
**CELEBRATING NATURE, HEAVEN AND LIFE THROUGH MEMORY: PHAD
AND MADHUBANI PAINTINGS**

Dr. Niranjan Kulkarni

**Head, Dept. of History (UG & PG), Hon. Shri. Annasaheb Dange Arts, Commerce and Science
College, Hatkanangale.**



INTRODUCTION :

Art separates human being from other species. Along with its creation, the appreciation of art is the hallmark of any culture. Fortunately, India has a rich cultural heritage. Right from the Mesolithic Cave art to the modern day's abstract art; Indian people have contributed tremendously in this sphere of expression. Jumping up to Medieval (with its origin in early) period, we have regions of India which have their own characteristic painting styles, viz. *Phad* (Rajasthan), *Pithora* (Gujarat), *Vaarli* (Maharashtra), *Madhubani* and

Manjusha (Bihar), *Pattachitra* (Orissa) etc.

The Medieval period was a typical feudal one with *Badshahas* and *Nababs* at their heads. The administration was centered on the collection of taxes, only. For the rest of the year the people were left to their fates. Hence, sub-feudalization (i.e. importance of local chieftains and patriarchy in family), landlocking and local aspirations were the consequent result. The growing popularity of devotional cults was another feature of this period. Strong patriarchy, fueled with obedience and exploitation was the base of the society. That was the period of local Gods and local lords! Devotion and obedience were the virtues!! Hence, the regional paintings received the subject matter and details from such context.

In this article, I have selected the *Phad* and *Madhubani* paintings to understand them more. At the outset, we would have a general understanding of the paintings and people involved in it, both from artist and audience sides. Then, we would understand the technical aspect of the painting. In the end, we would know the contemporary situation in which these paintings are surviving.

PHAD PAINTINGS:

Phad (scroll/Fold) painting depicts story of folk Gods Pabuji and, somewhere Devnarayana on a long rectangular cloth. Pabuji is considered as son of Rathod Rajput king and celestial nymph. Devnarayana (of Gurjar caste) is perceived as an incarnation of Vishnu. The devotees belong to *Rabari*-a nomadic pastoral community. These paintings are like 'mobile-temples' carried by the *Bhopa* family. The *Bhopas* are the bard-priests, belong to Nayak caste (sub-group of Eastern Rajput Bhil tribe) who are hailed from Pabusar (Shekhavati). These *Phads* become 'live' by the performance and story telling of *Phad* by the *Bhopa* family. On the occasion of festivities and, mostly, during the distress, sickness, evil possession; they were called by devotee to perform *Phad*.

It runs for the whole night! The cluster of 10 villages are assigned to a specific family of *Bhopa* and *Bhopi*, to perform *Phad*.

The hero of the *Phad*, i.e. Pabuji is perceived as 14th century local ruler of Kulu (Rajasthan). His life was eventful with various kinds of miracles and surprises, like, his birth from celestial nymph (*Kesar Pari*), the return of nymph after 12 years in the form of black mare (*Kesar Kalami*) etc, his attack of Mirza Khan and saving cattle, his defense of the honor of women-folk, marriage of Gogaji etc. However, it is the marriage of Pabuji which is mostly the center part of the *Phad* painting.

We can't stretch the historicity of *Phad* paintings before Early Medieval period. However, according to Bhandari, "The tradition of narrating legends with visual aid (can be found) ...Bhagvatisutra (3rd c. AD), Mudrarakshasa (4th c. AD)....". Thus, such painting style, in general have a long history.

This is the regional painting style of Rajasthan. More specifically, we can witness its creation and its performance in the region of Shekhavati, Bhilwada and desert area of Marwad. The hero of the painting (Pabuji) hailed from Kulu; his bard-priests hailed from Pabusar, both in Shekhavati; the paintings were created in the Shahapur, Bhilwada region; the audience from the desert of Marwad region.

The painting of *Phad* is not mere an art form i.e. painting. It's an important part of a religious performance. The *Phad* of Pabuji is 15 feet long (30 in case of Devnarayan*Phad*), rectangular cotton scrolls where the life and exploits of folk God Pabuji are painted in various sections. Generally, Pabuji is painted in center and the gods from "Great tradition" are depicted at the top level of the *Phad*.

Only Joshi family (of Chipa caste) is commissioned the task of the painting the *Phad*. The priest-performer (*Bhopa*), along with his wife (*Bhopi*) tells the story of Pabuji to the audience. The performance starts at the Sun set and concludes in the dawn.

