



A PUPPET'S TALE: Making a positive impression with Kaktarua

Growing up, most children develop a certain fondness towards fictional characters. Cartoons, puppets or comics — they serve the same purpose. To entertain, to teach, and to play a vital role in the psychological development of the children. Presently, puppets may not be as popular as they used to be. And puppet shows are a dying art to some extent. Standing against such challenging odds, 'Kaktarua Puppet Theater' is doing some commendable work.

What is Kaktarua?

A kaktarua or scarecrow is an effigy created in human form made out of hay or straw, dressed in old clothes, and often a hat. A scarecrow is erected in order to scare away birds from a farmland and to protect crops.

"Similarly, Kaktarua Puppet Theater aims to work by driving away all the negatives and superstitions from society. Hence, the symbolic name," said Asaduzzaman Ashik, the founder who started working with puppets in 2016, but it wasn't until 2019 that he established the theatre.

The Puppets

There are at least 30 different puppet characters that are used in different shows. Some of these are original characters, created by the members of the theatre. Some of them are based on mythical stories and used to recreate those tales. Others are based on the stories from the Bangla book of primary school, created in order to play out the stories from the books, so the children can learn by watching the puppet shows.

"It's one thing to just read. But if you can integrate the lesson in a show, children love



that, and this can be a way of teaching. Apu and Dipu'r Golpo is one of our most popular shows, and it teaches children about the demerits of fighting and quarrelling," said Ashik after one of his shows where his team had just performed.

The team is ten members strong, with MD Aminul Islam Rasel making most of the puppets. The puppet and sound designs are done by Pronoy Sarker. The rest of the members work together to bring a show to reality.

The puppet designs are sometimes inspired by the stories. Sometimes they are created based on the need of the story and show, and sometimes the team members just brainstorm and create a new look.



Puppets for Palliative care and teaching

"The reason I am still working with puppets is to bring joy to the children. I have had a few shows at CRP, NICRH, and Dhaka Medical College. There were these children who were in so much pain and suffering. And I made them smile for a little while. By the end of the show, they wanted to shake hands with the puppets. This little girl, who



had a cannula in her hand, reached out to me. And that is the moment that stuck with me," recalled Ashik when asked what his greatest achievement with the puppets was.

"A lot of people are not aware of this, but puppets can be used as a palliative care and a tool to teach children. Their responses are amazing, and with more efforts into puppets, a lot more can be done for the children. Everyone is so engrossed in screens these days. We can use puppets to entertain them in a different way that is not confined to a screen," observed Ashik, pointing out that, as rewarding as the response is, the funding is very limited. The theatre can barely finance itself.

Taking this as a full-time job would be next to impossible. With the rent for the studio, the expenses that go into the creation and maintenance of the puppets and the expenses of travel and others, it makes it a very difficult job to carry on, but Ashik has not given up.

Impression

As observed during a live show, young children are not only fond of but also interactive with puppets. And throughout the lesson delivered by the show, they remained interactive. This is a credit to the puppeteers as well as the fact that puppets are interesting to children. These shows can be a teaching mechanism, especially for children with special needs.

With positive response from the children during different shows as well as organisations who work with children, Ashik and his team can see the potential for more elaborate shows and says he is just a phone call away for those who are interested in working with puppets or puppet shows.

Nineties children grew up with puppets, and now those are little more than nostalgic elements. Similarly, bioscopes have gone extinct too.

Kaktarua Puppet Theater has revived both of these things and is working to not only popularise them but also use them as teaching mediums. This deserves recognition and perhaps some attention from people so they can carry on the show. Because the show must go on.

By Ashif Ahmed Rudro
Photo: Kaktarua Puppet Theater