The Kaavad storytelling tradition of Rajasthan.

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Introduction

Stories could be memories or mediations between reality and aspirations that reflect what a society wishes to express about itself. Story is perhaps the oldest form of communication known to humankind. It has a way of mesmerizing the listeners into silence and the tellers into expressing the deepest desires and anxieties of their society, directly or through subversive means. Storytelling brings people together, whether it is a street corner or a darkened cinema hall. While the essence of story remains the same, the way of telling stories has been influenced by the kind of tools and technology of the times. From telling stories with the help of voice and gesture alone to using painted scrolls and boxes, text, dance, music, performance or a combination of all, storytelling in India is a rich heritage. It defines our culture and our identity.

'Kaavad Banchana', an oral tradition of storytelling is still alive in Rajasthan where stories from the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana are told along with stories from the Puranas, caste genealogies and stories from the folk tradition. The experience is audio-visual as the telling is accompanied by taking the listener on a visual journey made possible by the 'Kaavad' shrine. Against the backdrop of storytelling it invokes the notion of a sacred space and provides an identity to all concerned with its making, telling and listening.

The Kaavad is a portable wooden temple/shrine that has visual narratives on its multiple panels that are hinged together. These panels open and close like doors simulating the several thresholds of a temple. The visuals are those of Gods, goddesses, saints, local heroes and the patrons. It is made by the Suthar (carpenter) community in Mewar for the itinerant Kaavadiya Bhat (storyteller) from Marwar who brings it to his patron's houses in Rajasthan.

This portable temple/shrine comes to the devotee rather than the devotee going to the temple (Bhanawat, 1975). The Kaavadiya Bhat periodically brings the shrine to his patron's house to recite his genealogy and to sing praises of his ancestors. He also recites the stories especially those that relate to the patron saint of the community concerned. The Kaavadiyas (storytellers) and their jajmans (hereditary patrons) consider the Kaavad as a sacred shrine which demands certain rituals to be followed, listening to genealogies, epic stories and making donations. It is believed that listening to stories purifies the soul and reserves a place of entry for the devotee in heaven.

A synergy exists between the maker, the storyteller and his patron which has kept the tradition alive. The survival of the Kaavad tradition hinges not only on a set of economic relations and transactions but on the fact that the maker, teller and patron are dependent on each other for their individual identity which cannot exist if either of them is absent. The Suthar community prides itself for being the preservers of the Kaavad making craft for generations since no one else outside Bassi makes it. The storyteller's identity is tied to the very term Kaavad as they are known as the Kaavadiya Bhats, (distinguishing themselves from other Bhats or Kaavadiyas), and their patrons derive their identity from the Kaavad recitation where their genealogies are recited by the storyteller as he points out at their painted images on the shrine. Thus, the Kaavad imparts each with an identity that reaches back into time and space, in a way enabling 'the

groups to preserve a remembered past, conserve community integrity and identity and behold a vision of the future" (Mayaram, 1997). One of the ways by which the identities are reinforced is the way the origin myth of each community connects to reality and binds them together. The synergy that exists within the communities is thus mirrored in these myths, making life and myth seamless. Finally, images, myths and genealogies together connote memories as well as aspirations of the communities involved.

Overview of the Kaavad tradition

The Kaavad tradition is approximately a 400 year old tradition (Lyons, 2007) although like several oral traditions in India, its origin is located in mythology or attributed to a mysterious power. Historical evidence of portable shrine exists in some religious texts (Jain, 1998) but there are no clear references to the Kaavad. An indirect reference is probably made to the Kaavad in Tarikh-i-Firoz-Shahi of Afif, where it is referred

to as a 'Muhrik — a wooden tablet covered with paintings within and without' (Singh, 1995)

All the extant Kaavad shrines have images of the Bhakti saints as well as stories of Ram and Krishna, so it may be assumed that it probably came into prominence after the 'Bhakti movement', bhakti also being the term for Hindu devotional expression. The Bhakti movement in the North, centered on the devotion of Ram and Krishna, both considered as incarnations of Vishnu. Bhakti was also associated with a group of saints who rebelled against rituals and caste distinctions (Sharma, 2002) Saints like Kabir, Meera, and Narsinh Mehta amongst others can be found in the Kaavad. The fact that the other images on the Kaavad represent Hindu gods and goddesses also suggests its intent of being a sacred shrine which is portable.

The Kaavad Makers: Suthars/Basayatis
The kaavad makers known as Suthars or Basayatis reside in Nalla Bazaar in village Bassi, approximately twenty five kilometers from Chittor. Bassi lies on the Chittor-Kota road. It is situated amidst the hills of the Aravalli ranges in Rajasthan. Of the 25 families of Suthars only five to six families are involved in making Kaavads.

