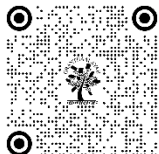


# AESTHETICS AND VISUAL CONNOTATIONS OF RAJASTHANI FOLK ARTS: A CRITICAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

In Indian culture folk arts like *Aipan* Art, Miniature Painting, *Bhil* Art, *Dokra* Art, *Godna* Art, *Kalamkari* Painting, *Kalighat* Painting, *Kavad* Art, Mural Painting, *Madhubani* Art, *Mandala* Art, *Mandana* Painting, *Pattachitra*, *Phad* Painting, *Pichwai* Painting, *Sanjhi* Art, *Warli* Painting and many more are passed down from one generation to another without changing its cultural and traditional vibrancy, that is why Indian folk arts are still alive and these are successfully taught informally. Indian folk arts are not just expressions of artists, but a way to portray their stories, memories, values, and beliefs. The folk arts are ethnic, simple, vibrant, and colourful in nature. Folk art plays an important role for the richness of Indian art and culture. The folk arts show the history and the heritage of India. In Indian art, culture and tradition, Rajasthan stands as the most colourful and breathtaking state with its various art forms and unique culture. Reflection of uniqueness can be seen in *Mandana*, *Pichwai* and *Kavad*. These traditional art forms depicting various gods, goddess, and folk tales. These folk arts are affected by many critical situations in time to time, but these folk arts are continuously maintaining their tradition vibrancy.

**Keywords:** Folk Art, *Mandana*, *Pichwai*, *Kavad*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Origin of folk arts came into existence with the civilization, it can be said that art has stayed with the mankind as a companion from its existence. The folk arts are most unique, because these are born from the soul of people. Existence of folk arts in prehistoric era were developed to address the very real needs and desires of a community. Man has been conscious of beauty since ancient times, be it the walls of the caves or the weapons or utensils used in the different works. Many examples of these are found in Aryan tradition and Vedas. Since Vedic times, the rituals of *Yagya* and *Havan* are being performed for the worship of *Agni*, *Surya*, *Indra* and *Varun*. The method of *Havan* was given various symbolic forms by decorating it with different

types of grains, turmeric, flour and *Kumkum* in the shape of lines, triangles, rectangles and many others with a meaning. Folk art and people's life complementing each other, from time immemorial the imprint of its existence on all the people of the past remained in various forms [Sharma \(2011\)](#).

In the progress of art and culture, folk arts played an important role. The development of folk arts came in existence in houses, worship-places and in the courtyards done by women of house. The folk arts started from the house peacefully and innocently without any fame and intellectual touch, with religious and cultural traditional. In India the folk arts progress with freedom and its originality. India has exclusive collections of Folk arts, for instance, *Aipan Art*, Miniature Painting, *Bhil Art*, *Dokra Art*, *Godna Art*, *Kalamkari Painting*, *Kalighat Painting*, *Kavad Art*, Mural Painting, *Madhubani Art*, *Mandala Art*, *Mandana Painting*, *Pattachitra*, *Phad Painting*, *Pichwai Painting*, *Sanjhi Art*, *Warli Painting* and many more. Folk arts of India are very important part of its philosophies and identities; because folk arts are connected with the spiritual nature of human's lives. The Indian folk arts are visual phenomena which have unique definition with beautiful aesthetic qualities. The folk arts are passed down from one generation to another without changing its cultural and traditional vibrancy, that is why Indian folk arts are still alive and these are successfully taught informally. Folk arts are not just expressions of artists, also a way to portray their stories, memories, values, and beliefs. Folk arts of India are very ethnic, simple, vibrant, and colourful in nature [Rossi \(1998\)](#).

## 2. OBJECTIVES

- To know about the historical background of Rajasthani folk arts.
- To study the complementing relationship between folk arts and human beings.
- To understand different stories, memories, values, and beliefs, which are part and parcel of folk arts.
- To discuss the popularity of *Mandana* among the village women and its acceptance among the people of urbans.
- To analyze the legacy of *Pichwai* painting and its contemporary aspects.
- To study different features of *Kavadas* as well as collaborative activates of *Suthar*, *Chitrakar* and *Kavadia Bhat*.
- To discuss the elements which are enriching the aesthetic and visual qualities of *Mandana*, *Pichwai* and *Kavad*.

