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Kaavad: The Verbal Visual Narrative of Rajasthan

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Abstract: Rajasthan houses a rich treasure of oral narratives. Some of these oral narratives contain accompanying visuals, such as paintings, performances or puppets. As a popular verbal visual narrative of Rajasthan, *Kaavad* is a text and performance that lends itself to various interpretations. The study aims at analysing the physical, visual and narrative structure of *Kaavad* and understanding the interconnectedness between the verbal and the visual forms of narration. The study also aims at decoding the narratives and the painted images to understand the social and cultural histories of the communities involved. Finally, it attempts to understand *Kaavad* narration as a metaphor for virtual pilgrimage. The study brings out that *Kaavad* is more than just a worship ritual and ceremony, for the narrators, it is an act of protest, a response, and an admission into a socially and historically barred place. Another way to look at it is as a virtual manifestation of the patron's unconscious aspirations and deepest desires. These performances serve as a metaphor for virtual pilgrimage for those whose wish to go on a pilgrimage remains unfulfilled.

Keywords: *Kaavad, oral narrative, panels, performative art, pictorial representation, storytelling tradition, verbal-visual narrative.*

Introduction

Some oral narratives are communicated through the combination of the verbal and the visual narration. In such narratives, the visual representation is usually in the form of artifacts, cloth scrolls, painted shrines and/or performances. Shekhawat observes, “The oral narratives in which paintings are used as complements to narration are popularly known as *Chitrakatha* (pictorial narrative). This mode of storytelling is quite popular in South Asia and is believed to have its roots in pre-Buddhist pictorial narrative traditions. India houses a rich tradition of *Chitrakatha*.” (2018: 174). Wickett writes:

Pictorial narrative traditions are found in Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jaina literature (in particular, the so-called *pata chitras*, a type of religious painting that originated in Orissa) and some scholars see analogies in the folk narrative-cum-painting customs practiced by various adivasi tribes and sub-tribes in the central Indian state of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan. (2010: 6)

A widespread practice in India, pictorial scrolls, also known as *pata* in Bengal, is painted by *patuas* (storytellers), depicting the stories from classical epics. In Gujarat, the painted scrolls are called *garodas*, which are based on Puranic legends. Maharashtra is known for its *chitrakathis*, or painted panels, which portray scenes from the Puranas and epics. Rajasthan also houses two incredibly intriguing verbal visual narratives- *Kaavad* and *Phad*.

The Mewar and the Marwar regions of Rajasthan are home to the four-hundred-year-old *Kaavad* storytelling tradition. Etymologically, the name *Kaavad* is derived from the word *kivad* which is a derivative of the Sanskrit word *kapaat*, which means "half a door". According to Bhanavat, the word *kivad* means door (1975: 2). *Kaavad* is a portable shrine that has panels that fold up and are painted with pictures that tell stories.

Discussing the origin of *Kaavad* tradition, Sabnani speculates that Rajasthan's sandy soil may have been a major barrier to the building of temples, and that the ones that were constructed were difficult for people to reach because of strict caste and race hierarchies. In response to this strict social structure, *Kaavad* was created to give the lower classes direct access to the divine, and the Bhakti movement strengthened the influence of this tradition (2014: 18–19).

As a verbal visual narrative, *Kaavad* is a text and performance that lends itself to various interpretations. Sabnani opines, "The Kaavad is a microcosm that encompasses religion, myth, family and genealogy. It is designed for collective memory; therefore, it guarantees the perpetuation of a collective identity" (2014: 106). Combining the verbal and the visual modes of narration strengthens the narrative appeal greatly and provides a framework for analyzing the interplay between the spoken and the visual narratives and, on how they combine to create new stories. Having developed within certain social, political, religious, economic, and ecological circumstances, this tradition is revived and reinvented, with every retelling, wherein, the factual

and emotional content is changed, amended, and reinterpreted; hence, a flexible methodology is needed for research on *Kaavad* tradition.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a structural, semiotic and qualitative approach, grounded in oral theory and intertextuality, to examine *Kaavad* as a verbal visual narrative. Textual analysis method has been used, wherein, a range of secondary sources, including books, journal articles and scholarly discussions on the theme have been examined. These sources provide a critical lens for analysing *Kaavad* as a verbal visual narrative and support the arguments put forward in the research paper.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims at analysing the physical, visual and narrative structure of *Kaavad* and understanding the interconnectedness between the verbal and the visual forms of narration. An inquiry into the verbal narrative and painted images aims at understanding the construction of the socio-cultural and family histories of the various groups and communities involved. This research also attempts to explore the basic anthropological concepts like self, identity, memory and desires of the communities involved. The way it moves through different media contributes to the development of theoretical framework for the study of interpersonal relationships amongst the different groups.

