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Choreographed Memories and Theatricality in Collage: The Collages of Banaras-based artist Rajkumar

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Abstract

The collages of artist Rajkumar, who lives in Varanasi, are magnificent in terms of style and visual configuration. I met him in Banaras, and he enthusiastically showed me some of his collages. The political and religious ambience of the city is subconsciously reflected in his works with the intervention of normative morality. He has depicted his nostalgic memories of childhood and brought them to life with choreographed cut-outs and silhouettes. Primarily, his collages are composed of collected waste materials. He has collected many old prints and photos and used them in his collages to produce a dramatic visuality that hails subconsciously from his interest in theatre. He signed his name as *Rangkarmi* on collages that indicate him as a theatre artist.

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Rajkumar, a seventy-four-year-old versatile artist who weaves his ideas and memories through visual fabrics, lives in a small, messy room in a narrow lane of the Bhadaini region of Varanasi in India. His ancestors belonged to Janakpur of Bihar, and his grandfather was part of the entourage of Queen Dulari Radhakunwar of Sursand estate, Bihar, when she came to Varanasi for residence in the late 19th century. The queen marked the Bhadaini region as their residential area. She patronized many buildings, temples, and ghats nearby, such as the Lakshmi-Narayana temple near Vijayagarh Kothi, Assi, the Pancharatna temple at Assi ghat, the Janaki Ghat, and other residential buildings in the Bhadaini region.

The artist belongs to the 'Patel' community called '*Khawas*', which means '*khaas* (special) to royal families' in Janakpur, Mithila region. Rajkumar does not belong to any traditional art, but he had an interest in art since childhood. He did not receive any formal academic education in art; instead, he was a self-taught artist. His main areas of interest are collage-making and theatre. The paper focuses on the vibrant collage practices of the artist. It analyses how his artworks weave together past and present memories. Rajkumar collects visual materials that are essentially scrap and waste items discarded by people, such as incense stick boxes, calendars, posters, marriage cards, and other printed materials.

On the morning of March 19, 2024, I visited Rajkumar's residence in the Bhadaini area of Varanasi with a friend. Rajkumar lives and works in a single-room space that serves as both his home and studio. During my visit, Rajkumar showed me his collage works, which I found visually and conceptually fascinating. He described his collages like a storyteller, sharing many nostalgic stories related to his life, village life, fairs, childhood, and royal life. Through his father and grandfather, he has been closely associated with the royal family and



their affairs.

Rajkumar's collages are not just artistic creations but also vessels of memories and stories, blending elements of the past and present through the use of everyday discarded materials. His storytelling adds a rich, narrative layer to his visual art, making the experience of viewing his collages deeply engaging and evocative. The artist delves deep into the wellspring of nostalgia, drawing forth the essence of village life, the opulence of royal existence, the sacred aura of Banaras, and the pure, untainted joy of childhood. In his hands, discarded fragments of the past are reborn. Through this alchemical process, he breathes life into the mundane, creating art that is both deeply personal and universally evocative.

Collage as a medium allows for the juxtaposition of various elements, creating a layered and textured narrative. The cut-outs from calendars and prints add a tactile quality to the work, making it visually engaging. This technique also enables the artist to experiment with composition and symbolism, thereby creating new meanings and interpretations. Such artwork can evoke a range of emotions and thoughts in the



Figure 1: Artist Rajkumar is showing the poster.



viewer. As a visual scholar, I will focus more on visual analysis, followed by theoretical concepts of memory studies and theatre.

Theme:

Thematically, the artist explores a diverse range of themes and subjects. Rajkumar's artworks incorporate the memories of regal life. He utilises his recollections of forts and palaces to create intricate collages that reflect the grandeur and cultural richness of historical periods. By assembling various materials, he brings to life the opulence and architectural beauty of these royal settings. This artistic approach not only preserves his personal memories but also offers viewers a glimpse into the historical and cultural legacy of Banaras. His works are deeply rooted in his memories of childhood and village life. His art often explores themes of motherhood and childhood, capturing the intimate bond between mother and child. Rajkumar also expresses a profound nostalgia for village life. He frequently discusses the vibrant social interactions at village fairs, highlighting how these events foster strong community bonds. His works depict the simplicity and interconnectedness of rural life, showcasing farmers, bullock carts, and women working in the fields.

