



Sutradhar

A UNIMA India Publication

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A Note from the Editor



1 | The Contemporary Marionette Theatre of Rajasthan....

Devi Lal Sama | Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal | Udaipur
By Ranjana Pandey



SUTRADHAR

The intersection between tradition and modernity- perhaps that is how one can describe the emergence of Contemporary Puppet Theatre in India.

There are few accounts and fewer articles of this fascinating time in the journey of the Puppet Arts in India. We took the period between 1950 and 1980's for our search. The information was scanty. Most of the players are no longer with us. It has been hard to piece together this jig saw puzzle. There are many gaps...but we bring to you whatever we could find. The source of our in-formation has been largely first person accounts from people who knew/ know the chief players of those three decades- Devi Lal Samar, Meher Behn Contractor, Raghunath Goswami, and Suresh Datta.

One of the most fascinating personalities Madhu Lal Master, who left a collection of his puppets, collection of journals and books and an amazing body of work proved to be the most mysterious. We could not find enough information to flesh out his career, his contribution, or find his students and followers. There were other names who surprised us, and we are frustrated by the blind alleys we have come up against. An article appearing in Marg (volume 21 issue 3) provided many leads. Despite all our efforts, I am sure that many talented puppeteers have been left un-sung swallowed in the cobwebs of time. We intend to keep up the process of research and gather enough material for a second issue on Contemporary Puppeteers of India early next year.

India in the 1950's was a young democracy. It provided a wide open playing field for all these personalities. None of them were generational puppeteers. In fact to begin with each one of them was very far from Puppetry.

Some event or a chance meeting, catalysed their fascination.

Some remained within their cultural context and some flew far and wide.

Some even went for training to the West. The mark of this training re-mains strongly stamped on the style evolved by them - Suresh Datta is a case in point.

Each one tried to build an Institution. Some with great and some with on-ly moderate success. Each one thought beyond their own boundary.

But each of these personalities were such that they wielded an important influence on their peers and students and in the end the momentum of their pioneering efforts created the beginnings of Contemporary Puppet-ry. Meher Contractor, Devi Lal Samar, Suresh Datta and Raghunath Goswami were honoured with National and International awards. They put the Puppet Arts centre stage of the Performance arts scenario of their times. Their influence and the foundations they laid continue to re-verberate.

It is the right time to acknowledge their contribution.

The newbies of the 21st century who have been working for the last decade, should not believe that they have emerged from a vacuum. They owe a great deal to these personalities who have rarely been acknowledged.

Ranjana Pandey

**President
Unima India**



The 1950's must have been an exciting time in Post Independence In-dia- Building the nation provided ample opportunity for innovation. A selected few took advantage of their education to cross boundaries set by caste and creed. They dared to dream and succeed.

Devi Lal Samar was one such person. If you look at his stern black and white portrait, hanging benign and all seeing in the lobby of the Lok Ka-la Mandal, it doesn't reveal his passion and determination. But without these two qualities he could not have achieved what he did. He built a remarkable Institution - Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal. It was no simple task.

The gardens are well kept, the premises are spread out over a very large space in the centre of Udaipur City. The gentle, Riaz Tehsin Sahib, had given me an appointment. The auto that brought me for my meeting did not need any directions. Who does not know this unusual building in Udaipur!

I spent many hours walking through the corridors and building, sitting through performances, watching the eager audience buying show tick-ets, watching a rehearsal....

Riaz Tehsin Sahib, knew Devi Lal Samar as a young boy. He spoke at length of the journey of this remarkable man who sowed the love of performance arts in many. It is mostly from his accounts and the walk through that I gleaned the following...

Devi Lal started as a teacher in Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan a career path far removed from Performance arts and Puppetry. His association with Uday Shankar and passion for dance is probably what led him to use

When he experienced the sheer power and joy of performance arts, he became fired with a vision of creating a permanent space.

"the arts" with children in the classroom. His summer workshops became popular. When he experienced the sheer power and joy of performance arts, he became fired with a vision of creating a permanent space.

Such were the times that his free spirit made waves in the right circles and Devi Lal found many supporters.. This meant that when Devi Lalji spelt out his vision which was to create a landmark institution to honour, safe guard, promote, celebrate the folk traditions of Mewar he found acceptance. He impressed people like Dr. Zakir Hussain, Prithvi Raj Kapoor and many other personalities of the times. Mohanlal Sukhadia, Chief Minister of Rajasthan allotted land and funds to build the Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal.

This is how the city of Udaipur got a landmark Institution in 1952.

The Institution provided a continuity between the past and the present. The community celebrations, narratives, (like Bapuji ka Phad) festivals, dances, traditions which were woven into the fabric of village life were studied, honoured, collected. A Museum and regular performances cre-ated a bridge between the new generations raised with western educa-tion post independence, and their struggle to understand their identity.

Devi Lal Samar's vision remained rooted in the traditions of Mewar. He was fiercely proud of them .



Yet he was acutely aware that when taken out of its context (the Kathputli)- or for that matter any folk performance) and put into a proscenium theatre, the audience will expect something different. It had to match the expectation of the urban need for entertainment. Soon television and cinema would invade.

The traditional Kathputli puppeteers at that time were traversing difficult terrain on foot, on mule back with a bag of puppets, gypsy like, and very poor. Devi Lal had great affection for this community. He paid deep attention to them by creating a localised festival. Bringing the migrant Kathputli troupes together in a large gathering at Bedla village.

This historic gathering was marked by a sharing, and training workshops. New narratives were created. It was the first of many camps and festivals.

Over the years more than 3,000 puppeteers were trained through Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal. All this opened the doors to a linkage between the puppeteers and the new patrons- Grameen Sanchar Department, Song and Drama Division and even Banks and Educational Institutions.

Fortunately, Devi Lal was not alone in forging this new space for the Puppet Arts. Govind Karnik a young talented man and his protégé shared the same vision and passion. He was sent to the Czechoslovak Republic to get training in Puppetry. He travelled widely in Europe. Once back in Udaipur, he formulated the puppet repertoire, led the technical innovations and established the fundamental discipline of training.

The foundation was strong. The training was very pure and sincere. So much so it still shows (after many decades) in the quality of the manipulation and the craftsmanship of the marionettes.