Bassi was found in 1560 AD by prince Jaimal from Devgarh. According to the genealogist of the royal family one of their ancestors Govindadas happened to come across a group of artisans in Malpura near Nagaur making painted wooden objects. He brought one of them, Parabhat to Bassi (Lyons, 2007) offering him ten bhigas of farming land and a house to settle in. This house called the Bheda ki Guwadi has seven to nine rooms and some families continue to live there, although several families have moved out of it over generations. Since they came and settled in the place it came to be called Bassi (as in Buss jaana: to settle) and the Suthars (carpenters) came to be known as Basayatis.

Origin myths of the Suthars
The Suthars of Bassi call themselves the children of Visvakarma. According to the Hindu tradition, Visvakarma is the chief architect of the Universe, the supreme patrons of the Arts (Raina, 1999). He had five sons that were born from his body, one of them being Maya the carpenter (Suthar), who fathered the carpenter community. The community in Bassi believes that Visvakarma was the younger brother of Brahma (others believe he was Brahma's son). Visvakarma was called upon several times to build for the Gods. At first he made the Universe, and then he recreated a Golden Lanka because it was burnt down. He also recreated Dwarkapuri for Lord Krishna because it had drowned. So pleased were the Gods with Dwarkapuri that they wanted to send him gifts. While he was still on his way home they sent the gifts of diamonds & emeralds and a cow to his house. His wife was sweeping the floor when the gift bearers arrived. She would not accept the gifts in his absence and sent them away. A merchant's (Baniya's) wife in the neighborhood invited the gift bearers to her place and accepted the gifts meant for Visvakarma. And 'so the suthars lost their wealth to the baniya merchants' (Mistry, 2009).

This myth establishes the professional identity of carpenter for the Suthars although not limited to the makers of Kaavad but it does give them a status of a higher caste whose ancestry is connected to the Gods themselves. The specific identity of Kaavad makers comes from the place Bassi, as it is the only place where Kaavads are made by a community that has one common ancestor.

The Kaavadiya Bhat or Storytellers
The Kaavadiya Bhats are the itinerant storytellers of the Kaavad tradition who live around the Jodhpur, Nagaur and Kishangarh districts of Rajasthan. The name is derived from the profession of the ones who carry/use the Kaavad to make a living. The term 'Bhat' is derived from the caste of the teller. This distinguishes them from the Kaavadiyas who carry

the water from the Ganges in Haridwar to their hometowns in 'Kaavads' (two baskets balanced on a pole in which the pots of water are placed and carried on the shoulder by the Kaavadiya). The Kaavadiya Bhats are related to the Barots of Gujarat as they too are record keepers and maintain a Bahi Khata of their patrons (Rav, 2008). The Kaavadiya Bhats live the life of a genealogist in their own village preferring to hide the teller identity at home because the storyteller status equates them to a 'maang khani jati' (those who beg and survive), the stigma of which is worse than being called a thief or murderer (Rav B. , 2004). Their life too revolves around the seasons. In the monsoons it is believed that the Gods sleep and therefore the patron cannot wake up the Gods and make a wish through the storyteller. This makes the storyteller free to pursue other economic activities such as agriculture. Some Kaavadiya Bhats have their own land but most often they work on the land of others. Others use their camels to transport goods for the community. For some months they even travel to distant places to work as masons or do labour work like carrying stones or making roads. Today too, the storyteller has to adopt multiple professions to make a living. However, he comes into his own when narrating stories or reciting the genealogies for his patrons.

Origin Myths of the Kaavadiya Bhats

There are several narratives built around the origins of the Kaavadiya Bhats. A Bhat has been described in some of the ancient texts (Brahmavaivarta Purana) as the one born of a Kshatriya father and 'prostitute' mother, or Kshtariya father and widowed Brahmini or Brahmin father and Shudra mother etc. Gunarthi (2000) describes the Bhat as the 'other' jati who are the record-keepers or genealogists of all castes, from the Brahmin to the Bhangi' They are divided into 9 'nyat' (the superior caste that drinks alcohol and smokes Bidis and visit the 'Chhoot or touchables') and 12 'Phagotara' (those who visit and eat with the 'untouchables'). Gunarthi also reports Sir Henry Elton's (reference to accounts of Bhats in the Ain-i-Akbari) origin story of the Bhats. This is the time before

the universe was created (Sristi) Shiva wanted to spend time with his wife Parvati and did not want to go grazing the cows. So he created a Bhat from his sweat to look after the animals and chant (stuti) his name. But the Bhat began to sing praises of Parvati and wandered here and there. This angered Shiva considerably so he evicted him from heaven and cursed him to be a Bhanwar Bhat whose children will forever wander aimlessly (Gunarthi, 2000).

