

STORYTELLERS AND THE TRADITION OF STORYTELLING IN INDIA : A LOOK INTO THE PAST AND PRESENT

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Abstract

Story telling in India has been an age-old tradition. Storytelling through the medium of visual art, masks and puppets has been a common practice in the Indian subcontinent since time immemorial. In ancient India, in the absence of written texts, information and knowledge were transmitted orally from one generation to the next through the practice of storytelling. With the progress of civilisation, written material came in. Texts such as the Panchatantra, Hitopodesh and Kathasaritsagar formed valuable sources of storytelling. This paper emphasises that most of the myths and legends narrated in the Indian subcontinent have found their origins in the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas. Tales, whether historical or mythological, were told in different regions of the country through the medium of visual art and performing art which today form part of the cultural heritage of India, although some of them are on the verge of extinction.

Keywords: Storytelling, bards, visual art, performing art.

Oral transmission of folk tales, myths and legends has been an age-old tradition in India. The Indian tradition of storytelling can be traced back to at least the 2nd century B.C.E. and is known to have existed almost all over the subcontinent. In the olden days, in the absence of written material, knowledge and information were passed on orally from generation to generation through prose and verse. The heritage of oral communication in India can be traced back to the Vedic period (Basu, unpublished paper, 2020 : 1) when *sruti* (listening) and *smriti* (memorising) were the only ways of learning.

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The *Ramayana-Mahabharata* or the five great epics of Tamil and Sangam literature have oral origins and have remained as some of the oldest surviving epic poems and sources of storytelling all over the subcontinent.

In ancient and medieval India, professional storytellers acted as bards and ballads, genealogists, praise-poets and the like. The main work of these bards and ballads was to entertain people by reciting songs and poems. With the progress of civilisation came in written texts in the form of parables and fables. One of the earliest texts used for storytelling in this country was the *Panchatantra*. The *Panchatantra*, penned by Vishnu Sharma in the 3rd century B.C.E., is a combination of prose and verse. It primarily deals with animal fables and folkloric plots, where anthropomorphised animals having human virtues and vices form the main characters and necessary advice is given to apply wisdom to ways of life. The *Panchatantra* allegorically depicts Hindu society and satirically reflects social relations. The stories have a moral ending and an ethical value. Passed on from civilisation to civilisation, the *Panchatantra* reached Europe by the 11th century and became hugely popular. Originally written in Sanskrit, it was translated into a variety of European languages including Greek, Latin, Spanish and German by the 17th century. The *Panchatantra* also became very popular in the countries of the East Asia. Needless to say, even today children are fascinated by the tales of the *Panchatantra* and at present there exist as many as 200 versions of these stories translated into 50 different languages. Another similar text from which stories were often narrated was *Hitopodesh*, composed by Narayana Pandit. This book is believed to date back more than 1000 years. The tales from the *Hitopodesh* were meant for young princes and statesmen as the content is based on statecraft, the conduct of war and peace and the development of allies. The *Kathasaritsagar* was another popular book containing Indian legends and folk tales as retold in Sanskrit by a *Shaivite* of Kashmir named Somdeva Bhatta. It is a compilation of 18 books with 124 chapters and 22,000 *slokas* and prose sections. Unlike those mentioned earlier, this work contains no hidden moral lessons, but is a celebration of earthly life.

In ancient India, there existed a class of storytelling bards referred to as the *suta*. They are believed to have narrated stories from the *Puranas*, *akshyans* (legends) and *itihas* (history) in *yajna* ceremonies. However, the epics introduce another class of *suta*, literally meaning the 'charioteer.' According to this version, *asuta* is supposed to be a royal bard of the ancient period who narrated the heroic deeds of the king and his ancestors, while he drove his chariot to battle.

This meant that he had to memorise portions of the epic poems. Although his social status appears to have been low, he was much respected for the duty he performed. In the *Mahabharata*, reference has been made to Sanjay as a *suta*, as Sanjay narrated the events of the battlefield of Kurukshetra to the blind king, Dhritarashtra.

In the medieval period were found *Bhats* and *Charanas*. Regarding the origin of the term, *Bhat* is a Sanskrit word, *Bhatta* which means 'the Lord' or 'the Scholar.' *Bhats* claim their origin from *Brahmins* who used to compose praise poems on clay tablets in temples. They were mostly found around Rajasthan and narrated the story of Rajput kings. In return, the king gave them donations. The legend goes that King Mann Singh of Jaipur presented his *Bhat* with an elephant for praising his son's birth. However, the *Bhat* was not satisfied, so that the king was enraged and went to a marriage party without taking his *Bhat* with him. At the marriage party, all other kings had their own *Bhats* who sang praise poems in favour of the king. Suddenly, the king noticed his *Bhat* who had gone there without any invitation. Mann Singh asked him to recite a praise poem in his honour and promised him four elephants in return. The *Bhat* praised the king and compared him with *Lord Vishnu*, as powerful as the solar system. This impressed the kings present there and Mann Singh was so pleased that he gifted four elephants to the *Bhat*. This legend shows how much the kings of those days were dependent on their *Bhats* to raise their honour and prestige in public. *Charanas* were praise-poets of the same kind as *Bhats*. They were mostly found in the Kutch region of Gujarat. A festival dedicated to the *Charanas* is celebrated every year in Kutch (Basu, 2020: 3). However, in contrast to the *Bhats*, the *Charanas* claim their descent from the *Kshatriya* clan. The *Bhats* and *Charanas* were both held in high regard in the society. Both these communities are invited to folklore festivals and are hired by the tourism industry to narrate epics and history by means of puppetry and storytelling (Basu, 2020: 3).

In ancient and medieval India, a popular form of storytelling was *katha*, otherwise known as *Pravachana*. These were usually religious discourses by professional storytellers who recited a text with music in-between. The narrators were well acquainted with a number of languages and occupied a respectable position in the society.

