

PHAD : THE VISUAL ORAL NARRATIVE OF RAJASTHAN

Santosh Kanwar Shekhawat*

The oral narratives cannot be studied in isolation as some of the narratives have complements in the form of paintings (*Phad, Kaavad, Pichwai*), puppets or dances. In such narratives, narrative and visual art act as stimulants to each other. Such narratives gorgonize the audience because of perfect synchronization between audio-visual modes of narration. The study of such narratives provides a scope to study and understand the relationship between verbal and visual art forms as well as between producers and consumers of art form. O.P. Joshi, a renowned folklorist on the basis of his research asserts that the study of such art forms offers an excellent scope for anthropological studies. An art form being an institution, the study of its structure provides a platform to understand the intricate yet interesting interactive patterns between the creator, the critic and the public. (1976) As Raymond firth also expresses, "Art is one of the high points in individual expression, a vehicle for conveying intense and refined emotion, which can be recognized as of universal order when they are is dated. But all art is composed in a social setting; it has a cultural content". (2013, p.162) Again to quote Joshi; "The social context of art includes technical skill, material, ideas and social skills, material, ideas and social environment in which it is created and consumed. The elite art has its own sphere..... similarly a piece of folk art belongs to social gatherings. A folk artist does not create simply for his aesthetic satisfaction". (1976, 08)

The oral narratives in which paintings are used as complements to narration are popularly known as *Chitrakatha* (pictorial narrative). This mode of storytelling is quite popular in South Asia and is believed to have its roots in pre Buddhist pictorial narrative traditions. India houses a rich tradition of *Chitrakatha*. One of the most popular forms of *Chitrakatha* is 'Par', popularly known as 'Phad'. This 700 years old narrative form has its roots in Shahpura, a princely state of Rajasthan which is at a distance of 35 Kms from Bhilwaradistrict. Some believe Pur, a small village near Bhilwara to be the traditional home of the origin of phad. Phad gets its name from the Sanskrit word *patt* i.e. a flat painting surface. In Rajasthan language phad means a fold. Both the meanings are significant because phadsare painted on flat surface (cloth) and are folded (rolled) during transit. John Smith on the basis of his research reports that the earliest phad is dated to 1857 while colonel James Tod assigns it the year 1819. Pabuji's phad scroll represents events and episodes of Pabujis's life. His palace, his court, the forts and sanctum of goddess Deval are represented. John D. Smith opines that in phad events are depicted in terms of place of occurrence and hence chronological pattern is not followed. (2005) Icnographically phadcontains the intricate pattern of myriad images depicted logically. William Dalrymple, a renowned historian describes the depictions on phadas, panorama of medieval Rajasthan: Women, horses, peacocks, carts, arches, battles, washer men and fisherman, kings and queens, huge grey elephants and herds of white cows and buff camels, many-armed demons, fish-tailed wonder creatures and blue-skinned gods, all arranged around the central outsized figure of Pabuji, his magnificent black mare, Kesar Kalami, and his four great companions and brothers in arms. The sequence of

images painted on the Pabuji Ki Phad is: the main deity Pabuji is at the centre and to his right is his court which his four principal companions, on the left of main deity is the court of Buro, his brother. At the extreme left is Umarkot and at the left edge, Lanka. To the right of Pabuji's court is the court of the Lady Deval (goddess of Kolu). At the far right of the painting is Khichi's court. The blank spaces in between are depicted with scenes of Pabuji's journey from Rajasthan to Umarkot, and also images of Ganesh Saraswati and Vishnu in different incarnations that are painted at the top of the Phad or par. (2009)

At this point it becomes necessary to have a glimpse of life history of Pabuji. Pabuji was a 14th century warrior hero hailing from the Dhandhal Rathore clan of the Rajput rulers of Marwar. His father ruled over a village named Kolu. His older brother was Buro and his sisters were Sona and Pema. Khichis of neighboring kingdom had encroached their land, to evict which a battle was fought in which young Pabu participated and killed Jindrav Khichi's father. Although later to pacify Jindrav's anger he got his sister married to him but of no avail. Infuriated Jindrav was in search of appropriate opportunity to avenge his father's death.

