

Threads of Life: A Glimpse of Shattered Dreams

- Ananya

“Seven threads”, Baghwan Das Ji mentions, “is enough to make kathputli move in any desired way”.

I have always wondered what stories would lead to the creation of kathputli and how close to God an artist is by exercising the same control of the divine creator. Built in the late eighteenth century as makeshift tents in an open field on the outskirts of Delhi, the Kathputli colony was a cultural hub, bringing in individual artists and communities from all corners of the country. A settlement of street performers included puppeteers, musicians, percussion players like dhol and Tasha and traditional Rajasthani dance like Kachchi ghodi (dancing horse), with fluid and porous boundaries celebrated and preserved hereditary artforms. Overstepping the caste and geographical dimensions, the Kathputli colony over the years took shape as the largest slum near Shahdipur Depot and the only place where artists from almost 14 states and belonging to diverse communities could move closer towards the artist's imagined creative utopia. They travelled the world by upholding their ancestral art, and they redefined India through those seven threads, hues of dedication and dream of a better tomorrow.

But this thriving cluster of art was soon subjected to Delhi Development Authority's (DDA) first In-situ slum rehabilitation project (2008). Articulated on similar grounds as the Mumbai Rehabilitation Project, the project was first in terms of the Public-Private Partnership slum rehabilitation model in Delhi. It was based on the idea that the artist community is under grave threat of losing out on all possible sources of livelihood and that the rehabilitation project would be pivotal in ensuring better and financially secured present and future conditions. It took the shape of Master Plan 2021, promising the residents that finally they have witnessed the 'The light of Day' and will be provided with clean and well-planned units equipped with adequate social infrastructure accessible for all the residents. It was further claimed that residents would have access to 12- storeyed buildings in which the ground floor would include facilities that would ensure the promotion of artistic and commercial enterprise.

Conceptualization was soon followed by practical action from the authority. After a year-long dispute, in 2017, the authorities 'successfully' demolished the kathputli colony. The land was provided to Raheja Developers to fulfil the ambition of building 'Raheja Phoenix', Delhi's first skyscraper and luxury apartments with facilities including a helipad and swimming pool. As for the residents, no attempts were made to inform and involve them during the project's planning or during or post demolition. All strings cut in one go, to leave them in a situation where no demands could be raised, simply accepting and moving the way the master demands.



Receiving a call from my friend, who always finds ways to give me new questions, asked me to accompany him on one of his projects. Unaware of the prior developments, we ventured into Anandparbat, where around 2000 families were reportedly rehabilitated with an expected stay of 2 years until they return to their 'promised land. With the dream of exploring 'Delhi Dharavi,' I envisaged colourful streets with art in every corner similar to a still from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*. Welcomed by two young adults who slowly and gradually helped me venture into the reality of their condition, of the way their art had been valued and supported by the authorities brought us closer to disparities that existed between the on-paper commitment and lived realities, particularly how the plan of 2021 has been 'mastered'. Sitting in the house of Bhagwan Das Ji, a celebrated virtuoso puppeteer who travelled entire India on foot and world performing innumerable theatrical, musical and puppet shows, being an ally of the government promoting various welfare schemes through his art. Something that he particularly remembered was the faces of the Chinese they drew during India- China war to boost the morale of individuals and to continue to cultivate confidence about the indispensability of military power and cultural heritage of India in the face of dire situations.



As my friend stood there asking questions to help them revive their art and think of any prospective method of revenue generation to overcome the constant threat of dying out of hunger during the pandemic, I couldn't help but notice the pictures on the wall. They were a reminder of all that he has achieved and what his generations were meant to. I wondered about the room where he sat, paralysed more by the situation than his health as an entire family of 6 members forced to live in a single room smaller than the lobby of the planned high-rise building, leave alone the idea of a helipad. No private washroom, no facility to ensure hygiene, with talented unemployed youth forced to breathe in the air of squalor. With children out of school since the new place inhibits them from travelling to their earlier institutions, many lose parents and siblings but most importantly, get trapped in the constructed reality of a fogged future. With a pandemic in control of all strings, it's hard to ignore the reality that the new master wants them to stay still, dissolve all resistance as no solution awaits and carve out a docile mind from the unbounded creative imagination that they have been blessed with.





We left with what we imagine the development to be, and in the truest sense what India is. Over the years, we have admirably 'socially distanced' ourselves, imagining India through political and communal narratives where cohabitation of communities, protection of indigenous art, appreciation of ingenious capabilities of individuals irrespective of race, caste, class and gender have been constantly threatened and discouraged. The question that we ask today is how high we aim to rise if we keep purposely destroying the roots. How do we aim to stand if all strings continue to be removed but most importantly, who gave the private-public authorities absolute control over the will of the masses?

This article is written to voice the concerns of the community and hold the authorities responsible.

References

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