

Sutradhar

A Unima Puppeteers Trust (India) Publication

A Note from the Editor 02

Pictorial Elements of Karagöz: Stories told and Stories Performed by Nazlı M. Ümit 03

UNIMA Heritage Awardees- 6 Indian Master Puppeteers 13

The Anatomy of a Festival : The Harmony Festival by UNIMA THAILAND 21

Master Puppeteer Sinde Chidambra Rao by Karen Smith & Ranjana Pandey 27

Master Puppeteer Puran Bhatt by Karen Smith & Ranjana Pandey 35

ISSUE 19 NOVEMBER 2026

1 A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



While the world around us is continuously impacted by violence and political tensions, Puppeteers, in war torn spaces, bring healing to communities and refugees, battered and homeless, separated from their loved ones. Despite threats and daily risks such efforts are on in Gaza, Egypt and Turkey to name a few.

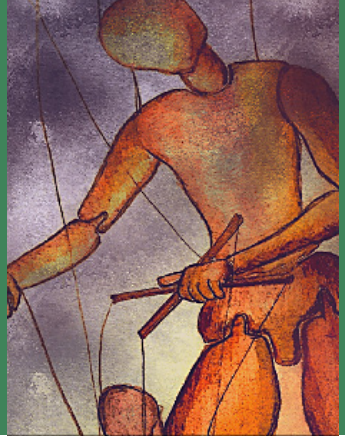
These Puppeteers, our colleagues, protect a valuable space for healing and normalcy, touching people's hearts and minds. We bow in gratitude for your contribution to humanity.

We need to build many more bridges between cultures. It is with this in mind that this issue carries an article on Karagoz, the Turkish Traditional Shadow Puppetry by Nazli Umit.
By knowing each others journey,we become acutely aware of the similarity of our experiences, our hopes and our dreams.

Festivals (of Puppetry) generate amazing energy and excitement. The Harmony Festival, Thailand, is one such. We bring a peep into the making of a Festival. In what Konglar Kanchanahoti tells us, there is a resonance, a similarity, and clarity of purpose.

Unima Innternationale honoured 6 master puppeteers from India with a UNIMA Heritage award this year. Enjoy reading about them.

Ranjana Pandey
Editor
Founder Trustee Unima
Puppeteers Trust India



2 PICTORIAL ELEMENTS OF KARAGÖZ: STORIES TOLD AND STORIES PERFORMED

by Nazlı M. Ümit

Recent approaches to puppetry have moved beyond the study of puppets as theatrical objects or performance traditions, incorporating pictorial aesthetics, visual materiality, and relationships with various artistic, literary, and oral traditions across a broad range of media ecologies. Such approaches examine how puppets adopt, transform, and reinterpret pictorial conventions, and how their designs reveal technical and stylistic connections with other forms of visual representation. For instance, in "A New Light on the Shadows of Heavenly Bodies", Rui Oliveira Lopes gives particular attention is given to the ways in which Indian shadow puppetry may transform still narrative representations into more kinetic and interactive forms, creating a closer relationship between the visual object, the performer, and the audience. Or, in his study "The Illustrations of the Maqāmāt and the Shadow Play", Alain F. George examines the relationship between shadow play and the tradition of illustrated Arabic books, particularly the illustrated manuscripts of al-Harīrī's Maqāmāt. He draws attention to the circulation of visual forms and techniques between shadow theatre and manuscript illustration, demonstrating how puppetry can be understood in relation to other modes of image-making and narrative transmission.[1] While not as detailed or comprehensive as these studies, this paper examines the pictorial and material characteristics of Karagöz puppets, with a particular focus on scenery and decorative elements known as *göstermelik*.

The puppets used in Karagöz are referred to as *tasvir*, resim, *suret*, or *hayal*. All three words are associated with the idea of creating an image, depicting something, or drawing a picture. The term *suret* can also refer to three-dimensional sculptural forms, while *hayal* carries additional connotations related to histrionic performance and acting. However, the relationship between the Karagöz puppet and painting is not merely terminological. The visual design of Karagöz puppets and the visual dramaturgy of the screen (*ayna*) (Figure 1) share affinities with various forms and traditions of Turkish painting. Moreover, they draw upon common written, oral, and visual sources.



Figure 1

One of the elements connecting Karagöz puppets and painting within Ottoman-Turkish cultural and artistic history is the absence of shading, shadows, and the classical notion of perspective. When viewed from the audience's side, the puppet itself is visible rather than its shadow, as both the screen and puppets are made of translucent materials that transmit light. Unless shadows are deliberately created as an exceptional effect, the area between the light source and the screen is kept clear of any objects other than the puppet and its rod, as any intervening object would cast a shadow onto the screen. These characteristics of what may broadly be termed classical Karagöz led some early European Orientalists to argue that terms such as *shadow theatre* or *schattenspiel* were inadequate for describing a colourful tradition and constituted an erroneous generalisation.[2]

In Karagöz, all pictorial elements that create a two-dimensional visual representation on the screen ultimately serve a dramatic structure. Logos, or the spoken word, occupies a central place in Karagöz; yet, as a form of puppet theatre, it necessarily relies on visuality as an indispensable component of performance. At the same time, Karagöz operates through mimetic rather than diegetic structures. Its puppets do not tell a story; they enact one. The Karagöz stage thus functions as an optical medium in which visuality and dramatic action operate together.[3] The puppeteer does not address the audience directly, nor do the puppets generally do so, except in the exceptional instances of direct audience interaction. The puppets speak to one another, without a separate interlocutor mediating between the screen and the audience. The puppeteer and their assistants remain behind the screen and are not visible.

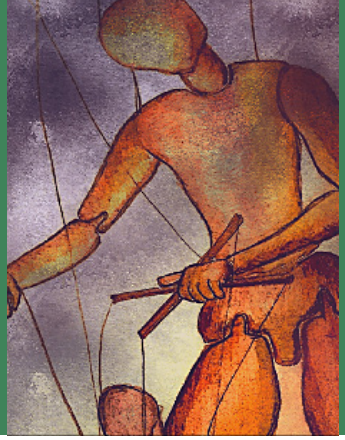
When considering the screen as a performance space, the side from which a character enters, the number of characters visible at any given moment, whether a character can turn towards either side of the screen, and the number of movable joints in its body are all determined in relation to Karagöz's dramatic structure and the puppeteer's interpretation of it. The organisation of speech, as well as spatial and dramaturgical composition, is also reflected in the visual composition. The number of puppets and objects visible on the screen at any given moment is generally kept limited, avoiding unnecessary visual clutter. The main puppeteer, who manipulates the puppets, also provides the voices. When musical instruments are played or additional characters need to appear, assistants may help by holding and manipulating the *tasvirs*. Except for certain crowded scenes (Figure 2), the number of characters appearing simultaneously on the screen generally does not exceed three or four, and the episodes of the performance are likewise structured around this limitation. These choices shape both the verbal dimension of the play and the visual movement through which the drama unfolds. If the Karagöz texts are understood as frameworks transmitted across generations, its puppets also allow us to examine how individual artists interpreted and transformed them.



Figure 2

A group of puppets used in Karagöz performances is known as *göstermelik*; these differ from the puppets used for dramatic characters in certain design and dramaturgical respects. *Göstermelik* is also divided into two categories: temporary and permanent.[4]

Temporary *göstermelik* constitute the first visual element encountered by the audience. They appear on the illuminated screen before the performance begins (Figure 3–4) and are removed to the sound of the *nareke*, signalling the beginning of the play. They consist of a single piece and are not manipulated in classical Karagöz performances. Their function is therefore not to participate in the dramatic action but to mark the transition into performance. A temporary *göstermelik*



therefore occupies the only moments in which an independent narrative may be conveyed through an image, or an image may evoke a narrative related to the play text, thereby engaging and preparing the audience's imagination before the performance begins.[5]



Figure 3



Figure 4

Permanent *göstermelik*, by contrast, represent settings and animate or inanimate entities appearing throughout the performance, such as houses, trees, animals, household objects, and vehicles. They may consist of one or several pieces and, like character puppets, can be manipulated through articulated joints (Figure 5). Similar images, however, may be used as either temporary or permanent *göstermelik*. One important distinction is that permanent *göstermelik* may be fitted with a rod for manipulation (Compare Figure 6 and 7). Moreover, as performance objects, *göstermelik* are not necessarily fixed to a single function: an object used as a temporary *göstermelik* by one artist may be adapted by another as a permanent one, with minor modifications. A single *göstermelik* may also serve both functions within the same performance, appearing first as a temporary visual element and later being used as a permanent setting or object within the dramatic action.



Figure 5

The theme and visual details of a temporary *göstermelik* may relate to the subject of the performance, providing the audience with



Figure 6

a visual indication of the play about to be performed; alternatively, it may be based on a theme entirely unrelated to the play. For some surviving examples, however, it is not yet possible to determine whether they were ever associated with a particular play, because they have no corresponding example in the extant repertoire. Such examples can nevertheless be considered in relation to the visual imagery and broader visual culture of their respective periods. One such example is the Wak-Wak tree (*Vakvak ağacı*) (Figure 8).

Researchers who have examined sources ranging from Ibn Khaldun to European travellers note that the etymology of Wak-Wak cannot be established with certainty, although the term is generally considered onomatopoeic. In medieval Islamic literature, Wak-Wak appears in a variety of geographical, zoological, and mythological contexts and also became a visual motif. In Turkish sources, one of the closest representations to the Wak-Wak tree used as a *göstermelik* (Figure 8) in Karagöz can be found in the *Tarih-i Hindî Garbî* (Figure 9). First completed in the 1580s and presented to Murad III, the manuscript, which combines geographical accounts with fantastical narratives



Figure 7

and illustrations, depicts the Wak-Wak tree as a large tree bearing female figures as its fruits. According to the account, these figures hang from the branches by their hair, cry “wak wak”, and die shortly after being removed from the tree.

