

Like every folk artist, Santokhba has developed a concept and a style of expression pertinent to her personal exposure. Born on 2 October 1912, in Akulwarigir in Junagadh district, Saurashtra, Gujarat, Santokhba's father was a railway ticket collector. She did not come from a family of artists, nor did she receive any formal training in the arts. Her career as a painter began accidentally in 1977, when at the age of 65, she visited an exhibition held by her son, Bhanu Dudhat, an art teacher at Kalakendra College of Fine Arts, Vallabh Vidya Nagar. There she heard an inner voice, 'You are also a born artist, you can create wonders and surpass many contemporary artists'. Thus, Santokhba took up a brush and paints, and on cloth, painted images of Ganesha and Radhakrishna. Later, she moved on to depicting the *Ramayana* on 54 metres of cloth. Air India was quick to buy this unique heritage! Santokhba was then discovered by the painter-connoisseur, KG Subramanyan.

Santokhba's next theme, the *Mahabharata* began in 1989. When the first 1,200 metres of the proposed 6,000 metre scroll was completed, some international bidders offered astronomical figures for it. Santokhba, however, refused to let her work leave the country. Then, the doyen of contemporary Indian cultural heritage, Dr Kapila Vatsyayan intervened and an



SKILL

Epic Theme; Epic Proportions



To depict the **Mahabharata** on an immense 1,200 metres of cloth is indeed a rare accomplishment. **Gautam Chatterjee** pays homage to octogenarian Santokhba Dudhat, whose visual interpretation of the epic is original in concept and style

exhibition of her paintings was jointly organised in Delhi by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and the Bal Bhavan Society. This exposure opened up new vistas for discussion on Santokhba's work, from a national perspective.

Santokhba's childhood memories and her proximity to nature greatly influenced her work. The trees and hills of Akulwarigir obviously fascinated her, and as she says with a

glow in her eyes, 'You will find me in every tree and hill of Akulwarigir. I am there'. True to this feeling, the *Mahabharata* panels have numerous trees in multiple forms, colours and shapes studded with a colourful variety of birds, flowers and foliage. Each tree is different in style, form and colour, and rarely repeats itself. She recollects her first, rather unusual, drawing venture, at the age of 6 or 7, when she used to spin yarn out of cotton at Hathkarga. While

she was widowed fairly soon, she continued to embroider saris and skirts, to eke out a living.

Santokhba soon proved her versatility in another field — designing pots and sculpting. She toyed with earth and with rapid movements of her nimble fingers created, without any moulds, fine figures, each significant in style and composition. Santokhba's painting venture, however, started with pot



Ved Vyasa dictates the invocatory sloka to Ganesha in the opening panel of the 1,200 metre long depiction of the Mahabharata. The actual sloka has been written alongside by Santokhba's painter son Bhanu Dudhat. The next scene shows uniform rows of disciples sitting in the verdant surroundings of Ved Vyasa's gurukul. Vyasa's halo is unconventional as Santokhba has used yellow ochre to simulate the brilliance of jagged edged sunrays.

working, her hands used to get smeared with dust and cotton residue. With a twig she would then draw flowers, foliage and birds on her dusty hands. This was Santokhba's first creative expression and the beginnings of a self-initiating journey into the spheres of art and aesthetics.

Like any other Indian girl, preparing for marriage, she learnt embroidery from her mother. By the age of 12, when Santokhba was married to Premji Bhat, a jagirdar from Vithalpur, she had mastered the intricacies of traditional embroidery designs, like *kaweda vel*, *popard vel*, *wako vel* and *undi fulwari*. Though

designs where initially, she painted traditional folk art motifs like flowers and foliage and later lesser known mythological stories such as the *samudra manthan*.