## 3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are collected from traditional artisans by personal interviews and observation of art works in actual sites. Observational method is critically use for this research paper to collect primary data. In this research paper observation method is used as a scientific tool. The information and visuals which are collected from this method helps to relates with what is currently happening in folk arts and specially in *Mandana*, *Pichwai* and *Kavad*. Simultaneously, secondary sources are numerous books, internet, journals, and unpublished data. Before, taking information for this research paper a minute scrutiny done on all secondary sources and then adequate data are taken in the contexts of this research paper. The

scientific interpretation of all data leads towards new avenues of intellectual adventure and also explored the real significance of this research paper on folk arts. These all process of methodology helps to articulate this research paper in a proper manner and make this paper more scientific.

#### 4. MANDANA: AN OLDEST FORM OF FOLK ART

In Indian art, culture and tradition, Rajasthan stands as the most colourful and breath-taking state with its various art forms and unique culture. In Rajasthan the oldest form of folk art is known as *Mandana*, which is continued over the ages. *Mandana* is mostly depicted in Rajasthan by the women of the oldest tribal community, which is known as Meenas. *Mandana* is depicted on walls and floors of houses. *Mandana* is done at the entrance of the houses as a way to prevent evil and welcome the blessings of deities into the home. In Indian culture it is believed that making *mandana* is a decorative attribute. In India *mandana* is seen on major occasions and events and it has religious and auspicious significance. Such occasions and events are religious worships (Goddess *Lakshmi* on Diwali, *Dev Probodhini Ekadasi*), different festivals (Diwali, Holi, Navratri), auspicious days in the human life (for instance birth or marriage) and vows (Marriage, *Ganguar*, *Karva Chauth*). *Mandana* is derived from the word *Mandan* which means decoration and beautification of houses in Rajasthan. This folk art is done predominantly by women, in India usually it is woman's social role to take care of the house and the family's wellbeing. *Mandana* is a traditional art, and it is not passed on through any formal training. Previously it was not recognized as a discipline but now changes are happening and *mandana* has special significance in Indian folk arts. Girls learn this art by observing their mothers and grandmothers. *Mandana* is seen as a skill that has connected women over generations. It is seen that *mandana* is pursued by females of a family. This form of art does not require any training in the schools and the colleges. In India *mandana* has an oral tradition and it can be learned practically only by emulation [Sharma \(2007\)](#).

Over the decades *mandana* that has adorned mud houses, now the mud houses are replaced by concrete houses and cemented floors. *Mandana* is a type of folk art which is popular among the village women and now this art is adopted by the people of urbans. *Mandana* is a simplistic form of painting which is very attractive in Indian folk arts. The materials which are used in making *mandana* are the natural materials which are eco-friendly and not so expensive [Sharma \(2011\)](#). The drawings of *mandana* are very simple and which doesn't follow any set principles for perspective and proportion. Now a days, chalk is used to draw the basic drawings of the *mandana* [Rahman \(2020\)](#).

There is some process to draw and paint the *mandana*. First of all, the walls and floors are coated with mud and cow dunk, then motifs are drawn onto the walls and floors. Once the motifs are made, then they are filled with colors. Fillings of the motifs are more painterly, and these are done without pre-planning. The color scheme of *mandana* is very simple, that are *khadiya* (white color) and *geru* (red color). Specifically, these colors are chosen, because these are merely accessible in the natural surroundings. The brushes which are used for *mandana* are made out of twigs, cotton and cloth. The surface for *mandana* is typically the mixture of cow dung with some amount of red soil. The elements which enrich the aesthetic quality of *mandana* are predominantly flowers, leaves, floral patterns, birds, animals, and geometric shapes. These are some very common motifs used in *mandana*, these motifs have aesthetical significance. All motifs and their shapes have different interpretation and identity. For instance, *Rath* (Chariot) of Goddess *Lakshmi*

