



PAITKAR PAINTING OF JHARKHAND: THE SCROLL NARRATIVES OF TRIBAL STORYTELLERS - A SUMMATIVE STUDY

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Cite This Article: Satyamangal Rege, "Paitkar Painting of Jharkhand: The Scroll Narratives of Tribal Storytellers - A Summative Study", *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Modern Education*, Volume 11, Issue 2, July - December, Page Number 105-107, 2025.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17417706>

Abstract:

Paitkar painting also known as Pyatkar or Paitker is one of India's oldest surviving narrative art forms, practised primarily in Amadubi village, East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, and surrounding regions. This unique scroll tradition combines visual art, oral storytelling, and performance, creating an expressive fusion of image, rhythm, and ritual. The chitrakars (artist-storytellers) of Jharkhand paint sequential scenes on handmade scrolls and narrate them through song, transmitting myths, moral teachings, and social values to rural audiences. This study offers a summative examination of the Paitkar tradition its historical background, materials and techniques, themes, iconography, and current challenges. Drawing on secondary literature, ethnographic documentation, and contemporary field accounts, the research highlights Paitkar painting as both an artistic expression and a cultural archive, embodying tribal worldviews and ecological wisdom. The study concludes with recommendations for sustainable preservation through community-led documentation, ethical market strategies, and inclusion in intangible heritage frameworks.

Key Words: Paitkar Painting, Jharkhand, Chitrakar, Tribal Art, Scroll Narrative, Visual Storytelling, Intangible Heritage

1. Introduction:

Within India's varied visual cultures, Paitkar painting holds a unique position as a blend of imagery and oral storytelling. Performed by a limited group of chitrakars in the village of Amadubi in Jharkhand, Paitkar painting illustrates an ongoing lineage of India's scroll-painting customs, encompassing Bengal's Patachitra, Odisha's Pattachitra, and Rajasthan's Phad artworks.

In contrast to static paintings intended for personal observation, the Paitkar scroll is presented gradually unrolled as the artist vocalizes verses that relate to each depicted scene. The combination of scroll, voice, and rhythm creates a striking theatrical experience. Its purpose goes beyond beauty: it is educational, ethical, and ceremonial, imparting moral values, cosmological ideas, and societal principles.

The Paitkar tradition developed in the tribal and rural context of eastern India, where daily life, religion, and art are intertwined. The term Paitkar probably comes from the Sanskrit pata (fabric or scroll), highlighting its storytelling aspect. The scrolls generally vary in length from 4 to 15 feet and are segmented into consecutive frames, with each illustrating a section of a narrative. These are employed in village rituals, particularly during funerary ceremonies, to depict the soul's journey and the moral repercussions of human deeds.

Traditionally, Paitkar painting has served as a communal art form, acting as visual scripture for societies lacking written records. Nonetheless, in contemporary times, it is experiencing a downturn because of the deterioration of support, movement of people, and commercialization of the market. Only a small number of families in Amadubi still engage in it genuinely. Revitalization initiatives from government bodies, NGOs, and tourism endeavors have generated awareness, yet frequently fail to maintain the ritual and oral spirit of the tradition.

This research thus explores the cultural, aesthetic, and social aspects of Paitkar painting. It aims to decode its symbolic language, record its material processes, and examine its changes in response to contemporary pressures. It seeks to interpret its symbolic language, document its material processes, and analyze its transformation under modern pressures. Ultimately, it argues that Paitkar art represents a living archive of indigenous knowledge a form of storytelling that bridges art, ecology, and ethics.

2. Historical Background and Cultural Origins:

The origins of Paitkar painting can be traced to the early medieval period, developing alongside Bengal's Patachitra and Odisha's Pattachitra traditions. However, unlike those temple-based arts, Paitkar remained a folk and tribal practice rooted in community storytelling rather than institutional patronage.

The chitrakars of Amadubi traditionally served as itinerant storytellers, moving from village to village with scrolls rolled in bamboo tubes. They performed at religious festivals, harvest celebrations, and death rituals, narrating tales of gods, spirits, and moral conduct. Their art was sustained through reciprocal patronage villagers offered grain or gifts in return for performances.

