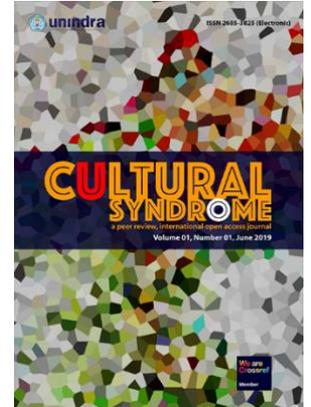


Putala Naach and Wayang: Ramayana Tradition in Puppet Theatre in Assam and Bali

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***Putala Naach* and Wayang: Ramayana Tradition in Puppet Theatre in Assam and Bali**

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Abstract. The Ramayana is not only a Hindu epic, it is a symbol of truth, victory over evil, and this is the reason the main route of the epic has accepted by many countries along with India also. Many local parts of Ramayana have also recognised. Not only in literature, but the Ramayana tradition has preserved in performing art form also. Bali of Indonesia is one of the tourist attraction places for its tradition, culture, and puppetry. Besides the local version of Ramayana, through the Wayang (puppet) the Ramayana has been preserved in Bali. For thousands of years, the stories of Rama, Sita, Hanoman and Ravana have been told in Java and Bali in Indonesia, and thru Wayang (Wayang Kulit and wayang Golek) the Ramayana tradition has been performing. In the North-eastern state of India in Assam, the Ramayana tradition has been performing thru *Putala Naach* (puppet). The Ramayana tradition has been preserved in two different puppetry forms. In Bali, the Ramayana tradition has performed in shadow puppet (Wayang Kulit), but in Assam, the Ramayana tradition has been performing thru string puppet. Though there is a vast difference between Wayang and *Putala Naach*, this paper has tried to examine the relationship between them thru the stories of Ramayana, the repertoires, the puppeteers, the beginning rituals, and the musical accompaniments.

Keywords: Assam, Bali, *Putala Naach*, Puppet, Ramayana,

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Introduction

The Ramayana represents as an ancient repository of social and moral values in present day context. The Ramayana portrays the legendary exploits of the virtuous warrior Prince Rama. Rama is regarded within the Hindu tradition as the exemplar of social and moral conduct, serving to define and perpetuate South Asian social values (Balkaran and Dorn). Robert Goldman (1984) mentioned “few works of literature produced at any time have as popular and influential as the great and ancient Sanskrit epic poem, the Valmiki Ramayana, entertained, moved, enchanted, and uplifted untold millions of people in India and much of South East Asia (Balkaran and Dorn).

‘Tradition’ as described by the Webster’s New World Dictionary is a “Cultural continuity transmitted in the form of social attitudes, beliefs, principles, and conventions of behaviour” which is derived from the past experience and helps us to shape the present (Moushumi). Sakalani also mentioned “The tradition, along with an unbroken historical continuity, covers a wide spectrum of the socio-cultural life of the people. It has flourished and grown in the temple, the court, and the community, and in many periods of history, the tradition existed simultaneously at all these centres and levels” (Sakalani). The Ramayana tradition has also a wide spectrum, and this tradition connects community and it makes the socio-cultural life strong. The author mentioned about the four main aspects of Ramayana tradition and they are the oral, the performing arts, the religious and the pictorial tradition (Sakalani).

The stories of Ramayana have been performing mainly through dance, drama, and puppetry. The mask tradition is also very strong, and this tradition is connected with drama. For example, in ‘*Bhaona*’ (drama of Assam, India, introduced by saint Sankardeva), Sankardeva used *mukha* (mask) to present the characters strongly in front of the audience. Hanumana, ten headed Ravana, Surpanakha etc characters are strongly presented in *Bhaona* through *mukha* in front of the audiences. Although dance, drama, and puppetry are used for entertainment, but the Ramayana tradition is “purely religious tradition”. But the principle of this tradition attracts different communities and hence it is popular in South and South-East Asia region.