The image did not remain confined to the written and visual culture of the imperial spheres. When

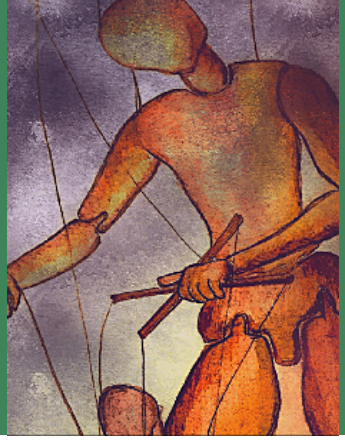




Figure 8

İbrahim Müteferrika printed the *Tarih-i Hindî Garbî* in 1729–30, the story entered Ottoman print culture (Figure 10) and became one of the most widely circulated books. Yet the circulation of illustrated books was not dependent on widespread literacy. Both before and after the expansion of print culture in the nineteenth century, such books could be purchased or borrowed and brought into different social gatherings, where their stories were read aloud, recounted and discussed, often with reference to their illustrations. Public spaces such as coffeehouses and reading rooms (*kıraathane*) provided settings for such collective practices.[6] According to Giambattista Toderini, the Wak-Wak tree had become a popular tale of the kind told by older family members to children. Toderini records that the story had become sufficiently popular to be recreated as a spectacle at a naval festival: a life-sized tree was erected with painted female figures suspended from its branches, which detached themselves and fell



Figure 9



Figure 10

to the ground, producing the sound “wak wak” through a mechanical device. The Wak-Wak tree, one of the earliest images published in Islamic print culture[7], thus provides an example of an image moving across different media and modes of representation-from written and illustrated sources to print culture, oral storytelling, public spectacle, and, eventually, the Karagöz screen.

Another narrative source that appears both in oral cultural contexts and written sources and has found visual expression in various forms within Turkish painting, is the *Hamzanâme*. The *Hamzanâme* is a narrative tradition that circulated across a wide geographical and linguistic area. It extends from the Arab and Persian worlds through Anatolia and Central and South Asia to Southeast Asia, including the Indian subcontinent, Bengal, and the Malay and Javanese cultural spheres. Naturally, this has given rise to a diverse and rich visual repertoire, including the miniature paintings commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Akbar around 1557–1562. As in the case of the Wak-wak tree, no Karagöz play based on any of the narratives from the *Hamzanâme* has yet been identified in the known Karagöz repertoire. Alongside images associated with Turkish mythology and Islamic



Figure 11



Figure 12

cosmology, images and narratives found within the *Hamzanâme* also found their way onto the Karagöz screen. The depiction of Rustam fighting the White Div (Figure 11–12) and certain battle scenes (Figure 13) and are examples of this.

Alpay Ekler suggests that the different phases through which Ottoman Turkish painting evolved can also be observed in the production and design of Karagöz puppets. Although Westernisation began in the eighteenth century, initially developing largely within the palace and military spheres, it gradually found resonance among different segments of Ottoman society, particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century. These transformations became



Figure 13

increasingly visible in the visual arts, as new approaches to representation and pictorial space entered Ottoman artistic practice. For instance, while puppets produced in the nineteenth century and earlier generally reflect a more economical approach to line, form, and detail, the European impact became more pronounced towards the end of the nineteenth century, resulting in the incorporation of more detailed and naturalistic anatomical features, such as pupils, eyelashes, and fingernails as well as decorative motifs. This should also be considered in relation to the changing function of puppets, particularly as Karagöz *tasvirs* increasingly acquired the status of tourist commodities and souvenirs. As they came to be produced not only as performance objects but also for tourists and collectors, increasingly elaborate and detailed designs became more common.[8] At the same time, just as Karagöz incorporated influences from European dramatic literature in the nineteenth century, it also drew on images from European visual culture, as can be observed in Figure 14, a temporary *göstermelik* that resonates with paintings depicting Diana with nymphs preparing for the hunt or resting afterwards.



To conclude, this paper has explored the relationship between Karagöz puppets and Ottoman-Turkish visual culture, focusing particularly on *göstermeliks* and their pictorial and material characteristics. The examples demonstrate how images and narratives circulated across different media and contexts and were ultimately projected onto the Karagöz screen.

Figures

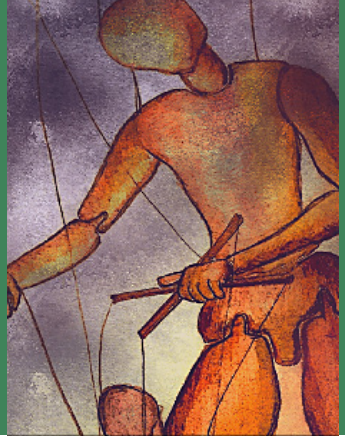
Figure 1. Alpay Ekler performing *Karagöz'ün Gelin Olması* at UNIMA Istanbul, 26 May 2022, photographed by Nazlı M. Ümit. Karagöz is looking out through the window of the house positioned in the corner (right). Hacivat is positioned at the centre of the *ayna*, the white, translucent screen. The puppets are manipulated directly against the surface of the screen which is framed by the *perde* (curtain). Such demountable Karagöz stages can be assembled and dismantled for use in different locations, and this type of stage became popular during the twentieth century. Photograph by Nazlı M. Ümit.

Figure 2. The image shows a scene from *Tımarhane*. Inside the madhouse are several figures identified as lunatics, one of whom is Karagöz, while three distinct stock characters wait outside to talk to him (Cevdet Kudret, *Karagöz*, V. 3, Istanbul: YKY, XV)

Figure 3. A *göstermelik* depicting a Mevlevi dervish playing the *ney* in the middle, designed and made by Alpay Ekler. Photographed behind the stage where the puppeteer stands by Nazlı M. Ümit, 2019. During the twentieth century, it became increasingly common to place houses at both sides of the screen, one of them representing Karagöz's house. This practice explains why other images appear to the right and left of the *göstermelik*. Photograph by Nazlı M. Ümit, 2019.

Figure 4. A temporary *göstermelik* depicting a lemon tree, made by Nazlı M. Ümit. The photograph was taken from the front of the screen. Although the light behind the screen had not yet been switched on, the *göstermelik* positioned behind the screen remains visible from the front due to the ambient lighting conditions of the space and the translucency of the screen, known as the *ayna* in Karagöz, which, like the leather used to make the *tasvirs*, allows light to pass through. Photographed by Nazlı M. Ümit, 2026.

Figure 5. Although catalogued as Çinili Saray (Tiled Kiosk) in the Topkapı Palace Museum Karagöz Collection (Metin And, *Karagöz*: *Théâtre d'Ombres Turc*, Ankara: Dost, 1977, 60), the figure has been identified under different names in subsequent reproductions and reinterpretations. The Karagöz repertoire includes a play in which the characters enter a garden and engage in various forms of entertainment, while Karagöz himself is repeatedly prevented from entering. For this reason, this early



surviving example has previously been associated with the play by some Karagöz masters. On the gate opening onto the garden, a small additional piece of leather can be seen, resembling a door handle. Rather than serving as a handle, however, this piece functions as a leather fastening: attached to the gate, it keeps it closed, while loosening it allows the gate to be opened and closed during the performance.

Figure 6. Dragon, an example of a temporary *göstermelik*. Artist and period unknown (In *Hayal ya da Gerçek: Şeyh Küşeri'den Hayalî Küçük Ali'ye Karagöz Sergi Kataloğu*, Istanbul: Istanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2018, 64). The protruding piece of leather at the bottom of the figure serves to keep it in place on the screen before the performance begins, without the need to hold it with a rod.

Figure 7. *Dragon* as a performance object. Artist and period unknown (In *Hayal ya da Gerçek: Şeyh Küşeri'den Hayalî Küçük Ali'ye Karagöz Sergi Kataloğu*, Istanbul: Istanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2018, p. 141). In some plays, it is also used to represent a snake, a monster, or a supernatural being.

Figure 8. *Vakvak Ağacı*, an example of a temporary *göstermelik*. Artist and period unknown (In *Hayal ya da Gerçek: Şeyh Küşeri'den Hayalî Küçük Ali'ye Karagöz Sergi Kataloğu*, Istanbul: Istanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2018, p. 61).

Figure 9. An illustration of Wak Wak Tree in *Tarih-i Yeni Dünya, el-Musemma be Hadis-i Nev*, The Newberry Library, Edward E. Ayer Collection, No: Ayer MS 612/ 174224, fol.18, https://collections.newberry.org/archive/-2KXJ8ZSFBWFMQ.html

Figure 10. A printed illustration of Wak Wak Tree in 1730 edition, JCB Archive of Early American Images, No: 04407-16 (Nazlı M. Ümit, "Oynayan Nesne Olarak Resim ve Kukla: Karagöz'de Tasvir ve Taklit Tasarımı". *Art-Sanat* 26, 2026, p. 245, DOI : 10.26650/artsanat.2026.26.0008).

Figure 11. The fight of Rustam and the White Div, from the *Mecmua*, Petit recueil de peintures turques, 1651-1700, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, turc 140, fol. 12a. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8432526g/f35.item

Figure 12. A temporary *göstermelik* illustrating the fight of Rustam and the White Div, by Hidayet Gülen, Karagöz Collection at Türk ve Islam Eserleri Müzesi, Istanbul. Photographed by Nazlı M. Ümit.

