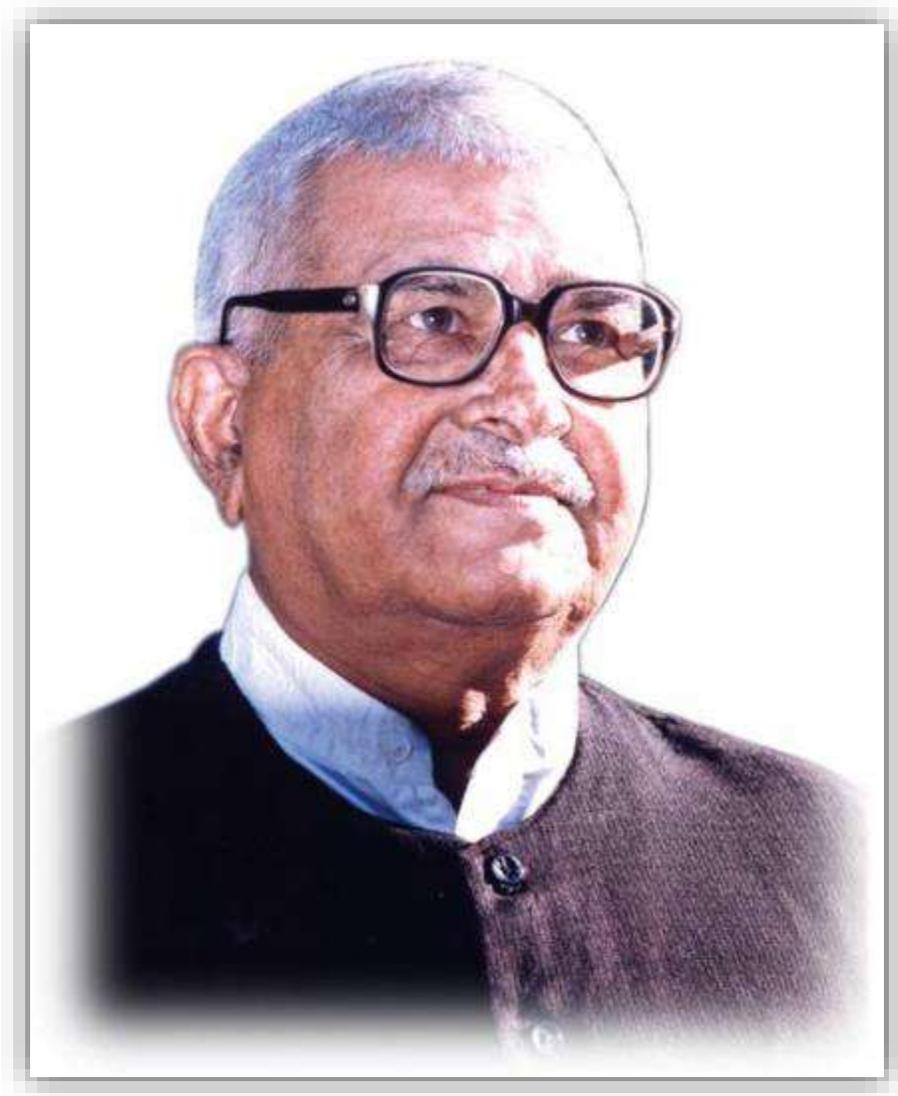


Remembering Khodidas Parmar a little-known great painter

By Tushar Bhatt

Source article -

<http://tusharbhattsgujarat.blogspot.com/2009/12/remembering-khodidas-parmara-little.html>



He is no more, but Khodidas Parmar was a great presence as an artist and a greater gentleman that one does not relish it to talk about him in the past tense.

His is a decidedly low-key profile. The round head sports a closed cropped hair, bristling with a mix of black and silver, which tend to make his ear seem rather prominent. The black-framed spectacles are as if trying to conceal his keen eyes as well as age even as strands of grey fight for a majority in his bush moustache. The black jacket over the snow-white zabhbha and pyjama which have been for more than four decades his standard wear. But overall all these features do nothing to promote the real identity of the man, Khodidas Bhayabhai Parmar as someone distinct from other similarly dressed people.

That is, until one has seen a rather fabulous, mountainous portfolio of his paintings, many original, others derived from the folk-art of his native area of Gohilwad, as Bhavnagar district of today was known in olden days. Add to these, an equally impressive array of anthologies in which folk-tales, songs, stories for children, excavated like nuggets of pure 24-carat gold from villages from the mists of time.

For good measure, throw in a collection or two on traditional embroidery of Saurashtra, and sundry writing on related subjects. Put in as bonus, the teaching of painting to students at a home class, totally free for more than a quarter century.