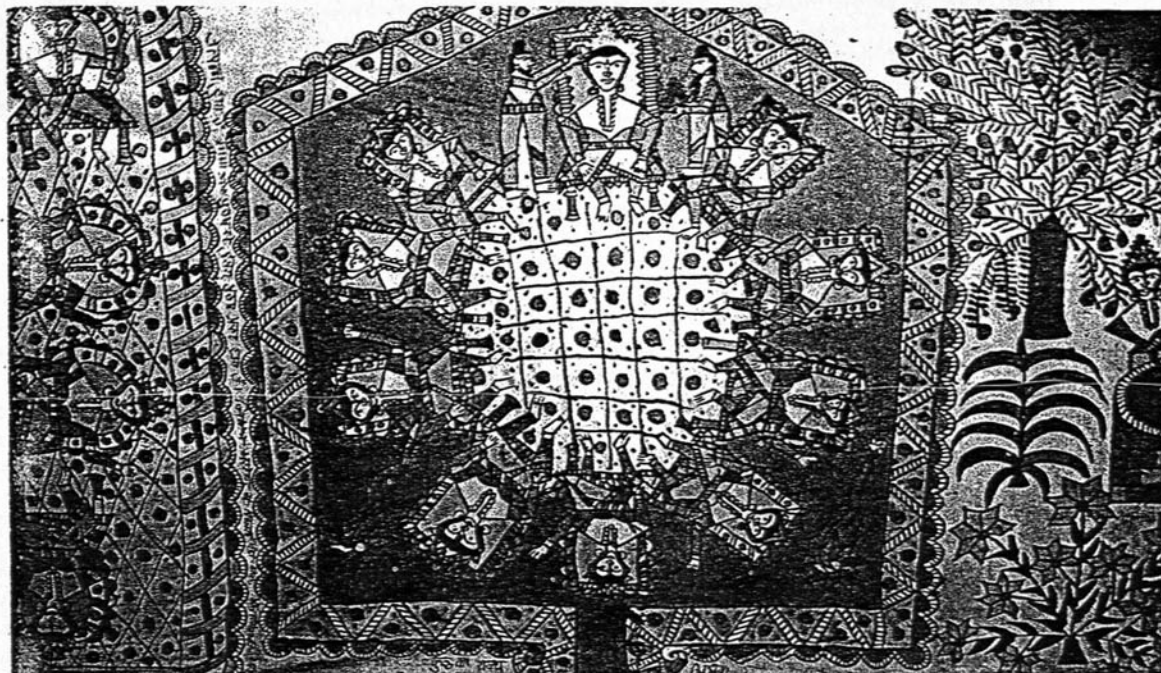
This was the unconscious beginning of Santokhba's drawings of epic themes which she later serialised through the *Ramayana*. Though uneducated, she has seen the works of Michelangelo, Picasso and MF Husain, yet their paintings do not fascinate her. 'They draw in an odd manner, sometimes giving undue prominence to some parts of the body, like ears or big eyes, which are enigmatic to the onlooker. But, I do

not draw anything which creates confusion. You might not understand the thematic background of some canvases but would definitely understand the movement and the composition of paintings'. Among Indian folk painting Santokhba likes the Madhubani school most!

The most striking element in Santokhba's one kilometre long *Mahabharata* canvas is her unconventional and often whimsical

use of colour. At times, instead of using flesh tones she paints the bare bodies of her figures in red. Ageing trees are painted in burnt umber while new leaves and young trees are in red instead of light green. Though the colour blue has been used to depict the sky, it is also a symbol of water and even night or darkness. 'I do not know the grammar of colour. I use bright colours, which aesthetically appeal to me, whether they are in contrast or in harmony —

The colour arrangement in the *Mahabharata* scroll is easily categorised as each panel and theme is painted in a different colour style. Yellow ochre dominates the initial portion while the next phase is mainly red. Gradually, blue practically overshadows her later canvas. An interesting motif which indicates the end of a sub-story and the beginning of a new one is a full-grown, fruit bearing banana tree, regarded as an auspicious symbol.



The coronation of King Puru. The entire scene is framed within a square with a border similar to traditional embroidery patterns. The circular arrangement of the king's throne and the seats of the ministers are superimposed on a dark red background

they are reflections of my life and times', she comments.

Santokhba uses colours from vegetable extracts which come from Saurashtra and some parts of Rajasthan. Instead of the traditional harmonising earth colours like Indian red, burnt sienna with yellow ochre, used in most folk art from Saurashtra and Rajasthan, Santokhba prefers bright turquoise blue, red and yellow ochre and deep green, with each motif prominently outlined in black. Whatever the colour, she maintains a uniform tone with her own water treatment.

Though traditionally one-dimensional and flat, the contrasting colours give the figures a lively appearance. Her male figure is a long inverted V with a triangular body. The V shape, she explains, gives the figure its masculine element. She aptly distinguishes the prince from an ordinary soldier by manipulating the headgear and ornamentation which is more elaborate for the prince. Female figures on the canvas are dressed in colourful *ghagras*, *kotis* and *chunnis*. But, a queen like Gandhari and other important female figures have elaborate headgears and ornaments. This style can be identified with



the Kishangarh *Bani-Thani* figures.

Animal and bird motifs are neither flat nor dull. Santokhba, in fact, subtly conveys a sense of movement through them. For instance, the horses in Dhritarashtra's marriage procession or the two peacocks alighting on a hut seem to radiate with life and energy.

The style, composition and colour distinction of the various panels in the *Mahabharata* series indicate Santokhba's expertise. The first canvas depicts Ved Vyasa dictating the *Mahabharata* slokas to Ganesha. The actual slokas, *Pratham Parva*, have been written by her son Bhanu, alongside the painting. The next panel portrays Ved Vyasa's gurukul with rows of pupils listening attentively to their guru in verdant surroundings. The topknots and sitting postures of the pupils show a maturity of perspective without undermining any figure or row.

