

# Strings and Stories

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## Katha Kathputli ki, Jaipur



# **Strings and Stories: Katha Kathputli ki Jaipur**

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**Discover India Program**

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## Certificate

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled “Strings and Stories: Katha Kathputli Ki, Jaipur” submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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## **Abstract**

The tale of the string puppets of Rajasthan is one that dates back many centuries, while the art form has a rich history, current awareness on it is depleting. While it still remains a vital attraction in Jaipur's tourism industry there isn't much that is known about what happens behind the curtains of the stage; from the moment the wood is procured to the final moments of the Kathputlis dancing on stage. This had come to our notice while looking for secondary information, that there aren't many reliable sources. Much of the information we found only brushed the topmost layer. With this research we hope to understand how the art form has changed over the years, study its implications on the stakeholders, while paying heed to the art form itself.

The research conducted was qualitative in nature, where empirical and interpretive approaches were employed. The data collection was done with the aid of semi-structured questionnaires and took into account the views of the art forms stakeholders.

Through this research it was found that the members of the Bhat community are the sole practitioners of this art form, bringing the Kathputlis to life with the swift movements of their fingers. The process of making a Kathputli is time taking and involves a variety of intricate work to be done in the final stages of manufacturing and the themes of the stories narrated range from the valiant tales of warriors to romance and comedy. However, the style of their performance has changed over the years, this change can be factored to the reason that the artisans believe that the demand from the audience has changed. And that changing their way of showcasing the art form would be the only way to attract more audiences. While the puppets were predominantly made for performing in the past, their purpose has shifted to meet the needs of the artists. With the change in technology, environment and globalization, the artisans have adapted in order to survive.

This research explores the various methods in which the puppeteers have evolved to sustain the art form in the 21st century and how the current day and age is affecting them and the measures they have taken to sustain their families.



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# Introduction

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## 1.1 Introduction

Puppet shows and dance performances for centuries have been a source of entertainment. While India itself has an abundance of such art forms, Rajasthan is home to the Kathputli puppets. The art form began in Rajasthan but hasn't been restricted to this region. Various states throughout India have replicated their own miniature Rajasthan, showcasing Kathputli performances. One such example is Dhola Ri Dhani in Hyderabad.

Places like Dhola Ri Dhani in Hyderabad have helped in spreading Kathputlis and Rajasthani culture throughout India. Regardless of these efforts there still wasn't much that we knew about the art form before we began this journey. Our knowledge of the art form was limited to the sparse interactions we had as children, but we were curious.

While Rajasthan remained as the source, with areas like Jaipur, Udaipur, etc being hotspots, the art form had managed to weave its way through various states in India. Local sources contended that Jaipur was a shining beacon for tourists looking for Kathputli performances and dolls; giving us a large sample size for interviewing and analyzing. Alongside this colonies like Kathputli Nagar and Adarsh colony (located in Jaipur) were the residences of the puppeteers. This proved to be opportune as it was a tourist season in Jaipur. The performance aspect was another vital piece of this research. Henceforth the research team traveled to local destinations like *Hawa Mahal*, *Regenta Hotel*, and *Amer Fort* to gain further insight.

Traveling through time, the influence that the art form has had on the livelihood of those who practice it and how their current situation could impact the overall essence of the art form can be seen. Another aspect is how the current stories, themes, and melodies contradict those performed in the past and how they have evolved to fit current trends. The research aims to gain knowledge on these topics while simultaneously gauging the perspective of the puppeteers.

## 1.2 Historical Overview

The desert region of Rajasthan is home to some of the most relished art forms of India, one such art form being Kathputli; the dance of the string puppets. Puppeteers would build a stage on which they would make the wooden marionette dolls dance; by attaching strings to the dolls. Simultaneously they would recite poems and stories, with an entourage of musicians assisting them. The story of the Kathputlis of Rajasthan is an age-old one, one that dates back 1000s of years. (“Kathputli- The Art...”, n.d.) It's said that the art form was restricted to the hands of a *Bhat* puppeteer. It was practiced and perfected by the *Bhat* community of this desert region. Whereas contradicting sources discovered on-field; Mr. Lakshmikanth claims that the art form originated from Iran. Many centuries prior immigrants from Iran settled in what is now modern-day Rajasthan. They came during the *Maharaja* period, bringing with them their culture and practices which influenced the locals of Rajasthan and made this art form a commonality in the region (Lakshmikanth Bhat, 9th February 2020).

Very commonly seen amongst the hustle and chaos of festivals and religious gatherings, the string puppets of Rajasthan have had a long turbulent journey. Their downfall from the glamorous title they once held as the secret counselors of past kings, to their current status as a mere tourist attraction. Having been reduced to mere tourist attractions, “that art seems to have been reduced to gaudy souvenirs and variety acts aimed at the foreign tourists” (Plowright, 2005). Being a hotspot for tourists the city of Jaipur currently doesn't have any buildings dedicated to the art form, tourist places like *Hawa Mahal* and *Jaigad Fort* are hotspots for Kathputli performances. Alongside these historical buildings the *Ram Prakash Cinema/Cottage* built by *Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II* was the first and oldest theatre located in Jaipur; located in the vicinity of *Chandi Ki Taksal*. Now, out of commission, the historical building was originally dedicated to Kathputli.

While the art form is now referred to as a tourist attraction in the past it wasn't just limited to the courts of the kings they were also performed in the town square. People of all ages would gather to watch the performers put on their favorite stories; Dola & Maroo, Maharaja Ratan Singh, Anarkali, etc. They would revel in the music and storytelling and the performances would go on for hours and hours running on the excitement and encouragement of the

audience. They would breathe life into the lovingly carved wooden dolls through music, storytelling, and the swift movement of their fingers. Reciting stories about the benevolent rulers, or the mighty gods. These stories comprised the puppeteer's portfolio until recently, now they have opted for stories that are more attractive to the audience such as those with snake charmers and dancing women. In the past, the kings they served would bestow upon them honor and prestige. Recognizing them for their talents and handiwork. Now they are fighting for minimum wages and living with this meager amount on a day to day basis (Dilip Bhaat, 9th February 2020)

Moreover, the secondary sources cite that the women in this art form are restricted to more intrinsic roles and their importance in the art form is downplayed. This is ironic considering that in historical texts the 32 wooden effigies which were cautiously littered around the throne were female. In a country where the utmost importance was given to the male species; and the females dismissed, it could be said that "this highest tribute was paid to feminine power" (Plowright, 2005). As said by Poh Sim Plowright in *The Desacralization of Puppetry: a Case History from Rajasthan* the stories which were previously performed by the puppeteer had the essence of female wisdom and insight, "the puppets themselves were considered a reliable means of moral instruction" (Plowright, 2005).

### **1.3 Research Statement**

To study the evolution and changes in the art form of Kathputli and analyze the socio-economic implications the art form has on the communities involved with it in Jaipur.

### **1.4 Aims and Objectives**

- To understand how the art form has evolved over the years and to form a comparison between the traditional and modern outlook on the art form.
- To elaborate the process of making the Kathputlis and the tools/techniques used to make these puppets come to life.
- To analyze the perceptions on the future of the art form and see where it is heading.

- To understand the livelihood of the people involved with the art form and gauge their perspectives on the art form with the help of interviews and observation.
- To inquire about the demand for Kathputlis in Jaipur today and find out the perspective of sellers in the field.
- To study the social understanding of the art form in Jaipur - by analyzing how aware people from different backgrounds and age groups are about the art form today; through interviews and interactions with the locals.
- To review the involvement of the government and non-profit organizations.

### **1.5 Pre-field Hypothesis**

After the literature review, numerous articles were found talking about the art form diminishing at a rapid pace. Therefore, it was hypothesized that the number of people practicing the art form today would be limited; ergo there wouldn't be many performances in the city. Due to this reason, we assumed that the local sellers as well as the mass sellers would face certain implications. Another assumption made was that the artisans practicing the art form today would have a variety of insights on the history of the art form, as their ancestors have been a part of it for centuries. It was also assumed that the equation between stakeholders involved was a part of an ongoing cycle, and such implications would break the flow of this cycle.

