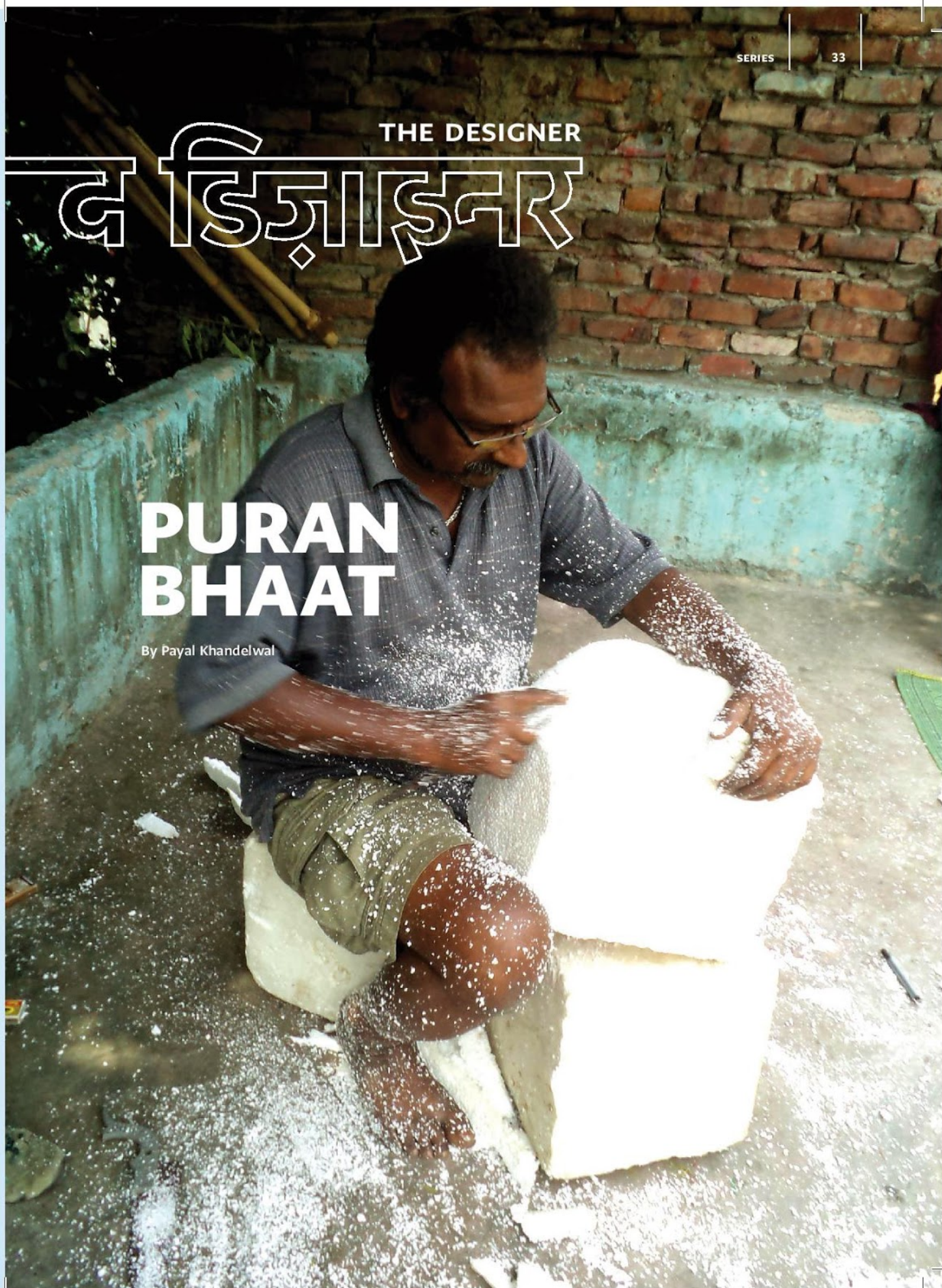


THE DESIGNER

द डिज़ाइनर

**PURAN
BHAAT**

By Payal Khandelwal





The crumbs of gleaming white thermocol look like snow on the reasonably sized terrace of puppeteer Puran Bhaat's home at Kathputli Colony, Delhi. These tiny flecks playfully stick to his hands and legs while he continues to shape the nose and eyes of the new "contemporary" mask he is making for a company called Hare Krishna.

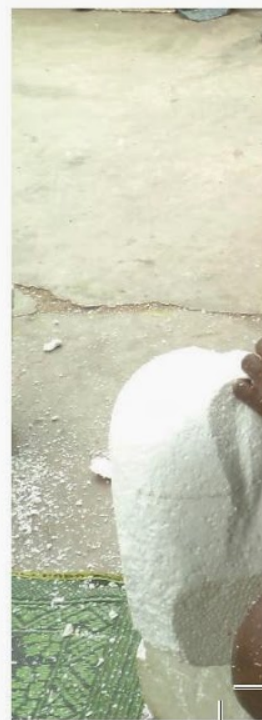
He sits on a makeshift stool made of thermocol, which will later be used for another mask, and remains diligently submerged in what he is doing while talking about the contemporary and traditional puppets. For traditional puppets, the face is made of wood and the body is made of cotton with a dressing on top of it. Their look and feel has remained same over the years and you can't change that, he says. Contemporary/modern puppets can be made of various material including thermocol (the easiest material to work with), iron, papier mâché, etc. depending on the requirement of the play or production for which it is needed.