An interesting feature here is Ved Vyasa's halo which is not the conventional moon-like disc in tones of light yellow. Instead, she has used yellow ochre to simulate the brilliance of jagged edged sunrays. 'Since all great men have a sun-like power, I have given the sun-glow to Ved Vyasa', explains Santokhba.

However, she uses the moon-like aura as well while depicting King Puru in royal gatherings, thus, successfully distinguishing the narrator and the actor in the great epic.

Another ingenious distinction that Santokhba makes is between earthly and celestial beings. In one panel, Lord Indra is portrayed against a white background, as if in space, clad in a colourful striped *ghagra*, despite which his legs, outlined in black, are visible giving a translucent effect. Santokhba does not play with this type of transparency while depicting earthly beings, especially females.

Glancing through the panels, Santokhba's early association with weaving and embroidered motifs is apparent. One comes across the mythical bird Garuda, painted in bright yellow ochre and fiery red, threatening a rakshasa. The intricate design on its wings is similar to a sari border with two parallel red lines bordering a white strip, decorated with identical angular black strokes. Moreover, the wings have triangular frilled edges, typical of sari anchals or borders.

In the prologue of the *Mahabharata*, the serpent king Sheshnaga is depicted as holding *prithvi* or the



world on its head. The striking black snake has a yellow ochre chest and red eyes on a white background (depicting *sunya*). The colour of *prithvi* is deep green with a blackish patch, symbolic of the earth's prosperity.

After the preliminaries, Santokhba addresses her subject with Sukhdevji narrating the story of the *Mahabharata* to the first Rishi king of the world, Janmji. Thereafter, the story is related using the flashback technique so popular with the modern electronic media, establishing a synthesis of the old and the new.

Among the initial panels, the coronation of King Puru is quite striking and different. The whole concept is framed within a square with a border similar to traditional embroidery patterns. On the dark red background, the throne of the king and the seats of the ministers are placed in a circle, symbolically depicting some mystic tantric concept.

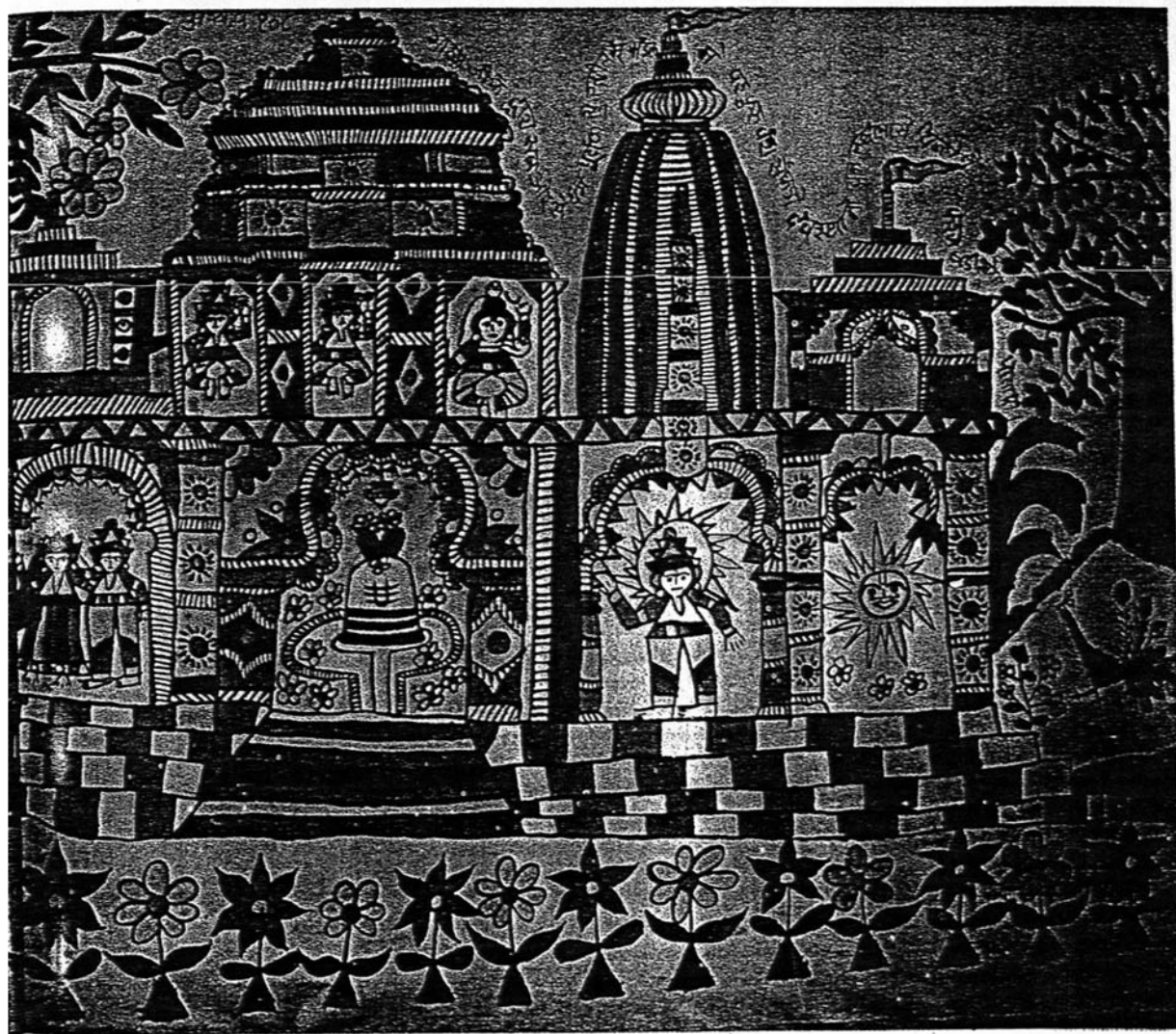
Santokhba uses those elements in her paintings which are, in fact, a part of her life. She has recorded the names of the members of the Puru family in a *vamsha vriksha* or family tree. Santokhba explains, 'In my family

