

**Prelims Master Program (2023-24) – Ancient, Medieval, Art and Culture**  
**Handout 34: Puppetry (additional handout)**

**Four basic types of Puppetries**

One of the most popular forms of rural entertainment, puppetry has a bewildering variety of avatars. Considering differences in design, mode of manipulation, and presentational techniques, puppets belong to basically four types. All four varieties survive in different parts of India.

- Glove Puppetry
- Rod Puppetry
- String Puppetry
- Shadow Puppetry



	<b>Glove Puppetry</b>	<b>Rod Puppetry</b>	<b>String Puppetry</b>	<b>Shadow Puppetry</b>
<b>Northern India</b>	Uttar Pradesh (Gulabo-Sitabo)	Bihar (Yamapuri)	Rajasthan (Kathputli)	
<b>Eastern India</b>	Orissa (Kundhei Nata) West Bengal (Putul Nach)	Orissa (Kathi-kundhei Nata) West Bengal (Putul Nach)	Orissa (Sakhi-kundhei Nata) West Bengal (Putul Nach) Assam (Putla Nach)	Orissa (Ravana Chhaya)
<b>Western India</b>			Maharashtra (Kalsutri Bahulya)	Maharashtra (Chamdyacha Bahulya)
<b>Southern India</b>	Kerala (Pavakuttu)		Karnataka (Gombeyata) Tamil Nadu (Bommalattam)	Andhra Pradesh (Tolu Bommalata) Karnataka (Togalu Gombeyata) Tamil Nadu (Tolu Bommalattam) Kerala (Tolpavakuttu)

### (1) Glove Puppets (hand puppets)

- Simplest, but that does not mean they are less fascinating.
  - A miniature figure with movable head and arms and a long flowing skirt that the puppeteer wears like a glove.
  - While the index finger manipulates the head, the thumb and middle finger control the arms.
  - Traditional Indian glove puppeteers frequently squat on the ground and manipulate the puppets in full view of the audience: they do not hide behind a screen.
- The form survives in
  - Orissa (Kundhei Nata)
  - West Bengal (Putul Nach)
  - Uttar Pradesh (Gulabo-Sitabo)
  - Kerala (Pavakuttu, puppet play).



- A rare variety called Pava Kathakali ('puppet Kathakali'), saved from extinction in the 1970s by the intervention of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya.

### (2) Rod Puppet

- An extension of the glove puppet, but often much larger, with a full-length rounded figure.
  - The movements are limited compared to a string puppet's, but control is absolute and can attain broad gestures of rare beauty.
- Traditional rod puppets survive in
  - West Bengal (Putul Nach)
  - Orissa (Kathi-kundhei Nata, wooden-doll dance')
  - Bihar (Yamapuri) puppets are single objects with no joints. Thus, their manipulation is difficult and requires more dexterity.



### (3) String Puppet

- String puppetry is widespread in India, with a variety of themes and techniques.
- Full-figure puppets (**marionettes**)
  - Jointed limbs controlled by strings allow greater flexibility
  - Most articulate of all puppets.
- Indian marionette traditions exist in

- Rajasthan (Kathputli)
- Orissa (Sakhi-kundhei Nata)
- Maharashtra (Kalsutri Bahulya)
- Karnataka (Gombeyata)
- Tamil Nadu (Bommallattam)
- Assam (Putla Nach, doll dance')
- West Bengal (Putul Nach)



- Some scholars think that shadow theatre evolved earlier than string puppetry, but this belief may not hold much water. The earliest reference to shadow puppets is in Tamil Sangam literature, whereas the term sutradhara predates it and cave drawings etched millennia ago unmistakably represent string puppets.

#### (4) Shadow Puppetry (Chhayanataka)

- While in puppet theatre the audience directly sees the puppets, in shadow theatre it sees only their moving shadows cast by light on a screen.
  - The spectators and actor-manipulators are placed as if in different rooms separated by the all-important screen, which filters and modifies the action—almost like a primitive motion picture.
  - The actor-manipulator is isolated from his audience, unlike the performer's experience in live theatre.
- **The leather puppets**
  - Normally, the puppet figures in shadow theatre are made of leather. They can be made from any opaque material like cardboard, but leather can be used many more times without damage.
  - While the puppets of Orissa, Kerala, and Maharashtra cast shadows in black and white, and draw exclusively upon Rama myths for their stories, those of the other three states throw spectacular multicoloured shadows.
- India has a very long and rich tradition of shadow theatre. According to many scholars, the art originated here two millennia ago.
  - The earliest reference appears in Silappatikaram, a Tamil classic.
  - Many Western Indologists think that the well-known Sanskrit drama Mahanataka ('Great Drama') was originally a text for shadow theatre. Although its exact date cannot be fixed, it was written before AD 850.
  - Subhata's Dutangada (Angada the Messenger), a play from the 13th century, is expressly designated as chayanataka (shadow drama).
- Thus, India has a continuous history of shadow theatre for about 2000 years. Possibly the form reached south-east Asia, where it now flourishes, thanks to maritime and cultural relations originating from India's eastern seaboard.



- Fortunately, shadow theatre traditions still exist in varying styles in peninsular India:

- Orissa (Ravana Chhaya)
- Andhra Pradesh (Tolu Bommalata)
- Tamil Nadu (Tolu Bommalattam)
- Kerala (Tolpavakuttu)
- Karnataka (Togalu Gombeyata)
- Maharashtra (Chamdyacha Bahulye, leather puppets').



- **The fortune:**

- The Maharashtrian form barely survives in the hands of one troupe in Kudal village (Ratnagiri district). In contrast, Andhra Pradesh now has the strongest activity in shadow theatre, with more than a hundred puppeteers.
- In general, shadow theatres are dying slowly because people prefer 'modern' entertainment like movies and television. Governments provide financial incentive for their survival, but it is too meagre. Besides, no art can thrive under doles. Unless society becomes genuinely interested in the continuation of these rare forms, they are destined to vanish sooner or later.