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Cognitive and Socio-economic Development: A Case Study of Warli Art

SYEDA FATIMA RAZA

Fourth-Year Student
B.A. (Hons.) English Literature
Aligarh Muslim University, India

Abstract: This study examines how folk traditions such as Warli art enhance creative thinking, aesthetic sensibility and contribute to the Indian economy by bringing in modern cognitive theories and market expressions. The paper synthesizes existing literature to analyze how Warli art can evolve into tools for cognitive development and market persuasion.

With the world moving at a fast pace, India is still a developing country. However, prioritising the diverse folk traditions can help in becoming a developed nation. Therefore, this study delves into how Warli art, an Indian folk tradition, can influence the minds of the individuals and modern economic market. It brings to light the value of Indian folk traditions, holding the potential to rewire thoughts and social behaviour. Yet, it is widely considered only as a part of cultural studies neglecting its effects on psychology and market behaviour.

The findings suggest that folk traditions, when supported by appropriate policies and educational reforms, can enhance the intellectual, economic, ethical and civic development of the country, leading us one step closer to the vision of Viksit Bharat (Developed India) by 2047.

Keywords: *Creative economy, Folk traditions, Interdisciplinary study, Neuroaesthetics, Socio-cognitive development, Viksit Bharat 2047, Warli Art*

Introduction

Amid India being culturally rich, it is still considered a developing country. Across India, folk traditions are often considered only as part of cultural studies, which is demeaning to the intellect of its people and its market. Although this study focuses only on Warli art, it is applicable to other folk visual art traditions which are practiced in India, such as madhubani, Gond and Pattachitra.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines folklore as “the traditions and stories of a country or a community” (“Folklore,” *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). The traditional practices, beliefs, or customs of a community or group often belonging to a particular geographic region which are passed through generations are called folk traditions. “Warli painting is a style of tribal art mostly created by the tribal people from the North Sahyadri Range (the Western Ghats of the Deccan Plateau) in India” (“Reviving the Warli Art Form”). According to researchers, “Warli art is ancient, containing expressions which are highly repetitive and symbolic in nature” (Patel and Srivastava). “Although it is difficult to trace the origin of the respective tradition, in the late 1970s, an artist Jivya Soma Mashe started practising Warli art on an everyday basis and not only as part of rituals, which got Warli art recognition at national and international level” (Patel and Srivastava).

Despite having cognitive potential, it has largely been confined to anthropology, heritage conservation and craft studies. It is rarely observed through the lens of psychology or economic theory, even though it holds equal significance. This study aims to review the existing literature to explore how Warli art can enhance creative thinking, aesthetic sensibility, economic innovation and influence social behaviour through different industries particularly design and textile.

In a broader perspective, this study aligns with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 (Developed India by 2047) which is foregrounded in holistic development, emphasizing-intellectual, cultural, ethical as well as economic growth of the country. By demonstrating how folk traditions like Warli can influence the cognitive and economic growth of the country, this study offers new direction for education and development policies.

Methodology

This review paper adopts a theoretical approach, purely based on secondary data. The methodology is centered on the synthesis and critical analysis of the existing academic resources including peer-reviewed research articles, books, reports and other relevant sources. The study carefully examines the existing sources which help in understanding the cognitive impact on individuals and how the Indian market can be influenced.

Literature Review

History of Warli Art

The history of Warli art is as stated in a UNDP report:

Warli painting is a style of tribal art mostly created by the tribal people from the North Sahyadri Range (the Western Ghats of the Deccan Plateau) in India. This range encompasses places such as Dahanu, Talasari, Jawhar, Palghar, Mokhada and Vikramgad of Palghar district. While there are no records of the exact origins of this art, its roots may be traced to as early as the 10th century AD. The style of Warli painting was not recognised until the 1970s (Reviving the Warli Art Form).