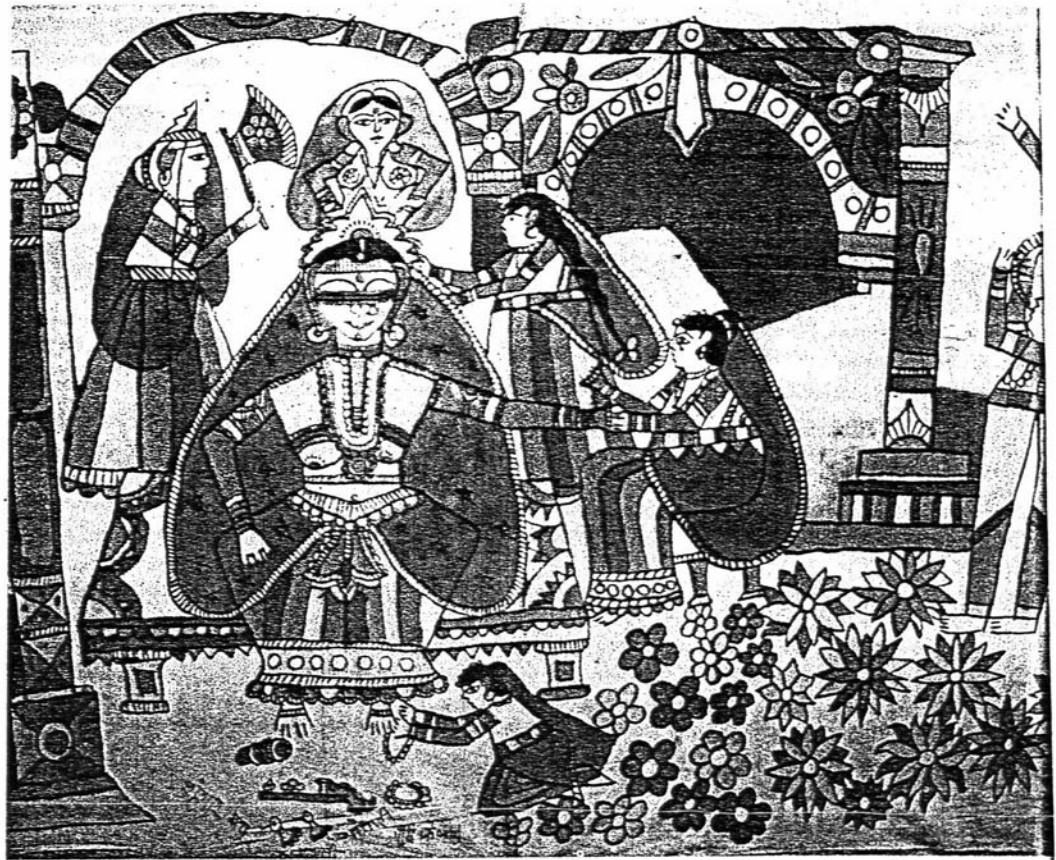
Facing page:

The palace of King Puru.
An interesting motif here is the auspicious, mature, fruit bearing banana tree which indicates the end of a sub-story and the beginning of a new one

Below:

A detail of Puru's palace. The influence of Dwarka temple is evident here





Ided Gandhari
lies-in-waiting.
other
female figures
ate clothes and

there is a *vamsha mala* tree which is commonly termed as *amba*. I have borrowed the same concept to incorporate those names of the Puru family who matter in the *Mahabharata*.

