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Pahari Mural Painting as an Indian Knowledge System: Indigenous Art, Cultural Memory and Sustainable Heritage Conservation

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Abstract

Indian Knowledge Systems represent a vast and diverse body of knowledge developed through centuries of interaction between communities, culture, spirituality, nature and lived experience. Traditional Indian art forms constitute an important part of this knowledge heritage, as they preserve not only aesthetic traditions but also indigenous techniques, cultural values, social practices and collective memory. Within this framework, Pahari mural painting occupies a significant position as an artistic tradition of the Himalayan hill regions, particularly Himachal Pradesh. Developed largely under Rajput patronage, Pahari art evolved through important centres such as Basohli, Guler, Kangra, Mandi and Chamba and incorporated influences from Bhakti traditions, classical literature, regional culture and the natural environment.

This paper examines Pahari mural painting as a living component of the Indian Knowledge System rather than merely as an object of artistic or historical importance. It analyses the indigenous knowledge embedded in traditional materials, natural pigments, painting techniques, religious narratives and representations of nature and community life. The paper further considers Pahari murals as repositories of cultural memory that preserve regional customs, architecture, dress, court life, devotional practices and the relationship between human beings and their natural surroundings. At the same time, this heritage faces serious challenges arising from environmental deterioration, loss of traditional patronage, urbanisation, inadequate documentation and weakening intergenerational transmission of artistic knowledge. The study adopts a historical, doctrinal and analytical approach to examine these concerns and explores sustainable conservation through community participation, traditional knowledge transmission, legal and institutional protection, digital documentation and modern conservation practices. It argues that meaningful conservation of Pahari murals must extend beyond the physical preservation of paintings to the protection of the knowledge, practitioners, cultural narratives and communities associated with them. Such an integrated approach can transform heritage conservation into a means of sustaining indigenous knowledge, cultural diversity and intergenerational continuity in contemporary society.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems; Pahari Mural Painting; Indigenous Art; Cultural Memory; Traditional Knowledge; Sustainable Heritage Conservation; Himachal Pradesh.

I. Introduction

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) encompass the intellectual, cultural and practical traditions that developed in the Indian subcontinent through sustained interaction among communities, their social institutions and the natural environment. Their scope extends beyond classical philosophical or religious texts to knowledge preserved through oral traditions, artistic practices, architecture, craftsmanship, literature and customary ways of life. Such traditions demonstrate that knowledge may be transmitted not only through written texts but also through skills, symbols, visual narratives and practices carried from one generation to another. Traditional arts are particularly important in this context because their materials, techniques and themes often preserve the cultural experiences and collective understanding of the communities in which they originated.¹

Pahari mural painting provides an important example of such knowledge transmission. The Pahari artistic tradition developed across the Himalayan hill states and attained particular prominence in areas that now form part of Himachal Pradesh. It flourished under the patronage of Rajput rulers and developed through centres such as Basohli, Guler, Kangra, Mandi and Chamba. Although these schools acquired distinctive stylistic characteristics, they shared a wider cultural environment shaped by regional traditions, devotional movements and interaction with Mughal artistic practices.² Pahari murals were closely associated with temples, palaces and other architectural spaces and therefore became part of the cultural landscape rather than remaining independent objects of art.

Viewed from the perspective of IKS, these murals embody several interconnected forms of indigenous knowledge. The preparation of natural colours from mineral, vegetable and other locally available materials required specialised knowledge of resources and artistic processes. Similarly, techniques of surface preparation, colour application, composition and fine brushwork reflected skills transmitted through artistic practice. Their subject matter provides another dimension of knowledge. Narratives drawn from the *Gita Govinda*, *Bhagavata Purana*, *Ramayana* and other literary and devotional traditions transformed philosophical and religious

¹ Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India.

² Singh, C. (1982). *Centre of Pahari paintings*. Abhinav Publications.

ideas into visual forms.³ Depictions of mountains, rivers, vegetation, animals, seasons, dress, architecture, courtly activities and everyday practices also preserved important aspects of the ecological and socio-cultural memory of the Himalayan region.

