Beni Putul or the Glove Puppetry: A Performing Tool for Resistance to Colonialism

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Abstract:
Puppetry or the puppet show is a very popular performing art that is chiefly concerned with the manipulation of the puppets for entertaining people. India has a rich heritage of puppetry. Depending upon the various ways in which the puppets are manipulated, puppets in India are divided into four different categories – String Puppet, Shadow Puppet, Rod Puppet and the Glove Puppet. This paper revisits the Indian tradition of puppetry – String Puppet, Shadow Puppet and Rod Puppet, and relates it to the Glove Puppetry of West Bengal, more particularly the tradition of glove puppetry as still practised in the Padmatamli village of East Midnapur district of West Bengal. Popularly known as ‘Beni putul’ or ‘Bener Putul’ in Bengal, this form of puppetry has its genesis in the colonial period. By examining the origin of this puppetry in Bengal, this paper attempts to explore how this performing art served as a tool for colonial resistance against the British Indigo-Planters. It also highlights the present state of the puppeteers and their struggle to keep this ancestral tradition of puppetry alive.

Keywords: Puppet, Glove-puppetry, Beni-putul, Padmatamli, Indigo-Movement, Colonial Resistance.

Methodology

1. For this small project, a field survey was undertaken on the practice of Glove Puppetry in the village of Padmatamli near Mugberia, in the district of Paschim Medinipur
2. A survey of the condition of the lives of the performers at the present was conducted.
3. Token performances were arranged and recorded for the purpose of this study.
4. Performers were invited to a fair to study the aesthetic reactions of the audience.
5. Critical writings on the Indian tradition of puppetry were consulted to examine its origin and relate this particular form of puppetry to the tradition.
Puppetry or the puppet show is a very popular performing art that is chiefly concerned with the manipulation of the puppets for entertaining people. In India, its origin goes back to the ancient times and the earlier references to its performance can be found in the Mahabharata, Srimad Bhagvata, Patañjali by Mah?bh??ya and in various other classical Sanskrit texts. The reference of ‘Sutradhar’ in Bharata Muni’s Natyashastra also gives a testimony to one of the ancient forms of puppetry known to have existed in India i.e. String Puppetry or Marionette.

Traditionally, India has a rich heritage of puppetry. Depending upon the various ways in which the puppets are manipulated, puppets in India are divided into four different categories – String Puppet, Shadow Puppet, Rod Puppet and the Glove Puppet. String-puppetry or marionette is the oldest form of all. Traditionally thought to have its origin in the ancient religious myths, string puppetry generally deals with mythical stories from the epics, legends and the Puranas. It is performed with the help of the strings tied onto the fingers of the puppeteer and the puppets. It has an aristocratic lineage since it is generally performed in the rich aristocratic strata of the society. Some of the famous ‘string-puppet’ performances are- Kathputli of Rajasthan, Sakhi Kundhei of Orissa, Gombeyatta of Karnataka.

Figure 1. Location of Padmatamli village, near Mugberia, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, India
Shadow puppetry also has an aristocratic tradition of its own. In this kind of puppet show, puppets are generally made of leather that is translucent in nature so that the shadow of the puppet created by the source of a light behind it falls onto the white curtain and makes the performance visible to the audience. This form of puppetry is popular in the region of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

Rod puppets are large in size and are manipulated with a single large rod or pole by the puppeteer. In this type of performance, the puppeteer normally remains invisible to the audience as they are cast aside behind a curtain below the stage where the puppet-show is performed. Holding the rod in their hand from a hidden position, they perform the show. This type of puppetry is popular in West Bengal and Odisha. In West Bengal, Putul Nach is such a famous form of Rod Puppetry. Unlike String puppetry or Shadow puppetry, Rod Puppet is generally performed by the lower class people of the society.

Reserving the discussion of these puppets i.e. ‘String Puppet’, ‘Shadow Puppet’ and ‘Rod Puppet’, for further writing, I’ll particularly focus on ‘Glove Puppetry’ in the state of West Bengal, or more specifically in the East Midnapur district of West Bengal where this tradition of glove puppetry is still continued today.

II

‘Glove puppetry’ is a very popular form of puppet show in India, famous in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Kerela. In this type of puppet-show, puppets are usually worn on the hands of the puppeteers like gloves and the performance is shown to the audience with the accompaniment of narrative songs. The performance may be solo or in a group. The narrative songs are usually accompanied with traditional folk music played by dholak or damru. The songs vary based on the regional differences and keeps on changing on occasions. Sometimes these are composed by the puppeteer and sung in imitation of the tune of popular Hindi or Bengali songs. This performance Apart from the mythical stories of Radha-Krishna and other figures, most of their narratives are related to the daily lives and events of the common human beings like- social awareness for pulse polio, environmental pollution, dowry system, female infanticide or child marriage or promoting women empowerment and education among the masses.

