

“Phadchitra of Rajasthan: Significant contribution of women artists among the unique art forms”

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Abstract: *Phadchitra* (scroll painting) is the peculiar art form of *Bhilwara*, Rajasthan. *Phad* is the combination of visual and oral narratives. People from the *Joshi* families are the painters, *Bhopa* and *Bhopi* (professional singer) are the narrators of *Phadchitra*. It had been a male dominated artwork from ages. It was the culture in the *Joshi* families that *Phadchitra* technique will be taught to male members only because this is peculiar technique and should not go in one another families, as daughters will go in other families after marriage. Intention was to maintain the uniqueness of *Phadchitra*. Daughters and Daughter-in-laws used to help in preparation of colors and other pre-production jobs but not into core painting work, although the very first stroke of the painting was supposed to be done by a virgin girl. Then in the coming years gradually this art form came into the category of endangered folk art because very limited practitioners were left. Then *Padma shri Shree Lal Joshi ji* came up with the idea to teach it to other communities, including girls and women. Now female members are also learning *Phadchitra* painting and teaching it to others to keep this art form alive. From narrative point of view *Bhopi* (female narrator) plays as important a role as *Bhopa* (male narrator). *Bhopa* plays the *Jantar* or *Ravanhattha* (a violin type of musical instrument) and *Bhopi* illuminates the particular plot on *Phad* scroll with the oil lamp in *Pabuji ki Phad*. *Bhopi* sings and dances along with *Bhopa* to elaborate the stories of local deities in front of the audience. Focus is there on the significant contribution of women artists/artistes in *Phadchitra* of Rajasthan, whether it is painting part or performance. It is meaningful in retaining its existence for future generations.

Keywords: *Phadchitra*, Narration, Women artists, *Bhopa*, *Bhopi* and Indian folk art.

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I. Introduction:

Phadchitra or *Phad* painting is the hand-painted screen which is a religious and folk scroll painting, practiced in *Shahpura*, *Bhilwara* district, Rajasthan. Making painting on ‘*Phad*’ (long piece of cloth) makes it ‘*Phadchitra*’. Traditional scroll painters sell their scrolls to the professional narrators (*Bhopa/Bhopi*). It is so popular because it is being accompanied by oral tradition. *Bhopa* and *Bhopi*, a pair of balladeers, usually a priest and his wife, perform an elaborated song-and-dance, who sings the subject depicted on the scroll paintings. Commonly the roles of rural women in Rajasthan remains unnoticed and their deeds are seldom perceptible, if ever recognized, it is only folk arts, folk songs and narratives. Although Indian government provides immense support to low caste minority people in Rajasthan but because of ignorance, being nomadic and lack of adaptability with modern trends female narrators don’t receive proper recognition which they truly deserve. Whether it is the matter of *Phad* painting or *Phad*’s oral narration in both the medium role of women artists/artistes is crucial.

***Phadchitra* of Rajasthan:**

“A devotional mural storyboard painted on cloth.”

Phadchitra (scroll paintings) is the peculiar art form of *Shahpura*, *Bhilwara*, Rajasthan. *Phadis* a type of scroll paintings in which *Chitrakar* uses natural colors. Making the scroll is the very lengthy and painstaking process. In these paintings there are particular rules of composition, main hero of the story will be drawn exactly in the center and hero’s face will be towards right and rest of the plots of stories will be drawn around the main hero but smaller in size and the narration will be linear. These artworks are in the form of rolls on the fabric, heavy scrolls are purchased and carried by the story teller called as *Bhopa*. *Phad* paintings are part of storytelling practice of contemporary Rajasthan, where a small number of picture showmen who follow this caste-based occupation can still be found. They travel from one place to another with their “*Ravanhattha*”, or ‘*Jantar*’ a two-string violin like instrument, using *Phad* painting as visual aid. They perform a dramatic public presentation of the local deities like *Devnarayan ji*, *Pabu ji Rathore*, *Goga ji*, *Narikunjar*, *Panchatva ka Ghoda*, *Dhola-Maaru*,

Gan-gaur, Hadi Rani, Lord Krishna, Prithviraj Chaohan, Rani Padmini like stories from the *Ramayana, Hanuman Chalisa* and other mythological tales. Each painting depicts a different episode or plot of biography tales of local heroes in folk manner. *Phad* is supposed to unfold after sunset, in the alignment with the whole night musical presentation. Except Rajasthan hardly there are one or two places where this folk art is still alive.

