



PULLING THE STRINGS

Exploring the vibrant world of Indian puppet theatre and its cultural impact.

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Fieldwork is always a significant challenge for a humanities scholar, a journey into the unknown. We search for knowledge, data, and first-hand accounts, seeking to immerse ourselves in the authenticity of local cultures and their unique realities. Often, the paths we tread lead us to unexpected places.

Let's take Paharganj, a lively tourist district in New Delhi. It's a bustling hub, alive with noise and filled with an array of shops and stalls that stay open until the late hours. Here locals and tourists mingle in cozy cafes and bars. Over spiced milk tea, amidst the thick air, they engage in casual yet culturally rich conversations. One of these locals is Jagdish Bhatt from Rajasthan, a practitioner of Kathputli puppet theater, little-known outside India.

Jagdish's home was near the Shadipur metro station in western Delhi, close to a busy thoroughfare where a colony of artists, known as the "Kathputli colony," is located. Established about 50 years ago, it's a haven for puppeteers, jugglers, dancers, musicians, and acrobats. Life here is simple and unadorned, with many just scraping by. Younger generations often decide to leave behind their family's performance-art traditions in favor of other careers. Such a decision is not easy to make in India, where professions are traditionally inherited; such a departure can have significant social consequences. Making and selling puppets as a source of income also doubles as a tourist attraction – they are sold in bazaars, souvenir shops, or directly by puppeteers on the streets.

The colony's fate began to shift in 2008 with the announcement of a revitalization project, part of a larger initiative to reduce India's slums. The aim was to enhance living standards by constructing a large complex with 2800 apartments, complete with essential infrastructure, an amphitheater, and a museum. Initially slated for completion by 2019, the revitalization project has faced delays due to legal disputes, resident protests, and the coronavirus pandemic, casting uncertainty over its finalization. Some families were moved to a temporary camp in 2014, more followed in late 2016, and the demolition

of the old colony began in 2017. The artists themselves hold mixed views: while there's some degree of enthusiasm and hope, there are also critical voices and concerns over preserving their craft and the unique bond that came from living and working together in the colony. Reports suggest that in the transitional camps, the puppeteers are struggling to survive, facing reduced earnings, isolation, and poor sanitary conditions. Though the revitalization is progressing, with some 700 apartments completed, it is hard to predict when construction will be finished. Time will tell if the project's goals have been achieved: not only improving the artists' living conditions but also helping to promote Kathputli and other performance arts practiced in the colony.

The Kathputli Tradition

Originating in Rajasthan, a sprawling state in north-western India, Kathputli is a tradition that has flourished and spread its roots far and wide, especially



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Puppet maker and performer
Jagdish Bhatt



throughout Northern India. The term *kāthputlī* itself is a fusion of *kāth* (wood) and *putlī* (doll), translating directly to “wooden puppet.”

Puppet theatre is an art form that boasts a rich heritage that can be traced back to ancient times, including mentions in the epic tale known as the *Mahabharata*. Despite this long history, the exact origins of Kathputli remain shrouded in mystery, with estimates dating back to the sixteenth or seventeenth century, and some sources suggesting an even older lineage of over a millennium. Historically, the art was patronized by Rajasthani rulers, becoming an integral part of religious festivals and ceremonies. Kathputli performances, once believed to have powers to repel demons or invoke rain, have evolved over time from ritualistic to entertainment purposes, now gracing significant events, serving educational roles, and captivating tourists.

The narratives of Kathputli performances are deeply rooted in the folk traditions of Rajasthan and beyond. Drawing from a vast repository of folktales, songs, and epic tales like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, they weave stories from Hindu and Muslim cultures alike. The most commonly played piece in their repertoire is Amar Singh Rathor (*Amar Simh Rāṭhaur*) – the tale of a seventeenth-century warrior, the descendent of a Rajasthani royal family. However, puppeteers are now also open to contemporary repertoire. In his performances, Jagdish Bhatt often depicts well-known film stories, and even draws upon European traditions (such as his adaptation of

Romeo and Juliet). In addition to traditional songs, popular Indian film songs are also used as accompaniment – reflecting the puppeteers’ adaptability to changing audience tastes.

