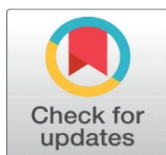
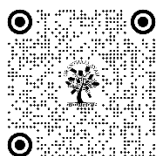


THE POLITICS OF PUPPETRY: STUDYING THE PLAY *AMAR SINGH RATHORE: KATHPUTLI-KA-KHEL* AS A CHALLENGE TO HEGEMONIC CONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Rajasthan is widely considered as the hub of folk art and folk theatre. Puppetry also known as *Kathputli* is performed by the Bhat community precisely which renders them as an inevitable part of oral literature and also as the main contributor in documenting history of Kings. The artform of Puppetry has always been a genre that never fails to capture immediate attention and has the power to bind the audience, compelling them to think as to what the puppet masters of the Bhat community are trying to point out. Our reasons for choosing Puppetry as the prime focus of our small project has been inspired by the same argument. Folklore has immense aesthetic and traditional values for every region. The way it ranges from talking about mythical celestial heroes to kings and their kingdoms, *kathputli* tradition has incorporated it all. Our inclination towards the art of string Puppetry is undeniable. The efficiency with which the Bhats have employed their skills to demolish the hegemonic constructions, depicts that their methods are nothing short of perfection. This article attempts to venture into this very discourse, unravelling the politicised stance of Puppetry in decentring the hegemony of caste/class construction.

Keywords: Folk, Rajasthan, Puppetry, Bhats, Hegemony, Power, Resistance, Language

1. INTRODUCTION

India, the land of diversity, is rich not only in its religious and cultural beliefs but also in the domain of dramatic performances in the *Natyashastra* and various regional folk performances which provide a rich legacy to the idea of Indianness. The earliest account of drama/theatre is found in the *Natyashastra* which is the oldest and the first systematic work on the subject in the history of Indian dramatic theory. It has the privilege to be the most quoted and most referred by theatre practitioners and authors alike on the subjects such as recitation (pāṭhya),

histrionics (abhinaya), music (sangeet), sentiment (rasa), imitation (anukarana), action (avastha), diction (lakshana), gesture (*āṅgika*), prosody (chandaśśāstra) and so on. Folk theatre, it is believed, originated roughly around 15th and 16th century if one is to rely solely on evidence catered by the Puranas, epics and myths. But the insights provided in the *Natyashastra* are clearly reflected in the corpus of folk theatre. Every state in India has a distinctive folk culture employed to serve as a form of entertainment in the Vedic ages but later evolving as a medium of education. Some of the types of folklore around the country are *Jatra* in Odisha, *Nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh, *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, *Bhavai* in Gujarat, *Manch* in Madhya Pradaesh, and *Kathputli* or Puppetry in Rajasthan. Indian folk is so well branched that on further research it becomes vividly clear that folk performances have been subdividing themselves into Fine Arts, Literary Writings and Performance Arts.

Rajasthan is widely considered as the hub of folk arts; hence we have designed this paper to focus on Rajasthan's performative art forms namely, its folk dance, folk music or folk theatre. *Khayal*, *Rammatt*, *Bhavai* and *Kathputli* are some of the few widely performed forms of performative arts that have ruled the Rajasthani stage. Puppetry also known as *Kathputli* is performed by the Bhat community precisely which renders them as an inevitable part of oral literature and also as the main contributor in documenting history of princes or at times they go on to provide proof for the existence of an entire kingdom. The art of puppetry has not restricted itself to the state of Rajasthan; it spans over the four directions of Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western states like Bihar, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Maharashtra and many more. Broadly speaking there are four different types of Puppetries: Rajasthan's art form *Kathputli* refers to String Puppetry; Shadow Puppetry in Andhra Pradesh; Rod Puppetry of Bihar; and Glove Puppets in Kerala which are native to their own state and culture.

The beauty of Rajasthani Puppetry of *Kathputli ka khel* is directly linked with its depiction of history and how these historical events are represented by amalgamation of various *Rasas*; be it the *Veer Rasa*, *Srinagar Rasa* or the *Raudra Rasa* all of them have made home in the puppet art form too and despite the players being wooden puppets, the Bhat community through its dialogue delivery and intonation successfully educate the audience in regards to the prime *Bhava* of the scene. One of the most well-known and active clans of this community resides in Nagaur. At least eight members of this family are still earning their bread through *Kathputli* art performances which has been taught to them by five generations of ancestors who were avid members of this stage art.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Tiby Cherian. Dreamstime.com

Figure 2



Figure 2 Puppet Theatre Setup in Amer Fort, Jaipur. Photo: Prachi Chauhan, August 2017.

2. BHATS

The Bhat community which hails from the soil of Rajasthan, once upon a time, were a group of genealogists employed generally by the kings. They were given the task to trace the lineage and hierarchical backbone of the ruler reigning the country. The Bhats, though harbouring from the lower strata of the hierarchical pyramid, resulted to be the main contributors who ensured that the royal histories remained alive.

The Bhat community when substituted in the modern age can be referred as the public representatives of the king and his regime. They were laden with the responsibility of travelling to different parts of India performing and staging acts through local songs, *Kathputli Natak* and other methods of entertainment to inform the neighbouring kingdoms about the prosperity and monetary power their patron kingdom exercised. Their acts often served to bring in alliances for their ruler building political strength and also served as a communicative link which served to immortalise kings. History serves as a living witness to place and situate Bhats to be one of the lowest rankers of the court assembly yet the ultimate power of establishing or ruining a king remained solely in the hands of the Bhats. They were skilled in the art of clever manipulation and could easily increase the trade of the court or completely ruin the goodwill of the ruler. In this paper we endeavour to deconstruct the hegemonic construct of the *varna* system imposed on the Bhats which compared them as the 'feet' of the society. The narrations and records that have been validated as a part of Indian history describe the local identities of the different regions. In modern era the Bhats of Rajasthan as observed by Snodgrass no longer identify themselves as a part of the marginalised section of the society rather, they claim to be at par with the Brahmins who wrote and created manuscripts in Sanskrit to keep the legacy of the king alive, a work which resembled the acts and performances executed by the Bhats.

