



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

English

**AESTHETIC SYMBOLS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: A STUDY OF RAIKA COMMUNITY**

**KEY WORDS:** Cultural Identity, Oral Tradition, Aesthetic Symbol, Symbolism, Mythology, Folklore, Raika Community.

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**ABSTRACT**

The uniqueness of a community lies in its language, ethnicity, myths, religious beliefs, history, art and traditions that constitute its cultural identity. The concept of cultural identity has been explored in fields as diverse as Anthropology, Sociology, History, Psychology and Literature, in order to get a better understanding of the key elements, shaping the individual and collective identity of the people residing within the community. Focus of the current paper lies in the exploring and analyzing aesthetic symbols, prevalent in the myth and oral tradition of the Raika community. These symbols not only act as the carrier of social, traditional and religious beliefs of the community, but also play a vital role in creating and recreating the identity of the community, in this rapidly changing world. They prove instrumental in allowing individuals, sharing the same beliefs, to identify with each other based on their common experience of the ritual, customs and tradition. By exploring these symbols in great detail, this paper intends to unravel the underlying general patterns of the culture, constituting the psychological, social and behavioral functioning of the Raika community, which is further reflected in its cultural identity.

**INTRODUCTION**

Identity is a complex social, political and psychological phenomena, which incorporates the individuals with a better understanding of selves and their surroundings. Being once relegated to the socio-temporal phenomenon, instrumental for marking the individuals within their communities, the idea of identity has now become a site of active contestation, where myriad communities, belonging to a wide range of social, cultural, political and religious background, fight for the assertion and expression of their belief, in order to either subvert or further consolidate the pre-established socio-cultural hierarchy. Identity is reproduced and asserted through shared language, myth, traditions, rituals and aesthetic symbols, such as paintings and other artistic objects, defining the remote origin of the community. These lifeless aesthetic objects decorated on the walls of domestic arenas, placed in museum as the repository of past, recreated and propagated through the shared traditions and rituals, have acquired an instrumental role in the identity of nation, as heterogeneous state, commemorated for tolerating cultural, social and religious diversities. Such socially and politically charged objects might seem lifeless, but consist of huge potential for defining the very present of the associated communities.

This research paper intends on investigating one such aesthetic object, *phad*, central to social, cultural and religious beliefs of Raika community. This pastoral community, residing in arid and semi-arid regions of Western Rajasthan is known for sharing a cordial bond with cattle, which emerged as their only source of subsistence in the harsh environmental conditions of such deserted territory. Scanty vegetation, scarcity of rainfall, frequent drought and famine, left little scope for agriculture to thrive, rendering Pastoralism as the primary mode of subsistence for the poor folks of the community. The community, along with raising goats and sheep, obtained much of their income from the sale of male camels as draft animals, used for the transportation of goods and people in the arid areas. The major economic activities substantiating the needs of the communities involved manufacturing of carpet using the wool of camel and sheep and sheep shearing. Thus the contribution of livestock in facilitating not only the basic requirement, but also providing the financial security to the community, can't be ignored. Despite sharing a harmonious symbiotic relationship with livestock, the community is known for rendering camels the central position in their social, cultural and religious arenas.

Pabuji, a heroic deity, is revered not only for protecting the livestock of the community, from the atrocious foreign forces, but also for securing camels from the distant land of Lanka, with the aid of a Raika counsellor. The heroic pursuits undertaken by Pabuji have set a benchmark, elaborating the social and moral responsibility of the community towards their cattle, while also demarking the economic activity of the community. Raikas are known for following the taboos and teachings, well suited to the social, cultural and economic needs of the community in the medieval era. The community still follows the prohibition against consuming the meat of the camel, selling the she-camels, and their milk. The deification of Pabuji has brought about the sacralization of the economic activities once associated with the community. The deviation from the ascribed economic activities is still looked upon as the denouncing of the communities' social, moral code and is strongly disparaged.

The annal depicting the heroic pursuits of Pabuji is inscribed pictorially over a canvas, in the form of a scroll painting, which serves as their portable shrine. *Bhopas*, wandering minstrels, perform the sacred task of *phad* reading, interspersed with dancing and the audience interaction, in order to shower the blessings of Pabuji upon the community and thus facilitates the spiritual and religious awakening of the community, in the contemporary era. *Bhopas*, usually called to perform in the time of distress, sickness and celebration, have thus become an indispensable part of the *phad* tradition, propagating and revitalizing the centuries old belief, central to the collective identity of the community, in the globalized and digitized contemporary era

The painters of the *phad* carry the lineage name 'Joshi', belonging to the Chipa caste, known for being traditionally involved with textile paintings, as their mode of subsistence. While *Raika* community is known as the custodian of *Phad* artform, *Joshi* community has played a prominent role in preserving and perpetuating this centuries-old tradition amidst the social, political and economic landscape of the global era. The advancement of technology not only led to the drastic change in the lifestyle of people, but also marginalized these storytelling traditions, intrinsic to the social and cultural fabric of the communities of Rajasthan. The *Joshi* community has been traditionally involved in the religious and scholarly pursuits reflected in their unique art form. The advent of the twentieth century brings forth the role played by modernization and lack of economic vitality in threatening

the *phad* artform. Kalyan Joshi, a prominent member of the Joshi community, played a prominent role in keeping this traditional artform intact by making it relevant in contemporary society. He bridged the gap between the modern and traditional, by inculcating new themes, addressing the global realities. He brought the once hidden traditional art form to the wider audience and also highlighted the underlying cultural and religious narratives. Through various workshops and exhibitions, he attracted new international and domestic patrons which aided the revitalization of the dying artform. *Phad* painting, one of the many cultural traditions of Rajasthan, has thus not only gained global acclamation but has also secured its reification into a historical object, which is preserved in the museum, as a token of bygone age.

