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Developing Vajjika Art and its Cluster: A Major Scope for the Livelihood of the Artisans of Vajjikanchal

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ABSTRACT

Vajjikanchal, also known as Bajjikanchal, encompasses six districts in North Bihar: Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi, Samastipur, Vaishali, Sheohar, and East Champaran. This region holds a profound historical and archaeological significance, deeply intertwined with Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. Ancient texts such as the *Anguttara Nikaya, Mahaparinibban Sutta, Lalitvistara, Bhagvati Sutta, Valmiki Ramayana*, and *Tulsidas Ramacharitmanasa* elaborate on the rich history of Vajjikanchal, suggesting it was the world's first republican state and one of the sixteen *Mahajanpadas* of the post-Vedic era. Travel accounts from historical figures like Fa-Hien and Yuan Chwang further enrich our understanding of the cultural and religious landscape of this area. Archaeological excavations in Vajjikanchal have unveiled treasures such as the Ashokan Pillars, Buddha's Relic Stupas, including the world's largest Buddhist Stupa at Kesaria, and ruins of King Vishala's palace. The discovery of sculptures, coins, and artifacts from ancient and

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medieval periods provides tangible evidence of the region's historical significance. Despite this wealth of historical and cultural heritage, the indigenous art and craft practices of Vajjikanchal remain poorly documented and inadequately showcased to the world. A notable gap in existing research is the lack of documentation and discussion on the indigenous forms of painting within this region. Given the region's vibrant religious and cultural heritage, this oversight is particularly significant. Recent discoveries, such as handwritten and illustrated manuscripts of the *Ramacharitmanasa* and intricately carved wells, underscore the urgent need to unveil, document, and revive the indigenous art forms of Vajjikanchal. This revival could re-establish the region's rich tradition of art and craft, creating sustainable livelihoods for local artisans. This paper aims to uncover the unique characteristics of the art forms found in the manuscripts and carved wells, proposing the term "Vajjika Art" for this indigenous art. It explores how Vajjika Art can be developed into a thriving art and craft cluster, discussing the potential socio-economic benefits for the artisans. By establishing a robust framework for the development and promotion of Vajjika Art, this initiative can help preserve the cultural heritage of Vajjikanchal while providing a sustainable means of livelihood for the artisans.

Introduction

The Vajjikanchal region of North Bihar, India, holds a prominent place in the cultural and historical heritage of the country. Known as an ancient hub of religious and philosophical thought, the region boasts a deep connection with traditions of Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. Its cultural significance is further accentuated by its archaeological findings, including the renowned Ashokan Pillars, the vast Buddhist stupas, and ancient architectural structures like the palace of King Vishala. Despite these rich historical roots, the indigenous art forms of Vajjikanchal remain unexplored and inadequately documented. In particular, artifacts like carved wells in various villages and a hand-painted manuscript of Ramcharitmanasa found in Lalganj stand as testaments to the region's unique artistic expressions.

This paper proposes to identify, preserve, and develop these indigenous art forms as "Vajjika Art." Vajjika Art embodies the simplified yet metaphorical carvings on the wells and the distinctive painting styles seen

in the manuscripts. A systematic approach to analyzing, documenting, and popularizing these art forms could result in significant economic and social benefits for the local artisans. By establishing a structured craft cluster, the artisans can be equipped with resources, skills, and platforms to sustain their art. This initiative will not only preserve the artistic heritage of Vajjikanchal but also provide artisans with a sustainable means of livelihood.

The research adopted a mixed-methods approach to analyze and document the indigenous art of Vajjikanchal, focusing on establishing the Vajjika Art cluster. Qualitative field research involved in-depth interviews and focus groups with artisans, cultural historians, and community leaders to capture the cultural significance, unique techniques, and socio-economic needs of local artists. Observational data on traditional carving and painting practices were documented visually, creating a detailed digital archive to support training and educational programs. Comparative analysis positioned Vajjika Art alongside other Indian folk traditions, identifying distinctive motifs and styles that could help establish its identity within heritage and tourism markets.

