

SPECIAL FEATURE

Theme for this issue: Literature, Art, Architecture, Culture and heritage of Rajasthan



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Review Article

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In Rajasthan, the traditional art forms are windows to the land's diverse culture and history. Each region reflects its own history, beliefs and ways of life contributing to the rich mosaic of Rajasthani art and culture. From the vibrant *Phad* paintings and miniature paintings to the intricately designed architecture of *havelis* and forts as well as folk tales, folk songs and folk dances, these art forms continue to enchant art lovers and critics. The artworks and literature in Rajasthan often depict nature, folk deities, tales of heroism and divinity, geo-cultural specificities and so on, each distinguished by their unique aesthetic elements and themes. Various styles of paintings such as Mewar, Marwar, Bikaner, Jaipur, Bundi and Kishangarh schools fall under the umbrella of miniature paintings that flourished from the beginning of the 16th century down to the 19th century. They are characterized by bright colours and portray not only the life of the local people but Indian divinities and gods, Krishna, Radha and *gopis*; numerous *bhakti* cults also became the subjects of these paintings. Kishangarh painting, an 18th century school of the Rajasthani style of Indian painting called *Bani Thani* originated in the princely state of Kishangarh, is distinguished by its individualistic facial type and its panoramic landscapes transmitting the romantic and religious passion of its patron into visual images. *Phad* paintings are large scale cloth-paintings illustrating local deities and epic narratives and are a blend of the folk, heroic and religious themes. They are traditionally used in storytelling performances where the painted cloth serves as a backdrop for narrating tales.

Rajasthani literature, traversing through centuries, demonstrates its verve in the songs, stories, verses and *Bhajans* focusing on multiple *rasas* including *vira*, *shringara* and *bhakti* at the same time. These literary creations date back to the *Veer-gatha* period inspired by heroic

sentiments and were composed by loyal courtiers. These literary traditions continued through the medieval era when Meera's poetry, festured with elements of romance, mystery and *bhakti*, exhibit feminist overtones stretching to the 19th century when poets like Surya Mall Mishran became known for historical and patriotic compositions expressive of the rebellious voice against British colonialism. Contemporary poets and story-writers Kanhaiyalal Sethia, Lakshmi Kumari Chundawat and Vijaydan Detha have also exercised significant impact on the literary landscape of Rajasthan. Detha's collection *Bataan ri Phulwari (Garden of Tales)* draws on folkloristic traditions of the desert in the spoken dialects of Rajasthan and many of his stories have been adapted for the stage and screen. Folk songs and oral narratives depicting natural beauty, landscape, geography, seasons, flora and fauna, festivals, clothes, traditional rituals and rites, instructive and practical proverbs related to pragmatic wisdom, praise of wars heroes, saints and patrons, eulogy of gods and kings, sufferings of the people at the time of famine and flood, water-scarcity in the desert region and so on form a part of the rich literary and cultural traditions of Rajasthan.

The architectural heritage of Rajasthan has earned fame for its forts, palaces, *havelis* and temples showcasing a blend of structural elements such as courtyards, *chhatris* (domed pavilions often used as cenotaphs or decorative patterns), *pols* (elaborate gateways), *baories* (stepwells), *jharokhas* (spiracles, peep-holes, vents, breathing holes, skylights, or window-like structures to permit passage for light and air with overhanging enclosed balconies adding a distinctive charm of discreet observation) exemplify a unique aesthetic and functional design characteristic of these buildings. The integration of artistic finesse like decorative frescoes, grand arches, lattice work and intricate carvings reflecting the magnificence and grandeur of Rajasthani architectural patterns and styles with traditionally relevant and climate responsive elements as well as socio-culturally gendered spaces have earned distinction as repositories of historical-cultural memorabilia.

The Special Feature issue of the journal *Caesurae: Poetics of Cultural Translation*, Volume 6:2 engages with the theme 'Literature, Art, Architecture, Culture and Heritage of Rajasthan.' It will offer an interesting insight into the artistic-cultural creations from the arid landscape of Rajasthan by placing them within the contextual frame of interdisciplinary studies of art and literature. The creative interventions from Rajasthan in the form of literary writings, folkloristic compositions and architectural constructions, providing both aesthetic appeal and inquisitive space for research, serve foundational to give agency to oral traditions of

storytelling such as the performative art of *Kaavad* recitation as well as to architectural marvels like stepwells which are symbols of traditional engineering for water management.

