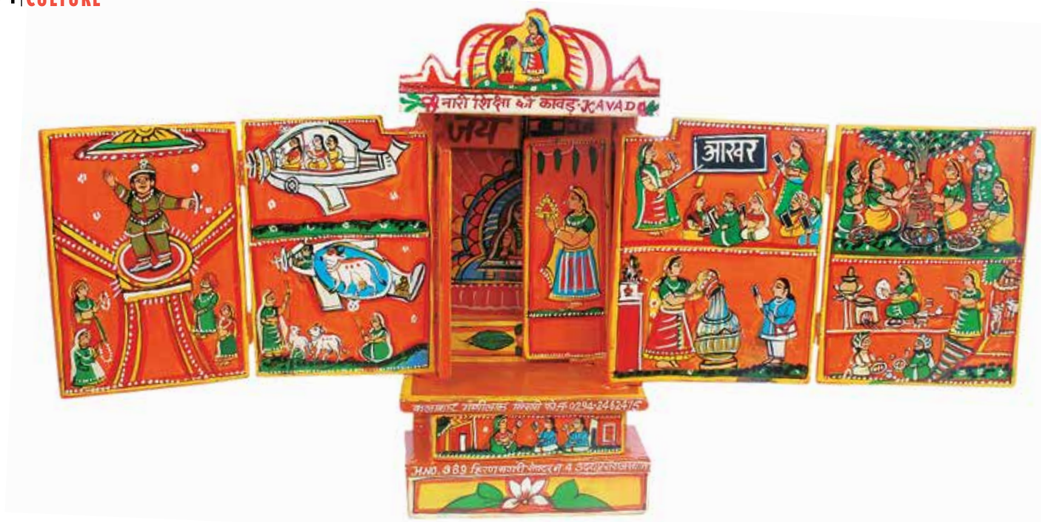

A VICARIOUS PILGRIMAGE

MARWAR traces the journey of the little-known, pictorial storytelling tradition of kaavad over the years, and the creative communities that make and read these portable shrines while colouring them in their own distinct hues of heritage and culture.

Text ✲ **Pooja Mujumdar**
Image courtesy ✲ ***Kaavad Tradition of Rajasthan***

THE VILLAGE IS TUCKED AWAY ON the edge of the Thar Desert, looming out of the dust in an area several miles away from any source of water. The thick-walled huts with their low, conical, thatched roofs are set apart from each other, individually surrounded by open courtyards. In the corner of a courtyard, a group of villagers are sitting in a circle around a man dressed in a white dhoti-kurta, his head adorned with a *bandhani* turban. In his hands is a wooden box called a *kaavad*, painted a bright red and constructed like a shrine with secret compartments and panels that unfold to reveal a pantheon of Hindu deities. It seems that he is telling a story, his manner gentle and unflappable, and the audience listens raptly as he points at the images with a peacock feather. The villagers are sitting with their hands folded and their heads bowed, and as the story progresses, they chant '*Jai ho*!' several times.

The speaker, held in the same esteem as a priest, is a storyteller from the Marwar region of Rajasthan, who has journeyed with the box to the home of his *jajmans* (or patrons) in this village to recite their genealogies and regale them with the stories of the gods and goddesses painted on the shrine. "The *kaavad* is equated to the sacred Bhagavad Gita, and it is believed that listening to the stories purifies the soul and reserves entry for the devotee in heaven," shares Nina Sabnani, associate professor at the Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay and author of the book, *Kaavad Tradition of Rajasthan*. She further adds, "The *kaavad* recitation or *baanchana* (in Marwari) is similar to performance-based storytelling forms from Rajasthan such as *kathputli* (a string puppet theatre) and *phad*. The storyteller visits each patron's house at least once every two to three years, narrating stories of hardships and hurdles as well as tales of community bonding, charity and worship."

