



Strings of Decline: A Socio-Economic Study of the Kathputli Art Form in Jaipur City, Rajasthan

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Abstract

Art plays an important role in human culture and helps define a nation's identity. In India, Kathputli is one of the most famous art forms. This string puppetry from Rajasthan gets its name from 'Kath,' meaning 'wood,' and 'Putli,' meaning 'doll.' The Bhatt community first made these puppets using wood, cloth, and wire. Kathputli used to be a lively way to entertain people, teach lessons, and share cultural identity, especially in Jaipur, where its colorful dolls attracted large crowds. However, in recent years, this traditional art has declined because of changes in society, history, and technology. The COVID-19 pandemic made things even harder, as lockdowns stopped live performances and left artists without their main source of income or their audiences. Today, Kathputli is at risk of disappearing and needs urgent action to survive.

Keywords: Kathputli, Art, National identity

Methodology:

This study is based on primary surveys and fieldwork conducted in Rajasthan between 2023 and 2024. Interviews with Kathputli artists and their families, supported by observational analysis and secondary sources, provide the foundation for the arguments presented. Over time, the Puppet shows have concentrated in particular locations that are popular tourist attractions, such as Amber Fort, City Palace, Chowki Dhani, and Hawa Mahal. These locations are specifically attracting more tourists and entertaining them through Kathputli Dance. This provides employment and income to the puppeteers. The income generated, particularly in tourist spots, is much higher than on the street plays. A puppeteer in these specific locations mainly follows the traditional art of the Bhat community. This community has its own colony, "Kathputli Nagar," located in the Lalkothi area, which is also included in the research. The researcher has used "purposive sampling or deliberate sampling," which was chosen because the population is homogeneous. Thus, the five spots were selected for the study. The questionnaire and open-ended questions were used during the process. For the literature survey, the various articles were used. MS Excel is used to prepare various charts and graphical diagrams. ArcGIS 10.2 Software is used to prepare the study area map.

Objectives:

1. To analyze the factors behind the decline in the Kathputli art form.
2. Exploring perspective linkages to revive the art form.

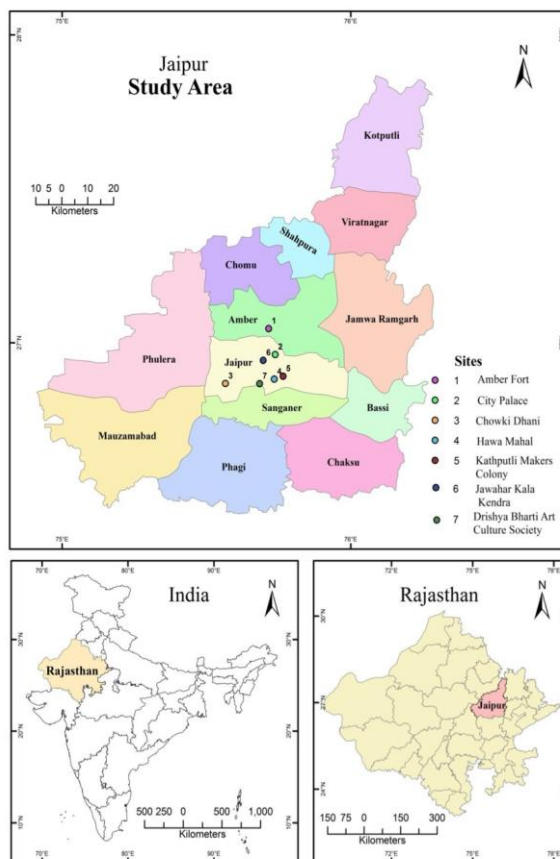
Study Area:

Rajasthan, literally mean the “land of Maharajas” is India’s largest state according to area 342,239 km². Its geographical location lies between 23°3’ to 30°12’ North Latitude and 69°30’ to 78°17’ East Longitude. It lies in the western part of the country, encompassing much of the vast and arid Thar Desert. To the northwest, it shares a border with Pakistan’s Punjab province, and to the west with Sindh, along the Sutlej–Indus Valley. Within India, it is bordered by Punjab to the north, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to the southeast, and Gujarat to the southwest.

Its capital and largest city is Jaipur, also known as the Pink City or “Paris of India,” located on the state’s eastern side and world-famous for its unique Architecture, Forts, Monuments, Palaces, Art and craft, and Culture. Jaipur is renowned on the international tourism map as one of the vertices of the Golden Triangle of Indian Tourism.