signifies as wealth, *Bandarwal* significance as door *toran*, *Bajot* as wooden *chowki* for worship in Rajasthan, *Panihari* means women who fetch water, *Paglia* is interpreted as footprints, four petalled flower *mandana*, eight petalled flower *mandana*, threshold *mandana* made on floor as a symbol of rituals, these signifies happiness and prosperity. Different motifs of birds and animals are considered auspicious in *mandana*. The most important motif found on the walls is peacock, which signifies the protective energies, power, strength, confidence, and divinity. Other motifs found on walls, such as camel symbolize journey and wisdom, baboon indicates communication, elephant shows luck and prosperity, horse represents determination, peahen characterize beauty, train denotes depth, airplane signifies connectivity and flowerpot suggest happiness. All these motifs used in *mandana* have social and aesthetical connection with traditions and beliefs of Rajasthani culture. On some occasions such as Diwali, Holi and Navratri, the entrance of the house decorates with *saathiya* (Swastik), nariyal (Coconut) and *kalash* (Pitcher), a pot filled with water and coconut with mango leaves on top of it. *Mandana* is made with the combination of simplicity and beauty. Along with these traditional surfaces, *mandana* is now practises on canvas and marble floors. So, the existence of *mandana* is inspiring many artists and designers in contemporary times in many ways. For instance, designers are adapting motifs from *mandana* and using in different things like clothes, bags, shoes, and other items. The traditional *mandana* designs are increasing and trendy day by day. So now *mandana* is surviving with the flavour of tradition and contemporary both [Pal \(1984\)](#).

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Traditional Mandana by Shanti

Source (Courtesy of the Artist)

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Traditional Mandana by Shanti

Source (Courtesy of the Artist)

## 5. PICHWAI: A RELIGIOUS CLOTH PAINTING

*Pichwai* is another form of folk-art of Rajasthan surviving with its traditional vibrancy and beauty. The *pichwai* painting was originated over four hundred years ago at Nathdwara situated near Udaipur, Rajasthan, India. The term *pichwai* originated from 'pichh', means back and 'wai' means textile hanging. *Pichwai* is a religious cloth painting that is hang behind the idols in the shrines. *Pichwai* illustrate the story of Shrinath Ji, another form of Lord Krishna, holding the Govardhan hill. In *pichwai* the representation of Lord Krishna done in the form of Shrinath Ji, which is the deity manifest as seven-years-old child. There is a charming history attached with *pichwai*. The people of Vrindavan were saved by Lord Krishna when they confronted the fury of Lord Indra in the form of heavy thunderstorms and rains. At that time, Krishna picked up Govardhan *parvat* on his little finger for the people of Vrindavan, where all the people took shelter. After seeing all this Lord Indra realized his mistake and stopped the tribulation. Since that time people started worshipping Govardhan Hill. This art is intricate and visually stunning, the procedure of making a traditional *pichwai*, it takes some weeks and some time it can even stretch to months to complete and also requires massive skills because of the smallest details needed to be painted with accuracy. The themes which are popularly painted in *pichwai* paintings are Radha-Krishna, *Gopis*, Cows, Lotuses. The festivals and celebrations such as *Holi*, *Sharad Purnima*, *Nand Mahotsav*, *Govardhan Puja*, *Raas Leela*, *Janmashtami* and *Gopashtami* Lyons (2004).

*Pichwai* has twenty-four boxes around it, typically which is called *Swaroops*. These has a Krishna, *Gopis* and several other elements on each of them. In the *pichwai* painting the intricate *Shringar* of Shrinath Ji is visually appealing. In a *pichwai* painting so much happens, yet it doesn't feel crowded in any manner. *Pichwai* painting is a sheer example of aesthetic balance and beauty. The vibrancy of colours and detailed depictions are the strength of *pichwai*. Originally *pichwai* paintings were done on the handspun starched cotton fabric, but now the surface on which *pichwai* paintings are made is mostly on paper (Sharma, M. D. personal communication, 2022, March 13).