It was quite natural that he introduced the European cross and realistic characterisation as against the "no cross" manipulation technique and the stylisation of the Rajasthani Kathputli.

Now the puppets were different even though they portrayed the same characters. This departure from



tradition was embraced by audience and performers alike. It brought a freshness and contemporariness to the form.

The Circus - a popular entertainment in those times, provided the inspiration for a host of trick puppets. Skillfully made and skillfully manipulated, they are a popular part of Lok Kala Mandal's daily shows even today.

Together this team stuck to the "big stories" to ensure that Puppetry was lifted out of the frivolous light hearted entertainment model of folk art to something with gravitas. Themes like Ramayan, Gautam Budha and Swami Vivekananda were chosen.

This model of Puppetry developed all the trappings of miniature proscenium theatre. Having a fixed theatre was a luxury. It meant you could have complex productions requiring a large team. A successful performance created in this style in the sixties was "The Ramayan".

To support these expensive and large productions, Lok Kala created a well equipped puppet making workshop, a costume workshop- with sewing machines and tailors, stage lights, curtains, wings, back drops, complex props and a sound system. Live musicians or recorded tracks both were used.

Govind Karnik, unfortunately died young and Shyam Bhai became the chief trainer.

In 1965 Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal took a traditional

performance of the typical Kathputli items to the Bucharest International Puppetry Festival. They created waves and won a prize.

This acknowledgement strengthened Devi Lal Samar's resolve to create a space for the contemporary puppet in his own Institution.

For some time they even experimented with rod puppets. A story on Bhagwan Budh was prepared.

They mixed marionettes and rods. Innovating both in theme and technique. They were combining western technique with authentic Indian narratives and aesthetics.

The repertoire had already participated in International Festivals and won awards. Devi Lal Samar decided in 1959 to host a Puppetry Festival in Udaipur. It was perhaps one of the first such Festivals in India. Few records of the program and participants are available today. But in Raghunath Goswami's accounts there is a mention of this Festival and the participation of his troupe "The Puppets" from Calcutta. It seems the Festival was a landmark.

The Institution became a gateway for growth of the contemporary marionette. The foundation of the organisation was strong. Even after Devi Lal Samar passed away in 1981 Lok Kala Mandal continued his work. Many dedicated members and patrons took up the baton and kept the flag flying...

A decade later, In 1992, there was another important seminar hosted by Lok Kala Mandal - in the tradition of Devi Lal Samar- a 3 day discussion about the status of Puppetry in India. Different forms and states were represented. The reverberations of these very important discussions were felt for years after. The proceedings were published by SNA.

In his lifetime, Devi Lal Samar was a force to reckon with. Because of the sheer stature of Devi Lal Samar, national resources and regional networks were open to Lok Kala Mandal.

He had important friends from diverse fields like, Prithvi Raj Kapoor and Genral Cariappa. Through the first he facilitated the entry of Rajasthani folk

music into Bollywood - Through the other he mooted the idea of "Jhanki's" in the Republic Day Parade.

To give Puppetry a professional status and to include women in the work force was nothing short of a miracle specially in Mewar where gender and caste roles are cast in stone. Today it is interesting to note- there are very few Bhattas on the rolls of the repertoire or even the larger support team. They are mostly non generational puppeteers.

Amongst his many contributions are 6 books on Puppetry. He created a museum of the Folk Arts, showcasing an impressive collection of artefacts from the different folk traditions of Mewar. He created a library. With Government support he brought puppetry into the classroom in Rajasthan.

Today the Institution has an impressive annual budget of 2 crores. The continuous support from the State and committed patrons helps sustain this unique complex of buildings.

It is a tourist landmark even today, after nearly 70 years. The Lok Kala Mandal boasts of 3 performance spaces and draws full houses daily for its performances. The tourists throng. When I watched the shows, the hall was full to the brim with indigenous tourists. The squeals of delight at the antics of the "Circus" show made it memorable for all.

Lok Kala Mandal has seen its ups and downs. When an Institution becomes synonymous with one towering personality, there can be a vacuum - hard to fill.

There is much to be done. The dedicated team and the new director - Dr. Laique Hussain, have their hands full. But they are excited by the prospects of new growth and I even heard of some plans to start a professional training for puppeteers.

2 Making cross-overs in indian contemporary puppetry

Meher Contractor

By Sammitha Sreevathsa



Meher Rustom Contractor, lovingly known as Meher Behn, was one of the most illustrious puppeteers of her times. Based out of Darpana Academy, Ahmedabad she carved out a space for puppetry in Gujarat and for Indian puppetry on an International platform. As someone whose work traversed across rural, urban, national and international networks and in the process touched many lives, she stands out as a personality who needs to be spoken about. Active as a member of the UNIMA, she started the Indian chapter of the UNIMA. In this article, she is remembered by her son Navroze Contractor and by her student Mansingh Zala. Through their narratives we build a portraiture of Meher from two very different perspectives which intersect at many points. In Navroze's stories, we hear of the Ahmedabad city in the early post - independence era in which Meher not only grew as a puppeteer but also honed a pool of students who went on to become the next generation puppeteers, one of who is Mansingh Zala.

Navroze Contractor

Conversation with Navroze begins on the note of being an interview, but snowballs into a storytelling session with deviations becoming more insightful than direct responses. One can recognize after listening to him that he seems to carry two kinds of memories of his mother. The first kind are those that he has

experienced himself as he grew up and the second are the ones he has formed after listening to the stories of his mother. These include the stories of her life before he was born. His narrative of Meher, springs from an intimate space - physically and emotionally. In most of his experiential memories, one can sense that he is barely a few feet away from her either holding her hand in a public space, sharing the dining table with her or being in the hospital when she was unwell. Yet, what keeps repeating itself in his stories is her presence among people, how she was towards others and others were towards her, images of people at her home, her at other people's homes. Though he talks from an proximate place, he stands at the periphery of her world as a puppeteer, a comfortable onlooker as his mother's students walk in and walk out his home. Therefore his stories offer a very socially situated perspective of Meher which is what becomes so crucial in helping us understand the intangible yet lasting contributions (such as building network, making opportunities, teaching) she has made to the world of puppetry. It helps in contextualizing Meher's career in puppetry to the Nehruvian urban scape of Ahmedabad where the first educational institutions were sprouting in every direction hence offering a suitable atmosphere for experimentation in puppetry as well. In the following conversation, Meher's life does not unfurl in a chronological order but despite the temporal back and forths, one can arrive at an



understanding of different phases of her life, mostly adult life which started very early for her.

