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## Raghupathi Bhatta: Reviving a Dying Art

### **Abstract**

Raghupathi Bhatta of Mysore, one of India's most promising traditional artists, hails from a family of South-Indian Pandits (Brahmin priests). It was in the ancient town of Nagamangala, seventy kilometers from Mysore, that his artistic imagination was fired. First, by the exquisite details of Hoysala craftsmanship in the temples there, and then, by the beautiful nineteenth-century playing cards of the Mysore Maharaja, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV. He began his artistic career by learning Ganjifa, the delicate art on these tiny playing cards. But there were no gurus in the family from whom he could learn this centuries-old craft which had fascinated him since he was a child. To quote Bhatta: 'In the early seventies, I bought a few Ganjifa paintings from the Mysore Palace. Since then, it's grown into an obsession and I've lived for, and by Ganjifa, collecting as much information as I could, including old photographs and cards from all over India and Nepal'.

JUNE GAUR

## Raghupathi Bhatta: Reviving a Dying Art

Raghupathi Bhatta of Mysore, one of India's most promising traditional artists, hails from a family of South-Indian *Pandits* (Brahmin priests). It was in the ancient town of Nagamangala, seventy kilometers from Mysore, that his artistic imagination was fired. First, by the exquisite details of Hoysala craftsmanship in the temples there, and then, by the beautiful nineteenth-century playing cards of the Mysore Maharaja, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV. He began his artistic career by learning *Ganjifa*, the delicate art on these tiny playing cards. But there were no gurus in the family from whom he could learn this centuries-old craft which had fascinated him since he was a child. To quote Bhatta: 'In the early seventies, I bought a few *Ganjifa* paintings from the Mysore Palace. Since then, it's grown into an obsession and I've lived for, and by *Ganjifa*, collecting as much information as I could, including old photographs and cards from all over India and Nepal'.

To capture the real meaning of this delicate art, Bhatta spent time researching materials at Melkote and Srirangapatna. At Nagamangala, he was able to trace the family of a traditional painter from whose work he painstakingly taught himself, imbibing the technique of centuries through a slow process of discovery. And when he finally settled down to re-creating the intricate work of the nineteenth-century card-makers in his modest studio, Raghupathi was glad he'd had a chance to learn the traditional Mysore style from an established Master — M.S. Nanjunda Rao, at the *Chittrakala Parishat* in Bangalore.

Raghupathi Bhatta brings a fresh and original approach to the traditional art of *Ganjifa*. His cards, or *chadas* as they are called in Karnataka, are very distinctive. Oval-shaped, and with a diameter of about seven centimetres, the tiny discs are cut to the required size from strips of cotton cloth pasted onto several layers of paper glued together. The cloth is given a priming of rice gruel (*ganji*) followed by a coating of white clay to toughen it and extend the life of the painting. The background is then filled in, using vegetable pigments bound with glue. And finally, the principle figures are drawn in with deft strokes, using fine brushes made from squirrels' tails.

Bhatta's pioneering efforts to infuse new life into *Ganjifa* won him the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya Vishwakarma award in 1992. In the same year, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan sponsored a one-man show of his paintings in London. In 1995, he won the National Master Craftsman Award (conferred by the President of India). In 1994, he was back in England's capital at the Victoria and Albert

Museum, courtesy of Art in Action, Oxford, demonstrating his intricate work to a wonder-struck audience. Subsequently, he has held oversea exhibitions in the USA and Tunisia (1997), Germany (1998) and Japan (December 2000).

Raghupathi's miniature paintings show the same attention to detail, complex iconography and sense of wonder that characterise his *ganjifa* paintings. These superb paintings done in splendid colours on wafer-thin slivers of sandalwood and tiny paper discs are inspired by Bhatta's profound knowledge of the *Shastras* or Hindu religious and philosophical texts, his own devout lifestyle and the history of Karnataka. The tender language of line and colour through which they communicate, is inspired by the browns and greens of the forests around Bhatta's native place at the foothills of the Western Ghats, by Bhatta's own experience of the secret life of the jungle, the rustle of leaves, the murmur of a mountain stream, the music of birds and insects.

Bhatta draws on epic themes that have stirred the imagination of both ordinary people and artists for centuries now — the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The *piece de resistance* of his oeuvre is the set of *Ganjifa Ramayana* cards he was commissioned to create for the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1992. A series of sixty paintings depicting the life of Ram in narrative sequence, the cards have a fresco-like composition.

In his new works, Raghupathi has been inspired by the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Dhammapadha* and by classical ayurvedic philosophy. These splendid miniatures are done in vibrant vegetable colours and finished with a natural varnish. Paintings with an embossed effect incorporate sandal-wood paste, and some are done with gold leaf. The figure seem to melt away into the background and at the same time to be quite tangible, with gesso work accentuating their outlines in some places.

Should you drop by on a week day at Raghupathi's cottage in Mysore, you will find him seated cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by enthusiastic students whom he is training in accordance with the *guru-shishya parampara* (the ancient teacher-student tradition). Raghupathi realises that today's traditional artists cannot be complacent, saddled as they are with the awesome responsibility of saving their art from extinction. 'We cannot afford to be mere imitators of our forefathers. If traditional art is to regain its lost glory, we must innovate,' he says. So, while he works within a framework that is still clearly traditional in nature, Bhatta, in his own way, continues to stretch the boundaries. As he continues to experiment and explore the well-springs of his own creativity in a way that is both unique and powerful, he re-affirms his traditional moorings.

It is a treat to watch him at work. With firm, rapid strokes, he outlines a figure over the ground colours. His line has all the rhythm and grace of the *chitrakars* (artists) of a century ago. A few strokes of the brush and a vision of another world, powerful and intensely spiritual, comes to life on the tiny disc. An entire heritage of thought, feeling and creativity crystallised in a few square centimetres of paper and cloth.

