



Sutradhar

A UNIMA India Publication

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR	02
OVERVIEW OF THE DECADE 1980 - 1990	04
MAHIPATRAY PRATAPRAY KAVI	06
MANSINH ZALA - In Gratitude to his Guru	10
RATNAMALA NORI - A Puppeteer of her Own Making	13
UNIMA INDIA FOUNDATION COURSE	18

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



Note from the Editor

This issue of Sutradhar has been put together in continuation of our effort to begin a discourse around the history of contemporary puppetry in India which initiated with the Sutradhar, Issue 8.

Recognizing the absence of documentation of contemporary puppetry in India, these two issues of Sutradhar hope to initiate a critical dialogue on the history and cultural milieu of contemporary puppetry in different parts of the country. The issue 8 which looked at the nascent stages of contemporary puppetry in India (1950s and 1960s) did so by focusing on some key first generation contemporary puppeteers whose work put initial structures in places for future. We relied mostly on interviews of students and acquaintances of these key figures to weave a web of narratives.

In this issue, we pick up the thread from where we left off and cover the next few decades. We get a glimpse into the lives and works of the next generation of contemporary puppeteers who continued to build on what was initiated by the likes of Meher Rustom Contractor and Suresh Datta. Making this continuity between generations explicit becomes an important exercise especially in the context of contemporary puppetry. *Unlike in the case of traditional puppetry where the passing on of knowledge from generation to generation is a given, in contemporary puppetry we hope to actively reconsider the tendency to think of the work done by present day contemporary puppeteers as disconnected or in isolation from the work done by the previous generation of contemporary puppeteers.*

Meher Behn in Ahmedabad, not only established UNIMA - India but wielded a far-reaching influence on the growth and spread of contemporary puppetry in India. She informally trained and influenced many new puppeteers. In this issue we follow two of her students / alumni: Mahipat Kavi and Mansinh Zala and an admirer from Hyderabad, who also learnt, albeit briefly, from Meher Behn to Ratnamala Nori.

While documenting the journey of many puppeteers and practitioners, they themselves give testimony to the hardship faced to gather learning, in the absence of structured training. They had to learn by watching each other. It was tough to make ends meet. The larger population had little understanding of contemporary puppetry. Much of the work was marked with passion but without proficiency. These brave puppeteers made a great contribution to puppetry in the field of development and education. Piecing this history is difficult. Sadly, puppeteers are not given to documenting their work. The photographs are faded and the videos have fungus.

Thanks to Meher Behn's efforts, and connections, her influence spread to many people in Ahmedabad. She approached Mrinalini Sarabhai of Darpana Academy. Mrinalini Sarabhai, dancer, patron of the arts and an influential person, understood the value of this performance art. Generously she gave Meher Behn a platform and a physical space to establish a Puppetry Center. Until 2002, The Darpana Academy hosted a Puppet Centre which ran regular workshops for children and adults and sponsored productions.

In 1992 the Darpana Academy hosted an International Festival of Puppetry. Puppetry got a great deal of encouragement and developed a sizeable following in Ahmedabad. The Darpana Academy played an important role in the promotion of the Puppet Arts.

Meher Behn's work inspired Mahipat Kavi and Mansinh Zala. Both of them learned and worked with her over time. Both went on to establish their own Puppet Theatre groups and continue to contribute to the field even today.

In this issue, all of the puppeteers interviewed, call our attention to the need for a training program in puppetry. UNIMA – India, after toiling for six years has arrived at a carefully curated Certificate program for puppetry which was launched in October 2018. The program is born out of the struggles echoed in these stories of contemporary puppeteers. Their struggles are living records of a deep absence of spaces, learning opportunities, critical discourse and above all a community which can support the practice and pursuit of this performing art in the Indian context. Hence, along with the articles on the puppeteers, this issue carries an article briefly describing the course, outline of its structure, its content and some key features.

On that note, we bare our efforts to you readers, inviting you to engage and take this dialogue on Puppetry forward.

Ranjana Pandey

President

Unima India

1

OVERVIEW OF A DECADE 1980- 1990

by Ranjana Pandey

A boom in television industry. Declaration of State Emergency. Beginnings of a liberal economy. Intensified social discourse on population, poverty and education. Such is the generic collage evoked of India in the 80s. What did it mean, however, to practice puppetry in this socio-political and economic milieu? How did 80s change the winds of Indian Contemporary puppetry? Through the journey of a handful of Puppeteers, we recreate the decade of contemporary puppetry 1980 onwards. It is a decade of importance, for the gust of socio-economic change altered the public identity of puppetry in India. Puppetry occupied the public sphere like never before.

