

When Gifts Speaks: The Artists Legacy of India's Cultural Offerings

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Abstract

This Research paper explores the intersection of traditional craftsmanship and modern soft-power diplomacy in which highlighting the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's strategic use of indigenous Indian art forms as bilateral gifts. This study specially examines Rogan Paintings and Mata ni Pachedi – two centuries old Gujarati crafts that were once on the brink of extinction. By documenting the intricate methodology (the use of castor oil-based pigments and hand-painted ritualistic clothes) and the historical evolution of these art forms, this paper highlights how these “cultural offerings” serve as more than mere souvenirs.



This analysis demonstrates that by presenting these rare masterpieces to global leaders, India successfully revitalizes dying traditions, provide economic impetus to artisan communities, and communicates a narrative of civilizational depth. The findings suggest that the “gift diplomacy” acts as a vital tool for heritage preservation, transforming forgotten legacies into symbols of international prestige and cultural continuity.

Keywords

Rogan Art, Mata ni Pachedi, Culture, Soft power, Significance, Artforms, Process, Artists, Gift.

Literature Review

In our literature, Scholars states only about the history and processes but here in our research we note that the indigenous Indian artforms embody stories, beliefs and identities turning objects into carriers of heritage. In this sense, gifts made through traditional arts represent not only aesthetic value but also cultural memory and social meaning.

The reviewed literature establishes that Indian artforms are not merely artistic products but hadn't discussed them as culturally embedded forms of communication. *John Gillow* in his book *Traditional Indian Textiles* has only mentioned about the Rogan art and its unique oil-based techniques. *Jai Prakash Jain* in *Indian Folk and Tribal Art* discussed Rogan art as rare artform of India. *Joan Erikson* in *Mata ni Pachedi: A Book on the Temple Cloth of Mother Goddess* explains its history, symbolism, rituals, motifs and its process of making. Existing literature provides substantial insight into individual craft traditions and their historical significance, there is no research conducted which specifically examines handicrafts as communicative gifts within cultural and social frameworks.

The idea that "Gifts speaks" is central to understanding India's cultural practices, where gifting goes beyond exchange and become a form of communication. This idea is also visible in India's modern diplomatic practices. This research highlights that such crafts transform gifting into a meaningful cultural act, where objects communicate heritage, sustain traditions and connect past with present in contemporary society.

This research, therefore, aims to bridge the gap by analyzing how traditional Indian crafts function as expressive cultural gifts- objects that "speak" through their materiality, symbolism and heritage.

Introduction

In the Vast and layered cultural history of India, the act of gifting extends far beyond material exchange rather it is a language in itself- one that communicates identity, memory, reverence and artistic expression.

In contemporary times, this legacy has found a powerful expression in the diplomatic practices of prime minister Narendra Modi, whose choice of gifts during bilateral and diverse artisanal traditions. Rather than presenting generic tokens, these gifts often Handi crafted textiles, traditional paintings, or region-specific artifacts – serve as cultural ambassadors, representing the history, craftsmanship and identity of different parts of the country. By situating these practices within both historical and contemporary contexts, the study seeks to understand how gifts function as meaningful expressions of national identity, cultural community and soft powers in an interconnected world.



Among such expressions, distinctive art forms like *Rogan Painting* and *Mata ni Pachedi*, both of them rooted in Gujarat yet different in technique and purpose. Both become powerful symbols of identity, soft power and artistic legacy on the global stage.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design. This research is based primarily on secondary data collected from books mainly Indian Folk and Tribal Art, Traditional Indian textiles, *Mata ni Pachedi: A Book on the Temple cloth of the Mother Goddess*, research articles and online sources related to Rogan Art, Mata ni Pachedi, and India's cultural diplomacy. Relevant literature was reviewed to understand the historical, cultural, philosophical, ecological and diplomatic significance of these art forms. It also aims to study particularly Gujarat's on line extinction art forms including Mata ni Pachedi and Rogan Art, in context of cultural gifting and soft power. Data were analyzed through content analysis and comparative interpretation to examine how traditional art contributes to India's cultural representation and soft power in international relations. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and availability of materials published on these art forms. It aims to Provide a comprehensive understanding of how both these artforms serves as carriers of cultural identity, heritage preservation and India's soft power in global Diplomacy.