The study aims at investigating *Kaavad* narration as an intersection of opposites- divine and mortal, time and timelessness, reality and imagination, and history and myth. Furthermore, it creates a space where opposing ideas of ownership and authorship, as well as those of religious and secular art forms, and the disadvantaged and privileged roles of performers, can be studied. *Kaavad* also provides a forum for investigating the connection between the pilgrimage and the artistic expression.

Physical and Visual Structure of *Kaavad*

The physical, visual, and narrative structures of *Kaavad* can all be examined using structural, semiotic and qualitative approach. *Kaavad* shrine has a three-dimensional structural design. It has a complex physical construction with *paats* (panels) on either side of the shrine connected to

the main framework. During transit, *Kaavad* resembles a small, roughly twelve-inch wooden box.

Kaavad shrine's physical layout is essentially modeled on a Hindu temple, with *dwarapalas* (guards) at the entry called. These guards lead to a *mandapa* (covered hall) that houses deity statues, and from there to the *garbhagraha* (inner shrine), also known as Ram Mandir or Krishna Mandir. The wooden structure is shaped and painted from the center outward, following the traditional pattern of building a temple, which starts with the *garbhagraha* foundation and ends with the creation of the periphery and its decorations.

Bund paats (closed panels), *khul paats* (open panels), and *gupt paats* (hidden panels) are the three types of *paats*. Each of the ten, twelve, or sixteen *paats* has a name and a distinct purpose. The *Poliyas ka paat*, *Raavan ka paat*, and *Jajman ka paat* are located on the *bund paat* on the left side of the central structure. These panels are recited for the new patron during their induction. To the right of the shrine lies *khul Paat*, this is home to *Poliyas ka paat*, *Badrinath ka paat*, *Pandava ka paat*, and *Jajman ka paat*. These are meant for recital to the old patrons. *Gupt paat* consists of *Poliyas ka paat*, *Suraj ka paat*, *Chandrma ka paat*, *Naag ka paat*, *Sani ka paat* and *Jajman ka paat*, and are recited for those who wish to keep their identity anonymous and donations secret. The structure also has a ticket, a license with the statement that *Kaavad* originated in Kashi, tucked away at the farthest door. A *daan peti* (donation box), hidden at the base of the structure, holds jewels and cash given by patrons (Sabnani 2014: 88).



Image 1: Close-up view of a *Kaavad*'s Panels

The visual structure of *Kaavad* consists of complicated pattern of several images on each panel of shrine placed in a grid. The principal figure, the folk deity, is larger and positioned in the middle. The figure's scale conveys both its significance in the story and social standing. Saints and local legends are portrayed carrying out roles that are appropriate to them. Ordinary characters are depicted in profile, whereas the deities are shown frontally. Patrons are depicted as either flying in an airplane, chariot, or on horseback. Multiple timelines and spaces are represented- mythical spaces of Gods, historical spaces of heroes, the real time spaces of attendees and the imaginary spaces of patron's aspirations.

Wickett observes, the characters are portrayed in profiles and with a formulaic, clichéd physiognomy. As a result, they lack any unique experiences or personality traits. *Kaavad* is emotionally and dramatically neutral... (2010: 17). The figures are depicted without any context and the visual representation lacks chronology but owing to the shared experiences of the narrator and the listener, the visuals are immediately recognized. The purposeful similarity or ambiguity of the patrons' figures represents the importance of community over individual. Additionally, this gives the image the adaptability to convey various stories. Images are embedded with narratives by the storyteller, and vice versa.



Image 2: A *Kaavad* Showing Detailed Narrative

In *Kaavad*, the Maru-Gurjar painting style of Chittor is used. The red background of the panels is in consonance with *Kaavad's* status as a sacred place and is a sign of auspiciousness. The figures and motifs are straightforward and uncomplicated, with strong black outline. The narrative framework of *Kaavad* is built by combining images from several panels, telling stories from mythology, history, and imagination, and reciting genealogy. A semiotic analysis of painted images shows that the verbal story is enhanced and complemented by the symbolic meaning of the colours. It also indicates a character's moral and physical identity and points to the predominant *rasa* (sentiment) at play. The colour blue symbolizing divinity is used to signify the three gods, Vishnu, Ram, and Krishna. While the low caste and demons have darker skin tones, the deities and upper caste are depicted as having pale skin tones. While yellow signifies prosperity and is used for jewellery and decorations, white indicates austerity and is used to colour the eyes. Green is a symbol of Muslim identity, whereas red, the color of blood, represents heroism.