Figure 13. A temporary *göstermelik* illustrating a war scene from *Hamzaname*. Artist and period unknown (Metin And, *Karagöz: Theatre D'ombres Turc*, Ankara: Dost, 1977, 63).

Figure 14. In *Hayal ya da Gerçek: Şeyh Küşeri'den Hayalî Küçük Ali'ye Karagöz Sergi Kataloğu*, Istanbul: Istanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2018, p. 62. As can be seen, the *tasvir* depicts three female figures, one of whom is playing a hunting horn. The central figure is likely to be Diana. On the ground, a hunted animal can also be seen lying with their legs bound. However, it is recorded in the collection (IBB Kütüphane ve Müzeler Müdürlüğü Koleksiyonu) under the title *Çoban Kızları* (Shepherd Girls).

Nazlı M. Ümit (Dr.) is an independent researcher, Karagöz puppeteer, and theatre practitioner. She studied under Alpay Ekler, a Karagöz master recognised by UNESCO as a Living Human Treasure. She is the founder of Sirkeci Theatre, which aims to reconstruct and stage lost or lesser-known texts through research- and performance-based approaches. She currently serves as Chair of the UNIMA International Heritage Commission.

Endnotes

1 Rui Oliveira Lopes, “A New Light on the Shadows of Heavenly Bodies: Indian Shadow Puppets: From Still Paintings to Motion Pictures.” *Religion and the Arts* 20, nos. 1–2, 2016: 160–196; Alain F. George, “The Illustrations of the Maqāmāt and the Shadow Play.” *Muqarnas* 28, 2011, 1–42.

2 Georg Jacob, *Das Schattentheater, in seiner Wanderung vom Morgenland zum Abendland*, Berlin: Mayer & Müller, 1901, p. 3; Wilhelm Radloff ve Ignaz Kúnos, *Proben: Der Volkslitteratur der Türkischen Stamme*, haz. Saim Sakaoğlu ve Metin Ergun, Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları, 1998, 20-21.

3 Nazlı M. Ümit, “Oynayan Nesne Olarak Resim ve Kukla: Karagöz’de Tasvir ve Taklit Tasarımı”. *Art-Sanat* 26, 2026, p. 244- 248. DOI : 10.26650/artsanat.2026.26.0008

4 Nilüfer Zeynep Özçörekçi Göl, “Karagöz Oyunlarında Göstermelik.” *UNIMA Bülteni* 2, 2020, 11-18. http://www. unima.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/2_Unima-Bulteni.pdf.
Nazlı M. Ümit, “Oynayan Nesne Olarak Resim ve Kukla” 244.

5 Nazlı M. Ümit, “Oynayan Nesne Olarak Resim ve Kukla” 244.

6 Tülün Değirmenci, “An Illustrated Mecmua: The Commoner’s Voice and the Iconography of the Court in Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Painting”. Ars Orientalis 41, 2011, p. 188-193.

7 Thomas D. Goodrich, *The Ottomans and the New World: A study of Tarih-i Hind-i Garbi and Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Americana*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990, 68.

8 Alpay Ekler, “The Study of Karagöz Tasvir by Classical and Contemporary Artists”, *Genç Karagözcüler Project*, organised by Karagöz Derneği and the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2022. Unpublished lecture notes.

3 UNIMA HERITAGE AWARDEES

By Karen Smith

The UNIMA Heritage Awards recognize and preserve the rich traditions of puppetry across cultures, fostering a deeper understanding of this unique art form. These accolades acknowledge exceptional contributions to the conservation, documentation and promotion of global puppetry heritage. Officially known as the Certificates of Recognition for the Preservation of Puppetry Heritage, these international honours are awarded by UNIMA every four years. The awards commend individuals, organizations and projects dedicated to safeguarding living puppetry traditions, historical archives and museums. They are administered by UNIMA's Heritage, Museums and Documentation Centres (HMDC) Commission. Candidates for the award can be nominated by UNIMA National Centres, individual UNIMA members, councillors or commission members.

The award was launched in 2015 by UNIMA's then-General Secretary, Jacques Trudeau, and presented to three recipients: Yaya Coulibaly (Mali), Danaye Kanlanfeï (Togo) and Werewere Liking (Cameroon/Côte d'Ivoire).

Idoya Otegui served as President of UNIMA's Heritage Commission during the 2024/2025 awards cycle. Those awards recognized 37 individuals from 13 countries who have dedicated their lives to protecting, disseminating and researching puppetry heritage. The Heritage Awards also honoured younger individuals actively working to preserve, promote or develop specific puppetry traditions, showcasing promise for ongoing research or the exploration of a heritage form.

The international jury for the 2024/2025 awards included Lucile Bodson (France), Kathy Foley (USA), Idoya Otegui (Spain), Dadi Pudumjee (India) and Nancy Staub (USA).

The 2024/2025 Heritage Awards represented 13 countries, including six awardees from India, four from Japan, three from Korea, two from Indonesia, and one recipient each from Hawai'i and New Zealand in the Asia-Pacific region. Latin America was represented by one awardee each from Brazil and Mexico. Europe included eight awardees from Italy, six from Spain, two from the Netherlands, and one each from France and Portugal.

India was highly honoured with six puppet masters receiving a UNIMA Heritage Award.

The recipients include Sadananda Pulavar and M. Lakshmana Pulavar, both masters of Kerala's ancient shadow puppetry, *Tholpavakoothu*. Other awardees are Chidambara Rao, a living exponent of Andhra Pradesh's *Tholu Bommalata*; Gunduraju, a master of Karnataka's *Togalu Gombeyaata*; and Bhaskar Kogga Kamath, a lineage bearer of Karnataka's *string puppetry art,* Yakshagana Gombeyata. Additionally, Delhi-based Puran Bhatt was recognized as India's preeminent living master of *Kathputli*, Rajasthan's string puppet tradition. All six masters represent historic family lineages spanning multiple generations.

This issue of *Sutradhar* and the following two issues will each feature two of our six Indian Heritage awardees.

For more information about the award and the awardees, go to the UNIMA International website page titled "UNIMA HERITAGE AWARDS" at: https://www.unima.org/en/unima-heritage-awards/.



Name: Chidambara Rao Sindhe
Birth: Pune, Maharashtra, India (1 January 1969)

Master puppeteer-craftsman of *tholu bommalata* traditional leather shadow puppetry of Andhra Pradesh. As director of the state's Chaya Nataka Brundam shadow theatre troupe, Sindhe Chidambara Rao, along with his team, is famous for vibrant performances locally, nationally and at international festivals and exhibitions. As a traditional lineage bearer, Sindhe Chidambara Rao received the 2024/2025 UNIMA Heritage Award for his work preserving this tradition with some of the largest puppets used in Indian shadow theatre. In 2025, he was honoured with the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award.

Sindhe (or Shinde) is a traditional family surname or clan name derived from a prominent Maratha community lineage. The family has carried the Sindhe/Shinde surname for generations as custodians of this ancient art. Sindhe Chidambara Rao was born in Dharmavaram village, located in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, to Sindhe Narayanappa and Sindhe Shanthamma, as one of their seven children, and received the given name Chidambara Rao. (Note: Rao is a common honorary title/suffix used widely in Andhra Pradesh.

Dedicated to artistic preservation and education, Chidambara Rao has trained many individuals, including university students. Beyond cultural promotion, he leverages puppetry in community social awareness campaigns on both regional and national scales.

Chidambra Rao has participated in many prestigious collaborative multimedia performances in India as well as overseas.He has worked with contemporary masters and brought artistry and nuance to the collaborative works. He is a superb craftsman and his creations embellish public spaces for which he has received many accolades.



Name: Puran Bhatt
Birth: Delhi, India (15 December 1952)

As a revered lineage bearer of *kathputli* – the traditional string puppetry of Rajasthan – Puran Bhatt has been honoured with the UNIMA Heritage Award for 2024/2025. This prestigious tribute celebrates his lifelong dedication to the art and craft, highlighting his decades of international performances and global teaching that have been vital in preserving and safeguarding this ancient folk art for future generations.

Bhatt founded the Aakaar Puppet Theatre in 1991. His goal was to preserve traditional *kathputli* techniques while integrating modern innovations to keep the art form relevant amid declining patronage. He blended traditional string puppetry with diverse techniques – including rod, shadow, black-light and mask theatre – to address themes like education and folklore preservation. In his production *Carvaan*, for example, Bhatt examines the historical significance of puppetry by highlighting the Bhatt community's contemporary struggles to keep their traditional art alive. While his *Amar Singh Rathor* recounts the folk epic of a 17th-century Rajput warrior serving under Mughal emperors like Akbar and Shah Jahan. Directed and puppeteered by Bhatt, the 40-minute Rajasthani performance captures the multi-episodic structure typical of traditional *kathputli* narratives.

Puran Bhatt has brought traditional Indian *kathputli* puppetry to the global stage. His modern puppet designs have been showcased at international festivals and a 2018 exhibition in the USA – at Atlanta's Center for Puppetry Arts – helping preserve and share this folk art worldwide. He has led global workshops, including annual master classes in France, to teach puppet manipulation and storytelling. He also organizes sessions in Jaipur for French artists to learn traditional *kathputli* techniques. These efforts bridge traditional Indian puppetry with modern international practices.

Puran Bhatt received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for his production *Dhola Maru* in 2005.



