

## **EMBODIED STORYTELLING POTENTIAL OF INDIAN PUPPETRY CRAFT**

Author1 – Mr. Devidas Haribhau Agase  
Research Scholar  
MGM University, Aurangabad

Author2 – Dr. Ayushi Varma  
Associate Professor  
MGM University, Aurangabad

### **Author Biography**

Mumbai-based Artist and Educator Prof. Agase Devidas received his bachelor's and master's in Visual art (Drawing and Painting) from Sir. J. J. School of Art Mumbai, specializing in Portraiture Painting in 2013. He had several art camp participations several group exhibitions to his credit and three solo exhibitions. His works are in sculptural installation and painting in several mediums. Presently pursuing PhD in Fine Art at the MGM University, Aurangabad, Maharashtra.

### **ABSTRACT**

Embodied storytelling is an enthralling and ever-evolving form of artistic expression that weaves performers' physicality, gestures, and movements to create compelling visual narratives. Within the context of Indian interactive puppetry craft, this form of storytelling acquires a unique and culturally significant dimension, rooted in centuries of tradition and visual cultural heritage. This study explores the depths of Indian puppetry craft, seeking to illuminate its energetic potential, methods, visual cultural contexts, and profound impact on audiences. The study aims to answer the following research question: how does Indian puppetry craft embody visual culture and artistic innovation? Using snowball sampling, 20 in-depth interviews with puppeteers and artisans and participant observation were carried out. Findings identified that using narrative communication and interactivity in puppetry craft enables puppeteers to convey complex ideas, social commentary, and visual cultural significance. Furthermore, the article argues that this puppetry craft must be preserved.

**KEYWORDS:** Storytelling, Indian puppetry craft, physicality, movements, culture, engagement.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The expressive probable of Indian interactive puppetry craft deceits in the perfect integration of the puppeteer's body with the puppet, where the performer becomes a

conduit through which the puppet comes to life. The puppeteer's movements, gestures, and facial expressions infuse the inanimate puppet with emotions, personality, and depth (Pandey D. A., 2017). This embodiment of the puppeteer breathes life into the characters, appealing to the Audience and inviting them on a transformative storytelling journey (Kamaladevi, 1985).



**Figure 1** India puppetry region wise © credit-Author

Rooted in a rich cultural heritage, Indian interactive puppetry encompasses various styles and techniques across diverse regions of India (Coomaraswamy, 1965). From the intricate string puppets of Rajasthan, and the dynamic rod puppets of West Bengal, to the graceful shadow puppets of Karnataka, each state carries its storytelling traditions, mythologies, and cultural nuances (Suresh, 2001) **Figure 1**. The puppeteers draw upon these traditions and blend them with their artistic expressions, creating a tapestry of narratives that resonate with audiences of all ages (Anindita, 2017). In Indian interactive puppetry, physicality and movement are integral to storytelling (Astles, 2010). The puppeteer's body becomes an extension of the puppet, allowing for fluid and expressive communication between the performer and audience (Brenda Keogh, 2008). The subtle shifts in posture, the graceful hand movements, and the nuanced facial expressions convey a myriad of emotions and the story's essence (Coomaraswamy, 1965). Through their embodied performances, puppeteers captivate the audience, transporting them to magical worlds and weaving tales that touch the heart and the imagination (Gour, 2022). Beyond mere entertainment, Indian interactive puppetry craft holds deep cultural significance. It serves as a vehicle for transmitting cultural heritage, preserving ancient traditions, and fostering community (Anindita, 2017). These performances often draw upon religious and mythological themes, bringing the stories and characters to life in a way that engages and educates the audience (Mazalek, 2011). The interactive nature of the performances invites the viewers to participate actively, creating a shared experience that strengthens cultural bonds and stills a sense of pride in the community (Dunst, Effects of Puppetry on Elementary Students' Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward Individuals

with Disabilities, 2012). In recent years, Indian puppetry has also witnessed artistic innovation and adaptation to contemporary contexts. Puppeteers have embraced new technologies, and interdisciplinary collaborations, and addressed contemporary social issues, expanding the expressive potential of the art form (Dash, 2021). These innovations enable puppeteers to engage with diverse audiences and create thought-provoking narratives that resonate with modern sensibilities (Gour, 2022)

This research aims to examine the realm of Indian puppetry craft, exploring the communicative potential of this captivating form. It will delve into the techniques, cultural contexts, and audience engagement in Indian interactive puppetry performances. By examining the historical roots, regional variations, and contemporary applications, this paper seeks to shed light on the transformative power of embodied storytelling through Indian interactive puppetry. Through this exploration, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the cultural heritage, artistic innovation, and the immersive experience that Indian interactive puppetry offers.

