

Puppets with a Purpose:

Folk Arts, Cultural Communication, and Development in India

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Introduction

The Author's Journey

In recent decades, the Indian government and numerous non-governmental organizations or NGOs have been employing traditional folk artists like the Bhat community of puppeteers to educate impoverished urban and rural people about controversial social issues such as AIDS, family planning, and women's rights. In this thesis, I will examine the reasons that these institutions have incorporated traditional puppetry performers in their educational programs. Also by exploring the history of puppetry in North India, I will explain how and why traditional forms continue to have educational efficacy for contemporary developmental projects.

I first became interested in the ways performing arts are used to impart ideas and knowledge after taking a class on African art and religion in which we discussed the ways that some groups in Africa use art and performance to teach about morality and cultural heritage. After seeing a brief puppet show on my first trip to India in the fall of 2000, I wondered if the concepts that I had previously learned also applied to Rajasthani puppetry. I found this question so interesting that I made it the basis of my independent research project, and I soon realized that few scholarly studies of the subject exist. Thus much of my information was collected from interviews with puppeteers and scholars.

After conducting this initial research, I returned to the United States and wrote a paper that examined the historical development and social role of the Rajasthani *kathputli* tradition. Upon completing this project, I realized that because of limited time, experience, and resources, I had countless questions that still remained unanswered. In

particular, I was interested in the ways that both traditional and modern puppetry were being used in education. To examine this topic further, I returned to India in the summer of 2001 and conducted additional field research for two and a half months. Initially, I focused on the modern developmental performances in which many Bhat puppeteers had participated, but after only a few weeks, I realized that despite my previous work, I did not have a solid understanding of the cultural context in which Indian puppetry existed. Thus, I altered my research program and examined extensively both the traditional and more modern aspects of the art form and its practitioners.

During these ten weeks, I traveled through the Rajasthan and the Delhi regions and collected information through archival research, interviews, and participant observation. To gather written and photographic materials, I visited several private and government sponsored cultural institutions, talked to the scholars, and examined their libraries. The bulk of my analysis, however, is based on information from interviews and participant observation. In the text, all of these sessions are cited with the name of the person to whom I spoke and the year in which it took place. Because of time limitations and language barriers, I was unable to spend prolonged periods with any single puppeteer group, and thus, this work will contain little ethnographic information about their everyday lives. To compensate for this shortcoming, I attempted to meet and interview as many puppeteers as possible. I found that the Bhat puppeteers had extensive networks of associates, and thus the two families that I knew from my previous work were able to refer me to many others throughout North India. All in all, I interviewed some fifteen traditional, hereditary puppeteers from seven different cities.

Because I was introduced to many of them by their associates, relatives, or patrons, I found that most Bhats were eager to share their stories and accomplishments with me. The reader, however, should take into account that I am still a foreigner in their eyes, and because of myriad reasons, not all of the information that they relayed to me was completely unbiased or unembellished. For example, nearly every interviewee told me that he was the greatest and most knowledgeable puppeteer while everyone else was either lying or ignorant of “the real *kathputli* tradition;” *kathputli* being the Hindi word meaning “wooden doll” and used to refer to the traditional marionettes of Rajasthan. Throughout the thesis, I introduce non-English terms in this fashion, and thereafter only the native word appears in italics. My command of Hindi does not enable me to engage in complex conversations, and thus, many of my interviews were conducted with the help of various interpreters. All of these people were my good friends, and each had experience with scholarly research. Therefore, I am quite confident in their translations, but the reader should take note, however, that through the process of interpretation, certain information is inevitably lost. For this reason, my study will not cover the many linguistic phenomena that influence puppetry’s educational efficacy.

To gain different perspectives on the art form and its modern applications in the field of informal education, I also interviewed numerous non-traditional puppeteers whose families did not practice this art as a hereditary occupation. These individuals had often received training from government agencies and NGOs, or they had studied the art at the university level. Also, I found that these puppeteers came from a wide variety of castes and had diverse economic backgrounds. In most of these interviews, I was able to converse in English.

I also interviewed numerous administrators in both government agencies and NGOs to learn more about the development programs themselves. Likewise, I found that many of these people were eager to inform me about the work and accomplishments of their organizations. Quite a few officials shared extensive written materials with me, but unfortunately, I was unable to acquire any type of field reports that assessed the impact of their programs. After talking with several administrators from different institutions, I realized that most believed puppetry was useful for education, but each had dramatically different opinions about the art's exact achievements.

To help deal with these difficulties, I conducted participant observation by accompanying development artists on trips to villages on two separate occasions. After each show, I talked with members of the audience in an attempt to gauge the impact of the performance. In addition, I went to ramshackle artist "colonies" in Jaipur, Udaipur, and Delhi, and I visited the facilities of numerous NGOs and government agencies. I also spent one week at the Social Work and Research Centre in Tilonia village where I noted the day-to-day operations of the organization and saw the ways that they make their puppets and create their development education programs.

Based on this research, my thesis will attempt to demonstrate the qualities that enable government agencies and NGOs to use puppetry and puppeteers as effective educational tools in the context of Northwestern India. I argue the socio-cultural positioning of the puppeteers and the highly charged symbolic nature of the puppets themselves are the two primary elements that give puppet culture its power of communication. The study is divided into five major sections including the introduction and conclusion. Part one examines traditional Rajasthani puppet culture, its historical

relevance, and its place in modern North Indian society. This segment also discusses the social and economic changes that have taken place in North India over the last fifty years. Part two examines the art of puppetry and the traditional *kathputli* performance by focussing on its symbolic nature and the ways that it entertains and communicates. In the next section, I discuss the development work that is done through this art by examining its value as an educational tool. I conclude with my observations regarding the effectiveness of puppetry as a method of communication and a vehicle for cultural change.

Part I

The Puppeteers of Northwest India

For millennia, people around the world have used performing arts to convey their most important social values and cultural ideals. Through mediums like music, dance, masquerade, and storytelling, knowledge has been transferred from one group to another. These methods of communication have had such great success and remained culturally significant because they are both enjoyable and informative. In addition, they provide cultural critiques, alter the social order, and are imbued with great symbolic meaning (cf. Barber 1997). The same is true of the *kathputli* tradition of Rajasthan as this ancient art and its practitioners have entertained, made social commentary, and passed down important information for countless generations. In fact, many scholars believe that puppetry even predates human theater on the subcontinent (Pani 1986: 4). Because of the art's tremendous symbolic and ideological importance in North Indian society, puppetry is able to communicate with people in a manner that is quite different from human drama. Also, the low social position of the Bhats, who uphold the *kathputli* tradition, allows them to express controversial ideas and social critiques in ways that members of other castes cannot.

Chapter 1

Location of Bhats in the Social Hierarchy of North India

To understand puppetry's role in communication, one must first examine the social placement of those who practice the art because in India, many communities of folk entertainers exist on the fringes of society, and thus they are given significant leeway for conducting social commentary. In much of South Asia, the caste system stratifies various social units based largely on the concepts of ritual purity and pollution and occupational status. A group's placement in this complex hierarchy determines the ways that its members can acceptably interact with others. Thus this cultural organization has a significant impact on how the puppeteers communicate through their art.

The vast majority of the puppeteers in this study are members of a caste of hereditary bards and genealogists known as Bhats, but this community is also closely associated with another group of professional performers called Nats. In Hindi, *bhat*, which is pronounced *bhaat* with a long "aa" sound, is a term used to refer to all types of genealogists regardless of ritual purity or caste status. For the purposes of this thesis, I will follow the accepted convention and write *bhaat* as Bhat. This name, however, should not be confused with *Bhat* pronounced with the short "a" because the latter is the name of a North Indian Brahmin caste. The title *nat* literally means performer, and the word is derived from the term *natya*, or performance. Thus *nat* refers to a person who performs some type of theater display or *natak*. These occupational categories, however, are rarely clear-cut, and a great amount of overlap exists between these professions. "Thus though some castes attend exclusively to genealogy, there are others who combine

the functions of the genealogist and the musician,” acrobat, or puppeteer (Singh 1990: viii). According to the Census of India, all Nats and some Bhats are scheduled castes as they are considered to be highly polluted *dalits* or untouchables. Therefore, these people’s social position actually exists outside of the four *varnas* of the caste system (Gahlot 1989: 189). One primary reason for this low ranking is that these entertainer communities are semi-nomadic, and their lineages, dietary customs, and marriage habits are unknown to the rest of society. Consequently, they are considered to be ritually impure and placed in the lowest category.

Because Bhat is a very general term for bard or genealogist, all people who are called Bhats do not form homogenous social unit as the category is divided into numerous subgroups that have different status levels based on the social positioning of their *jajmans* or patrons (Singh 1990: xi). Three primary groups exist, and these are the Brahma, Bahi, and Rani-Mangas. Of these, the Brahma Bhats, who live primarily in Gujarat, have the highest social status as they serve as genealogists for higher caste Rajputs much like the Charans of Rajasthan. These people “do not marry with the Bahi Bhats whom they regard as of inferior position” (Singh 1990: 118). In contrast, the Bahi Bhats can be divided into eight subgroups, and they perform genealogy for a wide variety of patrons who range from low-status Rajputs to members of the scheduled castes. Unlike the Brahma Bhats, they permit *nata* or widow remarriage, and they consume both alcohol and meat (Singh 1990: 118). The puppeteer Bhats that I studied fall within the Bahi subgroup, and they are known as the Tori Bhats or Nat Bhats. This social unit is further subdivided into fourteen exogamous *gotras* or sub-castes, which are outlined in the chart on the following page. The sub-castes within the Tori Bhat classification are

largely of equal status with the exception of the Naredas as numerous puppeteers told me they were an inferior group. In fact, Mohan Bhat stated that if a Nareda visited his house, he would perhaps offer him water, but under no circumstances would he allow him to smoke from his hookah (Mohan Bhat 2001).