The continuity of this heritage, however, faces significant challenges. The decline of traditional systems of patronage, deterioration of historic structures, environmental conditions, urbanisation, changing lifestyles and inadequate documentation have affected both surviving murals and the knowledge associated with their creation. When traditional artistic skills cease to pass between generations, conservation becomes a question not merely of protecting physical objects but of safeguarding a wider cultural knowledge system.⁴

This paper therefore argues that Pahari mural painting should be understood as a living component of the Indian Knowledge System rather than merely as an object of aesthetic appreciation. Sustainable heritage conservation must consequently protect the paintings together with indigenous techniques, cultural narratives, practitioners and communities that sustain their meaning. The study adopts a doctrinal, historical and analytical approach and relies on scholarly literature, historical writings, government and heritage documents, and documented visual sources to examine Pahari mural painting within the broader discourse of cultural memory and sustainable conservation.

II. Pahari Mural Painting: Historical and Cultural Foundations

A. Origin and Development of the Pahari Tradition

The emergence of Pahari painting was closely connected with the political and cultural environment of the Himalayan hill states. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, a number of small kingdoms in the lower Himalayan region developed into important centres of artistic activity. Their relative geographical separation did not prevent cultural exchange; rather, interaction among neighbouring courts encouraged artists, techniques and visual ideas to travel across the region. Rajput rulers played an important role in this development by extending patronage to painters and providing an environment in which distinctive regional styles could evolve.⁵

³ Chaitanya, K. (1987). *Arts of India: Architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance and handicraft*. Abhinav Publications.

⁴ Jeratha, A. (1995). *The splendour of Himalayan art and culture*. Indus Publishing.

⁵ Randhawa, M. S. (2013). *Basohli paintings*. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

The weakening of Mughal authority also influenced this artistic development. Political instability encouraged painters associated with Mughal artistic traditions to move towards the hill states, where local rulers offered new opportunities for patronage. Their technical refinement interacted with existing Rajput aesthetics, regional traditions and the growing influence of Bhakti devotional thought. Pahari painting therefore did not emerge from a single artistic source. It developed through the gradual interaction of local knowledge with artistic ideas circulating across northern India. This synthesis eventually produced a tradition distinguished by its treatment of nature, human emotions, devotional narratives and regional life.

B. Major Centres and Artistic Traditions

The diversity of Pahari artistic knowledge can be understood through its principal centres. Basohli represents one of its earliest major expressions and is recognised for strong lines, geometric compositions, expressive figures and vibrant colours. Guler marked a gradual movement towards greater naturalism, delicate facial expressions and softer treatment of landscape. The tradition reached a particularly refined stage in Kangra, especially under the patronage of Raja Sansar Chand. Kangra painting developed a lyrical visual language in which natural scenery, human emotions and Radha-Krishna devotion were closely interwoven.⁶

Other centres contributed distinct elements to this wider tradition. Mandi painting combined royal portraiture with strong devotional and tantric influences, while Chamba developed an important tradition associated with both miniature and mural art. The murals of the Rang Mahal at Chamba, for instance, demonstrate the relationship between Pahari painting, architectural space, religious narratives and courtly culture.⁷ These variations indicate that Pahari painting was not a uniform school but a network of related regional traditions. Each centre adapted shared artistic knowledge according to its local religious, political and cultural circumstances.

C. From Miniatures to Murals

Although Pahari art is frequently associated with miniature paintings executed on paper or other portable surfaces, mural painting represents another important dimension of the tradition. A miniature can be moved, collected or preserved separately from the environment in which it was produced. A mural, in contrast, forms part of the physical structure on which it is

⁶ Sharma, O. C. (2018). *Kangra school of Pahari paintings*. National Publishing House.

