedagogy in different capacities.

The introduction to the learning process began with a fundamental and a rather very philosophical inquiry into what makes an object a puppet? Performing a little act with shoes and bags, Dadi demonstrated that any inanimate object can be brought into life. This discussion took a somersault into understanding that the life and meaning of a performance is complete only when an audience receives it through their senses and pours their own sensibility into the performance.

The activities progressed from colour, texture, pattern, form to narrative, character and dramaturgy and back to colour, texture, pattern and form. Each day included an early exercise session and post breakfast discussion session, when everyone shared their learnings, challenges and questions. The first set of activities on colour, texture, pattern and form strived to communicate that these aspects of performance, often trivialized as decoration, can play an active role in expressing and evoking emotions. The participants were asked to respond emotively to colour stimulus. However, the participants responded to colours by associating it with learnt symbols. For example, red was largely associated with danger and stop signal. It took multiple exercises and continuous prodding to bring a shift in understanding that what is asked for is an expression of feeling and not an externally validated "correct" answer. Were these responses coming from being deeply entrenched in didactic systems of learning where the effort and emphasis on being right/wrong is far greater than effort on expressing oneself? A similar attitude was reflected when we worked on an activity of narrative building. After many such exercises, Dadi took us all to watch a video installation of Ranbir Kaleka's film, which was set as a part of the larger video installation exhibition of Mani Kaul's films

at JKK. In responding to this experience there was a moment of breakthrough, as one could see slivers of their own emotion that the movie evoked.

While most participants were at a loss of comprehending why these activities were being done, the connections began to emerge as they started working on their individual projects. Each participant set out on a different journey and focussed on a different aspect of what the Masterclass could offer.



**CHETAN GANGAVANE**

**Chetan Gangavane's "Khud ki Kahani"**, was a project that enabled Chetan to delve into his own past and enact his journey with his tradition on stage using shadow, string puppets and OHP slides with photographs of his village and museum. His biggest difficulty in this project, he explained, was to maintain a tight and precise timing especially with changing the OHP slides. Coming from a situation where there are only two families that practice traditional puppetry, he perceives his role as a saviour of the tradition and believes in taking responsibility for continuity of tradition. Over an interview, he explained to me that he wanted to foreground the background story of the struggle his grandfather, father and he experienced to bring their tradition of Chamdache Bavali, Kalasutri Bahuliye and Chitragathi to a certain level of steadiness. He wants to change the misguided impression of family wealth that people often get from his museum in Pinguli, Maharashtra. Chetan also



believes in a narrative that casts his tradition in the frame of “dying art” that he has taken the responsibility of preserving. The narrative choice he made for his show reflected what he wanted to project about his tradition to the public eye.

*His project resonated with a confrontational discussion where Anurupa provoked the participants into thinking what are the implications of rehashing the rhetoric of preservation of art and dying art? What is their relationship with their tradition beyond this rhetoric? Does negotiation with the state only involve evoking pity for the tradition to get grants? What is the value of identifying specific needs of the tradition and proposing grants for those needs?*

These discussion sessions and movie sessions tried to foreground the role that ethical and political awareness play in influencing the tradition. Chetan felt he really benefited from these discussions and one of his most emotional moment was while watching the documentary on Ravan Chaya.



**RAJEEV PULAVAR**

**Rajeev Pulavar's** project was an exploration of Rabindranath Tagore's “**Chandalika**” in shadow and imagery. With close and meticulous punching, his paper puppets threw the most intricate shadows on screen. He exploited what the OHP had to offer and created visual effects using water, ink and paper cut outs. He came from a rich narrative tradition of “Tholpava Koothu” in Kerala and had performed in temples, yet he had a good deal of exposure to

technology and non-mythological content. He had already worked on OHP before and had been a part of shows outside of temple. He had worked on a state funded show about Gandhi, a show with Evan Hastings called the “Ramayana Remix” and a promotional video for a tourism company. But, for somebody with a good level of familiarity with technology and different content, he did not fully emerge out of his comfort zone. His takeaway was recognizing the use of water in shadow. However, he was deeply perceptive of the application of the activities that they were asked to do in the beginning of the workshop. He also mentioned during his interview that he intends to develop this show and take it forward by building a team of women puppeteers.

Rajeev showed us a video of his collaborative show with Evan Hastings one evening along with his other shows leading us into an inquiry on how one must understand “collaboration”. Does working as a traditional puppeteer in somebody's show imply a collaborative relationship? A collaborative relationship necessarily implies an involvement of all collaborative parties in decision making. This question embodies the larger ethical dynamics of the relationship between a traditional puppeteer and an outsider to the tradition. In the technologized and globalized world, many traditional puppeteers have been subjected to being appropriated. The participants shared many such instances where they felt they had been “cheated” or where their work was “stolen” and then either sold or showcased as somebody else's work. In the discussion after the public screening of Shankhajeet's film “Samayara Chhaire” which depicts the sociological and political state of puppeteers of Orissa who belonged to a shadow tradition called “Ravan Chaya, we explored this very grey area of what could fall within the bracket of appropriation. In a conglomeration of traditional puppeteers, urban artists, European puppeteers, film maker and documentarians, different instances of overt and covert appropriation were debated and discussed.



