



Review Paper

Regional Puppetry traditions for Social development in India and their role in Folklore preservation

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Abstract

Puppetry has been an integral part of India's rich cultural heritage, serving as both a form of entertainment and a medium for social communication. Various regional puppetry traditions, such as Kathputli of Rajasthan, Tholu Bommalata of Andhra Pradesh, Bommalattam of Tamil Nadu, and Putul Nach of West Bengal, have played a crucial role in addressing social issues, educating communities, and preserving folklore. This study explores how traditional puppetry has been utilized as a tool for social development in India, particularly in promoting literacy, health awareness, and social reform. Moreover, puppetry serves as a living archive of folklore, passing down myths, legends, and moral narratives from generation to generation. By blending storytelling, music, and visual artistry, regional puppetry forms help sustain cultural identity and reinforce moral values. However, with the rise of digital media and modern entertainment, traditional puppetry faces challenges in maintaining its relevance. This research examines the efforts being made to revitalize puppetry, including government initiatives, NGO interventions, and digital adaptations. By analyzing the role of regional puppetry traditions in both social development and folklore preservation, this study highlights the importance of sustaining these traditional art forms as powerful tools for education, cultural continuity, and community engagement.

Keywords: Folklore-Preservation, Regional puppetry traditions, Social Development, Folk Media, Development Communication.

Introduction

As a form of folk media, puppetry has maintained a strong presence in the hearts and minds of people due to its ability to appeal on a personal and intimate level. From the dawn of civilization to the modern era, folk media has played a vital role in shaping and influencing societies. Puppetry, in particular, is a traditional and heritage art form found across various regions of India, used not only for entertainment but also as a tool for education, awareness, and folklore preservation. India is home to diverse forms of puppetry, each unique in its style, materials, and themes. Traditional puppetry styles such as Kathputli of Rajasthan, Tholu Bommalata of Andhra Pradesh, Bommalattam of Tamil Nadu, and Putul Nach of West Bengal have served as important cultural expressions. These art forms bring myths, legends, and historical events to life, ensuring their continuity across generations¹. The storytelling aspect of puppetry is deeply rooted in Indian tradition, portraying narratives from local myths, Puranic Kathas, and folklore. Puppetry has always been a medium of cultural expression, providing both entertainment and moral education to communities, especially in rural India. However, puppetry is not merely an art form for amusement. It has the potential to function as a social development tool by conveying messages related to social, economic, political, and

educational issues. In various rural and semi-urban communities, puppetry has been used effectively to disseminate information on health awareness, sanitation, environmental conservation, women's empowerment, and political consciousness. This aspect makes puppetry a powerful medium of mass communication that is both engaging and impactful².

Puppetry as a Medium for Social Development: The social development of a nation is deeply connected to the way its citizens receive and interpret information. Traditional puppetry plays a significant role in spreading awareness and educating people on various social concerns. Given its informal and engaging nature, puppetry becomes a strong channel for transmitting essential knowledge to communities that might otherwise have limited access to modern mass media. Puppetry has been widely used in India for educational campaigns. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and government agencies have leveraged puppetry for various causes, including³:

Health Awareness Campaigns: Puppetry has been used to educate people about issues like maternal health, HIV/AIDS awareness, child immunization, and sanitation. Since puppetry performances are visually appealing and interactive, they easily capture the attention of audiences and make complex topics more

comprehensible. **Women's Empowerment:** In many rural areas, women's issues such as gender discrimination, domestic violence, and reproductive health are considered taboo topics. Puppetry has been utilized to break these barriers by narrating stories that highlight these problems and provide solutions. Many grassroots organizations have successfully used puppetry to encourage discussions on women's rights and legal awareness.

Political Awareness: Puppetry has been instrumental in educating people about their voting rights, democratic processes, and political participation. During elections, puppetry performances are conducted to encourage voter turnout and to inform citizens about various political agendas.

Environmental and Economic Awareness: In rural India, issues such as deforestation, water conservation, and agricultural techniques are often communicated through puppet shows. By presenting these topics in a familiar and engaging manner, puppetry helps raise awareness and promote sustainable practices among farmers and villagers.

Puppetry as a Tool for Folklore Preservation: India's rich and diverse folklore traditions are passed down through various oral and performative mediums, and puppetry has been one of the most effective methods for preserving and transmitting folklore. Unlike written literature, which requires literacy, puppetry relies on visual storytelling, making it accessible to all sections of society.

Folklore consists of myths, legends, moral stories, and historical narratives that are crucial for maintaining cultural identity. Traditional puppetry keeps these stories alive by presenting them in a dynamic and engaging manner. The transmission of folklore through puppetry ensures that cultural narratives remain relevant and continue to be shared with future generations⁴.

Regional puppetry traditions serve as custodians of these narratives, embedding moral and ethical teachings within their performances. For example: i. Kathputli of Rajasthan narrates stories of Rajput valor, love, and sacrifice. ii. Tholu Bommalata of Andhra Pradesh features shadow puppetry depicting mythological epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. iii. Putul Nach of West Bengal incorporates elements of Bengali folklore, keeping regional legends alive. iv. Bommalattam of Tamil Nadu combines elements of string and shadow puppetry to dramatize historical and mythological tales.

