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Expressions of the Soil: An Analytical Study on the Folk Art of Bangladesh

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Abstract

This journal provides critical analytical study of Bangladesh's Folk Art culture in tracing its symbolic richness, geographical diversity, and socio-cultural values. Based on interdisciplinary knowledge derived from art history, cultural anthropology, and semiotics, the research examines influential art forms such as nakshi kantha, alpana, patachitra, and terracotta sculpture, their iconography, gender component, and dynamics through time. They were collected through literature review, field observation, and interviews with artisans and cultural historians. The findings reveal that folk art in Bangladesh is not only decorative but deeply charged with narratives of identity, spirituality, and resistance of communities. It continues to unfold against the backdrop of globalization and urbanization, raising very important questions pertaining to preservation, authenticity, and innovation. The study underlines the need for urgent institutional encouragement, education, and research to safeguard and revive this intangible cultural heritage. The book contributes to a wider knowledge base of how folk expressions encompass the lived tradition and historical awareness of the people of Bangladesh.

Keyword: Folk art, Bangladesh, cultural heritage, nakshi kantha, alpana, cultural heritage, symbolism, regional art forms.

Introduction

of life of the rural folk who are the backbone of the nation and who over the centuries have contributed in a major way to the development of the nation. Folk art of Bangladesh is an expression of the rich culture, believes and ways 'Folk art, deeply rooted in the cultural soil of Bangladesh, stands as a vibrant testament to the creativity, resilience, and identity of its people. It embodies the collective memory and imagination of rural communities, reflecting not only aesthetic values but also socio-religious beliefs, agrarian lifestyles, and historical narratives passed down through generations.' For Bangladesh, a nation whose wealth derives from the strong cross-current of ethnicity, linguistic forms, and sacred practice—popular art functions as an aggressive visual form, a form wherein ordinary men make known their own bonds to nature, to society, and to god. 'Whether expressed through alpana (ritualistic floor art), nakshi kantha (embroidered quilts), clay dolls, woodcraft, or patachitra (scroll painting), these forms collectively represent a uniquely indigenous aesthetic deeply entwined with the land's geography and cultural rhythms.'

The objective of this study is to introduce a critical and analytical analysis of Bangladesh folk art, particularly its symbolic character, history, geographical variation, and present-day use. 'As



modernization and globalization continue to reshape artistic practices, there is an urgent need to preserve, understand, and reinterpret folk traditions within academic discourse.’ ‘Moreover, folk art not only reveals the artistic sensibilities of marginalized voices but also challenges the hierarchical distinctions between “high” art and “low” or “popular” art, making it a fertile ground for interdisciplinary investigation.’

over the generations, conserving ancient habits, but adjusting to new realities. embroidery, painting and sculpting and is frequently functional, symbolic and aesthetically-lush. Such traditions are often handed down produced by self-taught artists using local techniques and materials, Bangladeshi folk art is a testament to the resilience of creativity that exists outside the purview of formal academic and institutional art. It runs the gamut from pottery and weaving to woodwork, Frequently

In this journal, an attempt will be made to examine folk art not merely as utilitarian or decorative craft but as an important medium of cultural expression one that expresses the spiritual values and mundane existence of rural Bangladesh. The article will also explore how such forms change with shifting social, economic, and political contexts, raising important issues about authenticity, cultural sustainability, and identity formation in postcolonial South Asia.

Literature Review

Academic study of Bangladesh folk art has evolved over the last decades, particularly where researchers have actively sought to document, preserve, and reestablish traditionally set practice behavior in face of adversity presented by modernization and globalization. ‘Several works have established that Bangladeshi folk art is not merely a form of rural creativity, but a profound cultural archive that embodies spiritual symbolism, historical memory, and social narratives.’ These material and visual manifestations convey rural societies’ everyday lives, suffering, and spirituality, regularly serving ritualistic, didactic, or commemorative functions.

Ahmed (2008) carried out one of the pioneering studies in this region, documenting various folk arts such as nakshi kantha, alpana, and patachitra. His work emphasizes the relationship between folk art and agrarian calendar, particularly how forms of artistic depiction are connected to seasonal festivals and religious rituals. Similarly, Chowdhury (2015) examined the role of oral tradition in the persistence of folk art’s visual culture, how motifs and symbols are passed from one generation to another through stories, song, and communal rituals. His work places memory and performance in folk beauty as essential.

