

Phad of the Phad: Reading and Writing of the Ritual Craft

Sharma Saurav* and Mishra Pratibha

Manipal University Jaipur, India

Abstract: The primary objective of this paper is an attempt to understand the ‘Liminal Quality of the Ritual’ with reference to the Phad painting i.e. famous folk craft of Rajasthan. Phad painting majorly divided into three components which are, visual (imagery), oral (story telling) and performative. How these three components are interconnected? And how each component is changing according to the evolving communities? There is an urgency to record and understand these facts, keeping in mind this study is an attempt to explore about the origin of this folk tradition and its contemporisation. The other objective of this study is to communicate what the Modern/Urban community communicates through their oral narratives and through their folk mediums.

During research the findings have suggested that most of the time these local deities are the incarnation of Greater God to develop the connection between great tradition and little traditions.¹ In today’s scenario cotemporary tales, myths, stories, talks about the current issues of the modern communities. And these modern communities have modern Gods, such as Om Banna Ji who is recently developed ‘Folk God’ of Rajasthan of Pali district near Jodhpur. The new God addresses the modern issues and sometimes old folk Gods such as *Papuji* or *Teja ji* etc also deal with prevailing issues of the communities. These stories, myths are shifting, symbols, signs, meanings are also shifting, and resulting the so called “Traditional Craft” is also shifting towards the contemporisation.

Keywords: Phad Painting, After Life of the Craft or Contemporary Craft , Visual Ethnography, Great and little traditions

Introduction

There is an immense amount of oral literature within every culture in the form of Folktales and Myths. These are metalanguages, which are the languages of the communities, full of signs, symbols and meanings. Myths turns these languages into a means of communication about itself, but in repressive way by masking the construction of signs. The ideal consumer of myths does not perceive the construction of a signs or symbols.² They only perceive the Image of symbols as the presence of the essence which it signifies. It’s a literature, which is not written or read and can only pass verbally from one to another. These oral narratives are the symbolic language of the nonliterate part of us and our culture.³ Therefore, every community has myths, folktales, stories rooted into their culture that depict their beliefs, ideas, customs, rituals, lifestyle etc.

The Phad, is one of the oral narrative which is painted scroll of muslin fabric which are consider as a movable temple (*Chalto Phirto devra*)⁴. Where heroic genealogies of a local deities, particularly *Papuji* and *Devnarayan*

¹ Redfield Robert and Singer Milton (1956). Traditions: Origin of Little and Great Traditions.

² Barthes Roland. (2014). Mythologies. points.

³ Ramanujan A.K. (1990) Who Needs Folklore?: The Relevance of Oral Traditions to South Asian Studies,

⁴ It is considered, the active phad possessed deities. Hence phad is treated with full respect as living being. Told by Praksh Joshi, in the personal interview.

ji are told in form of liturgy performance. Visual portrayal of the heroic deeds of *Pabuji* and *Devenarayan ji* are painted by *chitarkar* (painter) particularly from *chippa* community of Joshi clan⁵. *Chippa* community is well known for their printing work in Rajasthan and the making of the phad is the act of ‘*Chappna*’ which literally means ‘printing’. Hence printed scroll, depicting heroic deeds of *Papubji or Devnarayan ji* would be ‘same’ every time as it is painted respectively. Prakash Joshi, the phad artist opined that, they can’t alter the traditional phad at all. To make it same they used to use *Khakha*⁶ so that they can make or print exact phad without any alteration. Even today naive phad artists need to use *Khakha* to avoid any kind of mistake or alteration.

‘Phad of *Pabuji*’ is around 15 feet long while ‘Phad of *Devenarayan ji*’ is around 30 feet long, these are most well-known tales, ‘epics of Rajasthan’. According to Rustom Bharucha “The oral epics correspond to specific agricultural zones, like the bajra zone, the jawar zone and the makka zone, if divided roughly. The bajra zone, where the oral epic of *pabuji* is located, is a cattle breeding area rather than an agricultural one. In this zone the dominant caste group is *Jat*. In the jawar zone, the dominant group is *Gujar*, and here you find a greater focus on the *Devnarayan* oral epic tradition dealing with the *Bagrawat* brothers⁷. In the makka zone, where the dominant group is Bhil you find epics but with no males heroes. Here women and mother goddesses are the dominant protagonists.”⁸

