SYMBOLS AND MEANINGS: PICTORIAL-NARRATIVE TRADITION IN WEST BENGAL, JHARKHAND AND RAJASTHAN

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DECLARATION

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **"Symbols and Meanings: Pictorial-Narrative Tradition in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan"** is submitted for the award of Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of this University. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University and is my original work.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1. General Introduction

> "*…when any impression becomes present to us, it not only transports the mind to such ideas as are related to it, but likewise communicates to them a share of its force and vivacity.*" (Hume, 2011: 92)

Wayfaring across communities, culture and geographies, trajectories of ideas and conscious deliberation constituting knowledge has helped human beings make sense of the social world around them, their personal domain, and thereby structure it within the understanding of space and time. Constructed through countless experiences and encounters of individuals and communities in their attempt to sustain life and civilization throughout time and spaces, this repertoire of knowledge is what has made possible the development of culture. Reason cannot operate in vacuum and needs a particular understanding of a situation or event in the first place. Experience then can be said to be the bedrock of knowledge in human society. It is through the conceptualization, understanding and consciousness of a process or an action or even an object that the faculties of reasoning can be applied to it. Throughout history, patterns of experience and reasoning have led to crystallization of beliefs and ideas about the world. These ideas manifest themselves in the body of diverse symbols which represent their essence and meaning. Operating as forms of representation of knowledge, these symbols then confront the individual in the course of everyday life as well as in periodic occasions through visuals, images, sounds or written texts, permeating their consciousness through the sensory ways of perception and thereby transferring this meaning to their domain of understanding. The human world being marked by unequal access to power, knowledge has also been subservient to the categories of domination and authority. The way in which concepts are formed, the manner in which logic and reasoning take place, the means by which the development of cognitive thinking takes form, and the approach in which action is streamlined to take place in relation to others in society, all this reflects the continuous battle in human society for the legitimacy of meaning. Based on this

knowledge which helps in the formation and maintenance of a world-view, actions are traced, their patterns decided and their existence justified. In the functioning of everyday life, the social context is therefore characterized by an overflow of symbols that channelize thought and action in the community. The interpretation of these diverse bodies of symbolic manifestations then facilitate in the understanding of the intricacies of structure and process in the construction of knowledge and the emanation of meaning. Their understanding also brings to light the role of human agency in mediating between the discursive structures and processes to make use of such symbols in order to maintain the shared belief and continually reassert their social identity.

When in the course of daily life, time is categorized to ensure the culmination of necessary activities; symbols allow the experiences to be meaningful and also make way for the governance of human conduct. However, when the individual participates in collective moments that are periodically arranged by the society in the form of rituals, festivals and other gatherings, the symbols address the individuals as part of a collectivity. Socialized within the community, and having internalized its belief system and the concurrent set of practices, the individual is able to understand the meaning of the symbols in a manner similar to others. Although the idea of experience itself is a subjective act, the lived experience of such symbolic performances does give way to a shared understanding initiated by the symbols themselves. This is not to say that individuals develop completely identical perceptions about the world from the experience. But it is their participation and their act of living or encountering it, through which the symbols function as connecting elements between individual minds thereby enabling them to develop a common identity. Deriving from experience, the development of meaning is also characterized by subjectivity and it is only through the performance of the common symbol at these moments of ritual or collective gathering that a shared experience is made possible.

In the case of the sacred symbol, the enunciation of a common understanding becomes even more possible as the religious discourses and practices constitute an important part of culture itself. Most of these meanings are strongly contextual in nature, and owing to the similarity of social location, their performance becomes easy in the sense that they can be understood and defined within the social contexts in which these practices are

born. As both, culture and religion can be described as realms which are interdependent in terms of their relationship to one another in society, they both comprise of common components, and change or transformation in one sphere is bound to have an influence on the other. Therefore, if religion is a kind of symbolic universe, then religious symbols and practices of a society are coterminous with the culture of the place. Every society, at every point of time, throughout history, has attached significant cultural meaning through the medium of symbols. Besides being culture bearers, these symbols have often played very important and influential roles in the maintenance of social, political and cultural order. In the present day, with the overflow of symbols due to the growth in technology and communication, their importance in the society in terms of their functional value has become all the more important.

The work is therefore an exploration into the social and cultural power of the symbolic representations as found in the pictorial-narrative tradition of India, in terms of their function and their role in the restructuring or the maintenance of social and moral order, and the construction of identity. This tradition of storytelling through painted images, primarily used for religious purposes, has a remarkable influence on the lives of people, preserving and reaffirming their social attitudes and values. Interpreting the symbols and the meanings that lie beneath, this research presents an ethnographic study of the age-old tradition of showcasing images with narration, as found within the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, in order to delve into the larger questions of performance and experience, symbolic power, collective identity, and morality.

1.2. Conceptual Framework of the Research

Central to the understanding of knowledge and power in society, is the interpretation of symbols in which their meaning lies. Comprehension of such symbols reveals the multifarious ways in which culture and its trajectories of meaning which help make sense of the world, are constructed. Especially in the context of atypical moments, when rituals or cultural performances induce the power of the collectivity in social life, such symbols attain the power to transcend their bodies in the form of images, sounds, words and enter the realm of human consciousness. This is what gives symbols their power of

representation as well as transformation of reality. In this research, the understanding of the symbol has been majorly derived from the writings of Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz. Defining them as forms of representation that stand for ideas, Durkheim (1915) stated that it was in the moments of social togetherness, characterized by the presence of the community in the performance of a ritual that these symbols assert their representational power. For Geertz (1973), it was through symbols that culture constituted itself and represented history. In this work, the concept of symbol has been used to refer to images and oral narratives as found in the pictorial-narrative tradition in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, as forms of representation whose presentation enables in the unfolding of meanings, and whose performance helps in the re-institutionalization of collective belief in society.

The concept of meaning in this context is related to Max Weber's idea of *verstehen* and the hermeneutical understanding of interpretation. Meaning for Weber (1968) was intrinsically associated with the idea of subjectivity. For Gadamer (2007), meaning is what came up in the context of experience, or as a result of the confrontation with a certain situation. In this sense of the term, meaning refers to the encounter and interpretation. As of the idea of the power of these symbolic forms to restructure or maintain the social order, the concept of 'social order' in this work basically refers to social composition, or the stratification of individuals and groups along the lines of caste and religion. As these practices are mostly found in rural areas, the factor of caste still remains as a very important marker of individual and group identity. The concept of identity in this sense refers to the role of the agency through the help of their created symbolic representation, in influencing the notion of the sense of self, both at the personal and at the group level. Through an analysis of the social order of the artists, this work thus attempts to emphasize on the relation between these symbols and the construction of social and religious identity of the communities associated with these practices.

The idea of performance in social theory can be recognized in terms of what Victor Turner described as social drama (1986: 71). It is used to refer to all those extraordinary moments of experience when culture is performed (Abrahams, 1986: 49), including diverse forms of presentation in the form of dance, music, rituals involving performers

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and audiences (Schechner, 1988). In the context of the present work, the concept has been used to refer to the performances or presentations of the artists who display scrolls and engage in its narration.

Closely related to the concept of performance is the understanding of experience. This idea of experience, as Gadamer (2004 [1975]) says, is the remnant of situations that involved complete consciousness or awareness, or what he termed as *erlebnis*, as being separated from the experience which takes place in the domain of everyday life. Within this understanding, the notion of 'collective effervescence' as used by Durkheim (1915) to refer to those unitive events in which people in a group experience a different reality collectively, has also been referred to, in order to understand the powerful influence that the performance of scroll-painting and narration pertaining to the theme of sacred exerts on the audience, where all individuals feel like being transported to a totally different world, and where they have no control over their own selves, their thoughts and their actions. It is then through lived experiences that knowledge is transmitted as well as transformed. When social events enable the community to collectively participate in its experience, the participation itself is then facilitated by the common parameters of understanding, which facilitates a collective perception of meaning.

The concept of the moral is deeply immersed in the notion of the social. Emphasized by Durkheim (1915) in this study on totemism, the moral is also meshed up with the concept of the sacred, which provides the former with the authority to impose its rules as expected duties. Moral represents collective beliefs and values, which are followed for social action and order to be maintained. If people lack collective thought or agreement on certain basic concepts and practices, social life would be impossible. There would be no solidarity in society. Human life will thus not be possible under these conditions. It is therefore the role of the moral order to maintain some conformity amongst the members of the society. Moral rules set down certain manners or codes of acting to individuals in society (Durkheim, 1915). Durkheim explained morality as composed of discipline, attachment to social groups and autonomy (Durkheim, 1973). For Bellah (2002), this morality could be exerted through religious symbols in the modern society. He believed that in modern societies, factors like global market economy and the mass media all promote a sense of individualism (ibid). It is however the presence of different social

forces in diverse societies that takes care of this moral order, mostly through symbolic forms (Madsen, 2002). This work therefore explores the symbolic representation of morality, as being subsumed in the representation of the sacred, thereby projecting on the social nature of the moral.

As about the idea of the power of these symbolic forms to restructure or maintain the social order, the concept of identity in this context can be used to refer to a collective sense of identification, or the 'we feeling' of a community, their social composition, or the stratification of individuals and groups along the lines of caste and religion. As these practices are mostly found in rural areas, the factor of caste still remains as a very important marker of individual and group identity. The concept of identity in this sense refers to the role of the agency through the help of their created symbolic representation, in influencing the notion of the sense of self, both at the personal and at the group level. Through an understanding of the social position of the artists, this work thus represents an attempt to emphasize on the relation between these symbols and the construction of social and religious identity of the communities associated with these practices.

1.3. Review of Literature

This work is an attempt to attain an interpretive understanding of symbols, as used in the pictorial-narrative traditions of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, to highlight on the significance of performance and experience in the construction of meaning and identity. The idea of the symbol has occupied a central position in the discipline of sociology, in terms of making sense of function[1], social structures[2] and processes[3] in society. To understand how in the act of cultural performance, such symbols come to the forefront in creating and reaffirming meanings is what this work intends to emphasize on. However, it is only through the process of experience that the underlying ideas represented through these symbols enter the consciousness of individuals and influence their thought and action. For gaining a detailed insight of the ethnographic reality and the

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[1] Durkheim, E. (1915), Turner, V. (1967), Douglas, M. (1970), Geertz, C. (1973), Bellah, R. (2011)

[2] Levi-Strauss, C. (1963)

[3] Turner, V. (1967), Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. (1967)

major points of conceptual and theoretical intervention, which would facilitate in structuring the main concerns of this work, it is essential to revisit the contributions of some of the thinkers who have carried out on a similar theme or its constituent ideas. This moreover enables in bringing to light the work that has already been done and the work which remains.

I.   *The Concept of the Symbol*:

Social life in all its aspects and in every period of its history is made possible only by a vast symbolism (Durkheim, 1961: 264).

The character of symbol to signify a culture, and its ability to contain ideas and meanings essential for the maintenance of social and cultural order, can only come into play when it enters into the realm of interaction. It is then through the event of experience incurred in the process of interaction that the meanings underlying the symbols are interpreted to individual agents or communities, which influences their future behavior pattern, and their action. This notion of experience includes events and instances of social action in everyday life, as well as the singled out, particular moments marked by sensitive collective behavior, leading to the display of ecstatic emotions. It is thus through the experience that the interpretation of the symbol takes place for the observer, for whom, the symbol not only provides with meanings of experiences, but also reveals ideas to them which transcend the very body in which they are born, and condition their action and behavior. While the symbol facilitates in the interpretation of meanings connected with the domain of experiences, experiences themselves also play an important role in the maintenance of the symbol and its meaning in society.

Symbols signify the representation of some meaning, relating to the belief systems of a particular region or community. Religious symbols thus epitomize the values and belief patterns of society considered to be central to a community (Durkheim, 1915). These symbols thus stand for society, its structures and patterns of belief, and the periodic performance of rituals enables their survival across time. This being one of the fundamental themes in his seminal work on *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*,

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Emile Durkheim stated that the study of religion provided insights into the social and individual needs present in the society.

From an interpretive perspective, a symbol can thus be described as "*any structure of meaning in which a direct, primary, literal sense designates in addition another sense which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first*" (Ricoeur, 1974: xiv)[4]. Symbols are interpreted if one needs to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of social reality. An understanding of its functioning within this space is therefore essential to further interpret its symbolic power. Symbols do not function in vacuum. They exercise their authority over human mind and action through their existence in the social space. They assume significance only when they are experienced by the observer in the context of a performance.

II.   *Culture, Symbolism and the Need of Interpretation*:

Although there is no standard definition which should guide the understanding of the myriad realm of culture, earliest understanding of the phenomenon was based on the idea that it referred to all those habits and ways of life acquired by an individual as a member of its community including beliefs, customs, knowledge, etc. (Tylor, 1871). Since then, with change in the social system, the meaning of culture has also changed. But, if culture is can be understood as working within the social space through individuals and objects, transmitting ideas and meanings and therefore contributing to systems of power and authority in society, then it is obvious that it works through the form of medium. Of course, as the proponents of the 'culture industry' thesis would have to say that in the case of the contemporary society, culture has become a commodity to be manufactured in the industry (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1993); it has nonetheless become a more dominant means of transferring power and knowledge in society. With the development of the powers of technology and communication, culture is now easily transferable, and its meaning has also altered, keeping in mind the fact that it is owned and circulated by those in economic power, who are aimed at incurring profit from selling culture. However, the idea that is intended to be emphasized at this moment is that culture functions through the

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[4] Italics author's own.

means of mediums. There is hence both, the material medium like television or maybe an ethnic outfit and non-material mediums like rituals, beliefs, customs, through which culture is depicted. But even in these mediums, how is it that the idea underlying the culture of that particular context, or the common culture, manifested? This is made possible through their representation or manifestation in mediums or signifiers which are understood as symbols. Thus, whether through the form of food items, dress, artifacts, or art, poetry, rituals, etc, culture makes itself apparent through the medium of symbols. Symbols thus function as the very form through which meaning is expressed.

In the domain of sociology, the classical thinkers looked at the phenomenon of culture as being placed within the objective conditions as individually experienced in society. Whether in the form of ideology, or ideas of morality, social solidarity, or religion, culture thus consisted of ideas and beliefs of individuals in society, which could be understood through interpretation of experience (Hallett, 2003). This significance of interpretation can also be found in the contributions of the school of phenomenology which stresses on the relevance of interpreting phenomenon or experience as the step to understanding social reality; and hermeneutics, which emphasizes on the importance of texts or social reality as texts to deciphering meanings hidden in society. In the present day context, the continuous transfer and exchange of cultural commodities as well as human beings, has led to a rethinking of the concept of culture itself. Although with the blurring of geographical, social and political boundaries, owing to the relentless flow of cultural goods across them, the existence of culture as a fixed concept cannot be unquestioningly accepted; its significance in contemporary times, in terms of being interpreted as a symbolic entity, comprising of institutions and practices which contain hidden power, thereby encouraging a sense of 'collective misrecognition' (Bourdieu, 1990) in the society, has becomes even more prominent.

Interpretation highlights on uncovering meaning. So how does a particular meaning take shape? In other words, how does an entity, and object, and action or an event, or anything that captures the consciousness, come to have particular connotations? For Manheim, the maturity of human thought was contingent on the discourses and ideologies characterized by its social context (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The knowledge that enables the interpretation of experience and perception is then to a large extent historically and

culturally situated, shared through familiar forms of expression. Deciphering this knowledge therefore requires the realization that ideas are but socially constructed. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) point out, this does not repudiate the presence of objective facts or the incidence of objects and events outside the arena of subjective understanding. Instead, the point that is being emphasized here is how these objects, human entities and events are interpreted by the experience and understanding of individuals through their socialization, their prior experiences, or through the permeation of ideologies and discourses on their thought and action. If knowledge is socially produced and situated then the meaning of objects and events are shared by the members of a community, making possible in a shared understanding of the world where communication and mutual participation becomes possible. The social stock of knowledge also lays down the rules of accepted codes of conduct in a society and it is through this habitualization of action that a social institution comes into being (ibid: 58). Drawing on the significance of symbols in the construction of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann state that symbols facilitate "the legitimation of the institutional order by bestowing upon it the primacy in the hierarchy of experience (1967: 98). These symbols also contribute towards providing a rationale of the institutional order and its related processes in the maintenance of shared meanings by locating them within a certain context and providing a sense of past by giving a historical background, and also allowing the envisioning of the future. The interpretation of meaning should therefore emphasize on their social and historical construction, their symbolic representation, their inter-subjective understanding, as Berger and Luckmann writes,

> "Knowledge about society is thus a *realization* in the double sense of the world, in the sense of apprehending the objectivated social reality, and in the sense of ongoingly producing this reality" (1967: 66).

Going back to the analysis of symbols, which is of central concern to the present work, it can thus be seen that their interpretation brings to light the historical and culturally situated nature of human thought and knowledge and how the symbol contributes towards the development of a shared identity around its existence and meaning. It is through this process of interpretive understanding that the underlying discursive power of symbols and the knowledge constitutive of social reality can be brought to light. Each of these

symbols is born within a certain context and their interpretation is possible through their very context of creation and their embodiment of those shared ideas which are the found in that particular society. These symbols thus act as purveyors of meaning and as interpreters of realms of existence and action beyond their own being and temporality.

The task of interpretation therefore brings to the forefront the existence of multiple symbolic entities representing ideas and discourses pertaining to the understanding of social reality. The domain of culture is then best understood through an interpretive analysis. Going beyond the debate between subjectivity and objectivity, Clifford Geertz's contribution on 'The Interpretation of Cultures' perceives culture as a symbolic whole or a symbolic system and thus highlights in the need to interpret the meaning of symbols within their contexts of significance, in relation to one another (1973: 10). This makes it possible to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the larger system structured around certain symbols. Abstracted and conceptually represented, symbols are always a part of the life-world to which individuals belong and in which they live. These symbols, as Geertz puts it, allows people to construct the social world of which they are a part, and to make sense of the processes that surrounds them (1973: 45). Culture, Geertz implies, is rather understood as a set of "control mechanisms", or instructions and rules for controlling conduct (ibid: 44). It consists of symbols with the help of which human beings frame their course of action. Symbols and forms of communication thus form the channels in which meanings are embodied and contextualized, and that in turn helps make sense of the world and conceptualize social reality (ibid: 89). Inferring from this perspective, Geertz explains religion as comprising of symbols that induce motivations and dispositions in human beings, by relating to a social whole and envisaging a sense of order in a manner of accuracy that provides explanations for the disposition and intentions (ibid: 90). Through symbolic representations and rituals, religion establishes patterns of belief in individuals (ibid: 112-13), not simply restricted to the understanding of religion, but to the interpretation of "wider reality" (ibid: 122). Interpretative understanding of symbols in general and religious symbols in particular, therefore, are not only valuable for unraveling the meaning underlying their existence, but their relation to perception and action in the wider social world.

III.   *The Domain of Performance*

Performances can be broadly defined as aesthetic practices, including ways of speaking, patterns of behaviour, manners of bodily demeanour, whose repetitions places the actors or the participants in time and spacing, enabling the construction of individual and group identities (Kapchan, 1995). Victor Turner described performance as "social or cultural drama" (Palmer and Jankowiak, 1996: 225) which included both, the actions, behaviour, interaction and the presentation of self in everyday events and life, as well as in the specifically organized collectively significant practices (ibid.). The act of performance can thus include both, extraordinary situations and ordinary events. For Tambiah therefore, "human beings anywhere and everywhere are simultaneously in their actions involved in two modalities, the modality of causality and the modality of performative acts" (1985:2).

Richard Schechner wrote that all performance have a ritual action at its core, which aims at a "restoration of behaviour" (Schechner, 1985). For Turner (1986), there exists a dynamic and continuous process which interlinked performative behaviour and social and ethical structure. Performance in this respect is open, decentred and 'liminal' in nature (ibid). Performance genre according to Turner is not simply expressive or reflective of the social system, but instead it is reflexive, in that it often provides critiques, directly or indirectly, of the very social system of which it is a part and of the social life it grows out of (Turner, 1986). Milton Singer (1972) in his work on tradition and modernity in southern India too observed the importance of the element of performance in social life. Performance for Singer was the basic constituent of culture (ibid). Each performance was thus marked by a time span, a set of performers, an audience, a place, and an occasion for phenomenon to take place[5]. These cultural performances including festivals, prayers, ceremonies, etc, were made of elements of cultural media, or mode of communication, including verbal or spoken language as well as non-verbal media, like song, acting, dance, narration and display of graphic and pictorial art, which enhanced in the communication of culture (Singer, 1972).

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[5] These performances were thus according to Singer, an amalgamation of the ritual as well as artists and cultural aspects of a society. For a proper study of cultural performances, for Singer hence, the role of the cultural specialists and the cultural media, together with the cultural stage is very important.

For Turner (1986), a large portion of whose works deal with the aspect of ritual and performance, the genres of carnival, ritual, drama, all have in common a temporal structure which replaces the constant features with variables, and also provides a space for possibilities of spontaneous innovation and management in the course of any performance. As such a role in a performance enables the presentation of the self, and it is through performance again that these roles can be broken (Turner, 1969). Human beings are endowed with rich means of communication, verbal and non-verbal (Turner, 1986). Based on this, performances can be divided into two groups, social and cultural (ibid). There are again different types of social performance and different genres of cultural performance, depending on societies and cultures. In the genres of the carnival, theatre, ritual, etc, non-verbal communication plays the most basic role in the form of signs and symbols (Turner, 1986). But as Turner (1986) states, it is the social drama from which originated the major genres of cultural performances and narration, and to which it continuously refers to draw meaning. This social performance is the result of the suspension of normative role-playing which in its process replaces the usual activity of reflection with reflexivity (Turner, 1969). Following on Arnold van Gennep's study of the rites of passage, Turner gathered data from the Ndembu initiation ceremonies and the larger events of the carnival, to find that all of these socially dramatic performances bore with them a meta-communicative and explanatory function that attempts to make social sense of split or rupture, ambiguity and division through reflexivity of the public (ibid).

Symbols are always effective in human society because through performances, they help in generating meanings in a social rather than cognitive space, and thus the participants are able to engage with these symbols in the interactional creation of a performance reality, rather than only being informed by them as 'knowers'. Performance in this sense is then not just a medium for communicating information, as it does not aim in constructing symbolic reality through a description or a commentary, but instead by constructing a situation in which the participants familiarise themselves with symbolic meanings as a part of the process in which they are also engaged. The most important feature of performance thus lies not in the meanings contained in the symbols themselves, but the actual way in which this symbolic material emerges in the interaction (Schieffelin, 1985).

Performance then can be said to play an essential role in the creation, maintenance and mediation of communities. These performances, as Turner claims, whether done by individuals or by the representatives of a collective tradition, hold up "magic mirrors" to the society which turn events and practices beautiful or ugly, and which otherwise are accepted unquestioningly, and are moreover not recognised in the flow of the life of the social community (1986: 22). Integrating the concept of liminality in his work on performance, Turner (1969) stated that in technologically simpler societies, 'liminal' performances made sense of the social structure by providing the example of anti-structure. In the technologically complex societies, 'liminoid' performances which had the capability of not only providing with an anti-structure, but contained the possibility for social subversion and rebellion (ibid). Performance in this sense is composed of symbols containing meaning. These performances not only comments on those meanings, but also interprets them for the larger community not in a reflective manner but instead in a reflexive manner, by critiquing and challenging them (Turner, 1986). The concepts of performance and genre are highly interlinked, and it is not possible to talk about performance without locating it in a genre. Genre thus in a broad sense of the term refers to a network of sign relations in which history along with its categories and valuations are embedded. Every genre thus reflects a particular or several ideologies. Performance genres are hence the very locations for the rise and the negotiations of the politics of identity (Kapchan, 1995).

Since it is through performances, both mundane and extraordinary, involving an individual or a group, that ideas and impressions are formed in the human mind, which influences their future action and also shapes their future experiences, the interpretation of experience is also of significance in reaching towards a comprehensive understanding of human action as well as the processes of knowledge construction in society. It is when performances are experienced, that the within the minds of the individuals involved in it, there is an imagery which is formed (Palmer and Jankowiak, 1996). It is this imagery that the individual falls back on while recollecting the experience, and again it is this mental image that influences his or her conduct in the social space in future. This notion of imagery or mental image in this sense refers to cognitive models in the form of understanding based on scenes (ibid.). Like Hume stated, that impressions and ideas from

experience form the necessary components leading to the birth of thoughts, perspectives, and further ideas; in the case of a performance, impressions through the medium of sensory experiences, are either stored in the human mind as concrete images like figures or in the form of metaphorical images (ibid.).

Keeping aside the realm of mundane experience, the performance of individuals in the course of everyday activity, and focussing on the conventionalized performance also understood as ritual, which is the context of this present study, it is interesting to see how significant and influential threads of meaning emerge out of performances and experience involving cultural symbols. Relations and interactions in the life-world are influenced through discourses which shape action and thought. These discourses are then manifested in symbols, which emerge during a performance, from being an abstract thought or idea, to a more specific one that carries a sense of social sentiment, that which is a product of the habitus, and that which gets registered in the human memory as imagery, acting as a reference point for future behaviour and action.

Focussing on the aspect of language, Dell Hymes considered performance to be a form of social action, in which tradition is expressed through the use of poetic forms of expression (Palmer and Jankowiak, 1960). Those specific acts and not mundane events, which are performed in front of a community, which are repeatable, and in which the "standards intrinsic to the tradition in which the performance occurs, are accepted and realized" (Hymes, 1981: 84), can then be understood as performance. For Turner, it was his treatment of performance as social drama that broadened its definitional base to include the ordinary as well as the extraordinary events in social reality (Palmer and Jankowiak, 1960). Although, for him the context for the creation of a performance, or the social drama is some situation of disharmony and conflict (ibid.), it is his emphasis on ritual which highlights the symbolic power present in rituals, that gains signification only in the context of a performance. The significance of the act of performance is then apparent in the exploration of the idea of symbolic power and the materialization of meaning, especially when symbols contain the ability to conceal their authority and at the same time influence on processes relating the power and knowledge and their relation in society.

Performance is strongly symbolic in nature and its interpretation often brings to light its underlying discursive formation. It engages the human consciousness in the act of the experience and in the process facilitates the transmission of meaning. To comprehend the relation between the effectiveness of symbols in performances and its contribution to social identity, it is then essential to understand and delve deeper the concepts of meaning and experience. The apprehension of an object, situation or social action involves an understanding of the cognitive, as well as social and cultural factors at play. Meaning in this context can then be used to allude to the subjective connotations that develop in the course of action and experience. For Weber, meaning is subjective in nature, developed by the individuals who take part in a particular course of action (Weber, 1968: 20).[6] The action can thus be divided up as having two kinds of meanings, the actual one referring to the situation of the actor at hand, or an ideal one, which can be supposedly ascribed to a particular form of action whenever it takes place (ibid: 21). A precise interpretation of meaning then ideally requires understanding the experience and the subjective state of mind of the actor (ibid: 22). However, placing oneself in a position similar to that of the actor may be difficult, as Weber says, "The more radically they differ from our own ultimate values, however, the more difficult it is for us to make them understandable by imaginatively participating in them" (ibid: 23). Accordingly the precision of understanding may either be rationally or emotionally apparent (ibid: 22). Sometimes when the action might not reveal a logically rational and comprehensible relation to its meaning, it is through an empathetic understanding that an interpretation of the action can be discerned (ibid). Subjective meaning of any action subsumes motives, personal intentions as well as values (Weber, 1968), and hence the individual becomes the reference point for any attempt to arrive at a Weberian understanding of social action. Even when looking at collective action, Weber states that understanding should emphasize on the "action of the participating individual men" (Weber, 1926)[7]. Tucker carefully makes a note that even though the emphasis is on the individual action and its subjective meaning; its social connotation necessitates the acknowledgment of the action

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[6] Reprinted from Weber, M. (1947). *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, New York: Oxford University Press.

[7] Weber, Marianne (1926). *Max Weber: Ein Lebensbild*, Tubingen, as quoted by Gerth, H. H. and Mills, C. W. (1946). Translated and edited, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 55.

within a particular context (1965: 159). There is therefore the need to place individuals within a social context, and accentuate on their social relation in the community, as motives and values are not simply the product of an individual mind, but are also based on experiences and internalization of collective belief patterns in the community wherein the individual is socialized.

IV.   *The Realm of Experience*

> "Experience is, at one and the same time, illustrative of what individuals do and of the conventional patterns of culturally learned and interpreted behavior that makes them understandable to others" (Abrahams, 1986: 49).

Exemplifying feelings, motives, and meanings, experience is therefore a very important platform for the interpreting human behavior and the notion of collective identity. For Kierkegaard, it was through experience and involvement in the form of actions, that the intricate nuances of social reality could be grasped in a better manner (Dreyfus, 1993). This gave birth to what came to be known as the stream of existentialist philosophy, which denied the possibility of maintaining a detached perspective towards understanding society (ibid.). It was from this strand of philosophical thought that the significance of experience in interpreting social reality came to the forefront. Experience in general however, had to be separated from "an experience" (Dilthey, 1976 [1914]: 210), which was different from the former in the sense that it was not associated with an arbitrary beginning and end, and instead involved a process of initiation and tendencies of transformation. With these unusual experiences, which according to Dilthey, contain the power to alter human thought and action, the attention is then turned towards finding out its meaning, something that involves taking into consideration the actions and experiences of the past (Turner, 1986). When the memories of past experiences are related to the present events, it is through this process that 'meaning' arises (ibid.).

Going back to the ideas of the Enlightenment era, philosopher David Hume (1777) also stressed on the significance and the necessity of experience and observation in the interpretation of social reality, as against the simple use of objective reason. He stressed on the need to replace the abstract hypothetical mode of inquiry by empirical and

descriptive inquiry which resulted from experience (Rawls, 2000). Hume (2011) stated that all ideas were a product of impressions, and it is not possible to think of anything which has not been seen. Stepping out from ideas of sentimentalism and empiricism, as against rationalism, Hume's theory of moral philosophy stated that experience was the very birthplace for the formation of ideas. It was from the effects of feelings of sensation on human minds, that impressions were created which matured into ideas (Hume, 2011). In fact, impression in fact was an explanation of experience. This was what Hume termed as the Copy Principle, according to which, complex ideas are made up of simple concepts and ideas, which are remnants of basic impressions gained from experience, to which they are related (ibid).

Throughout the period of Enlightenment, till the dawn of modernity, development in the fields of metaphysics, philosophy and ethics, were carried out through the works of different philosophers who took differing and almost opposing stands on ideas concerning rationalism and empiricism. The superiority of the powers of reasoning was believed would bring about a transition in human beings in terms of their intellectual maturity (Kant, 1784). This led to the growth of the philosophy of Rationalism, which presupposed that knowledge was beyond experience, and achieved through intuition, which resulted from the rational nature of human beings (Kenny, 1986). The power of rationality in the Enlightenment thus gradually faded with the increasing bent toward quantification and prediction of nature based on logic and mathematical mode of inquiries. Empiricism which emerged as a strand of philosophical thought to counter the extreme tendencies of rationalist thought, waned in terms of its significance and usage. Being appropriated by the calculative and logical principles of social inquiry, empiricism was reduced from its relevance as a methodology, to that of its existence as a method, an abstract technique to divide and classify social reality.

Experience as such becomes the bridge between objects and events on the one hand, and the internalization of the underlying discourses and sentiments by the audience or community. A conceptual understanding of experience would require an acknowledgment of the centrality of consciousness in it. In this light, the selected writings of Alfred Schutz (1970) in the text 'On Phenomenology and Social Relations' provides a phenomenological perspective into the world of experience and social reality.

For Schutz, experience takes place within the life-world; a term that is central to phenomenological understanding, used to explain the entire space within which all action and experience take place in the life of individuals (Wagner, 1970: 14). This life-world, as Schutz explains, exists prior to the existence of any particular individual. It is through action and experience in this world that human beings develop their personal cognitive framework of thought and action (Schutz, 1970: 79). Their understanding of the world also depends upon what Schutz calls the "stock of knowledge", or the cognitive accumulation of all past experiences that endows an individual with the capacity to interpret the present situation (ibid: 74). These experiences are highly subjective in nature, as no two individuals can be said to have the same experience and therefore not the same 'stock of knowledge' that frames their future understanding and action (ibid: 73). Considering the subjective nature of experience, the growth of a community with shared cultural patterns and ideas then becomes possible when the community believes in their similar position vis-à-vis the other communities and makes use of common forms of expression to maintain communication (ibid: 79-82). Language, for Schutz is one such medium through which the common knowledge is transmitted and communicated and it is only in the social context where it is used that its complete meaning can be comprehended (ibid: 96-97). Highlighting on different forms of communication that make possible communication, Schutz also emphasized on visual communication in the form of painting as enabling "symbolic appresentation" (ibid: 209) facilitating in the transferring of meaning from the painter to the audience. Musical performances in a similar manner also make possible the alignment of the consciousness of the performer and the audience on a common plane wherein the meaning of the performance is articulated to the listener (ibid: 213). Arriving at a phenomenological understanding of the life-world, its actors, their "stock of knowledge" (ibid: 74), their intentions and their experiences, Schutz's work intricately links the thread between the concepts of experience, interpretation, meaning and action.

It was to accentuate the significance of the notion of experience in understanding social reality, and the relevance of maintaining a subjective perspective for interpreting social action and comprehending existential concerns in the society, that the disciplines of phenomenology and later, hermeneutics developed. The philosopher Martin Heidegger,

whose contribution concerned with the question of the Being in the world, believed in the importance of a phenomenological approach to understanding human existence in the world (Heidegger, 1996). This phenomenological method emphasized on the need to acknowledge the ontological nature of reality. For Heidegger, the need was therefore to turn to "interpretation of genuinely historical beings with regard to their historicality" (Heidegger, 1996: 9). Reality in this sense can only be interpreted through a state of being in the world, in other words on realizing the ontological state of *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1996).

Gadamer distinguished between two different German terms dealing with the notion of experience while explaining on art (Gadamer, 2004 [1975]). *Erlebnis* according to him implied residue of moments which are lived in their complete immediacy, which is then transformed into art (ibid.). *Erfahrung*, also signifying experience, provided the basis in human lives for the particular hermeneutic manner in which individuals are related to other persons and to their own cultural past, through dialogue and specifically through dialogue including questions and answer (ibid.). This meaning is separate from the previous term which deals with the residue of isolated moments, but instead highlights on an ongoing integrative process which widens the thinking process and transforms already existing perspectives (ibid.). It therefore does not just merely add to the already existing stock of knowledge or information, but provides a broader perspective of human life and culture, and helps in the formation of meaning (ibid.).

This concept of *Erlebnis*, as also stressed upon by Wilhelm Dilthey, influenced the ideas of the anthropologist Victor Turner, according to whom the event of experience not only incorporated feelings and actions, but also reflected, about them (Bruner, 1986). The act of experience was thus one in which the active individual is not only a part of, but that which is also influenced by him or her (ibid.). This event of experience however, is not simply a verbal one, and also includes images and impressions. Imagery and the significance of image are as necessary as the identification and interpretation of language in the understanding and study of experience (ibid.). Since the concept of experience becomes personal, and it becomes difficult to comprehend or completely grasp the experience of others, the disadvantage of individual experience is dealt with, what Dilthey mentioned as, "by interpreting expressions" (Dilthey, 1976: 230).

For Dilthey, interpreting experience included a hermeneutic understanding of "representations, performances, objectifications, or texts" (Bruner, 1986: 5). Expressions can hence be believed as the very medium through which meanings can be brought to light. They are, as Turner remarked, "the crystallized secretions of once living human experience" (Turner, 1982: 17). The relationship between experience and expression is both "dialogic and dialectical" (Bruner, 1986: 6), in the sense that expressions themselves are also interpreted and understood through experience, and again expressions also help give a structure to experience. Life then is a "temporal flow" (Bruner, 1986: 8), in which experience and meaning are attached to time sequences, that recognizes the past and also anticipates the future; in which the link between the past and the present is provided by the unity of meaning which does not exist separately but is a product of the experience (ibid.).

Experience as a concept is characterized by subjectivity. One can never really experience for others, but can only understand their experience through the gestures and expressions of the actor (Kapferer, 1986). Being an abstract concept, this idea of experience can then be comprehended through the medium of expressions like rituals, language or other symbolic forms. Expressions and experiences are dialectically related to each other (Bruner, 1986). It is through the lived nature and the participation in the act of an experience that gives form to different ways of expression, which enables in the interpretation of the experience itself. These different forms of expression again help in defining and explaining what the idea of experience is about. The notion of experience in addition, includes events and moments of intense social action and heightened emotions and also takes into account the most ordinary of circumstances of everyday life (Abrahams, 1986).

For Henri Bergson, the separation of the concept of duration, understood as being experienced as a continuous and an unbroken stream of consciousness, was starkly different from the modern concept of time as one which was measured and discontinuous in nature (Schutz, 1970: 60). From a phenomenological perspective, a critical realization of this realm of experience and consciousness is only possible through a careful reflective approach, which would then enable to distinguish one experience from another and thereby bring out the meaning underlying it (ibid). This attitude requires the ability to not

make judgments and suspend personal beliefs from coloring the process of understanding, by bracketing them[8] (Wagner, 1970: 6). For Schutz (1970), this approach would then help recognize a consistent core in each object intentionally experienced, which would in turn facilitate in apprehending the meaning behind the experience.

Alfred Schutz was of the idea that it was through the quality of "appresentation" present in individuals that the human mind was able to make sense of objects, persons or situations not experienced before (Schutz, 1970: 316). This is where the significance of symbols comes into play. Appresentation was hence the correlation between events, objects or persons not experienced by the self, and other objects which are not immediately present to observation (ibid.). This correlation, from a phenomenological perspective, was possible from the contextualization of individuals within life worlds which contained ideas of prior experiences (ibid.). Symbols, for Schutz, therefore arises whenever there takes place on the part of an individual, an experience of some object, a person or an event, which gives rise to a context of meaning (ibid.). "Symbols represent the conditions of possibility for migrations of experience between an object or event in the everyday world and transcendent horizons of meaning" (Stolzfus, 2003: 188). Symbols only attain their performative ability and cultural power to influence human thought and action, when they are experienced. In fact the creation of a symbol is undertaken for representing and manifesting ideas, powerful discourses and streams of knowledge. This function becomes even more prominent in the case of the institution of religion, where systems and practices involve the use of symbolic forms and rituals to communicate religious ideas and discourses.

V.   *Witnessing the Sacred as Extraordinary Experience*

Religious experiences form an important aspect of a sociological understanding of religion. The social significance of religious experiences stem from the fact that they are perceived and understood from socially formed ideas. For the purpose of the present

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[8] Understood as the process of phenomenological reduction, it requires the researchers to remove all preconceived notions and all elements of subjectivity from their thought and process of research, so as to study the act of experience in its true form, and not let it be diluted by one's own judgment of it (Schutz, 1970: 6; 59).

work, the discussion of experiences has been taken into consideration in terms of their relation with the expression of symbolic power, to involve those experiences which arise in the context of conventionalized ritual performances which are associated with feelings of social solidarity and which are also related to processes of knowledge construction and its percolation in society.

> "When particular symbolic value horizons are co-experienced in the social world, then a value paradigm emerges that can generate a moral tradition or a social movement that is able to influence the interpretive, projective, and motivational experience of many individuals in similar ways" (Stolzfus, 2003: 191).

The social world of reality, which provide human beings with a 'stock of knowledge', contextual and universal in terms of guidance, or a sense of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) to give direction to their thought and behavior have their existence outside the individual. Their concomitant processes of constructing and maintaining a model of social reality, made possible through the presence of social institutions and forms of social knowledge, has been evident all throughout history and across all societies. Every individual however senses and perceives the world in a manner that is socially decided, sanctioned and understood, as well as subjectively sensed and perceived. Given the situated in the 'life-world' and influenced by the habitus, the individual attains a sense of being through sensation, interaction, observation or participation, or more broadly experience. Some experiences could be more abstract than the others while some others are concretely felt, some are a part of everyday life which some others which are atypical and take place for a limited time period only. How then can the idea of extraordinary experiences concerning the sacred be defined?

The idea of religion itself is fairly comprehensive and abstract at the same moment, to be described by a single definition. From a functionalist perspective, Emile Durkheim described it as a set of practices and beliefs which bring together the members of the society as a single "moral community" (1915: 47). This definition aimed at reflecting on the characteristics commonly found in all societies in terms of their association with a sacred object or being. For William James, the concept of religion could not be defined as portraying a single essence, but as embodying numerous principles, and attitudes of belief

towards intended object(s) whether actually sensed and perceived or thought of (James, 1960).

The present work has focused on collective experiences and thus religious experiences, for the present purpose could be understood as experiences aimed towards religious objects, and which contain the highest levels of collective emotion and ecstasy, where the common sentiment facilitates in the continual construction and maintenance of a common consciousness and thereby a common understanding and knowledge, although every individual present also have a subjective interpretation present to it. An association with the sacred, where the interplay of emotion and socially internalized ideas about the divine or the numinous, brings into play the production of belief which enables the maintenance of religious institutions and discourses and contributes towards the continuation of such experiences. The research has therefore emphasized on a reflective analysis of experiences as they give rise to, and reaffirm certain discourses of knowledge in society and contributes towards the maintenance of social identity.

> "there seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw, so there might conceivably also prove to be no one specific and essential kind of religious object, and no one specific and essential kind of religious act" (James, 1960: 47-48).

It is then the object of experience which can be attributed to primarily contain a religious characteristic, which in the course of experiencing confers the feeling of religiosity, mysticism and emotion on the process and on the individual. It is the 'noema' which is religious and which transmits this quality to the 'noesis', by which the latter comes to be considered as religious. The ideas and emotions that enable this experience find their expression in the form of objects. In order to understand the concept of experience, it is therefore very essential to interpret the symbols and objects through which meaning and emotions facilitating this experience are made possible. Following this, it can then be said that symbols function as significant religious objects and it is through the process of experiencing them that individuals undergo religious emotions and developing consciousness relating to collective moral sentiments.

VI.   *The Construction and Collective Imagination of Space*

Symbols provide representations of ideas, beliefs and situated knowledge. Their meaning is only transmitted to individuals through the event of experience. And the emanation of a shared meaning arises only when the individuals from a community or from similar social location experience and interpret the symbol. Its experience requires its existence in space. Symbols are manifestations of ideas which find expression in the form of tangible objects and/images that permeates the consciousness and enters human cognition, mostly in the form of visual entities attached to some meaning. This idea of space could refer to a physical space where the material expression of the symbol finds place, or it could signify the cognitive or mental space of the experienced individual wherein the image of the symbol is retained. For an interpretation of symbols, the conceptualization of space is therefore very essential. Space as a concept can be defined to contain things, ideas as well as relations (Lefebvre, 1991: 73). Space is where the activities of production take place, be it the production of things, ideas and discourses or of human social relations (ibid). It is neither perceived to be imaginary nor categorized as a material entity (ibid). However, space is not just about social relations. It also has an instrumental role in the "existing mode of production", as "knowledge and action" (ibid: 11). The interests of those in power are reproduced in the social space through action as well as knowledge, which then facilitates in the formation of a system, one that perpetuates itself through a logic of continuity (ibid). By allusion to different kinds of space, Lefebvre thus states that in the understanding of the concept, the physical, mental and the social space are interconnected (ibid: 12). The terms and concepts we use, the space of perception and symbolic representation and the space of action and experience, are analytically distinguished, but they do have a thread of continuity underneath their functioning. Highlighting on the important feature of visualization, Lefebvre states that space comprises of visible things, objects and human beings (Lefebvre: 76). Ideas about social reality are shaped by sensory perception and experiences in the life-world. These ideas then frame the structure of social action. As he notes, it is the visual nature of objects and individuals that masks its repetitive content (ibid.). What can be added is that the visual aspect not only obscures repetition but facilitates it. What is seen is understood as real. Sensory ways of knowing and cognitive ways of interpretation are intricately

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interrelated. In a certain way it can be said that when one sees an object or image rather regularly, it is visualized and interpreted as real or having a valid existence. Their continued existence in some cases resonates or symbolizes the underlying discursive structures of authority. These spaces are then to be interpreted in terms of the meanings that arise from the circulation of commodities, things and human beings and the network of social relations.

The discussion of space encourages a revisit to the theme of consciousness, as the understanding of space in terms of its distinction from other spaces is to a large extent contingent on the idea of time. As Bergson describes, the idea of inner time refers to an incessant flow of consciousness, where subjective experience takes place, which is different from the time that is categorized and calculated, whose continuity is broken (Schutz, 1970: 14; 60). Consciousness in the former is unalterable in the sense that one cannot go back, as there is not distinction between the categories of past, present or future (ibid: 61-62). It is only through the act of "reflection", which Schutz remarks as being a quality of the social world of everyday experience that this flow witnesses discontinuity and categorization (ibid: 63). Each experience is then characterized as being separate from each other (ibid).

VII.   *Art as a Symbolic Entity*

Symbols are thus representative forms of culture through which meanings are expressed and experiences take place. Symbols function as vehicles or carriers of meaning of beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, practices, customs, languages, etc. It is through them that the social processes of formation of collective behaviour and representation in society take place (Swidler, 1986). These symbols make up what Clifford Geertz called the '*control mechanism*' (Geertz, 1973) which constituted culture. In fact, it is in these symbols that historically transmitted pattern of meanings are situated, and it is through these symbols that communication and development of knowledge among human beings take place (Geertz, 1973). For Robert Bellah, who extended the basic ideas of Durkheim on the idea of religion and morality and the importance of symbols, states that many objects which individuals come across in their daily life have potential religious and cultural meanings.

Thus any object, individual or event "may have a meaning in another reality that transcends the world of meaning" (Bellah, 2011). Symbols therefore define the world comprising of social groups, draw links between conscious and unconscious meanings and thus constitute realities which transcend individuals and groups. "All thoughts and feeling are formed and reformed by culturally provided symbols" (Shepherd, 1975: 6). It is through the help of these symbols that the otherwise narcissistic attitudes and instincts of human beings can be disciplined and engaged for social and/ or collective purposes necessary for the establishment and maintenance of a moral order.

Victor Turner's (1967, 1969, 1986) works are considered significant because of his contribution in terms of his emphasis on the exploration of rituals and on the recognition of symbols in social reality. He was of the view that these symbols influenced social action, transformation and change in society (Turner, 1969). Acting as cultural agents, symbolic forms contained meanings which altered with changes in context. The indispensability of symbols lay in the fact that they represented the collective ideas and sentiments of the society, which through the medium of performance was sustained and reaffirmed as essential ideals for maintenance of social order (Durkheim, 1915).

The institution of art, in the context of the present work, can thus be understood as a symbolic system, containing as Durkheim (1915) would have to say, the shared ideas of society, or power yet hidden discourses of knowledge influencing behaviour and action in society. Art thus, like other symbolic forms attain their concrete significance and meaning when in interaction with an individual or an audience, whose experience makes possible the interpretation of the meaning and the authority hidden in it, and again, whose expression through human conduct reaffirms this aspect of authority and throws light on its power to construct or to shape action and thought in society.

Art has always been an elaborate expression of individual and social identity. It is a vital part of society, associated with the healthy and pure development of society. Yet, there has always been neglect in terms of scholarly contributions in the relation between art and religion in human society, with art being portrayed as capable of only making sense in relation to aesthetic sensibility. The social function played by art in human civilization, through the endless varieties of art forms available in all kinds of societies throughout the

world, has somehow been buried in its growing popularity as an aesthetic or artistic tradition. However, if the concept of art is explored in terms of its relation to religion as a form of representation, as a set of symbols defining the religious values and meanings, then the importance of this symbolic form can be made clear. Art as such can be described as subtle yet powerful tool of the society to shape and regulate social values and human relations in society. It symbolizes a complete fusion of conscious and unconscious desires of human beings. It expresses individual creativity as well as the vitality of the entire society. Every art form is a reflection of the artist's creativity of the myths and traditions as well as the social and historical environment in which the tradition is as such born. If the entire culture system is assumed to be highly symbolic in nature, then there are also structures of interpretation. The institution of art, in this context, is then also a symbolic system. Art functions as a symbol. It provides intimation about the culture of a society.

Heidegger was of the belief that the significance of an artwork; in terms of its difference from all other products or things, lay in its independence and its ability to reveal truth about particular beings, contexts or situations through interpretation (Bossart, 1968). The power of the art form, according to him, lay in its ability to create a new world of thoughts and emotions (ibid.). Moreover, for Heidegger, the uniqueness of the work of art only comes to the surface when it is interpreted within the historical context where it was born (ibid.). This is where Gadamer differed, and stated that the power of the art work lay in its ability to transcend the boundaries of time and history and contain features of timelessness (Gadamer, 2007), which allows them to be continually performed and experienced.

VIII. *Experiencing the Artwork*

"The work of art is the expression of a truth that cannot be reduced to what its creator actually thought in it. Whether we call it the unconscious creation of the genius or we consider the conceptual inexhaustibility of every artistic expression from the point of view of the beholder, the aesthetic consciousness can appeal to the fact that the work of art communicates itself." (Gadamer, 2007: 124)

The significance of the experience of the artwork lies in its ability to transcend the limits of temporality and history. The timelessness of the art facilitates in the meanings contained in the symbols to be conferred to future audience. This is how the ideas of solidarity and morality from the myths as illustrated in the paintings are carried over throughout generations and still make meaning, and allow understanding to take place in the present audience.

If from a hermeneutical perspective, history consists of mediations, interactions and interpretations by living social beings, then it can be said to include the entire gamut of what can be termed as tradition. This sphere of tradition then involves art also. In this sense then, the artwork created, can be attached to a particular historic-temporal context wherein the artist produced it. But, it is here that art defies the confines of the history and time (Gadamer, 2007).

For Hegel, appreciation of the beauty of nature was essential for the appreciation of beauty as found in art. But Gadamer (2007) opined that natural beauty was bound by temporality and found within a certain spatial context. Therefore, it was the work of art, and not natural beauty which was considered by him as an object of hermeneutic interpretation and understanding (ibid.).

If hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of language, then how is the experience of art understood within the same domain? Gadamer believed, "Every interpretation of the intelligible that helps others to understanding has the character of language" (2007: 127). Works of art according to Droysen are both historical and linguistic sources of information, as well as remnants of an era gone by (ibid.). For Gadamer however, it is only through the appreciation of the art form by the future audience that it retains its permanency (ibid.). Here again, it is the art form which interprets itself, and the language through which the appreciation by the audience is made possible, is the language of its experience. This language of interpretation then relates to the present and is not confined within any historical context and does not necessarily always reveal the initial purpose or bring up the original meaning (ibid.). The point which is intended to be emphasized is that if hermeneutics is the study of interpreting languages or texts, then can experience of an artwork be compared to a language, since experience

might not be literally expressible in a linguistic form itself, but just like a language it helps in understanding a foreign creation.

Interpretation does not always denote tracing back to the original meaning, and is not simply restricted to the meaning which has already been declared; it is also found in the unitary meaning of all words and immediate meanings that have been expressed (Gadamer, 2007). The experience of art is something which involves self-interpretation, as when the artwork expresses or interprets itself, the act of experience enables self-understanding in the individual.

The language of art is different from other uses of language, in the sense that it cannot be limited to the original meaning intended by the author, and may be capable of multiple interpretations (ibid.). It is therefore not the original intention of the author or creator that is significant, but the meanings are posed to the individual in the context of experience with art that influences its understanding (ibid.). The work of art therefore, in this manner, functions as a symbolic entity, enabling interpretation through experience, revealing meaning which is timeless and therefore always contemporary, and facilitating self-understanding of individuals. It is in the process of interpretation that, according to Gadamer (2007), the work of art reveals itself. It is through this process of encounter with the art that it becomes alive, and releases energy which then contributes to its understanding by the observer (ibid.).

Gadamer's query concerned the point of commonality between the image and the word, and how their connection contributes to formation of culture and perspectives of truth in society (Gadamer, 2007). For Hegel, just like religion and philosophy, art could be placed within the domain of the 'absolute'[9], as it was capable of transcending all boundaries of society, history, and temporality, and remain timeless and contemporaneous (Gadamer, 2007). The very idea of the existence of a 'present' assumes the existence of a future, and this concept of future according to hermeneutics, depends on the experiences gained in the present, just as the present itself is based on the past (ibid.). This is from which the character of contemporaneity comes in the world of art, which emphasizes more on the

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[9] This notion of the 'absolute' emerged in the Neoplatonism era, and referring to its Latin root, meant independent. This concept was therefore used to refer to anything which was completely independent, and not relatively dependent on any other factor (Gadamer, 2007).

process of experience, than on history and time (ibid.). What should be taken into consideration is that this feature of timelessness however does not mean that the facets of history and time are not significant enough for a consideration of art. What it means is that art has the ability to move over the confines of time and history. This tendency to view art only through the categories of historical context becomes apparent in the creation and popularity of museums dedicated to art, where they are observed as elements of history, of an era gone by. The historical context of a painting or any artwork is significant in the sense that it gives the observer with an idea of the subject and the meaning contained in it. But the point here is that, one should not limit one's understanding to it, and try to discover the not-so-revealed meanings through experience.

Every notion of 'present' contains within it, based on experiences; knowledge of the past, and an expectation of the future. The past is then what Gadamer (2007) terms as tradition, which consists of developments, both material and non-material, based on experiences. These non-material developments, in the form of beliefs, customs, ideas, morals and religion, characterize a society (ibid.). But again, these grounds of religious and cultural heritage create the idea of absolute knowledge, forming boundaries and separating communities, and it is here that Gadamer believes, the significance of art comes into action (ibid.). The ability of art to travel beyond the set boundaries is what brings to light, its significance in society. Having an advantage over language, whose verbal and linguistic character, makes it difficult to understand foreign languages; art, through the process of experience, speaks for itself to the observer, and facilitates self-understanding (ibid.).

In the creation of poetry or of a pictorial piece, what is noteworthy is the very creation of a text (Gadamer, 2007). In this matter, while painting does require some concrete materials for its creation, poetry uses words to create a text which can be understood and interpreted in the mind (ibid.). Again, both art and poetry are not produced in the same sense as an industrial production, merely for the serving some particular function in the society. It also emerges as a specific entity expressing and interpreting itself. Experiencing an artwork is a process whereby the observer realizes and understands its hidden meaning through an encounter with it, where the piece of art, no matter how strange and unfamiliar, manages to allure and absorb the observer with its power of

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contemporaneity (Gadamer, 2007). It provides the observer with an image of a higher reality through engagement in process of observation, interpretation, realization, and self-understanding, and thereby leads to the unconcealing or the disclosing of the meaning that was hidden in it (ibid.).

Gadamer refers to the German word *Vollzug*[10] to refer to the quality of the artwork to surprise the observer and interpret itself (Gadamer, 2007). Its ability to come alive is only made possible in the course of their encounter with an observer, whose experience makes interpretation and understanding possible (ibid.). The power of 'beingness' in an artwork, and its ability to remain alive, present and contemporaneous, does not lie in its production or reproduction by the artist or the creator; it comes forth through the process of experience (ibid.). At this point, it is necessary to mention that Gadamer here states that the experience of such a kind that the observer feels that he or she has never come across this before. But this might not be applicable for religious paintings which are repeatedly seen by believers and worshipped each time by them. In this case however, it can still be said that the artwork induces feelings of the kind mentioned above each time. What cannot be put into words, are as if expressed by the picture itself, and it is this state of not being able to accurately express oneself linguistically, that also contributes to the sense of awe in the observer and facilitates in the exploration of meanings which were not so clearly articulated before. In fact this process of experience not only helps in the uncovering of meanings, but also contributes to the reaffirmation of those meanings. It is in the course of the encounter with it, that the artwork seems to be in a state of performance, interpreting itself to the observer. This is what Gadamer call the "sovereignty" (Gadamer, 2007: 217) of the work of art, whether in the form of image or through poetry.

IX.   *Witnessing the Narrative*

Experience of religious performances, as the kind highlighted in the present work, includes the presentation of images and the rendition of narratives in the course of the

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[10] *Vollzug* a German term, refers to the act of carrying out some action, following or performing a task through (Gadamer, 2007).

performance. As experience in the social world is always tied to a particular context, it becomes important to contemplate on how the concepts of time and space work in the sphere of these performances. Elaborating on the constitution of time, Paul Ricoeur (1980) states that it can be divided at three levels, first, dealing with the present time, in which the event happens, second being a historical understanding of time in relation to the past, and the third involving the aspect of temporality. A narrative then takes into account the elements of historicity and temporality (Ricoeur, 1980: 175). The time in which the act of narration takes place, as Ricoeur remarks, is public or shared in nature, whereby the individuals collectively witness the present experience (ibid). He adds that the process of recitation of the narrative, wherein the story is presented in a chronological manner, accentuates its element of historicality in the narrative, whether real or imagined (ibid: 176). Borrowing the idea of "repetition" from Martin Heidegger, Ricoeur avers that it allows the transmission of ideas and the experience to be a shared act by building a unity between the past, present and the future (ibid: 180-88). Repetition further draws attention to the explanatory and aspects of the story (ibid: 187). This emphasis on explanation further takes turn towards an interpretive understanding of the essence of the story (ibid). This act of repetition, by highlighting a sense of history, also provides a collective sense of a shared future (ibid: 188). Drawing on the collective understanding of tradition, Ricoeur therefore asserts on a possibility in the narrative to achieve a temporal unity in terms of the historical past, the present and the future (ibid: 190).

