



























































## PUPPETRY IN INDIA

Puppetry is an ancient art form in India, and evidence shows that it probably predates human drama. The origin of Indian puppetry is found in Hindu mythology associated with Lord Shiva, the god of dance and drama, and his wife, Parvati. It is perhaps for this reason that puppets are still considered to be celestial beings and are revered as divine. The traditional puppeteer of India to this day continues to have a high regard for his puppets.

Puppetry in India is not only a traditional art, but has now developed as a contemporary medium. During the past few years, much work has been done in contemporary puppetry in many independent and government supported institutes in India. The Centre for Cultural Resources and Training in New Delhi, India, trains K-12 teachers in all forms of Indian puppetry, traditional and modern, for use in many types of classroom activities. Thus in India, puppetry is recognized as a living folk art of the rural areas, a contemporary entertainment form of the modern theater, and a useful teaching aid in many levels of education. It is also used in advertizing and as a tool for mass communication..

The forms of puppetry used in India include string puppets, hand puppets, rod puppets and shadow puppets.

### TYPES OF INDIAN PUPPETS

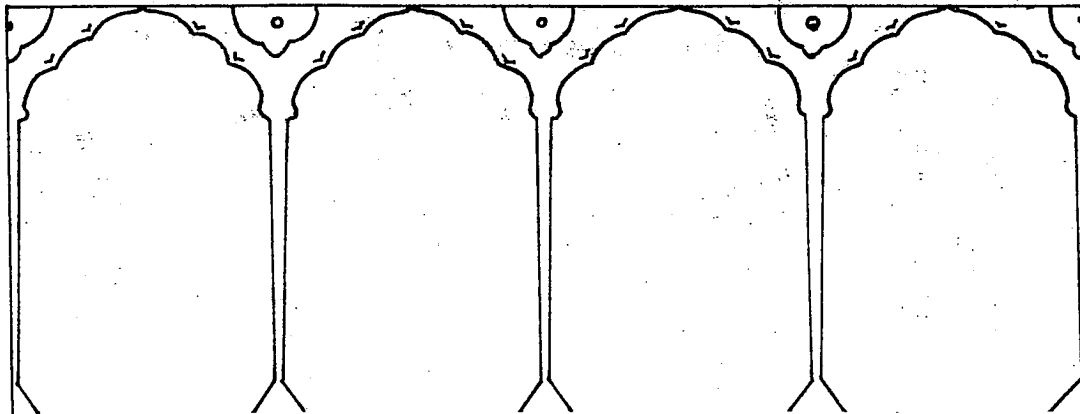


1. **STRING PUPPETS:** In India, there are two major types of string puppets used: the traditional single-string puppet and the marionette, or multi-string puppet.

a) **Single-string puppets:** These puppets, called kathputli and meaning "wooden puppet", are the traditional puppets of the western state of India named Rajasthan. The form of the face is hand carved on a single wooden block. The arms are made from stuffed cloth and attached to the wooden body, but generally do not move in any way. There are no legs constructed, but a cloth skirt or robe is used as a base. Usually the details of the painted face include very boldly carved features: elongated eyes, wide lips and a very dominant nose. The styles of chiselled beard and turbans are used to delineate the characters, whether they be kings or courtiers, Hindu or Muslim, rich or poor. Other ways to indicate the personality of the puppet include the types of cloth used, the kinds of jewelry and the kind of animal it rides.