‘The distinctive style of visual depiction of the narration is unique to Phad artists. The visual depiction of folktale or story is not linear. The space is divided not according to the narrative but to their epic geography, a sort of ‘epic map’⁹. Stories exist in time but images exist in space. The primary characteristic defining a scene is not when it took place in the narrative but where it took place in the epic.¹⁰

This painted, portable, moveable fabric scrolls are communicated by *Muhkvanchi Bhats* known as *Bhopa or Bhopi*. These *Bhopas and Bhopis* are the priest singers of the folk deities. *Pabuji’s Bhopas* are from *Nayak caste*, which are listed regrettably enough, under the abusive synonym *Thori*¹¹ while *Bhopas of Devnarayan* belong to the *Gurjar, Rajput, Kumbhars, and Balai* communities. A few Phad *Bhopas* live in Mavali, Mandal, and some other villages, but a majority of them reside in the Marwar area of Rajasthan, in the Nagaur district of Jodhpur division.¹²

Singer- priests, *Bhopos* perform a liturgical epic telling of life, death, and avenging of their hero god; these performance take place at night, typically in front of phad that depicts the episodes of the narrative of the folk deity and functions as a portable temple. The *Bhopas* carry this phad traditionally and are invited by villagers to perform in their localities during times of sickness, misfortune etc. Traditionally, the phads are kept rolled in transit. After reaching a village or town, the *Bhopas* erect the phads between two poles in a suitable public place shortly after nightfall. The performance goes on throughout the night and terminates only in early morning.

⁵ Chippa Community is basically Block printers . the term that Bhopas used for the making of the phad as the act of Chappna which literally means ‘printing’. For more details read Singh Kavita (1998), To show, To See, To Tell, to Know: patuas, Bhopas, and their Audiences. Marg Publications

⁶ Tracing paper which help to replicate the same art work.

⁷ For more details read Joshi O.P. (1976) ‘Painted Folklore & Folklore Painters of India’. Delhi: concept pub.co.

⁸ Bharucha Rustom ‘Rajasthan an oral history conversation with Komal Kothari ‘

⁹ Smith, J. (2012). *The epic of Pabuji*. New Delhi: KATHA.

¹⁰ According to Smith “ if different events are depicted next to one another, it is not because they happened in rapid succession but because they happened in close proximity.”

¹¹ Smith, J. (2012). *The epic of Pabuji*. New Delhi: katha.

¹² Joshi,O. (1976). Painted Folklore and Folklore Painters of India. Delhi: Concept Pub. Co.

The epical narratives of the folk deities are told by the *Bhopas* during the *jagarans*¹³. The purpose of these *jagarans* are to evoke the prakas (presence) of the folk deities. As it is stated aloud that we approach our God through Phad, and we approach phad through bhopo's "reading" of it. Therefore Bhopa is mediator between mortals and immortals, who creates liminal space between these two ends.

Phad as 'Social Darma'¹⁴

The process of writing¹⁵ and reading¹⁶ phad, can be called as 'social darma'. As it is sacred ritual which involves Breech, Crisis, meditates on the relationship between the concepts of *liminality* and *communitas*,¹⁷ and finally reintegration.¹⁸ According to Turner, societies must maintain a balance between *communitas* and structure in order to survive, generally taking the form of a cycle where structure is temporarily suspended during rituals that reignite a sense of *communitas* in various ways depending on the type of ritual. As in phad, the ritual process start with its first stroke, which is performed by the minor girls (pre-teen age). According to Prakash Joshi, minor girls are the symbol of purity and goddesses. As soon girls turns into adolescents, it is hard to include them into this rituals, as in certain days of months girls are not even allowed to enter the kitchen, temple, or to participate into any ritual process etc.¹⁹ Therefore to start the process of Phad painting, to create the object, which is a part of bigger liminality of status. As per their belief system the commencement should be as pure as possible, so that no god should be annoyed with the ritual process. Initially, the phad is illustrated by thin point brush directly on the pretreated muslin fabric. This is called as Kachi Likhai (temporary writing), and then one by one colors will be added to temporary writing to make it permanent. One colors is added to figures at a time for instance, if pahd artist had prepared skin color, he will add that color on the phad, wherever that color is needed and then he will move to different colors. Hence one complete figure is not done at a time, entire phad is done at a time. Black out line is added at the end to define figures, motifs etc. The black color is obtained by Khol²⁰, and this black color is also used to make eyes of the figure. As soon as the eye of the main figure (local deity) is completed, the phad is consider to be active. Hence it have invoke the god, the phad is now consecrated. The object which is deific, superlative, a divine being. Now onwards phad will be treated with proper respect throughout its life time, even when phad is worn off, it have to be discarded with proper ritual.²¹

