

# Contemporary Practices of *Chitrakathi* in the Twenty-first Century Art Market

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## Abstract

Though industrialization and globalization has connected the world more than ever before the changing lifestyle has highly impacted the folk culture and traditions, amongst others. Even as the folk artists and their art form are developing and finding a way into the mainstream of art, it becomes difficult to retain the essence of the original folk art. *Chitrakathi* is a traditional folk art, performed by the *Thakar* tribe. The *Thakar* tribe is the resident of *Pinguli* village, *Kudal* taluka of *Konkan* region in Maharashtra. Owing to the Mumbai Goa highway, the *Thakar* community, which was once deported out, has morphed into a median between the city and village. This resulted in the development of *Pinguli*. The folk artist took various jobs or business as a new means of livelihood. Thus we can see a difference in their art practices and presentations. Narration in *Chitrakathi* has focusing only on the ritual and visuals of *Chitrakathi* has been limited to the art festival and making saleable craft objects. This changing format can be linked to the socio-cultural and economical effect of globalization.

**Keywords:** *Chitrakathi*, performance, craft object, *Thakar* tribe, caste, Maharashtra

## Introduction

Indian tradition of storytelling in visual art, broadly understood, has two modes: oral by means of ballads and visual by means of scroll paintings. Most of the Indian states have a tradition of scroll paintings known as *Patachitra*. However in Maharashtra, it is traditional *Chitrakathi* paintings (*chitra* meaning painting and *kathi* meaning story or narration), performed by the nomadic *Thakar* tribe of *Konkan* region. In Maharashtra, the evidence of *Chitrakathi* goes back approximately to the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Chitrakathi* is broadly divided into two styles 'Paithan style' and 'Pinguli style'. This paper is written keeping the 'Pinguli style' in perspective. *Gudhipur* in *Pinguli* village in *Kudal taluka* of *Sindhudurg* district is the home of the *Thakar* tribe. This tribe has 11 male-focused and 3 female-focused folk art forms (Ransing, M.2007) of which *Chitrakathi* being one. Unlike other states, a *Chitrakathi* painting is not a running scroll painting but an individual work of art on approximately 28 X 38 cm size rectangular paper. Similar to a religious book, a compilation of such paintings is known as *pothi*. The most prevalent themes in these paintings are the stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The *Thakars* are not aware who painted these and around which year, they just remember having these *pothis* in their family. The narration of *Chitrakathi* is a combination of the songs, instrumental music and the stories. The stories include the moral values, contemporary political and social references and events are told in local language *Malvani* and main language *Marathi*. The characteristic of folk art form, the frame story and ideal talk, is also used in this oral tradition.



Figure 1: *Chitrakathi* painting, 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Pinguli*.

### ***Chitrakathi* in pre Independence period**

It is believed that the origin of *Thakar* community was not from Maharashtra, but they would have migrated from Rajasthan or through the Ghats and have established themselves in *Konkan* (Ransing M. , 2007). Even though *Thakar* people can communicate in *Marathi* and *Malvani*, they have their own language, rituals, and traditions. The honour of presenting *Chitrakathi* in different temples on different important days like Navratri, Diwali etc. was bestowed on these families by the Kings and temples in 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century and the tradition continues. Otherwise treated like untouchables, this was the only time when they could enter the temple premises due to the ritual, and were honored and given offerings which became one of the medium of living. In this period after the *Chitrakathi* storytelling performances the performer used to gather alms from house to house. These offerings were their earnings. But during the colonial period, these artists were labelled as wandering beggars (Dallapiccola, 1998). The changing societies of this period and the accompanying economic changes resulted in the ignorance of this art form.

### ***Chitrakathi* in post Independence period**

To achieve the total control of India, the British used Divide and Rule policy in terms of religion, caste, tribe, region and language. This affected India's socio-cultural scenario. Alienation due to migration and belief in untouchability had a huge impact on the psychology of the *Thakar* community. After 1974 this art form came into the purview of researchers (Ransing, 1994). Following this, the *Thakar* artists *Ganpat Masge* and *Parshuram Gangavane* were honoured with government awards. In 2006 *Parshuram Gangavane* established '*Kala Aangan*', a *Thakar* tribal art museum in *Pinguli* at *Gudhipur*. Establishment of this art museum proved to be a milestone for the *Thakar* artists to showcase their art.

On one hand while this situation can be seen as a growing step in the tribe and the art form, on the other hand there was a separation of the story telling tradition from the visual art form. This shattered the basic crux of *Chitrakathi*, reducing its flow and for various reasons it became collective art and festive in nature, thus beginning to disconnect from its original form.



Figure 2: 'Kala Aangan' Thakar tribal art museum, Pinguli.