In this decade, we were just becoming aware of the wealth and depth of the traditions of puppetry in India. Learning from the traditional puppeteers, the new puppeteers adopted a few traditional devices like the Sutradhar, Ganesh Vandana, live music and songs. Meher Behn Contractor was unique in trying to use much more than just these devices. She explored the aesthetic of traditional shadow puppetry and created a performance: Rustom Sohrab a Persian story told in Andhra style leather shadow puppets.

However, Rustom Sohrab was an anomaly, the narratives of this decade were not romantic like Rustom Sohrab. They were prompted by the current needs and pressing development issues. The challenge was to resist collapsing performances into simplistic, didactic lessons and instead develop performances that were engaging, entertaining and yet delivered the message.

In the cities there was a growing awareness of children as a separate audience adding a new dimension to the traditional concept of the community show. Schools opened their doors, puppets in the classroom, puppetry in education became

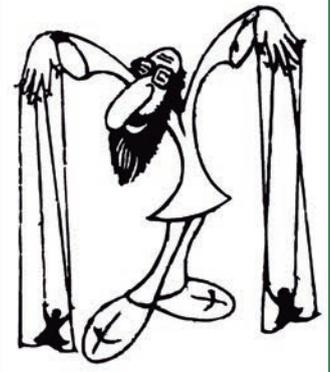
a by word for some, announcing the dawn of applied puppetry in India. Puppetry in education was adapted to suit our own indigenous needs whether it was for first generation learners, children with disabilities, a rural school, or even an adult education program. The aesthetic of these was completely different from the traditional visual vocabulary.

Doordarshan (the national television channel) was beginning to recognize puppetry's phenomenal reach and power. Technology was moving rapidly connecting remote villages. In all the journeys shared by puppeteers in this issue, Satellite TV in Gujarat, CCRT in Delhi, Hyderabad Television feature as their clients. Creating puppets for television and writing for this new medium was exciting. With their simple charm, puppets were soon captivating rural audiences on the small screen. The Muppet and the sophisticated look of American Puppets on television had not invaded the screen in India. (It would happen a decade or so later).

This magical success fueled the application of puppetry in Development Communication for many decades and it still reverberates.

The cycle of sharing

Much was happening in the world of contemporary puppetry. The intangible labour of building a culture of puppetry by first generation contemporary puppeteers such as Meher Behn and Suresh Datta paved way for the next generation puppeteers to emerge. Despite this however, there was a gaping vacuum of a formal pedagogical framework for the young puppeteers. They looked up to their foreign trained Gurus and learnt informally at their feet.



In this decade- no one looked to the traditional puppeteer for learning and exploration. Everyone looked West. Meher Behn and Suresh Datta were two Puppeteers of previous decades who were trained and well connected in the West. They brought directors and artists from Europe to offer training programs and workshops in India. They taught generously to all those who were interested. It was a natural cycle of sharing which characterizes puppetry community the world over. Mahipat Kavi set up workshops for students and teachers. Ratnamala taught others. The same experiences resonate in Gujarat, in New Delhi and in Hyderabad. There were Government sponsored training workshops too.

For so much effort however, the result was limited. Many participated in workshops and training programs but few stayed the course. In the absence of constant follow ups, the government sponsored workshops too, ended in a blind alley. The hope was to build a community of puppeteers who could work together, but building a community was a laborious task. In addition to the financial uncertainty and career challenges in Puppetry perhaps the workshop model without structure, build up and rigour remained incomplete and did not propel participants into the path of puppetry. The fall out was that you ran at the same spot.

In their work, many of puppeteers including Ratnamala Nori, Mahipat Kavi and Mansinh Zala had to rely on their family members to help them. They also had to hold other jobs to survive and fuel their passion. There wasn't enough confluence and stimulation for dynamic growth. The space for discourse and study did not exist. Perhaps this was one of the reasons for an aesthetic and qualitative stagnation.

Given this atmosphere where the social conditions did not support a learning experience that is continuous, how can we construe inter-generational continuity in contemporary puppetry of this decade? Mansinh Zala had a constant teacher – Meher Behn Contractor, whereas Ratnamala Nori stands as a puppeteer with a unique hybrid identity who learnt from a broad range of senior contemporary puppeteers and traditional puppeteers. This decade to throws up important questions that we need to consider while weaving a narrative of puppetry for 80s – what was the new meaning of being a puppeteer that was emerging? How did the social conditions change the relationship between a puppeteer and society? How was state viewing this relationship between the two? How did doing puppetry for camera change the relationship between puppeteer and the puppets?

While we might not find answers to all these questions, asking them becomes nevertheless important not only to build a critical discourse but to be vigilant about how we're framing the past.

It has taken 20 years to reach a point when UNIMA- India took up the gauntlet to run Master Classes and then to create a structured training program. Having emerged from the experiences of challenges narrated throughout this issue.

