

Indian, Folk: Genesis and Origin of Puppetry

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Abstract

'Indian, Folk: Genesis and Origin of Puppetry' article is an outcome based on the interactive discussion with my father-Shri T. Rangarajan-Theatre person about 'Bharat Natya Shastra and Folk Oral narratives' which I had last week. The exhaustive discussion compelled me to write down the article. The importance of oral narratives that has constituted as the firm base of beliefs and ritual practices among the traditional puppeteers- nomadic group across the country. Perhaps the strong belief of this folk theatrical art form originated from Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Again, the Goddess Parvati treated as a daughter of the puppeteers or adivasis. There are different folk stories narrated in South and North India on the origins of the traditional puppetry art form. This paper presents some of the oral folk stories about the origin of puppetry in Indian Context.

Key words: Puppetry, genesis and origion, folk theatre, folk stories

Introduction: Puppetry: one of most lively and successful folk theatrical forms in India. It is the most sophisticated enactments with boundless possibilities for evolution and creativeness. There is a strong belief and contention by scholars across the globe that Puppetry originated in Asian countries and India or the Bharat Kanda- the cradle of Puppetry and travelled across the seven seas to the other parts Eastern and Western world. The fact is that the origin of puppetry in India is rather unknown, there are references to different kinds of puppets in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Buddhist work called Therigatha and stories behind the origin of puppetry. Puppetplay is defined as any inanimate figure given life by the will and spirit of man (Asian Puppets: 1976).

Animating the inanimate figure and transforming the puppet into the characters linked with the Puranas refers to the Lord Shiva as the chief 'Sutradhar'—the one who controls and manipulating the puppets for his beautiful consort Goddess Parvati. Well, both South and North Indian folk versions of the origin of Puppetry hold Lord Shiva and Parvati as chief Puppeteers from whom this art form has been originated and passed on to humans. There are different versions behind the origin of Puppetry in India. According to (Rangarajan-2014) refers to the significance of Lord Shiva and goddess Parvati as the chieftains of various folk art forms in India—with special reference to South India. According to (Rangarajan 2014) 'Once in Kailasa Parvathi and Parameshwara were engaged in talking, and then came devotees of Shiva who wanted his help to protect them from the troubling demons. In order to fulfil his devotees' request, Shiva left Kailasa on Vahana Nandi. While Parvathi being left alone, she complained the same to Lord Shiva. In order to make her feel happy, Shiva created some dolls and said to the dolls to entertain Parvati and obey her till his return.

While all the dolls obeyed the order of Lord Shiva and started performing, Parvathi who watched them for some time; started thinking of Lord Shiva. In the meantime, all the dolls were playing all around her. She got wild and shouted at the dolls "Can you be silent for some time". Obeying her order all the dolls kept quite.

After sometime Parvathi realized her mistake and asked the dolls to perform. But the dolls did not move an inch. She requested them, still they did not move. By then Lord Shiva returned back to Kailasa and asked about the doll play. Parvathi narrated the whole story and asked Lord Shiva to request them to play. Lord Shiva replied that "The dolls are obedient servants and they obey whatever their master or mistress says. However, their job is to entertain and not to cause inconvenience. However, I can still make them play and perform for you". So saying, Lord Shiva tied a string called "Sutra" and asked Parvathi to manipulate them. So, she became the 'Sutradhar'. That's how the origin of 'Sutradhar'-Puppets originated. Nevertheless, another story with slight variation mentions that when Shiva returned back and found the dolls remaining silent, said that henceforth they would never speak, sing or dance but entertain on their own.

Parvati felt sorry for her ridiculous act as requested the Lord Shiva to pardon her and bring back life into the dolls. For which Lord Shiva assured that these dolls would

come back to life and sing and dance by a manipulator and not on their own self. Thus emerged 'Sutra-string' tied to the dolls and 'Sutradhar- manipulator'.

Well, it is the matter of pride that in India we can find all forms of puppetry namely: Hand-Glove puppets, String puppets – popularly known as Katputalisin Rajasthan, Rod Puppetry and Shadow puppets or leather puppets. Yet, we are not sure of the fact that which forms of puppetry emerged first -whether it was Shadow puppetry or String.