¹³ Jagarans - 'A Vigil'

¹⁴ The term is coined by Turner Victor (1969)

¹⁵ The joshi painters use the word likhna (lit., writing, commonly used by the artists for 'drawing') for their activity, but to the bhopas and the audience the joshi's task is chhapna. (lit., printing, as in block printing), from the article to show, To See, To Tell, To Know: Patuas, Bhopas, and their Audiences by Kavita Singh (picture Showmen Insights Tradition in Indian Art, Marg Publication)

¹⁶ Phad Banchna (lit. reading of Phad)

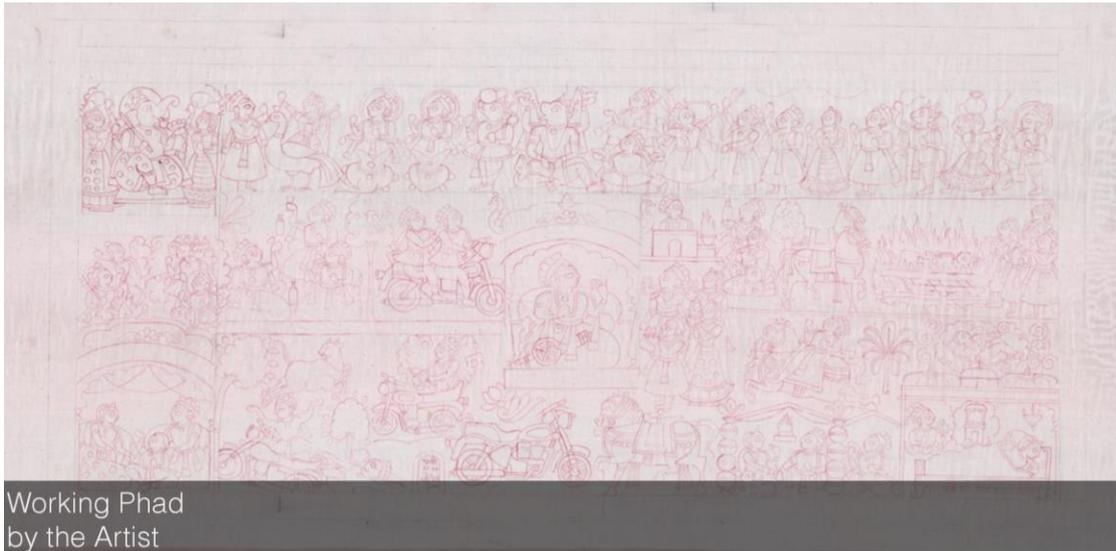
¹⁷ According to Tunner 'communitas and structure are two opposed yet mutually necessary modes of social life: the concept of structure is defined as "society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less.'" Communitas, on the other hand, is defined as "society as an unstructured or rudimentary structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders."

¹⁸ For Details explanation see Tunner Victor's *The Ritual Process*

¹⁹ Informed by Prakash Joshi in my personal interview with him.

²⁰ Kajal

²¹ When pahd worn of, it have to be given to Ganga (Holy river) with proper ritual. For more detail read Jain Jyotindra Introduction from 'Picture Showmen Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art' Marg Publication



Once phad is active, it will be treated as temple. Daily prayer, incense stick, paraphernalia will be offered timely. Phad are mostly commissioned by the local families of Rajasthan, those might be suffering through some local problems, such as, agriculture, infertility, snake bites, cow safety etc.²² whatever the issues may be, it is considered that reading the phad, will invoke the particular god, and the issues will be resolved in near future. These local deities are incarnation of greater god such as *Pabuji* is incarnation of *lakshmana*, *Devnarayan Ji* is incarnation of *Vishnuji*, *Tejaji* is incarnation of *Shivji* etc

All Phad paintings have certain common features. Every space of the canvas is jam-packed with only profile figures in the flat construction of the pictorial space. While these profile figures are harmoniously distributed all over the area, the size of figure depends on the social status of the character they represent and the roles they play in the story.

John D Smith has served to establish some general principles regarding its iconographic layout. Following are the fundamental principles on which events are depicted in terms of the place, rather than the time, of their occurrence.