The Ramayana tradition in Indonesia

From thousand years, the stories of Rama, Sita, Hanuman and Ravana have been told in Java and Bali in Indonesia. They were written in all the major languages that flourished there during this period: Old Javanese, Old Sundanese, and Malay (Saran). In the 9th century onwards during the period of Hindu-Buddhist kings, the story of Ramayana was read, recited, sung and chanted in the Land of Java Island. An indigenous compilation, known as ‘*Serat Kanda*’, which was appeared in 17th century, the Ramayana story fused with the Mahabharata and both merged into Java’s historical past. Saran stated “integrated with Islam and local history as well as with regional traditions of theatre and dance” (Saran).

On Bali, where the Ramayana's significant stylistic and thematic influence has endured until the present, the old Javanese Ramayana is regarded as the '*Adi Kakawin*' that is as both the first Kakawin and as the preeminent example of the Kakawin genre (Acri et al. 93). The old Javanese Ramayana was remained a powerful source for cultural, literature and religious life in Bali. Likewise, other part of South and South East Asia, in Bali also, "there is no single 'Ramayana' but instead a number of distinct literary, visual and performing arts representations that have each contributed to the creativity that underpins the vitality of Ramayana traditions broadly considered" (Acri et al. 93). A regional perspective on 'Kakawin' is also available in Bali and this is linked to enduring Ramayana tradition. It is notable that most of the Kakawin were started composed in the 18th century onwards, but the earliest examples were found from 16th century (Acri et al. 93).

Puppetry and the Ramayana tradition

Puppet theatre is one of the largely living folk traditions in Asia. The puppets are used verities in size, modes of constructions and composition. There are four basic genres of puppets, they are: (1). Shadow Puppet; (2). String Puppet; (3). Stick Puppet; (4) Hand or Glove Puppet. Shadow puppets are flat and transparent, and it is made from leather or paper cut-outs, fastened to one supporting stick and manipulated by at least two other thin sticks or rods (Orr 69).

Shadow puppets are popular in South India, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, China, Korea, and Japan. String puppets are used in modelled of wood or wood and cloth, paper mache or leather. They are manipulated by means of strings fastened to the joints (Orr). String puppets or marionettes have spread throughout Asia and Inge C. Orr mentioned about the ancestral home was in Northwest and North Central India and those puppets were mentioned in Mahabharata in 4th century BC (Orr). These string puppets are still popular in Rajasthan (West India) and Orissa (East India). In Rajasthan they are simply looped around the puppeteer's figure.

Stick puppets are supported and manipulated by sticks or thin metal rods. The technique is similar to shadow puppets. But, this technique is also used for the round puppet (Orr). Wayang Golek of Java Island is the best example of this technique. Stick puppets are available in Indonesia, Bengal (India), Thailand, Korea, Japan, and China. Hand or glove puppets are known all over Asia. But in modern context, especially in India, Japan, China, the puppets are mainly used for children's entertainment (Orr).

Puppet performances in Asia are generally set-up in open air and the performance takes place in a shrine or in the temple court yard and usually in the Asian village areas these puppet theatres are shown on the occasion of marriage, births, funerals, and religious purposes as well. Iyer (1960) mentioned here is a belief for village folk on a puppet performance "auspicious, effective in warding off evil spirits and epidemics, avoiding drought and bringing rain" (Orr).

In India, among Rajashthani puppeteer, it is believed that puppets are sacred object, and when a puppet is broken, it is mandatory to float down in river instead of throw it away. Miles Lee mentioned in the article 'Kathputli an experiment' the South Indian and Indonesian shadow puppets are ritually created. They are cut out according to traditional rules, whereby the heads and facial features are incised last, thus ritually giving life to the puppet" (Orr). Throughout India, Indonesia and all of Southeast Asia the traditional repertory of the puppet theatre is still largely religious. It is based on Indian mythological tales and legends, especially based on Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (Orr).

