

When Stories Take Shape- Odia Folklore on the Canvas of Pattachitra

By

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Abstract

This essay explores the intricate relationship between Odia folktales and the traditional painting art of **Pattachitra**, highlighting how visual storytelling serves as a powerful medium for preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. Rooted in the worship of **Lord Jagannath**, Pattachitra evolved from ritual temple art into a dynamic narrative form that visually translates the region's rich oral traditions, myths, and legends. Through examples such as *Kaanchi Abhijaan* and *Tapoi*, the essay examines how painters, or **chitrakaars**, employ symbolic colour schemes, stylised gestures, and moral themes to convey stories of devotion, virtue, and community identity. It also discusses the role of the artist as both storyteller and cultural custodian, bridging the past with the present. Finally, it considers the art form's contemporary transformations, where traditional aesthetics are reinterpreted to address modern social and environmental concerns. In tracing these continuities and adaptations, the essay underscores how Pattachitra remains a living embodiment of Odisha's collective imagination and enduring cultural ethos.

Keywords

Pattachitra, Odia folktales, Lord Jagannath, Visual storytelling, Cultural heritage

Introduction

Odisha is a culturally diverse state. From the coastal plains to the myriad tribal hinterlands, each region and tribe has its own mythology, legend and associated folklore. However, the one unifying force that forms the core of Odia identity is Lord Jagannath. Among the various

media that transmit the narratives of Lord Jagannath - oral storytelling, dance, theatre, and music, visual art occupies a special place. The traditional painting style known as *Pattachitra* (literally meaning cloth picture) has for centuries served as a bridge between the spoken word and the visual image, depicting folklores from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, local legends, and even contemporary issues like the environment. The central theme of Pattachitra, however, remains rooted in its origin - Lord Jagannath.

Historical Context

Traditionally, chitrakaars were attached to the Jagannath temple to create ritual paintings for different services to the Lord. Even to date, they are used extensively during Ratha Yatra. Moreover, during *anasara*, when the Lord is on his 15-day customary quarantine, these paintings are used as a substitute for worship. Lord Jagannath is represented as Narayana, Balabhadra as Ananta and Subhadra as Bhuvaneshwari in the painting popularly known as *Anasara Patti*.

Beyond the temple walls, the painters painted a sequence of these scrolls that the bards used to narrate popular folklore. Thus, Pattachitra were not only a visual treat, but also were used as an important tool in the traditional theatre of Odisha.

Visual Storytelling Through Pattachitra

Folktales of Odisha encompass a wide array of topics, including heroic narratives, stories of ghosts, fables of mythological animals, and stories illustrating the grace of the Lord on common men and royalty. *Kaanchi Abhijaan* is one of the most popular folklores that has been extensively depicted through Pattachitra. It narrates the saga of King Purushottam Dev of Puri, who went to war with the King of Kaanchi after being insulted by him and how the Lord Himself comes to help the King win the war disguised as a soldier. Paintings depicting different *beshas* or looks of the Lord also form an important theme of Pattachitra. Interestingly, each look of the Lord is associated with a belief, tradition or a legend. For instance, the Gaja besha of the Lord honours a devotee named Ganapati Bhatta, who was despondent to see the Lord and the Lord graced him by appearing in front of him as Ganesha.

The artists exercise creative liberty and imagination to narrate different themes of folktales. While depicting the story of *Tapoi* (a popular folktale about the sufferings of a young girl mistreated at the hands of her brothers' wives and eventually getting redemption) is portrayed in dramatic vignettes, each frame captures different emotions of the heart-wrenching tale. Likewise, the saga of *Kaanchi Abhijaan* is illustrated to evoke patriotism, belief, and devotion.

Narrative Dimensions of Pattachitra

The Odia culture is essentially syncretic. This is captured exquisitely in the folklore and mythology of Odisha, where divine figures live and act like the masses. For example, during the *hera panchami* ritual of Ratha Yatra, Goddess Laxmi breaks the Nandighosa ratha of Lord Jagannath in anger for being left out in his annual travel plan. These rituals and tales make the divine accessible to the common man, as they can then relate to the divine rather than being intimidated by lofty ideals. The whole idea of Ratha Yatra is based on bringing the Lord of the masses to the masses. Fables abound about the Lord honouring his devotees. Pattachitra does justice to the intent of these fables as they too have devotional undertones.

Further, the moral dimension of folktales finds potent expression in *Pattachitra*. For example, tales emphasising the virtue of truth, patriotism, devotion, and familial duty are expressed through evocative gestures and symbolic colour schemes. The use of red often suggests valour or sacrifice, while white connotes purity and devotion. The visual language thus reinforces the ethical messages embedded in the stories, transforming art into an educative medium.

Moreover, *Pattachitra* serves a collective and social purpose. Traditionally, they were used to mark festivals or important occasions, and the collective viewing of them fortified a shared cultural identity. In this sense, *Pattachitra* operated as a participatory art form, its storytelling role fostering harmony within and amongst communities.

Role of Chitrakaar in Storytelling

Traditionally, folktales have been passed down orally. In this context, the role of a pattachitra painter evolves not just as mere storytellers but as custodians of history. The art and its nuances have been passed through generations as family heritage. Thus, every chitrakaar

inherits a corpus of stories, family techniques, and symbolic codes. He presents a slice of the community's rich cultural past to the newer generation through his paintings, thus acting as a bridge between the past and the present. In today's era of individualism, his role to foster a shared cultural identity attains an even greater significance.

Moreover, his narration transforms static images and imaginary figures into living and moving stories that help people identify with them. This makes it easier for them to accept the moral values and ideas behind the story, thus structuring a just and sustainable community.

Contemporary Transformations

In recent times, Pattachitra has reinvented itself in keeping up with the times. Artists have started exploring modern themes with new ideas. The folktales and corresponding paintings are being reinterpreted to address issues like gender, environment, and social justice. This is the best way to keep this ancient art form relevant; however, it will be challenging to keep the narrative of the folklore intact while reinterpreting it.

Conclusion

Exploring Odia folktales through Pattachitra reveals the profound interconnectedness of oral, visual, and performing arts. They not only act as an art form but are also an important means to present our rich cultural heritage to the generations to come. In preserving and reimagining Odia folktales, they continue to affirm the cultural identity of Odisha. Each Pattachitra painting transforms memory into art and art into meaning.

About the Author

Ms. Aarti Agrawalla is a talented poet and author hailing from Odisha. Her works draw inspiration from the rich cultural and literary traditions of the region. Through her poetry and writings, she explores themes of emotion, nature, and everyday life. She continues to contribute to Odia literature with her thoughtful and evocative creations.