Literature Review

The development and preservation of traditional crafts have long been recognized as key components in supporting local economies and maintaining cultural heritage. As the global market for indigenous art grows, so does the need for strategic frameworks that can promote the economic sustainability of local artisans while preserving their unique art forms. This section reviews existing literature on the importance of art clusters, the role of indigenous art in cultural preservation, and the socio-economic impact of such initiatives on local communities.

Art Clusters and Regional Development

Art clusters are increasingly being recognized as a viable strategy for the preservation and economic revitalization of local art forms. According to Florida (2002), cultural clusters facilitate the development of creative economies, creating networks where artists, designers, and cultural entrepreneurs can exchange ideas, resources, and skills. Art clusters in India, such as those centered around Madhubani and Pattachitra painting, have demonstrated significant potential for economic growth by promoting local crafts and improving artisan livelihoods (Sengupta & Sharma, 2017). Similarly, the establishment of the "Vajjika Art" cluster could offer opportunities for artisans in Vajjikanchal by creating a structured framework for skill development, marketing, and sustainable income generation (Hassan & Kaur, 2020).

Indigenous Art Forms and Cultural Preservation

The preservation of indigenous art forms is critical not only for maintaining cultural heritage but also for fostering a sense of identity among local communities. Indigenous art practices are deeply intertwined with religious, social, and cultural histories, and their preservation ensures that future generations maintain connections to their roots (Kothari & Sharma, 2016). In the case of Vajjikanchal, the unique art forms such as the illustrated manuscripts and carved wells represent a rich history that is often overlooked. The need for documentation and preservation of such art is underscored by Tiwari (2019), who argues that without active preservation, these forms face extinction due to modernization and changing cultural dynamics.

Artisans and Livelihood

Craftsmanship is often a vital source of livelihood for artisans in rural areas. However, many traditional artists struggle with low income and limited market access, hindering their ability to sustain their craft (Bansal, 2015). Initiatives that integrate traditional arts into contemporary markets have proven successful in improving economic outcomes for artisans. For instance, research by Srivastava & Dube (2020) highlights how modern adaptations of traditional art, such as including local crafts in tourism-related products, can increase demand and support local economies. The Vajjika Art cluster aims to achieve similar results by offering artisans new market opportunities, skill development programs, and platforms for international exposure, thus enhancing their income and sustainability (Sharma & Nair, 2020).

Government Support and Institutional Collaboration

Government schemes and institutional collaborations play a significant role in supporting the development of traditional arts. As Sharma (2018) notes, the introduction of artisan cards and access to government-sponsored subsidies can provide a crucial financial safety net for artisans. Furthermore, collaborations with academic and design institutions can facilitate the modernization of traditional techniques without compromising their authenticity. Partnerships with institutions like the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) can offer resources for design innovation, product packaging, and marketing, thereby ensuring that Vajjika Art remains relevant in both national and global markets (Ankur, 2023).

The literature consistently emphasizes the critical role of art clusters in preserving indigenous art and improving artisan livelihoods. The proposed Vajjika Art cluster offers a promising model for revitalizing the region's rich artistic traditions while providing economic stability to local artisans. By adopting strategies from successful art clusters and integrating contemporary design practices, the Vajjika Art initiative has the potential to foster both cultural preservation and socio-economic growth in Vajjikanchal.