The artist is deeply influenced by the rich religious and cultural heritage of Varanasi, also known as Banaras, which is considered a stronghold of Hinduism. Living in Banaras, the artist is surrounded by an environment steeped in religious practices, rituals, and iconography. The city's atmosphere, filled with temples, ghats, and religious ceremonies, naturally seeps into the artist's consciousness and work. The use of cut-outs of gods and goddesses, as well as temples from calendars and religious prints in his collages, is a direct



reflection of this influence. The collages explore themes of devotion, spirituality, and the omnipresence of the divine in everyday life. The use of familiar religious prints makes the art accessible and relatable to the local populace, who see their faith mirrored in the artwork.



Figure 2: Depiction of Shiva-Linga and Garbha of Parvati containing Ganesh.

Formal Analysis:

Rajkumar creates intriguing collages on hardboard bases, which are meticulously layered with dark fabric to serve as a backdrop. Against this sombre background, according to his ideas, the artist arranges and affixes vibrant cut-outs of various figures, including male and female silhouettes, trees, rivers, flowers, and houses. The contrast between the dark background and the colourful figures enhances the visual impact, making the elements appear more vivid and dynamic, as if they are blossoming and emerging from the depths.

Compositionally, the collages are narrative in style, reflecting themes akin to a storyteller.



Each piece weaves a visual tale, where the juxtaposition of diverse elements creates a cohesive and engaging story, inviting viewers to explore and interpret the underlying narrative.

Collage as a Stage:

Theatricality, as I used the term in the paper title, refers to the properties associated with theatre or performance. However, the term is not confined to the stage; it is frequently used metaphorically to describe behaviour; everyday interactions often involve role-playing, social ritual, or cultural phenomena. Rajkumar basically choreographed the figures accordingly. He is also a theatre artist, which influences the style of rendering in his collages. He subconsciously choreographs the characters to tell the story. Thus, the collages are a type of theatrical performance. A concept, “theatrical instinct” (Carnicke 51) as discussed by Nikolai Evreinov and explored by Sharon Marie Carnicke, suggests that humans naturally dramatize life; however, Rajkumar is already a theatre artist. In the case of his collages serve as a medium to visually express his instinct. The way he choreographed his collages also reminds the concept of “postdramatic theatre” as developed by Lehmann, which supports non-linear, fragmented storytelling that is perfect for his collage style, as it resists traditional narrative. Rajkumar transforms every composition into a staged event, where collaged elements evoke nostalgic memories, political events, village life, and devotion on the flattened ‘stage’ of the paper.

Collages, textuality, and memories:

We observed that Rajkumar's collages function like a text, not in a literary sense, but



as an integrated artistic or performative form, in which the ‘ideas of memories and theatricality are communicated.’ Memory here refers not just to personal recollection but to cultural and historical, how past experiences are represented, remembered, and reinterpreted. Theatricality refers to the performative nature of these collages, in which they enact, stage, or dramatize ideas through choreographed cut-outs, rather than simply narrating them. Memory, in the context of collage and performance, transcends mere recollection; it becomes a creative reconstruction of the artist’s past memories of religiosity, association with royal life, and royal architectures such as havelis and forts in the city. The collages, composed of silhouettes, fragmented images, and textures of Banaras, as well as architectural and religious images, activate mnemonic traces such as subtle remnants or impressions of past experiences, emotions, or cultural memories that invoke past histories and traumas the artist has experienced. Drawing from concepts like Pierre Nora’s “*lieux de memoire*” (06) literally, “places of memory”, that crystallize collective histories in material form, and Ann Rigney’s idea of ‘cultural memory mediated by aesthetics’ (73) that states how artworks transform and transmit cultural memories through material and sensory qualities, the collages perform memory as something in flux, where the past is not archived but reenacted and reimagined. The time-worn havelis, *kothis*, and several other royal residential buildings, as well as temples, serve as anchors for the places of memory of the society to which the artist belonged in his past. These places of memory, through aesthetic mediation (architectures of temples, forts and *havelis*, religious prints and photos, etc.) are expressed in the collages as past memories of the artist through choreographed silhouettes.