The entire performance of *Phad* combined with various type of creativity, i.e. a. the painting of *Phad* (by Joshi family), b. singing the poetic part (*Gav*) of story (*Bhopi*), c. reciting the prose (*Arthavs*) part of the story (*Bhopa*), d. enacting various events with physical movements (*Bhopa*), the musical support (*Bhopa* and other). So, the entire part is a beautiful combination of painting, music, singing, dancing, acting with a devotion as a common thread!

The audience basically belongs to *Rabari* caste. They follow nomadic pastoralism as their lifestyle. Hence, a temple in a stable place mismatches with their life. Thus, *Phad* works as a 'mobile-temple' for these devotees. *Bhopa* and *Bhopi* belong to the scheduled tribe. They are priests and the nomadic storytellers/performers of *Phad*. The story of Pabuji has various sources, among which the *Khyata* of Muhato Nainasi is an important one. Its name is *Vata Pabujiri* which contains 4000 lines. The complete performance takes nearly five nights! According to various scholars the performers "...make only cursory reference to the scenes of the *Phad*" and mostly give stress on contemporary issues and the problems in hand.

The performance starts in the evening and runs till dawn. It is quite systematic with exact sequence, called as *Phad Vacno*. During the performance, the *Bhopa* performs and indicates the part of the story by pointing out the stick to that specific section of the *Phad*. He is clad in long red dress (*Baga*). When, *Bhopi* sings (*Gavs*), she lights that section of the *Phad* with the lamp in her hand. During the singing of *Bhopi*, the *Bhopa* plays *Ravanhatta*, a string instrument. Besides, he also enacts the events by using the whole stage in tune with the singing of *Bhopi*. He also narrates in prose (*Arthavs*).

Elizabeth Wickett, in her project, carefully observed the role of *Bhopi* in such performances. According to her, it is *Bhopi* who is the main singer of the duo. The *Bhopa* only introduces and enact the act. 70% of the singing is done by the *Bhopi* only. Thus, she understands the role of *Bhopi* as "presentation of self" and "perceptions of self".

Generally, the *Bhopa* assigns the task of *Phad*-painting to the Joshis. The Joshis of Shahapur is only one family which, since many generations, are commissioned of this art. The art passes through generations in the members of the family. It should be noted that daughters were not trained in this art because, after their marriage they would become member of another family. Hence, to retain the art in their family; along with male; the daughters-in-law were trained!

Now, let us understand the technical aspect of *Phad* painting.

After the commissioning of painting; the handmade coarse cotton cloth is selected as canvas. After soaking it overnight in the water; it is starched with wheat and rice flour. Then it is polished with moonstone. called as *Mohra*. With the first stroke of *Svastika* (in yellow) by a virgin girl (from the same family or higher castes) the painting gets started. This initial ritual is called as *Chanka*. Then, the main artist sketches the entire plan of painting in outlines. It is called as *Chakanaor Naksha banana*. It is done in light yellow color. It is also called as *Alekhanaor Ukerna*.

All the colors are natural color, made by using minerals and plants where every color has its own destination. Light yellow (from *Hartaal*) is for figures and structures, Orange/saffron (*sindur* plus *hartaal*) is to paint faces and flesh, Yellow (*Hartaal*) for ornaments, Red (*sindur*) for royal clothing, blue (*indigo*) for water and curtains, Brown for architectural design, Black (lamp soot/burnt coconut shell) for the outline etc. The Black color is used at the last for borders. The colors are mixed with gum and water.

The application of color in the *Phad* is a peculiar one. Each color is given for only one at a time; throughout the painting. And there is a sequence like, saffron, yellow, green, brown and red. The painting starts with coloring the faces, called as *Mundo bharano*. After the completion of painting the artist sign below the image of main deity. In the end, the pupils/eyes of Pabuji or main hero are drawn. At this time, it is perceived that the Pabuji has come to life. Then, nobody can touch the painting or sit on that.

The main **subjectmatter** is the story of Pabuji. The story is completely folk and embedded, cherished in folk memory. Though there are some sprinkling similarities with Ramayana; the nature of story is maintained as the folk only. The *Phad* of Pabuji, includes all his heroic deeds in various sections on the *Phad*. Similarly, there is another *Phad* of Devnarayana. He is also a folk deity; but perceived as the incarnation of Vishnu. Upward mobility is more witnessed in the *Phad* of Devnarayana.

The *Phad* is maintained by the *Bhopas*. However, when it gets worn a ritual (*tandakarna*) is performed which is quite similar to the *Antyeshti* of a Hindu corpse. The ashes of burnt *Phad* is then poured in the Pushkar lake.

