

# **Introducing a theatrical and easier technique for restoration of the traditional puppetry of Bengal**

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## **Introduction**

In spite of a glorious heritage, the traditional puppetry of Bengal of different style is dying day by day due to some various reason, which I have collected from recent survey work in East Medinipur, Nadia, and south 24 Parganas district of rural West Bengal. Whatever the style may be, the traditional puppeteers are not getting their call shows and they have compelled to join in another profession. The survey report says that not only the urban but the rural people also have lost their interest in traditional puppetry due to its shabby and old technique in comparison with the new internet world! On the other hand, there are some few groups who have changed their technique for upgradation are able to survive. It means you may survive if you change your presentation techniques accordingly. After a prolonged experimental process, we have invented an easy technique, which may be introduced for rod puppet making to make upgrade the traditional puppeteers in their struggle for existence. I personally do this work as a mission by arranging workshop and training in various districts with my team – Bangopootool, operated from Kolkata.

Before looking into the matter with a deep view, some serious questions come automatically. According to the cultural history of India, India is the motherland of world puppetry in one hand and in another hand, puppetry art is in dying condition in our country itself. It should be restored for the development of our society and documentation too. Now the question is, why it is diffusing day by day and how it should be restored properly? During the 90s there was a survey work done by Calcutta Puppet Theatre under the banner of Sangeet Natak Akademi, Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Being a member of that team, I observed that, most of the traditional groups of rural West Bengal have defunct due to non-availability of call shows and non-patronization of local rural people. They have compelled to shut down their groups and

engaged themselves to another profession. The next generation was also not interested to continue according to their predecessors. It also revealed from the survey that the rural people have also a discrete this traditional folk art form due to an easily available internet connection and for changing faces of social values. The survey report also said that, in spite of the rejection of this art by the local people, there is still something exists inside this art form, which is very much positive. On the contrary, the contemporary puppetry is being popular day by day, it means puppetry has not rejected by the local people, they have rejected its traditional form and shabby presentation techniques, which is very heavy and old also. Analysing the survey report we could understand that this art form may survive by changing its form and presentation styles, through proper training in the workshop.

### **Project Plan**

Considering the above mentioned fact, I made a route map to run the whole project step by step as planed below, for first six months which is laid out as follows:

#### ***Step-1 Workshop for traditional groups***

I selected 2 no's of spots to teach trainee puppeteers for the workshop, one from the 'Traditional School' and other from ST/SC unemployed youth of the rural area. As such, I made a camp at Joynagar of south 24 Paraganas district, which is the original birthplace of World Rod Puppetry, during July 2018, with the assistance of Guru Nirapada Mandal, director of Satyanarayan Putulnatya Sanstha- a traditional rod puppet group. Before starting the Workshop- Camp we motivated and able to convince the selected puppeteers to give up their old and unpopular schooling regarding toy-making & manipulation and to adjust with the easier technique along with an introduction of the new theatrical system on set, light soundtrack etc. They agreed with the same and we started our camp accordingly.

- Duration of the 1st camp-workshop: 21 days (2-22 July 2018)
- Timing: From 10 Am to 6 pm (8 hours every day)
- Number of trainee-students: (15 male+ 6 female) 21
- Venue of the Workshop: Baharu High School, PO Baharu, District: South 24 Parganas

- Trainer: 1) Subho Joardar, Director- Bangopootool, 2) Nirapada Mondal, Director- Satyanarayan Putulnatya Sanstha, 3) Pradip Sardar- Ravindrabharati University.
- Result: After completion of the workshop, the successful trainee made a professional puppet show with their newly made toy and technique, produced from the said workshop.
- Funds: The funds collected from the school committee and local people.
- Effect of the workshop: The local traditional puppeteers are now ready to perform Applying their new easier technique.