Glove puppets are normally one to two-feet long. The head and arms of the puppets are made either of wood, cloth or papier mâché. Excluding the head and arms of the puppet, the body is generally covered with a long variegated skirt. Unlike the puppeteers of the shadow puppet or the rod puppet, the puppeteers of the glove puppetry perform in full view of the audience. Writing about the Glove puppets, Sampa Ghosh and Utpal Kumar Banerjee in their seminal book on puppetry Indian Puppets also mention that:

Glove puppets are a simple form where the puppeteer puts on the puppet-like glove and manipulates the head of the puppet with his forefinger, controlling the arms with his thumb and middle finger. Puppeteers operate either from below or squatting on level ground, seldom hiding themselves from the audience. (Ghosh & Banerjee, 2006)

Glove-puppetry forms vary on the bases of regional differences. While in Odisha it is widely known as Sakhi Naach or in Kerela as Pavakathakali or Pavakoothu, in West
Bengal it is popularly known as Beni Putul or Bener Putul. Though the performance of glove-puppetry is now in an endangered state in West Bengal and traces of its performance can be seen occasionally in some parts of Murshidabad and 24 Parganas districts, it is still a very popular performing art in East Midnapur district of West Bengal. Particularly, in one of the villages in East Midnapur named Padmatamli (near Mugberia) under Bhupatinagar Police Station, it is still practiced and performed by a small number of puppeteers.

III

Padmatamli village (coordinates 22.024853, 87.721172) is divided into two sections or ‘Pallies’ – ‘Mahishya-pally’ which houses 100-120 families of Hindu Mahishya caste and ‘Harijan palley’ where 80-90 families of the dalit ‘Hari’ caste live. ‘Beni Putul’ or ‘Glove puppetry’ is thought to have originated among these Hari caste people living at the ‘Harijan Pally’ or more specifically, among their forefathers who started to show puppetry for earning their livelihood. Unlike Shadow-puppet or String puppet tradition which has an aristocratic lineage, glove puppetry has a humble lower-class origin. It was started mainly by some nomadic, ‘lower-caste’ Hari people who earned their livelihood by begging money, rice etc as a result of showing their performance. Since this profession had been traditionally associated with begging, most of the people from mahishya caste were not involved with this so-called ‘ignoble’ profession. Subsequently, with the passage of time as the people from the Hari caste itself gets affluent and a large number of people are engaged in other professions which could provide them a better amount of money for livelihood than begging money or rice, most of them have lost interests in this performance and have switched rapidly to other professions. Only five to six families continue this ancestral tradition as a side-line activity, though most of them are engaged in some other small professions like grocery or daily wage earning etc. But in spite of their financial difficulties as a result of living in meager income, they continue their struggle to preserve this ancestral tradition of glove puppetry.

If we look at the history of glove puppetry then we’ll come to know that glove puppeteers were normally nomads who performed at a particular place for ten to fifteen days before
moving to a new region. Since their performances were associated with lower-caste begging tradition, no historical accounts of their performance were documented. To examine this folk art form, we made a visit to the place and met the performers. When we asked Basanta Kumar Ghorai, leader of a group, about the origin of this performance, he narrated an interesting story about its origin which was handed down to them from their ancestors. This story relates how the performance of Beni putul or Glove puppetry served as a tool for resisting colonial oppression of the white Europeans.

In the pre-independent colonial period, Indigo-planting or Neel-chas was a very common phenomenon in Bengal. As a result of the massive demand of blue-dye (made of indigo) in the European market, the British imperialists strived to make profit in this business by producing indigo in colonies like India and manufacture it in Europe. The imperialists forced the farmers to plant nil or indigo instead of rice or wheat. The poor farmers as a result of their dire poverty and as a necessity to keep on feeding their families surrendered to the white neel-planters in front of their ruthless oppression inflicted upon them. Oftentimes, the Indigo-planters gave the poor farmers loan or ‘dadon' with a high rate of interests, knowing full well that the farmers would not be able to return the sum of the loan. Once the farmers became unsuccessful in returning the money, they were ruthlessly forced to plant indigo by the white indigo-planters. They ravaged the villagers with their violent oppression. Whenever the Indigo-planters or ‘Nilkar sahibs' visited the village, most of the farmers absconded themselves to a safer place in order to get protected from the brutal oppression of the indigo-planters.