At this point it is necessary to address a relevant query about the relative significance and reciprocal coordination in the application of the two narrative forms—verbal and visual. The scroll serves as a backdrop to heighten the story's emotional appeal rather than merely being a pneumatic device to make long narratives easier to narrate. For the believers, who think that the god visits the shrine during the narration, the intricate pictures transform *Kaavad* shrine into a living shrine of the deity.

The Narrative Structure of *Kaavad*

The narration of *Kaavad*, popularly known as *banchana* (recitation) is a spectacle to behold. The narration combines poetry and prose. While the prose portion differs, the verse portion is similar in the majority of the renditions. Before the recitation, the shrine is brushed with a peacock feather, signifying the destruction of evil forces to make way for the divine to enter the hallowed area. The *banchana* process begins with invocation, aligning with the epical traditions. The deity is called upon for the welfare of the masses, a notion that is deeply ingrained in the classical Vedic tradition. According to common folk belief, the invocation is chanted as audial mediation between the devotee and the deity via the priest (in this case *Kaavadiya bhat*). The chants and rhythm create musicality. Additionally, the chanting has a calming and peaceful vibration that

heals people around it. The negative vibrations are calmed by the sound waves as they radiate and spread out in all directions. The healing and nourishment of the soul through linguistic sound is similar to the healing of the spirit in traditional spiritual traditions.

As the performance goes on, spaces are constantly changed- private to public, secular to sacred, mental to physical and so forth. *Kaavad* performance is held in a private setting, typically the patron's courtyard with audience comprising of primarily family, relatives, and neighbours. The patron's private space transforms into the public space of performance throughout the narration. The shrine is cleaned before *Kaavad banchana* begins, with a peacock plume symbolizing Krishna. The goal of the cleansing is to fend off demonic powers. It also symbolizes the god's entrance into the shrine, since the deity in question is said to have visited the place during the narration. Thus, the secular space becomes the sacred space. The *bhat* takes the spectators on a journey from physical to mental spaces through his art of connecting with the audiences. Ramanujan cites Psychoanalyst Alan Roland, who observes that Indians have a radar consciousness that helps them to stay aware of other people and helps them say things that are suitable for the situation and the individual (2004: 46). This also applies to the *bhat* who narrates *Kaavad*. The narration becomes informal when *hunkariya* (spectator cum respondent) participates. Throughout the narration, he converses with the narrator, compliments the performance, makes incisive remarks, and conveys the audience's awareness. Neither is his introduction impromptu nor overlaid. Gold observes, the *hunkariya* adjunct is “a formalised element of performance-audience interaction” (1993: 21). The narrator has more opportunity to voice his sharp opinions on current social issues and concerns that society faces because of the dialogic style of narration and the questions posed by *hunkariya*.

The study of *Kaavad* from the perspective of intertextuality identifies various connections between *Kaavad* and texts from other traditions. *Kaavad* shrine seems to be a compendium of several stories. It is related to mythological tales, classical epics, regional folklore, and genealogies of patrons as either co-text or meta-text. Themes from mythology are taken from the Puranic and Classical epics. Historical accounts feature seers and saints associated with pan-Indian identity. Stories of saintly figures like Kabir, Meerabai, Namdev, Narsibhagat, etc. depicting their adversities, struggles, testing at the hands of fate, and their eventual triumph, convey a message of resilience, perseverance and forbearance. Stories about

the lives and acts of regional legends like Pabuji, Ramdevji, Jagdev Panwar and Dhanna Bhagat are also depicted on *Kaavad* panels. Real life stories are depicted through the portrayal of patrons. Mythological characters and real-life people on panels resemble closely making it difficult to differentiate between myth and reality. This is so because myths are shaped by people's imaginations and the collective consciousness of the masses. Furthermore, myths are dynamic. Slow mutations alter the myths' narrative structure as they move through space and time. As a result, regional mythologies are created. The epic stories that are shown on panels differ slightly from the classical renditions and are a testimony of the existence of vernacular versions of myths.

