

THE CELESTIAL DEVIS DESCEND ON THE HOUSE OF SUKKAR MAHATO

From building the house, in this second part of the story of Sukkar Mahato's house, Peeyush Sekhsaria narrates the role of women in construction. Final finishes are given to the walls and they become the canvas for their fascinating age-old art of wall painting.

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1,3,5 & 6. you could be walking in one of the worlds art capitals with the late afternoon sun giving a orange glow and livestock returning from the forests.

2. Parvati Devi returned to her mother and brothers home, leaving her ex husband with his infidelities. She is one of the most well proponents of this unknown art and holds the authorship of this detailed courtyard.

4. The hands are that is needed to build these homes, plaster them and then paint them with this rich matriachal tapestry drawn from thousand of years of living heritage. The signatures of artists of the highest calibre.



The month of May leaves its mark, as the temperatures kept sizzlingly hot, Sukkar felt the heat even more this summer as he toiled away on his house extension. After two long and tiring months of hard work the last tiles are being put in place and the roof being secured. No hard earned vacations for Sukkar this year though, he has to now attack the preparation of his fields for the next crop, the house construction had kept him busy and he is slightly delayed.

It is time for the *Devis* of the house to take over. The fine task of plastering these solid mud walls is that of the dexterous hands of the married village women, *Devis* as they are called. They have not been waiting in the wings, as the end of the construction approached they had got themselves busy preparing the plaster mixes. With the brisk swipes of a broom (made out of the tough date palm leaf) the walls are cleaned of all dust and loose parts. The surfaces are roughened up. The walls are watered lightly and are ready to be plastered. Plaster is done in a minimum of two and often three coats. The principle is simple, the first coat is the base coat, relatively thick whose earth mix is finer than that used for the wall, but still very close allowing for good adhesion and cohesion of the plaster to the wall. The second coat is made of a finer mix, is thinner and starts to give the walls a well disciplined neat appearance. Often a third very fine plaster, in the form of a slurry coat, is applied to complete the plastering.

It is important that these coats follow this gradual progression (both in their mix and reducing thicknesses). Earth plasters allow the walls to breathe, which is essential to any building material but even more for earthen walls. Water climbs into these walls through capillary action during the monsoon. As the monsoons are over and the outside gets drier, the moisture from the walls is sucked out and the walls dry up. Despite their solidity it is the roof overhang and these finely done plasters that protect these walls from the furious rain, harsh sun, winds and even the activities of children and domestic animals.

The *Devis* are very good at their work and take no help or assistance from the men folk, apparently not even for the menial task of the transport of the earth. The earths for the plaster mixes are selected depending on the availability, requirement and economy. Sometimes soil is brought in from a distance and specially selected, this is more often the case for the final coats. The base coat is usually made from the same soil that has gone into the construction of the walls. Sometimes cow dung, straw and other organic material is added to the mix. Once all the ingredients are in place they are thoroughly mixed and kneaded and left to prepare. (The thorough kneading, mixing and *left to prepare* phase, that sounds rather casual could be equated to the proper and long enough soaking of chick peas of the *chana bhatura* fame and their actual fine cooking over a slow flame with all the *masalas*, oils, spices before they are ready to be eaten).



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This heavenly mix of earth is watered regularly to assure uniform moisture levels, because as mentioned earlier we are in the time right after the month of May. The same tough broom is dipped in water and used to moisten the wall in rapid swipes. The base coat is applied in confident and vigorous gestures of the bare hands. All gaps, fissures, cracks are filled out with care and the surface is evened out. The women work on the interior walls during the hot parts of the day and the exteriors in the late afternoon, when the sun is relatively more soft. Care is taken that the fresh plaster coat does not dry too rapidly for that will result in deep fissures and uneven adhesion.

The work is done in a group, married women of the family, joined by other married women of the village assisted by young girl apprentices. This is a rather important learning process where in young girls learn the skills from their mothers, that in turn have been handed down since ages in a matriarchal lineage. The women work rapidly, waiting for the first coat to dry before starting on the next.

The second coat fills up the fissures formed in the first, also allowing it to be keyed in properly. Within a week's time the entire new wing of Sukkar's house would have its three coats of plaster.

The *Devis'* work however has not finished yet, in a way it has just started. This finished plaster provides the canvas for their astonishing

Painted art. These are no mean artists for they have been practising an art of wall paintings that is in continuity to art found in 6,000 year old rock art sites in this region.

The art is practised at two times of the year, *Sohrai*, the harvest festival at the end of the winter and *Khovar*, the annual marriage period during the summer. The styles for both are different *Sohrai* is a painted art and is seen all over the house, where as *Khovar* which means bridegrooms cave is done in the interiors.