Developing the Vajjika Art Cluster: A Comprehensive Strategy for Preservation and Livelihood

Developing a structured Vajjika Art cluster involves a multi-dimensional approach, bringing together artistic integrity, cultural preservation, community engagement, and economic sustainability. The following detailed steps highlight how to establish and maintain this art cluster for both preserving the unique heritage of Vajjika Art and improving the livelihoods of local artisans:

1. Analytical and Comparative Study of the Art Form

The foundation of the Vajjika Art cluster begins with a rigorous analytical study of the region's indigenous art forms, which serve as historical reflections of Vajjikanchal's culture, beliefs, and artistry. This analysis involves:

- **Comparing Vajjika Art to Other Regional Art Forms:** By examining Vajjika Art alongside other celebrated Indian folk art traditions like Madhubani, Pattachitra, Warli and indigenous artforms, researchers can distinguish unique elements in Vajjika motifs, color usage, line work, and subject matter.
- **Identifying Symbolic Elements:** Through this comparative analysis, the common symbols, motifs, and visual metaphors unique to Vajjika Art can be recognized and cataloged, allowing researchers and artisans alike to understand their significance within the art's cultural context.
- **Creating a Repository for Reference and Training:** Documenting Vajjika Art in the form of a digital and physical repository will provide an essential resource for training, historical records, and academic study. This repository will be critical for transferring knowledge to future generations, ensuring that these elements become part of the training material for artisans.

2. Unveiling Vajjika Art

The recent study has uncovered a 118-year-old handwritten and illustrated manuscript, along with several ancient carved wells in various villages of this region.

2.1 Manuscript

The manuscript, a rendition of Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanasa* (an adaptation of Valmiki's *Ramayana*), was discovered in Lalganj, a small town in the Vaishali district of Vajjikanchal, about 40 km north of Patna.

Written in 1906 by Late Shri Anchanand Sahu Mali, it spans 773 pages, with 153 of them dedicated to vivid illustrations depicting episodes from the *Ramayana*. The remaining pages contain inscriptions along with decorative motifs.

Figure 1: Vajjika Manuscript Paintings, Source: Self Clicked

Interestingly, the artist's name is not mentioned, a common anonymity seen in much of India's folk and tribal art, including miniature paintings and ancient cave murals. The manuscript is on paper, most likely painted with organic pigments, and bound as a book. The script used is *Kaithi*, also known as "Kayathi" or "Kayasthi"—a Brahmic script once used for legal and administrative records in Northern and Eastern India. This manuscript, challenging to decipher, serves as both an artistic and historical treasure.

Characteristics of the Manuscript Illustrations:

- **Technique**: Traditional Indian miniature painting methods with layered colors, bold black outlines, and intricate details.
- **Subjects and Themes**: Focuses on scenes from *Ramcharitmanasa*, showcasing human figures, animals, mythical creatures, and decorative motifs.
- **Male Figures**: Larger heads, simplified facial features, and robust, rigid bodies, differentiated by color symbolism and unique attributes.
- **Female Figures**: Emphasis on femininity with long hair, jewelry, and traditional attire. Figures are static, with subdued expressions.

- **Garments and Ornaments**: Men in solid-colored, geometric-patterned garments; women in *Ghaghra-Choli* with jewelry; divine figures often bear bare torsos with stoles.
- **Animals and Mythical Creatures**: Unique colorings with simplified, intricate forms, often merging human and animal traits.
- **Nature and Architecture**: Stylized foliage, unique color choices, and decorative elements in palace friezes, lacking linear perspective.
- **Borders and Motifs**: Intricate, symmetrical designs influenced by Islamic and Mughal art, with vibrant colors and repetitive patterns.
- **Colors**: Flat, vibrant colors are used without shading to evoke mood and depth.
- **Composition**: Figures arranged on the same plane, with multiple perspectives within a single frame and bold outlines to enhance dynamic movement.

2.2 Ancient Carved Wells

Several ancient wells with interior carvings have been discovered in different villages like Lakshmipur Arar, Badka Gaon, Karja, Ramnagar Tonk, Bevar etc, across the area. It is likely that many more remain hidden. However, many of the discovered wells are in poor condition—some have been covered due to incidents, others are dry or filled with toxic water, and several are abandoned in remote village areas, overtaken by bushes and creepers, deterring visitors due to the presence of poisonous snakes and other reptiles.

