

Breaking Boundaries: Diversifying Pavakathakali Puppet Theatre

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Abstract

Efforts by individuals, groups, and government agencies and departments entrusted with conserving folk art forms have resulted in the revival of nearly extinct folk-art forms like Pavakathakali Puppetry.

The Government of India's Department of Culture and the national level Sangeet Natak Akademi (Academy of Performing Arts) both contributed to the art form's revival.

With the help of a government grant, six performers were able to learn the art of puppetry, and the group now features both traditional and trained puppeteers. Puppetry in this form combines the use of both glove and string puppets. In this article, we'll explore how welcoming puppeteers from all cultural backgrounds has revived and regenerated a centuries-old art form.

Keywords: Puppetry, sustainability, inclusivity, and pavakathakali

Oral Tradition

Folk media is an indigenous form of communication, and like with the majority of indigenous folk forms, it is transmitted orally from one generation to the next. According to Bhattacharyya (2007), originally it is an individual's invention, but through the process of re-creation and ongoing modification, it gradually becomes a group's creation. There is still a very rich culture of oral tradition in India, which serves as a ready source of subjects and ideas for our written literature. Oral literature is constantly growing and transforming itself; it is never static. Awasthi (2001) recognises that India's oral folk tradition media has its origins in the tradition of reciting epics and puranas, which eventually evolved into different kinds of play.

It is astounding how many oral forms of folk media in India have survived the ravages of time while being primarily oral in nature. One of the most noticeable qualities of Indian folk media, as Parmar (1975) acknowledges, is that traditional folk media "have neither grammar or literature." However, due to this very nature of folk media, the actual form varies considerably and sometimes fails to endure. Should this be viewed as continuity or as one form dying and another evolving?

A traditional puppeteer is the sole custodian of the art form, as he or she alone possesses the collective memory of the oral text and is responsible for transmitting this cultural information through verbal expression. As the social system progresses, cultural transmission of traditional knowledge from one generation to the next changes.

In both Karnataka and Kerala, it has been observed that the current generation of puppeteers in traditional puppetry repertoire have attained a minimum of a secondary education, with many having graduated from college or desiring to do so. Puppeteers want their children to be well-educated and choose a profession with a secure salary. This leaves them with less time to recite and learn the different verses required for a performance; consequently, many have begun writing them down and reading them during temple performances. This does not leave

much time for the school-aged children of puppeteers to rest and prepare for the following day, as ritual performances begin late at night and end between 3 and 4 a.m.

The abridged version of the Ramayana that the company performs in non-temple settings employs pre-recorded tracks, altering the oral heritage of the performance, although Master shadow puppeteers continue to employ the oral method of vocalisation.

Numerous of these folk forms have religious significance and should therefore be utilised with care. Parmar (1975) contends that effective communication is impossible in a "cultural vacuum." According to him, culture and attitude operate as a driving force; therefore, it would be immature to disregard them when creating communication tactics for rural areas. India is a land of diverse culture, languages, and dialects; therefore, it is essential to spread social messages in a popular folk/traditional manner.

Puppet

Puppet derives from the Latin term puppa, which means doll. In Sanskrit, a puppet is called Puttalika or Puttli, both of which indicate puppet, and their root is the Putta, which means son. (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2006)

A puppet is often an inanimate representational object that is imbued with life by a puppeteer who manipulates and animates it, so producing this wonderful illusion in which the audience is prepared to suspend disbelief and start believing that it's all real.

Francis (2011), a worldwide puppetry educator, consultant, and author, defines Puppet as a representational form that is superficially personified by both its audience and puppeteer, as evidenced by its physical state. According to her, any object can be imbued with life by a human who controls and inspires it through wires, strings, wood, metal, or even remotely through a mechanism if there is a living human interaction. This human intervention distinguishes puppets from toys or mechanically controlled images/objects like automatons. As a result, Baird (1973) believes that mechanically presented images are not puppets, but machines and dolls are personal play objects in which the movement is constrained to a more human contact and hence cannot be transmitted as a puppet.

