

# DISAPPEARING HERITAGE: PROMOTION AND PRESERVATION OF INDIAN FOLK ART

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## ABSTRACT

India is a country with rich customs and a varied population, all of which are deeply ingrained in the country's history. The folk arts, which are ancient manifestations of creativity and individuality passed down through the years, are the foundation of this cultural fabric. However, many of these old art forms are in danger of disappearing due to the quick speed of modernisation. This study examines the declining Indian folk arts and the need of preserving these priceless cultural assets. India's disappearing folk arts are live testaments to the many cultural landscapes that make up the nation, not only artistic expressions. From the intricate wood carvings of Kashmir to the vibrant Pattachitra paintings of Bengal and Odisha, each art form carries with it, centuries of history, tradition, and storytelling. However, many of these artistic expressions are in danger of disappearing completely as traditional lifestyles become increasingly urbanised and obsolete.

**Keywords:** Folk Art, Preservation, Urbanisation, Traditional Art, Disappearing Art

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India is a cultural treasure trove of many art forms that are passed down from generation to generation due to its rich historical and cultural past. Every state and union territory in India has a unique culture of its own. These are visible through the existence of different art forms across different states in India. Folk art is the form of art that is unique to each of these political entities. India is home to a plethora of basic, ethnic folk and tribal artworks that are vibrant and colourful, evoking the nation's rich past. [Sharma \(2015\)](#). The worldwide market offers enormous commercial possibilities for Indian folk art. Its classic aesthetic sense and

sincerity are the reason behind this. India's rural folk paintings are characterised by their vibrant colours and exquisite mystical and religious themes, all of which serve primarily practical purposes. Through the expression of common aesthetics and communal values, folk arts transmit cultural identity. A variety of media, such as fabric, wood, paper, clay, metal, and other objects, make up the foundation material.

Many of these folk gems have remained completely untouched by the vagaries of modernization while many others have evolved to become mainstream. Most of these folk cultures share common themes of mythology and nature. Their distinctive nature is apparent due to their uniqueness of style and aesthetics. These ancient Indian folk painting and art styles are not governed by distinct rules but they maintain their distinctive character of their originality guided by the prevailing traditions. They learn the art form within community settings through informal apprenticeship. The guidance comes from the senior artists, usually a family member such as mother, father or some other close relative. The famous traditional and historical folk-art forms prevalent in India are as; Madhubani painting in Bihar, Pattachitra paintings in Odisha, Mysore paintings in Karnataka, Tanjore paintings in Tamil Nadu, Rajput paintings in Rajasthan, Kalamkari paintings in Andhra Pradesh, Kalighat paintings in West Bengal, Pahari paintings in Northern Himalayan region, Warli paintings in Maharashtra and Gujarat, Kashmir wood craft, and Rogan Art. [Iftekhhar Alam \(2020\)](#)

In Kashmiri tradition, wood carving is a deeply ingrained craft. Expertise and accuracy in crafting elaborate patterns on furniture, kitchenware, and ornamental objects characterise Kashmiri wood carvers. The history of wood carving in Kashmir goes back to the 14th century, a time when the Mughal emperors encouraged the art.

Unfortunately, the craft of wood carving is gradually disappearing due to the rise of manufactured furniture and the drop in demand for antique wooden objects. Many groups and government programs have been established to give young artists resources and training in order to maintain this distinctive technique. Furthermore, an attempt is being made to educate visitors and residents about the cultural significance of wood carving in Kashmir in order to motivate people to support and buy handcrafted goods from local designers. [The Lost Heritage: Preserving the Traditional Crafts of Kashmir \(n.d.\)](#).

In fact, Rogan represents a legacy of art that we have all but abandoned. Why is it so difficult for us to value our own craftsmanship more highly than Western modern designs with advertised aesthetics? The Muslim Khattris, a group in Gujarat, invented the technique of painting fabric using this oil-based paint.

Initially, rogan painting was done in a few different places throughout Gujarat. Women from lower castes primarily bought the painted fabric to adorn garments and sheets for their weddings. As such, it was a seasonal craft, with the majority of the work being completed in the few months that coincide with the majority of weddings. The artisans would transition to other occupations, like agriculture, for the remainder of the year.

Rogan-painted items became relatively more costly as machine-made, cheaper textiles gained popularity in the late 20th century, and many artists left the field. In the end, only the Gujarati families of Abdul Gafur Khatri carried up the tradition. (Csjmu.Ac.In.)