To map the Kathputli Art Form, Jaipur is chosen as the study area. Here, the 5 spots are chosen to carry forward the further study. They are- Chowki Dhani, Amber Fort, City Palace, Hawa Mahal, and Kathputli Makers’ Colony. Except for the Kathputli Makers’ Colony, all the spots are taken into consideration because these spots are rich tourist attractions, and the puppeteers found there performing and selling the Kathputli. The Kathputli Makers’ Colony is a slum-dwelling community of artisans in professions related to various art and cultural forms.

Map 1



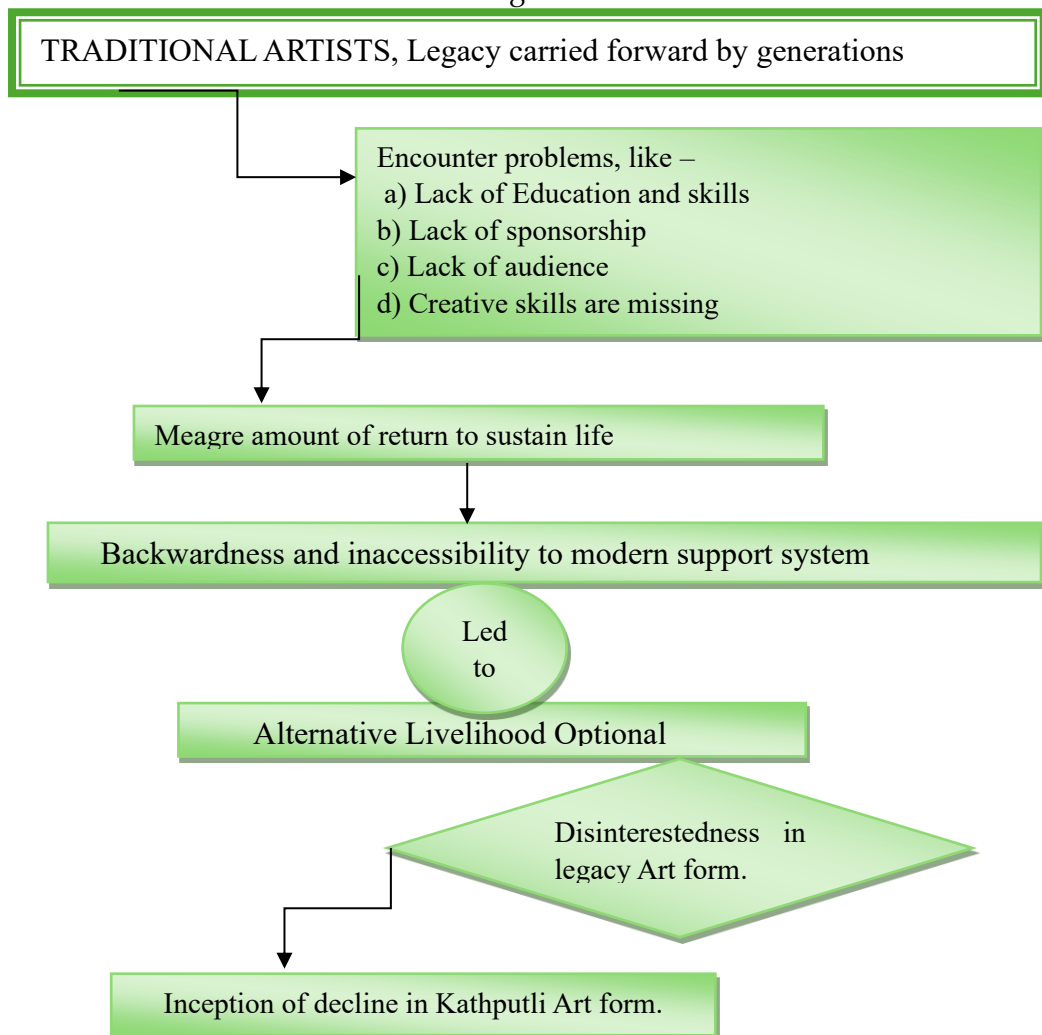
Source: Prepared by Researcher, 2024

Results and Discussion:

Theorizing the Decay: Initial Phase of Decline

The colorful and magical string puppets are not only a source of entertainment but also a source of educating and sensitizing people across the nation. This Traditional entertainment Art form is no longer considered a full-fledged art; it has become “A Dying Traditional Art”. Its manifestation lies in the visible lack of initiatives to promote and protect our country's culture. Major challenges stem from Kathputli's long history and the changing modern world. The balance between these two created a disturbance in the survival of these puppeteers who have been engaged in this for many generations. The structure of puppetry is not only the problem highlighted in this era, but the social acceptability of this art form is also in question, as these performers continually seek alternative sources of livelihood.

