



Reviving ancient environmental wisdom through Indian folk paintings

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Abstract

Traditional Indian paintings express the rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions. The roots of ancient practices, can be seen in folk paintings. These art forms have been passed down through generations, reflecting rural communities' beliefs, values, and lifestyles. Indian folk paintings such as Madhubani, Warli, Gond, Bhil, Kalamkari, Mandala, and Pattachitra are more than just art; they are the symbol of centuries of environmental wisdom. These tribal art forms highlight the valuable message of the environment and sustainable living. This study has two objectives: 1. To identify and interpret environmental themes in seven Indian folk painting traditions. 2. To explore how these paintings reflect traditional sustainable environmental wisdom and environmental awareness. This research delves into how these paintings can foster modern environmental awareness using an exploratory and qualitative approach. Secondary data has been used in the present study. By analysing the visual motifs and reviewing existing literature, the research identifies key environmental themes in these art forms. The study investigated that traditional art portrays environmental themes of 1. biodiversity, 2. forest and wildlife conservation, 3. celebrations of flora and fauna, 4. agricultural practices and water resources, 5. forest preservation, 6. community harmony, 7. balance and sustainable living, 8. interdependence between humans and the environment, 9. the interconnectedness of life, 10. geometric patterns to represent natural cycles, 11. natural dyes, and eco-friendly techniques. Madhubani art is recognized for its patterns and natural dyes. Warli paintings use simple geometric shapes to depict daily life. Gond art celebrates the connection between humans and the environment. Bhil paintings, a traditional tribal art are celebrated for their unique dotted patterns. While Patachitra narrates mythological tales with elaborate detailing. By showcasing the Bhil community's deep connection with their environment, these paintings inspire others to develop a similar respect and care for nature. These traditional art forms not only serve as a medium of storytelling but also embody sustainable practices by utilizing eco-friendly materials. These paintings can be utilized for environmental education today. By bridging ancient wisdom with sustainability efforts, this research suggests the potential of Indian folk art to inspire a deeper awareness for the environment. Integrating these traditional art forms with school curricula and community learning programs to spread ecological awareness can be helpful. By this, the students can gain a greater respect for sustainable activities and the interconnectedness of cultural heritage.

Keywords: Ancient, Environmental wisdom, Indian folk paintings, Sustainable living, Motifs

Introduction

Indian folk paintings are not only arts but are deeply connected with the environmental stories of the tribal communities. Folk art is known for its method of using traditional simple techniques, often involving collective efforts (Das & Jain, 2024). The folk and tribal paintings of India are mainly related to ethnic traditions and simplicity. Their colourful nature represents their rich heritage. (Sharma, 2015) ^[12]. Motifs from seven of the folk paintings of India named Madhubani paintings of Bihar, Warli Paintings of Maharashtra, Gond Paintings of Madhya Pradesh, Kalamkari of Andhra Pradesh, Mandala paintings, and Patachitra paintings are explored concerning environmental themes in this study. These artistic expressions are enriched with ancient folklore that reflects humanity's age-old harmony with the environment. It is believed that Madhubani have begun during the Ramayana period, 2500 years ago (Yadav *et al.*, 2024). The Warli art form is simple compared to the bright paintings from Madhubani (Masram & Vishwakarma, 2019) ^[8]. Gond painting, being an integral part of the Gond ethnic culture of central India, has

emerged as a widely appreciated and recognized tribal art in the world recently (Padhi & Goswami, 2024). These art forms are different from modern art, which primarily depicts personal sentiments or aesthetic appeal. Classical Indian folk paintings function as a collection of environmental wisdom. It took a long time for this consciousness to pass down from generation to generation. Kalamkari art uses natural pigments that originate from different varieties of plants' roots, leaves, petals, and barks (Chandra, 2015) ^[3]. These art forms describe the narratives of biodiversity with spiritual landscapes. The representation of seasonal changes and the friendly coexistence of humans with their natural environment are specialties of folk paintings. Mandala art is a geometric concept of defining the inner state of human consciousness. It has its roots in Hindu as well as Buddhist culture. The term 'mandala' is derived from the Sanskrit word for 'circle,' and mandalas are often identified by their circular shape. Folk art across Indian Indigenous communities has long history. It is imperative to coexist in harmony with nature which is highly relevant today. Pattachitra is a style of traditional scroll painting on cloth or palm leaves.