⁷ Singh, C. (1982). *Centre of Pahari paintings*. Abhinav Publications.

painted. In temples, palaces and forts, the wall itself becomes the artistic surface. The placement of images within these spaces consequently gives murals a cultural meaning that extends beyond visual beauty.

Pahari murals communicated stories drawn from devotional literature, mythology and social life within spaces regularly occupied by rulers, worshippers and local communities. Their production required knowledge of wall preparation, pigments, binding materials, brushwork and the relationship between painting and architecture. Traditional natural pigments derived from mineral, vegetable and other sources further demonstrate the practical knowledge involved in their creation.⁸

D. Royal Patronage and Community Knowledge

Royal patronage was essential to the continuity of these traditions. Hill rulers provided painters with financial support, commissions and spaces in which artistic skills could develop. Patronage also enabled knowledge to pass through artists, workshops and family networks across generations. Painters therefore functioned not simply as individual creators but as custodians of specialised knowledge concerning materials, techniques, iconography and visual storytelling.

Seen in this context, the historical development of Pahari mural painting represents a continuing process of knowledge creation and transmission. The interaction of royal patronage, migrating artists, local communities, devotional traditions and regional environments produced an artistic heritage in which indigenous knowledge remained embedded in both artistic practice and cultural memory.

III. Pahari Mural Painting as an Indian Knowledge System

A. Art as a Form of Indigenous Knowledge

Understanding Pahari mural painting within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems requires a broader understanding of what constitutes knowledge. Knowledge in traditional societies was not confined to written texts or formal institutions. It was also developed and communicated through practices, skills, oral traditions, symbols, rituals, architecture and visual expression. Traditional art therefore performs a function beyond decoration. It can preserve practical knowledge about materials and techniques while simultaneously communicating religious beliefs, social practices, historical experiences and

⁸ Jeratha, A. (1995). *The splendour of Himalayan art and culture*. Indus Publishing.

perceptions of the natural world. Pahari mural painting illustrates this relationship particularly well because its artistic process and subject matter bring together several forms of knowledge within a single visual tradition.

The knowledge embodied in these murals was largely practice-oriented. An artist needed to understand materials, surfaces, colours, composition and established forms of representation. At the same time, familiarity with religious narratives, literary traditions and cultural symbols was necessary to communicate a subject effectively. Pahari mural painting can therefore be approached as a visual knowledge system in which technical skill, cultural memory and philosophical meaning operate together rather than as separate elements.⁹

B. Indigenous Materials and Artistic Knowledge

The technical process involved in Pahari painting offers one of the clearest examples of indigenous artistic knowledge. Traditional painters relied considerably on colours prepared from natural sources, including minerals, vegetation and other organic materials. The selection, preparation and application of such pigments required practical knowledge acquired through experience and transmitted among artists. Fine brushes facilitated detailed work, while the preparation of the painting surface and selection of suitable binding materials influenced the durability and appearance of the finished work.¹⁰

Mural painting involved additional technical challenges because the image became part of an architectural surface. Unlike a portable painting, the artist had to consider the condition and preparation of the wall, absorption of colour and interaction between pigments and plaster. Techniques associated with tempera and fresco or fresco-secco practices demonstrate how knowledge of materials was closely connected with the physical environment in which the artwork was produced. Such knowledge was rarely reducible to a written formula. It depended upon observation, repeated practice and intergenerational learning.

These techniques are important from an IKS perspective because they demonstrate that indigenous knowledge may be embodied in craftsmanship. The ability to identify appropriate materials, prepare colours and adapt artistic techniques to particular architectural conditions represents accumulated practical knowledge. Consequently, the disappearance of traditional

⁹ Chaitanya, K. (1987). *Arts of India: Architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance and handicraft*. Abhinav Publications.

¹⁰ Jeratha, A. (1995). *The splendour of Himalayan art and culture*. Indus Publishing.

practitioners may also result in the disappearance of knowledge that cannot be recovered merely by preserving the completed painting.