**HARIDAS**

**Haridas** decided to work on the mythical narrative of “**Puthana Moksham**”. Carved in Styrofoam, his puppet was two faced, representing Puthana in her demonic form and in her dainty motherly form. He comes from a family of astrologers and belongs to a group of “Pavakathakali” artists who identify themselves as revivalists of the traditional glove puppetry form of Kerala. Apart from this, he is also a make-up artist for Kathakali performers. A sceptic of the Masterclass, he was disappointed that his expectation of learning a new form of puppetry, especially string puppetry, was not met here. He was clear that the exercises and the activities were not along the line of the learning that he was seeking.

Over an interview, he explains what are the different aspects of revived Pavakathakali performances and how different or same they are compared to the old style. Even though Haridas mentions once that there is not much difference between the old and the revived form he explains on further questioning that the fundamental structure of the performance in the revived form is different. The revivalists brought Pavakathakali onto the stage from the doorstep, making it resemble the Kathakali dance-drama form. This led to other changes like division of skill in performance. The puppeteers who perform on stage no more sing the narratives, they only manipulate the puppets. The artists who sing and play the

instruments are musicians who give music to Kathakali performances.

“Revival” was a recurring theme in many discussions. Shankhajeet’s film also explores in detail the repercussions of reviving Ravana Chaya on the community of traditional shadow puppeteers. As somebody interested in the history of dance in India, it felt like a historical Déjà vu to see puppetry at a place where dance was during the nationalist movement i.e. at the tipping point of revival and classicization. Pallabi Chakravorty, in her book “Bells of Change” discusses the state of North Indian courtesans in 19th Century India when Kathak was going through its shift from being a Nautch to a classical dance. She says “they eventually became stigmatized as the debased women of a shameful past, to be quickly glossed over in the cultural history of North Indian Kathak”. Revival and the classicization of the traditional dance forms was a part of the larger nation building project that left a large number of Devadasis and courtesans stigmatized, unemployed and at a loss of identity.

*How can we learn from the history of one art form and make more sensitized choices and decisions in dealing with another? How can change happen from within the community of practitioners without the loss of collective identity? This brings us back to the question of how can an outsider to the tradition engage with the traditional artists to enable change. Could a Masterclass such as this, be one possible way of engaging with traditional puppeteers to make them stakeholders of change in tradition? Can we think of more context specific ways of engaging with traditional puppeteers?*





DARSHAN

The question of change from within the tradition brings us to **Darshan's** project, a satirical narrative that takes up the problem of gender bias through the voices of his traditional clown puppets "Bangarakka" and "Juttu Maama". Darshan comes from the shadow puppetry tradition of Karnataka called "Togalu Gombeyatta". With his father being a prolific and heroic figure for him, he feels convinced about directing his efforts in taking his tradition forward. Although not fully clear about the mileage of this particular project, during the course of the Masterclass, he resolved to rekindle the desire for puppetry within the younger generation of his familial community. He is also keen to use the new shadow techniques that he learnt in the Masterclass for his shows back home. He marvelled at the uniform light of OHP that allows the puppeteers to take the puppet away from the screen.

*His project is a case in point for many reasons. With a choice of an ideological theme like gender bias, the process of working on his project constantly brought him face to face with his own gender biases. This confrontation occurred overtly while building the narrative and covertly while making the puppet. He battled with an enormous discomfort of making a naked Bangarakka and allowing her character to win the argument in favour of her nudity and her "progressive" ideals. Although at moments I felt doubtful about invading his narrative to foreground what we (especially Dadi and I) thought was right,*

Darshan explains that he felt convinced about the story for himself.

This project also stands as an example of how a tradition can be re-contextualized to engage with and respond to prevalent issues in one's society. It demonstrates, that the clown puppets have a subversive potential that gives them a possible life outside the epic stories and hence can also be brought into state funded shows for social awareness. Apart from being comic relief, clown puppets are traditionally the connectors between the mythic narrative and the audience. Similar to how they were used in Darshan's show, the clown puppets can help the puppeteers bring their own perspective even in the state funded awareness shows that they perform. As Chetan once mentioned, the state funded shows have become no more than a chore where they are given a script and the puppeteers simply have to deliver the dialogues through the puppets and some basic manipulation. Taking the developmental shows seriously (at least the ones that are value-based) can probably enable bridging the gap between traditional and development shows and also make it creatively fulfilling. These shows are also the point of contact between the audience and the puppeteers and a crucial platform for the puppeteers to showcase their skills of manipulation, criticality and narration. As an opportunity to build audience, the attention they gather from the audience can be transferred on to their traditional performances as well.