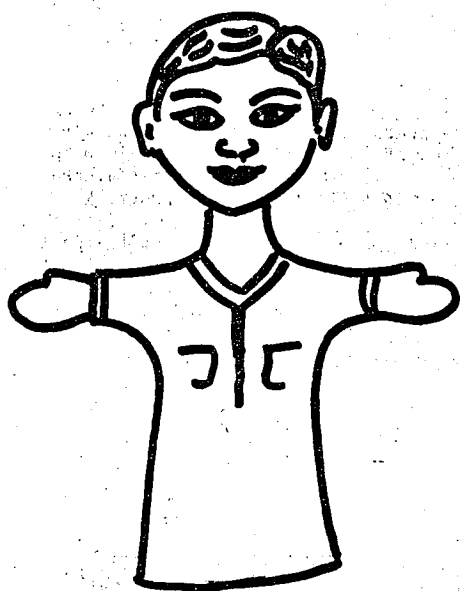
With the single string, which runs from the top of the head to the lower back forming a loop, the puppeteer can manipulate the puppet to produce a variety of movements. Besides basic locomotion, the puppet can be shown as sitting, talking, listening, fighting, dancing and even embracing. These puppets are generally used to perform the regional heroic tales which are well-known and appreciated in rural areas. Although they originated in Rajasthan, the nomadic puppeteer families have brought their art to many parts of India and Nepal.

b) **Multi-string puppets:** There are relatively few traditional Indian puppets with multiple strings. These include, however, the kathputli court dancer and the snake charmer, and several other regional styles. Generally, the marionettes are a relatively modern form of puppetry in India. They do not resemble the kathputli puppet in construction, manipulation or thematic use, but are used in modern puppet theaters in much the same way as in the West.



Typical Kathputli Stage

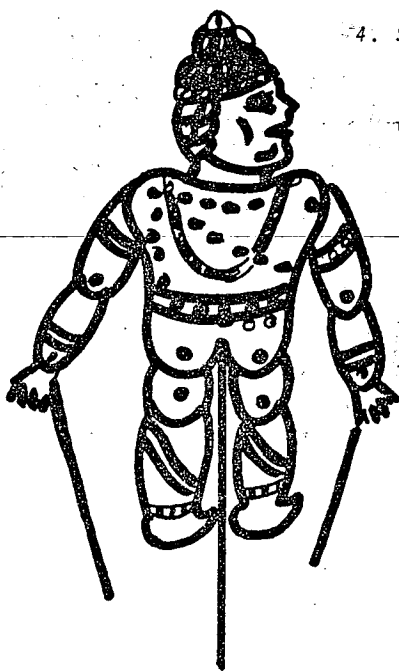




2. **HAND PUPPETS:** In traditional puppetry, the hand, or glove, puppet is historically associated with the southwestern hill regions of India. There the puppet plays are based on the well-known religious epics. The puppet head is usually constructed with papier-mache, with a gown type of costume acting as the body and the arms. Traditionally, this type of head is constructed and painted in imitation of the facial make-up used in the regional dance-drama, called kathakali. Due to the hand puppet's simplicity in construction and manipulation, it has gained popularity in recent years in modern theatrical performances, television, advertizing, education and informational programing, as well as in all levels of classroom activities.



3. **ROD PUPPETS:** The rod puppet is a development from the hand puppet, using bamboo or wooden sticks to support and manipulate the puppet's arms, rather than using the puppeteer's fingers. These puppets, like the hand puppets, are operated above the head with the puppeteer being hidden behind a curtain. The rod puppets are quite large, though, reaching 3 or 4 feet high. Unlike the hand puppets, they may have manipulatable legs attached. Like the marionette, this style of puppet can reach high degrees of sophistication.



4. **SHADOW PUPPETS:** Shadow puppets in India are known as leather puppets because they are constructed from the skins of deer, traditionally, and in more recent times from goat skins. In some cases, the skin is treated to the level of translucency, whereupon it will be dyed to indicate the character and costume.

This type of puppet then casts a colored shadow. Other puppets are simply tanned, cut and perforated to form the figure and the dress. This type of shadow puppet casts a simple silhouette on the screen.

A second differentiation between shadow puppets is whether they are jointed or not. If they do not have joints, then the whole figure is moved on the screen to indicate locomotion, emotion and speech. Jointed puppets usually can be moved by means of thin sticks at the hip, knee, shoulder and elbow.

This style of puppetry is still basically used only by the traditional artists. At a village, a large white semi-transparent cloth would be stretched on bamboo poles. The shadows would then be projected from behind the cloth by means of oil lamps.