Wickett also comments that the *Phad* is threatened by the growth of Television, collapse of traditional ways of pastoralism, encroachments upon pasture land, growing interest in urban, cash-based livelihood etc. However, the demands of tourism industry came up as boom to them. Such challenges and new opportunities provided way to change in the *Phad* painting.

It is Shree Lal Joshi who decided to make *changes* in the tradition of *Phad* painting. First of all, he opened the training to the aspirant artists from any castes or parts of India. Subsequently, he started a school (Joshi Kala Kunj-1960) and kept the admissions open to all. Now, the school is renamed as 'Chitrashala'. As we know, the state of Rajasthan is a tourist hub of the world. Hence,

keeping an eye on the market economy; especially the tourism industry, the artists have made many changes. First of all, the artists do not wait for the commissioning from *Bhopa* to paint *Phad*. Besides, they also do not go for 15 feet long painting. Instead, they select small sections/exploits/events from the paintings and sell them to the tourist. As the artists, instead of the changes; retain the same traditional flare in the painting, they are surrounded by the flocks of tourists. Accordingly, now a days, they, in *Phad*-style, create paintings with new subject matter, like, image of Ganesh, Radha-Krishna, Child Krishna and its exploits, *Satynarayanakatha* etc. The most interesting part is, now the artists like Kalyan Joshi (of 30th generation), through collaboration with Pennsylvania University, have created animated stories of Pabuji!

Such overall changes against the backdrop of loss of patronage and growing tourist economy; have kept the traditional painting style of *Phad*-alive!

MADHUBANI PAINTING

Madhubani painting is a regional painting style of Bihar. It is mostly a ritual wall painting. Since many generations it is created in the area of *Mithila* region of north Bihar, in district. *Madhubani*. Hence, it is called *Madhubani* at the same time the '*Mithila*' painting. As, the geographical region of the painting is unique and locked, it has received the GI (Geographical Indicator) status. The paintings are done by the women only. Women from villages like Jitwarpur, Ranti, Rasidpur, Bacchi, Harinagar, Leheriagunj, Rajangarh etc. still follow the tradition of *Madhubani* painting. Generally, major events of life cycle are celebrated by paintings, like, birth, *upanayana*, marriage etc. Besides, they are made during the festivities, like, *Holi*, *Surya Shasti*, *Kali Puja*, *Durga Puja*.

The painters perceive its origin in the times of Ramayana. During the marriage ceremony of Rama and Sita; King Janaka invoked the people of Mithila to celebrate the ceremony by creating the paintings on their walls. The style is also mentioned in the tantric text of one poet Vidyapati of 12th century. With due respect to their tradition, the actual references can be received from the Medieval period, only. Under the rule of Karnatas, Oinavaras, Khandavala *Madhubani* received patronage and cognizance. The style is mentioned in one 14th century local text. Then, after buried in the dusts for centuries; with the findings and publication by Archer in 'Marg' (1949), *Madhubani* paintings emerged from the ashes of time and left the world in wonders. Due to encouragement from Bhaskar Kulkarni (commissioned by the then Board of Handicraft), for commercial sale, the artists were encouraged to shift to handmade paper. Since, many decades, the artists have received many prestigious awards like National Awards, Bihar Awards etc. Sita Devi (of Jitwarpur) and her painting of 'Radha-Krishna and Gopi' is considered as 'iconic' painting. The area is a pilgrimage for art-historians, scholars, painters and art connoisseur across the globe. Foreigners like Erika Moser (Germany), Yves Vequaud (France) helped the artists to go worldwide. Tokio Hasegawa (Japan), being tremendously inspired by the style; established Mithila Museum in Japan. By adhering to changes according to the demands of modern days; *Madhubani* has become a vibrant and beautiful folk-style of Indian regional paintings. Now, the elites and socialites adorn their wall with the *Madhubani* decors.

Coming to the technical aspects of the paintings, the *Madhubani* paintings can be classified in four categories, viz. *Kachani*, *Bharani*, *Godana* and Tantrik (*Kohabar*). The *Kachani* painting is an art of lines-outlines which mostly in monochromes. It is mostly done by Kayastha women. The Brahmin women create *Bharani*. Here, the figures are 'filled' up with vibrant colors. Generally, the Brahmana artists use bright red and yellow colors. The stories from *Bhagvat Purana* is the basic

repository of these artists. Gods and Goddesses appear on *Kachani* and *Bharani* styles. Then, the *Godana*, like tattoo, primarily created by Dalit women. Concentric circles and the bands of horizontal lines are the highlight of these paintings. Generally, king Shailesha, Rahu and daily life, symbols are painted in *Godana*.