However, the distinctive character of these folk arts is getting compromised. The exposure to modernization has led many of them to adapt new synthetic colours, techniques and materials. The majority of these folk paintings typically feature religious epics or Gods and Goddesses, yet each of these distinctive forms

has a distinct, admirable, and timeless style all its own. They were created using natural dyes and colours in the past on a variety of matrix materials, including walls, floors, murals, canvases, and more. [Iftexhar Alam \(2020\)](#)

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the necessity for Indian folk arts preservation and conservation. The research process is based on secondary data and incorporates information from books, journals, research papers, and artwork, among other sources.

### **2.1. OBJECTIVES**

- To understand the need of preservation and conservation of folk art.
- To understand the disappearing folk arts of India and its importance
- The role of government and NGOs in the revival of folk arts.
- Suggest strategies for enhancing the promotion and preservation of India's rich folk-art heritage.

## **3. WARLI PAINTINGS OF MAHARASHTRA**

The origin of Warli art can be traced from the early 1st century AD. Many scholars suggest that this habit, which dates back to the Neolithic era between 2,500 and 3,000 BC, was spread by the tribal people. Basic design elements like squares, triangles, and circles are used in these really basic wall paintings. There is a strong connection between nature and these artworks. The triangle symbolises mountains and pointed trees, the circle stands for the sun and moon, and the square appears to have been created by humans and may have represented a piece of land or a holy enclosure. Women were the primary artists of the Warli paintings. These paintings are beautifully executed and have close resemblance with the pre-historic cave paintings. The common motifs and themes depicted their lifestyles, usually the human activities of hunting, dancing, sowing and harvesting.

Jivya Soma Mashe, the most popular of Warli artists, who lives about 150 km from Mumbai says, "Warli art speaks of our way of life, our culture; it reveals the heart of the tribals." If you choose, it could be a statement of your lifestyle too.

## **4. PATACHITRA PAINTING OF ORISSA**

It has originated in 12th century from the temple of Jagannath, Puri. These are considered as one of the oldest forms of paintings in Oriya. Pattachitra has its origin from the Sanskrit words 'patta', means canvas while 'Chitra' means picture. Thus, Pattachitra is a form of painting which are made on canvas. These paintings are made with a variety of colours while creating the motifs and designs related to different themes. Some of the important themes include Thia Badhia -which presents the temple of Jagannath, Krishna Lila – Celebrations for Lord Krishna while displaying his powers as a child etc. The artists are disciplined in the use of materials and the choice of themes. The discipline can be retracted from their rigid rules in the use of colours and patterns. The colour pattern is restricted to a single tone. The indigenous paints made by the Chitrakars are made from basic elements found in nature. [Iftexhar Alam \(2020\)](#)

## 5. PHAD PAINTINGS OF RAJASTHAN

Phad painting, often referred to as Phad, is an Indian folk art from the state of Rajasthan. Traditionally, these paintings have been created on lengthy canvases or pieces of cloth. It shows several Rajasthani traditional deities, including Pabuji and Devnarayan. The priest-singers (The Bhopas) carried painted phad along with them and used them as mobile temples for the folk deities. The normal length of the phad of Pabuji are about 15 feet. Traditionally, the colours used for the phad preparation were obtained from various natural sources. Phad art was naturally vulnerable to the prospect of extinction since the tradition was so fiercely preserved. Famous Phad painter and Padma Shri recipient Shree Lal Ji Joshi chose to establish Joshi Kala Kunj in Bhilwara, Rajasthan in 1960, challenging all conventional notions about the Phad heritage in an effort to maintain and revitalise the art form. School that taught Phad painting to artists not related to the Joshi family. In 1990, the school was renamed Chitrashala as part of an expansion of the revival effort, which was supported by his sons Gopal and Kalyan Joshi. At Chitrashala, almost 3,000 artists have received training over the years.

Kalyanji Joshi began painting figures in Phad paintings other than Devnarayanji and Pabuji since the fundamental element of Phad paintings was storytelling. The paintings became more appealing to a wider audience by including stories and characters from the Panchatantra, Hanuman Chalisa, Mahabharata, and Ramayana. Chitrashala's artistic community was urged to continue the heritage while incorporating their own distinctive styles. Today's Phad paintings are as little as 2, 4, or 6 feet in size, a major reduction from their original size due to the demands and limited space of contemporary households. Kalyan Joshi encouraged the idea to paint only one of the mini-stories in smaller Phad paintings because the original paintings included many distinct stories or episodes that made up the complete story. In addition, he included written language into the pieces, something that was absent from classic Phad paintings.