Pabu's niece Kelam was married to his contemporary, snake deity Gogaji. He had promised camels to Kelam as wedding gift so he went to Lanka to fetch camels. On his way back home he happened to pass through Umarkot. Princess PoolvatiSodhi of Umarkot fell in love with him. When he went to Umarkot to wed Sodhi he borrowed KesarKalmi, a mare from Deval Charni on the assurance that he would

protect her cows. When he learned that Khichi had attacked and abducted Deval Charni's cows, he cut his nuptial knot and left his wedding rituals unaccomplished and returned back to rescue Deval Charni's cattle for he was highly comminuted to his promises. JindravKhichi offered him tough fight in the fierce battle that took place between them and ultimately Pabuji fell martyr at a young age of twenty four and was canonized as a *Bhomya*, a folk deity. ElizabethWickett describes him as a "Patron deityreputed to have been a 14th century hero". (2012, p.10) She further says, "Pabuji is worshipped as a local deity by herdsmen, nomads and those who pursue a livelihood based on animal husbandry in the harsh terrain of the Thar Desert." (2012, p. 11). Pabuji is the presiding deity of Raika (Rebari), a camel rearing community of Rajasthan occupying low status in the social hierarchy.

Phad scrolls were traditionally prepared on hand woven *khadi* cloth for it is more durable. The prominent themes of phad scrolls are the peculiar social contexts and relationships that were the hallmark of the times of their origin. These visual narratives depict the wondrous stories of heroic men and women i.e. the legends of folk heroes who scarified their lives in the battlefield or who died for some social cause. Such heroes are endowed with cultic power. Traditionally phad were based on exploits of the folk deities Pabuji and Devnarayan who are considered to be the incarnation of Vishnu and Laxman respectively, signifying the vernacularisation of the classical epics. The epic narration is a way to express gratitude to the divine hero and also to invoke him for healing diseased animals, for health, wealth and prosperity of human beings and for protection from evil powers. It is noteworthy

that Pabuji is worshipped for worldly ends and the traditional Hindu concepts of spirituality and *moksha* (salvation) find no place here.

The additional benefit of the phad performance is the wholesome entertainment of the spectators/audience by the lively performance. The Chippa painters and Bhopa singers collaboratively infuse life into this religio- cultural rural musical narrative tradition. The caste of Chippas who have been involved professionally in painting phads, historically belong to Joshi clan of Bhilwara. The narrator of phad are folk singers known as Bhopas, an itinerant story teller caste from north western district of Jodhpur and Nagour with their roots in a village named Pabusar. Most of the Bhopas come from *Nayak Adivasi*(tribal) community. The Bhopa community associated with ancestral ritualistic tradition of phad narration differentiates themselves from other adivasi Bhils based in pastoral region practicing hunting and farming. They are privileged to occupy higher social status within their community owing to their legacy of the phad tradition. From its advent until the end of 18th century this story telling tradition enjoyed royal patronage of kings and feudal lords, therefore the Bhopas initially led nomadic life, taking seasonal routes, performing for their patrons. At the threshold of 19th century the royal patronage gradually declined and the Bhopas adapted to the situation by setting to semi nomadic lifestyle. Further, with the annihilation of feudal power after independence, the Bhopas lost patronage and thus the art form received a great setback. Consequently the phad painters and narrators migrated to big towns and cities and it resulted in commercialization of the otherwise strictly ritualistic art form.

The phad painters do not have a particular style and neither do they belong to any specific school of painting. They borrow lavishly from the historically famous schools of painting such as Mewar, Kishangarh, Kota, Bundi, Jhalawar, Jaipur and Bikaner depending upon the demand yet due to adherence to certain set of rules there are striking similarities in the paintings of the artists hailing from different regions. Moreover basically they emerge from common ancestral group. The phad painters learn this art from the elder members of the family and seem reluctant to share the secrets of this art with others due to their conservative approach. Moreover the tough competition amongst the rival groups and fears of unemployment prevent them from doing so.