The process of developing an indigenous and relevant training for India has only just begun. The UNIMA India foundation course for puppeteers ran from October 20th 2018 to January 2019 followed by an intensive internship.

2

MAHIPATRAY PRATAPRAY KAVI

Based on interviews with Chandni Zala
edited by Ranjana Pandey



Mahipat Kavi began as a student of Meher Behn Contractor and soon took over the Puppetry Section in the prestigious Darpana Academy. After leaving Darpana, in 1974 he set up a Puppet Theatre Company called **Puppets and Plays**. His work took him to many parts of the country as well as England and Wales. His company was invited to perform in Europe and Dubai.

Mahipat Kavi became deeply interested in teaching puppetry and floated an Indian Puppet Academy in Ahmedabad in 1987, where he ran many short-term courses for teachers, students, and children. He remains deeply committed to his passion - puppetry in education. His is an interesting journey revealed to Chandni Zala, a young Puppeteer living in Ahmedabad. Mahipat Kavi agreed to be interviewed by Chandni. The article is based on the audio recordings made by her.

Kickstarting a career in puppetry

At that time - in the mid 1960's, why Ahmedabad, even in all of Gujarat no one had any thought about puppetry. Let alone 'New Puppetry', what Meher Ben taught us.

So, my defining moment was when I went to Shreyas school where Meher Behn was teaching children with puppets- using them in a new way. I was amazed. It hit me hard. New Puppets - New Way and how wonderful! I was enraptured and decided immediately to give up Theatre and join Puppetry.

Even today my passion is undiminished.

I am even more deeply involved in research. In Atharva Veda I found that there is a mention of Puppets. My God! in Atharva Veda! So many new revelations. So, I decided to study and now I am working on a book, "Indian Puppetry and its various forms".

An unusual man for his times

My family was into Textile Business. I was expected to join the business and learn the trade. But I had different ideas. I declared to my family, that I would not join. "Why?" I was asked: I will have to lie and that is not acceptable. *(He meanders reliving his younger days)*

I was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and his Satyagraha. I had taken 27 oaths and sacrificed many things. For example, I took an oath that until India became independent, I would remain barefoot. I declared I would wear only khadi; I gave up eating sweets...etc.

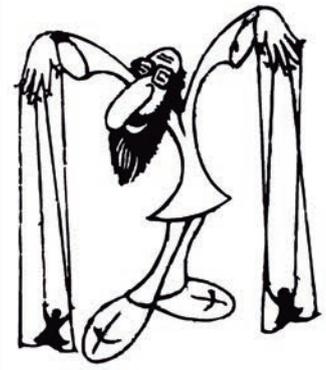
(He laughs indulgently at the person he was. Stubborn and determined. He even used to spin ((charkha)).

"So, what will you do?" my family asked.

"I will do Theatre."

"But you will have to learn - you know nothing about it!" they retorted.

Fortunately, Darpana Academy, run by Mrinalini Sarabhai had just started a Theatre/Drama course which was two years long. I joined. In the two years there were 6 theatre productions and



would you believe it, I was always given the role of an Old Man!!! Such was my body structure. This was very limiting and disheartening.

One day at Darpana- Meher Behn arrived with her “foreign” puppets. It was a fascinating moment. I was captivated and decided to join her, learn from her.

I learnt with her for 3 or 4 years. She taught me everything and also opened a bridge to the world of Western Puppetry and Puppeteers for me.

Although Rajasthani Puppets were popular for 1500 years, I learnt modern puppetry. When I was with Meher Behn I encountered glove, rod, shadow and string puppetry. I learnt them all. I used different kinds of puppets for different stories.

The focus of my work was particularly looking at Puppetry in Education and in Mass Communication. Gradually I began to teach young people in university and run workshops. It is difficult to earn from this art, and people have failed to understand the depth of Puppetry or how children learn through this medium, which I am passionate about. Till today people have not understood. And now it is almost time to leave this planet... *(laughs lightly, Mahipat Kavi is well into his eighties)* *(He is amused at the recording on the phone and says “kamal ho gaya” (how amazing is this?))*

Influence and inspiration

Meher Behn surely- she was my guide and my

teacher. All my learning was experiential. I learnt about the depth of puppetry from her.

She taught me how Puppets could be used in the classroom, how teachers also could be taught to use puppets. There should be a Puppet teacher in all schools.

In the west I have seen how they use Puppets in the classroom for children. The stories they enacted would be based on the lesson. It was wonderful.



Meher Behn taught me, but my wife (Leelaben Kavi) was my inspiration. It was a love marriage. She was a good crafts woman. She would have been 88 yrs. old today. My wife died at the age of 82. After losing her, I have lost my inspiration. I cannot work anymore. When I pick up a puppet in my hand, I see my wife...and I put it down again.