SS: What is the earliest memory you have of your mother?

NC: I was three years old when Gandhiji was shot dead in 1948. We used to live in Ahmedabad across the ashram with my father's side of the family. Since people in our family were believers in Gandhi and his ways, they took me to the Shok Sabha in the Ashram. The whole time I remember distinctly that everyone was crying. There was not a single soul in the crowd who was not crying and one among them was my mother. My mother crying in the Sabha is I think the earliest memory I have of her.

When I was growing up we lived in a big compound in Ahmedabad with our uncles and their families. Those were the days when my grandmother and even my great-grandfather was alive. My mother was the type that remembered everybody's birthdays, sent cards to everyone. She was a catalyst in the family. When I grew up, she would remember the birthdays of my friends. When they would come and stay with us she would know what they liked to eat. But she was also very strict and very principled in her own way.

SS: Can you tell a little about what you mean by "strict and principled"?

NC: My father's family was a big Industrialist family and in the house there were many people who were working as servants. My mother had a different relationship with them compared to the rest of the family, so she laid down the rules for us as to how we were to behave with them. Once a week when they would get an off, we had to do the housework. We had to clean the house and under no circumstance were we allowed to make other plans on that day. The day that cook had a holiday, my father would cook. But my mother herself was an excellent cook, she baked a lot of cakes, cookies and other things. She also went to Paris once to take cooking classes. Once I was complaining about work, I remember she clasped me by my hand and took me to the balcony and pointed down. I looked down and saw that some urchins were picking rags. Then she asked me

pointedly "when they don't complain, how can I?" She herself was deeply engaged in social work, one was with a womens' organization in Ahmedabad, then in the Leprosy asylum. Even when we started getting some pocket money, we were taught to keep some of it aside for the sake of charity. My first pocket money was 4 annas, 25 paisa. I had to give 5 paisa for charity.

SS: How did she end up in Ahmedabad?

NC: My mother grew up in Panchagani and met my father there who had travelled from Ahmedabad to study. So it is when she got married to my father that she came to Ahmedabad. My father's family was a big industrialist family but they were culturally engaged. My grandmother was very artistic and kind of a control freak. She loved Hindustani classical and abhorred any kind of light art. No film music was allowed. My grandmother was what I would call a cultural tyrant. At the same time she was liberal in her ideologies. So she was happy that her son after all found himself an artist to marry. But my mum told me later, that the first time she was introduced to my grandmother, my grand mother said "you may have studied in England and all but here is a broom, sweep the floor and show me!" My mother was the first daughter-in-law in the family and though she was asked to sweep the floor she was really loved by my grandmother.

SS: What was she doing before she got married. Was she practicing puppetry?

NC: Puppetry happened after she got married. Before that she was studying. She finished her Senior Cambridge and got a degree from JJ School of Art when she was just 16. That is when she met my father and they fell in love. My Dad wanted to marry her, so she told him you wait, I'm going to London and I'll finish my education and come back. If you're still waiting for me after 3 years I'll marry you. And she did. And he was waiting for her. So in the year 1935, when she was just 17, she traveled alone to London by ship to study in the Royal Academy of Arts. But anyway what happened was that the second world war started and the children who could afford to come back were sent back. So she was sent back to India and she couldn't finish her education. She came



back in 1939 i.e after three and half years. Apparently my father and her brother went to receive her on the port and I'm old it was all quite romantic. She returned in her English clothes with a suit and feathered cap on her head. Then they got married and my elder brother was born. Then during the war it was a difficult time for everybody. There was severe rationing. Anyway they had one child, then when the war finished in 1944 I was born. After I was 2 years old, she went back to England to finish her education leaving me behind with my father. She continued from where she had left and finished her degree.

My father was extremely supportive of her. I think till the day he died he was madly in love with her. When we were growing up we always knew that we were secondary. His wife always came first for him. All through her career my father supported her. In everything that she wanted to do. When she started to travel very much, they used to write to each other every single day. My father would be the one to book her tickets so he always knew when she was to leave. Those days it would take seven days for a post to reach London. So seven days before she would reach he would start writing to her, even if she would be sitting right across him so that when she reaches she would find a letter waiting for her. He would write and post every day so that she could receive one letter everyday. She too would reply to his letters from there and so many times even after she would be back, my father would keep receiving her letters.

SS: At what point did puppetry enter her life?

NC: What happened is that in Ahmedabad one of the Sarabhai ladies, Vikram Sarabhai's elder sister Lina Sarabhai was very interested in education. She wanted Madam Montessori to come and open a school in India. So when Madam Montessori came, the first Montessori school of India called "Shreyas" was started in Ahmedabad. Of course, nobody knew what kind of a school it would be because people were told that there would be no exam or any of the other regular things. So Sarabhai went from house to house, asking the parents to send their children to school. We used to be their neighbors. So my mother enrolled me in the school and together we were about

30 children. My elder brother was already in boarding school by then. He was five years older to me.

So when this school, "Shreyas" started we were enrolled as the first batch. The students who were enrolled were all from different age-groups. The kids were simply divided into two parts - kindergarten and for older kids. They were very keen on the arts and since my mother was an artist, she was called by Lina Behn to teach art at school. My mother joined Shreyas as an art teacher. At the end of each year we would have a festival called "Shreyas Mela" in which the whole school would participate. It so happened that Lina Behn asked my mother to try her hands in puppetry with some older kids for that year's Mela. So my mum made some glove puppets and they (the older kids) had a little five minute Panchatantra puppet show. That year, in Shreyas mela, their performance became popular. Offering her support, Lina Behn then asked my mother to find out about the places that would train her in puppetry, study puppetry. Though very hesitant in the beginning because of her other responsibilities in the family, my mother did some research and found out that Czechoslovakia was a good place to train in puppetry. So when I was 5 or 6, my mother went to Czechoslovakia to study puppetry under Obratsav.