Santokhba uses her own principles of perspective to lend a three-dimensional effect to her work, such as in the panel depicting the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Jamuna. A long panel of river Ganga, done in blue, depicts figures in white which denotes the purity of the river. Suddenly, the colour of the river changes to a murky violet, as Ganga meets Jamuna, which Santokhba calls the Machhli Ganga. This change in colour occurs because 'Kala naga lives under the Jamuna', quips Santokhba.

The panel of Vichitra's funeral procession is also imbued with a



three-dimensional element. Whether done consciously or not, the street houses are haphazardly placed upside down, as if to depict the turmoil of the tragedy suffered by Vichitra's loved ones. The funeral pyre is like a flight of stairs with a shed over it. The stairs are painted with contrasting colours, representing the varied stratification of life from birth until death. However, the flame from the pyre is

dull and not as striking as in the *yagna* panel where the fire again has jagged edged red and yellow flames.

The city life of Hastinapur is depicted realistically. There are shops on both sides of the streets. Sometimes the streets have men and women walking and even a bullock cart in a swirl of yellow ochre to indicate rising dust. As one approaches the vicinity of the royal palace, the empty street is

painted in white, implying a clean environment. Interestingly, the palace resembles old havelis in Saurashtra, with their typical arched doorways. Forts are depicted, in some panels, with arches presumably for the cannons. This is a clear influence of the Junagarh fort which is Santokhba's only exposure to royal fortifications.

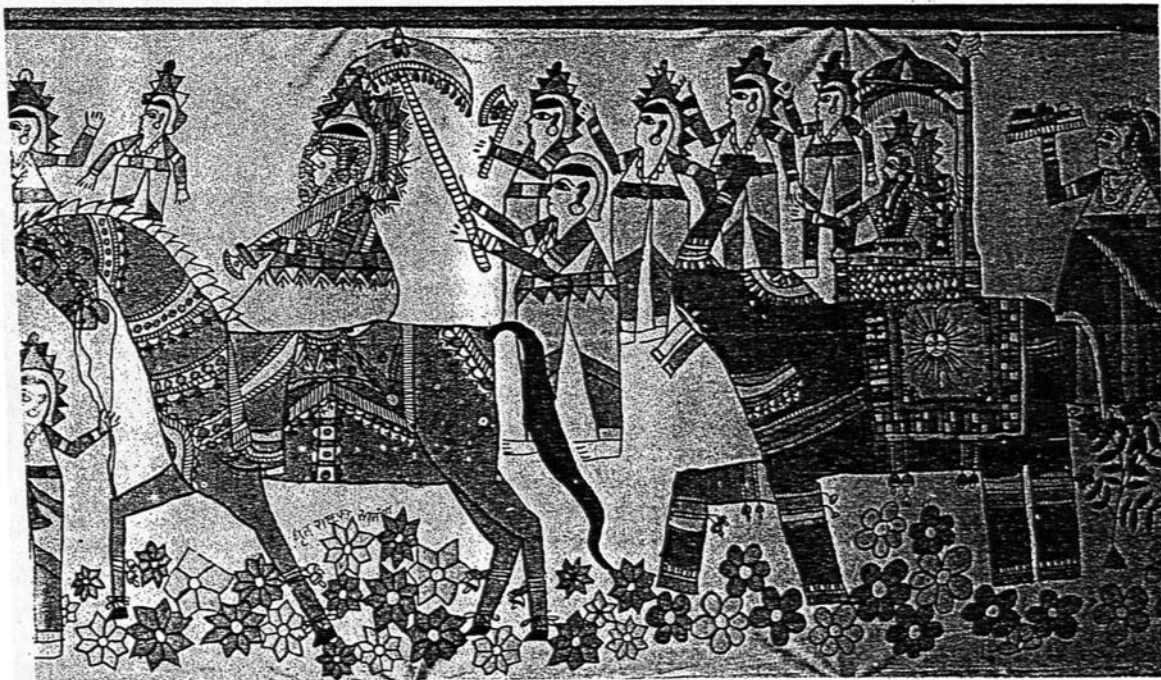
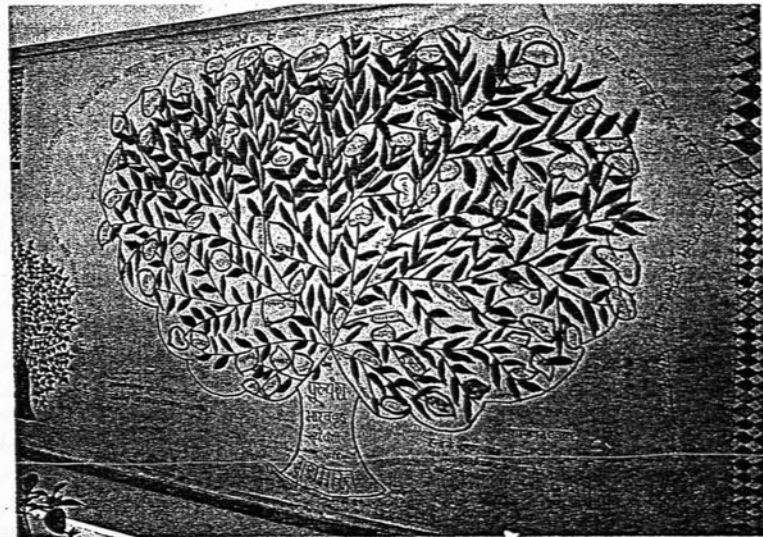
While portraying jungle life where