Karim (2019) approached folk art sociologically, arguing that folk art has a tendency to challenge hegemonic power structures by expressing subaltern voices. He identifies motifs of feminine strength, ecological balance, and resistance to social inequality inherent in folk imagery. This interpretation is supported by Roy (2017), who examined the threshold position of folk art between craft and high art. Roy laments the elitist bias that tends to marginalize folk expression, and instead calls for a broadening of the reading of artistic worth.

Most recently, Chakraborty (2021) has studied the impact of globalization and mass production on the folk art economy in Bangladesh. Her study identifies a double process: commercialization has provided new opportunities for folk artists, but it has also commodified and diluted traditional



forms. She poses significant questions regarding cultural preservation in an increasingly fast-changing world by pointing out the tension between authenticity and marketability.

Despite such rich contributions, there is a gap in literature that holistically analyzes the symbolic lexicon and regional variation of folk art in Bangladesh. Research focuses on documentation or socio-cultural value but fails to undertake comparative or semiotic analysis of motifs, technique, and material across districts. This journal attempts to fill this gap by providing an analytical and interdisciplinary framework incorporating art historical, anthropological, and cultural studies methods.

Problem Statement

‘Despite its rich and diverse heritage, the folk art of Bangladesh remains underrepresented and often misunderstood within both national cultural policy and global academic discourse. While numerous studies have documented various forms and practices, there is a lack of analytical frameworks that deeply engage with the symbolic, regional, and socio-political dimensions of folk art.’ Most of the literature to date has a tendency to emphasize descriptive cataloging or narrowly focuses on the decorative and utilitarian purposes without taking into account the underlying semiotic and cultural meanings of these works. ‘Moreover, as Bangladesh experiences rapid urbanization, technological advancement, and globalization, traditional folk art practices face increasing threats. These include the erosion of community-based knowledge systems, the commodification of heritage for tourism, and the growing disconnect between younger generations and indigenous art forms.’ The shift from cultural practice to commercial product typically takes away the contextual meaning of folk art, changing its intended use and symbolism.

There is a pressing need to study how folk art continues to be a means of expression, resistance, and identity in contemporary Bangladeshi society. In particular, the concern is that not enough research has been done on how regional variation, symbolic language, and traditional modes of production factor into the cultural persistence of folk art. Without critical analysis, such precious knowledge can be lost or misread in local and global accounts of art and culture.

Therefore, this study aims to bridge the gap between traditional ethnographic account and contemporary cultural critique by presenting a comprehensive and interdisciplinary critique of folk art in Bangladesh. It aims to highlight the enduring relevance of such works, study their development through time, and appeal for their rightful place in the broader context of South Asian art history.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative review of existing literature, interviews with rural artisans, and field observations in regions like Kushtia, Bogura, and Jamalpur. Data was collected from academic publications, NGO reports, and museum archives. Thematic analysis was applied to examine patterns related to symbolism, gender roles, and commercialization trends in folk art.

The present study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary framework incorporating cultural anthropology, art history, and semiotics methods to analyze the folk art traditions of Bangladesh. Both primary and secondary sources are focused upon in the current study through ethnographic



observation in combination with visual inspection and literature survey to create an integrated understanding of the subject.

Research Design

The study is done in the shape of an analytical and descriptive investigation of Bangladeshi folk art in selected districts including Rajshahi, Jessore, Mymensingh, and Sylhet. They were chosen on the basis of their distinctive school of art and concentrated tradition of folk practices such as nakshi kantha, alpana, terracotta sculpture, and patachitra. There is comparative methodology applied for the identification of regional differences and prevalent motifs in these works of art.

Data Collection

Information was obtained from three major sources:

1. Field Observations: Artisan villages, village fairs (melas), and rural culture centers were observed in an effort to see artists working, take records of instruments and methods, and conduct loose conversations with artists. Limitations of accessibility made additional records available through photographic accounts and video recordings that can be accessed through bodies like the Bangla Academy and Shilpakala Academy.
2. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with art educators, cultural historians, and folk artists were conducted. The interviews were intended to disclose the lived experience, intentions, and symbolic meanings of folk art practice. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
3. Document and Visual Analysis: Written materials such as journal articles, books, museum catalogues, and NGO cultural preservation reports were used. In addition, some paintings were evaluated based on form, color, symbolism, and technique using iconographic and semiotic analysis principles.