One day it so happened that when the Nilkar Sahibs arrived at the village and ravaged the people with their ruthless oppressions, people fled away from their homes to different places in order to avoid the beatings and violent oppression of the white indigo-planters. One of the villagers absconded himself in a deep forest and spent the whole night there behind a bush in the woods. In the morning when he was about to leave the jungle to return to his home, he saw a figure with long white hair at some distance. Assuming the figure to be a white indigo-planter who might have come to look for him, he became

Figure 3: Glove Puppetry made of dry Palmyra Fruit (Image courtesy: Daricha: http://www.daricha.org)
puzzled at what to do. He remained there motionless for quite a long time. But after some time he suddenly had a doubt that stuck to his head that how could the White Sahib stand there so long without any movement? Suddenly, he found that a big palm leaf from the palm tree dropped down onto the head of the English sahib and then the whole matter was disclosed to him. He came to know that it was not a white indigo-planter who might have come to hunt him. When the farmer moved ahead to see the object, he found that it was not the head of a white sahib but a dry hairy Palmyra fruit (*Taal Aanti*) which had probably been eaten by some animal in such a way that it looked like the head of a white man.

While he was returning to his home happily with the dry Palmyra fruit, suddenly an idea dawned upon his head that if something interesting could be made out of this dry palmyra fruit. After returning to his home, he cleared the hairy fibres from the surface of the dry palmyra fruit and gave it a shape of the human face. After putting his fingers into the two holes of the dry palmyra and observing it, he thought that a good doll or puppet could be made with it. Later he added two arms to it and put an old decorated cloth to it, thus giving it a shape of a doll or puppet.

![Figure 4: Glove Puppet looks like Plait or Beni when folded](image)

By putting the puppet in his hand as a glove, the farmer began to show puppetry in his village and earned some rice, paisa etc. He was going well. But one day while he was performing the puppet show in his village, he found that at a distance someone was loudly clapping after watching his puppet show and bestowing words of praise in English tongue. To the utter surprise of the villagers, it was an English Indigo-planter with some policemen who had actually come to ravage the village people with their oppression. But surprisingly, they had been watching the performance with great enthusiasm. In the mean-time the villagers fled away to save themselves. And after the delightful performance was over, the sahib and his policemen didn’t make any harm to the performer. The puppeteer left the place silently without any harm. After that incident, whenever there is an occasion of the arrival of those white indigo-planter...
policeman, their oppression could be resisted by showing the performance of puppetry. The villagers often got enough time to escape to a safe place. Thus, glove puppetry acted as an effective tool for resisting the colonial oppression of the indigo-planters inflicted upon the poor Indians.

IV

Whatever the reason may be regarding its origin, subsequently it became a popular source for entertaining people and earning livelihood for the puppeteers. In West Bengal this glove puppetry is popularly known as Beni Putul or Bener Putul. Beni or Binuni refers to the ‘Plait’ which women make on their heads by grouping the three-part interlaced hair into a single rounded group. Like plait, glove puppets are also divided into three parts—head, usually made of wood or paper, two arms made of wood and a long skirt made of cloth and after the performance is over, the puppet is folded into a round shaped plait-like object. That is why it is called Beni putul. But it is also called Bener Putul. If we take this terminology, it refers to the nomadic people of ‘Bede’ or ‘Bedia’ community who performed the puppet show professionally for commercial purposes and thus this performance is named as ‘Bener putul’ which means “Dolls of the commercial people”.

![Figure 5: Group performance of Beni-Putul puppeteers at Bhatter College, Dantan Book Fair](image)

But it is true that Beni putul or glove puppetry is now in an endangered state which is almost on the verge of extinction. At present, there are only five to six families in Padmatamli village who are struggling their best to continue this tradition of glove puppetry. They are now engaged in various other professions like cultivation or daily wage earning since showing puppetry only is not enough to earn their livelihood. Mr. Basanta Kumar Ghorai himself runs a grocery shop. While talking with Basanta Babu, we came to know from him that most of the masses whether from the audience or from the performing community itself are losing interests in this performing art. The arrival of digital media like television, computer and internet has made their popularity worse than ever. But still, whenever they find some time and occasion, they still roam about different places by performing their ancestral art of puppetry. Sometimes, they are invited at different cultural programs to perform. Recently, they have been registered to various
cultural organizations of Central and State Govt. like Sangeet Natak Akademi and are receiving dole. The collaborative and collective effort of the masses can only sustain this traditional art form. With this ray of hope, I would like to conclude the paper with a quote from George Latshaw:

The Puppets are coming! The Puppets are coming!” might turn out to be the “cue and cry” of the century. So pervasive are the puppets of today, it seems unlikely that anyone could pass through life without running into them at least once. People are meeting puppets in the most unexpected places, because the puppet explosion is a phenomenon of our own time. *(The Complete Book of Puppetry)*

![Figure 6. The authors with the artist](image)

**Acknowledgement:**
This small project was funded by the Department of English, Bhattar College, Dantan, Paschim Medinipur.

**Notes:**
1. Literally, it means ‘the holder of the strings’. In classical Sanskrit drama, the function of a ‘Sutradhar’ was to initiate a drama.
2. In Bengali terminology these are popularly known as ‘Taar Putul’, ‘Chaya Putul’ and ‘Dang Putul’.

**Bibliography:**


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