### **Historical background**

The historical and cultural context of Indian interactive puppetry is deeply rooted in the country's rich heritage and diverse traditions (Kamaladevi, 1985). Puppetry in India can be traced back thousands of years, referencing puppet performances found in ancient texts, sculptures, and archaeological discoveries (Anindita, 2017). This art form has been an integral part of Indian culture, serving as a medium for storytelling, entertainment, and religious rituals. Indian puppetry traditions vary across different regions Figure 1, each with a unique style and techniques (Pudumjee D. D., 2006). Some prominent forms of Indian interactive puppetry include Kathputli (string puppetry), Yampuri (glove puppetry), Togalu Gombeyatta (shadow puppetry), and Putul Nautch (rod puppetry) (Kamaladevi, 1985). These styles have distinct characteristics associated with specific regions, communities, and cultural practices. The origins of Indian puppetry can be traced to various cultural and religious contexts (Anindita, 2017). Puppetry has been closely connected to Hindu mythology and epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata (Jairazbhoy, 2007). The puppet performances often depict stories of gods, goddesses, and legendary heroes, bringing these ancient narratives to life through vibrant characters and intricate puppetry techniques (Gangavane, 2019).

Puppeteers in India have traditionally belonged to specific communities or families who have passed down the art form from generation to generation (Dunst, Effects of Puppetry on Elementary Students' Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward Individuals with Disabilities, 2012). The knowledge, techniques, and storytelling traditions are preserved within these communities, making puppetry an integral part of their cultural identity and heritage (Rangarajan, Chekka Bommalata of Burugupeta Village, Telangana State-Wooden String Puppets of Buruguteta, 2017). In addition to its entertainment value, Indian interactive puppetry has played a significant role in religious and social contexts (Jayakumar, 2021,). Puppet performances have been a part of religious festivals, folk celebrations, and auspicious occasions, serving as a means to connect with the divine and invoke blessings (Pandey D. A., 2017). Puppetry has also been used as a form of social

commentary, addressing contemporary issues, satirizing societal norms, and conveying moral messages to the audience (Anindita, 2017).

Over the years, Indian interactive puppetry has evolved and adapted to changing times while retaining its cultural quintessence. Puppeteers have integrated new techniques, materials, and thematic content to keep the art form relevant and engaging (Coomaraswamy, 1965). Contemporary puppetry performances often incorporate multimedia elements, music, dance, and interactive storytelling methods to captivate modern audiences while staying true to their traditional roots (Simanta Sarma, 2013). Recently, efforts have been made to preserve and promote Indian interactive puppetry as a valuable cultural heritage (Gour, 2022). Organizations, institutions, and individual puppeteers are working towards documentation, research, training, and the revival of traditional puppetry techniques (Kamaladevi, 1985). Festivals and platforms dedicated to puppetry allow puppeteers to showcase their skills, exchange ideas, and reach wider audiences (Roy, 2006).

Understanding the historical and cultural context of Indian interactive puppetry is fundamental for appreciating its significance and the artistic expressions it represents (Rangarajan, *Puppetry Unclean to clean art form A Paradigm Shift* Roles of women in Indian Puppetry, 2019). Exploring the diverse traditions, storytelling techniques, and social contexts enriches our understanding of this art form, highlighting its contributions to India's cultural fabric and its continuing relevance in the contemporary world (Jayakumar, 2021.)