To creatively engage with contemporary content through tradition requires the puppeteers to develop and hone their critical perspective. This could probably be made possible by working more in new learning contexts like the Masterclass. The next logical step could be an internship with Anurupa or Dadi where reading, researching, questioning and expressing opinions can become a part of their practice.



**JAGANNATH**

**Jagannath** learnt and transformed in leaps and bounds across the three weeks of the Masterclass. He comes from Burdwan in Bengal as a “Tare Putul” (string puppetry) practitioner. Although he belongs to a tradition, his engagement with Tare Putul stems from a definitive sense of volition. Before him, his grandfather was the last puppeteer in the family. What is left of his grandfather’s puppets are their decrepit bodies without faces. Not bound by an overarching weight of his tradition, Jagannath feels as much freedom to bring newness to his traditional shows as much as he feels for his social awareness shows. In the interview he said,

*“Change in traditional will happen. I will have to bring changes. My grandfather also brought some changes, he reduced the size of the puppets and made them more proportionate. Before they were like the large puppets we saw in the Telugu movie. Also he changed the entry of the puppets from top to side. Only the puppets representing gods still enter and exit from the top.”*

His project “Moorkh Brahman” was a refreshingly original depiction of a comic situation in the technique of string and rod puppetry. Moving away from his comfort zone of manipulating basic three to four stringed puppets, in the Masterclass, he learnt to make and manipulate a much more complex string puppet. He was eager to go back and flesh out this

project and was excited about performing it in Partho’s festival. Having always used recorded sounds for performances, Jagannath’s biggest challenge in this project was dialogue delivery. Very early into the Masterclass, he appreciated being exposed to theory and he deeply valued being able to work in others shows especially because he got an opportunity to touch and manipulate the shadow puppets.



**PRAVEEN**

Praveen was another participant who came from the “Togalugombeyatta tradition” and belonged to the same community as Darshan. His project was a direct result of the narrative building exercise that Dadi conducted. The story revolved around the life of a Peepal tree in his village and provoked the audience to reimagine nature as suffused with life and emotions. He created miniature paper puppets and manipulated them on the OHP light box. Although he has grown up in the presence of a Master puppeteer this was his first experience with manipulation. Apart from working on his own project, he played an active role in manipulating Bangarakka and Sita puppet for Darshan’s show. He was playing the percussion or was at the OHP slide for almost every other participant’s show.

His dreams and plans are conjoined to Darshan’s. Having shared a bond since childhood, in him, Darshan might find a potential supporter. In his own work,





Praveen was very dependent on others, he sought people who could do the work for him rather than for finding out how to work.

### Questions

Douglas M. Knight, in his biography of Balasaraswati explains tradition using a Sanskrit word, "Sampradaya". He says, "A Sanskrit word that conveys this sense of continuity and evolution is Sampradaya, or tradition subject to review or redefinition." Continuity and evolution of a tradition, according to this interpretation is a proactive process involving constant reviewing and redefinition of tradition.

*As inheritors of tradition, how can the puppeteers engage responsibly with the tradition? They cannot simply be onlookers of change in their tradition as it flows past them nor can they just "go with the flow".*

*As inheritors of tradition, how can the puppeteers engage responsibly with the tradition? They cannot simply be onlookers of change in their tradition as it flows past them nor can they just "go with the flow".* But, going against the flow need not imply preserving the tradition in its fossilized form. They need to constantly engage in the tradition and reinterpret its meaning by asking questions pertinent to their context. In the Masterclass, Darshan and Chetan made an attempt to actively engage with the tradition and reimagine it in a different capacity while remaining rooted as traditional puppeteers. They made references to their tradition in their performances. Darshan's show depicted the traditional characters and a snippet from the Ramayana while in Chetan's show the primary content was the story of his tradition. Can we say that Rajiv's show and Haridas's show also reinterpret the tradition or did they just use elements (like stylistic aspects of the puppet) of the traditional form? On what basis can we differentiate between a

performance that reinterprets the tradition from a performance that "uses" the tradition? What is it that the Masterclasses can do to ground the puppeteers deeper in their tradition yet help them develop tools to interpret, review and redefine the tradition within their own context? Since the need for growth of each community is different, having Masterclasses with puppeteers of a singular community might enable situating and identifying their specific needs and exploring different ways of addressing them.

**Sammitha Sreevathsa** is a researcher, writer and documentarian of performing arts. After completing her Masters in Philosophy, she has been a part of Antara Collective (Bangalore), where she explores the idea of body as a site of knowing and learning.

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## 2 | THE MASTER SPEAKS Dadi Pudumjee

This Master Class presented a unique opportunity for traditional puppeteers of the younger generation. Our objective was to create a pedagogical framework for transmitting knowledge, experience and practise for this specific group. The first of its kind- such an immersive training opportunity has never been offered to the younger generation of traditional puppeteers before. We were very excited.