Kaavad's narrative is more than just a method of preserving recollections and representing a shared awareness. It is a phenomenon that offers deep insights on the relationship and relative identities of the spectator, storyteller, and maker. It also provides a forum for researching the contradictions between memory and imagination, marginalization and empowerment.

***Kaavad* as Complex Sociological Phenomenon**

A complex social network made up of the painter, the storyteller, the patron, the spectators, and the *hunkariya* is depicted in the narrative. The examination of performative narratives as a cooperative endeavour between the producers and consumers opens up a discussion on the relationships between the various communities involved. The *Bassayati Suthars* of Bassi (Chittor) are the creators of *Kaavad* shrine, while *Kaavadiya bhats* of Marwar are the narrators. The commissioning *bhats* provide the *Suthars* with instructions on how to paint the patron's panel. In *Kaavad* narration, the relationship between the painter and the narrator goes beyond that of a client and a service provider. It is a representation of what's left of the classical tradition's *guru-shishya* (teacher-student) dynamic. After obtaining the shrine, the *bhats* offer the *Bassayati Suthars gurudakshina* (fees) and consider them as their gurus. The dynamic nature of the narrative allows for suggestions and improvisations at every level.

The story of *Kaavad* is told to hereditary patrons who could be a Rajput, Jat, Kumhar, Nai, Mali, or Meghwal. The performance is commissioned with certain goals in mind such as financial gain, family safety and security, requesting divine intervention in the shape of a child,

or as a patron's duty to his panegyrist to offer him a donation each time they meet. It is also a means of giving thanks to the divine hero and calling upon him to heal sick animals, grant health, money, and prosperity, as well as to protection from evil forces. The worship manifestly disregards the conventional notions of spirituality and *moksha* (salvation), in favour of worldly and materialistic rewards. The storytellers of *Kaavad* keep scripted records of the donations they receive from their patrons.

The study creates avenues for investigating the ideas of the individual, the community, and multiple identities. During the narration process, the narrator's group identity is addressed through the stories of his origin myth, while the patron's individual identity is solidified through the recitation of his genealogy. *Kaavadiya bhats* have multiple identities, some assumed, while others thrust upon them by the society. They are teachers, priest, entertainers, match-makers in marriages, informers, and genealogists.

The origin myths of *Kaavad* tradition, which are recorded through the rendering of images on *Kaavad* panels, advocate different identities for *Kaavadiya bhats*. The origin of *Kaavad* tradition is the subject of numerous intriguing theories. The first version is connected to an episode in the epic Ramayana starring Shravan Kumar, whom *Kaavadiya bhats* consider as being the inspiration behind the origin of *Kaavad*. The second account, supported by pictures on the front door of *Kaavad*, claims that Kundanabai, the *Kaavad's* originator, gave it to *Kaavadiya bhats* as a source of income for narrating genealogies. According to the third version, the tradition is connected to Lord Shiva, who gave storytellers the ability to remember things when written genealogies were lost or stolen. By associating the narrators with Ram, Kundanabai, or Shiva and by recognizing their cognitive and memory capacities, all three renditions enhance the narrators' identities (Sabnani 2014: 22-23).

Bhats are recognized as genealogists and storytellers, they choose the former identity over the latter as it empowers them by enhancing their social standing as influential panegyrists to their patrons. This causes an interesting paradox of marginalized and empowered identity; the narrator of *Kaavad* enjoys empowered identity as a family genealogist in spite of belonging to a lower *varna* (social class). This shift from being ostracized to being powerful and back again is a distinct sociological phenomenon connected to *Kaavad* narration.

The narration of patron's family history further solidifies his identity. By reciting his genealogies, describing the gifts he received from his ancestors, acknowledging the kindness of his clan, and thanking him for it, the storyteller creates the persona of his patron. The image of an upside-down couple is superimposed with the identities of the patrons' ancestors who neglected to pay the storytellers their due. The storyteller chastises the patron in a symbolic manner, implying that if he pays his ancestors' debts, their standing would be reestablished. The narrator affirms his own strong identity as a panegyrist with the ability to create and reconstruct his own identity while creating that of his patron.

