

# WHISPERS OF HERITAGE

THE ORAL TRADITIONS OF RAJASTHAN

Kavad



Phad



Molela



Behurupiya



Puppetry



















# PREFACE

This project is dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Rajasthan's rich and diverse cultural heritage, particularly its oral traditions, which have played a pivotal role in shaping the region's identity. The purpose of this report is to highlight the significance of these traditions, their historical importance, and the ongoing efforts to safeguard them in the face of modernity.

Rajasthan's oral traditions—spanning folktales, songs, proverbs, and storytelling practices—offer invaluable insights into the beliefs, customs, and social fabric of the region. They have been passed down through generations, serving not only as entertainment but also as a medium for education, moral teachings, and social commentary. However, these traditions are increasingly at risk of being lost due to the rapid changes brought on by urbanization and technological advancements.

This project seeks to Qdocument and protect these oral histories through various mediums, including video documentaries, to ensure that they are preserved for future generations. By doing so, it contributes to fostering a deeper appreciation of Rajasthan's cultural diversity and encourages the continued celebration of its heritage.

Through the collaboration of the Rekhta Foundation and the National Culture Fund, this initiative aspires to safeguard the rich tapestry of Rajasthan's oral traditions, ensuring that they continue to inspire and inform both locals and global audiences alike.





Culture plays a pivotal role in the development agenda of any nation, representing a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices. In a diverse country like India, culture and creativity manifest themselves in almost all economic, social, and other activities, symbolizing the plurality of its heritage. The Ministry of Culture is dedicated to the preservation and conservation of our cultural heritage and the promotion of all forms of art and culture, both tangible and intangible. Its mandate encompasses developing and sustaining avenues through which the creative and aesthetic sensibilities of the people remain active and dynamic. The Ministry's functions range from generating cultural awareness at the grassroots level to promoting cultural exchanges at the international level. To achieve these objectives, the Ministry undertakes various activities as outlined under the Government of India's Allocation of Business Rules.





# Shri Gajendra Singh Shekhawat

*Union Minister Culture & Tourism*

## ***Message from the Union Minister***

*As the Union Minister for Culture and Tourism, I am proud to share that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's cultural influence has rapidly grown and established itself globally over the past decade. Our tourism sector is forging new pathways of development, with immense potential for growth in various regions across the country. The growing soft power of our nation is rooted in its rich cultural fabric, which manifests in the diverse forms of art, music, dance, textiles, and much more.*

*Rajasthan, in particular, has always drawn tourists with its timeless allure. Despite the advances of modernity, the state has successfully preserved and nurtured its glorious history, folk arts, architectural splendour, and cultural heritage. Through this project, an innovative effort has been made by the National Culture Fund and the Rekhta Foundation to document and preserve five remarkable oral traditions and folk arts of Rajasthan – Phad, Kavad, Bahurupiya, Molela, and Kathputli – through a series of documentaries. This initiative is truly commendable.*

*Let us all join hands to further enrich and preserve our cultural legacy in this Amritkaal, and ensure that culture continues to be a unifying force, strengthening the spirit of our nation for generations to come.*





## Rao Inderjit Singh

*Minister of State for Culture*

Shri Rao Inderjit Singh is one of India's senior politicians. He represents the Gurugram constituency in Haryana and currently serves as Minister of State in the Ministry of Culture. Alongside his political role, he has actively contributed to social and cultural spheres, particularly in preserving and promoting India's cultural heritage.

### Message from the Minister

"Our cultural heritage is the soul of our nation. This project stands as a testament to our commitment to preserving and promoting the rich tapestry of India's traditions for future generations."



## Vivek Aggarwal

*Secretary, Ministry of Culture*

Shri Vivek Aggarwal provides effective leadership in advancing India's cultural vision at both national and international levels. Under his visionary guidance and policy direction, the Ministry of Culture remains actively engaged in the preservation, promotion, and global dissemination of the nation's art, heritage, and traditions. As the Ministry's principal administrative head, he oversees the effective functioning, coordination, and implementation of various cultural institutions and programs across the country.

### Message from the Secretary

India's timeless cultural heritage embodies the wisdom, creativity, and spiritual strength of our civilization. It connects our glorious past with the present and continues to inspire the future. Art and culture unite us, nurturing creativity and a deep bond with our roots. Preserving this priceless legacy is our shared responsibility, ensuring that India's vibrant traditions keep illuminating the world. The Ministry of Culture remains committed to protecting and promoting this living heritage on both national and global platforms.



## Gurmeet Singh Chawla

*Joint Secretary, Ministry of Culture*

Shri Gurmeet Singh Chawla, Joint Secretary of the National Culture Fund, leads key initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting cultural heritage. His expertise and unwavering dedication have been instrumental to the Fund's success, effectively blending tradition with innovation to engage the younger generation. Under his leadership, several major cultural projects have been successfully implemented.

### Message from the Joint Secretary

*The National Culture Fund is steadfastly committed to the preservation, promotion, and celebration of India's rich and diverse cultural heritage. We firmly believe that safeguarding traditional arts and crafts not only honors our past but also fortifies the cultural consciousness of future generations. This project exemplifies our vision of nurturing cultural excellence and ensuring its global recognition. Through such initiatives, we aim to elevate India's cultural legacy onto the world stage.*





## Inderjeet Singh

*Director, National Culture Fund (NCF)*

Shri Inderjeet Singh provides exemplary leadership in mobilizing vital support for cultural initiatives across the nation. His visionary guidance ensures these efforts gain due recognition while playing a pivotal role in preserving, promoting, and enriching India's artistic and cultural heritage. Under his stewardship, the National Culture Fund continues to advance its mission of safeguarding living traditions and fostering cultural excellence.

### ***Message from the Director***

*Art and culture are vital expressions of our identity, history, and values. In today's dynamic world, preserving and promoting our cultural heritage is more important than ever. It nurtures our spirit, strengthens societal unity, and connects us to our roots. The responsibility to safeguard this legacy rests with all of us. Through collective effort and awareness, we can ensure that our culture remains vibrant and continues to inspire future generations.*





## Message From Rekhta Foundation



*Sanjiv Saraf*

*Founder*

As the Rekhta Foundation, our commitment is to preserving and promoting India's diverse and rich cultural heritage. We recognize the immense value of various traditional art forms—each representing the soul of different regions and communities across the country. Art forms such as Phad painting, Molela terr cotta, puppetry, Bahurupiya performances, and Kavad storytelling—all embody the spiritual and cultural essence of India.

These living traditions are not just forms of artistic expression but are deeply interwoven with the beliefs, rituals, and narratives that have shaped the cultural landscape of our nation. Through the powerful combination of art, music, and oral storytelling, these art forms continue to inspire and engage generations, passing down timeless wisdom, stories, and traditions.

Our mission is to ensure that these invaluable cultural treasures are not only preserved but also shared with the world. By offering visibility and recognition to these art forms, we seek to safeguard their legacy, ensuring they remain a vibrant and integral part of India's cultural identity for future generations. Through our work, we aim to keep these traditions alive, fostering a deeper appreciation for their beauty and significance on a global stage.

### **Anjas: Preserving Rajasthani Heritage**

Anjas, an initiative by the Rekhta Foundation, is dedicated to preserving Rajasthani language, literature, and culture for future generations. Explore more at [anjas.org](http://anjas.org).













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# Brief Overview of the Five Art Forms

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## Kavad

A traditional form of storytelling in Rajasthan, the Kavad is a portable wooden shrine that is used to narrate mythological tales and folklore. The storyteller opens the panels of the Kavad to reveal images that correspond with the narrative, making it a dynamic and visual method of communication.

## Molela

A unique form of clay art, Molela involves creating intricate sculptures that often represent deities, folk heroes, and mythological characters. These sculptures are typically displayed in open-air temples or shrines, reflecting the region's deep spiritual roots.

## Puppetry

Puppetry in Rajasthan is an ancient art form that blends entertainment with social commentary. Rajasthan's puppets, often made from leather or cloth, are used in folk theatre to tell stories that date back centuries, providing both a means of expression and a tool for education.

## Phad

Phad is a traditional style of scroll painting originating from Rajasthan. The paintings, which depict local deities, kings, and epic tales, are often used in religious rituals and are known for their vivid colours and intricate detail.

## Bahurupiya

The Bahurupiya tradition involves performers who assume various characters, often using elaborate costumes and face painting. These artists travel from village to village, performing for local communities, and their performances include elements of mimicry, comedy, and social satire.



# Funding Acquisition For Project Implementation

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As a non-profit organisation, Rekhta Foundation sought external support to fund this crucial documentation project. It was at this juncture that the National Culture Fund (NCF) played a pivotal role. The NCF, a trust under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, generously agreed to provide the necessary funding to support the preservation and documentation of these five vital Rajasthani art forms.

## The Role of the National Culture Fund

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The National Culture Fund (NCF) was established by the Government of India under the Ministry of Culture as a Trust under the Charitable Endowment Act, 1890, through a Gazette Notification on 28th November 1996. The NCF serves as a financing mechanism that enables donor and sponsor institutions to support the protection, restoration, conservation, and development of India's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. By partnering with the Government, NCF plays a crucial role in safeguarding India's rich cultural legacy.

Managed by a Council and an Executive Committee, the NCF is overseen by the Hon'ble Minister of Culture, with members representing the corporate and public sectors, private foundations, and non-profit organisations. The Executive Committee, which is chaired by the Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, ensures the efficient execution of the fund's objectives.

The generous contribution of the NCF was instrumental in realising the Rekhta Foundation's vision of preserving Rajasthan's endangered artistic traditions through this video documentation project, ensuring their legacy is recorded and accessible for generations to come.





# Project Overview

The Preserving the Oral Traditions of Rajasthan initiative, spearheaded by the Rekhta Foundation under its Rajasthani project Anjas, in collaboration with the National Culture Fund, seeks to document, conserve, and promote the rich and diverse oral traditions of Rajasthan.

**This project focuses on five key art forms:**

Kavad, Behrupiya (Bahurupiya), Phad, Puppetry, and Molela. By highlighting these significant traditions, the initiative aims to celebrate and preserve the vibrant cultural heritage of Rajasthan for future generations. Through this endeavour, we honour the storytellers, folk singers, and oral historians who have long upheld the region's cultural legacy, ensuring that these invaluable traditions continue to thrive and inspire.

## Project Objectives

**Documentation:** Produce a series of video documentaries, with ten videos dedicated to each of the five oral traditions. These films will capture the essence, techniques, narratives, and cultural significance of each tradition, offering an in-depth exploration of Rajasthan's heritage.

**Preservation:** Ensure the preservation of these oral traditions in digital formats, thereby making them accessible to a global audience and safeguarding them for future generations.

**Promotion:** Raise awareness and foster greater appreciation for Rajasthan's oral traditions by widely distributing the documentaries across various media platforms.

**Cultural Exchange:** Promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of Rajasthan's rich cultural heritage, fostering cross-cultural connections both within India and internationally.

*Support for Practitioners: Provide a platform for traditional storytellers, artists, and historians, showcasing their work to a broader audience and recognising their vital contributions to the preservation and promotion of Rajasthan's cultural legacy.*

## Project Significance

This initiative holds immense value as it addresses the urgent need to preserve and promote Rajasthan's oral traditions, many of which are at risk of being lost due to modernization and changing cultural dynamics. Through the creation of video documentaries, we aim to document these invaluable traditions, not only safeguarding an essential part of Rajasthan's heritage but also providing an educational resource for cultural enrichment. The project pays tribute to the skill and dedication of those who have worked tirelessly to preserve these practices, ensuring their stories and techniques are passed down to future generations. In collaboration with the National Culture Fund, the Rekhta Foundation plays a crucial role in preserving India's rich and diverse cultural legacy, fostering pride and appreciation for these time-honored traditions.



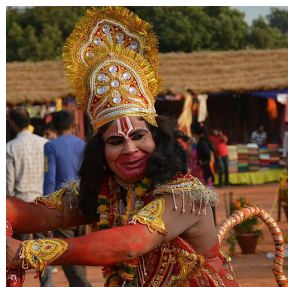
# Cultural Context

*Rajasthan's oral traditions are fundamental to its cultural fabric, preserving the region's stories, values, and artistic expressions that have been passed down through generations.*



## KAVAD

The Kavad tradition involves storytelling through intricately painted wooden boxes. Each panel tells a part of the story, preserving religious, folk, and local legends. This tradition has kept the community's narratives alive by sharing them through itinerant storytellers.