Puppet is an extension of the puppeteer and vice-versa (Ravi Gopalan Nair, Personal Communication, February 2011) as stated by Nair (a traditional 'Pavakathakali' puppeteer), *'At times it feels like the puppet is controlling you rather than you are controlling the puppet'*. This phenomenon experienced by Nair can be traced to the atavistic nature of a puppet.

Though during the last few decades, the spectrum of what puppet is has widened tremendously. A piece of cloth or found object - anything can be a puppet though termed differently as object theatre (an alternative form of theatre).

A puppet is not merely an object but a means of self-expression and at times they also act as a reflection of self.

Puppeteer

One who manipulates a puppet is a puppeteer, who is essentially a puppet operator. A puppeteer could imbue any object or puppet with believability. In addition to being a performer, a puppeteer must also design his/her puppets, tell stories, sing, modulate his/her

voice, sculpt, sketch, dance, and have a rudimentary understanding of light designing and costume design, depending on the type or genre of puppetry practised.

As a puppeteer frequently assumes numerous responsibilities in a play, including those of director, writer, puppet-maker, and in many cases even vocalist and musician, he or she represents the pinnacle of theatrical performance art. Regardless of the puppet's form Image. The primary responsibility of a puppeteer is to physically operate the puppet such that the audience believes it is real. Depending on the size and shape of a puppet, it may be necessary for a puppeteer to collaborate with a team of puppeteers in order to manipulate the object.

The vast majority of current puppeteers either teach themselves how to perform the art form or learn it by apprenticing themselves to an experienced puppeteer. However, a traditional puppeteer starts learning the art form when they are very young and doesn't start using the skills they've learned until they are teenagers.

Based on the current scenario, Francis (2011) has classified puppeteers into three groups. The first group consists of puppeteers who operate behind the stage as designers of sets, props, and puppeteers who sculpt and paint their creations.

Francis makes the observation that the most talented people who build puppets are fine artists who would rather create work for a theatre of movement than be satisfied with displaying their work in galleries. Francis asserts that the number of freelance puppeteers is constantly increasing, despite the fact that there are only a few of them now working in the field. This group does not create their own puppets and does not typically perform in front of an audience, but its members are familiar with the various acting techniques, and they occasionally perform with the puppets.

In order to be more marketable to "multi-disciplinary performance organisations," many members of this group also have acting, dancing, and singing careers. They function in the same way as performers standing by to be engaged, theatre companies, puppet groups, and so on.

The third group consists of individuals who are all-rounders, are capable of multitasking, and work both as designers and performers. In this passage, Francis suggests that their number is decreasing in western tradition. The reason for this is the structure of formal training, which divided the activities into two specialised groups: "the actor-puppeteers and the designer-puppeteers."

On the other hand, there are also schools that train students in a format that draws from multiple disciplines, such as the Institut International De La Marionnette, which is located in France. In this article, Francis grouped puppeteers into three categories. The first category is comprised of those puppeteers who create puppets, props, and settings but do not do the actual manipulation of the puppets. This is a circular argument due to the fact that the definition of "puppeteer" refers to the person who operates the puppet. The first category that can be applied to her is "a puppet maker," however she does not perform the role of a puppeteer.

The puppeteer is no longer concealed from the audience, with the exception of certain traditional puppet performers; however, even in many traditional forms of puppetry, such as Indonesia's Wayang, traditional shadow puppetry of Cambodia, and Japan's Bunraku, all of

these formats have a strong presence of the puppeteers, both physically and in the narrative structure that is imbibed in the performance.

In modern puppet shows, "the puppeteer" is very much present on stage, dancing, singing, acting, and speaking. This is common in contemporary puppet shows.

This has resulted in an increased demand for puppeteers who are able to act, dance, sing, and so on, despite the fact that traditionally, they were frequently hidden from the sight of the audience, which gave an element of illusion to the play itself.

Even if, from a purely theoretical standpoint, actors and puppeteers belong to two very distinct categories of performers, An actor interacts with the audience by moving their body, expressing emotion with their face, and moving their eyes. A puppeteer interacts with the audience by gestures and sometimes even by remaining still.

It is possible to credit this to the fact that a puppet has any sense of self-consciousness, which is one of the virtues of a puppet. One advantage of using a puppet is that it can say or do things that a human actor might be hesitant to do or say.