Situating the historical *baories* or stepwells of Rajasthan in Foucauldian ‘Heterotopia’, Professor Kiran Deep in her article “Stepwells as Cultural Texts: Decoding the Architectural Narratives of the Historical *Baories*/Stepwells of Rajasthan” critiques the formative role of ancient stepwells scattered across the desert for centuries that hold significance for their water management engineering and stepped architectural designs that have ensured groundwater conservation and access during periods of low rainfall or draught when other water bodies dry up in this climate zone. Placing these architectural spaces as reliable sources of water supply in the arid region, she explores these functional structures as cultural texts to show how these sites have served as socialising places for communities to participate in religious or cultural activities, especially for women who gathered at these stepwells to collect water. The article elaborates upon the architectural marvel along the utilitarian relevance of these stepwells to show how their multi-level step-like structure often adorned with intricate carvings on their walls offered space for social interaction, relaxation and recreation as well as celebration and trade transforming them into intimate, lived spaces of cultural memory.

Vijaydan Detha, fondly remembered as ‘Bijji’, is one of the most celebrated literary voices of Rajasthan in the 20th century whose writings received national and international acclaim through translation into Hindi and the other major languages of the world, “*Duvidha*” being notable among them. He is remembered for his contribution to the folk legacy and storytelling tradition of Rajasthan by recording the traditional folk tales into local dialect and language. He resourced his tales from local oral narratives and anecdotes, putting the almost lost stories back into circulation, with many of them finding their way to stage and silver screen. Dr. Shruti Rawal’s article “Folklore, Social Constructs and Gender in Vijaydan Detha’s “Double Lives”” examines the representation of gender and social constructs in Detha’s story “*Dhohri Zindagi*,” focusing on how the narrative challenges conventional gender binaries and societal expectations. Contextualizing the story within broader feminist and postcolonial theoretical framework, Rawal explores how Detha deconstructs socially imposed identities through his storytelling and thereby studies the role of Rajasthani folklore and oral traditions in both reinforcing and subverting dominant cultural narratives.

The next article of the special feature, authored by a budding scholar Rajni, “Between Tradition and Transgression: A Feminist Rewriting of Vijaydan Detha’s “*Duvidha*” in the

Cinematic Spectacle of Amol Palekar's *Paheli*" addresses the journey of *Duvidha* from Detha to Amol Palekar whose film *Paheli*, offers yet another creative reimagining and reinterpretation of the folktale. Her study reflects on how the film recreates a different kind of resolution, where personal desire and emotional connection are given more weight than social expectations while it retains the original spirit of the tale, giving it a fantastical twist at the end. Through a close reading of both the original story and the film, the research considers how *Paheli*, drawing from the rich aesthetic language of Rajasthani folklore, with its vibrant colours, haunting music, and textured desert landscapes, reimagines the fate of its heroine while simultaneously reshaping the very traditions that once sought to confine her.

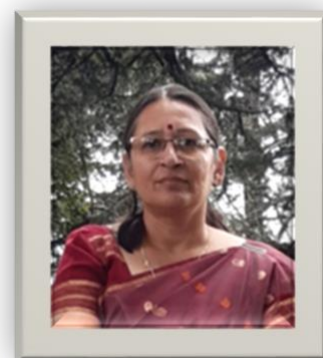
Kaavad, a portable shrine or temple, is a painted wooden structure resembling a cupboard with multiple folding panels hinged together that open and close like doors containing images depicting the lives of Bhakti saints, Indian deities or mythological figures, as well as the scenes and stories from Indian epics *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*. The tradition of *Kaavad banchana* (recitation), popular as the oral-visual storytelling tradition in Rajasthan, involves carrying the *kaavad* to different places narrating stories from the epics, Puranic tales and local folklore while the corresponding visuals are displayed on *Kaavad* panels. The *Kaavad* is considered a sacred object and a representation of the divine which serves for more than a storytelling tradition; it is a form of cultural preservation connecting people to their cultural heritage and beliefs which involves a synergetic relationship between the maker, the storyteller/narrator and the hereditary patron to whom the story is narrated. Dr. Santosh Kanwar Shekhawat, in her article, "*Kaavad: The Verbal Visual Narrative of Rajasthan*" brings to light the interconnectedness between pictorial-oral storytelling tradition embedded in performative art called *Kaavad*. The study foregrounds *Kaavad* recitation as more than a worship ritual and religious ceremony and attempts to critique how *Kaavad* performance provides a venue for storytelling and a metaphor for virtual pilgrimage simultaneously.