The puppet theatre of Indonesia

The puppet theatre has been attracted me from my childhood. Though I was not so clear at that time about its construction and all, but the colourful puppets were attracted at the child mind. During a field work on mask in 2019 in Majuli, Assam, India the material culture attracted me indeed and after presentation on mask in Jakarta, Java Island, I decided to do work on puppetry also, and as a researcher of Ramayana, it was a great opportunity to know about how the Ramayana tradition is performing in performing arts. As I mentioned above the Ramayana tradition has been performing through puppet theatre, dance and drama in South and South Asia in a large number and Indonesia is the one of the main sources of this tradition along with India. I have visited Indonesia and the place attracted me to do work on it and this is the reason I have been chosen Indonesia along with my native land Assam for puppet theatre work.

From 1300 A.D. onwards the shadow puppet Wayang Kulit was developed. Wayang Kulit cyclic puppet repertoire developed a number of sub types and they are: (1). *Wayang purwo* or *kulit*, which is based on the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata; (2). *Wayang golek* (from 1584 AD) is a doll puppet performing of West Java or Sunda, and this puppet theatre is based on Ramayana and Mahabharata; (3). *Wayang godek* (from 1553 AD), is a shadow puppet form and it performs the Panji cycles; (4). *Wayang madya* is a leather puppet and it is based on the historical life of the king of east Java; (5). *Wayang klitik* or *krutiil* is a flat wooden puppet, located in central Java, and this puppet theatre is based on story about royalty of Majapahit kingdom of Central Java; (6). *Wayang Tengul* and wayang djawa are leather puppets which are based on rebellion of Prince Diponegoro against the Dutch in the 19th century (Orr).

From the above-mentioned sub types of puppet theatre of Indonesia, the *Wayang Kulit* and *Wayang Golek* is based on the stories of Ramayana and my main objective of this paper is to focus on Ramayana stories or tradition thru puppet theatre, and hence I shall focus on only *Wayang Kulit* and *Wayang Golek*. Balinese *Wayang Kulit* is a most important and vital part of attraction of the world's oldest theatrical traditions (deBoer et al.). *Wayang* (puppet) has a special status in Java Island and Bali. They are both for source of entertainment and communication with about spirits, ancestors and the unseen world(Cohen). Puppets are considered as '*Pusaka*' or sacred objects, which are carefully

crafted and stored in the wooden box and taken for performances or maintenance rituals at least once a month (Cohen).

Wayang Kulit is single medium of dramatic art forms defined by the use of flat, perforated, animal hide (*kulit*) shadow puppets. *Wayang Ramayana* helps to keep the venerable work alive in Indonesia, and as Bandem mentioned “in turn the genre draws strength from the continuing importance of the Ramayana itself in Balinese aesthetic life” (deBoer et al.).



Fig. 1 *Kumbakarna* and *Rahwana* (Ravana)

Result and Discussion

Repertoire

In Balinese *Wayang Kulit* shorter sections or episodes like ‘The abduction of Sita, Anuman as Ambassador’. ‘The banishing of Wibisana’ are performed along with the entire Ramayana epic stories like ‘*Cak*’ and ‘*Sendratari*’ (summarization of Ramayana) (deBoer et al.).

The puppets of *Wayang Kulit*

The puppets are presented on the basis of the characters of Ramayana (also of another Indian epic Mahabharata, but in this article focuses only on Ramayana). Only few human characters are appeared in the *Wayang Kulit*. Main characters are Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Ravana, Surpanakha, and Vibhisana. The monkey figures are used as many as a dozen and these are special type of puppets. Moreover, the *Kakayonan*, a leaf-shaped puppet, which is served as multipurpose characters, the ‘*panasar*’, or attendant buffoons, who interpret and explained the deeds of their high-ranking masters, and the ‘*rewang*’ is used for both human and ogre (deBoer et al.).