On his understanding of the origins of puppetry in Gujarat and Rajasthan

“My research tells me that there is an ancient form of puppetry in 5th century Gujarat. It is said that a Jain Monk made rod puppets made of wood and cloth. He gave these puppets to Padalipt Suri who used them in the court. He was criticized for bringing these female (puppet) forms into the austere court. The tale ends with a curse to puppeteers. Therefore no one practiced puppetry.”

There was once a poet called Kank Bhat in Gujarat. He had amazing memory power. He listened

to poetry just once- and he could recall them all. Even so one day he plagiarized a poem and got caught. For this insult to the Goddess of learning, Saraswathi, he was expelled from the kingdom and had to leave the very same day.

He went to Rajasthan with his family. There he saw some heads sculpted from wood which inspired him to create stories around Vikramaditya's court which became very popular!

The current trend of Kathputli is different from this, and is rooted in the post Moghul era.

(He also maintains that Puppetry's original birth place is India and from here it went to China and Japan).

On his challenges

My biggest challenge was to stay steady on the path of puppetry despite all the difficulties.

When the audience sees a show, they do not see the hard work and dedication behind this art.

There are many writers, authors, storytellers and all have ignored this art form. We get acclaimed abroad for puppetry yes but here? Puppetry does not get the respect it deserves.

Without community support and government sponsorship the art cannot thrive, improve or spread. It will dilute and deteriorate. The challenge is to keep this lamp lit and shining.

SNA does a lot. They invite me also.

Earlier it was very challenging to find trained people in the field. We would often turn towards stage actors. But actors and theatre people had little interest or respect for puppetry. But I had (my friends) Hari bhai, Thakur Darbar, Mahesh Kakkar... many people. Through the course of my career, about sixty to seventy people (my friends and trainees) have worked to help and support my theatre. It was not a professional arrangement. I

could pay only a pittance.

When my children grew up, my dependence on outsiders diminished. My entire family including the larger extended family of 3 generations are in puppetry. They are all involved in this art in some way or the other.

On the Future of Puppetry in India

Training is the need of the hour. For every puppeteer. Traditional or contemporary.

Rajasthani Kathputli Puppeteers despite poverty have not given up puppetry. But now, their younger generation needs to be improved. I have given training to them, introducing them to contemporary puppetry. If their (The Kathputli Puppeteers) art does not improve they will be finished. They are repeating themselves which is no good. The audience doesn't want it any more. Even the puppeteers themselves feel empty and disconnected with their tradition. *Anand nahin aa raha logon ko, to kyon aayengay?*

(The audience does not enjoy these shows any more so why should they come)?

There should be a Lok Kala Vidyalaya - a residential training for the children of kathputli puppeteers 'children. Nobody seems to have a vision or thinking. When I write about it, it is not given importance.

The people who can make a difference are not worried. I now despair for the future and for the quality of this art form.

Puppetry - A Multiskilled Art

To be a puppeteer you have to have 10 other skills. While teaching I told this to my students many times. (reciting the rhyme, he has created):



Writing
Sculpting
Dance
Acting
Sewing
Music
Poetry
Art

To be a puppeteer you must be accomplished in all.

I created a teacher training course which has been very popular. I have had students from different countries- a total of 26 students. They were on a scholarship, free of cost training. I had a generous approach. They lived in my home and enjoyed our hospitality. 26 people have learnt from me.

What are your best memories as a puppeteer?

Pleasant memories... I cherish them. All my life, I did nothing else but puppetry. The clapping, applause, the handshakes, the praise and great feedback was warm and wonderful.

During the Janmashtami Mela, we would do thirty or forty shows a day! But the smiles and happiness it brought to people energized us, making us forget our tiredness and enjoy the work.

THE KRISHNALEELA TOUR

Workshops and Training programmes are a vital part of this tour, and The Krishnaleela Tour will be hoping to give this exciting opportunity to as many people as possible.

Workshop

1-day educational programmes in schools & community centers.

Training

Intensive 10-days course in Shadow Puppet making, manipulation and Bharat Natyam Dance.

Lectures and Demonstrations will also be available.



3

MANSINH ZALA In Gratitude to his Guru

Based on interviews with Chandni Zala
edited by Ranjana Pandey



If it had not been for the Darpana Academy and the role it played in promoting the arts, puppetry would have vanished from Ahmedabad, with Meherben. Darpana remained a nurturing platform until the early 1990's. But the torch (For Meherben Contractor) has been carried forward by her students and Mansinh Zala is one such.

A Commerce graduate, he jumped into puppet-

ry the moment he completed his SSC education. After his guru passed away he worked as Head of Department Puppetry in Darpana Academy till 2002. He established his own Puppet Group after leaving Darpana, he called it "MEHER" - The Troupe. No greater tribute could be paid to his teacher - Meherben Contractor.