Kaavad as an amalgamation of Storytelling and Pilgrimage

Kaavad provides a venue for the intersection of storytelling and pilgrimage. Bhanavat calls it, "*chalta phirta mandir*" (1975: 5), meaning 'a portable pilgrimage'. *Kaavad* is a mobile shrine that travels to the devotees, in contrast to the traditional concept of pilgrimage, which involves the pilgrim making a drawn-out and arduous journey to the holy place as a token of reverence to his deity after a desired wish is fulfilled or to seek blessings. Because it is a portable shrine, anyone who is unable to travel to pilgrimage destinations in person can still benefit from *darshan* (to have a vision), or seeing their beloved gods, without having to physically visit those hallowed places.

The unfolding of *Kaavad* represents the beginning of the voyage, which continues with navigating the panels that represent crossing the temple's threshold. Entering a new area is symbolized by passing the threshold. The entire experience evokes the feeling of a pilgrimage. The go-between for the devotee and God is the *bhat*. He transports the rapt audience on a holy voyage through space and time. The journey in space opens up one space after another when one travels through luminal spaces, or "betwixt and between," as Sabnani refers to them, and enters a new realm where people can converse with deities, flora, and fauna (2014: 17).

Beyond the barriers of caste and class, the travellers (here referred to as spectators) have a strong sense of brotherhood with fellow travellers. Their distinct identities are absorbed into the pilgrim's identity. At the end of the performance, their willingness to give up their name, reputation, and identity connects this to the similar experiences experienced at the culmination of the pilgrimage.

Conclusion

Kaavad storytelling, encouraged by the royals, flourished until the end of the eighteenth century. The custom of *jajmani* (patronage) has allowed the performing communities of *Kaavad* to sustain. The patron champions, defends, or supports a cause. The *bhats* traveled seasonal routes as nomads, entertaining the public. The abrupt decrease in royal patronage throughout the 19th century forced the narrators to adopt a semi-nomadic travel pattern. The basic fabric of the tradition was altered by the fall of royal patronage. The storytellers and painters moved to larger villages and cities, reducing the ceremonial art to commercial. Changes in the themes, structure, colour patterns, and other intrinsic elements of *Kaavad* storytelling led to the secularization of this tradition; the emphasis is now on technique rather than content. The recitations are trimmed down to two to three hours, with tea breaks in between. The sharp sarcasm has been replaced by popular cinema music.

Kaavad is a polyphonous text (Bakhtin 2004: 42), reflecting various voices with varying points of view. *Kaavadiya bhat* takes on the voice of figures from a variety of settings and eras, including history, imagination and mythology. Shekhawat observes, “There are gendered voices of bhopa and bhopi, patron’s voice and his ancestors’ voices are also echoed through the narration of genealogy. The voices of folk psyche and collective consciousness of communities involved is also given a voice in the narration” (2021: 90).

The representation of different narratives by the same image in *Kaavad* implies that the storyteller imposes the stories on the images, rather than the stories existing independently within them. The speaker encodes the shared experiences into words, which are then communicated to the listeners who decode them to relive the experience. The concept of *spota* (in Sanskrit it refers to the linguistic concept of the essence of a word or its inherent meaning) offers an explanation of how the narrator's inner consciousness is conveyed to the audience during storytelling. The *bhat* begins the process of articulating meaning to his inner consciousness in his thoughts with the aid of the images on the shrine, and he manifests the meaning he desires to impart, in words of narration. The two components of the word- verbal and visual stimulate one another and work together to give viewers an experience that is comparable to what the *bhat*

feels. Together with the narrators and patrons, *Kaavad* structure and storylines produce a tradition, a meaningful art form, and a pilgrimage experience.

The study brings out that *Kaavad* is more than just a worship ritual and ceremony. For the narrators, it is an act of protest, a response, and an admission into a previously socially and historically barred place that cannot be recovered. Another way to look at it is as a virtual manifestation of the patron's unconscious aspirations and deepest desires. It is the means by which the unfulfilled aspirations and hidden desires of patrons come to life through their paintings on panels. Through the artwork on the panels, the patron can also share the sacred place with gods and goddesses. These performances also serve as a metaphor for virtual pilgrimage for those clients whose wish to go on a pilgrimage remains unfulfilled.

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Images

Image 1 Peepul Tree. "Kavad Art: portable Kaavad shrine panels." *Peepul Tree – Live History India*, circa 2021. Image. peepultree.world+2peepultree.world+2peepultree.world+2

Image 2 Gaatha. *Kathanik – A Wooden Shrine (Real Marwadi Kaavad with 51 stories painted – 41 cm)*. Online store, undated. Image. shop.gaatha.com



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