In Sanskrit, "Patta" means "cloth," and "Chitra" means "picture" (Banik *et al.*, 2018)^[1]. These paintings are based on Hindu mythology and tribal folklore. Indian folk paintings, rich in portraying sacred trees, birds, aquatic organisms, animals, snakes, rivers, ritualistic events, crop harvesting, teachings of peace and the elements, feature the possibility of providing valuable insights into sustainable life. These art forms do not merely symbolize nature; they rejoice in it as a divine entity. It offers a visual message showing respect for all natural resources. Involving knowledge holders in various types of village-level engagements can add value in promoting traditional practices. It will facilitate knowledge sharing and will be helpful in conserving resources associated with the tradition (Singh *et al.*, 2010). This paper aims to explore the environmental themes that exist within Indian folk paintings. The focus point of this study is to find the way, how such folk-art traditions can contribute to environmental awareness and sustainable practices. Motifs such as the artistic representation of flora and fauna, use of colours, patterns and dots have been explored. The community rituals, use of agricultural instruments, group farming methods, sacred groves, and cycles of seasons have been analysed in the study. These ancient art forms would be able to integrate environmental awareness with the sustainability of natural resources.

Objectives of the study

- To identify and interpret environmental themes in seven Indian folk painting traditions.
- To explore how these paintings reflect traditional sustainable environmental wisdom and environmental awareness.

Materials and methods

Research design

This study adopted an exploratory and qualitative approach, focusing on folk paintings' motifs and thematic analysis.

Data collection

The study relied on secondary data from online resources, including online Literature, Academic articles, books and research papers. Online digital Paintings and art repository collections are available on museum websites, art galleries, and cultural heritage platforms. Documentaries and video content from platforms like YouTube showing the history, techniques, and motifs of these art forms have been used in research work as secondary data.

Data analysis

Motifs analysis and Thematic analysis have been used in the following seven paintings to interpret their ecological significance: i. Madhubani ii. Warli iii. Gond iv. Bhil v. Kalamkari vi. Mandala vii. Pattachitra.

Findings

Theme No. 1: Biodiversity, wildlife conservation, forest preservation, and celebrations of flora and fauna

Traditional Indian artworks including Khobar along with Warli and Gond art demonstrate natural representation that drives

forest protection while emphasizing wildlife preservation. The creative art forms help artists build a solid foundation about environments in which plants interact with animals while forming connections with human beings. Painting as a concept known as Khobar appears within the Mithila region of Bihar and falls under the category of Madhubani. Through a strong symbolic representation of fish and peacocks along with parrots and turtles the art enhances the connection between communities. The Khobar style of painting displays its meaning through walls decorated with cow dung to express fertility, divine powers and natural force equilibrium. Warli art functions as a tribal heritage that displays natural awareness through its artwork. The painting displays deer as well as tiger alongside snakes and peacocks, monkeys and cows to express the tribe's understanding of ecosystem diversity. The Gond artistic style pursues detailed representations of forest-related subjects through its native roots by depicting various species in one frame. The artist uses the tiger figure to symbolize jungle safety while emphasizing wildlife value. The artist depicts both peacocks and owls along with various other birds which symbolize the traits of wisdom and control. The Gond paintings demonstrate how human beings maintain an intimate forest connection by showing activities such as fruit harvesting, religious tree worship and forest conservation efforts. Through her perspective, Bhuri Bai establishes that trees hold the same emotional characteristics as human beings. Bhuri Bai expresses the significance of trees by portraying them in human forms in her artworks. The members of the Gond community show great respect for the Pakri tree because it belongs to their religious deity, Thakur Dev. The use of newly grown leaves from the tree serves to prepare food that protects against different diseases in their belief system. Painters commonly use this tree as a subject in their artwork. In Pattachitra painting various motifs show both medicinal plants and aquatic creatures together. The birds and various species represent natural harmony. The tree represents both human-nature connections as well as ecological harmony in life. Each motif of different styles of art forms demonstrates biodiversity and celebration of flora and fauna in community practices.

