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CHITHRAKATHI: AN ORAL NARRATIVE TRADITION WITH VISUAL SUPPORT

Abstract

Humans have been evolving with stories that transcend emotions and communicate values and way of life across generations. Visual storytelling which is in practice from primitive periods evokes immersive experience and visualization. India has an array of visual story-telling traditions including manuscript illustrations, Ajanta cave painting and mural traditions. Also a range of folk visual-narrative traditions like Phad painting, Kaavad, Telangana and Bengal scrolls, shadow puppets and stringed wooden puppets have contributed in transmitting stories to a community or a group of people. Most of the folk-narrations involve musical rendition making it a performing art delivering aural and visual treat. The painted visuals are notable for its compositional style and skillful rendering. These have contributed parallelly to the mainstream visual art traditions of India.

This study elaborates the nuances of Chithrakathi painting, a visual art tradition from Maharashtra. Chithrakathi is a person who narrates the stories of regional heroes and mythology using a hand-painted picture as a visual support. Based on earlier studies, Paithan and Pinguli were identified as two distinct styles of Chithrakathi paintings. The Paithan style was influenced by the forms of the Leather puppets and Pinguli by the Wooden-string puppets. Presently Pinguli style is only practised by one family from the Thakkar community in the village of Pinguli near Kudal in the Sindhudurg district of Maharashtra. Paithan style paintings were found only in the archives of Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum, and is no longer in practice. This study encompasses iconographic analysis of the chithrakathi paintings, formal inquiry of the style and identifying the stories narrated through the painted visuals. Harischandra story panels from the collection of British Museum were analysed as a case study for its view-point narration.

Keywords: *Traditional, Water, Oral Narratives, Perception, Value, and Management.*

Introduction

Stories are the integral part of human social life. From the primitive

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cave art till the era of virtual reality humans are trying to narrate stories in several ways to make it livelier and more immersive by involving all the senses; aural, visual, touch, smell and experiential. They have aspired for blending the reality with fiction. Visual story narration was considered more powerful as it leaves a quicker and lasting impression. Art and Cultural Historian Jyotindra Jain quotes from Tulasidasa's *Ramacharitamana* that a female friend of Sita while describing the splendor of Rama feels that 'the speech does not have the vision and the vision is bereft of speech'. This explains the differences and complementary quality of the verbal and visual narrative methods. The charming visuals always enhances the visualization in the viewer and brings a rapport between the imagined attributes of the characters and the sequences that unfold during the narration.

In India while we have a long history of visual story narration through manuscripts, murals and miniatures, we also have picturemen or Chithrakathis, one who narrates story with the aid of hand-painted visuals. Someshwar in *Manasollasa* quotes

“Varnakaisaha ye vakthisachitrakathovara: l

Gayakayetrageyanthi vina thalamanoharamll”

- A person who with the aid of colourful visual illustration tells the puranic stories is a good Chitrakathi when with vina and percussion sings the lyrics melodiously.

References of painted scrolls or panels date back to second century BC to communicate and narrate stories belonging to Buddhist, Jain, Hindu and folk literature. Along with the strong oral narrative tradition these visual narrative traditions too grew to entertain and educate people. These visual narrative traditions are still in practice in certain parts of Rajasthan, Bengal and Andhra. Musical rendition also accompanies most of the narration making it a theatrical performative tradition. The painted pictures are referred as *chithrakathas*, *chithra* means picture and *katha* means story. *Chitrakatha* is identified in three forms-- leather or shadow puppets, stringed wooden puppets and painted picture stories. Few examples of *chithrakathas* that are still in practice in the form of painted picture scrolls and wooden panels are notable in Phad and Kaavad tradition of Rajasthan respectively, Patuas scrolls of Bengal and scrolls of Telangana.

Chithrakathi of Maharashtra

One such forgotten *chithrakatha* tradition of Maharashtra is Chithrakathi. Significant collection of unique bold paintings were collected and documented under private and public collection during the 19th century. These paintings were used by the storytellers belonging to the caste *Chithrakathi* whose professional occupation is to exhibit pictures and narrate

stories of gods and heroes, as mentioned by R.V. Russell in his *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (Part II Volume II pp 438-40). It is also mentioned that it is their caste rule that every *Chithrakathi* must possess a complete set of sacred pictures that comprises of forty representations of Rama, thirty-five of the sons of Arjuna, forty of the Pandavas, forty of Sita and Ravan and forty of Harishchandra.