In performances of all four types of these Indian puppets, the play would be accompanied by some sort of music, with several different kinds of drums being used to enhance the drama. The exact style of the accompaniment varies from region to region. The puppet characters are always very animated, filling the puppet stage with songs and dances.



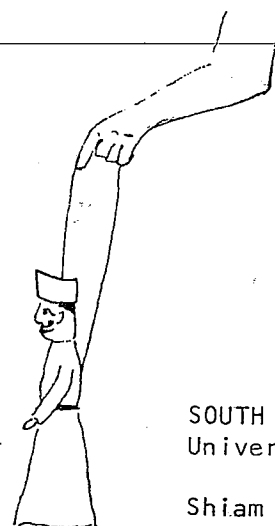
# HOW THE FIRST PUPPET WAS BORN: An Indian Fable.

Once upon a time, Shiva, the God of Dance, and his wife, Parvati\*, saw a carpenter carving beautiful wooden dolls. Parvati asked Shiva to make the doll dance for her. To make her happy because he loved her, Shiva with his magic power entered into the wooden doll and the doll came to life and started to dance. Parvati, of course, was very happy to see this. After a little while, Shiva appeared again and the doll stopped dancing. But Parvati wanted the doll to keep on dancing for her. Shiva, again because of her wish to see them move, called the carpenter and told him to tie a string to the doll and then pull it with his fingers. In this way, the doll started moving and kept on dancing for Parvati. This was the first puppet, and the carpenter was the first puppeteer in India.

\*pronunciation

Shiva: shi-vah

Parvati: pah-r-vuh-tee



SOUTH ASIAN AREA CENTER  
University of Wisconsin

Shiam Swarup-  
Curriculum Consultant





**NOTES:**

*New Delhi is the national Capital and is a separate district like Washington, D.C.*

*Chandigarh is the capital city of both the states of The Punjab & Haryana.*

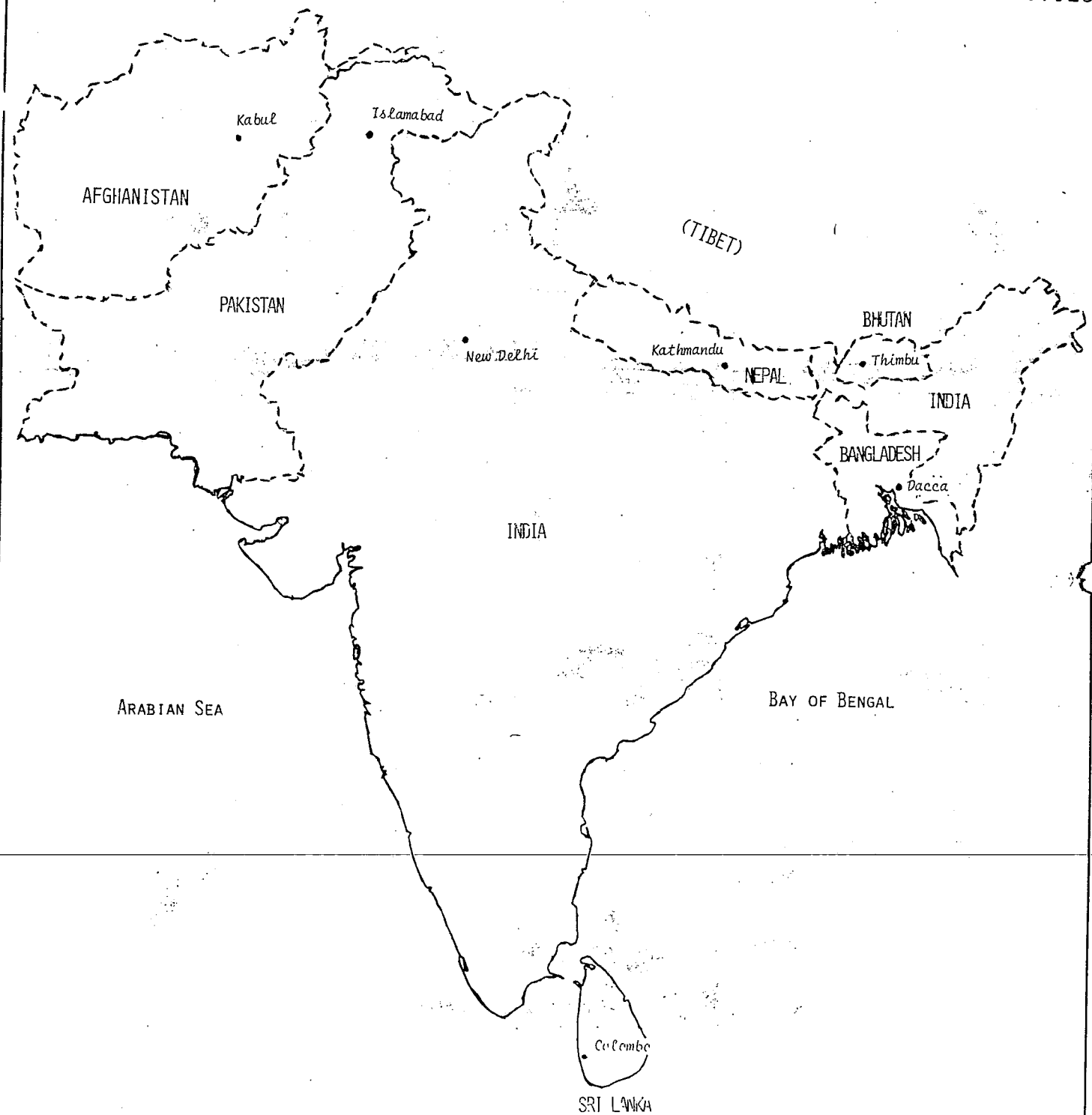
*Jammu & Kashmir is the name applied to the northern state made of several valley regions.*