First Name: Gunduraju
Birth: Hoovinahalli, Hassan district, Karnataka, India (1 March 1959)

Indian master puppeteer of Karnataka's traditional shadow puppetry from Hassan, Karnataka, specializing in togalu gombeyata, the "play of leather dolls". Gunduraju comes from a multi-generational line of shadow puppeteers who carry on an over 200-year family heritage of traditional puppetry. With experience in the genre and Karnataka acting and narration techniques since his childhood, Gunduraju is dedicated to heritage and cultural preservation. He founded the Sri Gombe Ramaiah Indian Leather Puppetry Research and Training Centre Trust, named for his father and puppetry guru, Ramaiah. Gunduraju received the 2024/2025 UNIMA Heritage Award for work conserving this art form.
He leads a troupe that blends traditional devotional musical storytelling (keerthana) with shadow puppetry. He serves as the President of UNIMA Puppeteers Trust - India, the national chapter of UNIMA.
For the past 35 years, Gunduraju has travelled through every district in Karnataka, bringing both traditional repertoire and government-sponsored awareness programmes to local villages. His artistry has also earned him national and international acclaim. Gunduraju has taken 25,000 performances across India and around the globe – including the United States, Kuwait, South Korea, Hong Kong, South Africa, Zimbabwe, France and Poland.

Gunduraju represented India in South Korea (2009), where he secured a bronze medal for his performance. He also presented at the India-Kuwait Festival in Kuwait in the same year earning special recognition from the Kuwait Kannada Koota. Other accolades include the Science of Knowledge Award from the Karnataka Folklore and Yakshagana Academy (2003), the Suvarna Karnataka Award from the Karnataka Nataka Academy (2006), the Karnataka Folk Council Award, the Karnataka State Music Award, and the S.K. Karim Khan Award from the Karnataka Sahitya Parishath.

Gunduraju and Anurupa Roy from Delhi have collaborated on educational curation. Shadow Walk Exhibition (2019) was an interactive exhibition curated by Anurupa Roy for the 2019 Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa, tracing the evolution of Indian shadow puppetry. Gunduraju contributed ancestral puppets, conducted live demonstrations and gave talks on bridging traditional and modern practices.
Mahabharata (2016-) was a theatrical collaboration staged by Roy's Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust.



Name: M.Lakshmana Pulavar
Birth: Koonathara, Palakkad district, Kerala, India (30 November 1957)

Based in Koonathara in the Palakkad district, M. Lakshmana Pulavar is a renowned, seventh-generation master of tholpavakoothu . Performed by specialists called pulavars, this ritual shadow puppetry features the Kamba Ramayanam – the 13th-century Tamil version of the Ramayana by the poet Kambar. It is staged during the festival season on permanent stages called koothumadams. These stages are situated within around eighty-five temples and sacred groves, known as kavus, dedicated to the Goddess Bhadrakali (Bhagavathi) across the Kerala districts of Palakkad, Thrissur and Malappuram. Lakshmana Pulavar is celebrated for his masterful ability to memorize and recite all 2,100 verses of the epic across a demanding 21-day performance cycle.

M. Lakshmana Pulavar has earned many honours during his long career performing and promoting tholpavakoothu. Recently, he received the Kerala Folklore Akademi Award in 2020 .Additionally, he received the Smt. Anuradha Bishnoi Sanmaan and the 2026 award from the Crafts Council of Telangana.

M. Lakshmana Pulavar and his family dedicate their lives to preserving the centuries-old Koonathara style of tholpavakoothu shadow puppetry. Traditional artists strictly follow temple rituals and never shorten their performances of the Kamba Ramayanam.

In contrast, Lakshmana introduces modern innovations during secular performances outside of temples.

He follows the footsteps of his father, K.K. Krishnankutty Pulavar, who broke centuries of strict rules in 1972 by taking the puppet shows outside temple grounds for the first time.

These creative changes successfully engage younger audiences and help spread their cultural heritage across Kerala. M. Lakshmana Pulavar's family arts centre, the Harisree Kannan Tholpavakoothu Kalakendram, helps preserve and keep this heritage alive.

Located in the village of Koonathara, the centre is led by Lakshmana Pulavar and his sons, Sajeesh and Sajith. They host educational workshops, teach puppet-making and support global academic research.



Kamath Family
Heritage: Yakshagana Gombeyata /
Uppinakudru Yakshagana

Indian family of master puppeteers of yakshagana gombeyata traditional string puppetry, also known as Uppinakudru yakshagana after the island village of Uppinakudru in Karnataka, India. The famous Uppinakudru Kamath gharana (family) has preserved the heritage of yakshagana gombeyata for six generations.
As the sixth-generation lineage bearer, Bhaskar Kogga Kamanth received the 2024/2025 UNIMA Heritage Award on behalf of his family and their art form. The award recognizes the family's exceptional contributions to conserving Karnataka's unique string puppet tradition through teaching, writing and decades of national and international performances.

Kamath Family Lineage
1. Krishna (Babu Kamath) (circa 1648–1708)
2. Lakshmana Kamath, Narasimha, Manjappa and Rangappa (span: 1708–1798)
3. Venkataramana Kamath, Nagappa Kamath (span: 1798-1888)
4. Ganapayya Kamath and Srinivas Kamath Devanna Kamath (1888–1971)
5. Kogga Devanna Kamath (27.11.1921–27-08.2003)
6. Bhaskar Kogga Kamath (son of Kogga Kamath 1.8.1964)

Stretching across a three-century lineage, six generations of the Kamath family from Uppinakudru, Kundapura Taluk in the Udupi district of Karnataka, have preserved the local traditional art of string puppetry, yakshagana gombeyata. Uppinakudru yakshagana, founded and popularized in the 18th century by three Kamath brothers – Laxman (Lakshmana), Narasimha and Manjappa – this puppetry tradition has been handed down through the generations via the traditional gurukul family system. During the 20th and 21st centuries, the tradition has been championed by three generations of master puppeteers – Devanna Padmanabha Kamath (1888–1971), his son Kogga Devanna Kamath (1921–2003) and his grandson Bhaskar Kogga Kamath, who is the sixth-generation practitioner of uppinakudru yakshagana and currently leads the family's puppet troupe with fifteen artist – Sri Ganesha Yakshagana Gombeyata Mandali.





Name: Sadananda Pulavar
Birth: Palapuram, near Ottapalam, Palakkad district of Kerala, India (15 October 1953)

Sadananda Pulavar is a veteran master of tholpavakoothu, a ritual shadow puppetry that tells the story of the 13th-century Tamil Ramayana. These sacred performances take place over many nights during the festival season held inside specialized theatres built outside Goddess Bhadrakali (Bhagavathi) temples that face the shrines so the deity can watch the plays.

Sadananda Pulavar abandoned a career in economics – to dedicate himself fully to performing and teaching the traditional shadow puppetry art of tholpavakoothu. Operating in the district of Palakkad, he is renowned for his ability to perform the complete 2,100-verse Kambar Ramayanam across 21 days during temple festival seasons. His five decades dedicated to performing and conserving this ritual art have earned him numerous accolades, including the prestigious international UNIMA Heritage Award in 2024/2025.

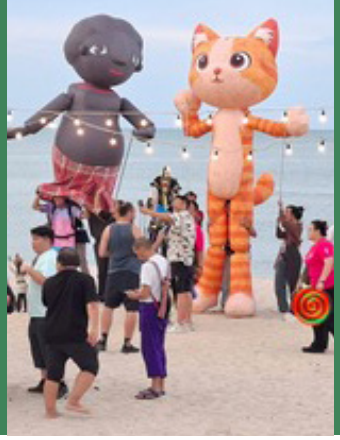
Sadananda Pulavar belongs to a distinguished six-generation lineage of shadow puppetry masters, one of the few traditional lineages keeping this ritual art alive in Kerala.
He began his training in the ancient art of tholpavakoothu at five years old under his father and grandfather, who were both renowned scholars, making his official performance debut at age 14 at the Sree Chinakkathoor Bhagavathi Temple. Mastering this spiritual art form took 20 years of intense practice. He had to study sacred Hindu scriptures, including the Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads. He also had to study classical music while using heirloom palm-leaf manuscripts and deerskin puppets. Following his father's death in 2010, he took over the family troupe and centre, the Palappuram Sangham. Today, he leads the artists and manages performances across eleven traditional temples.Sadananda Pulavar continues his family's legacy forward by preserving the ancient, ritual core of tholpavakoothu shadow puppetry.

As the current leader of the Palappuram Sangham, he guides the group with his deep devotion to sacred spaces and an exceptional command of storytelling. Much like his father, he is celebrated for his powerful chanting of epic verses and his ability to captivate audiences for hours through lively, local-language improvisations.









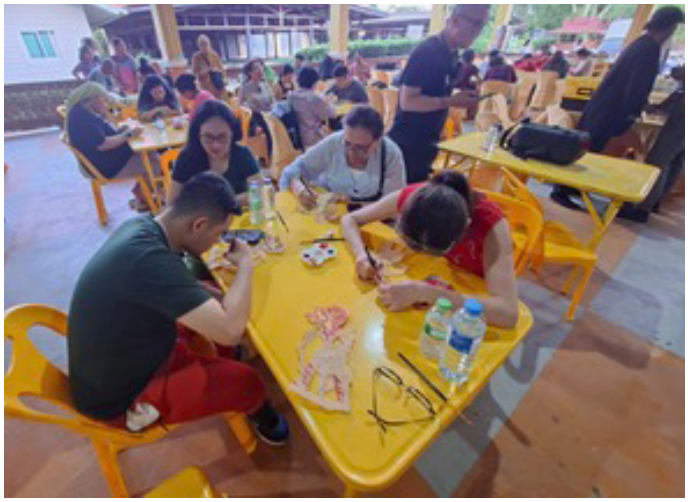
4 THE ANATOMY OF A FESTIVAL : THE HARMONY FESTIVAL

by UNIMA THAILAND

From Shadows to Bridges: Songkhla Harmony World Puppet Festival 2026

When puppetry becomes a language of friendship, heritage and innovation
From 5–9 August 2026, the southern Thai city of Songkhla welcomed puppeteers, artists, educators, researchers and cultural practitioners from Thailand, Asia and beyond for the SONGKHLA HARMONY WORLD PUPPET FESTIVAL & UNIMA ASIA-PACIFIC FORUM THAILAND 2026.