In South India, the art of storytelling is referred to as *Kathakalakshepa*. In *Sangitratnakara*, a text written in the 13th century, mention is made of two *desi* dances, one of which had expressive gestures illustrating a *kavita* or poem. This is *kathakalakshepa*, a kind of narration with music, dance and acting which is performed in

temples, weddings and other religious or social gatherings. Here, the storyteller is a scholar in ancient Sanskrit texts and other vernaculars. He interprets the religious and mythological texts of the past to the present generation. In the *Kusha-Lava* tradition, the storytellers used to narrate stories from the *Ramayana*. A similar tradition of storytelling existed in Maharashtra – the *Powada* tradition. In this tradition, the narrators, called *Shahers*, told stories of Shivaji and other heroes. In the *Burra Katha* tradition of Andhra Pradesh, folk tales are narrated with the accompaniment of drum-beats. On the other hand, *Villu Paatu* (bow songs) are folk narratives of Tamilnadu, where heroic ballads are presented with a bow-like stringed instrument. Other folk traditions of storytelling found in South Indian villages are locally called *Kanian Koottu* and *Udukkadipattu*.

There was yet another group of narrators – the *kathiks*. The *kathiks* sought to narrate legends and myths through the use of mime and gesticulation (Narayan, 2017:37). Norvin Hein writes, ‘The *Kathaks* are the expounders of the *pooranas* and other *shastras*. They sit on a *vedi* or raised seat and address the audience on incidents appertaining to the *Shastras* supplementing the same with explanations of their own....’ (Narayan, 2017: 37). The Oudh Region was well known for *kathaks* during the Colonial Period. So strong was the community of *kathaks* here that it led to the evolution of hundreds of *kathak villages*, well known among which were Nasirpur Kathak Village, Paraspur Kathak Village, Kathak Purba Village, ChakKathak Village, Gaur Kathak Village, JagirKathak Village, etc. The *kathaks* were held in high esteem.

In Bengal, at one time, professional storytellers were known by the name, *kathak*. Most probably, the word, *kathak* originated from *katha* meaning narration. They narrated stories both in prose and verse. These *kathaks* flourished in Bengal during the rule of the *Sena* dynasty. The *Senas* were highly caste conscious and greatly respected the *Brahmins*. They were keen to restore the glory of the Brahmanical period through the rendition of stories from religious texts including the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*. For this purpose, they appointed *kathaks*. The *kathak* was the main storyteller and was assisted by the *pathak* and the *dharak*. This kind of storytelling was known as *kathakata* and is still prevalent in some parts of rural Bengal.

Women storytellers in Bengal were known as *alapinis*. In this region of India, there were professional storytellers in the king’s court also. Their work was to entertain the king with music and poems. In his famous book, *Brihat Banga*, Dinesh Chandra Sen has written about

these storytellers – ‘In Bengal, every king had professional narrators of poems and stories. This practice is going on from the time of the Ramayana.’ (citation) In this book, Sen mentioned one – Bharat Chandra Ray, a storyteller from Dhaka. He was appointed as the storyteller of the royal court of Tripura and narrated stories for the king of Tripura. Sen is of the opinion that there were two distinct periods of storytelling in medieval Bengal. During the Gupta and Pala periods, the stories that were narrated revolved around love, sacrifice, self-control and community service. There was no place for mythology in these stories. Mythological themes evolved later, when gods and goddesses started gaining popularity. It was at this time that the *Mangalkavyas* came in.

Picture Showmen

The term, ‘picture showmen’ was first used by Anand K. Coomaraswamy while giving reference to Patanjali’s *Mahabhasya*, composed as early as the second century B.C.E. The *Mahabhasya* is a discussion of the 4th century B.C.E. grammarian, Panini, who mentions the use of paintings in storytelling (Blurton, 2011: 47). In the Indian subcontinent, probably scroll painting used by itinerant bards is the earliest form of vernacular painting on cloth. In this country, the bardic tradition of moving from place to place showing scrolls and singing to them had been in vogue since the ancient period, particularly in the Bengal Region.¹

Innumerable references to picture showmen and painted scrolls can be cited in literary sources —Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jain. Scroll paintings known as *patachitras* have been mentioned in sacred texts such as the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* (thirteenth century A.D.), *Uttar Ramcharita*, *Harivansa*, *Malavikagnimitram*, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, Patanjali’s *Mahavasya*, Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, *Harshacharit* by Banabhatta and so on. Patanjali, in his *Mahavasya*, has described folk painters narrating the story of *Kamsavadh* with the help of a long scroll. Similarly, Banabhatta, in *Harshacharit*, mentions a *Patkar*² holding the picture of a God seated on a buffalo and narrating the story of *Yama* in a sing-song manner (Sengupta: 9). Early Jain literature contains some of the authentic references to picture showmen. *Bhagavati Sutra*, a canonical text belonging to the third century A.D. refers to Mankhali Gosala as the son of a *mankha* – a special type of mendicant ‘whose hands are occupied with a picture board.’ The term, *mankha*, is also mentioned in the *Aupapatika Sutra*, a text written sometime between the third and fifth

centuries. Hemachandra, in his *Abhidhana Chintamani*, explains the word *mankha* as a bard. On the outer walls of the Mukteshwar Temple in Bhubaneswar (10th century A.D.), the researcher found engraved female figures that appear to be showing vertical scrolls. From these engravings it can be inferred that *women chitrakaras* were active in this region of Odisha even before the Jagannath Temple came into existence.³ The tradition of scrolls can also be deciphered on early Buddhist art in India. For instance, the stone panels in Sanchi bear a close similarity with the format of bardic scrolls. The narratives in Sanchi are divided into smaller panels, having borders with floral or architectural designs on all sides. In ancient times, the Buddhists used bardic scrolls to propagate stories from the *Jatakas*.