This study therefore will provide evidence as to how the Bhats have consciously led to the phenomenon of 'anti-structuring' the belief that the royals were self-sufficient and that the lower communities had negligible contribution to the building of a strong literary canon in their respective states. The direct rejection of a dictated identity is vanquished by the Bhats as a part of a conscious endeavour who have gone as far as to employ performative art as a tool that challenges the caste and cultural notions of the society. Their plays and puppet shows have incorporated symbols and metaphorical themes that directly question and challenge

the possibility of a kingdom without the Bhats educating them of their lineage and venturing away from their homelands with the prerogative idea of bringing back home trade and political security. This study aims at highlighting the fact that both the oral literature and recorded history are indebted to the Bhats for passing it to generations and often educating young princes of their own roles in the society by providing examples from the experiences of their forefathers and former rulers. While talking of a marginalised existence in the society one can also not neglect how Folk culture and Folk Studies has been compelled to be a part of a recessive genre of literature. *Kathputli* becomes a medium of resistance for the Bhat community who effectively use music and dialogues to problematise the then traditions through their folk performances.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Puppeteer Selling Puppets at Amer Fort, Jaipur. Photo: Prachi Chauhan, August 2017.

3. FOLK AS A MEDIUM

Folk culture has various components of expression and one of these is performance. One can find performances around various things including customs, rituals, festivals, tales and legends of specific communities. These performances are rich in multiple narratives of the communities and serve as creating a tradition which furthermore develops a cultural identity. These performances therefore become a cultural space and serve as a cultural activity which henceforth strengthens the community. The tradition of the community dictates the lifestyle and connects its people with a sense of belonging to their community. Further, it develops a cultural identity among the people to recognise themselves collectively and at the same time individually.

Folk performances come down to folk dance, theatre, music, games etc.; each holds a certain level of significance and leads to cultural production of the community. Across the country, one finds various forms of folk dance which include *Bihu* in Assam, *Ghoomar* in Rajasthan, *Chhau* in Jharkhand, *Lavani* in Maharashtra etc. Then there are different types of folk music like *Baul* in Bengal, *Thumri* in Uttar Pradesh, etc. and folk theatre like *Nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh, *Kathputli* in Rajasthan, *Yakshagana* in Karnataka etc. Our small project, as mentioned previously, aims to focus on one of the folk theatres of Rajasthan; *Kathputli* or Puppetry practiced by the Bhat community.

Folk has not just been about a community's tradition but also about preserving that tradition and the culture. Therefore, there are various aspects of resistance that could be found in folk. These elements of resistance are an attempt to protect their

culture and represent the significance of the same in the society. It challenges the binary between the classical and the traditional in many ways and in doing so deconstructs the hegemony of the dominant narrative of the upper class/caste. The research paper posits the politics of the folk, specifically the puppetry tradition of Rajasthan. In looking at the puppetry tradition, we choose to analyse and understand the puppet drama titled *Amar Singh Rathore: Kathputli-ka-Khel* by a politicised stance. We argue that hegemony has been decentred by these puppet dramas through three aspects. First, language becomes a prominent tool used by the Bhats to 're-present' the glorious actions of the kings. In a way it gives them the license to deconstruct and reconstruct the hegemonic history creating a space for themselves which was not given to them as per the *varna* system. Second, while watching these performances we witnessed a certain kind of power reversal between the rigid categorisations of 'upper' and 'lower' castes. These puppet dramas equip the Bhats with power with which their narratives create and recreate history. That is to say the 'upper' caste is indebted to the Bhats for passing its genealogy and legacy to generations and traditionally often educating young princes of their own roles in the society by providing examples from the experiences of their forefathers and former rulers. Third, *Kathputli* becomes a medium of resistance for the Bhat community who effectively use their music and dialogues to problematise the then traditions through their folk performances. Simultaneously these performances while challenging and resisting the prevalent discourse of the *varna* system and defying the marginalisation of Bhats contribute immensely in the vibrant culture of Rajasthan.

4. DISCUSSION

The members of the Bhat community were a clan of low-ranking human beings who were often considered to be not just lower in social status but also in their intellectual abilities. The feats of these puppeteers are often neglected, unknown to many. These people can be substituted by the images of kings' spies and became the eyes and ears of the king in his own kingdom. [Ojha \(2016\)](#) argues that the great mind Chanakya has always been known for his excellence in the field of worldly knowledge and his *shloks* have been compiled into a book *Chanakya Neeti*. Chanakya has forever laid emphasis on the importance of the espionage system and how common man or those lower in the societal hierarchy have a pivotal role in the running of the state (Learning from Chanakya). To hide themselves from the public eye and remain unidentified the kings would appoint the members of such small communities to not only warn about a possible rebel but also travel to different states performing their art, unsuspected yet gathering knowledge about the weakness and strength of the rival state. People in the form of fruit sellers, performance artists would enter the rival kingdom and gain access to such crucial knowledge which even the kings could not have. Their loyalty and valour have often saved kingdoms from losing wars and also in gaining powerful allies by their songs where the lyrics would often be composed of appreciation for one's home state. As mentioned above the Bhat community of people involved in the art of *Kathputli* play, were generally regarded as members of a lower caste community. Yet their intellectual skills can be considered as rivalling with the likes of the kings.

Often folklore and age-old stories have treated upon a similar path though shrouded in the garb of either Children Folklore or fantasy-fictional writings. *Panchatantra* by [Sharma \(2011\)](#), the ancient Indian writing woven intricately by numerous animal fables each of which has a moral to convey. As a child one may tend to overlook the garbed meaning that comes forth as a sharp criticism to the

hierarchy of the community. The adept use of animal imagery serves to become a point of similarity depicting the innate social order followed by both species. The well-known fable of the lion and the rabbit is one fine example that can be used to understand the clever and street-smart attitude of the Bhats through the image of the rabbit and the lion serves as the representation of the royalty, literally and figuratively. The story titled *the story of the lion and the hare* is an iconic representation depicting both forms of passive resistance and active resistance (p, 33).