Political:

The artist creates a unique and thought-provoking body of work that blends contemporary religious and political themes with his collage technique. By incorporating cut-outs of Banaras Ghats, images of PM Narendra Modi, temples, and thin paper strips to represent the Ganga, the artist creates a multi-dimensional effect. The collages explore significant contemporary issues such as the role of PM Modi, the cultural and religious importance of the Ganga, and the historical and political significance of sites like Ayodhya and the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. The juxtaposition of political figures with religious symbols and sacred sites highlights the intersection of politics and religion in contemporary India. This can provoke viewers to reflect on the influence of political leadership on religious and cultural heritage.

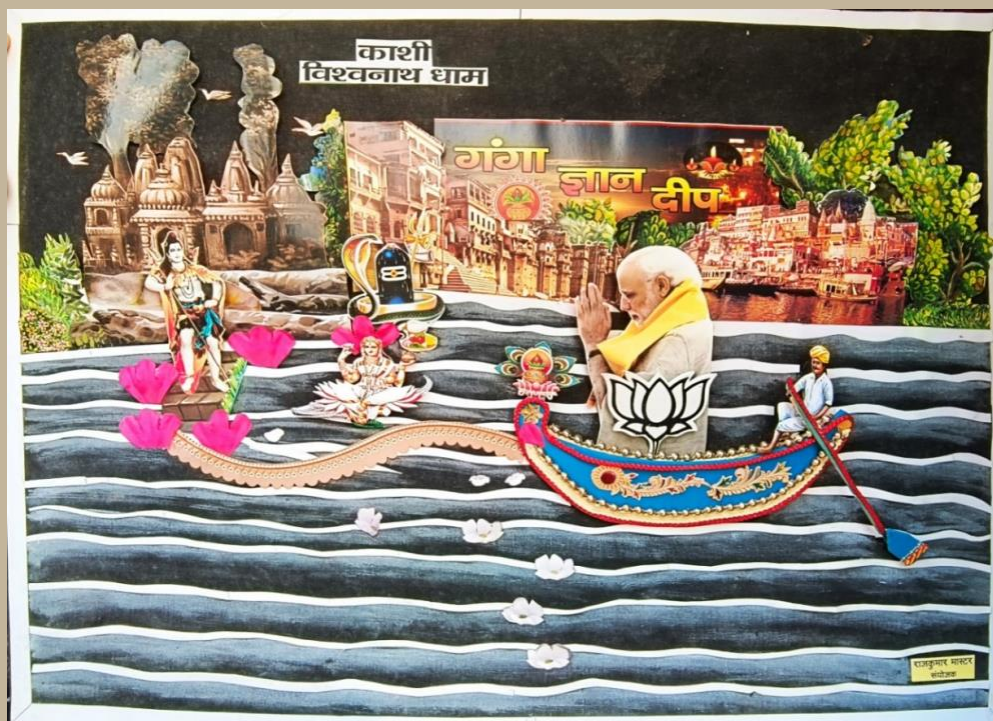


Figure 2: Narendra Modi in Varanasi.