Figure 2: Carved Wells from different regions of Vajjikanchal, Source: Self Clicked

Material and Construction

These wells are made with unique ancient bricks, each around 2 feet in length and 1 foot in width, shaped semi-circularly. With diameters around 4.5 feet, most wells are constructed with just two to three bricks forming the circular structure.

Motifs

The carvings in these wells prominently feature simplified leaf and creeper motifs, geometric patterns like crisscrosses and triangular hems, as well as circular ornaments locally known as *Laddu* motifs. Rhythmic lines and decorative patterns add to the intricate artistry found within these wells.

This exploration into Vajjika Art not only unveils the region's artistic heritage but also highlights the urgent need for preservation and cultural revival of these remarkable artifacts.

3. Deciphering Unique Characteristics of Vajjika Art

A central step in establishing the Vajjika Art cluster is understanding and preserving the distinct characteristics that set it apart. This involves:

- **Detailed Analysis of Carvings and Manuscripts:** The motifs and styles seen in the carved wells and the illustrated manuscripts of the *Ramacharitmanasa* are unique to Vajjikanchal, with simplified yet metaphorical imagery. These motifs should be examined to determine how they can serve as the defining characteristics of Vajjika Art.

- **Developing Training Modules Based on Unique Features:** Once the style's specific features—like unique color palettes, symbolic forms, and distinctive line work—are identified, specialized training modules can be created. This step helps to ensure artisans are well-versed in the authentic characteristics of Vajjika Art, maintaining its cultural integrity.

4. Community Awareness and Outreach Programs

Increasing local awareness of Vajjika Art's significance is vital for creating a strong support base within the community. Effective outreach programs include:

- **Organizing Exhibitions and Talks:** Local exhibitions showcasing Vajjika Art, combined with talks on its history and cultural value, can be instrumental in connecting community members to their

heritage. These events should highlight the region's unique art forms to build pride and foster local support.

- **Engaging Art Patrons and Scholars:** Outreach efforts should also be designed to attract art patrons, cultural scholars, and other stakeholders. This expanded interest base can create a supportive network for artisans, facilitate funding, and open new market opportunities.
- **Involving Schools and Educational Institutions:** Incorporating Vajjika Art into local school curricula through workshops or educational modules can engage the youth, fostering early appreciation and encouraging them to contribute to preserving the art form.

5. Training Local Artisans

Training programs are crucial for artisans to master the technical skills and knowledge needed to sustain Vajjika Art. This training should cover:

- **Workshops on Traditional Techniques:** Conducting workshops to teach essential techniques in Vajjika Art—including carving, painting styles, and use of traditional materials—will help artisans develop proficiency and maintain authenticity.
- **Developing Artisan Skills in Production and Efficiency:** Artisans should also be trained in efficient production practices, allowing them to balance quality with productivity. Skills in sourcing materials, tool maintenance, and time management will improve their output without compromising the art form's integrity.
- **Offering Continuous Development Programs:** Training should be an ongoing process, with opportunities for artisans to refresh and enhance their skills. Periodic advanced workshops can help artisans innovate within the traditional style, encouraging creativity and evolution in Vajjika Art.

6. Awareness about Artisan Cards and Government Schemes

Raising awareness among artisans about government-issued Artisan Cards and available schemes provides financial and institutional support. This awareness campaign could include:

- **Education on Artisan Cards and Benefits:** Artisan Cards offer access to subsidies, social security, and marketplace entry, but many artisans are unaware of these opportunities. Informational sessions can clarify the benefits and application processes, ensuring artisans receive due support.

- **Providing Assistance in Application Processes:** Helping artisans apply for these cards and other benefits will formalize their status, giving them access to a range of government-supported benefits. This formal recognition also makes it easier for artisans to secure funding for their craft.