Theme No. 2: - Water resources

In Madhubani paintings, ponds, rivers, and other bodies of water adorned with lotus blossoms are the part of main motifs. Various scenes related to water resources are reminded by these paintings. It shows the significance of respecting and preserving these priceless natural treasures. Fish and turtles are represented the coexistence in the water in these paintings. This underlines the need to conserve water and highlights its life-giving power.

Warli art visually represents the importance of water resources by showing a river running across the village. This represents the importance of the river in sustaining life. In this laconic scene, the river is situated in a socio-economic context, as activities like agriculture, fishing, and animal husbandry are based on water. The sceneries represented along its banks, show the river's significance in everyday community activities.

The presence of wells, water pots, and human interactions with water give more emphasis to its usefulness. The existence of mountains and trees near rivers or ponds are the symbols of natural means of water. The traditional art pieces also combine the idea of land and water conservation with sustainable practices. In the Bhils' paintings the utilization of an innovative approach wherein thousands of dots create showers of rain across fields, giving artistic look to the much-needed value system behind the conservation of water and essential survival of vegetation and animals from monsoon. Gond, in their unique way of drawing, portrays water in different forms through a zigzag of waves. These patterns highlight the vibrant and active presence of seasonal flows and the role of monsoons in the environment. In another scene, coiled-shaped snakes around rivers and ponds signify the conservation of water bodies, urging humankind to protect all sources of water on earth.

Theme No. 3: - Agricultural practices

Warli folk art motifs are composed to highlight the scenes different dimensions of farming, representing farmers' agricultural knowledge and traditional practices in agricultural fields along with community engagement. A common motif is farmers ploughing fields with the help of bullocks and wooden Plows like instruments. Seed sowing and crop planting scenes are drawn through simple stick-figure representations, emphasizing the hard work involved in farming activities. The harvesting process is often shown with a group of people cutting crops with sickles, highlighting the shared efforts of the community during peak farming seasons. Women can be seen doing various daily activities. Wells or buckets being taken from water bodies beautifully highlight their dependence on traditional methods of watering crops. The art frequently depicts dances like the Tarpa dance and celebrations after successful harvests, symbolizing the community's enjoyment and collective hard work. These festivals play a role of a break from labour and reboot social bonds. Bhil art utilizes dot patterns to represent raindrops, reflecting the cyclical nature of agricultural activities and the community's reliance on the monsoon.

Theme No. 4: Geometric patterns to represent natural cycles

The word 'Mandala' has its origin in Sanskrit and the meaning of this word is 'sacred circle' or 'centre'. It represents the balance of the universe with beings. The circle is for the cosmos, on the other hand, the square symbolizes the Earth and human life (Zhou, 2015) [15]. Mandalas have compositions of detailed geometric shapes that have deep and varied spiritual meaning for life. They reflect a person's inner universe and help them to create peace and balance with nature. Famous psychologist Carl Jung believed that drawing Mandalas helps people understand their emotions and feel more stable (Memories, Dreams, Reflections). A similar idea can be found in the research work of Dr. Masaru Emoto in 2005 [6]. His study on water crystals concluded that water reacts in different ways to human thoughts and emotions. When related to kind spells,

nice music, and pure intentions, water forms beautiful-looking symmetrical crystals. But when exposed to negative feelings or pollution, the crystals convert into chaotic and broken patterns. Both Mandalas and water crystals show how thoughts and intentions shape the nature and universe. Experts of Mandala art revealed that drawing Mandalas, even without any realization about it, is a way to live in harmony and balance the mind. Water crystals, when beautifully formed, also seem to reflect a peaceful universal order. These two different approaches highlight the strong connection between the mind, body, nature and the universe. This theme of balance and connection is also represented in Indian folk art forms. In Warli art, the "Tarpa Dance" showcases human dancing in a round pattern around a tarpa player. This motif conveys the message of the cycle of seasons and the link between humans and nature. In "Fishing and Hunting" scenes in Warli paintings, fish, deer, and birds are drawn in spiral order. This depicts the process of movement, migration, and the food chain in nature. In Pattachitra art, scroll paintings are enriched with rectangular frames, describing the stories in a path that reflects the cycle of time and nature's rhythms. In Madhubani art, diamond patterns filled with fish represent the continuous flow of aquatic life and the arrival of monsoons. In Kalamkari art, spirals are often used to show the movement of air, seasonal changes and climate which are essential for all living beings.