X.   *Symbols and their Potential Attribute of Agency*

Agency can be roughly understood as a means to a particular end. It can be interpreted as the capacity in individuals to exercise their free will or engage in rebellion (Kockelman, 2007). It can also be realized as an act involving 'mediating relationality', and it is this meaning of agency which has been prominent in the works of Bourdieu and Giddens, while explaining the interaction between social structure and agents (ibid). Interestingly, for Francis Bacon, this concept of agency referred to power and knowledge. Kockelman introduced two dimensions of agency, including the "residential agency" and the "representational agency" (Kockelman, 2007: 376). Residential agency, which reflected

power, referred to the degree to which one would control the control and determine the expression of a sign, lay out the relation between the object and the sign, and also decide the effect of the expression of the sign (ibid.). The second concept of representational agency, which is related to the sphere of knowledge, is involved in the thematic structure of the sign or a semiotic process, including the determination of its theme and its characteristics, and also reason out the relationship between the theme and its features (ibid.). These two aspects bring out very important dimensions in the discussion of agency, as involving and influencing the processes of power and knowledge in society.

This notion of agency is inclusive of both human as well as non-human agents. A capacity for agency becomes prominent not only as a form of resistance towards the limitation of the structure, but also exists in the very entangled and relational character of social reality, which involves continual interaction between systems of social structure and institutions, and forms of agency. This is what Giddens acknowledged in his theory of structuration, which recognized that an understanding of social reality could be done by recognizing the processes of structure and agency and relational and interdependent in terms of the construction of society (Giddens, 1984).

If structure is understood as including systems and forms of signification, then the symbolic order may also function as a significant source of non-human agency. While society determines the structure of its symbolic system, this system itself also acts as a medium of social transformation. Symbolic agency can then include both dimensions of residentiality and representability, to function as a process which involves the use of power in the construction of knowledge in society. Following this, art being a part of the symbolic system, can thus be said to contain the potential to act as a source of non-human agency.

Alfred Gell was of the view that if the subject-matter around which anthropology revolves, deals with social relationship and the interaction between living entities and human agents, then the anthropological theory of art could be understood as one in which, "*persons* or 'social agents' are in certain contexts, substituted for by *art objects*" (Gell, 1998). As for Mauss, gifts for exchange were considered as extensions of persons, similarly for Gell, objects were like living social agents (ibid.). Just like human agents,

these objects were thus considered to have the capability to allure the recipients into eliciting certain kinds of responses (ibid.). Gell's idea of the art-form as an equivalent of human agency changed the view of art as a given product, and emphasized on the need to re-locate art within the world of social relationships. However, his lack of attention towards the relation of the aspects of temporality and historical context with the creation of the artist's role as a social agent, and his negation of the significance of symbolic interpretations of the art-form, are concerns that this paper has endeavoured to deal with. While looking into the social context of an art-form, a consideration of its historical context is extremely significant, as this has serious repercussions on its cultural system. Social interaction and behaviour patterns are guided by the cultural system, which itself is a product of a particular time, a specific history, and a definite geo-spatial location. Moreover, the entire presentation and performance of the art forms and their very creation is done by human artists. It is then these individuals who with their creative insight express certain themes and ideas in different forms of art. The power of transforming meaning and imagination in the individual consciousness is conferred on these symbols through the human agents. Without their control, symbols cannot alone operate as independent agents of cultural transformation in society. It is through their occupational ability as artists to endow these symbols with meanings that these material objects or abstract forms of representation gain their significance. The potential agency in artwork can then never be understood without taking into consideration, the significance of social context, history and the intervention by the human agent.

If the task of a source of agency lies in its ability to instigate certain actions of a causal nature, by influencing intentions and acts of mind (Gell, 1998), then the art object can be said to play an extremely significant role in the transmission and proliferation of discourses and ideologies of the community associated with it, to the larger society. Embanking on Alfred Gell's significant contribution to the construction of an anthropological theory of art in terms of the art-form as agency, this work considers artwork, including both art as well as narrative poetry as being equivalent to the notion of a human agency.

At this juncture, Hannah Arendt's idea of human action reveals an interesting understanding on the theme of social action in human society. Building upon a

phenomenological perspective, Arendt elaborates on reconsidering the idea of political action (Arendt, 1958). By characterizing labour as being related to the biological process of life itself, and work being the activity carried out to produce the artificial world consisting of things, she defines action as the only activity that characterizes the plurality of individuals in the world (ibid: 7). Individuals are not only conditioned by their life-world, but also by things created by them. It is in this context that Arendt introduces labour as a concept that does not refer to the completion of product (ibid: 80). The idea of work according to the author is on the other hand the activity that includes the production and completion of an artificial object (ibid: 91). The concept of action however, can be understood as the activity which facilitates pluralism (ibid: 175). Action in this sense denotes beginning something, and is not conditioned by necessity or the need to create objects (ibid: 177). Action is also reproduced as stories whose narration facilitates the preservation of their speech and their deeds (ibid: 184). These stories become the source of inspiration for the future, as it is through their telling that the element of action stays alive. Critiquing political philosophy by reorganizing the human world around the three concepts of labour, work and action, Hannah Arendt's work is not only insightful for discussions on participatory democracy and the condition of human beings in the contemporary age of automation, but also provides a brilliant explanation to understanding action as praxis (ibid: 185).

The creation of artwork, including paintings and narrative poetry, are created in specific socio-historical and temporal contexts. Although these creations are not limited to representing their context of origin, they play a major role in defining these contexts and manifesting them. Following this argument, it can thus be said that art as symbol function in society to act as powerful mediums of discourses, which are used to represent the interests of power, which then again manifests through this body of creation its constructed forms of knowledge. Again, art itself also acts as an agency, using its symbolic authority to manipulate the controlling of power and re-create knowledge in society. Understanding and interpreting works of art as symbols can therefore bring to light the meanings, both revealed by it as well as disclosed by it, thus unravel the under-workings of powerful discourses of power in society in terms of what gets to be understood as truth, and also explore the power of the artwork itself to reveal truth.

Moreover, if the art attributes certain intentions and ideas of the community or context of origin to the society, then the art-form is itself a source of representation for the community. Representation can only be possible when the individuals in a group can relate to points of identification and experience a sense of unity and belongingness. Art then creates this very space for enabling this sense of familiarity and association among individuals in the community, which has consequences on their social, religious and cultural identity.

XI. *Pictorial-Narrative Tradition in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan*

Moving over to the existing body of literature that facilitates the understanding of the ethnographic field, Heinz Mode and Subodh Chandra's (1985) book, *Indian Folk Art* is one of the very few books in this area of study which provides a comprehensive description of the prominent folk art forms all over India, in different regions, from the forms of sculpture at different regions. It manages to view these art forms not simply in terms of their existence but also in terms of their importance and social significance in society.

In the study of this tradition of illustrative-storytelling as found in certain parts of West Bengal and Jharkhand, the volume on *Cultural Oscillation: A Study of Patua Culture* by Binoy Bhattacharjee (1980), is indispensable. Being the first monograph towards a systematic understanding of society and culture in relation to the tradition of scroll painting, the author describes the origin and history, the economic and the social life, the social structure and the material culture of the scroll painters-cum-performers who are known as *Patua* or *Chitrakar* in this part of the country (Bhattacharjee, 1980). Through a deep analysis of the various aspects of social life and the different life-cycle rituals and ceremonies, Binoy Bhattacharjee explores the unique intermediary position of the scroll painters between the Hindus and the Muslims, in terms of their social and religious identity (ibid).

The works by O. P. Joshi (1976) on *Painted Folklore and Folklore Paintings of India: A Study with reference to Rajasthan*, and John D. Smith's (2005) book *The Epic of Pabuji*, are also extremely valuable as they detail on one of the most elaborate and complex

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structure of pictorial devices ever used for the picture-storytelling tradition as found in the tradition of '*Phad'* paintings of Rajasthan. While Joshi's (1976) work traces the myths associated with the rise of this tradition, the relation between the painter and the *bhopa* or the performer who is responsible for narration, the themes used in the practice, and elaborate nature of painting and narration, a history of the tradition on the whole, and as it is found today, J. D. Smith's (1976) work provides a elaborate interpretation of the entire myth of Pabuji.

Sankar Sen Gupta''s (1973) edited text titled, *The Patas and Patuas of Bengal* offers substantial discussions on scroll painting and narration as practiced by the Chitrakar community which reside in the Santhal Parganas of Jharkhand. Sankar Sen Gupta's article on the classification and dating of the scroll painters or *Patua*, as they were known, throws light on the origin and the growth of the '*secular-pata*', which basically refers to the paintings dealing with secular and non-conventional themes illustrated and performed in the traditional manner as the '*religious-pata*'(ibid). Pradyot Kumar Maity's article (1976) in the same book also focuses on the religious scrolls and provides an important insight for the discussion on the tradition as found among the Santhal tribes located in certain parts of Jharkhand.

1.4. Research Objectives

2. To carry out a historical and descriptive analysis of the narrative-art traditions as they are practiced in parts of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan.
3. To arrive at a conceptual understanding of the relation between knowledge and experience by detailed interpretation of visual and narrative symbols and their underlying meanings.
4. To explore the social and cultural power of symbols manifested in narrative-art traditions in the restructuring or maintenance of the moral order.
5. To explore the social and cultural power of symbols manifested in narrative art traditions in the restructuring or maintenance of the social identity

1.5. Research Questions

1. What role did these pictorial-narrative traditions of India play in the society prior to the advent of modern forms of communication? How has it changed today?

2. What is the social composition of the artist communities, the patrons and the audience related to the pictorial-narrative traditions in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan?

3. What are the main themes used for illustration and narration in these picture-storytelling traditions?

4. How do symbols permeate the realm of experience? And how is collective experience possible in the act of a performance?

5. How do these pictorial-narrative symbols contribute to the restructuring or reaffirmation of social identity?

6. How do these symbols contribute to the maintenance of collective morality?

1.6. Rationale of the Study

The image and the spoken word have been central symbols in the perception of social reality. Immersed in the realm of culture, these symbols assume different meanings across space and time. At a time when with the overflow of information in communication and technology, the manner in which knowledge is circulated and ideas are dispersed worldwide has completely transformed, in such a context, images, words and the entire realm of knowledge becomes extracted from its very context and is given, or rather assumes a universal meaning. With the prominence of the word and the image in itself, the different trajectories of meaning and the different processes involved in the construction of that meaning lies rather neglected. It then becomes essential to revisit the production of knowledge in a certain context as being represented through symbols that highlight on its relation to power.

The pictorial-narrative tradition as practiced in parts of West Bengal, and Rajasthan consists of hereditary communities of artists who are involved in painting and narration

of myths and oral histories. The study is not comparative in scope, and although they belong to different ethnic and religious communities in three regions, their social position is relatively low. Even in the present day, when their performances have somewhat faded in popularity owing to the influx of electronic mediation, these communities continue to practice their traditional occupation and derive their sense of collective identity from it. It is then through their association with this occupation of pictorial-narration that they reassert their collective identity even in contemporary times. Revisiting these age-old practices as constitutive of symbolic elements performing to provide expressions of cultural distinction and social identity enables in the accentuation of the processes of experience in the construction of collective belief and identity. Extending the idea of experience in the act of performance consisting of images and texts as existing for purposes beyond mere aesthetics, this research has aimed to highlight on the relation between the lived experience of symbols and the uncovering of meaning underlying them. Pertaining to themes concerning the manifestation of the sacred infused with the idea of the moral, these artists emphasize on the periodic reaffirmation of collective belief. Through the performance of these sacred symbols and the reiteration of the shared values and beliefs within the community, they reassert their social position and collective identity. The understanding of symbols and their meanings should therefore take into consideration the significance of the aspects of performance and experience. Symbols used in these practices in the form of illustration and narratives, act as powerful tools, which through the process of performance, creates meaning and enables shared beliefs and values to exist.

The justification of the proposed research is that instances of the institutionalization of belief, the merging of the sacred with the moral and the cultural performances involving the presentation of myths, bring to light the centrality of the significance of the social in the community. Morality and identity is subsumed within the larger idea of the social. It is in relation to this notion of the social that maintenance of meaning and the projection of identity makes sense. Studies in the field of symbols should therefore look into the significance of experience and their role in structuring the thought and action of the individual in the community. In the context of performances, these images and narrative assume added symbolic power which transcends the boundaries of the body in which

they are represented and enters the consciousness of the collectivity. The prime motivation for this research was to understand why these communities continue to hold on to their traditional occupation even in the present day, if it is their very association with this occupation that relegates them to their accorded social position in the larger society. It was to comprehend how this space of work or source of livelihood for these artist communities also functioned as a platform or a space for transformation of social thought and collective belief. Their spaces of representation, their themes, their stories, their personal beliefs, all reveal their role as cultural agents engaged in the attempt to situate their community within the larger social history and thereby reaffirm their identity.

The rationalization for the present study therefore, is that meanings of symbolic performances can only be uncovered through their encounter with the context in which they are being performed, and therefore the ethnographic observation of these pictorial-narrative traditions of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, requires their recognition as extending beyond their aesthetic dimension, and their interpretation as symbolic entities involved in the representation of the sacred and moral. It also requires understanding these communities involved in their creation and performance, as cultural agents engaged in the reaffirmation of their social identity. When looking at cultural practices where pictorial and narrative symbols function together, it is essential to revisit and observe them as existing beyond the aesthetic domain or beyond the binaries of folk and urban, and instead experience and understand them as attempts to permeate the collective belief system in the reconstruction and reaffirmation of social identity, and this is what the present work has endeavored to put together.

1.7. About the Fields

As this study attempted to gain insight into an interpretative understanding of the social and cultural power of symbols associated with the narrative art tradition, it required a detailed ethnographic understanding of the field, where such practices as involving the performance of visual and narrative symbols are at play. Three field destinations were therefore chosen in the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, with the aim of

getting intense reflections on this theme. As each of these practices is characterized by diverse features, owing to their social contexts, the objective was not to compare them to arrive at generalizations of pictorial-narrative traditions in India. Instead, the three fields were chosen to provide a wider picture of the significance of such practices, without drawing generalizations, to reflect on the symbolic power of all the practices in the course of performance, their internalization through experience, and to bring to light the agency of these artists involved who are nevertheless distinct in terms of their social location, their politico-cultural contexts and their history.

I. *West Bengal*

Of all the folk forms of pictorial art still practiced in the rural villages of West Bengal, the most important is the tradition of the scroll painting, known as the *Patachitra*, painted by the folk artists earlier known as *Patua,* now as the *Chitrakar*. While the rectangular paintings mostly include illustrations of deities or single episodes of certain myths and are mainly created for the purpose of sale, the scrolls portray a story or a few scenes from a story in the form of continuous pictures. In terms of size, these scrolls vary from one to three feet in width and from about ten to twenty feet in length (McCutchion and Bhowmick, 1999). This vertical scroll then functions like a mobile gallery of paintings, arranged in relation to the story that is narrated by the *Patua* marking the beginning of the story to its end (Dutt, 1990). The themes are usually based on the mythological and religious stories of the epics, the *Purana*, and other myths including some local stories of *Behula* and *Lakhinder*, *Chaitanya*, *Satya-pir*, etc, which appeal to prospective audiences from different sects of Hinduism. In West Bengal, the *Chitrakar* families are distributed over a wide area including the districts of Medinipur, Birbhum, Purulia, Murshidabad, Howrah, Nadiya and Kolkata (Bhattacharjee, 1980). This study of the *Patachitra* was conducted in the Medinipur district of West Bengal, particularly the village Naya, and also in Jhargram, both of which boasts of active communities of the *Chitrakar* who actively engage in the production of the painted scrolls and their performance in the present day.

II.   *Jharkhand*

In the present state of Jharkhand, one of the divisions is the Santhal Parganas. This division comprises of six districts of Dumka, Jamtara, Deoghar, Godda, Sahibganj and Pakur. It is in these regions, that one finds this tradition of scroll painting among artists who are known as the *Patua* or *Chitrakar*, and also the *Jadu-Patua*. Functioning as the main mode of communication by the Buddhists, these scrolls it is believed were used by the tribal community, and it was with their migration to Bengal that the tradition of *Patachitra* commenced in the region (Bhowmick, 2008). For these artists, their relation with this tradition also divides them between the categories of the *Chitrakar* and the *Jadu-Patua*. There is a repeated attempt to conceal their possible tribal origin and it is with the category of the *Jadu-Patua* that they draw the line of distinction. The common themes in the *Patachitra* tradition in Jharkhand do reveal a cultural interaction between these artist communities and their counterparts in West Bengal. Thus, there are illustrations from the grand epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, along with other local legends. Apart from these, their distinctive themes consist of painting and narration on the origin of the Santhal community, which is performed by the *Chitrakar* for the tribal community, and the practice of illustration of members from the Santhal community known as the *Chakshudan pat*, usually presumed to be carried out by the *Jadu-Patua*. The present study was conducted in Dumka and Godda districts of Jharkhand where these communities of *Chitrakar* are concentrated.

III.   *Rajasthan*

In northern India, in the state of Rajasthan, the tradition of scroll-paintings is known as the *Phad* tradition in which elaborate and exquisitely created painted horizontal scrolls are accompanied with narratives for performances. Unlike the *Patachitra* tradition in both West Bengal and Jharkhand, where the painter also performs as the performer, in the case of the *Phad* painting in Rajasthan, these two related activities are performed by separate communities hereditarily associated with its creation. The painting on the scrolls is done by the community of the Joshi, after which it is purchased and used for performances by the *Bhopa*. Although of late the themes in the scrolls include episodes from Ramayana or

the life of Krishna or even the *Purana*, the essence of their practice lies in the pictorial depiction and narration of the legends of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan*. For the painter, this is their chief occupation and the main source of their income. For the *Bhopa*, who is engaged in the rearing of cattle or camels, the performance of narration and display of the scroll is more of a religious duty in the community. For this research, the study of the *Phad* tradition was comprehensively carried out in the Bhilwara and Shahpura districts of Rajasthan, along with a visit to Jodhpur.

1.8. Operational Definitions of the Research

After setting up the conceptual framework of a research and the main objectives of inquiry and understanding, it becomes necessary to have in hand a working definition of the central concepts before embarking on the ethnographic journey, so as to not falter away from the concerns of the research in the field. In the context of the present research, these concepts were arrived at from an understanding of the theoretical and empirical research which already exists on the subject of research, and facilitated in guiding the course of the study, especially in the field and in the course of data analysis. In this study, the central concepts include pictorial-narration, symbol, meaning, tradition, performance, experience, morality and identity.

Pictorial-Narration: This term has been used to refer to the cultural practices of scroll-painting which are accompanied by narration. In the scope of the present work, this pictorial element refers to the paintings done by hereditary communities of artists in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, while narration refers to the narratives created by the same community of painters or other bardic communities in the region, engaged in the storytelling of the painting. Usually these involve the representation of popular myth and local legends and it is in the synthesis of the painting and narration that this practice has been identified.

Symbol: The idea of the symbol has been used in this study to refer to the paintings of the artist communities in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, and their constructed narratives that are presented together in the course of their performance in front of audience. The paintings function as visual images and the narratives as uttered words, and together these define the understanding of symbols in the present study.

Meaning: In the act of their performance, meanings underlying symbols come to the surface. In the pictorial-narrative tradition in the three states, where performance through visuals and narratives harp on representation of popular myths and local stories, symbolic meanings refer to the underlying idea as stated in the storyline of the myth itself, which is mostly along the lines of the reaffirmation of the sacred and insistence on the maintenance of morality. In this study, the concept of meaning has therefore been used to refer to the underlying interpretations of the symbol, which is itself based on the connotations of the myths that come to light in event of performances.

Tradition: The idea of tradition in the present context of the research refers to the repetition of practices over a considerable period of time. The practice of painting on scrolls of cloth and performing on them with narratives has therefore been termed as a pictorial-narrative tradition in this study because the practice is hereditary in nature and defines the occupation of the artist communities in the regions of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. For the present purpose, the term tradition has been used to refer to all those body of practices and patterns of thought that have continued from the past to the contemporary times, and which are thought to have relevance for the present and also potential for the future, and suffixed to the process of pictorial-narration. The tradition is understood as a practice that has been carried out through generations. Although open to modifications and transformations till a certain extent, its understanding also hints at the presence of a stable structure, marked by a constant pattern of interaction, therefore facilitating in envisioning of the future.

Performance: The concept of performance in this study has been used to make sense of the dramatic presentation of the scroll paintings along with the narration as a staged act in front of an audience. In all three regions of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, the element of performance is central to the practice of pictorial-narration. It is the act which unites the visual and the word as conjoined symbols. It is through the performance that the symbolic interpretation of this practice becomes possible. Performance then refers to the display of images with the recitation of performances in front of a live audience, by the communities of artists hereditarily associated with its transmission.

Experience: The understanding of experience in relation to the present work can be placed within the context of performance, where the symbols are at work. When the performance takes place, with the help of the common symbols, the individuals present in the audience are transported to a socially imagined realm of the past. Seeing the same symbol and hearing the same words, along with the collective presence, enables in a shared experience of the situation. Experience in the context of this study therefore refers to the collective encounter with visual and narrative symbols in the act of a pictorial-narrative performance as is practiced in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, and thereby the awareness and internalization of their embodied meanings.

Morality: The idea of the moral used in this work is closely tied to the importance of the sacred and the significance of the social, as a set of values reflected in deeds, which are idealized to the point of becoming sacred or close to it, and deviation from which results in punishment. The concept as emphasized in this study refers to the presence of the attributes of virtue, honesty, loyalty, chivalry and honour in human action, among other qualities that differ from region to region, but all of which most importantly accentuate on the individual acknowledgement of the self as a social being, and hence the social construction of behavior, as represented in the images and narratives in their performances in the pictorial-narrative practices in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan.

Identity: The notion of identity in the sense of the present work is used to signify a sense of we-feeling, the sense of community that is made possible through the presence of common occupation and sources of livelihood, shared social location, common ascribed status and therefore similar chances in terms of access to opportunities. This understanding however does not assume human beings as mere recipients of the structural processes at play, which place them in a particular position in the first place. The concept of identity in this context, has therefore been taken to refer to the identification of the artists to their community, that is traceable through the presence of their common tradition, their life-world and resources, but also one a process which can actively be transformed, or reaffirmed or reasserted and in fact performed through the ritual presentation of their constructed symbols in the practice of pictorial-narration in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan.

1.9. Research Methodology

The complex nature of social reality can only be comprehensively understood through an attached and involved perspective. In fact, in the understanding of social reality, experience becomes a very vital source of meaning. It is through experience in the life-world that belief patterns are reaffirmed. The self, for Kierkegaard, was therefore a "temporal structure", who depended for its present actions on its past experience, and which in turn defined its future (Dreyfus, 1993: 289). The philosophical concerns of this research have been to revisit certain methodological concerns in social inquiry including the deliberation between a priori reasoning and a posteriori experience, the question of objectivity and subjectivity, the relation between phenomenology and hermeneutics, and the theme of interpretive understanding.

The old debate between the power of reasoning and the knowledge of the senses still remains as one of the main concerns of inquiry for research in the social sciences. In this research, the main objective has been to undertake an interpretive understanding of symbols in the context of performance, so as to highlight on their powers of representation and the agency of the artists involved in their construction, and thereby also realize the emanation of meaning underlying these symbols as possible only through

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an act of experience. These symbols represent ideas that are already planted in the collective belief system in the community. They manifest discourses of power and dominance, which defines knowledge in society. When people are confronted with such symbols, they are already aware of its underlying meaning, although this confrontation in the course of everyday life might not lead to critical reflection on the part of the individual. It is through their socialization within the society in which they are born that they become acquainted with such symbols and their meanings. However, in the course of performances like that of the pictorial-narrative tradition in the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan encounter or confrontation with the symbol takes the shape of extraordinary experience. With the representation of the sacred, the symbols including images and narratives highlighting on the past, the present and an anticipated future, appeals to the collective mind. And this is where they power of transformation and transcendence lies. Their understanding therefore involves the participation or the lived experience by the individuals as well the ability of the collective cognition to interpret and make sense of the symbols. Accentuating on the significance of experience in the construction of meaning, and the importance of interpretive understanding in comprehending the symbolic expressions which influence experience and therefore cogitation and action, the research has tried to bridge the gap between the phenomenological understanding of experience and the hermeneutical journey of interpretation.

In the study of symbols and the understanding of their meanings that take place in the context of collective experience, the issue of subjectivity also becomes very important. The act of experience is by nature a subjective one including the directing of the consciousness to an object or a thought. How then do collective experiences take place? This is where hermeneutics comes to the forefront and phenomenology takes a backseat. The phenomenological preoccupation with positive methods does not help in understanding how collective experience and shared consciousness becomes possible. It is then through the hermeneutical interpretation of knowledge and understanding, which emphasizes on the historicity of ideas and discourses that it becomes possible to decipher how these pictorial-narrative symbols dealing with sacred themes situated in a socially imagined past, are able to arrange the individual consciousness at a common level, and in

this manner produce a common consciousness. Related to this is the concept of *Verstehen* as elaborated by Weber. Action being dependent on the subjective perspective and meaning that the actor attaches to it, an exploration into this subjective state of mind then becomes significant in order to understand the actual meaning, motives and values involved in the activity. It is then through the recognition of *Verstehen* that the subjective ideas of the actor can be discerned. *Verstehen* stresses on the development of an empathic relation on the part of the researcher towards the subject being observed, in order to comprehend their social actions as subjective behavior induced by the intentions and values of the subject (Bourgeois, 1976), instead of explaining them from objective categories imposed from outside. If understood as a method in social sciences, or as a supplement to facilitate and validate explanations, *Verstehen* can, by helping place the researcher in the position of the subject, assist in a possible reconstruction of the state of mind of the actor, to arrive at an explanation or to assist in arriving at an explanation of the action (ibid.).

Through its emphasis on some of the methodological issues relevant to its theme, in the course of the research, this work has therefore tried to bring to light the significance of interpretation, historicality and experience in the construction of belief, knowledge and collective identity. By accentuating on the use of qualitative methods and ethnographic experience on the part of the researcher in the attempt to uncover meanings underlying symbols in performances, this study has accentuated on the possibility of revisiting theoretical conjectures in understanding social reality.

I.   *Nature of the Study*

As the present work has been aimed to reconnoiter the social and cultural power associated with the symbols constitutive of the picture-storytelling traditions, and its relation to the maintenance of belief and the structuring or reasserting of social identity, the research conducted was highly qualitative in nature. Highlighting on the symbolic power of performance and the cognitive power of experience, this research endeavored to arrive an interpretive understanding of the symbols and their meanings. Dealing with visual and narrative symbols, in the form of painting and narratives, and the

understanding of human agency, the research emphasized on the aspect of subjectivity and therefore focused on an ethnographic and interpretive understanding of the practices and the lives of the artists. Involving the unraveling of the realms of performance, the world of semiotics and the act of experience, the information and insight gathered in the course of the research has been descriptive, explanatory as well as exploratory. The exploratory element involved the understanding the different traditional practices as comprised of painting and narration, as found in the different regions. The descriptive part consisted mostly of the description of the field, including the artist communities, their livelihood, their social position, their contexts of creation and performance, and their world of belief and practices. The explanatory part of the research was mostly concentrated in providing and interpretive explanation of the symbols in the form of images and narratives as gathered from the field. However, this does not mean that these activities of exploration, description and explanation were used separately for separate aspects of the field. Instead it is the ability of the researcher to merge these qualities involving the need to explore the field, to describe what is seen and to provide suitable explanations to bring to light the underlying meanings, that makes a research more comprehensive in nature.

II.   *Sources of Data Collection*

The understanding of symbols and their meaning as represented in the pictorial-narrative traditions of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, requires an acquaintance with the socio-cultural context in which they are practiced. This would entail a first-hand observation of the fields as well as primary interaction with the artists themselves. The most important source of data collection for this research therefore, was ethnography. Detailed fieldwork was carried out in the three states to arrive at an insight into the world of these distinct traditional practices, which have existed since time immemorial to the present times. As the central problem of the research deals with the interpretive understanding of symbols in their transformative sphere of performance and the understanding of human agency in the construction of belief and identity, the fieldwork involved interactions with the community of artists and the experience of such

performances as practiced by them. The main tools used for collection of primary data included observation, interviews and interpretive analysis.

The use of triangulation in the proposed research, in terms of the methods chosen, were intended to cross examine the data and explain more properly the complexity of the phenomenon. The study being ethnographic in nature, observation functioned as one of the most important tools. This process was supplemented with the taking of field notes containing the details of the communication carried out in the field, in terms of verbal interaction as well as the note of gestures, and non-verbal interaction, the personal impressions of the researcher. Semi-structured open ended interview guidelines were used for interaction with the artist community so as to understand the role of human agency in the creation of symbols having transcendent meanings for the society. Finally, interpretive analysis was used to comprehend and explain the illustrations in the scrolls, and the narratives which accompanied them. All this together will facilitate in acquiring a detailed picture of the inter-relation between the narrative art form, the social structure and the human agency.

The study of symbol has had a long history in the discipline of social sciences, and so has the idea of meaning. Although these theoretical writings have fragmented into many sub-trajectories in many disciplines, information provided in them allowed in the understanding of how interpretation of concepts and the understanding of social reality transformed over time leading to the presence of multifarious perspectives. These secondary data sources were also involved to arrive at knowledge of the work already carried out in the conceptual field, if not in a similar empirical location. Through books and articles, this knowledge helped frame the theoretical arguments and the main aspects of inquiry.

III. *Sampling*

In the course of this research, interactions were carried out with the painters and performers of the pictorial-narrative tradition as respondents describing their livelihood, their social identity, their association with the art form, and its explanation. As the practice in all three regions is carried out by specific communities of artists, the sampling

technique for the study included both purposive and snowball sampling. The painters and narrators in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, do not occupy a position of social prominence, and owing to the itinerant tendencies of the performer, locating them becomes a problem. Among the places visited, all those painters whose residence could be identified and who could be reached were chosen purposely as respondents. These respondents then helped in finding other members of their community within nearby regions. Throughout the three phases of fieldwork carried out in the three states of India, it was the primary respondents who helped in establishing contact with the secondary informants.

1.10. Ethical concerns

Whenever the theme of research deals with the human subject, the issue of ethics assumes added significance, regarding the dissemination of knowledge concerning the respondents involved. Its selective use should keep in mind concerns of anonymity, respondents' awareness of the purpose of the research, assurance to refrain from using personal information without the approval of the subject, etc. In the present research, the respondents who were interviewed and observed were the painters and the narrators involved in the pictorial-narrative tradition in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. At present, along with the illustration and narration of the traditional themes which has been their occupation, they are also involved in producing scrolls for the market as decorative items, and in addition many of them have performed internationally. Anonymity in matters related to their association with this occupation is therefore not required. In fact, although they still strongly maintain their community identity as *Chitrakar*, or the *Bhopa* or the Joshi, their entry into the international market has made them highlight on their individual skills and thus they are keen on letting the outsiders know and recognize them by their name.

However, keeping in standard with the requirements of ethicality in social research, in the present study, care was taken to ensure that respondents were informed about the objectives of the research, and about the findings. As their painted scrolls were photographed and their performance videoed for the purpose of future analysis,

permission was taken from these artists for reproducing their creations in the research, as materials supporting the arguments. Since their source of income still surrounds around the practice of narrating illustrated scrolls, and the research requiring such performances to be documented, financial compensation was provided to those who displayed the scrolls and performed on them.

1.11. Limitations of the Study

Although this research included both primary and secondary methods of data collection, there still remains a fear of an overgeneralization of facts where the evidence of a few similar events leads to the assumption of the prevalence of a general pattern. The evidence of a few similar events did not lead to the prevalence of a general pattern as data gained from ethnographic studies of this kind depend on the particular context in which they are born or in which they are found. Hence, one of the limitations of this study remains that the results of this research cannot be applicable to all other similar practices.

The prime area of interest in this study being the narrative-art or the picture-storytelling tradition, what should be kept in mind is that these traditions have always been a part of the larger practice of oral tradition. Over the decades, due to historical reasons like the colonial rule, climatic reasons, and with the competition from the technologically superior modes of communication, these forms have been waning in importance. Due to the oral nature of the tradition and the hereditary nature of this practice, and also due to the lack of literacy of the artisans, documents, biographies, experiences written by these performers is absent. It has been only in the past few decades that that they have been documented and studied, from the British ethnographers to the modern day anthropologists and social scientists. Attempts were however be made by regular and repeated visits to the field, to include as much of information as possible in both English and in the vernaculars of the regions in which these traditions exist.

The lack of time has been another limitation of the study as field visits often surprises the ethnographer with revelations that upturn their understanding. The more the number of visits was made to the fields, the more exciting and insightful knowledge came to the forefront. Due to the limited amount of time also majorly marked by financial constraints

for this work, it could not exhaust all the possible and available sources of information and knowledge under the concerned area of interest.

1.12. Chapter Scheme

Interpreting symbols in terms of their underlying meanings that emerge in the context of performances, this study presents the coalescence of conceptual and theoretical arguments as well as ethnographic knowledge. Accordingly it has been divided into six chapters.

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter introduces the main theme of the study, the thematic discussion and review of the existing body of literature, the basic conceptual framework which discusses the primary concepts used in the course of the work, the research objectives and questions, and the rationale provided for carrying out this research. This is followed by a brief description about the fields of study, the research methodology chosen, including the methods of data collection, discussion on the main themes of ethical concern and the limitations of the research.

Chapter Two: The Setting

This chapter deals with a discussion of all the major concepts arranged in the form of sub-themes relating to the understanding of symbols and beliefs, morality and identity, performance and experience alongside a description of the field in general. It makes possible the contextualization of the research in terms of the field areas chosen and thereby paves the way for the understanding of the fields that follow.

Chapter Three: West Bengal

This chapter deals with the *Patachitra* tradition of West Bengal, in terms of the art form and the narratives, and the social composition of the artist community associated with its performance. It also includes an interpretive analysis of two main myths popular in this practice, through the description and explanation of the illustrated symbols in the painting, the summary of the narration, and their contribution to the maintenance of collective belief and identity.

Chapter Four *:* Jharkhand

This chapter provides an insight into the *Patachitra* tradition as is practiced in Jharkhand, through a description of the practice, the paintings and the narratives, and the communities of the *Chitrakar* and the *Jadu-patua* who are engaged in its performance. The interpretive understanding of the two distinct myths performed in the region through the interpretation of the narratives and paintings based on them, brings to light the underlying processes involved in the construction of collective belief for the community and therefore in the reassertion of identity for the community of *Chitrakar* and the *Jadu-Patua*.

Chapter Five: Rajasthan

This chapter deals with the *Phad* tradition in Rajasthan in term of its painting and narration and the two communities of artists involved in the culmination of its performance. Tracing their journey to a socially imagined past, made possible by the rendition of the popular myths, this chapter shows how this pictorial-narrative tradition represents the concepts of moral and social in the space of the sacred, and how this act of embodiment of meanings vests the artists with the agency to reassert their collective social identity.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This chapter recapitulates the main arguments and the insights as elaborated in preceding chapters of this study. It provides a summary of the methodology, the main concepts and the fields, and then moves on to present a discussion on the objectives and certain theoretical possibilities in the interpretive understanding of symbols and their meanings.

THE SETTING

2.1. The Synthesis of the Image and the Spoken Word

"Once upon a time, there was a demon that would go about attacking villagers of a region every day. Life in the villages had become difficult. Terrified of the demon striking them, most people would not even venture to go out to work. To put an end to it, one day, some people from one of the villages decided to trick the demon. They arranged a huge mirror. The demon as usual came to attack. The mirror was placed on the way and when it saw its own reflection, it supposed that there was another demon facing it. Angered by the presence of another creature, it tried to scare the image away, but every time the image ended up doing the same acts as the demon. Fuming with anger the demon attacked the mirror. The glass shattered into several pieces. Each piece now reflected an image of the demon. Frightened by their number, thinking them to be real, the demon hit the pieces of the mirror again and again. In the course of it, one of the pieces hit the demon badly and it died. The villagers, who watched the entire episode, were very happy! They wanted to inform the other villages about the death of the demon. So they painted pictures of the whole story on a piece of cloth and went around from one village to another to narrate the story of their victory. Thus, began the practice of painting on scrolls."[11]

The story of the image has undergone one of the most illustrated journeys throughout space and time. Appealing to the sensory ways of experiencing and knowing, representation through the visual medium has existed as a common way of manifesting individual ideas, and maintaining collective beliefs and powerful discourses. The act of representation itself comes with knowledge or experience, or both. The need to re-present, only takes place when there is a stock of knowledge at hand, ideas that need to be shared with others or that are required to be collectively preserved. It is this collective aspect of representation that can be said to make way for the origin of symbols. The

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[11] A tale narrated to me by a painter in the course of my fieldwork for M.Phil in West Bengal.

concept of the image in general could refer to any two dimensional form of visual representation or impression reflecting a real object or entity or an idea. In this context, the discussion of the image is restricted to art, painting or illustration. Whether a popular symbol in the community or not, it always contains vested symbolic properties. Behind the image lie the personal motivations of the artist or the values central to a community, or could include both. Although an acknowledgment of the context in which it takes shape and is practiced is indispensable for the interpretation of its underlying meanings, the power of the image also revolves around its ability to transcend space and time. The categories of time and space, as will be dealt with in the subsequent chapters, build on a different trajectory of their own when engage with the image. The image, viewed from a sociological or anthropological perspective, is therefore not simply a matter pertaining to the realm of aesthetics. In fact, the limited association of art with aesthetic beauty can be misleading. It pertains to the world of culture, to the arena of social relationships and to the domain of knowledge and power.

The act of representation is not just restricted to the image, and extends to include the oral and written medium. Language works as the vehicle through which the oral and written codes are made comprendible and it is in its use both orally and as written text that significant elements of power and discourses find expression. As Gadamer states, language plays a crucial role in maintaining an idea of commonality and conformity by creating the space for the sharing and interpretation of ideas and discourses (2007: 98). But again, what needs to be kept in mind is that it also contains the power to transform structures when they become repressive by enabling the provision of a common space where ideas of criticality and antagonism can be voiced and shared (ibid). Like an image, the word also contains the ability to travel beyond the boundaries of space and time in terms of its creation and use. However, unlike art, which might be the work of a particular individual or a group of individuals, language develops collectively. It is then in the course of its saying that a new totality emerges (ibid: 152).

Artworks and texts (oral or written) are usually perceived to be different sources of interpretation. It is then in the context of the performance that both these sources can come together on a common platform of understanding. The performance makes possible the content of the image and the word to fuse to bring forth a common meaning.

Interpretation of the image involves understanding the meaning behind the illustration, and that for the text entails in deciphering the meaning of the words used. But when both of these forms of representation come together, it is through their experience by the audience that their shared meaning emerges. The pictorial-narrative traditions in India refer to forms of artwork that are accompanied with oral narratives in the course of their performance. It is in the context of performance and their act of being experienced that they constitute a common body of tradition. Generally focusing on religious themes in the form of epics, myths and local legends, their meanings are not simply about the sacred characters in the picture and the narrative, but also imply an understanding of the shared values and morals underlying the story and its illustration. Analyzed as being representational forms of art uncovering the underlying meanings for the researcher, for the audience these pictures and texts add knowledge to their life-world as vehicles of communication, enlightening them about values and belief patterns central to the community and/or reaffirming and preserving their ideas.

The repeated emphasis on the image and word as being forms of representation therefore is intended to bring to light the role of knowledge in shaping experience and thought, and how experiences also sometimes contains the ability to transform understanding. It is also meant to draw attention to the element of agency involved in the acts of performance and experience. The term further emphasizes on the difference between religious rituals and cultural performances. Representation by definition itself denotes the presentation and embodiment of ideas and discourses. It concerns the internalization of knowledge through sensory perception and therefore accentuates the experiential and constructed nature of knowledge itself and the conceptualization of social reality. The concept alluding to a social act, it also highlights on the relation between the social nature of the performance and the subjective nature of experience.

2.2 The Pictorial-Narrative Tradition in India: A Note

The earliest traces of art in India can be found in the village, with the decline in the itinerant living habits of human beings and their growing tendency to reside at a stable location (Mode and Chandra, 1985). Art at this point of time, in its various forms, were

all meant to serve some sort of function or the other (ibid: 21). Gradually with specialization of labour, particular communities took to art as their primary source of occupation. Their association with this work also vested them with a definite social identity. The politics of identity is reflective in the engagement with geographical space. In the village therefore, the residence of the artist community is also marked by their affiliation to a particular caste (Mode and Chandra, 1985). If village art was said to be largely domesticated, characterized by caste differences, then that explains the absence of literature on them, or their preservation. This art form which was termed as *gramashilpi* as being distinguished from high art or what used to be called *rajashilpi* (Mookherji 1962), was later identified as folk art[12]. Relying on patrons from within the village and nearby, the different forms of art practiced in villages have witnessed upheavals in terms of their continuity, form and content. It was these guilds that helped these art forms to sustain, and it was with their breakdown that the practices received a major setback (Kramrisch, 1994).

Artwork whose different manifestations involve the hereditary association of communities aimed at its creation and maintenance, those that define the prime modes of occupation of the people associated with them[13] in terms of their social identity, are the forms of art that are of concern to the present work. It could largely be said to include wall paintings, scroll-paintings, narrative-storytelling, theatre, weaving, forms of dance that exists as elements of religious ritual; all those forms of manifestation that express the cultural system and prominent discourses that shape the understanding of the world. Highlighting on the medium of the image, diverse traditions of practice can be traced as existing in different regions in India. From the rendition of local deities in the *par*-painters of Rajasthan, to the *Pahari* wall-paintings of Himachal Pradesh, the wall-

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[12] This insinuation of art forms practiced in the villages as being relegated to the domain of folk has been rather problematic. The classification has facilitated in tracing practices continued by generations from the same community for ages. But their rendition as folk has unproblematically reduced the politics of caste that is also involved in their distinction, from painting in temples and in the royal courts. Irrespective of their association with the practice as a source of occupation, it is their representation as 'folk' that has been responsible for their art as being recognized as seemingly exotic.

[13] The emphasis on occupation is to place the artwork within a social context of systemic hierarchies and contested identities, and highlight on the communities of artists involved in it. For many such artist communities in the present day, the creation of such artwork does not remain the central or even the primary source of income, owing to the availability of mechanically reproducible manifestations available in the market.

paintings of Madhubani and Mithila in Bihar, the *Pata*-painting of West Bengal, Orissa and Jharkhand, all of these traditions embody distinct cultural practices reflecting the beliefs and values considered to be of utmost importance to the communities.

For the present work however, its meaning is limited to refer to paintings on scrolls of cloth accompanied with narrative poetry, which has broadly been termed as the pictorial-narrative tradition. In the constant flux between the city and the village, such works cannot be identified as rural art even though their origins in the distant past might relate to the countryside. Disputes and debates over the social identity of the artists relating not only to the Hindu caste structure but other ethnic and tribal groups also brings to light the structural processes of power involved in the production of knowledge and identity. The construction of their themes and styles, their ability to grasp the nuances of the cultural system in grandeur or reflecting the poetics of everyday life, their potential to capture the sensory abilities through the image, word or both; their constant endeavor to resist domination and maintain a certain sense of social identity, provides them with a sense of 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1989) that avoids their categorization as either rural or urban, and urges an understanding that journeys beyond their sale as commercial art items in the present day.[14]

Alongside the glittering world of electronic images and discourses promulgated by the ever-growing culture industry, lie the parallel universe of the artist and the storyteller. Being associated with a history of lived traditions of art and narratives, these communities not only engage in processes carrying forth their hereditary occupations, providing alternative forms of social memory, entertainment and enlightening generations with local knowledge, but also contribute towards the construction of discourses and principles that enable in the interpretation and the maintenance of society.

The significance of art in its various forms lies in its ability towards building and maintaining the visual repertoire in a community, influencing imagination and understanding. Narrative on the other hand engages with the spoken word or the written text, facilitating in the construction of a semantic universe for comprehending the cultural

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[14] This is not to undermine the debate on their growing saleability in the market as leading to their diminishing aura, as what Walter Benjamin (1970) argued, which is utmost significance in the present day. It is just to note that such arguments do not describe the objective of the present work.

stock of knowledge in society and reaffirming or deconstructing discursive formations. Narrative art or pictorial narratives are therefore forms of cultural representation that highlight on the performance of the spoken word and the experience of the image. This is not to imply that art pertains only to the visual and narrative to the word. When considered from the aspect of experience, to the individual situated within a socio-historical context, art as well as narrative are texts in the sense that they are constitutive of meanings. In fact, both the picture and the text contribute towards the transmission of socially established meanings and also in the emergence of newer modes of thought.

The narrative and the visual, stand as powerful signifiers of knowledge and meaning in the life-world, assisting in the interpretation of social reality. The cultural system of a community can be understood as manifesting its ideas and practices through multiple signs and symbols that individuals engage with in the course of their everyday life and in spectacular isolated moments. These symbols are thus representation of underlying thoughts and discourses. When in contact with the human consciousness, these symbols help in reaffirming patterns of belief and invoking imagination to bring about new perspectives. Symbolic representations then enter the cognitive space of the individual consciousness as images and ideas that guide subsequent processes of subjective interpretation and behavior. In this manner, socially accepted and established forms of symbolic representation facilitate in the communication of shared meanings and patterns of interaction. Intermittently, the engagement of the community in collective action through rituals and performances then contribute in reaffirming these ideas and images once again.

The tradition of scroll-painting accompanied with narration is a practice that goes back to centuries ago, when scrolls of cloth functioned as significant mediums of communication and exchange of information. Scrolls of cloth are painted vertically or horizontally with epics, myths, legends and historical events. This tradition traces its existence not only to India, but also to the other countries of Asia, including China, Indonesia, Japan, Nepal, etc. Commonly known as '*pat*' or '*pata*' which refers to a scroll, this tradition of imparting knowledge and information played a major role in most of the rural societies in enhancing communication before the industrialization and urbanization of such areas and the consequent improvements of the electronic mediation in these communities. The

origin and history of this practice is unknown, but the term as such is also found in Vedic texts. The use of the word in a way similar to the contemporary use of the term is found in the epic *Mahabharata* written in around the 5th century B. C (Ghosh, 1966). The elaborate details of the technique of painting the 'pat' or the scroll is also found in the *Arya-Manjushriz-Mula Kalpa*, an ancient Buddhist text, which is also translated into Chinese and Tibetan (ibid). Writings of the Chinese traveller Fa-Hien, on account of his travelling experiences in Sri Lanka in the 4th century A. D. also reveal the existence of scrolls in that period relating to the life of Buddha (Barapanda, 1999).

This work therefore focuses on three distinct pictorial-narrative traditions in India, as found in the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. Known as *Patachitra* in West Bengal and Jharkhand and *Phad* in Rajasthan, these age-old practices of painting deal with the illustration of religious themes that are accompanied with narrative poetry. Each tradition is characterized by painting on cloth or paper scrolls, which are then accompanied with narrative poetry for performance. The prominent themes in each of these traditions are however different along with their form and style, reflective of the cultural beliefs and practices of the region. The study, as mentioned earlier, is not comparative in nature and through an insight on the practices, it endeavours to bring to light the intricate relation between experience and knowledge and the representative power of symbols in religious practices and performances in terms of their contribution to the structuring of life-world and the perception of reality. It seeks to go beyond the debate between objectivity and subjectivity in the social sciences and highlight on the relation between the subjective experiences and objective knowledge. In addition, it attempts to highlight on the element of agency

The concept of the rational is itself contextually located and understood, in terms of its content and its uses (Herzfeld, 1998: 74-75). If the premises of reason are itself based on larger paradigms of understanding or discourses of power, then what comes to be recognized as reason, virtue, morally 'good' and 'bad' are also contingent on the socio-historical and cultural factors where these parameters of perception and interpretation are created. The embedded nature of the construction of meaning and the domain of rationality further helps in realizing common sense as a relative body of knowledge conditional on various structures and processes in society. The role of sensory perception

in the process of interpretation of social reality then gathers new meaning, not only for the individual consciousness but for the collective social mind which, through events of experience and performance engages in the social production of knowledge and meaning.

If collective belief sustains the body of common sense and morality in a community and if this belief is largely produced through collective and individual experiences, and performative acts based on the common discourse assists in the construction and maintenance of social identity, then, it is through an insight into the domains of experience and performance itself that the symbolic construction of meanings can be deciphered. Understanding the influence and significance of the experience and the workings of collective and subjective interpretations on the construction of meaning in society then requires the process itself to be understood through observation and participation in the community.

2.3 Does Knowledge Structure Experience or Experience Structure Knowledge?

I. *The Concept of the Symbol*

The understanding of symbol assumes immense significance in the interpretation and deciphering of religious thoughts and beliefs. It is in the course of experience that the symbols find their expression in human beings. The pictorial-narrative tradition in India, in general, and the three fields of study chosen for this work in particular; all of them largely deal with the performance and experience of religious themes. Individuals confront the repertoire of ideas through symbols, which Ricoeur (1976) categorizes as being linguistic as well as non-linguistic. When dealing with linguistic symbols, interpretation reveals the unity of semantic properties between the individual's understanding and that of the intended meaning of the symbol itself. The social context is of vital significance in the construction and usage of language. The interpretation of the written or spoken word then facilitates in the understanding of underlying meanings which reveal structures of power. But the manner in which this understanding of meaning takes place is also guided by the common structures of communication and linguistic expression. In the case of an image, its non-linguistic nature allows the process of experience to be relatively more subjective, although processes of decoding the image

also remain guided by the life-world that a person is part of. When the image and the word come together to embody a form of symbolic representation, as in the pictorial-narrative tradition of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, their interpretive analysis establishes them powerful symbols contributing to uncovering the complex processes involved in the construction and comprehension of social reality.

Each of these traditions comprises of the illustration of some myth, epic, or legend, or episodes from them on cloth or paper. These painted pictures then operate as visual symbols to the audience, for whom the illustration functions in the form of a visual memory depicting the distant mythical past. The figures of the characters, their positioning, and the colours used on the cloth, together facilitates in the understanding of the theme by the individual. When the painted scroll is displayed along with narrative poetry explaining the painting in the course of a performance, it is then that the artwork is experienced. Two interrelated understandings of the functioning of symbol in society can therefore be mentioned at this point. First, within a culture, symbolic elements influence the human mind as significant representations of powerful and dominant discourses and the therefore leave their mark on the structuring of social action and identity. Second, how would symbols develop the attribute of representation but for the embodiment of ideas in it by human action? Individuals assign meanings to symbols through their experience and performative acts, and again resort to the symbolic space (Bourdieu, 1989) to reflect and express their experience in different situations and events, and make as manifest, the ideas of the society. It is this relatedness between symbols and the realm of human action as described above, in expressing experience and representing knowledge that this present work emphasizes on.

II. *The Institutionalization of Belief*

For a cultural interpretation of any society or community, it is essential to perceive knowledge as being contextual and relative in nature. This idea of relativity presumes that thoughts and belief are but socially produced. What becomes meaningful in society is dependent on the social context wherein it takes shape. This relation of knowledge to social context obviously takes into account the significance of human action and

experience. The social context, to put it the other way round is then the context of the social, the milieu in human action and interaction takes place. It is the space where through this constant process of interaction of human beings with each other, with structures of domination, with existing structural processes, in the constant endeavor to engage in social action that meaning emerges. And it is this meaning which constitutes for the large part, the body of knowledge. This is not to negate the presence and importance of objective facts in the domain of knowledge, which also shapes understanding in the human world. It is to refrain from neglecting the role of the human agent and interaction. It is to reconsider the attempts made to understand society through construction of theoretical universals (Parsons, 1937). It is to bring to light the role of history in shaping knowledge, the accounts of interface between the social structure and the agency, the account of resistance, and that of social transformation. And it is to acknowledge the vital significance and authority of institutions of power in terms of their relation to the construction of truth and knowledge.

In perceiving the world not through *a priori* concepts and reflecting on experience, dispositions and interpretation, does not suppose that every object and entity is subjectively constructed. The emphasis on subjectivity is in relation to their interpretation and experience. If knowledge is said to be socially produced, it means that it is available to interpretation[15] by all those members who are located in that particular socio-historical context. Meaning of objects and events are then shared by these individuals, which facilitates in reaching a common understanding about the social world and also makes communication possible. Berger and Luckmann (1967) referred to the idea of 'objectivation' to refer to the ability to share such subjective meanings and highlighted on the role of signs and symbols in acting as the medium through which the subjective meanings of the cultural discourses are commonly shared and understood. This possibility of shared meanings through collective symbols makes way for the development of social institutions, which prescribes certain codes of action and provides guidelines for channeling perception and thought through socialization (ibid: 20). If

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[15] This does not mean sharing or availability of knowledge for everyone equally. If knowledge functions as a form of capital in contemporary times, then access to it is a precondition of power and authority, and is therefore conditional on their social location and their standing in the structural hierarchy.

institutions arise from habitualized conduct and if social action is itself guided through the shared universe of meaning in a society, then institutions can be comprehended as being reflective of such situated knowledge. The institutionalization or formalization of thought and behavior also subsumes the notion of belief. When belief is collectively shared and accepted, it constitutes an important part of the repertoire of knowledge, especially in the realm of culture. Patterns of belief then structure perceptions about the life-world and the stock of knowledge in it. Belief in this sense could be said to emerge from experiences or through collective faith (Lindholm, 2012). Experiences structure understanding and shape an individual's perception of the lived reality. While beliefs may belong to the body of reserved knowledge, it is the act of experiencing them that provides the individual with some conviction in the original idea. Belief is both subjectively and collectively experienced in the course of engagement in social action, and is also a part of the already available body of knowledge framed by prior experiences of the individual, or that of the other. The institutionalization of belief then functions as shared knowledge that also contributes to the maintaining the conventionalized codes of conduct.

Symbols therefore perform a central role in making possible the development of shared meanings. By creating communities of belief around it, symbols facilitate the transmission of collective ideas and their meanings. It represents ideas of the community, and by institutionalizing belief, it also channelizes thought and action on a common plane. Religion provides significant symbols as purveyors of meaning and interpreter of thought and action beyond their own material existence and temporality. Religious symbols, as Geertz states, present the society with an explanation of the entire order of existence (1973: 90) that exceeds beyond the body of religion and influences action in everyday life. The idea of religion existing around the maintenance of certain beliefs and practices which embody the values central to the society (Durkheim, 1915), religious symbols enable in the articulation of core ideas of religious institutions, and contribute to the sharing of their meaning, thereby maintaining the community of belief. Berger and Luckmann aver that symbols provide the highest sense of legitimation to any institutional order and its concomitant set of meanings, because it is all at once, a point of reference for the individual to arrive at a subjective understanding of certain aspects of social

reality, and again the purveyor of meanings that are objectively available and accepted by the members of a particular society to collectively make sense of the world and maintain certain shared sources of conduct (1967: 61; 65)

In the *Patachitra* tradition of West Bengal and Jharkhand, and the practice of the *Phad* of Rajasthan, the sources chosen for illustration and narrative performance are largely religious in origin. These texts are of considerable significance in the community, not only pertaining to the religious beliefs and practices, but in providing a cultural overview of the world. Consisting of snippets of social history, mythical tales with moral underpinnings, legends deifying local heroes, tales eulogizing the deeds and miracles of prominent deities, these texts present to the individuals an explanation of the life-world including the sacred and secular domain, and activities ranging from all aspects of their social to their personal life. Going by a Durkheimian (1915) understanding, religion is understood as being constitutive of the core values in society. These values habitualize conduct by placing significance on certain modes of thought and action as socially desired and ideal. The idea of the religious, the moral and the cultural then become entwined in their manifestations through the paintings and narratives in these traditions.

As these practices offer an audio-visual journey to a socially imagined past, their presentation and telling emphasize on the world of the sacred, one which is pure and ideal. This portrayal of this religious sphere overlaps with the rendition of the idea of the moral, in which local heores are deified, or in which gods and goddesses reprimand human beings for immoral codes of conduct while rewarding the moral upright, and also guiding and rescuing them in the face of danger. The idea of the religious and moral, are then immersed in the realm of culture, as it is in the world of action and interaction that their values can be realized. When they are performed through these pictorial-narrative traditions, the ideas underlying such epics and myths are reinstalled in the body of knowledge in the community. Their adaptation in the scrolls and the narratives depend on the relative popularity of these sources. The rendition of epics like *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, or the popular myths and local legends through illustration and narration make possible for the images and the words to function as symbols. These stories are popular for the local population and their essence or the outline provides a sense of religious world-view to them. Occupying a rather significant place in the ethos of the

community, the visual and narrative performance of these stories facilitate in the maintenance of communities of belief. Although many of these myths and legends have been preserved in the written form, their origin is largely oral in nature. Their presentation by the artists also does not focus on the literal texts, but on the way in which the story has been interpreted in the region. The focus is on the representation of the popular episodes from these myths and epics. These stories having already been a part of the religio-cultural domain of individuals in the communities, their symbolic representation through words and images then makes way for the reaffirmation of ideas and belief patterns that underlie their performance and presentation. The symbolic images and the words, when taken together in the context of a performance allows for the sharing of their meanings, and the reaffirmation of the values and beliefs.