### **Selection of trainee by motivation and interview**

Though there is various type of traditional puppet in West Bengal, like Rod, String, Gloves, Shadow etc., I basically working with. Rod puppet style. According to the cultural history of India, south 24 Paragons district of West Bengal is the motherland Indian rod puppet. History also says that during the King Asoka rod puppet of West Bengal was migrated to Indonesia and Sri Lanka by the navigation, to spread Buddhism. Basically south 24 Paraganas district of West Bengal is an underdeveloped area as per Government notification, a backward section from ST/SC are the majority in the population. As such, all the modern facilities are beyond their reach. Generally, these artists are orthodox to some extent and it is a very hard task to convince them with a new idea, apart from their tradition. It is fact that, though their toy, text of the play, dialogue, music and set etc. are monotonous and far from as contemporary demand, there is huge hesitation to carry out a better decision. Until they understand their own problem, one cannot move them towards positivity. So I did a motivation camp near Baharu in south 24 parganas with a view to convincing a few traditional puppeteers from rod puppet style. Nirapada mondal, a famous Traditional Puppet Director, was known to me and we both gradually motivated at least 30 no's of traditional artists to have their training in a month-long workshop for their enrolment and enrichment towards advance technique.

Meanwhile, a school-teacher cum social activist helps us a lot by giving permission to use his school building as the venue of our workshop. During July 2018 we started the workshop which was continued for 21 days. At first, we selected 21 head of young traditional puppeteers, who were agreed to change their old and previous schooling. Workshop schedule was from 10

mornings to 7 evening for each day. The students were taught in theatre technique. As without knowing about theatre technique one cannot manipulate the toys according to the dialogue and musical audio soundtrack. As we know, the traditional puppeteers are used to manipulate their toys following live audio acting and musical performance. Most of the time many a character is being done by the same person, even male and female role also done by him! Naturally, it creates monotony and this is why people do reject this. But introducing a modern technique, if we use a pre-recorded soundtrack with proper dialogue, background music and songs etc. it may be more effective than the previous vintage processes. To present an accurate well designed audio play and to avoid, reduce the regular expenditure headache, a one-time final audio recording system is more scientific. Moreover, a colourful and professional soundtrack sometimes cover the shortfall of manipulation.

This is the main difference between the presentation of old and advanced technique so far the rod puppet manipulation is the concern. Another difference is about the toy. Generally, the old toys are very heavy in weight, sometimes it becomes very inhuman to operate the same. But in advance technique, toy-weight has been reduced from 3-4 kg to 500-700 gram, which is very comfortable to operate even for a fresh young star. These are the main points of the easier advance technique of rod puppet manipulation. We motivated the traditional puppeteers in this two ways, before joining the workshop.

### **Cultivation of theatre sense before manipulation**

Indeed puppetry art is nothing but a bridge between theatre and magic. Actually, men used to make theatre, tell stories, create and recreate momentum through puppets, placing them in front of the public and hiding behind a curtain. As such, a puppeteer can portrait his toy-character by cultivating his or her theatre sense. To be frank, particularly this thing is unavailable inside a traditional puppeteer, as they used to perform mechanically and traditionally, even they do not rehearse before their performance. As the commercial market of traditional puppet has become dry, the scenario may be changed by improving their quality of production. For this reason, the said training or grooming is inhabitable for the traditional puppeteers.

### ***Acting sense***

According to Bharat Muni's 'Natyashastra', there are (4) four type acting. 1) Angik (physical), 2) Bachanik (vocal), 3) Aharya (property) and 4) Satwik (philosophical). According to history, South Bengal is the Motherland of world rod puppet and this was being practised since the pre-Arian period, as part of Dravidian civilization. History says that Bharatmuni himself was a non-Arian and wrote his 'Natyashastra' collecting the data and following the live style of the then folk culture. As puppetry is a part of folk culture, the Sutras or rule may be implemented during the cultivation of the theatre sense among the traditional puppeteers, in the workshop.

### ***Physical fitness for proper manipulation***

Not for physical acting but to move the puppets according to the scene and character, puppeteers should be strong and physically fit. Generally, the traditional puppeteer is used to manipulate their toy holding them in a wooden holder, which has already fixed in their waist with a rope and holding the toy's hand by their own hand. In this case, they may hold the toy in one hand and they should manipulate the hands of the toy by holding the same by two sticks which are already fixed with the toy's hand. Standing beneath a curtain, fixing their eyes on toy face, it is too tough to operate a toy unless the puppeteer becomes physically sound and fit. This is why they should train physically with proper drill and exercise as a preamble during the workshop. Otherwise, their manipulation may be disturbed and the toy character may not be established. In our Baharu camp, there was half an hour exercise-schedule for each day.

