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Puppet Theatre in Assam: A Critical Study with Special Reference to Kamrup District

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Abstract

Puppet theatre is an important traditional performing art of Assam that combines storytelling, music, dialogue, dance, and visual performance. The tradition is closely associated with the folk and cultural life of Assam and is particularly significant in Lower Assam, including the Kamrup region. The present study examines the traditional puppet theatre of Assam with special reference to its historical background, forms, performance practices, puppet-making techniques, themes, and present condition. The study also explores the role of puppetry as a medium of communication, education, entertainment, social awareness, and social change. Kamrup district has been selected as the principal area of study, where field observation and interaction with puppeteers and performing groups were undertaken. The study also examines the changing nature of puppet theatre in response to modern technology, electronic media, changing performance spaces, musical instruments, lighting systems, costumes, and contemporary themes. The findings indicate that although traditional puppet theatre has declined in popularity because of the growth of modern forms of entertainment and mass media, the tradition continues to survive through the efforts of individual puppeteers and puppet groups. The study therefore highlights the cultural significance of puppet theatre and the need for continued preservation, documentation, innovation, and promotion of this traditional performing art.

Keywords: Puppet, Theatre, Putala, Bhaona, Folk Theatre, Kamrup, Assam, Traditional Performing Arts, Social Communication.

Introduction

According to historians, puppets are as old as civilisation. Although the theory held by scholars such as Dr. Pischels that theatre in India originated in puppet plays has largely been rejected, there is general agreement that puppets and puppetry have been known in India from ancient times. References to the art and craft associated with puppet shows are frequently found in ancient Indian literature, including religious, sacred, and secular works, Sanskrit texts such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata may be cited in this connection. It is not known exactly when the art of puppetry appeared in Assam. Some scholars point to the term Panchalika Vihara, mentioned in the Kalikapurana, believed to have been composed between the ninth and eleventh centuries, as an indication of the existence of puppet shows during that period. One of the meanings of Panchali or Panchalika in Sanskrit is a puppet, and Panchalika Vihara has been interpreted as referring to a particular type of puppet show with erotic overtones.

It is also believed that Srimanta Sankaradeva, the great fifteenth-century savant of Assam, utilised elements of several local folk, dramatic, and semi-dramatic institutions in developing the distinctive form of Bhaona theatre.

Puppet theatre is particularly popular in Lower Assam, especially in the Kamrup and Mangaldai areas, where a comparatively large number of practising troupes are found and where the art maintains strong links with the local community. Fairly competent troupes have also worked in Nagaon and other districts of Upper Assam, including Satras, although the few known troupes of the erstwhile Goalpara district are either inactive or declining.

Historical Background of Puppetry

Puppetry has a very long history. References to puppets can be found in the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Panchatantra, Naishadheeya Charita, Kathasaritsagara, Jnaneshwari, and many other works. A verse in the Mahabharata compares human action with the movement of a puppet:

Paraprayuktaba Purusho Vichestate
Sootraprota Dasamayeeba Yosha

The verse suggests that, just as a puppet moves according to the wishes of its manipulator, human beings move according to divine will.

Among the various folk theatres of the world, puppet theatre is considered one of the oldest dramatic traditions. The English word “puppet” is associated with the Latin pupa, while the Sanskrit term Puttalika is related to Putalika or

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Putala, which later became associated with the famous Putala dance traditions of India.
There is also a connection between the term Sutradhar in Sanskrit dramatic tradition and the terminology associated with puppet performance.
From ancient times, this form of folk drama has been prevalent in India.
In Assam, Putala Nach is also known as Boti Putala or Jaal Putala. Putala Nach is generally performed with strings. Shadow puppetry is also found in Assam, and reference to it is made in the writings associated with Sankaradeva:

Kotu Geet Gaantai Krishnai Gopira Basane
Saaya Putala Jan Naachwajatone
(Sankaradeva: Aadi dasham, pada 324p-73)
The puppets are made from materials such as wood, bamboo sticks, and thermocol. Puppet performances combine instrumental music, dialogue delivered by prompters or performers, music, and dance.
In Assam, many puppet performances are based on stories from the Ramayana. Puppetry and Its Development in Assam.
A puppet is one of the remarkable and ingenious creations of human beings. Its suggestive quality makes it different from an ordinary living representation and gives it a distinctive appeal. A doll, for example, is not necessarily a puppet.
When a child plays with a doll as if it were a living baby, it is not a puppet show. However, when the doll is presented before an audience and is made to walk, move, and act as a baby, the performance becomes a primitive form of puppet theatre.
Ancient Hindu philosophers also used the image of the puppeteer to explain divine control over the universe.
The Almighty was compared to a puppeteer and the universe to a puppet stage. The Srimad Bhagavata describes the divine manipulation of the universe through the three qualities of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas, comparing creation to a marionette controlled by strings.
According to the source material, puppetry may have originated in India more than 500 years before Christ.
It is also stated that Srimanta Sankaradeva brought puppets into Assam from Orissa. Assamese puppetry is said to have been influenced by puppet traditions of Rajasthan and West Bengal.
The string puppet of Assam is known as Putala Nach and has different forms.
It is particularly popular in Lower Assam, especially in Kamrup and Mangaldai. Khulia Bhaoriya is a famous folk form of Lower Assam, and puppeteers have adopted stories, costumes, and performance styles from Khulia Bhaoriya to develop Putala-Bhaoriya. In Kamrup district, both string and rod puppets are found in places such as Mirza, Khetri, and Guwahati.
Although the performing tradition has faced serious difficulties, some puppeteers continue to preserve and practice the art despite their limited economic circumstances.

Types of Puppets
The document identifies four major types of puppets:
i). Glove or hand puppets.
ii). Rod puppets.
iii). String puppets or marionettes.
iv). Shadow or leather puppets Glove or Hand.

Glove or Hand Puppets
These puppets are used mainly in Kerala. They are used both for entertainment and in certain religious rituals. These Kathakali-like dolls are worn like gloves on the hand and are made to perform around a homakunda. They are known as paavaikhuthu or paavaikali.

Rod Puppets
Rod puppets are particularly popular in Bengal, where both traditional and modern puppeteers use them extensively.
Some of these puppets may be four to five feet high. In Bengal, the tradition is known as Putul Nach or Putul Khela. In Orissa, puppet theatre is known as Kathi Kundehi.
The rods used in this form may be approximately twelve to eighteen inches long. In Bengal, the puppeteer generally manipulates the puppet while standing, whereas in Orissa the performance is traditionally conducted while sitting.
In Assam, rod puppets are known as Lathi Putala.

String Puppets
A string puppet or marionette is a figure with multiple joints suspended by strings controlled by the puppeteer.
String puppets are found in Rajasthan, Orissa, Assam, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. In this form, considerable emphasis is placed on the manipulative skill of the puppeteer.
In Assam, string puppets are known as Suta Putala or Boti Putala.
Examples of regional string-puppet traditions include:
- Kathaputali of Rajasthan
- Sakhi Kundehi of Orissa
- Putala Nach of Assam
- Malasutri Bhaulya of Maharashtra
- Bommalattam of Tamil Nadu
- Gombeyatta of Karnataka

Area of the Study
The Kamrup district of Assam is the principal area of the study.
Present-day Assam was referred to as Kamrup in several ancient Indian literary sources.
It was also known as Pragjyotishpur, associated with the prevalence of astrology and Jyotish Shastra in the region.
The name Kamrup became more prominent during the later historical period.
Kamrup district is situated between 25.46 and 26.49° North latitude and 90.48 and 91.50° East longitude.
The district is bounded by Udalguri and Baksa districts to the north, Meghalaya to the south, Darrang and Kamrup Metropolitan districts to the east, and Goalpara and Nalbari districts to the west.
The climate is subtropical, with relatively dry summers and cold winters. Annual rainfall ranges between 1500 mm and 2600 mm.
Flooding generally occurs in low-lying areas between May and August, while late floods may occur during September and October.
The floods are associated with the Brahmaputra and its tributaries.
According to the 2011 Census, Kamrup district had a population of 1,517,202, with a population density of 436 inhabitants per square kilometre.
Its population growth rate during 2001–2011 was 15.67 percent. The sex ratio was 946 females per 1,000 males, and the literacy rate was 72.81 percent.
The district is inhabited by followers of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Animism. The ancient temples of Kamakhya and Hajo attract pilgrims from different regions.

Importance of the Study Assam is rich in traditional folk drama, and many resources related to folk performance traditions remain to be explored in different parts of Kamrup district.
In the present situation, a systematic study of the traditional puppet theatre is important because the tradition requires documentation and exploration.
Such a study can contribute to the study of the traditional folk literature and performing arts of Assam.
Puppetry as a performing art of Assam has experienced many changes throughout its history. During its earlier stages, religious and mythological themes attracted large audiences, and puppet shows became a popular form of entertainment.
However, the appeal of these small-scale traditional figures has declined with the emergence of new forms of media. Folklore and media are both concerned with communication and are therefore connected in complex ways.
Puppetry has functions beyond entertainment and education and can serve several supportive roles in society.
Both children and adults can benefit from puppetry in areas of rehabilitation.
Puppet performances can use simple materials and costumes and can be presented in daylight or under artificial illumination.
The form appeals to people of different ages and social backgrounds.
Comedy and tragedy can both be communicated through puppet theatre, while the situations and problems represented in puppet plays can be related to everyday life.
Puppetry can therefore be used as a medium for religious instruction and social awareness, including messages related to cleanliness, disease prevention, and awareness of social problems.