### Product oriented 'Chitra' and the art market

It is after 1979 that the *Thakar* tribe started getting the benefits due to the reservations under schedule tribe. But in 1984 the state government discontinued such benefits. However, because of the awareness in society about literacy and overall education, youth of the *Thakar* tribe took a step towards literacy and many of them completed their higher education. Thus they created a new income opportunity for themselves. Obviously the *Chitrakathi* artists of the tribe, doing jobs and earning, did not find it necessary anymore to go begging from house to house. In the meanwhile, the interested artists found their way to the government schemes related to the folk art. These government schemes, art workshops, numerous folk art festivals and projects helped them to connect to various other organisations and build a network. Because of such exposures they started valuing their art form. The above mentioned Art Museum, *Kala Aangan*, was established as a result of this knowledge. Parshuram Gangavane received the honour to conduct the *Chitrakathi* tribal art workshop under the Ministry of Textiles Government of India's 'Guru shishya parampara' project between 2004 and 2008<sup>i</sup>. This government initiative focused on teaching the visual style of *Chitrakathi* art form. This workshop and several other government organised folk art festivals and projects have helped the *Chitrakathi* artists to replicate the old-aged *Chitrakathi* artworks using new mediums such as acrylic colour, print etc. and learn how to use it as a base to create decorative objects and products. It becomes obvious that the section of society interested in such art and craft objects was not in the artist's periphery. It is the folk art festival, art museum, and the media like the websites and online shopping sites that helped these artists get respectable income. This resulted in the inclination of the artists from the traditional art form and storytelling performances to make newer craft objects. Under the government schemes, the art workshops gave necessary training to the people from the village of all castes. The main objective was to create a source of income. Many students learnt the art form merely to avail the government scholarships. But there wasn't a common platform to sell the items made by the ones who did not traditionally practice *Chitrakathi*.

Ek Nath Gangavane had himself learned the *Chitrakathi* in this scheme. He creates craft objects for his art museum 'Kala Aangan'. Apart from that he has immense interest in making his own expression through *Chitrakathi*. But he thought of many questions such as, how to create new expression through *Chitrakathi* maintaining traditional forms? How to start the related thought process? What topics can be chosen? How does an artist create his own artwork? <sup>ii</sup>. These questions are related to the existence of the folk art in today's world. Jyotindra Jain (2002) observation can provide some insights into the contemporary situation of folk art. He states that the art academy or art institutions saw folk art as a traditional art and the five- years plan started

after Indian independence, have seen folk art as craft industry<sup>iii</sup>. As a result folk arts were not included in the so called mainstream art market.



Figure 3 : Chitrakathi craft objects by 'Kala Aangan',

A. T-shirt, B. Hand Bag, C. Chitrakathi painting - acrylic on canvas, D. Craft stall in folk art festival.

### 'Kathi' - The performance

The oral tradition of storytelling is the strength of *Chitrakathi*, where we see the possibility of it staying contemporary and rooted. However the present day *Chitrakathi* performance in its localised sphere has remained only as a ritual in light of the current scenario and its socio-cultural status reduced.

Today, because *Chitrakathi* was traditionally practiced since olden times, and probably with the fear that some curse may befall upon them if they do not follow this ritual, they continue practicing *Chitrakathi*. In many places it is still continued because of an inevitable tradition<sup>iv</sup>. In earlier times the performers used to eat and stay at the place where they had been invited for storytelling, keeping in mind that they lived at a faraway place. This was the time when there was a conversation between them and the rest of the society. The performers used this conversation and their further research work for storytelling purpose. Stories related to mythology, the relationship between villages and the houses and various other questions were discussed. As a result of this oral tradition, ethical and mythological stories, references become contemporary. Awareness against untouchability spread during the independence time. We can see its effects on the *Thakar* tribe as well. Becoming aware about the ban on untouchability, many artists stopped eating at peoples places and visiting their *basti*<sup>v</sup>. Grains and money especially related to remuneration could now be taken or given through temples only. Because of this, connect between the folk artists and the society seemed to have reduced. The artist, who considered the offerings as their right, went to give only about an hour of the presentation and received their offerings. However, they went in their own four wheeler cars. In spite of the fact that they belonged to the lower castes, some of them were economically well off. Today, artists are no more dependent on the monetary help from the people in *basti*, hence they do not attach importance to the monetary benefits from the *basti*. As a result of the increasing distance between the artist and the society, the quality of their presentations has degraded. The audiences who devotionally attend the program remember that presentations in olden days, when the artists performed for the whole night were certainly better. The truth nowadays is that the audiences are more aware of

mythology due to the ongoing television serials. It thus becomes a challenge for the *Chitrakathi* and the related traditional artists to attract and retain the viewer's attention towards them<sup>vi</sup>.

The entire morphology of the folk art should be seen according to the periphery of the related people. The changes in the surroundings leave a visible change in the art form practised as well. The modified social and cultural surroundings have also left a visible change in the forms of *Chitrakathi*. In olden times, the *Chitrakathi* presentation would start at the night and would continue for about 3 to 4 hours. In recent times it has drastically reduced to 30 to 40 minutes<sup>vii</sup>. After the outburst of audiovisual media, the audience's concept of entertainment has completely changed. It is an obvious fact that the rapid growth and interaction with such media and technologies have disturbed traditional art like the *Chitrakathi* folk tradition. The artworks of *Chitrakathi* are smaller in size that is 28 x 38 cm. While presenting, the audience see it from a distance of about 6 to 8 feet and because of this they are unable to capture the small details of the art work. As a result, the audience remain solely dependent on the details of the storytelling aspect or the repeats. The artists may use a bigger medium like a projector for their artworks to attract the attention of the audience. This would eventually increase the effectiveness of the performance. For these measures, the artists are required to overcome their traditional mindset but they are yet to let go off and think beyond their traditional outlook. However they do not seem to be prepared psychologically for this change<sup>viii</sup>.