Kohbar is a special painting which is drawn with a specific objective of 'fertility'. It is painted on the south-east wall of nuptial chamber of newly-wed couple. The south-eastern wall is chosen because it is believed that the *Shukra* (Venus-God of love) resides at that corner. It is expected that the newly-wed couple should live here and follow celibacy for three nights. Then, the marriage is consummated on the fourth day. Hence, all the responsible factors for the fertility can be seen symbolically in *Kohbar* painting viz. bamboo tree (male), lotus (female), pot (fertility), mat (the place of the expectation of progeny), ideal couple of Shiva-Parvati etc.

Aripana (*Alpana* in Bengali) is another category of *Madhubani* painting. It is created during various *samskara*; however, also created during festivities, like, *upanayana*, marriage, banyan-worship, *Naag-panchami* etc. The artist of *aripana* is called as *aripanadenihari*. It is made on the floor of the courtyard or inside of home. It is a kind of *Rangavali*, created with the mixture of water and rice-powder (*pithara*). Besides, red, green, yellow, black colors are also used.

Along with depicting deities like Shiva-Parvati, Radha-Krishna, Vishnu-Lakshmi (to emphasize the love in couple); the designs are mainly *tantric* in objectives which comprised of *mandala* and *vrata mandala*. These are created to invoke nature's energies. However, the major designing pattern of *aripana* is *sarvatobhadra*. It is drawn near Tulasi plant; having two triangles in opposite direction. This is perceived as the source of all other *mandalas*. It is created, in the courtyard of Brahmins and Kayasthas; during Tulasi worship. The *ashtadala* (eight-petalled Lotus), created during Durga worship. Every petal of the lotus is drawn with auspicious symbol, like conch shell, sword etc. Then, other patterns include *saddala*, *daspata*, *madhu-sravani* etc.

Generally, before the *Madhubani* painting, the walls are prepared, at first with cow dung and then white-wash. They use natural colors like lamp soot, burnt barley seeds (for black), powdered rice (white), turmeric, *singar*/Jasmin flower (yellow), *palash* flower (orange), leaves of apple/*bel* tree (green), seeds of *Sikkar* berry and indigo (blue), *Kusum* flower (red), bark of pipal (pink/saffron). Fingers, bamboo twigs, brushes, nib pens, matchsticks are tools to draw painting. Bamboo twigs used for outlining. The twigs, tied with a cloth (*pihua*) used for color-filling. Symbols are important part of the paintings, like, Turtle (union), Fish (Fertility), Goose/Peacock (welfare), Lotus (female), Bamboo tree (Male), Elephant (royalty), Sun-Moon/*Banyan* tree (long life), etc.

In the home, the paintings are done in *Ghosain-ba-ghara* (room of family deity, having *sarovarchitra*), *Kohabara-ghar* (nuptial chamber with paintings of symbols depicting union and fertility, *nayana yoginis*) and *kohabaraghara ka koniyana* (verandha of nuptial chamber, having paintings of rural scenes).

Madhubani is one of the strong mediums of expression of women in patriarchal-feudal Bihar. Hence, the issues of domestic violence, women's health, religious violence get voice through the paintings. The art travels through generations from mother to daughter. At the time of wedding, the girl receives the design on paper. She carries it to her home of in-laws; there, she added her own design.

The paintings are two-dimensional; mostly the figures are in profile. Use of double lines for outlines is the highlight of this painting. The figures are abstract and linear. The eyes are big and without eyelashes. Only one eye is shown clearly. The nose is slanting. The hands are short,

comparatively, the legs are elongated. The woman figures are with plated hair and colorful traditional attire. Not a single space is retained empty, it is filled with floral designs. The borders are beautified with floral designs.

Surrounding ecology, epics, folk stories and own lives are the repository of *Madhubani* paintings. Nature, heaven, memory and life are the pillars that hold these paintings. Buddheshwar, Jutki Malini, Reshma, Raja Shailesh are heroes/kings who are worshipped like Gods. Then, Gods from "great tradition" Shiva-Parvati, Krishna-Radha, Ganesh, Durga are also here. Sun, Moon, *tulasi* are profusely used.

Now, *Madhubani* paintings is going through many changes. Centers like Kalakriti (Darbhanga); Vaidehi, Benipatti (*Madhubani*); Gram Vikas Parishad (Ranti) have kept the art alive. Due to recognition of GI, *Madhubani* has attracted the attention of art lovers from all over the world. To meet the demands of the buyers, the *Madhubani* artists are making paintings on portable objects or canvases. Now we can enjoy *Madhubani* paintings on saris, bedcovers, curtains, coffee mugs, note-book covers etc. It also has become an integral part of the interior decoration.

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