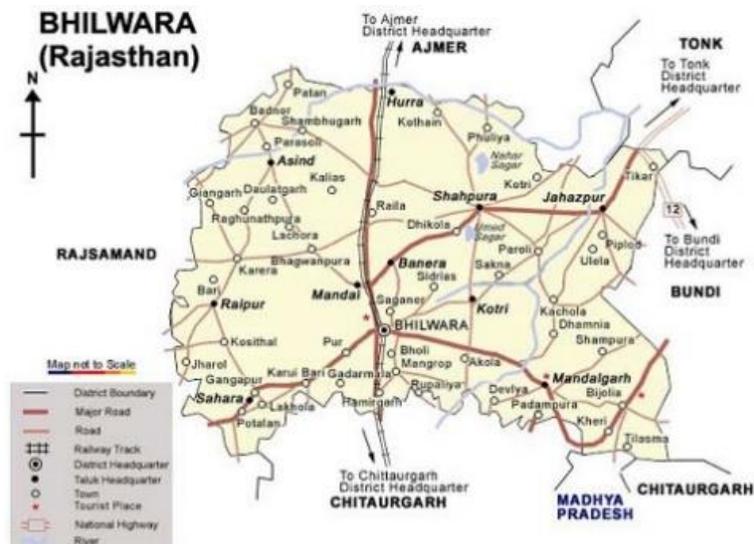


Figure 1 Map of Bhilwara district, Rajasthan Image: www.connectrajasthan.com



Figure 2 Phadchitra of Pabu ji Rathore Image: Dr. Shraddha Shukla (2013)

Contribution of women artist in Phadchitra painting:

For Phadchitra painting always natural colors are used, these colors are extracted from natural elements and to make them usable for painting there is a long process. Many colors are extracted from various types of stones, flowers and eatables etc. Preparation of proper color is also very necessary, if colors will be imperfect to apply, artist can't get desirable results in painting. Daughters and Daughter-in-laws used to help in preparation of colors and other pre-production jobs but not into core painting work. There is the ritual that the first stroke of the painting should be applied by a virgin girl, as this is the religious painting and will be used in offering prayer to deities. It is a belief in Joshi community that the first stroke of the painting should be put by a young virgin girl (*Kanya*). Virgin young girls are like goddess. If a young girl or goddess starts the painting, the blessings of the goddess will there with the artist and completion of Phad painting will successful.

Phadchitra painting was not an art to teach female members of family:

It had been a male dominated artwork since beginning. It was the culture in the Joshi families that *Phadchitra* painting technique will be taught to male members only because this is peculiar technique and should not go in one another families as daughters will go in other families after marriage, intention was to maintain the uniqueness of *Phadchitra*. Daughters used to help in pre-production jobs only. There was the belief that *Phad* painting is very auspicious so while painting bodily purity is also important, during the period of menstruation ladies shouldn't touch the auspicious *Phad*. Although *Phadchitra* which are supposed to be used by *Bhopa* for story telling is approximately 30 feet long and five feet wide, so artists need to sit on the scroll for painting work, they complete the whole painting and make eyeball in last and there is the belief that when they make the eyeballs in the painting it becomes live. There are many social taboos for women in the society, not indulge women in the painting work was somehow a taboo only because people didn't have any rational reason why women shouldn't be in the painting work. Gradually time is changing women are also allowed to get into the painting work. There are many women and girls in Bhilwara district who are learning *Phadchitra* painting.