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This qualitative study uses interactive and in-depth interviews with artisans and puppeteers, and secondary sources to explore the social actions performed in space. Interviews are among the most popular forms of qualitative research methods, where the researchers and respondents engage in a social interaction in which the respondents verbalize the meanings of their lived experiences. The means and outcome for the analysis of interviews are represented by language, which helps to assess the respondents' opinions and worldviews about the cultural phenomena under study (Pharm, 2014). In-depth interviews help establish the study's ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions. Language plays a role as a tool that helps in understanding the meanings of ideologies that are predominant and contested (Phillips, 2017).

The researcher seeks to incorporate an organization named UNIMA to conduct interviews, the researcher is a practicing artist and is associated with UNIMA and became a member in the past 3 years, data has been collected on many occasions so there are no ethical approvals required. UNIMA India- Union Internationale de la Marionette - International Puppetry Association has evolved its unique identity as a puppeteer's association and storyteller through puppetry. UNIMA has a set of quality and skilled artisans and puppeteers. In India, hand-crafted puppets have been produced for a long time. However, modern technology and a dramatic shift in storytelling traditions are not able to cope with increasing pressure and are facing strong challenges in the contemporary market. Thus, the study was conducted in many regions of India through UNIMA

puppeteers and artisans to collect information about the changing trends concerning the motif, material, and technique and to understand the networks and processes involved in storytelling. Aesthetics, and processes in the contemporary scenario, the study required the collection of information and understanding of perspectives of two categories 1) Traditional puppetry Artisans and 2) Contemporary Artists.

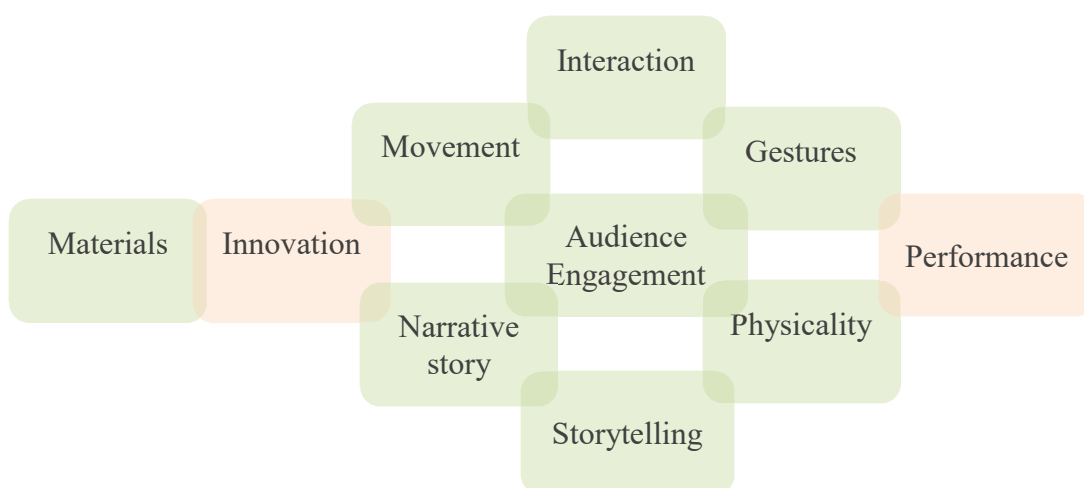
**RESULTS**

As earlier mentioned, respondents are selected through the UNIMA India Puppeteer Association from various states of India. Maharashtra, Kerala, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujrat, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Most artisans are based in rural villages and Artists are based in and working in metro cities like Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai, and Bhopal. This qualitative interview was structured with ten major key questions that correlated with keywords Table 1 in two variables of respondents 1) Traditional puppetry Artisans

Table 2 and 2) Contemporary Artist Table 3. These keywords are used to understand the current trends, Aesthetics, and processes in the Traditional and contemporary practice. The profile of the respondents is presented in Appendix A. Keywords are used for creation, presentation,