Rogan Art is an ancient form of painting that has been practice for over 300 years in the *Kutch* region of Gujarat, India. It is believed that Rogan was originated in Persia and was traditionally used to embellish the bridal outfit. As it crosses borders it began fading from the collective memory of its creators. Rogan in Persian, means *Varnish* or *Oil*.

This art is nearly died out in the late 20th century as it was being practiced by only two families of same village named *Nirona* and the 9 members of Khatri family were the last surviving custodians of this art form. In 1985, this art form was revived. Abdul Gafur Khatri was credited with resurgence of Rogan Art and also awarded by the National Award.



It strikes odd that all 9 members of the family working on the form of art are men. This could perhaps do with the belief that women, once they get married, would pass on their knowledge to their husband's families, threatening the art with dilution but later on when this art form was on being extinction Gafur Khatri himself taken the task of teaching the technique to 200 girls of his village. This initiative has breathed fresh life into the dying art.

Unlike the other textile art forms like Ajrakh that were under threat by factory art productions, Rogan faces no competition but meeting the market demand has been challenging because of slow making process. Only five/six exhibitions organized around the country throughout the year.

The art form gained global recognition when a Rogan artwork called “Tree of life” was presented by Narendra Modi to Barack Obama during a diplomatic visit. This gesture highlighted Indian craftsmanship and introduced Rogan art to a wider international audience.



The process technique of Rogan Art is highly specialized, time-intensive and passed down through generations of artisan families. The entire process can be divided into several stages: -

Preparation of Rogan Paste: The foundation of Rogan art lies in the preparation of its distinctive paint called Rogan. Its making process takes place on the outskirts of village

where there is no residences as in there is a high risk of inflammation. It is made from Castor oil (abundance in region). Oil is heated continuously in an Iron vessel for several hours until it thickens into a dense sticky substance. During heating it goes undergoes Polymerization. After achieving a desired consistency, the paste is cooled and mixed with the natural or mineral pigments to produce vibrant colors i.e., Red, Yellow, Blue, Green, White and Black. Maintaining the right texture is crucial- if it is too thick, it won't spread and if it is too thin, it will lose its raised effect.



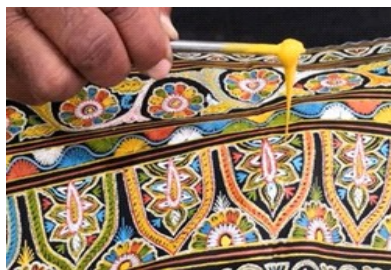
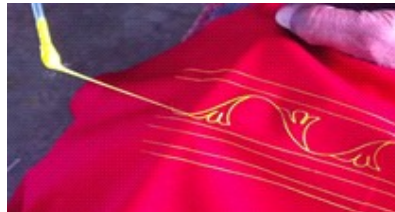
Preparation of Fabric surface: This technique is usually applied on dark colored cotton or silk fabric, often in shades like Black, Maroon or Deep Blue, which help highlight the bright designs. Firstly, it is washed to remove starch or impurities and then dried. It stretched tightly on a flat surface to avoid wrinkles. Unlike other textile arts, it doesn't require pre-treatment of the cloth as the paste adheres to surface rather than soaking into it.

Designing without direct contact: One of the most distinctive aspects is that the design is not drawn directly onto the fabric with a brush. Instead, the artisan uses a thin metal rod or stylus (often a needle like tool) to work with the rogan paste.

Free hand pattern creation: Without using stencils or outlines artisans create pattern free Handly. Traditional motifs including Floral; Faunal Patterns and geometric shapes are used extensively in the paintings. The flow of the paste is controlled by the movement of the

wrist and fingers. As the paste dries slowly Artists can adjust or refine the design during the process.

Folding technique: By folding the fabric to achieve the symmetrical designs is unique in itself. After completing the one half of the motifs, the cloth is carefully folded while the paint is wet. Gentle pressure transfers the design onto the other half creating a mirror image. This ensures the perfect symmetry.



