

STORYTELLING TRADITIONS – INDIGENOUS TO INDIA/BHARAT

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling in India has been a tradition for ages. All of us have listened to stories of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Legends of Krishna, Panchatantra, Jataka Kathayen etc., since our childhood days with awe and admiration. The oral tradition, the print material, and now the digital modes have all been prevalent and loved by the young and old. Stories are written in multiple languages and dialect covering the landscape of the whole country. In India, traditional storytelling transports audiences to a world of myths, folklore and cultural wisdom. Sant Gora Kumbhar of Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Goa's vibrant tradition of Naibag telling tales of Satiya Devi and her son Mulvir, Ladakh's Zanzkarpas tribe tales talking about warmth and wisdom from snowy winters, weaving together familial bonds and ancestral tales, Odisha's Daskathia performance telling legendary tales of Ekalavya and his unwavering devotion to his guru, resonating with themes of sacrifice and honour are some of the examples that have woven the rich tapestry of storytelling in Bharat.

Keywords: Storytelling Traditions, Oggu Katha, Chitrakathi, Gangavane, Tholu Bommalata, Bhopa

Introduction

India is a country where storytelling has been a tradition for ages. All of us have listened to stories of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Legends of Krishna, Panchatantra, Jataka Kathayen etc., since our childhood days with awe and admiration. The oral tradition, the print material, and now the digital modes have all been prevalent and loved by the young and old. This is a tradition or Parampara which gives examples of love, valour, intellect, wisdom etc. in a non formal setting.

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The interesting part is that there are creative modes of storytelling, which are through paintings, puppetry, songs, dance, movement and drama. It is a fascinating world where the audience of varied age groups is transformed to a world of abstract images, fluttering wings to fly high. These stories, rich in cultural depth and moral lessons, highlights India's oral traditions, connecting generations through timeless narratives. Let us now read about some examples of storytelling in our country.

Oggu Katha – (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana)

The Oggu Katha performers of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are traditional folk storytellers. This ancient oral traditions combines music, storytelling, dance, and drama. The word *Oggu* refers to the small hand drum that keeps rhythm, while *Katha* means "story." The songs or compositions are accompanied by musicians playing instruments like the *dolu*, *kanjira*, and *nadaswaram*. The performance comprises of different types of styles in dialects of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh regions. The ballads are sung in a specific poetic form known as *Manjari Dwipada*—a style of rhyming couplets that blends lyrical prose with intense rhythmic narration. The language often incorporates local words, idioms, and expressions specific to the pastoral *Kuruma* and Golla (Yadav) communities, enhancing the traditional authenticity of the storytelling

Originating mainly among the *Kuruma* (shepherd) community, they worship Lord Mallikarjuna. The lead singer, called the *kathakudu*, sings and narrates ballads in praise of Lord *Shiva*, and the



myths of *Mallanna*, *Beerappa*, and *Yellamma*, who are the caste Gods of those regions. Performances take place during village festivals and temple fairs, which last for hours or even through the night. The Oggu singers wear unique costumes and ornaments symbolizing their spiritual connection. Traditionally, Oggu Katha was performed for both worship in religious festivals and also for livelihood. It is performed in return for offerings from devotees. This form is now performed in devotional programmes and state cultural days. In recent times school children from the state performed and represented their state in Kala Utsav (a Ministry of Education and GOI enterprise)

The Oggu Katha artist like Chukka Sattaiah of Warangal district, Midde Ramulu of Karimnagar district and Devuni (Achchana) Mallaiah brought national recognition to the folk art. **Chukka Sattaiah** went on to receive Sangeet Natak Akademi from former President APJ Abdul Kalam. Potti Sriramulu Telugu University conferred Doctor of Letters (Honoris Causa) on Sattaiah in 2005 for his immense contribution to folk art. Sri Sattaiah was instrumental in using the art form for narrating social messages, starting with the 20-Point Programme launched by the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. He also adapted the ancient folk art form to create awareness among the masses on the need for adult education, family planning and more importantly on social evils such as dowry system, superstitions and bad habits.