Narrative scroll paintings, known by a variety of names, are abundantly found in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar as well as in parts of the Deccan including Maharashtra and Telangana. Scroll painters, otherwise known as *patuas*, still exist in the villages of West Bengal (particularly in Birbhum and West Medinipur). They narrate stories showing their scrolls⁴ which they carry from one village to another and even to nearby cities like Kolkata. The story known by the *patua* is converted into a verse, which he calls *payar* and this is given a tune. The entire scroll is divided into frames and the song accompanying the scroll is called *patuasangeet* or *pater gaan* as it explains the *patachitra*. Each stanza of the song corresponds to one frame of the scroll. The *patua* sings the song, stanza by stanza, in a monotonous tone in the form of a *panchali* as he unfurls and rolls the *pata*. As he sings about the particular characters of the story, he points them out with a stick or with his forefinger. In this way, the whole story is narrated before an audience. In a religious *pata* such as a *Manasa pata* or a *Durga pata*, usually, the scroll opens with the picture of the deity which suggests the process of invoking the deity. The narration revolves around this particular deity, whereby the *patua* praises the deity for His or Her benevolence. When the narration is over, the deity again appears in the last frame. At one time, among the *Bangla patas*, there was a category known as *Jishu patas* or *Krishto patas*. They depicted episodes in the life of Jesus Christ and were accompanied by songs sung in praise of Jesus and Mary.

A very special type of scroll painting which picture showmen used in ancient India to narrate stories is the *Yama Pata*. The *Yama Pata* is still in use in some parts of India. *Yama* is looked upon as the God of Death. In the *Yama Pata* of rural Bengal, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, *Yama* is seen pronouncing judgement for sinners after death. It is said that a wandering teacher (*upadhyaya*) showed

a Jain monk a *samasarachakra chitra pata* (a painted panel depicting the cycle of the Universe), which is comparable with the Sanskrit version of the *Yama pata* (Jain, 2010 : 15). In the *Mudrarakshasha* of Vishakhadatta, mention of a *Yampattika* is found and from his remarks, it is gathered that he was a picture showman, singing songs of heaven and hell while showing his pictures. In the same way, *Yampattika* is also mentioned in Banabhatta's *Harshacharit*. In Buddhist literature, mention has been made of the *charana chitra*,⁵ which is again comparable with the *Yama pata*. The *Yama Pata* depicts the journey to heaven as a reward as well as the sufferings of the sinners in hell as a punishment as the *patua* loudly narrates the moral lesson emerging from the scene.

By the end of the 20th century, secular *patas* illustrating social and political themes found a place in the *pata* genre of rural Bengal. In 1989, Bahar Chitrakara of Naya Village drew a scroll on the murder of the former Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In this scroll, the *patua* has almost deified her by placing her photographic portrait in a frame within a frame (Jain, 2010 : 25), while to narrate her mortal life, he had painted episodes related to her tragic death. The frames of the scroll are in conformity with the news telecast by the media. Perhaps the reason behind painting this *pata* was to arouse the sentiments of the countrymen so that it would enhance his own popularity as an artist. Thus, it is seen that these modern, secular *patas* are mostly inspired by contemporary events such as deforestation and its consequences, the literacy campaign, marriage and divorce, the dowry problem, the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre, terrorism, the outbreak of coronavirus, etc. In most cases, these incidents are illustrated in the form of scroll paintings and carry narrations which are 10 to 15 minutes in length. It is interesting to note that the *women chitrakararas* of Naya Village, West Medinipur, are today taking an active part in these narrations and are earning in their own right.⁶ Often, these *social patas* and the narrations accompanying them have been found to be the outcome of the interference of NGOs and other urban agents.⁷ However, it should be emphasised that while at one time, the *patuasangeet*, that is, the practice of storytelling with the help of scroll paintings was totally disappearing and *pata* culture was almost fully being transformed from an audio-visual genre to a visual art, urban interference succeeded in arresting it and reviving the original narrative tradition.

Scrolls in India are often looked upon as sacred objects. When they are no longer usable for narrating stories, they are deconsecrated and then ritually discarded. Such are the *Garoda scrolls* from Gujarat. The

Garodas are an ancient tribal community and are mostly found in the Ahmedabad, Sabarkantha, Khaira and Panchmahal districts. They are not only famous as storytellers, but they also prepare horoscopes for newly born children and practise palmistry and astrology. The *Garoda scroll* is also known as '*bhambal*,' meaning noisy narrative. Hence, a *Garoda* is also called '*Bhambal Bhatt*' or the *Brahmin* who narrates. The *Garodas* narrate legends both in prose and verse with the aid of their scrolls, which they call *tipanu* or *tippan*, meaning recording or remark. A *Garoda scroll* depicts a number of legends and is divided into 19 panels (Chandra, unpublished paper: 8). Each panel depicts a single legend. This obviously leads to the fact that each compartment in a *Garoda scroll* is highly abridged and the narrator has to squeeze in a large number of important events related to a legend within one compartment. The last three panels of the scroll depict people receiving rewards and punishments in heaven and hell after their death, thus this part of the scroll is akin to the *Yama Pata*. Popular legends narrated by the *Garoda* community are the *Shravana* episode from the *Ramayana*, the story of truthful king *Raja Harishchandra*, the game of *amli-pipli* played between the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas*, the local story of *Dhana Baghat*, the story of *Kaliyadamana*, the legend of *Chelaiyyo*, popular in Gujarat and so on. The scrolls are regarded as mobile temples by the *Garodas* and the storytelling tour is referred to as '*yatra*' or pilgrimage. This provides evidence to the fact that the *Garoda scrolls* are looked upon as highly sacred objects and the entire process of storytelling is ritualistic in nature. Thus, the *Garodas* are a group of itinerant picture showmen who move from village to village carrying illuminated paper scrolls and narrating stories in prose and verse. The *Garoda* tradition of Gujarat combines the narration of local versions of sacred stories from the epics and *Puranas* with the *Yama Pata* tradition.