The herd mentality and the submissive attitude which one adopts when subjected to societal norms also finds voice in the story through animal figurines. The lion who is addressed as the king of the jungle, blinded by greed and gluttony forgets about the devastating ripple his actions have on the members under his domain. His greed for more and the unquenchable thirst for massacre makes him murder multiple animals daily leaving the forest susceptible to extinguished talents and hindering the ecological food chain in the environment. The superiority and the authority he exercise arouses an immediate feeling of submission and the animals readily decide to betray one of their own, sentencing him to death rather than posing any form of resistance to the dominant ruler. One such day a puny yet clever hare lowest in the food chain is allotted to be the designated prey of the king and leaves for his death. Yet the calm and composed behaviour of the rabbit does appear to be out of the ordinary. The clever rabbit who supposedly is to occupy the lowest rank in the social ladder, after meeting with the furious lion he not only lies to him but also successfully manipulates him into believing that his authority and position is being challenged by another. The ultimate blow on the societal beliefs comes in the form of the death of the lion that jumped blindly to his death proving that the king who is supposed to be the owner of the said kingdom is ultimately unaware of his own territory and is defeated by the 'puny rabbit.'

Apparently, this story can easily be studied and used to understand the Bhat community. The lowest in the hegemonic order has the power to uproot an entire kingdom. The active resistance of the rabbit is similar to the likes of the Bhats. The clever manipulation and the art of deliverance in performance are both filled in by these people. The calculated plan of the rabbit can be compared to puppeteers and *Kathputli*. These performers have the ability to invoke rebels, lead to wars, extract enemy secrets and also gorge out the possibilities of future alliances for their home. The rejection of this community, to be subdued by their superiors as seen in their performance, the themes of their plays and the dialogues can be taken as instances of garbed resistance. The lion though unflinchingly projects the picture of several normative patriarchal kings who use their strength and power to subjugate the ones beneath them.

Another such old-time fable is the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes* written originally by the Danish author [Andersen \(1837\)](#). His work has been translated into more than 100 languages. The vanity of the king is exposed to his kingdom by a person who by profession is a tailor. His use of language and the tactful manipulation has brought him bags of gold coins and also the credit of exposing the vain king who is greedy enough to spend the state's money on things as simple as clothes. The tailor belonging to the lower caste again serves to bring forth the idea that despite being lower in the hierarchical order the intellectual skills of these men remained unparalleled. He convinces the king that he knows the art of creating such a fine piece of cloth that it is only suited for the king to adorn it. Apart from the beauty the cloth is also magical and hence can be seen only by someone who is wise and intellectually capable of understanding the beauty of the cloth. In the end not only is the king robbed of his money but the vast difference in the thinking and

manipulating capabilities of both the king and the common tailor deserve to be largely highlighted. He disrobes him in front of his entire nation proving that vanity cannot be covered by the status of the person.

These fables serve as an example to highlight that the commoner clans of the people were largely the reason in some kingdoms for the smooth functioning of the kingdom. The dependency of the king on the Bhats is an inevitable part of Indian princely history though much has not been done to preserve the same. Such aspects are further discussed in this section, bringing forth the politics involved in the performances of puppetry; before analysing the three aspects mentioned in the previous section, let us first understand the performance of the play *Amar Singh Rathore: Kathputli- Ka- Khel*

5. THE PLAY: AMAR SINGH RATHORE: KATHPUTLI- KA- KHEL

As discussed previously the art of puppetry has delved into various art forms like String puppetry, Glove puppetry and many more. Rajasthan primarily has focused itself in performing purely the Marionette art form commonly known as String puppetry. In the court of Emperors and Rajput kings two forms of puppetry had taken the frontline, namely the *paper matche* form of puppetry and the wooden puppets. The Persian puppeteers and the Rajasthani performers clashed amongst themselves in regards to the survival of only one superior puppet performance. As per their traditional ideals the Rajasthani Bhat community proclaimed that their puppets were full of *Rasa* and had their own living identity. After a battle of the puppets being submerged in the well, the *paper matche* Persian puppets succumbed to their death while the Rajasthani wooden puppets were glowing more than ever. [Bharucha and Kothari \(2003\)](#) notes that this led to the entrance of *Kathputli nautanki* in both the Rajputana as well as Mughal court. One of the most well recognised and frequently performed plays of the Bhat community is the play titled *Amar Singh Rathore: Kathputli- Ka- Khel* which tends to have a lasting impression on the reader's minds. The beauty with which the puppeteers have projected different strains of resistance, power anarchy and the constant hierarchical manipulation is duly highlighted (p. 201).

The puppetry is set in the early seventeenth century around the life of Amar Singh Rathore the eldest son of Gaj Singh Rathore, the king of Mewar. Amar Singh, a valourous and just prince, accompanied his father in all state battles bringing back home alliances and eliminating enemies that proved to be a threat to his kingdom. Despite being recognised for his victorious attempts as a companion to the king, his father declared his second son Jaswant Singh to be the king of Mewar and disinherited Amar Singh, robbing him of his rightful title as the King of Mewar. This deception drove Amar Singh away from home yet he was appointed as the *Subedar* of Nagaur, a district directly under the rule of Mughal king Shah Jahan. His skills and talents won him the title of *Rao* in the Mughal court. Amar Singh soon became in charge of a *Mansab* in the Mughal army. His increasing status and closeness to the emperor angered the other courtiers as to why a Hindu-Rajput being rendered with titles in a Mughal Muslim court. Provocations and manipulations were nothing new when one talks about the inner battle of raising one's status in court. Salabat Khan was one such courtier in the Mughal realm who was also the brother-in-law of the emperor. He played a major role in the downfall of Amar Singh. The marionette was designed after the exile of Amar Singh and post his entry into the Mughal court (p, 203).

