

# STRINGS ATTACHED: PUPPETS OFFER SAFETY LESSONS TO FIGHT COVID-19

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Learn and play: The puppet videos were part of a collaborative project with UNICEF. Special Arrangement

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an Assam-based trust the opportunity to focus on a near-forgotten form of string puppetry called Putola Nach.

In collaboration with the UNICEF-Assam, the Anamika Ray Memorial Trust (ARMT) has produced three short videos using string puppetry for creating mass awareness of COVID-appropriate behaviour. A fourth video is on the issue of school dropouts.

The video 'COVID *Shatru* (Enemy)' is based on a king, who preaches safety measures after the spread of the novel coronavirus threatens to devastate his realm. 'COVID *Bibhrat* (confusion)' is aimed at students for instilling COVID appropriate behaviour — washing hands regularly, wearing a mask, maintaining physical distance and adhering to other precautionary measures as prescribed in the standard operating procedures.

While these two are in Assamese, ' *Mama ro Mina ko COVID Katha* ' (COVID Tale of Mama and Mina) is in the Nepali language, made especially for the Sikkim government.

"These videos are a part of a larger collaborative project with UNICEF done in November and December 2020. We used the dying folk art form of Putola Nach to campaign for its conservation besides creating awareness on the pandemic," ARMT's managing trustee Ankuran Dutta said.

The videos of 4-8 minutes have been launched on various social media platforms to reach millions of viewers, he said.

## Interactive scripts

"We have also prepared other multimedia interactive documents creating general awareness on COVID-19. But as time demands, we are focusing on the circulation of the three puppetry videos that encapsulate COVID appropriate behaviours in a simple, entertaining and attractive manner for people of all ages," Dr. Dutta said. ARMT is named after his wife, a Gauhati University teacher who died from a gall bladder surgery gone wrong in New Delhi in 2015. The Medical Council of India had in October 2019 found two doctors guilty of medical negligence leading to her death.

Dr. Dutta had campaigned against what he called "medical terrorism" prior to the verdict.

Assam's string puppetry had three distinct styles based on the area performed. These areas were Barpeta-Nalbari in western Assam, Kalaigaon in northern Assam and Majuli "island" in eastern Assam.

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