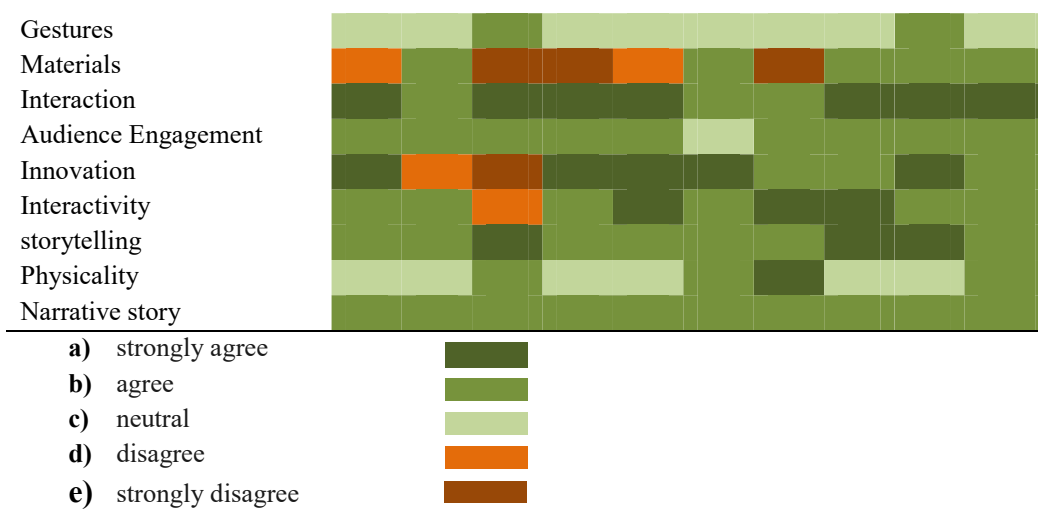
The results from the interviews are presented below.

**Table 1** Keywords Used for Interviews

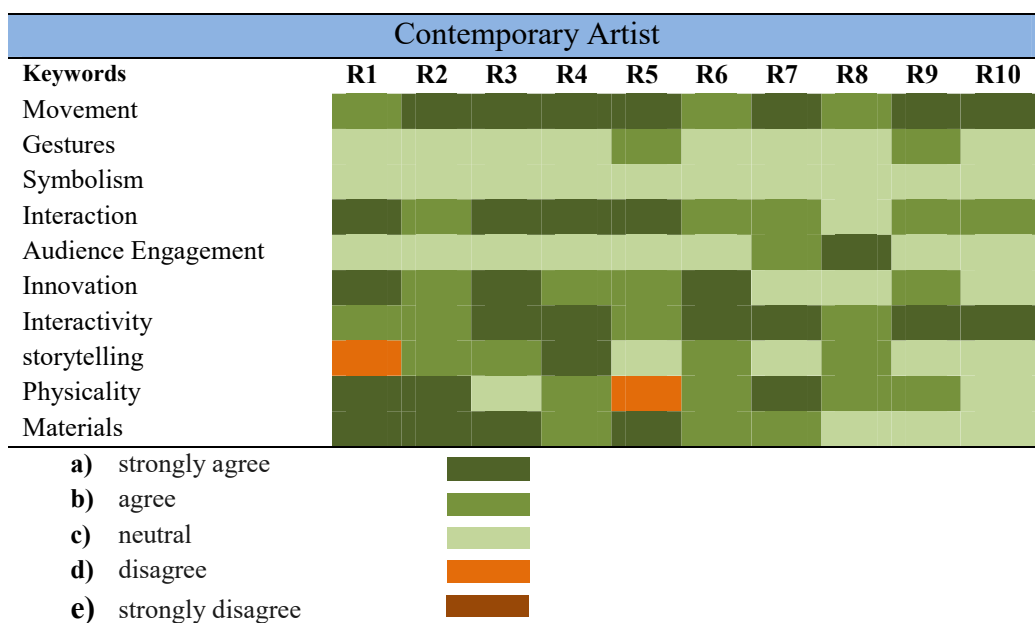


**Table 2** Artisan Perspective Towards Puppetry Craft

Traditional Puppetry artisans										
Keywords	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10
Movement										



**Table 3** Contemporary Artist Perspective Towards Puppetry Craft



**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Indian traditional puppetry form has flourished for centuries, characterized by its unique styles, cultural significance, and engaging performances. Puppetry, which differs broadly across different regions of India, combines storytelling, music, and drama to create an immersive experience for the audience. Artisan

Table 2 expressed some of the key types of Indian puppetry, their interactive elements, their cultural significance, and modern adaptations. While deeply rooted in tradition, Indian puppetry has adapted to contemporary times. Contemporary Artist incorporates current social issues and themes into their performances, making them relevant to today's audience. Technological advancements have also found their way into puppetry, with

some artists using screens, sound systems, and modern lighting to enhance the interactive experience. The overall findings are discussed with the following points.