The Bhopas narrate phad with the help of their audio-visual paraphernalia consisting of the phad (the painted scroll) and *Jantar* or *Ravanhatta* (a fiddle like stringed musical instrument) made of bamboo. They traditionally moved in group of two, the *Patavi* or the chief is the narrator and the *Diyala* or the assistant holds the lamp during the performance. The phad scrolls are gifted to them by patron. The patron is one who donates the phad to Bhopa as a token of his reverence shown to the deity in the hope of receiving certain favors. The favours could be protection from a deadly disease, to be blessed with a son any other boon or materialistic pleasure.

The Bhopa usually performs the folk epics of Devnarayanphad or Pabujikiphad. Devnarayanphad consists of 335 songs comprising nearly fifteen thousand lines

while the complete legend of Pabuji comprises of 52 *panwaras* (couplets). The narrative of Pabuji has been recorded by Muhato Nanisi in his *Khyata* with the title *VataPabujiri*. John D. Smith has used in his research the synopsis of *VataPabujiri* published by the historian L.P. Tessitori in 1916. The transmission of the epic is completely oral as the Bhopas are illiterate. The Bhopas learn the art of phad narration from his guru, step by step, it involves a rigorous yet patient training in the art of singing, dancing, playing *jantar* and finally performing all these activities simultaneously. He has to remember all the songs of the epic in sequential manner. His competence and success is judged by the accuracy of his coordination in singing, dancing, playing *jantar* and pointing towards the incident on the scroll which is being sung. He is supposed to have a thorough understanding of the figures and more than 100 different scenes or episodes depicted and their symbolic significance. Apart from Devnarayan and Pabuji, phads based on lives of other deities such as Rama, Krishna, Ramdevji and Goddess Kali also gained popularity with the passage of time. Recent years have seen an expansion in the themes of phad narration with the introduction of historical icons such as Prithviraj Chouhan, Hadi Rani, Padmawati etc. into the periphery of phad narration. The limits of set rules and set themes controls this art form and also results in repetition and symmetry which are other characteristics of this art form.

The narration of phad popularity termed as '*phadbanchana*' (narration of the legend) is a spectator to behold for the coupling of narration with dance and drama adds charm to it. The performance usually takes place after the sunset. The conglomerate

of villagers assembles at the *choupal* (village square) to witness the musical feast. Under the dim light of the lamp held by the assistant Bhopa, the chief Bhopa sings the epic and dances to the tune of his *jantar*, mesmerizing the audience with his polymathy. The chief Bhopa puts on special red colored attire-*safa* (turban), *bagatari* (shirt) and *baga* (skirt). He also wears *ghungrus* (jingling anklets) and hangs his *jantar* in his neck. He also carries a red *jhola* (bag) to carry the accessories such as the lamp, the pointers, peacock feathers, conch shell etc. which are required during the performance. The Bhopas claim to have inherited this attire from Sawai Bhoj, Devnarayan's father. The assistant wears ordinary clothes. Under divine inspiration, the chief Bhopa performs certain *puja* (worship) before the actual performance begins. Thereafter the deity concerned is invoked for public welfare and happiness, a distinct practice popular in India as a part of its Cultural tradition as has been expressed through the Sanskrit *shloka*.

Lokah Samastah Sukhinobhavantu

(May all beings everywhere be happy.)

It is believed that the chanting of invocation is aural mediation and a vibratory healing. It grants peace and calm to the listeners. The vibration created by the invocation radiates and disperses in all directions to create an atmosphere of love, peace and healing. The linguistic sound reverberates through the body and nourishes the soul, a process which surpasses logical explanation. The distinct feature of these invocations is that rising above the narrow mentalities of caste, clan or tribe the

welfare of every human being is wished for. There after the assistant puts questions to which the chief answer thus explaining and unraveling the theme and events of the epic. The audience also puts questions to the Bhopa during the performance. There are interludes when the Bhopas interact with the audience. The Bhopas sometimes interjects the performances with jokes and banter with the audience. In answering them the Bhopa not only builds the plot of the narrative but also philosophize by building his perception of worldly entities through the epic. To make the performance more colloquial a *hunkariyaa* (a spectator cum respondent) is appointed from amongst the audience, who converses with the singer, praises the performance and gives his pointed comments. His presence and participation makes the performance more exciting. He actively participates in the narration by repeating the last phrase uttered by Bhopa at regular intervals. He also communicates the alertness of audience by uttering *Khamma* or *Hukum* (many greetings/ many blessings). The dialogic form also offers an opportunity to the Bhopa to express his pointed views on the contemporary social issues and problems confronting the society. This is how the narration gains momentum and continues till the Bhopa pauses for a while which signifies the completion of one major part, during such pauses devotees offer donations and the assistant Bhopa blows the conch shell as a mark of recognition to each donor. The rendering of the narration is highly stylized and formulistic. The text of 4000 lines is divided into many episodes has the *parvaros* and the *sayls*. The narration of the complete texts requires full five nights of 8 hours duration each. The narration of the epic is prosimetric. The verse section known as *gavs* consists of many couplets known as *karis*. *Gavs* are usually sung by female