Data Analysis

Data were coded into five broad thematic categories: symbolic motifs, ritual functions, gender roles, regional styles and adoption of modernity using thematic coding. Trends and variations were explained and interpreted in the context of broader socio-cultural, economic, and historical contexts.

Limitations

This study is bounded by time and resource constraints that did not allow extended fieldwork across the entirety of Bangladesh. Moreover, using translated interviews and secondary sources may affect the cultural nuances interpretation. Nevertheless, the triangulation of different data sources enhances the validity and reliability of the findings.

Analysis

The art of the people of Bangladesh, far too readily classified as a rural recreation or backwoods craft, is filled with a dense system of meaning, social commentary, and religious depth. The



following discussion looks at significant themes which have emerged in the data: symbolism and iconography, regional differences, gendered production, and contemporary shifts.

Symbolism and Iconography

‘Folk art in Bangladesh is rich with symbolic motifs that communicate social values, religious beliefs, and cosmological ideas. For instance, the lotus frequently appears in alpana and patachitra as a symbol of purity and divine femininity, often associated with Hindu goddess Lakshmi.’ ‘Birds, trees, and aquatic life are recurrent elements representing fertility, harmony with nature, and the agrarian cycle (Ahmed, 2008). In nakshi kantha, patterns are stitched with coded symbols that narrate life stories, dreams, and aspirations, serving as embroidered chronicles of women's lives.’

These works employ non-linear perspectives, cyclical forms, and intense color to awaken the religious concepts and the feeling of belonging to community. Unlike Western art fine arts traditions, most Bangladesh folk arts rarely dichotomize beauty from function, the religious from the secular. ‘Everyday objects such as pots, fans, or wall hangings are ornamented with intricate designs, transforming utilitarian items into spiritual or cultural symbols.’

Regional Variations

Each part of Bangladesh possesses distinctive folk art traditions shaped by environmental resources, religious demographics, and historical contacts. ‘In Rajshahi and Kushtia, for example, *patachitra* often illustrates stories of Lalon Fakir and Baul mysticism, blending folk spirituality with narrative scrolls.’ In contrast, the Sylhet region, dominated by Sufi culture, has stylized floral and geometric patterns in its wood and embroidery. Mymensingh is renowned for its alpana motifs, which combine symmetrical patterns with auspicious symbols traced during rituals and festivals. Meanwhile, ‘Jessore and Khulna have sustained a long tradition of terracotta sculpture and pottery, where figures of deities and village scenes are molded in clay with fine detail and symbolic proportion.’

These local modes of style convey localized histories and values along with contributing to a national visual vocabulary that is unavoidably Bangladeshi.

Gendered Artistic Expression

Most of Bangladesh's folk art is executed by women, especially rural women of the family in which nakshi kantha, alpana, and ornamentation crafts are regular and seasonal work. These creative acts are not just beauty-making, but they also share strong affinity to domesticity, coming of age rites, and transference of intergenerational knowledge.

Women's roles as cultural custodians have been ignored in official art discourse for too long, but their art is invested with a collective female agency and emotional labor that disrupts patriarchal narratives in art history and society at large. The quilts and designs have a tendency to communicate personal histories, feelings, and politics through an intimate and resilient visual language.

Contemporary Transformations and Challenges



‘In recent years, folk art has undergone significant transformation due to commercialization, urban migration, and digital exposure. While these changes have opened new markets for folk artists, they also risk detaching artworks from their ritualistic and contextual origins.’ For example, nakshi kantha is currently mass-produced for overseas markets, often using synthetic materials and cookie-cutter designs that are far removed from age-old, handmade narratives.

Some artists and institutions, however, have reacted by initiating workshops, festivals, and museum shows to keep old ways and contextual information alive. Hybrid forms are emerging, in which folk themes are being inserted into contemporary fashion, interior decoration, and city murals both evidences of cultural accommodation and artistic creativity.

