

The vibrant tapestry of Indian folk art: preserving cultural heritage

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Abstract—India’s diverse cultural tapestry is richly reflected in its folk art, embodying aesthetic and communal values that have endured for centuries. From Madhubani paintings in Bihar to Kalamkari art in Andhra Pradesh, each of India’s 36 states and union territories displays distinct cultural identities through unique artistic forms. Art styles like Maharashtra’s Warli paintings and Odisha’s Patachitra highlight the depth of India’s artistic diversity. These art forms, often adorned with religious and mystical motifs, are valued not only for their traditional beauty but also for their economic potential in international markets. Despite this potential, however, Indian folk art faces challenges due to limited public awareness and economic instability. While Indian craftsmanship across media like cloth, wood, clay, and metal is gradually gaining global recognition, the lack of widespread support leaves these traditional arts vulnerable to cultural isolation.

Index Terms—Indian folk art, Madhubani paintings, Kalamkari, Patachitra, Cultural heritage, Handicrafts industry

I. INTRODUCTION

India, renowned for its diverse cultures and traditions, boasts a rich legacy of folk art, exemplified by the Madhubani paintings of Bihar and the Kalamkari of Andhra Pradesh. These art forms, deeply rooted in religious and mystical themes, offer profound cultural insights and are increasingly valued in global markets for their authenticity (Kolay, 2016). Rural folk art in India, characterized by vibrant designs, is expressed on various media such as cloth, wood, paper, and metal, making them popular among tourists due to their ethnic beauty (Upadhyay & Jain, 2019). Every craft reflects the cultural richness of India’s 35 states, each with unique traditions, such as Madhubani, Patachitra, Phad, and Warli paintings that highlight the nation’s artistic diversity (Dash & Bidhu, 2021). While India’s traditional and

contemporary art has gained international recognition, contributing to global auctions and exhibitions (Paul, 2014), the lack of public awareness and the isolation of these forms pose challenges to their economic and cultural sustainability (Kolay, 2016). New-media technologies can enhance global awareness of India’s cultural heritage, potentially integrating traditional art into mainstream knowledge (Paul, 2014). India’s arts spanning architecture, literature, dance, and cuisine serve as cultural assets with soft power potential, capable of influencing global perceptions (Paul, 2014). The country’s handicrafts industry, decentralized and labor-intensive, employs over six million artisans, including many women and marginalized communities. Despite its significance, artisans face challenges related to economic viability and preservation of traditions (Upadhyay & Jain, 2019). Promoting these art forms via new-media could ensure the continuity and global recognition of India’s folk and tribal arts (Kolay, 2016).

India’s folk painting traditions: symbolism, ritual, and regional identity

India’s folk painting traditions reflect a complex interplay of ritual, community identity, and visual symbolism, with each regional style offering unique formal and thematic vocabularies. Madhubani, also known as Mithila art, originates from Bihar’s Mithila region and is steeped in Hindu iconography and rituals. Initially wall-based, it transitioned to paper during the 1960s famine, gaining global prominence for its vivid palette, dense motifs, and mythological narratives from epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (Agrawal & Ukande, 2022). UNESCO’s recognition as Intangible Cultural Heritage underlines its enduring cultural value. Rooted in Maharashtra’s tribal regions, Warli art, dating to 2500–3000 BC, uses minimalist geometry

to depict communal life, from farming to rituals. Created traditionally by women, its visual language of circles, triangles, and squares conveys ecological and spiritual concepts, preserving Warli identity through living traditions (Anand, 2019; Saldanha, 1990). Aipan, a ritual art from the Kumaon region, is crafted with rice paste on ochre backgrounds, typically by women during festivals and life events. Featuring divine and natural motifs, it bridges devotion and aesthetics while sustaining intergenerational cultural transmission (Kolay, 2016; Monia, 2017; Agrawal & Ukande, 2022). Dating to the 12th century, Odisha's Patachitra centers on painted cloth scrolls depicting tales from Jagannath cult and Krishna's lore. Chitrakars employ natural dyes and disciplined techniques passed through hereditary lines, ensuring the continuity of this temple-linked tradition (Hacker, 2004; Lyons, 2004; Menon & Sreejith, 2021).

Phad scrolls, used in mobile religious performances by *Bhopas*, portray folk deities like Pabuji and Devnarayan. Created with natural pigments, these scrolls, sometimes up to 30 feet blend oral tradition with narrative painting, showing adaptability through contemporary themes (Ziegler, 1976; Rathore et al., 2021; Attri, 2020; Agrawal & Ukande, 2022). Kalamkari, ancient textile art includes the Srialahasti style of freehand pen drawings and the block-printed Machilipatnam style. Both utilize natural dyes and religious narratives, particularly around Hindu deities. Revival efforts echo broader appreciation for traditional textile arts (Kordhanyamath & S, 2019; Menon & Boobalikirshnan, 2018; nu et al., 2018; Mandal & Rose, 2023). Gond art is distinguished by vibrant color fields and dotted line-work illustrating myths, flora, and fauna. Rooted in animistic traditions, these paintings retain spiritual significance while achieving international recognition through stylistic evolution (Malik & Sethi, 2023; Arur & Wyeld, 2016). Mandana is practiced on domestic surfaces using red ochre and lime-based motifs. Its symmetrical geometric patterns echo temple designs and parallel Warli and Madhubani traditions in form and symbolism. Despite limited commercialization, Mandana plays a key role in sustaining ritual life (Mandal & Rose, 2023; Agrawal & Ukande, 2022; Saldanha, 1990; Nu et al., 2018).