What I saw at Bhelwara during my work there was the *Sohrai* paintings. This is a purely matriarchal art form, where a girl learns the art and the motifs from her mother and carries them to her husband's house. Depending on the location of the village, if in a deep valley or in isolated hill forests the inspirations are different and you may find highly diverse art in the same joint family household coming from the matriarchal lineage of the married woman. Mr. Bulu Imam, who has studied this region extensively says that he can trace a woman's village of origin from the content and style of her art.

Paintings in isolated villages near jungle represent their close observations of wild life around them. Mr. Bulu Imam has found fine details of deers and goats feeding milk to their young ones, birds feeding fish and insects to their young ones, a peacock or mongoose fighting a snake, snakes fighting



7. Courtyards play many roles. In Bhelwara marriages are conducted in the courtyards and hence we still find a symbolic remnant of the same in the pucca houses.

Courtyards also become bare backyards, which still serve the function of drying, but do not have the charm of the courtyard of Parvati Devi's house.

8. The village post office, connects Bhelwara to large Indian metros, Delhi, Calcutta, Mumbai even Pune & Nashik and the world. The small fortune our friend Mangar Mahato earned in Libya was sent to Bhelwara regularly through the faithful money order. To do a socio - economic study of the village and the surrounding region, it is enough to get chatting with the post man.



themselves, a peahen breaking an egg and so on. In a village like Bhelwara which is far more connected to the modern world, with access to education, greater *sanskritisation* forms are more stylised and we can see an influence of the Hindu pantheon and also that of illustrations from school text books. I quote from Mr. Bulu Imam's works, " The women use chewed toothsticks (*datwan*) instead of brushes. They make a liquid pigment of three or four shades (red, white, black, yellow) in which they dip the *Kuchi* or *datwan* and make the painting, applying the liquid earth colours directly on the clay walls which immediately soak up the paint like a sponge. Sometimes cloth pieces are dipped in the colour as a brush. These are indigenous techniques. They do not mix up any binding agents such as lac, acacia glue, or rice water (*marh*). For this reason, after a heavy shower of rain, sometimes the painting itself washes off. The white is plain kaolin; yellow is a natural earth ochre; the black is a kind of manganese earth; the red is the natural red earth colour, or ground haematite stone (where it is found), the latter being popular among the *Ganjus*. All the colours are found close to the village except the white, which is dug out of a tunnel in the earth wherever it is found, (...) These sites are called *Chuna-Khaan*, where *Chuna* being the local name for white lime, and *Khaan* being a mine".

In Suzzane Gupta's film, "The One Eared Elephant of Hazaribagh" a woman artist explains in simple words her world of art, "I do not know how to write

my family name, so I paint. Men do not know how to paint, only women do. I paint spontaneously what comes to my mind. When we get up in the morning and put *sarso ka tel*, (mustard oil) it makes us feel good and clean, once a house is painted it looks good and clean too. When the paintings get washed out in the monsoon we redo the paintings, like this the house remains good. If you are educated you can write and when you see something you can read, who does not like to read and write? Painting is in my hand, I can make it. What is in my hand nobody can steal. Can anybody take away what you have in your head, same with my hand that paints".

Post script

In recent times cement plasters have made their appearance on the earthen walls of better placed folks of Bhelwara. They seem to work well, do not have to be redone every summer. However, in reality cement mixes do not adhere to earthen walls and do not allow the walls to breathe, meaning that moisture continues to climb into the walls through capillary action every year and remains trapped inside, eating into the wall. The solid cement plaster remains intact on the outside, but the walls inside start to crumble and nobody even notices, leaving the walls more vulnerable than ever. There are other cultural disadvantages, tragedies we can call them. Women are no more involved in the plastering, with that dies the canvas for their fascinating age old art of wall painting. This loss cannot be calculated, cannot be quantified.



9. If I only knew or had enough time to decipher all these symbols and signs. A detail from the courtyard.

10. I request a Devi to pose for a photo in front of her creating and she cannot stop blushing, a truly shy proponent of this extraordinary art form.

11. The future builders and artists of Bhelwara?

12. Parvati devi, one of the famous exponents of this art form was also the subject of Suzzane Gupta's documentary film, The One Eared Elephant of Hazaribagh.



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This is the second part of a series. The visit to Bhelwara and this region was undertaken as part of an initial feasibility study on a project proposal of improved earthen housing for this region in partnership with "INTACH Hazaribagh" and Bulu Imam. Visit the Intach website for more information :<http://www.sanskritihazaribagh.com/>