

Chitta : The Traditional Art of Odisha

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On the East Coast of India where the Sun God emerges from the sea every morning and a black pagoda has been constructed to worship him, Goddess Lakshmi finds an equally important place. While the Sun God graces the precincts of a temple, Lakshmi finds a place in each house, of the villages surrounding this well-known historical place. While the sun temple is adorned with dancers, courtesans, musicians, soldiers and plebeians, graphically sculpted in an ecstasy of sexuality, the mud walls of the houses around it are decorated with Chitta.

In most traditional societies innumerable varieties of art, form an integral part of the fabric of social and cultural life. In India, each art form moreover has been linked with some religious aspect, usually with a festival or a god or goddess of the Hindu pantheon. One of these is the folk art of Chitta which is exclusively executed by women as a wall art.

As modernization progresses and concrete and brick walls replace mud walls the art of Chitta continues to die. With very little space to carry out the paintings and with rice becoming relatively more expensive than even electronics, the poor farmers faced with a dilemma- eat or conserve –are compelled to follow the first and very little left to decorate their houses. It seems



as if Lakshmi is leaving these villages and disappearing into the realms of mythology alone.

Chitta are of various types, but it concentrates on the local specific art form. The location of the Centre in the heartland of Jagannath the deity that is omnipresent in their lives is a constant reminder of the co-existence of the traditional and modern. The geographical location of Godhasalia village (where the Centre is located) near a little highway town of Nimapara, situated on the road connecting Bhubaneswar and the abode of the Sun God at Konark defines their changing life-styles.

This nearby town, affects the lives of these rural women. A college, a cinema hall, a bus stop, and newly mushrooming of little shops, as a town,



Nimapara looks desultory enough. For people driving past, there is only the occasional open shrine – ancient statuettes carved from stone, with a primitive power that makes one pause and wonder – decorated with vermilion and flower and fitting without apparent contradiction into the mundane existence of this small town – to remind them of the ancient culture that still lives beneath this veneer of ordinariness. For, Nimapara under this recent mist of smalltime commerce, is still a part of that generated triangle formed by the centuries old temple sites of Puri, Bhubaneswar and Konark. Its proximity to Puri connects it intimately with the yearly and the daily ritual of Jagannath.

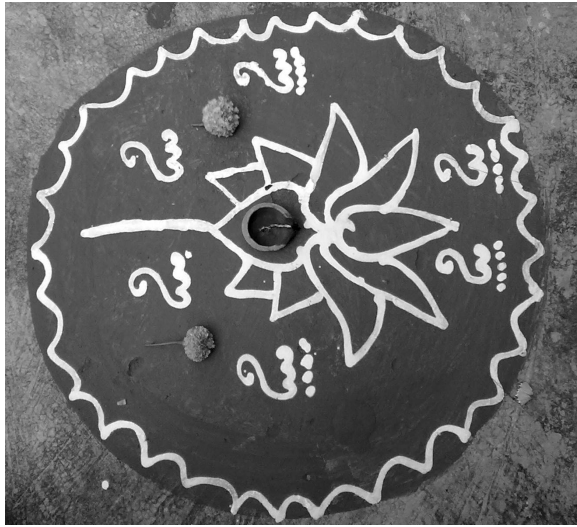
Surrounding the town is a rural hinterland with its villages of mud and thatch, paddy fields and coconut palms. The people of these villages have their brush with the changing world along the highway in their jobs, colleges and excursions for buying and for selling, than get back in the evening to that age-old kernel of village existence, that only gradually yielded to change.

At the junction of road and village, at first one might see no more than a tea stall, a coconut vendor, and a bicycle repairman. Then a mechanic, a bus stop, and around it an endlessly growing cluster of shops and services.

The road brings new markets and new goods. It brings dispensaries, colleges, and cinema halls. When the tarred road cuts through, it cuts through its isolation. To youth it brings new songs, new styles, new and alien ways of being.

Girls learn to take buses, go to college, and take in their stride, libraries and boy friends. They discover that out there in the world, women are able to take loans and set up enterprises, be financially productive and independent. They find a new perspective with which to look at their mother's lives, and at their own future. The prospect of work and career gradually replaces the ideal of an early marriage. And, inevitably, a whole pattern of life has to be redefined. An old fabric has to be woven into new patterns. The changes are all pervasive – in lives and lifestyles in modernity and tradition it brings new complexities and new horizons but at the same time leaves behind historical moments and actualities.

The word Chitta is acquired from the Sanskrit vocabulary where the word 'Chit' means eye. As paintings appear attractive to the eye they are called Chitta (Mishra, 1997: 4). This rural art form is found all over India though it has different names such as Rangoli, specific but also occasion specific. There are Chitta, particularly for different occasions on which the articles of worships of the food offering to the Gods are to be placed. There is circular Chitta called Kundali Padma on which the Guru (the teacher) is to be seated when he is worshipped on Guru Puja. Obviously, these Chitta meant to decorate the space before the Tulsi (the basil plant) shrine on special days. Marriage Chitta may carry the motif of the Tulsi plant, symbol of the eternally faithful wife or they may give prominence to the fish as a symbol of fertility and abundance.



Chitta (from Bhasakosa) is done on the oven, funeral pyre. It is made with sandal paste on the face and body, as tattoo designs on women's faces, bodies and spaces, bodies and space between the two eyebrows on the centre of the forehead. It is also a pattern with rice paste or lime on walls and doors.

On Amavasya the moonless night, Jagannath has Chitta done on him and is offered Chitta Pitha (A sweet food item made during religious festivals). Then the days of new/no moon and full moon, the eleventh day of the lunar fortnight, Sankranti, when the sun enters new sign of zodiac, these are the routine auspicious days where Chitta is a necessary rituals.

On festivals, and fasts associated with them, Chitta is a must. Thursday is the day of Lakshmi. A little extra care in cleaning the house, vegetarian food, perhaps a Chitta or two, Monday is for Shiva. Over and above these there are

special days of ritual observance frequently involving some kind fast or penance called Osha. For instance Savitri Osa is offered by married women for the well being of their husbands. On that day the women wear new saris and eat only fruit – all the fruit to be found in that tropical summer which is the season of this observance – mango, jackfruit, papaya, pineapple, banana, coconut all mixed together with soaked mung (a type of lentil). This, constitutes the ritual offerings on this day, later shared by the family so that what is supposed to be a fast becomes in effect a meal. There are other fasts that are more rigorous, where the women fasting for long lives of husbands will not even drink water.

Then there are the festival days, several in the year, with rituals to invoke the blessings of a particular deity, like Ganesh Puja. Those who can afford wear new clothes, and a variety of special foods are cooked for the offerings and the family shares a rare feast. The women and girls were Alata (a red paint) on their feet and perhaps new bangles.

In some communities, a bride takes a pot of rice flour paste to draw Chitta in her new house. All young women learn this art from their mothers. The most well known Chitta is called Jhoti. This is the Chitta referred to in this article.

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