Tracing the origin of *kaavad*

While *kaavad* storytelling is a recondite tradition, its origin can be traced back to nearly 400 years. Sabnani mentions that the emergence of *kaavad* may be attributed to the desert terrain of the state; the sand dunes of western Rajasthan and the rugged Aravalli range that runs from the northeast to the southwest of the state would have made it difficult to build temples. A firmly entrenched system of caste and race would have led to discrimination in gaining entry to the temples, banning many from offering their respects to the deities. "Conceptualised on the lines of a Hindu temple, the *kaavad* would have become a portable shrine for devotees who could not make a pilgrimage," says Sabnani.

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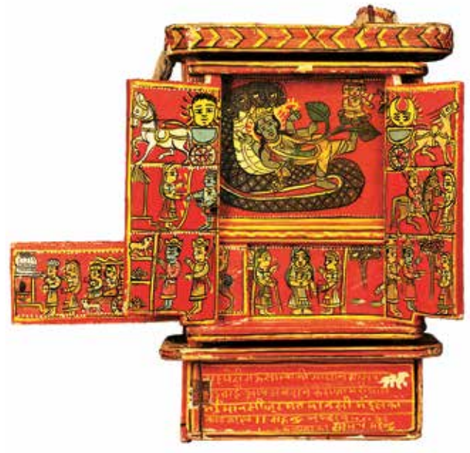


Clockwise from right: The kaavad, when partially open; A contemporary kaavad designed by kaavad-maker, Mangilal Mistry, to promote education for girls; The kaavad is kept wrapped in a cloth to protect it from negative energies

Mangilal Mistry, 71, a *kaavad*-maker based out of Udaipur learnt the craft when he was 15 years old. He believes that the art originated during the reign of Raja Vikramaditya of Ujjain. The king was enormously fond of puppets and may have patronised pictorial and performance-based tradition of storytelling, which then would have traversed across the border into Rajasthan.

Chalking the anatomy of the *kaavad*

According to Sabnani, the traditional *kaavad* is usually 12 inches tall with 10, 12 or 16 panels or *paats*, but Mangilal Mistry claims to have made 108 variants of the portable shrine. "The smallest *kaavad* can be as small as a matchstick, while the biggest one I have made is eight feet tall and 20 feet

Above: Mangilal Mistry with wife Sayar Devi at their workshop in Udaipur

Below: Storyteller Pappuram Rav demonstrating his skills in front of his patrons

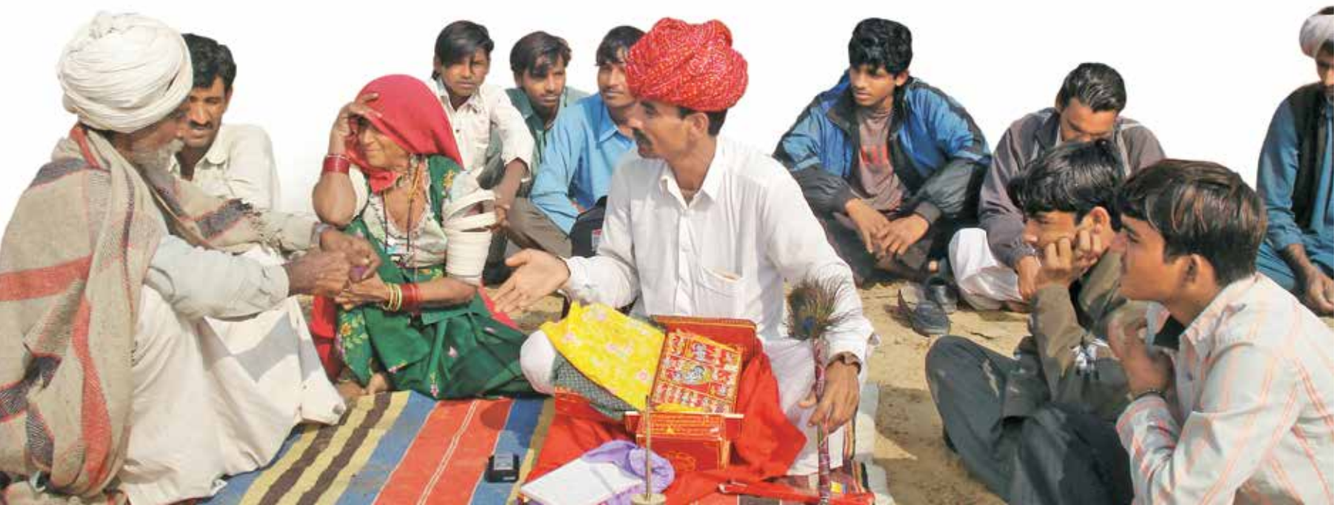
long when all the panels are opened out. It has been kept at the Sanskriti Kendra at the museum at Bagore-ki-Haveli in Udaipur," he says. Mistry also makes *kaavads* depicting Mahavir and Christ as well as those that focus on themes like family planning, saving money and educating the girl child.