SS: What do you remember of her from the time when she started taking puppetry very seriously, do you remember her rehearsing with others?

NC: I do but very little because I went away to Baroda to study, that was in early 60s. By this time she had become quite well known, she started working with Darpana Academy. She was working with Darpana for 36 or 37 years. I never actually sat down and saw her rehearsals but I would pick her up and drop her to rehearsals many times. I got very involved in my own world of films. So many of the stories she told me, I got to know much later, after I moved to Bangalore. Once, when my mother was here we decided to drive down to Ahmedabad from Bangalore. The two of us were in the car by ourselves for two days and two nights and that's when she ended up telling me a lot of stories. Lot of people say artists are eccentric but she was not at all eccentric. Even when she got her

Padmashree she never let it take over her. She did not even want to go and pick it up. Her SNA award is now sitting with my father's secretary.

SS: Do you remember anything about how she was around her students?

NC: With her students she was like a teacher-mother-parent. Many of her students would wish to come home. Even Dadi would come home. But there were other students who used to live in the same compound so they would come and help her with work. Of course all the time we used to have guests, many times international puppeteers like Micheal Meschke would be home and the students would want to meet them. I remember once when Dadi was small, he was walking holding his mother's hand into out compound and I was walking out. His mother asked me 'Where does Meher Contractor live?' I pointed to my house and said, this is where she lives and I am her son. Dadi had just come to Ahmedabad to study puppetry under my mother.

SS: Did she ever perform for you as a kid?

NC: Not really, but she did perform in other children's birthday parties. We also did not show that much interest in puppetry. We were very rough and we always wanted to play cricket, football or go swimming. What I do remember is that people really liked being around my mother.

SS: Did she ever feel like starting her own organization/institute?

NC: I don't think so. But also she never spoke to me about it. She was I think quite content with Darpana.

SS: Have you seen any glimpses of Meher's work in any of her students puppetry?

NC: I haven't seen any of her students works. So I don't know. Some of Dadi's works I have seen with his big and small puppets but I don't know enough to comment about it.

SS: Mother as a puppeteer. What do you remember?

NC: She used to perform in Ramlila in Benaras quite often. She would stay there with very little

arrangements but she might have gone at least 10 times.

SS: So when did she make this transition from doing puppetry in education to becoming a performing puppeteer.

NC: It happened simultaneously I think.

SS: Any stories that she told you, would you like to share?

NC: One striking story she told me was from the time that she was in London. She was a major theatre buff but had no money, so she would buy tickets to watch three hour Shakespeare plays standing. Once she was returning home late in the night after watching a John Glib's (she was his big fan and had seen him in films when she was in India) show when a gypsy woman started chasing her. She managed to reach her house, and just as she was entering the house, one police man came and saw that this young woman was being chased by a gypsy. So he stopped both of them and asked what the problem was. My mother replied that she lived there and hence was walking to the house. The gypsy woman replied that she had something to tell my mother. She told her that her mother (my mother's mother) had died. Then either my mother connected to her family or she was intimidated so it was verified that gypsy woman was right. Her mother had indeed passed away. She was helpless and had to suffer alone in anger, guilt and regret. It turned out that my grandmother was suffering with cancer even before my mother had left towards England but hesitant that it would stop my mother from pursuing her education she did not inform.

Another thing I remember is from the time we were going through a financial crisis. My mother started painting sarees. Because hand painted sarees were a very big thing and it fetched money. I remember our dining table used to be full of her work. Apart from this she also started coloring the black and white photographs. People used to give her a black and white picture and she would color the photograph and give it back to them. And besides doing all this and puppetry, running a school, looking after my dad everything, she had time to go to parties and play cards.



SS: What were the kind of challenges she had to face to become a puppeteer?

NC: I don't know in a way what her challenges were specifically. But I think one was to make puppetry acceptable. To get people out of the mode of thinking that puppetry is Kathputli. But otherwise I think Ahmedabad as a city in the 60s and the 70s was very accepting of the new things. Charles Correa in a documentary has said that if you were a young person in 60s and 70s then Ahmedabad was the place to be. There were many firsts like IIM, NID, Montessori system schools that Mrinalini Sarabhai started, Kumudini Lakhia started her dance school, physical laboratory. It was not like how it is today. The rich of Ahmedabad those days were very invested in seeing their city grow, give it a direction. It also helped that she was pally with the people in power.

So she always had two students from the lower castes who would she would take abroad with her because she understood that they did not have access to these opportunities. But unlike today, she never made a big scene about it. Its only after she died when people poured in to grieve her did we realize these things about her. She knew the limitations of their world. She was not politically much aware but was socially very conscious.

The day she died, nobody was there with her. I was in Bangalore, my brother was in Africa or Canada or somewhere, my father was no more. She had travelled to almost all the countries in the world but she had never gone to Pakistan. She wanted to visit Pakistan for a long time. They were going to go to Pakistan on a Monday morning and her troupe had been rehearsing everyday for the performance but she died on the Sunday morning. So that wish of hers was left unfulfilled.

Mansingh Zala

While Navroze Contractor stands at the periphery, Mansingh Zala takes a look at Meher Contractor's life from inside the puppetry community. He has shared his life with her as her student – working on her productions and touring with some of the very well



known ones. So he focuses pointedly at her work and life as a puppeteer, giving us details of the depth as well as the range of her practice. He talks about her tangible and intangible contributions to puppetry - the productions she has made, her work in the applied sectors like education and entertainment, the local attitude she shifted in Gujarat towards puppetry, her work in bringing contemporary puppetry into public light, the support she offered to the young puppeteers and her skills as a teacher. Even though he doesn't seem to associate her with a specific technique or an aesthetic, he is clearly dedicated to continue her legacy in puppetry. More than anything, he continues to be overwhelmed by her personality and runs a puppetry troupe in her memory called

"Meher". His connection with his teacher and desire to pass on her memories stand as a living example of how contemporary puppetry and puppeteers in India share a collective past. The conversation happened in Hindi and so the interview had to be not only transcribed but also translated. However, since the voice of Mansingh Zala was not quite his own when I began to translate it into English, I decided to write the article in third person narrative.