Chitrakathi (Maharashtra)

This is a rare and culturally rich storytelling tradition practiced by the Thakar Adivasi community of Pinguli village in Maharashtra's Sindhudurg district. Unlike most other Indian folk art forms, Chitrakathi is not just a style of painting—it is an immersive storytelling performance that blends oral narration, music, and hand-painted visuals. The name itself comes from *chitra* meaning picture and *katha* meaning story, and this union of image and narrative lies at the heart of the tradition.

A typical Chitrakathi performance involves a set of sequential hand-painted illustrations that depict episodes from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, along with local legends and moral tales. These paintings, made traditionally on handmade paper using natural dyes and age-old motifs, are preserved and performed like a visual scroll. Each painting is carefully crafted in standard sizes like 12 x 15 or 12 x 18 inches and presented one at a time, as the storyteller narrates the plot through songs, dramatic dialogues, and rhythmic music, using instruments such as the ektara, huduk, or any percussive instrument. In earlier times, these performances were held in temples or open spaces during festivals like Navratri and Diwali, serving as both entertainment and a medium of education in villages with limited literacy or access to books.



What makes Chitrakathi truly distinct is its deep social and historical significance. For the Thakar community, Chitrakathi is more than a painting tradition—it is a way of life, passed down orally through generations. Many artists still possess original Chitrakathi paintings that are over 300 years old, passed through family lineages as living archives of knowledge and artistry. Moreover, it is believed that *Dnyaneshwari*, the 13th-century commentary on the Bhagavad Gita gives references and reflects the presence of such traditions. Then Chitrakathi must be far more ancient than we currently estimate—its origins possibly stretching back a thousand years or more.



Historically, Chitrakathi artists played a powerful but little-known role during the reign of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. According to oral history,

it was Shivaji Maharaj who recognized the cultural and strategic value of this art form and helped bring it out of the forests into broader society. He gave land near temples to the community, encouraging them to settle and share their art with the larger public. But beyond their artistic contributions, Chitrakathi artists also acted as covert messengers under the intelligence system known as *Guptachar*. Disguised as performers, they travelled between villages, gathering and passing on information crucial to the Maratha empire.

To protect their secrets, the community developed two sophisticated methods of communication: one was a form of sign language, and the other was a community-specific code language, completely distinct from *Marathi*, *Malwani*, or *Varhadi* dialects. This enabled the artists to speak freely even in the presence of enemies, making their role not only artistic but also political and strategic.

In the present day, Chitrakathi faces challenges due to modernization and fading intergenerational transmission. However, the tradition remains alive, thanks to the continuous efforts of families in *Pinguli*. Leading this revival is Padma Shri awardee Parshuram Gangavane, who received the award from the Govt of India in 2021. He has also been nominated as a Guru under the Guru Shishya Parampara initiated by the Ministry of Culture, GOI. Along with his family, he has dedicated his life to preserving, practising, and promoting this heritage. The Thakar Adivasi caste of *Pinguli* is traditionally occupied with eleven different performance arts –



- Kalsutri Bahuliya – a string show depicting the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata
- Dayati – The shadow puppet theatre
- Storytelling with the paintings
- Pangulbael – a ritual form of theatre around the figure of the sacred bull of Shiva

The Gangavane family has ensured that Chitrakathi continues to evolve by propagating the art form in workshops, exhibitions, and educational programs. Through the trust and other like-minded artisans they have hosted awareness campaigns based on HIV aids, Beti Bachao, Swachha Bharat Abhiyan, health awareness programmes during Covid etc. They have been a part of Kala Utsav and Pratibha Samvardhan programmes of NCERT and Ministry of Education (School education and Literacy). Their exhibitions distinguish between digital Chitrakathi, handmade originals, and other related crafts, allowing audiences to experience the full spectrum of this art form. The enduring work of Parshuram Gangavane and his family, has given this ancient legacy, survival, linking the wisdom of the past with the possibilities of the future.