## BEHRUPIYA

Performers in the Behrupiya tradition disguise themselves as mythological, historical, or contemporary figures. This art form not only entertains but also critiques social norms, reflecting Rajasthan's evolving cultural and political landscapes through satire.



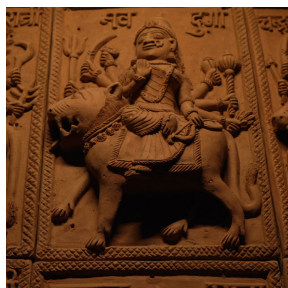
## PHAD

Phad paintings are large-scale scrolls that depict heroic tales of local deities and warriors. These paintings are often accompanied by songs and performances, engaging the community while preserving stories of Rajasthan's spiritual and cultural history.



## PUPPETRY

Rajasthan's puppetry, especially the Kathputli tradition, uses intricately crafted puppets to perform stories of kings, queens, and mythological figures. Puppetry serves as both entertainment and a tool for moral education, offering a deep connection to the region's cultural consciousness.



## MOLELA TERRACOTTA

Molela is a tradition of crafting terracotta plaques that depict deities and mythological scenes. These plaques are not only artistic creations but also preserve the region's religious and cultural beliefs, reflecting the syncretic nature of Rajasthan's spiritual traditions.



# Historical Relevance

*These traditions provide a crucial lens through which we can understand the historical and cultural evolution of Rajasthan, shedding light on its socio-political, religious, and cultural transformations.*

## KAVAD

The Kavad tradition reflects the historical reliance of Rajasthan's communities on oral storytelling for the transmission of religious and social narratives. The painted boxes preserve ancient stories and offer insights into the region's spiritual and cultural development.

## BEHRUPIYA

The Behrupiya tradition has a historical function beyond entertainment. It often used satire to comment on social and political events, offering a unique perspective on Rajasthan's changing political climate and the role of performance in societal critique.

## PHAD

The Phad tradition is over 700 years old and serves as a historical record of Rajasthan's religious and cultural beliefs. The scrolls not only tell stories but document the socio-religious life of the region, offering insight into its historical narrative and value systems.

## PUPPETRY

With a history spanning over 1,000 years, Rajasthan's puppetry tradition has preserved the region's history and mythology. Puppetry has historically been a method of conveying important cultural narratives, helping to sustain the region's social values and historical consciousness across generations.

## MOLELA TERRACOTTA

Molela's terracotta plaques provide a historical record of Rajasthan's religious and mythological beliefs, spanning over 500 years. These plaques document the syncretic nature of Rajasthan's spiritual evolution, reflecting how various influences shaped the region's cultural identity.

This project plays a crucial role in preserving these oral traditions, ensuring that the cultural and historical essence of Rajasthan endures through modern challenges and continues to inspire future generations.















# Phad

An Artistic Legacy of Rajasthan





# Introduction

The Phad project aimed to document and preserve the traditional art of Phad painting, an essential part of Rajasthan's cultural heritage. This project involved in-depth research into the artisans and their communities, observing their techniques, conducting interviews, and gathering historical and cultural insights into Phad painting. The process of creating a Phad painting was meticulously documented, from canvas preparation to brushwork, with a focus on the storytelling elements and the traditional tools used.

Video documentation captured interviews and footage throughout the artistic process, which was then edited into a series of documentaries, serving both as a visual record and an educational resource. This project ensures the preservation of Phad painting's techniques and cultural significance for future generations.

## Detailed Study on Phad

A comprehensive study on Phad was conducted, with valuable insights gathered from Bhopa Sugna Ram Ji, a member of the Naik community from Bhakrasni village, Jodhpur. Sukanaram Ji is renowned for crafting the largest Ravanahatha, a string instrument used in Phad recitals. He performs alongside his wife, Manwari, who sings during the recitals, while Sukanaram Ji provides the interpretation.

## Tradition Passed Down Through Generations

The art of performing Phad has been a family tradition for around eight generations. Bhopa refers not only to the performers but also to those considered divine and responsible for conducting recitations and worship. Sukanaram Ji learned the craft from his father, while his wife, Manwari, despite her family not practicing Phad, learned to sing the Phad after their marriage.



## Performance and Worship Rituals

Phad paintings are traditional scroll artworks from Rajasthan, mainly created in the Mewar and Marwar regions. These paintings are not just artistic expressions but also serve as religious artifacts used in Phad performances or Padh, a ritualistic form of storytelling.

The Phad is set up during religious ceremonies, often in villages or temples, where it is worshipped. The process begins with lighting incense sticks and performing Aarti, a ritual involving hymns and praises to deities. This practice underscores the Phad's significance as a sacred object, especially during Katha (storytelling) performances.

Katha songs form the heart of Phad performances, narrating the stories depicted in the paintings, often centred around mythological figures and local legends.





# The Legend of Pabuji



Pabuji Rathore, born in Kolumand village, Jodhpur, is the central figure of many Phad performances. According to legend, Pabuji's birth followed a series of divine and miraculous events. His life is marked by heroic deeds, such as protecting Kalmi, a magical mare, and sacrificing himself to fulfill a promise made to Deval Charani. Despite his death, Pabuji continued to perform miracles, especially related to livestock health, making him a revered figure. Phad listeners from communities like Kumhar, Jat, Vishnoi, and Bhil, particularly Rajputs and Raikas, hold Pabuji's Phad in high regard.

## Phad Paintings and Community Faith

Phad paintings, created by the Joshi family of Shahpura and Bhilwara, are an integral part of the tradition, often commissioned by devotees. These paintings can cost up to sixty thousand rupees, making them expensive and difficult for Phad readers to afford. The survival of this art has been supported by wealthy patrons. Communities such as the Gurjar, Kumhar, Nath, Rajput, and Raika hold strong faith in Phad, particularly Pabuji's Phad, with some also engaging with Devnarayan Ji's Phad.

The cultural significance of Phad is underscored by the community's deep-rooted faith and dedication to preserving this unique art form, ensuring its continuity across generations.

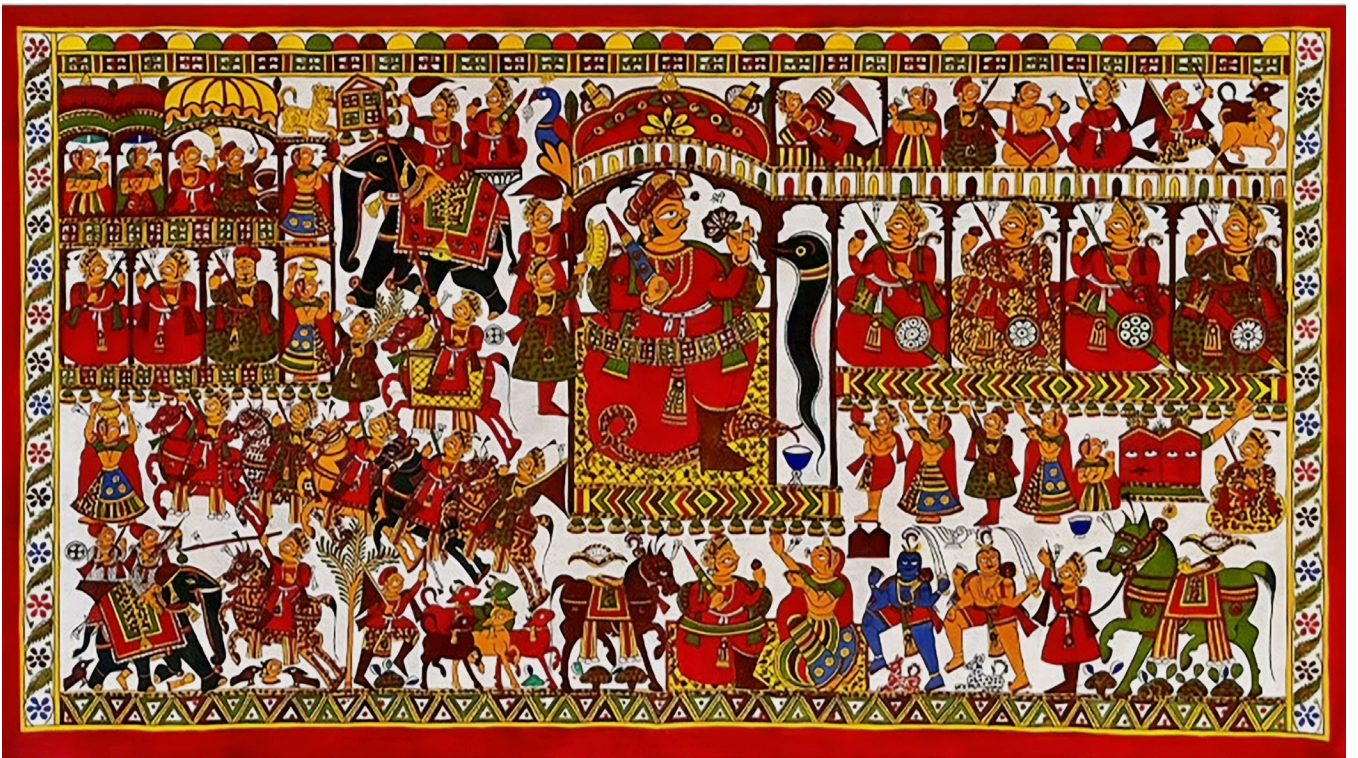




# The Legend of Devnarayan Ji



Devnarayan Ji, a revered folk deity in Rajasthan, is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Born in Malaseri village in 1243 CE, he was raised in Devas and became a skilled warrior and powerful figure. He performed many miracles, including healing Queen Pipalde and reviving people like Sarang Seth and Chonchu Bhat. Known for his devotion to Gau Mata, he owned 98,000 cows and was a protector of cattle. As a warrior, he fought and defeated foreign invaders and ruled Ajmer in the 8th century. His life and legacy are depicted in the Devnarayan Phad, a popular cultural tradition in India.









# Devnarayan Ji Temple & Phad Performance

Javla | Mehrana | Degana | Nagaur



The Devnarayan Ji temple in Javla, Mehrana, Degana, and Nagaur is surrounded by lush greenery. It features a statue of Devnarayan Ji on horseback and a Bhopa Ji idol outside. The temple's bricks are adorned with shiny chola foil.

Tulcharam Ji Bhopa, the temple caretaker, explained that Bhopa refers to those skilled in singing and performing Phad recitations. Along with Sukharam Ji, he demonstrated the Phad setup in the courtyard. After arranging the Phad with Kamdi supports, lighting incense, and preparing the space, Sukharam Ji, dressed in traditional attire, sang a brief segment while Tulcharam Ji played the strings.

Phad recitals attract more visitors during the annual fair and on Saturdays. The offerings collected support the temple's upkeep. Tulcharam Ji shared that his ancestors founded the temple 900 years ago, and his family continues to maintain its legacy.



# Conversations with Key Figures in the Tradition & Phad Art

Late Piruram Ji Bhopa | Javla | Mehrana | Degana | Nagaur



Piruram Ji Bhopa, approximately seventy years old, is highly esteemed for his expertise in Phad reading, with recognition reaching international audiences. He has lectured abroad and was revered during the time when only a few practiced Phad Vachan. Before cassette recordings, villagers solely relied on his performances. Today, around 100-150 Bhopas, many of whom he trained, continue the tradition. While phone recordings have made learning easier, the quality of performances has declined slightly. The tradition remains strong, with inquiries from places like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Gujarat. Gurjars are the main patrons, followed by Jats and Rajputs.



## **Gopal Acharya – Multidisciplinary Artist & Art Expert, Bhilwara**



Gopal Acharya is a prominent figure in Rajasthani arts, known for his work as a writer, poet, folk artist, sculptor, dramatist, and stage artist. With a deep connection to Rajasthan's cultural traditions, he has spent decades promoting and preserving the region's artistic heritage. His works, from literary pieces to performances, reflect the essence of Rajasthan's folklore. As an expert in traditional art forms, Gopalji offers invaluable insights into the Phad painting tradition, emphasizing its cultural significance in Rajasthan.