To start a *pichwai* painting the artists have to start sketches of events or stories on cloth or paper which they want to paint. Afterwards very decorative and beautiful images are composed according to need or demand of that particular event or story. When sketches are ready, then they start to paint with organic and natural colours with natural brushes. Earlier natural colours were very difficult to collect. These natural colours were obtained from different natural sources like gold, silver, coals, indigo, saffron, zinc, and other natural sources. In *pichwai* paintings mostly bright and strong colours like yellow, green, black, and red are used and the ornaments are painted with gold in form of colour. The outlines or borders of *pichwai* paintings are enriched with crystals elements and different ornamental elements. In *pichwai* paintings while depicting image of Shreenath Ji, give distinct features to Shreenath Ji like, large eyes, a big nose and fat belly. The distinct features and expressions of the Shreenath Ji's face release the pleasing and gives divine feelings. Therefore, in *pichwai* paintings one can easily see how much time and affords has been put in making, considering the details and the enormity Bachrach (2020).

*Pichwai* paintings are traditionally used for religious purposes like adorning the walls of temples or as decorations pieces in temple chariots. To narrate tales of Krishna is another purpose of *pichwai*. The *pichwai* serves as more than a mere backdrop in the temples, it has an interacting and altering meaning to the viewers.

The *pichwai* is changed in temples time to time to reflect the seasons as well as the festivals. In *pichwai*, the depiction of the *Annakut Utsav* is a popular subject for paint. On the occasion of *Annakut* the *pichwai* of Nathdwara is made by heavily jewelled. Previously the *pichwai* paintings were given as gift by the high ranked 'Goswami' priests. Now a day's artists have begun making smaller pieces and started working with acrylic paints. Now a day's artists are using acrylic colours, which allow their works to fall within a more affordable price range and thus encourages their sale to tourists and art collectors [Krishna & Talwar \(2020\)](#).

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Traditional Pichwai Artist Murli Das Sharma with his Works (Nathdwara, Rajasthan)  
Source (Shanti)

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Traditional Pichwai Paintings of Shrinath Ji by Murli Das Sharma (Nathdwara, Rajasthan)  
Source (Shanti)

*Pichwai* paintings were traditionally expansive because these were hung behind the deity in temples. As the time passed the size of these paintings started reducing. The colours used in *pichwai* are no longer pure organic because now acrylic colours are being used in *pichwai*. Artists are now using either synthetic or the mixture of synthetic and natural colours due to the lack of budget and time constraints and the unavailability of natural colours. Likely, at the place of handspun cloth the alternative is also used such as paper. Today, the *pichwai* paintings belongs everywhere to everyone. Previously the *pichwai* was hung in temples but now because of their beauty and brilliance, *pichwai* is now also hung on house walls and other places. At present, the artists are making paintings in smaller sizes and earning their livelihood by selling their art works to national and international buyers [Gangopadhyay \(2018\)](#).

## 6. KAVAD: A STORY-TELLING DEVICE

Another form of folk art known as *Kavad* which is very famous in the state of Rajasthan. The essential features of *Kavad* are colourful patterns, elaborate designs, the presence of religious and mystical elements. The *Kavad* has a long history date back to four hundred years ago. The community known as Kumawats, started this age-old tradition of the *Kavad* Art. In Rajasthan, the traditional *Kavad* is made in a village called Bassi which is situated in Chittorgarh district of Rajasthan, India. The *Kavad* is an art form which also a story-telling device which sometimes helps as a temporary temple for the people. The term *Kavad* derived from the word *Kivad*, with an obvious response to its form. *Kavad* is an art which need collective activities of *Suthar*, *Chitrakar* and *Kavadia Bhat*, they are popularly known as carpenter (*Suthar*), painter (*Chitrakar*), and storyteller (*Kavadia Bhat*). The *Kavad* has several wooden panels those are hanged together, painted with beautiful scenes from the stories and the outermost panels is usually painted as the guardians of the story painted on them. The *Bhat* opens each panel and narrates the story with the help of images depicted in *Kavad*. The opening and closing of all the folds also tell a story, at a point when all the panels are open it reveals the shrine, where the image of the main deity is placed. For the viewer it is like an audio-visual journey [Sabnani \(2014\)](#).

