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A Sociological Study on the Decline of the Traditional Puppet Art of Ambalangoda.

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Background: The traditional puppet art of Ambalangoda, a unique intangible cultural heritage of Sri Lanka's Southern Province, once flourished as a vibrant form of folk theatre. Recently, it has experienced a significant decline due to social, economic, and institutional challenges, including a lack of sustainable income, limited recognition, and insufficient training opportunities.

Objective: This study aims to identify the sociological factors contributing to this decline and to propose strategies for its sustainable revival.

Methods: A qualitative research design was employed in the Balapitiya area of Ambalangoda, involving 12 in-depth interviews with practising and retired puppeteers, supported by observations and analysis of primary and secondary documents. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings.

Results: Results indicate that only two major puppet groups remain active, while many traditional artists have abandoned the craft. Younger generations show limited interest in learning puppet art, which threatens the intergenerational transmission of this art form. Despite its potential to generate tourism revenue and community-based employment, puppet art remains underutilised. Structured training programs, integration into school and community initiatives, and workshops modelled on traditional low-country practices are largely absent.

Conclusion: The study concludes that immediate, coordinated interventions—such as strengthening institutional support, implementing training programs, promoting the art through cultural and tourism initiatives, and creating income opportunities for puppeteers—are essential to preserve this unique heritage while enhancing local employment and tourism development.

Keywords: Ambalangoda, Cultural Heritage, Puppet Art