Market forces, however, have reoriented production towards consumer preference, often diluting traditional integrity. Although government and NGO initiatives have helped preserve some practices, such efforts are sporadic and poorly coordinated. More sustainable approaches are needed to integrate traditional folk art into education, tourism, and economic development in respectful ways.

Conclusion

The Bangladesh folk art, the topic of this paper, is not just a warehouse of ornamentation tradition; it is a vibrant and dynamic expression of the common people's shared identity, consciousness of the past, and spirituality. It takes its origin in rural Bangladesh's agrarian and ritualistic society and bears witness to the interconnectedness of human imagination and natural, social, and metaphysical orders. Through symbolic treatment of motifs, materials, and convention of narrative, it expresses social comment, cultural values, and gendered experience intergenerationally.

This discussion has shown that Bangladesh folk art is extremely regional in its aesthetic but one in intention: to represent the community through a language of pictures. It transcends the oppositions of the sacred and the secular, art and function, and male and female domains. Moreover, the research identifies how globalization and modernization have introduced challenges and possibilities of survival of these art forms. Commercialization, as it can dilute traditional meanings, offers a vehicle for innovation and wider exposure if done with sensitivity and in touch with culture.

There remains an urgent need for greater scholastic attention, institutional support, and grass-root initiative to document, preserve, and tap folk traditions without sacrificing context and authenticity. This book has attempted to fill some of that gap by presenting a comprehensive, symbolic, and place-sensitive interpretation of folk art as a constituent of Bangladeshi heritage. Doing so, it pleads for the recognition of folk art neither as a peripheral craft, but as a mainstream narrative power in the South Asian artistic and cultural life.

Recommendations

With reference to the findings of this study, several pragmatic suggestions are proposed to help in conservation, promotion, and sustainable development of Bangladesh folk art:

1.Documentation and Archiving: There must be a mass national effort to document regional folk art traditions, e.g., oral history, visual motifs, production techniques, and cultural meaning—by



audiovisual recording, digital archives, and scholarly writing. This will help preserve endangered knowledge systems and enable future research (Haider, 2012).

2. Curriculum Integration: Folk art needs to be incorporated into educational curricula formally at primary and tertiary levels. Teaching children and students about traditional art forms gives rise to cultural pride as well as retention of intergenerational knowledge (Roy, 2017).

3. Support for Artisans: Government and non-governmental organizations need to provide rural artisans with market access, training, and finance. Local cooperatives and fair trade systems can provide economic sustainability without compromising the cultural authenticity (Chakraborty, 2021).

4. Community Museums and Cultural Tourism: Marketing folk art through sensitive tourism and the setting up of community-managed museums can boost rural economies without compromising the local practices. Care should be taken not to commercialize sacred or ritualistic elements (Karim, 2019).

5. Urban and Contemporary Integration: Artists and designers in urban settings ought to be incentivized to incorporate folk art imagery and methods in ethical forms into modern media such as fashion, public art, and the internet. This not only maximizes exposure but also brings traditional looks to modern people.

Through these recommendations, Bangladesh can ensure that its traditional folk art exists not only as a remnant of the past, but as an evoking and evolving influence in the modern world of the 21st century.

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Footnotes

Alpana – Classic wall or floor patterns made with rice flour paste, commonly practiced in religious rituals and festivals in Bengal.

Nakshi Kantha – Quilt embroidered using worn-out saris and fabric, commonly produced by rural women as both beautiful and narrative textile artworks.

Patachitra – Scroll painting commonly used in storytelling performances; consists of visual and music components based on folk customs.

Terracotta – Fired clay used in sculpture and decoration, hitherto seen in temples and architectural ornaments.

Rajshahi – A northwestern area in Bangladesh famous for pottery, mask-making, and folk art.

Jessore – A southwestern area famous for musical heritage, wood carving, and handloom weaving.

Mymensingh – A culturally important area in central Bangladesh famous for alpana and wall art traditions.

Sylhet – A north-eastern region with typical woodwork, folk music, and symbolic use of natural motifs in craft.

Folk Art – Traditional, handmade arts derived from the daily lives and rituals of the local populace, usually passed down through generations.

Motif – A recurring visual motif or symbol in art that has cultural, spiritual, or aesthetic significance.