The play begins with a *beldar* levelling the stage for performance followed by a *jamadar* cleaning the court and a *bhisti* watering the stage before all the rulers and

courtiers enter. We also see a local artist playing his drum on the stage. The play begins with Salabat Khan informing Emperor Shah Jahan that despite being trusted with the responsibility of the *Subedar* of Nagaur, Amar Singh wishes to go on leave and get married. Salabat emphasizes how Amar Singh is taking advantage of the trust that the emperor has shown to him. Despite the tactful manipulation by Salabat, Shah Jahan allows Amar Singh to go on a leave for seven days and return back on the eighth day without fail. Having agreed to the conditions of the emperor Amar Singh leaves for his marriage festivities but does not return back to court till the fourteenth day. The blatant disrespect towards the orders of the emperor serves to create a ridge in the bond of the emperor and his trusted *Subedar*. For his uninformed absence it is demanded that Amar Singh must pay the fine that is due for his extended unauthorised leave. Being a Rajput with a strain of pride Amar Singh rejects the demand of paying the fine. He exclaims that he is not answerable to anyone, not even the emperor himself.

His declaration was met with extreme shock and fury on the part of the king who instructed Salabat Khan to forcefully extract the revenue from Amar Singh.

"Dekhkar Shahjahan Badshah bharta hankare,

Kaha Salabat Khan nun: "Karo kam hamare.

Age auna na do, Rajput rakho atkare."

Salabat Khan un Bakhshi dida tare,

"Adab manke khara raho, Rajput bichare!

Teri bat digi Darbar men, main khara sidhare."

"Meri tu kya bat sanwarda, Kartar sanware!"

Amar Singh digaia, no dige, jaisa parbat bhari.

"Hatke khara ganwariar! Kya kare ganwari?"

Jabbal kadhi misri nikali do dhari:

Mare Salabat Khan di ja khili pari:

Lagi mard de hath di na rahi wo dhari.

"Eh le apne sat lakh, Salabat piare!

Kante dharke janch le, hor ghat hamare!" (*Amar Singh Rathore: Kathputli-ka-Khel* by Sangeet Natak Akademi)

Translated as, after being engaged in a long battle of swords, Amar Singh not only defeats Salabat Khan but also ends up killing him. His defiance and recent killings force him to flee from the Mughal court. He jumps off the fort wall on his horse leaving all the Mughal soldiers defeated. His skills save his life and he safely escapes the Mughal court. Despite successfully escaping the court, Amar Singh loses his life. His nephew Arjun Gaur shakes hands with Shah Jahan and tricks his uncle into entering the court of Shah Jahan. Amar Singh is attacked by multiple weapon clad soldiers along with his nephew Arjun who ultimately delivers the final blow leading to his death. Having been unjustly and deceptively murdered Amar Singh, the hero of Nagaur, is avenged by his friend Ram Singh who challenges Arjun for a fair duel and defeats him. Ram Singh then retrieves the body of Amar Singh and returns to Nagaur where he is given the burial of a Rajputana hero.

This recapitulation serves to be a skeletal framework of the play which has been employed to understand and highlight the idea of resistance and power politics that the Bhat community brings out through its performances. Though there still lies a

lot of ambiguity in the exact ending of the play yet the majority of the Bhat community has adopted this storyline in their stage acts. At this venture, let us examine the three aspects about the play namely, language, power reversal and resistance.

6. LANGUAGE AS A CULTURAL TOOL

Language is a product of culture and it also becomes a medium to transmit the culture as the cultural knowledge is communicated and transmitted through the language of the narratives of the community. The truth about the community is created through language and thereby contributing in the formation of one's cultural identity. It is through *matra bhasha* (mother language) one connects with tradition, cultural thought and history. According to the People's Linguistic Survey of India, there are 780 languages in India at present but over decades there are hundreds of indigenous languages which are dead now. With numerous indigenous languages in danger of extinction, it seems we are proceeding towards a monolingual cultural scenario and thereby damaging the rich multilingual heritage of the country. As noted by [Bhushan \(2020\)](#) "Language in its mundane sense is a medium of communication; but more importantly language is a cultural product, repository of heritage and indigenous knowledge and most importantly an instrument of thought" (p, 2). Hence, the protection of the indigenous language becomes integral to protect the 'indigenous knowledge'. Traditionally, in India we find a binary between *marga* and *desi*, the great and the little tradition of language, respectively. The former is the language of the elite like Sanskrit which is the language of the 'canon'; on the other hand, the latter is the language of the local, it is mostly present and circulated through the oral tradition and hence is not included in the literary canon of India. Noted Indian poet and folklorist [Ramanujan \(1990\)](#) talks about this distinction between *marga* and *desi*:

The "Great Tradition," with capitals and i in the singular, said to be carried by Sanskrit, is pan-Indian, prestigious, ancient, authorized by texts, cultivated and carried by what Redfield calls "the reflective few." The "Little Tradition," or traditions in the plural, are local, mostly oral, and carried by the illiterate (the liberal would call them nonliterate) and the anonymous "unreflective many" (p, 4).

Oral tradition in India has been an ancient one, narrating tales, legends and epics still holds relevance. Every household has the tradition of narrating stories of *Panchatantra*, *Jataka Kathas* and even tales from epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to their children. There are ritualistic songs sung during the festivities narrating tales about local deities and even there are *kathas* held with the fasting ritual wherein right before the worship, the matriarch of the family will tell tales about the importance of that puja and the association of fasting for it. Along with it, the tradition of narrating the *Ramayana* in the temples for the people still continues to exist. These narratives are not only found in these cultural narratives but also in various other forms of cultural performances like cultural dances, dramas and other cultural practices. The oral traditions not only narrate legends or tales but also give us a counter narrative for Sanskrit mythology. They offer alternative conceptions about religious practices and tales about deities. Unlike the Sanskrit mythology, folk culture portrays gods as more human whose bodies function as humanly as their devotees'. In doing so what makes the folk culture stand apart is the language of these narratives, it is the language which brings down these stories from a prestigious place to our everyday lives and connects them to our social realities. For instance, in one of our households, there is a festival wherein the women of the

family wake up the supposedly sleeping deities of respective clans by singing songs about them and how it is time for them to wake up from a long sleep and bless them right before the wedding season. There will be an offering prepared for the deities who are considered to be hungry after months long sleep and the food prepared is as basic as consumed in every household; seasonal vegetables and fruits along with a sweet dish. This cultural practice can be seen placing the deities in a very 'humanly' setting wherein they sleep and eat like their devotees.