The festival brought people together through performances, workshops, exhibitions, forums, parades and, perhaps most importantly, conversations.

For us, puppetry is not only about the puppet itself. It is about people—the people who make it, perform it, watch it and pass its stories on to the next generation.

Keeping the Shadow Alive
Southern Thailand has a long and distinctive tradition of shadow puppetry, especially *Nang Talung*. The art brings together carved figures, light, music, voice and storytelling, and has been part of community life for generations.

During the festival, this tradition was not treated simply as something from the past. It became a starting point for new conversations.

To be honest, organising an annual festival is always a challenge. There are so many things behind the scenes that people don't see — funding, logistics, venues, accommodation, transportation, international coordination, technical production, and working with many different partners. And because we want to keep the festival accessible to everyone, especially children and local communities, we often have to find creative ways to make things work with limited resources.

There are other puppet festivals in Thailand as well, but what we have been trying to build through Harmony is a continuous international platform where Thai artists can meet, exchange and collaborate with puppeteers and cultural practitioners from other countries.

We do receive some support from government organisations and local authorities, but it is not always consistent or sufficient to cover the whole festival. A large part of the work comes from partnerships, sponsors, friends in the puppetry community, volunteers and, most importantly, the passion of the people involved.

Our core organising team is actually quite small — around 5-10 people working closely together, with many volunteers, students, local partners and additional teams joining during the festival.

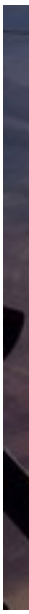
The Harmony Puppet network has been active since 2013, so we have been doing this for more than a decade now. Every year we learn something new, make mistakes, improve, and try to build something a little stronger for the next generation.

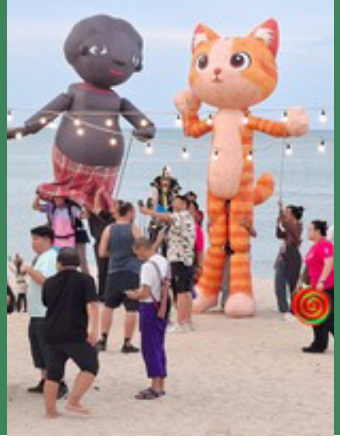
And yes, it can be hard and sometimes quite thankless! But seeing children watching a puppet show for the first time, schools joining the activities, local people becoming part of the festival, and artists from different countries becoming friends — those moments make all the hard work worthwhile.

We try to keep many of our community and outdoor activities free, while some workshops and special programmes may be ticketed. Our priority is always to make puppetry accessible and to bring it beyond the theatre and into the community.

-- KONGLAR KANCHANAHOTI

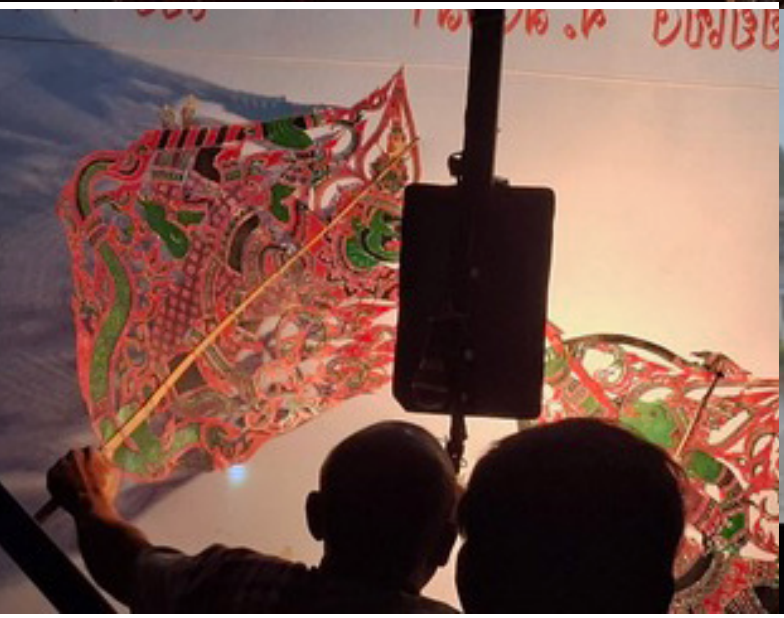


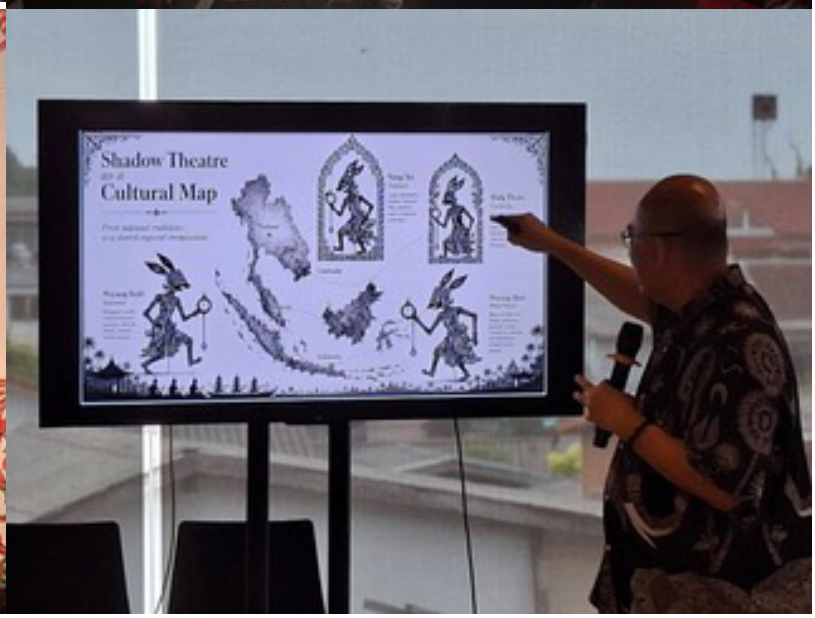








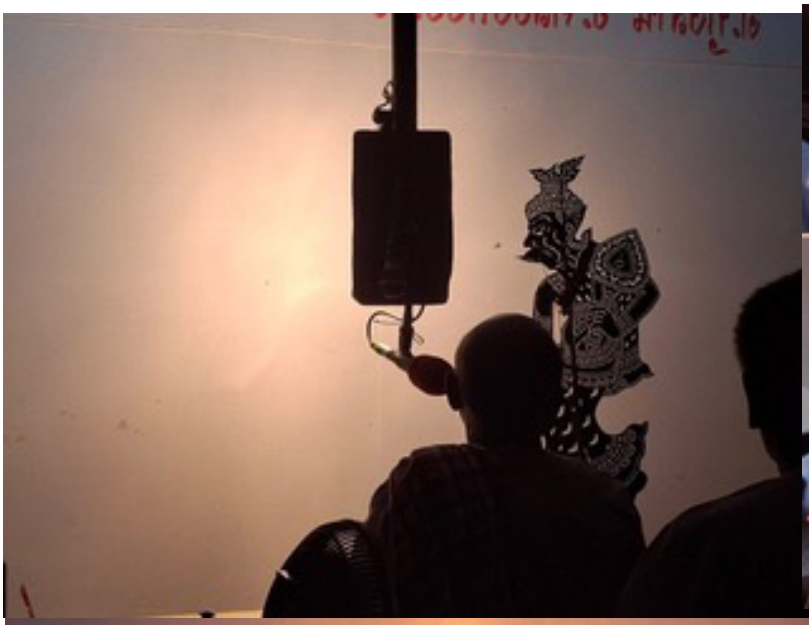




Through performances, exhibitions, lectures and discussions on documentation and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, artists and audiences explored an important question:
How can we protect a traditional art form while allowing it to continue growing?

Perhaps the answer is not to keep tradition unchanged, but to give it room to breathe.

From "Me" to "Us"
International festivals are special because everyone arrives with a different story.
One artist may work with shadow puppets, another with marionettes, objects, contemporary performance or technology. We may speak different languages and come from very different cultural backgrounds. But when the puppet comes alive, something changes.





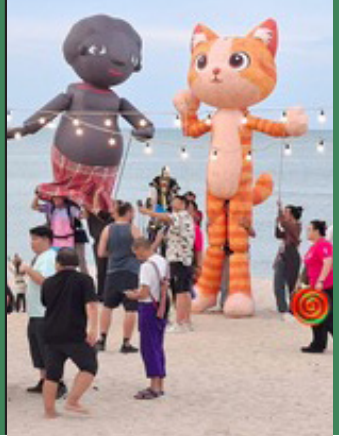




We begin to understand each other.
The UNIMA Asia-Pacific Forum provided an important space for this exchange. Participants shared ideas and experiences around heritage, education, artistic development, inclusion and the future of puppetry.
The exchange was not simply about showing our own culture to others. It was equally about listening and learning.

And that is perhaps one of the greatest strengths of puppetry: we do not have to be the same to connect.

