



Puppet as a Tool for Environmental Awareness

PARISHMITA KASHYAP

MPhil Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Sikkim University. E-mail: parimitakashyap1997@gmail.com

Abstract: Puppetry is one of the most popular art forms in folk culture and its technique is different from the others. The themes or the stories of puppetry range from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas etc. to various social, economic, environmental and other topics to bring awareness among the people. This paper examines how a lifeless puppet can provide awareness to the people through the skills of the puppeteers, and also through the narratives and narrator's voice. Moreover, it also provides specific examples of how puppeteers use their different puppets to help spread awareness among human societies on environmental issues in the present times.

Keywords: puppetry, environment, climate, ecology.

Received : 11 September 2022

Revised : 10 October 2022

Accepted : 14 October 2022

Published : 27 December 2022

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kashyap, P. 2022. Puppet as a Tool for Environmental Awareness. *Skylines of Anthropology*, 2: 2, pp. 135-140. <https://doi.org/10.47509/SA.2022.v02i02.04>

Introduction

Environment is the surrounding natural and social conditions that directly or indirectly affect human life and activities. One of the major problems in today's world is how to protect the environment and ecosystems. At present, everyone, whether developed or developing countries, is suffering from this problem caused by the atrocities of nature by human society. And to keep the world safe, it must be free from existing air, water, soil pollution etc. Unless everyone thinks about the ways to keep the environment healthy and to create a green world which is not only for humans but also for the animals and plants that coexist with human beings. To protect the environment various schemes have been formulated by now, but the public is not aware of all these schemes. Therefore, environmental education is essential to inform and create awareness among the public. Depending on it, debate competition, essay writing, and meetings are held from time to time in the educational institutions. But at times these activities are not able to provide an impression in the human minds and, in this case, performing art is the most appropriate way to convey this awareness message.

Performing art has been used as a visual communication for a long time for teaching, enlightening, entertaining and educating the community. Puppets, masks, clay dolls with specific paintings and oral narratives have not only entertained people but also reflect the ethics of their lives. Some of the popular performing arts of our country are on the verge of dying out. Puppetry is a type of art where one or two troupes manipulate the puppets with the help of rods or strings. In this form of art, the three aspects i.e., dance, song and dramatic pose are amalgamated together. The word "puppet" comes from the Latin word '*pupa*' which means "a doll". Puppetry is more or less popular all over the world and puppets are of different types viz., rod puppet, string puppet, glove puppet, hand puppet and shadow puppet which has local names. Puppets are suitable for different kinds of educational contexts - from rehearsing, performing to expression skills which are integrated into specific subjects (Fisler 2003, Kroflin 2012, Lowe and Matthew 2000, Simon 2008).

Art is an only type of medium, where the skills of the artists attract more people and make everyone understandable which is otherwise difficult at times. Puppetry is no exception; it has the power to affect the mind and brain of the people. It is regarded both as an amusement medium and a learning medium (Rangarajan,2011). Puppeteers can bring lifeless puppets to life through their technical skill as well as creative talent. It has been used as a medium of communication since ancient times. Through puppet shows, the stories of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata or other religious stories are communicated. However, different other themes are taken up to suit the current situation such as 'do not cut down trees', 'build a plastic free nation', 'prevent water wastage', 'drink clean water', 'ban the use of pesticides' etc. This is an era of social media, where the whole world has become one village. In that case, puppeteers can perform small plays about the atrocities committed against healthy ecosystems and also how to get rid of these. The plays can also be displayed through the social media platforms, by organising workshops via educational institutions at regular intervals. Moreover, the public can be taught to make puppets and elaborate the different ideas through puppetry.

Taking into consideration the area of 'puppets and environment', it has been noticed that many troupes of puppeteers across the world have been holding puppet shows over time with the most intriguing themes in order to bring about awareness among the general public irrespective of age and gender. The following paragraphs tries to look through some of such puppet shows put up in different parts of the globe to spread awareness regarding the environment and related issues among the masses.