C. Bhakti, Spirituality and Philosophical Knowledge

The intellectual significance of Pahari mural painting is equally visible in its religious and philosophical themes. The growth of Bhakti traditions had a considerable influence on the visual vocabulary of Pahari art. Radha and Krishna became especially prominent, while Shiva, Parvati and other Hindu deities also appeared within the wider artistic tradition. These representations were not simply portraits of religious figures. They communicated ideas concerning devotion, divine love, surrender, emotional attachment and the relationship between the human and the sacred.¹¹

The Radha-Krishna theme is particularly significant because Pahari artists frequently represented spiritual devotion through human emotions and natural surroundings. Love, separation, longing and reunion could acquire both aesthetic and devotional meanings. In this way, visual art provided another medium through which philosophical and spiritual ideas could be experienced. The aesthetic and the sacred were not necessarily separate categories; beauty itself could become a means of expressing devotion.

D. Classical Literature as Visual Knowledge

Pahari painting also demonstrates an important relationship between textual and visual traditions. Its themes were frequently inspired by works such as the *Gita Govinda*, *Bhagavata Purana*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Rasikapriya*. Rather than reproducing these works literally, artists interpreted episodes, characters and emotions through visual composition. The written or orally transmitted narrative was thereby transformed into a visual language capable of communicating meaning through gesture, colour, landscape and symbolism.

This process is important within the IKS framework because knowledge transmission in Indian traditions has historically occurred through multiple forms. A religious or literary narrative could circulate through texts, oral recitation, music, performance and visual representation. Murals placed within temples, palaces and community spaces contributed to this wider process of cultural communication. They enabled narratives and values to remain

¹¹ Randhawa, M. S. (1962). *Kangra paintings on love*. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

present within everyday cultural environments and helped successive generations encounter stories that formed part of their collective heritage.

E. Nature and Ecological Consciousness

Nature occupies a distinctive place in Pahari painting. Mountains, rivers, flowering plants, trees, clouds, birds, animals and seasonal landscapes frequently surround the human and divine figures represented in these works. Such landscapes are rarely passive backgrounds. They contribute to the emotional character of a scene and connect human experience with the physical environment of the Himalayan region.¹²

This representation of nature offers an important ecological dimension to Pahari artistic knowledge. Human emotions, divine narratives and natural surroundings repeatedly appear within a shared visual space. A flowering tree, changing season, river or mountain landscape may reinforce the emotional or spiritual meaning of the narrative. The result is an artistic worldview in which human life is situated within, rather than completely separated from, the natural environment.

It would be excessive to treat historical Pahari paintings as direct statements of contemporary environmental policy. Nevertheless, their artistic vocabulary reveals a sustained cultural sensitivity towards landscape, seasons, plants and animals. This relationship becomes especially relevant today when Indian Knowledge Systems are being reconsidered for their contribution to sustainable ways of thinking. Pahari murals show that indigenous artistic traditions can preserve ecological awareness alongside technical, literary and spiritual knowledge. Their importance, therefore, lies not merely in their aesthetic achievement but in the interconnected body of knowledge they embody and transmit. Recognising this dimension provides the conceptual foundation for treating Pahari mural painting as a living Indian Knowledge System whose conservation must include both its material heritage and the knowledge traditions underlying it.

IV. Pahari Murals as Repositories of Cultural Memory

A. Understanding Cultural Memory

Cultural memory refers to the ways through which communities preserve and transmit their shared experiences, values, beliefs and understandings of the past. Such memory is not confined to written historical records. It can survive through stories, rituals, monuments,

¹² Singh, M. (1971). *Himalayan art*. Macmillan Company.

religious practices, architecture, music and visual arts. Traditional paintings are particularly significant because they transform cultural experiences into visible forms that may continue to communicate long after the social circumstances in which they originated have changed. Pahari murals can be understood in this sense as repositories of cultural memory. Their images preserve aspects of the religious, political and social world of the Himalayan hill states and provide a visual connection between past communities and subsequent generations.¹³