What was the Puppetry scene in Ahmedabad when you started?

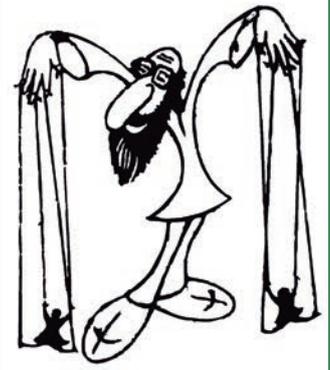
When I started puppetry there were only about two to three groups of puppeteers in Ahmedabad. Meherben, Mahipat Kavi, Satuji Chawda & Haribhai, Ranaji were popularly doing puppetry. I established the Trust - "Meher" The Troupe in 2002. I had continued to run Darpana Academy's Puppet Department until 2001 after Meherben's death in 1992.

Who did you learn Puppetry from?

I learnt puppetry from Meherben by working with her every day for 17 years. She has taught me all I know today. Other than being a part of her productions and touring with them, I used to accompany and assist Meherben in school workshops also. I learnt to conduct workshops from her and then carried it forward on my own. I have done workshops for children, youngsters, professionals, teachers and students of MSW. I must have trained thousands of people in all these years. I have also learnt from my seniors, Bharat Joshi, Dadi (Pudumjee), Meschke (Micheal), Suresh Datta by watching them work. It is now 43 years since I have been doing Puppetry.

What were the challenges of being a Puppeteer in those days?

Earning a livelihood through puppetry was and continues to be challenge. Patrons are important. One supporter who showed trust in our ability was- Uday Mawani of Suvik Communications.



His vision took us into the field of television. This journey began in 1985 with "Sooki Kheti" a television production for the rural areas. Apart from this we did 52 episodes of a puppet based program called "The Story Teller - folk tales of India" for Star Television.

In 1993 we began work with Dairy Co-operatives like Panchamrut, Uttam & Amul. This project continued for long until '96 and I trained 36 dairy workers as puppeteers. During the celebration of Amul's Golden Jubilee. I trained about 40 puppeteers. They performed 5 productions over a

year and covered one thousand villages of Kheda District.

I could keep at it because I had an administrative job with the Government of Gujarat. It gave me my bread and butter. My wife Geetaba was my constant companion and supporter. Sadly, she is no more. She held the fort while I was so pre-occupied and unavailable for the children. First for my job and then for my passion - Puppetry. It took all of my time.

I have been able to participate in International



and National Festivals and toured to places like Denmark, Sweden, Iran, France, Japan, Taiwan, Pakistan, Italy, Iran and recently to Mexico. Today after a long journey I feel confident that this work will continue. The scene is different today. The old patrons have vanished but now as a Trust or a Society we can find funding from different government departments. There is also a growing space for Children's Theatre. Each thing comes with its own new challenge.

How do you see your work continue in future?

Although many have learnt, (rattling a long string

of names) friends and followers, sons and nephews, my daughter Chandni has shown not just talent but also commitment and zeal. She will continue the puppetry tradition of Meherben and Mansinh Zala.

What is your dream for Puppetry in India?

From the puppetry that I have seen abroad, I feel that we need a regular training course a proper school for learning Puppetry in India. Maybe a Diploma course or even a Degree course will take Puppetry to greater heights.

4

RATNAMALA NORI A Puppeteer of Her Own Making

by Ratnamala Nori

I have memories of my grandmother telling me how they would watch Thollu Bommalatalu all night in our native village in West Godavari District, before I was born. She would laughingly tell us about how they used to doze off and on one such long night she picked up the wrong child instead of my elder brother and came home!

This was long before my journey with puppets began. I had never made a puppet, never even seen a real puppet show but my grandmother's stories stayed in my mind.

In Search of Knowledge – Attending Workshops and Festivals

My journey with puppets began in 1986. I was an Art Teacher in a school when I attended the National puppetry festival organized in Hyderabad where I was exposed to the work of Contemporary Puppeteers - Meher Contractor, Suresh Dutta and Dadi Pudumjee. This exposure was an eye-opening experience. All three had, I realized, different styles of doing puppetry. I attended their workshops and became aware of immense possibilities that lie in puppetry.

This is how I learned- through workshops, observing people's work and reading whatever came my way. This festival in Hyderabad also introduced me to UNIMA. Once I enrolled as it's member, I found some opportunities to attend the yearly UNIMA festivals and meet puppeteers (both traditional and contemporary). Besides organizing seminars and paper presentations, these UNIMA festivals became a platform for puppeteers to interact and learn techniques from each other. On one hand there were people like me with new interest in puppetry and on the other there were traditional puppeteers. What bound us together was a passion for the art.