Creation Myth Puppets held a spectacular puppet show through the project titled 'Talking Forest' which enabled 70 children from the South Hams district of America to express how they felt about climate change and biodiversity loss. Tony Gee, an artistic director with the organisation said that, with the project they wanted to create a piece of work which could make climate change and biodiversity issues more accessible to people who are not involved with the subject. He hopes that people could be more receptive to the subject if they could hear about the issues through the voices of children.

Through the article, '*Bird Wings and Puppet Strings: Puppetry, Ecopsychology and Story*', River examines bird wings and puppet strings as a constructive response to the ever-evolving environmental movement by exploring the principles of ecology through the evolution led research project that provides puppet characters and performance scripts. The puppetry for *Bird Wings and Puppet Strings* is a modification of traditional Japanese *Bunraku* puppetry, which explores a broader sense of ecological identity through hybrid characters such as Bird woman and possum boy. The Bird woman symbol helped the author to understand the living reciprocity between humans and nature that could take an imaginative form and communicated through art. Overall through this article, the author provides a new understanding about how puppetry can be implemented as an ecological display exercise and promotes change in ecological identity (River,2021).

In the news article of TRAFFIC, water puppet theatre spreads the messages to protect Viet Nam's biodiversity, and mentioned that in support of the International Day of Biodiversity, the Thang Long Water Puppet theatre in collaboration with TRAFFIC and the Biodiversity Conservation Association (BCA) under the Ministry of Natural and Environmental Resources (MONRE) organised a show for school children in Ha Noi to raise awareness about the threats faced by biodiversity in Vietnam. School children, who were selected from primary schools, participated in a newly developed show called 'Ao Lang - Village Pond' in 2013 which focused on the importance of biodiversity conservation through a series of short stories exploring the issues of habitat degradation and competition for natural resources.

Wayang kulit has a real connection to environmental concerns: the kayon represents the tree of life, displaying an inherent sense of ecological balance. They discuss issues like 'contaminated water should not be drunk' and so on before the actual play. I Made Sidia and I Gusti Putu Sudarta have also created a number of performances on the environment and sent messages directly or indirectly through narratives. At Sudarta's multimedia Wayang Plastics Show

in 2019, the costumes of puppets and dancers were made from recycled plastic waste. Through this demonstration Sudarta created his voice to this long running protest against endemic plastic pollution which is slowly taking the shape of pandemic threat to humanity. They also want to make people aware of environmental pollution through this play (Noszlopy, 2020).

‘Satya Narayan Putul Natya Sanstha is a popular troupe of West Bengal which has a tradition of rod puppet performance in Bengal and is known commonly as *Daanger Putul Nach*. The themes usually range from the epics, the Puranas and also from the *jatras*. The troupe performed ‘*Arannyer Rodan* – Crying of the Forest’ in 2010 through which the importance of maintaining ecological balance has been depicted. This play portrayed some evil characters who continuously destroyed the forest by felling trees and killing birds and animals for profit-making. At the end, the various animals of the forest unite to stand against those villains and thus they try to protect the environment.

On the occasion of Chandigarh Sangeet Natak Academy’s Puppet Theatre festival held in December, 2014, two puppet shows on different themes were held. ‘The Little Blue Planet’ commissioned as part of Climate Change Project - India and directed by wellknown puppeteer Anurupa Roy of Delhi, was performed. This show depicted the phenomenon of rapid climate change happening in the globe today due to the irresponsible human exploitation of natural resources causing extreme floods, drought and weather changes all over the world.

Through the article “Educative and interactive puppet plays addressing environmental issues and creating awareness in rural community - A case study of Mahaboobnagar district, Andhra Pradesh”, Rangarajan (2011) mentions the use of puppetry to inform villagers about environment related issues and environmental awareness. One of the plays used three characters – one old woman Avva, her grandson, and a pessimist who prefers only concrete jungles and always thinks to make money. Through this play the old lady only explained the positive and negative impacts on destruction of trees, about the conservation of water, the compost pit and about birds and animals, and informed how such a green environment can be restored. Thus, the narrator not only sheds light on environmental issues but also displays the stress on the impact of a healthy environment on mind and body (Rangarajan, 2011).