*The word "pradesh" means state.*

SOUTH ASIAN AREA CENTER  
Outreach Office  
1249 Van Hise Hall  
University of Wisconsin  
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

# POLITICAL MAP OF SOUTH ASIA

THE COUNTRIES AND THEIR CAPITAL CITIES



SOUTH ASIAN AREA CENTER  
Outreach Office  
1249 Van Hise Hall  
University of Wisconsin  
Madison, WI 53706

INDIAN OCEAN



## PUPPET TRADITIONS IN INDIA

Narration: Lynn Ate and Shiam Swarup  
UW-SOUTH ASIAN AREA CENTER

Slides: Sangeet Natak Academy,  
New Delhi

### SLIDES 1-5: KATHPUTLI or "wooden puppet" from Rajasthan.

This wooden string puppet is about 2 ft. in size with a wooden head, large eyes, wide lips, and a dominant nose. The body of the puppet is stuffed with cotton, and generally does not have legs. Instead, a long and soft-flowing skirt represents the lower extremities. (#2). The manipulation is limited to a single string, looped from the top of the head to the middle of the back, although there are a few specific characters like the dancer (#3) and the snake charmer (#4) which need 6-8 strings to be manipulated. The puppeteers do not use the wooden bar or controls, but tie the strings directly to their fingers to make the puppets move (#5). The stage is made from a few bamboo rods with cloth pieces as backdrops. Generally, the heroic tales of Rajasthan are performed through this art of puppetry with puppets depicting the warriors of both the Rajput and Mughul armies, rivals for power in that area. In addition to the drum and other musical instruments, the puppeteers use a sort of reed whistle made of two bamboo strips with a rubber band tied between them. This shrill sound represents the puppets' speech as the narrator gives the dialogue. The slides are from a play called "Amar Singh Kathore", about a freedom fighter from Rajasthan.

