

CHHAYA PUTUL

An exhibition of Shadow Puppets

2nd Feb.1994 - 13th Mar.1994

Matighar, IGNC



The Centre has been involved in exploring the possibilities of enlarging the repertoire of the traditional forms of puppetry known to India. It has also been in active dialogue with Indonesia and has invited the great puppeteers of Indonesia to hold a workshop. An exhibition of 'Shadow Puppets' Chaya Putul, an art popular in all parts of the world, was held in 1994.



The origin of shadow puppetry can be traced back to the distant past when man became fascinated with his own shadow. His experimentations with the idea of how to manipulate the shadow may have led to the birth of shadow puppets and shadow theatre. This form of art, with the passage of time became popular all over the world and each country evolved its own singular style.



To provide a glimpse into the global tradition of shadow puppetry, IGNC had organised an exhibition titled 'Chhaya Putul' in collaboration with Musee Kwok on the Paris which lent puppets of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Turkey, Greece and China, and Sangeet Natak Akademi which provided Indian puppets from its archives.



The exhibition was divided into five main sections. The first section highlighted the classical Indian puppetry - *Togalugombatta* (Karnataka), *Tolubommalattam* (Andhra Pradesh), *Talpavakoothu* (Kerala), and *Ravan Chhaya* (Orissa). Though the themes pertain to the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, each of these puppet traditions evolved its own style, derived from an indigenous cultural milieu and artistic tradition.

In the next section the shadow puppets of Indonesia and Malaysia, Cambodia and Thailand revolve round the same theme of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* but the intricate forms and features of each country stand out prominently. The puppets of Turkey and Greece have very distinctive form and theme. The chief protagonist of this section is *Karagoz* (called *Karagiosis* in Greek). Coming to China one can see a rich tradition of shadow puppetry. The stories are often from opera with moral messages but they ventilate modern viewpoints as well. The fine artistry of each puppet makes them singularly interesting as a work of art. While the north-eastern puppets are made of donkey skin, the north-western ones are seen to be crafted out of ox-skin.



The IGNCA in its endeavour of trying to understand the totality of this art form as a powerful communication mode, is trying to rejuvenate this traditional art form. The attempt is to broaden the repertoire of the puppeteers by incorporating contemporary themes of epic proportions like life of Gandhi, thereby keeping it alive for posterity.



The exhibition venture evoked a great deal of interest from discerning art-critics, media and public alike. Children from many schools across the city visited the exhibition. It was widely covered by many major national and regional newspapers. An extract of a review goes like this:



"Last week IGNCA threw open yet another exhibition in Mati Ghar. This time the focus is on shadow puppets or *Chhaya Putul*...

In India, a screen is tied, behind which the show is staged. Lamps are lit and against the light of which puppets dance to the *sutradhar's* commands on bamboo sticks attached to their backs.



Some theatres make every part movable and some others have only the main body movable.

The lower portion of the screen black representing pathal (hell) and the upper white portion represents the heavens. There is further symbolism in the very roots of the words putul (derived from Sanskrit putra) and puppet (from Italian pupa), not to talk of the sutradhar (the one who holds the strings) or the Great Puppeteer -- All the world's a stage?"

-- Shobhana Radhakrishna