

Caesurae Special

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

2019-2020

The PHAD: Singing the Tale

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No other folk-art than the *phad* displays an unusual fusion
Of drama, dance, music, oral literature and religion.

The way statues are carved and hewn
The painter draws the images and gets them sewn

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On fustian – bursting with energy of their own,

Enjoying communion with past unknown.

Or the way images of battle between the Greek forces and the Trojan

Were drawn on a red robe by voluptuous Helen.

The colours chosen are dazzlingly bright

Which fix images in mind during dim light.

Each colour is extracted from flowers and leaves

Which on the canvas its fast imprint leaves.

The uncouth painter's palette embraces only seven natural hues

Sunny-yellow, leafy-green, juicy-orange, brick-brown, flaming-red, inky-black and tyrian-blues.

Their flamboyance stresses artlessness and closeness to nature

While soothing colours symbolize *savoi vivre*.

The strokes wielded are broad, not subtle

Which prevent images from becoming dull.

Lush banana and cool *kadamba* waving in the back-drop lend beauty

To whatever drama that is enacted in the vicinity.

The *phad* flourishes on orality – rich in folk-lore,

Religio-cultural events form its core.

First God ushered in light, then the word spoken

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Which carries more power and immediacy than the written.

The sacred manifests itself through sound

Because in every heart reverence for it is found.

While reciting folk-deities' saga

The semi-literate bard goes over it gaga.

Recital is vital, not frippery

As the latter falls outside its periphery.

Some plosives easily roll off his tongue

While fricatives seem to be clung.

The range of his notes is narrow

Yet to move us he does not borrow.

It proves how cultures were sculpted on speech

And were brought within everyone's reach.

Recital is vital to the *'phad'*

Otherwise, it will die out without a thud.

The sonorously booming recitals never thud

As they portray tales of gore and blood.

The bard's spouse draws attention to the images with a pointer wooden

While the bard narrates the tale in verse to everyone's satisfaction.

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Once the rustics cluster around him
He infuses them with vim.
One is carried away as the pageants unroll
Before one's eyes on the painted scroll.
The entire medieval life is put on display
In primary hues without shades of grey.
The reciter sings away reverential ditties
In honour of folk-deities,

Some from recent past, others from antiquities
With great glee and ease.
Even the Iliad seems a composite of early lays
Which were improved on in later days.
A crude theatre is set up beneath the sky
While the sole actor surveys the audience with a keen eye.
The characters on the canvas enjoy interface
And never turn around to show their full face.
They never look us in the eye,
Some wear a smug smile, others wry.

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Facing the audience forms a part of the cinematic technique

Not that of the *phad* which is unique.

The scroll is fastened to the wall with slender ropes

Which ripples across when the breeze blows.

The earthen lamp does not with the same intensity glow

And flickers whenever the breeze does blow.

This leads to the half-visibility of the images

Blurring the story-line at the fringes.

The reciter steps into the role of a translator

Fills in the gap and make things clearer.

Narrating the events with great fervour,

He leaves on public psyche his acoustic signature.

The ambling bard hardly looks the *pothi*

And recites mostly from memory.

Illustrious exploits and simple deeds painted on the scroll

Depict how battles played out, how heads did roll.

The *phad* has evolved to show what is right

And what will never be forgiven.

For millennia it has satiated the moral appetite

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And catered for communal recreation.

It emotional arc embraces stories

Which always tend towards binaries

Banishing all complexities of life

Which beget so much strife.

All deities rose from origins humble

But through selfless services reached pinnacle

Upholding truth piety, justice, and morality

Social order, harmony and fraternity.

The painter keeps characters' hierarchy in mind

Sees to it who should be in front, who behind.

Stressing social harmony, *Pabuji* declared all equal

And would cure camels when they fell ill.

Extending hospitality to those who rushed into his care

He upheld women-dignity with exemplary ardour.

This incarnation of Lord *Laxman* protected cows

And laid down his life to fulfil his vows.

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I wish the *phad* represented *Tejaji* and *Gogaji*
Who in power equal any other divinity.

On merely chanting their names cobras and scorpions turn tail
And those with deadly bites soon get well.
Tejaji kept on acquiring skills in weaponry
And brooded on ways to lessen people's misery.
Deonarayanji performed miracles when the need arose
And gave marauders, cattle – raiders and oppressors a bloody nose.
Simple events are eulogized as great ones
Which justify portrayal for the nonce.
The bard goes ahead in a way linear
Rarely making a departure.
As the complex story picks up, he assumes impersonality
Which characterizes great minstrelsy.
The narrative reigns supreme

And shines out like a moonbeam.

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Routine activities are recited with zest
To arouse audience's flagging interest.
As the narrative forges ahead
One is unconsciously involved in the thread.
The tone of the bard remains stentorian.

To enthuse the rustics, to whip up their passion.
He recreates the epics like the *Mahabharata*
Simply to the accompaniment of '*ravanhatta*',
How the folk-deities fought with crusader's zeal
All along and all over for public weal,
How they won their way into the divine pantheon
By delivering humans and cows from perdition.
Like a shepherd he keeps the sheep in fold

And inspires them with his gestures inimitable and language bold.
This is how he passes on rich folk-lore to futurity
And thereby lends it immortality.
Straight from the heart of the sleepy village

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The phad has clambered on to the international stage
Diffusing the message of righteousness
In the midst of moral darkness.

Glossary

- Phad : A Rajasthani scroll painting which is musically rendered by the bard. It contains mainiature scenes illustrating the lives and adventures of folk-deities.
- Savoi vivre : Sophistication, urbanity.
- Kadamba : An evergreen tropical burflower tree
- Pothi : A scroll-like book containing the exploits and lives of folk-deities.
- Lord Laxman : The younger brother of Lord Ram in the epic Ramayana.
- Pabu ji : A scion of the Rathore clan, Pabuji is revered as an incarnation of Lord Laxman. Legend has it that even before his nuptials were completed he rushed to save cows and soon succumbed to his wounds fighting for them.
- Teja ji : Worshipped as an incarnation of Lord Shiva, Teja ji laid down his life delivering cows from cattle-raiders. Legend goes that he offered his tongue for the snake to bite to keep his word as his entire body was bleeding. The very invocation of him cures snake-bites.

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- Goga ji : Venerated as a warrior saint, this folk-deity cured snake-bites, warded off evils, blessed peasants with bountiful crops and fought with Mahmood Gajnavi to save cows.
- Deo Narayan ji : Revered as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, Deo Narayan ji, a Gurjar warrior, consecrated his life to the protection of cows and resisted tyranny and injustice.
- Mahabharata : The longest Hindu epic delineating the struggle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas.
- Ravanhatta : It is an ancient bowed, stringed instrument, a precursor of violin. The priest - singer plays it while reciting the phad.