In North India, all Bhats occupy a higher social position than Nats because of the extreme importance of genealogy for maintaining social status and rank. “Caste is an endogamous group with many sub-groups practicing exogamous matrimonial alliances,” and thus the system has numerous complex rules concerning marriage and incest (Singh 1990: xi). If any of these regulations should be violated, the transgressing family could face dire consequences with regard to prestige, purity, and status. Therefore people from both high and low castes often support Bhats because “any group which designates itself a caste needs necessarily a genealogist” (Singh 1990: xii). In addition, this occupation is essential for ensuring the purity of family bloodlines and for tracing ancestry for the purposes of inheritance.

Because of the status differential that exists between the Bhats and the Nats, these low status groups constantly jockey for an improved position by attempting to pass themselves off as members of a higher-ranked group (Snodgrass 1997: 12). For example, many Nat puppeteers claim to be Bhats to improve their social positioning. During the course of my fieldwork, I found that many people who were not from puppeteer communities used Bhat or Nat interchangeably when referring to the puppeteers. In contrast, almost all of the artists I interviewed insisted that they were Bhats and not Nats. In addition, I occasionally encountered some puppeteers who claimed to be Bhats even though their families did not perform genealogy. The complication of this situation is

best exemplified in the case of one performer who said that he was a Nat, but when I asked for the names of his caste and sub-caste, he told me two names of Bhat sub-castes. I attempted to clarify this point, but he told my interpreter that “there is some confusion about this” so I let the subject drop (Brij Mohan 2001). The majority of my interviewees, however, did in fact perform genealogy, and thus hereafter, I will refer to the Tori Bhats simply as Bhats. This situation demonstrates the complex and somewhat fluid nature of the caste system, and these traits allow the puppeteers to have a unique communicative efficacy.

The hereditary puppeteers I studied occupy a position on the fringes of the traditional social hierarchy in part because they perform genealogy for a caste of leatherworkers called the Meghwals or Bhambis. Because their occupation requires them to work with the remains of dead animals, the Meghwals are considered highly polluted, and “historically, they are also one of the poorest castes” (Snodgrass 1997: 12). Thus the Tori Bhats are also highly impure as they serve this untouchable caste. In addition, the Bhats travel and perform like the Nat communities of Rajasthan, and their association with this group further degrades their position in the social structure. This low status, however, has significant repercussions for the communicative efficacy of their art.

Chapter 2

Power of the Weak and Ritual Authority

Because the Bhats exist at the fringes of society, they are able to make critiques of the dominant culture, and their occupational activities demonstrate what Turner called the “power of the weak” as they are imbued with ritual authority on certain occasions (Turner 1973: 152). The puppeteers live at the margins of the social hierarchy and thus are not affected greatly in terms of status by criticizing it. In addition, their low position does not make them threatening to other communities, and they “are given license to gibe” at the inequalities and problems in the dominant culture (Turner 1969: 109). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Bhats often include social commentaries and critiques in their *kathputli* performances.

Because the caste system is fluid in many ways, the puppeteers do not always exist at the margins of the social structure. During traditional *kathputli* performances, the Bhats temporarily move to the center of attention and influence and thus have power over their audiences. Under normal circumstances, few people place value on the ideas and opinions expressed by members of this community because they are an impoverished, low-status group. In addition, the Bhats exist on the fringes of the social order because they live and travel outside of the normal community bounds, and thus, they are seen as outsiders in the villages in which they perform. As a result, they form a largely dependent group that has virtually no direct political power or socio-economic influence. The process of performance, however, creates space for the inversion of the ordinary social order constituting what Turner termed anti-structure. Thus, the puppeteers, who

fall “in the interstices of the social structure,” become “associated with ritual powers” as they temporarily become extremely important figures who command the attention of the entire village (Turner 1969: 109, 125). For example, the audience is composed of people from all economic and caste backgrounds so that even those of the highest social status and political prestige devote their full attention to the Bhat’s spectacle. In fact, I witnessed this phenomenon several times during the traditional shows that were held at the Shilpgram cultural center in Udaipur. Thus on one level, the puppeteers temporarily become the focal point of everyone’s attention, and their words and deeds have supreme importance.

This process of inversion is manifested through the physical actions and locations of the audience and artists during shows. For example, in all of the performances that I saw, the artists erected the stage in central areas of the village such as the temple mount or on the meeting area of the *panchayat* or village council, and the spectators were all seated on the ground. Thus the temporary importance of Bhats is manifested through the fact that they have moved from their camps at the edges of the community to the most important and central locations of the village. In addition, the areas on which they perform are elevated above the ground where the audience sits, and this situation not only improves visibility for the audience, but it marks the higher status that is accorded the puppeteers during the show. Normally, these elevated platforms exist to mark the importance of the areas occupied by the temple and the village council, but during the show, they signify the power of the puppeteers. At the end of the performance, the Bhats leave these key locations and return to their camps, and the ordinary social structure is restored. Clearly, however, the shifting social position of the Bhats both demonstrates

the fluidity of the caste system and indicates the formation of an anti-structure that differs from the normal social order.

This process, however, functions only on certain symbolic levels because the puppeteers' "power of the weak" exists only in ritual contexts (Turner 1969: 100). Overt and direct power is still held by the ruling parties of the village as they can stop the show and eject the puppeteers if they so choose. This behavior, however, is mediated by the popularity of the performances among villagers and the ritual importance of the Bhats. For example, Ram Niwas informed me that a villager once called for the end of their show because he did not like the content. The rest of the audience, however, shouted down the man, and the program continued as planned (Ram Niwas 2001). Under ritualized circumstances, the Bhats also receive a great deal of respect because of the importance of their profession, and this status further bolsters their authority during shows. For example, the Bhats are honored and treated well by their *jajmans* because of their genealogical services, and their patrons even bestow upon them honorary titles such as "*raja*" or king when they come to perform (Singh 1990: 119). In addition, many puppeteers told me that they hold a great deal of ritual power as they bring prestige to their *jajmans*. For example, Bansilal Bhat said that according to legend, the Bhats always speak the truth, as they are the messengers of the goddess. He also told me that because of the ritual power of their words, the puppeteers' *jajmans* respect and fear their ability to place curses on those who treat them poorly (Bansilal Bhat 2001).

Chapter 3

Traditional Lifestyle and Recent Transformations

Understanding the Bhat's traditional lifestyle and the ways it has changed in recent decades is also essential for comprehending how and why the community and its art have become important for rural development programs. Like other entertainer castes, the Bhat puppeteers traditionally lived in close-knit social units and had a semi-nomadic way of life that revolved around seasonal work. Members of this caste usually lived in extended family units that were led by the eldest male puppeteer. These groups usually consisted of the patriarch, his wife and sons, and any unmarried daughters. Often, the adult sons' families lived in the father's household as well. These social units are called *dera*, and they usually consist of seven to fifteen people. "Two or more families joined together form a *Tola*," and in the past, some puppeteers lived and traveled in these large groups (Singh 1990: 222). In modern times, however, few Bhats live in *tolas*, but the *dera* is still a common social unit. In addition, nuclear family groups have become more popular in urban areas.

Most Bhat families traditionally own small tracts of ancestral land in their villages of origin, which are mostly in the Nagaur and Sikar regions of Rajasthan. This property was often granted to them by their *jajmans* for their services, and many puppeteers also informed me that their families still retain these village lands despite the fact that they now largely live in cities. During the monsoon season, which usually runs from mid June to September in Rajasthan, the Bhats would remain close to home to cultivate their land

(Erdman 1985: 48). They would also visit and recite genealogy for their *jajmans* who normally lived in their villages or in the surrounding areas.

During the rest of the year, the Bhats used to travel across North India to perform puppetry, and this activity generated the bulk of their income. In the winter and after the rainy season, the puppeteers would load all of their possessions onto horses or small wagons and begin their long journey across the rugged terrain of North India. Each day, they traveled for several hours, and in the evening, the group would stop on the roadside near a town or village. There the Bhats would erect tents that were made from wooden poles and fabric, and these encampments were known as *dera* (Kothari 1985: 5). The men would then enter the settlement with their puppets and seek the village headman for permission to perform.