Puppetry Outside the Theatre
In Songkhla, the festival was not confined to a theatre. Performances and activities took place in cultural spaces, museums, historic areas, streets and public places. The city itself became part of



the experience.

A street could become a stage.
A museum could become a theatre.
A beach could become a performance space.

The international puppet parade brought this spirit to life, filling the streets with puppets, performers and audiences and introducing puppetry to people who might not normally visit a theatre.

The festival also explored new possibilities for traditional Thai forms through contemporary materials, design and technology. This showed that innovation does not necessarily mean leaving tradition behind. Sometimes, it simply means looking at tradition from a different angle.

Songkhla: A City That Became Part of the Festival
Choosing Songkhla as the setting was important. With its multicultural history, old town, local communities and distinctive southern identity, the city offered much more than a venue. It became part of the festival itself.

International artists experienced local food, architecture, stories and everyday life, while local





audiences encountered artistic traditions from other parts of the world. The exchange therefore happened both on and off stage.

A Bridge Between Generations
Puppetry has always depended on the passing of knowledge. A technique is taught by one generation to another. A character is redesigned. A story is retold. A puppet is repaired and given another life. Workshops and educational activities during the festival created opportunities for this kind of sharing between artists, students and younger generations.

Preserving puppetry is not only about keeping old puppets, scripts or archives. It is about keeping alive the knowledge and courage to **make, perform, experiment and tell new stories.**

India and Thailand: A Shared Conversation
For Indian participants, the festival offered an opportunity to strengthen connections between two countries with rich puppetry traditions. India and Thailand have developed their own distinctive forms of shadow, string, rod and other puppetry traditions. Although their histories are different, many common elements can be found in both: storytelling, music, craftsmanship,



community and the close relationship between the performer and the puppet.
Events such as the UNIMA Asia-Pacific Forum give these traditions a chance to meet.
The goal is not to compare which tradition is better. It is to discover what we can learn from one another.

The Puppet as a Bridge
Perhaps the most memorable lesson from Songkhla was simple: **puppetry brings people together.** A puppet does not need a passport to cross a border. A character can make people laugh even when they do not share a language. A shadow can communicate an emotion without translation. For a moment, the distance between cultures becomes smaller.

That is what the word "**Harmony**" means to us. Harmony does not mean that everyone is the same. It means that different voices, traditions and generations can exist together, learn from one another and create something new.
In Songkhla, the puppet became more than an object on a stage.

It became a bridge—

between heritage and innovation,
between artists and audiences,
between generations,
and between Thailand, India and the wider world.

And perhaps, most importantly, it helped us move from **"me" to "us."**







5 SINDHE CHIDAMBARA RAO

By Karen Smith, Ranjana Pandey

Master puppeteer-craftsman of *tholu bommalata* traditional leather shadow puppetry of Andhra Pradesh . As director of the state's Chaya Nataka Brundam shadow theatre troupe, Sindhe Chidambara Rao, along with his team, is famous for vibrant performances locally, nationally and at international festivals and exhibitions. As a traditional lineage bearer, Sindhe Chidambara Rao received the 2024/2025 UNIMA Heritage Award for his work preserving this tradition with some of the largest puppets used in Indian shadow theatre. In 2025, he was honoured with the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award.





The family has carried the Sindhe/ Shinde surname for generations as custodians of this ancient art. Sindhe Chidambara Rao was born in Dharmavaram village, located in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, to Sindhe Narayanappa and Sindhe Shanthamma, as one of their seven children, and received the given name Chidambara Rao.

Chidambara Rao comes from a traditional puppetry family: "Chithambara Rao's great-grandfather, Nayanappa Rao, was the first puppeteer in the family. He migrated from Solapur district in Maharashtra to Kolar district in Karnataka. Here he met with many leather puppeteers, forged friendships and learnt the art form. His son, Chinaveerappa Rao, moved to Dharmavarama and started practising the art in Anantapur district [of Andhra Pradesh]. From one generation to the next, Tholu Bommalaata was passed down to the hands of Chithambara Rao" (*Sarmaya* 2020).

Children handle the puppets at a very young age, so Chidambara Rao performed with his family

from age eight. He now performs with his wife, Chinna Venkatamma, two older brothers and three nephews. Three of the men are puppeteers and the others are musicians and singers. Chidambara Rao himself is both a singer and a puppeteer. The family makes its own puppets, which are masterpieces of intricate carving, perforating and painting. Their troupe has performed nationally and across Europe and Asia.

Training in the Art

As a child, Chidambara Rao learned to animate the puppets, clap the *thaal* (rhythmic time cycles) and sing from his parents and eldest sister who was a skilled singer, comedian and performer. While he completed his formal schooling up to the 5th standard in Telugu, his parents expanded his education at home using the *Peddabalasiksha*, a traditional Telugu encyclopedia of culture and general knowledge. He additionally studied the *Ranganatha Ramayanamu*, a 13th-century Telugu version of the Ramayana written in the simple *Dvipada* metre, and *Neethi Sastram*, a collection of ancient verses on ethics and governance by the 13th-century poet Baddena. Performing the epics through shadow puppetry from an early age immersed Chidambara Rao in the rich traditions of his region and country.

In 1986, with the help of Hyderabad's Professor Nagabhushan, Sindhe Chidambara Rao staged *Lanka Dhahanam* (Burning of Lanka), which depicts Hanuman burning the island kingdom of Ravana, from the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, at Pragati Maidan in New Delhi. Following this breakthrough, Chidambara Rao began showcasing his leather puppetry art globally. He has conducted numerous performances, demonstrations and workshops across India and in countries such as Germany, the UK, Spain,











Egypt, Oman and Mexico to widespread acclaim, including a prestigious National Award from the Government of India in 2003 and an Honorary Doctorate in 2022.

Dedicated to artistic preservation and education, Chidambara Rao has trained many individuals, including university students. Beyond cultural promotion, he leverages puppetry in community social awareness campaigns on both regional and national scales.

The Art of Tholu Bommalata – Modifications and Endurance

Tholu bommalata originally emerged from Maharashtra with puppeteers settling on lands awarded to them by local temples. As the tradition moved further south, the puppets steadily grew in scale: from the modest 45 cm (1.5-foot) Maharashtran shadow form, [*chamdyacha bahulya*]; to Tamil Nadu's larger [*tolu bommalatam*] figures; then to Karnataka's [*togalu gombeyata*] puppets; and, finally, to the magnificent *tholu bommalata* of Andhra Pradesh, whose largest figures reach a towering 2.45 m (8 feet). The language of performance is in a unique Marathi dialect called Aare (or Aré Marathi). Despite living across diverse geographical regions and cultures for hundreds of years, the puppeteers in all these forms can still communicate with one another using this shared tongue.







Modification and Endurance

"Tholu Bommalaata has a distinctive style – the eyes or lips, the way of holding weapons like a sword or mace, the style of holding a bow and arrow. You cannot change these, as that would dilute its authenticity" (*Sarmaya*, 2020). Reflecting on changes to the puppetry art during his lifetime, Chithambara Rao has noted that there are currently 80 leathercraft families. However, only about 30 people are still involved in shadow puppetry or related roles, such as playing instruments, singing or manipulating the puppets. He explains: "During my parents' time, in Andhra Pradesh, there were over 180 groups in 13 districts. Now there are not even nine groups.

We don't have an audience anymore. As a result, our groups have started pursuing other professions. We are trying our best to make sure this art doesn't disappear into oblivion. But we need support to keep this going. If this art is developed, many families will be benefitted. We need help from the government or private organisations to strengthen this art" (*Sarmaya* 2020). Today, the remaining puppet community members earn a living by making leather crafts – like lampshades and other artefacts – that feature the same intricate carving and painting style as the shadow puppets.

Until the 1970s, people eagerly anticipated the performances, arriving early to reserve their spots by laying down blankets on the ground, close to the puppet screen. The shows would last all night. Today, however, it is difficult for viewers to sit for even two hours. Due to competing entertainment options like television, modern audiences lose interest after just 30 to 60 minutes, even though the narratives remain the same as in the past.

Over the decades, modifications were also made to lighting, sound and materials. The original light source was an oil lamp. Today, harsh electric lighting flattens the image, alters colours and degrades on-screen puppet presentation. Furthermore, electric lights generate intense heat that makes puppeteers uncomfortable, and power outages frequently disrupt performances. Audio delivery has changed drastically. Modern performances rely heavily on amplifiers and microphones. In contrast, past performers relied entirely on natural voice projection. Puppet materials have evolved significantly over the years. Originally, artists crafted puppets from palm leaves, sizing them by character importance. Later, puppeteers transitioned to thicker, perforated deer skin. When government hunting bans protected deer, puppeteers switched to processed goat skin, which is smooth and translucent. Additionally, puppet sizes have grown, with some reaching up to eight feet tall.

Shadow puppetry has shifted from a restricted palette (red, black, yellow), using rare organic dyes, to a vibrant, detailed chemical and textile dye colour range. Colours mirror a character's mood and setting (e.g. Hanuman, the monkey general, is blue over water, red in battle, and green in gardens). This colour technique was passed down through generations in Chidambara Rao's family. Historically, the design of the puppet figures derived from temple murals, statues and paintings in the Pinguli style – a traditional folk art and storytelling practice from the village of Pinguli in Maharashtra's Sindhudurg district. But modern works show a trend toward facial and clothing realism.