Language is considered to harbour a metaphorical system which foregrounds fundamental concepts we live by; these are the concepts which govern our everyday realities and the metaphors through which these concepts are manifested become an integral part of our reality. These concepts can be arguments contributing constructively or creating a larger part of everyday reality. In a culture, such arguments are fundamentally the cultural values which are manifested through art forms or cultural performances like songs, dance, drama, narrations etc. Arguments, hereby are assertion of a cultural reality which may not be a part of the 'larger' social reality of the privileged. The cultural performances carry the fundamental values in a metaphorical structure of the language used in the cultural narratives. In understanding the relation between metaphor and cultural coherence, George Johnson and Lakoff (2003) write, "The most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts of the culture" (p, 29). Here let us examine the concept of fundamental values being foregrounded through a metaphorical system in language with the help of a folklore told by one of our grandmothers. The tale is about a *nat* and a *natni* who out of ardent need for money decide to visit a kingdom of a king known to be miser. Hence, the couple's request to put up a show for the king is rejected as the king does not want to pay for the show. The needy couple decides to put up the show free of cost to which the king immediately agrees and thus an evening show is scheduled for the entire kingdom. The couple starts the show wherein they sing, dance, play various instruments, perform stunts on the rope and bamboo sticks for which they are well known. As the night gets darker, tired of performing for free, the *natni* in a singsong way expresses her dejection to her husband. In response, the *nat* sings "*bahut gayi thodi baaki, thodi beeti jaye; par natni taal mein bhang na aaye*" (a lot of time has passed, the little left will pass too; but *natni* the rhythm should not be disturbed). On listening to *nat's* song, the prince comes forth and gives his gold chain as a prize for their performance, so does the princess with a gold ring followed, a blanket by an old vagabond, his only possession. Later in the morning the king summons the three of them and asks why they have offered their precious things to the couple. As answer to the king's question, they all confess what misdeeds they would have committed in impatience had they not listened to the *nat's* song about keeping the show going patiently and how difficult times will eventually pass. The king too learns his lesson as how valuable the performance has been for his kingdom and decides to pay the couple abundantly for their performance. The tale, therefore, brings out how the cultural values of the *nat* community about keeping the show going, which is their cultural heritage, is manifested in the language used of their songs. This story also brings forth the reality of the *nat* community which is constituted by everyday struggle to earn through their performances and the importance of flawlessly carrying out their show despite adverse circumstances. Their art also opens up space for 'anti-structure' which can be seen in the story, through language the *nat* couple who belongs to the lower strata of the society succeeds in educating people like the king, the princess and the prince who belong to the upper caste.

As seen so far, language used in the folklore creates space for anti-structuring and hence providing these folk performances a political stance. Folk tradition uses the power of language to strengthen the narratives of the community's everyday reality and this very aspect of folk has been used by writers in their literature written in their native tongue which brings out their Dalit consciousness. Omprakash Valmiki (2011), a prominent writer has talked about the power of words in his famous poem *Shabd Jhuth Nahi Bolte* and writes:

“मेरा विश्वास है
तुम्हारी तमाम कोशिशों के बाद भी
शब्द ज़िन्दा रहेंगे
समय की सीढ़ियों पर
अपने पाँव के निशान
गोदने के लिए
बदल देने के लिए
हवाओं का रुख”

Translated as, “It is my belief, that even after all your efforts words will survive to leave an eternal mark of their feet at the stairs of time, to change the direction of the wind.” Valmiki further in the poem brings forth the fact that words carry the truth of every human life, the story of every individual beyond the restraint of power. Likewise, the truth of the marginalised Dalit community, *Bhats* can be seen creating space for itself through language used in their folk tradition of puppetry.

In a performance, the puppeteer takes the liberty to satirise or stage a parody on the social condition. The same can be seen happening in the play *Amar Singh Rathore: Kathputli- Ka- Khel*. Through language the puppeteer is creating space for the voices of their ‘subaltern’ community. The skits in the performance may not be directly relevant to the story of Amar Singh but we can observe that these skits create a major portion of the play than the story of Amar Singh. The puppeteers seem to foreground their art performances in these skits and hence side lining the lead characters. The play *Amar Singh Rathore: Kathputli- Ka- Khel* begins with an entertainer Khadbad Khan, belonging from low rank who is playing his *dumdumi* (drum). He is asked by a *chowkidar* (gatekeeper) to vacate the place as the *darbaar* (court) of the emperor has to be set up there. On this Khadbad Khan says, “*mujhe kya aap ke darbaar se lena dena, mera toh pet ka sawaal hai meri dumdumi toh aur bajegi*” (why do I care about your court, it is the matter of bread for me and so I’ll keep on playing my drum). In this short dialogue of a local artist, the puppeteer tries to bring out the plight of an artist whose life remains unaffected by how grand the court of the king is and what decisions are made in it. The world created in the play is entirely the world of such local artists performing their arts to gain acknowledgement from the masses, although the play is titled on the lead character Amar Singh but through language, these puppeteers manipulate the performance and the meaning conveyed along with the legend of Amar Singh can be found in the spaces created for the marginalised local artists. In describing the concept of meaning, noted scholar Devy (2014) says, “Meaning’ consists of what is conveyed through gestures, sounds and characters as well as through the silence, stillness and blank spaces outside the pale of these three” (p, 109). Other than the vocalised performances of the local artists, the ‘silence’ and ‘stillness’ Devy talks about, can be

seen in the characters of the kings who are part of the play but do not contribute to it at all; they are just part of the set-up of the court. The silencing of the royalty in the play conveys the meaning that in this world of puppet theatre, the royalty is attributed minimal value and serves just as props for the show.