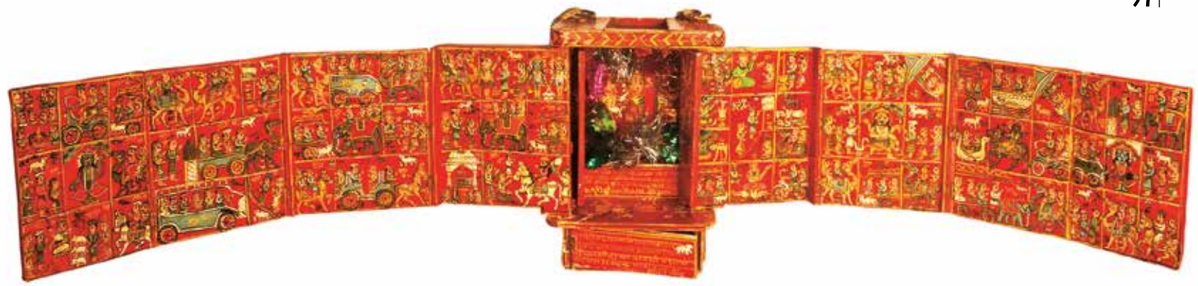
A closer look at *kaavad* reveals paintings of Hindu gods and goddesses as well as monarchs and saints riding cars, planes, carts, bicycles and even camels, horses and elephants. The figures have no context of time or space and often look similar to each other. A yellow line is drawn around all the frames, dividing it into grids. When asked about the process of making a *kaavad*, Mistry reveals, "The core structure is carved first from *sangwan* wood and then the individual panels are made and fixed with hinges. The paint is made at home by crushing coloured stones and mixing them with resin. However, apart from the customary red, I also make and use other colours like green, yellow and black."

Kaavad-making may be the hereditary occupation of the Basayati Suthar community of Bassi in Rajasthan's Chittorgarh district, but Sabnani reveals that of the 25 families of Suthars residing in the area, only six continue to make the portable shrine today. Mistry also hails from Bassi and so does the family of Satyanarayan Suthar, 41, who has his own *kaavad* workshop there. Suthar is always willing to experiment when it comes to his designs and says, "Some time back, I made a five-feet-high *kaavad* for the Dastkari Haat Samiti in New Delhi; while it looks like a *kaavad* from the outside, it is actually a cupboard with drawers."

The teller of tales

The storytellers live in villages around Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Nagaur and Barmer, and claim Rajput origins. *Kaavad* recitation is a craft handed down from father to son, and Pappuram Rav, 32, and his brothers inherited 200 patrons each from their father, Bansilal Rav. Pappuram belongs to Kumhara, a village 90 km away from Jodhpur, and reveals that his family has been reciting the *kaavad* for more than 200 years. He learnt the craft from his father when he was 13 years old and would often recite for a patron under his father's supervision. He shares, "My 13-year-old son Manphool started learning the stories and genealogies of my patrons in 2009 and gave his first performance in 2010. The patrons are now aware that he is my son, and this will help him to seek their patronage and carry on with the profession when I retire."