B. Visual Documentation of Social Life

The importance of Pahari murals as cultural records becomes evident from the variety of subjects represented in them. Although religious and literary narratives occupy a prominent place, these paintings also contain valuable representations of social life. Figures appear in regional clothing and jewellery, while palaces, temples and other structures provide indications of architectural forms. Court assemblies, musical performances, hunting expeditions and the domestic lives of rulers also formed part of the artistic vocabulary. Such scenes provide visual impressions of the social environment within which the paintings were produced.¹⁴

Even paintings centred upon religious narratives contain details that extend beyond the immediate story. Costumes, ornaments, musical instruments, vegetation and architectural settings frequently reflect the cultural environment familiar to the artists. Consequently, a scene representing Krishna, Radha or another sacred subject could simultaneously preserve elements of regional material culture. Pahari art therefore operated at two levels: it communicated religious and literary narratives while also recording aspects of the society that produced those representations.

This makes murals especially valuable as historical sources. Unlike a written account that describes social life through words, a mural communicates through colour, gesture, dress, spatial arrangement and symbolism. It does not provide a literal photographic record of society, and artistic representations must therefore be interpreted carefully. Nevertheless, when considered alongside textual and historical evidence, they provide significant insight into cultural practices and social imagination.

C. Regional Identity and Collective Memory

¹³ Kramrisch, S. (1986). *Painted delight: Indian paintings from Philadelphia collections*. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

¹⁴ Singh, C. (1982). *Centre of Pahari paintings*. Abhinav Publications.

Pahari painting also contributed to the development and preservation of regional identity. The Himalayan hill states shared certain cultural characteristics while simultaneously maintaining distinctive political and artistic traditions. Basohli, Guler, Kangra, Chamba and Mandi developed recognisable visual approaches shaped by their particular environments, courts and devotional preferences. The resulting diversity became part of the larger cultural identity of the Pahari region.¹⁵

Nature strengthened this relationship between art and place. Mountains, rivers, flowering trees, birds and changing seasons were repeatedly incorporated into visual compositions. These features connected sacred and human narratives with the landscape in which Himalayan communities lived. Pahari art consequently preserved not simply memories of individuals or events but a broader cultural understanding of place, spirituality and community.

D. Continuity between Generations

Cultural memory survives only when mechanisms exist for its transmission. In the Pahari tradition, artists and their families played an important role in this process. Artistic knowledge was developed through observation, practice and close engagement with established conventions. Skills relating to pigment preparation, brushwork, composition and iconography could be transmitted from experienced practitioners to succeeding generations.

Royal patronage historically provided an institutional setting for this continuity. Courts commissioned works and created opportunities for painters to practise and refine their skills. When political and economic circumstances changed, however, these traditional networks became increasingly difficult to sustain. Contemporary preservation must therefore consider not only surviving artworks but also the human processes through which artistic knowledge is reproduced.

E. Loss of Murals as Loss of Knowledge

This distinction is crucial to sustainable heritage conservation. A deteriorating mural represents more than the physical disappearance of pigment from a wall. Its loss may remove evidence concerning traditional materials, painting methods, architectural relationships, religious symbolism and the social environment represented by the artist. Where techniques

¹⁵ Ohri, V. C. (1991). *On the origin of Pahari painting: Some notes and discussion*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

have depended upon intergenerational practice rather than detailed written documentation, the disappearance of practitioners can intensify this loss.

Pahari murals already face pressures arising from environmental deterioration, changing lifestyles, declining patronage and inadequate systematic documentation. The vulnerability of historic mural sites therefore raises a larger question concerning the survival of the knowledge embodied within them.¹⁶ Preservation must move beyond treating murals as isolated artistic objects. Documentation of techniques, interpretation of visual narratives, involvement of artists and local communities, and transmission of traditional skills are equally necessary.

Thus, when a traditional Pahari mural disappears, the loss is not limited to a physical artwork; knowledge concerning its technique, symbolism, social context and cultural meaning may disappear with it. Recognising murals as repositories of cultural memory consequently transforms conservation from the protection of material objects into the preservation of a continuing relationship between knowledge, community and cultural identity.