We encountered diverse puppetry traditions including Tholu Bommalata from Andhra, Pava-kathakali from Kerala by G.Venu, Shadow play by Seethalakshmi from Chennai. This exposure encouraged me to conduct my own research in learning more about the art of puppetry in my country.

In the first UNIMA meeting at Bangalore I met Ranjana Pandey and even J.D. Virmani who was the then president of UNIMA – India. Unfortu-



nately, the UNIMA festivals were short lived and in the early nineties we all went our own way. However, the association I made and exposure I got, proved valuable for my growth.

Ratnamala Nori recalls some of the skills she picked up from meeting puppeteers during the course of some workshops and festivals. Following is a compilation of the same:

Meher Contractor In her workshop, she discussed how puppetry could help address the limitations faced by the classroom teacher. She demonstrated how simple puppets could be easily made with readily available material. As a teacher myself, I was deeply interested and formed a bond with her.

Suresh Datta Suresh Dutta's Stage Performances - were thrilling: Aladdin and Ramayana! In his workshop presentation he stressed on the importance of the third dimension- Space and how it could be given a magical quality. Improvisation was the key word used by him in explaining the relationship between time and space. He gave me Obraztsova's book, the Master Puppeteer who was his Guru. A very inspiring and informative book which I cherish still.

Dadi Pudumjee Helped me understand the concept of projected play further. His play with objects like pens, brooms and shoes to explain the concept of bringing an inanimate object to life was extremely enlightening. It was only later that I saw his performance. His unique sense of colour and design, and his blend of the Japanese bunraku style was my first exposure to this kind of presentation.

Ranjana Pandey Impressed with her sophisticated technique of puppet manipulation which she

had learned from her training abroad.

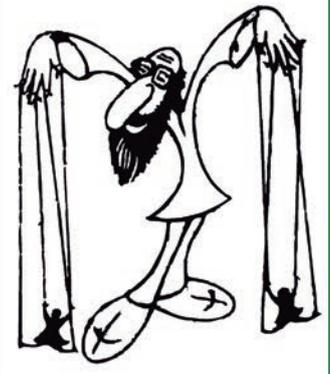
First Steps - Puppetry in Education

With the help of some of my willing colleagues in school, I put up my first puppet play "The Radiant Child" which was performed with glove puppets. The teachers loved it! I continued to work as an art and craft teacher and introduced puppetry to the school. Although school work provided me my bread and butter, I did not have the freedom to attend some rare training programs (such as the one at Darpana by Meher Behn). Outside of school, my work with puppets began getting some visibility and I would get invited to conduct workshops for children as well as teachers.

After this, a project called "Science and Technology" came to life within classrooms, offering an opportunity to prove that puppets work well in the elementary school. One science teacher and one art teacher from each school was called and the collaboration turned out to be a great success. While the science teacher would provide the content and subject matter, the art teacher contributed with her skills in puppet making.

Taking Off as a Puppeteer - Development and Communication for Rural Audiences

What began as humble experiments in motivational program for rural audiences (about issues around development) turned out to become very popular. In a van that was given, I went into the field with the troupe, to remote corners to give performances. Like in traditional tholu bommalatas, these performances too had a Sutradar and Sutradarini, Sri Lakshmi and a Veeriah (equivalent of the comedian in traditional puppetry). Live interaction with the audience was an important aspect of the show and the message at the



end would be loud and clear. People thronged to see our shows standing on bicycles and on rooftops for a better view. We carried loudspeakers and the whole village was informed in advance about the show. These shows received positive, sometimes raving reviews in newspapers too. These were our first success stories.

Over a period of about ten years we made several stories on many social issues. People would say “Your tholu bommaata is very nice, Amma, we can actually see ourselves in the story.” What we were doing is converting the traditional stories into modern ones so modern rural audiences could relate to it. Sadly, the projects depended on state funds which were sporadic. Funding and earning have remained a constant issue in Puppetry.

Now I wasn't a solo puppeteer anymore. In the absence of trained puppeteers, I had no choice but to involve my husband, daughter and son. The outhouse which my father had generously allowed us to use for our puppet work now hosted a number of puppets. Housed in a bamboo and

mud structure designed by young architects, Nori Arts was thus born.

There was no looking back!

Passing on the Knowledge - Training and Sharing

By 1997, we gained confidence to develop training programs to share our knowledge and experience on the use of puppets for social communication. We organized a State level training program for NGOs, to help them spread messages on topics such as population control, the evil of dowry and care for the girl child. Feedback from participants and press recognized puppetry as a fun, engaging and a cost effective medium with a potential to spread socially relevant messages.