Puppetry as a Vocation

The position of puppetry as a vocation in India is not satisfactory.
Traditional puppeteers who once depended on the art as a profession have gradually left it, and their children are often not encouraged to continue the tradition.
Several workshops organised at the official level to revive interest in puppetry as a vocation have not produced substantial results.
The rapid development of electronic media has further pushed traditional puppetry into the background.
Another major difficulty is the absence of organised curricula on puppetry in universities and colleges, as well as the lack of university theatre groups and clubs that could take puppet performances to children and social centres.
As a result, individuals wishing to adopt puppetry as a vocation generally have to depend on their own initiative and, particularly in urban areas, associate themselves with existing puppet groups.
There are also few structured academic courses for systematic training. The absence of state-owned or state-supported puppet theatres has further limited opportunities for trained performers and amateur groups.

Puppetry in Therapy and Rehabilitation

The Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal at Udaipur conducted pioneering work under Devi Lal Samar on the use of puppetry in mental and physical therapy.
Experiments with children and adults produced significant observations. For example, people who maintained normal relationships with their families and friends were found to make puppets with standard features and proportionate bodies, while people experiencing problematic behavioural relationships sometimes created puppets with disproportionate features.
In another experiment involving a child who frequently ran away from school, puppetry was used as an alternative to conventional class work.
This reportedly produced positive changes in the child's activities at home and at school. Experiments were also conducted with children who stammered.
Such children were nervous when speaking before groups and tended to stammer on particular consonants. They were able to narrate stories successfully with glove puppets behind a curtain, where the listeners were not directly visible to them.
Puppetry was also experimented with as a therapeutic medium for physically handicapped persons, including those without limbs.
In one experiment involving a child without legs, string puppets with loose limbs were used so that small movements could manipulate the puppets.
The child was able to present a musical narrative.

Puppetry for Social Change

Important social issues such as illiteracy, the status of women, bride burning, the dowry system, female infanticide, family planning, and other social problems require public attention.
In this context, puppetry can function as a medium for social action and social change.
Puppetry can communicate social messages through tragic and comic themes that reflect social realities and the surrounding environment.
Traditional Indian puppetry contains a value system that corresponds with aspects of Indian social life.
The Yampuri puppets of Bihar, for example, communicate ideas concerning socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.
Puranic stories emphasise good deeds and moral conduct.
When historical characters are presented in puppet plays, the narratives often represent the triumph of good over evil and the punishment of wrongdoing.
Thus, puppetry can contribute to therapy, rehabilitation, social awareness, and social change, while also providing possibilities for vocational activity.
Its broad appeal derives partly from its ability to represent human beings, animals, birds, and different forms of social experience.

Review of Literature

A review of previous research demonstrates the researcher's familiarity with existing knowledge and identifies areas that remain insufficiently studied.
Since effective research is based on previous knowledge, the review of literature helps avoid unnecessary duplication and provides useful suggestions and hypotheses for further investigation.
It also helps the researcher understand existing research methodologies and develop an appropriate approach to the subject.
Although there are limited books specifically devoted to puppetry in the Assamese language, several valuable articles and studies have been published. The following works are referred to in the study:

Table 1

Sl. No.	Article / Work	Writer's Name	Author / Book / Publication	Year
1.	Asomia Lokanatyor Porampora	Nabin Ch. Sarma	Asomor Lokanatya	2004
2.	—	Paramananda Rajbongshi	Darrangor Khuliya Bhaoriya	—
3.	Putala	Jugal Das	Asomor Lokakala	1968
4.	Putala Abhinai	Ram Goswami	Asomor Lokanatya	1991
5.	Poramatir Putala	Nilomoni Phukan	Loka Kalpadristi	1987

The literature identified above provides a background for understanding the traditional and changing forms of puppet theatre in Assam.