Fig. 2 Leather for puppet (left) and Puppeteer is busy in making the shape of puppet (right)



Fig. 3 Preparing the puppets with colour



Fig. 4 Hanoman (after finishing the colour)

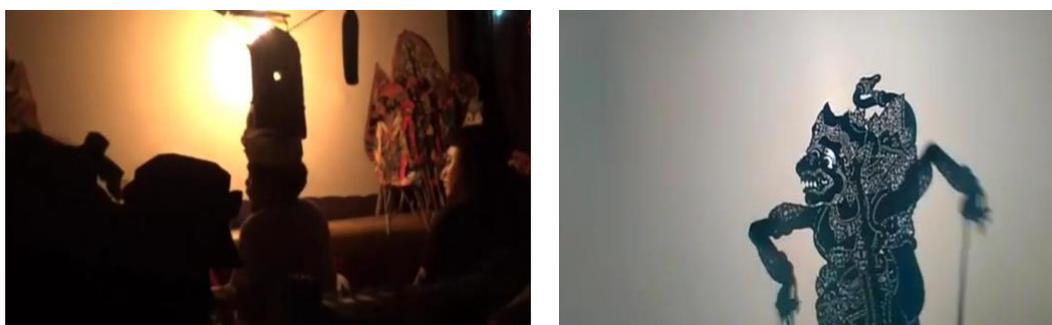


Fig. 5 Dalang (left) and Sugriwa (right)

The picture of behind the screen with dalang and his accompanies (left), and the shadow of Sugriwa (right) visible front of the screen

Dalang and musical accompaniments

Dalang (puppeteer) is the main part of *Wayang Kulit*. Each *dalang* serves as his own dramatist, constructing himself the plays he performs within the rather strict conventions of the shadow puppet medium (Orr). Thus, they invented and add some non-canonical stories in *Wayang Kulit*. *Dalang* interprets the stories of Ramayana, and in *Wayang Ramayana* maximum 15 people can be there. The puppets are shown with the help of one white screen, and the *Dalang* plays the puppets behind the white screen with the help of light.



Fig. 7 *Dalang* Kodu Guang is performing *Wayang Kulit*

Musical accompaniments play a vital role in *Wayang Kulit* for express the dramatic expression. A pair of medium-size drums, which is known as *Kendang*, a set of *Cengceng* (a set of cymbals), and the small gong chimes *Klenng*, *Kajar*, and *Kempul* are used in *Wayang Ramayana*. These musical accompaniments used to interpret about Lord Rama, incarnation of Lord Vishnu, wife Sita, and how he saved his wife from demon Ravana.



Fig. 8 Playing instruments in *Wayang Kulit*

The Assamese puppet theatre and Ramayana tradition

Assamese culture is one among the richest cultures of India. In Assam, found strong existence of various folk performing arts forms since ancient time. From the ancient period, there is an evidence of performing art (dance drama) which was held in

the temples of Assam i.e. Madhav Mandir of Hajo, Parihareshwar Devalay of Dubi and Shiva Mandir of Biswanath. These kinds of temple related dance drama performing art was known as 'Nat nati'. Moreover Putala Naach, Dhulia, Oja Pali, Kushan Gaan, Kati Puja, Hudum Puja, Mahahu, Sonarai, etc. are popular and important folk performing art forms of Assam. Kakati (1959) argues, the pioneer of Assamese theatre, Saint Sankardeva was also influenced by folk performing arts form of Assam (Goswami 174). Puppetry is the one of most popular folk performing arts forms of entire India. The initial stage of its inception, the traditional puppet plays in India as well as Assam enacted stories from Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas, besides local myths and tales (Moushumi). In Assam, the puppet theatre is known as *Putala Naach*, and it is an ancient popular traditional theatrical folk performing art form of Assam. It can be said that Putala Naach performance is the world's most ancient form of folk drama (Senapati). *The Putala Naach* tradition in Assam can be divided into two forms, oral tradition and written tradition.