Layering and detailing: After the base design additional layers of colors and detailing are added. Every minute detailing is added to the art piece finely which reflects the precise patience of the artists.

Drying and setting: After the completion of the designing and detailing the fabric is left to dry naturally. The rogan paste hardens after the drying forming a raised, embossed effect on the surface. No additional fixing or chemical treatment is usually required in this stage.

Final finishing: Once dried completely the fabric is carefully inspected by the artists. Loose particles or uneven lines gently corrected.

Some important tools and equipment: Dandi (wooden stick), Handi (clay pots), Suya (metallic rod to mix color and oil), Dhakni (cover plate), Parat (wide mouth Indian vessel to prepare raw material), Chullah (stove made up of clay and cow dung to heat oil), Kharal (grinding stone).

Subject Matter: Its subject matter is deeply connected with the everyday life, beliefs and imagination. They create patterns inspired by nature, such as tree of life (interconnectedness of all living beings and continuous cycle of life), flowers, leaves, vines, birds and animals which symbolize growth, prosperity and close relationship between human beings and nature. They feature themes related to festivals, family celebrations, folk stories and rural life.



The process of Rogan Art reflects a harmonious blend of science, skill and creativity. The absence of modern tools highlights the artisan's craftsmanship making each piece unique in itself

Mata ni Pachedi is one of the India's most soulful and fascinating art forms originating from the state of

Gujarat, specially around the banks of the Sabarmati River. This art is much more than just a painting, it is a “living temple”.

The name itself tells a story: In Gujarat, *Mata* means *Mother Goddess*; *ni* means *of* and *Pachedi* means *Backdrop* or *Cloth*. For over 300 years this art has served as a sacred tapestry for the *Vaghiri* community. The history of Mata ni Pachedi is rooted in a struggle for spiritual equality. Centuries ago, the Vaghiri community a nomadic group – was excluded from entering the main stream temples due to the rigid caste systems of time. However, their devotion to mother goddess remained unshakable. They began painting images of the Goddess on the piece of cloth which they could hang up anywhere- under a tree, in a field, or inside their homes.

In a typical painting, the center is always occupied by a powerful form of Goddess, like *Meladi Mata* or *Khodiyar Mata*, sitting on her animal vehicle(vahana). Surrounding her are intricate scenes of musicians playing instruments, devotees praying and various animals and flowers. Every inch of the cloth is filled with detail, leaving no empty space, which reflects the abundance of life and divinity. Historically, these cloths were used as the backdrops for altars during the festivals like Navaratri. Even today, ‘*Chitara*’ family- the traditional keepers of this art- continue to follow the ancient methods, using hand carved wooden blocks and bamboo sticks called *Kalams* to paint.

This art form is a story of resilience. It shows how a community used creativity and nature to overcome social barriers, ensuring that their faith could never be taken away. Today, it is recognized globally not just as a beautiful craft, but as a symbol of power of devotion and the richness of Indian folk heritage.



The process of Mata ni Pachedi combines devotion with skilled craftsmanship. The methodology involves multiple carefully sequenced stages, each requiring precision, patience and knowledge of natural materials.

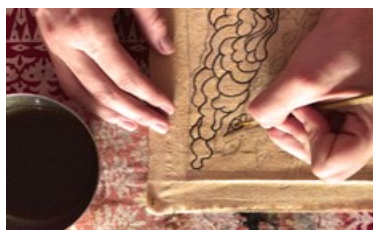
Preparation of fabric: The process begins with selecting a coarse cotton cloth, which serves as the base. This cloth is thoroughly washed to remove starch, oils and impurities. Traditionally, artisans soak the fabric in water mixed with castor oil, camel dung and soda ash. This treatment helps in bleaching and softening the cloth and enhancing its absorbing for dyes. Then this cloth is dried in sunlight which naturally disinfects and prepare it for further work.