Another group of picture showmen well known in the Mewar region of Rajasthan are the *Naik Bhopas*. The *Bhopas* use elaborate scrolls called *phad paintings* to narrate stories related to the folk hero, *Pabuji*, the neo-Hindu incarnation of *Vishnu*—*Dev Narayan* and *Ramdevji*—the *ishta devata* of the low-caste leather-working *Maghwals* and *Regars*. Storytelling with the aid of the *phad* is a night-long performance. The narrative structure in this case has remained rather static over the decades so that there has been no innovation in case of the *phad*. All the three deities are considered *bhomiya*s, that is, heroes who died in the process of rescuing their community's cattle from cattle robbers. *Dev Narayan* is a local deity, popular among the *Gujjar* community.⁸ The legend goes that he was incarnated in

911 A.D. as the son of the *Gujjar* warrior, Sawai Bhoj Bhagaravat and his wife, Sadhu Mata Gurjari. Sadhu Mata was an ardent devotee of *Lord Vishnu*. *Vishnu* was so pleased with her devotion that he promised to be incarnated as her son. So he came to this world as the eldest of the twenty-four brothers belonging to the *Bhagaravat clan*. Many battles were fought between the *Bhagaravats* and their enemies. At last, a divine stream of water issued from the rocks of the Malasari hills and *Dev Narayan* appeared in a lotus floating in the stream. *Pabuji* is the tutelary deity of the *Rabaris*⁹ — a group of camel herders. *Pabuji* was a *Rathore* who lived in the early 14th century. He is deified as an incarnation of *Lakshmana*. In the local tradition, *Pabuji's* legend thus, becomes sacred and acts as an appendix to the *Ramayana*, but this time it is *Lakshmana*, not *Rama*, who is the hero of the epic. The *Rabaris* believe that it is *Pabuji* who brought reddish-brown she-camels to Marwar and that singing in praise of *Pabuji* would help to cure camels of their diseases. The story goes that after the death of *Pabuji's* parents, his stepsister Premalde was married to Khichi. A *Charan*¹⁰ woman by the name of Dewal later gifted a mare to *Pabuji*, which actually turned out to be an incarnation of a celestial nymph, on the promise that he would look after her and protect her. *Pabuji* married a *Sodha* Rajput princess. Soon after his marriage, he received news that Khichi had attacked the cows of Dewal. He attacked Khichi, but later forgave him after restoring the cows to Dewal. Later on, *Pabuji* died in battle and thereafter, he has been looked upon as a deified hero by the *Rabaris*. Recitation of the *phad* is known as the *phad bachana* and is a unique performance of Rajasthan. The *phads* act as mobile shrines for the *Rabaris*. They are commissioned by the *bhopas* and are painted by the Joshi clan of the *Chippa*¹¹ caste. While the narration in the case of a *patachitra* or a *Garoda scroll* takes place in a sequential form from top to bottom, the *phad* is a horizontal scroll in which all the episodes of a legend are recounted within a single pictorial frame. Moreover, the episodes are not sequentially arranged in panels, but the entire *phad* represents a mural¹² in which the figures are represented in a haphazard manner. Smith, an expert on the *Pabuji* tradition, describes the *phad* as 'a representation of epic geography, a sort of epic map'. The narration is, by nature, ritualistic as sacred legends of deified heroes come in, but it is not accompanied by any religious ritual. The *bhopa* (priest) and his wife, *bhopi*, sing out the legends loudly pointing to a particular episode of the story with the aid of the *ravanhatta*, a two-stringed instrument looking somewhat like the *veena*. The narration is done from memory as the *bhopa* remembers the entire epic by

heart. As the *phad bachana* performance takes place in the dark, one of the performers holds a lamp against the scroll so that the images are illuminated as the legend is narrated. While the *bhopa* narrates the story, he points to the corresponding episode in the painting to bring the legend into a chronological order. Hence, he has to dance from one point to another and in that duration he gets an opportunity to improvise his song and music. The stories mostly relate to the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas* or to the origin of a myth of a particular caste. Sometimes, stories from the *Hanuman Chalisa*¹³ are also narrated. A *phad bachana* performance is thought to be auspicious at certain particular times of the year – from after *Holi* till the winter harvest in April and from after *Goga Naumi* in August till the monsoon harvest in October.

Chitrakathi is another ancient tradition of presentation of visual material to audiences accompanied by narration. The tradition of *Chitrakathi* is more than 500 years old and *Chitrakathi* has been mentioned in *Manasollas*, a book written by the Chalukya king, Someshwara in the twelfth century. Though it is on the verge of extinction today and none have been traced so far in Pune, Satara or Nasik where they were found earlier, at one time this practice was largely in vogue in the Pinguli and Paithan regions of Maharashtra. *Chitrakathi* was originally presented in three forms – leather shadow puppets, stringed wooden puppets and picture scrolls, however, at present it is the picture scrolls which are mostly known. *Chitrakathās* an art form – a heritage of the *Thakkar* tribe, a group of itinerant storytellers. 'Chitra' means picture and 'katha' means oral narrative. Through their songs, the *Chitrakathis* narrate stories from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* including the *Harivijay*, *Ramvijay*, *Bhagwat Purana*, *Nandipurana*, *Dangipurana*, *Pandav Pratapas* well as historical ballads about the Peshwas as they show their painted pictures.. The episodes of the story are divided into several pictorial situations and the pictures are drawn on sheets of paper, stuck back to back and arranged in chronological order. They keep these pictures (about 20 to 35 sheets) in a bundle called *pothi* which they carry from place to place. Thus, although the narrators are picture showmen, the *Chitrakathi* is not a typical scroll painting. From all accounts, it appears that the process of storytelling varies from one person to another. While J. Jain-Neubauer observed that the narrator held up the pictures on a stick and twisted the stick around to show the other side, Valentina Stache-Rosen has stressed that in all the performances she had seen, the pictures were kept on the floor. (Stache-Rosen, 1984: 256).