### **1. Physicality and Movement in Puppetry Performance**

Physicality and movement play an energetic role in puppetry performance, breathing life into the puppets and conveying emotions, actions, and narratives to the audience. In the realm of puppetry, the puppeteer's body becomes an instrument through which the puppets are animated and imbued with personality and expressiveness (Roy, 2006). The physicality of puppetry encompasses the postures, gestures, and overall body language of the puppeteer. How the puppeteer holds and manipulates the puppet reflects the character's attributes and emotions. Each puppet has its unique movement qualities, and the puppeteer must master the art of embodying the puppet's physicality, whether it's a graceful dance-like movement, a lumbering gait, or a comical stumble. Hand movements are particularly significant in puppetry, as they are responsible for controlling the puppet's limbs, gestures, and actions. The puppeteer's fingers become extensions of the puppet's arms, allowing for delicate and precise movements. The puppeteer must be adept at manipulating the strings, rods, or other mechanisms that control the puppet's movements, ensuring a seamless coordination between their hand gestures and the puppet's actions. Facial expressions are another essential element of physicality in puppetry. Although the puppets themselves may have fixed or limited facial features, skilled puppeteers use their facial expressions to convey the puppet's emotions. By employing nuanced changes in eyebrow position, eye focus, and mouth shape, puppeteers can communicate a wide range of feelings, from joy and sadness to surprise and anger.

Beyond the technical aspects, the physicality in puppetry involves the puppeteer's posture and body positioning. How the puppeteer stands, sits, or moves about the puppet affects the overall performance. A slight lean, a subtle shift in weight, or a dynamic movement can enhance the puppet's presence and give it a sense of life and believability. Puppeteers often undergo rigorous training to develop their physical skills and movement techniques. This training may include exercises to improve body awareness, coordination, flexibility, and stamina. Puppeteers also learn how to synchronize their movements with their fellow performers, creating cohesive and harmonious interactions between multiple puppets on stage. The physicality and movement in puppetry performance go beyond mere technical execution. Skilled puppeteers possess a deep understanding of the characters they portray and infuse their movements with intention and storytelling. Through their physicality, they create a unique language that communicates the essence of the puppets and engages the audience on an emotional level.

### **2. Narrative Communication and Symbolism**

Narrative communication and symbolism are integral aspects of puppetry, allowing puppeteers to convey stories, messages, and deeper meanings to the audience (Coomaraswamy, 1965) (Dash, 2021). Through the creative use of narratives and symbolic elements, puppeteers engage viewers on multiple levels, evoking emotions, stimulating imagination, and exploring profound themes. Puppetry is a powerful medium

for storytelling, as it combines visual elements, movements, and the manipulation of puppets to narrate compelling tales. Puppeteers carefully structure their performances to create coherent and engaging narratives. They utilize plot development, character arcs, and dramatic tension to captivate the audience's attention and maintain their interest throughout the performance (Smith, 2018). Symbolism plays an important role in conveying abstract concepts, cultural references, and complex ideas. Puppets themselves can be symbols, representing characters, animals, or objects that hold particular meanings or archetypal significance. Symbolic gestures, movements, and interactions between puppets can convey emotions, relationships, and social dynamics, allowing for layered storytelling (Coomaraswamy, 1965) (Smith, 2018).