On the basis of one oral myth, it is said that Goddess Parvati created one puppet and hide it inside a cave and later Lord Shiva gave life to that puppet and sent him to the earth to entertain (Senapati). This kind of folk myth proves its ancientness, though it is not mentioned anywhere. On the other hand, the existence of Putala Abhinay (puppet drama) or *Putala Naach* (puppet dance) is found in written form. It was mentioned in Kalikapurana near about 11th century (Senapati). It was mentioned in Kalikapurana as Panchalika instead of *Putala Naach*, and *Putala Naach* is the Assamese form of Sanskrit word Panchalika. According to the distinct areas of Assam, Putala Naach has been found in different names. In the Kamrup district of Assam, *Putala Abhinoy* or *Putala Naach* is known as *Botris* or *Boti Putala*. The reason of addressing puppet theatre as *Botris* or *Boti Putala* the use of 32 ('*botris*' is an Assamese term of 32) puppets in the group of puppet theatre. In Darrang distric of Assam the puppet theatre is known as *Jaal Puteli* (fake puppet). Puppet theatre is a man-made theatre, not act by human; hence jaal word is used as a contrarious meaning.

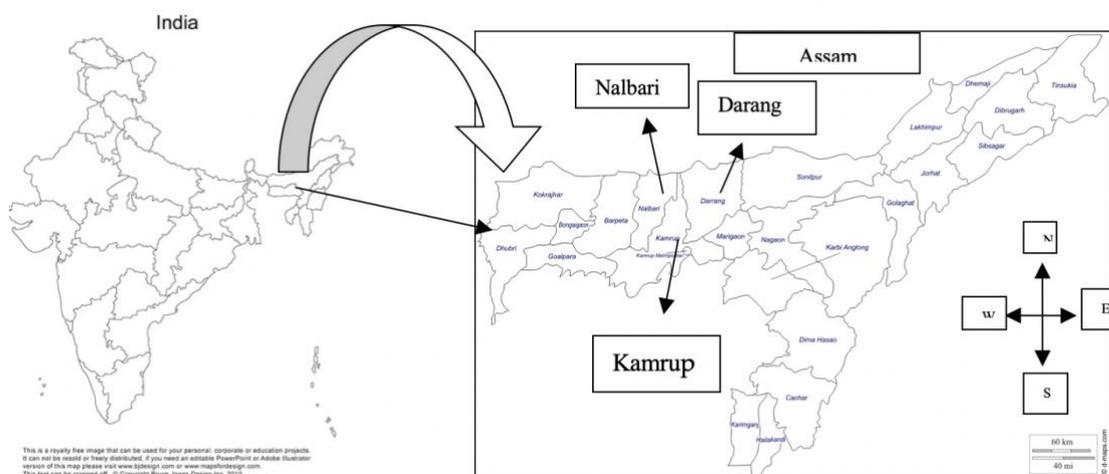


Fig. 9 Map

Figure 9 shows the spread of puppet in Assam. The puppet theatre of Assam puppet was developed by a number of sub types and they are: (1). *Anguli Putola* (finger puppet); (2). *Haat Putola* (hand or glove puppet); (3). *Khuta Putola* (String puppet); (4). *Laathi Putola* (Rod puppet); (5). *Cha Putola* (Shadow puppet); (6). *Jol Putola* (Water puppet); (7). *Adhunik Putola* (Contemporary puppet). *Anguli Putola* (finger puppet) is a small hollow structured puppet, and in a drama, they are performed by fixing them at the tip of the fingers. The puppeteer is used *Haat Putola* (hand or glove puppet) by using his hands and fingers inside the puppet. *Laathi Putola* (Rod puppet) is not commonly seen among the puppet theatre of Assam (Senapati). These types of puppets are made to move with the help of *laathi* (rod) and the bamboo or wooden rods are used under the puppets. The puppeteers use these puppets from underneath the stage. In Assam, the *khula putola* or string puppets are commonly used. The tradition of *Cha Putola* (shadow puppet) is the most ancient one. The thin leather (made from animal skin) is being used in the method of shadow puppet, but unfortunately the *Cha Putola* is no more can be seen in Assam (Senapati). *Jol Putola* (Water puppet) is performed with the help of strings or rods, and was being performed over water on a raft. The *Adhunik Putola* (Contemporary puppet) represents the tradition of strings, rods, hands, and shadow puppets. Among these sub types of puppetry of Assam, the *khula putola* or string puppets are popular and still alive, and it is quite popular in the lower Assam including Kamrup, and Nalbari rather than the other parts of Assam.