Dr. Alka Bhakar Jhahria in her article "Reflections on Chivalry and Sagacity in Rajasthani Folklore and Culture with Special Reference to Laxmi Kumari Chundawat's *Ke Re Chakwa Vaat*" attempts to give visibility to Lakshi Kumari Chundawat's contribution to the corpus of Rajasthani literature. Chundawat is known for her interest in Rajasthani folklore and she celebrates women's traditional roles while giving voice to their empowerment and resilience in her folktales and poetic compositions. Her work *Ke Re Chakwa Vaat* has preserved the region's oral narratives, customs, rituals, and festivals, and given them literary form preserving Rajasthan's cultural heritage. Dr. Bhakar provides insight into Rani Laxmi Kumari

Chundawat's role in reviving and reshaping Rajasthani folklore by documenting and archiving the folk tales, ballads, and songs that were previously passed down orally connecting generations. The article reveals how Chundawat's tales, collected in *Ke Re Chakwa Vaat*, demonstrates that oral traditions not only provide for as sources of entertainment but also serve as ethical and philosophical guides for society.

To conclude, the special issue focuses on how the transmission of cultural stories can reinforce the idea of empowering human subjects and help disseminate the wisdom inherent in oral traditions across Rajasthan. An attempt has been made in this issue to explore the role of art, architecture and literature in the making of the culture of the region and show how translating them into performative arts amounts to devise an alternative narrative of 'power' for traditional knowledge and cultural resources, ensuring their participation in the mainstream. The articles bring to point the idea that *translation* produces 'new' texts from oral traditions and reclaims orality as a site of Rajasthan's literary traditions that gives representation to cultural imaginaries inherent in memory, language, myth, ritual and other collective experiences. The issue acknowledges the agency of ancient knowledge embedded in the architecture, storytelling traditions, and cultural heritage of Rajasthan.

****Dr. Praveen Mirdha** is a Professor in the Department of English, Government Girls' College, Ajmer, Rajasthan, India. She has authored a book, *Madness: Perspectives and Representations in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (Authorspress, 2016). She has published book-chapters, book reviews and articles in International and National journals and presented papers in International Conferences and Seminars organized by institutions acclaimed for academics and research including IIAS, Shimla; Central Universities of Rajasthan and Pondicherry, the French Institute of Pondicherry, Puducherry and Thanatic Ethics. Her areas of research and publication primarily focus on Women's Writings, Human Rights Stories, Travel Writing, Partition Literature, Diasporic Imaginaries in literature and Translation Studies. Her book-chapter "How the River/Water Speaks in the Partition Narratives of the Indian Subcontinent?" is part of an edited-volume *Sarita Sutrakatha: Riverine Cultures in Indian Narrative* (IIAS, Shimla, 2023). Her book-chapters pertaining to Indian perspectives on Kala Pani Crossings and indentured female diaspora include "Exilic trajectories of crossing the *Kala pani*: Locating female subjectivity in the writings of Ramabai Espinet and Gaiutra Bahadur" and the latest one, "Between Homes and Shores: Reimagining Her 'Silences' from *Kala pani* Crossings in Indo-Caribbean Poetry," have appeared in two companion volumes *Kala Pani Crossings: Revisiting 19th Century Migrations from India's Perspective* (Routledge



and IAS, Shimla, 2022) and *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives* (Routledge, 2024) respectively. Her latest book-chapter “Memory Beyond Black Waters: Mapping History, Language and Culture in *Kalapani* Poetics from the Perspective of Female Indentureship” is included in a volume titled *Girmitiya Culture and Memory: Navigating Identity, Tradition and Resilience across Continents* published by Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland (2024). Dr. Mirdha’s book-chapters have been reviewed across the globe for their interdisciplinary research and her journal articles are cited by researchers in international journals and books published by international publishers including Palgrave Macmillan. Her upcoming book-chapter engages with the evolving genre of ‘petrofiction’ from Kerala and addresses the all-pervasive impact of precarities and vulnerabilities wrought by water-crossing and oil-encounter in the lives of migrant labourers from the Global South to the Arabian Gulf countries.