



# AN ARTISTIC SUSTENANCE

If the beachside beauty of Puri weren't enough, a short drive away is Raghurajpur where you can feast your eyes on art that is a way of life.

TEXT LAKSHMI SHARATH



Dinodia Photo

A young boy sits on the porch of his home with a pencil in hand. He bends over a small sheet of paper placed over a cardboard. I can neither see his face nor what he is sketching. He is so engrossed in his art that he barely notices me or his father standing behind, watching over him. Suddenly, he veers to his right to pick up another pencil and looks at us, surprised. "This is my son," says Abakash Nayak, a

craftsman from Raghurajpur in Odisha. "He is just learning," he adds, inviting me inside his home. The humble abode turns into a veritable art gallery. I see paintings scattered everywhere—on the centre table, hung on the walls, stacked in every corner of the room. And the Lord of the Universe, Jagannath, presides over almost all of them.

Above and facing page: The art form of *pata chitra* is believed to have originated in 12th century AD and is now practised in various places across Odisha.



The stories of Ram and Krishna come alive on the painted canvas. The *chitrakars* are lost in a world of their own as they step into the world of mythology.

**IT TAKES A VILLAGE...**

Almost every home in Raghurajpur is a studio and every man, woman and child living here is an artist or *chitrakar*, creating and preserving the traditional art form called *pata chitra* that has evolved from the traditional murals of Odisha, dating back to the 4th century. A cluster of 100 homes, this nondescript village, located barely 15 km from Puri, is now recognised as a heritage crafts village in the state.

Painted on *pata* or cloth, these scroll paintings are actually pictograms of the living traditions of the people. There are no landscapes or monuments painted here—just portraits of gods and goddesses



Dimedia Photo: Ephotocorp/AgeDinodia

and stories from Indian mythology. Motifs of birds, animals, trees and flowers are used to decorate borders and embellish the paintings that have a distinct folk flavour. But it is the triad deities who have inspired the *chitrakars*, as they grace almost every painting here. It is believed that when the wooden deities take a fortnightly sabbatical every year from the Jagannath temple for their ritual bath, they are worshipped in the form of a *pata chitra*.

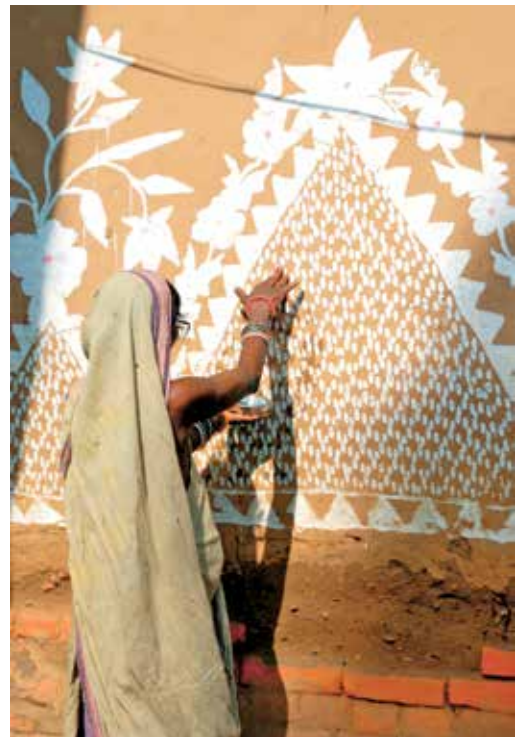
**Above:** A painter engrossed in making *pata chitra* in the veranda of his house, whose walls are adorned with mythological murals.

**Left top and bottom:** Besides *pata chitra*, young and old folk from Raghurajpur also make papier mache toys that are a hit with tourists.

But it is not just the *pata chitra* that has put this little hamlet, located on the banks of River Bhargavi, on the tourist map. The home of the famous Odissi exponent, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Raghurajpur also has artistes specialising in traditional and folk music and dance.