In order to save himself after confronting the Czech authorities with his puppet show, a puppeteer from the Czech Republic said unequivocally in his defence that it was not his fault but the puppets' responsibility. (Blumenthal, 2005)

According to Baker (2012), an expert in puppet and object theatre, a contemporary puppeteer is no longer restricted to any traditional technique. Furthermore, the puppet itself does not need to be constructed; rather, it can be anything, including a part of the human body or any other object. It is not even bound to the movement of humans or animals; rather, it can simply simulate the way water ripples using cloth.

Rituals

Rituals are defined by Foley as "a structured ceremony that teaches spiritual understanding." (Foley, 2001). She argues further that the relationship between puppetry and rituals is ancient, but that the employment of puppets in ritualistic contexts is only poorly understood. Due to the oral transmission of knowledge in traditional folk art and a level of secrecy to keep the information inside the community, an outsider cannot comprehend the esoteric meaning of the performance, even if they watch it.

She goes on to say that even when puppetry is employed solely for amusement, ritualistic patterns continue to be an integral part of the genre. Wood, leather, and other materials used in the creation of traditional puppets have embodied the creatures as if they were once alive, connecting the artefact to God spirits or ancestors.

This is prevalent in the shadow puppetry of Karnataka, according to Singh (2001): in Togalu gombeyatta, each generation of puppeteers adds a strand of hair from their head to the clown puppet's ponytail, therefore establishing a link with the generations that came before.

Rituals have always been an integral aspect of the display of puppets in numerous cultures and nations.

According to Henryk Jurkowski (2013), it all began with animism: people believed that natural components such as rocks, clouds, and animals contained spiritual qualities.

Similarly, their customary ceremonial Images were thought to be endowed with life and evolved into idols over time. Animating the idols was the next step, which culminated in the transformation of these images into puppets, which are divided into two categories based on their functions: ritual and theatrical.

Rituals and theatre frequently cross paths, with rituals becoming into theatre and vice versa. Shadow puppetry is a living tradition in six Indian states, according to S.A. Krishnaiah (1988). In each of the six states where shadow puppetry is performed, religious rites accompany the performance, or it is performed at religious celebrations and festivities.

Varadpande (1991) categorised Indian folk theatre as either religious or secular. Folk theatre centred on religious myths, according to him, was the consequence of the bhakti movement in mediaeval India, while the secular form evolved from the swang or sung tradition. Swang is regarded as the father style of numerous popular traditional folk theatre forms in Northern India, whereas the bhakti movement originated in the seventh century in southern India and then spread to the east and north.

In India, theatre has played numerous roles beyond mere amusement. Swang is the theatre of devotion, where mythical, historical hero tales, and folktales comprise the dramatic text for the plays. Like this practise evolved, it has also been a tool for political and social change, as in West Bengal's Jatra. Swang is played in classical, semi-classical, and folk musical styles.

The Bhakti movement gained new momentum, and numerous new types of folk theatre appeared; via a long and continuous history, it evolved while preserving its foundational components. One such component is the vidushaka, or jester, whose purpose is to amuse the audience. Being unrestricted by any script, the vidushaka grows, adapts, acquires new characteristics, and remains fresh; it can be found in numerous folk-media under various titles.

Mythology-based folk media is a living culture in India, particularly in rural regions, and is woven into the people's daily routines and responsibilities. This is reflected in all Hindu folk traditional media, where it is customary to worship Lord Ganesha before each performance of folk theatre. All Hindu folk traditions in India have their roots in the epics and puranas, and this is reflected in the major role of recitation in all traditional shadow puppetry forms in India.

According to Schenhner (1985), the transition from rituals to theatre is a logical progression of all performing art forms. Rituals before traditional shadow puppetry performed for an urban or foreign audience are an example of what Schenhner refers to as "restored behaviour." This retrieval and staging process is re-contextualized based on the audience, but he asserts that replicating a ritual may leave nothing out.