Puppeteers often incorporate symbolic objects or props into their performances, these objects carry metaphorical or cultural associations that enrich the narrative for example, a puppet holding a flower may symbolize beauty or love, while a puppet wearing a mask may represent hidden identities or secrets. The careful use of symbolism deepens the storytelling experience, inviting viewers to engage with the underlying meanings and interpret the performance on a symbolic level (Parmar, 1975). Puppetry also allows for the exploration of universal themes and social commentary through symbolic storytelling. By utilizing metaphor, allegory, and satire, puppeteers can address complex issues, challenge social norms, and provoke critical thinking (Gour, 2022). Symbolic representations of power, conflict, inequality, or environmental concerns can spark discussions and raise awareness among the audience. The use of symbolism in puppetry enables multifaceted communication between the puppeteer, the puppets, and the viewers (Pandey D. A., 2017). It invites interpretation and personal reflection, fostering a deeper engagement with the performance. Symbolism can transcend language barriers, allowing puppetry to reach diverse audiences and evoke emotional responses that surpass linguistic limitations (Pudumjee D. D., 2006). Traditional puppetry forms, such as shadow puppetry or string puppetry, incorporate symbols and narratives deeply rooted in local customs and mythology (Coomaraswamy, 1965) (Smith, 2018). Through these symbolic references, puppetry becomes a vehicle for preserving cultural heritage, passing down stories, and reinforcing cultural identities.

### **3. Interaction and Engagement with Audiences**





**Figure 2** Dadi Pudumjee © Credit-Ishara Foundation

Interaction and engagement with audiences are fundamental aspects of puppetry, creating a dynamic and immersive experience that distinguishes this art form. Puppeteers employ various techniques and strategies to actively involve the audience, forging a connection that goes beyond passive observation and encouraging participation, dialogue, and emotional connection (Pudumjee D. D., 2006) Figure 2. One of the primary ways puppeteers interact with audiences is through direct address, acknowledging, and engaging with viewers directly. Puppet characters may engage in conversations, ask questions, or even seek assistance from the audience, inviting them to become active participants in the performance. This direct engagement breaks the fourth wall and blurs the boundaries between the puppet world and the audience, fostering a sense of involvement and collaboration. Physical interaction is another powerful tool employed by puppeteers to engage the audience. Depending on the style of puppetry, puppeteers may allow or encourage viewers to touch or manipulate the puppets. This tactile experience creates a tangible connection between the audience and the puppets, enabling a deeper level of engagement and sensory immersion (Coomaraswamy, 1965).

Audience participation is often integrated into puppetry performances, encouraging viewers to contribute their voices, and gestures, or even perform alongside the puppets. This active involvement can take the form of call-and-response, sing-along, or even improvisational interactions, creating a shared experience that fosters a sense of community and collective enjoyment (Brenda Keogh, 2008). Puppeteers also utilize humor and comedic elements to engage audiences; by incorporating witty dialogue, comedic timing, and playful interactions, puppeteers create moments of laughter and amusement, eliciting a positive response from viewers. Humor serves as a bridge between the puppet characters and the audience, fostering a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere that enhances engagement (Dash, 2021) (Suresh, 2001). In addition, puppeteers may incorporate interactive storytelling techniques, such as choose-your-own-adventure narratives or decision-making scenarios, where the audience's input influences the direction of the story (Pudumjee D. D., 2006). This empowers the viewers and gives them a sense of agency, making them active participants in shaping the narrative outcomes (Astles, 2010).

#### 4. Artistic Innovation and Contemporary Application

Technology has also opened new avenues for interaction in puppetry. Digital puppetry, augmented reality, or interactive installations allow for real-time responses and interactions between puppets and viewers (Mazalek, 2011) (Phillips, 2017). This integration of technology enhances engagement, offering a multi-sensory experience that combines traditional puppetry techniques with digital interactivity. Beyond the performance itself, puppeteers often engage in post-show discussions, workshops, or demonstrations, providing opportunities for audience members to further interact, ask questions, and gain insights into the art of puppetry, these interactions deepen the audience's understanding and appreciation of the craft, fostering a lasting connection between the performers and the viewers (Ma, 2015).

Nowadays puppeteers and artists continually explore new techniques, technologies, and interdisciplinary approaches to push the boundaries of this traditional art form and adapt it to modern contexts (Pudumjee D. D., 2006). This pursuit of modernization expands the artistic possibilities of puppetry and enables its integration into diverse artistic disciplines and contemporary settings. Ranga Puthli Peppertrees M.R. Srinivas explained how he invented Innovation in his traditional performance, to perform more effectively, one aspect of artistic innovation in puppetry is the exploration of new materials and construction techniques Figure 3. Modern materials like foam, silicone, and high-tech fabrics now complement traditional materials such as wood, fabric, and strings. These materials offer greater flexibility, durability, and expressive potential, allowing puppeteers to create more intricate and lifelike puppets. Additionally, advancements in puppet construction techniques, such as 3D printing and animatronics, provide opportunities for more sophisticated movements and enhanced realism. Technological advancements have also opened up exciting avenues for innovation in puppetry.



