

Nandini Rastogi, XII D &
Ruqayya Rahman, IX B
AIS Mayur Vihar

Disappearing strings

Delhi's Puppeteers - From The Global Stage To Silence



In the heart of Delhi once thrived Kathputli Colony — a living museum of India's folk heritage. Home to generations of puppeteers, magicians, musicians and craftsmen, it was a world where art wasn't just livelihood, it was legacy. Today, the echoes of that vibrant past struggle to be heard as the artists await a place — and a future — they can call their own.

Of legacy that lives

"We've lived here for hundreds of years," says Harish Bhatt, a puppet maker whose family has called Kathputli Colony home for as long as memory stretches. "My father used to make them, so I learnt it from him."

In the same narrow lanes lives Pappu Keshav, a puppeteer with a legacy just as deep. "My forefathers performed in royal courts," he recalls. "They travelled across villages, performing their puppet shows. This tradition has run from generation to generation." Here, art isn't just livelihood — it's lineage. Each family, each home, is a story carved by hand, passed down through centuries.



Pics: Roudrodeep Chowdhury, AIS MV, X C

Of art once celebrated

The puppets of Kathputli Colony are more than wooden figurines — they are echoes of a celebrated tradition. Bhatt points to a puppet with pride. "You can see this 8-inch piece," he says, "but I make 12-foot elephants too. You must have seen them in Pragati Maidan or Dilli Haat. We make all of them by hand."

There was a time when Kathputli Colony's artists took the folk cul-

ture of India all around the world. "I went to Washington, America, in 1985," Bhatt recalls proudly. Keshav, too, carries memories of global applause. "I have performed in Holland, Thailand, Hong Kong, Dubai, and Norway," he says. "We represented India at world stages and brought glory to our country's name."

Of glory that's lost

But the applause has faded. "Work

has stopped," Keshav says. "There are no opportunities. Earlier, we used to perform in schools, but that has ended now. Our daily earnings have diminished, and with no government support, it is difficult to survive." Bhatt nods to a similar truth. "Maybe people no longer value handmade craft," he says softly. The younger generation, too, drifts away from their ancestral strings. "The children play drums and guitars," Bhatt explains. "I tell them they should learn this skill too. But they are more interested in other things."

Of a home that was

Amongst several reasons that can be attributed to this fading glory is the relocation of Kathputli Colony, which is currently in transit. Once alive with rhythm and colour, the colony in Shadipur was home to nearly 3,000 families of performers and craftsmen. But today, its artists live in transition — displaced by a redevelopment project. "When we were in Shad-

ipur Depot, people would approach us for shows," Bhatt says. "Now, work has stopped because no one knows where to find us."

Of people that dream

Today, Kathputli Colony's artists stand at a crossroads of survival and silence. Their dream is simple — a place to work, a home, and to be seen. "I want to find a nice shop in the market where I can sell my products," Bhatt says. "Because we don't have those means, the value of our art is dwindling." Keshav adds, "We've made India proud internationally — is it too much to ask to live with dignity?" Harish Bhatt's words linger like a song's last note: "I want to take this art forward, so future generations also get to know about it." The puppets hang still, their painted eyes reflecting a glorious past — and a flickering hope that the world will once again see their strings not as relics, but as roots of India's living heritage.

Pics: Roudrodeep Chowdhury, AIS MV, X C



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