### **1.6 Research Methodology**

To accomplish the aims and objectives listed above, qualitative data was used in the research method. Both empirical and interpretive approaches were employed in the research. The framework of the research makes it imperative that the analysis of data and facts are constructed, taking into account the different stakeholders. A combination of research methods that target particular segments of people, based on their part in the making, selling and performance aspects of the art form were incorporated. The method of sampling used was random and snowballing techniques. The stakeholders targeted were as follows:

### **1.6.1 Puppeteers: Makers and performers**

The puppeteers, both makers of the Kathputlis and the performers were the main target group in this research. Personal interviews and observations were used to gauge the puppeteer's perspectives. The aim was to interview at least 20 puppeteers who actively practice the art form. However, due to the multiple constraints faced concerning the puppeteers, the sample size came down to 10 puppeteers. The interviews were semi-structured and were standard for all of them. The goal was to find out about the current state of the art form, their living conditions, their economic status, and the art form itself i.e., the raw materials used, tools used in making, background music, stories, etc. the sample was chosen through the contacts made through tourist sites and Kathputli Nagar tour organizer.

### **1.6.2 The Sellers**

Semi-structured personal interviews and observations were used to get information from different sellers. The sample consisted of three types of sellers that are: 3 mass sellers, 4 local shops and 3 street sellers. Locating mass sellers wasn't a difficult task, but finding local shops and street sellers was difficult as they were scattered around the city, mainly near tourist spots or shopping areas. The topics that were covered included; the impact of the art form on their livelihood, the demand, their average sales, currently trending Kathputlis, their income from the art form, etc. This was very important for the research, as the different sellers also had a part to play in the current state of the art-form and its artists.

### **1.6.3 The Audience**

This sample was the most scattered as the interviews were taken with people at tourist sites/hotels after performances, at shopping areas where the Kathputlis are sold, etc. Semi-structured personal interviews were used to acquire data from 30 audiences and casual conversations were used with some to understand the social understanding of the audience about the art form.

#### **1.6.4 The event organizers, NGOs, and other stakeholders**

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain interviews from this sample. Questions related to the history, current day scenario and their involvement were asked. Their information helped in gaining a third-party perspective on the art form and provided clarity on the art form itself.

Mainly semi-structured interviews were used in this research, as it gave an idea on the list of questions we wanted to ask the sample, with the right amount of flexibility during the interviews, that helped us delve into a topic more deeply or move on to a related topic that would add to the research. 4 individuals from the NGO were interviewed, including 2 founding members and 2 teachers. 2 event organizers and 1 theatre teacher were also interviewed.

#### **1.7 Limitations**

The main limitations of the research were:

1.7.1 As assumed before going on-field, it proved to be difficult to extract the precise information the research required, from the puppeteers due to their busy schedules and inhibitions.

1.7.2 There are multiple cities and towns in Rajasthan that have a rich heritage connected to the art form of Kathputli, but due to the nature of the research, and time constraints we were only able to research Jaipur.

1.7.3 Female puppeteers were not interviewed as much, as they were restricted to speak to us in most cases. This reduced the possibility of getting multiple perspectives from the communities involved.

#### **1.8 Rationale**

The pink city of Jaipur once nestled between four arches, has now expanded beyond. But even after coming so far, the city has not given up on its rich history and art forms from

centuries ago. One such art form that represents their entire state is: Kathputli. What fascinated us about the art form is its symbolism of Rajasthani people, heritage and culture. Even after all these years, they proudly narrate the stories of their kings and warriors, keeping their history alive. Our group consists of people from different parts of India, and who have all heard about the art form, but realization dawned, that not many knew about it in depth. The Kathputlis were used in movies, advertisements, books and many other platforms. Then why is this art form considered to be diminishing? Is it diminishing at all? What goes on behind the curtains of the stage? How are these puppets made and what is the process of putting on a show? We were intrigued by these questions. And a majority of these answers rest within a selected community called that *Bhats*. We undertook this research to know more about Kathputlis and the *Bhats* who made these Kathputlis. Through our research, we aim to generate substantial information about the art form and bring it to a public forum. Our journey began with our curiosity about an art-form we knew about, but simultaneously didn't really 'know' about and we wish it ends with us understanding the intrinsic nature of Kathputlis and its people.

# Literature Review

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## 2.1 History

To comprehend the culture of any region, it is imperative to delve into the traditions, customs and the art forms of it. One such art form that has put Rajasthan on the cultural map of India is Kathputli. The art form has been claimed to be traced back to 1500 years (Sondgrass, 2004). Enwrapped in India's seismic economic and cultural shifts, this century-old art form is now alleged to be on the verge of extinction, losing its audience to film and television. An art form that once had a socio-political and religious role in the country is now striving to carve its way to reach its audience. Only, to stay afloat by appealing to foreign tourists, international festivals or programs for heritage preservation, this genre of performance can be termed as a "diminishing art form" (Sondgrass, 2004).

Skimming through the pages of history, a thread of information about the origin and the socio-economic status of these puppeteers can be traced. *Marwar*, rich in artistic traditions and narrative compositions is an abode to a mélange of semi-nomadic groups called *Nat* (now called *Bhat*). *Nat*, as the name suggests, means 'dancers'(Sondgrass, 2004 )The western region of Rajasthan is an abode to the performing communities whose prowess lies in the art of puppetry, music, poetry, comedy, snake-charming, mimicry, etc. These communities are composed of professional storytellers, skilled poets, and singers for centuries. The *Nat* claim to have descended from Brahmins who used to compose Sanskrit 'songs of praise' for kings and maintain royal genealogies by scribing them in temples, books, manuscripts, etc. (Sondgrass, 2004).

The audience of the *Nat* performers has been forever changing throughout time. The art form that was once performed to entertain the royals then went on to perform for a group of leather workers called the *Bhambis*, who were a part of a backward caste. It was when the *Bhambis* were forced to quit working in the leather industry, that the *Nat* gave themselves a name of higher status called '*Bhat*' (Sondgrass, 2004). The now termed '*Bhat*' community, who were earlier limited to dance and acrobatics, then took up puppetry. This can be identified as a milestone in the history of the *Bhat* community (Sondgrass, 2004). With further analysis on the topic, it was seen that their choice of audience members has led to a decline in their position on the pyramid of hierarchy in the caste system. Moreover, some claim that puppetry entered their community in the twentieth century, whereas contradictory sources say that the

art form and the community have been interlinked for thousands of years (Kathputli Or Indian Puppets From Rajasthan, 2018) (Sondgrass, 2004).

Prior to India's independence, Kathputli performances took place before the royal families of various Indian states (Sondgrass, 2004). However, after independence, the popularity of the art form gained elevation, leading to diversification in their clientele; Indian metropolitan cities, wealthy Rajasthani merchants, military officials, etc. (Sondgrass, 2004). With the evolution in the modern means of entertainment, its demand had declined. The puppeteers are striving to keep the art form alive but the community's approach to sustaining the art form and themselves is not elaborated upon, in the various websites and journals available. Adding on, there is a lack of information on the promotional techniques used by the *Bhats* and the use of technology for the sustenance of the art form. Through the survey of available research, it is clear that the current state of the art form and the process of its evolution is an unexplored area of research.

## **2.2 Background Assistance**

This segment of the literature review focuses on the available literature regarding the making process of the Kathputlis, and the roles of the people involved with this process.

### **2.2.1 How it's all made**

What might seem to be a simple puppet at the first glance, in reality, has gone through a well thought out making process. The painstakingly carved faces of the puppets are made from two distinct types of wood - *Aaru* and mango (Dangoria, n.d.). The exquisite wood of the mango trees is used for performance Kathputlis, whilst the inexpensive and more demure *Aaru* wood is used for selling puppets. However, the available literature does not enunciate the intricate differences between puppets that are made for selling purposes and for performances. Differences in their making process, their use, whether performance dolls are exclusive to performances, etc.