We snatched a few planning discussions with Dadi in between all our busy schedules. As the organising team, Anurupa and I were also unsure of the outcome, ... there were so many challenges and this was unfamiliar territory.

But it seemed that Dadi had many misgivings about taking this Master Class!

*“Why do you call it a Master Class? and not a workshop?” Dadi would ask us.*

Three weeks went by...and on the closing days of the Master Class when we were doing a feedback session, Dadi laughed and acknowledged... “Yes! I was unsure and hesitant when you asked me.”

*“But now I agree it is the right title- a Master Class. It couldn’t have been shorter. Three weeks is just right. You would not reach this depth and intensity with less time . The format is good.”*

We explored through this experience the difference between a mere workshop and a Master Class. It is the sheer immersion, the holistic experience taking the participants from aesthetics to ethics, into technique and design, making, creation, collaboration and finally performance. This is definitely more than a workshop- where the focus is typically on making and taking. Initially, in the first week, there was a struggle to find a common language. We groped our way into the minds of these generational puppeteers. The young practitioners (mostly between 22 and 30 years) were aware of the momentousness of the moment.



On the first day the excitement was palpable in both Dadi and the participants. There was an air of anticipation and awe. Dadi is a tall figure in the world of Puppetry in India- to have him as a Guru! well that was a real opportunity.

The participants were from different traditions, cultures and languages: a string puppeteer from Kala Sutri Bahulye- Maharashtra Shadow puppeteer from Tholpava Koothu tradition of Kerala, A Tarer Putul string puppets of West Bengal, Glove puppets - Pawai Kathakali of Kerala and finally shadow puppeteers from the Togalu Gombeyatta tradition. Each one speaking a different language carrying a different aesthetic and a different tradition. Not to forget the String Puppets of Rajasthan: Kathputli



Dadi was quite clear from day one: I am sharing my own journey. Success did not come in one day... to turn a hobby into a profession took a lot of hard work. I began as a student of design and the journey from design to the proscenium and performance was made possible by guides, teachers and mentors. He situated each element of learning within his own growth and work experience.

“I will introduce you to what I know best.” So what unfolded in the first week could well be a foundation course for Puppeteers- a broad based exploration of design, material, texture, colour, shape, space.

Next came the narrative and the sound scape and lastly the performance design.

Each element was taken apart. It was so abstract that it teetered on the edge of the esoteric and untouchable. It was the complete opposite of the transmission process each of the participants had received. Their learning had been informal, tactile, repetitive and imitative.

It was exciting to see each one respond with excitement to this honest, humble and ‘no holds barred sharing.’ Each element was illustrated by examples from Dadi’s own practice and from the work of other puppeteers(films).

Dadi shared generously from his own experience telling the young participants how “new work (as against the known-to-audience traditional temple performances) presents its own challenges. The audience will not have the same context as you, it is not a temple show where every one in the audience knows the Ramayan.” In USSR when Dadi was performing a Krishna legend, the audience was troubled by the “blue Krishna” puppet. They thought he represented a sick person because of his colour!.

The evenings were spent in watching films about traditions from the west, stories of struggles for survival, cutting edge contemporary work. They embraced the notion of being part of a world community of performance artists sharing common ground and a shared history. The discussions and

conversations that followed revealed how this exposure was received. The participants were fired up, hard working and productive. They began to perceive each other, learn about each other’s traditions, challenges and difficulties. It was a rare opportunity for these youngsters to expand their knowledge and vision not only of the country but also of the world. Dadi taught generously. It was a tough call to work in all 4 techniques simultaneously, switching from shadow to string, carving thermocol, wood to moving rods and gloves.

“Yes! I would like to repeat this experience.” both participants and Master felt the same way after the Master Class.

“Perhaps the Master Class can be followed up by mentoring of projects which have emerged, that the participants may want to flesh out.”

“It is, after a long time, a really exciting and creative workshop. So intensive.”

The feedback was rewarding. We value this experience and are encouraged by the positive response. It remains to look once again for support and space to take the next step in our journey for creating a pedagogical framework.





# 3 MASTERCLASSES – A journey of pedagogic possibilities

by Anurupa Roy



If one is to define a Master class in one phrase it would be “a lab of experiences in transmitting and receiving knowledge”. UNIMA India has finished its fifth lab recently thereby covering five pedagogic experiences, namely traditional master with contemporary artists as participants, traditional master with only contemporary puppeteers as participants, contemporary Indian master puppeteer with young generational puppeteers from traditional forms, masters from two allied branches of puppetry namely Paper Theatre and Material Theatre with contemporary artists (including puppeteers) from urban spaces.

Each of these lab spaces has given the observers and documenters many insights, has thrown open discussions and discourses and has created a powerful network of Master Class alumni, mentors and documenters. We are now able to see patterns emerge in the kind of participants who apply to the Master Classes. A comparative study of the five master classes has given us the beginning of a cohesive curriculum to train a professional puppeteer. We are also able to identify some gaps in the practices of the puppetry community, identified by the participants during all the master classes.