However, in their own words the Kaavadiya Bhats claim to be the descendants of Shravan Kumar of the Ramayan, but were born from the brow of Lord Shiva. In the Kaavad lore Shravan Kumar, was the nephew of Dashrath (Father of Lord

Ram) and was accidentally killed by him when Shravan was transporting his blind parents in a Kaavad. This narrative explains the given identity of being Kaavad bearers from the Treta Yug and also forges an alliance with Lord Ram. The other narrative which alludes to their birth from Shiva's brow explains their skills as storytellers. The way it is explained is that once a bit of ash fell from Shiva's brow and transformed itself into a bumble bee (bhanwara) and Shiva blessing the bee turned it into a human being. This 'being' then begged to be given an identity and to be assigned his task in life. Shiva pronounced him to be a Bhanwar Bhat who would go around singing the praises of the lord. Coming from the brow of Shiva the Bhanwar Bhats were thus gifted with superior memory and they became the record keepers of the barbers, tailors and carpenters (Rav, 2008). Lastly, they also claim to be blessed by goddess Sarasvati who resides in their throat when invoked, enabling them to speak fluidly and faultlessly.

There is no discomfort in claiming these multiple identities as each narrative tries to rationalize the storyteller's innate characteristics which are pre-given by birth. Besides claiming a space in immemorial time, claims are also made to caste status in historical time, that of having Rajput origins.

Origins of the word Kaavad
The dictionary (Apte, 1996) defines Kaavad as either a 'Kavaat' or 'Kapaat' or 'Kivaad' meaning half a door or panel of a door, or as 'Shruti' which is audition, hearing or relating to the ear. Bhanawat (1975) subscribes to the term 'Kivaad' meaning door and the shrine consists of several panels that open up like many doors. The Kaavadiya Bhats are more concerned with the conceptual aspects and for them the word Kaavad means 'that which is carried on the shoulder' and the origin of the tradition is therefore attributed to Shravan Kumar from the Ramayana who carried his blind parents in a Kaavad to various pilgrim spots but was accidentally killed by King Dashrath. Since Shravan was unable to complete the task of taking his parents to all the holy spots, the Kaavadiyas carry

on the tradition of bringing the pilgrim spots to the people in the form of the Kaavad shrine (Rav K. , 2007).

To explain the origins of the shrine-like form they attribute it to a Brahmini Kundana Bai from Varanasi who made the first Kaavad and gifted them to the storytellers (Rav, 2008). Kundana Bai collected half the earnings of the Kaavadiyas towards feeding of cows. This is also inscribed on the front doors of the Kaavad shrine for the benefit of the patrons.

The Patrons
The patrons of the storytellers are spread far and wide in Rajasthan. They belong to 36 jatis and each storyteller may have 30 to 50 patrons whom he will visit once a year. The patron or Jajman is inherited by the storyteller from his father and will in turn distribute his patrons amongst his sons when he retires. The patron is bound to make donations to the teller once in a year. The patron gets the experience of a pilgrimage as the shrine-like Kaavad comes to their homes and sanctifies their space.

As the teller performs the ritual of reciting their genealogies and points out the images of their ancestors on the Kaavad shrine the patrons have the satisfaction of seeing their forefathers well looked after in the other world. It gives them immense pleasure to be told about their ancestry and helps them and their children remember all the generations. It encourages them to make donations and also aspire for a place for themselves on the Kaavad. As a part of the donation they may provide the storyteller with a goat or a calf, grain for the year, clothes, cash and even jewelry. The storyteller will also regale them with origin myths of their community which establishes their caste or professional identity.

Origin Myth of the Jat Community
The jats came from the jatas (coiled hair) of Shiva and as they came into being they asked Shiva what they must do in order to get salvation. He asked them to be charitable and generous.

When they asked who they should offer the charity to, Shiva rubbed his forehead and with the ash created the storyteller who could be the recipient of all charity. This myth ensures a synergy between the teller and his patron as each depends on the other for his survival and identity. For the patron it explains his identity and establishes his direct descent from Shiva.

Conclusion

The Kaavad offers an identity to all the communities that are connected to it. Each community has multiple identities but in this specific one concerning the Kaavad they are all related. The makers get their uniqueness as they are the only ones who make them and were created to make them. They depend on the tellers to some degree to continue making the Kaavads. The tellers get their professional identity from the very name and depend on their patrons to continue the tradition. The patrons 'recognize themselves' and their ancestors in the images that the Kaavad mirrors. The myth in a way explains the reality and reinforces the dependence and synergy.

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