Once approval was granted, the Bhats would begin preparation for the show, and this event almost always followed the same ritualized pattern. First the puppeteers would gather the local children and lead a small procession through the village to advertise the show. As the group made its way through town, they would sing popular folk songs, shout praises of divinities, and announce their intention to perform that evening. The procession would conclude at a central public area such as the temple mount or the *panchayat's* meeting area. There the puppeteers would erect a *tambudi*, which is a stage made of seven bamboo poles and fabric (Kothari 1985: 5). As night fell, they would make two large bonfires or set out lanterns to illuminate the area. Shortly after sundown, the puppeteers would begin with several songs to announce the start of the show, and then they would conduct their *kathputli* play for two or three hours depending on the audience's interest. At various points in the performance, the Bhats would offer praises

of the villagers and the gods to solicit donations of foodstuffs and money. On the following day, they would depart and begin the process again. Many Bhats covered great distances on their performance routes, and several puppeteers told me that in their youth, they had traveled extensively in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. In addition, Harji Bhat proudly informed me that his family had ventured as far as Bengal.

Within the last fifty or sixty years, however, major social and economic changes have swept across North India, and these developments have greatly impacted the puppeteers' ways of life as they have begun to utilize their hereditary occupational skills in new ways. The growing popularity of radio, television, and cinema has caused many people to lose interest in traditional forms of entertainment such as puppetry. In addition, significant changes in the traditional village economic systems have occurred, and thus today fewer people are willing to sponsor the Bhats' shows so they have been forced to seek new forms of employment and patronage in large cities.

Numerous developments have greatly altered the village economic systems that once supported the Bhats, and these processes have had a significant impact on the puppeteers' lives. In the past, the Bhats relied on the *jajmani* system for financial support. This system of patronage revolves around occupational specialization, and it "functions to maintain the Indian village as " self-sufficing community" as it is an economic order that is based upon the reciprocal exchange of goods and services (Kolenda 1981: 290). Settlements would consist of a variety of different castes, and each of these groups performed some type of hereditary work. In addition, most villages often had a dominant caste that held a great deal of social and economic power as they owned the most land or had the largest population in the area. Because these groups controlled

much of the community's productive capacity, they formed the focal point of the village's economic structure as they supported and employed the services of many different groups. The dominant castes, however, did not monopolize social influence as the various occupational groups "have some power due to the necessity of their caste functions" (Kolenda 1981: 292). In addition, low ranked castes such as the Meghwals often enhanced their prestige by serving as *jajmans* for other castes such as the Tori Bhats. Thus in this system, social groups simultaneously provide goods and services for their patrons while acting as *jajmans* for still other castes. The puppeteers' situation, however, was somewhat unusual because they served two types of patrons as their *jajmans* supported them for their genealogical work and they received largesse from all members of the communities in which they performed.

The reciprocal relationships upon which the *jajmani* system is based have begun to disintegrate for a variety of reasons, and these changes have greatly impacted the Bhats' lives and work. For example, these developments have been marked by "the decline of occupational specialties, increasing use of money, [and] growth of factionalism" (Kolenda 1981: 286). In addition, populations have increased dramatically during this century, and "population pressure is leading to sub-division of land and agricultural inefficiency as well as an increased demand on a fixed land supply" (Kolenda 1981: 309). Because of these stresses, many communities are no longer willing to sponsor puppetry performances as they once did. For example, Prem Bhat and Puran Bhat stated that their families had stopped traveling and settled in the cities between 40 and 60 years ago because no work or support existed in rural areas.

Like these two families, the majority of Bhats have moved to cities because more opportunities exist there, and during this time many puppeteers have been able to earn respectable salaries and maintain some aspects of their traveling lifestyles. For example, many puppeteers have become involved with cultural preservation organizations such as Rupayan Sansthan and Lok Kala Mandal, and these institutes have allowed the Bhats and other entertainers to travel throughout India and overseas to demonstrate their art. In fact, most of the puppeteers I interviewed had been abroad, and Puran Bhat informed me that he had visited nearly forty countries. Because of these organizations, the puppeteers also gained the opportunity to perform for new audiences such as wealthy élites and notable politicians. For example, Bansilal Bhat boasted of performing for celebrities at the ritzy Lake Palace Hotel in Udaipur, and Mohan Bhat proudly showed me photographs of himself with Indira and Rajiv Gandhi.

As a result of this transition, the puppeteers have found new types of employment and patronage as they have become integrated into the development and tourist industries. Most Bhats continue to perform their family's hereditary occupation, but the new circumstances in which they live have led to dramatic changes in their profession. For example, the majority have been hired on occasion to use their puppetry skills to create skits for educational programs in rural areas. The Bhats informed me that government and NGO agents contract them to complete several such performances. Puppeteers, however, are not the only community hired by these agencies as they employ people from a variety of castes that have performance skills, but the majority are from entertainer communities such as singers, drummers, dramatists, and puppeteers. Often, the organizations offer contracted performers additional training in a wide variety of arts

to augment their skills and provide them with the versatility to participate in all aspects of the development shows. For example, many Bhats have received extensive instruction in song, drama, and musical instruments. In addition, their new patrons have trained them to make and use new types of rod and glove puppets because they are often cheaper and better than the traditional *kathputli* marionettes for educational shows. Most of the performers I met told me that they would travel to different cities and take jobs with various development organizations because their new skills were useful to numerous different groups. Thus, many Bhats have now become part of a new social group of freelance development educators that has emerged in North India in recent decades.

This work, however, does not provide enough money for survival because it is quite sporadic, and thus nearly all of the Bhats with whom I spoke had contracts with various handicraft shops and hotels to make puppets and to stage performances for both domestic and foreign tourists. These shows are extremely abbreviated versions of traditional ones, and they usually last only fifteen to thirty minutes. After the performance, the puppeteers attempt to sell stuffed animal dolls and cheap puppets to the audience members, and from this activity, they earn the majority of their income. In addition, the Bhats also acquire contracts to work for handicraft emporiums, and they manufacture large quantities of cheap nonfunctional *kathputlies* that the shops sell to tourists. Many like Prem Bhat, however, prefer to sell puppets on the roadside or at performances because the handicraft dealers give them “the price of garbage” (Prem Bhat 2000). Also, numerous puppeteers have been forced to sell the old hereditary *kathputlies* made by their ancestors. In the past, however, few would have ever taken this course of action as their income was based on performance. In addition, selling *kathputlies* was

once rare because, for the puppeteers, these figures are imbued with symbolic and metonymical significance, as they are manifestations of the divine.

The dramatic changes in lifestyle that the Bhats have experienced have also led many of them to adopt new work that was not common in the past. For example, the Bhats now live in sprawling slums that are known as entertainer colonies, and these areas are inhabited by numerous different performer castes like singers, dancers, acrobats, and magicians. Because of their close proximity, these communities are now sharing their skills to improve their opportunities for employment. For example, many Bhats informed me that they have adopted the Punjabi drumming and dancing art, *bhangra*, because of its popularity at weddings and other celebratory events. In addition, several puppeteers said that they run small bands that perform on festive occasions, and Vijay Bhat, who is a Hindu, told me that he even sings *qawwali*, which is traditionally a Muslim musical art form.

Part II

The Art of the Puppetry

In North Indian society, the *kathputli* tradition is a complex performing art as it is deeply encoded with symbolic significance, and these qualities give puppetry a special efficacy for communication. The art form has a long history, and a great deal of religious ideology surrounds it as the puppets are viewed as manifestations of *bhawani* or the goddess. Puppets thus serve as metonyms for the divine and liminars that straddle the line between the living and the inanimate. Because of these qualities, *kathputlies* are capable of doing and saying things that live actors cannot, and this trait contributes to what many of my interviewees called “the power of puppetry” (Puran Bhat 2001). In addition, Rajasthan’s *kathputli* tradition is unique in that the Bhats perform only one story, which is known as *Amar Singh Rathore ka Khel*, or The Play of Amar Singh Rathore. On the surface, this show seems quite mundane, but in reality it expresses complex social commentaries. All of these traits combine to give this folk art great power for communication.

Chapter 4

The Traditional *Kathputli* Performance

For centuries, the Rajasthani puppet show has retained the same simple structure that combines lively movement and music to captivate the audience, and this format has led in part to the art form's enduring popularity. Unfortunately, however, I was unable to actually see a complete traditional performance, but I have tried to recreate the events of a "typical" *kathputli* play based on the descriptions from my informants and the abbreviated versions that I witnessed. The shows are quite informal and take place in public areas like the village square, and they usually begin shortly after sundown. Normally lanterns or bonfires illuminate the stage, and the audience is seated on the ground. Traditional performances begin with a *Ganpat* prayer song to Ganesh, the remover of obstacles and the god of auspicious beginnings, and thus the events are ritually framed so that they command the attention of the audience (Prem Bhat 2000).

Afterwards, the puppeteers begin their show, which almost always revolves around the life of the great Rajput hero Amar Singh Rathore. The story's central character is actually a historical figure, but his life has become somewhat embellished and taken on numerous mythical and political themes throughout the years. In reality, Amar Singh was the son of Jaswant Singh I, who was the Maharaja of Marwar from 1638-1678 (Singh 2002). After being exiled from his homeland, Rathore served the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan and became the ruler of the Nagaur District. His career, however, was cut short by a dispute in the Mughal court in which he was killed by imperial soldiers. Over the centuries, this story has taken on numerous mythological

elements, and most Bhats have their own particular variation of the tale. Each informed me that his rendition was the “authentic *Amar Singh Rathore ka khel*,” and that anyone who told me anything different was a fool. I found, however, that the majority of the stories possessed the same basic features, and thus I will retell the one that I heard from Kanahya Lal Bhat because his was one of the most elaborate.