Adding on, the size of the puppets varies from 16-20 inches ("Kathputli or Indian...", 2018). The initial stage of carving the frame takes up to two to three hours, whilst the intricate

details that make the Kathputlis riveting are more time-consuming. The puppets are painted by hand, in various hues of black, white, red and yellow colors, making them full of life. The paint medium used can affect the longevity of the puppets' life; hence oil paint is used, as the color lasts longer (Dangoria, n.d.). The style of clothing is inspired by the traditional attire of Rajasthanis and reflects the vibrant culture of the state. One can differentiate the male and female puppets by paying heed to the details on the puppets themselves. The masculine forms are adorned with turbans and mustaches. The Rajputs have mustaches, whilst the Muslims have pointed beards. The females, on the other hand, have a *ghunghat* (veil) covering their heads and are dressed in blouses and *ghagras* (long skirts). The textiles used for the clothes included *Zari*, Silk, and *Bandhani*. At the final stage, strings are bound to the hands, head, and waist. The lightweight nature allows the puppeteers to make the dolls dance effortlessly.

In order to perform a puppeteer first must have a stage, in which he can do so. The construction process of a stage is simple. It includes 4 wooden logs, flat wooden sticks for the base, a carpet, a cloth for the front and back. Four of the wooden logs are tied with strings and the flat wooden sticks are placed on these logs, creating the primary structure of the stage. A carpet or mat is laid on top of the wooden sticks. The *tambuda* or tent is made up of three parts. The cloth on the proscenium is known as "*jhalar*", which means 'fringe' (Gründ and Bhat, 2012). The four wooden logs used to form the arches, through which the puppets are seen, is called "*tibara*" (Gründ and Bhat, 2012). A black cloth called the "*kanath*" is attached to the rear end of the stage (Gründ and Bhat, 2012). This cloth is placed between the puppeteers and the puppets, thereby making sure the puppeteers are not seen during the performance. In earlier times, kerosene lamps called *Khandils* were placed inside the tents while performances were going on (Gründ and Bhat, 2012).

The *Bhats* perform stories about the valiant *Prince of Marwar* and *Amar Singh Rathore* whose act is famously known as *Amar Singh Rathore ka Khel* (Kathputli- The Art of Telling Stories Through Puppets). Interesting characters in the stories include *Anarkali* the dancer and the snake charmer who enchants a snake with his flute but gets bitten by the snake and dies (Prem Bhat, 2001). Likewise, there are musicians, magicians, jugglers, horseback and camelback riders, clowns, and other characters that reflect the magnificence and grandeur of

ancient North Indian courts. Few of the most fascinating puppets are *behrupiya* (con-artist), the double-bodied or two-faced Kathputli that changes from a male puppet to a female puppet, and the *jadugar* (magician) that juggles his head (Gründ and Bhatt, 2012).

Lately, the stories have also been revolving around modern social concepts like saving money, family planning, and the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Kathputli- The Art of Telling Stories Through Puppets). These acts catch the eye of the tourists that come from all over the world and the puppeteers sell their puppets for thousands of rupees every month. However, the other aspects of the performances that have changed are not elaborated upon in the literature.



**Image 1: Audience enjoying a Kathputli show**

Source: Financial Express



**Image 2: A Kathputli performance**

Source: Trip Advisor

### **2.2.2 Roles Taken Up**

Secondary sources claim that the industry revolves around the specific roles and responsibilities performed up by the individuals who are involved with it. Men and women take up roles that complement one another. Customarily men are in charge of executing the more tedious tasks such as, acquiring the resources, as well as carving the wood and giving the puppets an identity. More often than less, men are the ones to perform.

While many women have taken up roles as housekeepers, there are many who concurrently work behind the curtains (Chandola, 2019). They stitch the clothes which are worn by the dolls and paint the Kathputlis in vibrant hues. The work doesn't end here for them, they also sing ballads. The women juggle more than one duty, they are designated to working in their homes, taking care of their children and supporting their husbands, who perform and sell the puppets. It can be assumed that the designation of the women lies in areas that are more artistic and intrinsic in nature. The women work in the sanctity of their own four walls and are bound by the precedents of society, leaving men to take up the more glorifying roles, such as performing (Chandola, 2019).



**Image 3: A puppeteer performing and a woman cooking (left)**

Source: Pinterest

**Image 4: A man making Kathputlis (centre)**

Source: Crafty Talks

**Image 5: A woman stitching the clothes for the Kathputlis (right)**

Source: dsouce

## **2.3 Livelihood**

### **2.3.1 Alleyways of Kathputli Nagar**

The pink city of Jaipur is acclaimed for its magnificent *mahals* and its grandeur but hidden behind this perfectly painted picture is the turbulent livelihood of the Kathputli puppeteers. An art form that was once of great importance is now enduring a crisis; its artisans are struggling to earn a decent living. This struggle can be reflected in their homes and living conditions.

Kathputli Nagar, a domicile for these artists, is an area of 789 meters. Narrow alleys, cramped houses, and sewage flowing through the streets are a few of the characteristics used to describe this locality. The houses themselves are constructed with short and common walls. The sanitation and hygiene conditions are deplorable. Rather there is no regard towards sanitation, so much so that its dwellers defecate in open fields.

Many of the NGOs which were looked into, focus on the empowerment of women and the upliftment of the community but don't focus on the bigger picture. There are NGOs that are working towards empowering the women of Kathputli Nagar. One such organization is Saarthak, which has recently begun working on improving their living conditions (Saarthak, 2020). While there are organizations like Saarthak that help these artists, there is a lack of secondary information on the effectiveness of these NGO's and whether they are sustainable in the long run.

### **2.3.2 Turning Tides**

The artists accused the digital age to be held responsible for the crisis the industry is enduring. They believe that modernization and the advent of film and TV have caused a drastic effect on the art form's sustenance (Chandola, 2019). It has been brought to their knowledge that the current generation is a techno-dependent one and that they would rather spend time indulging their phones than allowing themselves to experience an age-old art form. These are the claims of the puppeteers, who observe the audience members, but what about the perspective of the audience members themselves? The perspective of the audience

members must be explored in terms of what attracts/repels them towards the art form. This perspective can be used to study the reasons behind the decline in demand for the art form.

This shift in demand has led to the artists earning less than what they previously were. Ergo resulting in a lower standard of living. The meager income earned by the artisans presents them with no alternative, but to live in substandard conditions. The inhabitants of Kathputli Nagar are well acquainted with the fact that in order to obtain a higher standard of living they must venture out and take up alternative jobs, in fields such as shop keeping, vegetable vending, etc. Henceforth they are keen on barring their children from working in this industry and are adamant about educating their children by sending them to schools and encouraging them to get better jobs. While some believe that, there are others who want this tradition to be continued for ages to come and are keen on teaching this knack of fingers to their children as well. In terms of livelihood, it can be comprehended that these Kathputli Nagar dwellers are attempting to keep this art from afloat not only for the means of their survival but also because this form of puppetry brings an eminent cultural value to the state itself (Unfold Craft Official, 2018).



**Image 6: Kathputlis being used for rallies**

Source: Hindustan Times

## 2.4 Selling

While a large segment of the Kathputli industry relies on performing there is another stratum that relies on the selling of these puppets for income. The puppets are sold in the form of home decor, key chains, etc. Within these shops, the puppets can be spotted hanging on the doors, walls, and from the windows. The dolls are not the only trinkets sold, the puppeteers also make colorful chains of hanging birds, camels and other animals famous in the region. These bits and baubles are made of the same raw materials; stuffing used to make the puppets and are reinforced with metal threads (Dangoria, 2019).

The puppeteers finesse from the assorted convictions of their customers. The bird hangings are presumed to bring positive energy to a house. Apart from the lucrative puppets and bird hangings, they also make stuffed toys and dolls as decorations. All of the trinkets sold in the shops are patiently crafted by hand, with each piece being individually checked. The dolls are created to bring out the colorful elements of nature and the grandeur of Rajasthan (Dangoria, n.d.).

Most of the literature that discusses the different perspectives of the people only enumerates the puppeteer's opinions. The seller's perspective on Kathputlis, how the merchandising has evolved over the years and the use of online platforms has not been specified.



**Image 7: A pair of Kathputlis**

Source: Spicyip



# Kalakruti

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### **3.1 The beginning of the Kathputlis' life**

By delving into the process of making Kathputlis from start to finish, this section will enumerate the initial stages of procuring the raw materials and carving the wood, to the final stage of tying the strings to the newly assembled puppets.

#### **3.1.1 Contribution in the making process**

The art of making the Kathputlis is passed on from generation to generation within the *Bhat* community. The puppeteers have been assisting their families in the making process since their childhood. Each family member has a vital role in the process; the Kathputlis are a collective effort of the entire family.

