

For CMAT Exam

INDIAN PUPPETRY

Puppetry in Ancient India

Indus Valley Civilization

The excavation sites at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro have yielded puppets with sockets attached to them.

Vedic Age

In Bhagavad Geeta, God has been described as a puppeteer, controlling the universe with three strings – Satta, Raja and Tama.

Sangam Age

Written reference to puppetry is found in the Tamil classic Silappadikaram

Post Mauryan Age

Natyashastra (written sometime during 2nd century BC to 2nd century AD) refers to the producer-cum-director of the human theatre who is termed as 'Sutradhar' meaning the holder of strings.

Forms of puppetry

1. String puppet (Kathputli, Kundhei, Gombaeyatta, Bommalattam)
2. Shadow puppet (Tholu Bommalata, Ravanchhaya, Togalu Gombeyatta)
3. Glove puppet (Pavakoothu)
4. Rod puppet (Yampuri, Putul Nachh)

String Puppets

- Puppets are generally eight to nine inch miniature figures chiselled out of wood.
- Oil paint is used to paint the wood
- Miniature jewellerys and other accessories are attached to give it a true-to-life feel.
- Marionettes having jointed limbs controlled by strings allow far greater flexibility .
- Regions - Rajasthan, Orissa, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Regional Variation

1. Kathputli (Rajasthan)

- Dressed in bright traditional Rajasthani dress (medieval Rajasthani style) - long trailing skirts
- The absence of legs, oval faces, large eyes, arched eyebrows and large lips are some of the distinct features.
- Carved from a single piece of wood,
- Accompanied by a highly dramatised version of the regional music.

2. Kundhei (Odisha)

- Made of light wood
- No legs but are dressed in long skirts.
- Have joints therefore, more versatile, articulate and easy to manipulate.
- The strings are attached to a triangular prop.
- Influence of Odissi dance.
- The costumes of Kundhei resemble those worn by actors of the Jatra traditional theatre.

3. Gombeyatta (Karnataka)

- Styled like the characters of Yakshagana (traditional theatre form)
- The use of more than one puppeteer to manipulate the puppets is a unique feature.
- Have joints at the legs, shoulders, elbows, hips and knees.
- Theme - episodes based on Prasangas of the Yakshagana plays.
- Accompanied with dramatic music.

4. Bommalattam (Tamil Nadu)

- Largest and heaviest marionettes found in India (4.5 ft in height and 10 kg in weight)
- Rod and string puppetry
- Have jointed arms and hands, which are manipulated by rods.
- It has four distinct stages – Vinayak Puja, Komali, Amanattam and Pusenkanattam.

Shadow Puppets

- Flat figures cut out of leather (treated to make it translucent)
- Painted figures
- Shadow puppets are pressed against the screen with a strong source of light behind it.
- The figures are manipulated so that the silhouettes created on the blank screen create telling imagery.
- Region - Orissa, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.



String Puppet



Shadow Puppets

Regional Variation

1. Togalu Gombeyatta (Karnataka)

- Variation of puppet size based on social status is a unique feature
- Kings and religious figures are characterised by large puppets while common people and servants are shown by smaller puppets.

2. Ravanchhaya (Odisha)

- Most theatrical shadow puppetry.
- The puppets are in one piece and have no joints.
- The puppets are made of deer skin and depict bold and dramatic postures.
- They are not coloured, hence throw opaque shadows on the screen.
- Use of non-human puppets such as trees, mountains, chariots and animals is common.

3. Tholu Bommalata (Andhra Pradesh)

- The puppets are larger in size and coloured on both sides.
- Theme - drawn from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas.
- The music is dominantly influenced by classical music.

Glove Puppets (also known as sleeve, hand or palm puppets)

- Small figures with heads and arms wearing a long, flowing skirt as costume.
- Generally made of cloth or wood.
- The puppeteer wears the puppet as a glove
- Controlled by the human hand the first finger inserted in the head and the middle finger and the thumb are the two arms of the puppet
- Performance is accompanied by rhythmic beats of drum or dholak.
- Region - Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal and Kerala.
- Themes - social themes (Uttar Pradesh), Radha Krishna (Odisha)

Regional Variation

1. Pavakoothu (Kerala)

- The puppets are decorated with colourful headgears, feathers and face paints.
- Carved out of wood.
- The height of a puppet varies from one foot to two feet.
- The manipulator puts his hand into the bag and moves the hands and head of the puppet.
- Influence of Kathakali dance form.
- Themes - Ramayana and Mahabharata.
- Musical instruments - Chenda, Chengilola, Ilathalam and Shankhathe conch.



Glove Puppet



Rod Puppets

Rod Puppets

- Larger variations of glove puppet.
- Controlled by the puppeteer with the help of rods from behind a screen.
- Region - Eastern India mostly in West Bengal and Orissa.

Regional Variation

1. Yampuri (Bihar)

- Carved out of a single piece of wood and then painted and dressed in bright colours.
- Unlike the traditional Rod puppets of West Bengal and Orissa, these puppets are in one piece and have no joints.

2. Putul Nachh (Bengal, Odisha, Assam)

- The figures are generally three to four ft. high and dressed like characters of Jatra.
- Generally have three joints – at the neck and at the shoulders.
- The puppeteers move behind the curtain, imparting similar movements to the puppets.
- Musical instruments - Harmonium, cymbals and tabla.