Figure 1: Flow of change from traditional generation to modern generation who belong to the same genre.



Source: Generated by Researcher, 2024

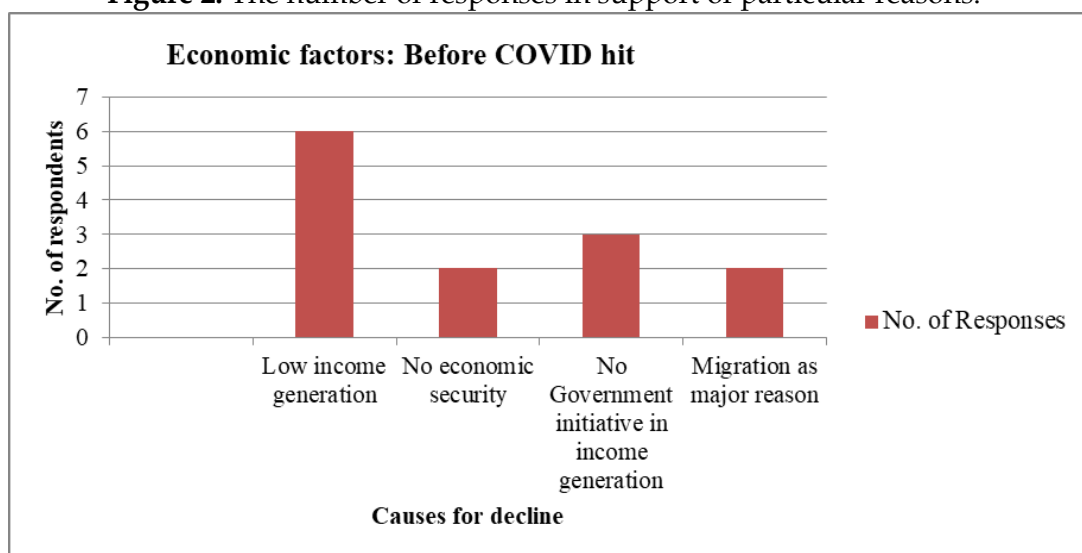
Figure 1 illustrates the continuum of flows between two generations: traditional and legacy art performers. When the legacy carried by traditional artists encounters difficulties in education, skills, audience, and enthusiasm, this raises the question of how to sustain it with the meager returns. The continuation of this sustenance led to backwardness and limited access to modern support systems, as this amount discourages puppeteers from seeking modern support for creative story creation or in any other way. This ultimately meant the only option was to pursue alternative livelihoods such as rickshaw pulling, auto driving, masonry work, etc. This disinterest in the legacy art form finally led to a decline in Kathputli.

Research Analysis: Before COVID hit:

In the seven selected spots, most respondents believed that Kathputli is currently in its initial phase of decline. However, one respondent expressed optimism, praising the government’s efforts to safeguard the art form. Some respondents acknowledged that films can help revive and popularise traditional arts, yet criticized the movie *Paheli* for depicting puppets hanging from a tree and conversing—an image they felt reinforced superstitions and notions of black magic, thereby harming the art’s reputation. Over time, puppetry has expanded beyond rural areas into urban spaces, where tourist attractions such as forts, lakes, and heritage hotels offer new opportunities for exposure. However, respondents also pointed to economic challenges and insufficient government support in creating sustainable income sources, both of which are accelerating the decline of this cultural tradition.

Fig. 2, It is interesting to consider migration as a major reason, coupled with low-income generation, as around 50% of respondents favor this factor in the art form's decline. People migrate from one region to another, seeking better livelihood opportunities and a good economic environment. But when they come here, the situation is totally opposite. Migration in Art is not only for the better opportunities but also the evolution of Art from Rural to Urban or Urban to Rural. The dark side of migration is noticed when this reality or optimism turns into pessimism, and many artists lose their roots.