An Important Aspect of Education

We are aware of the Indigenous knowledge which is unique in every human society. It is embedded in community practices (rituals, traditional lineage, relationships, livelihood value system etc.) and is an element in the shaping of a society. The refinement in the practices of any society creates art forms. When people in a society express through hand and feet movement it becomes dance, through images like sketching, moulding clay, making objects out of grass, rope, cane, cloth etc. singing poetry or literary phrases all of it showcases the thought process and it is unique which is termed as indigenous form of arts/expression. Art practices in India are indigenous and have become a part of heritage. They are resources of knowledge which point towards the creative and aesthetical journey of people in all parts of the country.

Tholu Bommalata – A living tradition of Story telling in India (Karnataka)

Nimmalakunta is a small village in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, known for 'Tholu Bommalata'— a traditional form of leather shadow puppetry that has existed for centuries telling mythical stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata. The name itself translates to "dance (attam) of the leather (tholu) puppets (bommalu)." The stories, songs and craft go hand in hand and so it is a combination of both performing and visual arts.

There are several stories about the origin of this craft as some link it to the age-old tradition of Chhaya Nataka (shadow drama), others trace it back to the Satavahana dynasty (around 200 BC). The 13th-century Telugu text Panditaradhy Charitra also refers to it.

Tholu Bommalata flourished under the patronage of dynasties like the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and later, the Vijayanagara Empire under Krishnadevaraya in the 16th century. Krishnadevaraya patronised the form as 'Thogulu Gombeyataa'. It was a medium to educate people on religious myths and practised by migrant workers from Maharashtra. Practised by the Aare Kapu community, the art migrated to the southern part of India. from Maharashtra as they received patronage from the rulers. This community gradually settled across Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu.

In every state it is performed according to the local language, bringing the epics — especially the Ramayana and Mahabharata — to life through the style of Harikatha. Shows often last through the night. On occasions like Shivaratri, Ram Navami, and other seasonal festivals. The scenario is like - Mats are unrolled under the open sky. A white canvas tied to bamboo poles at two ends is put up for screening backdrops. Somewhere behind the screen, the muddalam gives a slow, steady beat along with a traditional tune played on the harmonium. And then along with the beats, the puppets begin to move. Leather figures, lit from behind, came alive through the shadows, telling stories from the epic Ramayana, Mahabharata, local legends. The synchronised dancing of puppets along with the rhythm of the musical instruments and narration is extremely captivating. The whole atmosphere reverberates with joy. The puppet dolls sing, complain, fight, and are in continuous dialogue with each other, narrating frame-to-frame tales. The most important part of puppet show is the cut out of the leather puppets to different characters, bedecked with beautiful colours shimmering through tiny hand-punched holes. The scene is realistic, and it creates an emotional connection with all the characters.

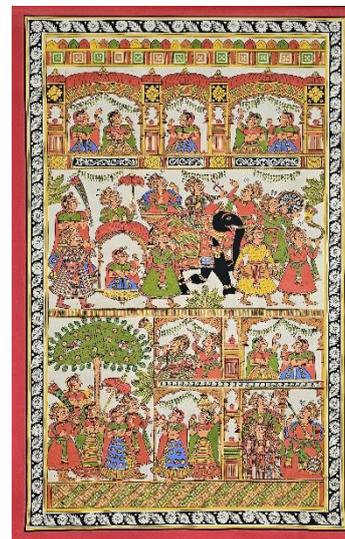
There is a lot of belief in each character by this community. Stories are prevalent about how the puppets were once believed to bless villages during the drought or any other natural calamity. The villagers believed the puppets had the power to summon the supernatural powers and even if it was coincidence, something about that story feels real.

(Chalapathi Rao, now in his late 70s, received the Padma Shri in 2020 for his work in preserving this endangered art.)

