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Katha Traditions and the Construction of Regional Identity: Insights from Patachitra and Harikatha Storytelling

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Abstract

Storytelling has been a foundational element of cultural expression in India, where various Katha (narrative) traditions play a crucial role in the formation of regional identities. Among these, Patachitra, a visual storytelling art from Odisha and West Bengal, and Harikatha, a performative tradition rooted in South India, stand out as key mediums for transmitting cultural values, religious ideologies, and historical narratives. This paper examines the ways in which these storytelling forms contribute to the construction and reinforcement of regional identities, focusing on their aesthetic, narrative, and performative elements.

Patachitra is a centuries-old art form that integrates painting with oral narration, often combining mythological stories with local folklore. This practice embeds regional symbols and socio-cultural values into its visual and narrative compositions, making it a powerful tool for cultural expression. Harikatha, a performative storytelling tradition, blends narration with music and theatricality, focusing primarily on religious stories from epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Beyond religious teachings, it also conveys local customs and historical events, thereby shaping community values.

This study contends that both Patachitra and Harikatha serve as cultural repositories, reflecting and shaping the collective consciousness of their respective regions. Through the incorporation of local dialects, beliefs, and historical narratives, these forms of Katha storytelling create a shared sense of history and belonging among their audiences. Additionally, they serve as dynamic cultural platforms, continually adapting to contemporary social contexts while preserving their core identity-building functions.

Using an interdisciplinary framework that includes cultural history, art analysis, and performance studies, this paper explores how Patachitra and Harikatha have maintained their significance in shaping regional identities in modern India, thereby fostering a sense of community and continuity.