A typical Kathputli performance, lasting about an hour, is a virtuoso demonstration of the puppet and puppeteer’s skillful artistry. Audiences are treated to a range of spectacles – from head-juggling to acrobatic animal rides, and even a snake charmer’s dance. The familiarity of the stories, particularly those drawn from folklore and mythology, allows for a performance style that focuses more on artistic expression than close narrative detail.

Kathputli puppeteers maintain a strong sense of self-reliance and tradition, with skills and stories passed down through generations. Performances usually involve two artists, often a married couple: a puppeteer and an accompanist. They may also be joined by a group of musicians playing traditional instruments like drums and harmonium. Staged predominantly outdoors in public spaces like squares or parks, these performances don’t require elaborate setups or scenography. A simple stage suffices, crafted from a woven lounge-chair and a colorful curtain, forming a kind of makeshift tent. The puppeteer does not always remain hidden, but sometimes comes out to interact with the audience, enhancing the spectacle. In Kathputli, the story is narrated by the accompanist, with the puppeteer using a small bamboo whistle, the *bolī*, to bring the puppet’s voice to life. This unique

expression, synced with the puppet's movements, creates a captivating dialogue between the puppet and its animator.

The audiences of Kathputli performances are both children and adults, so their content must be adapted to a wide audience and the humor nuanced. These shows often go beyond mere entertainment, serving as platforms to comment on social problems (poverty), interpret historical events (colonialism), and educate society (anti-tobacco campaigns). The puppet transcends its role as a storytelling device, becoming a vessel for conveying deeper thoughts and an authentic voice in exploring the complexities of human life.

Marionettes of Kathputli

The Kathputli marionette is brought to life through its strings, typically one attached to the head and torso and another to the hands. For some puppets (e.g. a dancer), an additional string might be connected to the hips. Each puppet is composed of two main parts: a wooden head and a body with arms. The intricately carved head is not just a facial representation; it often includes detailed elements of jewelry and attire, like turbans or crowns. Depending on the design, the head can be either movable or fixed. A fixed head extends into a long neck, forming the puppet's backbone and anchoring the arms. Movable heads, affixed with nails and fabric, add a layer of expressiveness to the puppet.

The torso and arms are made of various types of fabric, tightly and firmly intertwined and sewn together, so they form a rigid whole. Most Kathputli puppets do not have legs. However, the arms bend at the elbows, as they are one of the puppet's primary expressive elements. The puppet's costume is made of sequined and beaded fabric (often sari), appropriately tailored and attached to the body. Puppets depicting a female figure on one side and a male on the other are popular, as are designs where flipping the puppet around reveals a second character. Crafting a Kathputli puppet is a labor of love, often taking days to complete, with each handmade piece being one-of-a-kind.

For puppeteers, these marionettes are more than mere tools or sources of income; they hold a personal and emotional significance. Jagdish Bhatt, for instance, cherishes a dancer puppet he claims he never parts with. Others are decades old but continue to feature in his performances. The inaugural use of a puppet often involves a certain ritual, and when a puppet is retired, it is honored with a respectful disposal, typically being released into a river with a recited mantra.

Witnessing a Kathputli show, one is struck by its essence as entertainment – a masterful demonstration of the puppeteer's skill in animating the puppet through complex movements. Yet, one can't help but ponder: Is the puppet merely an instrument in the puppeteer's hands, destined only to dance as directed?



The art of animating a Kathputli puppet, challenging due to the puppet's weight and the pressure of the thin strings on the fingers, speaks volumes. The resulting performance, dependent on the puppeteer's dexterity, subtly shifts the spotlight to the puppet itself, transforming it into the true performer. It reveals its full potential, showing agency, and paradoxically emphasizing the human longing for freedom from constraints.

In the world of Kathputli, each performance is not just a display of skill but a narrative rich in tradition and human expression. ■

Further reading:

Jairazbhoy N.A., *Kathputli: The World of Rajasthani Puppeteers*, 2007.

Szysko A., *The Dholā-Mārū in Rājasthāni Folk Theatre*, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 2007.