### SLIDES 6-9: KALA SUTRI or "art of strings" from Maharashtra.

These puppets are somewhat like the previous Rajasthani puppets, being made of wood with long trailing skirts. The puppets are about 18-24 inches in size. The stories are taken from the Indian epics. In slide #7, we see a puppet of the god, Ganesh, the elephant-headed deity who is usually worshipped at the beginning of any endeavor, even a puppet play.

### SLIDES 10-14: BOMMALATTAM or "dance of dolls" from Tamil Nadu.

These puppets are from South India and belong to a Tamil-speaking area of India. They are made of wood and are fairly heavy, and are manipulated by a combination of strings and rods (#11). The puppets are beautifully clothed and decorated with typical Indian jewelry. The weight of a single puppet is often held by a ring placed on the puppeteer's head (#12). All the strings from different parts of the puppet's body are tied to that ring which, in turn, helps the puppeteer in making the puppet move freely. As the puppeteer moves his head, the puppet moves below. Note that some strings are passed behind the shoulder to subtly manipulate certain parts of the puppet. The hands of the puppet are moved with steel wires or rods. This allows for special types of movement not possible with other string puppets, as when the heroine garlands the hero (#13). Generally, mythological stories are performed through this art form.

SLIDES 15-19: GOMBEYATTA or "string doll dance" from Karnataka.

These puppets are also made of wood and manipulated with strings, but are unique in that they look like the miniature form of a live folk theater of Karnataka known as Yakshagana. The movements of the puppets are the same as that of the live actors, and are especially noticeable in the feet, which are directed sideways (#15). The puppets are decorated with South Indian style jewelry and are gorgeously clothed. The puppet faces imitate the make-up of a live Yakshagana actor (#17). The stories performed are from Indian myths and epics. The Ganesha puppet, or elephant-headed god, in slide #18, is over 300 years old. The puppeteers revere their puppets to such a degree that they never throw them away. They are handed down from father to son for several generations. When a puppet finally becomes completely ruined, it is given a religious burial by carefully letting it float away down a river. Note that the puppet on the left of this slide is holding a live flame to worship the elephant-headed Ganesha.

SLIDES 20-24: SAKHI KUNDHEI or "doll dance" from Orissa.

Here we begin a look at hand puppets. Generally, these puppeteers narrate the legends of the divine lovers, Radha and Krishna, and usually perform in a two-member team. Both members must be able to play the drums, sing and narrate the story. In slide #22, we see the puppeteer drumming with the puppet still in his hand.

SLIDES 25-29: PAVAKOOTTU or "doll drama" from Kerala.

The puppet figures of this tradition are influenced by the Kerala folk theater called Kathakali, especially in terms of make-up and headgear. The puppeteers very often use both hands to manipulate two puppets at once, while giving the dialogue of both (#26). The puppeteers sometimes sit on the ground in full view of the audience, but occasionally also use a small curtain. The troupe usually consists of the puppeteer and musicians, a drummer and singers. The themes of the plays are again drawn from the divine mythologies and epics familiar to everyone throughout India.

SLIDES 30-32: THOLU BOMMALATTA or "leather doll dance" from Andhra Pradesh.

We now go to a type of puppetry unique to Asia -- shadow puppets. These puppets from Andhra are the largest found in India and may be as tall as 6 feet at times. They are made of leather which has been treated to a high level of translucency and then dyed. The parts of the puppets are joined together with thread to give free movement to the limbs. These puppets are highly sophisticated and have a number of joints to make them move. The perforations and coloring depict the character of the story. The puppets are held with a central stick stapled or stitched to the puppet. Smaller sticks are attached to the hands to allow movement of the arms. The legs are left to dangle freely (#31). The puppets are then held directly behind a semi-transparent screen stretched between two poles. Traditionally, the light source (oil lamps) are placed on a platform or hung from above to throw the shadows of the puppets onto the screen. The puppeteer must be careful to keep his own body behind the lamp, so as not to cast his own shadow on the screen. The shadow plays are performed to depict the stories of the great epic, The Ramayana.