For instance, in Figure 3, the artist assembled the image of PM Modi, which faces Lord Shiva and the Kashi Vishvanath Dham. The Prime Minister is standing on a boat in the Ganga River, and a boatman is sailing the boat. The artist connects the boat with lord Shiva with a decorative strip; it probably symbolizes a path with a Red Carpet. Lord Shiva is standing on the stairs of the Ghat outside the Vishvanath Dham and blessing Narendra Modi. Goddess Ganga is also present near Shiva. Flowers are floating in the river around the boat and lord Shiva. In the background, the artist also depicts the riverfront in perspective with trees. He had such a beautiful imagination for the whole composition that he did. When I asked him, ‘When did you complete this work?’ He replied, “When Modiji came to Banaras and said that *‘Na main kisike kahne par aaya hoon aur na mujhe koi bulaya hai, mujhe to Maa Ganga ne bulaya hai’*, literally meaning in English, *‘I have not come here at anyone’s behest, nor has anyone called me. It is Mother Ganga who has called me.’* After that, I made this to offer him as a gift.” The juxtaposition of political figures with religious symbols and sacred sites underscores the increasingly blurred boundaries between politics and religion in contemporary India. While the visual strategy may initially appear to invite reflection on the influence of political leadership on religious and cultural heritage, a closer reading suggests a more celebratory tone, one that aligns political authority with divine sanction. In particular, the depiction of PM Narendra Modi receiving blessings from Lord Shiva at the Kashi Vishvanath Dham, adorned with symbolic elements like a red-carpeted boat and floating flowers, constructs a theatrical tableau that elevates the political figure to near-mythic status. Rather than offering a critical interrogation of this entanglement, the artist appears to visually endorse it, transforming sacred space into a stage for political veneration. This aestheticisation of power risks normalising the appropriation of religious iconography for



political gain, raising urgent questions about the role of the artist in either challenging or perpetuating dominant narratives. As such, the work may not merely reflect the socio-political climate but actively participate in shaping a cult of reverence around contemporary leadership, an intervention that demands critical scrutiny.



Figure 3: Lord Ram-Lakshman-Sita on the bank of a River

Morality:

Rajkumar's approach to art reflects his deep concern for social morality and ethics. He believes that nude images of women may not be appropriate for society. To address this, he creatively paints clothes onto the printed image, as seen in Figure 9, where a lady stands near a tree, her body covered with painted clothes. This method enables him to express his artistic vision while upholding his ethical beliefs and societal norms. By doing so, Rajkumar aims to balance artistic expression with a sense of responsibility towards the community's values in which he lives. This approach not only showcases his talent for painting but also his



commitment to creating art that resonates positively with his audience. However, the question of morality is a very debated topic in the art field. A community-rooted artist might be influenced by their community's cultural and societal norms, which could place a higher value on modesty and traditional representations of women. Local customs, religious beliefs, and community standards might shape their moral framework. The high-class, renowned artist might operate in a more liberal or cosmopolitan environment where artistic freedom and the exploration of the human form are celebrated. A broader, more global perspective on art and expression might influence their moral values. Morality can be seen as relative, varying greatly depending on cultural, social, and personal contexts. What is considered moral in one community might be viewed differently in another. In essence, perceptions of morality in art can differ significantly, shaped by varying cultural contexts, personal beliefs, and artistic intentions. These differing viewpoints reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of how individuals and communities engage with questions of ethics and representation in creative expression. Rather than offering a singular definition, such diversity invites ongoing dialogue about the role of art in society and the values it may reflect or challenge.

Patronage and Identity:

Rajkumar discusses various government-funded programs that are designed to improve the conditions of artists and craftsmen. He highlights both contemporary and earlier governments' initiatives, noting that many such programs are currently active in the city to support and promote artists. These initiatives include events like the *Shilpa Mela* and other art fairs, which provide artists with opportunities to exhibit and sell their works. This involvement with government programmes and events suggests a political dimension to



Rajkumar's collages. By creating works that feature significant cultural and religious sites, such as the Ayodhya Ram Temple and the Kashi Vishvanath Temple, Rajkumar aligns his art with themes that resonate with the current leadership. This strategic alignment may be a way for him to secure government funding, which is crucial for his survival and the sustainability of his artistic practice. Through his collages, Rajkumar not only expresses his artistic vision but also navigates the political landscape to gain support and resources for his work.