The smiling, diffident, almost self-effacing profile of Khodidas would then undergo a sea-change to bring up a quintessential re-searcher whose world, although revolving round Bhavnagar and Gohilwad, somehow encompasses a larger universe of world-class work in folk-art and literature. The man wields a facile brush and an equally facile pen in Gujarati; if very few know of him, it is because he has preferred to work mainly in the 52 villages around Bhavna-gar; perhaps also because he has not bothered to master the tricks of bringing the spotlight on to himself, tricks with which many lesser artists would have bathed themselves in greater glory than they deserved and far more cash than they could dream of.

Yet, art connoisseurs not only in India but also abroad know of Khodidas Parmar's work and worth, if not the man himself. His works have won as many as nine painting awards, ten of his paintings have gone into various collections in the country. four of his murals adorn different places. Ten of

his books have been brought out. To top it all, the Gujarat government has just announced the Zaverchand Meghani folk art and literature award of Rs. one lakh to him for the current year.

The house in which Khodidas now lives in Bhavnagar's Takhteshwar plot, is called Parmanand, supreme bliss, underpinning the attitude towards life of its resident. Khodidas, who began life at a very modest level, is a contented man; he has no complaints, nor has he any regrets. The artist-writer does not even own the house called Parmanand; its owners used to employ his father, Bhayabhai as a chowkidar first and then as a horse-carriage driver. Bhayabhai used to live in a tiny outhouse in the sprawling compound. Even today, Khodidas has his kitchen located in a small single room tenement, although he has been persuaded by the owners of the Parmanand Bhavan to occupy it since they do not live any longer in Bhavnagar and would not allow Khodidas to move away. Says Joravarsinh Jadav, managing trustee of Gujarat Lok Kala Foundation and a researcher in folk-art himself; "Khodidasbhai is a very tall personality in the world of folk art and literature, in the worldclass, combining in himself the rare ability to paint extremely well and write in a matching manner. But, as a human being, he is perhaps even taller because he never allowed his accomplishments to inflate his ego. Khodidas Parmar is an affable, modest and unassuming man of quiet dignity. He has never felt the need to boast and has always counted his blessings to be more than his woes."

Born on July 31, 1930, Khodidas, was the only son of a poor Karadia Rajput family. His parents, pining for a male child, having got only daughters earlier, always believed he was the gift of the goddess, Khodiyar, and named him after her.

Remembers the painterwriter: "My mother used to work as a laborer digging up earth to be loaded on to carts. After a day of ceaseless toil, she would bring home ten paise. Bhayabhai had come to Bhavnagar to work for a wealthy person, first as a watch-man and then looking after his horse-carriage from a nearby village. Bhayabhai and his wife, Vakhatba, were determined that come what may their son should get educated. They braved all the troubles to enable the boy to go to school. He more than justified their hopes, going on to take his M.A. with Gujarati and Sanskrit, learnt painting even as he studied and went on to become a guide to students doing doctoral research on folk literature for their Ph.D. Poverty, which has crushed many a dream, however, appears to have gifted

Khodidas with an ability to derive great aesthetic pleasure from what would seem to be trivial to others-- from folk songs, from the wall paintings in villages, from tales of the unlettered folks. Says the artist about his interest in all these: "Even when a small boy, I was immensely interested in the folk literature. I used to go to wedding ceremonies with relatives, one of whom, a widow in the family, used to recite a large number of folk songs, appropriate for different occasions. I had a God's gift in that I could remember them verbatim, along with their tunes, although I could never sing. I had as a boy managed to learn by heart a large repertoire of such songs".

When he was in Std IX, Khodidas wrote in a magazine an appreciation of a folk song, giving an advance testimony of his life's work. Karadia Rajputs, perhaps the poorest of the Rajputs, are an agricultural people, quite rich in cultural traditions. A typical home of a Karadia would have embroidery articles, wall paintings, other artefacts, and of course, music in the form of songs for all seasons and occasions. Their social traditions also encouraged women, as also men, to hone their craftsmanship; a girl would need to be given several embroidered skirts when she gets married and this would mean that right from the time of her birth, womenfolk in the house would be working on these presents. They would paint motifs, do intricate work on motif and other precious stones, to enrich their life-style. Poverty of a household could not stand in the way, and this tradition led to fostering of a tradition of arts and crafts among the rural folks in 52 villages inhabited by Karadia Rajputs. Not that this was the only community doing so.

Apart from the natural interest, Khodidas appears to have convinced himself long, long ago that there was something aesthetically superb in all this; it was an attitude unlike so many other rural youths who would abhor the indigenous lifestyle the moment they went to a school or college. The fall-out of the tinsel culture did not touch the young Khodidas at all. Nobody could say why.