Revolution for teaching *Phadchitra* painting to the women of the society:

Phad painting was not task for the females of the society, then gradually in the coming years this art form came into the category of endangered folk arts because very limited practitioners were left. Then *Padmashri Shree Lal Joshi ji* came up with the idea to teach it to other communities, including girls and women. Earlier daughters were not taught the art which is also changing. 21 year-old daughter is also making *phad* paintings. Now female members are learning *Phadchitra* painting and teaching it to others to keep this art form alive. Many skilled women artists are going out of *Bhilwara* district and in other states also to share their learning with other people to keep this unique art form alive. The variety of the work has been seen, new experiments are taking place, new stories are added. These artists have started making painting as per the need of clients, whatever topic or story clients ask, artists make *phad* painting on them.

***Parwati Devi Joshi* the first woman *Phadchitra* artist:**

Parwati Devi Joshi is the first female artist of *Phadchitra*. On 26 July, 1963 she was born in *Gangapur* Village, *Bhilwara*, Rajasthan. Her parents were in clothes business. After getting married in Joshi family she started learning *Phadchitra* paintings. At that point of time, it was the culture in Joshi family that they will teach *Phad* painting to male members only. *Kanhaiya Laal Joshi*, husband of *Parwati Devi*, taught her The *Phad* painting technique. All the family members and relatives were strongly unhappy, *Parwati Devi ji* with family left their home in *Bhilwara* village and shifted to Jaipur. *Parwati Devi* Joshi learned this art form in Jaipur and became the first female artist of *Phadchitra*. In the conversation with *Parwati Devi*, she told that her husband gave her immense support in her art practice. In conversation with her son *Lokesh Joshi*, he said that his mother taught him this art, for him *Parwati devi* is his mother and teacher both. She received two awards one is Jaipur state level award another *Bhilwara* district level award. She experiments with new subjects like *Hanuman chalisa* (liturgy), *Durga chalisa*, *Maharana Pratap* and many contemporary topics and makes *Phad* painting as per the requirement of various clients. Now she goes to different places and educational institutions to take workshops, she is educating other girls and women.



Figure3 *Parwati Devi Joshi* painting the *Phadchitra* of *Pabu ji Rathore*, **Image:** Dr. Shraddha Shukla (2013)



Figure 4 Newspaper cutting Image: Collection of Parwati Devi Joshi

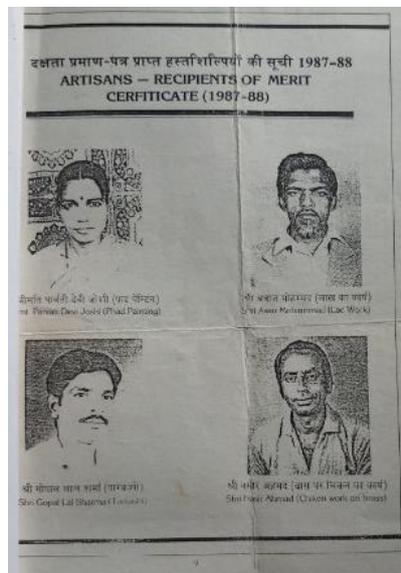


Figure 5 Artisan certificate of Parwati Devi Joshi, Image: Collection of Parwati Devi Joshi



Figure 6 Parwati Devi Joshi taking *Phadchitra* workshop **Image:** Prakash Joshi (2013)

Oral tradition of *Phad*:

Musical story telling of folk tales through *Phad* scroll painting is called as *Phad Banchna*, it is the popular tradition of Rajasthan. At the time of *Phad* narration, *Bhopa* makes stand the whole scroll painting with the help of bamboo sticks, he stretches the *Phad* painting and make it stand between two bamboo sticks. The life story of the local deity is painted on the scroll as per the folk story. In Rajasthan the oral tradition of *Phad* is very famous. It is the beautiful presentation by the *Bhopa* which is the combination of visuals, music, dance and conversation.