## **Kritika Joshi – Phad Artist, Bhilwara**



Kritika Joshi is an emerging talent in Phad painting, blending contemporary elements with this centuries-old tradition. Based in Bhilwara, she has learned the art from seasoned artisans, adding her unique perspective. Passionate about preserving Rajasthan's cultural heritage, Kritika is committed to showcasing the depth of storytelling embedded in the vibrant and detailed Phad paintings that characterize the tradition.

## **Mahant Suresh Das Ji – Asind, Bhilwara**



The Sawai Bhoj temple in Asind honors Devnarayan Ji, Sadu Mata, and Sawai Bhoj's brothers. Mahant Suresh Das Ji, the temple head, shared the site's historical significance, where the Bagdavat brothers fought against King Durjanasal. The temple houses a statue of Sawai Bhoj Ji and a platform marking the spot where his head fell. Mahant Ji, from the Tedwa Gurjar gotra, has served as the Mahant since 2017. The temple hosts a grand fair on Chhath of Bhadva and Magh Saptami, featuring Phad recitals, offerings, and prayers. Mahant Ji also shared the story of Ram Ji's promise, linking it to the Bagavat brothers' rebirth and their ongoing presence in Phad recitals.



### Shantilal Joshi – Phad Painter, Shahapura



Phad painting, often mistakenly attributed to Bhilwara, actually has its roots in Shahapura. National Award-winning artist Shantilal Joshi and his son, Vijay, provided valuable insights into the art form. Their process follows a strict tradition, where a virgin girl draws the first line on the canvas, and no woman touches the Phad afterward. The Phads are created using stone colors and cloth prepared in traditional ways. The Joshi family continues to preserve this art, producing Phads for Bhopas and others at varying prices based on the labor-intensive methods involved. Originally created to accompany Bhopas' storytelling, the Phads still depict the stories of Pabuji and Devnarayan Ji. The art is considered sacred, requiring careful handling, with Bhopas offering prayers before receiving a new Phad.

### Kalyan Joshi – Phad Painter, Bhilwara



Kalyan Joshi, son of Padma Shri Shri Lal Joshi Ji, continues the rich legacy of Phad painting in Bhilwara. Kalyan explained that the creation of Phads begins with a ritualistic worship, during which a virgin girl makes the first stroke on the canvas. The cotton cloth is carefully starched and kneaded to create a smooth surface for the artwork.

Kalyan emphasized that while Phad paintings traditionally narrate the stories of Devnarayan Ji and Pabuji, they have also adapted to modern themes, offering guidance on current issues such as the Corona pandemic. Phads continue to be displayed in temples, highlighting their cultural significance and role in preserving the storytelling tradition.

### Sanwara Rebari – Camel Herder, Shahapura



The Raika Rabari community, renowned for its camel herding, holds Pabuji in high regard. According to Rajaram Raika, Pabuji is credited with introducing camels to the region, which helped define the community's identity. Every Raika Rabari camp dedicates a space for Pabuji, with Phad readings and traditional dances by Bhil Naiks still being performed within the community.



### **Late Dr. Mahendra Bhanawat** – *Former Director of Lok Kala Mandal, Udaipur*



Mahendra Bhanawat, a former director of the Bhartiya Lok Kala Mandal in Udaipur and an esteemed expert in Rajasthani art, shared his deep insights into the legacy of Pabuji and his significant contributions to preserving Rajasthani art through his writings. Bhanawat emphasized how Pabuji's influence extends beyond storytelling, shaping the rich cultural tapestry of Rajasthan. He also underscored the pivotal role played by Devi Lal Samar in safeguarding and promoting this tradition, ensuring its continuity for future generations.

### **Shri Krishna Jugnu** – *Folk Art Expert, Udaipur*



Shri Krishna Jugnu, an esteemed Indologist and expert on Devnarayan Ji Phad, offered profound insights into the deity's cultural significance and his enduring influence on Rajasthan's spiritual and artistic landscape. He elaborated on how Devnarayan Ji's teachings and stories are intricately woven into the region's cultural fabric, with Phad paintings playing a crucial role in preserving these rich storytelling traditions. Jugnu highlighted how these sacred artworks continue to be a medium for passing down ancient legends, ensuring their relevance and reverence in contemporary times.

### **Mr. Rajendra Shekhawat** – *District Collector, Shahapura*



Phad art is a unique and priceless cultural legacy of Rajasthan, vividly illustrating our historical tales, religious beliefs, and folk traditions. In today's fast-changing world, where traditional art forms are fading, preserving Phad has become more important than ever. This centuries-old tradition is not just art—it is our identity and heritage. The district administration remains fully committed to its protection and promotion. Through documentation and awareness, we aim to revive its glory and global recognition. We sincerely appeal to all citizens to support and safeguard this rare and vibrant art form for generations to come.



## Bagri and Bijori Kanjari Communities



Efforts were made to connect with the Bijori, Kanjari, and Bagri communities, who follow a nomadic tradition. The Bagri community, once hunter-gatherers, is linked to the “door of Bhainsasur,” which they open during Navratri. Kalyan Joshi shared that twenty to twenty-five years ago, members of the Bagri community commissioned Phad paintings. The Bijori Kanjari community, featured in the Devnarayan Ji Phad, continues to revere the Bagdavat brothers and accept donations from the Gujjar community. They also perform traditional songs and dances during community events.

Phad art stands as a vibrant and revered tradition that not only depicts the rich cultural and spiritual narratives of Rajasthan but also preserves the stories of legendary figures such as Pabuji and Devnarayan Ji. This sacred art form, deeply intertwined with the practice of Phad singing, serves as a vital medium for storytelling, connecting generations through visual expression and song. The meticulous process of creating Phads, from the ritualistic first stroke to the careful handling of the paintings, reflects its spiritual significance. With Phad paintings adapting to both ancient and modern themes, they remain an essential part of Rajasthan's cultural heritage, bridging past and present while continuing to captivate audiences with their vivid storytelling.



# Rekhta Foundation's Workshops in Collaboration with the NCF

## Reviving Rajasthani Folk Arts

The Rekhta Foundation, in collaboration with the National Culture Fund, has organized a series of workshops aimed at preserving and promoting Rajasthan's rich traditional art forms. These workshops focus on Phad painting in Bhilwara, Molela terracotta art in Molela village, puppetry in rural Jodhpur and Udaipur's Shilpgram, the Bahurupiya performance art with Jankilal Ji Bhand, and Kaavad storytelling in Suthar Mohalla, Basi. Each workshop offers participants an immersive experience into these unique art forms, ensuring their continuity and relevance in contemporary times.

## Phad Painting

### The Narrative Scrolls of Bhilwara

Phad painting, a 700-year-old art form originating from Shahpura near Bhilwara, Rajasthan, is renowned for its intricate storytelling through elaborate scrolls. Traditionally, these paintings depict the heroic tales of local deities like Devnarayanji and Pabuji. Historically, the Joshi family of the Chipa caste were the exclusive practitioners of this art, creating portable temples for the Rabari tribe's priest-singers, known as Bhopas and Bhopis. These storytellers would unfold the Phad after sunset, narrating and performing the depicted tales throughout the night. The creation of a Phad involves meticulous preparation: a hand-woven coarse cotton cloth is soaked, starched, sun-dried, and polished with a moonstone to achieve a smooth surface. Artists use natural pigments derived from stones, flowers, plants, and herbs, adhering to a specific color symbolism—yellow for outlines and ornaments, orange for limbs and torsos, green for vegetation, brown for architecture, red for royal attire and borders, blue for water or curtains, and black for final outlines. The eyes are painted last, bringing the figures to life. Efforts by artists like Shree Lal Joshi and his descendants have been pivotal in reviving and adapting Phad painting, introducing contemporary themes and training new artists to keep this vibrant tradition alive.





# Molela Terracotta Art

## Sacred Plaques of Molela Village



Molela village, situated on the banks of the Banas River in Rajasthan's Rajsamand district, is celebrated for its distinctive terracotta plaques. Unlike typical three-dimensional idols, Molela's artisans craft flat, intricately designed terracotta panels depicting deities and mythological scenes. The clay, sourced from the Banas River, is meticulously prepared and molded into detailed relief work. Natural stone and mineral colors are employed, with a vegetable gum called Dawrigund used as a binder. A lacquer coat, known locally as 'Jala,' is applied to enhance the shine, adhering to traditional practices that avoid synthetic materials, especially in representations of deities. This art form holds significant cultural value, attracting tribal communities from distant regions who seek these sacred plaques for their rituals and homes. The Molela artisans' dedication ensures the preservation of this unique terracotta tradition, blending religious significance with artistic expression.

## Puppetry Traditions in Rural Jodhpur & Udaipur's Shilpgram

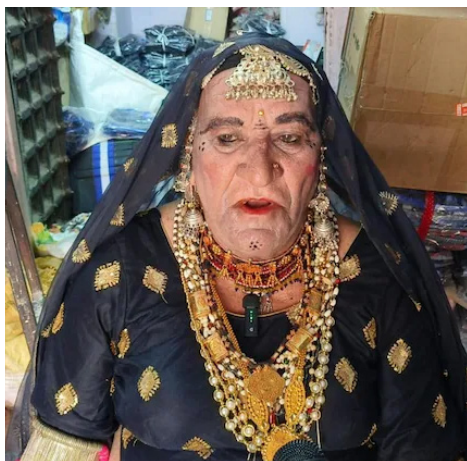


Puppetry, an integral part of Rajasthan's cultural heritage, thrives in rural areas of Jodhpur and at Udaipur's Shilpgram, a rural arts and crafts complex. Traditional puppetry, known as 'Kathputli,' involves handcrafted wooden puppets adorned in vibrant Rajasthani attire. These performances narrate folklore, historical tales, and social messages, accompanied by music and dialogues. The puppeteers, often from hereditary families, manipulate the puppets with skillful string movements, bringing stories to life. Workshops in these regions focus on teaching the art of puppet-making, storytelling techniques, and performance skills, aiming to rejuvenate interest and ensure the survival of this enchanting form of entertainment and education.



# Bahurupiya

## The Art of Impersonation with Padma Shri Jankilal Ji Bhand



The Bahurupiya tradition, epitomized by artists like Jankilal Ji Bhand, is a vibrant form of performance art in Rajasthan, where performers don various disguises to entertain and engage audiences. Derived from 'bahu' (many) and 'rupiya' (forms), Bahurupiyas transform into multiple characters, ranging from mythological figures to contemporary personas. This art form is not merely about costume changes but involves deep understanding of the characters portrayed, including their mannerisms, speech and behavior. Performances often occur in public spaces, festivals, and gatherings, where the Bahurupiya interacts spontaneously with people, blurring the lines between performance and reality. Workshops led by seasoned artists like Jankilal Ji Bhand focus on imparting skills in character study, improvisation, costume design, and audience engagement, ensuring the perpetuation of this unique and interactive art form.

# Kaavad

## The Portable Shrines of Suthar Mohalla, Bassi



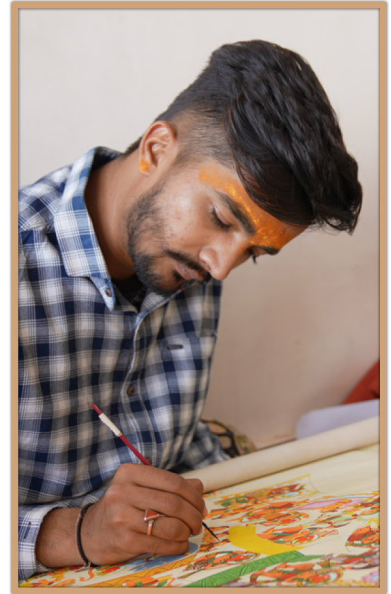
Kaavad is a traditional storytelling medium originating from Suthar Mohalla in Bassi, Rajasthan, involving intricately crafted wooden shrines that unfold to reveal a series of painted panels narrating epics and folklore. Crafted by the Suthar community, these portable shrines serve as visual aids for storytellers, known as Kaavadiyas, who travel to share tales from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and local legends. Each panel is meticulously painted with scenes and characters, allowing the storyteller to sequentially unveil the narrative. The art of Kaavad-making requires expertise in woodworking, painting, and an understanding of the stories depicted. Workshops in Suthar Mohalla aim to teach these skills, emphasizing the cultural significance and craftsmanship involved, thereby preserving this centuries-old tradition that combines visual art with oral storytelling. Through these dedicated workshops, the Rekhta Foundation and the National Culture Fund are playing a crucial role in safeguarding Rajasthan's diverse artistic traditions. By providing platforms for learning and practice, they ensure that these art forms continue to thrive, enriching India's cultural landscape and inspiring future generations.