**Figure 3: *Chitrakathi* performance by Eknath Gangavane and Chetan Gangavane at Brahmandev temple, Kumbharwadi, Kudal.**

*Chitrakathi* is a male-dominated art. It has been performed in the temples and includes *Ramayana* or *Mahabharat* and other religious stories. As a result, the participation of women in the creation and performance process has never been thought of. Sudhakar Ransing<sup>ix</sup> told that usually women do not participate in *Chitrakathi* performance. According to Ekanath Gangavane<sup>x</sup>, *Chitrakathi* is an art form connected to the temple. Women undergo menstrual cycle every month hence they are forbidden entry for the event. The tradition like *Chitrakathi* must adopt certain changes without disturbing its folk core. But the artists and the society are not aware of taking effective initiatives towards it. Fewer attendees can be seen if the time of the program coincides with the time of some famous TV serial or an important cricket match. Unlike the 24/7 entertainment cycle of modern media, *Chitrakathi* is unable to instantly update people. This is a one of its limitation. However this traditional art has its own strength that the performer can transform information into the knowledge and further analyse it. Originally the performer would narrate a story of Ramayana and highlight significance of values, moral and social situations through the analysis. Thus people could relate the epic stories in their daily life. In contrast today's generation

of *Chitrakathi* performers are educated but performance lacks the blending of knowledge and entertainment<sup>xi</sup>. These complex issues have further sprung up in recent times.

### Unanswered questions

Performance of *Chitrakathi* today continues to be outcaste due to the performances being still linked to temple rituals. As a result questions related to the inclusion of folk art into the purview of new society and traditions are still unanswered. The Indian Constitution imparts equal status and rights to the *Chitrakathi* community. However, it remains an unresolved question as to will the Indian society realize to go beyond casteism and accept broader perspective towards humanity and culture. In today's socio-political scenario, the prevalence of casteist ideology is underlined.

After Independence the industrial and rural development model of Indian Government focuses on folk arts as art and craft industry. However, the question are still neglected such as, will government grants, reservation was given to folk artists and the business opportunities made available to them be able to solve the problems about the sustainability of folk art? Do Government institutions or other art institutions will wish to take any holistic approach towards folk arts like *Chitrakathi*? As far as visual aspect concerned, the folk paintings are also not included in mainstream art market, owing to their traditional origins, thereby making them outdated, without contemporary relevance. The contemporary status of *Chitrakathi* and similar arts seems to be confronted by various such problems.

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<sup>i</sup> Parshuram Gangavane, personal interview, *Pinguli*, 16 November 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Interaction with Eaknath Gangavane, *Pinguli*, 2015 to 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> For an insightful discussion of folk art and revival, see Jyotindra Jain, 'Indian "Folk Art": Tradition, Revival and Transformation. In P.Pal,(ed.), *Reflections On The Arts In India* (pp.60-71). Mumbai: Marg.

<sup>iv</sup> On 31<sup>st</sup> October 2016 while discussing with the audiences, they pointed out that a few years ago Gangavane requested permission to put an end to this performance as he was not able to continue, to which the people of *Kumbharwadi* insisted that they wanted to continue the performance and if he didn't do it then he should himself request the God. They also further stated that in the future if any evil omen would befall upon villagers or on artist, then the Gangavane family would be solely responsible. Thus Gangavane had to continue the performance.

<sup>v</sup> During the discussion on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> November 2015, Ganpat Masge and Parshuram Gangavane shared many behavioral incidents experienced by them. Because of these experiences they stopped alms of grain or money.

<sup>vi</sup> Chetan Gangavane, personal interview, *Pinguli*, 16 November 2015. According to Chetan Gangavane in addition to *Chitrakathi* narration *Thakar* folk artists presents string puppetry performance. Puppets appeared more lifelike as they were more akin to living characters around, easy to change their pictorial identity, were accepted by the masses and puppetry programs were organized by social organizations. These organizations gave better treatment than traditional systems and soon it became another source of earning and *Chitrakathi* was sidetracked.

<sup>vii</sup> Parshuram Gangavane, personal interview, *Pinguli*, 16 November 2015.

<sup>viii</sup> According to Eknath Gangvane, such experimental ideas are used in art festivals. But it would not be appropriate to deviate from traditions in the village.

<sup>ix</sup> Interaction with Ransing family of *Thakar* tribe, *Pinguli*, 24 December 2017.

<sup>x</sup> Eknath Gangvane, personal interview, *Pinguli*, 29 May 2016.

<sup>xi</sup> While discussing with the audiences on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2017 in *Kumbharwadi*, some old members said that they remember the older artist held the attention of audience and were able to entertain them for 3 to 4 hours.

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