Meher Contractor- the Puppeteer

Mansingh Zala met Meher in 1976 when he was about 16 years old to learn puppetry under her and later joined her in her work. At that time she was

in Darpana Academy. He studied and worked with her for about 17 years till the year she died i.e. in 1992. He would tour with her to many countries and perform with her. He has performed Ramayan with Meher in many countries including in Islamic countries where they are known to have received a very good response. This became a landmark production, not only in Meher's life but in the history of Indian Contemporary puppetry by virtue of being the first work to bridge the gap between contemporary and traditional puppetry. With this production,

Meher brought to life the Andhra "Tolubommalata" puppets that were preserved by Mrinalini Sarabhai in Darpana Academy and re-crafted the Ramayana narrative to suit a one hour long show. This production also shifts the gears of the discourse of puppetry as one realizes that the traditional puppets are no more within the confines of the community of the traditional puppeteers.

With people from outside the community accessing the traditional puppets, it calls our attention to the relationship between contemporary and traditional puppetry, throwing up a lot of questions that even today shape the discourse of puppetry in India. Can the contemporary puppeteers use the traditional puppets the same way they use non-traditional puppets? What makes Meher's Ramayana a contemporary production? Meher in her article writes about the process of making Ramayana and one can infer that recontextualizing a traditional Andhra form to a Gujrati audience was central to this process. The narrative language changes from Telugu to Gujrati, the narrative is abridged to an hour long and most importantly the puppeteers themselves are not the traditional puppeteers.

Her work in the shadow was taken further in her next production Rustom and Sohrab which again Mansingh Zala was a part of and speaks about. He tells us that being deeply drawn to this Persian epic, she traveled to Iran to find out more about it. She worked slowly for about 13 years on this production, finally making an International debut in 1985 in France. Like many of



her productions, the script for this one too was penned by her. Commenting on the script she wrote, he says “the tragic end of the play where Rustom had to give a soliloquy was so well written that it almost always brought our tears in the audience’s eyes.” This play also saw some unique visual aesthetic. “In the Rustom Sohrab play that we did, we used the Andhra shadow technique but the aesthetic (looks and features) of the puppets as well as the music was Persian”. In line with this, we also find a quote in Sampa Ghosh’s article on Indian Contemporary Puppetry “Darpana revived the technique of Andhra Shadow Puppets under the direction of Meher Contractor and developed new themes and puppets using the same technique but changing the drawing...” In his view, her drawing and sketching were the most special aspects of her skills. He says “She would never use the pencil to draw. Many times she would just take a brush and dip it into paint and draw. She was so sure of what she would be making. She had a very clear and strong imagination of what is the kind of character she wants the puppet to represent.”

She continued using leather shadow technique even in her next work on Shakuntala in 1992. Throwing light on some of the changes she made to the traditional leather puppets for Shakuntala, Zala says, “Reducing the size of the puppets to 2 ft from the 6ft high puppets of the Tolubommalata, she made these puppets in the aesthetic idiom of the Gujarati Kalamkari tradition. She remained within the specific colour palette of the Kalamkari tradition.” He remembers this work especially for the discussions he engaged in with his teacher. He also remembers this time as a period by when he had absorbed her work enough to intuitively understand what she might expect from him. Shakuntala also became the last of her productions and though she made the puppets and worked on the script, she did not live to see its opening.

In the course of his career with Meher, he also spent time working on TV productions for a local Gujarati channel which were often educational and sometimes entertaining. Using 3D rod puppets in 70s, she made a one hour production on the history of

Ahmedabad. This production later became a regular TV show, focusing on the growth and establishment of Ahmadabad. The editing and testing for this serial was done by Mansingh Zala.

Meher as a Teacher

For Mansingh Zala, this was the first identity of Meher. He recognizes her as his teacher beyond their shared practice of puppetry. His insights tell us that as a teacher she definitely did more than teaching puppetry to her students, she took on the responsibility of helping them build their careers as puppeteers. When asked about her pedagogy this is what he had to say:

“About her teaching style, one could say that she would teach us like a mother. She would always engage with and listen to the problems of all those who would work for her. Work related and personal. And many times in in



puppetry a single role character had to be carried out by multiple people. She was the kind of person who would give everyone opportunities. Also, it seemed like she never minded teaching the same thing to the same person repeatedly. She had a lot of patience towards learners. However she was quite particular about being disciplined. We knew that when we were with her we had to work seriously. She did not like it if people were taking it lightly. Because of her nature a lot of people used to like to work with her. Because she encouraged people to learn more and promoted people unhesitatingly, a lot of people who joined her really grew from there and became successful. For example she sent Suresh Datta to Moscow to study puppetry. Now he has really gone ahead of so many of us. Take Dadi Pudumjee, he too has such a big name in puppetry. She never hesitated at the thought of her students getting ahead of her in a field. She even got scholarships for so many students. Today because I want to promote her name, I’m running an NGO in her name called Meher – the troupe. Since she was not only taking Indian puppetry to an International platform but also getting the people from other countries to come to India and with the puppeteers here, many of us were exposed to new developments in puppetry and diverse people. She was also well connected in SNA, CCRT and many other organizations like this and she made use of her connections to help people around her. She was always writing letters to people connecting people with each other.”

A teacher as a learner and her spirit of experimentation Reflecting on his teacher’s learning curve, he feels that it is when she went abroad to study puppetry after working at Shreyas is when she learnt a lot of puppetry. However, when she came back to Darpana it was this institute that became a place for her to execute and experiment what she had learnt. As a learner she drew influences from every where. If something caught her eye in festivals she would be sure to try it. In her time at Darpana, she dabbled with various media like glove, rod, shadow which began to change the public attitude towards puppetry. In his own words “Till then in Gujarat, other than Rajasthani Kathputli there was no other kind of puppets. So modern puppetry in Gujarat was not heard of until

Meher Behn came along and started the work on it. There were no “productions” in puppetry till she started it. Infact they would call puppets as Kathputli. Slowly people got to know there are different kinds of puppets and Kathputli is one of the many kinds. This change in attitude was possible because we toured a lot to rural places in Gujrat to perform puppetry to people. So it was not as if we were invested only in the international opportunities. Meher has also helped and supported a lot of traditional puppeteers but I think Meher’s big accomplishment was in drawing the educated crowd to puppetry which was key to the rise of contemporary puppetry in Gujrat. Till then most of the puppeteers came from an uneducated background and many of the uneducated puppeteers were mostly from traditional puppeteers. They were Masters but they kept repeating the same stories without innovating anything new.”