Formerly, he has been involved in various fairs and the government. programmes in another regime as well. He also said he would make collages to offer to other political leaders, such as Rahul Gandhi and Akhilesh Yadav. Thus, his works can be seen as a reflection of the political scenario in the city and state regarding identity and patronage. On the other hand, Rajkumar's disinterestedness in signing his works reflects a unique perspective on his artistic practice. By choosing not to attach his name to his works, he emphasizes the process and experience of creating art over personal recognition or ownership. This approach suggests that for Rajkumar, joy and fulfilment come from the act of making collages rather than from the accolades or identity associated with the finished product. It can be seen as a form of artistic humility and a focus on the intrinsic value of creativity. Rajkumar's lack of interest in signing his work might also indicate a desire to let the art speak for itself without the influence of his identity or reputation. This can create a more direct and unmediated connection between the artwork and the viewer, allowing the audience to engage with the piece on its own terms.

However, some collages have his signature, named as '*Divyang Rangkarmi Rajkumar*,' i.e., 'Physically disabled theatre artist Rajkumar.' Surprisingly, he wants to



present himself as a theatre artist; of course, he has done many theatre performances. So, my point is, on the collages, he presents himself as a theatre artist who is physically disabled. This signature reflects his three aspects of life. Firstly, he is a visual artist; by including his name in the collages, Rajkumar asserts his identity as a visual artist. Secondly, the title '*rangkarmi*' highlights his involvement and accomplishments in theatre. This aspect of his signature emphasizes his versatility and dedication to the performing arts and, connotatively, it also perhaps highlights the theatrical nature of the narratives in his collages. and the third thing is, the term "Divyang" (physically disabled) acknowledges his physical challenges. By incorporating this into his signature, Rajkumar not only embraces his identity but also challenges societal perceptions of disability. Further, Rajkumar's signature is a multifaceted representation of his life and work. It celebrates his artistic talents, his contributions to theatre, and his triumph over physical challenges.



Figure 4: A Village Life, Women at Work



Figure 5: A Village Life, Woman at Work

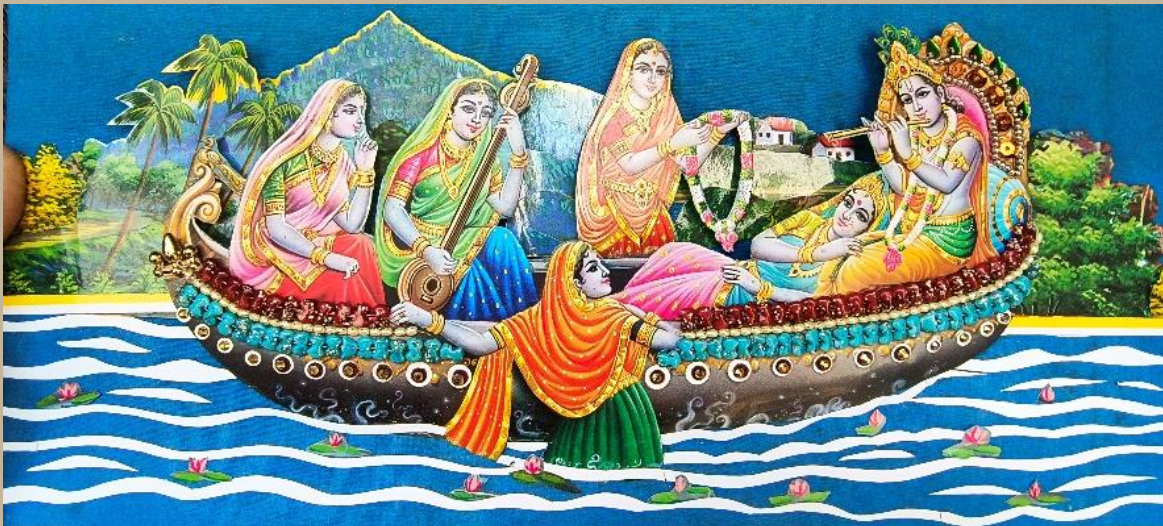


Figure 6: Lord Krishna and Radha with Gopis

The works of Rajkumar feature an amalgamation of different types of spaces, as shown in Figure 4. The panel depicts the story of the Ramayana, related to Ram, Lakshman, and Sita, who are present on the bank of a river and wish to cross it by boat. A *Kewat* (*Manjhi*, i.e., boat sailor) helped them to cross the river. The *Ramayana*, written thousands of years ago, features a vivid description of a pastoral landscape, including huts and forests, in a



specific scene. However, the collage includes sloped-roof modern houses and a royal umbrella on a boat, which refers to the anachronistic placement of objects. These collages also implicitly reflect an altered landscape, a positioning of otherness. The territory that exists beyond borders, rejecting the world's natural landscapes. It refers to the concept of heterotopia (Foucault 04) as discussed by Foucault. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about.