V. Contemporary Challenges to Pahari Mural Heritage

The survival of Pahari mural painting is closely connected with the social, political and environmental conditions surrounding it. Although the tradition once flourished under royal patronage, the institutions that supported artists and maintained painted spaces gradually weakened. Today, the challenge is twofold: protecting surviving murals from physical deterioration and ensuring that the knowledge associated with their creation does not disappear.

A. Historical Decline of Patronage

Royal patronage was one of the principal foundations of Pahari artistic production. Rajput rulers commissioned paintings, supported artists and provided spaces within palaces and temples where mural traditions could develop. This system began to weaken with political changes in the hill states and the gradual expansion of colonial authority. As princely power declined, the economic and institutional support available to artists was reduced. By the late nineteenth century, the quality and continuity of several Pahari painting traditions had begun to deteriorate.¹⁷ The decline of patronage therefore affected not only artistic production but also the networks through which specialised knowledge was transmitted.

¹⁶ Jeratha, A. (1995). *The splendour of Himalayan art and culture*. Indus Publishing.

¹⁷ Sharma, O. C. (2018). *Kangra school of Pahari paintings*. National Publishing House.

B. Physical and Environmental Threats

Murals face particular conservation problems because they are inseparable from the buildings on which they are painted. Ageing walls, damaged plaster and structural deterioration can directly affect painted surfaces. Humidity, variations in temperature and prolonged exposure to environmental conditions may weaken pigments and other materials. Unlike paintings preserved in controlled museum environments, murals located in older temples, palaces and remote structures remain dependent upon the physical condition of their architectural setting.

Natural disasters have also caused irreversible damage. The Kangra earthquake of 1905 represents an important historical example, as it destroyed buildings and numerous artistic works in the region.¹⁸ Such events demonstrate the vulnerability of mural heritage: damage to the structure can simultaneously result in the disappearance of the artwork attached to it.

C. Urbanisation and Changing Lifestyles

Contemporary social change presents another challenge. Urbanisation, changing patterns of construction and transformations in everyday cultural practices have reduced the spaces within which traditional mural art once functioned. Modern buildings rarely reproduce the social and architectural environment that sustained historical mural traditions. At the same time, changing aesthetic preferences and commercially produced forms of decoration may reduce demand for labour-intensive traditional practices.

The problem is therefore not simply that older murals are deteriorating. The cultural environment necessary for creating new works and sustaining traditional practices has itself changed. When an artistic tradition no longer occupies a meaningful place in everyday social life, its continuity becomes increasingly dependent upon deliberate preservation and revival initiatives.¹⁹

D. Declining Intergenerational Transmission

A particularly serious concern is the weakening transmission of artistic knowledge between generations. Traditional painting involves skills that are developed through practice, including preparation of materials, handling of pigments, brush techniques, composition and

¹⁸ Chawla, S. S., & Chawla, A. (2012). *Teaching of art*. Tandon Publications.

¹⁹ Thakur, N. K. (2021, January 3). To revive Kangra art, serve it on a plate. *Hindustan Times*.

understanding of established iconography. Such knowledge cannot always be preserved adequately through written descriptions.

Younger generations may be reluctant to continue traditional artistic occupations where income is uncertain, opportunities are limited or other professions provide greater economic security. As the number of practising artists declines, knowledge accumulated through generations may disappear even when examples of the finished paintings continue to survive in museums or historic buildings.

E. Documentation and Institutional Challenges

The preservation of Pahari mural heritage is further complicated by inadequate documentation. Existing research has devoted considerable attention to Pahari miniature painting, while mural traditions in temples, palaces and forts remain comparatively less systematically documented.²⁰ Remote locations can make identification, inspection and conservation more difficult. Limited financial resources, shortage of specialised conservation expertise and fragmented institutional responsibility can further restrict sustained preservation programmes.

