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## **Echoes of the Past, Visions for the Future: Delving into the Functionalities of String Puppet Theatre of Bengal**

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### **Abstract:**

Traditional String Puppetry bears a significant position in the cultural scenario of Bengal. Performers, with their dance-drama involving the folklores and legends from epic and Puranas, have bustled across the alleys of rural Bengal and enchanted the people with their beautifully adorned puppets. However, at present, this folk-performance art is facing issues that have, to a large extent, marginalised this art-tradition. The performers are trying hard to meet the challenges emerged as a result of the outbreak of modern means of public entertainments. Adopting subtle dynamic changes has become one of the key tools of survival for this performance art. This paper would like throw a searching light on the history and development of this art-tradition in Bengal. This will also try to highlight the areas where the changes have taken place in order to determine a better future course for this glorious folk-performance art of West Bengal.

**Keywords:** Puppetry, folk-performance art, public entertainment, dynamic changes.

Bengal is known for nurturing its culture and folk-performance traditions since time immemorial. Chhau dance, Baul dance, Patua sangeet, Gajan, Kirtan, Kabigaan and most importantly, Putul naach have enriched the cultural panorama of Bengal. Puppetry in Bengal

is known as Putul naach. Although critics like Richard Pischel, Jiwan Pani, Subho Joardar and many others consider Indian subcontinent to be the birthplace of world puppetry, in Bengal one finds references to puppet performances in the late 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century. Pischel in his book *The Home of the Puppet-Play* writes, “The art of puppet-player was always that of a wandering people, and the home of the puppet-play: the old ‘wondering’ India.” (Pischel 25) “In *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*,” as Jiwan Pani, a well-known author in this field, writes, “the Almighty God is compared to a puppeteer who with the help of three strings—*Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*—manipulates all the beings in the created universe.” (Pani 4) Notable puppeteer and researcher of West Bengal, Subho Joardar in his book *Bangodesher Putul Natya Kala* opines that the Gangaridai territory is the birthplace of world puppetry. Some critics even argue for Bharata Muni’s usage of the word *sutradhara* in *Natya Shastra* (c. 200 BCE and 200 CE) in the context of a puppeteer holding his strings.

However, puppetry as a living tradition in rural Bengal comes into foray in the middle of the last millennium. Recurrent use of different allusions to puppet plays in celebrated literary works like *Krittibasi Ramayana*, *Kashidasi Mahabharata*, *Chaitanya Charitamrita* and *Yusuf-Zulekha* bears proof to this supposition. Phrases like *chitrer putli* and *poter putli* in *Krittibasi Ramayana* and *Kashidasi Mahabharata* allude to ‘puppet found in paintings’. (M. Roy 11) In *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, Krishna Das Kaviraja (b. 1496) writes: *kasther puttali jeno Kuhake naachay* (as if the Kuhaka plays the wooden puppets) (Mitra 4). In his *Yusuf-Zulekha*, Shah Muhammad Sagir, an eminent poet during the regime of Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah, writes: *Poutla naachay jenho sutrer satar/ Badiya alope jenho suto rakhi kor* (as if the strings are making the puppets dance/ keeping the strings attached to the fingers) (Mitra 4, my trans.). The following excerpt from *Palli Baichitra (The Variety of Rural Bengal)*, published in 1905 by the eminent Bengali novelist and editor of the early twentieth century Dinendra Kumar Roy, will give us a distinct idea about how puppetry had left an indelible

mark on the life of the people of Bengal. Referring to *Kartiker Ladai*, a popular folk-festival in South Bengal, Roy writes:

*Dhop* (a traditional folk-musical performance of Bengal) was going on. Suddenly someone brought the news that *putul naach* was going to be performed at Halder bari (the house of the Halder's). The children ran at once. A separate enclosure was made in front of the *puja dalan* where *putul naach* had started. Many people had gathered around—all bewitched, watching the puppets manipulated by some invisible hands. The puppets were moving and dancing with the rhythm of drums and *ghungroo*. Behind the veil, the master vocalist was giving voice to the puppets in a nasal tone. A puppet was seen busy fishing; all of a sudden there came a giant crocodile! The viewers were thrilled as well as terrified. The performance moved on and there came Rama, Lakshmana, Surpanakha and Ravana. A great battle took place and Rama emerged victorious. All became elated to see Hanumana carrying a mountain and flying in the air. Later, Draupadi and the Pandavas appeared. Arjuna was seen killing the enemies with arrows. Everyone present was awe-struck to see the strength of Bhima. The puppet play went on and the night was about to come to an end. The performance finally ended around 3 a.m., and people finally left the place buzzing with the incidents they had witnessed. (D. Roy 56-59, my trans.)

Similar nostalgic references to puppetry can be found in the writings of Kaliprasanna Singhs's *Hutom Pechar Naksha* (*Sketches by a Watching Owl*) (1862), poet Nabin Chandra Sen's famous anthology *Palashir Juddha* (*The Battle of Plassey*) (1875), Kalikrishna Bhattacharya's *Shantipur Parichay* (1942), renowned biographer Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's autobiography *Phire Phire Chai* (1960) and many more.

These 19<sup>th</sup> century or early 20<sup>th</sup> century references validate how prominently puppetry coexisted with Bengali life and culture. However, one must keep in mind that these performers were purely amateurs and earning a livelihood by showcasing their performance at a professional level did not play a key concept in these performances. They were mostly sustained by local *zamindars* or wealthy patrons. The formation of professional puppetry troupe, as Subho Joardar has mentioned in his book, came into being much later when a group of young enthusiasts from Bramhanbaria (now falls in Bangladesh) formed a puppetry troupe of their own. They got the inspiration from some Rajasthani *Kathputli* artists who had gone there at Bramhanbaria to showcase their art. Puppeteers like Girish Acharya, Jiten Halder, and Dhan Mian had succeeded in spreading puppetry in Bramhanbaria, Faridpur, Khulna, Kusthiya, Jessore, Rangpur and many other places in the eastern parts of Bengal. As the names suggest, most of these puppeteers were Hindu and belonged to the Scheduled Caste community, and eventually had to leave their native place and come to West Bengal as refugees during the time of partition.

Traditional String Puppetry and Bramhanbaria are intrinsically interconnected since it was in Bramhanbaria where the earliest seeds of professional puppetry troupe were germinated. The soil of Bramhanbaria had been fertile enough to produce personalities like music maestro Ali Akbar Khan and Allauddin Khan, folk singer Amar Pal, poet Al Mahmud, Sufia Kamal, novelist Adwaita Mallabarmar, and many more. So there is hardly any surprise that a group of young enthusiasts would form a puppetry troupe having been inspired from Rajasthani *Kathputli*. In an interview published in the Bangladeshi daily *Prothom Aalo* (14 April, 2018), Professor Rashid Haroon of Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, and author of *Bangladesher Oitihyabahi Putul Natya Kala*, states that Bipin Pal of Krishnanagar village under Nabinnagar Block in Bramhanbaria district is the earliest of the professional puppet artists in Bangladesh. Later on, Girish Acharya, Taaru Mian and others took the charge from

Bipin Pal and tried their best to make puppetry a household thing in the eastern part of Bengal province. Mythology-based performances like *Radha-Krishna Leela*, *Seeta Haran*, *Behular Vashan* were immensely popular. After the partition, most of the Hindu puppeteers had to leave the then East Pakistan for good. That was an irreparable loss. Dhan Mian and few other Muslim performers stayed back, and tried their best to keep puppetry alive with the puppets and other accessories left behind by those Hindu puppeteers. Nonetheless, they lacked creativity and could not improvise regarding scripts, contents, puppets or presentation. From partition to 1971, when Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan, the communal rigidity also did its worst to subside plays based on Hindu mythology in an Islamic country. Consequently, puppetry had transformed into mere puppet dance. The drama had given way to dance. The results were obvious—the show became monotonous, people became nonchalant, and puppetry lost its earlier glory. In short, partition severely affected the puppet culture of the eastern half of Bengal.