The repertoire of the *Pinguli Chittrakathi* is vast. Stories based on the *Ramayana* performed by string puppets are *Ramajanma*, *Panchavati*, *Sitaswayambara*, *Aranyakanda*, *Indrajitvadha*, *Ravanavadha* and *Ahiravana-Mahiravana*. For narrating these stories, the instruments used by the *Chittrakathis* are *tumtumi* (drone), *tabla* (drum) and *chakava* (cymbals). Leather puppets perform the stories of *Indrajitvadha*, *Panchavati* and *Kichakavadha* while the narration is accompanied by *vatavadya* (a metal plate on which a stick is turned), *dholki* (a large drum) and *jhani* (cymbals). The narratives are sung in pure Marathi whereas for the improvised passages a mixture of Marathi and Konkani is used. On the other hand, stories from the *Mahabharata* include episodes like the *Vastraharana*, *Dudumbhi*, *Surat-Sudanva*, *Kapilasura* and *Karnavadha*.

Eva Ray (1978: 239–282). has explored *Paithani Chittrakathis* in detail. She has remarked, ‘As additional paintings become available for study, yet more sets of these and other stories will surely be identified and regional and chronological developments may be charted’ (1978: page?) In the *Paithani paintings*, some of the episodes of the *Mahabharata* have been improvised. For example, the story of *Abhimanyu-Vatsala Swayamvara* is not mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, but is well-illustrated in the *Paithani Chittrakathi*. The *Chittrakathis* have improvised the story thus – *Abhimanyu* was engaged to *Vatsala*. When the *Pandavas* lost their kingdom, this match was annulled and *Vatsala*’s parents betrothed her to *Lakshmana*, the son of *Duryodhana*. As soon as *Abhimanyu* learnt this, he started on a journey to *Vatsala*’s home. On the way, he met a demon – *Ghatotkacha*, the son of *Bhima*, who tried to torture him, but he wounded the demon with his arrows. In the meantime, *Lakshmana* arrived in Dwaraka to marry *Vatsala*. *Abhimanyu* killed him in a fight. Another popular story presented in *Paithani Chittrakathi* is the story of *Babhruvahana*. The story of *Babhruvihana*, the son of *Arjuna* and *Chitrangada*, is narrated by the *Chittrakathis* according to the descriptions given by the Marathi author Sridhara in his narrative poem *Sri Jaimini Ashvamedha*. The narration is such that it seems that the story of the *Pandava*’s horse sacrifice was being narrated by the sage, *Jaimini* to king *Janamejaya*. In this story, *Babhruvahana* defeated *Pradyumna*, *Vrsaketu* and finally *Arjuna*. In *Paithani Chittrakathi*, while the former two narratives deviate from the epic significantly, the story of *Lankadahana* follows the *Ramayana* closely and many of the scenes here are represented exactly as found in the texts. In some of their stories, the *Chittrakathis* depicted the *Pandavas* as a very powerful clan who overtook the Muslims and even defeated the British. These stories perhaps originated from

the hatred of the Marathas towards the British. They also reflect the independent nature of the Marathas and the long history of maintaining their status as a Hindu kingdom against the Mughals in the medieval age.

Another set of narrative scroll paintings are the Telangana scrolls, also known as the Deccani scrolls.¹⁴ These paintings are executed on cloth and were used by itinerant picture showmen who went from village to village narrating stories based on them in a bardic tradition. Unlike the *phad painting*, in these scrolls, the episodes of a story are arranged in chronological order, one episode following the other. Thus, in format, the Telangana scroll and the technique of its narration closely resembles the *Bangla pata*. The Telangana scrolls are extremely large in size: in a vertical scroll, the story is narrated from top to bottom, whereas in the case of a horizontal scroll, the panels are depicted from left to right to complete the narration. The Telangana scrolls mainly narrate legends related to the birth of a particular caste and the heroic deeds of one of its legendary heroes. In the narrative scroll paintings of the Telangana region, a unique importance is given to the different caste-groups. Every caste in Telangana has a specific community who performs for them a specific *Purana*. This tradition evolved from the *Veera-Shaiva* religion, followed in the Telangana and Karnataka regions.¹⁵ In fact, a special category of legends is reserved for a particular occupational caste in this tradition. The most popular stories told with the aid of the Deccani scrolls are *Markandeya* and *Bhavana Rishi Purana* narrated before the *Padmasalis* or weavers. According to this mythical tale, *Rishi Markandeya* performed a sacrifice to provide clothes to the supernatural beings who resided in heaven. From this sacrificial fire, rose *Bhavana Rishi*, holding a ball of thread which he had manufactured under the direction of *Lord Vishnu* from the fibres of a lotus which sprang from *Vishnu's* navel. *Bhavana Rishi* used this ball of thread to manufacture clothes for the celestial beings. He later married *Bhadravati*, the daughter of the Sun. They had a hundred and one sons. Of these, one hundred became *Padmasalis* and the remaining one became a *Pattusali*. Thus, according to this legend, it were the offsprings of *Rishi Bhavani* and *Bhadravati* who were the ancestors of the *Padmasali* or weaver caste of Telangana and *Bhavani Rishi* is looked upon by them as their patron deity.

Another story narrated by these picture showmen is the *Viratparva* episode from the *Mahabharata*. This narration is performed before the *Kanbis* and *Bhois*¹⁶ by the *Kakipadgilus* and the *Pandavulus*. Stories from the *Mandel Purana* including *Daksha Yajna* and *Virabhadra*

are performed for the *Dhobi* community by the *Ganjikotulus*. The *Madigas* are a scheduled caste of Andhra Pradesh, Telengana and Karnataka and belong to the *Dalit* community. They are leather workers and are the so-called 'unclean' castes of Telengana. Stories about the mythical ancestor of the *Madigas* are narrated from the *Jambavanta Purana* before the *Madigas* by the *Dakkalawadus*. The *Goud* caste of Telengana are wine sellers by profession and listen to the *Ballanraja-katha* from the *Goud Purana*, which is narrated to them by the *Goudchettis* with the help of Deccani scrolls. The narrators of the *Katamaraju-katha* use painted wooden dolls called *Mandaheccu* for their narration. They narrate stories from the long oral epic, *Katamaraju, katha* which traces the lineage of the *Yadava* caste before the *Dhangars* or *Gollas (Yadavas)* who are cattle breeders by profession. The occasion for the performance is usually a death and the narration acts both as a purificatory rite and a social obligation. The *Mandaheccu* set consists of 53 images (Vasudevan: 3) painted by the *Nakkashi* community of Andhra Pradesh and Telengana. These dolls represent the deified heroes of the *Yadavas* who died in the battlefield and are used to animate the invocatory narrative of the storytellers as the narration goes on.

