



Kathputli Performance & Folk Narrative

of

Amar Singh Rathore

The Hero of Honour and Valour

Abstract

Among the many cultural traditions of Rajasthan, folk art and folk theatre occupy a distinctive and celebrated place. One such vibrant tradition is *Kathputli kā Khel*, the art of string puppetry performed primarily by the Bhāt community. For generations, the Bhāts have served not only as entertainers but also as preservers of oral literature and history. Through their performances, they have narrated tales of kings, warriors, heroic battles, mythical figures and social life, thereby keeping regional memory and cultural traditions alive. Through their remarkable skill and expressive storytelling in puppetry, the Bhāts transform folklore into a living and engaging theatrical experience.

The art form of puppetry possesses a unique ability to capture immediate attention and establish a powerful connection with its audience. The rhythmic movement of the puppets, accompanied by music, narration and dialogue, creates an immersive atmosphere that encourages viewers to reflect upon the deeper meanings hidden within the performance. Folklore itself carries immense aesthetic, historical and traditional value for every region, and the Kathputli tradition beautifully embodies this cultural wealth through narratives that range from mythical celestial heroes to stories of kings and their kingdoms.

The fascination with the art of string puppetry also emerges from the extraordinary manner in which the Bhāt community has utilised this medium as a form of subtle social commentary. Through humour, satire, symbolism and performance, the Bhāts have often questioned dominant social structures and challenged rigid hierarchies of caste and class. Their performances demonstrate how folk traditions can become spaces for resistance, negotiation and cultural expression while remaining deeply rooted in entertainment and storytelling.

Through this puppet show, the Cultural Archives of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts attempts to explore the politicised dimensions of Kathputli puppetry and highlight how the tradition functions not merely as a form of folk entertainment, but also as a cultural instrument that questions and destabilises hegemonic social constructions. By presenting the narrative strategies and performative methods embedded within this tradition, the programme seeks to create a deeper understanding of the relationship between folk art, power and social consciousness within the larger framework of Indian cultural history.

Story Synopsis

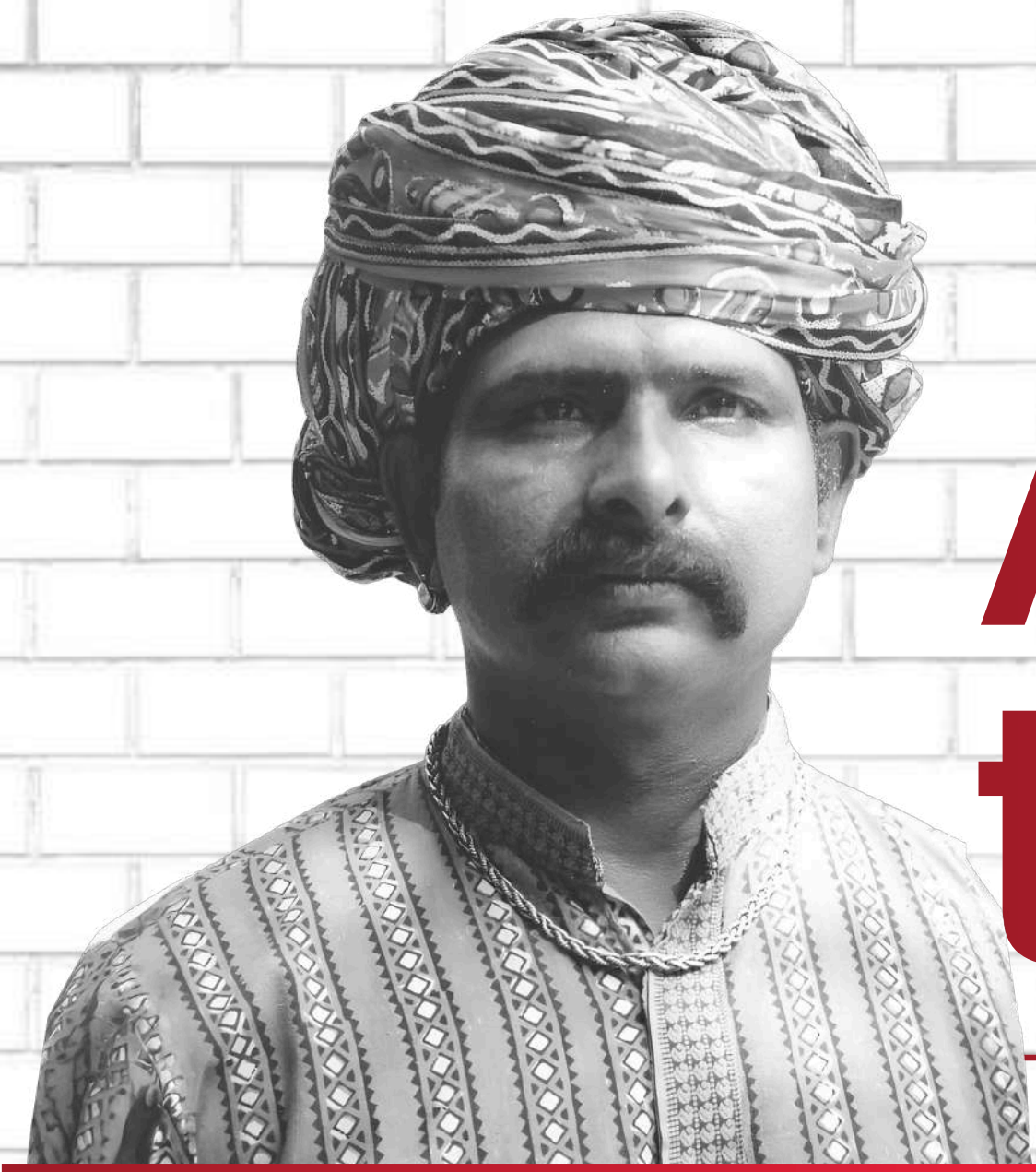
The legendary saga of Amar Singh Rathore has echoed for centuries across the deserts, royal courts and folk traditions of Rajasthan. Preserved by the traditional Bhā community through Kathputlī string puppetry, oral storytelling, folk songs and dramatic narration, this celebrated folk epic continues to represent the ideals of courage, loyalty, honour and sacrifice. Through the vibrant medium of Kathputlī puppet theatre, the performance invites audiences into a world of heroic battles, royal intrigue, music, humour and tragedy while celebrating one of Rajasthan's most enduring oral traditions.