Now, to look at the scenario in West Bengal, puppetry had become a survival tool for those political refugees who were initially given rehabilitation to Nadia and 24 Parganas. Those hapless people had no land for cultivation in a new country and they did not possess any other professional skills to sustain their family. Hence, it is quite obvious that many of them, having knowledge and skills of manipulation of puppets, would resume their earlier profession. Mohit Roy, in his book *Nadiar Putul Naach*, narrates how folk artists like Jiten Halder, Satish Chandra Chakraborty, Shashi Bhushan Mondal, Jaggeshwar Halder, Tarini Halder and many others who came from East Pakistan had set up the first professional string puppetry troupe *Bharat Mata Putul Natya Samaj* at Muragachha Colony in the district of Nadia. Soon, puppetry had become one of the most cherished performance traditions of West Bengal. Mohit Roy made a field survey in Nadia in 1994. It revealed that there had been as many as sixty-eight string puppetry troupes in merely two blocks in Nadia! He narrates:

Villages under Hanskhali block such as Bagula, Muragacha Colony, Haldipara, Gournagar, Purbapara, Bhabanipur, Shib Chandrapur, Milannagar, Durgapur, Kaikhali and Ramdulalpur had conglomerated thirty-one string puppetry troupes. There had been villages under Ranaghat block like Barabaria Colony, Duttapulia, Babanbaria, Radhakantapur which ensconced thirty-seven troupes. (Roy 29, my trans.)

In no time, traditional string puppetry had extended to undivided 24 Parganas, Burdwan and even Bankura. Consequently, thousands of artisans began to earn their livelihood by direct or indirect involvement with this folk-performance art.

However, as the new millennium set in, traditional puppetry had encountered an unprecedented reversal of fortune. The advent of numerous modern-day technologies had offered people a wide range of entertainments. The television with hundreds of channels through cable network had made people glued to the sofas in their drawing rooms. As if that was not enough, there came the mobile phones, and eventually devoured the entire generation. Economic reformation, consumerism, upsurge of the middle-income group, rapid urbanization, easy access to fast internet, and introduction of several OTT media services—all these have significantly changed the taste of the people. The once-coveted public entertainments like *Putul Naach* (puppetry), *Jatra* (a popular folk theatre in Bengal), *Kobi Gaan* (another popular folk-musical duel involving two poets) and many as such had to encounter a monumental crisis. Padmashree Suresh Dutta is often been held as the Father of modern puppetry in India. As a part of a project entitled *Puppeteers of Eastern India from 1983-86*, he, along with his disciple Sampa Ghosh, had prepared a list of traditional string puppetry troupes working in eastern India during 1980s. The data reveals that there had been as many as one hundred forty four traditional string puppetry troupes working in eastern India during that time. Nadia solely had seventy-seven puppetry troupes working there whereas the

undivided 24 Parganas had eleven, Midnapore had six and Burdwan had five. (Ghosh and Banerjee, *Indian Puppets*, 316-325) From Mohit Roy's book *Nadiar Putulnaach* (1995) one comes to know that the number of troupes had reduced to sixty-eight in 1994. The worrying sign is that the number sixty-eight has come down to a meagre twenty as per the field survey done by me in Nadia in 2019. In short, the strings, to some extent, have slackened for this folk-performance art of Bengal.

Howbeit, traditional string puppetry has not completely surrendered to the modern means of public entertainments. The dynamic nature of this performing art has kept it going even in this tech-savvy era. The art form has changed—technically, thematically, performatively, and productively. Significantly enough, these changes, unlike the changes and adaptations one might observe in contemporary or modern puppetry houses, have not rattled the nucleus of traditional string puppetry. To understand the changes, one needs to have glimpses of the proceedings of a traditional string puppetry performance.