Theme No. 5: Interdependence between humans and the environment, interconnectedness of life and community harmony

In Warli art insects, spiders, different birds and animals are represented in peace and harmony within the natural environment. Sceneries of different animals in forests or near water sources highlight the harmony of different species. In Gond Painting of "Children plucking blackberries as birds and squirrels await their turn." Durga Devi, conveys the narrative of a majestic tree which is the symbol of life and harmony. Children climb its branches, plucking blackberries, while birds and squirrels eagerly await their food share. This scene celebrates the interconnectedness of nature, encouraging present generations to cherish and protect the environment. These scenes encourage the practice of living in balance with all living beings. The central theme in the paintings of Rambai Tekam, a Gond artist from Madhya Pradesh, is the interaction among forest animals. In her childhood, she used to sit quietly and observe how birds interacted with snakes, and how frogs and birds used to communicate with each other. Bhil Painting of "Village and city life coexist" by Bhuri Bai of Pitol, has roots in Bhil artistic traditions, and presents an interconnectedness of nature and human life. Depicting a diverse story of animals, cows, fish, and deer alongside green trees and plants, it describes the essence of rural life. Traditional motifs, such as a bullock cart and scenes of village life, are interwoven with modern elements like a mobile phone and vehicles, showing the increasing effect of urbanization on these tribal areas. The mixture of rural and urban elements in a single frame illustrates the co-dependence and merging of these different dimensions of society.

Theme No.6: Balance and sustainable living

Madhubani art emphasizes balance through solar and lunar symmetry, positioning the sun and moon in opposite halves of the composition to reinforce the equilibrium of day and night. The motifs of Madhubani art often feature the Sun with human-like eyes. This is the symbol of the giver because he is the source of energy that ensures agricultural prosperity and balance in the environment. The Moon, in these paintings, is drawn with blooming flowers, representing the rhythmic cycles of life. Warli art represents the harmony and balance of cosmic and natural energies by showing celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars along with earthly elements. The artist portrays scenes of hunting and farming, where hunters with bows and arrows chase deer and farmers sow seeds. This scenery depicts the balance between consumption and conservation in the community. People of ancient times took only what was necessary. In another Warli painting, Birds sitting on tree branches, monkeys swinging from one tree to another, and cows grazing near houses make a shared space scenario. These paintings convey the message of the world, where no species dominates. The second scene is from Pattachitra art, the story of Krishna Bhagwan lifting the Govardhan Parvat on his finger, named "Krishna's Govardhan Leela," tells sustainable land management awareness. This scene aware people to respect nature's protective forces. The

symbolic interpretation of creepers in "Chitrarekha (Sacred Vines)" shows cycles in nature and plant conservation practices. This style represents deep ecological wisdom by depicting various animal motifs. The tiger motif, with intricate patterns, is the symbol of their role as protectors of the forest. In a painting, tigers with trees growing on their backs, reinforce the idea that a balanced tiger population ensures a good forest ecosystem. The merging styles of animals and trees, such as trees morphing into elephants or deer blending with plants, symbolize the naturally interconnected existence of life. The pictures of Birds like hornbills and peacocks, drawn in symmetrical patterns with tribal worshippers, symbolize a harmonious relationship between humans and avian life, emphasizing coexistence without any destruction. Kalamkari art is famous for its mythological presentations, such as Bhagwan Rama living in the forest and Bhagwan Krishna surrounded by cows and birds, promoting balance and respect for wildlife and village sustainability. In Pattachitra traditional paintings, floral borders with repeating lotus, creeper, and wave motifs, signify the renewal of life. The native and traditional art forms of India serve as a beautiful reminder of the interconnectedness of all living beings and the balance necessary for a harmonious existence.