The men are usually the ones that acquire the raw materials required. The raw materials include wood, cloth, paints, *keel* (nails), *basoli*, *genthi*, *chorsi*, etc. A few of the raw materials are recycled from old items, such as old sarees, *dhotis*, etc. The old performances Kathputlis are also reused, in parts or as a whole. Apart from acquiring the raw materials, men also carve the wood; the head and facial features of the Kathputli. The women paint the dolls, stitch their clothes and do the '*shringaar*' i.e., decorate the doll just the way people dress a bride. But this task isn't restricted to women, sometimes the men help. Many puppeteers said that they don't force their children to help them with the making, that the children do it of their own free will and self-interest (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February, 2020).

Adding on, our secondary sources said that men and women have very distinct and stringent roles, but the evidence found on field is contradictory to this claim. The stitching and painting work is also done by the men for Kathputlis and women help with the carving process as well (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February, 2020).



**Image 8: Vinod Bhat's Employee carving Kathputlis**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 9: Sushma Bhat Painting Kathputlis**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 10: Poonam Bhat stitching Kathputlis**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

### **3.1.2 Types of puppets**

The process of making the Kathputli varies with the type. Broadly speaking, there are two types: the ones used for performing and the ones used for commercial purposes. The ones made for commercial purposes are comparatively much simpler and easier to make, taking roughly two days to make a pair (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February, 2020). However, the artisans at the Puppet House make puppets by the hours and can make up to four to five pairs of

Kathputlis in a day. On the other hand, it takes twenty days to make a pair used for performing. This is because each part of the doll is made with precision and intricate details. The Kathputlis used for performing are much more colorfully painted and made to wear *ghagras* of brighter colors with more detailing on the material. The reason as to why it takes longer to make the ones used in performing is that almost every part of the puppets body has to be made separately and then attached, with the help of *keel*. This is done for the swift movement of the puppets' joints, which is required for dancing and performing (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February, 2020).



**Image 11: Dancing Kathputlis (left) Selling Kathputlis**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 12: Selling Kathputlis Local shop**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 13: Selling Kathputlis Puppet House**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 14: Dancing Kathputli performing**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 15: Dancing Kathputlis**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

There is also a difference in the materials used for selling and performing. For instance, the threads used in blankets and pillows are the ones used in the making of commercial Kathputlis. Whereas *suththi ka dhaaga*, a strong, silky black thread, used in the stitching of leather shoes is used to stitch the Kathputlis made for performing (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February, 2020).

In order for the puppets to dance, small holes must be drilled in, and strings must then be looped through the holes. The selling puppets have no more than three holes to which the threads are attached, whereas several holes are needed for the performance ones. Strings are attached to almost every joint of the dancing Kathputli, this is done for fluid movement when the puppets are dancing. There could be as many as 30-40 strings attached to the puppets. (Dilip Bhat, 9th February, 2020) The string material used is the same as the one used when stitching the Kathputlis for performing.

The variation of Kathputlis being manufactured has diversified a lot over time. Traditionally the Kathputlis were male and female dolls, that one could move using their hands. In early times these dolls were available in much simpler garb, only cloth, now there are different designs, shapes, and even different costumes. The puppets are now decorated with marble, semi-precious stones, and even in gold, all according to the customers preference. However, such customized dolls are rare in the market today, as they don't sell regularly, and are very exclusive. The pricing of the customized pieces depends on the size, the kind of base material

used and the kind of customizations the client wants. There is a very limited number of clientele for these kinds of Kathputlis. (Poonam Bhat, 10th February, 2020)

### 3.1.3 Making process

From the primary and secondary research, it is seen that the first stage of a Kathputlis journey starts with the carving of its head, using a tool called *basoli* to peel the wood. Then, the eyes, nose, and mouth are carved using a tool called *chorsi*. The head is made of wet wood which makes it easier for the puppeteer to carve. After carving, the head is put under sunlight to dry, for at least two to four hours. Once the wood has dried completely, it is polished using *regmal* (sandpaper), after which varnish is applied to protect the Kathputli from water. Then, *chalk mitti* is applied to fill any gaps in the wood's surface. The form is then polished once again using sandpaper. After the sanding and polishing process, comes the painting of the puppet. The Kathputlis are painted in two different skin tones, white and beige. (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February, 2020)



**Image 16: Tools used in making Kathputlis**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-2020

Then comes the body of the puppet. The material that is used for the body of the Kathputli is called *kichaan*, it is waste from carpets. This material is used in stuffing the hands, legs, and body. Apart from the generic puppets, several other types of dolls like elephants, camels, birds, snakes are also made. They are also made of the same cloth and *kichaan*. Some families prefer to make the animal puppets, rather than the traditional puppets. (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February, 2020).



**Image 17: *Kichaan*, waste from carpets**      **Image 18: Waste cloth to fill the Kathputlis** Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

The cloth for the puppets is bought from the *hatwara*, a “Gujarati market” selling second-hand sarees. The sarees used are second-hand *bandhani* sarees, available in a wide range of colors. The color of the saris is chosen based on the client’s demand. The entire saree is cut into pieces based on the requirement as to which item of clothing they are making. Then, *gota* work is done on the cloth using a stitching machine, after which different parts are made using the cloth. One saree is enough to make 6-7 Kathputlis. (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February, 2020) The outfits can either be hand stitched or stitched using a machine.

The puppeteers have adapted to the newer methods of production and have started using machines; cutting and sewing machines, which reduce the time and effort needed. However, there might be people who still stitch by hand as these machines aren’t used for the smaller puppets. (Poonam Bhat, 10th February, 2020)



**Image 19: Differently painted Kathputlis dancing**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 20: Intricate decoration on Kathputlis**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 21: Magician Kathputli**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 22: Snake charmer Kathputli**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 23: Evolution of a Kathputli from a wooden log**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

The clothing style of the Kathputlis is inspired by the traditional attire of the local Rajasthani men and women. The females are dressed with *pura saath shringaar*, a dressing style resembling the attire worn by brides. The *ghera*, which is the innermost layer is made from a waste cloth from the Rajasthani dhoti, the *ghagra* is stitched on top of that. Colorful *bandhani* sarees are used for making the *chunni*, the outermost layer, which is draped over the dolls head (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February 2020).



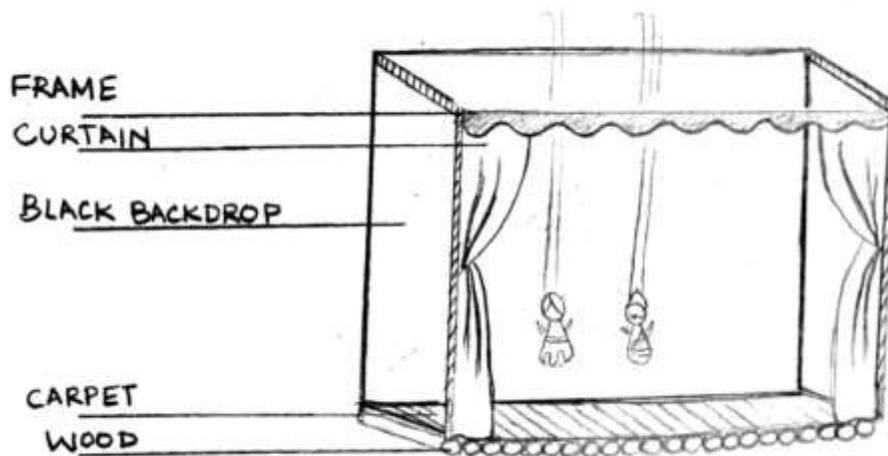
**Images 24 & 25: Female and Male dancing Kathputlis**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

## **3.2 The Act**

### **3.2.1 Behind the Curtains**

As mentioned in the literature review the setting of the stage itself is a major aspect of the performance. The entire stage is set up in a way that emphasizes the Kathputlis and creates an illusion that they are moving and talking by themselves. A component usually overseen by many about the stage itself is its compactable and travel friendly nature, as the puppeteers travel across Rajasthan and other constituencies of India. .