Aim and Objectives

The aims and objectives of the study are:

i). To study the traditional puppet theatre of Assam.
ii). To explore the present scenario of puppet theatre in Assam.
iii). To study modern techniques of puppet making.
iv). To study the inception of puppetry as a folk art form.
v). To study the influence of the participatory nature of Putala Nach.
vi). To identify the techniques and contents of Putala Nach.
vii). To examine the symbiotic relationship between popular culture and folk media.
viii). To study the importance of puppetry as a communication tool.
ix). To evaluate the role of Putala Nach in social change and examine its use from the perspective of the Uses and Gratifications approach.

Methodology

Research methodology refers to the systematic procedures followed in investigating a problem, beginning with its identification and continuing through data collection, analysis, interpretation, and conclusion. It provides the tools and techniques through which research problems are examined in a systematic and scientific manner.

The present study uses the historical method. Historical research attempts to establish facts and arrive at conclusions concerning past events. Its principal purpose is to determine "what was."

The process involves investigating, recording, analysing, and interpreting past events in order to develop a better understanding of the past and present.

Field study was also undertaken for data collection.

For examining the origin and development of puppetry as an art form, the study refers to the Historical-Geographical Theory, also known as the Finnish School of Folklore Research, associated with scholars such as Karle Krohn, C. W. Von Sydow, and Axel Olrik.

This approach seeks to reconstruct the earlier forms of folktales and other folklore materials and to trace their possible geographical routes of transmission.

In addition to field study, the researcher consulted the District Library, Gauhati University Library, and different journals.

The field study involved observation and interviews. The researcher also interacted with puppeteers and other artists and collected information from them.

Hypothesis

i). The study is based on the following hypotheses:
ii). Puppet theatre is an important element of folk literature.
iii). Puppet shows are performed with orchestral music, dialogue by prompters or puppeteers, music, and dance.
iv). Puppets are made from materials such as wood, bamboo sticks, and thermocol.
v). The themes of puppet theatre are mainly derived from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other mythological stories, although imaginary stories are also found in the repertoire.
vi). Puppet theatre in Assam is a declining performing art.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The string puppet tradition of Assam is known by names such as Putala Nach, Putala Bhaona, and Putala Bhaoriya.

The tradition is particularly popular in Lower Assam, especially in the Kamrup and Mangaldai areas.

Competent troupes have also worked in Nagaon and other districts of Upper Assam, including Satras associated with Sankaradeva. Khulia Bhaoriya is an important folk form in Kamrup and Mangaldai.

Puppeteers have adopted its stories, costumes, and performance styles.

Elements such as Purbaranga, invocation, and the songs associated with the Bayen are incorporated into puppet performance. When puppet theatre imitates Bhaona, it is referred to as Putala Bhaoriya, while Putala Bhaona is also found as a popular form in North Assam. The present study focuses on Kamrup district. In some parts of Kamrup, puppet shows are known as Bati Putala. The term Bati Putala has sometimes been associated with Batris Putala, meaning thirty-two puppets from Rajasthan.

Traditional puppet theatre is found in several districts of Assam, including Kamrup, Nalbari, Darrang, Golaghat, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Nagaon, Goalpara, Sivasagar, and Dhubri. The field study identified a few groups that continued to perform puppet shows in Kamrup district.

Kamrup District (Rural)

Ruby Puppet Theatre, Mirza

During the study, an active puppet theatre group was found at Dakhala under Kamrup district.

The group was established in 1974 under the name Ruby Puppet Theatre.

It generally performs string puppetry. The group consists of approximately five to seven members and uses a stage approximately six to seven feet in size.

Traditional costumes are used for the puppets, while instruments such as the harmonium, cymbals, and drum accompany the performance. The group has also participated in a puppet festival in Spain. Sagarika Puppet Theatre, Khetri another active puppet group in Khetri is Sagarika Puppet Theatre, established in 1998.

The group performs rod puppetry as well as traditional string puppetry. The puppets are manipulated through strings and rods.

The stage is approximately seven to eight feet long and six feet wide. Folk instruments such as cymbals and drums are used, while modern lighting systems are also employed. The group performs at different festivals in Assam and also

presents shows in schools to communicate educational information. Its dramatic themes are influenced by mythology and social events.

Sankardeva Kalashetra Puppet Group

A full-fledged puppet group was established at Sankardeva Kalashetra in November 1999 under the Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Government of Assam.

The group consists of twelve members and performs with rod, glove, and string puppets. In April 2011, the group also performed water puppetry for the first time in Assam.

The puppets are made from materials such as thermocol, cotton, hardboard, and newspaper. They are generally four to five feet high.

The performances use recorded songs and drama. The stories are inspired by folk tales, social events, and contemporary social issues.