**Figure 3** How Innovation is Keeping Indian Puppetry Alive | Srinivas M R © Credit-TEDx Bangalore

Digital puppetry combines traditional puppetry techniques with computer-generated imagery, motion tracking, and animation. It enables puppeteers to manipulate virtual puppets in real time, creating seamless interactions between the digital and physical worlds (Ma, 2015) (Dash, 2021). Projection mapping and augmented reality further enhance puppetry performances' visual and immersive aspects, transforming ordinary spaces into captivating and interactive environments. These interdisciplinary collaborations have become increasingly prevalent in puppetry, allowing for innovative artistic expressions and expanding the boundaries of the art form. Puppeteers collaborate with artists from various disciplines, including theatre, dance, music, visual arts, and multimedia. These collaborations result in interdisciplinary performances that fuse different art forms, combining puppetry with elements such as live music, choreography, video projections, and immersive installations. Such collaborations enrich the artistic language of puppetry and attract diverse audiences. Puppetry's contemporary applications extend beyond traditional theatre settings (Pudumjee D. D., 2006). Puppeteers have embraced site-specific performances, taking their puppets to unconventional venues such as streets, parks, galleries, and public spaces (Pandey D. A., 2017). These performances redefine the relationship between puppetry and the audience, blurring the boundaries between performers and spectators, and bringing the art form closer to people's daily lives (Parmar, 1975). Puppetry is also being engaged in various educational and therapeutic contexts. Puppetry workshops and educational programs introduce children and adults to the art form, fostering creativity, imagination, and self-expression. Therapeutic puppetry uses puppets as tools for healing, communication, and emotional expression, particularly in areas such as drama therapy and healthcare settings.

Indian interactive puppetry remains a vibrant and dynamic tradition, continually evolving while preserving its cultural essence. By blending ancient techniques with modern innovations, puppeteers create engaging performances that entertain and educate, ensuring the enduring legacy of this art form.

**CONCLUSION**

The exploration of physicality, movement, and embodied storytelling in puppetry craft allows puppeteers to bring their creations to life, infusing them with personality, emotions, and narrative depth. By connecting the power of physical manipulation, puppeteers engage viewers on a profound level, exceeding language barriers and evoking expressive responses that resonate deeply. The use of narrative communication and symbolism in puppetry enables puppeteers to convey complex ideas, social commentary, and cultural significance. Through carefully constructed narratives and symbolic elements, puppeteers create multidimensional performances that invite interpretation, foster dialogue, and reflect the cultural heritage and traditions of diverse communities. Interaction and engagement with audiences lie at the heart of puppetry, transforming the viewing experience into an active and participatory one. Through direct address, physical interaction, audience participation, and humor, puppeteers establish a connection that

breaks the boundaries between performer and viewer, fostering a sense of collaboration and shared enjoyment. Technology further enhances audience engagement, offering interactive and immersive experiences that merge traditional puppetry techniques with digital interactivity. Artistic innovation and contemporary applications drive the evolution of puppetry, propelling it forward and ensuring its relevance in today's artistic landscape. The exploration of new materials, technological advancements, interdisciplinary collaborations, and unconventional performance settings expand the artistic possibilities of puppetry craft, attracting diverse audiences and breathing new life into this ancient craft.

### **Limitations**

The study was limited to interviews with artisan and Artist respondents. Major UNIMA puppeteer associations were considered for the study. The study may be extended to include more respondents. The study may further be extended to seek input from kinetic artists working on physical and visual movements, and gestures.

### **Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare that have no conflict of interest.

### **Ethics Approval**

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing data and ensuring that personal information was securely stored.

### **Funding**

No funding was received by any government or private concern.

### **Data availability**

The authors declare that data is Available.

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