

The Sacred Moving Shrines of Gujarat

By

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Abstract

The article explores the sacred art of Mata ni Pachedi, vibrant cloth paintings created by the Vaghri (Devipujak) community of Gujarat as portable shrines. Born out of social exclusion and the need to protect sacred images during invasions, this 400-year-old kalamkari tradition combines block printing and hand painting with natural dyes on cotton fabric. It serves as both a powerful symbol of cultural resistance and a living expression of devotion to the Mother Goddess.

Keywords

Mata ni Pachedi, Vaghri community, Devipujak, Gujarat folk art, portable shrines, kalamkari, Mother Goddess, natural dyes, cultural resistance

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The Vaghri people, a semi-nomadic tribe of people, lived primarily along the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, in Western India. They made their living by working with their hands and making baskets, ropes, and nets, hunting, and doing seasonal agricultural labour on farms. For centuries, people belonging to the Vaghri tribe were not allowed to enter mainstream Hindu shrines to worship. Due to the fact that they led a nomadic life and followed traditional livelihoods, the British designated the Vaghris a criminal tribe of thieves. This stigma isolated the people of the tribe even more. The Vaghris responded to this unfair, caste-based social exclusion by painting their own sacred images of the divine feminine power of the mother goddess on cloth. These images on textiles were used to create portable, makeshift shrines where the Vaghris, also called devipujak (worshipper of the goddess) could carry on their religious rituals peacefully.

These vibrant cloth panels called ‘Mata ni Pachedi,’ meaning ‘behind the Mother Goddess’ in Gujarati, which were initially created as a unique act of resistance against social exclusion, eventually became a beautiful and unique art form that strengthened the community's cultural identity and fortitude. This art style is also linked to the geopolitical history of Gujarat, which was frequently invaded by ambitious conquerors because of its wealth and rich, prosperous states. These marauding invaders often sacked local temples, and the devipujak community used their ingenuity and found a way to prevent invaders from destroying their precious goddesses by transferring their images onto fabric, which could be easily transported to safety. At the time of worship, groups of devipujak devotees assembled and hung up one or more pachedis, painted with images of the goddess, and conducted their religious rituals which included singing of bhajans and aarti. At the centre of each pachedi, there would be a picture of the main goddess on her sacred vehicle or mount. Legends and events from the goddess’s life would surround the central image.

‘Mata ni Pachedi,’ as an art form is over four hundred years old. The paintings are created on off white Madarpat cotton, a thick, unbleached, cotton fabric. This traditional fabric is known for its strength and natural texture which adds a unique depth to the artwork's visual appeal, because it allows the vibrant colours used to merge well into the fabric. Preparing the cotton fabric for painting is a long, painstaking, labour intensive process with several stages. First, the fabric is soaked in water to remove any starch on it, Then, it is dried in the sun. Next, it is put into a mixture of cow dung and salt and boiled, after which it is immersed in a mixture of castor oil and caustic soda. Once the cotton fabric is dry, it is again soaked in a mixture of castor oil and myrobalan (powdered herbs) and left to dry. These herbs help the colours to be absorbed and fixed on the fabric. Mata ni Pachedi paintings are created using a combination of block printing and hand painting. The artists usually use wooden blocks to first outline the main drawing on the cloth. Wooden blocks are also often used to print repetitive motifs, especially for borders. Figures of flowers, animals like elephants and deer, and human figures like dancers and musicians were some motifs commonly carved on wooden blocks. These blocks, crafted from teak or sheesam wood, are considered to be precious ancestral tools and are carefully stored and protected by the artisans or chittaras, and are handed down from generation to generation.

After the outline is done, the colours are applied with a 'kalam', or handmade bamboo pen, that has a cotton swab at one end. This is also why this art form is called the kalamkari of Gujarat.



Image: Mata Ni Pachedi Painting

Originally, a traditional Mata Ni Pachedi painting would only have three colours in it - maroon or red, which represents the colour of the earth, black, which wards off the evil eye, and white, which stands for purity. The white was generally the background of the material. The natural black dye was made from iron rust, jaggery, and tamarind seed paste, and the red dye was made using alizarin (madder root) and alum, mixed with fire flame bush (dhavadi) flowers. Modern artists who practice this art form have now started incorporating more vibrant colours into their art works. These are all still natural vegetable dyes however, with no chemical additives. Yellow and ochre colour is obtained from turmeric or pomegranate rind. Green is created from henna, and blue and indigo are made from indigo leaves.

After each colour is applied, the cotton fabric is boiled in alizarin solution, which brings out the colours. Finally, it is washed in running water. Traditionally, all Mata ni Pachedi paintings were washed in the flowing waters of the Sabarmati River. This was believed to give the textile spiritual significance. This tradition has died out now due to urbanization and the building of the Sabarmati Riverfront project. Many artists now wash their paintings in small water tanks or wells.

Traditional Mata ni Pachedi art depicts Visat Mata, considered the ancestral deity of the Vaghri community; Vahanvati Mata, worshipped by traders and seafarers for protection during journeys, Momai Mata (Dashamaa), a protector of agriculture, livestock, and health, Khodiyar Mata, thought to foretell monsoon patterns; and Hadkai Mata, believed to give protection against rabies. These goddesses are all diverse manifestations of the Mother Goddess or forms of Durga, Kali and Mother Shakti, embodying the power of the universe. Episodes from Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata are also often woven into the overall narrative of the Mother Goddess.

Modern creators of Mata ni Pachedi paintings have made modifications to this unique art form for commercial use. Today, wall hangings, bedspreads, and clothing with motifs from the traditional art have become popular in urban markets. In April 2023, Mata ni Pachedi was granted a Geographical Indication (GI) tag by the Government of India, recognizing its unique regional and traditional attributes.

Conclusion

Mata Ni Pachedi is more than just a piece of cloth; it is a tangible representation of the socio-cultural history of a marginalized community that turned its unjust exclusion from mainstream Hindu worship into a sacred embodiment of faith, culture, and artistic excellence. While its vibrant colours and intricate designs have now made Mata ni Pachedi a sophisticated art form, prized by connoisseurs, it will remain, foremost, sacred images that connect generations of devotees to their spiritual heritage.

About the Author

Ms. Santhini Govindan is a widely published, award-winning author of children's literature in English. She has written more than fifty books for children, and has received two fellowships from the Government of India for research projects connected to Children's Literature in India.