Devy (2014) further says, “Those who can give or receive knowledge tend to acquire a certain authority in a given society, and what should really have been a means of knowing becomes a means of social control” (p, 207). This can be understood in terms of how knowledge is exercised as a power yielding tool by the dominating class in the society. He further adds the prejudice about knowledge, “Those who speak or recite Sanskrit have knowledge; those who speak Prakrit have no knowledge” (p, 207); this politics of knowledge can be seen contested in the puppet theatre. Though the knowledge of genealogy these Bhats possess is not given a status equal to the knowledge of Vedas possessed by the Brahmins but the former use it as a tool for social commentary if not ‘social control’. During the play, among all other skits in it, there is a skit which presents a parody on the British rule; the puppeteers present a puppet character named Pilpili Saheb (probably from someone called Philip sir) who is a British army officer leading a platoon of men and on his way, he randomly calls on stage a boy from the audience and asks him if he would like to join his platoon. Here we witness a funny conversation between Pilpili Saheb and the boy from the audience, the former asks the latter silly and irrelevant questions like how would you like your bride to be, dark or fair? Further he asks the boy to run across the stage and perform other silly actions, which becomes a matter of laughter for the audience. The supposed interview for the enrolment in the platoon is reduced down to a comic act. This brings out the triviality of the officer and how incapable he has been for leading a platoon and hence the entire skit becomes a parody on the British rule and brings out its folly. The play offers such skits which present to the audience a satire on social reality. There are skits which bring out the corruption prevalent in the society and how royal servants exploit people of low rank. Hence, it can be understood how language becomes a tool to resist the dominating class and along with it foregrounds the cultural values of the Bhat community.

7. POWER REVERSAL

Bhats belong to the lower caste as per the *varna* system but this structure too experiences friction between the ‘centre’ and the ‘margin’, perhaps because of what Derrida calls a ‘rupture’. For a long period of time, the lower caste has been surviving on the myths of the *savarna* and becoming a part of the history created by them but through numerous folk practices and a distinctive culture, these people in many ways are attempting to ‘decentre’ the hegemony of the upper caste. We have seen in the Introduction two commonly told folk tales, *The story of the lion and the hare* and *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, testifying the fact that the powerful centre can be overthrown or challenged by seemingly powerless subordinates. Bhats, who belong originally from the community of *Nats* (Acrobats) were primarily genealogists who used to narrate genealogy and history of the communities of their *jajmans* (patrons) and over the period of time they extend their source of earning, they started performing puppetry outside their hometown, Nagaur. Their community was divided into two: Bhats and Charans. Before independence, the Charans were praise-singers and genealogists for the kings and the Bhats for Bhambhis, an untouchable community of Rajasthan. Since they were familiar with generations of history and had a strong hold on language, through their performances they rose above the ‘lower’ conformities of their caste. Language gave them power to

manipulate the history of the upper caste like the kings, in a way they used their knowledge to equate their position in the society with that of the Brahmins who with their knowledge of the Vedas placed themselves at the highest position in the societal ladder. In many parts of Rajasthan and in other parts of the country where Bhats have migrated, they have identified themselves as Bhatt, belonging from the Brahminical section of the society, consequently it has always been a matter of controversy.

It was not just the Bhambhi patrons but also the kings who were dependent on these bards to collect and preserve their ancestral lineage and much gloried histories which helps in upholding the present king's rule as being associated with brave and legendary ancestors. The Bhats acknowledge this dependency unlike their royal patrons and hence attribute minimal value to the centrality of the kings. In this regard Snodgrass (2004) observes that "Unable to establish their names through real acts of generosity, bravery, and leadership, these kings would appear to be very dependent on their bards 'linguistic skills' "(p, 272). Their learning and knowledge become the basis of rejecting the rigid structure of caste system, Snodgrass observes "In 'taking patrons' names' - that is, in praising them and maintaining their genealogies and histories - Bhats argue that they give their patrons meaning (*matlab*) and history (*itihās*), and that they make them happy (*kushi*) and even immortal (*amar*)" (The Centre Cannot Hold 274). Hence, it can be clearly observed that Bhats do not consider themselves inferior to the royalty rather they strongly believe it is through their bardic skills they can glorify or demean a king. Their performances are not just limited to representing people from various communities but also foregrounding how one community sees the other and hence satirising the politics of the society.

The bardic skills of the Bhats provide them with power to manipulate the reputations of the kings; a king who is at the supreme position of a kingdom relies completely on a lower-caste Bhat for his genealogy. Here, we can observe an 'anti-structure' functioning in contrast with the rigid structures of the *varna* system wherein the 'centred' king is 'decentred' and his essentialised position is compromised. This very concept of power reversal not only functions in the bardic songs but also in the puppetry performances of the Bhats. The puppet theatre was originally performed for entertaining the kings and the crowd but it also presented myths and legends prevalent in the region, one of them being the legend of Amar Singh Rathore. For the Bhats, puppet theatre becomes a medium of exercising power; during a performance the word of the artist becomes the truth for everyone watching in the audience which has to be trusted by everyone despite their social rank. The artist sees everyone in the audience as people waiting to watch them perform. A king or a low rank person are all alike for the artist. Puppetry offers control to the artist and possibilities of choosing the subject matter and the medium to represent it. In this connection, noted scholar Tillis (1990) rightly observes:

These possibilities are of two basic types: first, the puppet theatre offers the artist a remarkable control over his or her medium; second, the puppet theatre offers the artist an equally remarkable freedom from restraint in his or her subject matter. (p. 78)