According to myth, Amar Singh was exiled from Marwar because he defied his father and refused to slay an infamous but honorable bandit he had apprehended. The prince then entered the service of Shah Jahan and gained a great reputation for his dedication and bravery. Consequently, the Mughal Emperor became quite fond of Amar Singh and named him Maharaja of Nagaur. In addition, he often invited the Rajput lord to go hunting with him in the land of Hada. On one trip, Amar Singh was riding his magical horse Naulakh through the region, and he decided to stop in the capital to rest. As he approached the palace, his horse thundered across the desert like an entire army, and the dust and noise he created startled the guards. Out of fear, they locked the gates and refused to open them despite Rathore’s requests. This insult enraged Amar Singh, and he and his mount leapt into one of the palace’s upper rooms. The brave warrior entered with his sword aloft to strike down those who had insulted his honor, but his temper was assuaged by the beauty of the princess, Hada Rajkumari, into whose room he had ridden. The Rajput immediately asked the King of Hada for his daughter’s hand in marriage, and he agreed. Amar Singh then sent word to Shah Jahan of his decision, and the emperor granted him seven days to complete the ceremonies, as his presence was needed at the court. Because of delays, however, fourteen days passed, and the Emperor received no word from Rathore.

Meanwhile, Shah Jahan's brother-in-law, Salawat Khan, who was jealous of Amar Singh's fame, convinced the Mughal lord that his servant was deliberately defying him. Thus, Shah Jahan sent word that the Rajput lord had to pay a tremendous fine for his insubordination. Amar Singh refused, and when he returned to the Emperor's court, he struck off Salawat Khan's head in front of the Shah Jahan. The Emperor was furious and ordered his guards to slay the murderer, but Amar Singh mounted his magical horse and rode over the walls of Agra fort to safety. Intent on eliminating this defiant Rajput, Shah Jahan placed an immense bounty on his head, and one day a Hindu monarch from the east named Arjun Gaur approached him. This Bengali king was the brother of Amar Singh's first wife, and he was enraged that Rathore had taken another bride to replace her. Thus Arjun set out for Nagaur, and through his deceptions, he convinced Amar Singh to return to Agra. Upon reaching the fortress, the two men had to pass through a small gate, and because the Rajput lord refused to bow his head in the direction of the Emperor, he had to step through the opening in a way that turned his back to Gaur. At this point, the Bengali king stabbed Amar Singh with a concealed knife, but before Rathore died, he sliced off Arjun's nose with his magical sword.

Upon hearing of these events, the Emperor ordered his guards to seize Amar Singh's body so that it could not be cremated, and he had Arjun Gaur killed for his cowardice and treachery. Amar Singh's family was quite distraught over these sorrowful events, and Hada Rani began to gather an army to retrieve her husband's body so that it could be cremated properly. One man who enlisted to help the queen was a Muslim named Narshevaaj Khan Pathan, who Amar Singh had saved from death many years earlier when Pathan had been injured and collapsed in the desert. The Rajput lord and his

entourage had found him while hunting, and the nobles said that Narshevaaj should be left to die because he was a Muslim, and his life was worthless. Amar Singh, however, ignored them and stated that as a ruler, his duty was to protect the lives of all of his subjects, and thus he bandaged Pathan's wounds and gave him water. Narshevaaj then vowed that he would repay that cup of water with one of his own blood. Upon hearing of Amar Singh's murder, he immediately agreed to help Hada Rani and avenge his friend's death. Shortly thereafter, the queen's army left for Agra, and after a fierce battle, they returned to Nagaur with the Rajput lord's body. Then his remains were cremated, and Hada Rani immolated herself and became a *sati* out of her devotion.

Despite the complexity of this story, the puppet play's actual plot is rendered secondary so that it "provides a 'frame'" for numerous stock scenes that involve a variety of characters like musicians, dancers, and snake charmers (Kothari 1985: 2). In fact, the narrative about the Amar Singh's deeds accounts for only about 15 minutes of the two to three-hour-long performance. During a play, one or two male puppeteers use nearly invisible black strings that are tied to their fingers to manipulate the 12 to 24 inch tall *kathputlies*, and between two and four figures are usually in motion at one time. Often, however, numerous inactive puppets hang along the *tibera*, which is the black backdrop of the stage (Kothari 1985: 5). These figures remain stationary until their part in the show arrives, and then they leap into motion. In the play, the *lag kathputlies* perform most of the action that entertains the audience as these figures represent stock characters from the servant castes. Also, they are the most complex puppets because they have numerous moving parts and controls. In contrast, the puppets that are used to represent the various personalities from the story of Amar Singh are known as *kacharaki*

kathputlies. These figures are highly decorated, and they have few moving parts because during much of the show they remain inactive. In fact, most of these royal puppets simply hang in the background, and their positioning frames the foreground actions, which are made to appear as if they occur at the *darbar* or the Emperor's court. All of the *kathputlies* wear long flowing garments common in the medieval court, and their turbans are replicas of actual ones from various regions in North India. Also, facial hair is a distinguishing symbolic feature for the male puppets as large black beards are used to mark Muslim characters such as Shah Jahan and Salawat Khan, while Hindus like Amar Singh sport elaborate moustaches and sideburns.

During the show, one or two people, usually women, sit beside the stage and sing and play the *dholak* drum and harmonium. These individuals often use traditional songs that are known by the audience members, which encourages their participation in the performance (Prem Bhat 2000). The music is almost always unrelated to the events of the play and is drawn from "ceremonial songs regarding childbirth, marriage, and other occasions" (Kothari 1985: 7). Occasionally, however, the women will combine new lyrics with a traditional tune and use this hybrid song in their performances instead.

The puppeteers and the musicians work together to create a united rhythm of movement and sound that gives a life and voice to the puppets and keeps the audience's attention for the duration of the show. To express the emotions and events of the drama, Rajasthani puppetry relies more heavily on this combination of music and action than on dialogue. Over the centuries, the Bhats have developed a large and highly complex vocabulary of movement so that they can replicate nearly any aspect of the human experience. For example, "anger is shown by a quick jerk of the puppet done with a

slight movement of the hand,” and “laughter is shown by jerking the puppet in such a way that the shoulders make quick upward and downward movements” (Samar 1960: 67). During most of the show, the puppets dance around the stage and respond to the singers through the shrill cries of the *boli*, which is a small reed whistle. This device is used to create the *kathputlies*’ voices and to coordinate the actions of the puppets and the music (Prem Bhat 2001).

Chapter 5

Discourse and Marginality in the Traditional Puppet Show

In the Amar Singh Rathore play, both the frame story that chronicles the Rajput ruler's life and the stock performances that divide the narrative express values and themes that demonstrate the importance of puppetry as a mode of social commentary. Traditionally, the primary theme of the show was a critique of Hindu and Muslim interaction as the narrative illustrated the complex interrelationships that existed, and usually it emphasized aspects of syncretism rather than those of conflict (Kothari: 2001). For example, Amar Singh leaves his father and serves the Mughals loyally for many years. In addition, the Rajput lord's most trusted friend is Pathan, a Muslim character, and these traits demonstrate the close social and political ties that existed among people of the two religions. In recent decades, however, the story of Amar Singh Rathore has taken on numerous Hindu Nationalist overtones. For example, many modern puppeteers tend to downplay the friendship between the Hindu Rathore and the Muslim Pathan. In addition, they often ignore the fact that Amar Singh served the Mughals loyally for many years, and was eventually betrayed by a Hindu (Kothari 2001). Instead, most Bhats now stress the part of the story in which Rathore defies his Muslim rulers and is killed in defense of his honor because these ideals are a crucial element of the Rajput ethos that values duty, honor, valor, and sacrifice.

Many of the extensive stock scenes that are performed by the lively *lag kathputlies* also demonstrate elements of social commentary, and thus these skits make critiques from the margins of the narrative much like the Bhats do from the fringes of

society. For example, the stock scene about Pilpili Sahib portrays a British army officer who is leading his platoon on parade, thus providing a social commentary on how many English treated Indians as second-class citizens. During the skit, the officer decides to hire a servant and “invites [on stage] a boy from the audience who is ready to serve him” (Kothari 1985: 3). To the delight of the viewers, Pilpili Sahib asks the volunteer several humorous questions and makes him perform ridiculous actions to embarrass him. Despite the fact that the skit is performed in a good-natured fashion that is not intended to hurt the participant’s feelings, this episode does provide insight into many people’s resentment and contempt for their colonial rulers.

Another common skit that involves specialized puppets depicts a story about *bahurupia* and “the game of imposter,” and this segment provides a critique on the rigid sexual mores that govern Rajasthani society (Kothari 1985: 3). In this episode, an usher from the servant castes becomes enchanted with a beautiful woman, but as he attempts to win her affection, she suddenly becomes a man. The imposter puppet switches genders numerous times during the skit and frustrates the usher until he finally abandons his quest for love. To create the transformation effect, the Bhats use a *kathputli* that has a male face on one side and a female one on the other. As one puppeteer suggested to me, this skit deals with the complex rules of sexual behavior in Rajasthan. This theory is quite plausible because Rajasthani folk traditions have produced numerous risqué songs, stories, and dramas.