The *Kavad* is painted by the mineral colours and its base colour is given to wooden structure, the outlines of the figures are done by using a fine brush. The *Kavad* paintings were originally done with red background. Nowadays changes are taking place, so *Kavad* are made to suit a variety of tastes of the consumer. The smaller panels of *Kavads* are painted directly on the wooden surface with colourful figures. In the *Kavads*, the process of colours application is done layer by layer on a panel, each of the layer add depths and details to the *Kavads* [Talatule \(2018\)](#).

This journey of *Kavad* is based on Ramayan, Mahabharata, folktales and regularly happening in our surroundings. A *Kavadia Bhat* opens the doors of *kavad* in sequence and narrates stories to the audience. For instance:

At the front door Jai and Vijay appears as gatekeepers of abode of Vishnu, took incarnation as Naland Neel to help lord Rama. After that the back portion of front door and its right part shows Moon God on his deer chariot and the Sage as well as general public worshipping Lord Vishnu. The left part shows Sun God on his horse driven chariot and the Sage and devotees of Vishnu. At the centre of the *kavad*, Lord Vishnu is lying on the Sheshnaag and Goddess Laxmi is soothing his legs and Brahma is in lotus flower has shown. The devotees of Shiva are worshipping Shiva Lingum just below the Lord Vishnu is nicely depicted. When the centre panel, where Lord Vishnu is lying further opens on the back portion of its left side four different events are depicted, the first event is shows as one elephant is trying to wake up Kumbh

Karna demon, the second is represented Lord Hanuman is at Ashok vatika in Lanka, approaching to Sita, the third event has shown Lord Rama and Laxmana are fighting with Demon Ravana and the fourth story highlights the marriage ceremony of Rama and Sita. Again, in the front side of same part there are six different narrations, first King Dashrath with his three queens, there Rama is ordered to exile for 14 years in jungle, next Sage Vishwanitra is performing *yagya* (prayer) and Rama and Laxmana are killing demons, who are interpreting the *yagya* and the third narration represents *Sawrn-Pankha* (Golden feathers) was the name of Ravana's sister, she was immensely beautiful, approaching Rama and Laxmana to seduce them. The fourth event shows Ahilyais released from her curse, when Lord Rama's foot brushed against her stone formed body. Gradually fifth story highlights Rama and Sita meet each other first time in the Royal Garden. Last scene signifies Rama is praising Brahmin warrior Parshurama, sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

At the back side of right door, different stories of Krishna are depicted, in the first Krishna is dancing on the head of black serpent Kalia. In the second, baby Krishna is doing activities while lying on betel leaf. In the last story Shree Krishna met the Pandavas (Dharmaraja, Bhim, Arjuna, Nakul and Sahadeva). On the back side of same door, again there are three stories from Mahabharata. First one shows Vasudeva with baby Krishna is crossing Yamuna River, the second depicts baby Krishna is killing demon Putna. The last story describes God Krishna steal butter from the houses of the *Gopikas*.

In the front side of right door, five stories are depicted one by one. First story depicted white coloured temple of Badrinathji (Lord Vishnu) and his statue, there devotees are worshipping. In the second king Bhagirath brought Ganga River to earth from heaven. Third event represents spiritual metaphor, where Krishna steals and hides the clothes of Gopies (female devotees of Krishna) who were bathing in a water. The fourth story signifies Lord Vishnu took incarnation as Narasimha (half man and half lion) to eliminate the demon king Hiranyakashipu and save his devotee Prahlada. The last fifth story depicted Shree Krishna lift up Govardhan hill.

At the upper portions of final door, all the events show people, sages and saints are in a posture of worshipping. Inside the Garbhagriha (Sanctum sanctorum), when the final door is opened it reveals three supreme deities, Rama in middle, Sita on right and Laxmana on left (Suthar, S. personal communication, 2022, March 12).