The collages of Rajkumar remind us of Duchamp's concept of ready-made, which he introduced in 1915. Rajkumar follows a similar approach. He collects everyday objects, such as visual prints and other materials, from various places. These objects are not chosen for their aesthetic appeal or practical function but for their potential to be transformed. Rajkumar modifies these objects and incorporates them into his collages, giving them new meaning and context. By doing so, he turns ordinary items into unique pieces of art. This process emphasizes the idea that art is not just about creating something visually pleasing but about the artist's concept and the context in which the object is placed. It challenges viewers to see the familiar in new, in very thought-provoking ways. However, as a means of conveying ideas, the readymade reaffirms the traditional art world. An ordinary object becomes art because an artist with a unique sensibility believes it can express a significant aesthetic concept.

Jyotindra Jain, an art and cultural historian, in his book *Indian Popular Culture: The Conquest of the World as Picture* describes how the collaborative effort of making collages by Nathadwara¹ painters and frame-makers of Rajasthan led to a unique visual language. This



language emerged from a mix of academic realism and European influences in the late 19th century. It involved combining diverse images from various sources into single artworks, creating collages that served as powerful cultural tools. These collages manipulated images and spaces across different times, places, and genres to address both regional and national cultural goals. However, Rajkumar's collages have some distinct qualities. His visual language is mostly inspired by Varanasi's local visual culture: narrative and symbolic. The city is full of ambiguous and enigmatic visual symbols of different religious cultures, which layered the city with ambiguity. On the other side, it is heightened with painted and sculpted narrative panels of various mythological stories. This storytelling and symbolism are reflected in Rajkumar's collages. He meticulously weaves his ideas through allegories and symbols.

Another interesting thing is observed that he made some collages symbolising other cities, such as Rajasthan and Calcutta. In Figure 10, he represents Rajasthan, where Rajasthani women are selling fruits. In another figure, 12, he depicts the city of Calcutta, where a woman is carrying a water pot and standing in a pond; coconut or palm trees are visible in the background. I am unsure if he has ever visited Rajasthan or Kolkata. However, the way he depicted it might be influenced by local folk perceptions and stories, as well as images that circulate in folk culture. These folk stories often paint a vivid picture of life in large cities like Calcutta (Kolkata) and Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay). In the late 90s, as I heard, villagers who travelled to these cities for work would return with tales of their experiences, describing the daily routines, fashion, work, and other aspects of the *pardes*. These stories contributed to a collective imagination of these cities as places of both dreams



and challenges. The term *pardes*², as it signifies a place that is different and distant, almost like a foreign land, even though it is within the same country. This perception differs from the modern concept of a country or *desh*³, where states within a country are seen as parts of a whole rather than separate entities. The artist's work seems to capture this older, more romanticised view of cities like Rajasthan and Calcutta, highlighting the blend of fantasy and reality that characterised folk perceptions of these places.