The *Maskaris* formed another class of picture showmen in ancient India. They acted mostly as comedians, but sometimes they also indulged in narrating social satires. They worked either as independent professionals or were appointed by the upper class of the society. The existence of the *Maskaris* can be traced back to the 7th century B.C.E.

A unique tradition of storytelling in Rajasthan is followed by the *Kavadiya Bhats*. The *Kavad* tradition is more than 400 years old (Sabnani, 2011 : 95) and is rooted in mythology. *Kavaad* is a portable wooden shrine that has multiple panels hinged together, with visual narratives painted on each panel. The panels are in the form of doors that open and close as the *Kavadiya* recites and narrates the stories of gods and goddesses, saints, local heroes and the patrons,¹⁷ the figures of which are painted on the panels. A single figure may inspire an hour-long narration. Not only so, the same image may sometimes be used to tell a different story altogether. The recitation of the *Kavad* is given the name, '*Kaavad Bachana*.' It is believed that a *Kaavad Bachana* is sacred and the narration is ritualistic; listening to the *Kaavad Bachana* purifies the soul and makes way for the devotee to reach heaven.

The *Kavadiya Bhats*, otherwise known as *Bhanwar Bhats*,¹⁸ are itinerant storytellers who live in the Jodhpur, Nagaur and Kishengarh districts of the Marwar region of Rajasthan. They carry the *Kavad*

shrines, painted by the *Sutar* community of Bassi village (Sabnani, 2017: 14), from one place to another, gather their patrons around them and recite the *Kavad* as they open the doors of the shrine panel by panel and show the pictures. As the *kavad* recitation continues, the *Kavadiya* proceeds from the outermost door to the innermost door of the shrine. Not only do they narrate legends related to mythology, but they also act as genealogists, thus informing the patrons about their family-tree. However, since they are forbidden to narrate stories in their own village, they have to lead the life of a genealogist, preferring to hide their teller identity at home. This is a unique feature of the *Kavad* tradition and gives concrete explanation for the fact that the *Kavadiya Bhats* are never found in their original village except in the monsoons when it is believed that the gods are in slumber and recitation of the *Kavad* is avoided. Some scholars have expressed the fact that a *Kavad* recitation takes place only on the occasion of the death of a patron's family-member. But others have refuted this opinion. A *Kavad* recitation takes place partly in verse and partly in prose. First, the deities, *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Maheshwar*, *Saraswati* and *Ganesh* are invoked in verse. This is followed by the opening verses composed by poet-saints such as *Kabir* and *Tulsidas*. After that, the figures are introduced and a synopsis of all the stories that are to be told by the *kavadiya* is given in a low voice. As the *kavadiya* opens the panels of the *Kavad* one by one, he introduces the figures in it (gods, goddesses, saints and deified personalities) in the present tense and carries the audience through a journey in which the listeners themselves get involved. Then he moves on to the panels which depict the images of the patrons and recites their genealogies. For this phase of the *Kavada Bachana*, he keeps a notebook with him, but he never reveals it to his patron, rather he recites the genealogies from memory. Finally, he opens the innermost doors of the shrine for the ritual *darshan* of *Rama*, *Sita* and *Lakshmana* wherein the *kavad* recitation ends.

Some of the mythological legends that have been traced in the *Kavad* tradition are similar to episodes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, but are changed substantially to adapt to the local culture. Thus, in this tradition, instead of *Rama*, *Lakshmana* kills *Ravana*. Several stories revolve around the challenges faced by those who have deep faith in the deities, despite being tested by them and having to make sacrifices. Some stories describe marriages between human beings and birds or humans and monsters. These are typical folk tales. Some stories have a moral ending and give the message of charity.

Masks and Puppets

In India, masked performances have been in vogue since prehistoric times as has been traced from archaeological sites and cave paintings. Mythology and the cosmic world as well as belief in rituals and ceremonies have given rise to the concept of masks. Most of the performances related to the world of masks in India as in South and South East Asia depict episodes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and their adapted versions. Added to these, is the repertoire of tales from the *Puranas* and local myths including folklore. The Bengal Region is the hub of mask culture in India. Cultural geographers are of the opinion that there exists a continuous belt of mask making and mask dancing stretching from Indonesia through Eastern India right upto Kerala. West Bengal comes well within this mask using zone. In the Bengal Region of Eastern India, *Shiva*, *Durga* and *Kali* are some of the iconic mythical figures that have inspired a strong mask culture. *Tantric* practices¹⁹ were in vogue here from a very long time. This has perhaps inspired the worship of *Shakti* and the origin of mask dances such as *Kalinach*, *Gamira*, *Gambhira*, etc. in this region. *Shakti* is Cosmic Energy that is manifested as Mother Goddess in the Hindu pantheon. *Gamira*, a popular masked performance of the *Rajbanshi*, *Desi* and *Polia* communities of *Uttar* and *Dakshin Dinajpur*, is based on stories from the *Ramayana*. These people have a tribal origin as has been traced by Risley (Sarkar, 2001: 222). It is said that perhaps later on, when these tribes came under the influence of Sanskritisation and entered the Hindu caste system, they took up the *Ramayana* as their sacred text. But this community of tribals was illiterate and could not read the *Ramayana*. To cope with the situation, they selected plots from the *Ramayana* and began to convey its message through the medium of drama. That is why the *Ramayana* is so important for their performance and *Ram Banobas Pala* — a performance of the *Gamira* dancers, exclusively relates episodes based on incidents from the *Van Kanda* of the *Ramayana*. It has been noticed by the researcher while working in the field that episodes from the *Mahabharata* are hardly narrated in the *Gamira* performances. In fact, the mask dancers reported to the researcher that they are not well-acquainted with the stories of the *Mahabharata*, so they cannot perform episodes from the *Mahabharata*. Again, it may be recalled that the *Tantric* system belonged to the Dravidians — the original natives of India. This makes it easy to draw a direct relationship between the tribal community and mask culture based on *Tantric* principles. Besides, *Gamira* performances involve a large number of folk myths. Primary survey in the field revealed two such

folk characters, *Mashna* and *Mashni*, who perform in water during *Pancha Nritya*, a typical *Gamira dance*. Each folk character in a *Gamira dance* is a brainchild of the *Desi* and *Polia* communities. The tales about these mythological characters are transmitted orally and are retained in the minds of the tribals. In fact, folk mythology and folk tales are related through a large number of *Gamira* performances.