The origins of puppetry in India that can be dated back to the pre-historic period when man residing in caves, was smitten or obsessed with the images cast on the wall of flames whereby he could imagine a shadowy picture of himself and his fellow beings, with all their gestures and established communication based on the shadow pictures and interpreted them, thus marking the origin of gesture narratives and later development of oral narratives. Referenceto Puppets existence can be traced to the oldest written mention of puppetry in India made in the Mahabharata. Panini, the fourth century B.C. Sanskrit grammarian, and Patanjali, the philosopher and author of the Yoga and sutras in the second century B.C., mentioned to puppets in their works. In their opinions the application of the term Sutradhar for the director or the stage-manager who presents the Sanskrit play before the audience mentions the close connections that had existed between the puppet drama and drama in later periods. The practice and presence of the Sutradhar with Sutra-Prata (strings tied) along with Manipuka (the stage setter) or the assisting the Sutradhar as a term used to describe puppets in Mahabharata is visible even today in the traditional puppeteer troupe.

To support the above statements yet another folk story states that, 'once Lord Shiva and Parvati in disguise came down to Bhuloka to test their real Bhaktas-devotees. Then they came across a man remembering the lords name all the time lived in utter poverty with not a single grain in his house. He still welcomed the couples with a smile on his face and spread his torn rags for sitting. In order to test his devotion, Lord Shiva asked him to entertain them with new and unique art form which was never seen or heard before. Immediately the man cuts the skin from his thighs and cut it into a figure that he tied to some twigs. Then he held against the dim lit earthen lamp. The reflection or the shadow of the figure that fell on the walls entertained Lord Shiva and Parvati. Impressed with his art lord Shiva blessed him with wealth and prosperity.

This marked the origin of Shadow-leather puppetry. This seems to be the beginning of man's attempt to recreate and rejuvenate toys according to his own imagination. Images and idols were created for magical/shamanic purposes (shaman in societies practicing shamanism: one acting as a medium between the visible and spirit worlds practices sorcery for healing or divination), for the sake of soothing the wicked natural forces like gods and demons, which are represented in visible forms by the puppet makers to the masses.

According to another popular Indian folk story, the origin of puppetry is attributed to Brahma (the deity who was assigned the function of creating the universe). It is said that for the entertainment of his consort Saraswati, Brahma created and gave life to the 'Adi', the first 'Nat' puppeteer. Then again, he created another figure for the Adi to manipulate and thereby entertain the goddess. However, Brahma was not very pleased with his efforts and he, therefore, banished the puppeteer to the earth and hence was the birth of the first Bhat community who are the one who play Katputlis in Rajasthan. So, Rajasthan is considered as the origin place of Indian Puppetry by and large since the Natbhats are the puppeteers belonging to the region.

However, according to folklorist and folk art scholar (Mahender Bhanawat: 2012), it was Lord Shiva not Brahma who created Bhat for the entertainment of his consort Goddess Parvati. It was the Bhat, who in turn became a great devotee of Lord Shiva and entertained the Lord using wooden dolls singing the glory of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Infuriated Shiva expelled the Bhat puppeteer to earth. However, the Bhat with the wooden dolls started entertaining the common masses by narrating the glory of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Thus establishing the Bhat-Puppet Community in Rajasthan.

Reference to Puppets existence can be traced to the oldest written mention of puppetry in India made in the Mahabharata. Panini, the fourth century B.C. Sanskrit grammarian, and Quite interesting story revolves around 'King Vikramaditya and the Throne-Singhasan Battisi'. Singhasan Battisi is a famous Indian folk literary work. King Vikramaditya was very well known and respected for his judgment, which was always proven to be the best and just. The stories from Singhasan Battisi are believed to have been written during the 15th and 18th centuries. These stories reflect the nine human emotions. He would sit on the throne that was designed with Katputalis or dolls who guided him about values, emotions, and judgement by narrating

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