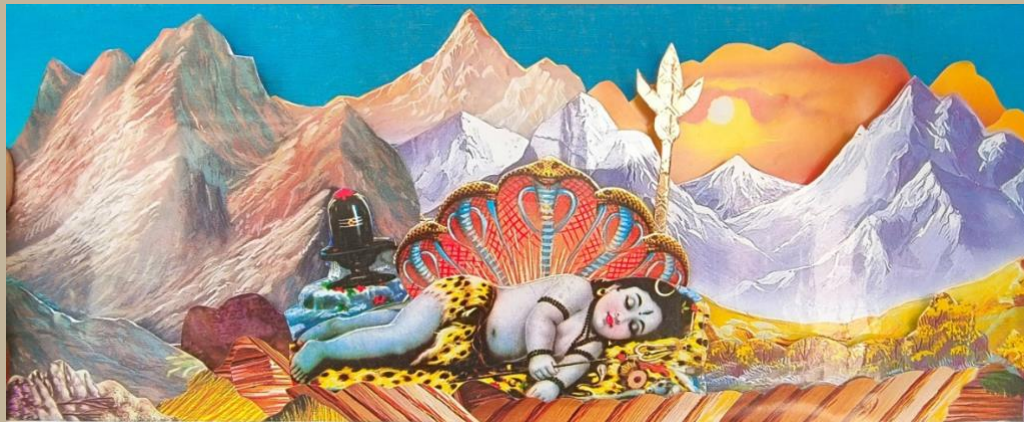


Figure 7: Lord Shiva Reclining on Himalaya

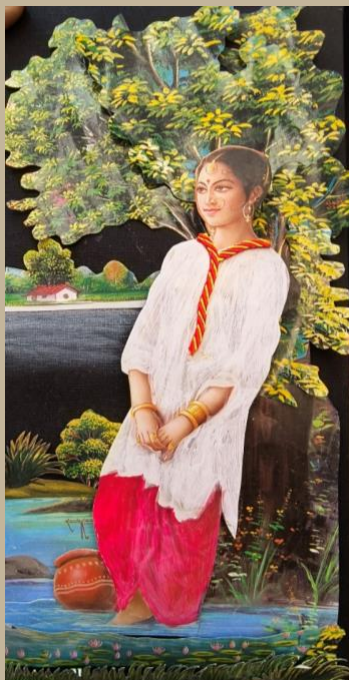


Figure 8: A Collage of a Woman Figure with Painted Clothes



It is interesting to see how easily he translates his stories and ideas into visual language by assembling the related visual materials. The artist uses collage to capture and express his nostalgic memories of village life vividly. His artwork prominently features cut-outs of female figures carrying pitchers of water, farmers ploughing fields with oxen, and women working in fields or selling vegetables. These elements collectively depict various aspects of rural life, reflecting the artist's personal experiences and memories. The artist's work is a reflection of his longing for the simplicity and communal aspects of village life. His memories of people gathering water, farming, and selling goods are infused with a sense of community and shared responsibility, which he seeks to preserve through his art. The artist sources his figures from inexpensive posters circulated among the middle-lower classes. This choice of material not only makes his art accessible but also connects it to the very people and lifestyle he aims to depict. It adds an element of authenticity and relatability to his work. By using these specific images, the artist is preserving cultural practices that might be fading with modernization. His art serves as a visual archive of rural traditions and daily life, ensuring that these memories are not lost to time. The collages allow the artist to layer and juxtapose different elements, creating a rich, textured representation of local culture. This collage method also reflects the fragmented nature of memory, where different moments and images come together to form a cohesive narrative. His art captures personal memories and serves as a cultural document, preserving the traditions and daily practices of rural communities.



Figure 9: Rajkumar is showing the collage 'Village Fair'



Figure 10: A Collage of Rajasthan



Figure 11: A Collage of Calcutta



End Note:

¹ Nathdwara painters refer to a traditional painter's community that is active in Nathdwara, a place in western Rajasthan. The painters' community is popular for Pichhwai paintings, a type of painting created as a backdrop for Shrinathji.

² *pardes*, in folk culture, especially across northern India, refers to a distant land or a foreign place, often symbolizing separation, longing, and emotional distance. Culturally, there are many aspects of a *Pardes*, the term significantly used in folk songs and stories to express the pain of separation, whether a loved one working far away, or someone exiled from their homeland. Brahma Prakash, a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, did significant work on the folk performance, *Bidesia* (it means a migrant or one who resides in *Bides* or *pardes*). He defines the term as, "*The term has strong socio-material contexts, which depict its relationship with labour and the trauma of indentured migration. The term frames love and labour in a mode that is at once playful and weighed down with lamentation.*" (Prakash, 137).

³ *Desh*, here it refers to India, which is a union of states with diverse languages and cultures, yet united by a constitutional framework and national identity.



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