Right:

The vamsha vriksha or tree tracing the genealogy of the Puru dynasty, an idea Santokhba borrowed from her own family

Below:

Dhritarashtra's marriage procession. Santokhba's figures appear highly animated. In this scene Dhritarashtra's horse gives the impression of leaping ahead



A yagna. This panel has been drawn in great detail without breaking the uniformity. The use of blue indicates night

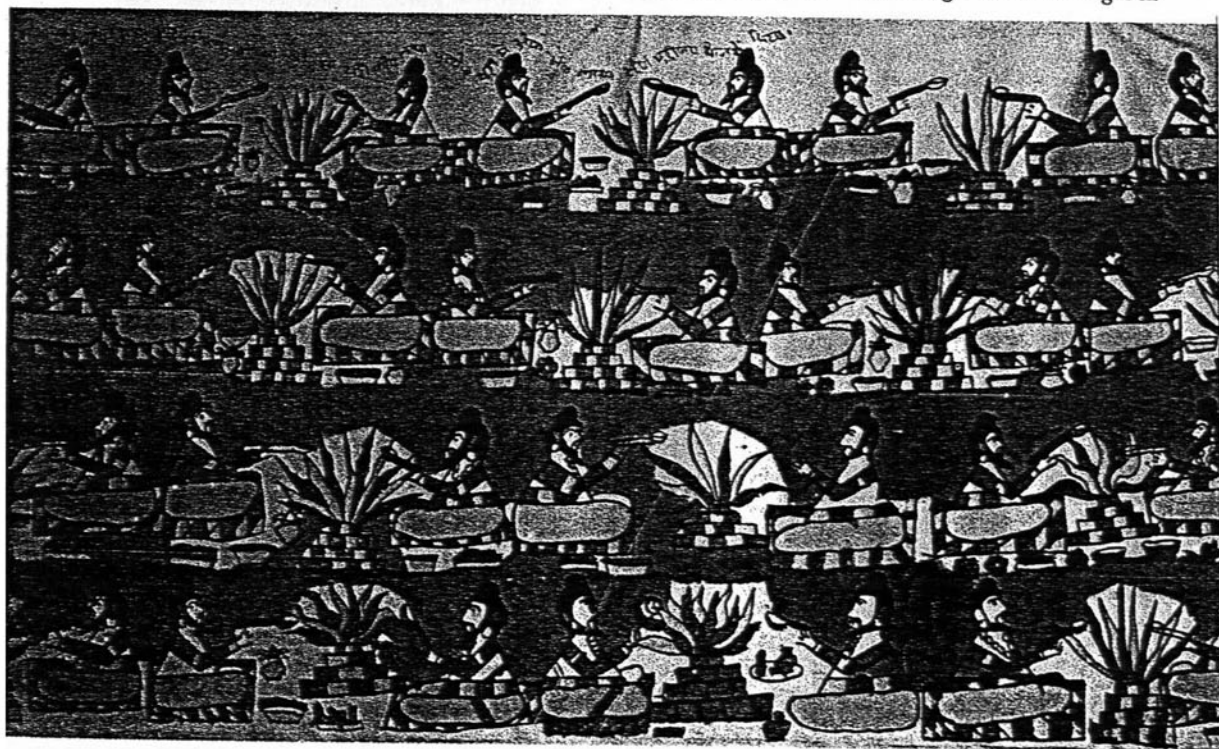
Kunti serves food to Brahmins, Santokhba has drawn beautiful bamboo huts. She recollects, 'I used to prepare such bamboo huts for our use and on festive occasions I painted them brightly'. Santokhba derived inspiration from her surroundings and then superimposed what she saw in the *Mahabharata* scroll.