**Illustration 1: Stage set up for a Kathputli performance**

A typical Kathputli show is performed by the entire family, where each member has a designated role. The head of the family (oldest male) sits next to the stage with his instrument, the *dholak* and narrates the story. The other men perform behind the stage and talk in the ‘puppet language’, which was invented to portray the puppets as having their language, the women in the family translate this ‘puppet language’ to the audience

The secondary sources claim that women have no involvement in the performance aspect, but what we found on field contradicts this, it was said that women play a vital role in the making and performance. This was observed during the performances attended as well. The whole process of a puppet show gives a significant role to each family member. The puppeteers say that it helps them stay connected to their roots and strengthens their family bond. (Anil Bhat, 8th February, 2020)

### **3.2.2 Stories and Characters**

It is hard to enter the pink city and leave without having heard of the great and valiant leader, *Maharana Pratap Singh* of Udaipur. He is considered as one of the greatest leaders born of Rajasthan and the tales of his bravery, determination and courage resound throughout the lands. The stories of his staunch warrior spirit and leadership are etched in golden ink

throughout Rajput history. The natives of Rajasthan still look at him with great respect and admiration, and honor him by telling tales of his bravery through various mediums. The reason for this admiration and unfaltering loyalty that exists till date is given in the stories recited by the puppeteers. *Maharan Pratap Singh* was the only Rajput ruler to have defied the Mughal emperor's army, to protect his kingdom of *Mewar* and its people. Despite the unfathomable odds piled up against him, he refused to surrender to the Mughal emperor and waged a full-blown war against him. Even though he lost the war, the Mughal emperor and his council were unable to outwit the *Maharana* and imprison him. The hardships that he and his family had to endure through these times were unbelievable, but owing to their determination and strong will, they survived the war against the Mughals. The Kathputli performances depict the battle scene between *Maharana Pratap Singh* and the then general of the Mughal Army, *Raja Man Singh*. They depict how the *Maharana* comes out victorious and then they speak of his glory. This very story is a prominent one and is often noted in the local puppet shows that are scattered at different venues throughout the city.

This story is also very significant for the artform because a majority of the performers weave their stories around the tales of *Maharana Pratap*. The story is a must have in the portfolio of every puppeteer and each one has their own variation.

However, the themes of the shows also include: romance, drama, comedy, etc. A few shows are known for their unique characters instead of the storyline itself. These characters are: the Magician who can detach his head from the rest of his body, Anarkali, the snake charmer, Micheal Jackson from pop culture who can also do his signature "moon walk" on the stage, and many more.

A puppet is designed and decorated according to the stories they are being used in. The sellers have also started selling Kathputlis of certain characters, as it adds an extra touch to the puppet and is connected to the stories recited in the shows. A lot of puppeteers we spoke to said that the story of a performance is the pinnacle of the performance itself along with the beautiful puppets.



**Image 26: Snake charmer (Selling Kathputli)**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 27 : Snake charmer (Dancing Kathputli)**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 28: Anarkali Kathputli**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 29: Magician Kathputli**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

People from the older age group i.e., 35 years+, knew more about the stories narrated in different performances and preferred stories about various historical figures. Whereas the sample that belonged to the younger age groups either didn't have a lot of knowledge about the stories and themes of Kathputli shows or were bored with the old stories and lacked awareness of the art form. The young locals just watched the shows when they are put up at weddings or other events.

### 3.2.3 Musical Instruments

A performance involves a range of different instruments like a harmonium, *dholak*, *ghungroo* (small bells attached to a string), etc. During sufi performances, a *tabla* is used along with a harmonium.



**Image 30: Different instruments used in a performance**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

Apart from the above instruments, it was observed that the puppeteers had made an instrument of their own called *boli*, to accompany in their performance. This is used for the ‘puppet language’. It is a small instrument, played using the mouth by blowing air into it. To make this instrument, a bamboo stick is cut into two, and both the ends are tied using a wire made from a particular orange rubber. There is a small passage in the middle, through which the air passes, creating a whistle-like sound as we breathe. This instrument is used as an accompaniment in several performances.

In modern-day performances, background songs are used to enhance the performances. Songs like *kalio kudd padiyo mela ma*, *cycle puncture kar gayo* are famous Rajasthani songs used in many Kathputli performances. Bollywood songs or foreign language songs are also played. This helps the puppeteers to attract a younger audience and tourists from around the world. (Pappu Bhat, 11th February, 2020)

### **3.3 Societal Understanding**

Different people associated with the art form have varying opinions on it. Like a newly assembled Kathputli, all of these varying opinions accumulate, to form what the art form has become today, and what it will become shortly. Throughout the process of interviewing, we came across various perspectives of the stakeholders, regarding the art form, the puppeteers, their future and the contribution of Kathputli to the culture of India.

#### **3.3.1 Thoughts on the Art form**

Most of the audience members consider Kathputli performances to be a form of entertainment. Simultaneously some people thought of it as a form of expression or a possible teaching method. The audience could be divided into two segments, the tourists and people who had witnessed a Kathputli performance, for the first time. For them, it was a colorful, off-beat, new experience altogether. Ms. Jennifer, a native of Sweden, was extremely attracted to the performances. She had seen it for the first time and found it to be beautiful and was enamored by the music, its tempo, the singing, and the instruments played. She said that the performance made her want to dance.

The other segment consisted of locals and audience members who had seen a performance before. For the local Rajasthanis, Kathputli was not something new. They had seen it since their childhood; it was inculcated into almost all of the local festivals. It can be seen in fairs, hotels, heritage places, and tourist spots on a daily basis. An example of this is the *Gangaur festival*, where the story of *Shiv* and *Parvati* was performed. However, due to the constant exposure to the art form, it's become monotonous for them.

A part of the audience liked the art form but weren't inclined towards its changing nature (Mathur, 10th February, 2020). The others were unaware of the art form's details and preferred other forms of entertainment (Kamal Jain, 14th February 2020).

According to the Kathputli sellers, the art form reflects the Rajasthani culture and heritage. It keeps them connected with their ancestors, and also attracts many tourists; thereby

encouraging them to continue selling puppets to date. The street vendors strolling next to *Raj Mahal*, with Kathputlis hanging off their shoulders, said that tourists don't come from different countries to see the modernity of Jaipur, rather they come for the old world charm it offers, this includes Kathputli.

### **3.3.2 Promotional Strategies suggested**

The different stakeholders also provided promotional strategies that could help in reviving the art form. Some of them are:

- The Rajasthan tourism department should use puppets instead of people in tourism ads. “An initiative has to be taken by the government otherwise in the next 15 to 20 years, the art form will cease to exist”, said Mr. Farrokh, the owner of Puppet House, a mass seller of puppets. (Farrokh, 2020)
- The puppeteers can record puppet shows and put them on YouTube. That will help people know about the art form and about the people behind the curtain who remain unnoticed.
- Mrs. Rama Datt, Executive Trustee of the City Palace said that a way to promote it could be holding many more Kathputli performances in different places, and educating people about the heritage of Rajasthan using the art form, which would also appeal to new audiences. (Datt, 2020)

# People, Perspectives, Problems

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## 4.1 The Kalakar's Narrative

### 4.1.1 Puppeteers' Perspective on Present State of the Art form

The hand-making of Kathputlis, is something that has been practiced for ages, but now is considerably declining in the modern era of massive technological advancement. In today's world, there are many means of entertainment, whereas a few decades ago, these sources were virtually non-existent. With the rise in technology and the easy availability of anything from around the world, comes the diminishing era of Kathputlis. Owing to the decline in a paying audience for their performances, the makers have resorted to selling the puppets (Pappu Bhat, 11th February, 2020).

The mode of production vastly remains the same for selling; as it is for performing puppets – a major portion of the preparation is done manually, but the end goal of production has changed. The Kathputlis are now mainly manufactured to be sold, instead of being used for performances. The shift in its popularity and demand has severely affected the lives of many, most of who have resorted to other part-time professions, to sustain their families. A common example of this can be the Kathputli makers that drive autos during most of the day, and spend the rest of their time making Kathputlis which are sold in the local market, known as *Baapu Bazaar*. A lot of these same makers that drive autos during the day have paraded themselves as tour guides. The puppeteers believe that the art form is extremely dependent on the tourist season. In the months after the season ends they have no income. This forces them to live on loans and turn to odd jobs. These months are a tough time for the entire community. Feeding the family itself is a hard task. The members of the community rely on one another during this period of economic standstill (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February, 2020).