According to the book *'Painted World of the Warlis'* by Yashodhara Dalmia, there is a resemblance between Warli art and prehistoric cave paintings. It's rooted back to 2500 to 3000 BCE (Dalmia). Patel and Srivastava in their work describe:

Its visual resemblance to the cave paintings points to its prehistoric origin. Warli art is a form of such preserved and practised art by the tribal community as it becomes part of their traditions and hence this art form propagated from one generation to the next generation. In the late 1970s, an artist Jivya Soma Mashe started practising Warli art on an everyday basis and not only as part of rituals. His exceptional talent and work in Warli soon got national and international recognition. He received the Padma Shri award for his contribution towards Warli painting. He introduced Warli to the world as an art form and inspired many tribal youth to practice Warli as commercial art. Tribal youth have now identified the potential of their traditional art and started using its benefit for the development of their community. Even formal government-approved courses and training of Warli is now available in this area to empower youth and create new Warli artists (Patel and Srivastava).



Fig. 1 Jivya Soma Mashe making Warli art (Padma Shri Award Winner 2011)

Redefining the Folk art-Warli Paintings in Interiors describes Warli art:

Warli art is ancient, highly repetitive and symbolic in nature. It follows the visual style and contains repetitive elements. Warli artists are now also changing their expression from just paintings to products of consumer value as Warli art is becoming popular among modern society. Warli art is visual representations of the lifestyle and culture of a tribal community. It carries-forwards the values, traditions and knowledge from one generation to next, in the form of paintings on mud walls of huts and temples (Patel and Srivastava).



Fig 2. Photographs of traditional Warli art on walls of tribal mud houses.
Source: “Maharashtrian Tribal Art-Warli Painting,” *Itokri Craft Masala*, Itokri

Warli Art and Cognitive Theories

If studied closely, Warli art is far more than just a folk tradition or a part of cultural studies. While it looks like a combination of simple geometric shapes such as circles, triangles, and lines depicting everyday human life, farming, festivals, and nature, it is a visual form of cognition. Even though it is visually simple, neuroscience decodes the compound ideas of community, balance, and rhythm, disclosing how the human mind through visual patterns processes symbols, colours, motion and emotion. Semir Zeki, the famous neurologist, in his work ‘Art and the brain’ explains that our visual brain looks for repeated patterns which he calls constancies, in order to understand the world around us (Zeki)

Processing Pattern and Perception

Gestalt principle: Warli art is based on grouping, repetition and closure which facilitates rapid organisation of people’s perception into structured format (Koffka). Though the paintings are minimal in nature, the audiences are able to perceive entire scenes such as harvest, dance or other rituals. This is because the human mind prefers clean and clear structures in order to understand unconnected

fragments (Zeki 26). In this way, Gestalt laws help explain why viewers can immediately recognise complex activities despite the simplicity of the form.

Schema activation: visual schema is a database that helps us relate one entity to another. Warli art relies on simple motifs, straight lines and triangles for representing human figures, circles for celestial figures like sun or the moon, conjoined figures for community which act like visual schemas. When the viewer observes these motifs, it leads to the activation of the stored schemas and this allows individuals to quickly interpret the narrative (Bruner). Hence, schema activation contributes to the cognitive clarity with which Warli paintings are processed.

Memory, Repetition, and Rhythm

Repetition as mnemonic device: The repetition and rhythm used to make Warli motifs enhance memorability. Repetition makes encoding and decoding easier by creating predictable visual patterns (Ramachandran and Hirstein). This increases retention as the repetitive structures act as cognitive anchors.

Temporal sequencing and narrative memory: The scenes in the Warli paintings are often cyclic or sequential activities such as dancing, harvest, farming. This promotes shared recollection and cultural memory (Dalmia). Visually narrating cultural routines with such sequencing reinforces collective memory.

Meaning-Making and Semiotic Processing

Iconicity and indexicality: Warli art contributes to rich meaning-making from minimal structures. It combines both iconic resemblance (stick figure = human) and indexical relations (plough = farming) (Eco). The dual semiotic structure lets audiences extract layered meanings from visually economical signs.