The puppeteer can also manipulate the puppet to do and speak anything, the puppet does represent a human character but their actions may or may not be humanlike, quite often one sees the puppets flying in the air during a show or decapitation as a technique of entertaining the audience. Hence, we can see how puppet theatre provides the puppeteer a license to juxtapose real with fantasy for the sake of entertainment and the audience too find the stories and representations

credulous enough to 'willingly suspending their disbelief' (as given by Samuel Taylor Coleridge). In the play we see the king demands entertainment, highlighting the importance of entertainers in the royal court, and for the same there are small performances in the midst of the play wherein we see dancer puppets performing on folk songs, snake charmer puppet, *jaadugar* (magician) puppet, *behrupiya* (impostor) puppet who changes its attire in seconds from a man's to a woman's etc. These skits bring out the most fantasised versions of performances: the *jaadugar* takes off his head with his hands and places it on his feet; further he flies in the air and spins like a copter which are beyond human limitations. The *behrupiya* does similar things like changing its attire in a flick and becoming a man from a woman. Despite these fantasy elements, it doesn't seem senseless to the audience and hence they choose to dive into the world of fantasy the puppeteer is creating in front of them; consequently, testifying the power of the puppeteer in a performance.

Through puppetry, the puppeteer not only compromises the binary between real and fantasy but also in certain ways challenges the conventions of live theatre. The linearity of a drama having a beginning, a middle and an end is distorted in a puppet theatre. For the puppeteer, the story is least of their concern and the skits in between become their prime focus. The story of the protagonist Amar Singh is never told from the beginning, it is rather an episode of his life which popularised him and hence it breaks away from the conventions of telling a story. Importantly, while watching the play we observe that it seems the skits are not a part of the episode of Amar Singh, rather it is this episode which has become a part of the skits performed during the show. The puppet theatre in such ways breaks away from the conventions of the live theatre, the entertainment of the masses and displaying their art become utmost important for the puppeteers. The puppeteer is free to exercise their power to manipulate the entire performance and break away from any kind of conventionality.

In the beginning of the play, we see the *Chowkidar* (gatekeeper) welcoming various kings and *nawabs* in the court. The course of action in the beginning of the play is majorly about the character of *Chowkidar*. The narrators sitting in one corner of the stage commands the *Chowkidar* to introduce all the kings and show them their places in the court. Right after the *darbaar* (court) is set up and all the kings have been placed in their positions, the next action is that of a dance performance by a puppet called Anarkali. At this point of time, the royalty puppets are pinned to the curtain and are completely inactive for a long period of time in the play; throughout the performances of the skits, these royal puppets just serve as a background in the show. Apart from this, we see historical figures like Shivaji, Emperor Ashoka, Nawabs of Agra etc. as being present in the court and serving as background like all others. These kings may or may not have been a part of the story of Amar Singh but the puppeteer still chooses to manipulate and make them a part of the performance even if it is for the purpose of serving as a background. This brings us to the juncture where we can observe how there is a shift in power from the royalty to these low caste Bhats who can even take the liberty of manipulating history during a performance. The legendary figures of Amar Singh and the Mughal Emperor are all reduced to 'wooden toys' which are designed by these Bhats in whichever ways they want to; at times their puppets do not even speak for themselves, the narrator takes over their dialogues and manipulates their speech. Komal Kothari mentions that in a lot of performances the character of Amar Singh is referred to as *Amar Singh ki tasvir* (an image of Amar Singh), in explaining the reason, [Bharucha and Kothari \(2003\)](#) says, "Amar Singh is never directly referred to as Amar Singh, but rather, as 'Amar Singh *ki tasvir*' (literally, the 'picture' of Amar Singh). The moment it is accepted that the characters are merely 'pictures', then they can afford to cross all boundaries of

space and time" (p, 205). This act of calling the character *Amar Singh ki tasvir* is a mere mode of exercising freedom to manipulate the story and the character as per the choice of the puppeteer. Furthermore, the puppeteer even manipulates the glorious battle between Amar Singh and Salabat Khan wherein the latter dies at the hands of the former. The battle like all other skits in the performance is presented as a spectacle for the entertainment of the masses and moreover to some extent reduced down to a fight sequel from a comic scene of a cinema which becomes a source of laughter for the audience. Hence, at this point, it can be concluded how the puppet theatre becomes an act of power reversal between the high-caste kings and the low-caste Bhats. It also foregrounds the fact that in this shift of power, the rigidity of the *varna* system is problematised and challenged at the same time. The Bhats in their choices to manipulate the story and exercise their power are defying the restraints of *varna* system and hence decentring the essentialised positions attributed to the upper caste.

8. RESISTANCE

A noted critic Layoum (1989) while reviewing Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature* in her work titled *Resistance Literature* observes the political significance of literary texts. The constant tussle between the West and East and the acknowledgement of literature produced by them (East) has taken the centre stage. It endeavours to educate the readers about the ongoing socio-political discrepancies that are plaguing their nation (Harlow, *Resistance Literature*). Talking about the term Resistance in India one is directly drawn to the idea of a marginalised existence of the lower caste or the Minority communities of India be it the Parsis, Sikhs or the Christians who suffer the most in the name of religious supremacy and cultural segregation. Resistance literature in India largely consists of a form of penned rebellion by the minority classes along with the representation of post-colonial literature. The concept of Resistance literature in India is largely associated with the idea of emerging Dalit Literature, a class of people who have been the victims of age-old caste discrimination. The term Dalit is derived from the Indian term *Atishudra* which refers to an entire community that is considered to be too impure and lower in the social hierarchy that even their shadow was supposed to be a curse to the high-class Brahmins. They were allotted different wells to draw water and were not allowed to enter public temples. They carried on with their lives as an alienated community. With the arrival of Dalit literature, the true realities and the sufferings of this community started unfolding with people writing their experiences to educate the people about the atrocities of the majority. The clear rejection of the Dalits towards the boundaries pre-defined for them by the upper classes became one of the most prominent forms of Resistance in the history of India.

