

## **Transcription of *Why Puppetry is Always at the Periphery?***

**Music (00:00:00)**

**Kapil (00:00:13)**

Hello, welcome to the podcast, *Why Puppetry is Always at the Periphery*. I am Kapil. I am a theatre practitioner, puppeteer and performance artist. I am also a researcher and I live & work in India. We are going to talk about puppetry. Why puppetry is at the periphery.

So I will be hosting this podcast. This podcast has been commissioned by culture360.ASEF.org, the arts and culture portal of the Asia-Europe Foundation, ASEF, as part of ASEF culture360's Going beyond 'green' open call, exploring and redefining sustainability within the arts and cultural sector.

We are talking to DeboSmita. She is a puppeteer from India. Hi, DeboSmita. Can you introduce yourself?

**Debosmita (00:01:03)**

Hi, Kapil. My name is DeboSmita and I'm a puppeteer, arts educator and facilitator. My work is primarily at the intersection of arts, health and education. And what that looks like is just to give you an idea. I'm a performing arts teacher at a school. At a university, I teach a puppetry elective. At a community library, I work with puppets under a play and arts therapy program. And I just finished work at a cognitive neurology clinic where I worked as a puppeteer for a dementia enrichment programme. And I also make puppet films. So I know that you're going to ask later about career and the viability and livelihood. So here's your answer. It requires me to do all these things.

**Kapil (00:01:56)**

First question, okay?

**Debosmita (00:01:57)**

Yes. Yes.

**Kapil (00:01:58)**

Do you think puppetry is always at the periphery of the art realm?

**Debosmita (00:02:04)**

I don't know if I have if I can answer this as directly as you've put the question. Because one thing is that puppetry is very much at the center of my life and work and play. I'm involved in teaching and learning. And I was wondering about why we would think about, you know, what is periphery, what is center. One of the things I thought about was how puppetry, I see puppetry as very defiant of an easy definition on form. You know it involves much understanding of movement and anatomy, its translation into an extension of the body, understanding of theatre, storytelling, visual art, design, sculpting. Traditionally, there is a context of ritual also. Then it has its application in theatre, entertainment, education, health. Often it's the puppeteer who's able to do all of this the labour isn't so divided. So I wonder that maybe the puppet is always an 'other'. It's definitely an 'other' to the dancer or the actor body. It's an 'other' to the human itself, it's dead material. So I think the puppeteer itself is also in many ways, you know, the 'other' and we know

the human instinct when confronted with you know what's strange and weird we are threatened by it. So I wonder if that's you know, in terms of the form but otherwise periphery could also be that I can very easily Google for a play or a dance performance and find something going on somewhere but a puppet show is not so easy to find. So I think that there is a kind of, one kind of art that's informed by the market you know in the main places like Delhi, Bangalore, you'll see LED boards with names of plays. There's art on these. Huh?

**Kapil (00:04:12)**

Yes, yes, you're right. Even we never find hoarding or poster for puppet festival.

**Debosmita (00:04:17)**

Yeah, yeah, that's that's hard to see. So there is that, so there's a market, right? Like who is paying for these LED billboards? And then there is art that's sort of informed by the people traditions. Like every morning like starting from things like in Bangalore you have women drawing columns Kolams outside houses for all kinds of festivals. We have these handmade bandas you know, so there's that kind of art also. So that's with regards to economics our views on labour, caste and now a global market too. I guess in these ways of course, for these reasons of what is market, what is labour, what is caste I think especially in our context. It's not at the center in those ways.

**Kapil (00:05:07)**

Yes. Okay. Then we go to the second question. So why does puppetry remain at the margins of academic discourse and artistic choice?

**Debosmita (00:05:22)**

I feel, initially when confronted, not confronted. When I introduce myself as a puppeteer, for example, there's often, you know, the picture of, do you do events at birthday parties and weddings? So where is that idea coming from? And sure, I mean, it's not something that I'm opposed to. And in places where the tradition of puppetry is still going strong in the sense that it's been going on for generations, this is where puppetry is performed. You know, in these situations. I wonder there is the idea of who is the audience. Audience to specific forms and if puppetry as a form has traditionally been performed for members of the village and the community itself, then does that qualify as you know, are those people then that have access to academic discourses itself?

**Kapil (00:06 :29)**

For example, when I was writing my dissertation in Masters about puppetry, so there is this thing that I couldn't find any book from Indian writers. I think I only found three books by Indian writers written on puppetry. Otherwise every other book is from a foreign writer. That's why I'm asking this question, why does puppetry remain at the margins of academic discourse? Because there is no academic reading about Indian puppetry. For example, you do therapy with puppets and also work with dementia. So in India, this is very new. For example, how many people are actually using this puppet for medicinal use or anything else?

**Debosmita (00:07:24)**

Yes, yes.

**Kapil (00:07:26)**

Or mental and psychological therapy. So when we look at Britain or any other European country or even US, they are using the puppets in hospitals.

**Debosmita (00:07:41)**

Yes.

**Kapil(00:07:43)**

Yes. So that's a one thing that's why I'm talking there are so many readings about academic discourse.

