

1. Kathputli- Art & Culture

In Frames- Kathputli — pulling strings in Jaipur's puppet colony. Centuries-old Kathputli puppetry, characterized by legless wooden dolls manipulated via simple string loops, continues to be preserved by hereditary families in Jaipur. This tradition is part of India's diverse puppetry heritage—comprising String, Shadow, Rod, and Glove forms—historically rooted in texts like the *Natyashastra* and *Silappadikaram*.

The Living Tradition of Kathputli

Current Status- In Kathputli Nagar, Jaipur, approximately 250 hereditary families are actively preserving the ancient art of Kathputli puppetry.

Cultural Significance- These families sustain Rajasthan's rich folk culture despite the challenges of rapid urbanisation and stiff competition from modern digital entertainment formats.

Overview of Puppetry in India

1. Definition and Essence

Puppetry is celebrated as one of India's most ancient forms of storytelling. It is a composite art form that seamlessly integrates multiple artistic disciplines, including painting, sculpture, music, and drama.

2. Historical Evolution

Origins- The art form is believed to be over 1,000 years old.

Patronage- Traditionally performed by travelling communities known as Bhats and Nats. They served as entertainers and educators in village fairs, royal courts, and festivals.

Archaeological Evidence- Excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro have unearthed terracotta figurines featuring sockets and movable limbs, suggesting an early precursor to puppetry.

3. Literary References

Silappadikaram- This Tamil epic (dating back to the 1st–2nd century BC) contains some of the earliest written references to the craft.

Natyashastra- The foundational text of Indian performing arts refers to the Sutracharya (literally meaning "the holder of strings"). This highlights the deep influence puppetry had on the development of classical theatre in India.

Deep Dive- Kathputli – The String Puppets of Rajasthan

1. Etymology and Geography

Name Origin- The term *Kathputli* is a blend of two words- 'Kath' (wood) and 'Putli' (doll).

Geographic Hubs- While the art is practiced across districts like Nagaur, Churu, and Sikar, Kathputli Nagar in Jaipur stands as its largest living hub today.

2. Anatomy and Design

Construction- The puppets are carved from a single piece of wood.

Facial Features- They typically feature oval faces, large expressive eyes, and arched eyebrows.

The "No-Leg" Rule- A distinctive feature of Kathputlis is the absence of legs. They are dressed in long trailing skirts, which creates a unique, fluid, floating movement during the performance.

3. Manipulation Technique

Mechanism- Unlike many other string puppets that use complex wooden cross-bars (propellers) for control, Kathputlis are manipulated using a simple string loop.

Technique- This loop is wrapped directly around the puppeteer's fingers, requiring immense dexterity to animate the dolls.

4. The Performance Elements

Voice (The Boli)- The puppeteer uses a specialized bamboo-and-rubber whistle known as a 'Boli' to produce a shrill, high-pitched, and stylized voice for the characters.

Musical Score- The rhythm and narrative are supported by traditional instruments like the Dholak (drum) and Harmonium.

Themes

Traditional- Stories focusing on the chivalry and valour of Rajput heroes, most notably Amar Singh Rathore.

Modern- Contemporary scripts often include social satire and moral tales to educate the audience.

Comparative Taxonomy- Puppetry Traditions Across India

The following table categorizes Indian puppetry based on the method of manipulation and regional variations.

Category	Type / Mechanism	Regional Forms & States
String Puppets	Marionettes Controlled by strings attached to the limbs.	Kathputli (Rajasthan) Kundhei (Odisha) Gombeyatta (Karnataka) Bommalattam (Tamil Nadu – <i>Note- Uses both string and rod</i>)
Shadow Puppets	Leather Cut-outs Flat figures pressed against a screen with light behind them.	Tholu Bommalata (Andhra Pradesh – <i>Colored, large</i>) Togalu Gombeyatta (Karnataka) Ravanachhaya (Odisha – <i>Opaque, no joints</i>)
Rod Puppets	Supported from Below Manipulated by rods or sticks from below.	Putul Nautch (West Bengal) Yampuri (Bihar – <i>Made of a single piece of wood</i>) Orissa Rod Puppets (Odisha)
Glove Puppets	Hand/Palm Puppets Worn on the hand like a glove.	Pavakoothu (Kerala – <i>Kathakali style</i>) Gulabo-Sitabo (Uttar Pradesh) Sakhi Kundhei (Odisha)

Unique Regional Characteristics

Bommalattam (Tamil Nadu)

1. These are the largest and heaviest puppets found in India.
2. Unique Manipulation- They are controlled using a heavy iron ring worn by the puppeteer on their head like a crown, with strings attached to it.

Ravanachhaya (Odisha)

1. Material- Made from deer skin.
2. Visual Style- The puppets have no joints and are not colored, creating opaque, bold black shadows on the screen.

Togalu Gombeyatta (Karnataka)

Social Hierarchy- The size of the puppet is determined by the character's social status; for example, puppets representing Kings are significantly larger than those representing commoners or soldiers.

Pavakoothu (Kerala)

Aesthetic Influence- This glove puppetry form is heavily influenced by the classical dance-drama Kathakali, clearly visible in the puppets' elaborate headgear, costumes, and facial paint.

Source- <https://www.thehindu.com/photos/in-frames-kathputli-pulling-strings-in-jaipurs-puppet-colony/article70496889.ece>