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Contemporary Puppetry in India



1950s

Yeshwant Keshav Padhye 1920s
Ventriloquist, Mumbai

Raghunath Goswami
Putulpuri Studio, Kolkata

Madhulal Master
Indian Institute of Puppet, Mumbai

Devilal Samar
Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal, Udaipur

Sailo Chakraborty
Putul Rangam, Kolkata



1960s

Meher Rustom Contractor
Darpan Academy, Ahmedabad

Suresh Dutta
Calcutta Puppet Theatre, Kolkata

R.N. Shukla Rahi & Sahai
Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, Delhi

S.N. Srivastava
Natarajan Puppet Theatre, Delhi



1970s

R.N. Lal Srivastava
Delhi

Mahipat Kavi
Puppets and Plays, Ahmedabad

Sanjit Ghosh
Little Puppet Theatre, West Bengal

Krishna Moorthy Koorella
Hand Shadow Puppets, Hyderabad

Ramdas Padhye
Second Generation Ventriloquist, Mumbai



1980s

M. Rajyalaxmi & Srinivasa Rao
Hyderabad Puppet Theatre, Hyderabad

Ratnamala Nori
Nori Art & Puppetry Centre, Hyderabad

Dadi D Pudumjee
Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust, Delhi

Ranjana Pandey
Jan Madhyam

Mansinh Zala
MEHER The Troupe, Ahmedabad

Swapna Sen
The Puppets, Kolkata



left to right: Meher Rustom Contractor , Madhulal Master, Suresh Dutta, R.N Lal Srivastava and Dadi Dorab Pudumjee

3 Puppeteer-Designer-Film maker - Raghunath Goswami

By Sapna Sen

13th January 1931 - 19 January 1995



“Raghunath Goswami, was an innovator, a visionary professional, an artist, a designer, a puppeteer, a film maker and a social communicator. He was a self-made man who was a thinker and a doer - a man of outstanding talent.” Sapna Sen

“Puppet is my first love” a brave statement coming from a designer and an advertising industry professional. The statement is telling of his unique view point. Here was an unusual man.

You wonder how his professional design unit saw this passion for puppetry when in 1952, he proudly established “The Puppets” India’s first contemporary puppet theatre.

There were others- Devi Lal Samar, who’s Lok Kala Mandal, throbbing with activity was also a “contemporary” space. But with a very different aspiration. Also established in 1952-but with a very different aspiration. It provided a showcase for the traditional folk forms of Mewar, Rajasthan.

Meher Contractor, at that time, exploring the Classroom as a space for Puppetry, in Ahmedabad. Madhulal Master who thought completely out of the box and worked with “Blind Puppeteers” in Mumbai!

As compared to the others, Raghunath Goswami’s journey was unique. His goal was quite clearly- creative exploration. He found many like minded people who free from caste and class restrictions were flowing in freedom and wanted to join forces with this unusual form (Puppets) for the sheer pleasure of creation.

His exposure to NID and design practices of course had an impact on him as did his exposure to other puppeteers through Unima India. Most of his creations emerged from an aesthetic-free of any specific cultural identity.

Devi Lal Samar, and Lok Kala Mandal, on the other hand were marked by the strong cultural identity of Mewar.

Raghunath Goswami was a man of many hats. He was not just a designer and writer, but also a film maker and teacher. He even joined Unima India and became the vice-president. He inspired many and gathered a talented group of young designers.

Together they made many productions, performances and experimented freely and participated in festival.

He created a Puppet Theatre “Putul Puri”, later he made another one in a school. A gift to the children of Calcutta.

His creativity could not be bound to any one form of puppetry. He experimented with marionettes, gloves, rod puppets, shadows with a lamp, with an overhead projector, with animation and even film. Raghunath Goswami’s work brought him awards and recognition.

THE JOURNEY

by Sapna Sen



A designer, he started his career as a book designer/illustrator. He established an independent designing unit in 1960, R. Goswami & Associates, to provide design and production services related to advertising, graphic designing, interior design, exhibition design, public relations, communication, theatre and film production.

Apart from these he was a consultant to National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. He also joined Unima India (an organisation of Indian puppeteers) and became the vice-president in 1982. Also locally, The Federation of Puppet Theatres, of West Bengal

was formed under his leadership in 1982. He was the recipient of West Bengal State Akademi Award, 1991-92, for his contribution to the field of Puppetry.

“Puppet is my first Love”

He was a creative man who seamlessly combined passion with profession. Despite his busy Design life- his real love and area of interest was puppet theatre. And he found time for it.

In 1952, he established ‘THE PUPPETS’. This was, perhaps, the oldest non-traditional puppet team in Bengal, if not in India. He was inspired by the technique of the traditional string puppets from Rajasthan, the Danger Putul (traditional rod puppet) and Benir Putul (traditional glove puppet) of Bengal. It is interesting that we always look back in order to move forward. He looked for inspiration at the Bengal Traditions.

Initially his puppetry started with strings tied to the heads of Kalighat dolls against a backdrop. He experimented with string manipulated dolls made of wood, straw and later wood pulp. ‘THE PUPPETS’ made marionettes to produce plays based on folk tales. The music, composed by him personally used folk instruments like – Dholak, Khamak, Dotara and also Piano and Violin. The tale of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ was produced in Bengali.

With the passing of time they took to rod and glove puppets. After much experimentation it was felt that hand puppets gave greater pliancy of movement and freedom of expression. Since the use of hand and rod puppets ‘THE PUPPETS’ produced many memorable plays like ‘Hattogol Vijoy Pala’ – a fairytale, Sukumar Ray’s ‘Abak Jalpan’, ‘Ravaner Chikitsha – a satire based on Ramayana stories, ‘Agdooom Bagdooom’- based on Indian traditional rhyme, ‘Buddhir Bal’- an animal story and ‘Kemon Jabdo’- based on the popular story of ‘Three little pigs’.