Traditional Puppetry Forms in Kerala

Traditional puppetry can be split into four categories based on the method of manipulation: glove, rod, string, and shadow puppetry. In India, traditional puppetry is largely based on epics, monarchs, heroes, satire, and romantic tragedies, except for South Indian states where shadow puppetry is based on Ramayana and Mahabharata. Even now, it is strongly established in religious ceremonies in Kerala, where it is done annually at numerous temples.

Kerala is one of the most culturally diverse states in India, and it is home to all four varieties of puppetry: shadow, glove, rod, and string. Tholpavakoothu, the traditional shadow puppetry practise of Kerala, is an ancient ritualistic art form dedicated to Goddess Bhagavati, the Mother Goddess venerated by the people of Kerala. Tholpavakoothu is a ceremonial art form that takes place annually from January to May in a specially constructed theatre known as Koothu Madam in front of the Bhagavati temple (the shadow drama house). Based on the Kamba Ramayana, it is believed to have begun in the ninth century AD.

Pavakathakali is said to have originated in the 18th century, a century after Kathakali (a significant genre of classical Indian dance) became popular. Local puppeteers were inspired by the kathakali costumes and adopted the ideas of the attakatha (theatrical interpretations of this drama), which had become the norm, from the dance drama.

Moozhikkal Pankajakshi and her granddaughter K.S. Ranjini perform Kerala's ancient rod puppetry, Nokku Vidya Pavakali, which is the rarest form of this art form. The puppets are suspended from a rod that rests vertically on the floor-squatting puppeteer's top lip. The puppets are animated by the performer using strings. Since the puppets are designed to move in rhythm with the accompanying music, balancing and animating them needs a great deal of expertise and concentration. (Paul, 2013)

Nool Pavakoothu (String Puppetry), previously prevalent in Tripunithura and Naarambalam, was on the verge of extinction in Kerala. It was reintroduced by G.Venu of Natanakairali, Irinjalakuda, a few years ago. Nool Pavakoothu received fresh life as a result of T.P. Kunjiraman Master of Vadakara's participation with the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT), which incorporated puppetry into teacher training programmes.

Into the Oblivion

Numerous times, the term "dead art" distorts the logical meaning of a form. Even though there are numerous forms and styles of traditional Indian puppetry, some of which are obscure and in need of support, puppetry is not a dying art in India. According to Upadhyaya (1990), puppetry troupes occasionally abandon this art form in favour of more secure work. Poitevin's primary concern is the museumization of culture and oral traditional folk-art forms, which, according to Poitevin (2002), has been appropriated by persons to whom it does not belong and is being used strategically for unintended objectives. Numerous individuals chose to harm the environment rather than preserve it. But without inclusiveness, numerous traditional art forms have perished; if a community abandons an art form, another group could continue it.

In lieu of safeguarding the integrity of the art form, they are frequently commodified into marketable cultural objects. This is due to the evolution of the patronage structure over time. In the past, landlords and kings would generously pay for the puppeteers, but now they must come up with their own business ideas or seek alternative jobs.

Due to the efforts of individuals, organisations, and government agencies tasked with preserving Indian folk-art forms, some nearly extinct folk art forms have been restored. One such instance is the resuscitation of Pavakathakali puppet theatre by Venu (2004) and his centre Natana Kairali. They assisted in the revival of 'Pavakathakali,' which is a glove puppet theatre form based on the most popular ancient dance – play form of Kerala, 'Kathakali.' Venu says that because the puppets are vibrant and entrancing, they draw a younger audience,

so encouraging children to appreciate kathakali. Natana Kairali has also reintroduced a few traditional art forms that were on the edge of extinction, including Pavakathakali (Glove Puppet Theatre) and a number of dance dramas, including Mudiyyetti, Padayani, Kakkarissi Natakam, Tiruvatirakali, Kummattikali, etc.

Pavakathakali

Pavakathakali performers from the Andipandaram community hail from a small number of families in the Paruthippully village of the Palghat (Palakkad) district. During the 14th century, their ancestors appear to have moved from Andhra Pradesh to Kerala. The Andipandaram, who worship Subramanya (Subramania, Murugan), make their living by leading pilgrims to Palani's Subramanya temple and performing worship in villages and households.