This article takes a closer look at the master classes though the lens of a final curriculum structure, the gaps

yet to be filled in the trainings available to puppeteers, and the emerging discourse in puppetry.

We start with a closer look at the “Masters” themselves and the role they play in a master class. The term “Master Class” is carefully chosen. These are not just workshops or trainings. They emphasize a deep engagement with the Master, her/his philosophy and journey as an artist. Immersion is “key” in the master classes. A Master is clearly someone who has devoted their lives to the art form and is deeply immersed in their practice. The Master Class is an opportunity for the participant to immerse in the master’s practice.

On the basis of the master classes we have identified certain patterns and systems of learning. Here is an in-depth look at the various components of the Master classes which will form the back bone of any future puppetry course in India.

If we were to design a curriculum which could weave in the skills and pedagogic systems of masters then it could look like this :

## FOUNDATION MASTER CLASS

With basic training in understanding design, brief theory, basics of manipulation and working with material (like Thermocol/wood carving, sculpting foam, working with fabric, glues, paints etc.)



## TRADITIONAL FORM

Once initiated into the basics the next step could be an in depth initiation to traditional form- Its narrative content, the traditional stories and philosophy. If this master class could be in the space/village of the master it could mean an in depth introduction to the context of puppet theatre and the arts. This would come from meeting the relatives and family of the master, following him with his shows to the community and watching shows by other puppeteers in the community. The making of the material like, leather, paints, brushes etc would be a part of the process.

## APPLIED PUPPETRY

Once the foundation training and various aspects of traditional form are introduced in depth, the next master class could look at applied forms like Paper Theatre or Material theatre which look at the building blocks of puppetry and manifest new forms. This master class could focus on creating core performances that become the future productions of the students.

## DRAMATURGY

The main gap we have in our master class experiences, in fact in puppet theatre performances in general in India, is dramaturgy. We need to include Dramaturgy as a major aspect of the master classes. This includes the skill of choosing a narrative or story, the skill of turning it into a script, making choices of what you want to say, then how to say it and the plan of realizing the “how”. This master class would be integrated into the making of a show by each of the students.

## THE MENTOR

### *A crucial but invisible role in a master class is of the mentor.*

The mentor’s role varies. She/he keeps in touch with the participants and the masters before, during and after the master class. The mentor supports the master in facilitation of the class, getting together the material, space, organizing resources like trips, film viewings, the reference readings and most importantly facilitating the discussions about technique, and form and initiating discussions and debates. Sometimes

the mentor must also step in to provide containers for the skills taught by the master or the narrative and philosophy introduced by the master, or creating the link between the master’s technique and the participants practice. Most importantly the mentor supports the participant’s projects by asking questions, discussing process challenges and identifying tasks for the participants so that they continue to immerse in the process and keep their eyes firmly on their artistic goals. In that sense a mentor is like a PhD guide.

In the puppet school situation the task of the mentor becomes more complex and grows manifold. While the masters will engage with the students for a limited period of time, the guide will follow the student’s path through the course by setting tasks for the students during the master class and between two master classes. The guide will follow and support in projects and also set up excursions, internships and recommend materials to study for the projects.

## PROJECTS

In every master class learning takes place in two distinct containers namely the direct hands on teaching by the master and the much more indirect learning during the projects. In each master class the participant has to respond to the Master’s practice and training with her/his own practice. This point of confluence is always the premise of projects. In Gunduraju’s workshop each of the participants presented their projects in collaboration with Gunduraju and as a response to the narrative or material or dramaturgy of Togalu Gombeyatta. Atul Sinha’s animation film “The exile of Ram” emerged from this project. It is an animation piece which uses Togalu puppets, Gunduraju’s music and voice and is a modern rendition of a small khand of the Ramayana, which creates a unique contemporary visual language. Aditi Chitre’s Surpanakha project took her all the way to Hassan to continue working with Gunduraju for a year after the master class, Partho Prathim Paul created the segments of his play “Bir Purush” inspired by Togalu Gombeyatta shadow puppetry.

In Puran Bhatt's master class both Shravana Heggodu and TP Kunhiraman created short solos with string puppets which they still perform. The shows created by Karim, John Basheer and Atul Sinha during Alain Lecucq and Narguess Majd's masterclass has become a regular travelling show in Atul's repertoire. Puneeta Roy and Binitesh Baruah's beautifully poignant piece is still performed at storytelling festivals by Puneeta. Barbara Kolling's technique has had a deep impact on the performing approach of all the participants in her master class.

More recently in Dadi Pudumjee's master class six distinct performance projects emerged. Jagganatha Singh's piece with string and rod puppets is all set to participate in the Burdhaman Puppet Festival. The documenters have also been deeply affected by the master classes. Mahesh Rai started working on a project with Gunduraju and Anurupa Roy has created the Mahabharata with a concentrated focus on the Togalu Gembeyatta version of the Mahabharata in collaboration with and under the guidance of Gunduraju, an idea which emerged during the master class.