Puppet Making

Puppets are made from sholapith or madar, a type of soft wood. Different parts are joined together to form the head, torso, and limbs, with cloth used in the construction.

Some groups also make puppets from paper pulp.

The puppets may represent animals such as tigers, snakes, deer, and birds.

They generally have four to six strings, with cloth joints at the neck, shoulders, elbows, wrists, and waist.

They normally have no separate legs. The head and hands may be covered with a paste of clay and cow dung and then painted.

The lower portion is generally covered with cloth so that the figures can glide smoothly across the stage during manipulation. The size of puppets generally ranges from one to three feet. Rama and Krishna puppets are represented in blue, while female figures are generally light yellow or pink.

Demons and evil characters are represented in deep green or blue.

Costumes resemble those used in mobile theatre. Puppets are stored in bamboo boxes, generally measuring approximately 2 × 2 × 2 feet, with two boxes sometimes hung on a bamboo swing.

Most traditional troupes continue to perform mythological themes and epic stories. The same figure may be used for more than one character; for example, Bhima may be transformed into Ravana by adding nine additional heads.

Animal figures are also used, and some appear as mounts of gods and goddesses. Stage properties include thrones, chariots, boats, and painted background scenes.

Puppet Group and Performance Roles:

A puppet group generally consists of at least five persons. The leader of the chorus is known as the Bayan, Sutradhar, or Oja. He functions as the producer, director, and coordinator of the performance. Other members include Jogali and Bhari, who assist in the performance.

The chorus, accompanied by the Khol and one or two Tala or cymbals, sits on one side in front of the stage. The Nachua, or puppet manipulator, remains behind the screen. Traditionally, torches were used for lighting, but these have been replaced by Petromax lamps and electric lights.

Stage:

The traditional stage is small and simple and generally faces the eastern direction. A frame is constructed using bamboo posts.

Within this frame, a small platform measuring approximately ten to twelve feet in length and three to four feet in breadth is raised about three feet above the ground.

Three sides of the frame are covered, leaving an open space along the length of the platform.

At the back of the platform there is another screen, generally black and approximately four feet high.

The puppeteers remain hidden behind this screen and manipulate the puppets while standing on the ground or on a low bench.

Traditional groups generally use few stage properties, with the throne serving as the principal prop.

Script and Drama:

Most Ramayana-based plays performed by older puppet groups in the Kamrup area are derived from the repertoire of Khulia Bhaona or Bhaoriya.

Their narrative sections are often based on the Krittivasi Ramayana. The Ramayana of Madhab Kandali is also used.

It is an important early Ramayana written in a regional language of north-eastern India and possesses literary value and popularity.

The narrative structure also contains similarities with the Krittivasi Ramayana.

New plays adopted by puppet groups contain fewer elements of older texts, although the musical structure of the narrative continues to follow traditional forms such as Dhura and Suchana.

The musical and theatrical forms have been adapted to the style of Bhaona, and many plays are adaptations of popular Bhaona performances.

The puppet Bhaoriya, or clown figure, interacts with the Bayan and comments on different social prejudices.

Conclusion

It is natural that a traditional art form such as puppet theatre should lose some of its ground in recent times because of the large-scale growth of modern forms of entertainment and mass media.

However, the art of puppetry in Assam has not disappeared, nor does the study indicate that it faces immediate extinction.

Although puppetry is not as flourishing as it was in the past, a number of puppet-show troupes continue to practice the art.

Puppetry as an art form remains relevant to culture and can be incorporated into modern life more extensively. As an expressive and direct medium, puppetry can communicate important messages.

It can represent values such as tolerance and peace in an accessible form.

Puppets can teach, model behaviour, express ideas, and communicate on behalf of human performers.

Puppetry continues to have universal appeal, although its role as a major medium of human communication has declined. Television, radio, film, and the Internet now have greater reach and greater potential for communication and exchange.

Nevertheless, puppetry can continue to survive as long as puppeteers continue to practice and preserve the tradition. Modern technology can be used as a tool to help puppetry reach wider audiences and fulfil its educational, communicative, and entertainment functions. Traditional puppeteers have already adopted stagecraft, recorded music, modern lighting effects, sound systems, slide projectors, keyboards, and modern stage materials.

Most of these changes have taken place without a systematic framework.

A more organised approach is therefore required to develop traditional puppetry and enable it to respond to competition from other performing media.

The study also points to the lack of large-scale puppet-training centres in India. Self-taught puppeteers may therefore receive incomplete or inaccurate training.

Training through television and video media can provide an accessible and low-cost means of learning because such materials can be reproduced and used at home.

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