The Role of Comic Characters in *Tholu Bommalata*

The comic characters Bangarakka, Jutupoligaadu, Khetigaadu and Alaatapaagaadu play an integral role in the form and tradition of *tholu bommalata*. Historically, comic characters were introduced to puppet shows to keep audiences engaged and prevent epic narratives from becoming monotonous. They draw directly from the various *rasas* (emotional expressions) in traditional performance arts, with the nine classical rasas remaining fundamental elements of the art form today. As experienced performers, Chidambara Rao and his troupe know when the audience is getting bored, distracted or sleepy. That is when the clowns make their appearance to provide the necessary "wake-up" moments during the show. Children are an important part of the audience. "As soon as these [comic] characters come on to the stage, the kids start laughing uncontrollably. The kids come to watch just for these characters. Kids love jewellery, and the characters are created accordingly. We try to convert the humour into something useful for kids—it's what's known as pandita haasyam [intelligent, refined or scholarly humour]. It's not crass humor, it carries a message" (*Sarmaya* 2020).

Puppeteers also address local social tensions through humour. They often create comedic characters who mock village opponents by using derogatory variations of their names during a live performance. Furthermore, character appearances are deliberately designed to reflect their internal nature: wise and heroic characters are crafted to be visually attractive, whereas comic characters are made intentionally unattractive to match the satirical nature of their roles and the messages they deliver.

Sindhe Lokesh, Chidambara Rao's son, explains that puppet shows in India have historically been used to educate communities about critical social issues. By utilizing comic characters alongside a narrator called the *sutradhara*, performers





have successfully raised awareness about topics ranging from family planning, domestic violence, water conservation, environmental conservation, HIV/AIDS prevention, to mobile (cell phone) addiction.

As societal realities shift, these comic characters change to reflect modern times. Today's clowns must mirror contemporary people through relevant caricature and comedy. Unlike the epic heroes of the *Ramayana* – who cannot break the fourth wall – these comic characters act much like the *sutradhara*. They speak directly to both the characters in the play and the audience. Consequently, they serve as a bridge between the epic characters of the story and the modern viewer, using humour to underline acceptable values and uphold community morals.

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Ranjana Pandey is a puppeteer and a writer-director. She trained in Europe with several Puppet Theatres. She has written, designed and directed several Puppet performances and a T.V. serial for children: Khullam Khulla.She is also a co-founder of Jan Madhyam a CSO working for the Inclusion of challenged and economically disadvantaged children. Ranjana has taken training in Puppet Therapy and practices regularly in Jan Madhyam. She introduced and taught Puppetry in many Mass Communication and Development Communication Masters programs in Universities, including MCRC , Jamia Milia, Delhi. Ranjana is on the faculty of many Teacher Training Institutes. She is the founding Trustee of Puppeteers Trust India-She curates and organizes professional training programs for Puppeteers. She is the Founder Editor of "Sutradhar", the only magazine on Puppetry in India. For the last decade Ranjana has been exploring intimate storytelling with puppets on video.

Karen Smith is an Australian-US puppeteer, scholar, and global arts leader who has lived across Asia and the Americas, served as President of UNIMA International, and currently directs the World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts as its Editor-in-Chief.

6 MASTER PUPPETEER PURAN BHATT



by Ranjana Pandey and Karen Smith

As a revered lineage bearer of *kathputli* – the traditional string puppetry of Rajasthan – Puran Bhatt has been honoured with the UNIMA Heritage Award for 2024/2025. This prestigious tribute celebrates his lifelong dedication to the art and craft, highlighting his decades of international performances and global teaching that have been vital in preserving and safeguarding this ancient folk art for future generations.

This art form originated primarily from the Nagaur district of Rajasthan. Historically, the Bhat and Nat communities sustained *kathputli* through travelling performances. Drawing on folklore and legendary tales, they entertained rural audiences across northern and eastern India, modern-day Pakistan and Nepal. Puran Bhatt's family perfectly exemplified this heritage. His great-grandfather, grandfather and father were active puppeteers who passed down to him the essential skills of crafting wooden puppets, manipulating strings and narrating stories through live music and dialogue. Living and working in Delhi's Kathputli Colony helped Puran Bhatt master puppet manipulation, singing and live music.

Puran Bhatt began his professional puppetry career in Delhi. He expanded his training and opportunities under Dadi Pudumjee at the Shri Ram Centre for Performing Arts. Under Pudumjee's mentorship, he learned to blend traditional Rajasthani *kathputli* with modern, experimental styles. Bhatt's own work would later feature adaptations of the traditional Rajasthani folktale *Dhola Maru*. He had previously co-produced an early-1980s adaptation directed by Dadi Pudumjee, which integrated actors, large costume puppets and traditional *kathputli* puppeteers, with Bhatt starring in the lead male role. Bhatt later created his own version of *Dhola Maru* – a cross-cultural collaboration with a French troupe that interwove the Rajasthani legend with *The Little Mermaid*, which was itself an early-1980s Shri Ram Centre production by Swedish guest director Gunther Wetzl. Bhatt's own *Dhola Maru*, a 50-minute adaptation, features ten actors performing a story of romantic separation and reunion. The production uses traditional Rajasthani string puppetry with slow-motion techniques to deepen emotional expression, blending ballads, *nautanki* (a popular traditional folk theatre style from North India) and painted illustrations.



During the mid-1980s, Puran Bhatt further expanded his skills by working with Ranjana Pandey and Jan Madhyam, the social puppetry group she led. When asked about Pandey's

influence, he noted: “I learned to truly believe in inclusion and equality. Through that collaboration, I experienced doing school shows, working directly with children and putting on community development performances in slums. It allowed me to work up close with marginalized communities.”

Ultimately, these pivotal experiences with Dadi Pudumjee and Ranjana Pandey enabled Puran Bhatt to experiment with contemporary staging and perform for a broader audience while keeping traditional puppetry forms alive. Based in Kathputli Colony, Bhatt founded the Aakaar Puppet Theatre in 1991, choosing a Hindi name meaning “shape” or “form”. His goal was to preserve traditional *kathputli* techniques while integrating modern innovations to keep the art form relevant amid declining patronage. He blended traditional string puppetry with diverse techniques – including rod, shadow, black-light and mask theatre – to address themes like education and folklore preservation. In his production *Carvaan*, for example, Bhatt examines the historical significance of puppetry by highlighting the Bhat community’s contemporary struggles to keep their traditional art alive. While his *Amar Singh Rathor* recounts the folk epic of a 17th-century Rajput warrior serving under Mughal emperors like Akbar and Shah Jahan. Directed and puppeteered by Bhatt, the 40-minute Rajasthani performance captures the multi-episodic structure typical of traditional *kathputli* narratives. Mirroring the communal, hereditary traditions of Indian puppetry, Aakaar Puppet Theatre initially consisted entirely of Bhatt’s family members. Nationally, the group also performs in schools, on television and for various organizations.

Puran Bhatt has brought traditional Indian



kathputli puppetry to the global stage. His modern puppet designs have been showcased at international festivals and a 2018 exhibition in the USA – at Atlanta’s Center for Puppetry Arts – helping preserve and share this folk art worldwide. He has led global workshops, including annual master classes in France, to teach puppet manipulation and storytelling. He also organizes sessions in Jaipur for French artists to learn traditional *kathputli* techniques. These efforts bridge traditional Indian puppetry with modern international practices.

In the early 2010s, he fought to protect Delhi’s Kathputli Colony from government demolition, defending the community’s heritage during relocation (for more, see below).

In 2003, master puppeteer Puran Bhatt received the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. This prize was given by India’s National Academy of Music, Dance & Drama to honour his lifelong work with *kathputli*. This is an ancient string-puppet tradition native to Rajasthan. Historically performed across India, the art form has recently gained worldwide recognition.

The following sections provide additional information on the Rajasthani Bhat puppetry



community and the Shadipur Depot/Kathputli Colony, as well as personal details shared by Puran Bhatt with Ranjana Pandey and Karen Smith in May 2026.

A Family Profession

Indian puppetry is traditionally a family-run business, with troupes passing down both physical puppets and memorized texts through generations as treasured heirlooms or dowries. Because of this insular apprenticeship model, regional puppet styles have experienced very limited aesthetic evolution over the centuries (Autiero 2013). A prime example is the *kathputli* string puppets of Rajasthan, which feature ornate decorations inspired by medieval Rajasthani style. Distinctly, *kathputli* puppet shows deviate from standard Hindu epic plots to narrate the legendary exploits of Rajput heroes (Salerno 2013: 75-88).

From Rajasthan to India's Capital – Delhi

From the late 1950s, many Bhat families began transitioning from pure nomadism towards semi-settled lives, foreshadowing their eventual migration to urban centres like Delhi, while preserving Rajasthan's performative legacy.

Puran Bhatt was a child in the 1960s when a major migration wave of Rajasthani puppeteers (कठपुतली कलाकार: *kathputli kalākāra* or "artist") moved to Delhi. Facing a severe decline in royal patronage and rural livelihoods in Rajasthan, these nomadic performers travelled to the capital in search of modern audiences and national recognition. Rajasthan was left behind, visited only occasionally for weddings, festivals or religious ceremonies. The puppeteers owned nothing in their ancestral villages – neither land nor homes.

Puran Bhatt describes being born "on the footpath 'camp' in Kamla Market", a traditional commercial area near Ajmeri Gate in central Delhi. Later, the Municipal Committee moved the camp to Delhi



Gate, near the cricket stadium. In 1970, the artists pitched their tents on a vacant piece of land in Shadipur Depot, a major bus transit and residential hub on Main Patel Road in West Delhi. Puran Bhatt had no formal education; instead, he mastered puppetry through hands-on immersion in his family performances. His life at Shadipur Depot and tours with his family shaped both his world and his work. He constantly navigated the challenges of living in India's capital city – which, by 2026, had grown to a population exceeding 23 million – while seizing opportunities at home and abroad through his art.

