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## Wandering Minstrels – The Tale of the *Phad*

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Decorative cloth has been used in India to portray folk epics as a means of entertainment and as a substitute for theater and other types of performing arts. I quote “The transmission media of the folk epics are large paintings, instrumental music, dances, songs, riddles, jokes, costumes and other equipments.”

“The tradition of narrating legends with the visual aid of painted panels is found in early literature - in Bhagavatisutra (third century), Visakhadatta’s *Mudraraksasa* (fourth century), Bana’s *Harshcharitra* (seventh century), and Vaddaradhane (10<sup>th</sup> century). Narrators in the Indian States of Bengal, Gujarat and Maharashtra use painted paper scrolls and those of Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, pigment painted cloths.



*Figure 1. Phad painting.*

Itinerant storytellers, known as Bhopas, use the Phad, pigment painted large rectangular cloth scroll, in Rajasthan, western India. The word phad is possibly derived from the Sanskrit word *patt*, a flat surface for painting. Phad in the Rajasthani dialect also means ‘a fold’.

It is believed that the epic narration in Rajasthan has existed for the last six centuries. The use of phad painting for narration and performance gives an opportunity to the social scientist to understand the relationship between verbal and visual art.



Figure 2. Painting centers in Rajasthan, India.

Pur is considered by the artists to be the place where phad painting began, though many consider the town of Shahpura to be the place of origin. Currently, the paintings are done in the towns of Bhilwara and Shahpura. The artists of the Joshi community who belong to a class of printers known as Chippas continue the tradition of painting. Among the renowned painters in the region are – Shri Lal Joshi, Shanti Lal Joshi, Durgesh Joshi.



Figure 3. Shri Lal Joshi – Padamshree awardee from Bhilwara.

### Preparation of the *Phad*

Cotton cloth locally known as *reza* or *khadi* is used as the base of the painting. This fabric is hand woven and hand spun. The fabric is treated with paste of home made gum - made by boiling wheat flour and water or barley and water. Starching the fabric converts it into a canvas ready for painting and prevents colours from bleeding through the fabric. To further smoothen the base burnishing with a stone, locally called *mohra*, is done till the fabric acquires a smoothness and shine.

Paintings are traditionally commissioned by the Bhopa and initiated on an auspicious day. Saraswati, the goddess of learning and creative sciences is invoked at this time and a virgin girl makes the first stroke.

The paintings carry a religious sanctity with them and during the monsoon season –*savan* – no painting, singing and dancing is done. Among the Hindus it is a belief that the Gods are sleeping in this period and thus no auspicious rituals are to be conducted in this season.

A rough sketch of the entire painting is drawn in a light yellow color. This initial sketching is called *alekhna* or *ukerna*. The whole scroll is divided at this stage into sections and sub sections. Most colours are from natural sources and are known as earth colours.



Figure 4. Vijay Joshi –Painter from Shahpura.

The coloured stone is ground together with natural gum for 2-3 weeks for a few hours every day. Orange, yellow, grey and blue, green, red are the most commonly used colors. These are obtained from the following natural sources:

- Orange – Sindur or mercury
- Yellow – Hartal, a stone color
- Green – copper sulphate
- Black/Grey – kajal /kohl
- Blue – Indigo
- Red – Sangaraf – stone colour
- Dull brown – Geru

After the rough sketch is made the artist fills in the colour using orange for body of the figures, yellow for jewelry, black and grey for structures and outlines, blue for water bodies, green- trees and red for dress.

The outlines are done using *syahi* – black – using a fine brush and this highlights the figures. The finishing touches are done on an auspicious day and the name of the painter, the bhopa along with the date, are painted on the phad. Finally the pupil of the eye is painted which denotes that the phad is now imbued with life.

The tradition of adding the painters name in folk painting is unusual in India, as ritualistic art is considered to be a community expression and not a personal one. The ownership of technique, design, layout, colours etc also belongs to a group of people who have practiced such arts over the centuries.

The *Bhopa* or bard is a priest who looks after the temple and its deity and he examines the painting carefully and assesses that the traditional forms, colors have been followed. Bhopas belong to three categories –Temple, Jamat and Phad Bhopas.

Phad Bhopa - The wandering singers and dancers in Rajasthan who tell the story of the Phad are called Phad Bhopas. They are perhaps the sole custodians of a tradition, which brings together three art forms together- painting, singing and dancing. They are part time narrators who perform in groups of two. The Patayi is the chief and his assistant is known as Diyala. The bhopa may sometimes perform with his wife the Bhopi as they travel together.

The Bhopa wears a *baga*, a long red dress. This has a tight fitting bodice till the waist and a wide panelled skirt, which is ankle length. He wears a headdress or *safa* and *jutis* on his feet. His wife, the Bhopi, wears a three-piece ensemble commonly worn in Rajasthan i.e. *kanchli*, (blouse), *odhna* (draped garment) and *ghaghra* (paneled skirt).

The epic singer and dancer use the phad for narration of the folk tale. “The performance signifies *parbancana* ‘narration of the legend’ with the help of painting which involves the exposition and explanation of the painting through songs, dances and instrumental music.” (O.P. Joshi). This performance begins after sunset and lasts 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 Ganesh – the remover of obstacles and Saraswati – goddess of creative sciences are offered prayers.

After the rituals of prayer, offerings are made before the picture of Pabuji. The phad is unrolled at night and set up for viewing for the devotees of Pabuji who are the villagers living in rural areas of Rajasthan. The legends of Pabuji, Ramdeoji or Devnarayanji are recited and the Bhopa and Bhopi sing and dance using a three stringed instrument called a Janter. The Janter is made by the Bhopa himself and hung around the neck while performing. The strings are plucked with fingers to create the music.

Appropriate sections of the painting are illuminated using a small lamp. The narrative depicted on the Phad is recounted through song and this continues through the night. The epics are often not in a chronological order and the Bhopa moves from one end of the phad to the other often linking the past and present and comparing qualities and deeds of Pabuji to other deities depicted on the Phad.

The phad wears out over the years but cannot be sold or destroyed as it is the abode of the Gods. It is immersed in the holy lake of Pushkar with appropriate rituals by the Bhopa.

### **Story of Pabuji**

Pabuji also known as Lakshmanji, is a 14<sup>th</sup> century legendary figure. He is regarded as a protector and is the patron deity of the Rabari community (nomadic camel herders). He was the son of a Rajput – Dhadal who is said to have married a nymph – Kesarpari.

The main story in the Pabuji phad describes the event, which epitomizes the heroic deeds and honour portrayed by him. Pabuji had a black mare gifted to him by Cherani Devi, an incarnation

of Goddess Shakti. In return he had promised to protect her and her cattle at all times. At the age of 12 Pabuji's marriage was arranged with a beautiful maiden – Phulkunwar. As he was taking the sacred circumbulations around the fire he was called for help by Charani deval whose cattle had been stolen. Pabuji rushed to her help and rescued the cattle but in the battle, which followed, he lost his life. In keeping his word the young warrior became a folk hero whose tales the Bhopas sing.

### **Current Status**

Painting today continues to flourish in Bhilwara and Shahpura region. The art is practiced in its traditional form and new stories like battle of Haldighati, stories of Gautam Buddha and even actors like Amitabh Bacchan are depicted through these paintings.

The phad performance transmits the religious ideals and provides entertainment to the spectators. These recitations are considered auspicious and sing of the triumph of good over evil and allegedly prevent disease and misfortune for the listener of the tale.

These narrators play a role in preserving and continuing a tradition as they move from place to place and link communities together.

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