III. *The Idea of the Moral*

Morality, ethics, and ideas related to social solidarity have always governed a considerable section of social thought. Beliefs and customs based on these ideals have at all times controlled and maneuvered human conduct and behavior, both in their social as well as their personal lives. Most of these ideas restricting behavior have been relegated to the domain of tradition and have remained as one of the very basic qualities necessary for maintaining social order. Their power also came from the fact that they were backed by religious myths, beliefs and values. Power has always been a decisive factor in the production of meaning in society. These cultural beliefs and customs have therefore also undergone great alterations in terms of their meaning and scope over the ages, from one society to another. If the notion of what holds morally good and what stands to be ethically ideal in a community is historically defined and situated, then an understanding of morality from a universal perspective becomes problematic. Although there could be certain ideas of ethics that are commonly shared by different communities in different regions across space and time, the very space of their creation and the larger ideal in terms of which they function and develop meanings, are socially defined. This contextualization of the idea of morality also highlights its creation through the working of the social imagination, of the sense of a shared history, of the development of the

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social memory, through internalization and institutionalization of experiences into a repertoire of beliefs, practices, everyday knowledge and tradition. What is morally acceptable or ideal in a community is therefore socially and culturally located and produced. What is subsumed as being an ethical attribute in a society is highly subjective and dependent on structural, cultural and historical conditions. This is not to undermine the significance of reason, but to elude the tendency to understand morality through the use of abstract rationality. The presence of collective memory, and social and cultural institution, all allow for a collective experience and understanding of morality in a community. Existing as a social being, the individual then internalizes these ideas through socialization and engagement in action and interaction that are then usually shared by all members of the society, in order to maintain certain forms of conduct. The principles of morality can then be explained as attributes which are held to be socially ideal and universally practiced. However, the understanding of meanings of morality in a society becomes difficult when looked at from a supposed universal definition of the concept as such. Although the obligatory nature of the ethical qualities uplift them to occupy a shared space of normative understanding, its essence lies in the very context in which it is produced and practiced. Processes of socialization, and the internalization of norms, beliefs and values, together with an individual's own subjective interpretations, constitute the life-world and the stock of knowledge, which then influences experience and understanding of social reality. It is through engagement in social action and interaction that layers of the shared cultural imagination are unveiled to individuals, enabling them to structure their patterns of action and their understanding accordingly.

If ideas pertaining to morality can be understood to stem from the larger collective need to refrain from submitting to individual desires and maintaining standards conducive to the maintenance and functioning of society (Durkheim, 1973), then it is through the percolation of this idea of the moral or the good that elevates it to the position of the ideal or the sacred. This sense of the ideal, cultivated in the collective consciousness through structures, institutions, practices, function through the elements of collective sentiments and authority. It is the element of authority characteristic in them that attracts belief and demand obligation. These principles of morality, which are contingent on socio-historical and cultural factors, are not only inculcated in the structures and discourses of the

community, but are also based on the understanding of common sense [16] in the community. This common sentiment is then experienced, performed and made obligatory keeping in mind the larger social attributes of sympathy and compassion. What is morally proper is held to be the ideal virtue, one that upholds the social goodwill of the community. It represents the shared sentiment of the society, one which aims at social order and a feeling of compassion towards fellow members and individuals. It embodies the collective conscience of the community. It enables the production of belief through its percolation in the shared common consciousness and its justification through the institutional domains of culture and religion.

The social nature of the principles concerning morality emanates from the notion of an assumed reciprocity on the part of the members of the society. The need to maintain certain ethical norms in the society is then transformed into moral obligations. But the actual efficacy of morality lies in the act of interaction, in its being reciprocal in nature. The essence of morality is situated in its lived experience, where the moral act of being ethically responsible is carried out. Being moral is having a sense of goodness in oneself, acting within the collectively agreed standards of conduct, and withholding from those patterns of thought, behavior or action, which are deemed to be improper. It is therefore in the space of action that the idea of morality is performed. This can only happen when there is a reciprocal acknowledgement of the moral attributes by the members in a society or community.

IV. *Experience in the Life-World*

The efficacy of belief and the establishment of morality therefore come into being in the social world where experience takes place. It is with experience, with the acknowledgment of time as the consciousness of a particular temporal moment, categorized and differentiated from other moments of consciousness (Schutz, 1970). This idea of consciousness is then actively associated with the idea of experience. Experience of individuals in different situations allows the consciousness to be separated and distinct

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[16] This idea of common sense has been inferred from what Vico termed as *sensus communis* (Gadamer 2004: 17).

in nature. Whether in the form of interactions in everyday life or in the acts observed as high moments of collectiveness, experiences function as important indices of reading culture in a society. To elaborate on the concept, Wilhelm Dilthey used the term *Erlebnis* to refer to events which were felt and lived through (Turner, 1986). This concept of experience did not just mean perception of data, but also included ideas, feelings and certain expectations. As a person is born into a society, it is with socialization, with engagement in interaction and action that the individual transitions from a biological organism to a socio-cultural being. Experience then enables the person to make sense of the world and the life-world. It facilitates in the interpretation of social action and the existing belief patterns, sometimes leading to the transformation of their meaning.

Since experience is a subjective act, it is through interpretation of the forms of expressions associated with the experience that the particular encounter can be understood (Kapferer, 1986). Expressions make possible the transformation of experience, from being simply personal to becoming a social concept, which can then be understood by interpreting the common expression of a group or community in regard to a situation or an event. As factors other than language also play significant roles in the expression of experience, representations in the form of images and activities also contribute towards the interpreting and understanding of experience. These instances of representation could also take place through performances of rituals, objectification in the form of totemism[17], manifestation through imagery, etc. Several ethnic communities also believe in reenacting their ancient or primeval experience, as part of the tradition, or celebrate, pay respect, revere certain events of their past experience, by continuing or preserving their customary rites and ceremonies. In the context of interpretation of symbols and the understanding of symbolic power in society, the exploration and elucidation of the act of experience is of great significance. It is through the act of experience that the abstract meaning of symbols receives their concrete meaning. Again, the interpretive understanding of the symbol throws light on the meaning of the

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[17] Durkheim, E. (1915). The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, New York: George Allen and Unwin.

experience. If experience is subjective in nature, its expression in shared symbols enables it to enter the sphere of the 'collective consciousness'.[18]

As Hume wrote,

> "…it is only experience which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another. Such is the foundation of moral reasoning, which forms the greater part of human knowledge, and is the source of all human action and behavior." (2011: 705)

V. *Performance as Extraordinary Experience*[19]

Experience involves informal actions from everyday life, as well as intended initiated singular acts which engage with a larger group or community (Abrahams, 1986: 49). As mentioned earlier, experience is subjective in nature. Its expression in the form of symbols facilitate in its interpretation. Such symbols are found in the course of action in everyday life, where the people having common socio-cultural position are able to arrive at a shared meaning of it. And then there are certain other moments where they are found; moments that are detached from the domain of everyday life. Experience of such situations has their bearing on thought and action even in the realm of everyday life. An engagement with the idea of sacred or with the religious ideal as prevalent in a community will help clarify the point made in this context. The world of religion is manifested with symbols and underlying meanings. These symbols are collectively followed and shared by most members of the community in which it is found. Even in the course of everyday action, these symbols are significant in underlining the socially desired course of action. Aspects of religion are therefore experienced in the course of daily life. But being cloaked in the guise of social action itself, its meanings are not clear to interpretation. It is then in the course of certain moments, when symbols reveal their power of representation thereby making the act of experience discrete. Religious experiences in the form of rituals or performances are therefore such moments cut off from the arena of activities of mundane, non-sacred, daily life, when the idea of the

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[18] Durkheim, E. (1915). *op. cit*.

[12] The expression 'extraordinary experience' has been borrowed from Abrahams, R. (1986). "Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience', in Turner, V. and Bruner E. (eds.) *The Anthropology of Experience*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

sacred comes to the forefront. Supported by socially circulated beliefs, religious experiences found on myths and the notion of the Sacred, are thus considered veritable due to their possible origin from a supposedly actual event in the past.

What then makes it necessary to observe particular moments of experience in their abstraction from the experiences of daily life? Going back to Abrahams' elucidation of the ordinary and extraordinary experience, the author stresses that culture needs to be understood in terms of the connection between the two (1986: 49-50). Ordinary experiences constitute a larger realm of social action and include all those actions and behavior patterns which characterize the activities of people within a certain cultural context. It is shaped by the discourses and prevailing cultural ideas which help in framing social perception and action. This form of experience is however more abstract to explain as it signifies an ongoing process of social reality. Extraordinary experiences on the other hand, include certain moments, which could be private as well as public; whose immediacy is more short-lived and which exist to reinstate the core cultural values and ideas held to be centrally significant in society (Abrahams 1986: 49-51). These isolated moments that are sometimes characterized by heightened emotion could be genuinely atypical, when a person or group experiences it for the first time, or could be performed by a community as a part of larger cultural practices. These particular moments of experience are then relatively easier to be observed because they contain an aspect of temporality in them[20].

Experience in this case then becomes a platform for a socially imaginative re-enactment of the past event. In this context, religious experiences can therefore also be understood as performances, as the social enactment of rituals allows a reorientation of thoughts, emotions, and consciousness to a common social plane, through which collectivity is performed and experienced. Religious rituals play a significant role as performative events, enabling the act of social experience and promoting a sense of familiarity. What is

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[20] The idea of a relatively less complicated interpretation of the underlying meanings when observing or experiencing a typical out of the ordinary infrequent moment as compared to understanding the experiences of everyday life is not to overlook the significant relation between context and meaning. In order to comprehend such moments, it is a precondition to engage in the understanding of the cultural context giving rise to such moments. Rather, it is possibly to state that since in such moments the consciousness is discrete and the experience is distinguished from other moments, the symbols become fairly distinct too, and thus discerning their underlying meaning becomes possible.

socially experienced as the numinous or religious also plays a major role in defining the numinous or the religious in society. The institution of religion, however, is deeply situated with the contexts of history and culture of the society where it has originated and where it is practiced. It is impossible to arrive at a universal definition of religious experience. For this reason, it remains crucial to contextualize religious experience in terms of its historical background and its culture.

If religious beliefs, symbols and practices are perceived as being constituted within a larger realm of culture, performance takes on an important role in the maintenance of this cultural framework. Culture therefore preserves itself and occasionally asserts itself through the acts of performance. These performances enable the manifestation of certain underlying meanings through the engagement of symbols and the action of individuals. Religion, with its routine enactment of ritual and ceremony therefore contributes significantly to the performance of values, beliefs modes of thought and patterns of action characteristic of culture. Performances invoking religious sentiments also induce shared emotion. This becomes possible through the presence of symbols and the structure of action in the course of the performance, which attract the attention of the separate consciousnesses and orients them on a plane of common experience. An association with the sacred, where the interplay of emotion and socially internalized ideas about the divine or the numinous, brings into play the production of belief which enables the maintenance of religious institutions and discourses and contributes towards the continuation of such experiences. Every performance is an act of presentation and such moments of *Erlebnis* (Gadamer, 2004 [1975]) contributed to what Durkheim explained as the "collective effervescence" (Durkheim, 1915).

Keeping aside the realm of mundane experience, the performance of individuals in the course of everyday activity, and focussing on the conventionalized performance also understood as ritual, which is the context of this present study, it is interesting to see how significant and influential threads of meaning emerge out of performances and experience involving cultural symbols. Relations and interactions in the life-world are influenced through discourses which shape action and thought. These discourses are then manifested in symbols, which emerge during a performance, from being an abstract thought or idea, to a more specific one that carries a sense of social sentiment, that which is a product of

the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), and that which gets registered in the human memory as imagery, acting as a reference point for future behaviour and action.

Everyday life in the villages and communities of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, like elsewhere, consists of mundane day to day activities related to subsistence. The idea of the sacred and its associated beliefs are a part daily life, both personal and social. Its impressions and workings are embossed so deeply in the social structure and its processes that its conceptualization as an isolated element is something that can only be visualized through critical reflection. Religion working through the establishment of belief, its ideational core, which is enmeshed in the functioning of social life, is not something that usually comes to the surface. Amidst the everyday bustle of labour and work[21] then, periodically there are occasions when this idea of the Sacred becomes manifest and appears at the forefront. Religious ceremonies or rituals operate as such spaces where the symbolization of the Sacred becomes apparent. If religion can be understood to be constituted of beliefs and practices embodying society[22], represented through a set of symbols[23], then this notion of the sacred can be found extending beyond the boundaries of institutionalized religion, to the larger domain of culture. The sacred could then manifest itself in the form of collective belief or values or a shared morality. Culture displays its underlying meanings through symbolic performances that not only deal with the sacred but also with the transmission of a collective morality. The pictorial-narrative traditions of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan brilliantly show how the concept of the religious is submerged in the realm of the cultural. It is at such episodic events, when the presence of the collectivity becomes significant, that the idea of the social becomes accentuated. Importantly, as Turner states it is in these moments that the society assumes the role of both, the object as well as the subject (1969: vii). These performances,

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[21] These two terms of labour and work have been borrowed in terms of their meaning from Arendt, H. (1958). *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

[22] This is a Durkheimian definition of religion, one that includes a conceptual classification of the institution into two interrelated parts pertaining to belief and action (Durkheim, E. 1915. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York: George Allen and Unwin Ltd).

[23] Clifford Geertz conceptualized religion as a set of symbols within a larger cultural system. (Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books)

liminal[24] spaces as they are, play a crucial role in reaffirming the beliefs and values of the society.

The performances by the artists displaying the scrolls and narrating their poetry relate to religious themes. While the *Patachitra* paintings of West Bengal and Jharkhand emphasize on the involvement of the religious deities in the lives of the people or how the creation of the world and their society can be attributed to the centrality of the sacred, the *Phad* paintings of Rajasthan elaborate on the deification of historical figures in the course of their lives and immense contribution. In all the three traditions, the idea of the sacred is not aloof but intricately involved in structuring society. The narratives accompanying the paintings too emphasizes on the telling of the deeds of individuals and worldly beings and that of the other world.[25] The themes prevalent in these paintings and stories are not uncommon to the people in these regions and form a significant part of the local folklore, or are even in some cases, manifested in the form of material constructions, such as public places of worship. But when these two elements merge together to deliver a performance, the telling of these stories with the visuals take on a new significance. The performance in most cases is done by the artists themselves.[26] The performance itself is a collective act. It is where most members of the community gather to see and listen. In the course of these performances, the attention of the audience is made to concentrate on the words being uttered and the visuals being shown. The channeling of the separate individual consciousness from their engagement in daily activities to a common theme enables their experience to at least take place at a common platform. Such moments, as Durkheim states, allows for the birth and the maintenance of ideas not only pertaining to religious beliefs, but to preservation of society as well (Olaveson, 2001: 95).

Going back to what he termed as the 'collective effervescence' that takes place in the course of rituals, Durkheim was of the belief that it was through such spark and enthusiasm produced during the rituals, that the idea of a unified representation of society became possible (ibid: 96). These ritualistic performances therefore merged individual

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[24] The concept of the 'liminal' was introduced by Arnold van Gennep in his work on *The Rites of Passage*, and then later taken up by Victor Turner (1977) to emphasize on the performative aspect of rituals in his work on *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure.* New York: Cornell Paperbacks

[25] This refers to the world of the Supernatural, as will be dealt with in the chapters to come.

[26] In Rajasthan, the painter hands over the scroll to the performer, after the illustration is complete.

thought into a collective whole, which is epitomized by symbolic representations that reaffirm the inevitability of the idea of moral and therefore social, in human life (Lindholm, 2012: 343).

Engaged in different pursuits concerning the everyday life, action for individuals in the community are characterized by personal motives and survival strategies. In the rural regions of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, where the fieldwork was carried out for the present study, economic resources are rather limited in nature and hence the people are for most of the time, engaged in acquiring the basic necessities of life and looking for ways to make it better. As for the artist communities of these regions, association with their traditional occupation is not the only source of income that they maintain in the present day. Absorbed in the verity of everyday life, collective passion and emotion tend to recede to the backstage. The periodic performance of these scrolls with narration therefore brings back occasionally the almost faint idea of the social, through the collective participation of the individuals in it. These performances initiate the awakening of unified emotion in individuals through symbols and therefore render the maintenance of social and moral values in a community as necessary (Olaveson, 2001: 97-98).

Each of these pictorial-narrative performances are carried out among particular audiences. In the *Phad* tradition and that of the *Patachitra* tradition of Jharkhand, the narrator is a part of the same community in which he carries out the performance. In West Bengal, the themes of the scrolls decide the audience. Interpretation of the experiences of the audience is not separately possible, without the expressions of the performers presented in the form of image and word. With the indication of the centrality of belief in the idea of the Sacred and in the significance of morality, these expressions hence contribute towards the interpretation of the experience of these performances. Because the content of these performances are a part of the body of oral tradition of the region, one which structures their frame of thought and action, their replication through the painting and the narration express a continuity in thought between the performers and the audience. The interpretation of these symbols then helps in getting an insight into the world of experience of the audience. As the content of these traditions is not bound by customary rules regarding the details of the characters or the storyline, it is in the form of

self-composed narrative poetry and illustrative stories that the artists use their own creative imagination, not to bring about changes in the story, but to highlight on certain aspects while placing the others in the background. In this manner, the artists function as creative agents representing a certain tradition.

VI. *Restructuring Time and Space*

For Heidegger, the elements of both, time and space were contingent on the essence of the being placed in history (Guignon, 1993: 151). Referring to this understanding, Ricoeur (1980) stated that in the act of narration the time is collectively shared, allowing for a unity of the past, present and future. Through the work of repetition in narration, the historical element in the story is reaffirmed along with an understanding of the present and a shared hope of a common future (ibid: 188). As for the understanding of space, Lefebvre remarks that the concept needs to be conceptually grasped as one that could be described as consisting of material artifacts or as being characterized symbolically or through a discourse (1991:141). In the pictorial-narrative traditions of Rajasthan, Jharkhand and West Bengal, these concepts of time and space can be perceived as contributing to the possibility of experience and social cohesion. The paintings illustrated on the scrolls can be materially considered as a space for the functioning of the sacred. As regarding the element of temporality, the scrolls are held to be sources of tradition, dealing with the past. The narrative considered separately, also provides a mythical space for the functioning of social history, and a space where the words are creatively used by the artists to convey certain meanings. The dimension of time in the narrative relates to its understanding of space, and therefore projects the historical past, whether factual or fictive. Interestingly, when the image and words come together for presenting a performance, the understandings of space and time acquire a new meaning. In the act of narration and display of the painting, time is interpreted as the utilization of space. It is the effort to put to work the elements in space to produce an intended meaning that distinctive definition of time comes to light. The performative space in this context is comprised of word and image, which function as symbols representing underlying meanings. The act of telling and displaying the visual allows the audience to witness a

visual journey to past, the narration and the painting channeling their cognitive abilities. This makes possible the reaffirmation of a historical past, from which linkages are drawn to the present. The mythical stories which travel beyond the temporal borders make possible to witness a common experience. This experience defines time in the context of the performance. Experience in this sense does not refer to encounter of the individual consciousness with the symbolic representation, but the alignment of individual consciousnesses to a common plane of interpretation. The shared understanding and encounter of the symbols makes possible the collective interpretation of a sense of shared history and a common present. This experience then makes it possible to envision a common future and thereby believe in the sacrality of the symbols and their underlying emphasis on a collective morality. The idea of time in the performance of these pictorial-narrative traditions therefore bring to light a new understanding of time, as existing between 'inner time' of the individual (Schutz, 1970: 60-62; 210-217) and the contemporary idea of "universal time" (Fabian, 1983: 3).

Even though most of them already know the story and have seen the painted scroll earlier, this retelling is like an audio-visual journey guiding their sensory perceptions back to a distant past or to a mythological event. The cognition of the individual is connected to a space where through the narration and the visual, there is perceived to be a thread of continuity between the past, present and the future. In addition, the individual witnesses an assimilation of understanding and experience in terms of everyday life and such concentrated moments. There is therefore a restructuring of time and space, beyond the structured temporality of contemporary life and the boundaries of geographical space.

2.4. From the Text to the Life-world

Relating the instance of a painter who knows while drawing a landscape that the sky and the earth are linked, to illustrate the point of reconsidering the lack of astonishment in the prevalent mode of thought in the sciences and the accumulation of knowledge, Ingold (2006) writes:

"Painters know this….. In their painting they aim to recover, behind the mundane ordinariness of the ability to see *things*, the sheer astonishment of that experience, namely, of being able to *see*."[27]

The pictorial-narrative traditions of the three states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, therefore deal with symbolic manifestations of the image and the word in the context of performances, in terms of their contribution to the continual restructuring of social identity and a common morality. Engaged in the understanding of the relation between experience and knowledge and the realms of subjectivity and objectivity, the study of these traditions endeavours to bring to light the overarching significance of symbols in the institutionalization of belief and the manifestation of the moral through experience in the course of their performance. The idea of interpreting experience in the course of religious and cultural performances such as the ones that form the core of this study, becomes rather abstract if perceived in isolation from its symbolic expressions. The influence of the experience caused by collective participation in these performances is not directly observable other that a rigorous study of behavior in all aspects of social life in the community for a significant period of time. Since that is a difficult proposition, the other way to understand these experiences is through their expressions. Not exactly their expressions, but the expressions that make such experiences possible in the first case. The intricate relationship between the repertoires of knowledge that is already available to an individual before her or his birth, its influence on the structuring of action and thought, the relation of this body of knowledge to the maintenance of social identity and a strong sense of morality, the representation of such ideas through symbols, and the experience of these symbols being possible in the course of their performance, all this reveals that a comprehensive interpretation of experience requires more than a phenomenological understanding of the concept. It requires along with it, a hermeneutical understanding aimed at the elucidation of symbols. This journey would then facilitate in uncovering the underlying meanings and discourses regulating behavior and perception in society in general, and would bring to the forefront the relation between symbolic

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[27] Ingold, T. (2006). "Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought". *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 71: 1, p. 18

representations such as the pictorial-narrative tradition and its relation to the reaffirmation of a shared morality and collective social identity.

If belief has to do with social memory and internal dispositions, then the understanding of facts, which are established from the socially accepted systems of belief, should also be recognized in terms of their contingency on cultural and socio-historical contexts (Herzfeld, 1998). The production and maintenance of belief that paves the way for perception, experience, understanding and action, is then made possible through the cultivation of collective emotion. The common consciousness through the unification of emotions facilitates in the maintenance of belief as a powerful discourse framing understanding in society. The system of belief enables the expression of common meanings and this also contributes to the initiation and invigoration of the collective conscience. And it is the latter that works towards the assertion of collective social identity and the maintenance of moral order in society. With this backdrop, the understanding of social identity and the notion of morality are more visible to be contingent on experience, interaction and the politico-cultural processes involves in the production of shared meanings.

The assertion and transformation of collective social identity through different processes of interaction and action is not a linear process. Even in the present day, with the growth in the impersonal nature of social life, social bonds still remain an important source for determining and projecting one's identity in particular aspects of life. For those communities who are ascribed hereditary positions of low social standing, or are economically deprived, the assertion of identity is even more pronounced. This act of assertion is however not always directed to their acknowledgement of the given socio-political position, whether traditionally ascribed or reliant on present conditions. The aim is not always to recognize their marginality within the system but also to affirm their social existence and standing as alternative and significant within the social structure. This aspect of human agency that is found to be at continuous work, giving way to transformation and meanings, is markedly observable in the field of the production of culture. Communities socially associated with the representation and reproduction of cultural beliefs and discourses through their relation to their occupation then engage in the creation of spaces that function to enable collective experience and thus

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reestablishment of belief. It is then through the very process of representation that they engage in the praxis of agency that enables them to reassert and redefine their social position and identity.

The artists, as observed in the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, are engaged in the practice as a result of their hereditary relation to it. These practices have therefore not only been sources of their livelihood in strictly economic terms, but have also been a part of their socio-political identity. Being involved in the illustration and bardic narration of folk legends, epics and myths, these artists use visual and oral symbols to contribute to the process of meaning making in society. The practice in itself, is not only significant from the point of view of these artists but is also extremely important for the larger community or the audience, for whom the rendition of the visual and the narrative of a collectively imagined past, helps in the reaffirmation of their unity and therefore their social identity. Accentuating on the creation and performance of such culture makers, would illustrate on their significant role as arts who through the fact of their engagement in traditional occupations of illustration and narration, takes part in the continual reconstruction of culture and social meanings, and in the process contribute to the reassertion of their collective social identity.

Far from the discourses promulgated within institutionary settings, which requires for its functioning the setting up of boundaries and sometimes ends up being limited to it, lies the human world of action, interaction and experience. Discourses and realms of knowledge are more embedded in social structures, individual thought, collective consciousness, social action, and are continually formed and restructured through them. What signifies morality in the society is largely discerned from the body of common sense present in a society, which guides social conduct and experience. The realm of common sense, in which 'common' does not indicate obvious or ordinary but the feeling of a shared sense of understanding that originates from similar processes of socialization, internalization and experience. What is shared then is that which is collectively owned and imagined. This common imagination is then fostered and maintained through collective acts of engagement, acts which are culturally significant and essential for the sense of the collective to survive. These shared acts engage the individual minds on a common plane helping them to relate to common understanding stemming from a

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collective lived experience. This connection in terms of the perspectives that guides judgment, which in turn influences all thought patterns and action; stem from the understanding of what passes as sensible. It is therefore what is commonly deemed as sensible that constitutes a considerable part of the understanding of morality, although not all principles of morality might represent common sense.

From the fields of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, the explorations of the nuances of pictorial narrative traditions as alternative modes of knowledge and spaces for the construction and reaffirmation of ideas of collective identity and understanding of morality, reflect that the idea of the moral is not capable of being understood as the same across space and time. The interpretation of what is a moral idea or action is contingent on the larger socio-cultural forces which structure the very understanding and meaning of morality in the society. Moral principles are ideal values held by a society, reaffirmed through social institutions and reframed through human agencies and put into a course of action through human action and experience. Moral values are coterminous with the attributes of the divine in certain cases, and in others quintessential for maintaining social order. Understandings of what comprises for the body of common sense in a society requires the interpretation and critical acknowledgment of the various factors of history, temporality, experience, interaction, and power as they interact to give way to working meanings of what constitutes the domains of sensibility and rationality.

Locating the complex relation between contextualized discourses and the possibility of experience, emphasizes on the need to view society, as Turner stated the form of a process, where moments enforcing the superiority of the social structure are interspersed with extraordinary moments that contain the ability to transform such structures (1969: vii). Consequently, this would facilitate in the interpretation of symbolic representations such as the *Patachitra* and the *Phad* tradition as forms of expression revealing both the influence of discourses as well as experiences. The phenomenological understanding of experiences along with a hermeneutic interpretation of symbols would also bring to light the role of the human agency in the creation of meaning relating to social and moral cohesion. If meanings are socially constructed they are obviously the interpretations of certain particular conditions which give rise to such inferences and deductions in the first case. Understanding this thus entails acknowledging the domain of performance and

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collective experience where meanings are generated and transformed. The different traditions of picture-storytelling[28] in the field areas mentioned above, in which the picture is accompanied by narrative for the purpose of live performances, have played an extremely significant role in communities since time immemorial for encouraging and sustaining collective emotions, preserving social memory, reaffirming the socially accepted dispositions and at the same time, creatively transforming them, thereby complementing the intricate process of inter-subjective understanding and social action. These pictorial-narrative traditions that usually work with religious myths, epics, folklores or other forms of collective memory visualizing and narrating them to live audiences, have functioned through communities of artists and performers hereditary associated with its practice. In some practices, the artist also carries out the role of the performer, while in others there remains a deeply traditional and often hereditarily influenced form of relationship between the artist and the narrator.

Representing communities, most of which do not occupy an esteemed position in the established social hierarchy, these performers then challenge their contested positions and construct their social identity through their hereditary occupation. With the heavy influx of the electronic media and advanced forms of communication and entertainment, these practices have no doubt received a setback in terms of their popularity. But it is through their engagement and association with social institutions enabling the circulation and maintenance of social emotion, belief, and a sense of solidarity, that has enabled some of these traditions to negotiate with the social changes and continue to exist in the present day.

By posing questions linking the relation of knowledge to experience and the correlation between objective symbols and the expression of subjective reality, the chapters that lie ahead entail a journey to the three distinct geographical locations of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, where the pictorial-narrative tradition can be found in the present day. Incorporating the ideas that have surfaced through a conceptual and theoretical discussion of the theme under consideration, the following sections seek to venture into the life-world of the people of these regions to attempt at an interpretive

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[28] The term 'picture-storytelling' has been borrowed from Jain, J. (1998). *Picture Showmen: Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art*. Mumbai: Marg Publications.

understanding of their symbols and meanings. Through an ethnographic description of the artists and their artwork and narration, the themes, the performances, the idea of the moral and the politics of identity, the work aims at gaining an experience between the emic and etic perspectives, in the understanding of social reality.

THE PARALLEL WORLDS OF THE SACRED AND THE SOCIAL: COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND THE IDEA OF MORALITY IN THE *PATACHITRA* TRADITION OF WEST BENGAL

3.1. The *Patachitra* Tradition in West Bengal

As one gets off at the train at small station called Bali chowk in West Bengal, and walks by the tea stalls, groceries and other small shops, one reaches a crowded bus stop, where drivers of rented cars shout out the names of places to grab the attention of the travelers. With paddy fields on both sides of the roads and sometimes cluster of villages located in between, after quarter of an hour, arrives the village of Naya. Located in the district of West Midnapore, this village boasts of the most active community of picture-storytellers[29] recognized as the *Patua*. Engaged in the illustration of lengthy scrolls depicting events and stories from myths, local legends and epics known as the *Patachitra*, these pictorial-narrative artists partake in the continual process of construction and reconstruction of domains of cultural knowledge, collective belief, identity, and meanings. Although in the state of West Bengal the tradition of picture-storytelling has had a vivid history in the districts of Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum, and Medinipur, it is only in the West Medinipur district that the tradition has incorporated a large variety of themes including age-old topics as well as recent ones of international relevance, possibly explaining its popularity and continuation to the present day. In the rest of the regions, it is mostly scrolls on religious themes that are depicted and narrated.

This tradition has been maintained through a hereditary pattern of association of the particular community of artists who are presently known by the name of *Chitrakar*. Although formerly referred to as the *Patua*, the artists now acknowledge themselves as belonging to the *Chitrakar* community. These artists are involved in the task of painting

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[29] Jain, J. (1998). *Picture Showmen: Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art*. Mumbai: Marg Publications.

on scrolls of cloth and also perform the role of the narrator. Travelling across villages, these pictorial-narrative artists then demonstrate scrolls on Hindu mythologies and religious myths. In their personal and social life however, their belief systems and their set of practices represent an unclear path between following Islam and Hinduism. Historical influences including conquests, their low status in the social hierarchy, leading to attempts at conversion and reconversion, and their myriad encounters and engagement with migration and cultural changes, all have led to their uncomfortable socio-political position in the present day[30]. It is then through the association of the *Chitrakar* community with this tradition and their creative participation through illustration and narration that they attempt to reaffirm their socio-economic position in the society.

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[30] A history of the *Chitrakar* community in terms of their social-religious position and their tradition has been dealt with in Bhattacharjee, B (1980). *Cultural Oscillations*. Calcutta: Naya Prokash
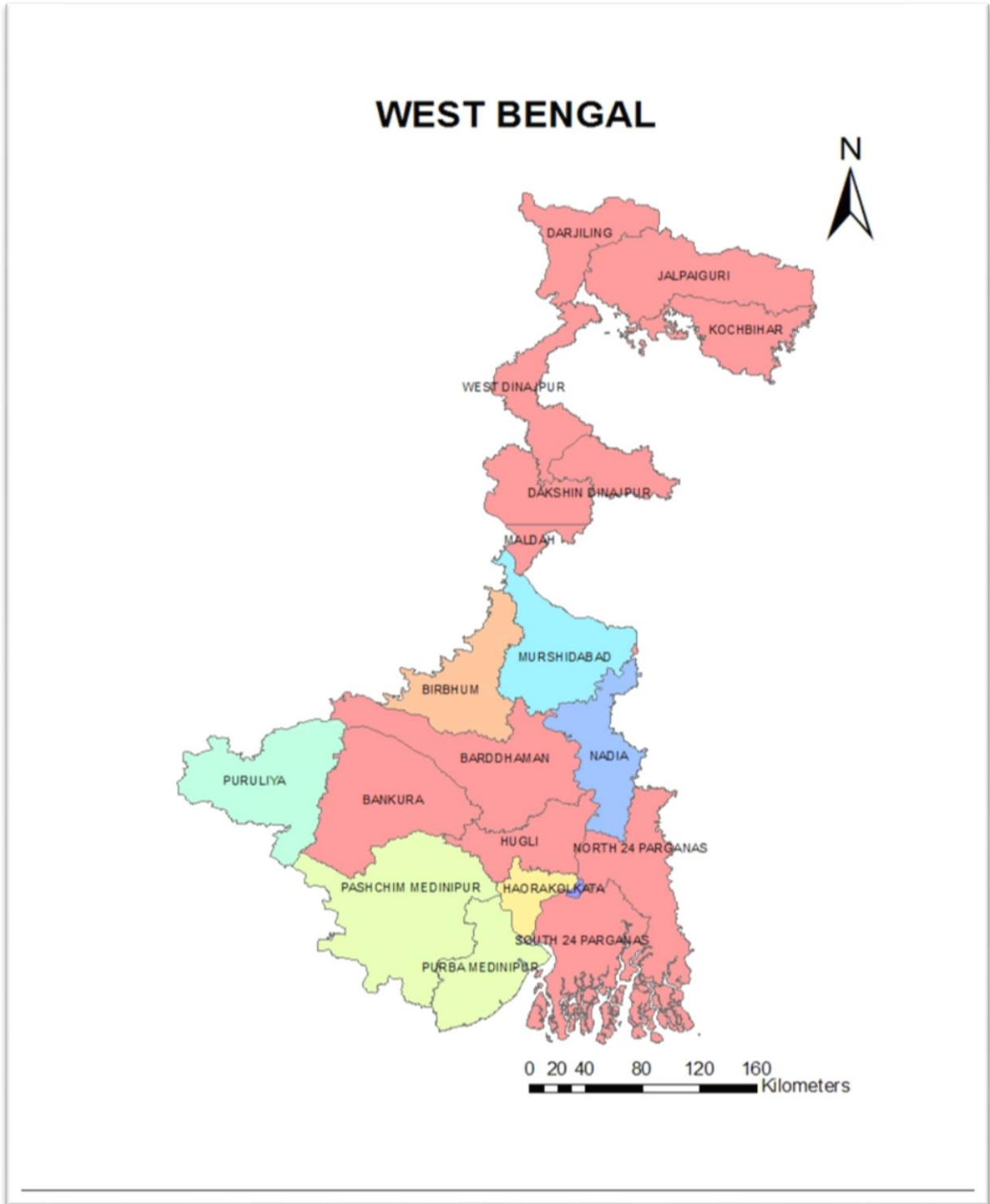
Fig. 1. This map shows the different districts in the state of West Bengal. Although the Patachitra tradition is found in the districts of Puruliya, Birbhum and Bankura too, for the present study, fieldwork was carried out in the district of Pashchim Medinipur (West Medinipur).

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I. The Painted Scrolls: *Patachitra*

The painting in this tradition was in the past carried out on starched pieces of vertical cloth on which illustrations would be made. Since the main task of these scrolls was to accompany narrative performances done by the *Patua*, the cloth was more prone to wear and tear. Assumedly it was from the colonial period, when the Kalighat temple was built in Calcutta, attracting these painters to migrate and illustrate on small sheets of paper which could be bought as souvenirs, that the use of paper became prominent. The *Chitrakar* in West Bengal now usually carry out their painting on scrolls of vertical paper that are supported with scrolls of cloth on which it is pasted.

The colours used are made from natural resources including flowers, bark of trees, pigments from the soil or rocks, and *kajal*, each of which is then mixed with resin before they are put to use. Although some families of painters at present do sometimes use certain synthetic colours which may be hard to procure naturally at that point of time, by and large *Patachitra* is done through the use of natural colours. As there is not much effort that goes into the preservation of this art form[31], it becomes vulnerable to the effects of time and natural decay, and gets faded or eroded easily. The structure of painting is done in a linear pattern, with the flow of events depicted vertically.

The main themes depicted in the scroll include episodes from *Ramayana*, *Savitri Satyavan*, the local myths of *Chandi Mangal* and *Manasa Mangal*, and *Behula Lakhinder*. The vertical scroll is then divided into segments, each of which portrays a scene or an episode and is marked by decorative boundaries resembling that of a frame in which a picture is encased. The figures illustrated are shown either shown in their front profile or their side profile, as if to add a three dimensional effect to the painting. One episode or a scene demarcated by the drawing of a frame or boundary could be used to refer to the narration of a rather lengthy event. The purpose being to visually depict the

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[31] With their increasing recognition as folk artifacts, there is a growing demand for the 'antique', and the *Chitrakar* not only preserve or even buy older scrolls from elderly artists and painters from tribal regions, which are faded, tattered and torn on sides and are rendered completely unfit for narration, but they paint the white sheets with a yellowish or brownish tinge so as to make them appear older. Interestingly, the damaged scrolls or older ones that do not seem to have much significance in the larger society, for the basic motive for which they are created, appear to have a growing market where there seems to an ever increasing demand for anything wrapped in the idea of the exotic or the antique.

main characters so as to make them known to the audience, every detail of the narrative is not necessarily illustrated. Only those figures and symbols which are descriptive of the situation and that leads to a better understanding of the narrative on which the very painting has been based, are depicted in the scroll, to avoid the concentration and or the imagination of the audience to wander off to other directions that are not important for the story. In the scrolls related to the depiction of sacred figures and epics, the related god or goddess is first shown in a sacred form, with the idea of the supernatural element or the aspect of sacred power and authority being present. Following this, the story is then depicted where the gods are goddesses sometimes also take birth in the form of human beings to protect or save the world, or to teach a lesson.

Although even the task of painting scrolls on gods and goddesses do not lead to the elevation of the scroll as something sacred, it is with the drawing of the eyes that happens in the end of the painting, that the scroll and the visual elements in it are assumed to attain their sacred character. The actual sacredness of the scroll however lies in the domain of performance when it is narrated to the audience, enabling the transmission of the hidden meanings and the values attached to it. As for the *Chitrakar* the scroll is not personally relevant in relation to their religious rituals, but continues to contribute to their identity, both economic and socio-political, and for this matter is believed to be sacred for them. The *Patachitra* then assumes its position of being sacred in the larger community in which it is believed and performed. It is the theme or the story and their intervention by gods and goddesses that builds to its sacrosanct nature. Since the narration and the illustration of the scrolls focus on certain episodes rather than the rendition of the entire oral or written text, it is subject matter that is visually defined through supernatural or socially ideal figures depicted and narrated by the picture-storyteller that takes up an importance place in this tradition.

II. The Painting and Storytelling Community of Bengal: The *Chitrakar*

The itinerant storytellers of Bengal, who are sometimes known in the local community as *Patua*, as referring to the community who engages in the painting of the *pat*, or by the more recent term of the *Chitrakar*, the community which is recognized with the tradition

of the *Patachitra*, are a hereditary community of artists engaging in an age-old tradition that maintains their social identity and contributes to the construction of morality in society. Residing in different parts of the state of West Bengal, these artists who double up as performers occupy a very significant position in the construction of cultural memory in the society. Although the tradition of *patachitra* can be traced in the districts of Purulia, Murshidabad, Bankura also, the present study chose the Pingla block and Jhargram sub-division in the district of West Medinipur. Positioning themselves between the intricacies of two religious communities, one remnant of past and the politics of power, the other referring to the present association, the *Chitrakar* artists then engage in a practice that preserves traditional cultural discourses and through the medium of this pictorial narrative practice assert their collective socio-political identity. Their reasons behind the changing from being identified as the *Patua* to being recognized as the *Chitrakar*, other than on grounds of conversion, could be attributed to the fact that the caste of *Patua* is not only involved in the painting of scrolls but that of other occupations like snake charming, that have been considered as defiling and disrespected by the society. Hence taking up the name of *Chitrakar* would facilitate in their recognition of being associated with only the traditional occupation of scroll painting and narration.

It is in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, written approximately in the middle of the 13th century, that one can find details on the early origin of the *Patua*, as belonging to the *Naba Sayaka* caste group that included nine castes, namely *Malakar*, *Karmakar*, *Kangsakar*, *Sankhakar*, *Kumbhakar*, *Tantubya*, *Sutradhar*, *Swarnakar*, and *Chitrakar* (Bhattacharjee, 1980). Legends have it that the sacrilegious act of painting Lord Shiva without his consent led to their eviction from the caste group, leaving them to occupy an inferior socio-religious position oscillating between the Muslim and the Hindu communities (ibid.). Within the caste group of the *Patua*, there are sub-castes of communities begin engaged in various occupations, with the *Chitrakar* occupying the relatively highest position. Given their position in the socio-religious structure, or their possibility of having a tribal origin, with the influx of conquest and the change of rulers, this community underwent conversions to secure a better position in the social hierarchy (ibid.). With independence from colonial domination, several Hindu organizations again

attempted to reconvert them, but as this did not improve their social standing, many families went back to their earlier position of following Islam (Chatterji, 2009)[32].

Considering their association with occupations that were assigned as disrespectable in the society, their ascription to a lower social status or an assumed tribal status, could be one of the most prominent factors for their history of engaging in conversion and reconversion as possible attempts to re-negotiate their social standing. Due to the nature of their occupation, and this being the sole source of earning in the past, the *Chitrakar* would often travel off to distant villages performing, and then returning back to their villages when they would earn sufficient for some time. In the present day, in the village of Naya, in Pingla, the *Chitrakar* community has become very active in both awareness of the demand of their art form in the market, and in its modification, performance and presentation. These artists therefore actively participate in exhibitions held nationally and internationally, and some of them still continue to visit nearby villages for the traditional display and narration of the *Patachitra*. When they visit these villages, they mostly perform on the popular local Hindu myths of *Chandi Mangal*, *Manasa Mangal*, episodes from *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*.

In village of Naya, in the Pingla block in West Medinipur district, the tradition has witnessed a new direction with its exposure to the international art market. It comprises of an energetic community of storytellers who have revived their art form, and their traditional occupation. The younger artists, with the help of the mass media and interaction with other painting traditions, have modified the practice of the *Patachitra*, by including new themes besides the older ones. Though they engage in storytelling when they go to participate in exhibitions and also sometimes in nearby villages, they have drawn more attention to the illustration of the art form that is also purchased for purposes of decoration. The families, on seeing the possibility of a future in their almost decadent tradition, have engaged their children into it, who along with formal education, also learn the *Patachitra* from their parents and other relatives. For the community, they have seen a new future in their age-old tradition and some of them have taken it up as their prime

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[32] Roma Chatterji in her article on "Global Events and Local Narratives: 9/11 and the Picture Storytellers of Bengal" remarks that the adoption of the title '*Chitrakar*' by many members of these groups is probably a result of their earlier attempt to reposition themselves within the Hindu social structure.

source of income once again. As for the older generation, they have witnessed great transformations in this practice. But they are open to changes as the *Patachitra* for them is primarily a source of livelihood, and identity. If with the popularity of their art form, they can secure their livelihood problems, they are hopeful that this would help them to maintain a strong sense of cultural authority, as artists of an exclusive tradition.

Although this village is set apart from all the other regions in West Bengal in terms of its growing popularity as producing folk art in the international market, with the *Chitrakar* community playing a significant role in the changing content of the painting and involved in matters related to its saleability, their consideration for the present study still holds significance. Unlike other regions where the lack of income has led the picture-storytellers to leave this occupation and get involved in other sources of employment, in the case of Naya, the tradition of *Patachitra* has flourished in the present day, albeit leading to modification in the traditional form of its practice. Along with the creation of scrolls on new themes meant for the market, there are also the older scrolls, some of which are taken for occasional performances or simply kept for display to visitors who might be interested in the art. As a result of their engagement to their traditional occupation in the contemporary times, older artists of the village still involve themselves in painting. Interaction with them not only provides insights on the transformations in the practice, but also contributes towards the interpretative understanding of the older themes and the traditional aspects of the practice. Their observation for the present study also becomes important to show how irrespective of the changing aspects of the tradition in terms of its use and its content, in Naya, the community still acquires its collective social identity from the traditional understanding of the occupation.

In Jhargram, the situation is however different, and rather similar to the condition of the rest of the *Chitrakar* artists in West Bengal. Here the community is engaged in their traditional occupation of storytelling and also occasionally engage themselves in casual labour to support their families. The children learn to draw from the elders, but they are not particularly encouraged in solely pursuing the painting as an occupation. The *Chitrakar* community being an endogamous one, and the members of the community being numbered, the painters mostly know each other or are distantly related to each

other from different parts of West Bengal, and even the adjoining regions of Jharkhand. Being less involved in the marketing of their art-form than the artists of Naya, these painters relatively engage in more traditional performances[33]. These artists also keep scrolls pertaining to the tribal community, thereby indicating that they do travel to nearby villages, not only to perform on Hindu scrolls, but also scrolls on the myth of origin of the Adivasi.

In the present day, the *Chitrakar* community largely follows Islam while there are a very few families who did succumb to their re-conversion into the Hindu social structure and hence follow sects of Hinduism. The social practices of the community however, interestingly reveal remnants of their engagement with migration and religious conversion and reconversion. Their life-world, comprising of their social beliefs, attitudes and engagement in socio-ritual practices reveal their intergenerational dispositions into different contexts, discourses and practices, and the interaction between the elements of selective history and practice, resulting in a unique habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) which shapes their belief and identity in the contemporary times. For the local population, these *Chitrakar*(s) or *Patua*(s) are a peculiar community who are neither Hindu nor Muslim, but who follow both Hindu and Muslim rites and also accept food from both the communities.

Irrespective of their economic status, the *Chitrakar* still do not have access to land for cultivation. Due to their historical fluctuations between the two religious communities of Islam and Hinduism, their present socio-religious status has not undergone much improvement. There are therefore looked down upon by the Muslim community for engaging in practices relating to the illustration and performance of Hindu gods and goddesses. Among the different sects of Hindus, though their scrolls and performance is considered as sacred, and is said to bring divine blessing, the community itself is not

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[33] However, with the growing awareness of the aesthetic value of their *Patachitra* in the global art market, some painters in Jhargram associate visitors only with the selling of their scrolls. With their economically vulnerable position, coupled with their knowledge of the growing demand for knowledge about folk arts, these artists realizing the exclusive character of their occupation and knowledge then refuse to give out any information without monetary help. In contrast, in Naya, where the economic condition of most of the artists are better, there is a more open attitude towards the sharing of knowledge, as these artists expect that the present research will be beneficial to them in some manner in the near future.

accorded a respectable position in the social hierarchy. This is also reflected in the nature of their residences, which is always found in clusters formed in one part of the village or on the outskirts of the village.

Along with their conversion and internalization of different cultural practices, rituals and forms of belief over time and space, the role of women in terms of their contribution to the tradition has also undergone change. With their conversion to Islam, the movement of women became restricted, although there is no proof to show that they were active in the act of performance. Although none of the women wore *burqha* in any of the households, and for that matter did not even wear a veil in the course of conversations with them, this could be explained as the loosening of some conservative socio-cultural practices and beliefs in the community[34]. In the present day, in Jhargram, the women are mostly involved in the work of the household and taking care of the children. In Naya however, women are also active producers of the *Patachitra*. Hence, Rani Chitrakar not only paints her own scrolls, but also constructs her personal versions of the narrative to accompany the *Patachitra*. With her husband Shyam Sundar Chitrakar, not being able to travel to far off places due to age and health issues, Rani has participated in several exhibitions in different countries. Her daughter is also involved in the practice of painting, but does not go out for performing on them. As observed, the restriction on the freedom and engagement in the practice outside the home is more for unmarried women. Khadu Chitrakar's daughter is also engaged in the painting of the scrolls, while his daughter-in-laws also go out of the village to participate in exhibitions.

By being a part of a cultural process that continues to transform and reproduce discourses and trajectories of collective belief in the larger society, the community of the *Chitrakar* reconstructs and creatively transforms the idea of moral value and social order, thereby using their traditional occupation and the creative space of myth, art and performance to emphasize on the their cultural authority and reaffirm their collective socio-political identity. Fluctuating on the borders between religious communities and leading a life that

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[34] However, this could also be a matter of gender and age. Rani Chitrakar wore a half veil over her head and while her photograph was clicked she pulled the veil till over her forehead. In most instances, the researcher being from the same gender, the women were possibly more relaxed and therefore did not feel the need to cover their head.

shows a blend of social practices of both, they not only engage in the production of collective belief of morals and cultural values in the society, but by this process also take part in the production of belief of their own collective identity.

Fig. 2. The two pictures display a *Chitrakar*'s necessary materials needed for a performance. The first is a traditional bag containing the scrolls, carried by the artists in earlier times when they would travel across villages for months. Stitched by themselves, the bag was conveniently made so that the scrolls could be instantly taken out or kept in, as the performance required. As the second picture shows, the *Chitrakar* still has his bag on his shoulder, as he takes out a scroll and begins to show it.

III. The Performance

O tui keno eli sarobar e behula sundori

O tor payer jol maa gaaye porilo ami bhishohori

O tui keno eli sarobar e behula sundori

Boli o tor baashor ghare morbe poti hobi khorer aari

O tui keno eli sarobar e behula sundori

Interpretation[35]: Oh why did you go to the lake, beautiful Behula

Oh if the water from your foot would fall on me, I would consider myself blessed

Oh why did you go the lake beautiful Behula

Your husband would die n the night of your marriage leaving you widowed

Oh why did you go the lake, beautiful Behula

The time-honoured tradition of the *Patachitra* has thrived by and large on the richly illustrated stories and events depicted on cloth and accompanied with narrative forms of storytelling for performances. The narratives are produced by the *Chitrakar* who paints on the scroll and constructs the narrative based on a theme that is locally popular and accepted. Certain events from myths, epics and local legends that aim to deliver some moral education or depict the sacred lives of incarnations are common in *Patachitra*. Each *Chitrakar* therefore constructs her or his version of the narrative with the underlying common theme.

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[35] These are the first few lines of the narrative on *Behula Lakhinder*, a popular myth along the people of West Bengal, dealing with the story dealing with Goddess *Manasa*. These four lines mentioned, introduce the central theme of the story, after which the narration starts with the actual story. Since the myth is very popular, there is no mention of any specific geographical location. It is understood to have taken place in Bengal itself. Interestingly, these first four lines are presented in a present continuous tense, after which the entire story is performed in the form of a narrative, i.e. rendition of something that has already taken place. The reason for this could be to locate the significance of the myth in narrative time, unifying the past, present and future, and render it equally significant in contemporary times.

Scrolls of cloth used in pictorial-narrative traditions have always highlighted on the aspect of performance for the task of communicating messages to the society. It is in the domain of performance, in their interaction with the members of the society, that the unseen meanings of the visual-narrative traditions are emitted, giving way to newer forms, or re-establishing earlier forms of knowledge and values. Even in the present day for the local community this practice is not aesthetically recognized for mere decoration.

The performance of the *Patachitra* in Bengal is carried out by the *Chitrakar* who paints it. It is only in the recent times, that some members of the community who are involved in casual labour, do not get time to paint at home and so they purchase a painting from within their larger community and uses it for performances in nearby villages for additional income, when they do not have any other work. Generally, a *Chitrakar* takes his bag of scrolls and leaves for villages to perform. He does not have to be invited to a household or a village to perform. They visit villages and ask the people if they want to see the *Patachitra*. The villagers often choose the *pata* (scroll) that they want to see, and accordingly the *Chitrakar* takes out the relevant *Patachitra* and starts the performance. The narrative poetry is often sung around a basic musical tune that is repeated, to keep a rhythm and to also give out the sense reminiscent of a traditional *katha* or reading. There are no musical instruments used in the course of the narration. The *Chitrakar* uses one hand to hold out the relevant part of the scroll, keeping the rest wrapped up, while using the other hand to point out to the corresponding part on the scrolls or the characters which the narrative pertains to at that point of time.

The *Chitrakar* starts the performance by situating the episode and introducing the characters. He opens the corresponding part of that scroll and starts his narration. The images in the scroll and the entire illustration in that section are simply to place the characters within a specific context, which is then elaborated and explained through narration. The illustrations then function as the main points around which the story revolves. Most of the scrolls relating to the myths and legends begin with an incantation to the sacred deity of the story or a highlighting of the main event that involves the

interference of the deity[36]. The narrative is orally created and maintained, sung in the form of storytelling. Representing the non-institutional side of religion, these narratives are performed in the local dialects and do not require additional explanation. In the village of Naya, the artists complete their performance by stating their name and their address as concluding lines of the narrative. This is however a recent act that is done when the performance takes place outside its traditional domain, in the presence of outsiders. Carried out possibly to highlight on the creativity of the individual artist, it facilitates those interested in the art form and its purchase to not only locate its geographical context of construction, but as a form of competition, be able to trace those artists in particular.

After the performance is over, the *Chitrakar* is given donations in kind including grains and rice, and some money, after which he goes off to another village. Once the word of the narration spreads out, neighbors and other members of the village gather to hear the storytelling session. For the audience, although the *Chitrakar* does not occupy a respectable position in their social system, and in fact belongs to a different religious community, it is their traditional association with the practice and their capability of storytelling that equates to the recital or religious texts or even to that of going to a temple that provides them with authority.

IV. The Narratives: Tales of *Behula* and *Savitri-Satyavan*

Performance of *patachitra* in Bengal revolves mostly around certain episodes from the grand epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, or the local legends describing the growth of cults, of goddess worship, and rituals and religious festivals. Two local legends that are popular in the present day in villages where the *patachitra* is performed have been summarized below[37].

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[36] In the scrolls that deal with a creative interpretation of current themes, which are generally made for sale, the representation of the Sacred still holds relevance, although the interpretation by the artist often assumes an understanding on the part of the audience, of the world in terms of ordinary beings and the sacred deities. In this sense, interpretation in the performance often partakes in a narrative reconstruction of the event, akin to the pattern of a myth.

[37] The summarized texts are interpretation of the stories that have been narrated by the artists in the course of interviews carried out during fieldwork.

***Behula* (from the *Manasa Mangal Kavya*)**

Set in Bengal, the story of *Behula* highlights on the power of the serpent goddess *Manasa* and the commencement of her worship on earth. The story begins with questioning the main protagonist of the story *Behula*, why she went to the lake, and how her husband would be killed on the night after marriage. Before the story progresses, the goddess *Manasa* is described as the powerful deity who sits on a throne of serpents and has a bed made out of serpents. As the narrator describes, her worship and her grace is very powerful and blessed. And then the story begins. There was once a very affluent businessman named *Chand Saudagar* who travelled by sea for a business trip, accompanied by his six sons. The six sons however faced death and only *Chand Saudagar* survived to return home. As the story goes, it was goddess *Manasa* who had saved him and instead wanted him to start the practice of her worship in Bengal, as he was very wealthy and thus influential, and his worship would make the practice more established. *Chand* who was a worshipper of Lord Shiva refused to this and remarked that he would never worship a woman with the same hands that he worshipped Shiva. When goddess *Manasa* came to know this, she was determined that she would anyhow make sure that he worships her. *Chand*'s youngest son *Lakhinder* had in the meanwhile grown up and it was his age for marriage. Astrological predictions confirmed that *Lakhinder* would die on the first night after his marriage from a snake bite. On knowing this, *Chand*, who was a powerful devotee of Shiva, asked *Vishwakarma* to build the son an iron structure with no holes or openings in which the son would spend the first night. But as under goddess *Manasa*'s intervention, a tiny hole was left unattended in the iron structure. *Lakhinder* was married to *Behula*, who was a pious girl and worshipped the goddess. On the night after their wedding when they both were in deep sleep; a snake came and bit *Lakhinder* on the feet and killed him. As according to the popular Hindu custom, bodies that were dead due to snake bite were not cremated, and were instead floated in water. So, *Lakhinder*'s body, it was decided would also be floated along the Ganga. *Behula* refused to this idea and did not want to give up. She stated that like *Savitri* from the *Mahabharata*, she would also bring back her husband from death. So she insisted on floating with her husband on a boat and on the way continued to pray to the goddess *Manasa*. *Manasa* interceded and revealed to her in person, saying that she would

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revive *Lakhinder* if his father *Chand* would agree to worship her. *Behula* requested for her husband's life and stated that she would try her best to convince her father-in-law to begin the worship of *Manasa*. When they both returned back home, the entire family was overjoyed to see them, and especially to see him alive. *Behula* and *Lakhinder's* mother requested *Chand* to hold a ceremony beginning the worship of *Manasa* as she had saved *Lakhinder*. After long, *Chand* agreed and it was since then that the worship of *Manasa* has become very significant and effective in providing blessings and protecting the people from danger.

Savitri - Satyavan (An Episode from the *Mahabharata*)

Taken from the Mahabharata, the story is about *Savitri* and her husband *Satyavan*. *Savitri* was born to king *Ashwapati*. A very pious man, he prayed to the goddess *Savitri* for a child. On seeing his devotion the goddess was pleased and was born into his family. In another kingdom, there lived a king by the name of *Dyumath Sena*. When he became blind, he and his family were thrown out of the kingdom, and he took refuge in a forest where he built an ashram and lived with his wife and his son *Satyavan*. *Satyavan* possessed all possible qualities of physical strength and intellectual virtues. Gradually *Savitri* grew up and time had come for her betrothal. Suitors were searched for from everywhere, but no one could be found. The messenger of gods provided *Ashwapati* asked *Savitri* to choose her husband and after travelling far and wide, she came to know *Satyavan* and expressed her interest in marrying him. *Ashwapati* consulted the messenger of gods *Narad*, to which he replied that *Satyavan*, would be most eligible for *Savitri*. But he added that there was only one problem. It was predicted that *Satyavan* would die at a very early age. Hearing this, *Savitri*'s father refused to proceed with the proposal. But *Savitri* convinced him that *Satyavan*'s qualities should not be underestimated by the prediction of his early death, and wished to be married to him. *Satyavan*'s father did not accept the request initially as they were living in a forest and besides he was blind. But later he was convinced and *Savitri* was married to *Satyavan*.

Savitri adjusted herself to the simple life in the ashram, took care of her in laws and did all the work of the ashram. Gradually she noticed that *Satyavan* was nearing his death.