- 1) The phad is highly directional: the orientation of characters within one scene very likely depends on the relative position of other scenes.
- 2) Scenes depicted on the phad may well be ambiguous: the same scene, or the same item with in the scene, may stand for different narrative elements at different points in time.
- 3) Conversely, there may be multiple occurrences of items within a scene.
- 4) The disposition of scenes and figure aims to fill all available space.
- 5) Space like scale is elastic and can shrink or stretch as desired.
- 6) Any boundaries have the effect either of dividing an obviously unitary structure into smaller parts or, equally undesirable, of separating related events from one another.

²² Though there are specific local god for such issues. For example, *Pabuji* is consider to be a god for cow, while *Tejaji* is consider to recover believer from poisonous snake bites.

The Visual image of the god (which is the most dominating figure on the phad, the ceremony recalls the shatrik consecration rite of the 'opening of the eye' of an idol at its installation in a temple.²³) actually possessed the quality which opens the doors for liminality of community.

According to Victor Turner, pilgrimage has been defined as a 'liminal phase' where pilgrims experience 'communitas', a deep sense of community with their fellow travelers that transcends all barriers of caste and class.²⁴ The position of the figure within the phad, and within the narrative both helps community to reintegrate and to elevate their status, through their connection with greater god. Hence the Greater God are more approachable through Local God²⁵ and local god are approached by Bhopa and Bhopi. Bhopa narrate the stories while Bhopi point out the figure with the help of handy oil lamp, similarly as Joshi ji first draw the picture roughly (kachi likhai) and then fixing it will color, here Bhopa is orally narrating the story and Bhopi validating the narrative through images or phad itself. Bhopa can go into trance while reading the phad, but the importance is validations of the narrative through the visual image on phad. The whole phad is exposed to the audience at once, just like whole phad was painted at once. The journey through the Phad recitation restores a sense of dignity to the patron purifying him, sanctifying his space and glorifying his identity. It also gives a new sense of self to its community. Therefore the relationship between visual (imagery), oral (Narrative, storytelling), performative is so amalgamated with each other particularly in case of phad, which form a ritual, which open space for trance, abstractions, transitions for the communes. The ritual process is part of Social Drama for the communities to enter into the space of reintegration of self-identity and glorifying it through the connection with main stream gods.

Modernization²⁶ of God

The artwork is communicated by *Muhkvanchi Bhats* known as Bhopa or Bhopi, as mentioned earlier. These Bhopas and Bhopis are the priestly singers of the folk deities (Perhaps like brand ambassador). They perform in front of a *Phad* that depicts the episodes of the narrative of the folk deity and functions as a portable temple. The Bhopas carry this phad traditionally and are invited by villagers to perform in their localities during difficult times. Only folk deities are called for such matters or a specific deity will be called for a specific matter or for a specific community. Such as *Goga ji* will be called specifically if the issue is related to cows, *Tejaji* will be called specifically if the issues are related to snakes etc. *Om Banna Ji* is also one such local god but interestingly, his existence is fairly recent with a unique set of practices and common beliefs.

The temple of *Om Banna Ji*, Om is located alongside the highway in the village of Chotila, near Pali district, Jodhpur, Rajasthan. About a thousand to two thousand believers visit this temple every day, and this number is increasing day by day. Here, *Om Banna Ji* is worshiped in a form which is his Royal Enfield motorbike. During the research multiple stories were found which have co-existed to form this new folk deity. More or less the conclusion of each story turns out to be the same.

²³ According to Kavita Singh although the central image in the scroll is treated like deity, it lacks an essential feature of icons that give darshan. It does not look out at the devotee. It does not return his gaze. Instead the figure is in profile; its gaze is locked with the other figure shown on the scroll. For more detail read 'Transfixed by the Arrow of Time : Phad Paintings of Rajasthan by Singh Kavita, Edited by Dallapiccola Anna (2011)' Indian Painting The Lesser-Known Tradition' New Delhi, Niyogi Books

²⁴ Turner (1969) quoted by Nina Sabnani, pg. 100 Sabnani, N. and Goswamy, B. (2014). Kaavad tradition of Rajasthan. New Delhi: Niyogi Books.

²⁵ I can take this to important issue of Bhakti movement. For more details read Sabnani, N. and Goswamy, B. (2014). Kaavad tradition of Rajasthan. New Delhi: Niyogi Books.