Figure 2: The number of responses in support of particular reasons.



Source: Primary Survey, 2023-2024

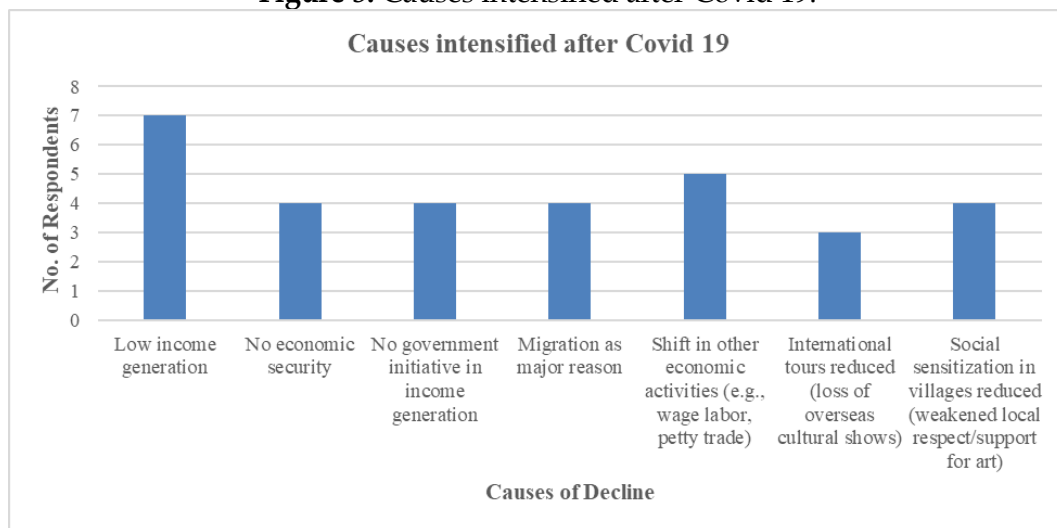
Shattered art after COVID-19 shock:

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the above-mentioned causes of pre-existing vulnerabilities. Lockdowns and travel restrictions in 2020-21 abruptly halted live performances, closed tourist venues, and disrupted domestic cultural events. For the artists reliant on in-person audiences, this meant a complete loss of income for extended periods. Even after restrictions eased, audience numbers remained depressed, and event budgets were reduced, prolonging the economic recovery.

The figure. 3 highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by Kathputli artists post-pandemic. Low-income generation emerges as the most significant factor, reported by seven respondents, reflecting the severe loss of earning opportunities due to the collapse of tourism, event cancellations, and reduced local patronage. Shifts in other economic activities (five respondents) indicate that many artists were compelled to abandon full-time puppetry for wage labor or petty trade to sustain their livelihoods. Four respondents each identified: no economic security; no government initiatives for income generation; migration as a major reason; and reduced social sensitization in villages – collectively pointing to unstable incomes, a lack of targeted policy support, the outmigration of skilled performers, and declining community appreciation for the art.

Additionally, international tours were reduced (three respondents), indicating a loss of overseas cultural engagements that previously offered both prestige and supplementary income. Overall, the post-COVID environment has compounded pre-existing vulnerabilities, eroding both the economic viability and the cultural significance of Kathputli art in Jaipur.

Figure 3: Causes intensified after Covid 19.



