

Phada Paintings: Pictorial Traditions of Rajasthan

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Heritage is our legacy from the glorious past, with which we exist today and have been entrusted to handover the same to the coming generations. It is generally classified into two categories: (1) Tangible and (2) Intangible.

Over the past 40 years, the concept of cultural heritage has rapidly changed. Earlier it was only confined up to architecture, sites, modes of production, etc. but today the anthropological approach to heritage leads us to consider it as a social ensemble of many different complex and interdependent manifestations. It includes traditions or living expressions, norms, values, ideas, beliefs, myths, legends, literature, rituals and other intellectual literary activities which we have inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants. The material (tangible) and non-material (intangible) aspects of any culture are usually dependent on each other. Sometimes, however, the material heritage may change quickly but the non-material may take longer time to change.

While fragile tangible cultural heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization, an understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities helps with intercultural dialogue and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life.

The importance of intangible cultural heritage is not the cultural manifestation itself but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that gets transmitted through it from one generation to the next. The social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge is relevant for minority groups and for mainstream social groups within a state and is as important for developing states as for developed ones.

Introduction and Importance of the Folk Tradition with Reference to Phada and Kāñvaḍas

Folk art and traditions in India were never for a privileged few. They have originated from the beliefs of people living in primarily rural and tribal societies unlike classical arts rooted in *Śilpa* texts that flourished under the patronage of royal courts. Classical art provided records of the kings and their kingdoms and folk arts are the records of the lives of the masses, their myths and legends.

We all have heard about the folk tales at some time or the other. It is often defined as a tale or legends which do not have always religious leanings and are not based on historical truths.

Stories could be memories or mediations between reality and aspirations that reflect what a society wishes to express about itself. It is perhaps the oldest form of communication known to its human kind which has a way of mesmerizing the listeners into silence and the tellers into expressing the deepest desires and anxieties of their society, directly or through subversive means. Story-telling brings people together whether it's a street corner or a dark cinema hall. While the essence of it remains the same, the way of telling stories has been influenced by the kind of tools and technologies of the times. From telling stories with the helping voice and gesture alone to using painted scrolls and boxes, text, dance, music, performances or a combination of all. Story-telling in India is a rich heritage that defines our culture and our identity.

Kāñvaḍa bācanā and *Phaḍa bācanā* are the oral tradition of story-telling that still prevails in Rajasthan where stories about the local heroes and folk traditions are told along with the stories from epics like *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*.

The experience is audio visual, as the telling is accompanied by taking the listener on a visual journey, made possible by the *Bhopās* or *Kāñvaḍiyās* (wandering minstrels). Against the backdrop of storytelling it invokes the notion of a sacred space and provides an identity to all concerned with its making, telling and listening.

Kāñvaḍa (Fig.1) is a portable wooden temple that has visual narratives on its multiple panels that are hinged together. These panels open and close like doors simulating the several thresholds of a temple. It is practiced in the *Suthar*

(carpenter) community of Mewar district. The *Kāñvadiyā bhāṭ* periodically brings the shrine to his patron's house to recite the genealogy and to sing praises of the God's and his ancestors. This tradition is approximately 400 years old. The *Kāñvadiyās* and the *Jajmāns* consider it as a sacred shrine which demands certain ritual to be followed, listening to genealogies, stories and making donations. It is



Fig.1 :Kāñvada

believed that listening of stories purifies the soul.

Phaḍa (Fig.2), a scroll painting, is a portable clothed shrine of approximately 4-5 meters long and has visual narratives on its multiple panels. It is practiced in the Bhilwara and Shahpura regions of Rajasthan (Fig.3). The *Bhopās* traditionally carry the painted *phaḍas* along with them and use them as mobile temples of the folk deities. The visuals are those of local heroes and the patrons.

Preparation of Phaḍa

The cotton cloth which is being used as a base for *phaḍa* is a hand-woven fabric that is being treated with a homemade gum locally known as *gonda*. Starching the fabric converts it into a canvas, ready for painting and prevents colour from bleeding through the fabric. To further smoothen the base, it is being burnished by a stone called *Mohrā* and the process carried out until the fabric acquires smoothness and shine.

There are many social and religious aspects which are involved in making of *phaḍas*. The first stroke of the *phaḍa* is carried out on an auspicious day by a virgin girl. A rough sketch of the entire painting is carried out in yellow colour which is known



Fig.2 :Phada



Fig.3 : Phada centres in Rajasthan

as *Ārekhana* or *Ukerana*. At this stage the whole section is divided into sections and sub sections. The colours which are generally used are earth colours and the most common among them are orange, yellow, grey, blue, green and red.

Once the rough sketch is made the artist fills in the colour using orange for the body of the figures, yellow for jewellery, black and grey for structures and outlines, blue for water bodies, green for vegetation and red for costumes.