### ***Vocal acting training***

Audio acting is an essential part of the theatre. There are so many parts in vocal acting. Pronunciation, modulation, sense of scale and volume is inalienable for an actor. By using proper scale and volume with pronunciation and acting sense, one can create a magical moment on the stage. So, training on vocal acting is the primary one. Besides this, the sense of music and rhythm is also an essential part of vocal acting. Music has different colours it makes sorrow, happy, angry according to human feelings. There are so many bits or tal inside the nature it reflects the mood accordingly. The 'bhava' and 'rasa' of Natyashastra may be implemented during the workshop to make the students sound in vocal acting. Audio acting is a very special

thing in respect to puppet training. Puppeteer moves his puppet according to the soundtrack. Until and unless he scans the sound (it may be dialogue or music) by bit to the bit he may miss the proper manipulation, which may refuse to establish the actual gesture of the respective character. In this way, vocal acting and physical manipulation make a puppet production, a complete audio-visual creation. Dancing and singing portion of production may be taught with very special care as per choreography.

### ***Knowledge of using set property & light***

According to Natyasastra, there are four types of acting. Now we are talking about acting by using property, set, light, requisition etc. Acting with the puppet is a world of fantasy with make-believe. Though people are ready to accept you, you should make the presentation smartly with full concentration and professional attitude. A production being established by proper use of set, light, requisition etc. It depends upon the actual desire timings, comes from theatrical sense. Rod puppet is a theatre style, operated from six and a half feet beneath the toy, as such not only toy but also each requisition may be placed according to with proper care and timings. It is next to impossible to perform correctly with repeated rehearsal.

In case light and sound the desired momentum creates with proper utilisation of time. Actually, theatre is fusion or a mixture among character, light, music, sound and dialogue. It depends upon the mixing skill of the director as well as an artist.

### ***Step-2. Workshop For Non-Traditional Youths***

I selected another spot at Chakdha of Nadia district under Chakdha Block to teach and train to 25 no's of girl student from Kamalpur Adarsha Vidyapith for girls', Kamalpur, Chakdha, Nadia of IX-XI standard as designed by both BDO Chakdha and head teacher of the school. They were selected to take part in a govt. programme on women empowerment through puppetry art. At first, I composed a script on the particular topic and recorded soundtrack with proper dialogue, music and song. Then we started the workshop to train them in making their puppets themselves with the necessary tools and materials. We teach them how to hold the toy properly and body movement and theatrical composition according to the pre-recorded soundtrack. After completing, the workshop schedule the trainee performed a puppet play 'Shuchibalar Golpo' in

front of the dignified guests and BDO and received their completion certificates. The point is to be noted that, these newly trained girl students are now getting their honorarium by attending the show schedule. It proves that the newcomer also is capable to perform professionally if they get proper training and guidance.

- Duration of the 2nd camp-workshop: 16 days (1-16 December 2018), From 10 Am to 6 pm (8 hours every day)
- Number of trainee-students: ( 25 no's girl students )
- Venue of the Workshop: Kamalpur Adarsha Vidyapith for girls', Kamalpur, PO, Chakdha, District: Nadia.

- Trainer: 1) Subho Joardar, Director- Bangopootool, 2) Smt. Taruna Mukhopadhyay-Kalabhaban, Shantiniketan, 3) Pradip Sardar- Ravindrabharati University.
- Funds: The fund arrangement made by local govt., Infrastructural assistance has made by the school authority.