The characters used in these skits are all *lag kathputlies* that represent people from the lower castes, and thus the reality of the social structure is recreated in the play as those at the margins make critiques of society much like the Bhats do in real life. For

example, the upper caste nobles whose ideas and values govern society serve as a somewhat distant and removed frame story as the different episodes of the play take place in the Emperor's court, represented by the *kacharaki kathputlies* that hang in the background. Ironically, however, the emphasis is not on the actions of the elite, but rather attention is focused upon the low status characters. Thus in the play, the upper castes are actually subordinated by the socially marginal figures in terms of importance for the performance, and this phenomenon is itself a powerful critique of society as it demonstrates whose actions really matter in the daily lives of most people.

Chapter 6

Liminality, Metonymy, and the *Kathputli* Tradition

The performance itself is not the only aspect of the Rajasthani *kathputli* tradition that is steeped in symbolic significance, as a vast body of mythology and ritual practice revolves around the puppets, and they are imbued with tremendous religious importance. According to traditional thought among the Bhats, the *kathputlies* are not merely “wooden dolls” as their name implies, but rather, they are seen as manifestations of the divine. For example, Kanahya Lal Bhat informed me that the Bhats first adopted puppetry after they were granted a magical boon from the legendary King Vikramaditya. Because of this ruler’s righteousness, the gods had given him a throne, which was decorated with 32 magical figures that had the power to come alive and advise the king. One day Vikramaditya decided that he should share this great gift with all of humanity, and he commanded the Bhats, who he knew to be excellent performers, to make copies of the figures and travel throughout the land spreading their wisdom to the masses (Kanahya Lal Bhat 2001). This origin story was not the only one I heard, but it clearly demonstrates the connection between the *kathputlies* and the sacred realm as their very origins intimately link them with legendary beings.

A great deal of mythology surrounds these figures, as for most puppeteers the *kathputlies* are manifestations of the goddess, and hence they are treated much like the *murtis* or sacred images of temples and shrines. Also, numerous ceremonies are associated with their construction, use, and disposal. For the Bhats, the *kathputlies* are liminal beings because they are manifestations of both the mundane and the divine. The

figures are made of simple profane objects like wood and cloth, but they also have religious significance as they represent the goddess. For example, to carve a puppet, a person must hold the wood in place with his feet and then shear off pieces with a small hatchet. Later, details are added with a knife through a similar process. According to Indian thought, however, the feet are quite polluted because they touch the ground, and thus it is a great insult to place your foot on other people or valuable objects. In fact, striking someone with a shoe is considered to be one of the most serious insults possible. Because of this tradition, Prem Bhat stated that after he carves the puppets, he performs a *puja* or worship ceremony for them and offers them sweets to apologize for having touched them with his feet. Out of curiosity, I asked Prem if he undertook these actions for both the high-quality puppets that he carved for his own personal use and the ones made for retail, and he informed me that for him, they were all the same in this regard.

The Bhats also have rituals that are associated with the *kathputlies*' disposal, and these ceremonies further demonstrate how the puppets are seen as liminal beings that are simultaneously mundane and divine. According to tradition, the puppets are not to be sold as they are passed down through the male line. Each succeeding puppeteer places a new set of clothes over those made by his ancestors to mark the transfer, and thus, over time, numerous layers of clothing accumulate on the *kathputlies*. In fact, Prem Bhat showed me several of his antique family puppets that dated back three or four generations. He told me that he took great pride in them and that puppeteers use this tradition to pay respect to their forefathers (Prem Bhat 2000). This process continues as long as the *kathputlies* remain intact and functional, but on occasion, some puppets inevitably become damaged beyond repair. Because of its sacred status, the Bhats cannot

simply discard the broken puppet. Thus they ceremoniously place it in a river, and the *kathputli* is “allowed to flow with the stream back to its celestial home” (Samar 1960: 68). A similar ritual exists for the disposal of *murtis*. In addition, when an extremely young child dies, the body is not cremated like that of an adult, but rather, the remains are placed in a river like those of the puppet. As this ritual demonstrates, the *kathputlies* are also viewed as liminal on another ontological level as the Bhats recognize them as living beings in one sense and inanimate objects in another.

For both the puppeteers and spectators, traditional *kathputlies* are also seen as liminars that exist “neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification,” and this trait gives the art form a special potency in communication (Turner 1974: 232). For the Bhats, puppetry exists in a liminal state because the art creates a “double-vision” of the *kathputlies* in which they are seen to be both inanimate objects and living beings (Tillis 1992: 59). For example, the puppeteers all treated the *kathputlies* as objects when they were not in use as they stored them in large boxes or bags and sold many for profit. In contrast, many Bhats told me myths about the puppets, which demonstrated that on an ideological level, they perceived them as living beings capable of action on their own volition. For example, Bansilal Bhat recounted how a family of Bhats that went to perform at a haunted village was saved by their *kathputlies*. One day while traveling, the puppeteers were invited to perform by the residents of a village. Unbeknownst to the Bhats, everyone in the region had been killed by a plague several months earlier, and it was actually the ghosts of the dead villagers who had invited them to perform. During the show, the puppeteers noticed that the people behaved strangely as they were unresponsive to all of the jokes, skits, and songs. Near

the end, one Bhat realized that the audience members' feet were backwards, and he knew this trait was a telltale marking of malevolent spirits. Thus the Bhats fled the area, and amazingly they were able to escape without harm. When the puppeteers returned the next day, they found the Amar Singh and Narshevaaj Pathan puppets in the center of the village, and they realized that the *kathputlies* had battled the ghosts to cover their escape.

Many of the Bhats' rituals also demonstrate the liminal status of the puppets as they are infused with life despite being objects (Turner 1974: 232). For example, several puppeteers said that after a young male reaches the appropriate age to begin performing, he makes an entire set of new *kathputlies* for himself. The youth then uses the puppets in seven shows and saves all proceeds from these events. After the final performance, the young puppeteer spends all of this money on a *puja* and sacrifice to the goddess. The ceremony strongly resembles one used to mark the soul's arrival into the human body on the sixth night after the birth of a new child, as both mark the initiation of beings into a new social status. In the case of the puppets, both the young Bhat and the *kathputlies* receive a new social position as they are recognized as complete beings.

Several puppeteers like Prem, Mohan, and Bhanwar Lal Bhat informed me that for them all of the puppets are sacred and that they perform their ceremonies even for the cheap ones that are made solely for retail. They also said that they felt that "selling the *kathputlies* is not right," but it had to be done for survival (Kanahya Lal Bhat 2001). Initially, the Bhats' perception of both types of puppets as being divine seemed rather paradoxical to me because I rarely ever associate business with religion, and thus I asked many of the puppeteers to explain this situation. Budha Bhat stated "When a farmer harvests rice in his fields, he puts some rice aside for the goddess, and some of it he eats.

But it is all rice, and it is all part of god” (Budha Bhat 2001). This statement clarified their views of the *kathputlies* as it demonstrated that they saw no contradiction between the mundane and the divine in their puppets. Thus the Bhats viewed them as liminars that existed “betwixt and between” what I considered to be mutually exclusive categories of being (Turner 1974: 232).

The ontological view of puppets as liminars also exists for the spectators because during performances “the audience can acknowledge the puppet as either inanimate doll or living being” (Tillis 1992: 59). For example, when a puppet is immobile such as before and after shows, people perceive them as objects. During a play, however, “the audience sees the puppet, through perception and through imagination, as an object and as a life; that is it sees the puppet in two ways at once” (Tillis 1992: 64). The *kathputlies* cause the audience to imagine their status as animate beings through three abstracted sign-systems that connote life (Tillis 1992: 113). The first group of signs is the design appearance of the *kathputlies* as they are depicted as stylized human beings whose anthropomorphic form makes them appear alive. In addition, both actual and perceived movement plays a key role in establishing the liminal status of the puppet for the audience. For example, the *kathputlies* appear to dance about on their own free will because the puppeteers are completely hidden by the stage. Thus they move as if they were living beings. Also, the shadows cast by the fires and lanterns that light the shows allow the audience to imagine movement, and this process lends the *kathputlies* a lifelike quality. Through this sign-system, the puppeteers bring “into juxtaposition the real and imaginary, endowing each with equal plausibility” as lifeless puppets hang from the back of the stage while others dance and whirl in the foreground (Tillis 1992: 37). In

addition, the puppets possess one other major sign-system that makes them appear to be living beings rather than inanimate objects. This system is speech as the characters communicate with one another and the audience. In the Rajasthani tradition, however, the *kathputlies*' language is highly abstracted through the use of the *boli* whistle. Thus their unintelligible speech places them in a liminal position as they talk like humans but communicate in a language that is quite different. Like the sign-system of movement, speech also combines the imaginary and the real to emphasize the liminal nature of the puppets as the shrill *boli* is contrasted with the narrator's and singers' voices during the shows. Thus, the liminal status of puppetry is created as the art form "pleasurably challenges its audience to consider fundamental questions of what it means to be an object and what it means to have life" (Tillis 1992: 10).