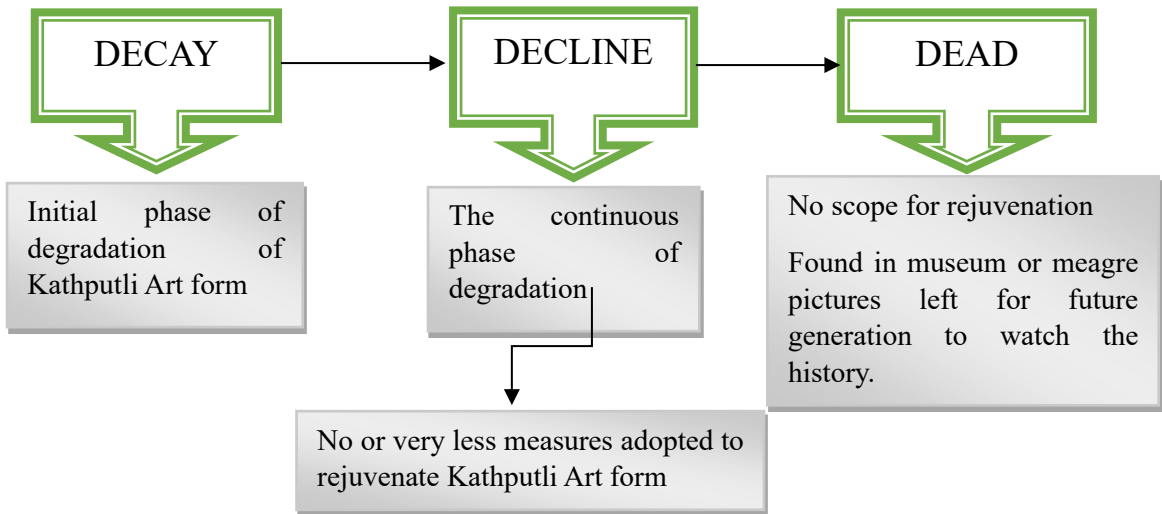
Source: Primary Survey, 2023-2024

3D Model for the decline of the Kathputli Art form:

In Figure 4.3, the researcher prepares an interesting model called the 3D Model. The stage-wise process of decline is shown: firstly, the initial phase of degradation in the quality and quantity of art, in which resistance to change is low and can be revived, called DECAY. Secondly, if the decay phase continued, then art would further degrade, and very few measures could be adopted to restore it, called DECLINE. Lastly, the art has no scope to

refresh itself and is kept in a museum as a preserved entity and not a living one, known as DEAD.

Figure 4.3: 3 D’s Model for the decline of Kathputli Art form.



Source: Generated by Researcher, 2024

The decline of Kathputli art in Jaipur stems from intertwined economic, social, and technological changes. Pre-COVID, highlighted low income, lack of economic security, limited government support, and migration as key challenges, which were sharply intensified by COVID-19. Lockdowns halted performances, collapsed tourism, reduced international tours, and forced many puppeteers into wage labor or petty trade. Even post-2022, incomes remain below pre-pandemic levels, and social sensitization in villages has weakened. Perception studies reveal that while natives still see Kathputli as a cultural link to history, modernization and rising living standards have shifted leisure spending toward digital entertainment. Migration, occupational changes, and family-level decisions to leave the art form reflect growing disillusionment with its economic viability. In response, artists are blending tradition with modern influences – introducing filmi music and global icons alongside historical characters – to attract audiences. However, competition from television, malls, and online platforms continues to overshadow puppetry, and while some see potential in digital integration, such connections remain minimal. The post-COVID reality is thus one of partial adaptation but deep structural challenges, requiring targeted policy support and innovative promotion to sustain this heritage.



Picture 1:
Carving out Kathputli from



Picture 2:
Carving Kathputli's set outside to dry
and a wood log will be prepared to give
a beautiful look.



Picture 3:
Charming stage for Kathputli show
Source: Captured by Researcher, 2024

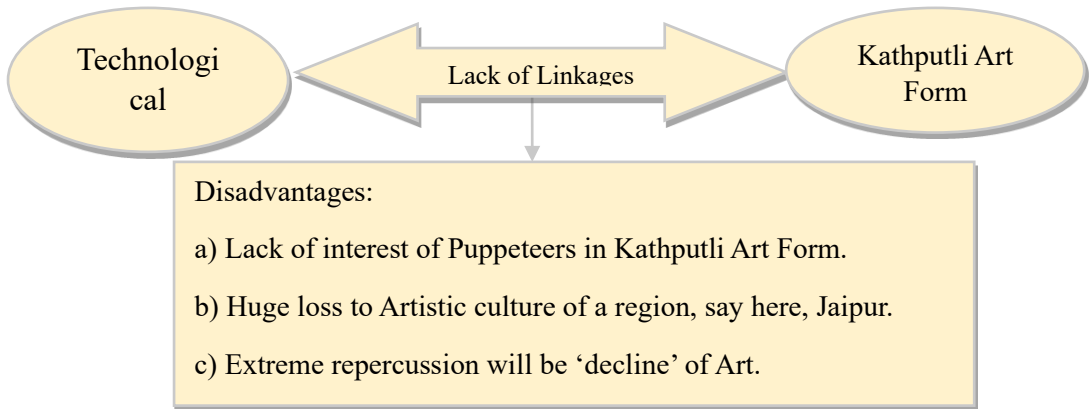
Perspectives Linkages for Revival of Strings:

The diagram illustration is followed in the following paragraphs-

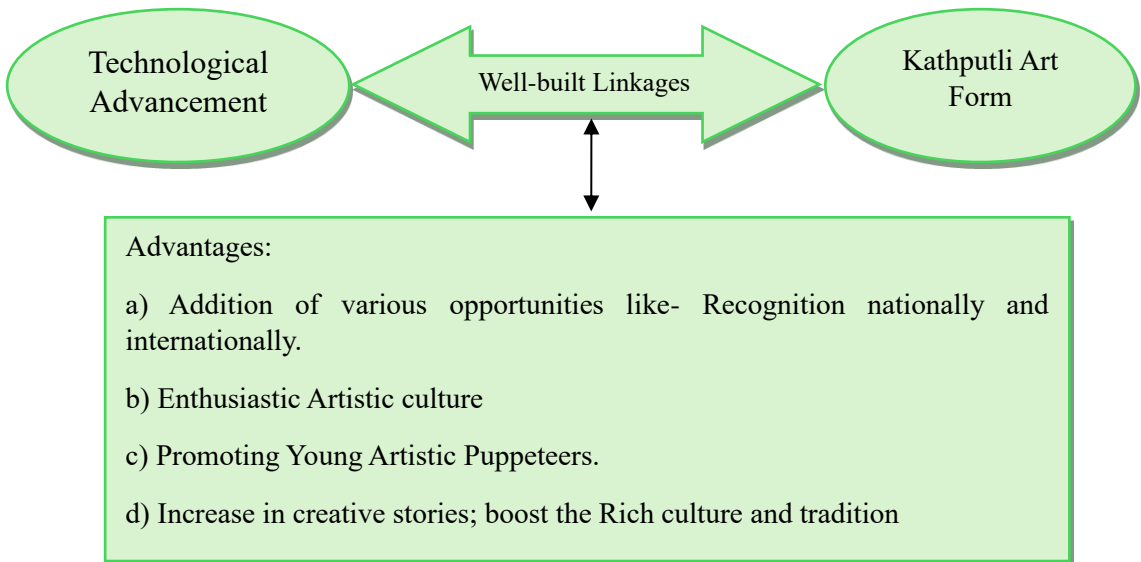
Part 1 of Fig. 5 follows, establishing the direct association between technological advancement and the Kathputli art form. The lack of associations and linkages led to various disadvantages, such as a lack of interest, significant artistic loss for Jaipur, and a decline in the risk of further periods of dormancy.

Figure 5: Potentiality and linkages between Kathputli Art Form and Technology.

Part 1- No linkages, bound to art decline.



Part 2 - Linkages developed the Revival of the Art form.



Source: Generated by Researcher 2024.

Part 2 of Fig. 5 shows the positive linkage between the two, which led to various advantages, such as additional opportunities, an enthusiastic artistic culture in Jaipur, the promotion of young artists, and creative skills in story writing, which further prevented the decline of the Kathputli art form and resulted in its survival.

The above bridge also expands the opportunity to connect this technology to the current Traditional culture. The creation of these bridges not only preserves the culture from Volume-XII, Issue-III

decline, but Kathputli shows can also be used as innovative methods for advertising. The idea is that the benefits of these strategies will percolate to Puppeteers while simultaneously promoting the culture.

The incredible highways (technology) have become an expressway for entertainment, while these traditional arts are lagging. The “Tragedy of Kathputli Traditional Art” does not restrict to the youth and the old age groups. The situation becomes severe when we see children being attracted to these sophisticated games and the internet. Instead of teaching children about their ‘Incredible India’, the fast-changing societal demands overtake the culture

Conclusion:

This chapter examines the decline of Kathputli art, shaped by economic insecurity, shifting perceptions, and reduced opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this decline by halting performances, cutting tourism, and forcing artists into alternative livelihoods. Post-pandemic recovery remains slow, with weakened village support and rising competition from digital entertainment. The gap between traditional and contemporary approaches highlights the need to integrate technological advancement with puppetry. Government and NGO support is crucial, focusing not on “whom” to preserve the art but “how” to adapt it for survival in a changing cultural landscape.

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