Savitri hence decided to keep a fast and lead a very rigorous life of penance and prayer for him. On the last day of *Satyavan*, when he was leaving to go and cut wood from the forest, *Savitri* initially did not want him to go. As she had never requested for anything before, her parents-in-law allowed her to accompany him. While cutting wood, *Satyavan* got a very bad headache and lied down. Both *Savitri* and *Satyavan* saw *Yama*, the lord of death come, to take him, after which *Satyavan* lost his consciousness. Even though *Savitri* pleaded for the life of her husband, *Yama* left the body and took the soul. *Savitri* therefore decided to go along with them. When *Yama* told her that *Satyavan*'s life was over, *Savitri* replied saying that she always led a pious life and didn't have anyone other than *Satyavan*. *Yama* then asked her to request for a boon for anything except *Satyavan*. *Savitri* asked for her father in law's eyesight and it was granted. *Savitri* still followed them and asked where would be her place without her husband. *Yama* gave her another boon and she asked for her father in law's health, his lost kingdom and his righteousness. *Savitri* however continued to follow *Yama*. When *Yama* asked her to wish for another boon, *Savitri* asked for her father's wish of begetting hundred sons to be fulfilled.

While continuing on the path with *Yama*, *Savitri* praised the lord of death as the *dharmaraj*, or the god of righteousness, and in the course of asking him questions about life and death; she defeated his arguments with logic. *Yama* agreed to grant her another wish, and to this she asked for hundred sons from *Satyavan*. *Yama* agreed to this wish too, but *Savitri* followed them. When Yama asked her then she replied saying that she did not want to live without her husband and how could *Yama* have blessed her with a hundred sons while taking away *Satyavan* himself. *Yama* pleased with her patience, her perseverance, devotion and knowledge, brought Satyavan back to life and they both went back to their parents together.

Fig. 3. An old scroll depicting the story of *Behula Lakhinder* (Gurusaday Museum Collection, Kolkata). The first scene relates to the three main characters, goddess *Manasa*, *Behula* and *Chand Saudagar*. The river throughout the scroll, could be symbolic of the geographical landscape of Bengal and could also be emblematic of the life as the flow of the river, a uni-dimensional representation of time within which the being was placed, as Heidegger (1996) understood it. The popularity of the myth of goddess *Manasa*, known as the serpent goddess could be attributed to natural landscape of the region. Having a tropical climate, rainfall led to swamps and the presence of snakes. As distance within the village or nearby areas would often be covered on foot, people were scared of snakes and poisonous insects. The *Manasa* cult grew in villages to deal with such fear.

3.2. Narrative Experience, Symbolic Performances and the Construction of Social Identity

The picture-storytellers[38] of Bengal belong to the *Chitrakar* community. Although the name *Patua* came to exist through their traditional occupation of showing and narrating the *pat*, the sub-castes under the *Patua* got involved in other tasks. Unlike the term *Patua*, which was indicative of the community's social standing, the term *Chitrakar* highlighted more on their role as creative artists in the society, attracting attention from the international market, as well as drawing affiliation from the *Chitrakar* community that is believed to ideally belong to a caste group who were spiritually blessed and authorized to paint scrolls and narrate them[39]. This explains the replacing of the surname of *Patua* with the *Chitrakar*. Although the *Chitrakar* are still recognized in the larger community through the traditional occupation that they are associated with, this notion of collective social identity has also undergone modification

Their work involves creativity in the domain of visual representation and narrative poetry. However, they do not construct stories or myths by themselves. The idea is always refer to something that already exists, and then to reaffirm it or transform it. Through depiction of popular epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* alongside the local legends, they assert their cultural agency by the selective illustration and performance of certain scenes detailing on the maintenance and upkeep of moral principles.

Owing to their history of religious conversion and reconversion[40], what was observed in both West Medinipur and Jhargram was that the social status of the community has not undergone an sense of betterment, as in the larger community, *Chitrakar* are still looked down upon by the higher caste Hindu population as belonging to a lower caste earlier and

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[38] Jain, J. (1998) *Picture Showmen: Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art*, Mumbai: Marg Publications.

[39] 'Myth of origin' from Bhattacharjee, B. (1980). *Cultural Oscillations*, Calcutta: Naya Prokash

[40] There is very little data offering concrete details about the course of their religious identity, prior to colonization and administrative documentation of the population by the State. With the exception of Binoy Bhattacharjee's text of these artists, there seems to be a lack of proper documentation on their conversion, possibly because of their marginalized social position. It is only through an observation of their fluctuation in caste and religious affiliation as enumerated in the caste census details provided by the colonial administration, combined with their oral history and myths concerning their origin that an understanding of their fluctuating religious identity can be arrived at.

for having converted to Islam, and are also neglected by other Muslim communities for their continuing association with the traditional occupation of painting and singing about scrolls with Hindu themes. Even though in Naya, with the popularity of their art in international exhibitions, certain artists have gained an economic stronghold, they still do not have lands available for cultivation. In both regions, different forms of exposure and differences in socio-economic position have led to a variation in the ways they deal the projection of their social identity. In Naya, the artists then assert their social position as effective sources of cultural capital, who have ushered in sources of prosperity to their region. For them, their economically stronger position than many other castes in the village has become a new source of defending their social identity. However, economic prosperity is only a recent way through which they try to claim their social position. It is hence, not also through their engagement with the practice in the traditional manner, but their association with the age old hereditary occupation of *Patachitra*, even if they do not actively continue it in the present day that contributes to their identity. This long term association with the caste-based occupation reflective of a prior position in the caste structure, and the use of the surname of *Chitrakar*, validates their task of creative engagement in the construction and reconstruction of Hindu religious myths. Even though they might not be considered ritually pure in the caste structure, their painting and its performance is considered sacred by the community. The source of legitimation permitting them to paint the sacred scrolls and narrate and interpret them can be said to lie in their occupational ability to reestablish the system of belief.

Narration and creative reconstruction are significant acts of power. The features of interpretation and structural translation that are involved in the process of constructing and performing a narrative reflect in the authority that the performer holds in the emanation of meanings. It is the construction of myths that allows the possibility of reflexivity in the description of imagined history. In the representation of the myth, creativity so long as it does not completely change the structure or plot story which then conflicts with the existing system of belief, is allowed as a form of re-telling. This is all the more pronounced when narrative is largely oral in nature whose re-telling makes possible the affirmation of the collective socio-political identity. The *patachitra* tradition is Bengal is based on myths and legends which themselves are not oral and are present in

the society as written texts that are significant for understanding the growth of religious cults and moral discourses in the region. The act of creative reconstruction therefore lies in the adaptation of these myths and epics in the form of narratives which are then presented in a storytelling manner to the audience, thereby bestowing on the artist and reaffirming his cultural authority.

The *Chitrakar* being a surname that is associated with the age-old hereditary practice of painting and storytelling, for the community that continues to use it till the present day, it can then be said to function as a major source of their social and political identity. Even though the traditional nature of the practice and the relation to it must have undergone modifications, the use of it in the proclamation of the present social identity helps in the confirmation of a connection with it in the past. The occupation being hereditary and caste-based in nature, the surname too reflects on the belongingness to a caste group in the past and thereby authorizes their social position in the present. Even in the absence of their continuation of the practice in the traditional pattern and the alteration of their religious identity and socio-cultural practices, it is the affiliation of the community to the traditional caste group of the *Chitrakar*, argued through mythology to exist at some point of time, that the lineage of their identity is confirmed. *Chitrakar* as a term therefore has replaced the previous connotation of the community with the term *Patua*. In the contemporary times, when the paintings have started being recognized as aesthetic pieces of folk societies, the use of *Chitrakar* also helps refers to the artist concerned, as a part of the community that has been traditionally authorized to the practice.

Although the connection with the past in terms of occupation and socio-religious position provides the community of *Chitrakar* with their present trajectory of collective identity, is in the domain of performance that their identities are constructed, reconstructed and maintained. Their participation in the activity of scroll painting and also narration, albeit in a modified manner, also contributes in the maintenance of their social identity. The performance of the scroll engages the audience to interpret the narration on the common plane and thereby have a collective experience. This act of lived experience then contributes to reaffirm the systems of belief of the audience about the content of the performance as well as the authenticity of the performers, and enables the *Chitrakar* to continue with their notion of a shared identity.

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Their effort to maintain the sense of a community that has a sense of unity in the way they choose to be seen by the larger society and complementing each other through their practices has further added their maintenance of collective identity. In terms of the market, their interest still remains to a large extent, to be recognized as individual artists but representing a larger tradition. In the village and the local society, it is their pattern of residence, and also their engagement in *Patachitra* narration as members of a larger community hereditarily engaged in its practice, that harps on the ways in which they hold on to their collective socio-political identity. The community's emphasis on an endogamous[41] system of marriage further enables them to maintain the kinship relations that form the community.

The practices and systems of belief in their domestic domain and the professional engagements for the *Chitrakar* community do not function within clearly demarcated boundaries. Their professional life is contingent on an occupation that is the main source of their socio-political identity. This identity in turn also ties them to a past with affiliation to the caste group of the *Patua* and thus their relation to the Hindu community. The religious practices and discourses governing their domestic and social life at present, is again based on Islam. This community hence occupies a midway position between the two religious communities. They are a part of the Hindu community in terms of their using of the surname of *Chitrakar*, but most importantly in terms of their participation and authority to depict, narrate, demonstrate and thereby engage in critical and creative reconstruction of the religious discourses; while again their religious practices and belief patterns make them a part of the Muslim community. The institutionalized form of religion is then for this community a mode to represent their religious identity while through the deconstruction and representation of non-institutionalized religious discourses they exert their collective social identity.

The institutionalization of belief and the possibility of a shared lived experience by the audience which consigns on the artists the power of agency through which they affirm their social identity, is all made possible through the symbolic representations of this idea of the sacred in the act of performance. Through the display of the scroll and the recital of

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[41] This system of marriage could be reflective of both caste restrictions as well as the influence of Islam.

the narrative, the centrality of the sacred and the significance of the moral are thus expressed. And it is through the interpretation of these forms of expressions that an insight to the subjective world of experience can be realized. The interpretive understanding of the narratives of *Behula-Lakhinder* as well as *Savitri-Satyavan* along with their illustration therefore reveals the power of the word in the form of myths, and the interplay of performance, belief and morality in the construction of social identity.

I.   Placing the Sacred in the context of the Local: *Behula* (worshipping the serpent goddess *Manasa*)

The narrative of the *Chitrakar* starts with questioning the main protagonist of the story *Behula*, on why she decided to go the lake. The narrative begins in the form of a recap in which before the storytelling begins the direction of the audience is turned towards the one of the major sub-plot of the story.

The narrator addresses the audience as '*Saotaali porboti'* referring to the tribal population that resides in the region, suggesting that these stories when presented in the form of a *Patachitra* performance, go beyond the boundaries of the established religious discourses and become more of local tales emphasizing on aspects of morality and virtue. The narrative poetry in the form of storytelling makes the performance and the illustration appear to be more animated. There is a change of tune in the middle when the mood of the story changes, which is expressed through the musical tune of the storyteller. The illustration or the narration does not include the significance of the *Chitrakar* or their history, or a justification of their occupation. In fact, the practice that deals with religious stories and events from sacred myths and epics, carried out by the *Chitrakar*, challenges the very socio-religious position that they are ascribed to. One the one hand, they are said to belong to a caste that is not attributed a respectable and powerful position in the social hierarchy. On the other, their scrolls and their storytelling is considered as conducive to bring divine blessing on the audience. It is this rupture in the social identity and the cultural authority that the community of the *Chitrakar* attempts to unite through their practice of this tradition. It is through the performance of the religious scrolls that the community derives its idea of collective identity and manifests it. The story of *Behula*,

which is a part of the *Manasa Mangal Kavya*, represents a written tradition that highlights on the worship and the significance of the rituals pertaining to the veneration of the goddess *Manasa* in the household. *Manasa* then represents the sacred in the non-institutionalized or semi-institutionalized domain of religion. The rituals concerning her worship is then mostly carried out by the women in the families, for purpose of begetting good luck and protection from danger. For the *Chitrakar*, along with the local legends, the visual and narrative representation of the sacred deities dealt with the presentation of the less formalized aspect of religion[42]. These artists therefore focus on the element of belief. The institutionalized or formalized part of religion which consists of rituals, scared chanting, offerings, would all require the intervention of a formal priest. The rendition of a myth, itself located in a socially imagined past, is therefore an element on which these artists can rest their cultural authority. To reassert their position, the community therefore emphasizes on the reproduction of the mythical view of the world and of the domain of religion. Their art and narration therefore contend on visually presenting and narrating of deified characters as represented in the myths. The institutionalization of belief does not simply require the carrying out of formalized rituals, but also the arousal of states of collective emotion, or as Durkheim (1915) termed, collective effervescence. Neither do these collective conditions merely require the implementation of formalized rituals. Myth plays a very central role in the institutionalization of belief in a society. Not necessarily containing logic or in fact continuity, as Levi-Strauss (1963) remarked, their meaning lies in the way the elements of the story are put together. This is where the agency of the artist lies. As for the folklores and local myths, these need not be necessarily understood as being 'folk' in nature, as many of these gods and goddesses were mostly manifestations of the more-established deities. Through their depiction and narration, the artist community therefore had access to the representation of the more popular gods and goddesses as well as the local deities, the major myths, as well as the regional lore; and

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[42] This does not mean that they did not have the privilege or authority of painting or narrating about popular gods and goddesses believed across regions in India. These popular gods and goddesses already have already been established in the community as Sacred beings through vast body of literature written on them as well as material manifestation in the form of common places of worship being set up for them. The *Chitrakar* community also paints from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and sacred texts. The point that is being made here is that these artists focus on the non-institutionalized or less formalized aspects of religion such as a myth, one which deals with belief. It is also something whose performance does not always strictly involve the presence of the priest.

this in turn allowed them to challenge their given position and assert for the better status in the social hierarchy.

Going back to the narrative of goddess *Manasa*, the story is not reflective of the position of the *Chitrakar* or their practices, origin, nor does it mention them. The story does not situate the role of these performers anywhere and simply engages in the re-telling of a myth that is a written text and is locally popular in terms of ritual and worship. The validation of the *Chitrakar*(s) in terms of their association with a traditional identity in the present day even when they have undergone social and structural transformations within their community then does not emerge from the story. Their justification for their social identity then springs from their earlier or a traditional association with the occupation of painting and storytelling. And their authority to depict and narrate Hindu gods and goddesses also arises from their earlier relationship with the occupation and identity. Their social identity as *Chitrakar* is therefore not depended on the structure or the direction of the narrative, but on their connection with a past that engaged in this occupation. And again it is the power of the performance which adds on to this reaffirmation of their past role. Authenticating their social position as the legitimate narrators, the performance then authorizes the *Chitrakar* to engage in the creative reconstruction of the original idea. The orality of the tradition however lies only in the creative construction of the narratives by the *Chitrakar*, as the themes of the *Patachitra* are usually adapted from texts that are already established.

Both the myths that have been mentioned, are not only in the cultural memory of the larger society in West Bengal, but are parts of written texts. These performances including the illustration and the narration are therefore not intended to highlight on the texts in terms of their plots and their details. Instead they endeavor to emphasize on simplifying the text that also form a part of the classical tradition and making it more understandable and comprehensible for more members in the society. Rather than harping on the written text, the tradition takes recourse to it, but in the construction of the illustration and the narrative uses creative inputs to focus on the moral principles hidden in these myths. By asserting on the maintenance of the moral in the larger society, they affirm their social identity. Through the pictorial-narration tradition of the *Patachitra*, the community of the *Chitrakar* therefore does not aim for its assertion as the subaltern or the

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marginalized, but as crucial agents of cultural processes, negotiating and continually reaffirming their contested spaces of socio-political identity by reconstructing, transforming and thereby facilitating the maintenance of collective belief in society. Within the part of the very structure that they are dominated, the *Chitrakar* hence exercise their agency and collective social identity.
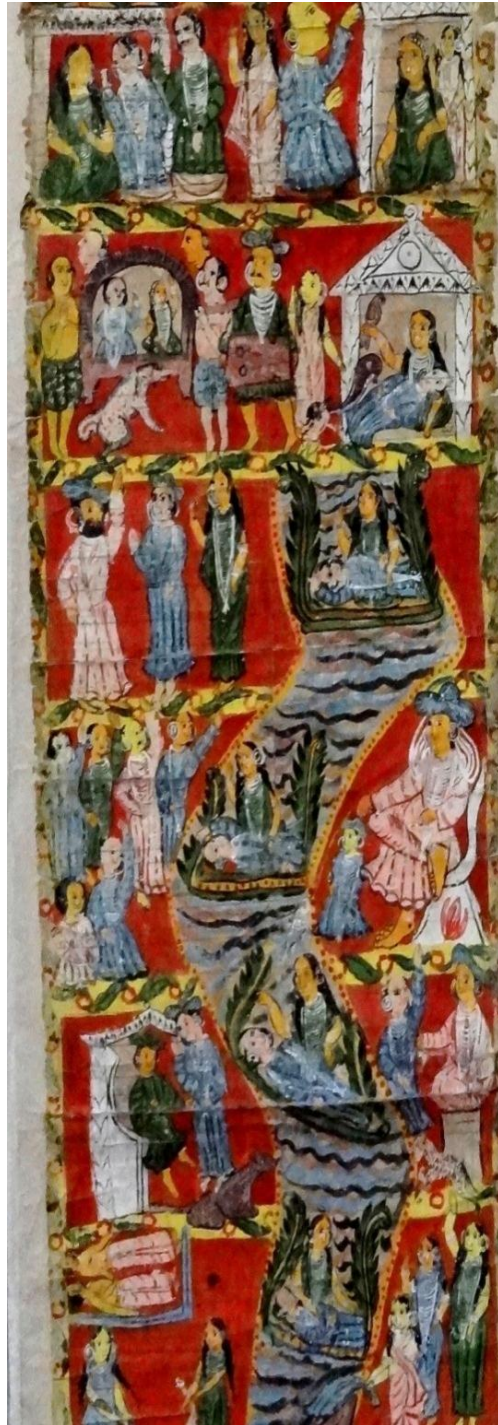
Fig. 4. This *Patachitra* on *Manasa Mangal* shows the story of *Behula* and *Lakhinder*. The river flows through the middle of the scroll from the iron chamber where they were kept for the first night after marriage, to almost the end, depicts the unfolding events on its both sides.

II.   The Infusion of the Moral and the Social in *Savitri - Satyavan*

This story is taken from the larger epic of the Mahabharata, and revolves around a theme similar to the one discussed above. It concerns the predicted death of *Satyavan* and his revival with the help of his wife *Savitri*. The allegorical implications of the storyline and the characters point not only underlying moral elements that are brought up in the course of the performance and narration of the scroll, but also brings to light the ways in which the performers or the *Chitrakar* associated with it, engage in the creative and critical politics of representation through illustration and narration thereby asserting their collective social identity in the society.

The narration contains creative inputs by the *Chitrakar* who intervene to enable the community re-imagine the tale of *Savitri* and *Satyavan* in a manner that is understandable and perceptible from the perspective of the life-world that they are situated in. The dialogues and poetic lines are created by the *Chitrakar*, and this act of the interpretation of a classical epic, contributes in a significant manner for this community to legitimize their occupation, draw their lineage to a traditional caste group, assert their function as significant culture-makers in the society and thereby reaffirm their collective social identity. It is then through the *Patachitra* and through the interpretive representation of these epics that they break down the barrier of their ascribed social status in the caste hierarchy, challenge their relatively low-socio-cultural position and reaffirm their collective social identity through the very same space of their traditional occupation that accorded them their social position in the first place. Through their engagement in this occupation they question and challenge their hereditarily assigned traditional social standing by their act of creative restructuring, transformation, retelling and interpretation of the stories and events that pertain to the exclusive world of the sacred. The content of their work being considered as potentially invoking blessings and it is therefore through this space that they question their traditional social position and reinstate for a powerful one. The story of *Savitri* and *Satyavan* accentuates on the need to maintain social responsibilities and moral duties under every situation. It also clearly states the gendered understandings of purity, piousness and honesty. *Savitri*, being the incarnation of the goddess herself, all the rest of the characters including *Dyumoth Sena* and *Ashwapati*, have strong connection with the world of the sacred. The characters in the epic are then

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mythically represented as ideal, larger than life in a manner that they themselves are considered as sacred by the community in which the epic is believed and read. It is due to their ability to express the highest level of morality, goodness and virtue in them that they become godly. The narration and scroll of the *Chitrakar* therefore contributes in keeping this idea of sacred intact, bringing changes underneath the stable structure that is remains unchanged in terms of plot and characters, and by making available to the audience the underlying meanings pertaining to religiosity and morality. However, the creative element of agency of the practice of the *Chitrakar* lie in the manner in which through the visual and the narrative they bring down the characters of the sacred to a more ordinary yet imagined space, without affecting their sacrosanct character. In this manner they make the moral principles that are venerated in the society to appear more human, necessary and achievable. Thus while the community priest narrates the same epic from an authoritative point of view, in a inflexible and rigid format, the *Chitrakar* does the same from a non-institutionalized and relatively religiously powerless point of view, and in the process gains cultural authority and through this asserts social identity of the community.

Village life is characterized by stronger sense of community feeling. Social solidarity is based on old ties and the notion of a moral community. By collective social identity is meant how the community identifies itself together by a common consciousness, by common association in terms of commonality of perspectives and dispositions arising from location and belongingness to the same field, and how it wishes to be identified and perceived by other communities and the larger society. Social identity for the picture-storyteller as a *Chitrakar* is then a matter of collective feeling, association to a common past, mythically reproduced, circulated in the social imagination through the practice of performance. Collective social identity for the *Chitrakar* community rises from their relation to a past association to a hereditary occupation, one that is also situated within the structures of the larger society and the sense of belongingness through the modified practice of the occupation in the present day. By accentuating on the need to maintain a collective moral consciousness in the society, the *Chitrakar* justify their position as a significant part of the society.

Even though the personal and social life and activities of the people in the *Chitrakar* community exemplify difference between them and the other religious communities, this difference is more of a degree than a kind. Life and thought in the community of these artists actually reveal interaction between the some of the discursive practices and rituals of both communities of the Muslim and the Hindu. Their unique position, which adds on to their challenge of projecting a particular collective social identity, also in a way represents their very socio-political identity. They are looked down upon by both communities and yet, this ambiguous cultural position shapes their collective identity as one that is contoured and confirmed through historical, religious and social processes. Religiously identified as Muslim, they continue to illustrate and sometimes narrate scrolls which are broadly based on Hindu themes. Their pattern of residence, mostly at a corner of the village or on its outskirts, and their lack of access to ownership and use of land for cultivation, reveals that the community is still accorded the traditionally ascribed social position. However, they are allowed to creatively interpret through visuals and narratives, the religious and cultural texts and discourses by the same society. Different sets of identities then interact and intermingle to give meaning to the complex idea of collective social identity of the *Chitrakar*. Religious, cultural and socio-economic identities intersperse, conflict and negotiate to produce the collective social identity of this community.

The presence of a separate sets of belief and practices governing their social and public life, and also possibly their thought process and action in the their domestic life, and their engagement in the act of upholding the moral conscience of other communities, given the social position that they are accorded to by these communities, then bring to light that their practice is much more than simply an act of reasserting morality or maintaining traditional beliefs in society. For the *Chitrakar*, the act of painting and the narrating scrolls is one that is identified as their traditional occupation. But this understanding of the notion of occupation does not only refer to an economic means of livelihood. For the *Chitrakar*, the assertion of the discourses of the moral, the right, and the sacred through the depiction and performance on scrolls is then an act of power, one which designates them with cultural authority. Through the reconstruction and representation of the moral, the *Chitrakar* challenges the socio-religious position accorded to them. Through the

emphasis and performance of the idea of the moral and the collective conscience, the community of the *Chitrakar* goes against any attempts of marginalization, but instead participates in acts of assertion and reassertion, to project their sense of collective social identity.

III.   Symbols and Performance in the Realm of Social Relations: Agency in the *Patachitra* Tradition

Satyaban Sabittitire deshe phire gelo

Mahabharoter katha amrito shomano

Eikhane te shesh korilam kobitar bondona

Amar naamti Rani Chitrakar

Naya, Pingla, Mednipur thikana

[Interpretation: Satyavan and Savitri returned to their hometown, And the sacredness of the text of Mahabharat is akin to that of amrit, This is where I shall end my recital, My name is Rani Chitrakar, with address being Naya (the village), Pingla(the sub-division), Medinipur (West Medinipur district)].

For the artist community of the *Chitrakar*, their blurred and 'oscillatory' position between Islam and Hinduism throughout history, has inferred on them a rather contested identity. It is then through their attempt to hold on to the traditional identity as an artist community hereditarily involved in narrating painted scrolls that they sustain their collective identity. This does not mean that they accept the marginalized position that they have been given. Rather, it is about how they strive to affirm their social existence as culturally distinctive and therefore socially prominent. It is this association with their traditional occupation that provides them with cultural authority and this in turn works towards reaffirming their social identity. Their symbolic performance of the sacred,

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therefore helps in the establishment of social memory among the audience, who are transformed with each performance and retelling, into a community of believers. The interplay of the word and the image in a situation of collective emotion, leads to the institutionalization of belief. The act of storytelling in the form of a narration with moral underpinnings, the structure of words and their positioning in a mythical time, allows for the contextualization of belief in terms of the contemporary times. This further paves the way for a reconstruction of a world-view and a similar life-world for the audience every time it experiences the performance.

Even though the market requirements of the scrolls have redefined their practices and the artists have also taken interest in themes of contemporary events from across the world[43], they have not given up working on the earlier themes of the sacred. Although in the case of some of these new themes, to prepare themselves for an international audience not only interested in buying the scrolls but also interested in their performance, the artists weave around their own narrative and songs. But when it comes to the traditional themes that are still popular in the villages, the emphasis is not on how creative or attractive the narrative is. The interest in the story related to a sacred deity rises from the belief that their telling and listening has the ability of bestowing blessings on the audience. This line of reasoning is not to state that the artists' rendition of the epics and the religious stories do not involve any element of creativity. In the place of secrecy, craftiness and improvise on the content of the theme to make it more appealing to the audience, there is more openness about the way in which the painting and narration is to be done in the *Chitrakar* community. The creativity of the artists therefore rises in the manner in which they choose to highlight certain parts of the myth in the painting and in its performance[44]. Although the tradition pattern of the practice is not enough for sustenance, the arrival of electronic communication has led to a decline of such performances; the Chitrakar community has not abandoned its practice. They sell their paintings at exhibitions and art fairs, and also go around villages to perform on the scrolls. As an artist from Naya says,

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[43] The scrolls of the Tsunami or the World Trade Center attacks are very popular.

[44] The aspect of individuality becomes important when the *Chitrakar* deals with the international market. Precision, detailing and ornamentation make their paintings more attractive as saleable items than others. As performers in the village, the collective identity becomes very important and each *Chitrakar* is not viewed solely as an artist but as a custodian of their larger community.

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"As the scrolls are based on sacred themes, they are revered by the villagers. And so, when we go to perform, they don't usually refuse us".

He adds,

"In the practice of the *patachitra*, the traditional themes derived from epics and myths will never lose their relevance, especially in terms of their performance. These older themes, involving the idea of the sacred, will never fade away. They have been carried over generations. Contemporary themes will be popular for some time and then people will forget them, as they will be replaced by the newer ones. The villagers are not interested in them, and we mostly make them for the international audience."

Their choice to continue their association with the practice in a traditional manner along with the new techniques, and their element of openness in terms of their art and narration therefore suggest the need to interpret the *patachitra* not as aesthetic materials but as cultural symbols that contribute to the structure of belief. Where does such belief come up other than collective moments, such as the context of a performance? The presentation of the images and the utterance of the words by the *Chitrakar* in the performance therefore enable to bring to light the agency of these artists in terms of their control over symbols and thus the representation of social reality. Deriving their legitimation from their association with the past occupation and the surname, irrespective of changes in their religious identity, and working their way through symbols, the artists participate in the institutionalization of belief. Through their performance that is collectively experienced by the audience, the shared patterns of belief and ideas concerning social cohesion are reaffirmed. And through this act of cultural authority, the *Chitrakar* derive their social identity.

The symbols used by the *Chitrakar* in terms of the painted figures and landscapes, and the words used in the narrative are not unknown to the audience in which a performance takes place. These symbols constitute the large body of cultural knowledge, guiding human thought, experience and action. Comprised of particular ideas and beliefs, their interpretation facilitates in the understanding of such underlying discourses. In the *Patachitra* tradition therefore, it is the uttered word and the illustrated image that together expresses the belief in the sacred and in certain moral principles. The lived experience of such collective moments by the audience functions as instances contributing to the

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reaffirmation of belief. It is through the interpretation of these symbols that the cultural authority of the artists in the act of performance can be uncovered thereby explaining the ground for the reassertion of their social identity as a community.

3.3. The Insinuation of the Moral in the *Patachitra* Tradition

The idea of the moral is deeply infused in the realm of culture, being represented through various symbols, discourses and practices. Durkheim believed that it was through collective rituals that the idea of a moral order in a society, one which emphasized on the social character of human beings, could be transmitted and maintained in the community (Olaveson 2001: 97-98). These collective moments not only describe the essence of religion, but also characterize social reality. Dealing with the representation of the sacred, the *Chitrakar* community of Bengal, endeavor to emphasize on myths. Such representations do not require formalized procedures as followed in religious ceremonies, but they do involve a reaffirmation of the Sacred. The performances of the painted scrolls with the narration of the artist therefore function as moments of shared emotion. The *Chitrakar* artists themselves therefore act as agents instilling in the individual minds a sense of collectivity. As for their own position within this domain of cultural practice and establishment of belief, to them the scroll or the process of painting is not sacred in the sense of the term that it does not relate to the religious practices and rituals of their community. But having a history of long association with the depiction of Hindu epics, myths and legends, and having a past of conversion and reconversion between the communities of Islam and Hinduism, one finds an interesting blend of practices and discourses from both the religious communities having been absorbed in their system of belief. Their history and knowledge about the larger cultural context of which these venerated characters are a part of, also occupies their repertoire of belief, and is internalized by their community as significant for reasons pertaining to professional and social identity, although they practice other religious rituals.

The practice being one of the prime sources of employment, for the *Chitrakar* community the depiction of the myths and epic on scrolls and their explanation through a personally constructed mode of storytelling, is an activity that is important for their livelihood. This

is not only in terms of economic sustenance, but also related to the production and manifestation of their collective identity. Being involved to a considerable extent in the production of collective belief that guides perception and further ideas of morality, the *Chitrakar* community engages in and contributes to the construction and reconstruction of discursive processes that help understand social reality. Through their traditional practice of illustration and storytelling, the *Chitrakar* artists then engage in the production of knowledge pertaining to the moral. This idea of the moral goodness in an individual, which is considered as socially ideal and necessary for the functioning of the community, also guides perception, common sense and social conduct. The occupation of painting and narrating the *patachitra* thus bestows on the artist community the element of cultural authority, through which they represent and justify their social identity. Their performance of the scroll along with narration therefore allows the individuals comprising the audience to witness a shared lived experience of the act, thereby reaffirming the idea of the moral in the larger community. If the idea of the moral order is valued in the society to the extent that it is sacralized, then the experience of this notion of morality is possible through an experience of the expressions, or the symbols that facilitate in its representation. Interpretive understanding of these symbols therefore bring to light their underlying meanings and the significance of the *Chitrakar* in relation to the maintenance of moral behavior in the larger community

I.   The Benevolent Goddess *Manasa* and the Virtuous *Behula*

The tale of *Behula* and the godess *Manasa* is a popular myth in West Bengal, replete with moral insinuations in terms of the expected roles of individuals in a society. The emphasis on certain sections in the story and the development of the plot till the end, through images and storytelling, the presence of different characters marked by a difference in terms of their behavior and maintenance of social values, clearly brings to light the moral significance of the myth. The narrative performance commences with the performer providing a very brief recap to the audience of the main episode which changes the course of the story for the main protagonist. It starts in the form of a question that is possibly posed to *Behula*, the main female character, by the divine ordain of fate

represented by the storyteller, which led the happening of certain events in her life. It thus begins by asking her why she went to a certain lake. The audience is already familiar with the tale of *Behula*, but the narration attempts to relocate the tale in the larger context of the worship of the serpent goddess *Manasa*. The rest of the story is in the form of an answer, to this question that the *Chitrakar* asks as well as answers. *Behula*, the ideal woman, who saves her husband from death, is considered divine and as the narration goes, even the water that touches her feet is holy and sacred.

The narrative performance, therefore does not attempt at the replication of the written text, but a more local, dialogical approach to it, highlighting on the non-institutional aspects of religious discourse that influences belief patterns and perspectives. The narration also contains local influences and creative interventions from the narrator, which sometimes leads to the modification of some of the side characters of the story. In the painting, *Chand Saudagar* is thus shown with a sword attempting to hit *Manasa*. For those who are outsiders and unknown to the myth, this narration would not be able to give a clear idea about the story. The events are simplified, the dialogues are localized, and the emphasis is mainly to bring to light the moral assertions and the values that underlie these myths. There is a close link observed between the mythical characters and the world of the sacred. It is as if to be believed that since these characters themselves are righteous, pious and exemplify all the valuable moral principles, they are not separated and in fact are in close association with the supernatural or the sacred.

The notion of beauty in figures illustrated in the *Patachitra* is also related to a sense of moral goodness. An immoral or an unjust person is therefore depicted and described in a manner which hints at his or her 'ugly' appearance. With not so perfect features or other established indices of what can be understood as unpleasing to the eye, the artist's rendition of the characters through illustration and later complemented through narration helps in the conferring of the certain ideas and parameters of moral values, sensibility, and beauty as originated in the text and presented to the audience. In the course of the performance, the task of the artist is then not to simply narrate the story, equally focusing on all events, but to highlight on some major turning points. By a modification in the tone of the narration or its style, the artists therefore engage in an imaginative recreation of the important scenes. The *Chitrakar* does not merely sing the verses in a musical tone, but

also enacts the dialogues of the characters. So when *Behula*'s husband dies of a snake bite on the night after their marriage, the *Chitrakar* does not narrate the feelings of *Behula* in an indirect manner but rather imitates what could possibly be her reaction and her sense of agony on realizing the situation. The narration then stresses on *Behula*'s thought as she states that if she was truly a righteous woman and the embodiment of sati, she would be successful in bringing her husband back from death. The character of *Chand Saudagar*, who refused to initiate the practice of worshipping *Manasa*, is shown and portrayed in a negative tone and is thus seen to rejoice at the death of his own son. This is a deviation from the written text in which as the father of the *Lakhinder*, he was definitely bereaved on the news of the death of his son, even with his attempts to lock them in an iron chamber without any openings. But as it does not affect the flow of the story and its primary message, which pertains to the role of *Behula*, it is not paid much attention. When no indigenous forms of healing can bring him to life, *Behula* decides to go afloat with him on the Yamuna. Here comes another point of deviation from the written source. According to the text, those who were dead by snake bite, were not burned but floated away on the river. The story set in Bengal, the text states that it was in the Ganga that *Lakhinder*'s body was floated. The narration in this instance however mentions Yamuna, possibly as a reference to Yama the god of death, in the form of rhetoric to allude to the situation in general. As the story progresses, *Behula* floats on the river with her husband, and continues to pray to the gods and goddesses for her husband's revival. In the end, the gods in the heaven and the goddess *Manasa*, pleased with the devotion of *Behula*, revives her husband and *Chand Saudagar* starts the worship of *Manasa*. As the narrator comes to an end of the story, there is a mention of how since then the worship of *Manasa* has been practiced in all households till the present day.

The moral underpinnings of the story therefore hinge on the personalities of the characters and their willingness to hold on to virtues or principles of righteousness at all times, especially portrayed through the character of *Behula*. It is because of her qualities, it is believed that she is able to bring back her husband's life, and hence in the beginning of the narration as well as in the end she is considered as the ideal woman, and therefore sacrosanct. The narrative act, along with the veneration of the goddess *Manasa*, also uplifts *Behula* as a sacred character in history. The emphasis is therefore on the personal

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and social qualities that are present, irrespective of situations. *Behula*'s character embodies and asserts on the local belief of the society at the point of time when it was created and written. Through the performance of the narration and the display of the visual, it is this idea that then circulated and reaffirmed in the system of collective belief, as belonging to the body of tradition, or a shared cultural memory.

The popularity of the themes in terms of the performances of the *Patachitra* is also related to the ecological as well as socio-cultural factors of the region. The worship of Manasa could then be relegated to the geographical structure of the region. Being flooded every year, with villages being washed away in the Gangetic belt, the region is, or perhaps was densely covered with forests. There was hence the fear of snakes and other dangerous insects and animals in the villages or even for those who had to engage in travel. Thus the cult of *Manasa* and her worship grew as a practice of dealing with the fear of the unknown and the possibilities of danger involved in travel, and became popular in Bengal. The cult and especially the performance of what the *Chitrakar* sometimes refers to as the '*Manasa pat*', also reiterates the popularity of goddess worship in Bengal. In this sense it also points out to the role played by the *Chitrakar* community in engaging with themes that would allow the functioning of their creative intervention considering their contested social standing in the caste hierarchy. By emphasizing on the local legends and cults that possibly grew as a result of their emergence from, or association with the larger tradition of goddess worship in Bengal, the *Chitrakar* endeavored to preserve their cultural authority. As the representation of idea of the sacred in the institutionalized domain of religion, noted in the formality of structured ritual processes are backed by religious discourses and remain mostly available to those communities who are considered ritually pure in society, the pictorial-narrative tradition of *Patachitra* deals with the realm of belief and its expression in the form of myths and legends. Through the medium of the myth, the *Chitrakar* is then able to invoke the Sacred and thereby maintain his cultural authority. The story or the myth, which the artist modifies into a personal narrative, provides him with the space for creative representation. The structure is less formal and therefore open to modifications caused by regional influences, belief patterns and improvisation. The *Chitrakar* community is engaged with the mythical representation of the sacred, involving the popular gods and

goddesses and other divine beings that are the personification and embodiments of the popular sacred deities. Myth, following no course of rigid logic, therefore clearly reveals the idea of the moral infused in the representation of the sacred. And the idea of the moral is again closely linked to the understanding of the social. Through the performance of this narrative alongside the display of the scrolls, relating either to the already established gods and goddesses or the locally worshipped deities, the *Chitrakar* artists reaffirm collective belief in the notion of sacred amongst the audience. In the process of the performance, through collective experience of the symbols they reassert on certain codes of moral behavior. By assuming cultural authority through their association with the tradition and the practice of representing the Sacred, the *Chitrakar* therefore continually participate in the representation of the moral in society.

The narrative performance does not represent the story as it has been depicted in the written text. It is more local in terms of the expressions, the terminologies and the way that the storytelling takes place. The narration is not just a passive mode of storytelling, but involves the audience's attention through questions of anxiety, expressions of mourning, rendered through musical couplets. Last two words of a sentence in the narrative are repeated often again as the first two words of the next line, as if to show continuity. The *Chitrakar* community belonging to a relatively low socio-cultural position could not state their cultural authority by elaborating on religious texts whose access and explanation were limited and contingent on factors of ascribed social status and power. The illustration and narration of the *Patachitra* being the hereditary occupation of the *Chitrakar*, the storytellers therefore emphasized on simplifying the text, making it available for the larger community, by highlighting more on their moral content, and thereby asserting its maintenance in the society.

Fig. 5. The scroll of *Manasa mangal* begins with the worship of *Manasa* goddess. On her right is *Chand Saudagar* and on her left is *Behula*. This is the first section of the scroll after which the story starts.

Fig. 6. This section of the patachitra highlights on the death of *Lakhinder* by a snake bite even though the father of the groom had arranged for an iron chamber with no holes. It shows *Behula*'s vain attempt to kill the snake. Above this sestion is the half opened part on the death of *Chand Saudagar*'s previous sons on their voyage on the dea, and the other half below this scene, gives a prelude on what is to follow this section

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Fig. 7. This section, following the previous one shows the river on which *Behula* is seen to float with her dead husband on a boat made out of banana leaves (the part where the *Chitrakar*'s hands point to). To signify the river and a sense of distance travelled, the *Chitrakar* has also illustrated the figure of a man fishing on the river bank. On the other side of the bank, *Behula* is also shown to plead to her father in law, *Chand Saudagar*, to commence the worship of *Manasa* in Bengal.

II.   *Savitri* and *Satyavan*

The story of *Savitri* and *Satyavan* is taken from the grand epic of *Mahabharata*. Dealing with the subject of life, death and the significance of a righteous character, this episode from the *Mahabharata* revolves around the story of *Savitri*, who married *Satyavan*, and through her noble and morally virtuous character managed to argue with *Yama*, the god of death and bring back to life her dead husband. The narrative and the scroll of the *Chitrakar* do not endeavor to provide detail on the philosophical elements that are present in the form of long conversations between *Savitri* and *Yama* in the epic. Instead, by drawing on the theme that is present in the episode, the *Chitrakar* reconstructs within the structure of the plot, the same story in a manner that enables the reaffirmation of certain ideas pertaining to moral values in the collective conscience. The main characters of the story both *Savitri* and *Satyavan* are portrayed as possessing qualities that are considered virtuous in nature. For *Savitri*, who is an incarnation of the goddess *Savitri* herself, it is her morally perfect character, that also gives her the knowledge to argue with *Yama*. The story also emphasizes on the necessity of a morally good character to the extent that the possession of a moral consciousness and socially established virtues is more important than life itself. Hence when *Savitri* expresses her interest in marrying *Satyavan* and her father objects the decision on knowing that he is destined to die soon, *Savitri* replies back saying that the morally and socially exceptional personality of *Satyavan* should not be underestimated because of his limited lifespan. The relation of the moral ideals to the social activities is also explained through the characters of *Savitri* and *Satyavan* in the sense that they maintained certain modes of conduct in their social action due to the presence of their moral values. The need to emphasize more on the performance of the duties expected of the socially established roles rather than the material wealth is also portrayed through the personality of *Savitri* who, in spite of belonging to a royal family, adjusted herself to the simple ways of living in the ashram with her husband. It is again the existence of moral virtues in these characters, whether it is the king *Ashwapati* or the daughter *Savitri* that allows them to remain in close connection with the world of the sacred. The righteous and noble character of *Satyavan*, as one who engages in the hard work of the ashram, takes care of his parents, also in a way can be said to contribute to his revival from death. When *Satyavan* is taken by *Yama*, and *Savitri* chooses to follow

them, it is again her pious and righteous nature that provides her with the knowledge to converse logically with *Yama*. Furthermore, for *Savitri*, it is the idea of the social which is more important than the personal. It is the sense of duty to one's society and prioritizing the need of others before looking into personal needs that is also reflected in the story. Hence, when *Yama* grants her boons one after the other, she asks for the eyesight of her father-in-law, the restoration of his kingdom and her father's wish of begetting sons, before pleading for *Satyavan'*s life. The element of being morally virtuous is then also related to the ability of acquiring and demonstrating knowledge. *Savitri* therefore had the ability to justify her arguments with *Yama*, who in the act of failure of not being able to answer her questions was left with no other choice but to offer her boons, in the course of which too, she demonstrated her knowledge by asking about her husband's family, her own family, and then her husband, and thereby retrieving not only her husband's life, but the fate of both the families.

This episode is not a part of a folk legend, and is taken from the epic of *Mahabharata*. For the *Chitrakar*, the performance of this story then adds on to the aspect of cultural authority as it refers to a classical text. However, although *Mahabharata* has been given the stature of a grand epic, there have been countless translations and regional interpretations with its rendition and popularity as a text that could be made accessible to everyone in their community. Community and family recital sessions of the epic, believed to bestow divine blessings and luck on those present and participating in it; the classical text, has broken down the idea of the sacred being available to those communities who are ascribed as being 'ritually-pure'. Through the medium of myth, the notion of the sacred and its abstention from anything and everything related to the world of the profane has become diluted. Although the very idea of the sacred is still maintained through its separation from the non-sacred, the ordinary or the profane, the sacred is present within the domain of everyday life, in ordinary discourses and in non-institutionalized domains of religious and cultural practices. It is the presence of the sacred among the relatively non-sacred, if not profane, that also contributes to the augmentation of its power and authority. Returning to the subject on the epic of *Mahabharata*, it is then through the form of mythology that the sacred is not kept exclusive and is made accessible to the community. It is hence through this understanding

that the *Chitrakar* artists take stories and events from the classical tradition to reconstruct them and represent them within their *Patachitra* tradition. The reconstruction and reinterpretation of the stories from the epics through visual and narrative techniques function within the line of acceptability. Creativity is therefore permissible so long as it does not establish contradictory situation or thinking. Keeping in mind the idea of the sacred, these artists cum performers then engage in deconstructing and reconstructing texts to engage in practices that reaffirm the socially accepted concept of the sacrosanct, and thereby assert the social identity of their community.

Whether through the depiction of local legends or those involving the representation of more popular and widespread established epics, it is the act of representing religious and moral discourses that confers on the community of the *Chitrakar* the cultural authority, which irrespective of their ascribed social standing, enables them to assert their collective social   identity. Through the interpretive understanding of the traditional practice of the *Chitrakar* in the light of related processes involved in the affirmation of social identity, it can be argued that it is the collective moral which is redefined and venerated as the sacred in the society. It is the idea of a collective conscience that guides conduct and hence facilitates order in society. By harping on the maintenance of the moral as the ideal, which functions through the common conscience shared by the members of the community, social conduct and order is maintained. Maintenance of the moral is then considered as virtuous and those ideals and principles that are socially established and considered to be even more important than individual thought and action. Elevated to a level where their acknowledgment is valued more than that of individual perception and action, this collective conscience is then relegated to the world of the sacred.

Fig.8. This part of the scroll showcasing events from the Mahabharata depicts the story of *Savitri* and *Satyavan*.

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III.   Performance of Identity through the Presentation of the Moral

The insinuation of the idea of the moral in the minds of the audience, who have gathered to hear a *Patachitra* performance, can then be understood in terms of the collective sentiments that are aroused during such moments of togetherness. The performance, take the individuals present, back to a distant mythical past, where the stories of *Behula* and *Savitri* take place. Through the retelling of moments from the lives of these characters and their veneration at the end of the story, the narrative highlights on their valued codes of conduct. The related of the moral to the sacred is therefore quite apparent in these myths where interaction takes place between the deity and the virtuous individual even in the same scene in the drawing, thereby erasing the distance of the sacred from everything non-sacred. Being virtuous and morally upright, miracles take place in their lives. This idea of the moral thus requires recognition of the significance of the social. The symbols used during the performance in the form of images and words accentuate on the idea of the sacred and the moral. It is only through the lived experience of the community of believers, in the context of a performance that the connection between the sacred and moral, and the social can be comprehended. These performances, in terms of their content and the act as such, attract the consciousness of individuals present in the audience. The sense of a shared past is made possible through the association with a common deity and location. As the myth has no timeframe, the story is related to a sense of the present and therefore also an awaited future. And it is this unity of time and space that allows the myth and its rendition through the *Patachitra* performance to remain significant even in the present day, as one which still holds meaning and whose act is considered to bring divine blessings on the audience. It is through this lived experience of the performance that the development of a collective sense takes place, which in turn reaffirms the life-world and correspondingly thought and action. Interestingly, both the myths focus on the virtuous wives saving their husbands from death, thereby highlighting on the patriarchal structure that requires women to be the transmitter of morality. However, as experience remains highly subjective in nature, it is again through their expressions that the underlying discourses can brought to light, thereby indicating the agency of the *Chitrakar* community to function as purveyors of morality in society.

The *Patachitra* tradition, through its visual and narrative components attempts to reaffirm or reassert a point of discussion or an established social value through its creative repetition, rather than stating something new. The *Chitrakar* do not employ their practice to reconstruct history, in order to prove their origin and hence their significance in the contemporary society. Instead, they use the space of myth to creatively reconstruct and represent elements of morality and social order for the larger society to which they belong. Through the visuals of the scrolls and their poetic narratives, the artist who also doubles up as the performer, enables the consciousness of the individuals to be directed to a common plane, towards the understanding of the significance of moral and cultural ideals in society. By directing the consciousness or the attention of the individuals to common objects, the *Chitrakar* helps in the possibility of a common lived experience. The visual and the story, help in the construction of images in the mind of the individuals, which through the direction of the performing artist, is led to a space where the others present in the situation feel and see the same. Through the reference to the morally ideal characters that are venerated or are in close association with the sacred, the *Chitrakar* artists place the attention of the individual on the notion of the social. This idea of the social, through the help of the stories that highlight on the necessity of the collective moral, helps in paving the way for a shared experience, which in turn enables the absorption and reflection of the minds on the need for collective conscience. The space of the myth, whether folk or grand, together with the elements of the visual, the oral word, the performative act of retelling, and the enabling of experience, altogether work in the reproduction of system of belief. And this is what helps in justifying the practice of the *Chitrakar* community, and their socio-political identity. In the process of showing the Other, they create the space for the assertion of their collective identity.

REALIZATION OF THE SOCIAL AS INTERSPERSED BETWEEN THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE NATURAL: CULTURAL AUTHORITY AND IDENTITY IN THE *PATACHITRA* TRADITION OF JHARKHAND

4.1. The *Patachitra* Tradition in Jharkhand

Moving through the hilly and densely forested terrain of the Santhal Parganas in Jharkhand, one readily witnesses the poverty-stricken communities of the tribal, large traces of uninhabited land characterized by the red soil that is unfit for cultivation, and the daily encounter of the locals with utmost forms of struggle and exploitation, to barely make ends meet. Along these almost forgotten paths, amidst these remote villages that are far from any traces of urbanization or development in the general sense of the term, reside the painter-storytellers known as *Chitrakar*.

In the present state of Jharkhand, one of the divisions is the Santhal Parganas. This division comprises of six districts of Dumka, Jamtara, Deoghar, Godda, Sahibganj and Pakur. It is in these regions, that one finds this tradition of scroll painting among artists who like to identify themselves as the *Chitrakar*. To gain an interpretative understanding of the pictorial-narrative tradition in terms of their construction of belief and morality, and the social position of the *Chitrakar* community associated with its practice, the present work was substantiated by fieldwork done in the districts of Dumka, East Singbhum, and Godda, in Jharkhand. In the past, their primary occupation involved that of an itinerant mode of picture-storytelling, for which they roamed around in villages far and near, to acquire payments in cash and kind for their depiction of the scroll of sacred stories from epics, legends, local myths, folklores and religious belief. In the present day, with the transformation of the social situation in the villages, these artists are mostly engaged in casual labour, when they are not engaged in the practice of painting and performance. Geographically a considerable part of the region is not fit for paddy cultivation. Coupled with shortage of water and other facilities, agriculture is not a favourable option for securing income. The tribal regions are located in hinterlands or

near the hills. The rocky terrain, severe lack of water, transport and infrastructural facilities make life extremely difficult and toilsome. With education facilities barely being there, the situation has hardly improved over generations. To make their ends meet the population then engages in casual labour in nearby regions, working at construction ties or in stone-cutting factories. Their daily or seasonal migration makes it difficult for the *Chitrakar* artists to travel around and carry out performances on their scrolls. The artists themselves are also engaged in casual labour, along with painting.

Age-old routes of migration for employment and performance, along the borders of West Bengal and Jharkhand, have allowed them to traverse across boundaries and cultures, illustrating and narrating on local traditions and grand narratives, highlighting on affinities and cultural transformations. The origin of the these picture-storytellers is therefore blurred in terms of their geographical origin, although there is a major difference in the art form, the content and the style of narration of *Patachitra* in Jharkhand and that in West Bengal. Historically it has been argued that it was initially from the Chhota Nagpur region that the Austro-Asiatic tribe migrated to regions of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, giving rise to the tradition of scroll painting that was formerly a Buddhist medium of communication (Bhowmick, 2008).

Although residing in the Santhal Parganas of Jharkhand, these *Chitrakar* artists are not only engaged in tribal forms of art and narration, which is but a part its larger discourse. The *pat* or the scrolls in these regions do not necessarily represent Adivasi painting, although the structure and style reflect tribal patterns. Themes are mostly related to the idea of the ultimate sacred, either reflected in the form of supernatural figures and gods and goddesses or shown through moral discourses of engagement in socially accepted forms of 'good' and 'bad' action. The cultural and religious practices of the region reflect remnants of unstructured yet fairly recurrent modes of migration from and to nearby regions over decades, continuing to the present day, along with the influx and conquest of various external influences infringing on their practices and systems of belief. The population of the region is either divided into the worship of their tribal god *Marang Buru*, or has been internalized into various sects of Vaishnavism.

The *Patachitra* tradition flourished at the time when in the absence of other forms of mass media, this shared medium of cultural communication provided discursive perspectives and ideas influencing belief systems, experience and action. Although with the influx of modern forms of communication and the overpowering discourse of the mass media in the contemporary times, the interpretation and hermeneutical discernment of this tradition is of crucial significance to the understanding of the larger cultural structures of domination at play and their continuous interaction with agencies attempting at transformation and assertion of alternate discourses.
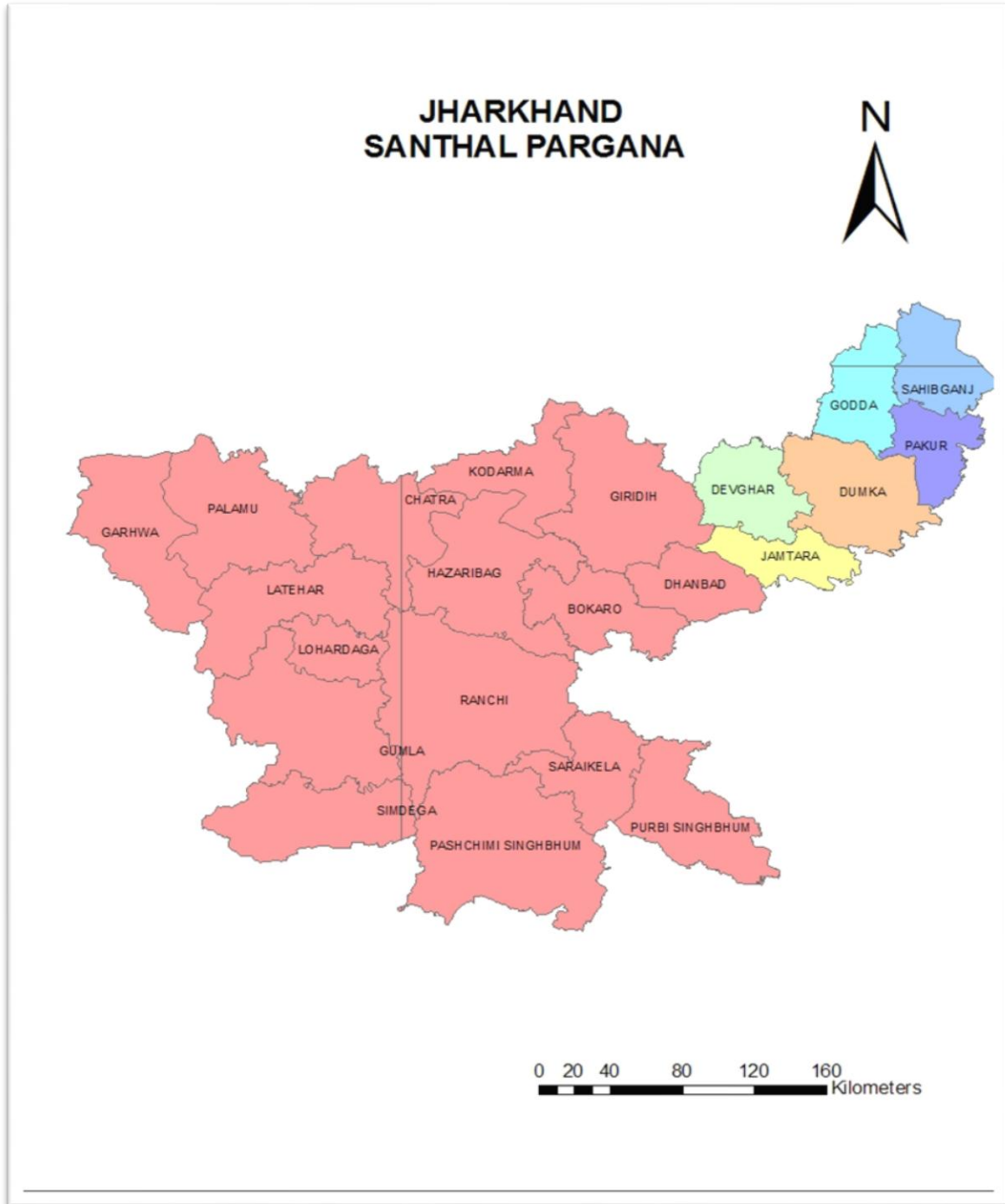
Fig. 9. The map of Jharkhand showing the division of districts. The division of the Santhal Parganas has been highlighted in different colours. The present work was carried out in Dumka and Godda districts.

I.   The *Patachitra*

The scroll or the *Patachitra* in Jharkhand is ideally made on vertical scrolls of cloth, with the ends attached to wooden panels, around which the scroll is wrapped and kept. In the present day, the illustrations are made on paper, which are attached on vertical panels of cloth. In the course of performance, as and with the narration, the *Chitrakar* unwraps and points to the relevant scene complementing the storytelling. The customary practice of painting and storytelling by the *Chitrakar* has been a traditional occupation wherein communities are hereditarily engaged in its illustration and performance. The painting is done mostly by men, and their performance is strictly done by the males in the family. The themes of the *Patachitra* in this region, could be arranged into thematic groups, including the portrayals of life in the realm of the dead; the myth of Creation; the festivals of the Santhal, their dances, certain emblems representing the Santhal clans, and also certain episodes from the life of *Krishna* as being parallel to the life of the Santhal themselves (Mode and Chandra, 1985).

The colours used in this tradition of painting refer to ones that are locally made from natural dyes. As there is no emphasis on the maintenance of this form of art as an aesthetic artifact, the main task being to be able to illustrate the theme and show it around the villages, not much attention is paid to the detailed forms of colouring and ornamentation or display. The figures illustrated on the scroll also reflect tribal patterns of painting and detailed work on the physical appearance of the characters is absent. The illustrations are but figurative of the deeper meaning that is attached to the scroll and through the medium of the *Patachitra*, the *Chitrakar* endeavours to make the audience understand the character, to make possible the creation of a space of collective imagination and thereby encourage the development of the collective consciousness, which is essential for the conveying the underlying message.