Conclusion

Climate change is a burning problem for the whole world today. It is caused by natural factors such as changes in the amount of solar radiation falling on

the earth, changes in underground tectonic plates and volcanic eruptions. However, today climate change is happening rapidly all over the world, its origins are human destruction of the natural environment, emission of toxic gases in the atmosphere, pollution of soil and water etc. One of the causes of this pollution is plastic waste which accounts for ten percent of all wastes generated in the world. Due to this, millions of sea creatures are being destroyed every year. Deterioration in soil quality, depleting groundwater level and artificial flooding due to this plastic waste, is nothing new now. Despite such incidents, the use of plastic is increasing day by day due to lack of awareness among the people. To get rid of this horror of plastics, the public needs to be made aware of the 4R policy - refuse, reduce, reuse and recycle. It is our moral obligation to preserve the environment, maintain the natural balance and protect it for the coming generations. There is awareness around the world today for environmental conservation by various international organisations, and developed countries of the world have already taken steps of short term as well as long term policies or action plans in this regard. In addition to this, performing arts such as use of puppets have also been a good way to educate people since art directly affects the people and helps in sharing through their experiences. It also provides an opportunity for students and professionals to express themselves eloquently and in a colourful, attention-grabbing manner.

Based on the above cited literature, it gives clear evidence that the role of puppetry in creating environmental awareness is definitely a dominant one. First of all, the public and the youth have to be introduced to this folk culture which is vanishing with passage of time. Secondly, to give a new platform to the traditional puppeteers so that they can keep pace with the present era through new themes. Thirdly, sending a message to the youth to not only engage in social media, but also to acquire knowledge about folk culture along with traditional education, as well as to get information about the environmental issues and take preventive decisions for this. Thus, as mentioned above, puppets have been used almost throughout the world as an awareness tool or as an educational tool to educate the people.

Acknowledgement

Many people have helped and inspired me in writing this paper and I would like to acknowledge them. I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor for her guidance and patience. Also, I would like to thank my friends and family for their mental support during my work.

Works cited

- Fisler, Ben. "Quantifiable evidence, reading pedagogy and puppets, research in drama education." *The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 8.1(2003): 25-38.
- Kroflin, Livija. "The role of the puppet in language teaching." *The Power of Puppet*, (2012):46-60.
- Lowe, L. Joy and Matthew, Kathryn. "Puppets and prose: using puppets and children's literature in the science and classroom". *Science and Children*, 37.08(2000): 41-45.
- Rangarajan, Padmini. "Educative and interactive puppet plays addressing environmental issues and creating awareness in rural community- A case study of Mahaboobnagar district, Andhra Pradesh." *Indian Journal of Science and Technology*, 4.3 (2011): 279-281.
- River, Sky "Bird wings and puppet strings: puppetry, ecopsychology and story" *Performance of The Real*, II, Performing Ecologies - Special Issue(2021): 88-94.
- Simon, Shirley, "Puppet Promoting Engagement and Talk in Science." *International Journal of Science Education*, 30.9(2008): 1229-1248.
- <https://www.southhams.gov.uk/article/8879/Talking-Climate-Change-Spectacular-Puppet-Show>. accessed on 25th May, 2022.
- Water puppet theatre spreads the message to protect Viet Nam's biodiversity - Wildlife Trade News from TRAFFIC, accessed on 25th May, 2022.
- <https://www.insideindonesia.org/wayang-helps-save-the-reef> accessed on 24th May, 2022.
- Puppets to bring alive tales of climate change, timeless romance | Chandigarh News - Times of India. 4th December, 2014. accessed on 27th May, 2022.