Repertoire and puppets

In Assamese *Putala Naach* is performed on Hindu epic Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Purana tales like Raja Harichandra, Beula Lakhindar etc. The story based on social life that also present in *Putala Naach* in Assam. But usually the contexts from the Ramayana have performed in *Putala Naach*. The puppets are made according to the characters of the stories. Their dresses, hairs etc are made on the basis of the characters. The height of the puppets generally in *Putala Naach* is four to five feet.



Fig. 10 Ram, Sita, and Lakshmana in the forest (left) and Ram, Lakshman with Jatayu (right) in *Putala Naach*



Fig. 11 *Ravana* (left) and *Ram, Lakshman* and *Hanuman* (right) in *Putala Naach*

Sutradhar and musical accompaniments

Sutradhar or *Oja* (puppeteer) plays the vital role in *Putala Naach*. He is also known as *Putala bazikar*. He takes the role of producer, director, and connector of the program as well. One *Gayan* (singer), one *Bayan* (instrumental player), and one *Pali* (helper) are accompanied with the *Sutradhar*. *Gayan* sing the songs and *Bayan* keep consistency with the drama, accompanying with musical instruments. The traditional musical instruments like *Khol* (kind of drum), *Dhol* (drum), *Taal* (cymbal) are used in *Putala Naach*. The *Bayan* plays these musical instruments, and he is the prime co assistance of *Sutradhar*. They start the *Putala Naach* with a prayer. In ancient time, the *Putala Naach* group used the traditional *jur* (torch) to focus light on the stage, but in modern context the *jur* has changed into bulb and other modern electricity accompaniments. On the stage for presentation, barriers are made using black curtains wrapped to bamboo pillars (Senapati). The *Sutradhar* delivers the dialogue from the behind of the curtains.

The Wayang and Putala Naach: similarity and compare

The *Wayang* and *Putala Naach* are two different art forms from two different countries. They are different in terms of presenting the puppet show, but they have similarity, and hence I have presented *Putala Naach* in this article. Bali is famous for shadow puppets (*Wayang Kulit*), and in Assam the shadow puppet is no more exist. String puppet is famous in Assam. But the source of setting up or presentation of puppet theatre in both places is same. They both take the stories from the Hindu epics the Ramayana, and Mahabharata. In this paper I have focused on how Ramayana tradition has been performing in puppet theatre, and in this case both *Wayang* and *Putala Naach* are the best example. Both puppet theatres have been presented the stories from Ramayana. In *Wayang Kulit*, *Hanoman, the Devine Messenger, the abduction of Sita, Wayang Ramayan* are performed, and in the other hand, in *Putala Naach*, *Ram banvas* (exile of rama), *Sita Haran* (abduction of Sita) has been performed. Here, if we notice then, the 'abduction of Sita' is the common story line in both artefacts.

Dalang in *Wayang* and *Sutradhar* in *Putala Naach* are both the vital part of puppet theatres of Bali and Assam. It is observed that both are wearing white dresses and they

are accompanied by three main assistance. But it depends on the numbers of puppets. There are also similarities with the rituals of puppeteers. The *Dalang* performs rituals with betel nuts and betel leaves, called '*Dakshina*' before starting the *Wayang Kulit*, and they please the God to protect the people from the evil, and the *Sutradhar* also pray with *Ganesh Vandana* (prayer related to Lord Ganesha), *Saraswati Vandana* (prayer related to Goddess Saraswati) or sometimes with *Shiva Vandana* (prayer related to Lord Shiva) before playing the *Putala Naach*. There is also similarity in musical accompaniments. The *Bayan* (musical accompany of *Sutradhar*) plays the folk instruments *Dhol*(drum), *Khol*(drum), and *Taal* (cymbal). *Dutara* and Harmonium are also used for musical accompaniments.