### ***Storyline of the puppet play Suchibalar Golpo***

Suchibala a girl student of a high school in a village was trapped by a local vendor as her father took some loan from the vendor which was unrecovered. One day Suchi's father and the vendor made a plan to arrange a marriage of Suchi with the vendor forcefully. This was opposed by Suchi and she informed the same to her teacher Bharatidi. Bharatidi complained it to the BDO and they stopped the pre-mature marriage. But one fine morning Suchi was kidnapped and send Hajipur of Bihar as a victim of girl-trafficking. Anyhow, Suchi was managed to escape herself with the help of police personnel and returned to her village. Suchi was kidnapped due to she used to live in a toilet less home. When she came out to the toilet in the morning the accident occurred. The villagers stated an agitation for making toilet in each home, not to arrange marriage in pre-mature stage and not giving douri in marriage. Bharatidi set her student Suchi as the role model of this social programme. After one year it was a successful programme and Suchi's village was received an award as the best and clean village of the district by the local authority.

### ***Toy making technique with domestic waste material***

We started a workshop in chakdha of West Bengal to train 25 no's of girl students in Kamalpur high school on a women empowerment awareness program through a puppet production Suchibalar golpo. We generally use domestic waste like the plastic bottle, packing thermocol, cotton cloth, PVC pipe etc. In chakdha we collected 20 no's of plastic bottles of soft drinks and out of these we made 20 fine rod puppet for our puppet production Suchibalar Golpo. We took a plastic bottle and made a 1-inch hole by shouldering rod. Heads of toys made from wastage packing materials tharmocol. Rubbing an each 5"x5"x5" tharmocol pice by sandpaper toy head were made. Separate eyes nose ear and lips were pasted with fevicol on every head. Arms were made with foam and palm were by rubbing tharmocol. We made each body of the toys putting



hosiery cloth and stitching the same tightly with the bottle like skin and painted them accordingly. Though the toy head and palm are made of tharmocol, there are 2 no's lire of cotton cloth and scramble newspaper were pasted as well as smooth and dry condition. Now toys are almost ready and paintings, costume work should be done according to the character. Head should be fixed with the respective body. A hole of 1" should be made in the neck position of the toy head to permanently fix a ¾"dia pvc plumbing pipe of 6" length putting a suitable pvc joint socket on the other end of the pipe. Now we can fix the heads with the respective body. And this the right time to fix two sticks in each toy's hand for manipulation. Now everything is ready except the colour, costume, hair and ornament work. This should be made as per the respective characters. All character should be well dressed. The female head demand a wig and male head may cover with long far accordingly. So far painting is concern we generally use the plastic emulsion (white) as base and primer, And for direct painting we use acrylic colours.

Now the toy making process has completed for manipulation. Artist is used to hold their toy by holding the pipe socket and on the other hand, they hold the two stick which is already fixed with the hands of the toy for operation. Puppeteer is standing beneath a certain and holding the toy towards the sky. They used to operate the same according to the script or soundtrack.

**List of materials generally used for toy making:**

1. Tharmocol 5"x5"x5" for head
2. ¾" U foam for arms
3. Hosiery cloth for skin
4. ¾" PVC plumbing pipe with relevant joint socket
5. Empty plastic jar (for the preservation of toffee)
6. 10 mm GI rod for operating toy's hand
7. Old cotton cloth and newsprint paper
8. Plastic emulsion paint
9. Fabric colours
10. Wig for female and long far for male hair
11. Costume as per character

12. Ornaments etc.

We did this toy making camp in Chakdha school successfully 25 girls participated in this workshop within 15 to 20 days they were completely trained to make the toy part by part and after the toy making session, they join to the manipulation part. The manipulation technique is the same and we have already described the same in the previous workshop.

### **The secret of rapid advance in toy making (rod puppet)**

As puppetry is a performing art can be restored by performances only, it should be practised not only by the traditional puppeteers but by the fresh young star also as such we have designed an advanced toy which is very light in weight and with no mechanism. Anybody can make his own toy with some simple and domestic waste according to our advanced technique. With a long experience, we have successfully invented this technique and able to teach this process through workshops in various districts of rural in West Bengal. Now puppet is for all.

### **Endnote**

1. The paper is based on the report made by Dr. Subho Joardar on his project on puppetry under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. File No. CCRT/SF-3/262/2019
2. A few black & white sketches and coloured photographs for the support of this report made by the author.

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