Efforts by several Joshi family members and other well-known Phad painters, including Pradeep Mukherjee, have contributed to the preservation and revival of this amazing art form to some extent, raising its market value and creating jobs for Phad artists. However, in spite of these initiatives, currently there are less than twenty professional Phad painters.

Such rich creative traditions from the past need to be promoted in the present society. Apart from its aesthetic appeal, traditional traditions and folklore that have endured through the ages are preserved in art forms like Phad, which showcase India's rich cultural heritage. (Phad paintings of Rajasthan – A tale of tradition, storytelling and revival in the modern day.)

## 6. KALAMKARI OF ANDHRA PRADESH

Kalamkari, also known as Qalamkari, is a hand-painted or block-printed cotton cloth which is made throughout India. The word has its origin from kalam (pen) and kari (craftmanship). In other words, it refers to the craftsmanship with the use of pen. Under the patronage of the Mughals and the Golconda sultanate, the ancient skill expanded to Machilipatnam in Andhra Pradesh. The Machilipatnam style and the Srikalahasti style are the two main variations of Kalamkari art. This style flourished around temples and the artistic works are used as temple hangings, chariot banners and the like. The themes depict deities and scenes taken from various great epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas and so on. For Kalamkari

paintings, only natural colours are used and the preparation of colours involves seventeen painstaking steps.

Unfortunately, Kalamkari, like several other ancient Indian art forms, is a generational art form; this means that a father or grandfather would normally instruct his grandchildren in the family craft. This is how it has been passed down and kept for many years. The majority of Kalamkari artists' offspring today choose to work in engineering, business, or other professions due to the abundance of opportunities for a more reliable and profitable income. Of the approximately sixteen proficient Kalamkari artists that are still active today, 10 have received national recognition. (Kalamkari: A traditional Indian art form, 2022)

## **7. PICHHVAI PAINTINGS OF RAJASTHAN**

This art form is indigenous to Rajasthan, specifically to Nathwara. The meaning of Pichwai is "at the back." The main purpose of these paintings in temples is as beautiful curtains. These paintings are found in Rajasthani temples dedicated to Krishna and Shrinathji. Considered highly sacred, these canvas painting hangings made of fabric are offered by followers at temples and brought back as mementos of their experiences. These paintings are more detailed and lavishly polished.

## **8. MINIATURE PAINTINGS**

These paintings are small in size with intricate details and acute expressions. These paintings have their origin in Mughal era in 16th century. These paintings carry features of the Persian style which flourished during the reign of Shah-Jahan and Akbar. However, later the paintings were adopted by Rajput's as well. The painting practice is still popular in Rajasthan. Like other Indian folk arts, these paintings depict various religious symbols and epics. These paintings represent human motifs uniquely. The motifs are portrayed having disproportionately larger eyes, pointed nose and slim waist while men are always seen wearing a turban.

## **9. TANJORE PAINTINGS**

The Tanjore or Thanjavur paintings were encouraged by the Nayaka's of Thanjavur. The painting has its origin from the modern Telangana in early 17th century. The gold foil used in Thanjavur paintings sparkles and gives the artwork a surreal appearance, which makes them very popular. These panel paintings of saints, gods, and goddesses are painted on wooden planks. The style has ingredients of Maratha art, Deccani art and some European styles. This art form is nearly threatened which is practiced by the Nakashi family only. They use primary colour hues. The customary rigour of Tanjore or Mysore paintings is reminiscent of a vivid imagination with a striking contrast.

## **10. KALIGHAT PAINTINGS**

A recently discovered painting style has its origin in Kalighat region of Bengal in the 19th century. These paintings are made on cloth and pattachis. Traditionally, the paintings depicted Gods and Goddesses while in the contemporary era, the subject matter has expanded to various social issues which are critically important for society. The materials of the painting include poor quality paper and colours, while the squirrel hair is used as brushes. This style of painting is distinguished by its strong, straightforward lines and flawless brushwork. The common themes of the

British era included; rich zamindars were depicted as having lavish life style and drinking wine with women, the priests were shown with 'unchaste' women and police babus as compromising in case of influential lots of society.