Creativity, Aesthetic Thinking and Cognitive Flexibility

Stimulating Divergent thinking: When individuals look at minimal constraints, few shapes or simple lines it enhances our imaginative capabilities. This supports divergent thinking as the audience fills in gaps or details, giving artists freedom to recombine motifs into novel scenes (Ramachandran and Hirstein). Therefore, minimalism becomes a catalyst for interpretive creativity.

Visual problem-solving: Engaging in these models exercises the ability to work out or decode meaning from limited input (Zeki). This strengthens cognitive flexibility by challenging viewers to decode meaning from scattered signs.

Neuroaesthetics and Brain Mechanisms

Reward and prediction: The brain systems which are sensitive to pattern satisfaction are engaged during the observation of Warli art due to its predictable and balanced nature (Ramachandran and Hirstein). The activation of the neural reward circuits due to pattern completion contributes to aesthetic pleasure.

Attention and perceptual fluency: Repeated or regular patterns support smooth perception leading to easy processing of things, which is connected with aesthetic preference and sustained attention (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman). Perceptual fluency is the reason behind viewers considering Warli art as visually appealing and cognitively effortless.

Connection with Learning and Communication

Source of Informal education: It supports informal education through encoding scenes which represent social practices and ecological knowledge in a simple, memorable form (Patel and Srivastava). Thus, Warli art functions as a visual pedagogical tool within the community.

Cross-cultural communication: The simple, universally understood motifs make Warli an effective source for cross-cultural communication (Ramachandran and Hirstein). The visual universality of Warli enables individuals to comprehend beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Limitations

There are certain cultural limitations due to semiotic content which is culture-bound, therefore there are some responses which are based on cultural familiarity (Dalmia). This brings us to the conclusion that interpretation may vary between insiders and outsiders.

The connection between Warli art and cognitive mechanisms is based on conclusions made after analysing existing cognitive and neural studies; direct data or studies are limited, highlighting a major research gap. Therefore, to substantiate these theoretical links, future empirical studies are required.

Warli Art and The Contemporary Global Market

Warli Art as Market Expression

As the study *Redefining the Folk Art: Warli Paintings in Interiors* explains Warli artists are now also changing their expression from just paintings to products of consumer value as Warli art is becoming popular among modern society. Warli art is visual representations of the lifestyle and culture of a tribal community. It carries-forwards the values, traditions and knowledge from one generation to next, in the form of paintings on mud walls of huts and temples. Warli art in the form of paintings is an

internationally appreciated art form but very few people know about the lifestyle and culture of the tribal depicted in these paintings of Warli art (Patel and Srivastava). This shows that people are recognizing the importance of folk traditions as market expressions not only at national but international level, especially Warli art.

Warli Art in Contemporary Fashion

Fig. 4 shows an Indian fashion designer Archana Kochhar’s Warli inspired collection at 2018 New York Fashion Week, published in *The Hindu*. It was a part of the ‘Make in India’ campaign highlighting how Warli art can elevate contemporary designs and enter the global market contributing to the growth of the economy (Sparkling on the Runway).



Fig. 4 Archana Kochhar’s Warli inspired collection at the 2018 New York Fashion Week “Sparkling on the Runway,” *The Hindu*, 5 Oct. 2018.

“The integration of Warli art into the Indian apparel industry represents a significant step in its journey from ritual to retail” (Joshi).

International Recognition and Cultural Impact

Warli art in the form of paintings is an internationally appreciated art form but very few people know about the lifestyle and culture of the tribal depicted in these paintings of Warli art (Patel and Srivastava).

Recently, Warli art has become a globally more significant asset both culturally and commercially. Joshi examines that Warli motifs are widely used in different industries such as interior design, fashion, and product design. This increases the artisans' level of participation and contribution in the modern economy and preservation of their culture (Joshi).

According to Joshi the Globalization of Warli art has created opportunities among the local artisans leading to economic empowerment. The integration of art has contributed to the socio-economic development and promotion of Indian heritage around the world (Joshi).