An important aspect of the learning takes place in "peer" circles thereby become the beginning of future collaborations. All projects are essentially collaborations between participants who support each other as co actors, puppeteers, designers, makers and technical support team. This was seen really strongly in Dadi Pudumjee's master class with young puppeteers from the traditional forms. This would probably lead to future co productions.

The Projects also serve as a wonderful assessment tool. They reflect the participant's true take away, albeit short term. What skills did they pick up? How did their skills improve? Did they take risks and try new things they learnt in the master class and apply them to the projects or did they stick with the old and the familiar?

Projects essentially throw people together, challenge them to revisit their own practice but armed with new knowledge and then give them the possibility to receive feedback from the audience and each other.



## DISCOURSE

The other reason why master class model is distinct from workshops is their focus on discourses around several puppetry related themes. In the five master classes these crucial discussions have emerged over and over again. The crucial challenge in the creation of a nuanced curriculum will depend on integrating these themes in the foundation of the course, both in theory and practice. Some of these themes are :

**The constantly changing and debatable definitions of Traditional and Contemporary Form.** This discussion will have to be entered again and again during the course especially in the context of the relation





How to survive as a professional puppeteer? What are the marketing strategies? How to promote puppetry? How to build an audience and new patronage?

Apart from performances, there is a lot of work being created in the field of puppetry in development communication. This is an important area of income generation for puppeteers besides reaching newer audiences. How can one improve the work in this sector?

### THE NETWORK

Last but not the least the one of the biggest salient achievements of the master is the alumni body that has been formed. This includes participants of the master classes, the masters of course, the documenter and observers and the mentors. Currently, these number fifty and their role in the future school is manifold. While some of them have attended more than one master class, and have begun subsequent puppetry careers, some have begun collaborations with each other, some have become local partners and guides of UNIMA India during regional master classes and some have become indispensable in the discussions about the structure and philosophy of the future school.

between the two. It is important to examine the exchange and borrowing between the two and ask the question “is this borrowing equal”, “is it ethical?”, “is their status equal in their own eyes, in the eyes of the public, the patrons, the state ?”

What is a collaboration between artists? What is an ethical collaboration?

What are the challenges faced by puppeteers in India? What is their identity? How to respond to the dying art tag? What is preservation in the context of puppetry? Is it necessary? Why and how?







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# 4 OBSERVATIONS

## *A theoretical framework*

The comments were flowing fast and furious after the first week of the Master Class:

*“I have never given this a thought?”  
“I never knew there was a theory to puppetry?”  
“A History?” “There are traditions in other parts of the world?”*

While some had experience and skill in drawing, painting, sculpture and colour, they had never thought of it from the design aspect, the meaning of colour per se, the choices that texture and the vocabulary of colour offers, the emotional reach of a colour. The exercises were too brief and ephemeral but the lens was opening wider.

## *New Material*

For most of them- this is what they were looking forward to most- exploration of new techniques, new tools, new material. Their eyes lit up at the sight of the material laden workshop space.

But there was a catch. The Master was clear that new materials were offered only in the context of design and aesthetic choices. The ‘why’ became more important than the ‘how’.

Repeated questioning forced them to face their own choices or the lack of them, their questions or the absence of enquiry.

They struggled -as making choices is not part of their traditional training in the family framework.

The introduction to new materials will definitely enlarge the aesthetic choices that these puppeteers will take away. Hopefully the choices will be informed by the theory and design elements so that the material/ technique/tool is not used only for its new -ness but other thought out qualities it brings.



## *Dramaturgy?*

The biggest challenge for all of the participants was to search for new themes, narratives, contents.

Clearly Dramaturgy is a crucial element in a syllabus. The next Master Class should focus on Dramaturgy.

*What is important from our own perspective is to locate an Asian ‘take’ on Dramaturgy. Like most ‘theory’ elements of Puppetry, Dramaturgy too come to us through the western lens.*

It is for this ,that Unima India has committed to research South East Asian (Indonesian, Malaysian and Thai )practices in order to have a more balanced view before formulating a syllabus.

Culturally there are greater similarities in the region.



## *Technology provides an inclusive platform*

The divide of the previous decades is being bridged by technology. The younger generation of puppeteers traditional, generational urban or rural are clearly comfortable with technology and connectivity it brings with it.

The new device for creating shadows- the Overhead Projector created ripples of interest. It was embraced eagerly in 4 out of 5 projects!

The connectivity whatsapp and mobile devices bring create an instant bond. The sharing in the group continues even today on whatsapp. Thanks to this development, an element of continuous mentoring has been introduced. Dadi, as the teacher, remains in touch and can follow the projects that are unfolding.