# Workshop





# Glimpses

















# Kavad Art

Storytelling on the Move





# Storytelling on the Move

## Jaisalmer | Ramdevra



The Kavad is a vibrant, foldable wooden shrine, beautifully crafted with intricate designs that tell both ancient religious stories and modern narratives. This portable artwork, originating from Bassi village in Chittorgarh, features panels that unfold to reveal vivid depictions of epics, myths, and local legends. The Kavad is not just a religious object but also a storytelling medium, bringing together art, faith, and history in a dynamic way.

Each panel is meticulously painted by skilled artisans, showcasing a fusion of traditional craftsmanship and contemporary themes. The Kavad serves as a canvas for oral storytellers, known as Kawadiya Bhats, who reveal its panels to narrate these tales, connecting generations through visual storytelling. While the Kavad's roots lie in religious traditions, it has evolved to incorporate modern narratives, reflecting the changing times while maintaining its cultural essence.

In a world where many traditional art forms face the risk of fading away, the Kavad continues to thrive, adapting and enduring. It remains a striking symbol of Rajasthan's rich artistic heritage, blending spirituality with innovation in every fold.



# The Journey

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## Jaipur | Osiyan | Ramdevra



The Rekhta team journeyed across Rajasthan to document the Kavad art form, a fusion of craftsmanship, storytelling, and spirituality. The Kavad, a portable wooden shrine adorned with intricate paintings, serves as both a spiritual object and a narrative tool, conveying stories of deities and epic tales. The team sought to capture not only its visual beauty but also its cultural and spiritual essence, which has sustained the tradition for centuries.

Starting in Jaipur, the team ventured to Osian, known for its ancient temples, where they documented the Kavad's cultural significance through local interviews. The vibrant desert landscape provided a stunning backdrop for the art. Next, in Ramdevra, a pilgrimage site, the team delved deeper into the Kavad's connection to devotion, learning how the artisans' dedication preserves this tradition.

In Dechu, the team explored how the Kavad integrates into daily life, while in Kolu, artisans shared the meticulous process of crafting the shrines. Moving on to Jodhpur Fort, the team captured the contrast between Rajasthan's grand architecture and the intimate stories of the Kavad. In Chittorgarh, conversations with local historians and artisans revealed the Kavad's continued role in Rajasthani cultural identity.

In Bassi and Udaipur, the team documented the Kavad's spiritual origins and contemporary relevance. Interviews with NGOs and educators in Udaipur highlighted efforts to engage younger generations in preserving the tradition. The project concluded in Jaipur, synthesizing the findings and reflecting on the Kavad's enduring significance in shaping Rajasthan's cultural and spiritual landscape.

This journey underscored the deep connection between storytelling, community, faith, and identity, offering a rich exploration of how the Kavad tradition continues to impact Rajasthan's heritage.



# An In-Depth Exploration of the Kavad Tradition

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The Kavad is a portable wooden shrine carried by the Kavadia Bhat to patrons' homes. As the Bhat opens each panel, he narrates the stories painted on them, which are received with deep reverence. The Kavadia Bhat also maintains genealogical records for the families he serves. For him, the Kavad represents the legacy of Shraavan Kumar, who carried his blind parents using a similar shrine.

Rooted in Marwar, the Kavad tradition has been passed down through artisans from Bassi, a village in Chittorgarh, for nearly five centuries. Despite its rich history, the Kavad has not received the recognition it deserves, raising questions about its fading presence, history, and relevance in the digital age.

To understand this, the Rekhta team began their journey in Bassi, known for its wooden crafts. They first met Natwar Tripathi, Assistant Director of PR at the West Zone Cultural Centre in Udaipur, whose expertise in folk art was invaluable. He advised them to visit Bassi before meeting further, highlighting the importance of supporting the well-being of the Kavad artisans to preserve the art.

Upon arriving in Bassi, the team found it a peaceful, picturesque area with beautiful murals and tranquil sights like the Shiv Sagar Lake. The team sought out Satyanarayan Suthar, a National Award-winning Kavad maker, who welcomed them into his home. As he painted a Kavad, he shared how the pandemic shifted much of the craft to online platforms, though he still hosted workshops for students.

The Rekhta team's exploration uncovered both the beauty and the challenges of preserving the Kavad tradition, shining a light on its deep cultural and spiritual significance.



# Conversations with Key Figures in the Tradition and kavad Art

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After February, most Suthars shift focus to crafting Ganguar items, symbolizing Goddess Parvati and Lord Shiva, along with daily wooden products like chakla-belan, torans, and bajoths, popular across India. Due to low demand, many Suthars have stopped making Kavads, with only a few artisans continuing due to growing interest in folk arts. Government support and Bassi's sanctuary have helped, attracting tourists to the region's wooden crafts.

Online markets and exhibitions have introduced the Kavad to new areas, but it remains largely unknown in Rajasthan. Even in Jaipur, many shopkeepers are unfamiliar with the Kavad, with one near Hawa Mahal recalling that they sold them years ago.

The Rekhta team learned that many associate the Kavad with the Sawan festival pilgrimage. While different from the bamboo "Kanwad" used in the festival, the Kavad is also seen as a pilgrimage object. Satyanarayan Suthar explained that both represent spiritual journeys, with the Kavad used to carry idols to holy sites, much like Shravan Kumar carried his parents. Despite its unique folk art form, the Kavad retains spiritual significance, especially for those unable to visit pilgrimage sites, and Kavadia Bhats earn modestly by sharing this experience.



## Satyanarayan Suthar – Kavad Artist, Bassi, Chittaurgarh



Satyanarayan Suthar's room, filled with both finished and in-progress Kavad along with his awards and photographs, reflected his respected position in the Kavad community. Despite time constraints, he shared his valuable insights with the team. As a well-known and acclaimed Kavad artist, he explained that while Bassi is known for various wooden crafts, he focuses entirely on Kavad due to the intense dedication the art form requires. He acknowledged the struggles faced by Kavad artisans today, including the declining demand for traditional work and the challenge of preserving the craft in a rapidly changing world. Still, he expressed hope for its future and recommended visiting Dwarka Prasad, another renowned artisan, for further insights into the art's ongoing evolution and the efforts to keep it alive.

## Dwarka Prasad – Kavad Artist, Bassi, Chittaurgarh



Following the recommendation of Satyanarayan Suthar, the Rekhta team visited Sh. Dwarka Prasad, a senior and highly respected Kavad artist in Bassi. Known for his dedication to preserving the tradition, he welcomed the team and was eager to share his expertise. His home, lively with activity, was filled with various works, including Kavad, puppets, painted wooden boxes, and small artworks. Dwarka Prasad's daughter-in-law, actively assisting with the organization of his pieces, highlighted the family's deep involvement in the craft.

Dwarka Prasad took the team to his workshop, where many women and young girls were painting under his guidance. He explained that he regularly teaches local students, women, and even people from other communities, emphasizing that the survival of the Kavad tradition depends on spreading it widely and encouraging experimentation. His own work reflects this philosophy, as he has created Kavad addressing contemporary issues such as education, social campaigns like "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao," traffic safety, and disease prevention.

Through his conversation, it became clear that the Rekhta team should explore partnerships with NGOs, as they may have used Kavad in their campaigns. However, before doing so, it was crucial to understand the tradition in its truest form by connecting with the Kavad artisans, particularly the Kavadia Bhats, who are the custodians of this unique art form.



## Suresh Suthar – Kavadi Artist, Bassi, Chittaurgarh



He shared that his family, originally from Nagaur, settled in Bassi under the local rulers, and their family deity is from Nagaur. A small temple dedicated to their Sati Mata was established using soil from their ancestral temple in Nagaur. This connection suggested that the Suthars of Bassi, likely linked to the Kavadia Bhats, had deep roots in Marwar. While the Kavadia Bhats still receive limited patronage, the Suthars have evolved into independent artisans.

In the past, all artisan communities received patronage under the Jajmani system, but eventually, only artists associated with music and storytelling maintained contact with their patrons. In Bassi, only four Suthar families were found to be making Kavads. Among them, Suresh Suthar and Gopal Suthar are the only ones working alone, while the entire families of Satyanarayan Ji and Dwarka Prasad Ji are involved in the process. Dwarka Ji's son, Govind, shapes the wooden panels to create the Kavadi's framework, and the women are seen applying primer and painting the panels, though they are not recognized as independent artists. The most significant point is that this less-educated Suthar community views their craft as a product, leading to a decline in intricate work. The work is done according to market demand.

## Nar Singh Kavadia – Kavadia Bhat, Jaisalmer



The search for the Kavadia Bhats led the team to Jodhpur and then to Osian, where they learned that Nar Singh Kavadia Bhat, a prominent figure in the tradition, had moved. The team found him in Lohawat at a tea shop, arriving on a motorcycle with his wife. Nar Singh Bhat explained that he was on a pilgrimage circuit and could not visit patrons at the time, but assured that once filming began, he would bring the Kavadi to patrons upon payment.

During the discussion, Nar Singh Bhat showcased the Kavadi he had with him and requested a donation, noting that the Kavadi would only close after receiving one. Part of the donation was used to buy fodder for cows, a symbolic gesture that reflects the spiritual and cultural aspects of the tradition. Nar Singh Bhat explained that the Kavadi features a cow as a donation box, with funds used to support animals or feed birds. They also maintain records of patrons' life events, including births and deaths. One side of the Kavadi depicts narratives of devotees, while the other features portraits of the patrons' families.



Nar Singh Bhat shared that the earnings are modest, with the family only touring for four months a year, from Diwali to Holi, mainly in designated areas. Due to many patrons moving to cities and the younger generation's waning interest, donations have declined. Villagers, focused on farming, are less likely to engage, leaving many homes empty during visits. He noted that donations are most often given by women.

Many Kavadia Bhats include “Ram” in their names, with their Kavads typically featuring a photo or sculpture of Ram Darbar. They also trace their tradition back to Shravan Kumar.

We spoke with Narsingh, who informed us he would soon be heading to Kolumand to set up camp near the sacred site of Pabuji. During a visit to a patron's home, we found no men present. When asked for a male contact, the woman claimed not to know Nar Singh Bhat Kavadia Bhat, even though he had identified them as patrons. Later, Nar Singh Bhat, known locally as "Omi," showed his Aadhaar card to confirm his official name.

# Kolumand



In the past, many artists traveled widely, sharing their traditions, arts, and skills. However, with sacred lands disappearing, finding suitable places for their camps has become increasingly difficult.

During our visit to Kolumand, we found many devotees present and met ascetics from the Nath Panth, though no information about Kavads emerged. We learned that a village of Kavadiya Bhattis is located near Ramdevra. Pappuram Kavadiya Bhat shared that his family sought refuge in Baba Ramdev years ago. He noted that the younger generation of Kavadiyas now feels embarrassed by the tradition and no longer wishes to perform Kavads. He reminisced about the past, when setting up a camp was a respected event that entertained and educated the villagers. Through storytelling, they taught lessons on family responsibilities, respect, and caring for the elderly. The Kavads, rooted in storytelling, are about listening and preserving wisdom.



## Pappu Ram Bhat – *Kawadiya Bhat, Jaisalmer*



Pappu Ram becomes nostalgic, reflecting on how people used to donate cows, camels, and goats in the past. Now, there is no space to keep these animals, and arranging fodder has become difficult. Today, motorcycles and sometimes four-wheeled vehicles are used to transport goods for the journey. Young people are rarely seen in these journeys, as they do not wish to beg. It is a strange dilemma; they want to preserve this art, but people are reluctant to beg.

Pappuram's brother, Koja Ram, suggests that the government should make efforts to teach Kavadiya recitation in schools and institutions. This would help preserve the art and maintain their respect. He also notes that they are descendants of the Raos, who were commanded by God to spread knowledge and beg for sustenance.

Pappuram acknowledges that spreading knowledge is their duty, but questions who is interested in listening today or has the time to sit and listen. When people are no longer interested in hearing stories, they wonder what purpose their efforts serve.