Theme No. 7: Natural dyes and eco-friendly techniques

Table 1: Showing natural dyes and eco-friendly techniques in traditional arts

Art form	Surface of art work	Colour material	Type of Pen/Brushes	Eco-friendly techniques
Madhubani	Mud walls handmade paper, cloth	Red - Hibiscus flowers, sandalwood; Blue -Indigo leaves; Yellow -Turmeric, marigold; Green - Neem leaves, banana peels Black -Burnt mustard oil soot	Bamboo pens (Kalam), twigs, fingers	Uses plant-based dyes and cow dung as a natural insect repellent
Warli	Mud walls, cow dung-coated surfaces	Red - Red ochre; White - Rice paste; Yellow -Yellow clay; Black - Charcoal	Bamboo twigs, chewed bamboo sticks	100% biodegradable, uses locally sourced earth pigments
Gond	Mud walls, handmade paper, fabric	Red -Geru (red oxide clay); Green - Crushed leaves, neem Yellow - Yellow ochre; White -Limestone powder.	Twigs, handmade bamboo brushes	Forest-derived pigments, zero-waste
Bhil	Earthen walls, handmade paper	Red -Pomegranate peel, red mud; Blue -Indigo leaves; Yellow - Turmeric root, flowers; Black - Burnt tamarind seeds	Sticks and fingers for dot patterns	Relies on natural colorants and biodegradable surfaces
Kalamkari	Hand-spun cotton fabric	Red - Madder root, pomegranate peel; Yellow - Turmeric, haritaki; Blue -Indigo leaves; Black -Fermented iron rust & jaggery	Bamboo pen (Kalam), natural resist printing with myrobalan	100% vegetable dyes, river-washed, no chemicals
Mandala Sand Mandala	Handmade paper, cloth, temple walls Temporary base (wooden, stone, or sand surface)	Red -Sandalwood paste, cinnabar; Yellow - Turmeric, saffron; Blue - Indigo White -Crushed pearls and conch shells; Black - Charcoal, lamp soot Coloured Sand- Made from powdered stones, flowers, turmeric, rice flour, saffron, charcoal, and gemstones	Fine brushes and natural pigments mixed with gum Hand-carved chakpur (metal funnels) to place sand in patterns	Uses natural minerals, reflects spiritual harmony 100% natural materials, impermanent and eco-friendly
Pattachitra	Cotton cloth (treated with chalk & tamarind gum), Palm leaves	Red- Hingula (cinnabar mineral), flowers White- Conch shell powder; Yellow- Haritala (orpiment mineral), Blue/Green- Indigo, ground emerald turmeric; Black -Lamp soot	Fine-tipped bamboo brushes	Uses mineral-based pigments, no synthetic colours

Pattachitra artists mix nature and art. They use natural colours like black from soot, yellow from a special stone, and red from another type of stone. White comes from shells that are crushed, boiled, and strained. Other colours are made from fruits, flowers, and minerals. To create the artwork, artists use palm leaves. These leaves are carefully prepared. Firstly, they gather leaves from palm trees then boiled with turmeric and neem leaves to protect them from insects. After that leaves are dried in the sun for about 20 days to prevent from damage. Durga Bai, a renowned Gond artist from Madhya Pradesh, was honoured with the Bologna Ragazzi Award in Italy for her

artwork in the children's book *The Night Life of Trees*, published by Tara Publishing. She mentioned that they use different types of soils black, yellow, and red soils as colours in her paintings.

Discussion

After analysing the qualitative data, it is found that Indian traditional art forms have their unique style of drawing and painting. Seven of the art forms have a special way and pattern in motifs. The different cultural and community backgrounds play a significant role in shaping the base of these art styles.