singers i.e. Bhopis. *Arthavs* are the prose part of the narration and are narrated in high pitched voice by the Bhopas.

The ambidextrous Bhopa who can sing, dance play *jantar*, remember the songs, narrate events of the epic, has ability to improvise them, has modulated voice, excels in kinesic expression, possess good sense of humour and presence mind, and is witty in answering the question put to him by the audiences, excels in this narrative art. Since the narration of phad involves singing hymns, dancing, playing on *jantar*, *maskari* (mimicry) etc., it is a wholesome entertainment and it attracts people of all classes, categories and age groups. There is a clear cut demarcation of audience on the basis of their social belongingness. They assemble in clusters of touchable-untouchable, men -women and so on. It is interesting to note that the Bhopas do not perform for communities involved in animal killing such as Meghwals and Chamars, this signifies social isolation of communities involved in animal killings. The composition of audience substantiates that Rayika or Regari, a cattle rearing and peasant community forms the major bulk of audience for Pabuji is their presiding deity. Although belonging to nobility Pabuji has attained the focal point in the faith of this community which occupies a low social status. The apparent reason is that being a saviour of cattle which is the lifeline of Rayika community he attains this stature.

Phad performances are usually held during winter. The long wintry night broaden the temporal scope of the performance. Moreover during winters, the people are

comparatively at leisure after reaping the *kharif* (monsoon crops) harvest. In addition to this the economic dimension of choosing this time is that people donate open heartedly at this time of year as they have in their hands the income from the harvest to spend on. The rainy season is period of dormancy for phad narration for it is believed that the deities are in slumber during this season. The probable reason for this might be that because Bhopas are wandering minstrels the rainy season makes the itinerary troublesome. Moreover people at this time are busy in agricultural activities.

Phad or the painted scroll is a divine cloth, which is a living temple of their deity for the devotees. Phad forms the part of mytic heritage of Pabuji epic as the Bhopas believe that they have inherited the phad and the attire they put on during the narration from their Bhil ancestors Chandoji and Dheboji, the courtiers of Pabuji. It is believed that Pabuji gave the cloth on his palanquin to Chandoji and Dheboji before his ascension to heaven. It is for this reason that these scrolls are as ascribed divine attributes and people claim that the deity visits the scroll. It is significant to quote Priyanka Mathur in this regard, who alludes to Prof. Anna Dallapiccola:

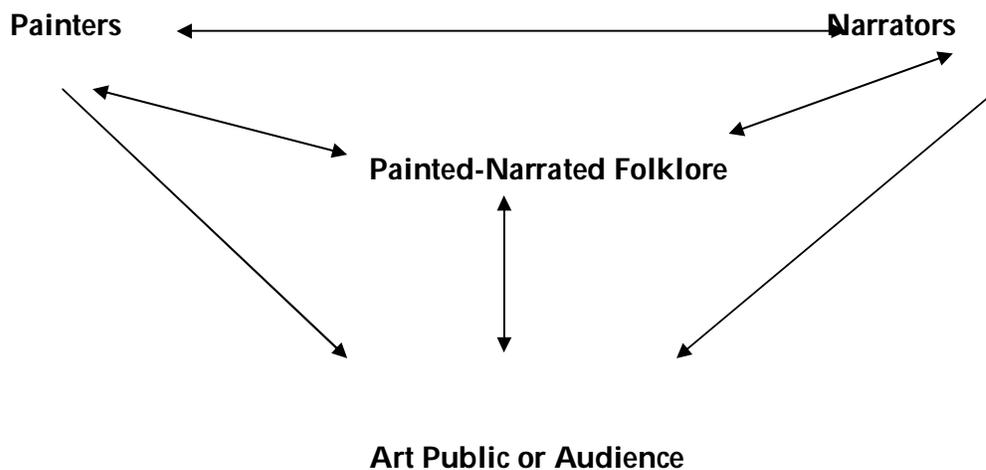
Prof. Anna Dallapiccola noted similarly that people who listen to stories recited by chitrakatha and view images of their local deities depicted on scrolls states that they get the benefit of Darshan that is the spiritual feeling of the presence of divine deity while looking at the image physically at the same time, unifying with it. (2015, p.97)