Despite being influenced by modern western practices, Raghunath Goswami’s Puppet direction did not expect the puppeteer to become the actor. In this respect, his performances remained old fashioned. The puppeteers were not actors. They did not reveal



Under his guidance a collection of regional puppets from India and abroad, an information bank concerning puppet theatre and a small library was built by 'THE PUPPETS'.

'THE PUPPETS' participated in important puppet theatre events, workshops and other activities. He often had intimate contact and exchanges of ideas with well known puppeteers from western countries, like Sergei Obraztsov from Soviet Union, Bill and Cora Baird and Marjorie Mc Pharlin, from U.S.A, Michael Meschke, from Sweden, Philippe Genty and Jacques Pimpaneau from France.

He was struck by the amazing possibilities of the medium. He felt that it could be used as a powerful tool for Development Communication. Alongside radio, television, the press and periodicals, puppetry could create a climate for practical innovation, stimulate the thirst for knowledge and provide instruction in particular fields of education and communication. It could be used in spreading knowledge and instruction. He had designed many short workshops to teach puppetry for teachers, social workers, health workers

'THE PUPPETS' conducted workshops and training programmes regularly for social service organizations like Chitrabani, Lutheran World Service, Ramakrishna Mission Pallimangal, State Resource Centre (West Bengal), CRY, Vikramshila etc. with the view to spread the movement of utilising the immense potential of the medium as a means of education and communication. Apart from this, 'THE PUPPETS' worked and conducted courses in collaboration with National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad.

He was the designer of 'The Crafts of Bengal' exhibition pavilion in the first Festival of India held in U.K, in 1982. He gave a number of puppet performances in the Commonwealth Institute. He was also the co-designer of Festival of India in Paris and Moscow, Tashkent and Leningrad in 1985 and 1987 respectively. He always found space for Puppetry in these ventures. He took two traditional puppet teams - marionette and Bengal rod puppet to perform

themselves and remained behind the curtain- hidden from the audience.

In 1959 'THE PUPPETS' was chosen second in merit at the first All India Puppet Festival, held in Udaipur, Rajasthan.

With a view to present Kolkata a permanent theatre he established a miniature puppet theatre at 6, Kiran Shankar Roy Road, Kolkata and named it 'PUTULPURI'. It was perhaps the first of its kind in the country. 'THE PUPPETS' also constructed a 'terrace stage' in the early seventies at Sushikhan Vidyalaya, a school in south Kolkata. He was always in search of a permanent space.

in Paris. He also performed in the museum 'Musee Kwok On' in Paris in 1985. Similarly, two traditional puppet teams were also taken to Moscow, Leningrad and Tashkent as part of their Festival of India.

Experiments with Shadow puppets

The most ancient form of puppet theatre of the country was confined only to South India and no non-traditional contemporary puppet team worked with that form. Fascinated by the potential of this form, he started working and experimenting with shadow puppet as an alternative to cartoon films and computer animation. After much experimentation and research he used techniques like silhouettes, flat figure animation and low-cost animation. He had also started using an overhead projector for shadow plays.

Efforts were constantly being made to produce plays based on contemporary themes and pre occupations, educational in content, by utilising modern materials and techniques while retaining the simplicity of traditional puppets. 'THE PUPPETS' produced a number of puppet performances.

Sukumar Ray's - 'Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La', 'Ramgarurer Chana', 'Khuror Kal'; 'Ekta Gaach Chilo' (The Giving Tree); 'Ring Master'; 'Rama-krishna Kathika' (based on some of the Sri Ramakrishna's moral stories) were some of his shadow productions.

He always kept away from the temptation of performing regular public shows. Instead, he was always deeply involved in experimentation and exploration and had succeeded in the fields of both contemporary trend and style derived from the traditional Indian shadow puppet.

Films based on puppetry

Raghunath Goswami did a lot of research on puppetry and was very impressed with Jiri Trinka's work. It attracted him deeply. He made an animation film: a beautiful dream with glove puppets for children.

Thereafter he created many low-cost animated films. Encouraged by his experiments he made a puppet

film 'Hattogol Vi-joy'. It won the Prime Minister's Gold Medal for the best Children's film in 1961.

This was the beginning:

- 'Bhabdhara' in 1963, a B/W film on Swami Vivekananda's life and teachings; Animated Advertising films (1965-72) - Fan Fancy, Important People and Black Cat; Short Educational films for Satellite Television (1974-77) - Water is Life, Tail Story, The Naughty Tiger.

Raghunath Goswami stepped into the growing world of Television also. He was involved in the basic planning for regular children's Bengali programmes for Doordarshan Kendra, Kolkata; he developed an educational series consisting of 30 programmes using live action and animated graphics for Doordarshan Kendra Kolkata; Doordarshan Kendra Kolkata produced 'Telescope' (1980), a programme in English, whose basic planning, production design, making of set-ups, props, puppets and muppets were done by him.

Thanks to Raghunath Goswami's efforts, talent and vision, Puppetry in West Bengal crossed the limited arena of proscenium performance into the wide open arena of television, film and animation.

He was a superb teacher. His understanding helped him to articulate and manage the tension between tradition and modernity. This ideology was imbibed among the team members by him.

The passing away of Raghunath Goswami on 19th January 1995 was an irreparable loss to Indian puppetry.

Sapna Sen learnt puppetry from Raghunath Goswami and worked with "The Puppets".



5 Weaving a Cultural Fabric for Puppetry

Suresh Datta

by Sammitha Sreevathsa



SUTRADHAR

Suresh Datta, calls our attention for the work he has done for puppetry in West Bengal. Born in a place called Hutsibari of undivided Bengal (now in Bangladesh), a large part of his career in puppetry unfolded in Calcutta. This article acknowledges him for his untiring work in setting up a puppetry scene in Calcutta almost from the scratch and moreover for bringing it to the notice of the State and the public alike. In the absence of Meher Behn and Raghunath Goswami, in the 90s he became a steadfast torchbearer for contemporary puppetry in India. He also happens to be the only puppeteer from the first generation of contemporary puppeteers in India who is still alive. His contribution to the field of puppetry has been rewarded by the government of India by bestowing upon him Padma Shri and Sangeet Natak Academy award. Yet, there seems to be a paucity of material on him, his work and life. Drawing on the conversation with his student Sudip Gupta, (currently a puppeteer based out of Bengal), Anurupa Roy (a contemporary puppeteer based out of Delhi) and some news stubs available on the internet, we have attempted to piece a few aspects of his life together. Sudip Gupta began working with Suresh Datta who he calls Suresh Da in the year 1983 and worked with him for seven years. He has performed in some of the productions such as Alladin which were turning points in his career as a puppeteer. Anurupa on the otherhand is a next generation contemporary puppeteer who has grown up watching Suresh Datta's puppetry.