In addition to the themes mentioned above, a very popular subject is one that shows the repercussions of bad work or what could be termed as karma on the assumed life that exists after death, and the collectively believed concepts of heaven or hell (McCutchion and Bhowmick, 1999). Known in the local language as the '*jom-pot*' these scrolls illustrate scenes from hell, depicting the punishments and that rewards that are received

after death, mostly stressing on the punishments received in hell due to misdeeds on earth. Emphasizing on the theme of action on earth and its consequent relation to rewards or punishment in a believed afterlife, these scrolls reflect religious influences on the belief in life after death and rebirth as stated in the philosophies of the Buddhist and Hindu religious doctrines. The narratives used along with the scroll of this *Patachitra*, mostly highlight on the negative aspects or the misdeeds of the human being and their result in punishment after death. As McCutchion and Bhowmick (1999) claim, that at the time when Buddhism was being spread across lands and regions, it was this form of scroll-painting, with an emphasis on the life after death, known as *paraloukik pat*, which was used as popular means of propagating the ideas and preaching the teachings of Buddhism. The *paraloukik pat* is now known as *yama-pat*.

Another very popular form of scroll in Jharkhand, prevalent among the *Chitrakar* artists of the region and extremely relevant from the point of view of their social identity and their moral and cultural authority in the region, is the scroll of *Chakshudaan*. The artists who paint this scroll and perform its narration are called the *Jadu-Patua*.[45] This painting relates to the magico-religious domain, and is starkly different from all other forms of scroll painting that have been described in the course of this work. The act of *Chakshudaan* in the *Jadu-pat* is but just a brief yet powerful act through which the *Jadu-Patua* wields authority as the *shaman* or the magico-religious priest. The essence of this practice lies neither in the painting nor in the process of narration that is not elaborate but in its performance by the *Jadu-Patua*. This *Patachitra* is done on a single sheet of paper that involves a crude portrayal of a dead person whose family the *Patua* visits to ask for money and donations in kind, in return of which he promises to ensure the journey of the deceased to heaven.

In the *Jadu-pat* therefore, the word *jadu* refers to a sort of black magic through which the *Jadu-Patua* who performs the role of the shaman makes possible through the act of drawing the pupil on the portrait of a dead person, the journey of the deceased to heaven. The families never go to the house of the *Jadu-Patua* asking for a performance, but it is

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[45] There is a disagreement between the different communities of *Chitrakar* artists residing in different regions of Jharkhand on whether there exists a separate community of artists called the *Jadu-Patua* or whether the painting of the *Jadu-pat* or the *Chakshudaan* scroll is a part of their practice.

the *Patua* who comes after learning about the situation of bereavement of the family demanding money for the ritual act to be performed. Illustration on the cloth or paper scroll is rather crude in form, and its performance is carried out secretly in the absence of an audience other than the family members of the deceased, without the accompaniment of any narrative. This practice is of considerable significance from the point of the power that the discourses relating to the religious and supernatural domain act on the maintenance of collective belief. Interpreting it as being mainly an act of beguiling families and playing on their emotion, the larger communities of the Santhal do realize that it is the deep rooted structure of belief that rationalizes the practice and sustains it to the present day.

There are hence, two basic types of *Patachitra*, one being the *Jadu-pat* and the other being the *lok-pat*[46]. Any scroll dealing with the depiction of any social message, sacred legend, or mythical lineage, fall under the domain of *lok-pat*, with *lok* referring to the domain of folk. In the scrolls dealing with myths and legends pertaining to the origin of the tribe, the primary objective is to transmit to the audience, the hidden message of the story. These myths are located in the larger oral discourse of the region, relating to the maintenance of certain moral principles and social order of conduct. The characters illustrated in the scrolls are mostly symbolic in nature and hence there is space for creativity by the artist. Over the decades, the overall themes may have remained the same but the styles of painting, the choice of colours and the positioning of the characters, the choice to provide details or not, is largely dependent on the *Chitrakar*. More than the need to draw a connection of the mythical characters represented with an actual historical past, there is an emphasis on the sacredness of the story itself in terms of its valued meanings. When the scrolls get damaged with time, they are replaced with the illustration of new ones, and the process of creation and illustration of the *Patachitra* itself is not given too much of attention as being a sacred act in itself.

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[46] This information was provided in the course of interview, by one of the *Chitrakar* artists in Dumka, Santhal Parganas, Jharkhand in October, 2014.

II.   The *Chitrakar* of Jharkhand

Entering the village of Potomda, in the Godda district of Jharkhand, one can see a couple of mud huts with straw thatched roofs placed almost on the outskirts of the village, on both sides of the main road that is being built. This is where four families of *Chitrakar* live with their families. As the community is pretty closely tied and not so populated in number, the members mostly reside at a common area. Being ascribed to a significantly low position in the social hierarchy, the pattern of residence of the artists was quite obvious. Godda being almost near the border of the Jharkhand and West Bengal, the *Chitrakar* artists remarked that many of their other family members reside in the other state. They spoke in Bengali, and identified themselves as practising Hinduism. When asked about the difference between the confusing categories of the *Jadu-pat* and the other scrolls, interestingly these painters stated that they too go to villages to show the pat of *Chakshudaan*. The painters first inquire around the locality to know if there is a family who has lost a member recently. They then go to this household remarking on the plight of the soul of the deceased due to bad deeds committed in the course of life. Demanding for money and usually food items, the *Chitrakar* then performs the task of *Chakshudaan* or restores the eyesight, and enables the deceased to reach heaven. Sometimes this painting is kept by the family as a memoir. Employment opportunities being scarce in the region, they are not left with many choices in terms of work. *Jadu-pat* is a source of earning money. Therefore, although in many other regions, the *Chitrakar* artists were not very comfortable talking about the scroll of *Chakshudaan*, or mentioned that it is done by a different community of artists, the artists here were relatively more open about it and their association with its practice. When asked about their work situation, a *Chitrakar* replied,

> "We have not left painting and narrating the *Patachitra*. But as you see doing this is not enough to sustain ourselves. When we get calls for casual work from the middleman, we go and earn some money for ourselves. Then we come back and work on our paintings. Sometimes we get calls from art organizations to showcase and sell our paintings in Jamshedpur or even Calcutta. So then we go there."

The respondent was staying in a joint family, and he added,

> "My elder brother has gone out to show *Patachitra*[47] in the nearby villages, with my father. Sometimes he also goes to the nearby temple areas. Usually he returns in two to three days. I take care of everyone here. Sometimes I go for casual work. Our mode of income is not fixed. So we have to do whatever work we get. But I too paint the *Patachitra* whenever I get time or when I find an interesting theme, or when there is a demand for its sale. It runs in our blood. My children will also learn it."

Again, in the East Singhbhum district, miles away from the small town of Dhalbhumgarh lies the village of Amadubi. The village is populated mostly with the Santhal tribe, whose huts are distinctly noticeable by the colourful decorations and designs depicted on the walls. Beyond the settlement of the Santhal, are the houses of the *Chitrakar* community. These pictorial-storytellers who follow the Vaishnavism sect, being adept at singing, are also engaged in local tours on performances of hymns or *kirtan* at religious gatherings. Apart from this, they mostly engage in casual labour. In the course of conversation with them during field visits, their attempt to conceal their low ascribed status was apparent from their rationale to not engage in agricultural pursuits being provided on the grounds that the land was not cultivable.[48] Historical evidence suggests that with the popularity of the Hindu saint *Chaitanya*; parts of Bengal witnessed the development of Vaishnavism as a sect of Hindu religion. This led to significant endeavours in large parts of population in West Bengal and also in Jharkhand to convert into Vaishnavism. Assumedly, those sections of the population that were on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy chose to convert to escape the brahminical domination and authority. In Jharkhand, a large section of the tribal population also converted into the Vaishnava sect to improve their social standing. Whether they were formerly Santhal or from the *Patua* caste is not certain as there is hardly any documentation on their history. But their assertion in avoiding

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[47] Showing does not merely mean displaying the painted scroll. The sentence in Bengali, which he said, was '*Patachitra* dekhate geche'. In the context of this tradition, 'dekhate' or 'dekhano' meaning showing would mean showcasing or rather performing on the *Patachitra* in the villages. If the painter goes to the city, showing the *Patachitra* would also mean showing it to a potential customer. In the village, nobody purchases the *Patachitra*. Its significance lies in its performance by the *Chitrakar*.

[48] Although it is true that there are large tracts of land covered in red soil and rocks unfit for agriculture, it is also important to keep in mind that the social position of a community in the caste hierarchy also determines their access to land. The *Chitrakar* community therefore does not have ownership over cultivable land, and other than *Patachitra* they are involved in casual labour.

explaining the tradition of the *Jadu-Patua* or their simple refusal in terms of knowing anything about it and therefore the inability of providing any information about it was quite evident. However, even though there was an obvious attempt to refrain from giving information about *Jadu-Patua* and relegating them to an even lower position, no conclusion can be reached about their original identity from these conversations alone.

Journeying over to the Dumka district, the cluster of residence of the *Chitrakar* community is to be found on the outskirts of small villages about twenty-five to thirty kilometres away from the town of Dumka, and even on the way to the Masanjore dam. Apart from the panchayat office that keeps a track of the population of the area, government offices and the local people in the town are unsure of where these *Chitrakar* artists stay. Many of them engage in daily wage labour and the performance of scrolls have become an additional source of income. With information from their relatives and other members of the kin, some of these artists also travel to the city for performing exhibitions or for working on producing *Patachitra* and other artifacts inspired from their art, for which they are commissioned. Sometimes when they do not get work, or have other commitments, they take their bag of scrolls and visit nearby villages performing and narrating the illustrated *Patachitra*, in return for donations mostly in kind.

When asked about the *Jadu-pat*, these artists stated that there are separate painters who are hereditarily associated with it, or the act of *Chakshudaan*. Scrolls pertaining to the Adivasi community are not all *Jadu-pat*, and the latter is but just one of them, that are painted by *Patua* who are from the Santhal community itself. *Jadu-pat*, as one of the *Chitrakar* replied is not a form of art, but a form of magic, hence the name *jadu*. It is *jadu* in the sense that the Santhal *Patua* assuming the position of the ultimate authority on matters relating to afterlife, this form of *pat* is mainly an act of taking advantage and deceiving the people in their community[49]. It is completely different from the *lok-pat* in

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[49] Although the *Jadu-Patua* occupies an authoritative postion in the life of the Santhal community, in the larger society they are looked down upon socially as belonging to a low socio-religious position. The *Chitrakar* artists therefore claim to never visit them. Interestingly, in Sikaripara in Dumka, where these *Chitrakar* were found, there exists an entire village called Jadopatia. This is however misleading, as it refers to artisans who are engaged in the work of Dokra.

What has been noticed is that the historical documentation of the region, in terms of the trajectory of the different tribes and castes from a semantic perspective has remained highly neglected. With the interaction between the tribes and the people from different dialects, cultural meanings representative of socio-political identity of the different communities in the region have become muddled. Being engaged in oral traditions

which the *Chitrakar* is referred to as the *shilpi*, which can be roughly translated as artist. The *Chitrakar* community of this region are therefore mostly associated with the painting of scrolls relating to the origin and life of the Adivasi, as well as scrolls portraying episodes from popular legends, the epics of *Ramanya*, and the events relating to the birth and life of *Krishna*.

As stated by Binoy Bhattacharjee (1980) in his work on the *Patua* of Bengal, L.S.S.O. Malley in his Bengal census report of the year 1901 wrote on the community of *Patua*, known as the *Jadu-Patua*. These *Patua* have been recorded as a minor caste under castes and sub-castes in the Census of 1901. As for their socio-religious customs and practices, there is not much of a difference. Bhattacharjee (1980) reported that they lived in the forest regions of the Santhal Parganas in Jharkhand, with also a few of them in Bankura, Birbhum and Purulia districts of West Bengal. These tribal *Patua* artists claim to be the predecessors of the Muslim or the Hindu *Patua* in the history of scroll-painting.

III.   The Performance

The performance of the *Patachitra* is not associated with the commencement of festivals or special occasions. Unlike the past, when this was their primary and in fact only mode of occupation, *Chitrakar* in the present day in Jharkhand engage in the practice of this tradition when they have less work at hand and when the climate permits them to travel to nearby and distant villages. Since most of them are engaged in daily wage labour, the absence of long-term contractual form of work, allows them to take their scrolls and travel to the villages to perform on their paintings and earn some money or receive some donation in kind, which serves as an additional source of income.

The performance usually happens at some point of time during the day, in an open space. The *Chitrakar* artists mostly travel with one or few of their male family members or other kin relatives. They carry with themselves the scrolls that are popular among the audience. As the act of narration of the sacred myths and stories are believed to provide the

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that demanded an itinerant lifestyle, the social identity of the *Chitrakar* or the *Patua* in Jharkhand have undergone several   transformations and levels of restructuring, leaving the task of attempts at the interpretative understanding of social identity contingent on the larger social memory of the community and the cultural imagination of the artist.

audience with blessings, sometimes a family also calls for the *Chitrakar* or *Patua* to perform when there is some personal good news for which, as an act of reverence they commission the performance, or for invoking the deity when they seek for blessings before the commencement of any task. The *Chitrakar* begins the performance by singings hymns of gods and goddesses followed by which he proceeds to the narration of the scroll. He does not lay out the entire scroll all at once in the beginning, but gradually unfolds it as the narration progresses, pointing his hand to the relevant section in the scroll.

The narrative is extremely significant in the *Patachitra* tradition in Jharkhand[50] and the paintings are done mainly to accompany the narratives. The narrative functions as the space that allows for the creative power of the performer to be realized. Most of the narratives as well as the painting have a personal touch of the artist. The aim is to convey the main theme or the message to the audience. The fixity of the illustrations and style of depiction of the characters in terms of maintaining the visual structure is not held to be necessary. The requirement is, on the other hand, how to make the message more creative and presentable within a new theme. The *Chitrakar* artists therefore engage in the production of new elements in the scroll, keeping the main theme of the story and characters intact. Their narrative is orally transmitted to the artists who are themselves the performers. The *Chitrakar* in Jharkhand also is well placed in terms of linguistic capability, as he keeps a good hold on the language of the tribal communities as well as the other dialects like Bengali and Hindi used in the region.

IV.   The Myths and Narratives

In Jharkhand, the *Patachitra* tradition is influenced by the waves of Vaishnavism, and by the effects of the religious communities of nearby regions. Other than the tribal themes, all these influences have found their way in the scroll painting and narrative tradition. Mythical renditions of the tribal origin as well as those relating to the stories and episodes from Hindu mythology and popular epics, all form a very significant repository of

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[50] This is so, keeping in mind the exception of the *Chakshudaan* scroll, which is marked by the absence of poetic, elaborate or creative narration of a myth or a common legend, and is instead characterized by the descriptive narration of a situation that is unknown to the audience.

cultural discourse framing the social identity of the community of the *Chitrakar* who engage with it through the *Patachitra*, as well as the larger society in which it is practiced. The themes of the scrolls are diverse, ranging from the *Jom-pat*, the *pat* on *Pilchu haram* and *Pilchu buri*, on the Santhal myth of creation, on indigenous festivals, on *Jagannath* or *Krishna*, to the *Chakshudaan pat*. The scrolls that are intended for display and performance in the local community or the nearby villages are not detailed and intricate in nature. Some recent scrolls that are produced for the international market are however illustrated with designs and motives that are reflective of the Santhal life. Although not similar to any other form of *Patachitra* in the region or anywhere else, the *Chakshudaan pat* is of prime significance in the life and society of the Santhal tribe. Other than this, it is the story of the *Pilchu haram* and *Pilchu buri* who are mythically believed to be their ancestors that is also listened to by the community to reaffirm their sense of a collective origin and a shared past.

Considering the lack of work in the region and the rut of poverty people are engulfed in, casual labour is the most common form of work in the region. Barring some tracts of cultivable land, most of the residents of this region migrate out seasonally or daily, for work. This has affected the traditional system of performance of the *Patachitra*. Marked by religious conversion, many tribal communities do not prefer being acknowledged with the performance of tribal *Patachitra* and also like to hear the narration of scrolls on themes from Hindu mythology. Amidst all these transformations and undercurrents, the *Chitrakar* endeavors to hold on to the traditional identity of the community as one of performing artists who make possible the reiteration of history and collective belief in the society. In the tribal society, it is therefore through their performance of the scrolls pertaining to the myth of *pilchu haram* and *pilchu buri* (the myth of origin) and the *jadu-pat* that they make way for the maintenance of their cultural authority and their social identity.

Chakshudaan

Not considered as *Patachitra* in the usual sense of the term, *Chakshudaan pat* does not involve scrolls of cloth but a single piece of cloth or paper, and is not performed in front of an open audience but secretly only in the presence of the members of the family into

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whose house the *Chitrakar* has visited. The contents do not involve the visual elaboration of some myth, but simply the portrait of a dead person, either a female or a male. The significance of the *Chakshudaan* therefore lies in the power of the *Chitrakar* who uses this scroll neither for moral instructions nor for entertainment, but as a ritual to assert his religious power in the society. The *Chakshudaan pat* is only carried out by the male *Chitrakar*, and it is not certain whether all the *Chitrakar* artists engage in this form of art or whether there has always been a specific category of painters associated with it. However, irrespective of the blurred understanding of the relation between the larger *Chitrakar* community and the practice of *Jadu-pat*, the act of *Chakshudaan* is still very significant for understanding the different ways in which agency functions to authorize communities and practices in certain contexts and again conceals those elements of knowledge and practices to assert identity in other.

Jadu-pat is a type of scroll which is mostly used for performances in the tribal regions by the *Chitrakar*. As apparent from the name, this pat or scroll does not simply involve the tradition of retelling or narration to evoke cultural memory, and contains what may be broadly translated as an element of magic. This understanding of magic however, includes an aspect of religious or spiritual authority. There is no traditional patron-client relationship and every believer is potentially a client. Unlike other forms of *Patachitra*, the performance of this act does not take place in front of an open audience. Neither is it called for by the members of the community and nor does its performance lead to divine blessing. Instead, this practice is maintained to avoid its otherwise negative effects. One such practice is known as the act of *Chakshudaan*, and its *Patachitra* is known as the *Chakshudaan pat*. Although the terms *Chakshudaan pat* and *jadu-pat* are coterminous, it is the act of *Chakshudaan* that defines the practice. This tradition is more about the practice or the performance where the scroll is used as a prop, rather than one that is of some visual significance. The images drawn on this *pat* are not detailed or intricately designed, and are rather crudely depicted. There is no myth on which the *Chakshudaan pat* is illustrated or narrated. But it is due to its significance and contribution to the collective belief in the society concerning morality and virtue, and the maintenance of social identity of the artists, that it has been described in the present context.

When somebody from the tribal community passes away, the *Chitrakar*, or the *Jadu-Patua*[51], as he is more commonly referred to, visits the family of the bereaved. The village community being relatively more closely tied to each other through kin and the idea of collective feeling, the artist come to know about the death through neighbors of the family or other relatives of the dead person. He then goes to the concerned family and shows his painted piece of paper, on which an imaginative portrait of the person has been illustrated. It is not necessary for the *Jadu-Patua* to have known the person before his death, to be able to draw him. Though the image symbolizes the late person, it is the narration that is more important than the image. As the painter has arrived at the home of the deceased, it is assumed that the portrait refers to the same person. The illustration is more in the form of a sketch, or an outline that has been painted of the person, with a colourless, blank background. Certain additional illustrations are made of some material possession of the deceased, like an umbrella, or a hen, or both. When the *Patua* comes to know about the deceased from the members of the village community, he also asks them about the physical features and other related questions to get an idea about the person's age, the cause of her or his death, and the economic condition of the family. As most of these tribal communities are located in extremely interior and remote parts of the region, their economic situation is impecunious. So their material possession would mostly consist of simple objects of everyday life, like an umbrella, or maybe in the form of animals such as a goat, or even a hen. Accordingly when the *Patua* illustrates the image, he keeps in mind, the age of the person, the sex, physical features, and the material property of the person. Old age could be depicted through the use of a walking stick, or the bent posture of the image.

The *Patua* generally prepares the image in advance and then goes to visit the concerned family. As the name suggests *Jadu-pat*, the artist refers to the illustration on the cloth or paper scroll and explains to the family that their deceased relative has not been able to successfully reach heaven after death. Due to the engagement in non-moral activities and impiety, the soul is unable to view the path leading to heaven. The deceased according to the *Patua*, is basically blinded due to his or her transgression from the moral norms

[51] As mentioned before, there is a lack of clarity on the difference between the *Chitrakar* and the *Jadu-Patua*. Some reveal that the *Jadu-pat* is drawn by the *Chitrakar* artists themselves. Others state that these *Jadu-Patua* artists belong to the tribal community and also act as the '*shaman*'.

during the lifetime. The image on the scroll or on the piece of paper is therefore depicted without the iris of the eye. There is often a bowl of water that is drawn beside the figure. The *Patua*, being the expert in matters of the supernatural and the other world, claims that he can see the soul wandering aimlessly due to the loss of eyesight. Stating the problem at, the *Patua* then asks for some donation in the form of money and/ or some food items and the personal belongings of the deceased. When he is given them, he uses his paint brush to draw back the eyeball or the iris, and this is what is known as the act of *Chaksudaan*. *Daan* in this context can be translated as an act of donation, one that could rise out of willingness or authority. In this case it is also implicative of authority of the artist.

The drawing of the eyeball or the iris is an act of power, which springs from the religious authority of the *Jadu-Patua* in the first pace and goes ahead to maintain it. The *Chakshudaan* is then a ritual that is supported by the community's belief in afterlife and the power of the *Patua* to intermediate between the two worlds. It is a ritual in which, the image that is symbolic of the deceased person comes to represent the person itself, and the act of drawing on the sheet of paper is supposed to alter the person's fate or future concerned. With the act of *Chakshudaan*, the soul is believed to have found back the eyesight, which then makes it possible for it to go towards heaven. After the act that is secretly performed only in the presence of the family members of the deceased, the *Patua* leaves after collecting the donations provided to him. The *pat* of *Chakshudaan* is then significant to understand the intricate relationship between the sacred and the moral, how the intricacies of social identity operate even within the larger community of the *Chitrakar*, and how the moral is represented in different ways by the *Chitrakar* to assert and maintain their collective identity.

Fig. 10. This is a *Chakshudaan* scroll, as painted by a *Chitrakar* in advance. The iris of the eye is therefore kept blank. The popular forms of property illustrated on the scroll are usually a hen, goat or an umbrella. There is not much emphasis given on detailing. The background is usually kept blank, to refer to the present condition of the soul of the departed as wandering in space.

The Myth of the Origin of the Santhal: *Pilchu haram* **and** *Pilchu buri*

This is the myth detailing on the origin of the Santhal community in Jharkhand. It does not assert to a specific historical location or a point of time in the past, but attempts to locate a possible situation of creation that is constructed in the imaginative space of the collective mind. This enabling of the social imagination further allows the projection of a certain past that is collectively experienced, providing a sense of a shared origin and facilitates in the affirmation of the power of the social or the community in the present day. This *Patachitra* is performed only in the Santhal community and is done by the non-tribal *Chitrakar* community[52] of Jharkhand. Performed by male artists, the myth is in the Santhal language and the characters lack any intricate detailing in terms of the visual display on the scroll.

The myth set in an imagined time of the past, deals with the story of the husband *Pilchu haram* and his wife *Pilchu buri*. The story begins with the description of *Marang Buru*, the revered god of the Santhal community and how different human beings, animals and insects were born on earth. In the beginning, there were no human beings. Three cows stepped on earth from a holy lake and from one of the cows, two flies were born. Gradually they developed wings and started to fly, encircling the earth. Thus in the process they developed into ducks. Encircling all over the earth, they realized that there was no sign of land anywhere. So they prayed to the gods *Marang Buru* and *Jaher Buri* for help. The gods heard their prayer and asked them to get soil from *pataal* or the underworld. Although several insects attempted to get soil from the underworld, they remained unsuccessful. It was the *kechua*, or the earthworm that managed to carry some soil to the earth. This soil was kept on the back of a turtle and habitation started on earth. *Marang buru* also planted lotus plants in the water and on its leaves stayed the two ducks. After twelve years they lay one egg each, and thus were born the first human beings, a

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[52] Again, this is the information shared by one of the artists in Jharkhand, and therefore its factuality is doubtful. The distinction between the tribal and the non-tribal artists is very prominent in the conversations of most of the scroll-painters of Jharkhand. In the course of the fieldwork, all the respondents with whom interaction has taken place, none of them claimed to be tribal in terms of ethnic identity, or mentioned a possibility of a tribal origin. In fact there were endeavors witnessed throughout the course of interaction to avoid or cover up any discussion on the tribal painters. As mentioned by one of the *Chitrakar* artists from Dumka, the tribal *Jadu-Patua* are usually relegated to a less respectable socio-cultural position, owing to the fact that they practice magic and beguile the bereaved families. Interestingly, those associated with the painting of *Chakshudaan* are still identified as *Patua* while others identify themselves as belonging to the *Chitrakar* community.

brother and a sister. On the creation of the humans, the god *Marang buru* was however enraged and he decided to get them killed. So for the next seven days and nights there was a great fire, in which he decided, they would be killed. However, both the brother and the sister dug out a hole and hid behind a rock underground. When *Marang buru* realized that even after the great fire they were alive, he put away the idea of killing them. As the brother and sister traveled they saw a monkey eating the root of a tree and getting drowsy. They decided to prepare a drink from this root, which later came to be known as the *haria*, or the local wine, for their consumption. *Pilchu haram* and *Pilchu buri* as they were called prepared the drink by smashing the roots with a rock. In the meanwhile a snake entered the kitchen and they decided to tie it up to a thorn tree and kill it with one of their tools. After drinking the *haria*, the name of which could possibly be related to the *hari* or the pot in which the drink was made; in a state of drunkenness, the brother and sister got married to each other, not realizing that they were related by blood. The *Chitrakar* stated repeatedly in the course of narration that he referred to the *shashtra* or the classical text, to interpret the visuals in the scroll. Going back to the story, after the marriage of *Pilchu haram* to *Pilchu buri*, seven brothers and seven sisters were born. Out of happiness, *Pilchu haram* asked his wife to prepare *haria* again. When she did not pay any heed to him even after he requested thrice, he took out a broom and hit her. *Pilchu buri* replied that since he had hurt her without any reason, she would not live with him anymore. And so they decided to divide the children amongst them and get separated, with the man *Pilchu haram* taking all the male children with him and *Pilchu buri* keeping all the female children with her. When the children grew up, one day the brothers went hunting and killed a deer in the forest. At about the same time, they heard a group of girls singing nearby. The eldest of the brothers decided to search them. On finding them, they asked the girls which caste or *jati* they belonged to? When the girls asked them back the same question they replied back saying that all the sub castes in the region were related to them. The brothers then decided to get married to these girls not knowing that they were kin, separated at birth. The rest of the story describes their life, their discovering other animals through hunting for food, and also the death of *Pilchu buri* and *Pilchu haram* with the god of death *Yama* coming to take their souls and the rest of the people singing *kirtan*, to ensure the resting of the soul in peace.

Fig. 11. A section of the scroll on the 'Myth of Creation'

4.2. Tracing a Mythical Past and Interceding with the Supernatural: Symbolic Representations in the Construction of Social Identity

The *Patachitra* tradition of Jharkhand comprises of the painting of scrolls related to religious, moral and social issues in the form of myths and legends undertaken by a community of hereditarily established artists cum performers engaged in its practice. The tradition does not exist merely as a form of audio-visual entertainment for communities in which they are performed and is reflective of deeper interplay between the dominant cultural discourses and the transformative forces that takes place in society. The understanding of this age-old practice of illustration and narrative storytelling is significant from how its creation and dissemination not only allows for the reaffirmation and reconstruction of cultural and moral discourses, but how in the course of this process, the tradition contributes to the question of social identity of the communities associated with its practice. In the attempt of redefining and reinstating the cultural system and the belief of the larger society in terms of the communities in which it is performed, which has repercussions on their perception, experience, action and therefore identity, these performers challenge their contested positions of ascribed socio-cultural status and through the space of cultural authority assert their collective social identity.

The lack of proper documentation, the miscellany of oral discourses, the contradiction discerned on the theme of the *Jadu-Patua* and the *Chitrakar*, render an interpretive explanation of this tradition in Jharkhand even more significant for understanding how within the space of cultural performance, the *Chitrakar* assert the collective identity of their community. By contributing to the production of cultural belief in the larger community, these pictorial-storytellers intervene in the continuous construction and reconstruction of discursive formations that takes place in the society, reshaping bodies of knowledge and patterns of meaning. Functioning as cultural agents, these artists affirm their authority as prime and socially authenticated sources of mythology, religious practices, and providing insights on the local culture. In this process of asserting their authority, they therefore retrieve, manifest and affirm their collective socio-political identity. In terms of their socio-political identity in the present day, these artists continue to use the title of *Chitrakar* as their surname, although the practice of painting and narration has become a secondary one.

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A significant problem in the research of an oral tradition, one that is marked by a tumultuous history of continual migration and transformation in socio-religious and political identity, is the authenticity of the data collected. This becomes even more problematic when the tradition that was essentially functionally significant for maintaining the moral order and the idea of the collectivity through the shared cultural repertoire, is faced with the alluring visage of the capitalist market, which substantially profits from the circulation the image, especially those on the economic and social margins as exotic. In order to withstand the competition of the market, these artists who have since long fought with the perils of social domination and poverty, then mould their answers to appear to be more enchanting and fascinating to the external eye. This is the problem that was realized when in the different villages the difference between *Jadu-pat* and other forms of *pat* were asked, as an obvious attempt to recognize and understand the differences between the Santhal *Patua* and the non-santhal or the converted *Chitrakar*. One of the most significant concerns in the community of the *Chitrakar* in Jharkhand, relating to their notion of collective identity, is that of their relation with the tribal *Patua*. Initially believing that conversations and interaction with the artists residing in the region would be able to clarify on this, the development of the research and the study of different regions revealed that there is no common understanding on this theme, or maybe there is a conscious attempt to filter the information provided so as to not appear vulnerable or in a contested position. Being a prime cultural agent in the communities in which he performs, the *Chitrakar* therefore as if in an unconscious attempt, refrains from positioning oneself as the subject of critical inquiry.

Among the three field areas, while in the first village, the *Chitrakar* stated that they too went around villages showing *Jadu-pat*, although at the same time they denied being Santhal in origin and also mentioned about the illustration of other scrolls depicting Hindu myths, the second region refrained from detailing anything about it stating that the *Jadu-Patua* were not respected in the larger society, and the third mentioned that there was a marked difference in the practice and social status of the *Chitrakar* and the *Jadu-Patua*. The difference between two types of painting that leads to different concomitant trajectories of socio-cultural and political identities were hence not starkly visible in the

field as different localities and different artists provided their own versions of the understanding.

A point that was highlighted in all three regions was a significant need to dissociate the identity of the *Chitrakar* from the *Jadu-Patua*. What could be interpreted from these situations was that *Jadu-pat* is by and large a Santhal art form, that which, in the course of conversations, were not approved of by the *Chitrakar* as *Patachitra* in the proper sense of the term, as it is used for a completely different purpose. But since there has been an undocumented and largely untraced history of continuous migration between the states of Jharkhand and West Bengal, alongside the traces of religious struggles, movements, and history of conversion, blurring boundaries between the neatly demarcated markers of identity assumed to exist and the institutional frameworks of religion, the difference between the two does not remain distinct. The *Chitrakar* community could have migrated from West Bengal and settled in these regions, practicing the art form. Or it could be so that the Santhal *Patua* over generations could have undergone conversion into the Vaishnava sect and appropriated certain cultural traits and practices of those communities with a better ascribed status in the society. Since they were already into the tradition of the *Patachitra* and were known as *Patua*, converting and expanding their art form from the depiction of *Chakshudaan pat* to other forms of *Patachitra* was not too difficult. And this gradual change marked over a period of a couple of generations could have easily remained unnoticed as the mode of living of these pictorial-storytellers has remained highly peripatetic.

However, the main intention was not to embark on an attempt to validate the authenticity of the information collected by quantitatively seeking similar patterns and therefore arriving at a common conclusion. Rather than simply stressing on the explanatory aspect, the attempt was to first explore and understand; the interplay between the multiple processes and structures of society at work, dominant discourses and alternative forms of knowledge at play, and the intricately complex interrelation of the human agents and social institutions, and that between different agents, in the construction of meanings that make sense of social reality. In this process, what could be understood is that there is no single version of social reality; like multiple agents, there are multiple meanings, each of which attempts to reaffirm itself and factualize its authenticity through the production of

collective belief. It is through these tendencies and contexts that social identity is constructed and continually restructured.

The performance of scrolls pertaining to tribal themes is not encouraged in the non-tribal regions, and the *Chitrakar* of Jharkhand who are also involved in the narrative storytelling of *Patachitra* on tribal themes, are not very open about their association with it. As the artists stated, the knowledge about their performance in the tribal society would be disadvantageous in terms of their present social position and their performance among the non-tribal communities. Their relation to the knowledge and practice of tribal *Patachitra* mostly on the myth of creation and *yama pat* is therefore mostly kept under wraps. Whether this has to do with their possible relation to a tribal identity in the past and therefore their recent emphasis on showing Hindu themes, is not clear. Although there has been historical evidence to state the occurrence of religious movements and conversions in the region, there is no proof to confirm their past belief and practices. Their lack of access to cultivable land even in the present day and the nature of their residence reveal that not much change has taken place in terms of the betterment of their social position. Even the local administration is not well aware of these artists in terms of their work and their residence. The *Chitrakar* artists from Bengal sometimes buy their scrolls on the tribal themes and keep them for exhibitions. The themes of the scroll and its related narratives hinge on the reassertion and representation of cultural discourses, which contributes towards the authentication of the collective social identity of the *Chitrakar* community as well the affirmation of the socio-cultural identity of the communities in which it is performed. The interpretation of the themes of the scrolls and the narratives accompanying them therefore enable in the understanding of the underlying messages and discourses at work, and thereby bring to light the space created in this merging of art and performance, in which the artist as the painter and the performer exercises his creative agency.

I. Mediating and Visualizing a Sense of the Otherworld: The *Chakshudaan pat*

Although the *Chakshudaan pat* was personally available with every *Chitrakar* who was interviewed in the region, one cannot ascertain from this that they actively engage in its practice in the present day. Moreover, the inconsistency with the information provided by the different *Chitrakar* artists, some of whom were reluctant to divulge any knowledge regarding the act of *Chakshudaan*, while others relegated them as practice carried out strictly by the tribal community, and still others confirming that as the *Chitrakar* they are also involved in the painting of the *Chakshudaan*, altogether does not lead to a clear picture. What can be interpreted from the different situations, by tracing snippets of the history of migration of the *Chitrakar* community in the regions of Jharkhand and Bengal, and the occurrence of religious conversions, is that there is a relation between this artist community in Jharkhand and the practice of *Chakshudaan*. The *Chitrakar* community in Jharkhand and West Bengal has for centuries had an itinerary lifestyle, permeating borders for earning their source of livelihood. In the case of Jharkhand, what could be underlined as one of the strands of possible explanation is that in the historical past, in order to have access to a better social position, a significant proportion of the tribal population took to Vaishnavism. The *Patachitra* artists were among them. This can be observed in their names which are similar to the tribal names in the region (although they all share the surname of the *Chitrakar*), their themes of painting and their reluctance to provide any information on the tribal painters. Due to their religious conversion it is possible that many of the *Chitrakar* artists refuse to acknowledge tribal art as falling under the domain of *Patachitra*, as their art form and their socio-cultural history and geographical context reveals that these artists could also be associated with the illustration of *Jadu-pat*. Since the notion of *jadu* or magic in this context had a negative connotation in terms of fooling or deceiving people through magic, the community of *Chitrakar* in order to continue their performance even in non-tribal areas, stopped associating themselves openly with the *Jadu-pat*[53].

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[53] In the course of fieldwork, there was no separate *Jadu-Patua* who was interviewed. None could be located, as those *Chitrakar* artists who mentioned the difference between them and the former, also stated

Chakshudaan pat, a specific form of *Patachitra* found to be practiced only in the tribal regions of Jharkhand, deals with the destiny of the soul into the Other world after leaving the body. Since it relates to the larger body of belief pertaining to life and religion in the Santhal community, the practice is more of a ritual than a performance in the general sense of the term. However, it is not a ritual that all the members of the community positively participate in. *Jadu*, as the name suggests, includes an element of magic, rather the use of sympathetic magic in which the ritual is performed in private. *Chakshudaan pat* which is a form of *Jadu-pat*, or the act of *Chakshudaan* which is the strongest element of magic in the *Jadu-pat*, is performed within the confines of the family in which the *Jadu-Patua* visits. The engagement with this type of painting and its customary ritual act of *Chakshudaan* then bestows on the artist, not only with cultural authority pertaining to the representation and manifestation of established discourses from the society, but furnishes him with the power to create and maintain a discourse of authority that emerges from and is maintained from his traditional practice.

The practice although a part of the collective belief system, is not necessary from the point of view of the community or the family of the deceased. The absence of the ritual would not entail the family members of the deceased to visit the *Patua*[54]. Instead, the power of the act is revealed when the *Patua* confronts the family with the unfinished *Chakshudaan pat*. Although not necessary welcomed or invited, the *Patua* is usually not avoided as well by the tribal community when he visits the family. The ritual is then initiated by the *Patua* himself, who is also the magico-religious priest. The engagement of the *Patua* in getting hold of the information about recent deaths in the village and seeking description of the deceased, itself affirm that the act is relatively more significant for the *Patua* himself than the others. The *Patua*, is assumed by the rest of the community to possess special powers to communicate to the world of the supernatural. The performance of *Chakshudaan* is also a very private act, one that is only meant for the deceased and that works for that particular soul. Its performance in a secret manner, in the absence of the other members of the community helps maintain the significance that

that these magico-religious painters of the *Jadu-pat* stay mostly in even more interior locales, near the forest, and moreover, they do not have a fixed residence.

[54] Important to note, all the *Chitrakar* artists whether in West Bengal or in Jharkhand, referred to the painters of the *Jadu-pat*, as *Patua*, indicating their relatively lower social status in relation to the *Chitrakar*.

is accorded to the process. As the painting is simply believed to be reflective of the dead person, and it does not contain any details, its community performance could reduce the intensity of the practice as the magical element would be reduced to a minimum, and it would be only considered as a repetitive form of art with limited religious or cultural significance.

In other forms of *Patachitra*, the community's participation in the form of audience during the performance is also an important factor relating to the social identity of the *Chitrakar*, and the community acknowledges the tradition as it directly represents and reconfirms their cultural belief, moral values and social practices. However, in the case of the *Jadu-pat*, the community acknowledges its practice not out of a complete voluntary participation in it, but because it imposes itself on them with authority and fear. For the *Jadu-Patua*, it is not through the representation of some discourse that is already established but the depiction of a theme relating to the world which is unseen, that the authority is maintained. As the consciousness is directed to the ideas of past, present and future, something that has not been experienced or is not capable of being experienced while living in this world of human beings, induces a sense of uncertainty. Imagining the future then becomes difficult, as it has not been experienced and is not marked by dispositions or ideas guiding thought and behavior. In such a context, when the *Patua* poses as the sole person who in the state of living in this world, is capable of viewing and communicating with the other world, this position provides him with a sense of authority. It is with this notion of cultural authority and expertise that the *Patua* then asserts his social identity. This process of identification however, is not directed towards any individual *Patua*. The very basis justifying their act is their association to the traditional community of the *Patua*, which has been hereditarily maintained. The markers of social identity, with which the *jadu-patua* wishes to be perceived and understood is then a part of the collective group, to which he belongs and from which he still derives his socio-political identity.

Interestingly even within Jharkhand, the painters associated with the scroll of *chakshudaan* is referred to as the *Patua* or the *Jadu-Patua*, while the rest of the community associated with *Patachitra* are referred to as the *Chitrakar*. The prefixing of the term *jadu* is understandable considering the element of magic and secrecy involved in

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the ritual act. But their recognition as a set of *Patua* while the rest of their kin relations have taken up the name of the *Chitrakar* reveals that there is a conscious attempt in the larger community of the *Chitrakar* to dissociate themselves from those groups which engage in the magical performance of the *Chakshudaan*. As the surname of the *Chitrakar* elevates the socio-cultural position of the community to a position of social respect that is mythically represented and believed, and makes way for a present situation in which the a new religious identity and the modified practice gets highlighted, those involved in the magical act of *Chakshudaan* are conferred a lower position. These artists are then associated with the traditional caste of *Patua*, but are not recognized as *Chitrakar*. As the original caste group was also involved in other occupations than that of *Patachitra*, they are looked down upon as functioning only within the tribal society, and possibly belonging to a tribal past.

In keeping with the views of the *Chitrakar* artists from Godda and Dumka, there can be two interpretations that can be drawn in terms of the relationship between the *Jadu-Patua* and the *Chitrakar*, although both communities are related to a history of scroll-painting and narration. The first understanding would be in accordance with the views of the artists from Godda who stated that they too drew the *Chakshudaan* scroll. Although their conscious efforts to conceal a possible tribal past can be understood as their attempt to maintain their present social identity, their account of visiting villages with the *Jadu-pat* of *Chakshudaan* alongside their performance of painted scrolls relating to the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, does provide a hint in terms of a connection between their past themes and the present, reflecting light on the history of their identity. Going by this explanation, it could be said that the *Chitrakar* community in Jharkhand involves artists whose families migrated from West Bengal decades ago, and tribal communities, who were then called *Patua* and are recognized as the *Chitrakar* in the present day. Hence, even though to the outsider they refrain from disclosing their practice of the *Chakshudaan* scroll, in reality they are engaged with it. This would also explain why most of these artists have copies of the scroll present with them. The second interpretation as according to the views of the *Chitrakar* artists in Dumka, assume that even if it is historically proven that these artists have had a tribal origin in terms of their ethnic identity, their present religious affiliation to Vaishnavism explains their intentional

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elucidation on the difference between the *Jadu-Patua* and the *Chitrakar*. It is through this separation that a distinction can be maintained between the two. The presence of the *Chakshudaan* paintings in their collection can be a relic of the past or something that they keep with themselves to give the outsiders a peek into the world of tribal art.

Considering that they belong to different communities in the present day, for the *Jadu-Patua*, even though this act of *Chakshudaan* is not called for by the community, it is initiated by the artist himself to assert his position as the 'shaman' of the afterworld, to assert his social identity as belonging to the community of *Jadu-Patua*, if not the *Chitrakar*. The element of *jadu*, which is then used by the rest of the *Chitrakar* to look down upon them, is again used by these *Jadu-Patua* themselves to assert their collective social identity within the tribal society. The *Jadu-Patua* occupies a challenging place where his authority is not supported by the larger community of the *Chitrakar*, but where he himself intervenes to assert his power, his religious authority, his revered social position and therefore his social identity as belonging to the larger group of the *Jadu-Patua*. Hence, even though the magical act of *Chakshudaan* confers them to a relatively lower status by the rest of the *Chitrakar*; it is the additional religious authority and reverence that they witness, that has led them to continue the practice. Their engagement with the domain of magic, religion, and cultural authority hence show that they do not act in favour of processes of marginalization, but instead on processes of self-assertion. With the possibility that some of the *Chitrakar* artists who converted their religious belief and social identity still continue to show the *Jadu-pat*, albeit in a discreet manner, as mentioned earlier, it can be argued that the lack of sources of income throughout the year leave no choices for the *Chitrakar* in contemporary times. Showing the *Patachitra* in and around villages, at a time when there was no competition from the world of electronic mediation, the *Chitrakar*, who had converted his religious identity, would have no problem in limiting his painting and narration to scrolls pertaining to the Hindu community. In the present context however, to reach out to a bigger audience, or to expand his sources of income, the *Chitrakar* has taken back to showing the *Chakshudaan* scroll too, although in a rather concealed manner. He refers to the other scrolls which deal with myths relating to the sects of Hinduism, and even the tribal scrolls, to derive his social identity as an individual member of the artist community of the *Chitrakar*.

Fig. 12. This chakshudaan pat depicts an old man with the possession of an umbrella and a duck. His age is ascertained by his bent posture and his carrying of a stick. This pat has the iris of the eye drawn in it.

II.   The myth of the origin of the Santhal community: *Pilchu haram* and *Pilchu buri*

This myth as portrayed through the *Patachitra* and the narration by the *Chitrakar* is a mythic tale depicting the origin of the Santhal tribal community in Jharkhand. The tale recounts how their ancestors were born and how it led to the growth of a community. Performed by the non-tribal *Chitrakar*[55], the circulation of this myth not only contributes towards the social identity of the tribals, but also adds on to the cultural capital of the *Chitrakar* community and hence their collective social identity.

The myth of *Pilchu haram* and *Pilchu buri* is a story that weaves into it aspects of nature, human survival and the origin of human beliefs and practices. The story does not begin simply with the origin of the Santhal community but gives a background into how life on earth evolves. The Santhals being very close to the nature in terms of their habitat and their daily life needs, natural resources are very important to them as it provides them with the means of their sustenance. Having resided mostly in hilly regions or in forested areas in Jharkhand, the life of the Santhal requires a great deal of knowledge about their local habitat, which they are a part of. Trees, animals and insects of the region those are vital for their survival, not only feature in the scroll and the myth as symbolic of natural space and geographic clarity, but is also very much a part of their social life and their identity. Being close to nature, the natural habitat and the significance of trees and animals therefore also feature as a part of their history, their origin, their community, life-world, and their distinctiveness. The events of the scroll leading up to its end not only detail on their social practices and their livelihood patterns, but also reflect on the cultural changes that the community has undergone over decades.

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[55] The myth of origin of the Santhal is carried out by the non-tribal *Chitrakar*. It is possible that this community had a tribal origin. But in the present day, they clearly confirm their non-tribal status. The *Jadu-Patua*, who engages in the magical rite of the *Chakshudaan*, being from the Santhal community itself, however does not engage in the *Patachitra* relating to the Santhal origin. It is the *Chitrakar* who from his massive cultural memory, his knowledge and his interpretive capabilities is able to narrate the story of the origin of the Santhal, to the members of their community. The *Jadu-Patua*, by his act of *Chakshudaan*, although is relegated to an authoritative position in the domain of magic and supernatural powers, in the larger society he is not considered as knowledgeable for the narration of the myth of creation of the Santhal. All the *Chitrakar* artists in Jharkhand, interviewed for the myth of creation, in the course of this research, claimed to be non-tribal, and either practicing Islam or Vaishnavism as their religion.

The myth being largely communicated and maintained through word of mouth, or through oral performances, there have been many points of restructuring, modification and addition in the narrative over the course of its retelling by the *Chitrakar* and over time. This can be most clearly noticed in the religious connotations of the scroll. The narration starts with the idea of *Marang buru* as the god in heaven and the creator of all life on earth. Towards the end of the scroll, death scenes are visually depicted and even narrated with the mention of *Yama*, the god of death who comes to receive the soul, and the chorus in the background of this scene, are visually illustrated with human figures beating on drums and believed to be singing praises of their god in a manner that is akin to the practices of the Vaishnava sect. This trajectory marking the journey of the religious belief of the Santhal and their concomitant practices also helps the community itself to understand it religious history.

Through the events of the birth of the first human beings, their marriage to one another although being related by blood, and their sons and daughters who, separated at birth, also unknowingly get married to each other; the interpretation of the myth seems to point towards two different but possibly coexistent routes of meanings. The instances of marriage between brothers and sisters could depict a previous point of time in history when this practice could have existed in the actual society as happening between first cousins, or to show an exceptional case indicating the bad effects of alcoholism and the later repercussions of this on their life after death. This understanding also includes a moral perspective on the certain ill effects of the past that are represented so that people do not indulge in them anymore. The other interpretation could use the space of the myth as one where the social and moral characters of the human figures are not to be judged by the audience, as their extraordinary or exceptional nature involve the representation of some hidden meaning. In this light, the marriage of the initial brother and sister, and then of the seven brothers and sisters could be an exceptional example to historically depict their similar origin and a point of their being connected to one another. Relating them to nature through the depiction of their very birth from ducks, the marriage of the first brother and sister could be understood as essential for the augmentation of the human population. The second incident of the marriage between the seven brothers and sisters could be again interpreted as a way in which the separated kin would be back together

again. Importantly, in this context there is the mention of the different sub-castes or surnames which fall under the community of the Santhal. In a way it could then be that the marriage depicted in the myth serves not simply to reflect an existing pattern but to provide a basis for the socio-political identity of all the sub-castes within the Santhal community. The marriage as a social act in a distant past that is not historically or geographically traceable, could then function as the umbrella endowing the different sub-castes a mythical proof to draw their lineage and establish their legitimacy in the society. Overall, the attempt to establish an intricate connection with the natural world and that of the humans, as well as between humans could be seen to highlight on the significance of the community and the relatedness of all living beings in the setting up and maintenance of the life-world. Both the perspectives put together, facilitates in understanding how the construction of the myth and its functioning in a space of its own, further contributes to the development of aspects of distinction and their consequent markers of social identity.

The myth situates the origin of the tribe to an imagined past, the factuality of which is not considered as important to be verified, and the emphasis is rather laid on the mythological character of the event. This mythological nature of the story permits the *Chitrakar* to engage in creative restructuring and since he is also engaged in the act of its narration, it places the power of interpretation and understanding on the performer or the *Chitrakar*. In the absence of facts and written documents supporting the myth of origin of the Santhal, the direction, structure and underlying meanings of the story solely depends on its representation by the *Chitrakar*. The visual-narrative artist then through this process engages in the act of asserting his cultural authority and therefore the exclusive nature of his practice as a representative of the community of the *Chitrakar*. The task of the myth is then to provide a sense of history, even if it is largely imagined and reconstructed, as it helps to provide a sense of belongingness to a common past for the Santhals. The purpose is not to show them how certain parts of their belief system and practices were in the past from a negative perspective, although its narrative performance by the non-tribal *Chitrakar* who places himself in a relatively superior position both culturally and socially, given the practices of the traditional social hierarchical structure, allude to the presence of implicit undertones of authoritative, judgmental and prescriptive patterns of narration. For the *Chitrakar*, the act of the narration of the myth of *Pilchu*

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haram and *Pilchu buri* places him in an authoritative position as he exists as a significant source of their history and culture. Through the reconstruction and performance of the narrative, and through the act of retelling and interpreting the tribal community their own tale of origin, the *Chitrakar* in the process acquires a sense of superiority of local knowledge and cultural history. And through this process, the community of the *Chitrakar* asserts and reaffirms their social position and their socio-political identity as significant culture-keepers and makers in Jharkhand.

It is the *Chitrakar* who enables the interpretation of the myth and hence directs the way in which the community understands and associates themselves with their past. His narrative approach and the presence of the visual then guide the direction of the attention and the consciousness of the audience to the imagination and perception of a common past. The lack of popular written sources substantiating the practice makes the uttered word and the illustrated image of the *Chitrakar*, powerful symbols of authority. The performance takes place in the tribal language of the Santhal, and the baseline of the narrative having remained mostly unchanged, with just reconstructions in certain parts, particular words and practices are not in use anymore. So it is the *Chitrakar* who explains these terminologies and practices to the community. It is then the perspective of the *Chitrakar* that also influences the way in which the tribal community conceives of its past. Through the performance, this aspect of power vested in the symbols of the word and the image is thus transferred to the community of the *Chitrakar* who have been engaged in its practice. However, for the community who form the audience, despite of the interpretative elements of the *Chitrakar* being present, the myth itself through the image and the story, is a mark of social and cultural distinction and hence social identity. The emphasis is then not on the continuity of all the practices and belief patterns of the past but rather their employment as a source of distinction to enable the Santhal community to differentiate themselves culturally from other communities in the society. In general it is therefore an aspect of culture, material or non-material, and in this context it is the visual and narrative representation of the cultural past that for the tribal community forms a mark of their distinctiveness, which is then significant from the point of view of the community to maintain their sense of collectivity. This externally represented imagery of the past, is then for the Santhal, a point of origin of their

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belongingness and a source of their collective identity. Through the performance, the community shares the lived experience of their inception and this contributes to the restructuring and reaffirming of their life-world that further structures their perception and action.

The narration and demonstration of this *Patachitra* is not a ritual task to be performed in the Santhal community, and the *Chitrakar* in the present day being also sometimes engaged in daily wage labour, continues this performance as a supplement to add to his income. Sometimes even when the painting and the narration of the *Patachitra* is the main mode of income for the *Chitrakar* community, they emphasize more on showing and performing scrolls related to Hindu themes. This could be a conscious attempt on the part of the artists to distance themselves from being associated with a possible tribal past. The scroll of the myth of origin of the Santhal, therefore works in different ways to contribute and assert social identity of the performer as well as the audience. The *Patachitra* hence serves as a text providing insights on the cultural patterns, discourses, structures of power, their interaction, and the social production of belief. The interpretation of this text and understanding its functioning within a particular cultural and historical context helps in realizing the constant interplay between structures and agents in the creation of cultural practices and discourses with underlying meanings that are involved in the construction of knowledge in society.

The interpretation of the scrolls and narratives and their understanding through the acknowledgment of the community and the historical context shows that these scrolls are not only representative of the social identity of communities that collectively believe in its cultural significance. In Jharkhand, the *Patachitra* tradition not only helps in the reaffirmation of socio-political identity for the larger society but also goes ahead to reassert the identity of the artists associated with it. Tribal painters are called the *Patua* by the *Chitrakar* artists to assert their cultural superiority over the former and the tribal artists themselves, or those that have undergone religious conversion rather recently, also identify themselves as *Chitrakar* to possibly hide their present or previous tribal identity. The same social category of the *Patua* is then used in different ways. Being associated to a caste, the acknowledgement of the social position of the *Patua* is positively used by the *Chitrakar* to associate themselves to a significant traditional past and practice. And again,

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the term is used by the *Chitrakar* to relegate to what they perceive as a lesser significant practice and a relatively lower social position of the *Jadu-Patua*.

III.   Reinventing 'Worlds': Reasserting Identity

Wedged between the lack of opportunities that place them in a situation of utter poverty, and the continuous struggle to secure a source of livelihood, the pictorial-storytelling artists of Jharkhand continue to hold on to their traditional occupation to derive their sense of social identity in the present day. Everyday life within the village and out of it, access to opportunities, both economic and social, are to a large extent contingent on the social status of a community that a person belongs to. There is therefore a constant need among these artist communities to maintain a sense of social distinction in terms of ascribed hierarchical structure, which is believed to place them in a relatively better position. In Jharkhand, the *Chitrakar* community practices scroll-painting and narration on themes related to the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and myths and legends which appeal to the Hindu community, including life of *Krishna*, or the saint *Chaitanya*. They are also engaged in the painting and narration of scrolls on the tribal life and history, including the scroll of *Chakshudaan* and the myth of origin of the Santhal community. These two broad types of themes, differentiated mostly in terms of their purpose and audience, therefore provide a different sense of identity to the painters associated with them, as the audience for which they are intended, are situated in different positions of the social hierarchy. The pictorial-narrative community in Jharkhand is therefore divided along the lines of the *Chitrakar* community, which is primarily engaged in the painting of themes that interests the communities following sects of Hinduism and also perform on scrolls relating to the origin of the tribal community, and the *Jadu-Patua* who is associated with the performance of the scroll of *Chakshudaan*. Even within the Chitrakar community, there are attempts to conceal their association with the painting and narration of tribal life.

Tracing their themes in a historical pattern further facilitates in underlying an interesting explanation in terms of a trajectory of their social identity and their concomitant representation in the form of particular themes in the *Patachitra*. Assuming that a

significant proportion of them had a tribal past, it can be said that practices like the jadu-pat formed a part of the religious practices that characterized community life. It was with their conversion to Vaishnavism, that these artists then started painting scrolls relating to representation of religious beliefs and myths of the different sects of Hinduism, along with the representation of the tribal community, assuming a sense of superiority by depicting their origin. The latter enabled these artists to contextualize tribal belief patterns and reconstruct a mythical history for the Santhal community, while the former facilitated their assimilation within the Hindu social structure. In the present day, the relation of the artists with the *Chitrakar* community in Bengal, has again influenced their themes, and to maintain a sense of social distinction from the tribal community, these artists tend to keep their practice related to the representation of the origin of the tribal relatively covered.

With a possibility of having a tribal ethnic origin and having converted to Vaishnavism, or even in a few cases Islam, it is clear that historical processes of migration have blurred their social identity. Whether in the past they had migrated from West Bengal, or converted from the tribal community, their sense to maintain a distinct social identity in the present day is clear. They carry out this sense of distinction and hence identity through their association with their traditional occupation of the *Patachitra*. It is through the symbolic representation of Hindu themes in their scrolls and narration that they seek to maintain their position, as the *Chitrakar* in the present day. Correspondingly, their tendency to cover up their performance of the scrolls pertaining to tribal themes can therefore be understood as their attempt to conceal their possible tribal past. In addition, their use of the surname of *Chitrakar*, and their endeavor to separate the identity of the *Jadu-Patua*, is not only to maintain the aforesaid distinction, but to also emphasize on their role in the society, not as magico-religious performers, but as artists making possible the visualization and narrative perception of social history and culture.