Although the *Phad* art and the associated artist community have gained international recognition, the Raikas and Bhopas are continually struggling to survive and protect their pastoral traditions and identity, in the face of contemporary technical, cultural and political change. The agricultural turn, overshadowing pastoralism as a mode of subsistence has appropriated the land and other natural resources, central to its existence. Their access to free farmlands and jungles has been undermined, in favour of protecting the agricultural lands from getting destroyed by the cattle. New laws and policies have further consolidated the restrictions imposed on the pastoral communities and have thus altered their lifestyle. The social boycott, faced by the community, has further accentuated their deplorable condition, making it even difficult for the community to get its concerns heard.

This research aims at investigating *phad*, as the aesthetic symbol constituting the collective identity of the community. By bringing forth the underlying social, behavioural and psychological thread weaving the collective identity of the community, through the artistic story-telling tradition of *phad* reading, the paper aims at transcending the association of aesthetics with beauty and successfully highlights symbols, as an potentially charged entity, which not only connects the past with present, but also paves the way for the future of the community, by preserving and enriching their identity.

#### Methodology

The study intends to investigate the interplay of various social, cultural, and religious factors underlying the narrative cultural identity of the community. It will employ some philosophical and theoretical plenitudes of Cultural Myth Criticism, Folk Philosophy and Archetypal Criticism to explore the archetypes of Aesthetic Symbolism, and images for explicating the cultural identity of *Raika* community and the Epic of *Pabuji*.

#### DISCUSSION

The cultural identity of a community is based on the experiences, beliefs, traditions and rituals shared by its individuals. Raikas are the pastoral semi-nomadic community, residing in the arid and semi-arid parts of Western Rajasthan. The unpredictable and uncontrollable forces of nature have been a major threat to the sustenance of the community, occupying such difficult terrain. Livestock, especially camels, emerged as a constant support, facilitating not only the survival but also the economic sustenance of the community in the medieval times. Occupying the lower strata of the established socio-cultural hierarchy, Raikas have been accustomed to discrimination in various forms and manners. Being at odds with social, cultural and political currents of the contemporary era, Raikas lack acceptance and accessibility to the social goods, leading to their constant impoverishment, in terms of economic instability, caste based discrimination, climatic unpredictability, lack of access to forest area, and policies supporting pastoralist worldviews. The anxiety and desires shared by the community is reflected in its origin myth, traditions, art and various rituals followed

by the community. *Phad* is one such aesthetic visual-oral tradition, narrating the adventurous and valorous deeds of *Pabuji*. The detailed narrative revolving around the attitude of *Pabuji* towards the livestock, mirrors the cordial bond shared between the community and its cattle. The adventurous exploits undertaken by *Pabuji* to get she-camels from the distant land of Lanka, has established the camel at the centre of social, cultural, religious and political beliefs of the community. Right from the medieval era, camels have managed to acquire and still constitute the core of the cultural reality of the community. The very origin myth of Raikas, established camel herding, not just as a profession, but as a social calling of the community. The continued existence of this visual oral tradition in the contemporary era, has been instrumental in keeping their cordial bond with livestock intact. Raika's abstinence from consuming the flesh of camels, selling the she-camels and her milk, reflects upon their continued abidance with the taboos, once established in the medieval era. The epic not only provides the origin of the community, but continues to structure the present and provides hope for a secured future to the community.

The Raika community's pastoral worldview inscribed in their epic, its visual depiction through *phad* and the performative ritual, depicting the narrative, interspersed with dancing and audience interaction, reflects the collective wisdom and values shared by the community. The symbolism, inherent in the narrative, reflects upon the themes of loyalty, honor, sacrifice and the moral obligation towards their cattle, interwoven in their everyday beliefs and practices. The continued existence of the tradition of *Phad* singing not only resurfaces the centuries old beliefs but also propagates and revitalizes the spiritual and religious beliefs of the community from time to time. *Phad*, thereby, emerging as a cultural artefact, has thus been successful in communicating and reinforcing the teachings of *Pabuji*, through its continual transmission down the generations. Moreover, archetypes found in the animals, especially horses and camels, in the figure of *Pabuji*, the protector, plays an instrumental role in defining the community's daily beliefs and values. The archetypal representation of protection, struggle and heroism, not only reflects Raika's collective identity, but also touches upon the universal experience of conflict, harmony and survival, shared within the human race. The archetypes inscribed in the community centric annal of *Pabuji*, successfully transcends to the broader human experience, thus giving voice to therepressed desires and anxieties of the community and the entire human race.

The exploration of *Phad* as an aesthetic symbol, has helped us understand the underlying social, cultural, political and psychological potential of such artistic expressions. The visual oral narrative, in form of *phad* not only established the connection between the Raikas, their deity, *Pabuji*, and the pastoralist worldview, but also reinforces the propagation and consolidation of such bond, essential for the formation of their cultural identity. *Phad* has not only enriched the centuries old story telling tradition, but has also managed to establish and substantiate the cultural identity of a dwindling community, living at the verge of extinction.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper offers a compelling insight into the formation and consolidation of cultural identity of the Raika community, through the centuries old visual-oral tradition of *phad* reading. The application of Archetypal criticism, Folk philosophy and Cultural Myth criticism, has been central to the multifaceted exploration of Raika's symbolic system, reflecting upon the values, myths and archetype underpinning their cultural expressions and practices. The paper, furthermore, highlights the relevance of symbols in transmitting and reinforcing cultural identity, especially in the communities, where visual narrative and oral traditions are the constitutive elements of cultural identity. Thus, the paper

successfully establishes the role played by aesthetic symbols in the preservation and propagation of the cultural repository, fundamental to the cultural identity of the community.

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