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Challenging Tradition in Religious Textiles: The Mata Ni Pachedi of India

Donald Clay Johnson

Walking the streets of most cities in India will reveal unexpected things. For instance, in the old city of Ahmedabad in the vicinity of the central post office one probably will be rewarded with seeing brightly colored red, black, and white textiles hanging from trees and buildings. Known as Mata ni Pachedi they are wall hangings and canopies made as religious pieces by members of the Vaghra untouchable community. If you are extremely lucky you might even encounter people squatting on the sidewalk applying color to the block printed textiles.

Figure 1. Streetside view of Mata ni Pachedi. Photograph by author.

Figure 2. Artist painting a Mata ni Pachedi. Photograph by author.
What is immediately apparent is that the Mata ni Pachedi incorporate both block printing and free hand drawing in a vibrant folk art style.

But what are the cloths and what functions do they serve? Responses to my questions about them indicated they were made for nomadic peoples in Gujarat to serve as temporary religious shrines that could easily be assembled, should a religious event or festival occur while they were on journeys far away from cities or towns. Yet Eberhard Fischer’s recent book *Temple tents for the Goddesses of Gujarat, India*, the only extensive work on the Mata ni Pachedi, documents the primary audience for these distinctive religious textiles was untouchables living in urban settings, who traditionally were banned from entering temples. The construction of such a shrine, or temporary temple, requires numerous pieces of cloth which conveniently brings together many members of a particular community, each contributing a family owned piece or two. The iconography or portrayals on the cloths show aspects of Indian culture.

The central figure of these works contains a portrayal of one of the Hindu mother Goddesses situated in a temple or similar enclosure.

![Figure 3. The Goddess Hadai who protects worshipers from rabies. Photograph by author.](image)

These mother Goddesses are personifications of *shakti*, a concept broadly defined as power or force. Worship reflects awe or placation far more than reverence as the shakti they represent relates to evil or negative forces. For instance, these Goddesses are associated with rabies, smallpox and other epidemic diseases. Given the long Gujarati coastline, which allowed a vigorous trade in the Indian Ocean area, another concern of the Mata ni Pachedi depictions relates to naval themes.
Gods and Goddesses in Hinduism have an animal vehicle which, among other things, assists in the iconographic identification of the deity. The animals shown in the Mata ni Pachedi are not those usually seen in Hindu iconography. They include dogs, roosters, goats, camels, and buffaloes, another indicator that this religious tradition is at notable variance from mainstream Hinduism.

The cloths typically have a series of bands that contain worshipers processing to the temple of the Goddess as well as a variety of themes based on well known legends or religious stories. Religious narrative paintings certainly are not unique to Gujarat. A related painting on cloth tradition is the Phad story cloths of the neighboring state, Rajasthan, which tell traditional tales via narrative bands. In south India Kalamkari cloths also narrate religious events via bands of illustrations using both block printing and hand painting.

What, however, are the distinctive subjects in the Mata ni Pachedi? In addition to the central portrayal of the Goddess, Ganesh, the elephant faced God, typically appears in the upper portion of the cloth. After portraying the Mother Goddess and Ganesh, the artist is free either to add representations of favorite religious themes or to focus upon particular iconographical representations desired by the person who commissioned the cloth.
The abduction of Sita as narrated in the Ramayana often is represented. Briefly stated, Sita, Rama’s wife, sees a golden deer and tells Rama and his brother Lakshman to capture it for her. The deer, which is actually an ogre in disguise, lures them away from Sita. Ravana, the monster ruler of Lanka, then comes to Sita as a holy man, seeking water. As she gives it to him he grabs
her and whisks her away to Lanka, thus precipitating the search for Sita and the resulting battle to free her. The artists have to modify the well known story in their representation of it. For instance gold was not a color used in the Mata ni Pachedi thus the golden deer is transformed into a two headed deer. Another well known Ramayana story typically gets included in the portrayal. Lakshman was wounded and only an herb that grows on a mountain in northern India can save him. Hanuman, the monkey God, volunteers to go to the mountain to get the herb. Once there he is unable to identify the herb and instead lifts up the entire mountain and brings it to south India where Lakshman is awaiting the medicine.