## *Cooperation may lead to collaborations*

One of the exciting outcomes was the collaborations that formed. Two of the performances (pieces developed as work in progress) at the Master Class were seamless production wise. Great team work. The coordination and cooperation was seamless. Future Collaborations will be valuable and a cross group/tradition/ fertilisation may yield rich dividends.

# 5 | Troubled Waters

by Ranjana Pandey

The Master Class threw up yet another insight.

The String Puppeteer of Rajasthan, The Kathputli performer, stood out in the group of participants at the Master Class.. for the wrong reason!

Three Bhattas (the caste name) were enrolled in the Master Class after heavy persuasion by the Jawahar Kala Kendra. They were so resistant that concessions had to be made to motivate them. Their work was not to be compromised. They could come late-leave early so that their work contracts with the hotels could continue uninterrupted. Concessions which no Master Class ever gave to any participant.

Despite all this, it was very disappointing when within the first few days the Bhattas began to lose their motivation. Why did we have to treat them differently? It seemed that they felt marginalised even within this group of traditional puppeteers. Their self esteem was very low.

“Kathputli” is the generic term for Puppetry in Hindi. In Northern India puppets are called Kathputli. Today The image of the Rajasthani Kathputli is synonymous with Rajasthan and its Tourism promotion. It is no wonder that today the new context of the Kathputli String Puppet tradition is tourism promotion.

The red black and white cloth “Taj Mahal” stage of yore is now replaced by the bland hotel lobby. The saga of Amar Singh Rathore (which they performed all over Rajasthan in courts and village squares) to day is replaced by a 15 minute string of “items”. The puppeteers complement their meagre earnings by selling poorly crafted puppet-dolls as souvenirs. The middle man and the hotel industry have replaced the palace patron and village ‘sarpanch’. Their audience is the Tourist.

While Tourism provides a precious opportunity for earning, it also turns a blind eye to quality and sustainability. From a performance art perspective this situation is very detrimental to the art. When it came to the Master Class, the Bhattas found it intimidating. They became excruciatingly aware of

their marginalisation even within the puppeteers of India. In the Master Class they felt powerless to engage with anything, either the material or the ideas. They failed to recognise it as an opportunity for growth.

Dadi felt after our discussion that in comparison with the other traditional puppeteers they were indeed insecure and marginalised. They lacked education, they owned no property, they had no financial security, no place in society. They are seriously marginalised. The performative aspect has diminished. The crafting has deteriorated. No wonder their self esteem has dipped to an all time low.







*“Since the need for growth of each community is different, having Masterclasses with puppeteers of a singular community might enable situating and identifying their specific needs and exploring different ways of addressing them.”*

How did this come to be... let us step back in time to see how the events unfolded.

Perhaps in the 1960's in a search for new audiences, the Kathputli puppeteers stepped out of the village arena into the urban spaces- out of their traditional context where audiences did not understand the nuances of their performances.

This is not the first time... and not the only example of something like this happening.

To give another example - “Thol Pava Koothu”, where the shadow puppeteers of Palghat district in Kerala moved out of the traditional performance space and context (the Koothu Madam in a Bhadrakali temple), to a city theatre or an international festival space. They had to modify their show, edit the narrative to suit the new audiences. However they did not compromise on the quality, aesthetics or diminish the intensity of the narrative

To compare the journey of the Kathputli performers, over the years, in playing to urban audiences, the original narrative of Amar Singh Rathore has shrunk to a point that the oral narrative is virtually lost.

What remains is a string of “items” bereft of a narrative or emotional content it became superficial. The audience the Kathputli Puppeteers perform to mostly (in Rajasthan) are the tourists who neither have the cultural context nor the discrimination. With shrinking audiences, further marginalisation has taken place. Pushing the Kathputli Puppeteer into a very difficult

space. To my knowledge there has never been a census of the Kathputli Puppeteers. My guess is that there are still hundreds of families, concentrated in Rajasthan and Delhi and scattered all over North India.

They possess a knowledge but no longer the where with all to own it. It appears that their imagery and their art has been appropriated and frozen into a picture postcard representing Rajasthan and its culture. The folk art patronage, the tourism industry and the government have let down the Rajasthani Kathputli Puppeteer.

In this situation for how long will they define themselves as Kathputli Puppeteers? They are quick to lament “I will not let my children join this art- there is nothing left in it, no respect, no earning.”

While this may be true of many other traditional forms (Kalasutri Bahulye and even Togalu Gombeyatta) it is particularly extreme in Rajasthan, the marginalisation and exploitation is visible..

There is a dire need for stimulation within the Kathputli art form. In this context what does a school mean to these puppeteers? Will a certificate course provide a stamp of excellence? social acceptance? Can it give legitimacy to a practitioner, will it help them get work? There are many questions which have to be dealt with in a dialogue with the stake holders and the “powers” to re invent the fate of this truly dying art.