Harda treatment (Myrobalan process): After cleaning, the fabric is treated with harda (by soaking cloth into it and then dries). This step is crucial as it acts a natural

mordant, enabling the dyes to bind effectively with fabric. This gives the fabric a pale-yellow tint and prepare it for outlining and dyeing.

Designing and Layout: This composition is highly symbolic. The central figure usually depicts the mother goddess- such as Durga, Kali, or Meladi Mata- surrounded by narrative scenes, devotees, animals and floral motifs. The story telling aspect is more important as the cloth often functions as a narrative shrine.

Block printing for outlines: This step establishes the structural framework of the artwork. Wooden blocks carved with the intricate patterns are used to print the primary outlines of the design. These blocks are dipped in a black dye made from Iron filings, jaggery and tamarind seed powder fermented to create a rich permanent color. And then by these blocks artists stamp the cloth.



Hand Painting and detailing: After block printing, finer details are added by using brushes made from bamboo sticks and goat hair. This stage distinguishes each piece as unique, even when similar blocks are used.

Preparation of natural dyes: The traditional palette of this art form is limited but powerful- primarily red, black and white.

- Red dye obtained from Alum mixed with tamarind seed powder or madder roots.
- Black dye comes from the fermented iron mixture.
- White areas are retained from the original cloth.

Dyeing Process: After completion the cloth undergoes dyeing. The red areas are developed by applying alum solution to required sections. The fabric is then boiled in a solution containing natural dyes sources such as Alizarin. During boiling, the red color emerges vividly where alum was applied white black outlines remain intact.



Washing and Fixing

Colors: After drying the cloth is washed in running water to remove excess dye and impurities. This also helps to fix the color permanently. This repeated multiple times.

Drying and Finishing: Washed cloth is spread out under the sun to dry. Sunlight enhances the brightness of the natural dyes and ensures even drying. After drying some



corrections are made if necessary and then the fabric is ironed and folded carefully.

Important tools and equipment: Hand woven cloth, Harad (Myrobalan), Hand carved wooden blocks, Bamboo kalam (pen), Large copper and iron vessels.

The completed Mata ni Pachedi is not merely decorative but holds deep religious significance. The artwork becomes a sacred space where rituals, prayers and storytelling take place. Its process methodology reflects a harmonious blend of art, ecology and spirituality. Each stage- from fabric preparation to final finishing- is rooted in traditional knowledge passed down through generations. The use of natural dyes, Handi crafted techniques and symbolic storytelling makes this art form not only visually striking but also culturally profound. Despite the modern challenges, artisans continue to preserve and innovate within this tradition, ensuring its relevance in contemporary times.

Conclusion

Both of *Rogan* and *Mata ni Pachedi* art forms are important traditional art form of India holds great civilizational, cultural, philosophical, ecological and traditional significance. These techniques have been preserved for centuries and passed down from one generation to another making it's a valuable part of India's cultural history.

Culturally, these artforms represent traditions, customs and identity of local communities of Gujarat. The intricate motifs and patterns preserve and promote the cultural values and heritage of the region globally.

Philosophically, these artforms symbolize Patience, Dedication and Harmony. Every minute detailing requires great skill, concentration and careful craftsmanship. This reflects the idea of unity between humans and nature; and also, a way of expressing emotions and beliefs.

These artforms also have ecological significance as these are largely based on natural and eco-friendly materials i.e., castor oil and naturally pigmented colors; tools and equipment. They promote sustainability and respect for nature.

Traditionally, these serves as a living link between the past and the present. By continuing these practices, artisans preserve their cultural roots and ensure that future generations remain connected to their heritage. These are not merely a decorative craft but a valuable symbol of India's civilization, culture, traditional wisdom and sustainable way of life.

These art forms are important example of India's soft power because they help to promote Indian culture, heritage and traditional craftsmanship around the world. Through international exhibitions, cultural exchanges, and diplomatic gifts, these art forms introduce global audiences to India's rich artistic traditions. These art forms also reflect values such as creativity, sustainability and cultural preservation, creating a positive image of India

internationally. Thus, these art forms strengthen India's soft power by building cultural connections, goodwill and appreciation for Indian heritage across the Globe.

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