The phads of Pabuji and Devnarayan are usually 15 feet and 30 feet in length and 5 feet in breadth respectively. The chronicling characters based on historical and spiritual themes are painted in vibrant colours. The phads were traditionally painted with natural colours prepared from gum, powdered earthen colour, water, indigo or vegetable colours because the colour of these dyes are fast and long lasting. A *kachcha* (rough) base is prepared with *geru* (ochre) and figures are sketched. A virgin girl marks the first stroke of brush which symbolizes the purity of the scroll. A specific pattern is used in dying the phad. Only one colour is used at a time starting with orange yellow followed by brown, green, red and finally black. The colours used for various objects are almost fixed. For limbs and torso orange, yellow for ornaments, grey for structures, blue for water green for vegetation red for dresses and all outlines are marked with black to enhance the figure. Each colour has its association or symbolic significance. The colours used in phad painting therefore complement and enhance the verbal narrative. The colour conventions also serve as pointers to the moral and the physical identity of a character. The demons are dark, the deities' fair, lower caste/class/tribes are also given darker complexion and green is used to represent Muslim identity. In traditional phads the use of colours is fixed and the painters seldom experiment with colours. The figures in the phad do not face the audience; rather they face each other giving logic to the story depicted. The scale of the figure depends on the social status of the character represented and the role it plays in the story. The deity or the protagonist being tied with the focal point of the narrative is larger in size and is centrally located. According to the demand of the narrative various Gods and Goddess, human figures, flora and fauna

are painted in phad. Phad painting depicts the epic/legend in a sequential manner scene by scene/event by event with utmost clarity. The nuances of each scene are elaborated by the narrator Bhopa. It is remarkable to note that the Bhopas do not use phad scroll as a pneumatic device but use it as a backdrop to intensify the emotions of the narrative. Illuminated by the light from the lamp held by the assistant Bhopa each scene comes alive with the narration and the mesmerized audience savories the dramatic details of the epic legend. The narration continues throughout the night and culminates at dawn with the recitation of the last *lura*. Thereafter the phad is folded at daytime and kept vertically against the wall in a temple or in the house. Even when not in use it is worshipped thrice a day at dawn, noon and dusk by singing hymns. When a phad scroll ceases its utility by getting torn, damaged or the colours of the figures fade, it is ritualistically immersed in the holy waters of the Pushkarlake, the ceremony of decommissioning a phad is known as *Thandi Karana*. Traditionally used scrolls were never sold since they were considered to be the abode of the deity himself. This practice has resulted in non availability of the ancient phad scrolls for the purpose of study and research. The other aspect of this practice is that the conglomeration of Bhopas at the Pushkar Lake offers them an opportunity to interact with each other and exchange ideas and enrich themselves.

The study of this narrative art form offers an opportunity to probe into the inter relationship between the verbal and the visual art form, between the oral and the painted folklore and between the painters and the narrations of this art. It further helps in exploring how both art forms complement each other in building an epic

narrative. O.P. Joshi points out that, the study of folk narrative should include the study of related artifacts and crafts and the social groups involved. He accordingly suggests a methodological model for the study of phad which involves three specific social structures, i.e. the painter, the narrator, and the art public or the audience, which is as shown in the diagram.(1976, p.10)



The process of phad narration helps to build a social network of the people, which involves the painters, the singer Bhopa, the sponsoring patron and the audience who are the consumers of the art form. This web of social interactions forms the art phenomenon because it determines the form of art. The improvisation of the art depends upon the interactions between the narrator and the audience. Based on the demand of the audience, the narrator suggests the required changes to the painters who in turn incorporate them in their later works.