Fig. 12 The folk musical instruments of *Putala Naach*. *Dhol* and *Khol* (left), and *Taal* and *Dutara* (right)

Conclusion

I have tried to highlight two different puppet theatres or puppetry forms thru this article. *Wayang* is world famous and Bali is famous for both *Wayang Kulit* and *Wayang Golek*. The government is also taking initiative to preserve this performing art form and this *Wayang* attracts the tourists more. The *Putala Naach* of Assam is also an important performing art form, but unfortunately this artefact slowly is seen drowning. The route cause is the ignorance of government, lack of awareness, and also the impact of modernity. India has an important place in the field of puppet theatre. In fact, German scholar Richard Pischel argued that India was the source of Western puppet traditions (Autiero). The *Tholpavakoothu* (shadow puppet) of Kerala, the *Ravanachhya* (shadow puppet) of Odisha, the *Koyya bommalata*, the *Keelu bommalata*, and *Sutam bommalata* (the marionettes or string puppet) of Andhra Pradesh and Telengana, the *Bommalattam* (string and rod puppet) of Tamil Nadu, the *Kalasureti bahulya* (string puppet) of Maharashtra, the *Kathputli* (string puppet) of Rajashthan, the *Yakshagana gombeyata* (string puppet) of Karnataka, the *Kathi kundhei* (rod puppet) of Odisha, *Putul Naach* (rod puppet) of West Bengal, the *Pavakathakali* (glove puppet) of Kerala, the *Pava koothu* (glove puppet) of Tamil Nadu, the *Gulabo-Sitabo* (glove puppet) of Uttar Pradesh, the *Sakhi kundhei* (glove puppet) of Odisha, the *Benir Putul* (glove puppet) of West Bengal are

famous examples of puppetry of India. Scholars and tourists are attracted by these artefacts of India. But, the *Putala Naach* has not that much place in scholarly work and not even for tourism. But we should not deny this artefact too.

Putala Naach is also holding the tradition of Ramayana as the performing art form, and tries to spread the tradition among the people. The Sangeet Natak Academy, Ministry of culture, Govt. of India took the initiative to present the *Ram Banvoas* (string puppet show), the story from the Ramayana in 2019 during *Putul Utsav*, held at Delhi, India. But still, the *Putala Naach* is far away to reach and itself in global context. Through this paper I have tried to highlight the artefact along with *Wayang*. Because the *Wayang* and *Putala Naach*, both art forms have the similarity in presenting the Ramayana tradition, and the musical accompaniments as well. Even the role plays of *Dalang* and *Sutradhar* are also having similarity. Though the government funding support like Sangeet Natak Academy, IGNCA (Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts), Puppet division at Kalakhetra, Guwahati, Assam are there, even NFSC (National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai, India) was there to support this artefact but due to lack of awareness, this *Putala Naach* is still far away from media and even in global context.

Kalakhetra (Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakhetra, Assam) is a cultural organisation and in Kalakhetra, Govt. of Assam, took the initiative to alive this *Putala Naach*. The puppeteer showed every day *Putala Naach*, but due to the lack of interests of audience, this puppet show has closed in Kalakhetra. Moreover, the puppeteers are rigid in nature. They are stringent to follow the tradition instead of to accept the modernity. They don't have the knowledge of social media or technical communication. They have technical difficulties, and therefore they are unable to develop. The government provides a pension to the puppeteers, but due to the poor knowledge of digital platform, they are unable to get the opportunity. Dr. Moushumi Bhattacharjee (researcher of *Putala Naach*) informed me about one incident of well-known puppeteer Abani Kanta Sarma (Dakhala, Chaigaon, kamrup district of Assam). He performed more than twenty *Putala Naach*, but he hasn't received the pension yet from the government due to his lack of knowledge of digital platform or technical ideas. He is unable to show his documents properly, and hence his application was rejected. For this kind of unawareness, Moushumi Bhattacharjee suggested to establish puppet school along with a puppeteer training centre, where the puppeteer can organise workshops and alive the *Putala Naach*, and people can also

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