Situated in the cultural corridor of Jharkhand, Bengal, and Odisha, Paitkar painting absorbed both tribal animistic beliefs and Hindu mythology, creating a syncretic narrative style. Common subjects include episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Shiva Purana, as well as indigenous myths about creation, fertility, and the afterlife.

The most iconic of these is the Yama-pata, or "scroll of death," which visualizes the journey of the soul and the moral judgment of Yama, the god of death. This theme, unique to the Paitkar repertoire, embodies the community's ethical cosmology, transforming art into an instrument of introspection.

Unlike temple murals, Paitkar paintings evolved independently of royal or religious patronage. Their aesthetics flat compositions, strong lines, rhythmic sequencing reflect the oral-performative nature of the art. Figures are stylized and expressive rather than realistic, designed to be legible even to large village audiences during performances.

The scroll's ritual function also shaped its form. It was used to guide souls, educate villagers, and mark transitions of life and death. Thus, the Paitkar scroll is not a commodity but a ritual document a sacred manuscript through which moral and cosmic truths are sung into being.

3. Materials, Preparatory Processes, and Techniques:

The material culture of Paitkar painting reflects an intimate ecological intelligence. Artists use natural resources drawn from their surroundings earth pigments, soot, plant extracts, and handmade paper to create scrolls that are both sustainable and symbolic.

3.1 Support and Preparation:

Traditional scrolls are made of handmade paper or cloth coated with tamarind seed gum or rice starch mixed with chalk dust. This coating produces a smooth, absorbent surface. The sheets are joined with adhesive and reinforced with thin cloth strips to achieve the desired length. Once dried, the surface is burnished with smooth stones to provide a polished finish.

3.2 Pigments and Colours:

Colours are obtained from natural sources:

- Red from red ochre or vermilion symbolizing vitality and divine energy
- Black from soot or lampblack representing death or mystery
- Yellow from turmeric or haritaki bark for knowledge and sanctity
- White from chalk or rice powder for purity and the spiritual realm
- Blue/Green from indigo and leaves signifying life and renewal

These pigments are bound with natural gums. Each colour carries symbolic significance, making colour itself a language of moral and emotional tone.

3.3 Brushes and Drawing:

Brushes are traditionally made from bamboo sticks with animal hair or plant fibers. The chitrakar begins by sketching directly with black pigment, without preliminary grids an intuitive process guided by memory and song. Colours are then filled in layers, and outlines are redefined for emphasis.

3.4 Composition:

Each scroll consists of sequential frames depicting narrative episodes. The composition favors flat perspective, bold outlines, and rhythmic repetition. Decorative borders and geometric motifs maintain visual unity. The top of the scroll often represents divine realms, while the lower sections portray earthly or infernal planes.

The process is both meditative and ritualistic; before beginning, artists offer prayers to Saraswati or local deities. The finished scroll is stored carefully in bamboo cylinders, considered sacred possessions. Thus, material technique in Paitkar is not merely craft it is an act of devotion and continuity.

4. Themes, Iconography, and Narrative Structure:

The thematic range of Paitkar painting spans mythology, morality, folklore, and social life. Its iconography reveals a worldview where the divine, the human, and the natural coexist in perpetual dialogue.

4.1 The Yama-Pata:

Central to Paitkar storytelling is the Yama-pata, illustrating the soul's journey after death. The scroll begins with the soul's separation from the body, continues through judgment scenes before Yama, and ends with the soul's rebirth. This narrative reinforces ethical responsibility emphasizing that every action carries consequence.

4.2 Myths and Local Legends:

Other scrolls depict Manasa Devi (snake goddess), Durga slaying Mahishasura, or the tragic tale of Behula and Lakhindar. These stories integrate tribal moral codes with Hindu mythic structure, localizing cosmic drama within the village context.

4.3 Social Narratives:

Later scrolls include depictions of daily life, marriages, festivals, and occupational scenes, transforming Paitkar into a folk chronicle of rural existence. Modern artists also portray contemporary issues environmental degradation, women's rights, and education thus extending the scroll's moral function to the present.