Shadipur Depot – Kathputli Colony

The puppeteers' settlement, known as Kathputli Colony, grew into the world's largest street performer settlement, welcoming diverse folk artists – magicians, acrobats, snake charmers, stilt walkers and folk musicians from Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. In 2016, Delhi authorities razed the valuable land for redevelopment, relocating families to a transit camp in Anand Parbat. Today, descendants struggle to preserve their ancient traditions against urbanization and digital entertainment. Puran Bhatt has been a community leader in defending his community's heritage during their long and unresolved relocation. The displacement of around 3,000 artist families fragmented their community, driving a decline in collaborative art forms. Isolation in high-density housing discouraged group performances and workshops, eroding traditional skills like *kathputli* puppetry amid dwindling practice opportunities.

Ancestral Village in Rajasthan

Although their home state was left behind – to be visited only on occasions such as weddings, festivals or religious ceremonies – the connection with Rajasthan for the Bhat community remained vibrant. The puppeteers owned no land or dwellings in their ancestral village, yet whenever they returned, their stay would be welcomed and organized by their traditional sponsor and patron – the *jajman*, a landowner or recipient of services within the traditional South Asian rural economic framework known as the Jajmani system.

Village Visits and Community Heritage

"We would visit our ancestral villages. It was a grand meeting of relatives and friends. There was song, dance and music. Food was very important. Local breweries (*theka*) would spring up to make alcohol, and goats would be slaughtered for the festivities. Our family and ancestors owed allegiance to Chamunda Mata – a temple of Bhavani (the Goddess). They did not do any agriculture and owned no fields, unlike other *kathputli* families. My *Dada* and *Pardada* (grandfather and great-grandfather) were *Ghumantroo* (nomads). Their mantra was *Khana Peena Gaana Bajaana* (Eating, drinking, dancing and singing).

"They would travel far and wide in family groups, using animals like donkeys and horses to carry their baggage. They moved from village to village in Rajasthan, where each family was assigned specific areas. Beyond Rajasthan, they travelled as far as Calcutta, Guwahati, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Living outside of caste strictures and boundaries, they faced no restrictions. We ate anything and made food in any kitchen; we were a law unto ourselves.

Mostly, they were hosted by the Muslim community. It was a performing circuit where they were always given full hospitality."

The Traditional Kathputli Performance

Puran Bhatt describes the typical *kathputli* performance. "It was highly interactive. There were 52 puppets and a traditional curtain setup





(*durbar*). We would weave the hosts into the performance, paying compliments and thanking them. We also gave them opportunities to dance, sing and participate in the show. Of course, the story was important – a tale of subterfuge, politics and revenge in the Rajput and Mughal courts. However, that was only one layer of the performance.

"There were other characters representing ordinary folks, like the *dhobi* (washerman) and his wife, the sentinel, the crocodile, the snake charmer and his snake, the horse rider, and aur bajegi – a funny clown-like character who remained seated, beating his drum and chanting '*aur bajegi, aur bajegi*' (And it will ring, and it will ring).

"Children would participate by doing *uthak-baithak* (squats). The women would play the *dholak* (drum) and sing. The puppeteer used a swazzle to create the puppets' voices. And the lighting was provided by a simple lantern. The stage itself was constructed using two *charpai* (string cots) to keep the puppeteers hidden. The puppets featured very stark, bold and stylized facial features. Music and rhythm were crucial, as the puppets moved entirely to the beat. Interestingly, most of the puppets did not have legs. The audience setting was very intimate, making the show highly versatile and tailored specifically to the crowd."

Kathputli Performances Today

"Shadipur Depot has changed a lot in these 56 years. The city has changed. The people have changed. People used to seek us out and invite us to perform. Today, it is the exact opposite. We have to go out and seek work. There used to be many more jobs, shows and opportunities to perform in the past. Now . . . not so many at all. The time of free flow and trusting relationships has gone. Post-COVID, the wars . . . and, of course, television, cinema, and now the mobile phone have caused the demise of live performances.

"Desire (*chahat*) is extinguished. We used to touch and feel fabric. I would search for the right feel, weight, flow and look of the material to dress my puppets. I would call you, Ranjana, to locate the shop and the name of the material (for example, "Malaysia Grey", a grey cotton used for unstitched men's clothing and perfect for the crow I was making at the time). Now, people shop online. The connection with material is fractured.

Our experiences are diminished. Communication is nil. In the past, a large *haveli* (the architectural venues where the shows are performed) would be commissioned. The puppeteers used to travel in large groups of 11 to 150 people, like a caravan."

Puran Bhatt's Personal Journey as a Kathputli Artist
"If I take a peek into the past, into my journey, my first monthly salary as a working puppeteer was Rs. 400 (in the early 1980s, equivalent to US$50). My first identity was that of a performer. Being a teacher came later.

"I thought, since I had learnt from someone, why not teach others? I feel good when I see my students doing well, succeeding and flourishing using *kathputli* as their idiom in Germany, France and Spain. It is so encouraging. I see that puppetry is alive through them. My art form is alive, and my tradition will survive through my students. The technique is the essence, even though the aesthetic may shift.

"I teach the younger generations, too – my grandchildren, nephews and now my nieces. You know, in Shadipur Depot, the women did not traditionally perform. They dressed the puppets, and some sang. Those who excelled in music, like my niece Guddi, embellished the performances with their talent."



In describing his own creative process, Puran Bhatt reflects: "The new puppets I made were more realistic. I created distinct characters and I used a different colour palette from the traditional one, with clothing appropriate to each character. Even the stringing had to be different to match what the character was going to do, such as riding a camel. Or my version of the *jadugar* (the magician: a disarticulating puppet that juggles its head). The stage, lights and audio are also different now, so I had to design for that. I also use new materials, not just wood, and incorporate different styles of puppetry that I have learned over the years. The creative process often starts with a random trigger, like stumbling upon an old puppet head. My new *Ramayan* production happened exactly like that, and all the other characters came later. In *Dhola Maru*, Reva, the villain, spoke to me first. From there, one idea simply led to another."

Contributors to Puran Bhatt's Success
"I learned *kathputli* from my father, of course. I learned sculpting from him. I was exceptionally good. I even worked for a wood-carving furniture company for a while. Actually, I began by wanting to be an actor. I craved for Bombay. I was tall and had an impressive physique.

"I came in contact with contemporary puppet theatre and the proscenium stage at the Sri Ram Centre in Delhi with Dadi Pudumjee. Proscenium was a shock. Everything was. This is a puppet? It can be any size? And so many styles? And mixing actors, dancers, puppets, masks! All of this triggered my thinking and my growth.

"The second explosion came when I was



contacted by a French lady. She wanted me to conduct a workshop for 12 days, 6 hours a day, for 21 foreigners. But I didn't speak any English. Anyhow, I managed. It gave me a lot of confidence. I taught whatever I knew and what I had learned at the Shri Ram Centre. Including theatre exercises, manipulation and making all kinds of puppets.

"This was so successful that I taught twice a year. Sometimes in France and elsewhere.
I taught with an open heart, with sincerity. I did not bind anyone to MY aesthetic. I gave them a technique and then left them free. The French connection continues even today. I am in touch with all my students."

Workshops and Masterclasses
"The Sangeet Natak Akademi workshop was with boys from my community. They were direction-less, time wasters, idlers . . . After the workshop, each one went back with a set of puppets, a *dholak*, a harmonium. It kickstarted a career for some of them. And they are successful today." Describing his UNIMA India Masterclass experience, Bhatt notes: "The truth is, every time I taught, I learned. Yes, it's true. I learned from my students. I was amazed at their freedom, their different ways of thinking, of solving problems. I also got creative ideas from them. For construction, for manipulation."

Two Special Productions:
Dhola Maru* and *Carvaan
"*Dhola Maru* was the pinnacle of my career.
It beautifully brought together tradition and modernity. During the performance, I revealed the puppeteers and used the stage space freely. However, the puppets themselves remained true to traditional *kathputli* and Rajasthani aesthetics. While the narrative followed the ancient story of Prince Dhola and Princess Maru, I evolved my own style to tell it. In 2003, I opened the Sangeet Natak Akademi Festival of Indian Puppetry [Putul Yatra] with this show. *Dhola Maru* was not even fully ready, but I took the plunge anyway. It turned out to be a grand success and is still running today. We are regularly invited to festivals. My family joins in for the performances, and everyone plays a role. We have taken this show all over the world, and it ultimately brought me a Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 2003."

"*Carvaan* was an experiment in combining different performance forms and live actors to tell an authentic narrative. It follows the journey of the kathputli puppeteers of Shadipur Depot. Local youngsters were involved, making it a unique experience for them. The project was sponsored by Rajeev Sethi [a prominent Indian designer and art curator who has spent decades advocating for the rights, cultural heritage and livelihoods of Delhi's Kathputli Colony performers]. I created large puppets for Carvaan, which soon started a major trend. Now, giant parade puppets can be seen everywhere.

"Over the years, I have created performances in various styles, and I continue to create and perform to this day. My latest project is *Ramayan*, told in the Japanese Bunraku style, which is completely self-financed."

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She introduced and taught Puppetry in many Mass Communication and Development Communication Masters programs in Universities, including MCRC , Jamia Milia, Delhi. Ranjana is on the faculty of many Teacher Training Institutes. She is the founding Trustee of Puppeteers Trust India-She curates and organizes professional training programs for Puppeteers.
She is the Founder Editor of “Sutradhar”, the only magazine on Puppetry in India. For the last decade Ranjana has been exploring intimate storytelling with puppets on video.

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