Two distinct styles were identified in Chithrakathi – Paithan and Pinguli. The Paithan style seems to be influenced by the Leather puppets and the later by the Wooden-string puppets. The antiquity of the paintings could be dated back to 400 to 60 years before. They are made on imported mill-made papers sometimes with watermark dating back to mid of 19th century CE. The size of the canvas was approximately 12 by 15 inches catering to the visibility of a small crowd of audience to whom the story would be narrated.

At present only one group of *Chithrakathis* were identified belonging to Thakar community, who are engaged in this occupation of story narration through painted pictures as visual aid. They live in a village called Pinguli, Sindhudurg District of Maharashtra. Shri Parashuram Vishram Gangawane is a notable National Award winning *Chithrakathi* performer. With the lack of patronage when many artisans went into other profession, he sustained as a preserver of Pinguli style Chithrakathi. He also set up a museum for Chithrakathi at Pinguli and his family is also involved in taking it ahead to the next generation.

Paithan paintings were found only in the collection of Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum, Pune, British Museum Collection and Victoria Albert Museum, no artist has survived to carry forward this tradition. They are called as Paithan paintings because they are majorly collected from that region, but there is no evidence whether they were made and used by the artists belonging to this region.

The similarity of these paintings with the Karnataka puppets is notable. Usually, the figures are composed between the top and lower margins marked like the screen of the Puppet performance.

Focus of the study is to differentiate the style variation in this art form and analyse the forms and figures to understand the iconographic representation. Since this art form has a unique and bold composition of figures against a minimal environmental backdrop. It has a compulsive and expressive structure, which demands more study on it. Additionally using a case study, the method of narration used by the chithrakathis and the visual narration supporting it is analysed. Linear narration, non-linear narration, view-point narration are few approaches they have commonly used.

Narration and the Performance

The narrator sings and elaborates the scenes along with the musical

rendition. Two to four persons assist the performance. The main person who narrates the story is called as Nayak. Others who play the instruments are called as Vajapee. Usually, they sit down on the floor and use a carpet to mark the performance area (Plate 1). The narrator places the paintings on a small wooden board rested on him and elaborates the scene. The musical instruments like Tambura, Janjh and Huduk were used by the Vajapee. At some places the Thambur and Janjh are replaced by Ektar / Tuntuna and Chipalya (Taal).



Plate 1 - Performance by Shri Parashuram VishramGangawane, Pinguli

The performance starts with the invocation of Ganapathi and Saraswathi. Stories of Ramayana and Mahabaratha are usually narrated in Chithrakathi. The story is divided in to 40 to 60 scenes and they are illustrated. Smaller segments of the epics were focused like Rama Ravanayudha, Lava Kusha from Ramayana and Rukmini swayamvara, KichakVadha, Babruvahana's Ashvamedha Yagna, Abhimanyu VatsalaSwayamvara from Mahabaratha. Stories of Harichandra is also common. The stories narrated by these *chithrakathis* are different from the classical literature.

After making the paintings, two paintings of consecutive scenes were stuck front and back to make it stiff enough to hold. The pictures are stored in bundles called as *chithrapothy*. These are considered sacred.

Formal Qualities: Pinguli and Paithan Paintings

Chithrakathi paintings are composed within the top and bottom margin or a minimal frieze unlike many Indian folk arts that are composed with a boundary or elaborate border on all sides. The top and bottom frieze and the motifs used reminds the theatre set-up for a puppet performance. This strongly suggests that this art form would have evolved from puppet tradition. Pinguli painting vastly resemble the wooden puppets of the Thakars, (Plate 4 and 5) whereas the Paithan paintings has a striking similarity with Karnataka leather puppets (Plate 2 and 3). The figures of Pinguli appear more rounded in shape

and are composed on plain ground, more scattered compared to the compact composition of Paithan paintings. The composition reminds of frozen moments of the puppet performances. Majority of the paintings are in landscape orientation yet very few are composed in vertical orientation as well. This shows the evolution and deviation of this style from the puppet theatre.

Figures are given more emphasis and are placed on an unpainted background with a bare minimum representation of ambience, flora, fauna or architectural details. Figures are usually arranged on a single ground line. Figures are robust and in strict profile or composite view in Paithan style, whereas in Pinguli style it is in two-third profile. In Paithan style the eye is represented with a full-round and a spot inside typically like in a leather puppet. This feature is missing in the Pinguli style. Male and female figures do not differ much in their anatomy but the attire and ornamentation elucidate the variations. Masculine figures are shown with wide shoulders, long arms, powerful chest and narrow waist, while majestic grace, magnificent garments and heavy jewellery are the features of female figures. The attire, headgears and jewellery were influenced by Mughal, Maharastrian, and Rajasthani style; sometimes even by the European style of shoes and garments were shown.