7. Contemporary Adaptation and Packaging

To make Vajjika Art appealing to a broader, modern audience, artisans should be guided in adapting their work for contemporary markets without compromising authenticity. This adaptation involves:

- **Introducing Modern Product Applications:** Vajjika Art can be applied to products like decor items, apparel, and accessories. By translating traditional motifs into these modern applications, artisans can reach new markets and diversify their income sources.

- **Enhancing Packaging and Presentation:** Investing in quality packaging and branding can increase the products' appeal to modern consumers. Packaging should reflect the art form's heritage, making it suitable for high-end markets while ensuring ease of transportation and presentation.

- **Collaborating with Designers and Marketers:** Bringing designers and marketers on board can help artisans create products that meet market trends and demands. Training artisans in design basics and customer preferences can also assist in making the art form more versatile and marketable.

8. Encouraging Participation in National and International Exhibitions

Exposure to national and international audiences through exhibitions will increase demand for Vajjika Art. This exposure can be achieved through:

- **Organizing Exhibition Opportunities:** Collaborations with art festivals, museums, and cultural events provide artisans with platforms to showcase their work. Such exposure can establish Vajjika Art's unique place on the global stage and help artisans connect with art connoisseurs.

- **Facilitating International Collaborations:** Artisans could benefit from collaborations with international artists and institutions. Exchanges of skills and ideas foster cultural exchange and open new creative directions within Vajjika Art.

- **Building Connections with Buyers and Art Collectors:** Exhibitions provide a space for artisans to build direct connections with buyers, increasing their understanding of consumer expectations and helping them tailor their products to international tastes.

9. Collaborations with Academic and Research Institutions

Collaborating with institutions for research, documentation, and design intervention will further support Vajjika Art's growth. Academic partnerships could include:

- **Documenting the Historical and Cultural Aspects:** Collaborations with history and anthropology departments can help create a documented history of Vajjika Art. This not only validates the art form but also provides a resource for artists, researchers, and cultural organizations.
- **Design Intervention and Innovation:** Working with design institutions can help artisans modernize their techniques and materials while maintaining traditional authenticity. These partnerships can enable artisans to explore sustainable materials, innovative techniques, and design adaptations suitable for broader markets.
- **Research Funding and Sponsorship:** Many institutions offer grants or sponsorships for preserving cultural heritage. Partnering with these institutions could secure additional funding for Vajjika Art, promoting both research and practical applications that benefit the artisans.

Importance of Developing the Vajjika Art Cluster for Art and Artisans

Developing a dedicated cluster for Vajjika Art is more than just an effort to preserve a traditional art form; it's a comprehensive initiative that can revitalize Vajjikanchal's cultural heritage, support local artisans, and positively impact the broader community. The following points elaborate on the multi-dimensional importance of establishing the Vajjika Art cluster.

1. Preservation of Vajjika Art

Creating a dedicated art cluster is a significant step towards preserving Vajjika Art's unique heritage, techniques, and motifs. Without a systematic effort, traditional methods and visual expressions risk being forgotten or diluted. An art cluster ensures that:

- **Documentation and Archiving**: Through workshops, exhibitions, and collaborations with academic institutions, Vajjika Art techniques can be meticulously documented, recorded, and preserved. This information will serve as a resource for training and passing down knowledge to future generations.
- **Skill Transfer**: Preserving the art form requires training young artisans in traditional methods. A cluster provides structured training programs and apprenticeships to bridge the generational gap, ensuring that the specialized skills required for Vajjika Art are not lost.

2. Sustainability and Livelihood for Artisans

A Vajjika Art cluster would create a dependable market for artisan products, promoting economic stability and encouraging youth engagement. This initiative supports artisans in achieving financial security, with benefits such as:

- **Steady Income Sources**: By establishing a local and national market for Vajjika Art, artisans can secure consistent sales and a stable income. This regularity reduces financial risks and helps artisans view art as a viable career rather than a secondary income source.
- **Attracting Younger Generations**: Financial stability is essential to attract the younger generation. When art is seen as a sustainable profession, young people are more likely to pursue it, ensuring the continuity of Vajjika Art for years to come.