Saora wall paintings, executed with twig brushes and natural colors, are ritualistic depictions of ancestors and cosmic elements. Their integration of modern imagery like airplanes signals adaptation under cultural pressure, prompting renewed preservation efforts (Sharman, 2020; Agrawal & Ukande, 2022; Das, 2020). Practiced by the Rathwa and Bhilala tribes, Pithoro murals are offerings to deities for well-being. Their symbolic animals and divine figures emphasize spiritual aesthetics over realism, maintaining oral transmission and cultural memory (Lyons, 2004; Das, 2020; Saldanha, 1990; Agrawal & Ukande, 2022). Pichhvai Painting, these cloth-based temple backdrops center on Krishna-centric themes and are noted for Mughal and Deccani stylistic influences. Created for the Pushtimarg sect, Pichhvai artworks employ intricate detailing and gold foil, sustaining devotional and commercial relevance (Lyons, 2004; K, 2022; Mandal & Rose, 2023). Originating from the town of Nirmal, Nirmal paintings style blends mythological and architectural themes with strong brushwork and textile-inspired designs. Despite modern challenges, Nirmal continues to thrive through hereditary artisanship (Lyons, 2004; Das, 2020; Mandal & Rose, 2023).

Threats and initiatives for safeguarding and revitalizing folk arts

Folk arts, integral to the cultural heritage of communities worldwide, face significant challenges to their survival due to globalization, urbanization, and economic development. These forces have eroded traditional lifestyles, leading to the decline of many folk-art forms. The dominance of mass-produced art has marginalized local, community-based artistic expressions. In response, initiatives emphasizing "living cultural heritage" have emerged, highlighting the interdependence of communities and their environments, and the need to preserve both physical artifacts and the social, economic, and ecological conditions that sustain these traditions. Sustainability governance has become critical in traditional craft communities, addressing issues such as financial survival, weak local governance, and adapting to market demands and social changes (Filho & Rayman-Bacchus, 2019). Innovation in design, production methods, and disposal practices plays a vital role in helping communities adapt while maintaining cultural integrity. Additionally,

developing new business models, marketing strategies, and consumer engagement can support sustainable economic interests for artisans, contributing to community well-being (Huang & Anderson, 2019). The revitalization of folk arts is a dynamic process of cultural renewal that enhances community resilience in the face of rapid societal and environmental change (Brown & Vacca, 2022; Huang & Anderson, 2019; Filho & Rayman-Bacchus, 2019).

Sustaining and promoting folk arts in India

India's diverse folk arts embody the country's rich cultural heritage, reflecting the unique traditions and customs of its communities. These art forms, passed down through generations, are deeply intertwined with cultural identities and daily life (Anand, 2019). However, globalization and modernization pose significant challenges to their preservation and development (Anand, 2019). The preservation of folk arts is crucial, as they represent India's cultural diversity and collective memory, while also transmitting traditional knowledge, skills, and values. By maintaining their vibrancy, communities can foster pride, belonging, and create sustainable economic opportunities for artisans. An example is the revival of Kasuti embroidery from Karnataka, which, while adapting to contemporary tastes, retains its traditional essence (Nu et al., 2017, 2018). Additionally, the concept of creating an "eco-system" for these arts, as highlighted in the paper "Designing for Revitalization of Communities through New Business Models for Traditional Arts and Crafts" (Huang & Anderson, 2019), emphasizes the importance of supporting these art forms not only in museums but also as cultural symbols in society. Virtual and new-media platforms also play a vital role in promoting folk arts. As suggested in "Cultural Heritage Preservation of Traditional Indian Art through Virtual New-media" (Kolay, 2016), digital media can raise public awareness about vanishing art forms. A holistic approach combining traditional preservation, innovative business models, and digital technologies can ensure the sustainability and relevance of India's folk-art heritage (Huang & Anderson, 2019).

II. CONCLUSION

India's folk arts and culture, deeply rooted in the creativity of its tribal and rural communities, have garnered both national and international acclaim. Among these, folk paintings stand out as vibrant visual narratives that reflect native life through colorful line drawings and intricate designs. These works evoke cultural identity and belonging, reinforcing their integral role in India's heritage. Furthermore, the commercial success of these paintings provides a vital non-agricultural income for the artists and their communities (Nu et al., 2018). In response to the growing global demand, organizations like the Office of Development Commissioner and the Ministry of Textiles have supported genuine craft artists through exhibitions, training, market access, and awards (Anand, 2019; Nu et al., 2018). This support aims to balance the preservation of traditional arts with sustainable economic opportunities, fostering community revitalization (Anand, 2019; Huang & Anderson, 2019). As both cultural and economic landscapes evolve, it is essential to ensure the continued relevance of these arts, which serve as enduring symbols connecting India's past and present (Anand, 2019).

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