Through these traditional puppet shows, audiences are not only entertained but also educated about their rich heritage, reinforcing cultural values and traditions⁵.

Challenges and Revival of Puppetry in India: Despite its cultural significance, puppetry in India faces several challenges in the modern era. The rise of digital media, television, and

cinema has reduced the demand for traditional folk art forms. Puppetry, once a popular means of storytelling, struggles to compete with contemporary entertainment platforms. Many traditional puppeteers find it difficult to sustain their livelihoods, leading to a decline in the practice of this ancient art.

However, various efforts are being made to revive puppetry and adapt it to contemporary needs: i. **Government Initiatives:** The Indian government has recognized the cultural value of puppetry and has introduced schemes to support traditional puppeteers. Cultural festivals and workshops are organized to promote puppetry and train new artists. ii. **NGO and Community Support:** Several NGOs work towards preserving puppetry by conducting performances, training programs, and awareness campaigns. They collaborate with puppeteers to use the art form for social and educational campaigns. iii. **Integration with Digital Media:** Modern adaptations of puppetry have started to emerge with the use of digital platforms. Online puppet shows and animated puppetry are gaining popularity, allowing traditional puppetry to reach new audiences worldwide. iv. **Educational Institutions:** Schools and universities are incorporating puppetry into their curriculum as a creative educational tool. Puppetry workshops help students develop storytelling skills, creativity, and an understanding of cultural heritage.

Puppetry is a timeless folk medium that continues to hold significant cultural, social, and educational value in India. It serves not only as an entertainment tool but also as a powerful instrument for social development and folklore preservation. By addressing key societal issues and transmitting traditional narratives, puppetry remains an effective mode of communication and cultural expression.

Although modern challenges threaten the survival of traditional puppetry, conscious efforts to revive and adapt this art form can ensure its sustainability. Whether through government support, NGO initiatives, or digital integration, puppetry can continue to play a vital role in shaping societies, educating communities, and preserving India's rich cultural heritage. It is imperative to recognize and support this art form to maintain the link between India's historical traditions and contemporary social realities.

Through a holistic approach involving policy interventions, community engagement, and modern technological integration, regional puppetry traditions can continue to thrive, ensuring their role in social development and folklore preservation for future generations.

Review of Literature

Review of Literature on Regional Puppetry Traditions for Social Development in India and Their Role in Folklore Preservation:

Puppetry has been an integral part of folk media since ancient times, serving as both a means of communication and entertainment. This art form has been utilized for over 30,000

years, allowing local communities to engage with narratives presented in their native dialects. Historically, family-based puppet shows such as Punch and Judy were among the first recorded forms of puppetry performances¹. Majaron noted that during the late 1980s and early 1990s, puppetry gained significant recognition in mass media, as evidenced by the success of the 'Lijjat Papad' bunny family puppet campaign. Thematically, puppetry in India has predominantly drawn from epic tales such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas. Puppeteers often attribute a transformative power to their puppets, believing in their ability to bring forth change in society².

Irving's empirical study demonstrated how life-size multicultural puppets were effective in reducing negative stereotypes about large body shapes in school-aged children. This suggests that puppetry is a powerful tool for shaping perceptions and fostering inclusivity. Similarly, Slater emphasized the importance of narrative impact, stating that identification with puppet characters could help propagate social norms, enhance artistic appreciation, and promote credibility in storytelling.

Puppetry has also served as a medium for social commentary, addressing contemporary issues, satirizing societal norms, and imparting moral messages⁵. According to Pandey, the intricate movements, gestures, and facial expressions of puppets breathe life into otherwise inanimate objects, allowing them to convey complex emotions and messages effectively³.

The word "puppet" originates from the Latin term 'pupa,' meaning doll. Various forms of puppetry exist in India, including rod puppets, string puppets, glove puppets, hand puppets, and shadow puppets. As a medium, puppetry excels in engaging audiences due to its artistic appeal and storytelling potential. It has been recognized as both an entertainment and educational tool⁶.

Gender roles in traditional puppetry have been historically rigid. According to Seltman documented that in tholpavakoothu, a form of shadow puppetry in Kerala, women were traditionally excluded from participation⁷.

India; for example, string puppets are considered the most flexible, while shadow puppets are primarily performed in southern states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka³. Puppetry performances have been integral to religious festivals, folk celebrations, and auspicious occasions, often serving as a spiritual connection to the divine.

Baird³ further examined rod puppetry in Bengal, linking its stylistic influences to Indonesia's Wayang Golek tradition. In India, rod puppetry is prevalent in West Bengal, Odisha, and Jharkhand, with unique regional adaptations such as Kathi Kundhei in Odisha and Chor Putul in West Bengal. Chattopadhyay highlighted puppetry's ability to surpass human performances by leveraging symbolism, subtlety, and exaggeration to engage audiences more effectively⁸.