**Debosmita (00:07:51)**

Yes, there's not enough. But you know, this is something I learned in conversation with Gunduraju ji, who is I think 10th generation shadow puppeteer from Hassan, Karnataka. And he. One of and when in the few conversations we've had about puppetry, he has mentioned an example of how when you know how as a traditional puppeteer, they travel from village to village performing. And one of the many things that people come up to them with, okay, tell us this story, what's happening in that village. They also come up with my child is really sick. So there is this situation where they place this leather puppet on a cot and the ill person is I think asked to lie down, underneath it. I'm explaining it in a very crude way, I think. But I would say that there is certainly an element of some sort of healing involved there. But you're right, there isn't. I'm not even I'm doing a really bad job of explaining it because it's something I've heard in one conversation. But you're right, there isn't anything about it.

**Kapil (00:09:04)**

I understood because in traditional puppetry, there is a use of puppet in therapy and... medicinal use.

**Debosmita(00:09:13)**

Yeah, but I think those puppeteers aren't writing or they're not. They're coming from oral traditions, right?

**Kapil (00:09:21)**

Yes, yes.

**Debosmita (00:09:22)**

I don't think they're writing and I certainly don't think they're writing in what is considered academic language certainly. So I think the question is what does academic discourse? What are its parameters? What qualifies as academic discourse? What does it filter out?

**Kapil (00:09:42)**

Yeah. Yes, you're right. And what about artistic choice? Why don't people choose puppetry as a career?

**Debosmita(00:09:53)**

Like I said, there are so many components to it, right? Like I was saying that it's not just, it's not easily defined as is it visual art practice, is it theatre and movement practice, is it simply working with materials practice? It's all of these things and simply with just one aspect.

**Kapil(00:10:18)**

So you have to hone many art skills.

**Debosmita (00:10:21)**

I think that that may be one reason also the other, is do you perform at weddings or exclusively for children like at events, parties.

**Kapil (00:10:32)**

It's not very respectful. People are not very respectful also.

**Debosmita (00:10:36)**

That's yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That also yeah. It's not like a classical art form, certainly not on that level.

**Kapil (00:10:44)**

It is, for India it is. India is one of the origin place for puppetry.

**Debosmita (00:10:49)**

Yeah. But in traditions of, when you ask people about classical forms of you know, performing arts.

**Kapil(00:10:55)**

People don't talk about it. People don't talk about it.

**Debosmita (00:10:57)**

People don't talk about it. There's also that know, if we say like about teachers, how do you learn to do this? If you had someone in your family, that would probably be so much easier. But if you don't.

**Kapil (00:11:13)**

Yes, yes that Indian traditional puppeteer don't give, don't teach their art form outside of their family.

**Debosmita (00:11:22)**

Yeah, yeah. So how does one even access this if you want to learn? You can. I find it a lot more accessible than other forms of performing arts. I think people in my experience have been a lot more generous.

**Kapil (00:11:36)**

There is not even a single school that teaches puppetry or.

**Debosmita (00:11:40)**

Exclusively

**Kapil (00:11:41)**

Or college or...

**Debosmita(00:11:42)**

Yeah. Well, I am offering an elective at one university. So... Yeah, yeah.

**Kapil(00:11:47)**

You are doing just now, it's 2024

**Debosmita(00:11:49)**

Yeah. 2024.

**Kapil (00:11:54)**

When I started Puppetry, I was looking for any... Bachelors or Masters but.

**Debosmita (00:11:59)**

No chance. They only include it as traditional forms of communication in mass media. I think there's one small module.

**Kapil(00:12:09)**

Yes

**Debosmita(00:12:10)**

So how to make artistic choice when there is, yeah it's not informed. Where do you learn from?

**Kapil (00:12:17)**

Now third question. Okay?

**Debosmita(00:12:20)**

Okay.

**Kapil(00:12:21)**

How viable is puppetry as an artistic career?

**Debosmita(00:12:26)**

Again, I will go back to the fact that puppetry allows, like there are so many entry points into this, from starting from movement to sculpture to visual theatre. In my case, I had to learn parts of all of it. So, and then I also had the privilege of having support of my family, like I could support, like I was supported by my family, at least financially for me to be able to work and learn and figure these things out. So it's only happened, it's hard. Of course it's difficult. But and then I told you what the list of my work day, like work looks like. It's really five things at five different places in a week that has. You know, barely seven days.

**Kapil(00:13:30)**

Okay, The other one, how do we sustain it as an art form? Especially, if its roots are more traditional.

**Debosmita (00:13:42)**

I mean, to this last part Kapil, I feel like, especially in the context of my practice, if I make, I make puppet stop motion animation puppet films. Okay. And the technology is not so different from what Lotte Reiniger (German Film director) made in 1926, the first animated film.

**Kapil (00:13:59)**

Yes, yes, yes.

**Debosmita (00:14:00)**

So I think it's very much in conversation with how things have been and tradition now informs my like, I need to know what has been done to continue doing it or to build on it. So it seems quite in conversation with what has happened has to be.

**Kapil (00:14:18)**

Yes, yes, Thank you for answering these questions. Thank you for agreeing for the interview. This interview.

**Debosmita (00:14:24)**

Yes. Thank you for asking these questions and I'm really glad that yeah it was such a nice chat unexpected chat.

**Kapil (00:14:36)**

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Thank you culture360.asef.org for their support. Thank you all for listening to this podcast.

**Music(00:15:02) – Music ends(00:15:15)**