## Craft

Clockwise from top left: Raghurajpur is famous for its Gotipua troupes comprising a group of young boys dressed as girls who perform dances inspired by the lives of Radha and Krishna; Villagers take great pride in the simple murals they paint on the outer walls of their houses; Colours used to make *pata chitra* are prepared using natural resources such as conch shells, coconuts, stone, etc.



Walking around the village, one sees boards where the skill sets of the artists are advertised. Besides *pata chitra*, you have *tusser* paintings, palm leaf engravings, papier mache toys and masks, wood carvings and cow dung toys to name a few. Families work as a unit, creating art out of cloth and the women are adept at carving toys out of cow dung and wood. They create papier mache toys and paint on coconut shells.

### ORGANIC PAINTINGS

I enter a street just as a couple of boys are returning from their school. A temple stands right in the centre of the lane, while a guest house lies around the corner. The village itself is a riot of colours. Each street is well laid out as houses with tiled roofs and spacious verandas are built adjacent to each other. Dappled with sunlight, the walls come alive with

murals, some narrating stories from the *Puranas*, while others from the *Panchatantra*. There are folk and tribal motifs depicted in bold strokes.

Alok Sahoo walks up to me and invites me to his house. Like Nayak, Sahoo learnt the craft when he was a teenager. As he showcases his work, he patiently explains the process of creating a *pata chitra*.

A strip of cotton cloth is soaked in water filled with tamarind seeds and is then coated with chalk and gum. Another layer of cotton is then stuck to it with gum and rubbed with stones to give it a smooth and glossy finish. The canvas is now ready for the artist. A palette of vegetable and mineral colours is prepared by the artists who apparently use very fine brushes, made out of mice hair. No pencil



or charcoal is used. Once the painting is ready, a lacquer coating is given to protect it.

### LEAVES OF ART

I am, however, fascinated by *tala pata chitra*, paintings done on palm leaves. Sahoo shows me a sketch of Radha-Krishna painted on tiny strips of dried and hardened palm leaves stitched together to form a canvas. Another strip depicts Dasavatharam, the 10 avatars or forms of Vishnu, where the images are superimposed on different layers. As I open small circular sections, they seem like windows to another painting as they reveal a different avatar of Vishnu from the first. "It is like we create a script and narrate the stories through our paintings," explains Sahoo as I buy the Dasavatharam series from him.

As the sun fades away behind the clouds, silence fills Raghurajpur. Artists lean on the walls of the veranda and add a dash of colour to their works. The stories of Ram and Krishna come alive on the painted canvas. It seems like the *chitrakars* are lost in a world of their own as they step into the world of mythology. They paint the gods as they see them in their mind's eye. It seems to come to them naturally. Birds fly out of their canvases; trees sway with glee; flowers bloom. Raghurajpur may be another village where the craftsmen work in silence, but the work is not lost to the world. As I plan to leave, I carry the images of Lord Jagannath in my mind. You see them everywhere—on the walls, on coconut shells, on earthen pots, on cow dung toys, on palm leaves and on the *pata chitra*. The Lord of the Universe is contained in art one hopes the world gets to see. ■



Above: Colourful murals adorn the outer walls of most houses in Raghurajpur. The common themes are inspired by the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Top: Shopping at the crafts shop in Raghurajpur for souvenirs is a must-do, if only to enrich the livelihood of artists engaged in keeping a very old artistic tradition alive.

### QUICK FACTS

#### GETTING HERE

Jet Airways has daily flights to Visakhapatnam from various cities across India. From Visakhapatnam, Puri is approximately 450 km by road. From Puri, Raghurajpur is around 15 km away.

#### ACCOMMODATION

Gram Kutir is a village rest house with limited rooms. The best bet would be to book accommodation in Puri which has several hotels to suit all budgets.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to [www.orissatourism.gov.in](http://www.orissatourism.gov.in)