The Bhopa narrator regards the Chippha painter as his *guru* (teacher) and offers his *guru dakshina* (fees) after the accomplishment of the task while the painter paints the

phad under the supervision of the client Bhopa. They therefore reciprocate reverence to each other. This is how they attain a higher level of camaraderie in their social interaction. Both the *yajman* (patron) and the Bhopa are present on the day of initiation of the painting which takes place on an auspicious day.

It is noteworthy that finally when the phad scroll is complete, the painter puts his signature on it before handing it over to the Bhopa and his patron. Name of Bhopa and patron are also added on the scroll and the date is marked. This signifies a mutual unity between them. Finally the painter paints the pupil in the socket of the god's eye signifying the breathing of life into the godly figure. This marks the enlivening of the painted scroll. It becomes more than a scroll- a temple, a shrine, and abode of the deity. The initiation or the first performance of the phad is held at the patron's house. All his friends, relatives and family members assemble for the same and the performance i.e. *phadbanchana* is followed by a grand feast. Hence, it is more than a verbal-visual narration-a ritual, a ceremony, a prayer, a social phenomenon and much more in which the narrator, the painter (in absentia) and the audience (patron, his family, relations and friends) reciprocate influences and define an art phenomenon.

The Bhopas perform the phad narration as a divine vocation traditionally handed over to them as ancestral legacy which they intend to handover to their future generation as a cultural heritage. Thus they have substantially contributed in keeping the institution of the phad alive for the last seven centuries. Unfortunately

after independence they lost the loyal patronage. The advent of photography and printing press added oil to the already troubled water. Unemployment forced them to give up the ancestral occupation. But the sudden flooding in of foreign tourist in India turned out to be a panacea for this dying art. The interest of foreign tourist raised its demand consequently the interest of painters and narrators revived. O.P. Joshi states, "The par paintings have now become popular with the tourists and the nouveaux riches; this has added a new dimension to their traditional use." (1976, p.8)

On the other hand these changes led to the commercialization of the otherwise ritualistic art. The commercialisation or secularisation of phad also brought about drastic changes in the traditional themes, style, colour pattern and size of the painted scroll. The mythological and religious themes were replaced with historical and secular themes. The size decrease because instead of painting the series of paintings the painters focused on a particular scene from larger phad. These handy manageable mini phads also known as *phadake* were fit to be decorated in the drawing soon. Cheaper synthetic colours replaced the dearer natural ones and hard brushes were substituted with factory made. The former painters of folklore were now dexterous commercial craftsmen. Most importantly the colours, design and composition because the central point of the phad scrolls and theme and content were marginalised. The traditional kinds of phad scrolls became costlier and were beyond the purchasing power of the Bhopas who had to sell their used scrolls to obtain the new ones. This practice caused a change in the very fabric of the ritual

which demanded the used scroll to be immersed in the Pushkar Lake. Gradually the traditional hard bound ritualistic form of narration was getting commercialised. Even the narration renderings have undergone significant changes. The current trend of narration is marked by many intermissions for taking tea, singing *bhajans*(hymns)and sometimes even the popular film music is studded in it to make it more entertaining. But the consolatory fact is that despite all the odds, obstacles and limitations there are still some devoted and dedicated painter and narrators who are burning the midnight oil to keep this tradition alive in its original contour.

Even in today's digitalized world with immensely popular means of mass communication at our easy access, phad narrative is very popular in rural areas, as a testimony of folk's faith in cultic powers of folk deities. Moreover its performance advocates the central concept of Indian culture which finds expression in *Rig-Veda*:

'BahujanaSukhayabahujanahitaya cha'

(Welfare of the many, the happiness of the many.)

To conclude it can be asserted that phad narration is a sort of communication between the deity and the devotee which is initiated through the channel of the Bhopa, who communicates the religious ideas in a simplistic, lively and entertaining manner so that the audiences are left spell bound. Bhopas are thus the Elysian folk singers who have shouldered the responsibility of promoting the solidarity in the society and preserving the unique religio-cultural narrative tradition of '*phadbanchana*' which has won Rajasthan international acclaim.

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