Phad Paintings and Bhopa (Rajasthan)

The traditional and historical roots are embedded particularly within the Mewar, Marwar and Shekhawati regions. But this art form of storytelling has moved to the international platform.

These are traditional singers who preserve and perform oral epic narratives of folk deities using a scroll called 'Phad'. They are storytellers who perform the stories



related to the king and kingdom, the valour of a sword and warriors, love themes for cultural and religious purposes and the trends in a society.

Phad is a piece of cloth. A piece of coarse cotton cloth known as *reja* in local language, with different dimensions is identified keeping in view the purpose and suitability. It is dipped in water for almost a day. A paste of barley, wheat powder and gum (tamarind seed powder or *kheriya gond*) is made which stiffens the fabric and fills in the cracks. Then it is dried in the sun. After it is stiff, it is rubbed with a heavy stone called *Mohra*, to give a polish to the cloth for all colours to shine brightly. A swastika is painted in the corner of the cloth as a ritual.

After this basic work this cloth is divided into segments which are rectangle or square as per the need. A story board is drawn in these segments which depicts historical stories of kings, queens, warriors, legendary epics of Ramayana, Mahabharata, of societal practices etc.

Along with this community, another community known as Bhopa is connected. These are singers, composers and lyricists. They play the Ravanhattha (string instrument), dholak, Naal and manjeera. Whatever is depicted in the painting on the scroll is sung by Bhopas and a story is told to the audience. The dialects of these areas are used to sing the paintings. "Created as travelling or mobile temples, these traditional paintings were carried by priest-singers of the Rabari tribe, called Bhopas and Bhopis, who would sing and perform stories of their local deities - Devnarayanji (a reincarnation of Vishnu) and Pabuji (a local hero). The Phad painting would be unrolled, or unfolded after sunset, and the performance in front of village members, would last into the night. This is perhaps why the paintings are called 'Phad', which means 'fold' in the local dialect." <https://www.artisera.com/blogs/expressions/phad-paintings-of-rajasthan>. Previously these paintings would be 20 to 30 feet in length but now they are customised according to the demand of the customers.



The Phad paintings have become significant as the artists have evolved and spread the culture from local to global. The credit for this achievement goes to people of the Joshi family like Shree Lal Joshi, Satyanarayan Joshi, Shanti Lal Joshi, Vijay Joshi etc. You will find these paintings in the assembly of Canada, private and personal collection of people living in Russia, USA, France etc.



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The diversified impact of Arts Education with ref to NEP 2020 and

- "The arts form a major medium for imparting culture. The arts, besides strengthening cultural identity, awareness, and uplifting societies, are well known to enhance cognitive and creative abilities in individuals and increase individual happiness. The happiness/well-being, cognitive development, and cultural identity of individuals are important reasons that Indian arts of all kinds must be offered to students at all levels of education, starting with early childhood care and education." NEP 22.3
- The worth of folk art forms -School children will remain distanced from social reality if Arts, especially, folk arts, are not inculcated in school education. Arts contribute to shaping children's thinking. NEP 7.3

Merits of Indigenous Art and Culture

The practice of these art forms definitely creates a positive environment making every child and adult happy giving them a conducive environment for learning. These art forms also have an outreach to tap the usual curricular areas like language, science, social sciences etc. Arts is a natural trait in all human beings which spontaneously addresses the needs in life aesthetically. It brings people together, as it has the power to make a person happy, soothe a

disturbed mind, inspire, energize and help an individual to easily connect to the immediate surroundings. They have the capacity of enhancing the physical and psychological well-being of both performer and the audience. Arts in India aims to enrich the quality of formal education by increasing awareness about different aspects of Indian heritage and inspiring the young mind to imbibe the values embedded in it. 1“It seeks to inspire the youth through experiencing the rich and heterogeneous cultural tapestry of Indian and World Heritage, with a hope that the beauty, grace, values, and wisdom embodied in these arts will influence their way of life and thinking and inspire one to become a better human being.”

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