4.4 Iconography and Symbolism:

Figures are elongated, expressive, and rhythmic, outlined in black with exaggerated eyes and gestures. Colour operates symbolically: red for vitality, yellow for prosperity, black for the afterlife. Trees, rivers, and serpents represent cosmic cycles, fertility, and transformation.

The visual grammar follows an oral rhythm lines flow like musical phrases, and scenes transition smoothly to match the performer's song. Hierarchical scaling signifies divinity or virtue; repetition reinforces rhythm and memory.

4.5 Performance:

A Paitkar scroll comes alive through performance. The chitrakar sings verses (pata gaan) as the scroll unrolls. The act of seeing and hearing becomes one ritual viewers experience a synesthetic event where sound animates image. The performance often evokes communal catharsis, reaffirming collective identity and ethical reflection.

5. Contemporary Context Decline, Revival, and State Interventions:

In recent decades, Paitkar painting has faced severe challenges. Only a handful of families in Amadubi continue the full tradition of painting and performance.

5.1 Causes of Decline:

- Loss of ritual demand due to modernization and changing beliefs
- Economic instability and migration of younger generations
- Market commodification, which detaches art from its moral and performative essence
- Use of synthetic materials, diminishing aesthetic authenticity
- Insufficient policy support and irregular patronage

5.2 Revival Efforts:

Efforts by the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT), INTACH, and the Amadubi Rural Tourism Project have introduced exhibitions, training programs, and documentation initiatives. NGOs and universities have digitally archived

performances and supported apprenticeships. However, many programs emphasize production over performance, risking the art's ritual vitality.

5.3 Ethical and Sustainable Revival:

True preservation requires:

- Community-led decision-making
- Long-term apprenticeship programs
- Ethical market frameworks ensuring fair compensation
- Documentation of both scrolls and songs
- Integration of Paitkar into local school curricula
- Such holistic approaches sustain both economic livelihood and cultural authenticity.

6. Discussion Interpretation and Synthesis:

Paitkar painting functions as a cultural ecosystem where art, spirituality, and ecology intersect. It is an oral-visual archive of Jharkhand's tribal imagination its cosmology, ethics, and worldview.

6.1 The Scroll as Living Text:

Each scroll is a living manuscript, performed rather than read. It democratizes knowledge, transforming moral philosophy into collective experience. The chitrakar is thus both artist and philosopher, preserving knowledge through rhythm and repetition.

6.2 Moral and Cosmological Dimensions:

The cyclic narrative structure life, death, rebirth mirrors the metaphysical worldview of the community. Paitkar art becomes moral pedagogy, externalizing invisible ethical truths through visible metaphor.

6.3 The Paradox of Modernity:

Modern exposure has brought income and recognition but also decontextualization. Commercial scrolls, stripped of performance, risk reducing Paitkar to a decorative souvenir. The future depends on balancing economic survival with ritual integrity.

6.4 Gender and Transformation:

The increasing participation of women artists signals renewal. Their engagement introduces fresh perspectives, ensuring intergenerational continuity and expanding the thematic scope of the tradition.

6.5 Ecological and Philosophical Significance:

Paitkar's organic materials and nature-centered themes align with sustainable art practices. Its ecological aesthetic anticipates contemporary discourses on environmental ethics, showing how traditional art embodies sustainability as spirituality.

Conclusion:

Paitkar painting from Jharkhand transcends being an art form it embodies a visual philosophy that intertwines beauty, ethics, and community. The scroll describes the timeless conversation between existence and demise, morality and wrongdoing, the natural world and mankind.

To maintain it, one must restore its vibrant context, rather than just safeguarding its physical appearance. Educational inclusion, community records, and ethical markets need to intersect for continuity to be maintained. When supported, Paitkar can flourish as a living heritage example a method of indigenous narration that resonates with both local and worldwide audiences.

The scroll, perpetually unrolled and re-rolled, symbolizes cultural resilience serving as a reminder that tradition persists; it evolves, adjusts, and keeps conveying messages through fresh generations of narrators.

Protecting Paitkar painting means protecting a timeless dialogue between art and existence, between the seen and the unseen, between recollection and significance. Its existence confirms that art, grounded in belief and community, is never truly gone only poised to be sung anew.

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