Folk Tradition and Viksit Bharat 2047 Vision

The vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 is to make India a developed country through holistic development by the time it completes 100 years of independence in 2047. This highlights its importance for folk visual arts to be included as a part of a broader educational and industrial framework, keeping the cultural identity intact.

According to Zeki, the repetitive nature of Warli engages complex cognitive processes. Visual art activates certain neural areas which can rewire the mind by enhancing creative and critical thinking (Zeki), while directly facilitating cognitive development in individuals, indirectly enabling social harmony and economic development.

Warli Art in Educational Sector

According to the report on Unified District Information System For Education Plus (UDISE+ 2023-24) by the Ministry of Education, India, there are 108237 schools in the state of Maharashtra (Ministry of Education). Therefore, the integration of Warli art into the education sector can offer multiple opportunities. It can contribute to the cognitive, aesthetic, and cultural development of students from a young age while also serving as a source of economic empowerment for local artisans by creating employment opportunities. Moreover, it promotes Indian heritage and aligns with the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision, which seeks to empower India through holistic development and foster a brighter, more inclusive future as the nation enters its 100th year of independence in 2047.

Gaps in Existing Literature

In spite of all the insights there are few studies that explore folk traditions through an interdisciplinary approach, integrating cognitive development, economic enhancement and development of the nation as a whole. Most research either focuses on anthropological discourse or studies economic cases in isolation. This highlights the need for interdisciplinary work that focuses on Warli and other folk arts as frameworks of educational integration, economic policy and national development planning.

Discussion



Fig. 5 Warli Painting by Jivya Soma Mashe

Fig. 5 is a Warli Painting made by Jivya Soma Mashe. It exemplifies a complex cognitive system where minimal visual elements are transformed into a highly organized representation of community life and collective memory. At the center of the painting lies a spiraling formation of human figures in

concentric circles, reflecting the Gestalt principle of grouping and closure. Although it is made with simple shapes, squares, triangles, circles and lines, the human perceptual system immediately recognizes them as coherent scenes of communal dance. Our mind prefers structured wholes over fragmented parts which enables us to recognize dance sequences. The clarity of motifs in the painting helps in schema activation which allows viewers to connect simple shapes like triangles, circles, and sticks to familiar cultural categories. The profusion of everyday motifs, such as food preparation, farming, and celebration, show how the tribe relies on stable schemas to support narrative immediacy and fluency in interpretation.

Further, the artwork contains repetition as a mnemonic and rhythmic device. For the Warli community, repetition is not just an artistic choice but a cultural technique of regulation and cohesion. For example, the repetition in the dance as observed in fig. 5 symbolizes social unity, collective labor, and ritual harmony. The tribe used to perform these circular dances during agricultural cycles, marriages, and festivals in order to coordinate physical movements, synchronizing emotional states and regulating group behaviour. By visually representing this repetition, the painting serves as a symbol of communal harmony and reinforces collective memory.

The painting is intentionally minimal, requiring active participation from the viewers. The patterned dance sequence, surrounded by daily practices allows viewers to fill in perceptual and narrative gaps, thereby stimulating divergent thinking.

From a neuroaesthetic perspective, the balanced arrangement of figures and the predictable rhythmic recurrence of shapes trigger brain systems sensitive to pattern detection and reward. The concentric design allows for perceptual fluency, enabling pleasurable ease of processing. The painting's structure promotes sustained attention while simultaneously reinforcing communal values embedded in cultural memory.

The artwork functions as a form of informal cultural education. Educating young generations about the rituals of the community through paintings containing minimal motifs. Overall, the Warli painting integrates repetition, minimalism, and symbolic clarity to produce a visual system that supports perception, memory, creativity, and cultural continuity. It regulates communal behaviour and facilitates communication across time and space.

Cognitive and Educational Implications

The existing studies reviewed explain that Warli art acts as a powerful medium for cognitive development in individuals. It engages viewers in schema activation, pattern recognition, memory, and

meaning-making (Zeki; Ramachandran and Hirstein). The simple repetitive geometric forms can foster aesthetic sense, creative, and critical thinking in students.