### The SNA Experience

More than a decade ago. there was another serious attempt at reviving Kathputli - In 2005 the Sangeet Natak Akademi took serious note of the diminishing status and quality of the Kathputli tradition. This was followed by a survey in Rajasthan and in Shadipur Depot (Delhi) where a large number of Kathputli puppeteers had gravitated and were living for many decades. Here too the young Bhattas were surviving by playing the Dhol at weddings, singing Bollywood songs, organising “cultural” and entertainment events...

They had hung up their puppets, forgotten their tools and no longer practised their art or their craft. The Kathputli Puppeteers had got swallowed up by the mixed up aesthetics of the city and the demand for entertainment.

A survey revealed that a group of young boys were interested in reconnecting with their identity as Kathputli Puppeteers. If given the opportunity, they were willing to learn.

A prolonged workshop was designed. The objective: to re-infuse and re-introduce the craft of puppet making and reviving the performative aspect. It was aimed at the younger generation of Bhattas from families of Kathputli puppeteers.

Puran Bhatt, the acknowledged Master Puppeteer of Kathputli Tradition was selected as the master trainer. 15 boys under 23 yrs of age were selected and enrolled by Puran himself.

Sangeet Natak Akademi sustained the training with all the support (financial, infrastructural, space, material) for one whole year. The trainees were given a stipend to keep them motivated.

At the beginning of the workshop, the boys could not even use a swazzle. They were taught to make and use the swazzle and perform with it.

It was clear they had moved very far from their traditional tasks. But to their credit they wanted very much to regain their self-esteem, to be called Kathputli puppeteers, and acknowledge their inherited identity.

The workshop gained momentum. The young puppeteers were taught to carve puppet heads out of mango wood, paint them, tailor their clothes, stuff the bodies and finally string the puppets. Then they were taught manipulation. All this required hard work and application.

Over the year, the traditional performance of the Kathputli Tradition: "Amar Singh Rathore", was recreated as a full production- with new puppets,



live music and narration. A lot of hard work went into research and sourcing of the original narrative.

It was a challenge for even Puran to recall the oral narrative and collect the songs and characters from his elders.

He admitted that at least some part of the old story was lost for ever. His memories of childhood performances with his father and grandfather had faded. Tragically the continuity was broken. He could no longer recall details. It had vanished from the living memory of his elders of his community also.



However the production was mounted and performed before Michael Meschke, Usha Mallik and SNA representatives and Dadi Pudimjee at the Kamla Devi Bhavan.

### Disappointing Outcome

Of the 15 puppeteers selected many dropped out (despite the motivational stipend). And today only 4 of them have emerged as puppeteers!

It was a heavy investment by SNA and Puran Bhatt. Despite all the support the young Bhatt wanted shows to be organised by SNA. They abdicated all responsibility to their patron SNA. Did too much support fuel unrealistic expectations?

Their work/manipulation did not improve beyond a point. When probed, they did not want to invest time in practise. Manipulation is a skill which has to be honed on a daily basis- like a 'pooja'. Puran Bhatt was a living example to them of outstanding technical excellence and precision in manipulation. His "items" are the same as any body else today. But he gets a standing ovation because of the masterly quality of his manipulation which comes only from hard work and passion. Both qualities are lacking in these boys.

SNA tried very hard to repeat this workshop/training in Jaipur. But they failed miserably to get a response from the local Kathputli performers.

Perhaps the future of these puppeteers lies in contemporary puppetry?

The contemporisation of technique without compromising the aesthetics (as seen in Puran Bhatt's 'Dhola Maru') can be successful in the eyes of both the audience and the puppeteer. To bring this about or for it to happen organically may not be possible in all cases.

*The challenge then is to find a bridge between the traditional and the contemporary, without compromising their identity and their aesthetics.*



## The Contemporary Experience

The community of younger puppeteers have had another strong influence and opportunity for growth from the Gali Gali Sim Sim Television project.

This TV project brought professionalism and discipline for those who were selected.

It also introduced a new aesthetic and contemporary, western look. This “new aesthetic” appealed to the urban audience and also to the corporate patrons.

College student groups and development junkies enamoured by the curious journey of the Bhattas adopted them. Kathputli Colony at Shadipur Depot (the urban slum )had by this time become the darling of an international storm, feted by media, front paged by the press and celebrated exotica in New York.

Everyone wanted to “save” the Kathputli Puppeteer and pull them out of their marginalisation. There has

been an enormous amount of cross fertilisation and State support in the last 5 to 7 years.

The attention and efforts of the urban educated elite has had some outcome.

Several small groups of puppeteers have come together under different banners. Even the women/ girls of the Bhatt families have been inducted into “development communication” and craft related “income generation activities”. How many of them will remain wedded to their tradition or will they wear two hats ? only time will tell.

In this Master Class we got an opportunity to reflect and discuss the situation of the Kathputli Tradition. It became clear to us that each tradition has its specific context, journey and therefore has specific problems.











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