Tribal people have their own cultural and traditional stories behind every motif and artwork. The recurring shapes painted by these people on the walls of their houses belong to specific emotions, rituals, beliefs and customs. Each art style of Indian traditional art forms depicts deep-rooted respect for the environment and shows the importance of preserving nature. Madhubani art reflects admiration for nature through mythological stories and considers trees as sacred beings. The togetherness of human beings in farming activities represents the true spirit of the interconnectedness of the community. Warli paintings are broad pictures of humankind in itself. It can be seen in Warli paintings that people celebrate festivals, dance together, and go for hunting in groups. They consume only according to valid needs. They follow sustainable practices and behaviour in daily life activities. Ancient folklore portrayed in Gond paintings by Tribal artists, Durga Devi and Rambai Tekam suggest new generation, a natural way of living and encourage them to connect to animals, trees and insects. Their stories and life experiences are valuable because today's youth is not encountering the basic hardships of collecting food, and shelter in natural ecology. Tribal communities go through circumstances that make them realize the importance of respecting nature. Now-a-days Bhil painters are trying to portray the coexistence of village and city life in their unique way of drawing. In Machilipatnam Kalamkari known by the other name of Pedna Kalamkari artists use vegetables for dying clothes as surface material. Traditionally, in most of the art forms, it is found that artists use colours and paintbrushes prepared from natural resources. Though the process is tough, this distinctive effort makes these folk paintings special. Symmetrical geometric shapes from Mandala art and its possible connection with Dr. Emoto Water Experiment open new doors to look into nature through different perspectives. It seems a huge area of research in itself. On the other hand, the making process of Pattচিত্র paintings and the use of different natural ingredients for colours is quite an interesting job. All of the seven traditional art forms Madhubani, Warli, Gond, Bhil, Kalamkari, Mandala, and Pattচিত্র are serving as visual tools for environmental awareness. These valuable traditional pieces of wisdom are passing down sustainable practices through oral traditions. There is only a need to view it from new perspectives. However, it is also investigated in exploration that commercialization has diluted their original environmental messages, turning them into decorative commodities but if some necessary steps are taken, the raw format of these arts can be revived. Field studies can be conducted to promote the sustainable practices of folk artists and understand the way their traditional lifestyles align with environmental awareness. Motifs from Folk paintings should be used in school curricula, environmental campaigns and community awareness programs, collaborating with NGOs and government agencies to promote sustainability through traditional art. While studying the patterns of folk art, the researcher found that there are a lot of unknown tribal and Individual traditional art forms with great folklore backgrounds and rich environmental heritage. These underestimated artworks and their process of

making colours from natural resources should be recognized globally. Universities should start Bachelor's and Master's degree courses in Specific Tribal and Traditional Indian Paintings with practical workshops on Indigenous Art Techniques, focusing on natural colour-making processes, traditional surfaces, and pen/brush-making methods. This effort will open the path of employment for the youth and also align with National Education Policy 2020 skill-based learning recommendations. Secondly, there is a big global market where these skilled artists can sell their paintings at good prices.

Conclusion

This study will not only uncover the environmental wisdom but also will be beneficial in modern environmental education and advocacy campaigns. These traditional art forms act as powerful visual tools for environmental awareness and pass down indigenous wisdom through generations. Through its symmetrical and spiritual patterns, Mandala art opens up new ways of understanding nature and human consciousness. The connection with experiments like Dr. Emoto's water theory in 2005 provides a new direction for research into how visual patterns may affect our perception of the natural world. However, commercialization has, in some cases, diluted their original messages. There is a strong need to revive the raw and authentic essence of these arts through education, fieldwork, and awareness programs. Incorporating motifs and sustainable practices from these folk arts into school curricula, campaigns, and higher education, along with practical training in indigenous techniques, can promote environmental consciousness. This effort can also create new employment opportunities. To ensure the preservation and promotion of Indian traditional art forms and their sustainable messages, the study recommends integrating folk motifs and eco-friendly practices. Collaborations with NGOs, government agencies, and educational institutions can further support this initiative. Most importantly, universities should introduce Bachelor's and Master's degree programs in traditional and tribal Indian art, with practical training in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). The focus should be on natural material use, traditional storytelling, and sustainable living practices. Such initiatives not only protect India's intangible cultural heritage but also align with the National Education Policy 2020. It emphasizes skill-based, value-oriented, and experiential learning. Promoting these traditional art forms can create meaningful employment opportunities for youth and give Indian artisans global recognition. These initiatives will inspire future generations to reconnect with nature through their cultural roots. In conclusion, Indian traditional art forms are treasure troves of environmental knowledge, ethical living, and community wisdom. With conscious effort, these visual traditions can become powerful tools in shaping a more sustainable, culturally aware, and environmentally responsible society. By reviving and promoting these art forms, we can foster a deeper understanding of the relationship between culture, art, and nature. This will ultimately inspire a more sustainable future.

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