### GANJIFA – ‘THE GAME OF THE GODS’

*Ganjifa*, inspired by gods, demons, sages, courtly life, fauna and flora, is a unique art form struggling to survive in contemporary India, where there are few takers for traditional art. Derived from the Persian word *ganj* meaning ‘treasure’, *ganjifa* signifies playing cards in India, Nepal, Iran and some Arab countries. These traditional playing cards have a fascinating history that goes back several centuries.

The game was a favourite pastime of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, and his daughter Begum Gul Badan. According to the *Babarnama*, a chronicle of Babar’s times, the Emperor introduced the game to India in the summer of 1527 when he sent *ganjifa* cards as a gift to his friend Sindh. By the end of the sixteenth century, several different types of games had developed. In the *Ain-I-Akbari*, Akbar’s biographer, Abul Fazal, provides a carefully tabulated description of a new game Akbar had invented. This game of ninety-six cards with eight suits consisting of twelve cards each, remains the norm today, though no set has survived.

The first four suits of this eight-suited *Ganjifa* are the strong ones and are called *Bishbar*. These are the *Taj* or crown signifying the imperial court; *Safed* or white, representing silver coin; *Shamsha* or sabre, standing for the palace guard; and *Ghulam*, symbolising the emperor’s retinue. The last four are the *Kambar* or weak suits. These are *Chang*, a small stringed instrument representing the king’s entertainment; *Surkh* or *Suraj* (sun) also called *Kanchan* (gold) stood for a gold coin; *Barat* symbolised the imperial chancellery; while *Qimash* (Persian for goods and merchandise) represented the emperor’s stores.

The game spread to all corners of the Mughal Empire and came to be known as *Changakanch* in the west and *Changarani* in the south. In the east in Orissa even today, along the byways leading to the Jagannath temple at Puri, players while away the hours with a game of *Navagunjara*, the local name for the royal *Ganjifa*. Where Hindu deities have replaced the figures on the court cards, though the suit signs of the Mughal *Ganjifa* have been retained, the game is also known as *Ath-rangi*.

The Hinduisation of *Ganjifa* themes spawned a variety of new cards and games that spread among the ruling classes and commoners alike. The genesis of the *Dashavatara Ganjifa* that flourished in Nepal, Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka was one of them. Similar in structure and rules of play to the Mughal *Ganjifa*, the *Dashavatara* pack has ten suits — Matsya, Karma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Ramachandra, Balarama, Krishna and Kalki — each representing an *avator* of the Hindu god Vishnu.

Traditional *Ganjifas* include interesting variations such as the nine-suited, 108 card *Navagraha Ganjifa* with the nine planets presiding over each of the nine suits; the eight-suited *Ramayana* set; the eight-suited *Ashtadikpala Ganjifa* (the

eight guardians of the regions of the world): the *Rashi Ganjifas* featuring the Zodiac in twelve suits; the 144 card *Ramayana Ganjappa* of Sonepur in Orissa, where Rama and his allies hold sway over the first six suits and Ravana and his followers dominate the last six. There is also the hexagon-shaped, eight-suited ivory *Arundhati Ganjifa* and the *Sapta Rishis* (seven sages) set. With the Hindu pantheon so well-represented, *Ganjifa* also came to be known as *Devara Aata* or the Game of the Gods.

Among the most beautiful and intricate *ganjifa* cards are those known as *Chadas* that originated in Mysore in the early nineteenth century, during the reign of Krisharaja Wodeyar III. A great aficionado of the game, the Raja commissioned several artists to paint these *Chadas*. He also compiled an encyclopaedia in Kannada called *Shritathwanidhi* that describes thirteen different *Chada* games, some of which required packs of as many as 320 or 360 cards. One of these, named *Krishnaraja* after its royal inventor, is typically Mysorean in pictorial composition and has four suits, each consisting of eighteen cards commanded by Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma and Indra. The symbols on the suit of cards are specifically related to the Wodeyar dynasty — the *Ganda Bherund* or double-headed eagle (emblem of the dynasty), the *Jatayus* or vulture, the *Makara* or crocodile, the *Hathi* or elephant and the *Gaja virala* or lion, to name a few.

Since every card is a little masterpiece, hand-made and hand-painted, and every pack an original creation, it is difficult to speak of a standard pattern for *Ganjifa*. Traditional *ganjifa* cards are circular in shape with diameters ranging from 22 mm and 32 mm to 120 mm in the larger cards. The more ornate cards, called the *Durbar Kalams*, meant for the nobility, were crafted in exquisite detail on expensive materials such as ivory, tortoise shell, mother of pearl and enamelled precious metals. The less expensive *Bazaar kalams* were made from papier-mache, palm leaf, waste paper and cloth. Today *Ganjifas* are made from layers of paper and cloth glued together, starched and burnished.

*Ganjifa* has its own set of conventions. The game must be played with a used pack of cards arranged face down in the centre of a clean white rectangular piece of cloth. Usually only three players are required, but for multi-suited games, four or five players are admitted. Play moves in an anti-clockwise direction, the object being to make as many tricks as possible. There are no trumps and the player with the maximum number of cards, regardless of their value, is declared the winner.

On just a few centimetres of material, these cards provide a window into the past by means of their delicate, sensitive art. Mughal and *Dashavatara Ganjifa* are still played in some parts of India — under street lamps in Hyderabad, Bombay and in the environs of the Jagannath temple in Puri. But the craft itself is threatened with extinction despite valiant efforts by artists like Surajit Dutta of Bishnupur, Banamala Mahapatra of Puri, Raghupathi Bhatta of Mysore and connoisseurs like Kishore N. Ghorandas of Bombay to preserve these precious heirlooms and keep the tradition alive.