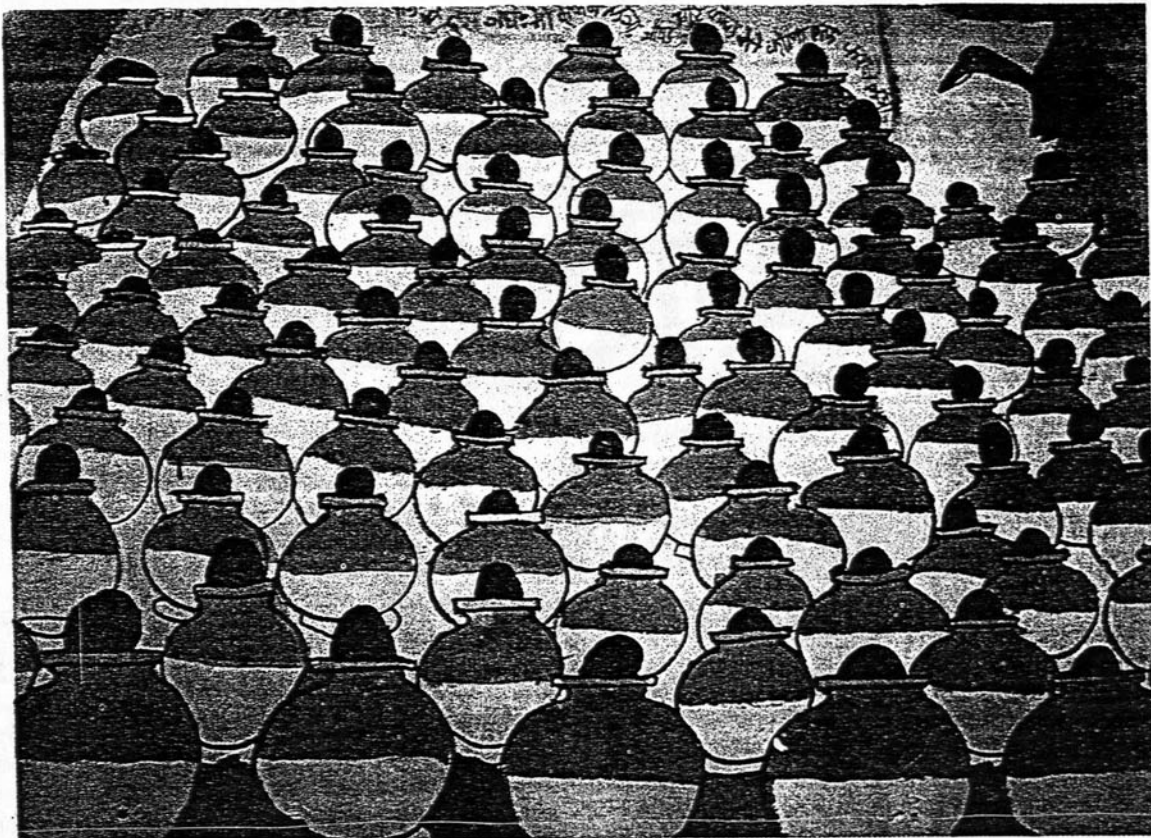
The royal court of Satyapal is ornate and extravagant. Here Santokhba's maturity is quite evident especially while composing the scene with its multi-dimensional perspective. The ministers or the *sabhasad* sit in two rows, facing each other. She has attempted to depict one row of ministers in profile by elaborating the side of their heads and seats. Sukuni is conspicuous, easily identified by a missing eye. Thus, Santokhba depicts the entire gathering without missing any intricate detail. The moon and the sun painted on a white background at the top of the panel are interesting elements. The sun has a smiling face with the *urdhapundra* tilaka on its forehead; a clear sign that the Vaisnava cult has influenced

Santokhba most. On the other side, a crescent moon with half-closed eye giving a soothing effect. These symbolised the celestial influence on the *Mahabharata* characters.

The war scenes are reminiscent of Rajput martial chivalry. But her paintings are unique because among the hordes of marching troops, elephants, chariots and horses, there is no evidence of blood. The only signs of blood are the red rings painted on the tips of the arrows. Santokhba contemplatively explains this curious phenomenon, 'Enough blood is spilt in the world so I do not want to further the sorrow with the sight of blood on my canvas'.