***Bhopa/Bhopi*, the professional narrators:**

Oral narrators reside and roam across the western thar desert in Jodhpur, Jaisalmer and *Shekhawati* region. These performers are the priest vocalists of local Gods in Rajasthan. They sing opposite to *Phadchitra* that describes the events of the life story of local Gods. In Rajasthan the people of eastern Rajput Bhil tribe and its subgroup known as Nayak, these performers call themselves as *Bhopa/Bhopi*. These narrators are of many casts, *Gurjar Bhopas* are for *Devnarayan ji* and *Nayak/Bhil Bhopas* are for *Pabu Ji Rathore's phad*. For *Devnarayan ji* there can be two male *Bhopas* for narration whereas for *Pabuji Rathore* it is found that there should be one male another female narrator as per the need of male or female voice required in the story.

The professional narrators perform these epic poems as a holy occupation. The performance tradition of *Phad* is a function of their patrimonial tradition that is transferred on from one generation to another. *Bhopas/Bhopi* move from one place to another when they get invitation for performance by their regular customer to give performance in their localities during times of illness or misfortune. *Phad* works as the portable shrine of local deities. The *Phad* scrolls are supposed to be kept rolled while transportation. After reaching the destination, the narrator unrolls and makes stand the *scroll painting* between two bamboo poles in a suitable public place at the time of dusk. The *Phadvachan* or performance continues throughout the night and ends just before the dawn like a vigil. When a *Phad* needs replacement, the *Bhopas* along with the *Phad* artist go to the *Pushkar* and afloat it in the *Pushkar* Lake, then *Phad* artist gives new painted scroll to *Bhopa*.”



Figure 7 Narayan ji Bhopa and his son performing in front of Devnarayan ji Phad Image: Satish Sharma



Figure 8 Bhopa and Bhopi performing Pabu ji ki Phad Image: Jaina Misra

Significant contribution of Bhopi in Pabu ji ki Phad:

The epic narrative of *Pabuji ki Phad* is the only tradition found only in *Nayak Bhill* tribe of Rajasthan, which is popular in *Thar* desert. In the Epic of *Pabuji* female artiste is the principal singer and the whole epic revolves around the heroic achievements of local folk hero, *Pabu Rathore*. He is the incarnation of God *Laxmana*. While narrating the epic, principal narrator *Bhopi*, illuminates the tribe’s perspective about material aspects of life and the socio-religious perception of woman in society. It not only the engendered epic traditions but also to record ‘women’s epic’ as a peculiar sub-genre. *Bhopi* plays as important a role as *Bhopa*. *Bhopa* plays the *Ravanhattha* and *Bhopi* illuminates the particular plot on *Phad* scroll with the oil lamp. She sings and dances along with *Bhopa* to elaborate the stories of local deities in front of the audiences.



Figure 9 Patasi Devi Bhopi while performance in Jaisalmer **Image:**www.repository.cam.ac.uk

The *Bhopa* and *Bhopi* don't sing together, they give their voices as per the gender of the roles. Before starting performance, The *Bhopa* performs some important rituals, and sings the liturgy. The *Bhopi* sings the episodes and events with emotional modulation and provides the melodic and rhythmic accompaniment to the epic and makes it peculiar and it is the fact that the most part of the epic song is sung by the *Bhopi*. The crux is that the epic is more of a woman's the voice than a man. The leading component of the epic sung by the female narrator enounces the concerns of women who listen to and patronize epic performance. *Bhopa* performs the chant portion, the chronicles events of the epic in a more emotionally neutral in past tense and he takes position in front of the sacred scroll. The episodes composed and performed by *Bhopi* in tandem with their male partners but the 'voice' of the chief character in the episodes recorded, mainly that is of a female. For example, the voices of *KelamDé* (sort for *Devi*) and the Goddess *Deval Charni*, are privileged above those of male characters. The man sings the first lines of each verse and plays the *Ravanhatta*, while woman sings the remaining verse. The *arthav* portion, sung by man, which is less than 25% of the whole epic narrative. *Pabujiki par* performance is the combination of a multi-vocal text of *Bhopa* and *Bhopi*, if a single male performer sings in isolation it would be expected to lack the fundamental element of collaboration in performance of *Pabu ji ki par*.