They view the turbulent times they have gone through as a test. Despite the dilapidated conditions in which they live and work, they hold immense value and respect towards the art form, henceforth they remain loyal to it. They have stood by it while it tested them, and their faith in the art form is what keeps them going. Contradictory to what one would expect of a person living in such an environment there was a combination of helplessness, as well as pride shined through their eyes while being interviewed. But the pain that comes with being a part of this art form overruled the pride they have; hence they are slowly letting it go.

Another observation made was that it's not the art form that the puppeteers look upon negatively, but the lack of interest or recognition is given to the art form. This has led to a part of the *Bhat* community resenting the art form itself.

#### **4.1.2 Puppeteer's Perspective on the Future of the Art-form**

In its time of glory, Kathputli was referred to as one of the most prestigious art forms since ancient times. However, this pride is ever-diminishing, and is evident when they are asked about their future. In the conversations ensued with the people from this community evidence of this was found. Their sufferings far outweigh the fruits that come with promoting and working in this industry. They serve the art by making and selling the dolls, while the art serves them by giving them a source of livelihood.

With immense confidence, it was reported that it's only the people from the *Bhat* community that have mastered the skillful art of making the Kathputli dolls dance, and there aren't any people from outside this community that does shows with Kathputli performances. This is because these skilled performers have been trained in the field by their fathers and grandfathers since their childhood. This practice continues but several families in the community don't wish to have their kids be employed in this profession anymore (Anil Bhat, 8th February, 2020).

This is because they believe that the art-form has a bleak future, and would much rather have their children be involved in a profession that promises a steady source of income. For this same reason, they wish to educate their children. While they would prefer their children to have a more sustainable profession, they still respect and value their ancestral art-form and treat it as a prized possession. They wish to pass on their skills to their children and hope that their children can keep the art-form alive, without necessarily working in the industry full time. They simply wish for a brighter future for their children. Sadly, they don't believe that by working in this field, their children would be able to achieve that (Anil Bhat, 8th February, 2020).

Vinod Bhat, a Kathputli performer and seller, shed some light on how the plight of people in this community can be improved. He said that the condition of people in this industry is

pitiful. They earn their living on a daily basis and they also face tough days when they are unable to sell even a single pair of Kathputlis. These days are especially difficult. When questioned about what can be done to help improve the plight of the individuals surviving solely on this art-form, he gave us a simple response, ‘Only the government can help us. If they were to allot us a special theatre or an auditorium that only houses Kathputli performances, the art form can be revived and the people might be able to earn a better income’. As mentioned previously, the *Ram Prakash Cinema/Cottage* which is not out of commission could be restored for this purpose. He also mentioned that the locations that still appreciate such performances are few. Most performances take place outside of tourist attractions, or on the roadside. There is no real infrastructure or special allotment for Kathputli performances and no entry/viewing fee, therefore the money earned solely depends on the audience’s will (Vinod Bhat, 8th February, 2020).

#### **4.1.3 Living Conditions**

The Kathputli makers and performers were a part of a nomadic community. They used to travel across the country, entertaining the audience with their unique art form. However, due to fewer work opportunities, they were forced to settle down. They cleared out a forested area in the city of Jaipur and made it their home. This place is referred to as Kathputli Nagar (Anonymous, 8th February, 2020).



## **Map 2: Aerial view of Kathputli Nagar, Jaipur**

Source: Google Earth

This took place about 40 years ago, as reported by an old lady encountered on the first visit to the colony. The colony is a squatter settlement consisting of hundreds of houses. The population of the colony can be estimated to around 10,000 people. Since it is not a society planned by the government, none of the inhabitants legally own any of the land.. The houses are built out of clay and bricks and are unevenly spaced from each other. Like a huge under-developed factory, the settlement is always bustling with activity – most of it revolving around the production of the Kathputlis. The colony has no proper drainage system or sewers. This is evident as, when one enters the colony one is greeted with a strong stench that emanates from the open drainage people build around their own houses to make-do in the absence of any real piping. The houses have a small area within the house itself where the males can urinate. Right next to this wall is the water storage unit. The urine flows outside the house through the small drainage that is made during the construction of the house (Anonymous, 8th February, 2020).



**Image 31: Wires submerged in sewage in Kathputli Nagar**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 32: Lanes in Kathputli Nagar**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 33: Open drainage system**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

Washrooms have been constructed outside the colony, by the government, a recent development which came forth after Akshay Kumar's campaign on the necessity to maintain safe and hygienic washroom conditions for all - since it is a basic human right. Till this initiative took place, the government hadn't provided any help to the community regarding their living conditions. The people naturally turned to the most primitive measures and would go into the nearby field to defecate. A house in Kathputli Nagar typically consists of two rooms, and in it resides a family of 8 or more people. The small home contains minimum furniture and utensils, and there are thread-bare mattresses on the floor, which serve as beds for the residents. The few families that can do well during the tourist season build another story to their houses and add a third room which makes the house more accommodating for the family. This is a common practice for the families living in Kathputli Nagar. There are several open spaces between the houses, which harbor the materials used for production; these also serve as a space for producing the dolls, among a few other handicrafts that they also manufacture. As previously mentioned the land which the puppeteers live in wasn't allotted to them. They hope the government can allot them spaces to live in. These houses were built by their forefathers; the subsequent generations have continued to reside in them as they have no other place to go (Pappu Bhat, 11th February, 2020).

## **4.2 Merchandising**

### **4.2.1 Mass Sellers**

To delve into the impression that Kathputlis have had in the business segment, it is crucial that one pays heed to the sellers. In this process, three individuals were interviewed. One of them was the owner of Puppet House, Mr. Farrokh Mohammad, a manufacturer and wholesaler of puppets. The other two were from Jaipur Handicrafts; the owner, Mr. Shivam Nagpal and a salesman there, Mr. Lucky Mehra.

Puppet House thrives solely from the sale of puppets, while on the other hand, in Jaipur Handicrafts puppets are a negligible fraction of the plethora of different art and décor they sell.

Puppet house is a 50 to 60 year-old establishment situated near the Hawa Mahal in Jaipur. Similarly, Jaipur Handicrafts has been in business for an estimated 40 years. The shops are considered to be a family heirloom, passed down from one generation to the next, by their grandfathers and fathers. Some geriatric dolls claim cherished positions, and the store owners value them to such an extent that they are considered to be collectibles.



**Image 34: Kathputlis on display at Puppet House**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

The demand for puppets significantly increases during the tourist season, as the puppets are perceived as something that must be acquired when one visits Jaipur. Tourists are attracted by the beauty of the colorful puppets. To them, the dolls are a symbol of Indian culture and a part of its history, and what better way to take home a part of this vivacious culture than to buy something which represents it. The season begins in November and ends around February. The sellers have their plate full during these four months but remain idle for the next 8 months. Regardless of this Puppet House is stacked to the brim year-round with puppets. The shop is filled with many fascinating varieties of puppets. These puppets are sold individually whilst the simpler puppets are always sold in pairs. According to him, some of these puppets are now found only in museums and exclusively sold in his shop. The sellers claim that with an increase in variety, there is a growth in demand. The Kathputlis have adapted to modern times in terms of designs, shapes, and costumes. In the modern-day and age, direct selling isn't the only means. Albeit the fact that the puppets are sold online as well, it is difficult to see the texture and the colors through photos. Ergo the direct sales exceed online sales (Farrokh, 12th February 2020).

The sellers are often engrossed in conversing with the tourists. Mr. Lucky speaks a variety of languages such as French, Spanish and a little bit of Italian. He claims to have learned French from an institute but he learned the other languages while interacting with the customers. When the language barrier is devoid, it's easier for them to communicate and bargain with one another. Like the many languages spoken by Mr. Lucky, the Puppet House owner claims to have set up stalls in many fairs, both in India and places like Europe, Germany, etc. Twice a year, he attends these fairs and has permanent stalls in Noida. While there are numerous fairs outside of Jaipur there are no fairs organized locally. Many of the fairs they attend have been on an international platform, in this manner, the culture of India and the art form are also promoted abroad. These fairs also allow the sellers to gain an international customer base, likewise, Jaipur Handicrafts exports the puppets to the U.S., Europe, Australia, Italy, and Spain (Lucky Mehra, 13th February 2020).