3. Community Engagement and Empowerment

An art cluster connects artisans with the community, inspiring local pride and a sense of ownership. This engagement encourages the local population to actively participate in preserving and promoting their cultural heritage. Benefits include:

- **Increased Community Involvement**: Through outreach programs, such as exhibitions and cultural events, community members are educated about the significance of Vajjika Art, fostering a deeper appreciation for their heritage.

- **Enhanced Social Standing for Artisans**: When a community values and supports local art, artisans gain social recognition and respect. This empowerment fosters a sense of pride, motivating artisans to innovate while staying rooted in tradition.

4. Promotion of Sustainable Art and Tourism

Establishing a vibrant Vajjika Art cluster can transform Vajjikanchal into a cultural tourism hub, drawing visitors who are interested in the region's unique historical and artistic offerings. Sustainable art tourism can:

- **Provide Supplemental Income for Artisans:** A steady influx of visitors can create additional revenue streams for artisans through direct art sales, workshop participation, and art tours.
- **Revitalize Local Infrastructure and Services:** Increased tourism can lead to the development of related businesses, such as local eateries, guided tours, and homestays, thereby fostering community growth and promoting Vajjikanchal's cultural identity to a wider audience.
- **Encourage Sustainable Tourism Practices:** Eco-friendly and culturally sensitive tourism can be promoted, emphasizing respect for local customs and environments. This approach not only enhances the visitor experience but also ensures that the cultural heritage of Vajjikanchal is preserved for future generations.

5. Integration of Traditional Knowledge with Modern Practices

Balancing traditional techniques with modern design and market expectations is key to making Vajjika Art relevant to today's audience. The cluster can facilitate this integration by:

- **Design Interventions:** Working with designers and artisans to create products that retain traditional motifs and craftsmanship but appeal to contemporary tastes. This could include home decor, fashion accessories, or lifestyle products that resonate with a modern audience.
- **Workshops on Contemporary Skills:** Training artisans in areas like product packaging, branding, and online marketing can help them better reach and engage with today's consumer, extending their market reach both nationally and internationally.
- **Cross-Generational Collaboration:** By pairing experienced artisans with younger designers, the cluster can foster a creative exchange that respects traditional methods while exploring fresh, market-friendly applications for the art.

6. Contribution to the Local Economy

A Vajjika Art cluster has the potential to uplift the local economy significantly. By generating employment opportunities, drawing investment, and fostering entrepreneurship, the cluster can stimulate economic growth across Vajjikanchal. This economic boost includes:

- **Creating Direct Employment Opportunities:** From artisans to production managers, sales staff, and event organizers, the cluster can employ a wide range of people with varied skill sets, reducing unemployment in the area.
- **Encouraging Small Business Development:** The demand for Vajjika Art products could lead to the growth of related businesses, such as suppliers for raw materials, logistics providers, and local marketplaces.
- **Uplifting the Quality of Life:** As artisan incomes grow and infrastructure improves to support tourism, the overall quality of life in Vajjikanchal can see substantial improvement. Better health care, education, and social facilities often accompany economic growth, creating a more prosperous community.

Conclusion

Developing Vajjika Art and its cluster holds immense potential for preserving the cultural heritage of Vajjikanchal while providing a sustainable livelihood for artisans. The creation of this cluster would not only safeguard an ancient art form but also promote socio-economic development within the region. Through structured training, community engagement, and collaborations with academic institutions, Vajjika Art can achieve both cultural and commercial significance. By encouraging artisans to adopt modern techniques, promoting their participation in exhibitions, and securing institutional support, Vajjika Art can be transformed from a little-known heritage to a celebrated cultural asset. Establishing the Vajjika Art cluster is a meaningful step towards preserving an ancient heritage while empowering artisans, promoting sustainable tourism, and contributing to the economic vitality of Vajjikanchal.

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