²⁶ By modernization I meant, god with are new and are meant for specific modern issues such as road accident in this particular myth.

The Modern God-Om Banna ji was born in a Rathore family. His father, Jog Singh Rathore was the sarpanch (head) of the village of Chotila. Based on field research, it was found that *Om Banna Ji* was leading a normal life without any miracle but he had an extraordinarily tender heart which was always eager to help. He got married at the age of 24. He was a royal child and was the only person in the village who owned a Royal Enfield motorbike. Back then in the late 80's, it was unusual for people to own motorbikes in a small village like Chotila. Because of his Royal Enfield, *Om Singh Rathore* later known as *Om Banna ji* was quite famous in the village and also because his great liking for alcohol.

On 2nd December, 1989 (verified by police records), *Om Banna ji* was traveling from the town of Pali to Chotila. On his way to Chotila, he lost control of his motorcycle and hit a tree. Now from this part onwards, there are multiple existing narratives. According to Rohet police station, *Om Banna Ji* has a criminal charge for driving carelessly, leading his own life and the lives of those around him in danger. Some say that due to the fog light of an approaching truck he met with an accident. Some maintain that in order to save a cow, he sacrificed his own life. A few people mentioned that he was drunk while driving. There exist many other versions to this story. This is a peculiarity of oral narratives that they build a complex net around one incident.

Nevertheless, he came to be a god-like figure that directed his grandmother in her dreams to build a temple at the site of the accident, from there Om Banna ji promised to protect people from further mishaps or road accidents. Many believers also believe that, after the accident the motorcycle was taken to the police station but it kept returning again and again to the site of the accident. This story among many other miracles, where people claim that they were granted protection by Om Banna, especially saved from road accidents on that particular highway, turned Banna ji to a deity (he is still in line to attain the position of a local deity). This is how people started following Om Banna ji and one ordinary incident turned into the extraordinary, an ordinary person turned into the divine....a local deity. However, the myth is still progressively building, even more stories are being attached to this particular folktale.²⁷

During the process of research on the myth of *Om Banna Ji*, one can derive almost instantly that humans feel vulnerable with respect to dangers that are beyond their control, hence they need an external force which can provide power and security to them and myths do this in a mystic, magical way. It is also true that people manipulate myths according to their needs and perspective, as nobody is sure about the exact or the specific narrative of the myth which help myths to open for interpretations. For example, in the narrative of the myth of *Om Banna Ji*, he is considered to protect people from road accidents, particularly on that Pali- Jodhpur highway, which was considered to be a highly accident-prone area in recent times. *Om Banna Ji* was also victimized for the same thing, whatever may be the reason for the accident is not important. The accident itself is important or in other words, the incident is significant, and to remember that incident the myth was initially created. It affirms that myths are open to interpretations, which is why the Roshomon effect is so prevalent in this particular narrative. Possibly, as *Om Banna Ji* doesn't belong to any specific community, therefore, every community (36 sub-caste groups of Rajasthan) has its own way to believe in the local deity.

Most of the believers that flock the temple of *Om Banna ji* are drivers (who can be from different castes but are linked by profession), they have a unique ritual of offering alcohol to their deity and consuming the alcohol as *Prasad*. Even though, drinking and driving is illegal but *Om Banna's* followers are protected by the mystical power of the myth. There might be groups consuming alcohol that may not consider it well, hence the narrative of the myth is altered accordingly without changing the offering (*Prasad*) for the god. Perhaps narratives alter but the incident still holds importance.

²⁷ For more details read Sharma Saurav (2017) 'Making of God' excel Publication

According to Barthes', 'myth' is a second-order semiotic system²⁸. It takes an already formed sign and turns it into a signifier. For instance, in this particular myth, *Om Banna Ji's* Royal Enfield bike is turned into a horse (*Vahan*) which signify the divinity in the epic folk stories of Rajasthan. Such as *Kesari Kalmi*, the black mystic horse of *Pabuji*. This horse was an incarnation of some heavenly nymph. Similarly, Dev Narayan will always be identified by his white horse and Maharana Pratap is identified from his *Chetak* (*vahan*). Here the bike is juxtaposed to the horse. Therefore, the bike attains a superlative quality. Now, this bike is not just a bike, it is much more than that. This bike is actually a superbike which possesses magical power. The Bike from which petrol was drained out, the bike which was chained in the local police station, even then the bike keeps returning to the point of mishap. As Andrew Robinson mentions "The system of myths tends to reduce the raw material of signifying objects to similarity". Hence *Om Banna* is objectified and simplified to his motorbike, like Barthes' Einstein is objectified and simplified to his brain²⁹. That is how the bike became the signifier to signify divinity, and open the space of liminal quality within the culture, community, and oral tradition, to drive power out from such substance again, the particular community or society tries to associate with its myth. For example, the bike of *Om Banna Ji* is a divine object, portraying magical and saintly miracles. Now people want to attain that holiness by procuring the same no. "7773", which was the number of *Om Banna Ji's* Royal Enfield. By doing so, people somehow became a part of that superlative object and that godly man. Through this they will attain the liminal power of the myth.