#### 4.2.1.1 Manufacturing for the sellers

Puppet House has a manufacturing unit of its own. The establishment has approximately 15 workers working full time. All of the puppets sold by them are produced in-house, they don't outsource or purchase any puppets from outside, and everything is made in the manufacturing unit from scratch. The cutting and carving process of wood is considered to be the most difficult part of making a puppet by the workers. These workers belong to the *Bhat* community as all the mass sellers believe that only the *Bhats* add the uniqueness to the dolls. (Farrokh, 12th February 2020).

A large fragment of the process is done by hand, except for when sewing machines are used to make the dolls' clothes. The entirety of *saath shringaar* is requisite to make a puppet. A new cloth is used only for the exclusively sold, expensive puppets. Brocade is the most expensive cloth and is only used to enhance the dolls. All the material is bought from Jaipur itself at wholesale prices. They also make various other props for the performance like horses, camels, elephants, birds, etc, from cloth (Farokh, 12th February 2020).



**Image 35: Horse Kathputli for performances**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Image 36: Horse Kathputli for Sale  
(Lakshmikanth Bhat)**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

Jaipur Handicraft doesn't manufacture puppets at their store; rather it outsources them from the nearby villages, where people are reliant on the Kathputlis to make a living. The store conveys the number of puppets required to the villagers, the orders are then paid for accordingly. The livelihood of the village workers thus depends on the demand. During the tourist season, they get a larger quantity of orders and therefore the villagers are better off during this season, while in the off-season the demand is less, the cycle continues (Lucky Mehra, 13th February 2020).

Moreover, Mr. Farrokh believes that the art form has in fact changed drastically over the years. The intricacy of making the puppet has reduced drastically. Though the demand is the same, earlier one person used to make one puppet in a day and now one person can make 10 in a day. Some traditional ways have remained unchanged but the art form is becoming materialistic with passing time. They have started using plastic to make Kathputlis nowadays as it is cheaper. The stories also have been adapted according to recent times; they have started talking about social issues like dowry, health, etc. through the art form. There has been a change in the music as well. Bollywood songs takeover the Rajasthani folk music at times but these measures are not playing an active role in popularizing the art form (Farrokh, 12th February 2020).

However, the shop owners support their employees (as they belong to the *Bhat* community and know how to perform) by sending their workers for performances if and when their clientele asks for one. Additionally, they set up performances at weddings; arrange shows and dinners for their clientele. The workers at Puppet House are from the *Bhat* community from Kathputli Nagar; meanwhile, Jaipur Handicrafts has sourced workers who also belong to the *Bhat* community from villages nearby.

#### **4.2.1.2 The pricing of the Kathputlis**

The cost of a puppet depends upon the quality and the type of the puppet. A multitude of people are involved in the making process of the puppets, there are those who carve the doll, stitch clothes and those who assemble the puppet. The cost of making a basic puppet is approximately Rs. 70-100 and the profit ranges from 20-30%. Since these puppets are taken

to fairs where tourists are present, the prices remain constant throughout the years, they don't change depending on the seasons. The prices are fixed throughout the year. The most expensive pair of puppets at Puppet House cost around Rs. 15000 and is 12 feet tall. The pairs which are 4 feet begin at the price of Rs. 5000. On the other hand, Jaipur Handicrafts make expensive Kathputlis based on orders. The puppets are made of marble, gold and semi-precious stones. The customers decide the price range and how much they are willing to invest in the dolls. The grandeur of the puppets depends on the taste of the customer. But there are only a limited number of clients like this and the orders are very customized (Farokh, 12th February 2020) (Shivam Nagpal, 13th February 2020)

#### **4.2.1.3 Selling online**

Jaipur Handicrafts has been selling puppets on an online platform for a year. According to Mr. Lucky Mehra, online selling is easier than selling live because it is physically impossible to have everything in one place. Also, it might be difficult for the customers to come to the shop. But while selling online, pictures can be shown and then the items can be made per order. It is a medium that helps them reach a wider customer base, all around the world. On the other hand, the owner, Mr. Shivam, finds it more difficult than first-hand selling because it requires SCOs, SMOs, digital marketing and a lot of advertising. Another problem that he faces is monetary issues, he feels that they haven't been able to expand as much as he had hoped for. They don't have a different inventory for online selling as that would further increase costs for them (Shivam Nagpal and Lucky Mehra, 13th February 2020).

#### **4.2.2 Local Shops/ Street Vendors**

Jaipur is littered with shops of various sizes. They line the pathways and the roads, each one selling a variety of bangles, earrings, saris, leather goods, alongside the Kathputli puppets. The Kathputlis, once the focal point of these stores, hang isolated in a corner or buried beneath more profitable attractions. Initially, a few of these stores sold only Kathputlis but with the decline in demand, they have shifted their core métier towards more profitable business ventures. The dolls have remodeled themselves to suit the requisition of these new ventures, i.e., they are now being sold as miniature dolls, key chains, pencils, etc.

The shopkeepers in their interviews said that the local sellers can be divided into two categories, the ones who make the Kathputlis and sell them and the others who buy them from the street vendors and sell. There has been a decline in the number of people who are making the puppets as well, the cost of the raw materials has rapidly increased, decreasing the added value of creating and selling a Kathputli. (Banalal Saini, 12th February 2020)

However, some of them continue to sell Kathputlis as it is a part of their lineage, their forefathers have been selling and performing with Kathputlis for decades. They believe that the least they can do for the art form is to sell the puppets on the side. It is their way of paying respect to the art form and the artists. The others continue selling the puppets because they don't have the heart to get rid of them completely. Regardless of the revenue generated they are kept in the shops as the shopkeepers like displaying them. They believe that Kathputli is the crown jewel of Rajasthan and these puppets catch the eye of tourists at times (Prabhu Bhat, 11th February 2020) (Jagdish Prasad, 14th February 2020).



**Images 37 & 38: Different shops selling Kathputlis as a side business**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20



**Images 39 & 40 : Street vendors selling Kathputlis  
(Ganesh Bhat (left) and Prabhu Bhat's Father (right))**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

### **4.3 Audience Impact**

The numerous sites and journals used as secondary sources fail to mention the audience's perspective of the art form, while they include a plethora of information on the puppeteers perspective of what they believe the audience wants. There are various aspects of Kathputli that attract audience members. For some, it is the music and the tempo of the instruments. For others, it is the background music that has various underlying meanings, rather than what is heard initially. The numerous stories recited at performances also enchant the people. The performances create a lasting memory for the audience. Many claim that they would

recommend these performances to their friends and family. Meanwhile, for the locals, it's a part of their day to day lives and many of their fondest memories, from birthday parties to weddings, all consisted of Kathputli performances. The older generation had memories of their childhood when puppeteers used to roam in their *mohallas*, and collecting money by showing Kathputli performances.

The modern performances have *Naagin* dances, Anarkali, Michael Jackson, and puppets dancing to variations of different popular Bollywood tunes. There is also an enactment of various Bollywood actors and actresses by the puppets. These elements of Bollywood are added according to the demands of the audience and to change with times. With a constantly evolving environment, evolving technology has a major impact on the art form. Rising indulgence in social media, networking, and TV have played a role in the future of the art form. Viral conversations on social media generate a large consumer base, people are eager to gain more information on such topics, this factor could be used to create a larger audience base for the art form. However, it is not enough to attract more audience. Audience wants something fast and more expressive, which they don't think Kathputlis have (Kamal Jain, 14th February 2020).

Another reason for the decline of the art form that was given by the audiences was that the new generation relates more to the technological and westernized culture rather than traditional culture. Movies and other televised forms of entertainment also showcase western culture instead of traditional customs and art forms. Creating a shift towards traditional factors would create greater awareness and enable the newer generation to appreciate their heritage (Dinesh, 14th February 2020).

#### **4.4 Non-Government Organizations**

There are many NGOs worldwide and in Jaipur itself which work towards the upliftment of members of society. Contrary to the NGOs, Helping Hands, founded in 2004, by Bob Mann and Jeannine Mann, not only hope to change the environment in which the members of Kathputli Nagar reside but also the mindset with which they live. The NGO has been operating as a unit to provide the people of Kathputli Nagar and multiple others nearby colonies with education, sanitation, etc.