J.D. Virmani was working with the NCERT in Delhi. He invited me for several NCERT orientation programmes to work out a syllabus for the CBSE. He was keen to introduce puppetry as part of the school curriculum. We conducted a number of orientations programmes for in-service teachers

of Navodaya schools in Hyderabad and Goa. We wrote papers and had discussions on how to include puppetry in the CBSE syllabus. But that's another story!

A Mass Media Experience - Television

Hyderabad Doordarshan invited me for doing 14 programmes on adult education. Without a live audience giving immediate feedback, I realized performing for TV is a totally different ball-game. Both the set as well as the puppets had to be carefully finished. Though challenging, I made a conscious effort to learn from this experience.

Our Latest Production - The Lady in the Mirror
Making a puppet play on Dementia was a major challenge. The whole project took about ten months. We used Muppets and worked on stage craft with professional lighting and a multi dimension stage set up adding to its production value. The Lady in The Mirror as we called it, is a play, frivolous in its humour but sensitive in its portrayal of dementia and how it can overpower relationships. The audience was moved by the vivid portrayal of dementia and its challenges. To quote



a caregiver who was in the audience, "This is exactly how my father used to behave. The story has captured all the different ways in which dementia affects a family."

Encountering Puppetry in the West

The world has moved on and it is amazing to see the strides that the world puppetry has taken. Visiting USA gave me the opportunity to visit Connecticut Puppetry Arts Centre and meet Bart Roccobarton. Interacting with him was itself a learning experience. I watched puppet productions like "Satyagraha", "Lion King", "War Horse" which are among the world's most famous ones. Attending the American puppeteer's festival, 2012 made me realise that there is a lot to learn from the Western Puppetry. However, I also realized how rich and deeply rooted Puppetry is in our own culture. One can't cast it aside. We must look up to it for inspiration and preserve it.

Looking Back

When I look back, I can see that trial and error was how I learnt. My first puppets were too large to manipulate, but I kept improving with each performance. The freedom to create and experiment led me to try large body puppets, small glove puppets and shadow puppets and sometimes found-object puppets.

I am not a professionally trained puppeteer. My journey has been sometimes rugged and sometimes smooth but it has taken me through various fields. Though scanty, the opportunities to attend some training programs helped me come a long way.

Puppetry has a magical charm, there is something about imbuing life into an inanimate object. Pup-



pets have limitations. We have limitations too. My limitations challenge me to explore the medium of puppetry further. While I look back to reflect, I look forward to the miles I need to go in my journey with my puppets.

Recognition and Recent Highlights

- Received an Ugadi Puraskar award in 1998 for innovative use of puppetry by the Madras Telugu Academy.
- Invited by SNA to perform in the National puppetry Festival- Putul Yatra
- Invited for a puppet playwright workshop by SNA in 2000
- A 15-day performance tour to the UAE sponsored by the ICCR in May 2015



5

Foundation Course for Puppeteers

October 2018-February-2019

A Short description

Background

UNIMA India has been working on a pedagogy for puppeteers in India for the last 3 years now. Currently no formal training in puppetry options are available in India. In the past, short courses have been offered from time to time, some workshops have also been organized but there has been no consistent pedagogic systems that have evolved. This implies that most professional puppeteers in the country are either from the traditional forms and have trained in the family, or non-traditional puppeteers who have trained abroad.

The government is the new patron and official cultural policies have had a serious impact on the form but the lack of discourse has led to a lack of proper overview of the same. Non-traditional puppeteers have been creating their own markets. Development communication is a major new market for puppeteers across India.

Conversations with practicing puppeteers reveals the same thing over and over again. There are inadequate training opportunities and very limited exposure to the world of puppetry outside India (*Non-traditional puppetry is only 50 years old India, a nascent form in the country as opposed to a long run in the rest of the world*).

Since 2014, UNIMA India has run five Masterclasses. These have been with Masters like Pura Bhat (Katputli tradition Rajasthan), Gunduraju (Togalu Gombeyatta tradition Karnataka), Dadi Pudumjee, Barbara Kolling (Material Theatre, Germany), Alain Lecucq and Narguess Majd (Paper Theatre, France/Iran). This series of month-long residential master classes served as pedagogic experiments, teaching us valuable lessons,

before they crystallized into a Diploma Certification Program.

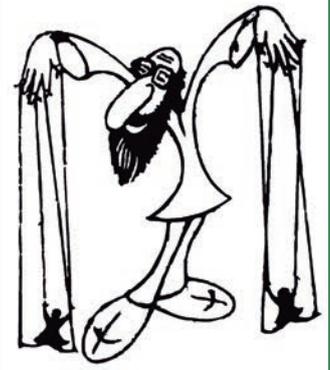
We did intensive research of pedagogic practices in Eastern Europe, Canada, United States and Indonesia before arriving at a syllabus that suits the learning needs of Indian puppeteers. Given the present context of Indian puppetry, some critical questions had to be asked and addressed

- How does the presence of other art forms like animation, film, human theatre and dance stimulate puppetry and vice versa?
- In what ways can traditional and new forms of puppetry collaborate? What are the questions that must be asked to the performers, artists and collaborators?
- What is the future of the younger generation within traditional puppetry? How can one revitalize the interest of the younger generation within the traditional forms? How does one train the next generation of young people who want to be puppeteers but are not from one or the other traditional form.