These two ways of understanding the *kathputlies*' nature, however, are not universal and unwavering for all situations, as people perceive puppets on different levels at different times. For example, the symbolism of life that operates during performances is incomplete, and "the audience is required to add in some way, to the deployed signs, so that they might imagine the object to have life" (Tillis 1992: 116). Also, everyone with whom I spoke acknowledged that in one sense, the *kathputlies* are only objects, and virtually no one would ever confuse them with a real person. Thus, people perceive the difference between animate and inanimate on a practical level, but humans handle this contrast quite differently in symbolic and religious terms based on their cultural experience (Turner 1969: 3). For example, in Rajasthani society, the puppet is surrounded by a great deal of mythology and ideology which makes it a highly-charged sign that is both metonymical and liminal in nature, and these qualities give the art great

power for communication (Turner 1969: 47). In part because of its cultural significance in the context of North India, many government agencies and NGOs have adopted the art form for rural development education.

The *kathputli* tradition also serves as a powerful metonym for the divine, and this quality imbues the art with great symbolic importance and gives it significant power for communication. Metonyms are often used to symbolize religious ideas, and the puppets perform this function for both the puppeteers and the members of the audience (Lakoff 1980: 40). For the Bhats, the *kathputlies* “have a referential function” as during rituals, these objects “stand for” the goddess much like the *murtis* that are found in temples and shrines (Lakoff 1980: 36). For example, most puppeteers informed me that they try to perform a sacrifice for the *kathputlies* at least once a year. In this ceremony, the Bhats purchase a goat or chicken, depending on their financial status, and then they sacrifice it. During the ritual, the puppets are displayed in a row, and then the patriarch of the family, uses his right thumb to mark each *kathputli*'s forehead with the animal's blood. Through this action, the puppeteer imbues the figure with religious significance as he transfers life from the goat to the puppet. The sacrifice also marks the puppeteers' “giving part of themselves” to the divine as they relinquish a great deal to cover the cost of the event (Firth 1973: 180). This transference of life from the puppeteer to the *kathputli* is even more apparent in the stories that Mohan Lal Bhat told me. He stated that if he does not have sufficient money to purchase an animal for sacrifice, he will cut his finger and use his own blood (Mohan Bhat 2001). In fact, Mohan proudly showed me the remains of his dried blood on the foreheads of several of his puppets. Also during performances, the puppeteers use a *kathputli* that is a representation of Krishna to solicit donations from the

audience by praising them and asking them to be generous in the name of god. Thus people give to the Bhats because this figure represents more than a talking puppet as its voice signifies the word of the divine.

Puppetry also serves as a metonym for the relationship between mankind and the divine, and this symbolic understanding of the art further imbues it with ideological significance. According Hindu religious thought, a person's lot in life is greatly influenced by unseen external forces that are beyond human control, such as divinities, spirits, and karma. Similarly, the *kathputlies* are manipulated by invisible masters who give them life. This way of conceiving puppets is in fact quite ancient, and references to the art form appear in many religious texts. For example, in the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna says “God dwells in thy heart. And His power of wonder moves all things—puppets in a play of shadows—whirling them onwards on the stream of time” (Awasthi 1983: 93). This fact attests to puppetry's special place in Indian thought. The relationships between god and man and puppet and puppeteer, however, are not identical as the divine actually gives life to human beings. In contrast, the Bhats only imbue their *kathputlies* with lifelike qualities that are imaged by the audience. Thus the puppet metonyms “hide... aspects of the concept” they elucidate as they cover up the fact that the puppets are not alive (Lakoff 1980: 10). The ontological association between man and puppet, however, is important in the communication aspect of the art form because “the knowledge that human life is itself regularly, if not always, subject to control lends the [metonym] of the puppet its peculiar power. We see ourselves in the puppet because we are all too well aware that our freedom of action is circumscribed by external forces” (Tillis 1992: 164).

Thus these associations allow the audience to relate to the puppet in ways that are quite different from the manner in which they perceive live actors on stage.

Part III

Puppet Drama and Developmental Education

In the last fifty years, traditional performing arts such as puppetry have become extremely popular methods of informal education in Northern India because of the powerful socio-cultural signs and ideas linked with them. Most of these development programs are framed in terms of traditional artistic shows, and they often employ members of performing communities such as the Nats and Bhats to convey their ideas. By packaging their messages as folk performances, development agencies incorporate the attributes of traditional shows to render their audiences receptive to their new programs. In addition, these organizations are relying on the metonymical and liminal properties of the *kathputli* tradition to convey controversial ideas and inspire dramatic behavioral changes.

During the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed the performances of two separate groups of development artists in different rural villages around Udaipur, Rajasthan. Both of these shows were conducted by an institute called Lok Kala Mandal, and thus they were quite similar to each other. I, however, did talk to artists and administrators from other organizations, and I asked them to tell me what a typical show was like for their institutions. Overall, their descriptions essentially mirrored the programs that I witnessed, and thus I believe that Lok Kala Mandal's performances are fairly representative of most informal education shows. My description of these events is a composite of what I saw and what I was told by my other informants.

Chapter 7

The Development Education Show

To better communicate information to their audiences, government agencies and NGOs attempt to structure their shows so that they resemble those of traditional semi-nomadic artists like the Bhats. In the late afternoon, the performers begin the journey to their destination by bus, and they play spirited music as they enter the village. The group then proceeds to the heart of the settlement to seek out the headman and ask permission to stage the show. After approval is given, the artists split into two main groups, and the smaller one, which usually consists of five to seven people, sets up the lights and stage equipment. Meanwhile, the other group begins a procession that winds through the village lanes as the members sing modified folk songs and chant slogans to encourage people to attend the show. In addition, the artists invite the village children to join, and the group dances and sings for about an hour before the performers stop to prepare themselves for the show. Around sunset, the spectacle begins, and the audience sits on the ground in darkness while the artists perform on the temple mount or the *panchayat*'s area, which is lit with large portable floodlights.

Generally, the shows follow a set pattern that develops the plot of the central story through a combination of song and dance skits, puppetry, and live drama, and thus these programs are quite similar to traditional performances like the Amar Singh Rathore play. The artists begin with several songs and slogans that praise the divine and frame the event as an important occasion. Then, they sing modified folk songs that retain the traditional beat and melody but substitute new lyrics related to the topic of the show. For

example, the ones I heard concerned pre-natal care and water conservation. After about thirty minutes, the artists perform a puppetry skit that provides a more rigorous and in-depth introduction to the subject. For example, the puppet shows often tell stories in which one character heeds the advice of the development agency and prospers while his/her foil ignores the message and suffers greatly because of his/her refusal to change. One play I saw involved two women, and one character sought proper pre-natal care while the other continued to see the village medicine man. The wise woman had healthy children who were able to play with the others and enjoy life, while the obstinate one gave birth to sickly infants who barely survived. In the programs I saw, glove and rod puppets were used rather than traditional marionettes, but these new figures demonstrated obvious artistic links to the old *kathputli* forms.

After the initial puppet show, which usually lasted twenty to thirty minutes, more song and dance routines were performed, and these were followed by other types of displays. Usually, at least one more puppet show occurred, and then a longer drama, referred to as a “street play,” was staged (Kapil Dev 2001). This final segment usually lasted about forty-five minutes, and the story was interspersed with various song and dance routines so that it was not a continuous narrative. This format is quite similar to the one used both in folk performances like *Amar Singh Rathore ka khel* and in large-scale motion pictures, and thus it shows the continuity of the entertainment style throughout Indian society. The “street plays” told a story that was similar to the one recounted by the puppets as it employed humor and music to entertain the audience while they were exposed to the organization’s messages. Normally, the entire program officially concluded around eleven at night, but the artists would sometimes be invited to

stay afterwards to sing their songs and dance. After everyone had grown tired, the performers would pack up their materials and file onto the bus to return to the city.

Chapter 8

Communication and the Social Order

To facilitate the education process, many government agencies and NGOs employ traditional artists like the Bhats, who because of their a low social standing are subject to fewer restrictions, and hence their actions can be more pliable. For example, the puppeteers are technically outside of the caste hierarchy because they are categorized as a scheduled caste. Thus, they exist at the fringes of the social order and are not held to the same behavioral standards of the upper castes so they can make controversial statements and deal with risqué subjects in their shows. For example, discussing sexual behavior in a performance is acceptable for folk artists, and these themes are in fact quite common in many Rajasthani musical traditions. Also, semi-nomadic entertainer communities like the Bhats have few ties to the villages in which they perform, and thus they can make potentially volatile statements without fear of long-term alienation. Because the Bhats are a low-caste community with the “ritual authority” to make critiques of society, their superiors “must accept with good will their ritual degradation” (Turner 1969: 167). This phenomenon is demonstrated by the fact that for centuries, the Bhats have been performing shows that criticize various aspects of society. Thus the “powers of the weak,” which are held by the puppeteers, are an important element in developmental education programs because folk artists can make controversial statements by virtue of their low social position and occupation (Turner 1969: 109).

The freedoms associated with their low status, however, do not always allow the puppeteers to perform with impunity as some audiences may reject the performers’

“discursive authority” precisely because of their low caste (Barber 1997: 14). For example, Ram Niwas, who is a development artist from a scheduled caste, informed me that some people had refused to watch his organization’s shows because he was a *dalit* and had no business standing on the temple mount and telling the audience how to live (Ram Niwas 2001). In addition, Kapil Dev informed me that, his troop of entertainers had been chased out of one Delhi slum because local drug lords would not tolerate their skits, which condemned the use of narcotics.