This being said, it is then through the performance that the *Chitrakar* and the *Jadu-Patua* act as agents in affirming their social identity. For the *Jadu-Patua*, the scroll of *Chakshudaan* provides him with a sense of authority over the tribal population. For the *Chitrakar*, it is through performances on the myth of origin of the tribal community, and through the collective emotion that emerges in the context of such audio-visual

performances that they engage in constructing a mythical sense of history for them, making possible the contextualization of common belief concerning collective past, and a common sense of the present life-world for the tribal community. It is by doing so, that the *Chitrakar* artists assume a position of cultural authority over them as the genealogist of their social history and in this process, maintain social distinction from them. Considering their blurred lines of religious and ethnic identity relating to migration, the emphasis of their performance and association with this tradition is not so much to institutionalize the belief patterns, values and ideologies, as it is to assert and affirm the social identity of the community. With their distinctive themes, their interpretations of history, and their creative reconstruction of the world of the Other, as prevalent in the *Chakshudaan* scroll, and the world of a socially imagined mythical past, as in the performance of the origin of the tribal communities in Jharkhand, these pictorial-storytellers continually engage in a process of asserting their collective social identity.

Fig.13. The myth of creation shows the seven brothers carrying out their daily responsibilities. In the first section there are singers akin to the Vaishnava sect, while in the last scroll, *Pilchu haram* is shown being taken away after death by *Yama* and being punished in hell, for having married his own sister. The last scroll is also used to depict the fate of people in the contemporary society who do not pay attention to their action.

4.3. Defining the Moral through Authority or Understanding Morality as Common Sense?

In Jharkhand, the tradition of the *Patachitra* is maintained between the blurred lines of tribal art, folk art and magic. Being influenced by the intermixing and the migratory trends of the *Chitrakar* community and their art form, the effects of various religious cults and the need to assert social identity in the contemporary day, the *Patachitra* reveals an interesting mix of the cultural practices and discourses that have left their mark on the traditional audio-visual practice. With the need to reveal certain aspects of identity and conceal others, the participation of the *Chitrakar* in this age old tradition has been complicated.

The various themes that present itself, are attached to certain trajectories of cultural beliefs and practices, and hence their consequent trajectories of social identity. These themes broadly include scrolls on the life of *Krishna* or episodes from the *Ramayana*, and other mythical texts that are already established in the cultural repertoire of the larger community of believers, the myth of origin of the tribal community, and also other set of subjects that do not endeavor to express or represent written texts and already established discourses accentuating on the similarity between the moral and the sacred. The latter type includes scrolls that do not have a story with a moral undertone, but instead overtly addresses the theme of morality, its implications and the consequences of deviation from it. These scrolls that do not seek in the recital of a text through narration and the visual, but attempt to direct the collective consciousness of the audience to the level of a shared conscience that guides perception and action. These scrolls although engage in narration, they have a rather prescriptive or authoritative undertone. The idea of the moral in this type of scroll is not portrayed as ideal but rather necessary to avoid being reprimanded, and also consists of what happens when the moral principles are not maintained.

It is the category of *Patachitra* and narration that focuses on the overt declaration of the authority of the moral and the repercussions otherwise, along with the scroll relating to the myth of origin of the Santhal community that have been elaborated on in the present study, for interpretation and understanding on the symbolic elements of painting and narration on the construction of the ideas concerning morality and order in the society.

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The performance of both the types of scrolls involve, not the reconstruction of any text, but a reaffirmation of the collective belief and the idea of a shared conscience that is situated in the life-world and the sphere of social action of the people in the community. The concoction of the visual and the narrative through the *Patachitra* then facilitates in the etching out of a space where collective imagination is directed, towards the reproduction of certain patterns of belief, that emphasize on the maintenance of particular moral and social principles that help keep social order, and in the process contribute to the collective social identity of the community of the *Chitrakar*.

The notion of the moral in society is steeply embedded in the need to maintain the social. Ensconced in the social system through symbolic objects and practices, it makes its representation and its internalization possible through the experience of these symbols. However, the realm of experience itself is subjective in nature and its essence can only be brought to light by deciphering the meaning of the symbols which make possible these expressions. Through an interpretive understanding of the visual and narrative symbols associated with the pictorial-narrative tradition of Jharkhand, one can therefore uncover the act of human agency in the reconstruction of morality and belief and the structuring of social identity. The following sections therefore provide an analysis of the oral narratives along with the visuals of certain sections from the scrolls of *Chakshudaan* and the myth of origin so as to enable a deeper understanding of the significance of such symbols, as used in the pictorial-narrative practices of these artist communities of the *Chitrakar* and the *Jadu-Patua* making possible the collective lived experience of the community and thereby the establishment of belief.

I.   *Interpretation of Moral Action and the Act of Chakshudaan*

The pictorial-narrative tradition in Jharkhand includes in its domain, a type of scroll painting and narration that is related to the enforcement of norms and moral values through the instilling of a sense of fear and authority of the sacred. Unlike other scrolls, this type is not accompanied by a myth or a legend. Instead, the theme involves the depiction of a certain situation, and presents the audience with the possibilities that lie ahead of them in the sphere of social action. *Yama pat*, as it is known, involves the

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illustration and the description of the relation between social action, moral responsibility and the life that awaits in the afterworld following death. Focusing more on the negative aspects of social action and the lack of the ability to perform socially expected moral roles, it shows how the soul undergoes suffering and forms of torture in the afterlife. The understanding of this type of performance based on such scrolls is significant as it throws light on a different genre of thought and representation that is present in the *Chitrakar* community which also facilitates in their assertion of social identity. This particular kind of *Patachitra* then shows the way for the understanding of the *Chakshudaan pat*, which is completely different from all other renditions of the *Patachitra* tradition.

The *Chakshudaan scroll* is a unique kind of *Patachitra* that exists and is practiced only in the tribal society. The illustration and the performance of the scroll do not attempt to impart any knowledge or add to cultural repertoire of the society. Neither is it an act of retelling. This practice is more like a magical ritual, dealing with the soul in afterlife. The magical element is also maintained through this idea of secrecy. Existing as a form of *Jadu-Pat* that is performed and practiced among the Santhal community, the *Chakshudaan* scroll is significant for its engagement with the moral element that is indirectly enforced through the idea of intermediate stage of the soul without eyesight because of the sins committed on earth.

If it can be assumed that the *Chitrakar* of the present day and the *Jadu-Patua* belong to the same larger group of artists cum performers associated with the *Patachitra*, and the *Jadu-Patua* is only but a sub caste within the larger *Chitrakar* group who is accorded very low status by the other *Chitrakar* artists related to the *Patachitra*, then it can be said that it is due to the involvement of the artist in the hereditary representation of religious and moral themes that they are believed to have magical power or religious authority. Other than this, *Jadu-Patua* in the past could also have been involved in dealing with the supernatural and the healing of people with his assumed magical powers. The act of *jadu* or magic also involves deceiving or fooling around, and so these *Patua* are feared in the community. If the practice is known as the *Jadu-pat* it does not only mean that people are aware of the aspect of *jadu* in it, or the act of them being deceived. By the production of belief in the larger community, this act of *jadu* is then also perceived of as a miracle, enabling the members of the family of the deceased to believe that their relative or kin is

in heaven. Even if people know that this is an act through which the *Jadu-Patua* compulsorily visits and requests for the personal belongings of the deceased, and money or some donation in kind, the belief system into which the community is socialized accords the *Patua* with authority.

The power of collective reasoning therefore merges with the shared patterns of belief. Collective belief is not in the performance as this is not a public one, but belief in the power and knowledge of the *Jadu-Patua*, as an authority on the matters of the afterworld, and interaction between this world and the world after. Collective belief in the idea of heaven or hell, or an afterlife, makes the larger tribal community believe in the act itself and in the *Patua*. The *Patua* through the performance of this act also asserts his social identity, not only of him as an individual, but one who is a representative of a community. In the domain of everyday life, ideas are institutionalized and strengthened through their circulation into modes of practice or even individual perception, social conduct. Their internalization and institutionalization into the society's cultural structure, and their merging with the ongoing cultural discourse, is made possible with the production and maintenance of systems of collective belief. What comes to be considered as rational is also defined by this system of established belief. For the tribal community then, the act of the *Chakshudaan* by the *Jadu-Patua* is justified and revered, as it strikes a chord with their belief in concepts of heaven, hell and the relation of good work on earth to the afterlife.

Morality in the *jadu-pat* is not thematically represented through recourse to myths, narratives and visuals, relating them to the world of the sacred. The significance of moral values and their assertion in the tribal society can be interpreted from their belief in the quality of work that one engages in during the lifetime, and the consequent place that one is accorded to after death. The *yama pat* shows *Yama* the lord of death punishing those individuals after death that had engaged in sinful activities, and therefore through narratives and visual representations reprimands the audience from engaging in activities that will bring them punishment later. The *Jadu-pat* on the other hand does not relate to such warning but instead depicts the condition of the soul who has already committed the sins and is thus presently suffering. The necessity of maintaining moral principles in terms of guiding perception, experience and action is a theme which the *Chitrakar*

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community largely focuses on through their scrolls on various religious-morally influenced stories. In *Chakshudaan pat*, the role of the moral is not cautionary but more authoritative, in the sense that it subjects the individual to judgment based on the assumption that he or she must have engaged in immoral activities in the course of a lifetime. What then stands for moral and what not, is very vague and is neither mentioned by the *Patua* nor questioned by the family members. It is assumed that the maintenance of all moral principles would be too idealistic to believe in, and therefore some digression from the sacred path of virtue must have been undertaken by the deceased when alive.

In the act of *Chakshudaan*, the *Jadu-Patua* not only functions as the shaman who intermediates between the world of human beings and the world of the supernatural, but in a certain manner also acts as a moral authority. He is believed to possess the powers to understand the requirements and conditions of the world of the supernatural. As a matter of his traditional and hereditary association with the religious themes and their representation, and also their interpretation, the *Jadu-Patua* is considered to be an expert on the theme of religiosity, spirituality and the supernatural. Although he is not given the same socio-cultural status as that of the priest, the *Jadu-Patua*, who is more associated with the performance of magic, is feared in the tribal society, for the magical powers he is believed to possess. He is assumed to be the negotiator between the human beings and the afterworld. But through the act of *Chakshudaan* he does not only remain as the negotiator, but also becomes the decider. He judges people, not based on factual arguments but on assumptions of them having been engaged in immoral and unjust activities. The families also do not argue back about the moral character of the deceased. More than the personal belief in the practice of the *Jadu-pat* of *Chakshudaan*, it is the collective belief which gives this practice the authority to function and remain unquestioned. It is in the acceptance of the larger discourse of life after death in the tribal society, that the *Jadu-Patua* exercises his cultural and religious authority. The *Jadu-Patua* then in a manner, acts as the gateway to the community's conception of heaven or afterlife, because no matter what sins the deceased are assumed to have committed in the course of their lifetime, their suffering can be ended by his act of *Chakshudaan*.

The name *Chakshudaan* itself has a moral connotation in the sense that it is believed to restore the eyesight of the blinded soul and show the way to heaven. The soul which is

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blinded by the lack of morality in character is then restored to a pure state for entry into the world of the supernatural. This other world, which is also conceived of as sacred and powerful, it is not possible for people of immoral and therefore profane character to enter it. Hence the allegorical blindness, that is cured by the *Jadu-Patua* through the magical act of *Chakshudaan*. The experience of the *Chakshudaan* pat by the members of the family is then enveloped by the existing system of belief regarding life and death in the tribal society, and the performance adds on to the maintenance of this pattern of belief and in the power of the *Jadu-Patua*.

II. *Revisiting the Origin of the Social through the Recreation of the Moral: The myth of Pilchu haram and Pilchu buri*

For the tribal community in parts of Jharkhand, a large part of the idea of the historical past is socially imagined and ideationally constructed. More so in the form of a myth as it intends to go back to the time of the origin or the creation of the community. As the myth is largely oral history, its reconstruction and representation by the *Chitrakar* is of utmost significance, not only to gain an insight into the social construction of their past, but how this process of construction is based on the idea of the moral and social intertwined. The process of creation is made to look extraordinary because it marks the beginning of an entire new community, who are related to each other through their common practices, beliefs and their life-world. The myth of creation is then the origin from which the consequent ideas of their life-world have emanated. The elements of social action, ritual and practices that are presented in this myth may in parts starkly differ from the practices and modes of thought existing today. But then, they are accompanied by narratives which critically address these issues and practices that are not considered as morally and socially desirable in the contemporary world. The mythological nature of the story and the characters help giving the story an elevated status or a mark of distinction. Although it contains plots and actions that might not be seen as morally valued in the present day, the story is considered as sacred in a manner as it provides an account of how the effectiveness of the morals should be realized. Structured in the theme of a myth, the moral elements present in the visual and more so in the narration are rather prescriptive than descriptive in nature. Being placed in a mythical time and place, the imaginary

characters are presented to serve the purpose of providing a sense of historical direction and identity to the community in which it is constructed. The time, place and the characters that can only be imaginatively experienced and visualized and mythically presented for the same, are not strictly judged, although the narrator points out the possible immoral acts that they were involved in, in the course of the story. But this is rather to advise the audience to not engage themselves in the same acts.

More than emphasizing on the aspect of the moral as virtue, this myth of creation deals with the idea of morality in terms of its relation to the notion of common sense or the sensibility, which in this context refers to the realization of the intimate relation between human beings and nature. This sensibility springs from a moral character, which places social needs before personal needs, and the social in this sense also includes the natural world. The myth does not simply endeavor to lay prescriptive principles governing social conduct and experience in the world. Instead, by rendering a mythical depiction of the life-world, it helps in the cultivation and maintenance of the common sense or the collective sense of the community towards their habitat and their cultural practice. The myth commences with the description of life on earth and how it started. Interestingly, those animals, insects or trees that have been common to the community in terms of their habitat play important roles in the story. Their relation and in fact their dependence on the natural world is depicted through the mythical rendition of the very process of creation of human beings from the ducks. Humans are therefore projected as in a way being inferior to the might nature. But as civilization progresses, the myth narrates on how they learn the tricks of survival, in terms of their protection from the snake, and also their hunting and food habits. The moral inferences are prominent in the narration of the marriage of *Pilchu haram* and *Pilchu buri* who were siblings, and who were described to have been in a drunken state, not even realizing that they had taken the vows of marriage. Although the locally produced alcohol called *haria* is still consumed in the Santhal community, it is presented in the myth in a rather negative light, therefore resulting in the marriage of kin related. Other events in the myth, like the instance of beating of *Pilchu buri* by her husband, her decision to henceforth separate from him, towards the end of the myth, the death of *Pilchu buri* and *Pilchu haram* and the role of *Yama*, the god of death in the Hindu mythology, reveals the strong influences of cultural interaction, migration and

acculturation in the region. The depiction of *Yama*, could also be an addition of the *Chitrakar* himself, at a relatively later point of time, to intersperse the tribal cultural space with authoritative figures from the artists' own or other communities. However, with the lack of written and stable sources of the myth, this thought cannot be ascertained, as such processes of creative intervention are rather subconscious and happen gradually over time.

Moral is then not only ideal and elevated but realized through the workings of the everyday life duty. The Santhal community, being based mostly close to natural habitat, their cultural patterns and beliefs influencing their perception and their action reveal an understanding of morality that is based on the maintenance of appropriate forms of conduct towards one another and the nature. This idea of the moral is sacred, but sacred not in the sense of being separated from the workings of everyday life and rather realized through involvement in hard work, regular duty. The understanding of the moral is that which is held as collectively sensible set of ideas and help maintain order in society. The life history of the mythical figures in the story therefore highlight on the significance of the sacred venerated principles of morality and how their deviation leads to punishment and suffering in the life after death. Certain actions of the figures in the myth however do not correspond to the accepted social principles and codes of conduct that actually exist in the contemporary day, and they are considered as exceptional as they arise in the body of the myth and represent an imaginative historical time and place. Hence the questionable and non virtuous act of marriage between the kin related is justified through its structuring in the space of the myth, the same would not be supported in the present day, and this event in the myth is justified for being the prime factor which made possible human civilization on earth and for enabling the tracing of lineage and social legitimacy in terms of origin of sub-castes within the tribal community.

Myth allows the blurring of existing established social boundaries, normative and conceptual trajectories of understanding and action, to take the human consciousness beyond it, and therefore in a way to sometimes help justify the very necessity of such boundaries and institutional limitations placed on human action and thought. The performance of this myth then relocates the human consciousness to an imagined past,

where the narration of events and actions have undercurrents of meanings directing towards the existence of social order and collective conscience.

Fig. 14. This scroll, having got dilapidated with reuse and time, shows the first two scenes of the *Patachitra* on the myth of creation. The narration is not always linear in the sense that the narrator may at any point of time, scroll back to an earlier section of the scroll again to narrate a different aspect of the story. In the first section, the illustrated figures are the gods and goddesses revered in the Santhal community, with *Marang Buru* and *Jaher Buri* in the middle. Just below them are the initial animals and insects that were born on earth. On the right hand side is a crab, and below it, although not clearly visible is the earthworm in red, which brought soil on the earth from the underworld and initiated habitation on the back of a turtle, which is situated beside the crab towards the centre. The second section illustrates the birth of the first human beings, *Pilchu haram* and *Pilchu buri* in the form of two eggs which were laid by the ducks on the lotus leaf. The semi-circle outline symbolizes the egg and on the right side is *Pilchu buri* and on the left is *Pilchu haram.* Below them are the ducks and in between are the lotus flowers.

*Fig. 15.*This part of the scroll shows *Pilchu haram* and *Pilchu buri* making liquor, after consuming which, they get married to each other.

Fig. 16. This section at the very end of the scroll shows the possibility of suffering in hell due to misdeeds on earth, with the barren tree and two jackals illustrated below

III. Mediating Modalities of Morality through Experience

The interpretative understanding of these illustrative scrolls and narratives of the *Chitrakar* community in Jharkhand therefore bring to light the significance of social context and social relation in the construction of morality. The meaning of the moral is intricately connected with the idea of maintaining a social whole, and interconnected society. This is only possible when social behavior is controlled and structured through rules and codes of conduct. These rules; often a reflection of existing power inequalities and the need to maintain social distinction and identity, then structures knowledge, perception and behavior in society. If the notion of morality is interconnected with the necessity to maintain social relations, then it is through discourses and practices that it enters the domain of collective belief. From activities in everyday life to extraordinary moments, the ideological discourses underlying these beliefs and values are then transmitted to individuals and communities through symbols. Experiencing these symbols therefore facilitate in the comprehension of meaning and therefore internalization of the underlying ideas.

In the case of Jharkhand, the pictorial-narrative tradition therefore reveals that the concept of the moral is only understood better when it is approached from a hermeneutical insight into the world of symbols. Although largely the notion of morality is subsumed in the idea of the social, it is through this interpretive understanding of symbolic representations that the many modalities of morality at work in a society can be brought to the surface. Thus in the case of the *Jadu-Patua*, the understanding of morality is not discernable through social action. Instead, it is defined through these artists. The emphasis is not whether a particular person was actually moral in nature or not, but the authoritative telling of the *Jadu-Patua* that in the course of life there may well be moments when the morality of an individual could be questioned, which are only recognizable by the magico-religious painter and therefore his indispensability in the society. As for the myth of origin, the idea of morality is instilled in the collective belief through the performance recreating an imagined past of the community. The 'lived' experience, the common consciousness made possible through the performance of the scrolls, then allow for the creation of a space in which the symbols created by the artist community facilitates in the construction and maintenance of morality and social identity.

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OF JUSTICE, NOBILITY, CHIVALRY AND THE UPHOLDING OF THE MORAL: SOCIAL IMAGINATION AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN THE *PHAD* TRADITION OF RAJASTHAN

5. 1. The *Phad* Tradition of Rajasthan

The small town of Bhilwara, in the Mewar region of Rajasthan, bustling with life, traditional vendors with portable stalls set up in front of the new showrooms, women selling jewelry, clothes for sale hanging on makeshift racks, traditional sweet shops, swanky hotels and restaurants with façade of old buildings and remains of intricately designed windows peeking through, as brave remnants of a bygone era, is home to an age-old tradition of painting known as the *phad*. As the streets get narrower and a busy market for steel utensils and silver jewels arrives to an end, one comes to a stop at a huge temple, with white walls and colourful paintings done on them. This is called the *devra*. A few metres away reside the family of the Joshi, the painters who have for decades been hereditarily commissioned to paint the *phad*. Belonging to the Shahpura School of painting, the art form is also practiced by other family members and relatives of the Joshi family residing in the nearby town of Shahpura.

As one who is acquainted with the myths on which these paintings are done, the travel to Shahpura through the Aravalli foothills, date palm trees, thorn bushes and dry lands feels like a travel back in time into the world of the grand narratives, where imagination almost makes the mythological characters and their legends seem to come alive. And one wonders, if such is the power of the narrative through its secondary reading, what effect would its periodical performance have, on the communities that derive their sense of past and their collective identity from these myths? Also significance does it hold for the artist communities including the painters and the performers who are associated with its performance, that they are engaged in its preservation to the present day?

The tradition of painting and performing the *phad* is one that goes back to centuries. Although this *phad* or the scroll itself is not a part of the royal court paintings, the painters associated with it were commissioned to also paint for the royalty in the past. Although their endeavor to experiment with the traditional themes and introducing new designs to expand their market has no doubt redefined their occupations, these painters are still engaged in the representation of the traditional legends which have historically defined their profession. Their painting, its performance by a community of the narrators known as the *bhopa*, the images and words involved in its presentation, and an interpretive understanding of all these factors as interrelated, then facilitate in arriving at knowledge of the tradition and its symbolic significance in the present day.

The *phad* is a scroll of cloth in which paintings are done in a horizontal manner, attributed mainly to the representation of folk deities worshipped and revered in regions of Rajasthan. The main regions in Rajasthan where it is painted include Chittorgarh, Bhilwara and Udaipur districts (Joshi, 1976: 10). The word *phad* or the *par* is believed to come from the Sanskrit term *pat* meaning cloth. Though the exact origin of the tradition is not known, it is alleged to be more than a century old. This tradition of illustrating scrolls thus became popular with the need to visually commemorate the life-story and conquests of historical figures that had been deified. Among the folk epics of Rajasthan, the most prominent ones leading to the rise of the practice of scroll-paintings in the region are the stories of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan*. Originating around the 14th century, both these stories gradually became extremely popular, and their complex plot interceded with sub-plots, lengthy structure and detailed narration led to their generation as epics. Gradually with the need to maintain a visual memory of the tales, the tradition of painting the *phad* started. To the present day, apart from some new small scrolls or other painting done in the style of the *phad*, members of the Joshi community follow traditional patterns for illustrating the life and the deeds the *Dev Narayan* and *Pabuji*.

Fig. 17. This map shows the districts of Rajasthan. For this study, the fieldwork was mainly carried out in southern and south-eastern part of Rajasthan, including the districts of Bhilwara, Chittorgarh, and Jodhpur ( )

I. The Painters and the Creation of the *Phad*

While *Pabuji* is primarily worshipped by the *Rebari* caste or the camel herders, as well as by Nayak, Rajput and the Bhil, *Dev Narayan* is worshipped by the Gujjar and the Kumar. In allegiance to the construction of a visual memory for the historical characters that had been deified, there was the need to present and represent them from time to time, to the community. As most of the people in the communities who worshipped the deities of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan*, were involved in occupations which required them to travel consistently, the was the requirement to make available the representation of this social and religious memory in a manner that would not be affected by the mobility of the communities. Hence, the scroll was used as the medium to illustrate the epics and function as mobile shrines. The *phad* are painted by the Joshi community who belong to the Chippa caste, which is a sub-group of the Brahmin caste. Although these artists do not themselves worship either *Pabuji* or *Dev Narayan* personally or as a community ritual, they have been hereditarily engaged in the task of illustrating these epics due to their traditional caste-based association with art and textile printing. However, as the illustration of these scrolls constituted one of the main and popular sources of their livelihood, the artists consider the epics as sacred, and revere the folk deities of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan*. The Joshi lineage have also been engaged in astrological professions in the past, and this along with their involvement in art and textile printing, could be one of the prime reasons why they were commissioned for the purpose of painting these stories on scrolls of cloth. In the present day, the artists of the Joshi clan are concentrated mostly in the towns of Bhilwara and Shahpura, in the south-eastern part of Rajasthan.

The venerated figures of both the epics, *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan* were believed to have been Rajput warriors of the past. With the gradual development of cults around them, temples were built for the worshippers in different regions of Rajasthan[56]. Which amongst the two epics were first to introduce scrolls is not historically traceable[57], but owing to the occupational trends of the followers which required them to be on the move

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[56] There is only one temple in Rajasthan dedicated to the cult of *Pabuji*, near Jodhpur, which is believed to have been his birthplace.

[57] *Pabuji* is believed to have been a Rajput prince around the 14th century A.D. in Rajasthan (Smith, 2005: 14), while the history of *Dev Narayan*, according to the artists Shrilal Joshi and Kalyan Joshi of Bhilwara, date back even to an earlier epoch.

frequently, it is assumed that the *phad* tradition became popular. From stationery temples there was hence the trend of travelling shrines dedicated to the deified historical figures, which consequently involved communities that became hereditarily engaged in its illustration and its performance. Though both the *phad* have different *bhopa*, they are all painted by the Joshi community. It is assumed that at the beginning of the tradition, these artists must have been commissioned by the worshippers to the paint the story and the achievements of the heroes, but for the *bhopa*, the painter is their *guru*, or teacher, somebody who illustrates the story of power and divine grace of their gods, and who paves the way for them to earn their livelihood.

Although not personally worshipped by painters of the Joshi clan, the *phad* is considered to be sacred, and there are certain customs which guide the process of illustration in this scroll. The structure and composition of painting of both the scrolls have remained relatively unchanged for ages. While some of the scrolls commissioned for purposes of decoration or for the consumer market, those painted for the traditional performance by the *bhopa*, has not changed in pattern. These scrolls focus more on the conventional symbols and traditional motifs that assist the *bhopa* in telling the story. The *bhopa* who is not literate, will not be able to understand if changes are made in the pattern and composition of the scroll. When buying the scroll, he asks the painter a few of the main scenes sometimes to get himself acquainted to the painting, while the rest is stored in his memory owing to his initiation into the practice from his childhood and his association to it as a form of livelihood.

The scroll is made of cotton, which is initially starched with flour and then glazed with moonstone to provide shine and avoid the colours from bleeding. Painting on the *phad* is usually started on an auspicious day according to the Hindu ritual calendar, where the first stroke of the brush is customarily made by a young girl. The painter then starts with an illustration of the lord Ganesh. This is followed by painting the outlines and segmenting the major scenes, which give a sense of the measurement and ratio of the figures to be followed. Most painters follow an outline which has been passed over to them by generations according to which the figures and the pattern of events are then depicted. The painting is carried out through the use of natural and vegetable dyes that

are obtained from various resources and then mixed with gum and some natural poison, to prevent the colours from fading away and the cloth from being damaged by insects. The initial colours include orange for the skin, followed by yellow, green, and then gradually darker colours like brown, red and blue. Black is used in the end to paint the outline and the eyes. The painting of the pupil is more like a ritual as it is after this stage that the scroll gains its sacredness, and the deity is brought to life. A small white space in the middle is maintained where the name and the address of the painter is inscribed. The colour red is used to paint the attire of the central character and the other Rajput royals, to portray a sense of chivalry. The main figures are drawn larger in size than the rest.

Events are not separated through boundaries, and the use of borders is usually to demarcate the depiction of different regions in the story. The story is not portrayed in a linear manner with one event leading to another, and the *phad* is more like a platform or a chart with an amalgamation of events in the lifetime of the central character across different geographical spaces. In both the scrolls of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan*, the centre contains large portrait of the central figure and the other important characters central to the story. This overpowers the other illustrations on the scroll, and it is through this main character that the audience can recognize the scroll. The figures painted may differ in size, but have similar faces. All figures on the *phad* have a side profile, as if to highlight on the aspect of interaction or to complement the narrative which introduces the event and describes it as being in motion and characterized by action. Outlines of marked spaces provide the sense of boundary as events are only separated in terms of geography. Both the scrolls of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan* have a court scene which is depicted in the centre and is larger in size than the rest of the figures and scenes in the *phad*. The lengthwise measurement of a scroll of *Pabuji* is usually of about eighteen feet while that of *Dev Narayan* would be of approximately thirty-six feet. Depicting tales of chivalry and undying valor, these epics symbolize the communities and castes in which they are practiced, functioning as a representative uniting the community through the idea of a collective past and common identity for the future. The places illustrated in the scrolls and mentioned by the *bhopa* refer to actual places that exist till date in Rajasthan, and this contributes to the reaffirmation of the epic as a series of actual historical events that took place in the past, thereby facilitating the tracing of collective identity. It is believed by the

painters that once the *phad* has been initiated, it cannot be left untouched for even a day, and daily advancement in terms of at least some illustration needs to be done.

The *phad*, as Kalyan Joshi of Bhilwara remarks, is similar to a map. It is a geographical delineation of the epics of *Pabuji* and Dev Narayan. So, each segment represents a geographic location and is thus depicted only once in the *phad* and every further reference to it in the course of the story requires the *bhopa* or the performers to go back to that section of the scroll. For example, the court scene occupies the central region of the scroll. Because these narratives largely deal with events of war, conquest, chivalry, justice and honour, the court scene is the largest in proportion to the other scenes. Hence, every time the episode takes place in the court, the *bhopa* points out to the same court on the larger *phad*, as if to refer to an actually fixed physical place in the spatio-historical context. Similarly, the physical features of the characters are generally the same, with difference in ornamentation and in size of the portrait. The difference between the main characters in distinct scenes would usually be demarcated by the use of ornamentation or colour. The *phad* has never been considered as a form of art meant for aesthetic purposes for the communities in which it is worshipped. Hence the role of the painter is not to focus on the physical features or the beauty of the characters, but just to depict the portraits in such a manner that they can be visualized and complemented with the narration. So apart from the main characters of the story which occupy the center-stage, the other portraits in the scrolls are sometimes used liberally used in the course of the performance of the *phad*.

II.   The *Bhopa*

Visiting the historical locales of Jodhpur, amidst the walks observing and reading the detailed inscriptions providing a historical description of the places, one can quite frequently hear the tune of a musical instrument, akin to the violin, or the *sarangi* played by a man or two in a corner, performing on popular songs to pull the crowd. Often, when asked about the myth of Pabuji, their eyes seem to lighten up. "Do you know the myth of

Pabuij? He is our worshipped deity!" exclaimed one such singer[58]. "Do you want to listen to any of his deeds or stories?" he added. This artist belongs to the community of narrators or the *Bhopa* associated with the performance of the myths related to the *phad*.

Anyone enquiring about the scroll-painting tradition in Rajasthan, either from the scroll-painter or from people in the community where the custom is recognized, can in no time comprehend the significance of the element of performance underlying it. *Phad* in Rajasthan is acquainted with the act of *Phad-banchana*. *Banchana*[59] means to narrate, and the involvement of the larger community in the age-old practice only comes to light in the context of performance. *Phad banchana* is then the act of narration through which the story depicted in the scroll, finds expression. This act of reading also has an element of interpretation present in it, wherein the meaning of the text emerges in the course of its recitation. *Banchana* is the reading of a text, in the process of which the symbolic elements present in the text give way to meaning, or rather provide a direction of meaning. With its presentation in the community, this element of narration in the *phad* tradition functions to merely tell the story. Telling has an explanatory dimension to it, and when this narrative telling takes place within the community it goes beyond mere description to the reaffirmation of some system of belief or underlying discourse. The act of *phad banchana* is then a form of narrative re-telling of social history.

But this task of narration is not the duty of the painter. Nor is it possible for anyone from the community to carry out the performance. Like the traditional association of the Joshi clan with the painting of the *Phad*, the task of narration and performance is relegated to the community socially recognized as the *bhopa*. Once the *Phad* is thus painted, the *bhopa* purchases them from the artist. For the *bhopa*, the folk epics and the deities illustrated on the scroll constitute the religious and cultural belief of their own community. While for the painter, it is more of an association with a traditional occupation, for the *bhopa* it is a part of their cultural system, their community life, and their system of collective belief. The epics pertain to the social memory of the

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[58] A casual encounter with this artist and a few others happened during the visit to Jodhpur in the course of fieldwork.

[59] *Banchana* comes from the term *vaachan* that refers to the performance of narration or reading out.

community to which the *bhopa* belongs. Its narrative performance by the *bhopa* is then a vital process through which the cultural belief system is re-conceptualized and reestablished. Though the task of narrating the scrolls has been one of the prime sources of their livelihood up to the recent times, it is their role as the cultural agents facilitating in the transmission and transformation of ideas, discourses and practices that makes their occupation significant for the survival of the community. For ages therefore, the *bhopa* have been primarily involved with the performance of the *phad*, although the performance as the occupation barely meets the necessities of existence. For the poverty-stricken *bhopa*, the act of *banchana* then has also been a moral responsibility.

The *bhopa*[60] themselves do not constitute a single caste and rather refer to groups of bardic performers from within the communities associated with the folk deities and the epics. In the tradition of the *phad*, the *Bhopa* thus acts the vanguard of the deity and performs the double task of acting as the official priest of the deity at the temples as well as functioning as the narrator. In accordance with the two main myths of the *Pabuji* and the *Dev Narayan* in Rajasthan, there are separate *bhopa* for the performance of the two folk epics. The *bhopa* associated with the narration of the *Pabuji* epic belongs to the Nayak caste, which falls under the scheduled caste category of the Indian constitution. Owing to the supernatural qualities of healing assumed to be associated with Pabuji, along with being the socially imagined harbinger of camels in Rajasthan, the castes of *Rebari*, Bhil, and also the Rajput, alongside the Nayak, engage in his worship. Although they do not occupy respected positions in the rung of social hierarchy, their traditional task of displaying and narrating the scrolls has remained an exclusive one. The task being related to the depiction of folk deities who are revered in the region, the *bhopa* plays a significant role in the sustenance of the larger moral and cultural system of the communities associated with the custom in Rajasthan. Having no ownership of land, these communities are largely engaged in camel herding, or cattle rearing. These occupations have required these communities to be perpetually on the move. This coupled with their poverty-stricken condition and the lack of access to land ownership has also led them to take up seasonal casual wage labour to sustain their livelihood.

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[60] The term *bhopa* refers to a single person, while *bhopo* and *bhope* are sometimes used to refer to more than one narrator.

The other kind of *bhopa* who is linked to the tradition of the *phad* in Rajasthan is the one who engages in the narration of the other epic; that of *Dev Narayan*. *Dev Narayan* is a folk deity worshipped primarily by the Gujar, Meena, and the Kumbhar communities. The *bhopa* associated with the performance of this epic belongs to the Gujar community that is recognized as one of the other backward castes in the constitution of India, in the state of Rajasthan. This *bhopa* is also engaged in cultivation. The *bhopa* for both the epics could then be roughly described as representatives of their community responsible for the transmission and the continuation of the social history and the collective memory that represents the social identity of the larger community. In the process of transmission, they function as effective cultural agents reconstructing social history and confirming their own position within the larger community. Mobility due to their traditional occupations or contemporary engagements in seasonal labour and cultivation has rendered the *bhopa*, the status or tag of the itinerant performer. Among the performers of both epics, the *Dev Narayan bhopa* is more settled in terms of occupation owing to their access to lands for cultivation.

Apart from the functioning as the narrator, the *bhopa* also performs as the priest of these folk deities. In the cult of *Dev Narayan*, the *bhopa* are separated in terms of their occupation as priests in the *Devra* or the temples of *Dev Narayan*, and others who are engaged in the narration of the *phad*. For the *Pabuji* epic, the same *bhopa* is however responsible for carrying out ritual duties to the deity and also for performing narrative acts with the scroll. Possibly due to the reasons of their mobility due to their occupation, their poverty-stricken condition, and their ascribed low social status, there is just a single temple in Rajasthan dedicated to the worship of *Pabuji*. The scroll and its narration then become all the more important in the communities which believe in *Pabuji*, for keeping alive the worship and the entire cult, and the social history essential for the survival of the community. There are however, several temples across Rajasthan dedicated to *Dev Narayan*, possibly from the conclusion that the deity is worshipped by the Gujars who have been one of the dominant castes in the region, and having access to occupations of agriculture and cultivation, have altogether been at a more advantageous socio-cultural and economic position than the camel herders. However, for both the cults, the *phad* is like a moving shrine which instead visits the followers. Experiencing the narrative

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performance of the scroll is believed to be of equal significance to that of visiting a temple.

In terms of its practice, it is the *bhopa* who goes to the painter to ask for a new scroll, only after which the artist prepares one. Once the task of illustration is completed, the painted scroll is then bought by the *bhopa*. Patrons of believers and worshippers who seek blessings for an upcoming event or task, or those who wish to pay their reverence for some accomplishment or thank for the positive effects of blessings, or still, for curing illness and protection from danger, call for the *bhopa* to come and give a performance. In the present day, the *bhopa* are mostly found in Nagaur and Jodhpur districts of Rajasthan.

III.   *Phad Banchana*: Nights of Storytelling

The performance of the *phad* takes place in the evening, when the people have returned from their work. The occasion of the act of *banchana* as mentioned before is usually for seeking blessings from the deity before the commencement of some act or journey, or paying reverence after the successful accomplishment of some task or event. A particular family asks the *bhopa* to perform the *phad banchana*, which then happens in an open space, attended by the family and other people from the village. The *bhopa* is in return given money and other gifts in kind for the performance. The epics are extremely exhaustive in content and the entire scroll is never performed as it would take many nights to complete the narration. Certain common episodes, relevant to the audience, requested by the hosts or from among the audience are usually sung and narrated. A performance usually continues for five to six hours at night.

At the very onset of the performance, the *bhopa* gets dressed in a bright traditional costume, including an embellished skirt, a shirt and a turban, suggestive of a Rajput prince. In the *Pabuji* performance, the main *bhopa* is assisted by the female *bhopi*, his wife, while in the *Dev Narayan* narration, there are two male *bhopa*. For the *Pabuji* recital, the *bhopi* has her head covered when she is in public. In the *Dev Narayan phad banchana*, it is the diyala *bhopa*, or the assistant to the main *bhopa*, and in *Pabuji* performance the woman, who hold the lamp, highlighting necessary areas of the scroll

pertaining to the course of narration. The chief *bhopa* in the *Pabuji* tradition plays a string instrument known as the 'Raavan-hatta', while in the *Dev Narayan* performance; the chief *bhopa* plays the 'Jantar'.

In both the performances, the *bhopa* makes these instruments by themselves. The use of indigenous musical instruments specifically used for the performance of the scroll also highlights on the attempt of the respective communities of the different cults to maintain their identity and distinction. The instruments are believed by the *bhopa* to invoke the presence and the blessings of the deity when played in the course of the performance. Both the 'Raavan-hatta' and the 'Jantar' are not just musical instruments for the narrator, but are props which are also culturally located in the context of the myth and the larger tradition. In addition the chief *bhopa* also ties ghungroo or bells to his feet and on the 'Raavan-hatta' for keeping a rhythm. The narrative is performed in the manner of a song, in which the main *bhopa* sings the introduction, playing his instrument and dancing around, while the assistant carries forth the tune and ends the verse. The main *bhopa* then pauses in between and explains the meaning of the narrative, pointing with his instrument to the relevant scene. Since the illustrations on the *phad* are not in a linear manner and the narrative description of some events may be repeated by indicating towards the same segment in the scroll, the *bhopa*'s performance is not inactive.

As the verses have been transmitted through generations, the *bhopa* does not make any alterations in their recital, though he may control the performance by choosing to highlight on certain parts of the story. These verses are learnt orally through family traditions or by training from other *bhopa*, and hence even in the absence of creative inputs, the *bhopa* adds his personal touch through the music, gestures, and mode of narration. As the crowd assembles for the performance, the *bhopa* commences the event by paying obeisance to the deity by lighting incense sticks and blowing the conch shell. He then proceeds with devotional verses and songs in reverence to the deity, before moving on to narrate the story. The audience comprises largely of men who ask the *bhopa* to narrate the events of battle and valor involving their deity.

IV.   The Epics

The following paragraphs summarize the stories of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan* to provide a general framework and outline of the epics that even in the present day remain popular to certain castes and communities, as a public ritual facilitating in the reaffirmation of their collective identity. The narratives that are sung in the course of performances are usually in the local dialects that are then explained by the *bhopa* to the audience. The narrative uses rhythmic verses that are sung to the tune of the *bhopa* along with the instrument. Each story is divided into a number of episodes and the overall text largely deals with the underlying principles of chivalry, valour, keeping one's promise, and the nobility of sacrifice. In between there are folk songs that are performed to change the mood of the audience. Some episodes are longer than the others and are followed by short breaks during which the *bhopa* drinks water or tea, rests for a while. Devotional songs, bhajans, are also interspersed with the main narrative when there is an audience which might not understand *phad* banchana.

Pabuji:[61]

The legend of *Pabuji* is about 600 years old. Born around the 14th century in the north-western part of Rajasthan, *Pabuji* was a great warrior, responsible for bringing camels to Rajasthan. Being a historical character who was later deified, *Pabuji* is believed to have healing powers and is worshipped mainly by the camel herders through the performance of the *phad banchana*.

The story revolves around *Pabuji*, a Rajput royal and his four companions, *Chando*, *Dembo*, *Salji Solanki* and *Harmal Devasi*. *Rao Dhandal* married a nymph called *Kesar Pari* on the condition that that they would share all her jewels and cattle, and that *Dhandal* would never enter her chamber without prior permission. Two years later, they had a son called *Pabu*. Not seeing his wife for a while, *Dhandal* one day stormed in *Kesar Pari's* chamber to find the young *Pabu* with a tigress. The tigress transforming

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[61] The story of *Pabuji* mentioned here is an outline of the larger narrative that has been extracted out of discussions with the Joshi painters of Bhilwara, with Peeru *bhopa* and from the work of John D. Smith (2005), 'The Epic of *Pabuji*', New Delhi: Katha.

back into *Kesar Pari* stated that since her husband had broken the promise she could not stay any longer, but promised *Pabu* that twelve years later she would return in the form of a black spirited horse called *Kesar Kelami*. Years later, *Chando* dreamt of *Pabuji* riding on a magnificent black horse called *Kesar Kelami*. On hearing this, they went to a lady named *Deval Chavan* the next day to purchase the particular mare. Initially refusing, *Deval Chavan* handed over the mare to *Pabuji* on the condition that he would save her and her cattle at any cost from *Pabuji*'s brother in law *Jindrav Khinchi*'s attack. With *Kesar Kelami*, *Pabuji* travelled to the holy lake of Pushkar to take a bath, where he met *Gogo Chauhan*, who saved *Pabuji* from slipping on the steps. In gratitude, *Pabuji* decided to give his niece's hand to *Gogo* in marriage and promised to gift him camels from Lanka as a gift for the wedding. *Pabuji*'s friend *Harmal Devasi* left for Lanka as an ascetic to find out about the camels and steal them from the *Rebari* community. On his way he encountered witches from whom he escaped by referring the name of *Dembo*, who is denoted as the incarnation of Hanuman. After miraculously walking over the sea by offering prayers to *Pabuji* and adorning a pair of magic slippers, *Harmal* reached Lanka, the land of *Ravana*. On making a note of the whereabouts of the camels, *Harmal* managed to return. Following this, *Pabuji* went to Lanka with his army and his chiefs to capture the camels. Although Ravana's army tried to attack them, *Dembo* killed all of them apart from Ravana.

While returning back, *Pabuji* crossed through the Sodhi kingdom, where the princess fell in love with him. *Pabuji*, much against his wishes, decided to marry the Sodhi princess *Phulvanti*. On the day of their wedding, the preparations and the ceremony were interrupted a lot of times and the usual seven circumambulations needed for the ceremony to be complete was disrupted after three rounds, with *Deval Chavan*'s complaint of her cattle being attacked by *Jindrav Khinchi*. In order to keep the promise, *Pabuji* stopped short of completing his marriage and departed with his army to save the cows, leaving behind the mightiest of his warriors, *Dembo*, who was sleeping. *Deval Chavan* woke up *Dembo* and asked him to join the army. *Dembo* reached Kolu, defeating *Jindrav*'s army all alone and reassuring the cows that they were safe. *Pabuji* prevented him from killing *Jindrav*, as he was his brother-in-law. *Dembo* died, as earlier on his way to the battle, he had fed his intestines to some hungry vultures. And while *Pabuji* went

ahead to water the thirsty cattle, *Jindrav Khinchi* returned with another army to fight *Pabuji*. *Pabuji*, in order to save his sister from becoming a widow, gave *Jindrav* the sword and he himself took a whip. *Jindrav* struck *Pabuji* with the sword, following which palanquins came down from heaven to take *Pabuji*.
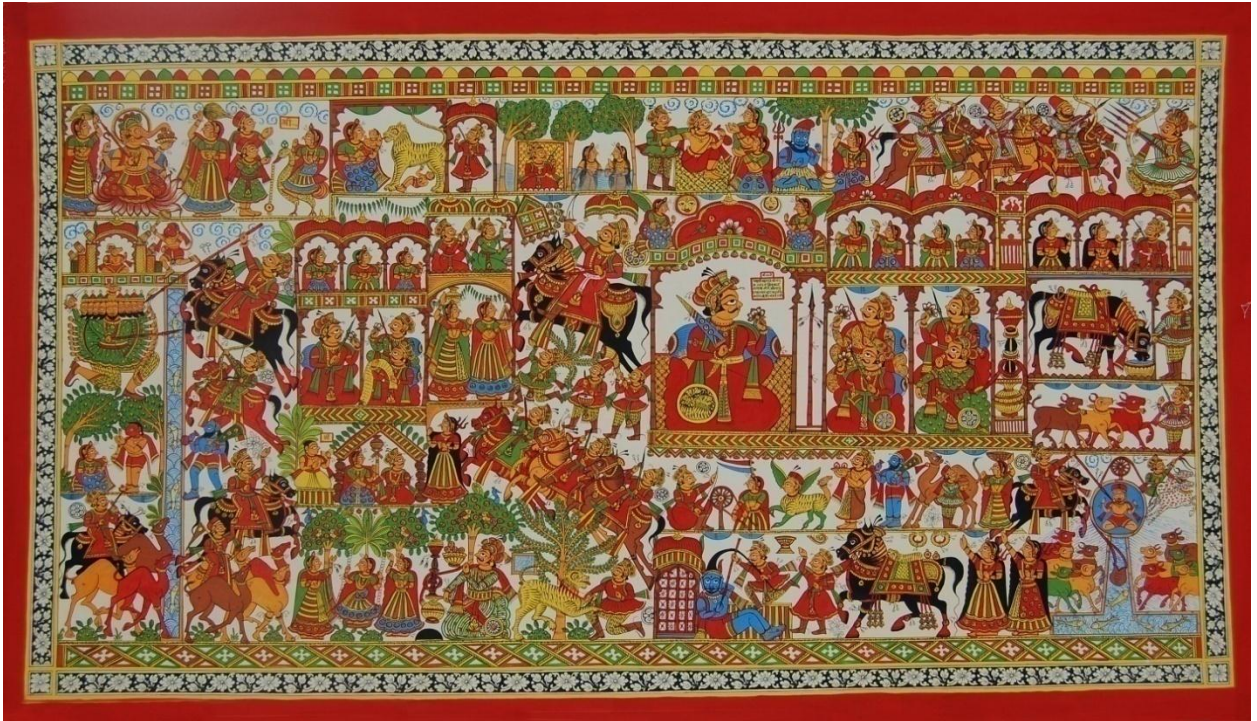
Fig. 18. The *phad* of *Pabuji*

Dev Narayan[62]:

The story of *Dev Narayan* began in Pushkar in Rajasthan, where a lady named *Leela Sevri* who worshipped *Vishnu*, saw a warrior mounted on a horse carrying the head of a tiger, coming to cleanse himself in the holy water. The mere sight of the warrior caused her to give birth to a boy called '*Baghrawat*' who had the body of a human and the head of a tiger. To ensure no harm to anyone, the kid was left in a jungle. *Baghrawat* grew up to marry twelve girls from twelve different castes each of whom gave birth to two sons. The twenty-four *Baghrawat* brothers were considered outcastes from their very birth and no family agreed to give their daughters' hand in marriage to them. The king of Ajmer sensed the problem and asked the Gujar to marry off their daughters to the twenty-four brothers and gave them cattle as dowry. Of all the brothers, the eldest, *Sawai Bhoj* used to tend the cattle gifted to them, with his brother *Neva*. Noticing that every night one cow would disappear from the herd, *Bhoj* decided to solve the mystery. To his surprise he found out that it was Shiva's holy cow, and decided to become Shiva's disciple. Shiva tested him in many ways but when he succeeded, Shiva gifted him enormous wealth so that the he could enjoy princely way of life, but only for twelve years.

Settling in Badnor, the brothers led a royal life and were known for their charity. One day, the brothers went to visit the king of Rann, *Raoji*. When stopped at the gates, the brothers became violent. On seeing their warrior skills, the king's brother *Nimdev* decided to befriend them. To pay their respect to the king, *Sawai Bhoj* and his brother went to purchase liquor from a dealer named *Pattu*. But she ridiculed them as they belonged to the Gujar caste and refused to sell liquor. *Sawai Bhoj* replied that if she could fill his small cup with liquor then she would be given a golden necklace. The magical cup remained empty and she asked for their mercy. The brothers decided to make her their sister and after collecting more liquor they left for home. Realizing that the amount was too much, they decided to throw the liquor outside of the Rann, which in turn managed to seep underground to the head of *Basak*, the king of the serpents. An angry *Basak* complained to Lord *Vishnu* to kill them, at which *Vishnu* send many supernatural figures

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[62] The story of *Dev Narayan* is much longer and complex in terms of the plot and the characters than that of *Pabuji*. The scroll or *phad* of *Dev Narayan* is almost the double the size of *Pabuji*, extending to about 36 feet in length. The present outline simply attempts to summarize the main events of the story that would be useful for understanding the analysis of illustration and narration.

to attack them, all of whom failed. *Vishnu* then decided to entice the wife of *Sawai Bhoj* named *Sadoo*, but on seeing her devotion, he blessed her saying that he would be born into her home but only after all the brothers were slain. *Vishnu* then turned to the goddess for help, avenging the brothers and she agreed by taking birth in the form of a small girl called *Jemati*. *Jemati* on growing up expressed her interest in marrying *Sawai Bhoj*, who passed on the request to *Raoji*, as *Jemati* was a Rajput and the *Bagrawat* brothers belonged to the Gujar community. Although *Raoji* agreed, on the day of her marriage, she secretly took her vows with the sword of *Sawai Bhoj*. After the ceremony with *Raoji* was over, *Neva* who had seen her secret ceremony, asked her to stay with *Raoji* for a while, after which he promised that they would come to take her to their home. After several months, on *Jemati*'s request, the brothers left for Rann to bring her to *Sawai Bhoj*. *Bhoj*'s wife *Sadoo* tried to stop them by telling them that stealing *Raoji*'s wife would be a sin. But as they had given their word to *Jemati*, they went to Rann and one night she managed to escape with *Sawai Bhoj* on his horse accompanied by her maid, *Hira* who rode with *Neva*. *Jemati* made *Sawai Bhoj* gave his word that *Bhoj* would never use his powerful sword to harm *Raoji* or together with his brothers collectively fight against him. When *Raoji* came to know where *Jemati* was, he asked the brothers to return her, to which they refused. *Raoji* decided to wage war against the *Baghrawat*. Concerned about his lineage, *Sawai Bhoj* sent his eldest son to the king in Ajmer. While *Raoji*'s army advanced to attack, *Bhoj*'s brother *Neva* was in deep sleep and his sons and later his wife went to fight the battle. The brothers fought one by one as according to the promise that *Sawai Bhoj* had made to *Jemati*, and although they managed to harm *Raoji*'s army to a large extent, they were killed. When *Neva* woke up from his sleep, he fought against the army single-handedly till the goddess intervened and beheaded him, at which eyes sprung from his chest and he still managed to fight the army for a long time.

Sawai Bhoj remained in the palace all this while with his wife and when *Raoji*'s army reached close *Jemati* transformed herself into goddess *Kali* and demanded his head for completing her necklace of the heads of twenty-four brothers. *Sawai Bhoj* cut off his head and sacrificed his life, and the army took away all the wealth of the *Baghrawat*. Except for *Bhoj*'s son in Ajmer, *Neva*'s son whom his wife had given to their spiritual leader, and two more sons from two other brothers, no one survived. *Bhoj*'s wife *Sadoo* went

with her maid to Malaseri hills where one day the rocks broke open to let out gushing water, and in that water on the bud of a lotus lay *Dev Narayan*, as *Vishnu* had promised. When *Raoji* found out that *Dev Narayan* was born, he tried to get him killed, but being an incarnation of *Vishnu*; the young boy took the form of a serpent and chased the armies away. Meanwhile a man named *Chochu Bhatt* in Nagaur, a genealogist by profession who was commissioned by the *Baghrawat*, searched for Dev Narayan. Thinking that he would bring harm to her son, *Sadoo* tried to kill *Chochu Bhatt*, but *Dev Narayan* found him and saved him. *Dev Narayan* also went ahead to marry the daughter of *Basak*, the serpent king of the underworld. Learning all about his father and the other *Bagrawat* brothers, Dev Narayan decided to reunite those sons who were alive and also win back all the wealth that had been stolen from their ancestors. *Dev Narayan* met *Bhangi*, the son of *Bhoj*'s brother *Neva*, who was in the company of their spiritual leader, and Ajmer, and one of his other brother *Teja*'s son named *Madan*. Together they went to ask *Bhoj*'s eldest son who was in Ajmer, named *Mhendu*. *Mhendu* claimed that being the eldest son he wanted the shares in the property from *Sadoo*. *Chochu Bhatt* intervened to state that he could retrieve the mare *Bavali* that was with another king, he could become the heir to all the property. But he could not fulfill the task. One of the sons of the *Bagrawat* brothers named *Bhuna* had grown up with *Raoji*, and so *Dev Narayan* sent him letters delivered by *Chochu Bhatt* to plead him to return and join the other brothers. On his way to *Raoji*'s place, *Chochu Bhatt* played the *Jantar* (which is now played by the bardic singers or the *Bhopa* associated with this epic). *Raoji* was attacked by other kings and his eldest wife who had taken care of *Bhuna* requested him to help out. Suspicious of his loyalty later, *Raoji* and his wife tried to kill *Bhuna* in many ways but *Bhuna* survived all attacks and decided to leave the Rann to join *Dev Narayan*. He managed to retrieve another horse that belonged to the *Bagrawat* brothers and located the cremation grounds of the *Baghrawat* and their family. *Dev Narayan* also fought back his family's elephant and learnt more from *Chochu Bhatt* about his forefathers. He came to know that the feud between the *Baghrawat* brothers and Raoji which resulted in the massacre was due to the fault on the part of the *Baghrawat* brothers, which was done just to keep the promise made to *Jemati*.

However, due to the loss of the family and the prestige, *Dev Narayan* decided to take revenge on *Raoji* and provoked him to wage a war by sending his cowherd *Napa* to destroy the cultivated fields of *Raoji*. After destroying them, *Napa* mediated for blessings from Lord *Shiva* and went ahead to kill *Raoji*'s brother *Nimdev*. An infuriated *Raoji* attacked and confiscated the cows, and it was then that *Dev Narayan* interceded, killed the army of *Raoji* and also exterminated *Raoji* to take the revenge. But since *Raoji* was initially not at fault, he was revived back to life again by *Dev Narayan*, thus ending the myth of the twenty-four brothers and *Dev Narayan*.

Fig. 19. The phad of Dev Narayan

5.2. Reliving the Imagined Past: Storytelling, Performance and the Construction of Social Identity

Symbols make possible the visualization of ideas and myths (Jung, 1953). Symbolic representations are a part of everyday life. However, as Durkheim mentioned, it is in the course of abstracted moments where sentiments get united that such symbols are performed and their ideas are represented (Olaveson 2001: 97). In Rajasthan, it is then through the performance of the *phad* of *Dev Narayan* and *Pabuji* that the story of the grand narratives are presented to the community. The symbolic representation of the myths through painting and narration facilitate in the formation of a space where the individual consciousness become aligned towards the symbols. Collective cognition and shared consciousness of the images and words, as made possible through the performance further allow for the contextualization of a common belief about the past, the present and a shared vision of the future. This is what provides the community with a strong sense of collective social identity. The *bhopa* being from the same community as the audience, the performance enables them to act as cultural agents involved in the continual reaffirmation of the social identity of their community.

The domain of experience is characterized by subjectivity. Gaining an insight into the experience of others requires an understanding of their cognitive perception, its workings in the unconsciousness and its repercussion on behavior. Its understanding is influenced by prior experiences, by values, personal motives, social location and socialization. It is therefore through expression that experience can be interpreted. However, in the context of extraordinary events, getting access of this experience and its repercussion in the realm of everyday life is rather difficult and is also not the purpose of the present work. The objective in this work is to accentuate on the relation of such symbolic performances in terms of their production of collective meaning as represented in the maintenance of shared social identity and a collective understanding of morality. It is then through the expressions which make the performance possible that this understanding is arrived at. This is the aspect of lived experience, which is collectively 'lived' or encountered through the performance of the symbols. An interpretive understanding of these symbols therefore facilitate in acquiring knowledge about the ideas underlying them and therefore their reflection on the consciousness of the collectivity which gathers during such

performances. In the pictorial-narrative tradition of Rajasthan, it is thus through an intuitive understanding of the images and the narratives which make up the *phad* performance, that the role of the artist and that of the practice, in maintaining social identity and morality can be comprehended.

The folk epics of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan* that are represented through the age-old tradition of *Phad Banchana*, stress on the aspect of *Banchana* to accentuate on the significance of retelling. *Banchana*, which comes from the word *Vaachan*, is storytelling or narration in the form of an affirmation of statements which are re-established every time with performance and contributes to the reproduction of belief.