The Foundation course

Post the five Masterclasses, a colloquium was organized where we discussed the next step for a deeper engagement with pedagogy in puppetry. There is no doubt that the Master classes were valuable. Our catchment of students has spanned 55 people across disciplines, forms in puppetry, traditional and non-traditional practitioners of puppetry. This group has incorporated puppetry in their practices both directly and indirectly.

We thus proposed a Foundation Course, a beginners course for puppeteers which will keep some of the essential components of the Masterclass but will have a longer duration with focus on a series of necessary skill sets of a puppeteer. The course has been designed as an immersive 14 weeks experience. Such a Foundation course may answer the need of today and give birth to new



puppeteers.

Fundamental Components

1. Exposure to Master Puppeteers
2. Having mentors who can guide discussions, contextualize the various components of the training and to provide/ direct the students to necessary resources.
3. Honing skills through daily classes which train both performance skills as well as plastic art skills
4. Projects with a public interface which enable each student to prepare a portfolio and performance to take to theatres companies, festivals and schools, followed by internships.
5. Developing a discourse around puppetry and building a body of written and audio visual documentation discussing the Indian puppetry scenario.

Features

The students were selected pan-India with the student demography including puppeteers from various traditions of puppetry as well as theatre practitioners from urban context. The selection process for the program is rigorous. The course is mostly in Delhi with the addition of a Master Class (traditional form) in the village/home of a Master. Some of the key features of the course included:

1. **Orientation:** The Diploma begins with an Orientation to different aspects of the course, to puppet theatre and to the skills that the students will learn through 8 weeks. These skills include narrative building, definitions of puppetry, history of puppetry in India and in the world, discourses on performing arts theory, practice and frameworks for building discourses. The students would also be introduced to some of the masters they would work with. It also included watching live shows.

2. **Daily Classes and Skill Sets:** There would

be every day classes for four weeks that would focus on building the following skills:

- **SCULPTURE (Clay to Papier Mache):** Working in clay, understanding symmetry, material, form, 2D and 3D, making sculptures (puppet heads), making POP moulds, learning papier mache, thermocol/wood sculpting and latex sculpting.
- **BODY (Anatomy, Mime and Manipulation):** Understanding the anatomy of one's own body with the purpose of replicating this in the inanimate body. The students would be exposed to voice work and to physical training in the form of Kalariyattu.
- **DESIGN (Colour, Texture, Form and Painting):** Sketching, anatomy, silhouette, proportion and landscape.
- **MENTORING:** Daily meeting with mentors were held in large groups or small groups or as one on one individual sessions.

3. **Master classes/ Short Workshops:** They would be part of the longer program and would follow the existing masterclass format.

4. **Selection:** Students from anywhere in the country can apply. After the initial application and submission of portfolio, students are interviewed before admission (a minimum of two interviews). Course is open for traditional/ generational / contemporary puppeteers / performance artist and those who are interested in puppetry as a profession.

5. **Evaluation:** Students would be evaluated after each assignment by Masters, Mentors, External evaluator, Self-evaluation, evaluation through shows for audiences. Students also continuously evaluate the course.

TO PRESERVE THE MEMORIES OF HYDERABAD AND ITS PEOPLE...

an Alzheimer's and Related Disorders Society of India Hyderabad Deccan Chapter Campaign

THE LADY IN THE MIRROR

a puppet show on Alzheimer's disease dementia



A story about...
a cacophonous Indian wedding,
a Grandma with Alzheimer's,
and her friend in the mirror

NOV

1st

2014

Paigah Palace, Begumpet
at 7.30pm

CHIEF GUEST- Mr KINGSHUK NAG, Editor, Times of India



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We invite you
for the Final performance of the
UNIMA India
Foundation course
for Puppeteers

30th January, 6.30 pm

C. D. Deshmukh Hall
India International Centre, Delhi

with support from:

We, Shruti, Sajeesh,
Preeti,
Shobhit, Matthieu, Gagan,
Maneesh & Jagannath
invite you for our
final performance!!!

World Puppetry Day Celebration



'Meher'- The Troupe
(Group of Puppeteers)



21st March - World Puppetry Day



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Sahapedia
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World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts
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For further details contact Ms. Anurupa Roy (Secretary - UNIMA India)
unimaindia@gmail.com

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Compiled by Dr. Atul Sinha