There was a time when a troupe consisting of eight to ten members would perform *putul naach* by erecting tents in fields and open spaces of rural Bengal. The troupe would include a manager cum owner, couple of manipulators of puppets, one *surmaster* or vocalist who would give voice to all kinds of puppets, couple of musicians accompanying the vocalist, an electrician, and a cook cum ticket collector. They would work together for seven to eight months at a stretch—from September to March or April, sparing the scorching summer and soggy rainy season. That is the time of various fairs and festivals in West Bengal which is ideal for their shows. The troupe would generally stay at a particular place for nearly a fortnight depending upon the income. Every day, they would organise at least two performances—from 5.00 p.m. to 7.00 p.m. and 7.30 p.m. to 9.30 p.m. A tent of about thousand square feet is set up for performance; the guard-wall is made by tin-shade to maintain secrecy of the show. The tent is divided into two parts—the stage for the

performance and the sitting space for the audience. The stage of a puppet show in West Bengal is worth watching, especially during the performance. It is set at a height of three feet above the ground. There are two rectangular screens of about fifty square feet on each side of the stage displaying an indoor and an outdoor scenario, respectively. The backdrop screen is changed manually by the puppet manipulator himself during the performance. The backdrops carry certain paintings of palaces, village temples, hills and rivers, simple cottages and many more as per the demand of the story. What is more striking, all the members of the troupe sleep under the wooden platform of the stage at night! The cooking space is made behind the stage; only a thin curtain separates it from the audience. Separate sitting space for male and female spectators is arranged inside the tent. There is no provision for chairs. Only some mats made of used jute sacks cover the dusty ground. Similar substance is put up as canopy during chilly winter. All of these arrangements are often found in deplorable conditions. The ticket counter selling tickets of ten rupees per person (back in 2016) is placed just in the middle of two entrances. The puppets are kept hanging behind the backdrop screen well ahead of the show. Outside the tent, near the entrance, age-old painted boards resembling the traditional cinema hoardings in the rural cinema halls are displayed to attract the viewers.

During the performance, the manipulator hides behind the backdrop screen and plays his puppets in tune with the vocalist. Generally, a puppet is held afloat with the help of six strings. There are two strings attached to the two hands of the puppet, two to its head, and two strings to the back and front sides of the body. One puppeteer manipulates the main puppets and another man assists him. Together they sequentially arrange the puppets at the backstage for a performance. A troupe would usually carry about fifty puppets ranging from king, queen, villager, villain, fool, etc. to animals and birds like tiger, elephant, eagle and snake with five heads (remember newborn Lord Krishna being carried by his father in a stormy night and the snake with five heads protecting Krishna from rain and storm!). A

puppet is about two to three feet high and weighs about five hundred grams. It is made of cork (sola), clay, primary colours and gaudy dresses. Usually, in Nadia, puppeteers do not make or create puppets. Rather craftsmen from Krishnanagar, a nearby town famous for making clay-idols, are called forth to prepare puppets as per the requirement of the troupes. It would cost around thousand rupees to make a puppet which would last for ten to fifteen years.

The way a puppeteer moves puppets is really intriguing! The master puppeteer is an ace in his job. With the minimum of movements of his fingers, he can produce miracle on the stage. The vocalist and the musicians sit at the left-hand side of the stage. There is not anything like scripts in front of the vocalist, nor is it possible to read anything amid the prevailing darkness in that chamber. It all comes from the memory of the vocalist who is all in one throwing the dialogues (male, female and animals!), singing songs (again for male and female puppets!), giving cues to the main puppeteer to bring in the right puppet and playing on the harmonium. The musicians accompany him with *dholak*, clarinet, flute, cornet, cymbal and violin. The electrician sits in between the two screens with a switchboard and throws light in order to intensify the effect.