The height of Pavakathakali puppets ranges from 40 to 60 centimetres. The intricately carved head and arms are connected to a little bag with strong cotton knots. As with the Kathkali dancers, the puppets are adorned with tiny golden jewellery, cowrie shells, coral, gems, peacock feathers, and other embellishments.

The hands of the puppets are positioned in a fundamental mudra. (Hand movements used to communicate emotions and ideas) Due of this, puppets can also carry objects such as a club or a lotus flower.

The puppeteer places his hand inside the bag and manipulates the puppet's arms with his thumb and middle finger, while his index finger moves the puppet's head. The movements of the puppet need a high degree of dexterity.

Since these puppets are made of wood and have multiple layers of clothing, rather than removing the old costume, a new costume is added on top of the previous one. As a result, the weight of the puppet gradually increases, and for some puppets, the puppeteer uses a string attached behind the head to support and balance the puppet while holding the other end of the string in another hand.

A puppeteer who sits in front with a puppet is also an integral element of the performance, as his facial expressions and gestures are in rhythm with the narrative and the way a puppet is moving and expressing emotion.

Pavakathakali adheres to the criteria of kathakali character types with regards to attire, headpiece, makeup, and hues. They represent the Gods of the upper realms, humans of the middle world, and demons of the underworld. A god, monarch, or hero's face is green, whereas a villain's face is crimson. The complexions of women and sages are orange yellow.

In the past, Pavakathakali performances did not necessitate the construction of a stage or podium. The puppeteers would travel from home to home, entertaining primarily women and children, and would set up camp in the courtyard. When nomadic entertainers visited ancestral houses, the hosts provided for their needs because the shows grabbed the children's attention.

One or two vocalists are accompanied by the same chenda (drum), chengila (gong), illetalam (cymbals), and shankh (mother-of-pearl conch shell) used in kathakali. A minimum of six

puppeteers are required to perform a show. Folk performance is the collaboration and originality of several artists. Following the Kathakali text, the accompanying instruments play their respective parts.

As soon as the nilavilaku (copper lamp) is lit in the courtyard, the puppeteers sit on the ground and begin performing. No barrier separates them from the audience. Each performance pays the puppeteers arangupanam (a shoulder cloth or stole worn by men in India). The most often performed Mahabharata episodes are Kalyanasaugandhikam (The Flower of Good Fortune) and Duryodhanavadham (The Slaying of Duryodhana). Pavakathakali remained popular until the 1940s, when its popularity began to decline.

The performance may continue many hours or the entire night. A copper oil lamp is lit prior to the beginning of a performance. Before this lamp, the artists sing songs of adoration to the Gods. After performing, the performers are compensated with money and gifts. Similarly, in the setup of a Koodiyattam or Kathakali performance, the illuminated lamp enhances the facial expressions of the performers. Similarly, the lantern in the Pavakathakali performance reveals both the motions of the puppets and the expressions of the puppeteers. The glove puppet has the benefit of being able to recreate combat scenarios with flying, screaming rage; these lengthy reactions can be well conveyed by the puppets.

Revival through Inclusion

This art form is supposed to have been created by the nomadic 'Andipandarams' of Kerala, who employ at least two kilogramme glove puppets. When performing pavakathakali, three fingers and a string are used to imitate Kathakali moves. The livelihood of Andipandaras relies on these performances. Pavakathakali can be found in the Palakkad district villages of Paruthippulli and Kodumbu. Their native language is Telugu, even though they moved to Kerala from Andhra Pradesh decades ago. When they landed in Kerala, they would perform a puppet show based on the Tamil traditional drama 'Aryamaala' Kathakali's popularity increased over time.

When Kathakali became popular in Kerala, they carved figures, studied the text, and moulded it to embrace the art form. Up until the 1960s, performers like Chamu Pandaram kept Pavakathakali alive. A troupe from Paruthippulli, led by Chamu Pandaram, travelled to other locales with their performances until reaching the Poornathrayeesha temple in Tripunithura.