Puppetry has been used to address ecological concerns as well. The 'Satya Narayan Putul Natya Sanstha' troupe in West Bengal performed 'Arannyer Rodan – Crying of the Forest' in 2010 to promote environmental conservation. Rangarajan explored how puppetry was utilized in Mahabubnagar district, Andhra Pradesh, to educate rural communities about environmental issues such as deforestation, plastic pollution, water conservation, and pesticide reduction.

Environmental awareness through puppetry has also been evident in national festivals. In 2014, the Chandigarh Sangeet Natak Academy's Puppet Theatre festival showcased 'The Little Blue Planet,' directed by renowned puppeteer Anurupa Roy, which highlighted climate change concerns. River reinforced this perspective, suggesting that puppetry can serve as an ecological display exercise and influence ecological identity transformation⁹.

In Assam, 'putul nach' performances have addressed pressing social issues such as girls' education, early marriage, domestic violence, and environmental conservation. The accessibility of puppetry to local communities makes it a preferred medium for communicating sensitive topics. Puppeteer Drishana Kalita, along with her husband Manash Protim Neog, established 'Puppet People' in Guwahati, collaborating with NGOs to use puppetry as a community engagement tool. Kalita emphasized that audiences are more receptive to messages delivered through puppetry than conventional lectures.

According to McLachlan, Fleer, and Edwards, a high-quality early childhood curriculum must be flexible and responsive to the diverse interests and cultural backgrounds of children. Play is identified as a central context for learning, enabling children to actively explore their environment and construct knowledge in meaningful ways¹⁰.

The role of the teacher is seen as that of a facilitator, who intentionally supports and extends children's thinking through thoughtful interactions. Assessment practices should be embedded in everyday activities, focusing on observing children in natural settings to inform planning and instruction. A holistic approach is emphasized, supporting children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Moreover, strong partnerships with families are considered vital, as they help create learning experiences that are relevant and connected to children's lives¹⁰.

Beyond social awareness, puppetry has been recognized for its therapeutic applications. Bertrand and Bertrand, along with Borkin and Frank, underscored puppetry's therapeutic benefits, particularly in fostering self-expression¹¹. Research on storytelling techniques highlights how narrative-based learning enhances students' academic performance. Jasim found that storytelling improved English language proficiency¹², while according to Boulton argued that storytelling methods were

more effective than traditional lecture-based approaches¹³. Puppetry, as a subset of storytelling, has been shown to increase students' engagement in classroom activities¹⁴.

Well according to this article puppetry explored its role in reducing anxiety and promoting emotional regulation among children and adolescents. In educational settings, puppetry has facilitated communication. Clinical studies have confirmed its effectiveness in alleviating preoperative anxiety in pediatric patients¹⁵.

Methodology

The primary objective of this research is to analyze how folk puppetry influences societal values and contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage. Traditional puppetry has long been a means of passing down folklore, myths, and legends, ensuring that the identity and traditions of various communities remain intact. Furthermore, this research seeks to assess the impact of puppetry in rural community development, where it has been used for educational campaigns, public awareness programs, and behavioral change. A significant aspect of the study is to understand audience reception and engagement, as well as the adaptability of puppetry in the digital era.

This research follows a qualitative approach, employing a combination of literature review, case studies, field observations, and community-based research to provide an in-depth understanding of puppetry's role in folk media and community development. A thorough literature review has been conducted, analyzing scholarly articles, books, and previous research studies on puppetry as a folk art and its use in communication. This provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how puppetry has evolved and how it continues to be relevant in the present day. Additionally, the study includes case studies of various regional puppetry traditions such as Kathputli from Rajasthan, Tholpavakoothu from Kerala, Putul Nach from Bengal and Assam, and Gombeyatta from Karnataka. These case studies offer insights into how different forms of puppetry have been utilized for storytelling, cultural preservation, and social awareness.

To gain practical insights, interviews with puppeteers, folk artists, and cultural scholars have been conducted. Their experiences and perspectives shed light on the challenges faced by traditional puppetry and its prospects in contemporary media. Observations of live performances and workshops provide valuable data on audience interaction and engagement with puppetry as a communicative art form.

Furthermore, this research incorporates community-based research methods, particularly in rural areas where puppetry is still actively practiced. Surveys and focus group discussions with villagers, educators, and social workers help evaluate the effectiveness of puppetry in addressing societal issues. The study also explores how puppetry has been used in various

awareness campaigns on topics such as education, women's empowerment, environmental conservation, and health and hygiene.

Conclusion

According to the Researcher of this article, this research is expected to provide meaningful insights into how puppetry, as a traditional folk medium, can continue to play a vital role in cultural preservation and social development. It highlights the importance of puppetry as a storytelling tool that not only entertains but also educates and influences public perception. By documenting its historical significance and analyzing its relevance in today's context, this study aims to support efforts to sustain and innovate traditional puppetry for future generations.

Puppetry remains an essential cultural and communicative tool in India, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. Its role in shaping societal values, preserving folklore, and driving social change makes it a significant area of study. By integrating traditional storytelling techniques with modern communication strategies, puppetry can continue to be an effective medium for education and social awareness. This research contributes to the growing discourse on folk media, emphasizing the need for institutional support and innovation to keep the art of puppetry alive in contemporary society.

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