Pabuji is believed to have brought camels to Rajasthan. This is the reason why he is venerated and worshipped by the camel herders of Rajasthan. Critical observation and reflection of the entire tradition and the aspect of performance shows how this folk epic, and also that of the *Dev Narayan* is more about the re-constitutionalization of a certain dimension of social memory, and how the story, along with the illustration and the narration function together towards the reaffirmation of collective social identity. It does not aim at ritual worship of the deity but his veneration in order to separate him from the world of everyday and the profane, and elevate him to the position of a deity so that the entire community also ascends in the larger of social hierarchy and ritual purity[63].

In the myth of *Pabuji*, the character of *Harmal* is said to go to Lanka, and promises to bring back camels. Many other similar instances from the epics of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan* show similarities between these folk epics and the grand narratives of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. As these performances are done by narrators who are from the same community as that of the audience, attempts at constructing or reasserting social identity works for the whole community. The underlying aim is not towards self-marginalization or self-projection as the subaltern[64], but taking symbolic elements from

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[63] Douglas, M (1966). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Taylor and Francis.

[64] The idea of the subaltern has been used in terms of its broader sense of meaning, as derived from Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. In this context, it refers to the idea of those sections of the society which lie on the peripheral rung of the structural hierarchy, rendering them with relatively no access to power and therefore the construction of knowledge. Their representation in the society reflects the authority of the powerful, whose discourses constitute the provinces of meaning, and their own marginalized

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the dominant epics, drawing connection to the epics and thereby justifying their distinctiveness in the society. Overturning the idea of remaining marginalized, through the visual and the spoken symbol, the performer and the painter emphasize on a distinct mark of social identity that falls within the larger social system or the majority, and that is socially imagined and affirmed repeatedly through this tradition. It is interesting to note how the communities whose social positions have been challenged in the present day and who occupy contested spaces in the social hierarchy, refer to mythic and sacred characters, to reaffirm and declare not only their own social identity, but that of the entire community.

The myth plays an important role in creating a space in which trajectories of cultural belief and social identity are constructed and legitimated. It is then the acknowledgement and the recognition of the structure of myth as working beyond the realm of religion and literature to enable the creation of a space in which the ideal can be collectively imagined and experienced, and through which the agency can function to transform the system of collective belief. What could be understood as a fact? It is one that is based on collective belief. In this manner the myth also becomes a fact, and for the Nayak and the Rebari, *Pabuji* did travel to Lanka! The facts become purported in the course of social acts of performance where the actuality and the justification of the events in the story are confirmed in the system of belief through the collective experience. In the context of the performance, the collective consciousness that is directed to the illustrations and its narrative interpretations, then highlights on the construction of a memory that merges the social imagination to a historical past, and tracing relations with dominant religious discourses they justify their claims to a respectable social position in the historical past and hence their claim to a higher socio-cultural and religious position in the present day. The emergence of the meaning that constitutes social memory, emanate from epics and narratives, functioning for the most part, to reaffirm their collective socio-historical and present political identity. The actuality and the verification of the facts are masked in the process of veneration of the historical figures, which allows the facts to remain value yet authoritative.

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position. The point that is being made is that these performances do not endeavor to project oneself as the ideologically, socially and politically powerless, to the outside world.

Both the epics deal with episodes and events concerning the cattle and their safety. The deification of the historical figures stems from their ideal qualities, their bravery, their adherence to promises and social principles, their duty to the community and other social and moral responsibilities. Their veneration originates from their allegiance to the maintenance of social and moral order. In the performance and the experience of the scroll and the narratives then these meanings underlie the story and its enactment and lived experience then facilitates in its reestablishment in the social memory. The idea of morality penetrates the collective mind as sacred, in relation to its association with the figure of the deified. Its upkeep in the domain of everyday life is then also justified through its relation to the ideal or the sacred. The idea of morality then functions not merely to make sure the adherence of the community to moral values, but operates as a principle of authority demanding recognition and subservience, thereby contributing to the production of certain spaces as contexts for the reconstruction and reaffirmation of collective social identity.

There is a clear emphasis on the redistribution of the space on the *phad* to the idea of actual places and the performance draws back the audience to an imagined historical past. Court scenes reflect the importance of justice and the adherence to locally established moral laws of the community and are illustrated in the centre of the scrolls. The positioning of the court-scene in both the scrolls could be to signify the centrality of the characters, their royal affiliation and hence the court, their emphasis on justice and on the maintenance of the socially upheld principles and virtues. The central location of the large portrait manages to catch the initial attention of the audience and therefore assists the narrator to transfix their gaze and powers of cognition to a time back in the past. The prominence of the characters marked by their large size, the majestic court scene, and the apparent use of the colour red, all contribute to direct the consciousness of the individuals in the audience to an imagined narrative time, where the size and composition of the characters, the choice of colour, clothing, jewels, and location, altogether function as symbols representing the Rajput kingdom, the ideal warrior and prince, as well as the ideal social being, highlighting at the same time on the creator of their lineage and therefore the source of their collective identity, and projecting the ideal qualities that were upheld in the past during the reign of their deity and hence should be followed at

present to maintain social order. The centrality of the main character and its typical depiction also makes it possible for the audience to view him as a deity and this justifies its purpose of acting as a portable shrine.

The display and narration of objects marked as sacred in the public space enables the production and establishment of belief, and this is what helps in the production of a common conviction towards a different reality. The performative act of narration by the *bhopa* through its ability to project a certain reality in the collective mind also functions to reconstruct and transform the larger structure in which it takes place.

The role of women in this tradition is also contingent on the socio-ritual status of their family and their larger lineage. Considering the growing international interest in what may be classified as the 'folk' category of practices, belief systems and institutional patterns, the painters and the narrators are already aware of certain common queries that are posed to them by outsiders interested in the tradition. Also many painters have gone abroad for exhibitions. So, most of them are already prepared with answers of possible questions that they might come across. In the *phad* tradition when, when the painters were asked about the role of women, they quickly replied back by saying that women are also involved in the creation of the *phad* through their contribution in the making of colours. They are however not involved in the process of painting Kalyan Joshi from Bhilwara mentioned that women married into the family are sometimes taught the art, but young girls who would be married off to different families would not be trained it in, so as to maintain the tradition within the family. However, the sacred scrolls of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan*, are painted by the men in the family, and the contribution of women are also reflective of gendered roles. The narrative performance of the *Dev Narayan phad* includes male *bhopa* only; while in the recitation of the *Pabuji*, the *bhopi* or the female narrator performs along with the *bhopa*. The economic condition and socio-religious status of the community to which the *Pabuji bhopa* belongs is much lower than that of the *Dev Narayan bhopa*. With the former having no access to land or cultivation, mostly being involved in a peri*pat*etic way of life, the wife does not stay indoors.

The narrative that is sung, is stored in the memory of the *bhopa*, and does not provide space for creativity. In fact, it is the unchanged transmission and presentation of the

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traditional epic over decades that add on to its authenticity. Owing to the sacred nature of the story, creativity does not find much place. Creative changes need not be made and in fact are not made, because they are believed to be referring to actual historical events. The role of the *bhopa* is then to take back the audience to that point of time in history when the events took place, with the help of the *phad* and the narrative.

It is important to note the attire of the *bhopa* in the attire of the Rajput warrior prince during the performance. The costume is as if to add to the authenticity of the performance and adds to the power of agency on the part of the *bhopa* to assert the inclusion or belongingness of his community to a Rajput past, and therefore reinstate his position and that of his entire community to a heroic past and to insist on the claim to a previous socio-religious position relatively more respectable than the present. The costume also helps to capture the imagination of the audience in the process of transporting it to the past. As they cannot, and do not, want to make changes or alterations in the narratives, the creativity of the *bhopa* and his individuality reflects in the style of singing and gestures and entire performance.

With the performance of the *bhopa* in the garb of a Rajput prince, the *Phad* and its *banchana* in Rajasthan is not merely the retelling of a narrative but the re-living and the re-experiencing of a past that is not considered to be fictional, but one which is mythically reconstructed and which attempts to transport the consciousness of the enthralled audience into a glorified past and thereby facilitate in the construction and maintenance of collective emotion and identity. The performance is then somewhere in the middle of a theatrical show and a ritual, where the *phad*, the bardic poetry, the music, the gestures, and the explanations provided, all combine together in the lived experience of the individual consciousness to symbolize and give way to feelings of collectivity and shared identity. The rich juxtaposition of colours and illustrative figures with the narrative mode of storytelling facilitates in a reflexive construction of a social memory, one that lies in between feelings of pride reminiscent of a past and the need to maintain a sense of collectivity pertaining to the shared understanding of past.

I. The Myth of *Pabuji*

As the entire narration and interpretation of the *phad* of *Pabuji* would take up nights, there are certain episodes that are highlighted in the course of performances. One such episode is that of *Pabuji*'s friend *Goga*'s marriage. *Goga*'s wedding highlights on the need to keep up to promises under any condition. The popularity of the wedding scene could be attributed to the elaborate description of the grandeur and pomp of the marriage ceremony, unlike the daily condition of the economically deprived audience, for whom the mythical description of faith and miracles, of bravery and wealth, makes possible for them to imagine a better future for themselves. The detailed description of the ceremonies and rituals pertaining to marriage also acts as a marker of social distinction of the community's cultural practices and hence adds on to their collective identity.

Equally popular scene, significant for the community is when *Harmal* goes to Lanka in search of the camels and when the camels are brought to Rajasthan. This has been one of the prime reasons of the deification of *Pabuji* and thus occupies the interest of the camel herders, for whom the particular episode is like a myth of the origin of their occupation and therefore their identity. The elaboration of the scene would reveal the possibility of drawing multiple parallels to the popular epic of *Ramayana*, in which the main protagonist's wife, *Sita* is abducted by *Ravana* and kept in Lanka, where *Hanuman* first crosses the ocean and goes to track her, bringing information about her, following which the main protagonist *Ram* goes to save her with the army. *Harmal* in the same manner goes to Lanka in search for camels crossing the ocean miraculously. He faces trouble and is buried alive by the Rebari when they find out about his real intentions even though he is dressed in the appearance of an ascetic, but he remains safe through the invocation of *Pabuji*. Following this, *Pabuji* leaves for Lanka and gets the camels, although unlike *Ram*, he does not fight *Ravana*, and *Ravana*'s army is solely defeated by *Dembo*, as in this case the real *Ravana* or the assumed villain, is *Jindrav Khinchi*, *Pabuji*'s brother in law. Throughout the story, the characters have been linked to, by the act of incarnation, to deified characters of dominant epics. *Pabuji* has been referred to as the incarnate of *Lakshman*, while *Dembo* has been said to personify *Hanuman*. It is interesting to note how the legend borrows sub-plots and characters akin to that in the *Ramayana* and

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intervene it with inputs from the local culture and community. The pursuit of Lanka, the mention of *Dembo* as *Hanuman* while his characteristics being similar to that of *Bhima* from *Mahabharata*, and the reference of *Pabuji* as *Lakshman*, as the austere saint of the region, whose wedding also remains incomplete as if to contribute to his inherent ascetic quality, all point towards the significance of certain ideal attributes as pertinent to the existence and sustenance of the community. Intermittently the *bhopa* breaks the flow of the verse by singing devotional songs which do not require explanation and function as if to highlight on the sacred nature of the story, the idea of which could be lost due to the historical nature of the text.

Pabuji's wedding is again noteworthy for the story as it highlights on approaching the climax of the story, and especially how the deified hero keeps his promise of saving the cattle made to *Deval Chavan*, at the sake of his own marriage. Being marked as an ascetic divine character throughout the story, the act of marriage would not act in favour to the sacredness of his character. He therefore keeps his word of marriage and completes the first three circumambulations around the fire, but before he can proceed, he receives the call to save the cattle. In the episode where the cows are recaptured by *Dembo* even before *Pabuji* can reach and the decision of *Pabuji* to not avenge on *Jindrav Khinchi* for protecting his sister from widowhood and *sati*, emphasize on ability of the protagonists to realize the priority of their principles even at the cost of their own lives. The deification of *Pabuji* follows this act of protection of cows, where *Pabuji* gives his sword to *Khinchi* and takes a whip instead, and asks *Khinchi* to kill him as otherwise *Pabuji* would definitely not leave him alive. As the story highlights on the prior connection of the communities with a Rajput past, the significance of the scene lies in the principle of abstaining from the misuse of physical power and the need to put forward the values of the community before that of any individual. *Pabuji* being a venerated figure in the community is not shown to die in the scroll or in the narrative, which would reduce the power of his sacrosanct personality. He is then taken up, assumedly to heaven by celestial bodies in a palanquin, symbolic of royalty and grandeur.
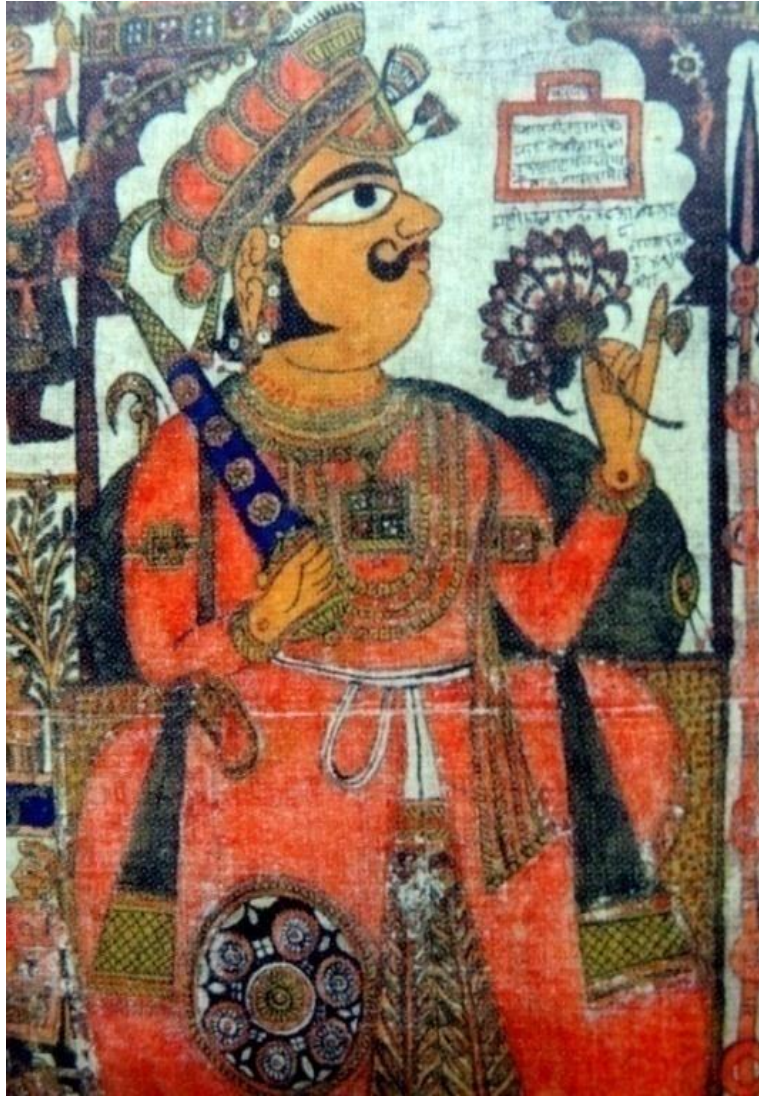
Fig.20. The largest image on the scroll of *Pabuji*, with *Pabuji* himself centrally placed within the border of the royal court, which is the seat of judgment.

Fig. 21. This is the central part of the *phad* showing *Pabuji* with his four companions, and the image of *Kesar Kelami* below

Fig. 22. This part of the scroll shows *Pabuji*'s quest to Lanka, war with *Ravana*, and the entry of the camels into Rajasthan. *Pabuji* is depicted as riding the black mare, *Kesar Kelami* and *Harmal* painted in blue as the ascetic. The water body divides the Indian subcontinent with Lanka

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II. The Myth of Dev Narayan

The *phad* and narrative for this epic is much more complicated and exhaustive than that of *Pabuji*. The birth of this revered historical prodigy, who is the primary deity of the community in which this legend is believed, happens after the story of an entire generation is completed. The attempt to draw parallel with gods and goddesses from the dominant Hindu pantheon is clearly evident in this epic where the incarnation of *Vishnu* is born in the house of *Sawai Bhoj* who is a Gujar, the blessings of Shiva on his disciple *Sawai Bhoj*, the marriage of *Dev Narayan* to the daughter of *Basak*, the serpent god of the underworld, the interference of the goddess of the Shakti cult to eliminate the twenty-four brothers and the incarnation of *Vishnu* in the same family to restore back the lost wealth and avenge the enemies.

The name '*baghrawat*' given to the twenty four brothers has a double connotation according to the Joshi painters of Bhilwara. The Joshi hailing from a different caste remarked that the obvious meaning of the term *baghrawat* came from the reason that the son of *Leela Sevri*, whose marriage to the twelve girls had given birth to the twenty-four brothers, had the body of a human and the face of a tiger. *Bagh* meaning tiger in hindi and the local dialect, *baghrawat* could possibly be attributed to the sub-caste which was born when this man married. The other meaning of *Baghrawat* could be understood, as the artists hinted on the casteless birth and unruly nature of the brothers. *Baghrawat* could come from the phrase '*bigre huye'*, which means being spoilt. For the *bhopa*, who also belong to the Gujar community themselves, it is the first meaning emanating from the usual depiction of the physical features that gave way to the name. The allusion to the blessings of Shiva, the instance of *Vishnu* being born in the family and the wedding of *Dev Narayan* to *Basak*'s daughter, all seem to work to establish a sacred history justifying their contested position in the social hierarchy. The request of *Basak* to *Vishnu* to kill the *Baghrawat* brothers for pouring liquor over him, *Vishnu*'s agreement to the proposal, his several unsuccessful attempts to murder them, his request to the goddess for intervening and eliminating the brothers, and then his rebirth in a human form in the *Baghrawat* clan and marrying *Basak*'s daughter, point towards the flexibility of the boundaries of the sacred and human in the domain of myth. Mythical discourses therefore

exemplify a terrain, or a space where the powers of the social imagination infused with the cultural practices and the dominant discourses work together to reassert collective consciousness and build understandings of social identity through the conscious employment of concepts and historical and fictitious characters who are attributed the qualities of sacred and again relegated to the domain of everyday life.

The storyline also highlights on the traditional social structure which disallowed inter-caste marriages to take place. So when *Jemati* expressed her interest in marrying *Sawai Bhoj*, he refused it on the grounds of caste. But again, as *Jemati* was the incarnation of the goddess Kali, her task of secretly marrying *Bhoj* was considered an exception and justified under the pretext that her real intention was to kill all the twenty-four brothers. Since the epic is believed to have actual historical relations, *Chochu Bhatt*, the genealogist who was chosen by the *Baghrawat* in the story, is actually believed by the Gujar *bhopa* to have started the entire tradition of *phad* by going to the painters and asking them to make illustrations on portable scrolls of cloth. It is he who informs *Dev Narayan* about the *Baghrawat* brothers, and is also stated to have played a 'jantar', or the instrument of the *Dev Narayan bhopa*. This epic therefore does merely stop by describing a past that the community could refer to, but instead forms a storyline which connects even up to the present day, therefore making the process of social identification more uninterrupted and exact in nature. For the *bhopa*, it is through the character of *Chochu Bhatt* who narrated the entire story to *Dev Narayan* and who was blessed in return, that their traditional occupation is justified. For the rest of the Gujar community, this epic is also a myth of their origin, with the situation of the twenty-four *Baghrawat* brothers attempting to provide a cause of their relatively low socio-religious status in the society. But again the intercession of *Vishnu* in the very family of the *Baghrawat* who represent the Gujar in the epic, is a basis for their justifying the assertion to a higher socio-religious position than the present.

The depiction of *Vishnu* in this epic then proves to bring to justice the wrong that was done by the *Baghrawat* brothers by killing them through *Jemati* and again taking birth in the very same family to take revenge on the enemies of *Baghrawat*. The story thus stresses on the upkeep of social principles and values above the needs of any individual,

and at the same time facilitates in the maintenance of social identity of a particular community. The heroic power and might of the *Baghrawat* brothers and also their sons in the battles is so strong that it is only through heavenly intervention that they are killed. In the end, although *Dev Narayan* kills *Raoji* in order to take revenge for the loss of his family and wealth, since he knows that *Raoji* was not at fault for the war, he revives him back again.

On the *phad*, the central place is illustrated with a large figure of *Dev Narayan*, which is the largest in comparison to all the other characters on the scroll. He is shown in royal attire with his four brothers. The rest of the *phad* deals with the events before this and after the birth of *Dev Narayan*. Since the entire narration of the scroll would take up several nights, certain episodes are generally highlighted by the *bhopa*, or are even requested by the audience or the *pat*ron. Some of the common episodes include the narration of the *Dev Narayan* as the embodiment of *Vishnu*, along with his other incarnations. The narrative performance starts with devotional hymns of *Dev Narayan* and other gods and goddesses whose invocation is considered auspicious and is believed to bring prosperity, material wealth and good luck to the performer as well as the audience. Other popular scenes include the birth of *Dev Narayan*, the birth of *Jemati*, the transformation of *Jemati* into goddess *Kali* after she completes her garland made out of the heads of the twenty-four brothers, the furious battle between the *Baghrawat* brothers and *Raoji*, and between *Dev Narayan* and *Raoji*, in which the narration refers to a common illustration of a battleground, the chivalry of the two sons of *Neva* during *Raoji*'s attack on the *Baghrawat*, the reuniting of the brothers of *Dev Narayan* who survived, the role of *Chochu Bhatt*, and the reclaiming back of all wealth.

*Fig. 23.* This scroll of *Dev Narayan* shows the central location and the relatively larger image of *Dev Narayan*, paced in the middle of the scroll. To the left of the portrait of *Dev Narayan* is the episode when the *Baghrawat* brothers infuriated *Basag*, and *Vishnu* decided to kill them. Just above it is the scene when *Jemati* asks *Sawai Bhoj* to complete her necklace of twenty-four brothers, and he cuts off his own head.

III. Imagining History: Invoking Collective Identity

In the case of the *phad* of *Dev Narayan* and *Pabuji*, the mythical depiction of heroes and clans from which the communities draw their lineage, justify their socio-economic status and assert their alternative claims, allowing a space for creatively imagining and reimagining of one's past. It is through the medium of myth which includes supernatural bodies and gods and goddesses, and its narrative performance in the presence of a collectivity, that the sacred element of the epic and the narrative is restated, repowered, and reconfirmed. This is also the space where through the revocation of the sacred, the institution of belief is reestablished in the power of the collective or the social, and this is turn makes it possible for the maintenance of the community.

Most of the primary characters have the immanent ability to interact with the powers of the supernatural and that of nature, and this works to reaffirm their sacredness. Both the myths build up a momentum leading to a battle in the end, with events leading to the deification of the central characters. In both the epics the crucial role of the cattle in inducing or waging wars is clearly visible, with the duty of the heroes or the main figures being to protect the cattle at any cost. These myths therefore do not endeavor to appeal to a common public across regions and spaces, and within the very space of construction and advancement of the plot lies the conscious attempt to reinforce collective identity of certain communities whose lifestyle and cultural patterns are also depicted. The relatively larger size of the central figure allows the collective gaze to be transfixed on the sacred heroic characters and the audio-visual presentation makes possible the emergence of collective feelings of ecstasy and emotion that enable the visualization of a past. The consciousness of individuals that which guided by socialization and their situatedness in a particular socio-cultural and economic setting allows in making sense of the situation, but it is through the context where the *phad* and the narrative combine to interact with the experience, that the contemporaneity is shared by all. This helps in the structuring and reaffirming of social identity as it is not thought the *phad* alone, or simply the narrative, but the role of both along with the audience that generates new meaning.

The understanding of space assumes newfound significance when one perceives it through the discourse of power. The absence of any physical places of worship for

Pabuji, other than the only temple that is presumed to be his birthplace, is symbolic of their social position within the larger society. Although the argument given by other communities and by the painters related to the *phad* hinge on the understanding that the absence of the edifices of worship in terms of physical topography is related to the occupation of this community, its reconsideration in terms of the relation between power and space can accentuate on the possibility of a different explanation. The idea of space is understood through the presence of material entities as well as ideas (Lefebvre, 1991: 73). It is also constitutive of social relations (ibid). If discourses and bodies of knowledge reflect relations of power, if symbolic forms of representation reflect this discourse of power, and if relations and positions within a society also reflect the structural arrangement of power, then the organization and ownership of space, within which these entities, thoughts and activities are located, is also reflective of the working of power and hegemony. This understanding then helps in recognizing how space, both ideational and geographical, can function as a site for domination as well as resistance. In the case of the communities related to the cult of *Pabuji*, the absence of physical places of worship can therefore also be interpreted in terms of their position in the social hierarchy.[65] The presence of temples associated with the deity make it possible for people from within the community and even those passing by, to visit and pay their reverence. It also allows for collective activities to take place periodically. In the cultural landscape of the region, it therefore functions as one of the significant symbols, representing the community. Its presence is reflective not only of the discourses underlying it but of the socio-cultural prominence of the communities associated with its belief and practice. For the followers of the cult of *Pabuji*, this lack of the presence of geographically tangible spaces of worship also becomes indicative of their restricted access to land, owing to their itinerary past[66] and their social position. In the absence of temples, reflective of their social marginalization, their construction of sacred space and their mobile places of worship through the abstract and discursive space of the symbols become even more significant

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[65] The Rebari and the Nayak communities in Rajasthan are identified as erstwhile nomadic communities and have therefore been at a socially disadvantageous position in terms of their access to positions of economic affluence and political authority.

[66] Even though they have a relatively settled life-style in the present day, and their migratory trails do not usually involve travelling much outside the territorial boundaries of the state, there are no temples dedicated to Pabuji across the entire region.

for understanding their attempt to reposition themselves within the community through recourse to collective beliefs about the importance and maintenance of the moral. Through the symbolic performance of the myth, the performers then reaffirm the existence of the community on a socially imagined geographical place of the past, and tracing this they therefore legitimize their claim to a present identity, not as the marginalized, but as the culturally distinct.

The *bhopa* belonging to the same community as the audience of its performance, the notion of collective social identity becomes an inclusive one. The performers do not merely carry out the tradition to assert their identity to the audience, but both equally participate in the practice – the former through telling and the latter through listening and seeing. The practice of retelling is then a performance not only within the community but also in the larger society. Performance therefore does not stay limited to the understanding of the narrative, but functions as the performance of the social identity of the community as a collective whole. Retelling enables the audience to relive, or revisit the past, contributing to the reaffirmation of a social memory, one that serves as historical understanding for primarily the communities of the Rebari the Nayak, who are associated with the *Pabuji* myth, and the Gujar, who are associated with the epic of *Dev Narayan*. This facilitates in the maintenance of a similar world-view, a shared life-world and therefore a shared sense of identity.

It is interesting to observe the tendency in the informant to sometimes modulate their answers in certain aspects so as to maintain an accordance with the modern researcher, whereas in the researcher there is sometimes the tendency to look for the exotic and to go to the extent of conceptually and visually creating it where it actually is not that evident. The informer being the primary source of information and the researcher being the conceptual and theoretically skilled in the field, both work in their own ways to construct and deconstruct knowledge and understanding in a manner that highlights their agency and their distinctiveness.

Concepts can be demarcated as ideal types for mere classification and simplification of understanding. But when one steps into the field, observations cannot help but reveal much more complex processes involved in the construction and the workings of social

reality. Concepts here no longer remain abstract and clearly demarcated from each other, but are heavily enmeshed, blurring the boundaries thus created, intruding into the domains of one another, influencing each other, interworking their way through differing levels of social structure and various processes, altering their meaning and function, being shaped by patterns and frameworks of power and again contributing to the reshaping and the reconstruction of discourses of power, social structures and patterns of meaning.

5.3. Social Identity and Performance in the Construction of the Collective Sense of the Moral

The idea of the moral is something that is collectively recognizable. The interpretation of this notion of moral hence requires the acknowledgment of the presence of a common belief system. Though personal experience and motives often reflect in individual thought and activity in the personal and social spaces of life, these are to a large extent based on the ideas and discourses prevailing in the life-world. In everyday life, individual consciousness is divided in order to carry out different activities. However, intermittently, there are certain activities which require the presence of a large collectivity. It is through in such moments that the larger understandings of morality prevalent in society are reestablished. The understanding that the idea of morality is said to be deeply immersed in the conceptualization and realization of the power of the social, can therefore be comprehended through such collective moments when symbolic performances help in the cognitive reaffirmation of shared morality. The tradition of the *phad* represents an opulent description of grandeur, royalty, religiosity, trust, honour and war, depicted through illustrious scrolls and grand narratives. Primarily recognized as the pictorial-narrative interpretation of the epics of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan*, the *phad* or the scroll for the local community, is always accompanied by the act of *vaachan* or telling. It is in the interplay of the illustrated scroll and the narrative mode of storytelling that is associated with it, that describes the tradition. Plots in both the epics are replete with insinuation to social acts that accentuate on the call for the maintenance of moral principles for the wellbeing of the community.

As the painters commence the illustration of the *phad* whose iconographic structure has remained largely unchanged, their ancestral blueprint helps them refer to locations of the episodes on the scroll, the style and size of the images, the length of the scene and the colours used. The size of the images and the use of colours are culturally defined. The central icon of the epic and the primary characters are shown in the centre of the scroll of both *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan*. The size of these images is relatively larger to the other icons on the *phad*, clearly visible, and making possible for the audience to understand the primacy of the characters and their sacred quality. The large icons also facilitate in the attraction of the initial gaze and attention. Different colours are sometimes used to differentiate between evil and the good, but again the idea of the good is socially and contextually constructed. Red, for instance is the colour associated with royalty and chivalry. The central figures in both the epics are therefore painted in red. Certain culturally constructed symbols which are socially established in the repertoire of collective memory are used to signify unpleasant circumstances or qualities of virtue. These symbols then go ahead to further visually reinstate the cultural construction in the consciousness of the collectivity. As the *phad* functions in the form of a temple which is always on the move, above the prime characters that are located in the centre, illustrations of gods and goddesses are portrayed, as if to add on to the sacred quality of the epic, and to reassert the sacred nature of the chief character. The identical physical profile of the characters, other than the difference in their size and their attire which simply acts to complement the description and enable the difference of characters, attempts to emphasize on the significance of the scroll as a form of cultural memory and not merely as an aesthetic artifact. The lack of particular detailing on the figures of the scrolls makes it difficult for the outsider to distinguish between the scrolls of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan* at the first glance. This is made up for by certain prominent symbols that help in their differentiation. The scroll of *Dev Narayan* has a snake illustrated beside him a vertical manner, possible in the attempt to draw a connection with *Vishnu*. In the scroll of *Pabuji*, the prominent figure of the black mare adorned with jewels, *Kesar Kalami* stands out, below the main figure of *Pabuji* in the court.

Although rural and village life in the contemporary world is characterized by a large number of individuals moving out for employment, the idea of community life and the

existence of collective belief still remains very essential. Although most of the age-old structures have given way to more modern ways, as a result of the tendencies of migration, social and cultural institutions still largely depend on traditional frameworks of understanding and interaction. Even though villages and towns still function to a large extent on what Durkheim termed as a mechanical solidarity[67], in which there is a simple division of labour and ties of interaction and communication are based on traditional understanding and relations, the need to maintain this solidarity is very prominent[68]. In this attempt, certain traditional cultural practices and rituals intervene to make this solidarity more organic in nature, wherein through the projection of a common past, a common present, and a possible common future, a collective social identity is constructed and maintained.

The construction of the space facilitates in the receding of the aspect of temporality of the event and allows the consciousness not only to engage in the lived experience of the present, but enables the direction of the imagination to an unobstructed flow of time, in which the past, present and the future seem are synchronized. This works as if to highlight on the timelessness of the moral principles and sacred qualities that were characteristic of the deified heroes of history, that which continues to hold significance and earn reverence in the society, and that which are needed to be preserved and maintained even in the future for the survival of the community.

Along with the depiction of the morally 'good', the cultural construction of the notions of wicked and the evil is also very apparent in both the *phad*. As much detailing on the physical features, is not a part of this tradition, evil characters such as the witches in the epic of *Pabuji* are shown with in their front profile. Unlike the rest of the characters whose images have been drawn as per their side profiles, as if to show them in interaction, the unusual portrayal of the witches could be done so as to induce a sense of shock, fright, or to depict the unusual. The construction of the notion of the wicked and the understanding of the evil is culturally contextualized and explained. In the entire

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[67] Durkheim, E (1997). *The Division of Labour in Society*, New York: The Free Press

[68] This situation is opposed to the urban life, where although the complex division of labour has led to the development of organic solidarity, the tendency towards individualism stands very prominent.

scrolls, it is the image of the evil that is made to stand out, in comparison with the rest of the characters whose features are almost identical.

The depiction of the court scene in the middle of both the scrolls of *Dev Narayan* and *Pabuji* is to impart a sense of significance to the idea of justice and morality. The court like structure with well marked boundaries also gives the out the image of that of a temple. When asked about the representation of moral ideas in the scroll, Gopal Joshi of Bhilwara remarked that the court is like the '*nyay mandir*' where the '*nyay adhish*' sits. *Nyay mandir* in this context could be translated as a temple of judgment, where the supreme judge sits. Morality in the *phad* is also largely connected to the idea of sensible and good judgment. The court is where all judgments and decisions regarding the upkeep of the social and moral order in the ancient society were maintained. The depiction of the court is not necessarily indicative of the power and the act of judgment on behalf of the central character. It is rather symbolic of the status of the main figure and the sense of maintenance of moral values and social principles above everything else. The rest of the story surrounds this space of the court. The main characters embody these virtues in their highest form and therefore are considered ideal and venerated in the society. The visual representation of the *nyay mandir* then suggests the relation existent between the idea of the sacred and that of morally and socially approved judgment.

The narrative performance of the *bhopa* also requires him to adorn a traditional red costume resembling that of a Rajput prince. The *bhopa* in this sense can then not just called the narrator of the story but the authentic narrator, who in a way also becomes a part of the narrative itself. Transposing the audience back to a time of fictive history, the *bhopa* in the attire akin to the characters of the story then engages in an act of myth-making and remaking, which contributes to the further production of belief. This collective belief in the narrative of the *bhopa* who is also a part of the community, and who also participates in the internalization of this system of belief, is then not an external agent transforming and reaffirming cultural ideas. The *bhopa* is like the priest and the genealogist in their community, presenting and re-presenting legends wrapped up with the cover of the sacred, to contribute to the representation of social identity and the maintenance of morality in society. With the deified folk heroes depicted in the *darbaar* or the royal court, the essence of justice is very prominent. This justice aims towards the

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upkeep of the ideal moral principles. Through the narrative depiction of the *phad* it is believed both by the *bhopa* as well as the audience that the path to salvation can be found, as Kalyan Joshi states that the *phad vachan* helps in the '*udhhaar*' of the people who participate in it.

Religious figures and symbols used accentuate on the authority of the sacred. For the Gujar community in Rajasthan, whose socio-political and religious identity had been compromised to due to their relatively low status in the social hierarchy, the worship of *Dev Narayan* comprises their ritual practices. The cult of the *Dev Narayan* personifies the community. For the Rebari and the Nayak of Rajasthan, whose traditionally ascribed socio-political and religious position is even more deplorable, *Pabuji* represents the religious cult of these communities. The act of veneration, of these historical figures who are revered as folk deities, then seem to be a purposive act of setting up alternate socio-religious identity. Instead of being passive recipients of marginalization, these communities engage in cultural endeavors not to rebel against the structure and thereby accept their marginal position. Instead through the establishment of folk deities, who are inspired and in fact assumed to be related to the gods and goddesses of the dominant castes and communities, these communities set up alternative practices to set up their own distinct social identity within the larger social system. The apparent aim is then not to accept their marginal status but to collectively engage in the production and establishment of belief which positions them as communities with alternative and distinct socio-political and cultural identity within the very system.

I.   The *phad* of Pabuji

The narrative of *Pabuji* commences with an initial invocation of the deity and the setting up of the mythical background, wherein the birth of *Pabuji* and the description of his four companions is sung about. This provides the audience with an introduction to the events and episodes that follow in the course of *Pabuji*'s life leading to his ultimate veneration. In the scroll, the episodes present itself all at once in a form similar to that of a map. The scroll pictures events from *Pabuji*'s birth to the battlefield in a non-linear manner, stress on the depiction of the myth according to the geographically distinct regions. The values

of morality are not illustrated separately, but are intertwined within the story, as related to subsequent instances of rewarding and punishment. The illustrations of the values and social principles that are held in high esteem in the society are therefore shown through the action of the characters and their representation in the scroll does not take place in a very obvious demarcated manner. The underlying moral values which are present in the story can therefore be comprehended only with the narrative which gives a sense of direction to the events and therefore to the scroll.

Nuances of the significance of a moral order are found in various episodes where the upkeep of the principles of virtue. The rescuing of the cows is one such instance that is found to repeatedly mentioned, occupying utmost significance. The realization and preservation of moral values is acknowledged through the qualities of hard work, honesty, dedication and the keeping of one's word. The communities of camel herders in Rajasthan, who are primarily engaged in the worship of *Pabuji*, occupy utterly low positions in terms of their ascribed social status in the larger community. Their low socio-political status, which also contributes to their poverty-ridden condition, leaves them with no choice but to engage in harsh conditions of work, to make their ends meet. In the legend of *Pabuji*, an important determinant of morality is therefore realized in the domain of work, of doing one's job, or what is expected of them. It is through the engagement of the person in the task that he is associated with, and the ability to do it even under tough situations, is considered socially ideal. So, *Pabuji*'s promise to *Deval Chavan*, to protect the cattle under any condition, made him leave his own marriage ceremony interrupted and unfinished. As a protector of his clan and his friends, *Pabuji* refused to fight and defeat *Jindrav Khinchi* in the end, as his sister was married to him, and when in Lanka, struck those enemies who had attacked *Harmal Devasi* when he had initially gone in search of camels. Again, in order to keep his word, he married *Gogo* to princess *Kelam*, although they were from different castes, and sent *Harmal* to Lanka in search of camels, as he had given his word to *Gogo* and *Kelam* as their wedding gift. As Rajput warriors who embody chivalry and valor, the companions of *Pabuji* also protect *Pabuji* and run errands for him throughout the story. When *Pabuji* stopped his marriage ceremony to go to protect *Deval Chavan*'s cows, *Dembo* reached earlier and killed all the armies of *Jindrav Khinchi*, and even offered his body parts to the hungry vultures on the way to the

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battle. *Harmal* voluntarily offered to go to Lanka to enquire about the camels, even though he knew that the road would be dangerous and possibly fatal.

Apart from front profile depiction of the demons which attacked *Harmal* on his way to Lanka, other visually comprehensible instances of the evil, is shown in the scroll on the part relating to *Pabuji*'s wedding. Bad omen which hindered the marriage procession included the representations of snakes, jackal, a woman with unkempt and untied hair, a woman with a lamp not lit, another woman carrying an empty pot of water, and finally a tiger, all obstructing the way at intervals.

In the attempt to draw a relation between the local epic and the epic of *Ramayana*, *Pabuji* is referred to, and in fact he also addresses himself as the incarnation of *Lakshman*. When they decide to return from Lanka with the camels, he also fights *Ravana*, the king of Lanka, but does not kill him, possibly because the act of *Ravana* to call for a battle is justified. Although not stated but understood as the act of *Pabuji* to bring the camels to Rajasthan, was a subtle act of theft. But since, the idea of conquests and forcible possession was very common in the absence of definite demarcated territories as in the present day, the act was acceptable. The killing of *Ravana* was not considered necessary for the advancement of the plot, and besides, in reference to *Ramayan, Ravana* was killed by *Ram*, and *Pabuji* was the incarnation of *Lakshman*. Hence in this episode, the emphasis was instead directed on towards the strength and the supernatural powers of *Pabuji* with which he rescued the camels with this other companions and brought them to Rajasthan, that even in the present day, in the rural regions, acts as main form of transport. In order to further connect *Pabuji* with the character of *Lakshman* from *Ramayana*, and maintain his ascetic character, his marriage ceremony is shown to be disrupted from the beginning and finally obstructed with the need of the hour being to save the cattle.

Although there are attempts to relate these folk legends with the major epics, there is a strong emphasis on the element of maintaining distinction with the grand narratives by highlighting on the issues and cultural practices of the local, and interjecting the common plots with elements from even the local geography. Issues pertaining to the environment are also dealt with in order to further accentuate on the locality of the epic. So, when

Harmal wondered how he would cross the ocean to go to Lanka, and *Dembo* proposed to drink up that water of the entire ocean, *Pabuji* intervened, saying that it would dry up the region and thereby affect the flora fauna and the underwater animals. Towards the end of the story, when *Dembo* offered his organs to the hungry vultures representing an act of valor, he stated that his deed would be immortalized and therefore kept the remaining parts of his intestines on the trees which in the present day is recognized as the date palm.

The theme of morality is strong in epic of *Pabuji*, which is replete with instances of heavenly blessings and power, and also punishment leading to death. The symbolic elements of the painted *phad* and the accompanied by the narrative therefore bring to light on the transformative and re-assertive attempts by cultural agents within the community to confirm and restate their social status and culture within the larger social system not as marginal but as culturally and ritually distinct communities by situating their history and discourses within the larger cultural repertoire of the society.

Fig. 24. Several episodes are merged in the *phad* of *Pabuji*, with the episode on *Pabuji* saving the cattle depicted on the upper right hand side, and just below it, the episode on the marriage procession of *Pabuji* where he meets unlucky omen in the form of snakes, a woman with open hair and woman carrying dry wood on her head
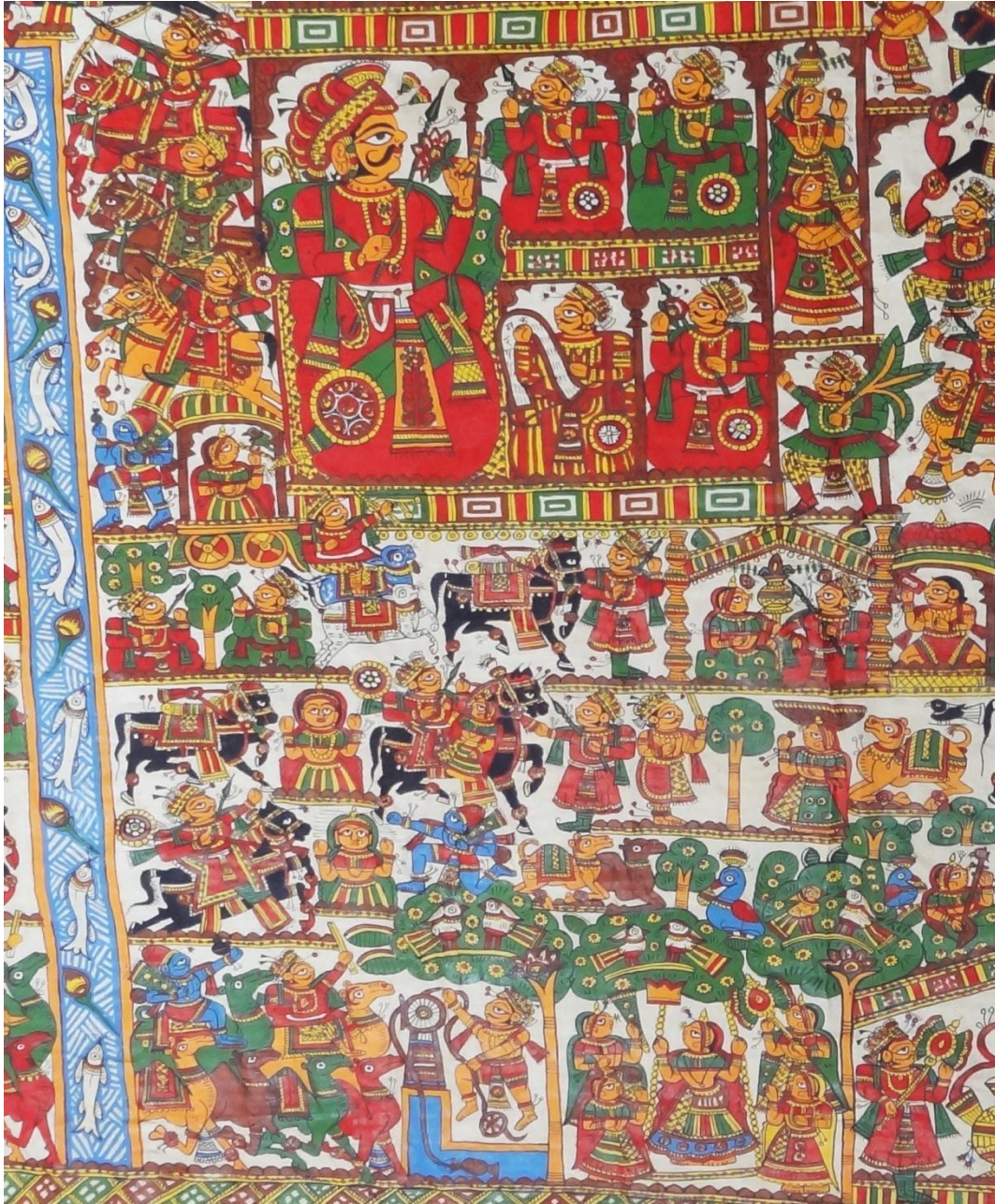
Fig. 25. This part of the scrolls illustrates the episodes on *Harmal* venture to Lanka in search of the camels on the left hand side shown by the water body, where he meets two witches, who are drawn in their front profile. Below on the left, is the part when *Pabuji* defeats *Ravana* and gets the camels, and further to the right on the same level is the Sodhi princess shown to play in her garden. Top above everything at the centre is the court of *Pabuji* where he sits with his four companions and below that is the marriage ceremony of Pabuji with the Sodhi princess.

II.   The *phad* of *Dev Narayan*

The legend of *Dev Narayan* is less performed in contemporary times, as compared to the popularity of *Pabuji*. The reasons could be due to the presence of temples or '*devra*' dedicated to the worship of the folk deity, the strict tradition of allowing only those *bhopa* from the Gujar community to perform the narration, or the migration of the communities associated with the tradition to urban areas for employment, or the socio-political awareness and mobilization of these communities resulting in the replacement of the traditional practices of preserving cultural memory to newer ones. This has not however led to a diminishing of the sacredness of the scroll or the narrative performance. The *Dev Narayan* epic and the narrative, which is double the length of the *Pabuji* epic is more complex with numerous characters and storyline, still forms a very important role in the social life of the communities of the Gujar and Meena in Rajasthan detailing on their traditional belief patterns and cultural practices to a considerable extent that continue to have repercussions on their thought, experience and action, and define their socio-politically distinct identity.

The narration of *Dev Narayan* initiates with devotional hymns which praise him as the incarnation of *Vishnu*. As mentioned before, the act of narration is not a mere event of storytelling, but one in which the god is invoked to bless the audience, and where the audience is made to travel back in time to realize historical events with moral and cultural underpinnings which still hold relevance in the present day, guiding their thought, perception and behavior, and from which they draw their collective identity. The story then moves on to describe about the rise and the fall of the twenty-four *Baghrawat* brothers, followed by the birth and the miracles of *Dev Narayan*. The storyline is complex with numerous characters and historical references of kingdoms, and battles. The moral element in the epic is quite significantly underlined through the events where acts of going against the norm and committing sin are punished with death by the gods. The epic, being constructed in a mythical space, allows for the fictitious creation of supposed historical figures, or the larger than life depiction of historical characters, and the vesting of supernatural powers on most of the central characters. The access to the power, both physical and supernatural is attributed to their ideal personality and exceedingly good moral character.

Pertaining primarily to the community of the Gujar, the story endeavors to uphold the occupational practices and certain cultural beliefs of the community and the region, locating the element of sacred within them and therefore asserting on the possibility of drawing collective identity from them. Thus in the epic, the king of Ajmer decided to gift the twenty-four *Baghrawat* brothers, cattle as dowry for their marriage to women from the Gujar community. And *Sawai Bhoj*, the eldest brother, found out to his surprise that one of the cows in the cattle that he grazed with his brother *Neva* was Lord Shiva's cows, which made him want to become a disciple of Shiva. The epic highlights on the preservation of socially sanctioned and traditionally established attributes and respecting the power and the authority of the sacred. The quality of engaging in hard work and not engaging in pursuits of alcoholism has been depicted in the episode in which the *Baghrawat* brothers purchased large quantities of liquor from the alcohol dealer in Rann and threw it on the outskirts of the region where it infiltrated to the underworld polluting the sacrosanct space of *Basak*, the serpent deity. As a punishment for their immoral behavior *Basak*, asked Vishnu to kill them, which led to the birth of *Jemati*, the incarnation of goddess Kali.

Jemati being the personification of the goddess, her character in the story has been shown to go beyond the customs of tradition, although her position is justified on the grounds that she simply took birth to kill the brothers. Her instances of cunningness, use of power to turn *Raoji*, or the palanquin carrier to mere animals for the sake of fun, seems to symbolically instill a sense of fear and reverence for the sacred in the community, in front of which the humans are shown to be powerless, and going against whom is bound to cause destruction and death. The initial idea of marriage between *Sawai Bhoj* and *Jemati*, was intended by *Jemati* to enter the *Baghrawat* household. However, as inter-caste marriages were not very common in the past, *Sawai Bhoj* was from the Gujar community, refused the alliance and passed it on to *Raoji*. Again on the day of marriage, *Jemati* and *Raoji*, *Jemati* ensured that most of the initial customs would be performed by *Sawai Bhoj* and then secretly made circumambulations with his sword. *Jemati*'s actions in the epic are significant from the point of the advancement of the story, as it was with her plan to marry Sawai Bhoj and later elope that helped her in getting the brothers killed.

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The episode where *Neva* decided to bring *Jemati* to the home of *Sawai Bhoj* is also relevant in terms of the rift that is present between the keeping of a promise and the committing of a sin. For *Neva*, going to Rann to get *Jemati* was crucial at any cost since he had given his word to her. Officially married to *Raoji*, the abduction of *Jemati* was however a great sin, as *Sawai Bhoj*'s eldest wife repeatedly tried to dissuade *Neva* from going to Rann, suggesting that if *Bhoj* wanted he could marry other eligible women. However, the needs of the story and the power of the goddess *Kali* to bend circumstances made *Neva* leave with *Sawai Bhoj* to get *Jemati*, and this resulted in the battle of the *Baghrawat* brothers with the army of *Raoji*, in the course of which all twenty-three died. In instances where the *Baghrawat* became too powerful for the army of *Raoji*, the goddess herself intervened to behead them. It was the initial sin caused by the brothers that led to so much of destruction. Their death was already fore-planned and no matter what they did, their punishment was inevitable. When *Dev Narayan* learnt about the story of his forefathers, the *Baghrawat* brothers, he took revenge on *Raoji* to reclaim his ancestral wealth, but even after killing *Raoji*, he brought him back to life again, as it was the act of stealing his wife that caused him to wage a battle on the *Baghrawat*.

In the middle of the narrative performance, in order to differentiate between two episodes, the *bhopa* sings hymns of *Dev Narayan*, as if to remind the audience of the central character, of the incarnation, the provider of justice and the keeper of morality, and happiness. Interestingly when the *phad* painters, who belong to the Brahmin caste, were asked about the story of the *Baghrawat*, they suggested that the term *Baghrawat* could have two meanings. First, it could just be in resonance with their ancestor who had the head of a tiger and the body of a human. Second, more interestingly, it could stand for suggesting an unruly attitude, or *bigre huye* or which means being spoilt. When the same question was asked to the *bhopa* from the Gujar community, they emphasized only on the first explanation.

This epic of *Dev Narayan* is sated with incarnations and powers of the sacred. Unlike the previous epic of *Pabuji* where there is a simple flow of events beginning with the birth of the central figure and ending with his journey to heaven, the legend of *Dev Narayan* starts a generation before, which in the first place gives reasons for the incarnation of *Vishnu* to take birth. Thus, although the sin of having emptied the liquor into the ground,

defiling the serpent deity deserved punishment for having contaminated the idea of the sacred, the craftiness of *Jemati* which beguiled the brothers into committing another sin was not considered just. Though for the goddess, it was simply the killing of the brothers, for the sake of the larger moral and social picture, equality had to be restored. In this way, *Dev Narayan*, who in the form of *Vishnu* asked Kali to kill the brothers, in the form of *Dev Narayan* rescued their remaining family, wealth, and married the daughter of the serpent deity. The first part of the story therefore in a very subtle manner indeed, seems to throw light on the historical proof of the dominant religious discourses and ritually pure communities and castes in relegating them an inferior and compromised position. As an answer to this they bring into play one of the gods from the same dominant religious discourse, *Vishnu*, to be born within their own community, to take revenge on their long-tolerated marginalization and domination.

The mythical sphere within which these epics are created, no matter how historically placed they are, with battles and revenges, there is an ideal life that is pointed to. The entire depiction of the life-world within which the epic takes place is one that is intertwined with the otherworld or heaven. Sacred powers also intermingle with the ordinary life and action of the people in this world. So actions are immediately met with consequences. The larger than life image is purposely given to enhance the power of collective imagination to engage in a shared experience of emotion and ecstasy, thereby directing the attention of the collective conscience to acknowledge and reconfirm the underlying principles of morality that allows for sensible judgment in perception and action in everyday life.

Fig. 26. Marriage of the *Baghrawat* brothers and the dowry given by the king of Ajmer in the form of cattle, illustrated above the wedding scene.

Fig. 27. This is the central section of the *phad* with the image of *Dev Narayan* and his brothers in the court. The snake symbolizes his incarnation as Lord *Vishnu*. On the upper right hand side is the transformation of *Jemati* to goddess *Kali* with the garland of the heads of twenty-four *Baghrawat* brothers, and at the bottom is the episode on saving the cattle stolen by *Raoji*'s army.

Fig. 28. This section of the *phad* details on the battle between *Raoji* and *Sawai Bhoj*, and is again used to explain the later battle between *Dev Narayan* and *Raoji*. On the upper hand right is how the illustration of how *Raoji*'s army entered the palace of *Sawai Bhoj* and took away his wealth and cattle. Below it is the chamber of *Sawai Bhoj* and *Jemati* where he holds him back during the battle to play a game of dice. Bottom right hand corner is the woman liquor seller of Rann who was promised jewels is return for liquor by *Sawai Bhoj*. Towards the left near the bottom is the scene of the battle which beheaded the brothers of *Sawai Bhoj* and their sons, whose valor is shown by eyes coming out of the chest of the warrior.

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III. Unwrapping the Past: Infusing the Concerns of Identity and Social Legitimacy in the Collective Vision of the Moral

The pictorial-narrative rendition of the *Phad* in Rajasthan, centered on the myths of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan* among others, have for time immemorial been a distinct part of the communities of the Rebari, Nayak and the Gujar. Even at a time when these scrolls have secured a place as a 'folk' artifact of a supposedly bygone era, its reconsideration beyond the domain of aesthetics facilitates in understanding its significance up to the present day, as a practice in which symbols interact with underlying discourses, myths and beliefs in the continual construction and reassertion of social identity.

The elaborate construction of the oral narrative, in terms of the characters, the story, and the landscape and other details in the forms of storytelling through pictures allow for a visual recapitulation of the past of the communities. The disadvantage of the absence of documentation or material evidences concerning their historical past is made up by their elaborate presentation of the myth. Through the representation of the myth, their past is performed and their present and future thereby socially legitimized. In the context of the performance, in the retelling of their history, their relatively socially marginalized position retreats to the backstage; in the front come their heroes who are venerated for their larger than life social and moral roles[69]. Through allusion to the activities of such deified figures, the communities socially imagine their collective past. In the event of such performances, in the imaginative reconstruction of their historical past and their relation to the present and perhaps indications to a shared future, they are then not projected as being marginalized. The glory, the spectacle, the emotion, the sacred, all come together to reassert the social position of the community not to a peripheral position, but as one which shares an equally significant socio-cultural position in the larger society. Through the visual and narrative representation of the myths symbolizing the values and morals held to be of vital significance in the larger society, in terms of its maintenance of the social order, these communities legitimize their social position in the present day and reaffirm their social identity.

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[69] The idea of social roles as being performed in a manner similar to roles being performed on a theatrical stage was introduced by Erving Goffman (1959) in his analysis of social interaction.

CONCLUSION

6.1. Ephemeral Moments, Enduring Meanings: The Symbolic Construction of Collective Belief and Social Identity

Elaborating on the distinction between the human mind and that of other living beings, Ingold alludes to Marx's example of a beehive and the lack of its prior mental representation,

> "what from the very first distinguishes the most incompetent architect to the best of bees, is that the architect has built a cell in his head before he constructs it in wax" (Ingold, 2000: 340)[70].

The ability to perceive, understand and imagine are qualities intrinsic to human life. All trajectories of human understanding become possible through the functioning of the mind, the power to imagine, the ability to cognitively structure and envisage the past, the present as well as the possibilities of the future. Imagination gives birth to ideas, and when working its way through a collectivity, it allows for the institutionalization of belief. Used by the powerful, it manifests itself in discourses that constitute the body of knowledge and factuality. Imagination, whether a collective act or done individually, requires the consciousness to indulge in creative thinking well as critical rumination. It is then through the workings of the consciousness that sense is made of the social world. It is through the infiltration of different forms of representations of the world into the cognitive domain through sensory abilities in the form of visual images or ideas, that understanding takes place. This understanding further structures or gives an idea how future course of action in similar circumstances can be carried out and how similar experiences can be comprehended. It is not only with the help of codes conveyed by the senses to the brain that this understanding takes shape. What appears to be rational and even logical in a society lies outside the arena of a particular individual experience and

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[70] As cited by the author from Ingold, T. (1983). "The architect and the bee: reflections on the work of animals and men", *Man (N.S.)* 18: 1-20; original cf. Marx, K. (1930) [1867]. *Capital* Vol. 1, trans. E. and C. Paul from 4th German edition of *Das Capital* (1890), London: Dent, 169-170.

comprehension of it. These are already present when an individual is born. Reflective of past experiences and understandings of the social structure and the processes, the vast body of knowledge that helps in making sense of the social reality encircling human life then manifests itself through diverse symbols, materials and discursive. These symbols then allow for the ideas underlying it to be transmitted to individuals, structuring their thought and course of action. Situated within a certain social location, a particular individual's experience and action is then bound to be the interplay of the large structural forces which shape knowledge and truth in society, and the person's individual motives at play.