In addition to the community background rich in arts and crafts, Khodidas counts amongst his blessing the fact that he got as his art teacher - kalaguru-- Mr Somalal Shah. Wayback in 1948, he was in Alfred High School. Recalls Khodidas:" Somabhai held my hand and taught me everything I was to know in painting and drawing". Two years later, in 1950, the young Parmar sent three paintings to an exhibition organized in Rajkot

by Saurashtra Kala Mandal, bagging the third prize for his work, Shyamsakhi. The painting was bought up by an enthusiast. Years later, Khodidas was to pay an unusual double-tribute to Somabhai. Remembers Joravarsinh Jadav: "It was some three-four years ago that the government had first thought to giving an award in folk art to Khodidasbhai, but he wrote a polite letter, suggesting to the authorities it be given to his guru, Somabhai. It was given. Khodidas has also completed a manuscript on the life and work of Somalal Shah, profusely illustrated and full of rare insights into the life of Somalal."

In 1951, even as he was learning painting, Khodidas passed his metriculation in the first class and joined the Shamaldas College where his understanding of the significance and relevance of folk arts to real life were deepened because of his contact with two other people who were to play a great role in his moulding-- Dr Ishwarbhai Dave and Mr Takhtasinhji Parmar.

Grateful as he is, Khodidas did not, however, copy his guru's style in his work. He evolved a highly personal, decorative style in painting. Although the inspiration came from the vast repertoire of folk art he has been ceaselessly collecting, Khodidas, says Joravarsinh Jadav, did not merely copy what was available in villages. While his work draws on the details of village life, it does not blindly ape the looseness of composition. He made the motifs and wall paintings more compact, added his own sense of proportion and aesthetics to implant a soul of its own. His paintings impress and interest the onlookers because life is throbbing in these, not merely captured as in a photograph. He makes the beauty of these works even more enjoyable because of his own artistic input. The pleasing effect this creates has in all these years made Khodidas a highly original art-ist, even as he was engaged in rescuing it from being forgotten.

Says Jadav: "Krishna is a favourite subject with Khodidas and he scrupulously does one painting at least a year for the Janmasthanami day. Similarly, another favorite subject is a ship. He must have done more than 30 paintings with a ship at the centre."

Along with this, Khodidas has been scrupulously writing on a wide variety of folk topics, ranging from the Kathiawadi turban -- there are 100 turbans of different types in Saurashtra -- to stories being told orally only in remote places. The work follows somewhat in the footsteps of the late Zaverchand Meghani.

The importance of this activity is immense because most of these stories and songs are part of the oral tradition only. With the advent of modernity, and the newer media of entertainment such as radio and television, less and less use of these traditional forms is being made. Since these were orally passed on, the danger is that if someone were not to put it on paper, they would be lost forever in the dust of time. Already a lot of rich heritage of this nature has been lost.

Khodidas Parmar's uniqueness lies in the fact that he has been not only collecting these, but putting them on paper in the form of words and paintings. The cultural richness of the material is enough to explode the myth that our rural society has been a dull, drab and singularly boring existence until the arrival of the western man on the scene. In truth, the old village society was not as isolated as is believed. "The motifs about Ramayana are almost the same in most parts of the country", says Khodidas by way of a proof. Similarly the motifs of lions found in some villages of Gohilwad are akin to those found in ancient Iran. The artist-writer retired from a job as a lecturer at the V.A.M.C. College in Bhavnagar. He was offered a chair in folk art at Rajkot but declined to move away from his home base, for there is a lot of work to be done. "So far, nobody has brought on to paper the innumerable occasion songs such as those sung at the time of death, or lighthearted banter called fatana. He is working on an illustrated volume on turbans, and another on embroidery. He coaches a group of students in painting at home, without charging any fee. He does not paint to order; nor does he price his works skyhigh. His children are also following the father's suit. A daughter is a good painter and so is a son. Another son is a good photographer, besides being a folk artist. His is a single track existence. His passion, his hobby, his work, his leisure and his recreation are all the same; painting and writing. "When I am tired of writing, I take up the brush, and the other way round." At 64, he is not resting on his laurels -- or his murals--, working regularly from 8.30 am to 11 a m and then from 3.30 p m to 5 p m. His only diversion is a walk for an hour that he religiously takes every evening after 5 p m. "Fortunately, I do not know how to ride even a bicycle and have escaped being a social person." His sketchbook and a pencil are his permanent companions wherever he goes. He comes across as a very reserved man, but his family says he can be extremely jovial among people whom he knows quite well. Joravarsinh Jadav says that although Khodidas is a contented man, the best of him in painting is yet to come. The artist himself does not permit himself to say any such things. Driven by some

inner force, he goes on documenting folk literature, striving to revive folk arts, reinvigorate