For the upper caste and upper class philanthropists and government officials who often operate development institutes, low status entertainer communities like the Bhats serve as an important link that connects them with the largely lower class and lower caste audiences they target. Folk artists are more accepted by audiences because caste and status tensions between the performers and the spectators are not as strong. For example, Varun Narain, who came from a wealthy upper caste household, told me that when he and his Delhiite associates went to do performances in rural areas, he found that the audience often did not relate to them because their behavior, speech, and clothing were somewhat awkward in the village setting. In addition, he argued that some educators looked down upon their audiences, and this phenomenon created a barrier to education (Narain 2001). For example, Varun said that he had once seen a disastrous program in which a team of doctors went to educate sex workers about STDs, but the two groups merely became angry at each other because of the physicians’ lack of respect for their audience. Thus little was learned, and the event was largely a failure. Varun suggested that many of these difficulties could be avoided if people with a cultural background similar to that of the audience were employed because the educators would be in the

same context as the spectators. Thus the groups could better relate to and learn from one other (Narain 2001).

Traditional entertainer communities like the Bhats, however, are not exploited by development organizations solely because of their low social status, as their knowledge of performance and the respect that is accorded to them during shows are also harnessed in the education process. Because of urbanization, the puppeteers are often skilled in multiple art forms such as song, dance, acting, and puppetry, and thus NGOs and government agencies are able to quickly refine their abilities with brief training programs and then send them out to perform. In addition, people from lower caste and rural backgrounds often speak the dialects of the various regions and hence are able to communicate more clearly with the local people. These skills make artist communities extremely valuable in the informal education field. In addition, development organizations utilize folk artists to frame their shows in a traditional context that will be accepted by audiences. This process negotiates the social rifts that exist between those who create the program's message and those who are expected to assimilate it.

These high status government agencies and NGOs also attempt to justify and validate their messages by linking this new material to the traditional symbolic forms of music and drama that are commonplace among rural peoples (Firth 1973: 86). Through this process, the audience becomes more accepting of the presentation as they associate it with their own culture and lifestyle. In addition, framing development shows as traditional performances places them in a ritual context that is popular and understandable to the spectators, thus facilitating communication (Barber 1997: 1, 2). In short, educational programs use traditional village narratives and stories to convey new

ideals concerning proper behavior and good values. For example, one show performed by the Communication Team at the SWRC in Tilonia told the true story of a poor farmer who was manipulated and murdered by an upper caste man for his land. The play was filled with numerous popular stereotypical characters like the annoying neighbor, the greedy money lender, and the corrupt police official, but it expressed values that are often absent in many folk tales as it encouraged the oppressed to stand up for their rights and fight for respect. In addition, I saw other shows that used folk stories with stock characters and scenes to promote small families and inform people about the value of formal education.

During folk performances like the Amar Singh Rathore *kathputli* play, a powerful sense of anti-structure develops as many elements of the normal social order are reversed, and by framing development programs as traditional shows, NGOs and government agencies capitalize on this phenomenon to facilitate the education process. For example in traditional performances, numerous temporary inversions of power, influence, and status occur as people who are largely considered to be on the fringes of society move to the forefront and become the center of attention. Thus the formation of anti-structure allows the entertainers' voices to be heard, and this process causes the normal social order to dissipate somewhat. Modern development programs deploy similar structural inversions and role reversals, which allow for a temporary "abeyance" of the social order (Turner 1969: 103). For example, Ram Niwas, who is a *dalit*, informed me that he is allowed to perform on the temple mount. In addition, he speaks directly to the audience and encourages them to change their lifestyles. Under normal circumstances, however, this type of behavior would not be tolerated in many rural areas because of his low caste

status. Also, the programs that I saw overtly mocked long-standing and important village traditions as the artists presented ridiculous caricatures of medicine men. For example, in one show, the faith healer made bizarre noises at random times and went into hilarious, exaggerated convulsions during a séance, much to the delight of the audience. Medicine men, however, are quite powerful and well respected by many rural people, but because of the potential suspension of ordinary social structure during performances, a space is created where they can be mocked without threat of social sanctions.

The temporary state of anti-structure that is created in educational shows, however, does retain elements of the normal social order. For example, Lok Kala Mandal's education team continued to preserve basic elements of the caste hierarchy during its shows as a Brahmin man named Jagdish was the leader of a group of largely lower caste artists. In addition, he served as the primary lecturer and would give informative speeches between the various skits.

The anti-structure that is established during development shows creates a communitas-like state among the spectators, and this phenomenon facilitates the informal education process. Watching live performances is a group activity on one level, and yet, such events are simultaneously intensely individual experiences. Because of this paradox, a state of awareness develops in which people temporarily de-emphasize the differences in social position that normally divide them. For example, the entire village comes to witness the show, but during the program, each person's individual attention is focused solely on the spectacle before him/her. In fact, I experienced this phenomenon myself as I often became lost in the performance and watched with no regard to those around me. Thus, the rules and norms that govern behavior are temporarily suspended as

people focus upon the show and de-emphasize their surroundings. In essence, they become part of one single entity or “multitude” so that people are “no longer side by side and, one might add, above and below” (Turner 1969: 127). For example, I noticed that few audience members looked at other spectators during the performances as everyone focussed almost completely upon the action on stage. Only during breaks between skits or during lulls in the show did people begin to focus on and interact with those around them. Thus like *communitas*, the phenomenon that occurs during educational shows causes audience members to temporarily de-emphasize the divisions of class, caste, and gender as they drift between the world created on stage and the one of which they are physically a part. Numerous aspects of the show facilitate this process. For example, performances are held at night, and only those on stage are clearly visible. Thus the lack of light contributes to the lessening of the visibility of markers of “status, property, insignia, rank or role,” and people’s immediate consciousness thereof (Turner 1969: 95). In addition, few property differences are apparent at the shows, and all of the villagers sit on the same equal ground. Therefore few wealth inequalities, which “correspond to major differences in status,” are present to disrupt the sense of *communitas* that is generated through the creation of anti-structure (Turner 1974: 246).

In the anti-structure that arises during performances, the spectators are largely equal to one another, but they are all subject to the power of the educators who temporarily become the dominant group of the social drama (Turner 1974: 273). For example, the audience members defer discursive authority to the entertainers as the spectators assume attributes of the inferiors and are silent and passive for the most part (Turner 1969: 133). This scenario, however, does not always hold true because people

can reject the discourse of the educators, and several puppeteers did in fact tell me that such events had occurred.

The *communitas*-like state generated during development performances is also a crucial element of the education process because it allows all spectators to be exposed to the messages of the government agencies and NGOs. Interrelationships that divide society into various groups are suspended at these times, and structural rearrangements are possible during the programs. Thus all people regardless of age, caste, or gender are exposed to the same messages in the same way. For example, in the shows that I witnessed, men, women, and children all participated and were privy to the information espoused by the development agencies. In contrast, if these organizations had tried to educate people in a formal setting such as a lecture or town meeting, fewer women and children would have been present. Also, Dr. Ranesh Bora argued that under normal circumstances, great difficulties arise when educators try to discuss risqué topics such as sexual behavior and family planning in mixed company (Ranesh Bora 2001). In contrast, these programs allowed all people to hear the educational messages because the strict social structures that separate men and women in public were in abeyance.

Chapter 9

Metonymy, Liminality, and Educational Puppetry

The Bhat's marginal social position allows them to make social critiques quite freely, but puppetry itself also plays an important role in development programs because the art form is a powerful metonym that has unique efficacy for the communication process. For centuries, people have conceived of puppets as metonyms for human beings, and thus these figures are able to communicate with others much like people can. Puppets, however, are not exactly identical to live actors, and thus they are not subject to the same restrictions so they can make controversial statements without causing offense. Like other metonyms, this art form conveys ideas by going from “the nonphysical [to] the physical” and from “the less clearly delineated [to] the more clearly delineated” (Lakoff 1980: 59). For example, Shubha Saxena told me how she created puppets of *rakshasas* or demons and made them represent the various ways of contracting AIDS. Thus she had a sex *rakshasa*, a drug *rakshasa*, and so forth. Shubha used these commonly known monsters as stand-ins for the various ways of contracting AIDS, which are far less known by the masses (Saxena 2001). In this way, the puppet characters that were easily comprehended by the audience served as metonyms for the less concrete ideas concerning the transmission of the HIV virus.

NGOs and government agencies employ puppets extensively because they are able to broach controversial topics and make risqué statements, and this unique “power of the puppet” arises not only from its nature as a metonym but also because it is a liminal (Puran Bhat 2001). Traditional *kathputlies* acquire this status because they are viewed as

existing “in the slender margin” between living beings and inanimate objects (Tillis 1992: 64). For example, Puran Bhat informed me that when he manipulated his Ji Sahib puppet on a popular television program, the station received a tremendous amount of mail addressed to this character. In fact, more letters came to Ji Sahib than to his human co-host, and some women even sent the puppet marriage proposals (Puran Bhat 2001). Also Puran told me that many of the mentally handicapped children for whom he had performed saw his *kathputlies* as their friends. In fact, they would greet and talk to the puppets rather than the puppeteers (Puran Bhat 2001).