The natural colours obtained from minerals and from organic extracts were used. red from Cinnabar, yellow from Haritala, brown from Garika, Indian red from burnt bricks and Indigo blue. Some set of paintings also exhibit variation in colour palette with the usage of synthetic colours as well. Application of colour is flat and transparent. Elaborate patterning is done on the garments and jewellery. Lamp soot is used for black outlines. Brushes were obtained from the shrubs named *chitari*. Plasticity of the figures are elucidated with sweeping contour lines and modelling lines. The elbows, wrists, ankles, toes and bellies are shown with curved lines followed by a series of short parallel lines. The facial features are flattened and reduced to a hairline that continued till the nose tip or till the bridge of the nose enhancing the nose in profile. Though the mouth, chin and neck are shown with another single line from the tip of the nose, it is very expressive. The black outlines add details and vibrancy to the painting. Treatment of flora and fauna are exclusively minimal in nature, yet the resemblances were clear and verisimilitude. The depiction of hands and fingers in Paithan paintings are inverted interestingly resembling the leather puppets of Karnataka. Art historian Anna L. Dallapiccola in her paper "Paithan Paintings: The Epic World of the Chithrakathis" states that the puppeteers of Karnataka who are known as Killekyatas speak corrupt Marathi and would have had their origin of lineage from Maharashtra which solves the riddle of the striking closeness of Paithan paintings with Karnataka leather puppets.



Left: Plate 2 - Scene from the Story of the Marriage of Abhimanyu and Vatsala, Folio from a Mahabharata, LACMA

Right: Plate 3 – Karnataka Leather Puppet



Left: Plate 4 – Ravana, Pinguli Painting

Right: Plate 5 – Ravana, Wooden string puppet

Stories in Chithrakathi

Stories narrated through a visual aid, registers in mind easily and allows the spectator to visualize more using these visual hints. The narrative is linear through 40-60 consecutive scenes but they are drastically different from the picturebook illustrations which is descriptive and explicit. Both the narrator and the spectator are familiar with the scenes and story and from similar cultural background as these performances are repetitive. The oral text for Chithrakathi is very different from the classical epics or puranas, influenced by local traditions and folklore variations. With a particular scene painted the narrator sings and tells the story that happened previously and lately, hence the visual stands as a connector or as hint for the visualization without suppressing the imagination of the viewer.

Repetition, overlapping and distribution of figures and decorative motifs are handled cleverly to reduce the appearance of the background space. The

gesture and posture are highly dramatic and animative. At times two consecutive scenes are painted in the same page, using a tree or architectural design as a visual separator between the scenes. Usually, the antagonist and the protagonist or the messenger enter the frame and are placed facing each other in an interactive mode. Customarily, the stories reinforce the winning of good over the evil or to prove the valor and virtuousness of the protagonist.

Case Study

The case study is done considering the collection of paintings narrating King Harishchandra story belonging to the British Museum. As any story begins with the invocation of Ganesha and Saraswathi this collection also has two paintings of the same. Next painting depicts sage Vyasa narrating the story of Harishchandra to King Janamejaya. This panel stands as an evidence for the view-point narration. The view-point of the story is to highlight the characteristics of an Ideal King. The virtues of a leader and the value system constructed for the social life of a king is exposed through the actions of Harishchandra, while he is tested by the gods through sage Vishwamithra. Both Vyasa and King Janamejaya are in richly ornamented attire, seated facing each other on a highly decorated throne. The king is shown with a crown, bow and arrow in his hand. Royalty is expressed through the fan and umbrella held and architraves of the palace (Plate 6). The dominating colours of the entire series are red, blue and green with minimal usage of yellow. One surprising colour used by these folk artists are the colour of the skin. Beige, fawn, blue and grey are used for the skin tone based on the clan and caste of the people shown.

Another interesting incomplete painting depicts sage Vishvamitra taking a leave from Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma, on his way to test Harishchandra's truthfulness. Though this is an incomplete painting, the composition is dynamic showing the sage moving out of the frame in swift action. It is not sure whether this scene would be revealed in the beginning of the performance or at the end, yet it suggests the non-linearity in the narration (Plate 7). Shiva with conch and matted hair representation is typically folk.



Plate 6 - Sage Vyasa and the king Janamejaya.