**Image 41: Mr. Bob Mann at the NGO**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

Many of the problems faced by the people of Kathputli Nagar were similar to those of nearby colonies, the narrow alleyways, and small homes, which seemed to barely be enough for one person, but somehow managed to shelter 4-5 people. Coupled with the unclean conditions, dirty water, sewage waste which openly flowed through the alleyways and the disastrous habit of defecating in the open field, the living conditions described were barely humane. The NGO since its commencement has strived to bring a change in the environment and the mindset of the colony's inhabitants. The NGO believes that changing the society is not necessarily changing the environment in which they live, rather changing the people in the environment is recommended as this has a better chance of sustaining (Bob Mann, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2020).

Like many schools with students belonging to lower financial and educational backgrounds in India, the school is run by Mr. & Mrs. Mann also faces the problem of students dropping out after a certain age. When a female student drops out of school it's presumed that she is preparing for marriage or that her parents aren't satisfied with her performance, and they see no reason for the child to continue attending school, rather she could be helping around with the housework or aid them in earning a living. While the girls are eager to come to school, but at times are held back, the boys themselves need convincing to attend the school. They think that working a 9 to 5 job is unnecessary as it would pay them the same amount earned

in a single Kathputli performance. The drive to excel in their education is generally found among those students who have joined school before the age of 6, whereas the dropouts are generally among the students who started a little bit older. The NGO tries to convince the children and their families that education is a lifelong process. By inculcating this mindset the NGO hopes to aid the colonies in driving towards a more sustainable future (Bob Mann, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2020).

While there is a need for literacy and education among the children, the adults and older members of society also crave this luxury. Mrs. Mann had noticed this necessity in the people. She started off with a sewing center and after it was brought to her notice that many of the center's constituents couldn't read and write, she began an adult literacy class in 2006. They have had 100s of young girls who have not been allowed to come to school but are allowed to attend those classes. In that way, the NGO has been able to educate young girls. A majority of the people living in the colonies like the change, but there is a segment of the people who prefer to spend their time, just trying to eat out of their living. It's especially difficult to get these types of people and elderly people into the literacy class (Jeannine Mann, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2020).

Whilst sustaining this mindset may be difficult with their unpredictable lives, Mr.Mann says that the NGO does as much as it can with the financial reserves it has, in practicality it has proved to be difficult, empowering the colonies to make these changes is actually very difficult because they are busy. They are busy day and night trying to earn enough of a living to feed and clothe their children.

One thing that has changed throughout the years the NGO has been involved with Kathputli Nagar is the mindset of its inhabitants. In that, they now see a need for things like sanitation and education. “We can say that families have seen a need and over years they have seen the benefit of educating their children”. As said by Mr. Mann, “Parents want to see their children educated because they don't want to have the same lifestyle as what they had” (Bob Mann, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2020).

Throughout the on field research conducted in Jaipur, it was noticed that there weren't many NGOs and Government schemes helping in the upliftment of this art form. Rather they were

involved with the community behind the art form. Their attempts to aid the people were, in reality, separating them from their art and their identity.



**Image 42: The team with the founders of Helping Hands NGO**

Source: Discover India Program, 2019-20

# Conclusion

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Time. Something that has a constant effect on everything. Something that was of utmost importance can become insignificant in a mere second. In order to remain relevant to the current generation, the artisans are striving to integrate this age old art form with the modern era.

In the last twenty-thirty years the art form has reinvented itself, this includes the manufacturing of the Kathputlis. The process of making Kathputlis is a tedious and time consuming one but with the advent of mechanized means of production; like sewing and cutting machines, the time frame required to make the puppets has reduced. Adding on, the quality of the Kathputlis and the performances has declined massively over the last decade. Due to the decline in the number of people who make these Kathputlis, the number of puppets made per day per person increases. Contradictory to when a single puppet is carved per day, there is less emotion attached when a large quantity is carved. The dolls are no longer viewed as pieces of art but rather as objects, tools to earn a living (Farrokh, 12th February 2020).

Another aspect in which puppeteers are attempting to attract the audience is with the duration of the shows. By reducing the performance time from 2-3 hours the puppeteers assume that the audience would be more inclined to watch shorter shows. They believe that a 15 minutes long show would be inconsequential to the audience's day. The artisans have also adopted modern story lines, in recent times, the performances talk about serious issues like Swatch Bharath, HIV AIDS, need for washrooms, etc; and have modern-day characters like Amitabh Bachan. The essence of the art form has been lost in the process of making it a quick and relatable entertainment medium (Anil Bhat, 8th February, 2020). The artisans believe it would be more enjoyable for the audience, but in reality the audience thinks that there isn't much to witness in a show that only lasts for 15 minutes, thereby preventing them from witnessing the storyline itself.

If 50% of the audience has lost their inclination towards the art form due to the changes it has undergone, and the 30% who are not well aware of the art form, would prefer other means of entertainment. Then the remaining 20% is what the art form is grasping onto for its survival. Not even a half century ago the *Bhat* puppeteers held glamorous titles in society, but these

titles have since been stripped away. In the modern era they are facing the challenge of establishing themselves. The current state of the art form prevents them from craving the titles they once held. Rather they now yearn for any recognition at all. There are typically two types of puppeteers, ones who want to continue in the field and ones who don't. Both these types have their own outlook on the 'recognition' aspect. On one hand, people like Mr. Prabhu, crave for recognition, and believe that if they continue working with and for the art form, they will surely gain recognition and respect. Whereas, people like Mr. Dilip, do not see any future for the art form due to the lack of recognition and would rather see their children work a 9 to 5 job. The miserable living conditions surrounding the puppeteers prevent them from wanting their children to follow the same path as them and their forefathers.

Likewise NGO's in Jaipur (Helping Hands) aim to help the artists sustain themselves now, and look for more sustainable means in the future. While there are NGOs promoting the artisans and the art form, there has been a lack of involvement by the government, considering the fact that Kathputlis and Rajasthan are often synonymous. When one mentions Rajasthan, it's hard not to envision the dancing string puppets.

Moving on, the socio-economic situation of the sellers and puppeteers is a cycle. A cycle that has three parts: the puppeteers, the audience and the sellers. The puppeteers bring life to these puppets and put forth shows for the delight of the audience, who pay to watch the show, thereby generating income of one sort for the puppeteers. The sellers make a business out of this appraisal by the audience, and sell the Kathputli made by the puppeteers. Despite the low revenues, the sellers continue with their business as it keeps them rooted to their culture and ancestors this way. The audience and sellers thereby provide a livelihood to the puppeteers, as only their community can make and perform the art form, and drives them to continue. Even if one of the parts is detached from the cycle, the other two suffer miserably. This is the current situation, where the audience does not prefer the art form as much. Thereby, the sellers do not want to sell puppets as their core business, and the puppeteers are running out of an active business, especially in the non-tourist season.

There are numerous implications the art form has on the puppeteers and different sellers. It can be concluded that the people involved have a magnificent impact on the art form itself. Their will to keep the art form alive and the few these stakeholders associated with the art form is the string that is holding on to the existence of the art form itself.

**Illustration 2: Quotes**

(Next page)

# FOOD FOR THOUGHT



## DILIP BHAAT

PUPPETEER, MAKER, SELLER AND PERFORMER

*The art form of Kathputli is diminishing with the change in time. Neither are we respected nor is the art form. There is no appreciation in this profession. All we want is to be recognized and appreciated for our talent and hard work. I pray to God that the art form of Kathputli ceases to exist.*

## SEEMA BHAAT

Makes puppets from home

*People take a stone, paint it with turmeric/kumkum and call it "god". We puppeteers make these Kathputlis with precision and love. This helps us fill our family's stomachs. For us, these are our "Gods"*



## RAMA DATT

Executive trustee of city palace

*I believe that the art form of Kathputlis can be used as a means to revive the lost culture of our country. We take our rich heritage for granted, but the next generations might not even know about the existence of these artforms and our culture as a whole. We must carry forward our history with the help of these art forms.*

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*Is gulabi shahar ka  
Har peher ek  
Kahaniyon ka bhandar laata hai.  
Nanhi nanhi galiyon me  
Rang bhari kathputliya  
Apna khel dikha jaati hai  
Baccho se lekar buddho tak  
Ye kathputliya sabka  
Man lubhati hai.*

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