## Laique Hussain – *Director of the Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal, Udaipur*



When we spoke with Laik Hussain, he mentioned that the Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal had organized programs on Kavads long ago. While the Kavads were available, the Kavadiya Bhattas who performed them were not found, leading the artists themselves to narrate the stories. The Lok Kala Mandal, established through the efforts of Deviram Samar, had showcased Kavads created by the renowned artist Mangilal Mistry. Though Mangilal has passed away, his son, who conducts workshops on Kavads, showed no interest in engaging further, believing they had not received the recognition they deserved.



## Late Dr. Mahendra Bhanawat – Former Director of Lok Kala Mandal, Udaipur



"In Udaipur, we met Mahendra Bhanawat, whose stature in Rajasthan's folk arts and crafts is significant. He has also served as the Director of the Lok Kala Mandal. He provided insights into the areas from Bassi to Marwar and expressed disappointment that Kavads have now become mere decorative items. Decorative objects cannot be considered folk art; true folk art must come from and be shared within the community. Until these stories are recited, their significance remains in question."

## Dr. Ramsingh Bhati – Assistant Professor, Government College, Udaipur



Dr. Ramsingh Bhati, who has completed a Ph.D. on Kavadi painting, notes that significant changes can be observed in the art of Kavads as well. He showed us a Kavadi he keeps, which had very beautiful paintings. He mentioned that nowadays, artists quickly produce Kavads to meet demand and are not directly connected with buyers, leading to a lack of responsibility. They complete orders, but Kavadiya Bhattis are now more focused on how to earn money. However, this is not entirely their fault; market forces have influenced many aspects, including art.

## Dr. Natwar Tripathi – Art Expert, Chittorgarh



Natwar Tripathi is also concerned that Kavads are on the brink of extinction, citing issues with the availability of wood and forest regulations. The craftsmen, who are not educated, frequently argue with forest officers. He suggests that if the government supports them by setting up a craft bazaar in Bassi, it would provide a platform to sell their goods and also help them learn about necessary resources.

Natwar Ji has provided substantial support and informed us about the largest Kavadi, which, according to him and Laik Hussain Ji, should have been at the West Culture Zone in Udaipur. However, we could not find it there. Despite inquiring with several people at the location, no one was able to provide information. We requested permission to visit the museum, which was granted, but we still could not locate the Kavadi. The museum was also undergoing renovations, making it difficult to determine its whereabouts.



Kavad art is a profound expression of Rajasthan's spiritual and cultural identity. This intricate craft, traditionally used to tell stories and convey the divine through wooden shrines, reflects the deep connection between the people and their faith. Whether as a pilgrimage tool or a medium for storytelling, Kavad holds immense cultural significance, linking the past with the present through its artistry. Despite the challenges faced by artisans in modern times, the resilience of Kavad makers, supported by growing awareness and preservation efforts, ensures that this sacred craft continues to thrive. As Kavad art evolves, it remains a vital part of Rajasthan's heritage, capturing the devotion, creativity, and cultural richness of the region for generations to come.

















# Bahurupia Art

A Living Legacy of Rajasthan's Cultural Heritage





# Bahurupia Art



The Bahurupiya art form of Rajasthan is a remarkable expression of transformation, imagination, and cultural storytelling. Rooted in centuries of tradition, Bahurupiyas, or “people of many forms,” are artists renowned for their extraordinary ability to assume various identities, ranging from mythological figures to historical personalities, animals, and even inanimate objects. This ancient tradition has long been a vibrant part of Rajasthan’s rich tapestry of folk arts, captivating audiences with its unique blend of performance, disguise, and storytelling.

Traditionally, Bahurupiyas were itinerant performers who traveled from village to village, engaging audiences with their theatrical displays. Often disguised in elaborate costumes, these performers would mimic gods, kings, or legendary heroes, bringing the stories of Rajasthan's rich history, mythology, and folklore to life. Through their performances, they not only entertained but also imparted moral lessons, offered blessings, and invoked the protection of deities.

Historically, the Bahurupiyas were considered to be spies for kings, gathering information from the common people under the guise of their various characters. This secretive role added an intriguing dimension to their performances, making the art form not only an avenue for artistic expression but also a tool for survival and political maneuvering.

As we explore the Bahurupiya art form in this report, we delve into its historical roots, the cultural significance it holds in Rajasthan, and the contemporary challenges it faces in the face of modernization. Through conversations with key figures and experts, we gain deeper insights into the evolving role of Bahurupiyas in today's world and the importance of preserving this living tradition for future generations.



# Historic Significance

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In ancient times, the role of Bahurupias was not only to entertain but also to serve as spies for kings. Their ability to disguise themselves and move unnoticed among the populace made them invaluable during times of war and political intrigue. The term “Bahurupia” is derived from the Hindi words “Bahu” meaning “many” and “Roop” meaning “form,” which aptly describes their ability to assume multiple identities with ease. These artists would travel from town to town, performing on the streets or at festivals, often taking on the guise of revered gods or warriors.

The characters they portrayed were diverse. Bahurupias could be seen as Lord Shiva, Krishna, or even mythical figures like Ravan from the Ramayana, or they might impersonate historical characters, such as Mughal emperors or local kings. Through these performances, they would not only entertain but also reflect upon the values, history, and struggles of the time. The diversity of their portrayals made them an important part of social life, connecting the spiritual and the temporal, the divine and the earthly.

Historically, the Bahurupia tradition was an essential element of various social events and religious occasions in Rajasthan, especially at festivals like Holi and Diwali, as well as in the royal courts. The colorful costumes, dramatic makeup, and exaggerated gestures that characterized Bahurupia performances were designed to captivate and convey deep moral, cultural, and spiritual lessons.



## Decline in the Art Form and the Challenges of Modern Times

In recent years, the Bahurupia art form has faced many challenges. With the advent of modern entertainment such as television, cinema, and digital media, the demand for traditional street performances has sharply declined. The younger generation has been increasingly drawn towards modern professions, leaving the art form at risk of extinction. The marginalization of Bahurupias, coupled with the lack of institutional support and recognition, has further contributed to the art's diminishing visibility.

Despite this, the tradition has survived through the unwavering commitment of veteran Bahurupia artists who continue to practice and teach the craft, ensuring its preservation for future generations. Yet, the art form's survival today is largely dependent on its ability to adapt. Some Bahurupia artists have started blending traditional performances with modern elements to attract younger audiences. However, the essence of the art remains deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual history of Rajasthan, symbolizing a bridge between the past and the present.

Moreover, Bahurupias face financial instability as their performances, once considered a vital source of livelihood, are no longer as lucrative as they once were. Most Bahurupia artists now supplement their income by engaging in other forms of work, and only a handful of performers remain dedicated full-time to the craft. The challenges of sustaining this art in the face of changing times have led to an existential crisis for the Bahurupia tradition.





# Cultural Significance

## A Unique Symbol of Unity



One of the most remarkable aspects of the Bahurupia tradition is its demonstration of Hindu-Muslim unity. In Rajasthan, it is not uncommon for Muslim Bahurupia artists to portray Hindu deities such as Lord Rama, Krishna, or Durga, while Hindu artists take on Muslim figures or even local Muslim rulers. This fluidity in cultural representation reflects the syncretic nature of Rajasthani culture, where religious and social boundaries are often blurred, and mutual respect is fostered through shared artistic expression.

The Bahurupia tradition stands as a beautiful example of how art can transcend religious and cultural divisions, promoting harmony and understanding. The collaboration between Hindu and Muslim artists within this art form is a testament to the deep-rooted pluralism in Rajasthan's history, where diverse communities have coexisted and enriched each other's cultural expressions over centuries.



# Interviews with Key Figures

## Voices of the Bahurupia Tradition

To fully understand the complexities and beauty of the Bahurupia art form, the Rekhta team engaged in conversations with key figures deeply involved in its preservation. These discussions highlighted not only the personal journeys of the artists but also the broader challenges facing this ancient tradition.





## **Padmashri Jankilal Bhand – *International Bahurupia Artist, Bhilwara***



Jankilal Bhand, a legendary Bahurupia artist from Bhilwara, Rajasthan, has dedicated over 60 years to perfecting his craft. At the age of 85, he is one of the oldest living practitioners of this art form. “In my youth, the streets were filled with Bahurupia performances. We were invited to all types of events, from weddings to royal courts, and the crowds would gather in excitement,” Jankilal recalls. However, he is deeply concerned about the decline of this art. “Today, the younger generation is not interested in becoming Bahurupias. There are no opportunities for them, no support from the government. Even with my experience, I struggle to earn a living solely from performing,” he shared with a hint of sadness. Jankilal expressed his hope that his art form would be revived through greater public awareness and institutional support. He also emphasized how Bahurupias used to play a key role as spies for kings, infiltrating crowds and gathering valuable information by pretending to be ordinary folk. “The kings would often use us to find out what people were saying in their villages,” he explained.

## **Shri Chhagan Lal Bhand – *International Bahurupia Artist, Chittorgarh***



Chhagal Lal, another prominent Bahurupia artist, has dedicated much of his life to performing and teaching the art form. Reflecting on his experience, Chhagal said, “When I started, the art was alive, and we had many students. But today, it is very hard to find someone willing to learn. The younger generation is obsessed with modern entertainment and technology, and folk arts are no longer seen as a viable career.” Despite this, Chhagal is determined to keep the tradition alive. “I teach my children, and I try to pass on the knowledge I’ve gained. I want the younger generation to understand that this is not just a performance; it is a part of our culture, our identity.” Chhagal’s reflections highlight a significant challenge: the lack of platforms to showcase the art, and the fading interest among modern youth.

## **Vilas Janve – *Mime Artist, Udaipur***



Vilas Janve, known for his work in mime and performing arts, drew comparisons between mime and the Bahurupia tradition, highlighting how both forms rely heavily on physical expression and storytelling. “Mime is about the expression of the body, while Bahurupia is about transformation, about becoming someone else entirely,” Vilas explained. “Both, however, require a deep understanding of human emotions, and both can be immensely powerful in their ability to connect with an audience.” Vilas spoke passionately about how the Bahurupia tradition is not just a form of entertainment but a deep cultural repository of stories, myths, and life lessons. “It is not just about changing your appearance. It’s about becoming that character, living their experiences, and conveying that to others.



## **Sikandar Abbas – Bahurupia Artist, Ahmedabad**



Sikandar Abbas, one of the younger practitioners of the Bahurupia art form, shared his experiences navigating the pressures of modernity while staying true to tradition. “I grew up watching my father perform and was always fascinated by how he could transform before people’s eyes. As a young artist, I struggled with balancing tradition and the appeal of modern entertainment. But I have learned to adapt,” Sikandar said. He emphasized that while he still practices traditional performances, he has also begun incorporating elements of contemporary culture into his work to attract younger audiences. “I perform at colleges, schools, and even modern events, trying to make the old art relevant today. It is a challenge, but I feel the art form needs to evolve to survive.” Sikandar’s thoughts reflect the constant balancing act Bahurupia artists must maintain between preserving their traditions and making them accessible to modern-day audiences.

## **Rajeev Acharya – Folk Art Expert, Udaipur**



Rajeev Acharya, a well-regarded folk art expert, talked about the need for institutional support to rejuvenate the Bahurupia art form. “There is an urgent need for government-backed initiatives to promote and sustain folk arts like Bahurupia. These forms are underappreciated and are at risk of vanishing,” Rajeev noted. He suggested that collaborations with educational institutions, media exposure, and increased tourism could help bring back the lost glory of this art form. “We need to educate the public about the importance of such arts. There should be festivals, workshops, and museum exhibitions dedicated to preserving the art.” Rajeev also spoke about the role of digital platforms, suggesting that online performances could give Bahurupia artists the exposure they need to thrive in today’s world.

## **Vikram Bhand – Young Bahurupia Artist, Chittorgarh**



Vikram Bhand, a young and emerging artist from Rajasthan, shared his perspective on carrying the Bahurupia legacy forward. “My father and grandfather were Bahurupias, and I grew up watching them perform. But as a young man, I realized that if this art form was to survive, it had to adapt,” Vikram said. He spoke about the creative ways in which he is reviving Bahurupia performances, using social media and modern technology to reach a wider audience. “I’ve started to do short performances and post them online. The response has been overwhelming. It shows there is a space for traditional art in today’s world, but



we need to make it more accessible to younger generations,” he added. Vikram’s approach reflects a hopeful outlook for the future of Bahurupia art, demonstrating how new platforms can serve as bridges between the past and the present.

