

Pandhari: The Life and Craft of a Beloved Carpenter

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October of 2017, Pandhari sits on the floor of our living room, building my swing. I wait in feverish anticipation for the day he completes it, when it will adorn my small balcony. The ever-romantic notion of being perched on a cozy bench swing, indulging my passions for writing and reading as the open air surrounds me, is irresistible. My initial thought had been to buy a ready-made one, but with my mother's fortunate intervention, we decided that Pandhari should make it. So, one day, with his cheerful "Good morning!", the work began.

Pandhari's real name is Raghunath Mistry. Before him, we knew his father, Shantaram. My toddlerhood was littered with Shantaram's visits, always coming in to build this or that cabinet, never leaving us dissatisfied with his work. Shantaram had come to Mumbai in 1968 from the Sindhudurg district on the Konkan coast of Maharashtra. He lived here with his brother, who used his contacts to get him a job in carpentry – their family occupation. Shantaram had dabbled in farming back in his village, but his new employer was a photography professor at the JJ School of Arts. "He showed my father what carpentry really is, how much more quality there is in carpentry than one would think. He taught him very well."

So, Shantaram, with these skills in hand, started his own independent practice and bought a small house in Borivali, where Pandhari now returns every night after working on my swing, to his wife and children. The times have changed; Pandhari uses electric tools to cut, level, and drill. He can get more done in a day than his forefathers ever could. "Common craftsmen have access to these goods – that's the level of advancement. Even the poor artisans can now use machinery." Yet, Pandhari's value for his craft has not diminished.

He gives me regular updates on the progress of my swing. I imagine Pandhari and my worlds are far apart: he invests himself in the process, I will reap the joy of the end product. I am pursuing a full education, Pandhari's ended earlier than he would've liked, when circumstances sent him down the same occupational path as his father. My challenges lie in writing good stories and reading enough books, his lie in sums and tools and wood.

But he makes excellent conversation. There's always something or the other for him to talk about. Sometimes it's about his children's studies, sometimes it's about his son's health issues, sometimes it's about the weather. He makes jokes and laughs heartily, and no matter where he's working, he always takes a nap after lunch.

He whistles and hums as he works, bringing colour into my brown swing. I never saw Pandhari as an artist – as a joiner of wood, perhaps; a driller of nails, or manufacturer of sawdust. Yet here he is, putting the planer to work as if creating a new masterpiece. It reminds me of myself, poring over the laptop keyboard trying to string the perfect sentence together. Suddenly, there he is: Pandhari the artist, the craftsman, leaning over his tools with love and focus. Carpentry was not something he took up just because his father did it before him. "I had an interest in the work. Moreover, I think the skills and craft of the family should be learned and preserved." The times have changed, his value for the craft of his people hasn't. He sees the intricacies and beauty of his work just as his father had.

Even so, his work does not stop at carpentry. He is a freelancer, of sorts. Different families hire him for different carpentry jobs. He travels from house to house and gets his work done.

It gets extremely hectic sometimes: in the middle of making my swing, he got called by another client for some very urgent work, and had to juggle between two major jobs for a while. But he much prefers it to working for someone else. “Working anywhere else didn’t suit me...my job includes going to each client’s house and working there, so that I can understand exactly the needs of the customer. How do things get done in their house? What exactly do they want? That’s the main point.”

Every day, he meets different people and understands their needs – another art in itself. This, too, Pandhari has mastered and used to charm the various households he works in. “When I go to a house, I consider it my own. I learn their ways of life, their customs, and don them as my own. ‘Just finish and leave’ is not the right attitude. You must treat your work as your God.”

As the swing is being prepared, I cannot contain my excitement. My mum and I tell our friends about it. One of them ends up giving him a call to build a large cupboard in her house. Just like that, he now has another big project lined up. His magic has struck again. “The people I am working for can earn me more work by referring me to their relatives, neighbours, and friends. This is what our work depends on, and how it starts. One job depends on another. That is how my work has lasted so long.”

Finally, the swing is ready. I fall in love as I look: a wooden bench with square cuts in the armrests, and rectangular ones in the back. A single, painted ceramic tile is embedded in the backrest – it is ornament enough. The body of the swing is smooth and reddish-brown. It is exactly what I wanted. By the time I get back home from college today, it will have been put up in my balcony.

Pandhari himself never went to college. His education ended after the 10th grade, when he took up carpentry with his father. He holds educated architects, interior designers, and other people working in fields related to carpentry, in high regard. “People who get a good education become interior designers, or civil engineers. Those who cannot do the same get left behind and become artisans. *Jo peeche hatt gaya, woh karigar ban gaya.*” His children are now all on their way to obtaining higher educational qualifications.

When I get back home in the evening, he is just finishing up hanging my swing. I am elated. I cannot wait to – I will sit with a thick cloth-bound journal, stare up at the swinging open sky, and, inspired, write for hours. Pandhari, however, seems a little embarrassed. Pointing towards a few extra holes in the ceiling, he apologises for having erred in his measurements. He had originally hung it up at a bit of a slant, and corrected it later. I didn’t mind, but he apologized a few more times anyway.

Not getting to complete his education sometimes rides on his mind. “When I have to use mathematics and geography in my work – and those are very important subjects in carpentry – I resent not having studied more. If I had, then I would be able to make measurements instantaneously. The main point is the measurement. Any mistakes – multiplication, plus,

minus – if anything goes wrong, then that is an indication of the weakness of my education. I could have progressed in my own craft, but I got left behind.”

Formal education or not, Pandhari is always learning. Wherever he goes, he picks up valuable lessons in his vibrant conversations and tireless stride. Carefully, with the same concentration he uses in his craft, he dissects what he learns from other people, determining what to take in and what to leave behind. He adapts to diverse situations and delivers exceptionally.

Pandhari, having finished his work in our house (for the time being) has left for home. I finally get to sit on my swing. It is not just my swing. It is, at least in this moment, the pride and joy of a craftsman who has never made a swing before, who takes his numerous professional and personal challenges in stride, who values his work over himself. This swing is days of his hard work, of a meticulous, demanding process of creation that too often gets cast aside as the humble affair of putting wood together. Swinging back and forth, back and forth, I think about Pandhari and me.

I have always regarded us as being very different; and we are, in the languages we know, the skills we have, the places we've seen, the people we've met. Our experiences have taken us down very different paths. Yet, here and there, those paths converge, and in those converging points lie the love for an exhilarating craft, the facts of struggle and laughter, and most of the furniture in my house.