Phad Of 'OM Banna Ji'

Based on field stories, Phad artist Prakash Joshi from Bhilwara, Rajasthan was asked to depict the story of Om Banna in the form of Traditional Phad. This is how the first ever Phad of Om Banna was created. The dimensions of the Phad made were 2' by 4'. Feet. The uppermost left corner is delegated to Lord Ganesha (every auspicious event is started with the name of lord Ganesha.) followed by Saraswati-vandana and dash avatar. The main figure of Om Banna is in the center which dominates the space because of its size and position similar to phad of pabuji and devnaryan ji.

²⁸ Barthes Roland. (2014). Mythologies. points

²⁹ Barthes Roland. (2014). Mythologies. points



The unique aspect of Om Banna's phad, is its contemporization of the myth and the symbol used visually to validate that narrative is also contemporize but being in same repertoire of visual language of phad. For instance Om Banna has been shown drinking alcohol with his friends and juxtaposition of horse to his moter bike is an example of evolving myth according to modern issues. The narratives are taken from the community and depicted by the community itself. My role as a designer was to bring these ends together by deploying aspects of culture. This *Phad* now can be a ritual, if it is read or narrated by *Bhopa* and *Bhopi*. Perhaps, we could be looking at a ritual of the near future with contemporary issues of people.

Contemporization of Phad

As discussed, Phad is sacred craft, where it has serve the role of moveable temple, entertainment through performance, the medium of communication aspirations, reality, needs etc. and also a medium to develop the sense of identity. Traditional phad mostly have heroic deities and their genealogies but now traditional phad is altering itself in different forms. Now there are more hero, or rather new narratives added in the repertoire of phad paintings, such as 'Haldi Ghati ki Ladai', 'Ramayan', 'krishna Leela' etc. Even one can find Mughal narratives in the phad, such as 'Akbar ki Phad'. One can also find phad is been replicated on small piece of paper, rather on muslin fabric. Even the size is considerably reduced, synthetics pigments are used instead of natural colors, to make it, as a commodity. A commodity, which is easy to carry, effortless to maintain, affordable, but it has lost

its liminal quality. This phad is not movable temple, or rather is not divine object any more. The ritual is detached from these phad, hence these commoditized phad pieces is not considered as phad. Perhaps it is just a part of bigger consecrated phad. The performative aspect of phad is also changed, due to technological development, we can find new way of storytelling, interlacing with the aspect of culture and visual comprehending, such as videos, animations, graphic novel etc. Yet Bhopa and Bhopi are considered the real door to local deities. They have power to bring both the end together and open the liminal space for the community.

Phad has changed over a period of time, from painting on muslin fabric, it's has been altered to paper, airport or railway's walls etc.. Though some believe that phad is adapted from murals, as we can find the trace of typical phad like figure on the temple walls³⁰ while some believe it has been adapted from Iranian Parada, a cloth scroll used in the recitation of stories of heroes, such as the martyrdom of Hasan and .hussein .³¹ One can also find different myths around the origin of phad. Perhaps origin of phad can't be determine but phad have seen extensive transformations, yet traditional phad hold it importance, at least among rural areas. The practitioner of this ritual craft are may be few, but it still hold the distinctiveness of the communes. Hence it is still the scared craft, with divine properties, which still able to transform its believers.

³⁰ For more details read Jain Jyotindra, Introduction from 'Picture Showmen Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art' Marg Publication.

³¹ For more details read 'Transfixed by the Arrow of Time : Phad Paintings of Rajasthan by Singh Kavita, Edited by Dallapiccola Anna (2011)' Indian Painting The Lesser-Known Tradition' New Delhi, Niyogi Books