The Bahurupia art form is a living reflection of Rajasthan’s rich cultural and historical tapestry. Rooted in ancient traditions, these master performers embody a unique blend of theatricality, spirituality, and storytelling. Originally serving as spies and messengers for kings, Bahurupias have evolved into beloved figures who entertain and connect with audiences by portraying a wide range of characters, from historical figures to gods and demons. Their ability to seamlessly adopt multiple identities is not only a testament to their skill but also to the unity and fluidity of Rajasthani culture, where both Hindu and Muslim artists work together, transcending religious boundaries. Despite facing modern-day challenges, the Bahurupia art form continues to thrive through the passion of the next generation of artists, ensuring that this vibrant tradition endures for future audiences to appreciate and celebrate.















### **Recognized with GI Tag**

Molela, Rajsamand — A Place Where the Sacred Art of Clay Attains Global Acclaim



# Molela Art

The Legacy of Terracotta Craftsmanship





# Molela Terracotta Clay Art

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The Molela art form, originating from the village of Molela in the Rajsamand district of Rajasthan, is a unique and ancient tradition of terracotta sculpture that holds a deep connection to the religious, cultural, and spiritual life of the region. Rooted in Hindu customs and practices, Molela terracotta has flourished for centuries, maintaining its cultural relevance and importance to this day. The art form has been granted a Geographical Indication (GI) tag, recognizing its authenticity and ensuring the protection of this traditional craft from outside imitation. This tag not only highlights the art's cultural significance but also safeguards the intellectual property of the artisans who continue to practice and perfect this unique form.

At the heart of Molela's artistic expression are the creation of terracotta plaques, idols, and figurines that portray a diverse range of deities, folk heroes, and mythological stories. The art form's most distinctive feature is its intricate representation of local folk deities, each of whom holds a sacred place in the daily lives and spiritual practices of the people. These terracotta sculptures are not mere decorative pieces, but are revered and used in temples, homes, and religious shrines. They serve as symbols of devotion, offering blessings, protection, and divine connection to the worshippers.

Molela's artwork reflects the cultural and religious values of the region, showcasing a seamless blend of artistic craftsmanship and deep-rooted faith. The sculptures represent not just religious figures, but also a profound link between art, spirituality, and the community. As an integral part of Rajasthan's folk heritage, the Molela art form continues to thrive, preserving and evolving its rich legacy for future generations.



# Historical Significance

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The Molela art form, rooted in the rural landscape of Rajsamand district, Rajasthan, is a centuries-old tradition. The art of terracotta sculpture in Molela is believed to have begun over 1,000 years ago, though the exact origin remains shrouded in mystery. It has been an integral part of the region's spiritual and cultural life for generations, passed down through an oral tradition rather than written records. Artisans, or "kaarigars," learn the craft not from books but by observing and absorbing the knowledge of their elders, who teach through stories, demonstrations, and hands-on experience. The legacy of Molela terracotta continues to thrive, with artisans still shaping their sculptures in the same methods as their ancestors, honoring the traditions that have endured for centuries.

The art's historical significance is also intertwined with the evolution of local beliefs. Molela terracotta sculptures were originally created as votive offerings and sacred images, often placed in village shrines to invoke blessings. These artifacts have long served as both artistic expressions and spiritual symbols, with the belief that they possess protective powers. The practice of crafting and offering these figures has significantly shaped the religious identity of the region, making Molela an important center of folk art and worship in Rajasthan.



# Cultural & Religious Significance

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Molela terracotta holds a deep cultural significance for the people of Rajasthan. The figures created here are not merely objects of decoration; they are integral to the spiritual lives of the local community. The terracotta deities are believed to invoke divine blessings and protection, ensuring the well-being of families and villages. These figurines often represent local gods and goddesses, each with specific qualities that relate to the needs of the people. Molela terracotta is seen as a manifestation of faith, with sculptures placed in homes, temples, and community shrines as a form of devotion.

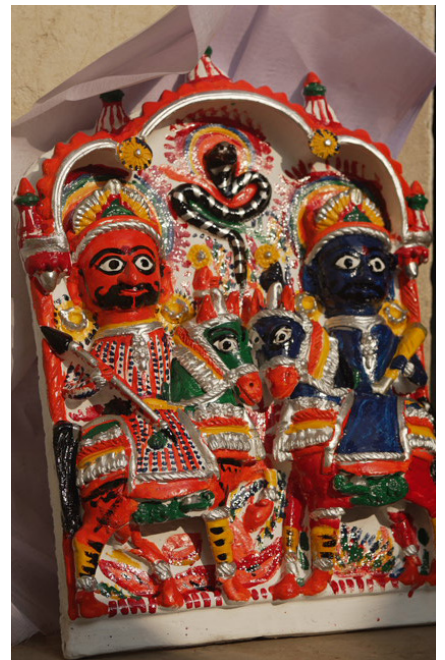




Among the most revered deities in Molela are Takajii, the Takshak Naag (serpent deity), and Kheda Devi, an incarnation of Durga Mata. Takajii is particularly significant in protecting against serpent-related dangers, while Kheda Devi is a fierce protector believed to offer safety and blessings. These figures are widely worshipped, and villagers continue to offer prayers and rituals for protection and prosperity. These deities are closely associated with the land, and their presence is believed to ensure harmony and peace in the region.

Molela terracotta has also become a part of the rituals and spiritual practices of local tribal communities, including the Bheel, Meena, and Chaudhary tribes, who travel from far distances to procure these sacred artifacts. These tribes have long considered Molela a spiritual hub, where they select the terracotta idols that are believed to cure ailments, ward off misfortune, and bring blessings for health. The process of selecting the right deity is guided by religious leaders known as papas, who help in choosing the most suitable figures for specific needs. The deeply spiritual connection between the Molela art form and the community continues to thrive.

The clay used to create these terracotta figures is sourced from two local ponds, Solah Ka Sapper and Aula Ka Talaab, which are considered sacred by the artisans. These ponds provide mineral-rich clay, essential for crafting intricate and durable sculptures. The process of gathering the clay is a meticulous one, with artisans selecting specific layers of the pond beds during the dry season. The clay is then carefully cleaned and refined using traditional tools before being shaped into the vibrant deities that Molela is known for.





## The Sacred Craft and Rituals of Molela Terracotta Art

The process of creating Molela terracotta art is an intricate and deeply spiritual practice, rooted in generations of tradition. The artisans of Molela, primarily from the Kumhar community, begin by carefully shaping the terracotta clay into detailed plaques and idols, each representing a deity or divine figure. The creation process involves a precise combination of handcrafting and molding techniques, with every figure carefully detailed to capture its spiritual significance. The idols are then left to dry in the open air before being fired in traditional kilns, which gives them their characteristic warmth and earth-toned hues. This meticulous craftsmanship is not just about artistic expression; it is an act of reverence, as each piece is believed to hold divine power.

Once the terracotta idols are completed, they undergo a revered ritual, particularly when they are taken from the potters of Molela to be placed in the homes or temples of devotees. The ritual of worship is symbolic and carefully structured, reflecting the spiritual importance of these figures.

When transporting the deity plaques, the manner in which they are handled is deeply significant. For the **Mata (female deity)** plaque, it is traditionally wrapped in a red cloth, symbolizing protection, power, and prosperity. The **red cloth** signifies the nurturing and safeguarding qualities of the female deity, embodying the essence of maternal strength and care.

On the other hand, the **male deity plaque** is draped in a **white cloth**, representing purity, divinity, and spiritual enlightenment. White symbolizes the sacred and untainted nature of the male deity, embodying divine wisdom and strength.

As the plaques are carried from Molela to their new homes, the rituals surrounding them are marked by reverence and devotion. The entire journey is treated as a sacred pilgrimage, with the deity's presence and protection believed to extend to the new environment. Once in their final resting place, the idols are placed in a designated altar or worship space, where they are honored with offerings and prayers. The entire practice, from the crafting process to the final rituals, underscores the profound spiritual connection that the Molela terracotta art maintains with the people who venerate these figures, reflecting a deep respect for tradition, faith, and the divine.





## Modern-Day Challenges and Preservation

While Molela terracotta has retained its spiritual and cultural importance, the art form faces significant challenges in contemporary times. The increasing influence of mass-produced goods and industrialization has affected the demand for traditional handmade terracotta artifacts. Many artisans, especially those from the younger generation, are abandoning the craft in favor of more modern professions. The rise of globalization has shifted the focus away from traditional arts, and the younger generation's interests in technology and urban lifestyles have led to fewer artisans learning the craft.

However, efforts are being made to preserve and promote Molela terracotta, both locally and internationally. The Geographical Indication (GI) Tag awarded to Molela terracotta has helped raise awareness about the uniqueness and cultural importance of this art form. The GI Tag ensures that only genuine Molela artisans can claim the craftsmanship, offering some protection against counterfeit goods and preserving the heritage associated with the art.



The introduction of new products, such as terracotta jewelry, has also helped revitalize the market for Molela art. Artists like Kailash Devi have experimented with different applications of the traditional craft, producing lighter and more durable items that appeal to contemporary tastes. This creative adaptation has opened up new opportunities for artisans and has helped sustain the art form by reaching new audiences.

Despite these challenges, Molela terracotta continues to serve as both an artistic and spiritual cornerstone for the people of Rajasthan. The art form's cultural and religious significance remains strong, and many local communities continue to use these sculptures in daily worship and rituals.







**Abdul Lateef Usta** – *Art Expert, Assistant Director, Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur*



Abdul Lateef Usta, curator at the Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur, spoke about Molela's growing recognition in the modern art world. "Molela terracotta is one of the finest examples of folk art from Rajasthan. It's not just an art form; it's a living tradition that tells the story of this region's spiritual and cultural identity. Over the years, Molela has gained recognition for its intricate designs and the deep connection it holds with the community. The art is so rich in symbolism—it speaks to you in a language beyond the visual."

He acknowledged the challenges Molela artists face in modern times. "In today's world, it's difficult for traditional crafts like Molela terracotta to survive amidst mass production. But the recent focus on preserving indigenous arts, especially after the GI Tag, has helped. Still, there's more work to be done in raising awareness and ensuring that these artisans continue to have a platform to showcase their craft."

**Dr. Gagan Bihari Dadhich** – *Professor, SMB Govt College, Nathdwara, Rajsamand*



Dr. Gagan Bihari Dadhich provided an academic perspective on the historical roots of Molela terracotta. "Molela's art is centuries old, and it reflects the deep religious and cultural fabric of Rajasthan. The craft has always been intertwined with the community's rituals. These terracotta sculptures were not made for mere aesthetic purposes; they were created to safeguard families and protect villages. The Bheel, Meena, and Chaudhary tribes, for instance, have been coming here for generations to select deities for their sacred shrines. The history of Molela terracotta is, in many ways, the history of the region's spiritual evolution."

He also touched upon the art form's role in shaping the identity of the local communities. "Molela terracotta is central to the lives of the people here. It's not just an art; it's a form of worship. Over time, it has become an identity for these communities. The terracotta gods are not mere representations; they are revered beings that have shaped the cultural and religious life of this region."



## **Dr. Hemant Dwivedi** – *Professor, Mohanlal Sukhadia University, Udaipur*



Dr. Dwivedi highlighted the preservation efforts for Molela terracotta in academic circles. “The art form of Molela is unique not only in its spiritual significance but also in its craftsmanship. The clay sourced from the local ponds is specially chosen for its properties, and the skill required to sculpt these figures is remarkable. As an academic, I have studied the traditional methods and the intricate iconography of Molela terracotta, and I can confidently say that it is one of the most significant art forms in Rajasthan. The challenge now is to preserve it in the face of modernization and to pass it on to future generations.”

He also discussed the significance of the GI Tag. “The GI Tag has given the art form a sense of protection. Now, there is more awareness about the authenticity of Molela terracotta, which is essential in maintaining its cultural integrity. However, the real task lies in encouraging the younger generation to continue this craft and sustain its relevance in today’s world.”