The Bhat community traditionally, too, has been clubbed as belonging to the lower castes as defined by the *varna* system. As mentioned earlier they were laden with the responsibility of keeping the history and narrate the lives of Kings and rulers be it the Rajputs or the Mughal Emperors. The Bhat community though thought by many to be a dispensable part of the kingdom were in actuality a kind of backbone to the smooth running of the court. The strain of rebel was exhibited by them through their art form of Puppetry. The conscious defying of the pre-established social order is one such aspect that has been carefully treated. One fine example of deliberate defiance and outward resistance by the lower communities is the life of the *Ramnami* community (28 November 2019) members. A staunch yet peaceful form of resistance can be linked back to the *Ramnami* community of Chhattisgarh. The beauty with which the community sets itself apart from the

predesigned and predestined caste culture of India is truly remarkable. The origin of the *Ramnami* community can be traced back to the caste leader Parsu Ram Bhardwaj. In the 1890's when the caste system and untouchability were at its peak Parsu Ram tried to enter the devotional temple of Lord Ram. On being confronted by the other devotees he was prohibited entry into the temple and also forced to draw water from a separate well precisely because of his caste. This sparked in him a seed of rebellious attitude and encouraged him to adopt a peaceful form of resistance. He is formally labelled as the founder of the community with the motive of demoting caste-based discrimination and changing the perspective of people in regards to the members of the lower clans. The idea behind this revolt of Bhardwaj was to highlight the aspect of *Nirguna Ram* according to which God and Ram are omnipresent. A person should be worshipping his deity with a pious mind and complete devotion irrespective of their caste superiority or imposed minority. The members of this remote clan have a unique way of exhibiting their defiance and rejection to societal norms. They are referred by many as the Tattooed Rebel community since the members of this clan get their entire body tattooed with the name of Ram covering roughly every inch of their anatomy, in some cases going as far as tattooing their eyelids too. Some devotees wear shawls printed in the name of Ram to show a direct resistance to the caste order. They make their stance of rejection glaringly pronounced not only through their attire but also with the heavily tattooed body (Ramnami Community of Chhattisgarh).

This form of rebellious act seems to have its origin from the *Satnami* and *Bhakti* movement culture. The people were primarily illiterate but taught themselves how to read *Ramcharitmanas* to be able to exercise religion to educate masses about the atrocity one faces under the umbrella of caste segregation. The art of tattooing adopted by this community is locally known as *Godna*. The clan which started with a strength of more than two lakh members is now left with no more than twenty thousand members (men and women included). Since the *Ramnami* clan has been accounted by the government as Hindus, stating an exact number of their population becomes an uncanny task. According to traditional beliefs the children of this clan when married at the age of eleven or twelve were subjected to the process of *Godna*, an extremely painful ritual done over time. The *Ramnami* community has hence projected a tranquil form of defiance against the upper caste community refusing to accept the dictates of a caste ridden society.

The play serves as the subject of critical observation for this study. The character of Amar Singh has a strain of Rajputana pride and despite his deteriorated status of a *Subedar* of Nagaur, he refuses to bend in front of the emperor, the supreme authority of the state. His refusal to accept the authority of another over him irrespective of his societal status is in a way the cloaked representation of the rebel that was breeding in the minds of the minorities. After being demanded to pay a fine for his uninformed projects his direct tone of Resistance towards the set normative is noteworthy. His sword fighting and horse-riding skills saved him from the Mughal soldiers. The Bhat community holds the play of Amar Singh Rathore very dear with multiple representations of the same. The main character has served to become the mirror self of the Bhat community members who refuse to bend before the state and solely rely on their *Kathputli* performances for their skills. Often their skills are left unrecognised like in the case of Amar Singh whose father failed to acknowledge the valour and zeal of his son towards his kingdom, yet his skills and talents set him apart making him the chieftain and hero of Nagaur. The art of puppetry becomes a medium of blatant rebellion and rejection of what is dictated. The language and dialogues of the puppeteers became a medium to project their

outright refusal to submit to the dominant culture that sets them apart from the ordinary.

9. CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the Discussion section how the politics of the puppet theatre functions through three aspects discussed in the project: language, power reversal and resistance; it is through their puppetry, the Bhats uphold and foreground their political stance challenging and rejecting the hegemony of the dominant upper caste. Puppetry today is becoming an endangered folk art and the puppeteers are finding it difficult to earn their daily bread through their performances. With the advent of electronic means of entertainment, the situation has become worse. These puppet shows have been used by the government to promote public hygiene campaigns in rural areas. These puppeteers perform storylines revolving around social issues such as dowry, child marriage, public defecation etc. to educate the rural masses. Though their stories have evolved over the period of time while emphasising the hardships these puppeteers are facing, they haven't given up the task of educating people through social commentary. They might be selling their puppets to tourists as show pieces but these puppets have become the symbol of their art and captures the essence of the culture of puppet theatre. These puppets are not just mouth pieces of the puppeteer but also their means of resistance and symbols upholding their cultural identity.

A first-hand reflection of the Bhat community comes from the mouth of Ghasi Ram, the 86-year-old patriarch of the Nagauri Bhat family. He describes that though the major themes of these *kathputli* performances in the ancient era would revolve around the feats of Gods, the love of *Shiv* and *Shakti* along with the famous *Shiv Tandav* but the patronage that this art form received from Rajput kings changed the entire course of action for these clan members. From devising their lays on the themes of celestial entities the focus shifted to the valorous war adventures of Rajput kings. Ghasi Ram (21 January 2024) believes that "Though the history of puppetry is traced back to several thousand years, attributed to deities Shiv-Parvati, it is the kings of Rajasthan who have kept it alive" (Deccan Herald). Thus, the entire politics of the Bhats and their practice of puppetry has occupied a central stage in the genre of performative arts. The judicious employment of puppetry as a pedagogical tool to shatter and question the existing caste discrimination is a powerful example for all community members to resist the set normative and adopt a more refined modern holistic approach.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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