

The Sacred Textile Art of Mata-ni-Pachedi

By Jaina Mishra

When pushed into a corner, people find a new way out. These new ways are often bitter, sometimes disruptive and only in a few instances do we see them giving rise to beauty and art. The Devipujak community in Gujarat, India, has unique beliefs about their origin, their diet and religion, as do other ethnic groups from that region. For a few centuries, this difference led to restrictive social practices and as recently as 140 years ago, an act passed by the British institutionalised their persecution. Ethnographic studies point to the fact that for a long time, the Devipujak community was not allowed entry into temples. To overcome this abhorrent practice, the community found a unique solution.

They painted an image of the goddess on a piece of cloth, hung it up behind the temple and directed their worship at the painting. This practice took root and the painted textile came to be known as *Mata-ni-Pachedis*, literally meaning 'behind the goddess (temple)'. The persecution of this community was detestable, yet resulted in the birth



Small vintage Mata-ni-Pachedi in traditional colours

of a new textile art. A lotus was born in the murky waters of social discrimination. Contemporary India has no place for such divisive concepts and so this selective restriction has been abolished. But the tradition of worshipping the *Mata-ni-Pachedis* continues even today.

About the worship

At the time of worship, groups of Devipujak worshippers assemble, hang up the textile painted with images of the goddess and conduct the rituals, consisting of group singing



Detail of the small, vintage Mata-ni-Pachedi in traditional colours



Old pachedi, property of and photo by A A Wazir

of *bhajans*, *arti* and other *puja* rituals. One or more *Mata-ni-Pachedis* are hung up and all the rituals are performed using the *pachedi*, the portable shrine, as the focus of attention. At the centre of each *pachedi* is a picture of the main goddess and surrounding the central image are the legends of her life. There are 999 avatars of the goddess and so there were 999 variants of the *Mata-ni-Pachedis*, each narrating a different tale.

In the social system of beliefs all over India it is common to take a vow that is associated with the asking of a specific boon or wish. For instance, a young student may take a vow that if she gets admission into medical college, she will perform certain rites or abstain from certain foods for a year or embrace a particular new habit. A man may vow that if he gets a son, he will give up smoking. To mark the granting of that boon, there is a worship ritual or *puja*. In the case of the Devipujak community this *puja* takes the form of animal sacrifice before the goddess along with an offering of a new *pachedi*.

Evolution of the art

The Devipujak community has been practising this worship and art form for 300-400 years. In the beginning, individuals used a wooden stick to draw their own *pachedi* and offered these for worship. As the art evolved, clay blocks were created for ease of replication and were used to apply mineral dyes to the cloth. These were coarse and the print became diffused over subsequent uses. So after a short productive life span these clay blocks were laid to rest in the river. They were eventually replaced by wood blocks that not only lasted longer, but



Vintage Mata-ni-Pachedi



Mata-ni-Pachedi created for the art market

also allowed for sharper drawings. Wood blocks are used even today to make *Mata-ni-Pachedis*. The production of hand-drawn *pachedis* continues, but is more labour-intensive, making them more expensive than block-printed ones. Economics forced a shift and today only a few *Mata-ni-Pachedis* are hand-drawn.

In the olden days *Pachedis* were meant for group worship and once hung up, the *pachedi* would be viewed by a large group of people. The proportions therefore, of both the textile itself as well as the motifs drawn upon it, were large and the *pachedis* could be up to three metres in length. Today they are much smaller.

During the last century measures have been taken to undo the crimes committed against this community. Along with gaining equality, entry restrictions to temples have been lifted and today the *Mata-ni-Pachedi* is not the only shrine available for worship. Sanjaybhai Chitara, one of the few artists who

continues to practise this ancestral art, says that there has been a shift in the primary usage of the work he produces: "These days these venerated textiles are sold mainly as works of art rather than as worship cloths. In the future these are likely to be seen only in museums"

What was once a form of folk art and practised by the laity has, over the centuries, changed status and now belongs to the category of art that is created only by skilled artists. *Mata-ni-Pachedis* today are made by only three surviving families of artists. Whether the next generation will find this profession economically feasible to continue for the sake of art, remains to be seen.



Detail of the Mata-ni-Pachedi created for the art market

Jaina Mishra has an MBA, is a MENSAs member, a professional speaker, writer and award-winning photographer in the domain of traditional art and tribal cultures. She has curated textile art exhibitions, most recently for Esplanade Singapore. Her collection of antique textiles and jewellery may be viewed at wovensouls.com.

Unless otherwise noted, the *pachedis* in the photos are the property of the author and photos are by the author



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