## **Kailash Devi** – *Terracotta Artist, Molela, Rajsamand*



Kailash Devi, a female artist from Molela, shared her experience of innovating with Molela terracotta. “When I first started making terracotta jewelry, I realized that the traditional pieces were often too heavy for everyday wear. I wanted to create something that was both light and durable while staying true to the art. It took a lot of experimentation, but now I make terracotta jewelry that is much lighter, and the demand has been growing. Women from the city have started showing interest, which is a good thing for the sustainability of our craft.”

She explained the importance of adaptability in preserving traditional arts. “Molela art cannot remain static. It has to evolve with time. While we hold onto its essence, it’s essential to reach out to new customers. Whether it’s jewelry, wall art, or small figurines, adapting to modern tastes has brought new opportunities for us. I believe this will ensure that the craft continues to thrive, even in the face of modern challenges.”

## **Dr. Rima Hooja** – *Archaeologist, Historian & writer, Jaipur*



Dr. Rima Hooja, an esteemed archaeologist, historian, and writer based in Jaipur, shares her insights on the unique art form of Molela: “Molela, a significant cultural and artistic hub, is located not far from the historic battlefield of Haldighati in the Mewar region, near the present-day city of Udaipur. While Udaipur itself may be centuries old, the artistic practices of Molela can be traced back even further. The area is renowned for its traditional pottery, particularly the creation of im-



ages and idols of local deities by the Kumhar families. These skilled artisans craft vibrant representations of regional gods and goddesses, making Molela a unique repository of ancient craftsmanship. The legacy of this art form, deeply rooted in the community, continues to thrive today, preserving centuries-old traditions while adapting to contemporary expressions.”

Molela terracotta art stands as a profound testament to the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Rajasthan. This ancient craft is deeply interwoven with the traditions of the region, serving not only as an artistic expression but as a way of life that has been passed down through generations. At the heart of Molela terracotta is the meticulous crafting of deities, each believed to offer protection, blessings, and spiritual significance. These handcrafted idols are more than mere objects; they are vital elements in the daily rituals, worship practices, and spiritual observances of local communities.

The importance of Molela terracotta extends far beyond its aesthetic appeal. It holds immense cultural and religious value, serving as a symbolic link to the divine and as a crucial part of the region’s heritage. Over time, despite the challenges of modernity and the encroachment of new technologies, the artisans of Molela have maintained a steadfast commitment to their craft. Their resilience, alongside the recognition of the art form with a GI (Geographical Indication) Tag, has played a pivotal role in preserving this unique tradition for future generations.

Through their innovation and ability to adapt to contemporary times, the Molela artisans continue to evolve their craft, seamlessly bridging the past with the present. Yet, even as the art form changes and progresses, it retains its deep spiritual roots, remaining a living representation of the communities’ faith, culture, and dedication. Molela terracotta is not just an art; it is a reflection of the enduring connection to ancestral traditions, a symbol of identity, and a testament to the unwavering faith that continues to shape the lives of the people of Rajasthan.

















# Puppetry Art

From Strings to Stories





# Puppetry Art

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Rajasthani puppetry, a vibrant and dynamic form of cultural expression, seamlessly combines art, storytelling, and music, making it an invaluable component of India's diverse and rich heritage. The tradition of puppetry in Rajasthan, particularly the renowned Kathputli (string-controlled puppets), has served as a unique medium to convey not only mythological stories and folk tales but also profound moral lessons that resonate through generations.

Originating in the heart of Rajasthan, Kathputli puppetry has transcended linguistic and cultural boundaries, captivating audiences across the globe. With its universal appeal, this art form has successfully bridged gaps between diverse communities, offering a captivating visual experience for both children and adults alike. Over the centuries, Kathputli puppetry has evolved to encompass a wide range of performances, spanning from grand epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata to the rich tapestry of regional folklore that reflects the history and traditions of Rajasthan.

The performances, marked by their vibrant colors and intricate puppet movements, do more than just entertain; they educate, enlighten, and preserve the essence of local stories, spirituality, and moral values. The puppets, expertly manipulated by skilled puppeteers, bring the narrative to life with their expressive faces and fluid movements, creating an immersive experience that forges a deep connection with the audience. This blend of creativity, tradition, and moral storytelling allows Rajasthani puppetry to continue thriving, passing on its legacy and lessons to future generations.



# Historical Significance

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Rajasthani puppetry dates back several centuries, and its roots can be traced back to ancient folk traditions. Historically, puppetry was not only a form of entertainment but also a vehicle for preserving stories of the gods, kings, and local heroes. Puppeteers, known as Bhaats, have long traveled from one village to another, presenting their shows in open spaces, temples, and even at royal courts. These performances were often seen as a tool for moral instruction, conveying stories of heroism, love, and wisdom. The puppets themselves are meticulously crafted from Mango or Aadu wood, chosen for its durability and fine texture, ideal for carving detailed figures. Puppets are painted with bright colors, which express the character's emotions and traits. These performances were traditionally held during religious festivals or important community events, and puppetry was used to reinforce moral and cultural teachings through lively dramatization.



# Cultural Significance

The cultural importance of Rajasthani puppetry goes beyond entertainment. It forms an essential part of the traditional lifestyle and folklore of Rajasthan. These performances are a source of collective identity for local communities. The colorful puppets come alive to tell tales of gods, kings, queens, warriors, and mythological figures, such as Maharana Pratap, Ram, and Sita. Characters from Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as regional heroes and heroines like Anarkali are regularly portrayed, offering people a chance to connect with their cultural roots.

Puppetry also has a role in the spiritual practices of Rajasthan, where puppets are used in rituals and prayers for local deities. They are often considered intermediaries between humans and gods. In Rajasthan, this art form has become a form of collective cultural expression that combines storytelling, dance, drama, and music, fostering an intimate relationship between the artist and the audience.

In rural Rajasthan, the tradition of puppetry is passed down from generation to generation within families, with the young observing their elders until they master the craft. As such, puppetry has become a communal activity, fostering a sense of belonging and shared cultural heritage.





## The Timeless Tradition and Rituals of Puppetry



The process of creating puppets is both an intricate art and a living tradition, passed down through generations. Puppeteers carefully craft each puppet by hand, often using materials like wood, cloth, and strings. The puppets are skillfully sculpted, painted, and adorned to reflect the characters they represent—be it mythological figures, animals, or historical personalities. The creation of a puppet is not merely a craft but a ritual in itself, with each movement, stroke, and embellishment carrying cultural significance.

Once the puppets are completed, they are prepared for performance. The rituals surrounding the puppets vary across different traditions, but the reverence with which they are treated is consistent. Before a performance, the puppets are often adorned with specific attire that signifies their character. For example, puppets of gods or divine figures may be dressed in ceremonial garments, while others are clothed in vibrant, traditional attire reflective of the stories they will tell.

In some communities, puppets are ritually blessed before a performance to ensure the success of the show and the safety of the puppeteers. In these rituals, offerings may be made to invoke the blessings of deities, and prayers are offered for the protection and prosperity of the community. This deep connection between the puppet, the puppeteer, and the divine realm reinforces the spiritual and cultural importance of the art form. The puppet is not simply an object of entertainment; it is a vessel of tradition, culture, and belief, bridging the past with the present in a living, breathing performance.



# Historical Evolution of Rajasthani Puppetry

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Rajasthani puppetry, particularly the Kathputli style, has a rich history that stretches back several centuries. It is believed to have originated in the royal courts of Rajasthan, where puppetry was employed as a form of entertainment for kings and their courtiers. However, its roots trace further into folk traditions, where puppets were used by traveling artists to narrate epic tales, moral stories, and religious teachings to the rural masses.

Kathputli puppetry, characterized by string-controlled wooden puppets, evolved as an integral part of Rajasthan's cultural landscape. The puppeteers, known as Kavadia Bhats, would travel from village to village, setting up their performances under the open sky. These puppetry performances not only entertained but also played a vital role in disseminating folklore, religious myths, and moral lessons among the public, making them an essential part of the rural community's life.





In its early days, Rajasthani puppetry focused largely on religious epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, portraying the heroic deeds of gods and kings. Over time, the repertoire expanded to include regional folk tales, social stories, and moral lessons, addressing everyday life, societal norms, and human virtues. Puppetry became not just a form of storytelling but also a medium for preserving and passing down oral traditions and local legends.

By the 20th century, however, the art form began to face the pressures of modernization, with the rise of cinema, radio, and television gradually diminishing the demand for live performances. Despite these challenges, Rajasthani puppetry still maintains its roots in rural Rajasthan, though its prominence has been reduced compared to its peak in earlier times.

## Techniques and Craftsmanship

The craftsmanship involved in Rajasthani puppetry, especially Kathputli, is a remarkable blend of artistry, skill, and dedication. The puppets are primarily made of lightweight wood, typically from the neem or sheesam trees, chosen for their durability and workability. The body of the puppet is carved intricately to represent human figures, with expressive faces that convey the emotions of the characters they portray. The colors used to paint the puppets are vibrant, often depicting traditional Rajasthani motifs and patterns, which are applied with detailed brushwork.

The puppets are jointed at the neck, shoulders, elbows, and knees, allowing them to move with fluidity. String control is a critical part of the performance—each puppet is manipulated by several strings attached to its body, and the puppeteer must skillfully control these strings to make the puppet move, dance, or interact with other puppets. The art of string control requires years of practice, as the puppeteer must coordinate the movements of the puppet in a way that matches the rhythm of the story being told. In addition to the puppets, the performances also involve the use of colorful and intricately designed backdrops and props, often hand-painted, which serve to create a dynamic setting for the story. Puppeteers typically use traditional musical instruments such as the dholak, sarangi, and sitar to accompany the performance, adding another layer of cultural richness to the performance.

The puppetry performances typically involve a mix of narration, music, and dance, and they are often used to teach moral lessons or impart religious teachings. The characters in these performances are symbolic, representing virtues and vices, and the stories they tell are aimed at reinforcing societal values, religious beliefs, and ethical conduct.



# Preservation Efforts and Initiatives

## Role of Lok Kala Mandal, Udaipur

One of the leading institutions working towards the preservation of Rajasthani puppetry is the Lok Kala Mandal in Udaipur, Rajasthan. Established in the 1950s, the Lok Kala Mandal serves as a cultural hub for the preservation and promotion of Rajasthan's folk arts, including puppetry. It has played a significant role in reviving interest in traditional puppetry by organizing exhibitions, performances, and workshops. The Lok Kala Mandal has also been instrumental in documenting the history and techniques of Rajasthani puppetry, ensuring that this invaluable art form is passed down to future generations.

The institution hosts regular puppetry workshops for both practitioners and the general public, allowing a new generation of artists to learn the craft. In addition to this, it provides a platform for puppeteers to showcase their performances, helping to maintain the relevance of the art form in modern times. Through collaborations with schools, universities, and cultural organizations, Lok Kala Mandal has made significant strides in integrating puppetry into educational programs, ensuring that it continues to be appreciated as both an art and an educational tool.





# Government Initiatives

The Government of Rajasthan, along with the Ministry of Culture, has also initiated several programs aimed at preserving and promoting traditional Rajasthani puppetry. These include funding for artists, organizing puppetry festivals, and providing platforms for puppeteers to perform in national and international forums. The government has also supported the establishment of puppetry museums, workshops, and cultural exchange programs that introduce this traditional art form to a wider audience.

The Sangeet Natak Akademi, an autonomous body under the Ministry of Culture, has recognized the importance of puppetry as part of India's intangible cultural heritage and has worked to safeguard this tradition through grants, scholarships, and various initiatives aimed at the revitalization of regional arts. In addition, various regional and national puppetry festivals, such as the Rajasthan Puppetry Festival, provide a space for traditional puppeteers to showcase their talents, ensuring that the art form is not lost amidst the growing popularity of digital entertainment.





## Challenges and the Need for Continued Efforts

Despite ongoing preservation efforts by cultural institutions and government initiatives, Rajasthani puppetry faces significant challenges. The rise of digital entertainment, television, and online media has shifted cultural consumption, particularly among younger generations. Once a primary source of rural entertainment and education, puppetry now struggles to compete with easily accessible digital alternatives, reducing its audience and relevance.

Additionally, the lack of formalized training programs and decreasing interest from younger generations threaten the sustainability of the art form. Puppetry, especially the intricate craft of puppet-making, string manipulation, and live performance, requires years of dedication. Unfortunately, it is often seen as outdated and not aligned with modern career aspirations or the job market. Financial challenges also weigh heavily on puppeteers. Sourcing quality materials like wood, fabric, and paint has become increasingly difficult and expensive, further hindering their ability to create and perform. Moreover, the rising global competition in the traditional craft market makes it harder for local puppeteers to sustain their livelihoods solely through puppetry.