Modern influences too surface in Santokhba's paintings. In a war scene, the deadly criss-crossing arrows reminds the viewer of television's rendering of the *Ramayana*. Furthermore, the chariots have lyrical curves and are embellished with traditional flower and foliage decorations as well as modern geometrical designs in

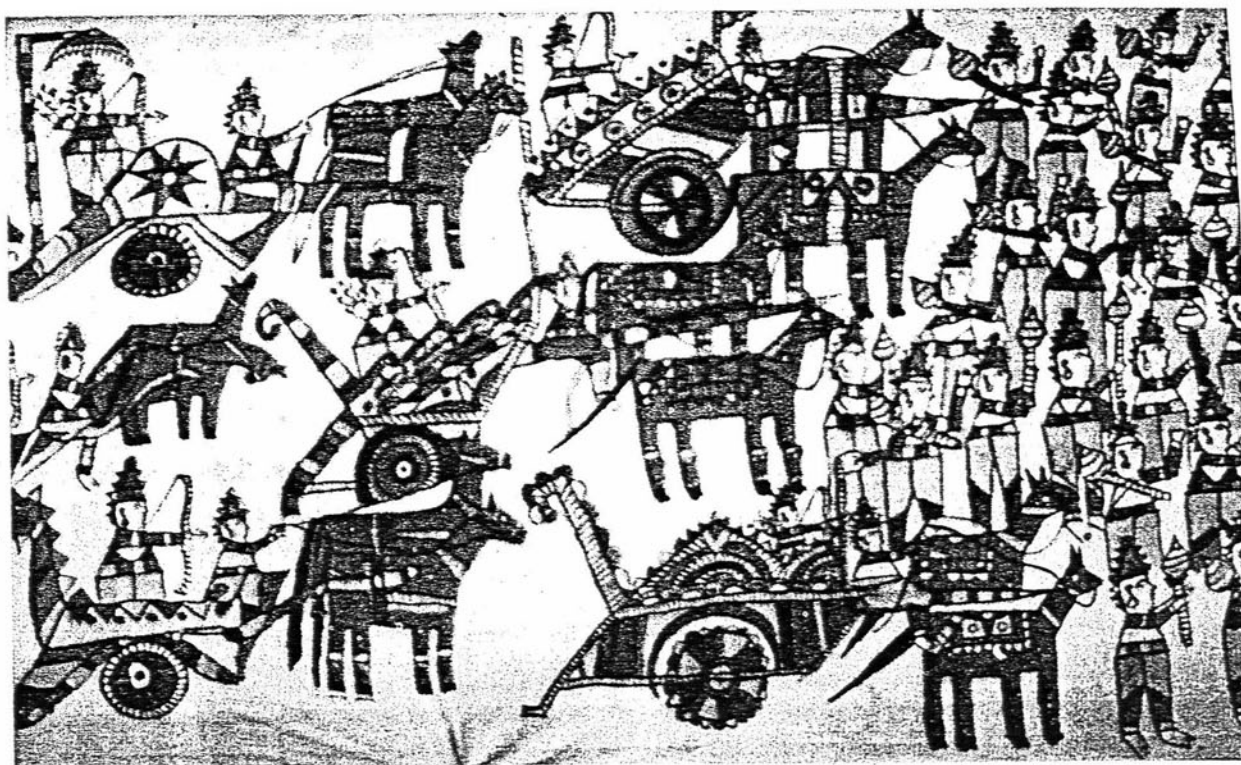




contrasting colours. In this context, Santokhba says, 'I have seen chariots during Janmasthanmi and then developed my own design of ornamentation'. Santokhba, therefore, does not restrict her work to the traditional motifs but is open to new interpretations of abstract patterns.

Another unique and engrossing panel is that of the birth of the Kauravas. Santokhba sang the passage of the epic to me and said that Gandhari was blessed by Vyasa to be the mother of a hundred sons. When she delivered a large shapeless mass of flesh, Vyasa placed a hundred portions of it into pitchers filled with Ganga water and ghee. Vyasa then asked her to store the pitchers in a cool place for two years. This scene has been dramatised by achieving here the audio effect through visual means! While the Kauravas are maturing in pitchers, vultures and

Rows of pitchers containing the Kauravas. The presence of vultures and donkeys suggest a sense of doom



Santokhba's battle scenes follow the Rajput pattern of warfare. The chariots are decorated with floral and geometric motifs. A significant aspect is the absence of blood in any of her battle scenes

donkeys cry out in the blue background as if to prophesy an ominous birth!

Each of Santokhba's panels is drawn with ease. In fact, the 1,200 metres of painted cloth has opened up new horizons in the world of art and is indeed a landmark in contemporary art history.

Santokhba Dudhat has not confined herself to this epic theme alone, she has also displayed her brilliance on 25 metres of painted cloth on the Indian freedom struggle. Despite her limited exposure she has even visualised London; so vast is her imagination.

Santokhba has also ventured into the field of book illustrations. Her son Bhanu Dudhat has conceived and published a hand-written colouring book on the *Mahabharata* calling it *Grand Maa's Art*. Santokhba, with some help from her daughter-in-law, Prabha, has done all the illustrations. Children can fill the sketches with the

colours of their choice and thus learn about this school of art.

Santokhba is a born artist. Through sheer effort, zealous determination, religious devotion and unfailing will-power, the octogenarian unlettered Santokhba Dudhat has added a vibrant new dimension to the world of folk painting.



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PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAMESH PATHANIA