Every day a separate play is performed. The plot of such plays ranges from mythology to patriotic stories, from fables to the caricature of recent Bengali films. Plays based on epics and *Puranas* like 'Raja Harishchandra (King Harishchandra), 'Bhakta Prahlad' (Prahlad, the Devotee), 'Kangser Karagar' (The Prison house of Kangsa), 'Lab-Kush' (Lab-Kush, the sons of Lord Rama) are performed at the beginning of a performance-cycle. Then it is time for patriotic stories like 'Kshudiram Fansi' (The Hanging of Kshudiram), 'Bir Netaji' (Netaji, the Brave). These are finally followed by inept imitation of some recent Bengali films like 'MLA Fatakesto', 'Sasurbari Jindabad' (Long lives the family of father-in law). This is done in view of the taste of the spectators as well as to provide the

necessary variety of the performance-cycle. Although the artists prefer performing the epics, mythologies, fables, and the patriotic stories, they cannot help aping the film scripts for their livelihood. Generally, for the first eight to ten days the shows run houseful. Thereafter, the number of the spectators decreases gradually. This is an indication that the troupe should make arrangements to move on to some new places. A successful show would help them earn only three thousand rupees a day (two shows a-day, one fifty seats with ten rupees per ticket). Sometimes the income escalates as the troupes get to perform in programmes organised by Govt. or private sectors. However, that is very rare. The shows take place mainly in the rural areas of West Bengal, with the women and the children as the main spectators. Lack of innovation has severed puppetry as a performing art from the urban audience, who has the money to pay and the refined taste to judge and appreciate. Interestingly, the rural women and children, even in this era of television and internet, still relish a puppet-play at the end of their daily chores. The older women also come with their grandchildren to these shows with an intention to pass on a long-preserved legacy. That is how the old-school puppetry troupes run.

Unfortunately, there remains only one such old-school string puppetry troupe in Nadia. The name of the troupe is *New Biswabharati Putul Natya Samaj*, owned by Sri Haridas Roy. The working conditions have become so hazardous and the overall earning has become so inconsistent for this type of old-school puppetry troupes that most of the puppeteers have withdrawn themselves from an uncertain journey of eight months. Instead, they have formed smaller troupes and have adopted specific changes in their performances. The puppets have become lighter and more refined regarding looks and longevity. The stage decoration has become modern with proper lighting and updated sound system. The performers no longer prefer performing itinerantly by setting up tents. Issues like arranging the field or open space for erecting the tent, getting necessary permission for electricity,

dealing with political pressure, supplying complementary tickets, and most importantly, the lack of enthusiasm for puppetry from this tech-savvy generation have posed a real threat to their existence. The weather conditions cannot be negated as well since a sudden storm or depression would often mar the entire setting. To deal with these issues, the performers, nowadays, prefer invitation from different clubs, organizations, festival or fair committees, or even from some government sectors and NGOs. With a fixed contract that ranges between eight to fifteen thousands (depending on the distance) they perform with a team of five to six members (one proprietor cum electrician, two manipulators, one vocalist, and two musicians). This has not only reduced the risks involved in this sort of business, but also helped them to be able to work all throughout the year. The scripts have also changed. Classics and fables from different languages have been adopted as a source of plots. Furthermore, they are often called forth to go on campaigning several government schemes such as *Pulse Polio*, *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, *Casting of Votes*, *Prevention of Child Marriage* with the help of their puppets. The government registered artists are given twelve hundred rupees per month from government as incentive. Most importantly, they have realised the importance of reaching out the people. They have learnt to utilise social media such as YouTube or Facebook to advertise their art. This has immensely helped them to reach a wide number of viewers. Troupes like *New Shantimata Putul Naach* (owner Amulya Roy), *Sreema Putul Natya Samaj* (owner Ranjan Roy), *Bhubaneswari Putul Naach* (owner Sadananda Sarkar) and many others follow the same footsteps. These artisans are looking for financial, infrastructural and promotional help for the betterment of their troupe. However, unlike the city-bred contemporary troupes like *Calcutta Puppet Theatre*, *The Dolls Theatre* or *Burdwan the Puppeteers*, these rural artisans have never forgotten their roots. Like a ritual, puppetry still remains a mode of showing respect for their ancestors. There have been changes as the time has gone by, but the changes are subtle and dynamic. These changes have helped this

performance tradition to still remain a much coveted medium for public entertainment and mass education even in this hour of uncertainty and fugacity.

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