The preservation of Rajasthani puppetry depends on continued and expanded efforts. There is an urgent need for greater institutional support, structured educational initiatives, and more substantial funding for large-scale performances. Collaboration with other art forms and incorporating modern technology could also help make puppetry more relevant in today's world. Without collective action from the government, NGOs, cultural institutions, and the public, the survival of this unique art form remains uncertain. The continued promotion and documentation of Rajasthani puppetry are essential to ensure that it endures as an invaluable part of India's cultural heritage.





## **Laique Hussain – Director of Lok Kala Mandal Udaipur**



Discussed the importance of preserving Rajasthani puppetry. He explained that Kathputli puppetry is not merely a form of artistic performance but a medium through which local communities continue to express their cultural identity. According to him, the significance of puppetry lies in its ability to convey complex narratives that speak to universal human themes, such as love, honor, bravery, and moral integrity. At Lok Kala Mandal, they host daily puppet performances and maintain a museum dedicated to preserving this cultural heritage. Hussain stressed that keeping the art alive requires innovation and adaptation to modern needs while still staying rooted in tradition.challenges.”

## **Dinesh Bhaat – Puppet Artist, Udaipur**



Dinesh Bhaat, a renowned puppet artist from Udaipur, offered valuable insight into the technical aspects of puppet-making. He explained that puppet-making is a delicate and detailed process that begins with choosing the right wood, typically from the Mango or Aadu trees, followed by carving and painting the figures. Each puppet can take several weeks to create, with artisans using traditional tools to shape and mold the figures. Dinesh emphasized that the key to a successful performance lies in the puppeteer's ability to make the puppet appear alive, by controlling its movements with precision, and synchronizing them with the accompanying music and dialogue.

## **Shyam Bhaat – Puppet Artist, Jaisalmer**



Shyam Bhaat, a puppet artist from Jaisalmer, shared how preserving traditional puppet-making techniques is vital for sustaining the craft. He has spent his life mastering puppetry, and according to him, puppeteers learn through observation, participation, and hands-on experience. Shyam explained how each puppet performance involves not just the artistry of the puppet, but the intricate choreography and timing needed to control multiple strings simultaneously. He believes that the beauty of puppetry lies in the emotional connection the puppeteer creates with the audience through subtle gestures and expressions.



## Deepak Dikshit – Art Expert, Udaipur



Deepak Dikshit, the founder of Lok Dharohar in Udaipur, highlighted the challenges faced by modern-day puppeteers. According to him, while the global exposure to puppetry has brought more attention to the art form, it has also increased competition, making it harder for local puppeteers to find regular audiences. Deepak believes that puppetry should not only be viewed as a form of entertainment but also as a valuable tool for education. He has worked on integrating puppetry with other forms of art, including music and theater, to help expand its reach. He mentioned the difficulties in sourcing traditional puppetry instruments, such as the Dholak or Sarangi, which are integral to the musical accompaniment of performances.

## Rakesh Bhaat – Puppet Artist, Jaisalmer



Rakesh Bhaat, another puppet artist from Jaisalmer, explained that puppetry is an evolving art form. While older, traditional stories like Anarkali and Amar Singh Rathore are still widely performed, Rakesh and his peers are experimenting with newer characters, such as Vivekanand and Maharana Pratap, to keep the art form relevant. He believes that while traditional stories are important, introducing contemporary themes allows the art form to stay connected with younger generations. Rakesh also discussed the intricate process of performing, in which the puppeteer must control the strings while speaking or singing the story's dialogue.

## Leat Dr. Mahendra Bhanawat – Former Director, Lok Kala Mandal, Udaipur



Dr. Mahendra Bhanawat, a folk art expert from Udaipur, pointed out that Rajasthani puppetry was nearly on the brink of extinction by the mid-20th century. However, the pivotal moment came in 1965 when Devilal Samar won the first prize at the Third International Festival of Puppet Theatre. Dr. Bhanawat believes that this victory was a turning point, as it revitalized the art and brought it to the attention of a global audience. He emphasized that while the international stage provided much-needed recognition, the key to preserving the tradition lies in educating the next generation of puppeteers.



## Gopal Meghwal – Puppeteer, Lok Kala Mandal, Udaipur



Gopal Meghwal, a puppeteer from Lok Kala Mandal, shared that the skill of managing the puppet strings is critical to a successful performance. The movement of the puppet is controlled by the puppeteer's fingers, and the slightest variation in finger position can create entirely different expressions or actions in the puppet. He stressed the importance of practice and the need for young learners to spend time observing and participating in puppet shows to gain proficiency.

Rajasthani puppetry, with its rich history and cultural significance, is a unique art form that continues to captivate audiences around the world. Despite the challenges posed by modernization, it remains a vibrant tradition that offers both entertainment and education. The ongoing efforts by artists, experts, and organizations to adapt the art form to contemporary tastes while preserving its traditional roots are vital to ensuring its survival. Puppetry, as a storytelling medium, transcends generations and cultures, offering timeless narratives that continue to inspire and educate. With continued support and innovation, Rajasthani puppetry is poised to remain an essential part of Rajasthan's artistic legacy.







तेराताल  
राजस्थान के अग्रणी नृत्य है। इसमें दो महिलाएं गीत गाती हैं, जो एक ही ताल पर, जो राग के दो भागों में बजाया जाता है। यह एक-एक करके ताल में ताली बजाती है। यह ताल में ताली बजाती है। (राजस्थान के अग्रणी नृत्य ताली बजाती है।)

TERATAL  
PLAYING OF CYMBALS BY THE KAMAD GIRLS OF RAJASTHAN IN AN INTRICATE STYLE. A TRADITIONAL DANCE REPLICATING RHYTHMS QUOTING THE TITLE OF THE DANCE. THIS DANCE IS PERFORMED TO WERESHIP RANDEVJI THE POPULAR FOLK DEITY OF RAJASTHAN.











# Conclusion

As we conclude this documentation, it is essential to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of all the artists, experts, and organizations who have made this project possible. Their passion, dedication, and commitment to preserving and promoting Rajasthan's rich cultural heritage are truly commendable. Special thanks are due to each artist, whether a seasoned puppeteer or a young terracotta artist, for their willingness to share their knowledge, stories, and experiences with us. Without their collaboration, this project would not have been as enriching and enlightening.

Our sincere gratitude goes to the folk art experts, cultural historians, and institutions who have generously shared their insights and provided valuable resources. They have guided us in understanding not just the technicalities and historical significance of these art forms but also the cultural narratives that breathe life into these traditions.

The stories captured in this documentation are not just of art forms—they are of people, communities, and the collective identity of Rajasthan. From the intricate movements of puppets to the vibrant colors of Molela terracotta, each piece of art tells a story that connects the past with the present, offering a glimpse into the cultural soul of this region.

As this report is prepared for publication, we are excited to announce that the documented episodes on these five folk art forms will be available for public viewing on the Ministry of Culture's National Culture Fund (NCF) YouTube channel under their Rajasthan initiative. These visual stories will offer a deeper understanding of the art forms, the artists behind them, and their significance in both traditional and modern contexts. We hope these episodes will serve as a valuable resource for future generations, helping them connect with Rajasthan's cultural roots while fostering appreciation for these enduring traditions.

In addition to the episodes, it is our hope that this documentation will serve as an invitation to all who view it to explore these art forms in greater depth. We encourage future researchers, art lovers, and cultural enthusiasts to continue learning, supporting, and promoting these priceless traditions. As Rajasthan's folk art scene faces various challenges in the modern world, it is through the support and dedication of individuals and communities that these art forms will continue to thrive and inspire.

The journey of documenting these art forms has been a truly rewarding experience, not just as a professional endeavor, but as a personal one. It is a reflection of the deep respect and admiration we hold for the artists and their work. And as we look ahead, we are hopeful that the efforts of the Ministry of Culture and its support to preserve and revitalize these art forms will contribute to the continued vibrancy and growth of Rajasthan's cultural heritage.

We would also like to acknowledge the dedicated project team, whose efforts have been crucial to the success of this project. From field visits and interviews to research and documentation, every team member played an essential role in bringing this project to life.

We conclude with optimism—hopeful for the future of Rajasthan's folk arts, and confident that with continued dedication and innovation, these art forms will endure for generations to come.



# A Night in Devnarayan Ji's Refuge

## Stories from the Road: Behind the Lens of Rajasthan's Living Traditions

The day we set out to document the Phad tradition in a remote Rajasthani village, we hadn't planned on spending the night there. But art has its own sense of time—and sometimes, so does the road.

As the sun dipped behind the dusty hills and our shoot stretched longer than expected, we realized there wasn't a single hotel or dharamshala nearby. With no choice but to stay, we wandered into the Devnarayan ji temple, where villagers were gathered for the nightly bhandara.

What began as a logistical dilemma turned into one of the most touching memories of our journey. The temple's simple langar was an unforgettable meal, not for the taste but the warmth that came with it—shared with villagers sitting cross-legged on mats, hands extended for rice and sabzi, laughter filling the air.

Women from the village guided our female team members to the temple's women-only sleeping quarters, while the men found space near the courtyard.

That night, lying under the open sky on temple grounds, listening to the lullabies of temple bells and hushed chatter, we weren't just documentarians—we were part of a living story.

It reminded us that the art we were chasing was inseparable from the lives and generosity of the people who carry it. The temple didn't just shelter us—it brought us into the soul of the Phad tradition.





# The Bhopa and the Burning Sand

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The sun was merciless that day. Even by Rajasthan's standards, the heat felt excessive, and the idea of wrapping up early had started circling among our exhausted crew. Equipment was heating up, water bottles were running low, and morale was beginning to dip.

That's when we saw him—an elderly Bhopa, barefoot on the scorching sand, carrying the weighty Kavad with grace and unshaken dignity.

He walked slowly but deliberately, eyes steady, his voice humming a tune lost to time. He wasn't performing for a camera. He wasn't waiting for applause. This was his calling, and he was honoring it.

That moment hit us all. Here we were, privileged with gear, shoes, and shade, complaining about the weather. And there he was, honoring generations of storytelling in the only way he knew—through perseverance.

Our cameraman silently adjusted his lens. Someone fetched water, not for ourselves, but for him.

We followed him that day—not just physically but emotionally. The shoot that could have been cut short turned into one of our most profound sessions. His spirit lit a quiet fire in all of us.

That Bhopa didn't just carry his Kavad across sand; he carried us into a deeper understanding of why we were doing this in the first place.





# The Silence Before the Story

## Meeting the Bahurupiyas

When we first approached the Bahurupiya artists, their silence was unnerving. No costumes, no makeup—just cautious glances and reserved nods.

They seemed distant, reluctant to engage. We had expected animated performers, but what we met were people unsure of whether they'd be understood.

We stayed. We sat under a tree with them. We shared chai. We talked about everything but the art at first—farming, families, even politics. Slowly, walls began to fall.

One artist brought out an old box of faded photographs. Another began mimicking a well-known politician, and laughter cracked the stillness.

Then, like the turning of a page, they began to speak—not as performers but as people.

They told us about the joy of transforming into mythological figures, the loneliness that often followed performances, the dwindling invitations, and the pain of being reduced to jesters in a changing world.

It wasn't an interview. It was a heart-to-heart. That day, the Bahurupiyas gave us more than content—they gave us their truths. And we realized that behind every transformation and theatrical mask was a soul craving to be seen, not just watched.

# The Potter's Dilemma

## Voices from Molela

In Molela, the red dust clings to your feet like history refusing to be washed away. We had come to document the terracotta plaques that have made this village famous.

The artists welcomed us warmly, but beneath the smiles, we sensed a quiet worry.

As we filmed the careful etching of deities onto clay, we asked one elder artisan about his thoughts on the art's future. He sighed, hands coated in ochre. "My son wants to go to the city. He says there's no money in this anymore."

Others chimed in. The market is uncertain. Tourists come and go. New generations are distracted by screens, uninterested in mud. Yet even as they spoke of fear, their fingers never stopped shaping the clay. Their gestures were stubbornly hopeful.