Chhou is a typical masked dance of the Bengal Region which is based on narratives from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*. Conventionally, it is of three types — *Purulia Chhou*, *Saraikele Chhou* and *Mayurbhanj Chhou*. The most popular theme of the *Purulia Chhou* is *Mahishashur Badh*, depicting how *Goddess Durga* slayed the demon *Mahishashur*. This dance manifests the victory of ‘Good’ over ‘Evil.’ The themes, *Sitaharan*, *Ravana Badh*, *Sita Swayambar*, etc. are taken from the *Ramayana*. In this case, it may be noted that Sri Ashutosh Bhattacharya, the veteran exponent on *Chhou*, has remarked that the episodes of the *Ramayana*, which are represented in *Chhou*, are not taken from *Valmiki Ramayana*, but from *Krittibasa Ramayana* (Mahata). Some popular episodes from the *Mahabharata* depicted in the *Purulia Chhou* are *Abhimanyu Badh*, *Arjuner Lokhyobhed* and *Draupadir Vastraharan*. The stories of *Hiranyakashya Badh*, *Raktabeejer Matri Darshan*, etc. are taken from the *Puranas*. Most of the dances are based on mythological themes that propagate moral and ethical values. However, today local legends, folklore and other abstract themes are also abound in *Purulia Chhou*. The *Saraikele Chhou* incorporates metaphysical themes such as *Ratri*. Traditional *Purulia Chhou* is purely instrumental and the verbal part in it is insignificant. Recently, as an innovative process, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and Tagore’s *Chitrangada* are also being presented by the *Purulia Chhou dancers* perhaps to avoid repetition of mythological themes.

Krishnattam, performed in the Guruvayur Temple of Kozhikode in Kerala, uses both external masks and pliant masks.²⁰ Through the plays enacted in *Krishnattam*, episodes from the life of *Lord Krishna* are narrated. The medium of narration is the *Krishnageeti*, composed by *Manadevan*, the Zamorin king of Calicut. There are eight plays in *Krishnattam* through which episodes from the life of *Lord Krishna* are narrated, these are *Avataram*, *Kaliyamardanam*, *Rasakrida*, *Kamsavadham*, *Swayamvaram*, *Banayuddham*, *Vividavadham* and *Swargarohanam*. On the other hand, *Kathakali*²¹ evolved from *Ramanattam* — a cycle of eight plays — *attakatha*, through which *Rama*’s life is narrated. Historically, all these plays were derived from Hindu texts such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Purana*.

In *Ramman*, another masked performance held in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand, episodes from local versions of the *Ramayana* are narrated through acting. Therefore, the stories from *Rama's* life form significant scenes here. The *Ramkatha* element is all-pervasive in *Ramman* and is rendered through *Jagar* singing which is again a bardic tradition. Similarly, the Buddhist version of the *Ramayana* is narrated in the *Aji Lhamu* masked performance, prevalent in Arunachal Pradesh.

Puppetry is the process of animating objects, mostly handmade dolls, by human agency. In India, puppetry has been used as a means of storytelling since a long time. Conventionally, Indian puppets enact episodes from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*. A large number of puppet plays are based on the *Radha-Krishna* episodes. Sometimes, local myths and legends also find a place in the puppet shows. One such popular narrative enacted by the *kathputulis* (wooden string puppets) of Rajasthan is the story of *Amar Singh Rathore*, who was historically the ruler of Nagaur in the 17th century. *Amar Singh Rathore* was a Rajput chieftain in Shah Jahan's court. This folk epic is enacted by an itinerant community of puppeteers known as *Nats* or *Bhats*. The narration is done in a high-pitched voice through the use of a reed made from a small piece of split bamboo. Music is an important part of this performance. Rajasthan has a rich history of heroic battles and martyrdom in the battlefield. The puppet plays, known as '*kathputuli ka khel*' in Rajasthan reflect mostly the glorious history of Rajputana by narrating the exploits of the local heroes and the various battles that were held in this region.

One very popular type of storytelling puppets is constituted by the shadow puppets of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. These are stylistically closely related to *Chitrakathi* paintings. The puppets are made of leather, they are sometimes life-size. The puppeteers narrate the legends in a dramatic way accompanied by visual presentation of the puppets. The shadow puppeteers of Karnataka (who migrated from Maharashtra) and Andhra Pradesh are known as *Killekyatas* and *Killekothus*. These are tribal people who narrate the songs and verses from memory as they move the puppets. The performances are accompanied by music and dance. These people speak corrupt Marathi which indicates their connection with the *Chitrakathis*. The *Killekkyata* tribe who migrated from Maharashtra to Karnataka narrate stories from the *Kannada Thorave Ramayana* and the *Bhagavata Purana*. They also include various folk tales in their performances. The traditional puppet show of Andhra Pradesh, *Tolu Bommalatta* presents episodes from the *Mahabharata* such as *Draupadi*

Vastraharan’ and *‘Keechak Vadha.’ Tolu Bommalatta* also narrates stories from the *Telegu Ramayana* written in the sixteenth century by Ranganath. The narration is done in the form of high-pitched songs with verses recited inbetween. The *Ravana Chhaya* puppets from Odisha form another interesting set of shadow puppets, named after *Ravana*. The performance of *Ravana Chhaya* is based on the Oriya version of the *Ramayana* called *Vichitra Ramayana*, composed by Vishvanath Khuntia, a seventeenth century poet. The puppet show is performed by a community of *Bhats*.