"*Kaavad baanchana* takes place only from November, shortly after Diwali, and goes on till the month of March, ending before the onset of the Holi festival. In the remaining months, we work in the fields or earn money as labourers," says Pappuram. In those four months, he travels with his family and goats from place to place, setting up camp on the outskirts of the village they are visiting. He shares, "The number of days we spend in a village depends upon the number of patrons I have there. Reciting the *kaavad* for *jajmans* in a small village may take two days, while meeting those residing in a bigger village may require even five days." He visits three to four patrons a day.

The ritual of *kaavad*

In those four months, Pappuram and his son, Manphool, can set out as early as 7 am for his patrons' houses. He carries along the *kaavad* and a *bahi khata* that contains the records of the patrons, wrapped in a red cloth, which he believes helps ward off negative energies. Before beginning the recitation, a purification ritual takes place, and Sabnani explains, "The storyteller brushes the outer doors of the *kaavad* with a peacock feather to ward off evil. He will then light a bunch of incense sticks and place it before the *kaavad*."

I ask Pappuram about stories from Indian mythology that storytellers recite, and he shares, "My patrons are usually from the Jat, Mali and Suthar communities; a popular story that they ask me to recite is that of Shravan Kumar, who appears in the epic of Ramayana." Shravan Kumar was an obedient son of his blind and crippled parents. When his parents wished to visit various sites of Hindu pilgrimage, he carried them on his shoulders in two baskets suspended from a pole. "And it is this remarkable service to his parents that earned him a place in history," says Pappuram, adding, "Another myth close to the patrons' hearts is that of Satyavadi Raja Harischandra, a king in the *treta* yuga who was known all over the world for being truthful and charitable."

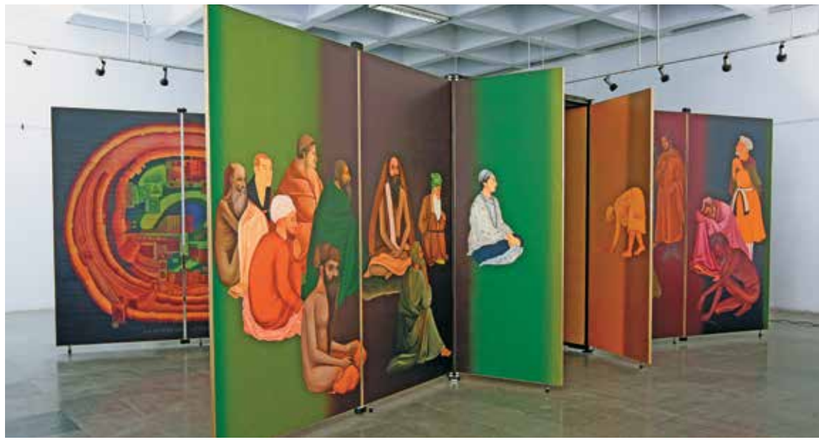
The *kaavad* is not simply a virtual pilgrimage or a sacred shrine—the narrator also uses verse and prose to narrate genealogies of his patrons. He will point at a particular image, identify the patron's ancestor, and then proceed to sing praises of his devotion and the notable donations he had made to the shrine.

He also maintains family records, and after the recitation concludes, Pappuram writes down the names of children born since his last visit, and makes a note of marriages that have taken place recently in the patron's family—writing down the name of the bride, her parents and the village she hails from.

Sustaining the tradition

Donations from patrons have helped *kaavad* survive through the generations, and Pappuram mentions that depending on his financial status, a patron donates a sum ranging anywhere from ₹100 to 2,000, as well as cattle, silver and gold. The storyteller also receives donations when patrons request to have their relatives' pictures painted on the shrine—something that requires the storyteller to sit down with the *kaavad*-maker who guides him along the way.

So what is the significance of this tradition? "The patrons belong to the 36 castes or jatis that were originally all Rajput. For them, the *kaavad* signifies social inclusion," signs off Sabnani. ✲



Right: A 34-panelled installation designed on the lines of the kaavad by well-known painter, poet and educator, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh
Above: A fully-open kaavad in all its glory