The main attraction of *Kavad* is the story and style of the painting. This art style begins much later in period, *Kavad* began to be appreciated and also seen as art pieces and artists started putting more and more effort into improving the quality of lines and colours. In the *Kavad* final touch is given by black outline which brings a flat figure to life. Rajasthan is home of this art and has been producing this art for many decades as a way to tell the history of Indian epic stories to the people. These wooden panels in the *Kavad* are interlinked to each other and open and close just like a puzzle. The wood often used to create wooden boxes for *Kavad* art are neem wood which hardly rotten, *Neem* wood are used to make the artwork to survive through ages. Other than *Neem*, *Semal* and Mango wood is also used. During the past years when there were no schools, *Kavadi* people of Rajasthan started making these wooden temple boxes with stories and started travelling from village to village to narrate story painted in the *Kavad* Goyal (2021).



**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Traditional Kavadi Artist Satyanarayan Suthar with his Work (Bassi, Rajasthan)  
Source (Shanti)

**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** Traditional Kavadi by Satyanarayan Suthar (Bassi, Rajasthan)  
Source (Shanti)

## 7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Origin of folk arts came into existence with the civilization, it can be said that art has continued with the mankind as a companion from its being. Folk arts are born from the soul of people. The development of folk arts came into existence with the activities of both men and women. India folk arts progress with creative freedom and uniqueness. India has exclusive collections of folk arts and Indian folk arts are visual phenomena with beautiful aesthetic qualities. In Indian tradition, Rajasthan stands with its various art forms and unique culture. The *mandana* of Rajasthan is inspiring many artists and designers in contemporary times. They are using motifs of *mandana* in different things like clothes, bags, and shoes. Thus, *mandana* is surviving with the flavour of tradition and contemporary both. *Pichwai* of Rajasthan previously hung in temples only, now because of its aesthetic significance, *pichwai* is also hung on house walls and other places. Therefore, traditional artists are getting better prospect for their livelihood. The main attraction of *Kavad* is the story and collaborative efforts of *Suthar*, *Chitrakar* and *Kavadia Bhat*. Rajasthan is home of this art and has been producing this art form to tell the history of Indian epic stories.

To understand folk arts and their aesthetics, small museums and libraries are very essential to each area of Rajasthan which are known for folk arts. *Mandana*, *Pichwai* and *Kavad* have great socio-cultural impact in terms of encouraging young generations for self-reliance as well as providing them chance to connect with old traditions. To encourage folk arts among the new generations in large scale, it is time to introduce folk arts as compulsory subjects from school to university level. This initiative will enhance the aesthetical engagement, knowledge of entrepreneurship, provide chance to face real-life situations and most important it will also offer a large platform to artisans. Many government agencies and NGOs are working on various issues of folk arts regularly. Through this research paper, it appeals to all enthusiast to come forward and rethink for the development of folk arts of Rajasthan as well as India. This can only be possible through regular seminars, conferences, workshops, and publications in different languages, so it can reach out to more readers.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The people of India are enriched with different folk arts. In folk arts, relationship of memory and imagination is very close. Creation played an important part in folk arts, where it invokes memory and imagination. Folk arts are very important for the Indian culture and identity, and they are directly connected to the people. The folk arts are the most original art works which are born out of the soul of people. Folk arts are mainly made for two purposes, such as applied and decorative. The folk arts are playing to enhance aesthetic sensibilities among the people and also playing a vital role in the growth of Indian economy. In India, Rajasthan is known for its various oldest form of folk arts, among them *Mandana*, *Pichwai* and *Kavad* are very special significance and great socio-cultural impact. These folk arts of Rajasthan are affected by many critical situations in time to time and these situations are affected its prominence. These folk arts are continuously encouraged by the several artists and art lovers, they are trying to maintain its traditional legacy. To make folk arts more prominent in today's context, art enthusiasts have also contemporized these art forms in many ways with traditional touches. Folk arts are always helpful to know about historical phenomena and

treated as historical visual documentations. Folk arts of Rajasthan are preserving rich cultural heritage related to religions, rituals, and customs. This research paper is a small effort to showcase various aspects of *Mandana*, *Pichwai* and *Kavad* of Rajasthan.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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