Conclusion

The narrative tradition continued in India uninterruptedly till the recent past. With the advent of the media and the advancement of technology, coupled with rapid urbanisation, visual aids accompanying the discourses began to lose their popularity. The tradition of storytelling gradually became extinct in the villages of India. However, some researchers have found that the tradition is being revived in a different way. Today, while the essence of the story remains the same, the rendition has been influenced by the new kinds of tools and technology that have come in, thus changing its flavour.

Notes

1. By the Bengal Region, the author refers to *Anga* (Bihar), *Banga* (Bengal) and *Kalinga* (Odisha), which, in the past, formed one contiguous eco-cultural unit. The geographical extent of ancient Bengal could be defined from the Himalayas in the North covering Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan, the Brahmaputra Valley in the North East, Darbhanga and the plains of Bhagirathi in the North West, Garo-Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Tripura, Chittagong, Rajmahal in the far East, Santhal Parganas, the Chotanagpur Plateau, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj forest and plateau areas in the West and the Bay of Bengal in the South.
2. *Patkar* is another name for *patua* or *chitrakara*. Traditionally, they are folk painters who paint pictures on cloth, based on religious or secular themes.
3. The Jagannath Temple of Puri was built in the early 19th century. It is a known fact that the tradition of *pata painting* developed in Puri, centred on the Jagannath Temple, where pilgrims used to come to have a *darshan* of *Lord Jagannath*. These paintings were sold in the precincts of the temple and they carried back *patachitras* as souvenirs.
4. The scroll paintings used to narrate stories in the Bengal Region, are known by the name, *‘Jorano Pata’* as they can be unfurled and rolled up as the narration proceeds. The other type of *patachitra* that is drawn on a single sheet of cloth instead of on a long scroll is called *Chouko Pata*, meaning *square pata*. These can be rectangular or square in form and do not carry any kind of narration.
5. *Charan chitra* is a scroll carried by itinerant picture showmen. In the ancient

- period, it was highly popular among the Buddhists.
6. See Chandra, 2018. "Women Folk Painters Empowered : A Revolution in a Rural Setting," *International Journal of Gender Studies in Developing Societies*, Volume – 2, No. 4, pp. 263 – 278.
 7. See Sharmila Chandra, "The *Patuas* of West Bengal and Odisha : An Evaluative Study," Himalaya Publishing House, 2017.
 8. The *Gujjars* are a group of pastoral agriculturists of north-western India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. They have no land of their own. They speak the Gujari language and variously practise Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam. In some areas of India, they are categorised as Other Backward Classes (OBC), while in some other areas, they are treated as Scheduled Castes (SC).
 9. The *Rabaris* are a group of pastoralists inhabiting the Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat states of India. There is a myth saying that *Lord Shiva* brought them on earth to tend the camels owned by *Parvati*. They are camel lovers. The *Rabaris* are also called *Rebari*, *Raikas* and *Dewasi*. In fact, they prefer themselves to be called *Raikas*.
 10. *Charan* is a caste living in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. In the ancient and medieval periods, *charans* were treated as gods.
 11. *Chippa* caste is a caste which is engaged in dyeing and printing cloths. This caste is found in Northern India. They are also found in Karachi, Sind, Pakistan. They are *Sunni Hanafi Muslims*. Though their original occupation was dyeing and printing cloths, they have now become cloth merchants.
 12. Singh (2011) notes that some scholars have found resemblance between the *phad* and certain mural paintings and that *phad* should be considered as a mural transferred on cloth. Singh herself is of the opinion that in format the *phad* is somewhat similar to the Iranian *pardah*, a large, horizontal cloth scroll used in the recitation of heroic ballads such as the martyrdom of Hassan and Hussain.
 13. *Hanuman Chalisa* is a Hindu devotional hymn sung in praise of *Lord Hanuman*.
 14. Telangana was originally part of the state of Andhra Pradesh. It was carved out of Andhra Pradesh as a separate state on June 2, 2014. Therefore, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana form a contiguous eco-cultural unit. The capital of Telangana is Hyderabad.
 15. Interview with Vikram Kulkarni, a specialist on storytellers of India in November 2020 at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.
 16. The *Kanbis* are agriculturists by profession, whereas the *Bhois* are involved in a variety of occupations, some of them are herders, others are domestic helpers and so on.
 17. The patrons of the *Kavadiyas* are known as *jajmans*. There are 36 *jatis* of patrons. Each *kavadiya* may have 30 to 50 patrons. Every patron is visited once a year by the *kavadiya*. The patron is inherited by the storyteller from his father and will, in turn, distribute his patrons among his sons when he retires. The patron gets the benefit of experiencing a pilgrimage and getting his home sanctified as the *kavadiya* brings the shrine to him. Therefore, it is obligatory for him to make a donation to the *kavadiya* at least once a year.
 18. The *Kavadiyas* are also known as *Bhanwar Bhats* because the story goes that once some ash fell from the brow of *Lord Shiva* and was transformed into a *bhanwra* or bumble bee whom *Shiva* blessed and turned into a *kavadiya*. Thus, the *Kavadiyas* are nomadic storytellers who originated from the brow of *Lord Shiva*.

19. *Tantra* is a way of life involving certain practices related to non-Vedic worship. In performing *Tantric* practices, one uses *mantras*, propitiates spirits and mystic deities and in the process, wields enormous powers and uncanny experiences. The principles of *Tantra* pervade *Vaishnava*, *Shaiva*, *Shakta*, *Saurya* and *Ganapatya* traditions. The modes of worship associated with the *tantras* are very rigorous and maintain a kind of secrecy.
20. Pliant masks are not masks worn on the face from the exterior. Rather, in this case, the entire face is masked with the help of heavy, stylised make-up. In this way, the physical identity of the person is changed.
21. *Kathakali* uses mostly heavy make-up in place of masks. However, two external masks are used in this performance – the goat mask in the play *Daksha Yajnam* and another mask in *Baliavadham*.

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