In the realm of culture therefore, understood as functioning through discourses and material symbolic representations, there are certain situations when this body of knowledge or what Schutz (1970) called the 'stock of knowledge' has to be reaffirmed, or at least some parts of it. At such situations, it is through the performance of culture staged by these different symbols that the underlying meanings are reasserted or transformed. These are moments which make way for the imagination to itself become a collective experience and also enable the same. Understanding in this sense of the term, subsumes the idea of experience. It is through experience and sensory perception of that experience, coupled with the ideas and images of prior experiences in the consciousness, that an interpretation of the present and an impression of the future become possible. If culture is constitutive of symbols, then the performance of these symbols can be interpreted as the performance of culture.

This work has endeavored to bring to light the symbolic construction of collective belief and morality, and the idea of collective social identity. Through the ethnographic studies of pictorial-narrative traditions in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, this research has attempted to highlight on the reproduction and reaffirmation of culture through performances of pictorial-storytelling practices, and the unfurling of meaning being possible only through the experience of the event. The notion of culture in a community or in a society is constructed in accordance with the knowledge existing in the life-

world[71]. Experiences and action taking place within this life-world is again structured through the prevailing cultural discourses. The meaning of morality is then collectively mediated by the cultural framework comprising the life-world. The way in which communities shape their sense of distinction and carve out a definition of their collective identity is also contingent on the life-world and the cultural system. The belief system of the communities, their moral concerns and the manner in which they project themselves to the other, thereby forming their notion of identity, is therefore intrinsically tied to symbolic representations. These symbols define their ideas and make it possible for them to conceptualize the social world. Again, it is the individuals who through their action vest the symbols with meanings or transform their understanding. This act of understanding and enunciation of meaning takes place in the context of experience. Experience could be understood as the act of encounter with a particular situation, comprised of certain symbolic representations both material and abstract, located within a temporal space that requires the attention of the consciousness towards its interpretation. The direction of cognition towards the object, the idea and the spatio-temporal situation enables the individual to store this encounter in the mind as a reference point for future experience in a similar condition and action. Extending beyond the world of conceptual knowledge, experience accentuates the significance of practice; it facilitates the recognition of human action.

The act of experience happens every time whenever an individual or a group is faced with a particular situation that requires the direction of their consciousness towards it. In both social as well as personal domain therefore, the very categorization and spatial division of time can be understood as the division of different categories of experience. Along with individual experiences in everyday life, there are occasions which usually include the presence and participation of a group or most members of the community. It is at such occasions that there remains a possibility of uniting the individual experiences to a common plane to enable a shared experience of the situation. These situations, enabling exceptional experience could be witnessed in the form of cultural and religious practices and performances. It is then in the course of such performances that the

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[71] In fact the conceptual categories of culture and the life-world, when taken out of the arena of methodological inquiry, and placed within the actual domain of human action in the social world, a connection between the two can easily be traced.

symbolic representation of collective belief and communitarian identity becomes possible. Through performative practices in the form of rituals, ceremonial acts, presentations through dance, music, narrative and drama, the central ideas, the shared beliefs and values that are of utmost significance to the community, are reinstated in the individual consciousness as being more important than their personal needs. These performances continually harp on the idea of the social, visible in terms of the presence and participation of the members of the community, for highlighting on its significance in the society and thereby maintaining its continuity.

Performances concerning the representation of religious symbols further accentuate on the development of individual into social beings by reifying the values and morals which constitute the collective belief system as sacred qualities. They therefore function as situations of atypical experiences enabling collective understanding of meaning. Presentations highlighting on the idea of the sacred therefore combine the understandings of sacred and moral in the larger realm of the social. Through their representation of the theme of social, and its common interpretation made possible by the act of collective experience, these performances therefore make it possible for human thought and behavior within a community to be structured through a common belief pattern, reflecting the significance of shared morality. And it is this process of institutionalization of belief that sets the ground for the construction and reassertion of identity in a community.

The notion of moral by its very understanding underscores on the presence of others, in relation to which individual action and behavior is modified and controlled. Morality itself emerges in the context of a society, where the maintenance of social order and also of structures and processes at play entails the acknowledgment of others and the realization of values as being different from personal motives. Even if it reflects an ideology of power, the construction of morality assumes and in fact harps on the existence of the social. Similarly, the construction of identity in a community, whether collective or personal, presupposes the existence of 'others'. It is in terms of this recognition of the presence of others and the perceived distinction from them that the idea of 'we' or communitarian identity emerges.

Highlighting on the inevitability of the social in the construction of identity and ideas of common morality, it is in the sphere of performance that symbols represent their underlying meanings. And it is through the encounter of the separate individual minds with the performance that knowledge becomes reaffirmed in the life-world and these ideas related to morality and identity finds their place in the collective social treasury of consciousness. Through an ethnographic understanding of the pictorial-narrative traditions of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, this research has therefore aimed to emphasize on how visual and narrative symbols concerning with the representation of the sacred, are used in cultural performances to facilitate a common experience by infusing the separate streams of individual cognition and consciousness to a common platform through which communities reaffirm their sense of morality, for themselves or for the larger society, and in this process construct their notion of identity.

Beginning with the conceptual understanding of symbols in the form of image and word, the work traces on how these different forms of symbolic representation come together in the act of performance, where their presentation of a sacred and moral theme enables in the collective experience of the event and therefore in the internalization of the meanings behind these symbols. Describing about the *patachitra* tradition in West Bengal and Jharkhand, and the *phad* in Rajasthan, this work brings together diverse practices of painting and narration, carried out by distinct communities of hereditary artists and performers, not in an attempt to compare their points of distinction but rather to accentuate on the thread of functional similarity between them. Carried out by specific communities associated with its practice throughout generations, presentation of painting on cloth scrolls and their narrative performance play a significant role the construction of ideas of morality and collective identity. The construction of such ideas takes place in the realm of consciousness and is maintained through the symbols in the act of performance. Experience being an individual act in the consciousness, this work then tries to show how through performances this individual cognition becomes a collective one, as the images and words from the life-world guide the path of understanding of individual minds to the shared perception of the historical past, the socio-cultural present and the future.

6.2. Revisiting the Methodological Contours

The methodological premise of this work was constructed around the interplay of symbolic anthropology, interpretive sociology, phenomenology and hermeneutics. These theoretical positions were not taken as distinct or separate perspectives but rather as working together to arrive at a better understanding of research objectives of this work. Assuming that the human world is based on inter-subjectivity and interaction plays an extremely significant role in its construction, the study commenced with highlighting the role of the symbol in the representation of human culture. It proceeded with the understanding that these symbols, in the form of words and images, add to the existing body of common sense (Herzfeld, 1998: 74-75). Common sense in this context refers to the concept of *sensus communis* as advanced by Vico (Gadamer, 2004: 17). It is then not perceived to be indicative of the ordinary sensation or awareness or the sense that is dependent on the functioning of reason, but understanding of everyday in terms of the common appreciation. It refers to the sense of a community, the perception or beliefs and the modes of action that are collectively shared.

The primary aim of the work was to uncover the representational power of the symbol through its meanings in the construction of morality and the assertion of identity, as understood through experience in the context of performances. With the endeavor of arriving at an interpretive understanding of the pictorial-narrative tradition of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, certain research objectives were traced to help guide the direction and content of the research. The first objective included a brief historical understanding of each of these practices in their socio-cultural and geographical context. This was then followed by a conceptual understanding of the relation between knowledge and experience, which makes possible the revelation of the discursive processes underlying human action and interaction. The third attempted to throw light on the power of symbols in the context of performance, to reveal their relation to the construction of social identity. And since the construction of identity is contingent on its performance, and this act in turn is based on factors that influence thinking and perception, the fourth objective dealt with the interpretive understanding of the social and cultural power of symbols in the restructuring or maintenance of the idea of the moral. Accordingly, based on these objectives, research questions were highlighted in order to arrive at a better

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understanding of the subject of this study. These questions dealt with a descriptive understanding of the function of these practices in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, as they were in the historical past and the present day; exploring the social composition of the communities engaged in these practices both as artists and audience; recognizing the art and the narrative as symbols through an understanding of their themes; and the relation between the performance of such symbols and their experience, which facilitates in the understanding of their relation to the construction of beliefs concerning morality and the assertion of identity.

Dealing with the theme of symbols and their meanings in the context of performance and experience, the research was carried out through an in-depth ethnographic study of the pictorial-narrative traditions as found in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. The sources of data collection first and foremost involved detailed observation, which helped in gaining insight into the reality of the field, building rapport with the respondents, acquiring an idea about their socio-cultural condition, their economic and political position, and the impressions gathered from the course of visits and conversations. This was accompanied with interviews carried out with the artists, including the painters and the performers, who provided vivid accounts of their practice, the history of the tradition, and its condition in the present day. Along with this, interpretive analysis was carried out for the painted scrolls and the narratives, which were considered as contextualized symbols that were interpreted by the artists themselves, and were again rechecked by studying the myths themselves, as heard by word of mouth and the written sources available.

Accordingly, the fieldwork carried out in the course of the research was broadly divided into three stages, which culminated in three visits to each of the field sites. The first stage of the fieldwork comprised of meticulous observation, gathering idea about the field, exploring the region, identifying the respondents, having casual conversations, and building rapport with them. This was followed by the second stage of field-visit, which mostly included meeting the respondents for carrying out in-depth interviews with them. In the course of these visits and in between these interviews, photographs and video-recording of these artists were made, with their due consent. The final stage of fieldwork was carried out after a preliminary analysis of the information obtained from the field in

the first two visits had been done. This field visit included visiting the respondents again, in case some of their answers could not be deciphered or if there were any doubts regarding their discussion. By this time, a casual rapport had been set up with the artists, and sometimes in the course of casual conversations, they provided with more elaborate reasons behind the answers given. Reflections from the field and on the field facilitated in revisiting the arguments of the research, and enabled the understanding of them within the context of their practice. By the end of the second field visit, when the basic socio-cultural and economic condition of this community had been made sense of, attention was placed on the collection of photographic and video documentation related to themes used in the pictorial-narrative tradition, required for the purpose of interpretive analysis. And apart from the fact that these traditional practices involved the use of painted scrolls and narrations used in contexts of performances by hereditary communities associated with its representation as their occupation, the *patachitra* tradition of West Bengal, that of Jharkhand, and the *phad* tradition of Rajasthan each presented a picture of contextually distinct practice engaged in the production of meaning and identity.

The sample size of the study included six *Chitrakar* artists from West Bengal, five *Chitrakar* artists from Jharkhand, five painters and three *Bhopa* from Rajasthan. The practice, in Rajasthan as well as in Jharkhand, is carried out by male artists. In West Bengal, women are engaged in the illustration of the scrolls but not with its performance in the villages. Interestingly, in the case of the performance of the *Pabuji* myth, related to the Rewari and Nayak communities, the *Bhopa* also has a *Bhopi* beside him who takes the candle or the lantern to light up the section of the scroll that is being narrated by the *Bhopa*, as these events mostly happen in the evening. She sometimes also sings along with the *Bhopa*, who is her husband, by repeating his lines. In the performance of *Dev Narayan* however, women are strictly not allowed. The size of the sample depended on the availability of the painters in the region and owing to the migratory nature of their traditional occupation of pictorial-narration as well as their engagement in other casual occupations to secure their livelihood, the study therefore could only include those people who could be located in the selected villages where they reside or could be contacted in nearby regions during visits to the field. Besides, as interviews took place within the household, the women also prompted answers and provided explanations to some of the queries being discussed.

6.3. A Brief Review of the Chapters:

The theme of symbols, primarily representing myths, and their concurrent meanings have been referred to in the course of this research, to throw light on the vitality of performance and experience in the enunciation of meaning, which serves to restore the collective belief and therefore assert identity.

To comprehend the practice of what has been defined as the pictorial-narrative tradition as a whole, it is essential to comprehend the subject conceptually as well as understand it within its contexts of practice. The research thus commenced with a discussion on the concept of the symbol and how they function as manifestation of ideas in the society. Their representation or display thus contributes to the institutionalization of belief in the community. The realm of belief constituting of what people think, their judgment, their perception, and their understanding therefore, does not simply reflect individual motives, wants and preferences. It accentuates on the significance of society, as collective belief enables individual communication and interaction to take place. It allows people to take into account the activities or patterns of behavior of others. By making sense of the action and the communication, individuals are then in a position to modify their behavior. This brings to the forefront the concept of the moral and its significance in society. If collective belief is how ideas are shared and maintained in terms of thinking and behavior, then a large part of the realm of belief involves the knowledge and preservation of the moral. This belief is assumed to be rational and hence ideal. This is because the essence of the moral is intrinsically tied to the space of action. The maintenance of morality then highlights on the significance of the notion of social, the idea of human beings not as separate individuals in the society, but as social beings who live and experience in an inter-subjective world created through interaction. Experience in this world is then possible because people share common understandings of it. This does not mean that experience is no longer a subjective act, but that the expressions of such experiences and those enabling it are understood by interacting individuals because they are located in similar contexts. Performances therefore facilitate in the presentation of such expressions through symbolic representation. Although a considerable part of action reconsidered as a role in a society can be re-read as performance, those acts which can be considered as atypical in relation to everyday life, and therefore extraordinary, are the

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ones that bring to surface the performance of symbols. It is during such performances that the restructuring of time and space makes way for a possibility of common experience, and thereby the maintenance of the sense of the moral and the affirmation of social identity.

This conceptual discussion was followed by an ethnographic description of the three field-locations in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, in terms of the human agents or the artists involved in their creation, along with an interpretive acknowledgment of the themes of their paintings and narratives, as presented in the context of their performances.

In the state of West Bengal, the *Chitrakar* community has been associated with the practice of painting on scrolls of cloth and narrating them to the rural audience in nearby villages. Dealing with the representation of the idea of the sacred and the moral in the themes of *Savitri- Satyavan*, *Behula – Lakhinder*, episodes from the *Ramyana* and *Mahabharata*, their practice accentuates on the reassertion of collective beliefs, pertaining to the moral character of human beings and the intervention of the sacred. Placed between the fluctuating identities caused to due persistent migration and a history of religious conversion and reconversion between the communities of Islam and Hinduism, it is through the representation of the moral and the re-institutionalization of belief that this community continually attempts to reassert their identity. Even though they are not allocated a position of social respect in both of these religious communities owing to their history of conversion, through the representation of Hindu themes in their practice and their identification as the *Chitrakar* (as modified from their earlier recognition as the *Patua*), these artists assert their cultural authority by presenting themselves as being responsible for the reinstallation and representation of morality in society, and in this manner reaffirm their social identity, not as the marginalized, but as culturally distinct agents involved in the making of meaning in society.

In Jharkhand, this practice of pictorial-narration is deeply related to the representation of collective identity. Also identifying themselves as the *Chitrakar* (erstwhile known as the *Patua*), these artists have also had a history of undocumented migration and religious conversion. But whether they have migrated from West Bengal, or have taken up

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Vaishnavism or even Islam, there is marked effort in concealing their possible connection to the tribal community in terms of their ethnic identity. Within this region, the *Chitrakar* also separate themselves from the *Jadu- Patua*, in terms of ethnic identity and the purpose of their occupation. While the *Chitrakar* claims to a mythically ordained position of artists in the Hindu social structure, the *Jadu-Patua* are assumed to be from the tribal community. The *Chitrakar* are concerned with the illustration and performance of the myth of origin of the Santhal community and also themes pertaining to the myths of the Vaishnava sect, while the task of *Jadu-Patua* is one that entails secrecy and magic. The act of *Chakshudaan* performed by the *Jadu-patua*, in which the task of illustration involves an element of magic, as it provides eyesight to the deceased wanderer who has lost his or her sight on account of immoral or bad tasks, endows the artist who is also the performer, with the power to function as the shaman or the magician in the community. Looked down upon by the *Chitrakar* as a practice that involves deceiving people, the act of *Chakshudaan* and the community of the *Jadu-patua* are both understood to be different from that practiced by the *Jadu-Patua*. Even though some of *Chitrakar* artists take part in the illustration and narration of the *Chakshudaan* scroll, it is usually kept under cover. Their distinction from the Jadu-Patua, their choice of themes and their preference to keep the surname of the *Chitriakar* therefore highlights on their assertion as ethnically and cultural different. The construction of history largely reflects the intricacies of power. With the representation of the scrolls on the origin of the tribal community hinting at the moral significance of action, the Chitrakar artists then assume a position of authority in terms of their relation to the tribal community, and it is this process of retelling their history, that the *Chitrakar* highlights on the aspect of difference from the other. In the case of the *Jadu-Patua*, if understood as a community separate from the *Chitrakar*, derive their identity from the representation the *Chakshudaan* scroll. But this identification is only within the tribal community as the practice is not carried outside. The practice of performance as the *Chitrakar* community and their concealment of the past, accompanied with the lack of any documentation other than oral histories, therefore allow them to project their community in a position higher to the tribal, and thereby enable them to assert their identity.

In the state of Rajasthan, the pictorial-narrative tradition is carried out by two separate communities of the *Bhopa* and the painters. The themes deal with the representation of local legends of *Dev Narayan* and *Pabuji*. The *Bhopa* or the performer, who narrates the story, is a part of the community in which the performance of the myth is relived, while for the painter, illustration of the scroll is a part of his profession. The paintings are done by the male members and so are the performances in large. In the myth of the *Pabuji*, who is worshipped by the Rewari and Nayak castes of camel herders, the lack of any material places of worship makes this practice even more symbolic of their past and significant for the collective identity of their community. In the presentation of this myth, the male narrator is often accompanied by his wife for holding the lantern above the present scene in the scroll and for sometimes repeating lines sung by her husband. Possibly belonging to an itinerary past, the married couple had to perform on the myth together as the wife could not stay back and reside alone. It is only now that they have had access to some land, but the practice has remained unchanged. For the grand narrative of *Dev Narayan*, practiced by the *Bhopa* of the Gujar community, the scroll-based performances accompany the paintings on the walls of the temples dedicated to the deity. While for the believers of *Pabuji*, the performance provides them with the only space for the representation of their socially imagined past, thereby facilitating in the maintenance and reaffirmation of their identity, for the believers of the *Dev Narayan*, the illustration and performance is a reiteration of their historical grandeur and chivalrous past. By reasserting this knowledge in the life-world of the community, they engage in their assertion of their collective social identity, not as marginalized but as culturally and socially distinct. Since the performer belongs to the same community as the audience, their insinuation on the significance of the moral and the maintenance of collective belief through the symbolic performances of myths personifying their social history, functions as act of assertion of identity for the community as a whole in the larger social context.

6.4. Symbolic Performance, Experience, Interpretation and Identity: A Discussion

The social composition of the performing community of artists in the three states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan includes different communities engaged in its practice.

However, what allows them to be placed in a common frame of understanding is that other than the Joshi painters of the *phad* in Rajasthan, who belong to a Brahmin sub-caste, the communities of the *Chitrakar* in West Bengal and Jharkhand, the *Jadu-patua* in Jharkhand, and the *Bhopa* in Rajasthan, all occupy relatively low positions in the social hierarchy. Their position in the social structure of cultural and religious authority, results in their limited access to resources within the community. Patrons for each practice include those communities which believe in these myths and the deities represented in them. In West Bengal, the *Chitrakar* artists therefore perform for audiences composed of different sects within the Hindu community. In Jharkhand, the *Chitrakar* artists perform for the tribal as well Hindu community, while the *Jadu-Patua* only performs for the tribal community. In Rajasthan, the performance is carried out by the *Bhopa*, who are members from within the communities which constitute the audience, primarily as comprised of the Rewari, the Nayak and the Gujar.

Creativity marked a very significant feature among all the artists across the regions, in terms of their ability to represent the traditional themes in a manner that allowed the audience to make sense of it even in the present day. However, this aspect of creative intervention remained noticeable only in matters of choosing the episodes on which to highlight, or simplifying the narrative so as enhance the transcendence of its meaning to the audience. At no point did it meddle with the structure of the myth in terms of changing the arrangements of the events in the story, or altering the moral values of the characters portrayed in them. The traditional themes dealing with the idea of the sacred and the moral, as characterized by the myths of *Savitri - Satyavan*, *Behula - Lakhinder* in West Bengal, the myth of the origin of the Santhal community in Jharkhand, and the legends of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan* in Rajasthan, therefore displayed a continuity in terms of the representation of the myth. It is important to make note of this continuity in the thematic structure of scrolls and performances related to these stories because it is their unchanged form and content, accompanied with their intermittent retelling in the society through the performance of these artist communities, which transforms these myths into perceived and imagined realities of the social past. In every community, the rendition of such myths in terms of their retelling through the performances allows the ideational component of these stories to be positioned in the social imagination as the

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prime source of their identity, in terms of their past. This idea of past, rather than being attached to the notion of a geographical place, accentuates on the space of collective belief, the presence of shared values and morals. Association with the past then highlights on the historical continuity in terms of ideas, beliefs and hence practices subsumed in the domain of the moral. What was noticed was that in the front of senior artists, the younger painters were not always comfortable to express their own views. This being a hereditary occupation, seniority in terms of age endowed the artists with experience, knowledge and therefore relatively more cultural authority than their younger counterparts.

I. *Interpreting Experience and Experience enabling Interpretation*

If representation is significantly related to the establishment of fact and knowledge, then it becomes necessary to contextualize this act of representation as taking place within the work of expressions (Gadamer, 2004; Herzfeld, 1998). The concept of experience as such, from a phenomenological perspective seeks to position the individual in a life-world, which contains an already available body of knowledge (Schutz, 1972). It is through experience that knowledge is constructed, and also thought and behavior (ibid). Social reality is therefore structured around experience, through which individual consciousness and awareness is developed in relation to the acknowledgment of others.

Concerning the relation of symbolic representation to experience, it then becomes necessary to inquire whether knowledge structures experience or experience structures knowledge. Symbols are located within the life-world and therefore are readily available for comprehension by the individuals who are a part of the society. However, it is only through experience that the underlying meaning and essence of the symbols get transferred to the cognitive realm of the individual. Experience then facilitates in the sharing of similar notions of the world-view among the members of the community. Nevertheless, dealing with the matter of cognition, experience itself is highly subjective in nature. Functioning through ideas from prior encounters and the stock of knowledge, as well as the use of reason and the act of living in the moment, this experience takes place in the consciousness through the senses, with the help of which the individual becomes aware of the object, other beings, or situations. It is through the common

symbolic expressions present in the society that this act of experience is then lived by the collectivity. Where then can one observe such collective experience but in the deed of performance? It is therefore in the space of the act of a performance, where symbols participate in the process of representation enable collective experience that the reaffirmation of shared belief becomes possible. Those engaged in hereditary processes of representation therefore play an important role in acting as cultural agents reconstructing and transforming ideas, and in the process reasserting their social identity. These beliefs include the insinuations of morality in the representation of the sacred, thereby elevating the essence of the social to the plane of the sacred, where morality becomes the bridge between the two. It is then through the symbolic representation of the moral themes interspersed in the myths of the Sacred, that the artists redefine their cultural authority. Through the periodical presentation of the symbols and their meanings in the performance, they enable the collective experience of belief and the institutionalization of morality, and through this space provided by their hereditary association to an occupation involving symbolic representation they represent their own past, justify their cultural authority and reassert their social position from that of marginalization to one of cultural distinction.

What is then the relation of knowledge to experience? And how can objective symbols represent or express subjective reality? It is through the act of performance, which makes possible the visualization of a shared sense of past and present and future, that social identity is constructed. The institutionalization of belief and values further works to construct and maintain the idea of common morality, which again helps towards the maintenance of a common identity. Symbols permeate subjective consciousnesses where in the course of the performance, their cognition guided through their sensory perception being facilitated through the words of the narrative, the image on the scroll, and the direction of the performer. Subjective consciousness comes to a common plane where observation, perception and understanding are cognitively restructured by a sense of 'we' feeling, by a sense of shared history and anticipation for a common future, every time with the performance and the retelling of the narrative. Social identity and common morality helps in enabling a common interpretation of the event, and therefore a common interpretation of their life-world and a common world-view every time the performance

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takes place. Also the other way round, this collective experience and understanding of the stories as they are performed every time allows their 'stock of knowledge' concerning their moral understanding of action, its source and significance and their collective identity as a group that shares a common social location to be reaffirmed and preserved. In this space, the agents are the artists and narrators who perform on this knowledge to reproduce it and represent it and in the act reestablish their social identity. In Rajasthan, they are from the same community as the audience. In West Bengal and Jharkhand, they are from different communities. Therefore experience and knowledge both guide each other and are interdependent on each other

II.   *The Construction of Social Identity*

In three of the region mentioned above, these visual narrative artists, who hail from different socio-cultural positions, depict mythical stories, well-known epics and legends focusing on moral principles because they want to maintain the position of their community as a part of the larger social history, in the process they unintentionally engage in creative endeavors that remake and transform the content and its meanings. They are therefore intentional agents intervening structural domination when it comes to the collective identity of the community. Hence they use the very discourses of power and their hereditary occupation to recreate spaces through which their practices are rendered as significant and even sacred considering their not so respectable position in the social hierarchy of stratification. They highlight on the depiction of certain parts of the story, guide the course of narration and owing to their specialization as exclusive hereditary communities involved in the transmission of cultural history, practice and beliefs, they are considered as the ultimate sources of history and the repository of social knowledge. Their folk narratives and paintings are considered as authentic and factual forms of symbolic representations and even accorded a status of being sacrosanct. It is then within this space of factuality that their creative and intentional reworking on their discourses, to transform belief and practices and maintain their position in the society, is not questioned. These myths and epics being largely oral in nature and origin, it is these communities traditionally associated with its illustration and performance that are

considered as genuine body of transmitting knowledge. But it is in the course of performance and experience that the process is altered from meaning transmission to meaning-making. Dimensions of causality and temporality are recreated and reconstructed in this performative space where experience enables individual consciousnesses are merged to form collective thought and understanding.

The relation between individual human cognition and collective consciousness is intricate and multilayered. Through the embodiment of the mind in performances and social rituals, and the participation of the body in the social act, there takes place an ascendancy of social emotion and collective ecstasy over the individual body, and a feeling of a collective or shared consciousness overpowers the individual mind. This emotion not only has its effect within the emotional and physical space of the performance but also extends beyond it through its influence on the individual minds in terms of their future engagement in thought and action. The performance of these visual-narrative traditions as practiced in the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan then leads the collective mind from the plane of experience to a state of experiencing. Narratives and visual symbols together with the lived presence of the individual in the performed event direct the path of the process of experiencing. The experience is made possible with the interaction and sensory perception of the individual with the event. Once in it, the experience becomes a lived state, conscious of the present within which the past and the future is creatively imagined. And this process of experiencing guided by the visual symbols and narration then leads to the reconstruction of the patterns of future experience for the individual, outside the event, even in social and personal life.

For Lefebvre, the notion of space is created "by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and Utopias" (1991:12). The setting up of a space through the inter-workings of symbols, myths, narration and performance, for the construction of an imagined past, aligns the multiple individual consciousnesses to form a collective state of thinking and being, in which shared feelings of oneness, community, commonality, and compassion, facilitate in the association of the individuals to a common past, and hence looking forward to a shared future. This in turn is made possible by, and also itself enables the functioning of collective experience. The shared feelings of ecstasy and emotion that arise from collective experience of these,

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inducing further ideas of a sense of belongingness and shared identity is imperative for the survival of the community.

The sense of an association with a common past, which is recreated in the course of the performance, contributes towards the construction and maintenance of the collective identity. The performance of these traditions facilitates in the construction of a space of lived experience of emotion and identity, and again it is the experience that is structured through the directions of the visual and narrative symbols that allows in the recreation of an imagined space conjoining the past, the present and possibly the future. Storytelling in all these traditions functions to reaffirm of the discourses and ideologies in society. The performative space then allows for the engagement of the symbols and their concomitant meanings to interact with the human consciousness that further generates a space of collective emotion and belongingness and identity.

The aspect of performance can then be said to make possible the lived experience of the visual scrolls of illustration. The symbolic elements and the trajectories of meaning that arise in the context of experience; in the course of sustaining the idea reaffirms the cultural and moral discourses. Narrative retelling of the folk legends and tales through these visual-narrative traditions also facilitates their establishment as cultural facts. The production of emotion and affect, contributes to the reaffirmation of systems of belief which then gives shape to meanings concepts, and ideas of the rational and the moral.

Going by the assumption that with the shift in their patterns of occupation, the popularity of the tradition has declined, would be to reduce the various social and cultural processes incumbent in the continual construction of culture as insignificant to the aspect of the needs of the market. Displacement from the traditional occupation is not enough as the tradition is rooted in the larger need to maintain and reaffirm collective identity. The association of the artists with the visual narrative practice has been traditionally rooted in the social structure as manifested in their ascription to a particular caste. The representation of the past and the reconstituting of the social memory by the artists cum performers therefore emphasize on their role as cultural agents who through recourse to their occupational practice of selective representation and creative restructuring of cultural beliefs, maintain distinction for projecting particular social identity. Although

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their work has significant influence on the affirmation of the social identity of the larger society, it is their functioning within the tradition through representation of cultural imagined history and their attempt to factualize it through collective belief that they contest social hierarchy and challenge their marginalization in society.

III.   *The Social Meaning of Morality*

In the picture-storytelling traditions of Rajasthan, West Bengal and Jharkhand, the main storyline of the myths acts on the consciousness to provide a sense of history, reminiscent of a past that harbored on certain characters and principles in the attempt to provide certain communities a direction of an identity, a shared identification with an imagined actual past. The prime plot described in the illustration and the narrative is taken forward by the elaboration of events that employ cultural epithets to highlight on the moral overtones of the story. But this very process through which the connection with a past feeds into the idea of a common identity in the present day world, takes into account the need of the maintenance of certain social principles of conduct and ordering of behavior, certain ideal modes of conduct which marked the personalities of their deified heroes of the past and something that can be held up to as desirable even in the contemporary world for the purpose of maintaining distinction.

The visual image and the spoken word through the context of performance and the space of experience help in the expression and communication of certain meanings and values that help in the reaffirmation of ideas concerning collective identity. This concept of collective identity, either for the performers, or for the audience, or for both, requires the association of the group or community with a shared past and a common discourse that enables them to be represented even in the future. The connection of a common past then also includes within it, certain principles either depicted through some godly, supernatural or mythical figure, or may be simply depicted as being ideal virtues in the society, equated with and assumed to be having sacred attributes. It is these principles that emphasize on the ordering of conduct through the continual re-enactment of certain rituals, and believed to have sacred qualities, they are then thought to be both ultimate and quintessential for the community to survive and maintain its social identity.

At this point, it is necessary to differentiate between those cases where the principles of morality merely applies to the audience, and other cases where even the performers and the artists associated with the pictorial-narrative tradition are subject to the adherence of such values. In the former situation, the narrative and/or the artist is but the human agent who intervenes through the visual and the word to present to the collective consciousness the possibilities of social transformation, reconstruction of dominant discourses, and the reaffirmation of alternative ways of thought and action. Through the representation of the sacred, that may primarily be a way of livelihood, the artist or performer asserts authority thereby taking part in the reconstruction of knowledge, culture and morality, stressing on their position in the larger society, and their significance to the other communities. For those instances where the performer or the artist is also a part of the same cultural community which comprises the audience, then they not only perform the role of cultural agents but also constitute the body of the subject. Their role as artists or performers is then not only a medium of sustenance for their group, but a task of agency through which they assert power to reaffirm their position within the same community. They not only participate in the production of belief, but this system of belief also characterizes their action and experience.

The display of the illustrative scrolls along with their narrative explanation repeatedly as a part of rituals or other occasions then facilitates in the dissemination and reassertion of a system of belief. Being structured around the idea of the sacred that wields authority, the reinstating of this system of belief, functions to avow the preservation of the idea concerning the sacrosanct. This network of belief, which influences socialization, structures experience, patterns behavior and formalizes discourses is expressed and maintained through social action. In the attempt to maintain the sacred, the system of belief is produced and reproduced through institutional frameworks and well as cultural processes. This notion of the sacred is then sometimes also considered distinct and separate because of the ideal or ultimate attributes that it characterizes. The attribution of sacred can then be said to have a strong relation with the idea of the moral. Moral principles in the society are considered to be ideal and supreme qualities, yet basic and quintessential for the functioning and the survival of the society. Moral values can then in this frame of understanding also be considered as sacred. Translated into the local

dialects, belief stands for *vishwas*, which means faith. This principle of conviction which assumes a factual status without verification or questioning can therefore also be attributed to its sacrosanct quality, for which it is assumed to be ideal and supreme in nature.

Being tied to the institutional structure of religion, belief then functions to control conduct to maintain its authority and also sustain the production of its own system of the unquestioned faith in a discourse of certainty. It then sets up the realm of morality, the upkeep of which is very essential for the preservation of the sacred. Moral principles governing thought and action distinguishes the good from the bad; the ideal from the unpleasant and the inappropriate. Since the sacred is elevated on the pedestal of a factual judgment, morality which is consanguineous with the sacred is also not doubted or questioned on by the community. Moral principles assume a sacred character and by the continual production and reproduction of belief, are furnished with a coat of the highest order of rationality. Moral values which are contextualized, and whose meaning is constructed by the interaction of space, history, temporality, culture and social structure are subsumed by the system of belief that through the help of social acts of the community sanctions these values as rational and sacrosanct. The notion of rationality, also contingent on socio-political processes and discourses, is then redefined according to contexts and the existing system of belief.

The pictorial narrative-traditions of Rajasthan, Jharkhand and West Bengal, thus present befitting instances of how customary practices deeply embedded within historical structures and cultural frameworks recreate meanings of sensibility and morality which not only reflect on the governance of human conduct, but also signify prominent features and virtues of the community that are used for representing collective socio-political identity. The element of performance in these age-old practices enables the physical participation of the community in a collective act, for whom these traditions are not characteristic of mere entertainment but epitomize the quality of a sacred ritual that is intricately associated with their culture and identity. The collective participation in this sense is then not passive, as that of a contemporary aesthetic performance, but one in which the lived experience of the audience also plays an important role in the emergence of meanings. In the performance, the journey takes place, from an individual plane of

consciousness to a moment when this consciousness becomes shared and the feeling of collectivity becomes so overpowering that the individual perception and thought become sidelined. This is made possible through the uniting the individuals' separate consciousnesses to a historical past that is iconographically and semantically bestowed on the collective imagination, which then internalize these ideas and meanings through the lived experience of this collective ritual.

The system of belief, that of collective acknowledgement and conviction functions as a prime cultural apparatus, working its way through structures and processes of everyday life as well as extraordinary events, influencing thought, perception, experience and action in society. The act of experience which emerges from the attention of the consciousness to the object and the discourses displayed and narrated, then further contributes to the reproduction of this belief, through which the hidden discourses and meanings of the sacred and the moral percolate down again to every individual consciousness, thereby influencing their perception and action even outside this event of performance. The sacred space then also acts as the moral space, whereby the collective mental construct of a domain characterized by discursive formations, transformation and reconfirmation of epistemes of thought, through the cultural authority of sacred, the moral is empowered. The illustration and the narrative enter the consciousness through the sensory perception and enable the experiencing of a space where the ideas and discourses are lived in the contemporaneousness of the event, and which are manifested through the ordering of future experience and the conduct of the individual as a social being in the community.

IV.   *Space and Place: Dichotomous or Related?*

Highlighting on the important feature of visualization, Lefebvre states that space comprises of visible things, objects and human beings (Lefebvre, 1991: 76). Ideas about social reality are shaped by sensory perception and experiences in the life-world. These ideas then frame the structure of social action. As Lefebvre notes, it is the visual nature of objects and individuals that masks its repetitive content (ibid.). What can be added here is that the visual aspect not only obscures repetition but facilitates it. What is seen is

understood as real. Sensory ways of knowing and cognitive ways of interpretation are intricately interrelated. In a certain way it can be said that when one sees an object or image rather regularly, it is visualized and interpreted as real or having a valid existence. Their continued existence in some cases resonates or symbolizes the underlying discursive structures of authority.

The research being on the performative power of symbols and the significance of images, the exploration of the concepts of space and place become imperative for understanding the transcendental power of these symbolic elements to facilitate the transmission of ideas from the object to the individual or collective mind. In the pictorial-narrative tradition of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, illustrated scrolls are accompanied by narration, performed by artists hereditarily attached to its practice. Relating to the depiction of the sacred concomitant with the representation of moral, these performances are revered in the community. In the context of the present work, the understanding of the relation between space and place as dichotomous or as interrelated can be placed in the representation of the sacred. The demonstration of these paintings along with narration in the act of a performance enables in the construction of a space, in which the images and the words float around with the direction of the artist as the agent. In the course of their presentation, every symbol performs to collectively recreate the social imaginary, within which the individuals associate themselves to their past and to one another. The symbols themselves a part of the life-world of the community, interpreted by the audience because of their past experience of it, or of their knowledge of it, emits similar responses from the individuals present in the audience. It is in this space that the artwork and the spoken word go ahead to support each other in the persuasion of individual cognition. In the case of the representation of the sacred, as is found in the pictorial-narrative performances of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, the power of this space in affirming the idea of the moral through the representation of the sacred becomes even more apparent as the idea of the sacrosanct is already placed in the collective belief of the community and is materially represented through symbolic artifacts present in geographical places. Its performance by the artist communities therefore function to reaffirm its underlying meaning, which centers on the necessity of the social. It is then through this space that

symbols which occupy a material place in the world and represent sacred ideas and moral beliefs, perform to make meaning and assert collective identity.

The existence of established places of religious worship in geographically discernable locations facilitates the devotees and worshippers to pay their obeisance in person and perform rites associated with its practice. Within the social space therefore, these physical constructs serve as symbolic manifestations of dominant religious discourses. The presence of places of worship with particular deities in any region not only explains the prominence and popularity of the sect or deity in that region, but also reveals the dominance of the community of believers associated with the tradition.

In the case of West Bengal, the myths and the sacred characters represented in them belong to the major sects of Hinduism. There are temples and places of worship dedicated to them. Their incantation in the myth which is performed on by the *Chitrakar* community then allows in the reestablishment of their sacred qualities. The space of performance where the sacred infuses with the moral, then functions as a space of potential transformation, for the community of audience for whom the significance of morality elevates to the level of becoming sacrosanct, and its realization through collective experience thereby emphasizing on its social character; and for the artists for whom this space provides them to showcase their cultural authority and thus reassert their collective identity as cultural agents in society.

In Jharkhand, the categories of space and place interestingly merge in both the scrolls of *Chakshudaan* as well as the myth of the origin of the Santhal community. Through the act of performance, the two worlds are conjoined by the artist. In the scroll of the myth of origin, the *Chitrakar*'s performance engenders a social imagination of the past in which the animals, insects and the natural world are all related to one another and in fact interdependent in the act of evolution and creation. The performance of the myth therefore creates a space through which the collective mind then not only perceives in the relatedness of the moral, the sacred and the social, but in their further relation to nature. In the act of *Chakshudaan*, the secrecy of the event, the socially assumed magical power of the *Jadu-Patua*, and his imagined capability to act as the mediator between the human world and the afterworld in the performance of the illustration, allows the artist to

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produce a space that is only created and maintained by him. Fused with power of magic and the ability to visualize the world of the supernatural, it is through the performance of this *Jadu-Pat* that the artist asserts his identity within the community in the region.

In Rajasthan, the employment of the categories of space and place in relation to the cults of *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan*, reflect its contingency on the politics of space and identity. The two cults are believed in communities which are marked by their relative differences in social position and their occupations. The Rewari and the Nayak castes who worship *Pabuji* are camel herders by profession, while the Gujar who venerate *Dev Narayan* are engaged in cattle rearing. The followers of *Pabuji* due to their profession and also other reasons of migration, occupy a rather marginalized position in society. Their lack of access to economic resources and sources of livelihood, does not allow them to have a settled lifestyle, and the absence of this pattern of living consigns them to a vulnerable position in the social structure. This is also characterized by the absence of temples or places of worship of *Pabuji*. The performance of this myth in the form of narration alongside the display of painted scroll is of central significance in the community as it provides them with a space where their collective conceptualization of the sacred and the moral is represented. In the absence of geo-spatial places of representation, it is the ideational space induced by collective imagination through which the community revisits its past, understands its present and anticipates its future. Although both are local legends, the cult of *Dev Narayan* is relatively far more prominent and popular. In the presence of the temples located in materially discernable places in the region, the performance of this myth functions to reassert their identity.

V.   *Cultural Reproduction and the Invisibility of Women*

The practice of pictorial-narration in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, each presents a distinct tradition in itself, in which the artist community is involved in the presentation of morality and the representation of identity. However, this practice has largely remained a male-dominated one, and it is only in the recent times that very few female artists from West Bengal have travelled outside of India to showcase and perform on their scrolls. In Rajasthan as well as in Jharkhand, women are not associated with

painting the scrolls. However, they contribute to the creation of a scroll by preparing the cloth before it is painted and also make the colours required for the painting from natural dyes. In Jharkhand, the women are not engaged in the painting of the scrolls. Consisting of work that involves both the private as well as the public realm, the contribution of women takes place within the private realm and more than often goes unnoticed. The involvement of women in terms of their work then reiterates the debate between production and reproduction and the division of roles. Women are involved in the domestic space, associated with tasks related to procreation.

However, cultural reproduction does not fall under this demarcated space, and by this it is meant reproduction of larger cultural patterns connected with the structure of belief and social action. Usually taking place in the realm of the public, represented through patterned action and interaction, this task then also reflects the invisibility of contribution of women in it. Perceived as a hereditary occupation that is related to communities who have been engaged in its performance, these related practices of illustrative-storytelling in the places where they have originated and are primarily found in the present day, have very limited aesthetic connotations attached to them. Assumed as taking place in the sphere of production that provides the community members with a source of livelihood, reflections of gendered roles are found at work here. Women are engaged in the preparation of colours and the materials required for painting as seen in Rajasthan, or involved in the rearing of children and managing household chores, as observed in Jharkhand. Although in West Bengal, two instances of women travelling out for participation and performance in international fairs outside the country were traced, in general women take part in its painting but do not travel in the traditional sense of the term, to perform. Moreover, when placed within the understanding of the representation of sacred, as prominent in the pictorial-narrative practices in these three regions, the issue of purity in relation to the illustration of the sacred and its narration becomes very significant to take note of. Women considered relatively ritually impure than men, they are not engaged in the traditional paintings of the sacred themes. The *Phad* in Rajasthan is now taught to women and young girls too, but as an art form, for personal use or even for certification. In Jharkhand, in the community of the *Chitrakar*, women are not engaged in the practice of painting or illustration. Even those scrolls which are sold in the

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market as decorative pieces are painted by the male members of the family. In West Bengal, owing to the difference of their personal religious beliefs, the *Chitrakar* community does not place much limitation on the participation of women and the sacrosanct nature of the object. Apart from the aspect of performance, women are mostly engaged in painting along with their husbands and individually on their own scrolls as separate artists.

VI.   *Performance and Experience: The Power of Human Agency*

An understanding of these distinct yet similar practices of illustrative-storytelling in the three regions of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, in their diverse contexts of creation and performance, the differing social position of the artists associated with them, and in the different meanings which they emanate, accentuates on the significance of the aspect of agency in human action. Agency in this sense, understood as the power of transformation through action, assumes added significance when placed with the contexts of performance and experience. Not perceived as completely separate spheres, but interrelated realms that make infer on human action the power of meaning and interpretation, and that endows the individuals with the ability to reflect, structuring the essence of their thought and action.

The power of agency, as understood in the pictorial-narrative tradition of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan therefore permeates through the working of these symbols of images and the uttered words into the individual consciousness. Whereas in the domain of everyday life, symbolic representation and their interpretation mostly takes place at the level of the individual, in extraordinary moments made possible through the presentation of the sacred, it is in the participation of the collectivity and the orientation of minds to a common theme, made possible by the symbols that are a part of their life-world, that collective experience takes place. And it is the ability to construct symbols which embody ideas and discourses thereby influencing human cognition and action that the power of the agency can be located in the practice of the artist community. Through their practice of painting and narration and its combined performance, these artists function as human agents involved in the continuous institutionalization and reaffirmation of belief

in the power of the social. Through the representation of the sacred and its relation to the necessity of the moral, these artists then highlight on the achievement of this morality being possible through collective social action, commencing from the shared experience of the event itself and spreading out to the different realms of action in everyday life. The element of agency then works its way through the construction of the imaginative space induced by the performance, where the symbols make it possible for the human consciousness to travel to an imagined realm stimulated by images, narratives and the myths themselves, and where the understanding of time as an integration of past, present and future allows in the reaffirmation of belief. Not merely limited to the space of performance, the aspect of agency also seeps into the space of human action in the material world. Through the practice of reaffirming belief and the emphasizing on the significance of the moral, the element of cultural agency as manifested in the symbolic performance, transforms or reasserts meaning and therefore structures experience in the ordinary, everyday life.

The significance of human agency can only be recognized when understood in terms of the underlying intention of such actions. For the artist communities of the Chitrakar, the Jadu-Patua, the Bhopa and the Joshi, their endeavor to maintain their traditional occupation in the face of massive social transformations highlight on the relationship of their work and the manifestation of identity. It is through this space of the traditional occupation that the painters and the performers therefore present their collective community identity. Negotiating their socially ordained position of marginalization through the performance on sacred and moral, they attempt to reconstitute their place and position within the community as the sources of cultural authority. While for West Bengal and Jharkhand, this performance works towards the construction of the identity of the artists themselves, in the case of Rajasthan, the performance in front of the audience acts as a representation for the entire community, in which the artists also belong.

By intervening in the individual minds and aligning their thoughts to a common plane of identification, memory and representations, these artist communities therefore reposition themselves as cultural agents in the society. Alluding to the idea of agency, their practice of illustrative-storytelling can therefore be reconsidered as what Arendt believed to be

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action, thereby enabling in the envisioning of the future and the maintenance of identity (1998: 182-184).

6.5. Performed Symbols and their Experienced Meanings: An Afterword

The present work on symbolic performances in the pictorial-narrative tradition in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, and their meanings in the construction of collective belief and identity, accentuates the power of the image and spoken word in the construction of the social imagination and the assertion of collective identity. The ethnographic study as carried out on the *Patachitra* tradition in West Bengal and Jharkhand, the *Jadu-Pat* in Jharkhand, and the *Phad* in Rajasthan, has therefore brought to light the need to revisit conceptual understandings informing the interpretation of social reality. The act of performance and re-telling and its insinuations in the assertion of collective identity reveal that social identity is not stagnant but a process which is continuously open to change, continually performed in the course of everyday life as a given and in the course of extraordinary moments as something to be realized and open to transformation. The representative symbols and the ideational discourses associated with it are therefore also not constant as their meanings undergo change with transformations in the socio-cultural and political context and social relations. Comprised of symbols, culture can therefore be understood as process of continual making and unmaking of symbols and affirming and reaffirming of meanings.

In the interpretive understanding of symbols and their concurrent meanings, there is thus the need to reconsider the ways in which various socio-cultural processes feed into the maintenance of social structure. Social structure should not be perceived as an end in itself. Recognizing communities within it as flexible structures, and human endeavors as possibilities of agency, symbolic interpretation should read social reality as being produced through a process of continuous negotiation and interaction between different structures and processes to incessantly intervene to make and remake culture as a way of knowing that is only realized in its acknowledgment as a way of being.

Oral tradition has always occupied a significant position in the repertoire of cultural knowledge. Its understanding and interpretation highlights on the fluid conceptualization

of culture. However, characterized by its lack of documentation, knowledge transmitted orally is sometimes foreshadowed by the supremacy of the written and preserved word. Language and history is crucial in terms of informing and supplementing the process of understanding but in no way is the domain of language to be understood as being limited to the written text. In the understanding of the social world as a space of production characterized by symbolic manifestations, the difference between the written word and that of the orally transmitted one reveals the undercurrents of power and authority in the preservation of knowledge and meaning. Knowledge in a society should be expanded to the acknowledgment of the word beyond the written, to recognize the space of oral and embodied discourses as texts open to interpretative analysis, to overcome the tendency of perceiving the world as a space in which the individual is but a subject acting or responding to structural processes and necessities, and recognizing social reality as a space which is continually in a process of construction and reconstruction, owing to the perpetual interactive nature and the blurred boundaries between the individuals and structures. Structures and frameworks do not exist out there somewhere tangibly or intellectually measured and exclusively delineated but can be comprehended in terms of the intricate interwoven nature of structures, processes, agents, discourses and objects in the interpretation of social reality.

Furthermore, in research that involves the performance of traditional practices in contemporary times, there often remains a tendency to relegate these to a domain of folk. In this context, the idealized differentiation of the folk and the popular or the urban, should be recognized as manifestations of the hierarchies of the global economy and its repercussion on those at the economic margins leading to their depiction as marginalized and therefore their relegation to an assumed and exoticized state of cultural and organizational simplicity. It is time to look beyond the constructed binaries of existence and acknowledge social reality as reflective of multiple processes interconnected in the culmination of social life.

When one draws attention to the symbolic power of performances and the interpretive relevance of experience, collective beliefs, ideas, values, morals can be seen as largely constituting discourses of power; defining knowledge and meaning in society. However, knowledge as a space of meaning does not only reflect authority; it also includes

resistance and transformation. Just as after the curtains fall at the end of a stimulating play, the individuals return with vivid memories in the form of images, sounds and words, symbols in the life-world continually pervade through the powers of cognition to make possible the dissemination of the meaning, and it is through their recognition in ritual performance and their non-textual experience that their repercussions on cogitation, action and the construction of identity can be deciphered.

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Appendix 1

INTERVIEW GUIDELINES FOR PAINTERS AND PERFORMERS OF *PATACHITRA* TRADITION IN WEST BENGAL

General:

- Name:

- Primary occupation:

- Religious beliefs:

- How many members do you have in your family?

- What about their occupation?

- What is *patachitra?*

- When and why did it begin?

- Since when did you start painting?

- How often do you paint now?

On Painting:

- Describe the different types of scrolls

- What is the most common theme that you paint?

- What happens to the scroll after it is painted?

- What is the structure of the composition of the painting?

- How has this painting changed from before?

- Any specifications regarding the use of colours

- Is there any specific process in which the painting is done?

- Who paints these scrolls?

- What is your contribution to these themes of painting?

- Can the artist use his creativity in the process of illustration or is does it strictly follow some traditional norm and pattern of the original myths

- In the course of painting is there any use of latent and abstract symbols? Or are all the symbolic representations manifest?

On Narration:

- Who composes the narration?
- What is the structure of the composition of the narrative verse??
- Describe the process of the performance of the scroll
    - Costume
    - Time
    - Song
    - Music type and instruments
    - Singers
    - Assistants
    - Role of the audience
- What is *pat-dekhano*?
- What is the significance of the performance of the scroll?
- Have the verse undergone changes over time? Explain.
- Illustrate the relationship between the image and the narrative- equality or primacy of one over the other?
- Elaborate on the process of preservations and disposal of these scrolls

Specific thematic questions:

- What was the significance of these scrolls in earlier times
- How is it different from today and why?
- Elaborate on the history of your community
- Religious conversions
- Bengal has been under different rulers at different points of time in history. How do you think this has affected the themes that are painted and performed today
- What is the *kalighat pat*?
- How is it different from the *patachitra* tradition in West Bengal?
- What are the main ritual ceremonies that the artists and their families observe during marriage, birth, death and other life events?
- Elaborate on the patterns of change and continuity in the visual-narrative form

- Comment on the rise of scrolls on secular themes for sale in the market and display in museums and exhibitions. What is the relevance of the mythological and religious scrolls in the village today?

- Why would people want to hear the same story again and again?

- How often do you perform on these scrolls in the village and nearby areas?

- What about the relevance of the myths today? What is the reason for your answer?

- What do you think is the most important aspect of religion in contemporary life? Explain

- What is the relation of this tradition to the representation of the sacred

- What according to you is meant by morality in society

- Do you think it is important? Why?

- Do your paintings have relation with the theme of morality?

- Has this tradition changed over time? What are the major influences?

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE FOR PAINTERS AND PERFORMERS OF *PATACHITRA* TRADITION IN JHARKHAND

General:

- Name:

- Primary occupation:

- Religious beliefs:

- How many members do you have in your family?

- What about their occupation?

- What is *patachitra?*

- When and why did it begin?

- Since when did you start painting?

- How often do you paint now?

On Painting:

- How do you paint? (The process, the use of colours, rules and thematic guidelines)

- What are the themes used in paintings?

- Can the artist use his creativity in the process of illustration or is does it strictly follow some traditional norm and pattern of the original myths

- Any personal contribution to the theme?

- Of what use is the painting

- Are there any specifications regarding the use of colour?

- What is the structure of the composition of the scroll?

- Has the painting change from before? If yes then explain how?

- What happens after the painting is done?

- In the course of painting is there any use of latent and abstract symbols? Or are all the symbolic representations manifest?

On Narration:

- Who composes the narration?

- What is the structure of the composition of the narrative verse??
- Describe the process of the performance of the scroll

  - Costume
  - Time
  - Song
  - Music type and instruments
  - Singers
  - Assistants
  - Role of the audience

- Have the verse undergone changes over time? Explain.
- What does the audience mostly want to hear?
- How long is the performance usually?
- And what is the composition of the audience?
- Illustrate the relationship between the image and the narrative- equality or primacy of one over the other?
- Elaborate on the process of preservations and disposal of these scrolls

Thematic guidelines:
- What are the themes used in the *Patachitra*? Which are the popular ones and why??
- Do you have a myth of evolution or creation?
- Explain the myth. Why is it important and for whom?
- Describe the different themes of scroll painting in Jharkhand.
- Why would people want to hear the same story again and again?
- What is the *jadu-pat?* Why is it called so?
- Do you have any idea as to when this tradition started?
- What is the structure of its composition and performance?
- Why do you show the *Jadu-pat*?
- What is the message underlying these images in the paintings?
- What is your role in relation to the display of these scrolls and their narration in society?
- What about the relevance of these scrolls today? What is the reason for your answer?
- What about the relevance of the myths today? What is the reason for your answer?

- Elaborate on the patterns of change and continuity in the visual-narrative form

- Comment on the rise of scrolls on secular themes for sale in the market and display in museums and exhibitions. What is the relevance of the mythological and religious scrolls in the village today?

- How do you think morality and values are maintained and transmitted through generations in a society?

- What do you think is the most important aspect of the idea of sacred in contemporary life? Give reasons for your answer.

- What is the relation of this tradition to the representation of the Sacred?

- What according to you is meant by morality?

- Why is the idea of morality important in society?

- According to you, what is the relation between religion and morality??

- What do you think is the role played by the visual-narrative practices in society?

- Has the practice and importance of this pictorial-narrative tradition undergone any change with time? If yes, explain the changes

- What was the significance of these scrolls in earlier times?

- How is it different from today and why?

- What do you think has majorly influenced this traditional practice?

Appendix 3

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE FOR PAINTERS AND PERFORMERS OF *PHAD* TRADITION
IN RAJASTHAN

General:

- Name:
- Primary occupation:
- How many members do you have in your family?
- What about their occupation?
- Since when did you start painting?
- How often do you paint now?
- What is the most common theme that you paint?
- What is your personal contribution to the theme?
- Who composes the narration?
- What is the structure of the composition of the painting?
- What is the structure of the composition of the narrative verse?
- How has this painting changed from before?
- Are there any specifications regarding the use of colour?
- Religious beliefs:

Thematic guidelines:

- Describe the different types of *phad*?
- Describe the process of *phad-banchana:*
    - Costume
    - Time
    - Song
    - Music type and instruments
    - Singers
    - Assistants
    - Role of the audience
- Is there any process in which the painting is done?

- Who paints them?

- What is the structure of the composition of this painting?

- Has it changed from before?

- Any specifications regarding the use of colour?

- What is your personal contribution to the theme?

- Any instructions for the painting? Who gives these?

- Are there instructions for painting? Who gives these instructions?

- Can the artist use his creativity in the process of illustration or is it strictly followed according to the traditional norms and the pattern of the original myth?

- During the performance, does the *bhopa* have the power to make minor alterations and creative inputs?

- What are the times for such a performance?

- Describe the painter-*bhopa* relationship?

- In the course of painting, is there any use of latent and abstract symbols or, are all the symbolic representations manifest?

- Have the verses undergone changes over time? Explain

- Elaborate on the process of preservation and disposal of this form of painting?

- What about the narrative accompanied? Is it also changed with newer versions of the painting?

- Illustrate the relationship between the image and the narrative – equality or primacy of one over the other?

- Elaborate on the patterns of change and continuity in the visual-narrative form?

- Why would people want to hear the same story again and again?

- Why do you think, are myths significant and important today?

- What is the relation of this tradition to religion?

- What according to you is meant by morality? (*Nyaytik shashtra, nyaytik bhavna*)

- What according to you is the role which is played by this visual-narrative form in the society?

Additional points of enquiry for the Bhopa (along with the pointers mentioned above)
- Name:

- Occupation(s):

- When did you start performing?

- How often do you perform these scrolls?
- Relationship with the painter
- What is *Phad Banchna*?
- Why do you dress up?
- How long is the performance usually?
- And what is the composition of the audience?
- Why do people want to hear the same story?
- Popular scenes:
- Preservation and disposal of the *phad*
- Places of worship
- Role of women in the family