If Maharashtra government schools integrate Warli art in their curriculum, it could therefore be beneficial. Either in the form of workshops or as part of the academic curriculum it can work as a tool for cultural awareness and cognitive development. This will make creative faculties available for students and increase respect for local artisans and heritage. Promoting it not just in the industrial sector but also in the educational discourse can boost its impact.

This interdisciplinary approach will allow students to reinterpret a single subject through multiple perspectives and pull out insights that a purely disciplinary approach would run. They will develop cognitive flexibility, creative problem-solving, and the ability to see things differently. Precisely, this is the reason, educational systems should integrate folk visual arts like Warli art in the school curriculums.

Economic and Market Implications

The transformation of Warli art from just being a tribal art to products of the contemporary market underscores its economic potential. Warli has been successfully incorporated by designers and brands into fashion, interiors and consumer products. This will provide increased employment opportunities for local artisans while maintaining the cultural authenticity (Joshi).

This integration with the market provides sustainable growth by helping local artists generate income. They can now contribute to the economic development of the country and achieve economic empowerment, keeping their cultural identity intact. It also aligns with the creative economic theory according to which a country or society grows when it invests in creative skills like art, design, music.

Cultural and Social Significance

Warli art reflects daily life, community rituals, and ecological balance (Dalmia; Patel and Srivastava). When it is practiced in schools in the form of workshops, festivals or curricula, it fosters community engagement leading to a shared sense of identity.

Furthermore, Warli's global outreach promotes Indian tribal culture among different nations. As the art is becoming a part of design platforms or foreign markets, it is gaining recognition which contributes to the elevated status of the respective tribal group. This also encourages artisans or the people of the tribe to engage in cross-cultural communication, reducing marginalization and increasing integration.

Employment, Crime Reduction, and Social Stability

Beyond cognitive and economic development, Warli art programs can also enhance social conditions. The increase in employment opportunities for tribal artisans through school workshops, community projects, or industry partnerships can help them deal with unemployment. Unemployment is often linked with crime. According to an empirical study, the youth employment programs result in reduced antisocial behaviour and violence (Ivaschenko et al).

The United Nations Development Programme states that initiatives taken with regard to employment offer economic relief and build community resilience, reduce inequalities and less grievance-driven conflict (UNDP). By engaging locals through employment and skill development, while on one hand generates income, on the other will lead to reduced crime or social unrest. Hence, Warli art's direct contribution to the economic market can indirectly influence the reduction in crime.

Contribution to Viksit Bharat 2047 Vision

Warli art is not merely a tribal art form but it holds potential for cognitive, economic, and social development which aligns with India's vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. The interdisciplinary approach to Warli art or other folk traditions ensures holistic development.

Implementing Warli and other folk traditions in school curriculum of respective states, community programs, and creative industries, can thus become a policy lever. This way we can preserve culture, build more human capital, more jobs and maintain social stability. These aspects align with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, making India a developed country through holistic development as it will complete its hundred years of independence.

Conclusion

Warli art, far from being just a traditional folk art form, emerges as an interdisciplinary tool which holds power to enhance cognitive abilities, foster economic empowerment, preserve culture, and contribute to the stability of the society. This study shows that this art, through its repetitive patterns, visual symbolism, and narrative simplicity engages the human mind in a complex process, which enhances aesthetic sense, creative and interpretive skills.

Economically, Warli art provides various employment opportunities to local artisans. Its integration with different contemporary industries has opened new avenues for cultural industries. While these initiatives generate income, they can indirectly lead to stable social behaviour and reduce antisocial behaviour.

The idea of integrating Warli art into educational curriculum, different programs, and creative industries aligns with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, fostering intellectual, economic, ethical and civic development of the country. It bridges contemporary needs with the past, underscoring how folk traditions can serve as a tool for holistic development of the nation.

Finally, this theoretical study examined existing literature but it is important to perform future empirical research to validate the cognitive, economic, and social impacts of Warli art. Such research may lead to sustainable national development through evidence-based policies and programs that leverage cultural heritage.

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