With the assistance of Venu G., Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988), the director of Sangeet Natak Akademi (The National Academy of Music, Dance, and Drama) in Delhi, brought pavakathakali back to life in the 1980s. When India's foremost craftswoman, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, visited Kerala thirty years ago, she discovered Pavakathakali puppets in a museum in Thrissur. Inquiries revealed that the art form was practically on its last legs because so many of its practitioners had fallen into poverty. She then asked Venu G., an expert in Kathakali and Koodiyattam, if he could save the art form from extinction.

Regrettably, the leading practitioners of this art form in the village of Paruthippully, Chamu Pandaram and Velayudhan Pandaram, had quit. With the assistance of K.V. Ramakrishnan and Chamu Pandaram's nephew Venu G, a pavakathakali knowledge base was compiled. Venu G gave his brother Ravi Gopalan Nair the mission of collecting information and puppets in all locations where this form was prevalent. (Nagarajan, 2012)

Shagunni Ashari, an experienced master carpenter, taught Ravi the techniques necessary to construct the puppets. They debuted an altered version of "Kalyanasaugandhikam" in 1984 at the India International Centre in New Delhi. After this, the troupes travelled to the United States, Europe, and several Asian nations to promote this one-of-a-kind performance art. The company was given an invitation to perform at the International Puppet Festival in Poland in 1984. The following year, in 1987, it continued its tour of the world by performing at the Maison des Cultures du Monde in Paris. After that, it also gave a show in Geneva.

Pavakathakali has achieved widespread recognition across the globe, and the group maintains its activities in Irinjalakuda. Natana Kairali, located in Irinjalakuda, serves as the location for the ensemble's rehearsals and practise sessions. In addition to K.V. Ramakrishnan and K.C. Ramakrishnan, other members of the troupe include K. Srinivasan, V. Thankappan, and Kalanilayam Ramakrishnan. All of these individuals work under the direction and supervision of Venu G.

To ensure that Pavakathakali continues to captivate its audience, the Natana Kairali Research and Performing Centre for Traditional Arts developed a plan and instructed six students from different regions of Kerala on how to construct and operate the puppets. This was done so that Pavakathakali can continue to be performed.

Conclusion

During the post-independent era, there has been a significant paradigm shift in the patronage structure for traditional puppeteers. Many traditional art forms are currently supported financially by organisations affiliated with the Indian government.

There are many puppeteers across India who are not aware of how to approach these organisations, how to submit a request for a grant, or how to complete the paperwork that is necessary in order to receive funding. As a result, they are left with a low sense of self-esteem and the belief that they are being given charity, although this is something to which they are entitled because they are the ones who carry on the art form.

Most traditional forms of puppetry in India are passed down by oral tradition; therefore, it is the puppeteers who need to earn their just compensation; otherwise, this heritage will be lost, and there will be nothing to aspire to.

It is essential for them to have an appreciation and understanding of what they already possess.

Pavakathakali, an art form that was on the point of extinction, was given a new lease on life as a result of an experiment in the inclusion and accessibility of this one-of-a-kind art form.

There is an increasing need for inclusive work within the realm of traditional performing arts. This demand is expected to continue growing.

Pavakathakali was resurrected as a result of new artists from other communities taking an interest in the art form. These new artists trained in the art form for a period of two years and worked closely with the few remaining performers who have the knowledge and skill to pass on. As a result, Pavakathakali is performed by people of all classes and genders, regardless of performance, and this will allow this art form to maintain the legacy for future generations.

As new generations enter the field, both classic and contemporary forms of puppetry are undergoing rapid transitions at the same time. There is a growing interest in collaboration between puppeteers and practitioners from other professions, such as animators, narrators, storytellers, filmmakers, designers, and musicians. Contemporary puppetry companies all around the world are experimenting with a wide variety of new visual forms and techniques in order to create new kinds of performances.

Traditional puppetry troupes are not far behind in evolving their art form by exploring new visual formats. Even though their heritage is deeply connected with their religion and culture, and even though they strive to preserve what they inherited, traditional puppetry troupes are not far behind in evolving their art form.

The new visual language is not limited to any technique or form, and it freely incorporates elements of puppetry, digital projection, pre-recorded soundtrack, interactivity, live actors, and found objects in order to convey complex emotional themes and narratives both verbally and non-verbally. This is done in order to communicate with audiences on a deeper level.

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