## 11. MADHUBANI PAINTINGS OF BIHAR

The most well-known type of Indian folk art are the Mithila paintings, which originate in the state of Bihar's Mithilanchal area. The essence of these artworks is religious. The majority of these paintings were created by women in their homes, usually in sacred spaces like the prayer room. The primary topic of Madhubani Painting is Hindu mythology. The Ramayana and Mahabharata legendary epics serve as the inspiration for this live folk culture in India. The essence of this art form is "unconditional surrender and thankfulness to God," and it is revered as heavenly. The devastating famine that ravaged Bihar in the early 1960s led to the rebirth of contemporary Mithila art. The paper paintings and other portable media paintings made their circulation possible. [Iftekhhar Alam \(2020\)](#)

## 12. CONCLUSION

Many folk arts are finding a place in modern interiors, clothing, jewellery, and bags such as Warli painting, Madhubani painting, Tajor art, Phulkari, Chikankari etc. The Warli folk art is now globally recognized due to its adaptation in fashion garments, accessories and other artifacts of home decorations. Like Warli art Madhubani art also got recognition in modern times because of its vibrant colours. Next, in order to increase their modest earnings, the ladies of Mithila were urged to use their painting abilities on paper. This enabled worldwide appreciation of this art and gave recognition to its best artists. Even though this Madhubani art has been practiced for centuries, recently this rural art form got noticed around the world and slowly but steadily found its way onto many merchandizes from greeting cards to fabric materials. The modern-day Madhubani artist now enjoys a wider spectators and increased business as fashion designers and interior decorators have used Madhubani art style to adorn wardrobes and home furnishing products too.

In today's scenario, breathtakingly beautiful jewelry is being produced taking inspiration from Tanjore motifs. Vandana Srivastav, a well-known jewellery designer is famous for excusite pieces of jewellery inspired from Tanjore paintings. There is global market for these contemporary jewellery pieces and paintings. But there are some folk arts which were slowly fading due to the lack of patience and interest. [Verma \(2018\)](#)

More than merely visual manifestations, India's fading folk arts are living testaments to the many cultural landscapes that make up the nation. However, many of these artistic expressions are in danger of disappearing completely as traditional lifestyles become increasingly urbanised and obsolete. [Kedia \(2024\)](#)

To promote and preserve India Folk art, a comprehensive approach that involves the education, marketing, and community engagement is essential. Here are some steps that can be taken:

- Include folk art into school and college curriculums to educate students about the importance of Folk arts and organize workshops where students and the general public can learn about folk art.
- Provide financial support to artists through grants and scholarships to help them continue their work, offer training programs to help artists to improve their skills and ensure artists are paid fairly to their work.



- Host exhibitions in urban areas, encourage the sale of folk art through online platforms, making it accessible to a global audience and partner with fashion designers, interior decorators, and other industries to incorporate folk art into modern products.
- Celebrate folk art at regional, national, and international festivals to keep it vibrant, commission public art projects like murals or installations that showcase folk art in urban areas.
- Advocate for government policies that protect and promote folk art, including financial incentives and grants, and collaborate with NGOs working in cultural preservation to provide training, resources, and platforms for folk artists.
- Create digital repositories of folk art to ensure these art forms are documented and accessible to future generations.
- Partner with other countries to organize cultural exchange programs, showcasing Indian folk art on global platforms, and work with international bodies like UNESCO to recognize and promote Indian folk arts.
- In order to fulfil the need of the current generation for leisure activities, the pattern of displaying these tribal/folk arts and cultural forms should be deliberately changed and adjusted to make them more vibrant. In order for the artists to produce these works of art and craft more quickly, they must be trained to employ cutting edge technology.
- Rural development planning may set up loans and incentives to encourage folk craftspeople to manufacture high-quality goods.

India is distinguished by its abundant and ancient legacy of Tribal and Folk Arts and Culture. India's rural and tribal communities have always been exceptionally creative, as seen by the wide range of artistic and cultural manifestations they have created throughout history. The folk paintings have a rich history. Folk paintings are essential to the identity of human society; without them, events would remain incomplete. Through their vibrant line drawings, folk paintings evoke aesthetic sentiments and serve as a reminder of local life. These tribal paintings have become highly valuable in the domestic and international art market thus their continued commercialisation will open up new non-agricultural revenue streams. Organisations throughout the globe are pushing artists to make traditional paintings on handmade paper for retail sales in response to the increased demand for crafts worldwide. The Indian government and other organisations are also actively involved in assisting and promoting legitimate craft artists through the coordination of diverse exhibits, training programs focused on specific skills, invitations to market events for artists, and rewards and incentives for their output. [Sharma \(2015\)](#)

Art can adapt digitalization, but the techniques behind it cannot be preserved. While the skills and methods that artists used can be passed down from one generation to the other, they cannot be preserved in the same way. Therefore, the only process that the digital world can help is to archive these precious techniques for the next generation. Also, it will be insightful to upload videos that demonstrate the specific methods the artists use in their works.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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