Because puppets are liminars, many restrictions on human behavior do not apply to them as they are infused with a different symbolic meaning, and this phenomenon is quite useful when dealing with controversial subjects. For example, Puran stated that “you can do the sex scene” with puppets when discussing topics like contraception or AIDS, but under no circumstances could actual actors depict this act for a rural audience (Puran Bhat 2001). Thus puppets have a special ability to communicate and express ideas much like their human counterparts, but because of their liminality, they are not subject to all of the rules that govern behavior.

Puppets’ liminal status also makes them largely exempt from the social biases that cause gaps between dramatists and the audience. For example, Ram Niwas and Puran Bhat claimed that people view puppets as being more trustworthy than humans because they are not subject to the politics of caste and class. He stated that when spectators see actors on stage, they begin to “wonder what caste he is from, and what are his motivations” for performing (Ram Niwas 2001). Varun Narain also touched on this subject when he told me about the situation in which the sex workers felt that the doctors

looked down upon them with contempt. In this case, the educators brought the baggage of their social position with them to their developmental programs, and thus these issues got in the way of the show's message. Puppetry, however, is largely exempt from these difficulties as the performers are hidden behind the stage, and the audience knows that the puppets do not have a caste, class, or political agenda. For example, Ram Niwas told me that even women could be puppeteers, but under no circumstances would a rural audience accept a female dramatist who was attempting to change their behavior (Ram Niwas 2001). In addition, Puran said that many people wrote to his Ji Sahib character because they trusted him more than the human actors who were on the show because they knew that the puppet was not subject to the same dishonesty and political motivations as real people. Thus the *kathputlies'* liminal status allows them to have discursive voice like actual people, but their simultaneous classification as object allows them to be seen as free of human biases.

Government agencies and NGOs also employ traditional folk arts like puppetry for use in informal education because people find such performances to be extremely entertaining. Thus, the audience comes to the show and listens to the themes expressed in the songs and skits not because they are particularly interested in the messages of the development organizations, but because the programs are extremely enjoyable to watch. For example, it rained constantly throughout both of the two-hour performances I witnessed, but the audience did not leave or even shrink substantially. Also, these shows made extensive use of humor, and the spectators were constantly laughing at the antics of the characters on stage. In addition, all of the performances utilized traditional folk songs that had been given new words, and the audience was often excited to hear the music.

Thus development organizations provide people with entertainment that is relevant to their tastes and lifestyles, and in the process, the viewers are exposed to new information that is intended to better their lives.

Conclusion

The Impact of Puppetry in Informal Education

During the course of my research, I heard a wide variety of sometimes contradictory opinions regarding the effectiveness of puppetry as a means of communication, and thus its exact impact is somewhat obscure. Based on what I saw and was told, however, it does appear that this type of informal education has changed people's lifestyles in various ways. Several administrators informed me that statistical studies of the subject exist, but unfortunately I was unable to access any of these reports. The extent to which informal education programs' messages are being adopted by people is not my primary concern in this paper. Rather, I focus on the ways in which these performances make people more aware of the issues expressed in the shows.

I often received conflicting assessments of the success of these education programs in changing behavior based on the affiliations of the people with whom I spoke, and this phenomenon led me to believe that a complex political culture surrounds the field of development work. For example, many government administrators told me that their performances had been extremely effective in altering people's behavior. In contrast, most NGO officials provided me with much more conservative estimates about the degree to which changes were taking place. For example, one official argued that the innovative techniques demonstrated in his teacher education programs were being utilized by over 60% of the participants in their classrooms. The director of an NGO that conducts similar work, however, stated that ten or twenty percent was a more likely number (Ranjana Pandey 2001). I believe that the main reason for this discrepancy stems

from the fact that many government officials have vested interests in proving the effectiveness of their work, and thus they have more of an incentive to make their programs seem successful. In contrast, administrators at NGOs are often more free to discuss their difficulties and shortcomings because they do not face as much bureaucratic and public scrutiny to achieve massive results. Thus the reader can see that the politics of development work has its own culture as competition and rivalry exists among the various organizations, which are situated differently within the social order.

Some people I encountered did not believe that these programs were particularly effective in educating people. For example, Prakash Detha thought that audiences were not “fooled” by development agencies’ use of folk arts to mask their messages. He stated that he thought this process “was forced” and made the art forms clichéd (Prakash Detha 2001). Thus, he did not believe that people were really interested in seeing the programs because they bastardized the art form. In addition, some development workers informed me that they thought that puppetry in particular was not overly useful for educating adults because it is seen as entertainment for children (Sharma 2001). North India, however, has a long-standing tradition of puppet performances for people of all ages, and thus I tend to disagree with this idea. Viewing puppetry as an art for children has become fairly common in the West, but it is not widespread in other parts of the world where it is seen as quite important and refined. Thus, I attribute this idea in part to the western style education received by many of the people who espoused this view.

Based on the available information, the impact of folk arts like puppetry in informal education appears to be somewhere in between these two views as the programs are successful at informing people about new ideas and changing behavior to some

extent. These performances do seem to be quite effective in conveying new ideas and keeping people's attention for long periods of time to allow the concepts to be absorbed. For example, at the end of the two shows I witnessed, I conducted brief interviews with several of the audience members, and all of the people with whom I spoke were able to clearly state the message of the performance. In addition, they understood how the behaviors they were encouraged to adopt could improve their lives. For example, after a show concerning water conservation, Lal Singh told me the NGOs wanted rural farmers like himself to construct earthen mounds around their fields to improve irrigation and water retention (Lal Singh 2001). Thus, the programs were effective in conveying ideas to people and informing them about ways they can better their lives. A significant difference, however, exists between knowing the message and actually adopting certain practices, and despite the fact that my interviewees told me they would alter their behavior in accordance with the NGOs' recommendations, I am unsure of the extent to which people actually changed their lifestyles. Uncovering this information would have required extensive follow-up visits to the villages to assess the impact of the shows, which for me was impossible because of language barriers and time constraints.

Several of the administrators and artists told me that informal education programs were most successful at changing behavior patterns that were not imbued with ritual or traditional importance, and I tend to agree with this viewpoint based on what I saw. For example, Ranjana Pandey said that shows dealing with simple matters like going to government health clinics for medicines, getting polio vaccines, and boiling water before consuming it had been quite successful. "The people will change the simple things," Varun told me, but he expressed concern over the extent to which audiences will alter

other more complex behavior patterns (Narain 2001). For example, he said that one time, an NGO with which he was working had performed several skits in rural areas on women's empowerment. "This program completely failed because the women had no idea what empowerment was. They've never been empowered in their lives" Varun told me (Narain 2001). He and many others also noted that family planning is always a touchy issue, and people are quite resistant to altering sexual behavior or undergoing sterilization procedures.

Ranjana Pandey stated that many artists come from the same rural backgrounds as those for whom they perform, and thus they tend to believe in the same folkways and traditional practices that are prevalent in villages (Pandey 2001). From the development agencies' point-of-view, this phenomenon causes difficulties in the education process as it can serve as a barrier to clear, unbiased communication. For example, Prem Bhat had constructed several doctor *kathputlies* for his education shows, but all of these figures were Caucasians and not Indians. In fact one of them was based on Pilpili Sahib, who is a foolish and weak English commander, and thus the puppet's appearance was quite bizarre, as it had exaggerated features and a distorted body. This character demonstrates that the performers associate modern medicine with westerners and people who are inherently different from them. Based on the Bhat's long tradition of expressing social commentaries in their performances, it is quite possible that this phenomenon is in fact a critique of the NGO's message itself. Thus in this case, Prem incorporated his own interpretation of the development agency's message into the show. The ridiculous doctor *kathputlies* served as a criticism of modern medicinal practices that are often inflexible and dismiss folk remedies as unscientific and superstitious. A figure such as this would

not win the trust and respect of the audience, and thus it may actually become an obstacle for the education process.

The use of folk arts in rural development clearly has limitations as to the role that it can play in changing people's behavior, but it is an effective tool for communication in most cases. The greatest strength of this type of informal education lies in its ability to capture the audience's attention through entertaining spectacles and to convey new ideas and information to people. In addition, the Bhats' social position plays an important role in the education process, as they are a marginal community that has provided social commentary through performance arts for centuries. Thus by employing them, NGOs and government agencies appropriate the benefits of their ritual discursive authority. Also, these organizations are aided by the inversions of the social order that occur during shows because the folk artists are able to command the attention of large audiences and thus disseminate their messages among diverse groups of people. In addition, the *kathputli* tradition of North India is steeped in mythology and symbolism, and these traits give the puppets themselves special ideological status as metonyms and liminars. In turn, these attributes allow the puppets to exist in a realm that is different from that of live actors, and thus they can communicate more effectively as they are exempt from many of the rules and biases that are linked to human behavior. Despite the numerous benefits of using folk arts in development programs, follow-up sessions and more extensive education for villagers and performers are needed to change behaviors regarding complex issues. These performances are quite successful at conveying information, but people are unlikely to incorporate into their lives new ideas regarding issues like folk medicines,

women's empowerment, and sexual intercourse because they are strongly imbued with cultural significance and closely linked to traditional values and ideals.

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