Bhaat has learnt both the forms but while the art of making traditional puppets is genetically bestowed upon him, he learnt the contemporary formally at Sri Ram Centre at Mandi House, Delhi in 1982 from the legendary puppeteer Dadi Pudumjee. He says that while traditional puppets have their limitations, there is something new to be found every time

there is a show. "Not everyone can understand its power but it looks like magic when you see it. Its energy is completely different." However, he says, with contemporary you could play a lot more with size, light, sound, effect, script and imagination.

Though traditional is considered to be a bit limited in scope as compared to contemporary, things are changing for it now. Bhaat himself does a lot of innovation by introducing elements of contemporary in traditional puppetry. "Earlier for a traditional puppet show, there used to be a stage of 10 by 6 with a curtain where the puppeteer could not be seen at all, like cinema. But now the puppeteers are also on stage so you can see both of them together and also the relationship between them. You can even see how the manipulations are done and how life is infused into the puppets by the puppeteer." Bhaat believes that when the focus needs to be on the puppet even while the puppeteer is on the stage, the puppeteer should put all his energy and thinking into the puppet so that he dies and the puppet lives.

His personal favorite show is his show called Dholamaru which he recently performed in Kolkata on the World Puppet Day. It's a Rajasthani folk tale, a triangle love story. "This is for the first time that traditional puppets have been given a theatre image. In this show, I have expressed emotions through puppets. Usually, traditional puppets only dance on rhythms, and not express emotions."



“See, if the youth was not interested, we would not have been able to keep the puppet tradition alive till now. And to keep the puppets alive, we don’t need anyone including the government. We only need puppeteers’ strength.”

When we ask Bhaat about the genesis of puppetry in India, he says that nobody really knows the exact origin till now and so far the story only goes back till the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan’s time. “Puppetry originated from Nagaur (Rajasthan). Amar Singh Rathore was an extremely brave soldier in Shah Jahan’s army and was ultimately killed on the orders of Shah Jahan over flouting his orders. The story of Rathore’s will and bravery is told through many folk tales in Rajasthan and this is where we remember puppetry to have started.” Bhaat philosophically adds that while various forms of puppetry derive their full names from

the material, for example Kathputli is made from *kath* (wood) and *putli* (doll). Similarly, Dastanaputli comes from *dastana* (gloves) and *putli*. “So what remains common and constant is the *putli*. And *putli* is not just the doll, it is actually the black dot inside the human eye. So I feel that puppetry has been around since the time mankind was born.”

Like many other traditional art forms of India, puppetry is also being nominated as a dying art form. But Bhaat begs to differ. “The art never dies but the audience does.” He says that it’s a myth that the youth is not interested in this age old art form as most children in the puppeteers’ families in Kathputli Colony exemplify this. He has given freedom to his own children to do what they want but they have all chosen puppetry. “See if they were not interested, we would not have been able to keep the puppet tradition alive till now. And to keep the puppets alive, we don’t need anyone including the government. We only need puppeteers’ strength,” he declares proudly.

He accepts that the puppeteers today need more marketing to be able to sell their art to the world but Bhaat jokingly says that everyone today needs to market themselves including Amitabh Bachchan. “The problem is not with the art. Art is the same but the audience has changed the rules and that’s why folk art is suffering. So the audiences for some of the folk art are already dead and some are on the verge of disappearing. They are running towards western art forms.” He feels that it’s also important to realize that a lot of contemporary art forms have emerged from the traditional art forms.





Kathputli Colony has obviously been in the spotlight recently because of its feud with DDA (Delhi Development Authority) who have offered to dislocate the families of puppeteers, artists, sculptors, magicians, snake charmers, musicians and dancers living in Kathputli for generations and “relocate” them first to a transit camp and then to buildings with urban 1 BHK flats. We have covered this extensively on *kyoorius.com* in a story titled ‘Poornima Sardana: The woman behind Friends of Kathputli Colony Delhi’. Sardana is a designer who has started this initiative called ‘Friends of Kathputli Colony’ to connect people from various backgrounds to the people in the colony. The article incidentally also talks about Jagdish Bhatt Dalmia, who is Bhaat’s brother and stays next door to him. And both their families are in the business of puppetry. In that story, Titu, Dalmia’s son, had mentioned Bhaat saying that, “Our terraces are connected so we can jump



over whenever we want. Our entire family is in this business and we have to stay together. We have so much space here to keep all our props, drums, materials etc.; how will we get this space in a flat?”

Bhaat feels that instead of offering impractical urban flats to the artists of Kathputli Colony, the government could look at a redesign where people could come and look at each artist community in the colony and understand their art and lifestyle. The government could also look at providing more platforms where these artists could perform. “What do performers need for work? A platform. If the government sanctions some areas where our artists could go and perform, there will be shows from the morning till evening in the whole of India. Once our work increases, our houses will get made on their own.” And Bhaat cleverly hints that if these artists make money, especially by going out of the country to perform, it will ultimately benefit the government. “But if you really want to change our lifestyle by giving us a flat, then give us a boring 9 to 5 job also. That’s the life of a person living in a flat. What we do cannot be done in a flat,” he declares.

And at this point he shouts at his son Abhijeet Bhaat who has started cutting the thermocol from the back instead of the front. Bhaat tells him that he needs to keep the back flat and firm till he has carved the features on the front. His son nods in agreement and the work goes on at the thermocol speckled terrace at Kathputli Colony.