Plate 7 - Sage Vishvamitrawith Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma.

Sage Vishvamitra on the verge of testing Harishchandra starts his play by creating havoc in the field in the disguise of a tiger, so the shepherd seeks King's help. This painting has a unique composition with animals spread throughout the frame reminding of the pre-historic cave paintings. A royal hunt was organised and during the hunt Harishchandra ends up disturbing Vishvamitra's penance, hence owing to his anger he loses his entire kingdom. In spite of being warned by sage Narada and Krishna, he became a prey to Vishvamitra's anger and was ill-treated along with wife Taramati and son Rohidas (Plate 9)



Plate 8 - Sequence from Havoc caused in the field to warning given to Harishchandra by Krishna.



Plate 9 - Vishvamitra ill-treating the King Harishchandra

The story moves on by Harishchandra and family been driven to forest. A painting depict the sorrow, fear, sympathy and curiosity of the common men waving good-bye to the family. This scene was depicted by repetition of figures, both men and women wearing different attire and headdress. Even after sent to the forest, Vishvamitra did not leave them at peace, he created bad weather by requesting the Sun and the Moon, he plundered their left over ornaments and the royal clothing. Even after that he plotted several tricks to make him pay more debt. One such trick was his disguise as an inn-owner to deceive the family making them enjoy the food and comfort. Vishvamitra using his magic created a inn and tricked the King to have food and solace. He also tricked Taramati and her son into the inn by creating a vision of her husband enjoying the facilities. This was painted in three consecutive scenes (Plate 10). To pay him more, Harishchandra was forced to sell his wife and son to a Brahmin in Kashi and himself to Virabahu and engaged himself working in a cemetery collecting taxes and other menial jobs (Plate 11). This was painted with several scenes bringing out sympathy for the king as he was forced to do all the menial job.



Plate 10 – Consecutive scenes depicting Harishchandra deceived by the inn-owner to pay more debt.



Plate 11 – Harishchandra working as a tax collector under Virabahu in a cemetery.

In the meanwhile Rohidas and Taramati lived with the Brahmin, where the boy was sent to collect flowers for pooja. He was bitten by a snake which was again disguised by Vishvamitra. Taramati was allowed to visit the dead son only after finishing all her house chores. This was pathetically shown in a scene where she is serving the Brahmin, when she heard the death news of her son. These are the scenes that heightens the mercy and sympathy towards the righteous King and his family. The hardship does not stop here.

Taramati with the body of her son Rohidas arrives in front of a Bhavani Temple. In this scene Vishvamitra appears twice, he is shown next to unconscious grieving Taramati, slyly smearing her son's blood on her face and sticking out some flesh in her mouth. Next moment he disguises and runs out to blame that the queen is a blood-thirsty witch who is capable of Blackmagic with human oblation for the goddess Bhavani. The composition is dynamic with a stop-motion being implemented to show the animation of the scene. The following scenes will plot a trial and Taramati would be decapitated by her own husband Harishchandra. This explains the superstitious belief that was in practice then, even after condemning with death sentence (Plate 12)

The surprising fact is, in India Maharashtra was the first state to enact the Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic. The Maharashtra Assembly adopted this bill only in 2013 lead by Dr Narendra Dabholkar, a co-founder of MANS (Maharashtra Anti Superstition Committee). Even during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2021, there was a pathetic story of two daughters being killed by the parents as a part of a strange rite practiced in their pooja room, near Madanapalle, Andhra Pradesh. This inhumane and irrational act was exposed and convicted in the folk tradition to preach the good over sin is notable.



Plate 12 – Taramati at Bhavani temple with her son's dead body.

Finally the plot is resolved and Vishvamitra gives up to announce that King Harishchandra cannot be matched for his truthfulness and the family rejoices and returns back to Ayodhya.

Same story must have been was handled by different group of *Chithrakathis* in different approaches. Set of 60 Harishchandra paintings in the collection of Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum also shows similar scenes. Though the core qualities of the form does not change, each artist have exhibited their own signature style, which leads to differences and trends of style.

Conclusion

Chithrakathi like any other folk performance was once vibrant in entertaining and educating the locals. Now the art works are the bare reminiscence of this art form. Though the same story was narrated again and again with the same visual, each time it is a new performance with new connotations and interpretations by the narrator and the spectator. With the advent of visual technologies and virtual reality we cannot afford to forget our roots that are still vibrant, adorable and more expressive in nature. The performance may not happen but the paintings stand as an echo of those voices narrated.

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