The upper panel in this segment of a Mata ni Pachedi portrays a central ritual of its use in religious ceremonies. In the lower right of the upper panel a priest is shown leading a sacrificial goat. The priest carries a sword with which to decapitate the goat as well as a bowl which will be filled with blood and then drunk. Behind the goat are two musicians indicating the festivities that accompany the sacrifice. Blood sacrifice, including the ritual drinking of the blood, forms a major component of the ceremonies of the groups who use the Mata ni Pachedi. Thanks to the influences of the non violent Jain community, the upper castes of Hinduism in Gujarat long ago abandoned such animal slaughter, which is probably a major reason untouchables were not able to conduct their ceremonies in temples.

Please notice the two people at a table in the upper right portion of the panel. This refers to the gambling scene in the Mahabharata in which the Pandavas lose their kingdom and go into exile. Again the artist has made modifications as the dice game described in the epic would be too difficult to portray, so cards are substituted.
The lower panel has a pond with fish, a reference to the Goddess being a protector of people at sea. Notice the bent fish at the right of the bottom row, a creative solution of the artist to fill a space which doesn’t allow the full portrayal that the other fish have.

These Mata ni Pachedi in their depictions thus narrate aspects of India’s two epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, in a charming folk art manner and serve an untouchable community in Gujarat. They have received at least passing mention in works on Gujarati textiles as well as a major exhibition at Zurich’s Rietberg Museum and the accompanying volume *Temple tents for Goddesses in Gujarat, India*.

Seldom do traditions remain static and over the last twenty years there has been a major transformation of the Mata ni Pachedi. Colors have changed and gone is the red, black, and white palate. Gone is the sequence of well defined narrative bands or panels. The sky in this example is filled with angels instead of rows of worshipers. The angels carry garlands and flags, items shown in earlier works held by mortals in their procession to the temple. Only the Goddesses and their mounts remain from earlier times.

![Mata ni Pachedi with the Goddess Khodiya in the central portion. Photograph by author.](image)

In this Mata ni Pachedi the three Goddesses are in domed temples, a distinct architectural change from the portrayals of their earlier temples. The temple architecture at first glance in fact appears to be an Islamic mosque rather than a Hindu temple.
Another of the new approaches to the Mata ni Pachedi shows the Goddess in a boat surrounded by mermaids. Even the elephant faced God Ganesh has acquired merman characteristics.
The dangerous nature of life on the water is shown with great effect by including crocodiles in the sea. The watery landscape contains themes which appeared in traditional Mata ni Pachedi, even if logic would indicate how improbable their appearance is.

Thus the table and gambling scene seem to be completely unaffected by their watery venue.
The tale of Shravan is another favorite story from the Ramayana often found in the traditional Mata ni Pachedi. Shravan’s aged parents want to go on a pilgrimage yet are too frail to do so. Shravan places them in baskets and then carries them. A figure with a pole and baskets each containing a person succinctly describes the Shravan story. In this new approach since everyone is in water, the baskets and pole for carrying aged parents are redundant. Yet they do serve to identify the Shravan story.

Similarly the procession of musicians and priest with saber and bowl for collecting the sacrificial blood, seem unaffected by their watery location. A most remarkable change, however, is the transformation of the sacrificial buffalo into a lion. Fish and turtles have now become part of the procession. The border of this Mata ni Pachedi contains a procession on dry land. The upper portion shows a festive procession while the bottom contains the gory details of the sacrifice itself.
Figure 14. Sacrificial procession. Photograph by author.

Figure 15. Sacrificial procession panel. Photograph by author.
Radhi Parekh of Artisans, the Centre for Art Craft and Design in Mumbai in speaking on this new evolution noted it is very much an emerging development within the tradition. I wish to thank Ms Parekh both for alerting me to this fascinating new textile development as well as her facilitating my acquisition of the two modern pieces shown in this presentation. Since there is considerably more hand painting on the new pieces their price is considerably higher than the earlier works. The audience of these new works thus is no longer nomads, sailors, and untouchable groups. Rather it is urban collectors of India’s ethnic art who are supporting this new aspect of the Mata ni Pachedi. It is important to note, however, that the older works are still produced but the exciting, new, vibrant re-orientation the tradition is also producing, is attracting a considerably wider audience and undoubtedly marks the future for this distinctive Gujarati religious textile.

Thank you.