Set within the historical landscape of seventeenth-century Rajasthan and the Mughal Empire, the story follows Amar Singh Rathore, the eldest son of Gaj Singh Rathore, the ruler of Mewar. Recognised for his bravery, military skill and strong sense of justice, Amar Singh accompanied his father in numerous battles, securing victories, forging alliances and protecting the kingdom from its enemies. Despite his achievements and rightful claim to succession, his father declared his younger brother Jaswant Singh as the heir to the throne, disinheriting Amar Singh and depriving him of his royal inheritance. Deeply wounded by this betrayal, Amar Singh left his homeland and eventually entered the service of the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan.

Amar Singh Rathore was later appointed as the Subedar of Nagaur, a region directly under Mughal administration. His extraordinary courage, leadership and loyalty soon earned him the title of Rao in the Mughal court, and he eventually rose to command a Mansab in the imperial army. Through his exceptional military abilities and successful campaigns, Amar Singh gained immense admiration from the Mughal Emperor and widespread fame among the people. However, his growing influence and close association with the Mughal ruler also created resentment among several courtiers who were angered by the prominence and honour bestowed upon a Hindu Rajput warrior within the Mughal court.

Drawing upon different episodes and defining moments from the life of Amar Singh Rathore, the puppet performance interprets one of the most celebrated narratives of the folk epic, Amar Singh Rathore's victorious conquest of the Gwalior Fort. Returning triumphantly from the battlefield, Amar Singh is welcomed with splendour and festivity in the royal palace alongside his wife Hadi Rani. To honour the occasion, the king summons performers, musicians and artists from distant lands and announces a grand reward for the finest performance. What follows is a lively sequence of folk entertainment, music, humour and theatrical spectacle, recreating the atmosphere of celebration and festivity that forms an important part of the traditional Kathputlī performance tradition.

As the narrative unfolds, the audience witnesses not only scenes of celebration and entertainment but also the growing tensions within the royal court. Amar Singh Rathore's rising fame gradually turns allies into enemies, eventually leading to betrayal and conspiracy. In the climactic moments of the story, the heroic warrior becomes the victim of treachery orchestrated by the cunning courtier Salawat Khan along with his own brother-in-law Arjun Gaur. His tragic death transforms him into a symbol of resistance, honour and martyrdom whose memory continues to live within the cultural imagination of Rajasthan.



About the Artist

Puran Bhat is one of India's most celebrated Kathputli kalākāras and a distinguished exponent of Rajasthan's traditional string puppetry heritage. Born on 15 December 1952 in Delhi into the hereditary **Bhāt** community of puppeteers, he inherited the centuries-old tradition of **Kathputli** from his father, Late Shri Malu Ram Bhat. From childhood, he travelled extensively with his family troupe across northern India and Nepal, learning the intricate traditions of puppet carving, manipulation, storytelling, music, singing and performance through the **guru-śisya paramparā** of oral transmission.

Growing within this vibrant folk tradition, Bhat expanded his artistic vocabulary by engaging with both traditional and contemporary theatre practices. His expertise covers traditional and modern puppetry, acting, dance, music and stage production. Over the years, he collaborated with several eminent cultural institutions and organisations including the National School of Drama Repertory, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Doordarshan, Akashvani, NCERT, Bal Bhavan, Song and Drama Division, Ishara Puppet Theatre and other national theatre groups. In 1991, he established **Aakaar Puppet Theatre** at Delhi's historic Kathputli Colony, creating an innovative platform that preserved traditional Rajasthani puppetry while introducing new theatrical approaches through productions such as *Carvaan*, *Dhola Maru* and *Amar Singh Rathor*.

As a cultural ambassador of Indian folk traditions, Puran Bhat has represented India at numerous international festivals including the Aditi Exhibition in Washington D.C. (USA), International Puppet Festival in Tehran (Iran), Hong Kong Festival, UNIMA Puppet Festival in Osaka (Japan), La Route Gypsy Festival (France), festivals in Greece, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Dubai and the Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes, Charleville-Mézières, France.

For his outstanding contribution to Indian puppetry, he received the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 2003, presented by Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. His other honours include awards at the Titirimundi Puppet Festival, Spain (2004, 2005), Rafi Peer Puppet Festival, Pakistan (2008) and recognition at various international platforms. Through performances, workshops and masterclasses worldwide, Puran Bhat continues to preserve and promote **Kathputli** as a living intangible cultural heritage.

Event Details

Date: 8th & 9th June 2026

Time: 5:00 PM - 5:30 PM

Venue: Samvet Auditorium, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts
Janpath Building (Near Western Court), Janpath, New Delhi – 110001