SLIDES 33-36: TOLU BOMMALATTAM or "leather doll dance" from Tamil Nadu.

These puppets are much the same as the previous ones, but are smaller in size and less vibrant in color and articulation. They have very few joints, and usually only at the arms or hands. The projection technique is also the same as that of the puppets from Andhra Pradesh. The stories also come from the epic, The Ramayana, which generally forms the basis of all shadow play productions in South and Southeast Asia.

SLIDES 37-44: TOGALU GOMBEYATTA or "leather doll dance" from Karnataka.

There is little design difference between these puppets and those from Andhra. Both are made of hides which are separated into layers and treated to the level of translucency. Three or four skins are required to make one puppet with its moveable parts. The figures are joined and brightly colored. The height of the figure varies, depending upon its role or the importance of the character and may range from 4 inches to 5 feet. In this shadow tradition, the stories are again from the epics. In certain figures (#40, 41, 42), you can see a complete scene in itself composed of three or four characters colored on the skin. The whole scene is moved on and off the screen as the narration demands.

SLIDES 45-49: TOLPAVAKOOTTU or "leather doll drama" from Kerala.

Unlike the previous colored puppets, these figures cast black and white shadows on the screen. These puppets are cut from thick buffalo or goat hides and perforated to outline the costume details. They are not as clearly defined as the large colored figures, and have only one arm movement which follows the narration of the stories. There is a row of lamps placed behind the screen (#47) and a team of puppeteers work the figures backstage. The troupes perform scenes from the two Indian epics, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata.

SLIDES 50-55: CHAMADYACHA BAHULYE or "leather puppets" from Maharashtra.

This type of puppetry also casts black and white shadows on the screen. The puppet stage is very small and consists of a few bamboo sticks covered with a white muslin cloth. In slide #53, you can see one man sitting on the stage handling small puppet figures with an oil lamp as a light source. This particular type of shadow puppetry has very recently been discovered by researchers of Indian puppetry.

SLIDES 56-60: RAVAN CHHAYA or "Ravan's shadow" from Orissa.

The Ravan Chhaya form of puppets are black and white, varying in size from 6 to 18 inches. These puppets have no joints at all. The figures move along with the dialogue. More than 700 puppet figures are required for the complete Ravan Chhaya show, which usually is performed for several nights in a row, each night with a different episode. The stage, in this case, is just 6-7 ft. The light source is from a bowl-shaped lamp filled with oil. This lamp is put on a stand about 12 inches from the screen. The style of music blends folk and classical traditions of Orissa. It is believed that gods do not have shadows, so this theater tradition is named after the 10-headed demon figure, Ravan, which is also much bigger than the other puppets.

SLIDES 61-66: PUTUL NAUCH or "puppet dance" from Bengal.

Moving to Bengal, we can begin to talk about rod or stick puppets. These puppets are actually a combination of string and rod together. The whole puppet figure is about 4 ft. in height and is fixed on a bamboo stick, 6-7 ft. tall. The stick is then placed in a heavy leather cup tied to the waist of the puppeteer, much like one would bear a flag pole in a parade. A string arrangement under the costume is used to make the arms move up and down, according to the dialogue. There is not much movement in the wooden body, but the puppeteers themselves jump and dance vigorously to produce a dramatic effect. The costumes and style of the drama imitates the Bengali live theater tradition called Jatra.

SLIDES 67-69: KATHI KUNDHEI or "stick puppets" of Orissa.

This is a rod puppet tradition very similar to that of Bengal, and is also performed in the same manner. Here, the puppeteers hold the figures in the hand (#69), and with the fingers manipulate the string arrangement inside the structure to give the movement. They generally perform the stories from The Ramayana.

---

These slides show the various traditional forms of Indian puppetry which have been popular for centuries. Contemporary puppetry is also very popular in India. Puppetry, both traditional and contemporary, is now being used to educate people in the village areas on health and hygiene, family planning, banking practices, farming, and much more. SESAME STREET, MOVE OVER!