An observation of the context of puppetry in Bengal in the sixties and seventies speaks galores about the contribution of Suresh Datta to the field. During this period puppetry did exist but in isolated pockets of Bengal before efforts by Suresh Datta and his troupe wove a cultural rubric for the art form in the city of Calcutta. He essayed the imagination of a puppeteer as a professional who made productions, gave public performances and also drew remuneration from the shows. However, his venture into puppetry was only after he dabbled in various other skills such as such as stage design, drawing, painting, dance and music. He was taken in by Samudyata to an organization he worked for called "Childrens Little Theatre". His work with children that he started here spilled over even in his career as a puppeteer. Apart from this he has

also worked with Uday Shankar in the Performing Arts Department of Rabindra University where he learnt music and dance. He is popularly quoted for having learnt many forms of dance such as Manipuri, Kathakali and even Bharathanatyam.

During his time in Children's Little Theatre, a Russian puppetry troupe visited Kolkata for a performance which opened his doors to Puppetry training in Russia where he trained under the well known puppeteer Sergei Obraztsov. This was in the year 1962. The Russian puppet theatre scence during this period was controlled by the Communist cultural authorities



who appointed Obraztsov as the artistic director of the Central State Puppet Theatre. In this institute they ran a Puppetry academy, absorbing thousands of students from various Communist corners of the world. One can speculate that with West Bengal being a Communist state in India, with the support of the state Suresh Datta found an opportunity to fly to Russia. This was a time in Russia when actors theatre, because of its nature of being obviously vocal was close to being prohibited under its totalitarian regime. On the other hand ballet and puppetry received a strong support as a result of which it flourished. In this context, using the rod puppetry technique, Obraztsov was making productions that were large in scale and were often spectacular to watch such as Alladin and Don Juan. It was in this stage of his career that he trained Suresh Datta. Having absorbed the technique from Obraztsov, Suresh Datta brought rod puppetry with him to Bengal with his own version of Alladin (which according to Anurupa had a lot of similiarities with Obraztsov's Alladin). Later, he adapted the technqie to suit his own theme and content evident in his productions such as Ramayana and Lab-Kush.

In terms of style, in Sudip Gupta's words "When an audience would watch his show it looked very natural and real." Having spent a lot of time working on children's theatre, his puppetry also took on educational themes and he believed in making an impact among children through the medium of puppetry. In an interview for The Indian Express, he is quoted to have said "When parents bring their children for shows, we have a chat with them about their children's behaviour at home. And then through stories we tell the child where he is going wrong. Of course, everything is through puppets and children believe that puppets are talking to them and telling them."

When Suresh Datta came back to Calcutta he re-joined Children's Little Theatre but he started making puppet productions such as Alladin, Ali Baba, Begging Mouse and Lab Kush. These productions garnered a huge amount of audience response, encouraging him to set-up an organization exclusively for puppetry which he called "Calcutta Puppet Theatre". Elaborating on

this phase of his life Sudip Gupta says "Children's Little Theatre, where he worked before used to have a lot of activities happening like music, dance, theatre but Suresh Da wanted to specially grow as a puppeteer and he felt that if puppetry were to become more visible it had to be given a separate place. In his work towards this dream, his late wife Bhavani Devi joined him, performing in his productions. But this decision to set up an exclusive puppetry organization and grow as a puppeteer came with a certain amount of dilemma and difficulty since he had already earned himself a good name as a stage designer." It is this decision that helped him pull puppetry into the popular imagination in Calcutta. He worked persistently on this decision, by unfliningly performing shows every week as a result of which the trickling audience multiplied. As mentioned in the beginning of the article his production Alladin alone has been performed over three thousand times locally as well as on international platforms and it continues to be performed along with few other popular productions like Rama and Sita and Lab-Kush.

However, according to Anurupa, it was not just his persistent performance that gathered support for puppetry. She says "His technique in rod puppetry is impeccable. The reason why Alladin played 3000 times was not because it was played 3000 times but because it was very good quality which is one of the reasons for it to become that popular." The quality of his puppetry along with his ability to institutionalize the art form by setting up CPT, lifted the public perception of puppetry from being a casual medium of entertainment to a serious art form. Anurupa, points out that he was the first one not only to set up a puppetry institute but to also receive state funding for doing so. Therefore, his institute was built with a sophisticated infrastructure which includes a recording studio, a place for performance as well as a place to make and build productions. He brought puppetry to the notice of formal state funding bodies such as Ministry of Culture and Sangeet Natak Akademi further reinforcing its status as an art form.

How ever his contribution to the field is not merely restricted to building performances but also in training a younger generation of puppeteers like Sudip Gupta,



Lucknow Brothers, Sanchit Ghosh and Sanjit Ghosh who continue to work in West Bengal. Anurupa credits him for popularizing rod puppetry technique among younger generation of contemporary puppeteers in India. She says "Everywhere that Bengal had a strong hold, especially in North East India, he trained people in rod puppetry." During the course of his career he traversed across the country offering puppetry workshops to children and adults. About the kind of teacher that he was, Sudip Gupta says "One could say that he was really enthusiastic. We would all get tired at the end of a day and he would continue working tirelessly through the night. Even now, when he is 85, he has the same enthusiasm. He would say that puppetry is a combination of poetry and magic, but to make these two come out a puppeteer must understand the role of time and space in puppetry."

Though Obrastzov was his formal teacher in puppetry, Sudip Gupta talks about the inspiration that Suresh Datta often mentioned, "He says that his main inspiration came from an idol maker in his village who used to make clay idols. When he moulded the clay to give it shape and form, Suresh Da would sit next to him and observe". So, despite not having a formal education, what started as an early childhood experience came a full circle in his adulthood with the training under Obrastzav and eventually with the setting up of Calcutta Puppet Theatre.

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