Bhopi Patasi Devi, from *Pabusar*, originally from the *Bhil* tribe group, she is from *Nayak* caste. *Nayak Bhopa* or *Bhopi* are the priests of *Pabu ji Rathore*. She indicated various episodes via a lamp while epic narration to connect audience, which is an essential pattern of storytelling in *Phad* tradition. The *Pabuji ki par* performance is a tradition of their heritage and the tradition is passed on from one generation to another. She tells that they begin with the amusement of audiences, and once they are able to sing the epic in proper volume, they start earning their own bread, as they are empowered by the blessing of *Pabuji*. Women narrators assure to raise economic and social status within their community. In ritualistic performances, mostly the *Bhopi* stands in veil to give performance to the left side of the scroll, she illuminates the *Phad* scroll with an oil lamp called *Diyali*, while her partner *Bhopa* stands to the right side, playing his violin like stringed musical instrument called *Raavanhatta*.

Lack of recognition of female narrator in *Phadchitra* performance

Lady artistes of folk epics are comparatively a few in the world. The main performer in *Phadis* always the *Bhopa*, he initiates the performance then *Bhopi* starts singing, she performs as the assistant although most of the part is supposed to be sung by *Bhopi*. *Pabu ji ki par* is a peculiar gender-based tradition which is a 'women's epic' as a remarkable sub-genre. It is also seen that sometimes *Bhopi* covers her face sometimes she doesn't, in the performance of *Pabu ji ki par*, *Bhopi* is supposed to cover her head to show respect to the prime deity. *Bharucha*, who published a collection of the works of the most spectacular *Rajasthani* folklorist, *Komal Kothari* (2003), no one had studied the text and meaning of the epic from the advantage point of the *Bhopis*, despite their significant role in maintaining the tradition, It is known that men are formally indoctrinated in epic recitation as men, but women are only allowed to sing after beginning to live with their male partner. *Bhopis* are completely illiterate, but they sing all the verses for 4-5 hours, which very special. These people are highly talented but somehow extremely poor, they live the nomadic life which is struggle in itself, then very low earning. Their coming generations are not interested in continuing the same occupation. They live in the remote area and travel from one village to another. Most of the time *Bhopi's* cover their faces while singing the verses. There is the *Bhanwari Devi Bhopi* who has joined the coke band to improve her earnings and recognition.

It is significant to know that the duet performance of the Epic of *Pabu ji* by *Bhopa* and *Bhopi* is inherited. Boys from these singer's community initiate formal singing practice on the other hand girls are allowed to perform publicly only after they get married. As these young women get married at a very young age, they begin to sing with their husband. It is a mystery how these young women mere at the age of seventeen or eighteen learn all the paragraphs of *Pabuji* Epic although she keeps on listening this epic since her childhood. The women narrators earn the livelihood for the family and one would surprise to know that she sings approximately seventy to eighty percent text from the real performance. There is the unacknowledged fact that *Bhopa* mere begins the singing with starting lines and the *Bhopi* is the one who completes it.

Bhopi always remains in veil in the performance. She never faces the audiences, she always keeps her face towards her husband and keeps supplementing his performance. In future the research will find out the contribution of women narrators, their efforts are not fully acknowledged till the date. Very few women narrators names are known they are known by as the spouse of the *Bhopa*. It is worth shifting the focus of the research on the on *gaav*(song) shared by *Bhopi* which is the bigger part than the *arthav*(explanation) shared by the *Bhopa*.

II. Conclusion

Contribution of Women is important in the inception and growth of Folk art. Folk Narratives provides the base to study and understand the role of woman in shaping cultural patterns in all the communities. Without the contribution of female members in Joshi family the execution of *Phadchitra* paintings was not possible. Now

the women painters have also taken lead in *Phadchitra* painting. The important role of the Women narrators in articulating the woman’s voice. These oral traditions that celebrate the life-style and courageous activities of nomadic people are now under considerable threat from television and entertainment industry. *Bhopi* who learns how to sing is able to overcome the barriers of traditional literacy and discrimination. Although the contribution of women artists is still not recognizable still, she is moving forward and becoming empowered economically and socially through performances. It is the significant contribution of women artists in *Phadchitra* of Rajasthan which is meaningful in retaining its existence for future generations.

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