The outlines are done using black *Syāhī* (ink) with the help of fine brush which highlights the figures. The final touches are also done on an auspicious day and the name of the artist and the *Bhopā* along with the date are painted on the *phaḍa*. Finally the pupil of the eye is painted which indicates that painting is now imbued with life. An interesting fact is that the figures in the painting do not face the audience rather than they face each other. The only frontal views are that of Gods and Goddesses.

Phaḍa as Audio Visual Aids

The *Bhopās* commission these elaborately painted panels, consecrate them on their acquisition and treat them as living shrines. Once painting is complete they hold performances in front of audience in which a part of the legend of these deities is related in prose and verse by them and their helpers with the accompaniment of a musical instrument known as *Rāvaṇahatthā* and choreographic movements. They are perhaps the sole custodian of this tradition which brings together three art forms painting, singing and dancing. They are part time narrators who perform in groups. The *Patayī* is the chief and his assistant is known as *Diyāla*. The *Bhopā* may sometimes perform with his wife *Bhopī* as they travel together. Each hero God has a different *Bhopā* who devote their lives in service of that particular deity. It is expected that a *Bhopā* must be able to perform for at least 12 hours dance and sing and have thorough knowledge of each scene/picture.

The epic singer and dancer use the *phaḍa* for narration of the folk tale. The performance signifies *phaḍa bācanā* (narration of the legend) with the help of painting which involves the exposition and explanation of the painting through songs, dances and instrumental music. This performance begins after sunset till early morning. The ground on which the temporary shrine is set is purified by

sprinkling with water and burning of incense. Before the actual narrative begins Gods and Goddesses are invoked through rituals. Lord Gaṇeśa and Sarasvatī are offered prayers.

After the rituals of prayer, offerings are made before the picture of Pābūjī. The *phaḍa* is unrolled at the night and set up for viewing for the devotees. The legends of the hero God are recited and the *Bhopā* and *Bhopī* sing and dance. Appropriate portions of the painting are illuminated using a small lamp. The narrative depicted on the *phaḍa* is recounted through song and this continues through night. The epics are often not in a chronological order and the *Bhopā* moves from one end of the *phaḍa* to another often linking the past and present comparing qualities and deeds of Pābūjī to other deities depicted on *phaḍa*. At times the story goes on for two consecutive nights. Once the performance is over sacrament is distributed among the devotees.

As the deity is believed to reside in a *phaḍa* there are special rites performed in order to dispose of torn and old *phaḍas*. They are taken by the *Bhopās* to the holy lake at Pushkar for immersion.



Fig.4 :Phaḍa of Pābūjī

Story of Pābūjī

The principal subject for the *phaḍas* is the life of their legendary heroes Pābūjī (Fig.4) and Devnārāyan jī. Pābūjī, who belonged to the Rathore clan of Rajputs, was incarnated somewhere in the 14th century in Kolumund. It is said that he was born of a union between a man named Dhandal and a nymph who from time to time converted herself into tigress and as such breast fed the infant Pābūjī. After the death of Pābūjī's parents his step brother Budojī ascended the throne while his step sister Premalde was married to Khichi. When Pābūjī attained adulthood he was gifted the divine mare Kesar Kalmī by Dewal, a *cārana* women on the promise that he would always protect her. For many years Pābūjī remained occupied in battles against Baghelas, Sumras, Dodas and others. He married a Sodha Rajput princess but soon after his marriage received news that Khichi has attacked the cows of his protegee Dewal who had gifted him the divine mare. He fought with Khichi and then forgave him after restoring the cows to Dewal. Subsequently Pābūjī died in a battle and attained divine status. Pābūjī is basically worshipped by the castes associated with animals because he is supposed to have powers for curing animals, specially camels.

Current Status

Phaḍa painting still continues its tradition in the regions of Shahpura and Bhilwara. Joshi family in Bhilwara is the only family engaged in the making of *phaḍas*. The art is practiced in its traditional form and new concepts like battles; *Jātaka* stories, etc. have also been introduced. But in order to keep the tradition alive and active, new themes can also be introduced in the making of *phaḍas*. This could even invoke the new patrons in the society. Themes based on environmental issues, literacy, population, child labour, etc. can be introduced.

Conclusion

In Indian villages and tribes different folklore traditions have existed which belong to our pride and wealth. But it is a big loss that due to the increasing urbanization such folk arts are gradually vanishing. Under the western influence the pace of life has become fast. Plastic and electronic toys have replaced our

indigenous wooden toys, machines are replacing the handiworks. But if the latest technology means the development then these art forms represent our rich and vibrant culture. For a developed civilization its art and traditions have to be valued and should be taken pride in.

A synergy exists between the maker, the story teller and his patron which has kept the tradition alive. The survival of the *phada* tradition hinges not only a set of economic relations and transactions but on the fact that the maker, teller and patron are dependent on each other for their individual identity which will fail to exist if any of them is absent.

References & Notes

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