These challenges reveal that conservation cannot be limited to occasional restoration of individual paintings. Systematic identification of mural sites, documentation of their present condition, recording of traditional techniques and coordination among cultural institutions, governments, researchers, artists and communities are necessary. Unless the physical and knowledge dimensions of Pahari mural heritage are addressed together, the disappearance of individual murals may gradually lead to the erosion of an entire indigenous artistic tradition.

VI. Sustainable Heritage Conservation: Integrating Indigenous Wisdom and Contemporary Approaches

A. Moving from Preservation to Sustainable Conservation

The challenges confronting Pahari murals require a shift from conventional preservation towards sustainable heritage conservation. Protecting a deteriorating wall or restoring faded pigments is undoubtedly important, but physical restoration alone cannot ensure the continuity of a living artistic tradition. Pahari mural heritage consists of interconnected material and non-material elements: the artwork, knowledge of materials and techniques, artists who possess specialised skills, communities that give cultural meaning to the

²⁰ Singh, C. (1982). *Centre of Pahari paintings*. Abhinav Publications.

tradition, and the architectural and social settings within which the art developed. Sustainable conservation must therefore be understood through an integrated relationship of **artwork, knowledge, artist, community and cultural context**.

Such an approach is particularly appropriate within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems. If Pahari mural painting embodies accumulated indigenous knowledge, conservation must ensure that this knowledge remains capable of transmission and adaptation. The objective should not be to freeze the tradition in a particular historical period but to create conditions in which its essential knowledge and cultural meaning can continue across generations.

B. Revitalising Traditional Knowledge

Documentation of indigenous artistic knowledge should form an important part of conservation policy. Traditional methods of preparing mineral and vegetable pigments, selecting binding materials, preparing wall surfaces and applying colours should be systematically recorded. Visual documentation can be supplemented by interviews, demonstrations and practical records prepared in collaboration with practising artists.

Training is equally important. Workshops and apprenticeship programmes can provide younger artists with opportunities to learn directly from experienced practitioners. Historically, artistic knowledge often passed through families and workshops by observation and repeated practice. Contemporary institutions can support similar forms of learning without separating the knowledge from those who possess it. The establishment of a training centre at Rait in Kangra district in 1973 illustrates an institutional attempt to maintain continuity by training artists in the Kangra tradition.²¹ Such initiatives demonstrate that revival is possible when traditional practitioners are actively included in knowledge transmission.

C. Community-Based Heritage Conservation

Local communities should be treated as participants in heritage conservation rather than merely as beneficiaries or observers. Murals situated in temples, palaces and historic settlements form part of local cultural landscapes. Communities may possess knowledge concerning the history, religious significance and social use of such places that is absent from formal archival records.

²¹ Jeratha, A. (1995). *The splendour of Himalayan art and culture*. Indus Publishing.

Community participation can also improve long-term protection. Local stakeholders can assist in identifying vulnerable sites, reporting deterioration and maintaining awareness of their cultural importance. Conservation programmes designed entirely through external institutions may protect the physical object while overlooking the social meanings attached to it. Sustainable heritage management therefore requires cooperation among conservation professionals, artists, residents, researchers and cultural authorities.

D. Livelihood and Sustainable Cultural Economy

A traditional art form is more likely to survive when practitioners can derive dignified and sustainable livelihoods from their skills. Heritage conservation should therefore be connected with economic opportunities for artists without reducing the tradition to a commercial commodity. Pahari painting already possesses potential within tourism, exhibitions, cultural centres and artistic markets. These opportunities can be developed through responsible cultural tourism, artist-led workshops, museum programmes and carefully designed cultural products.

Educational institutions can further contribute by inviting traditional artists for demonstrations, exhibitions and training programmes. Such engagement simultaneously generates livelihood opportunities and exposes younger generations to indigenous artistic knowledge. A sustainable cultural economy should place the artist at its centre and ensure that economic use of the tradition contributes to its continuity rather than merely reproducing its visual motifs for commercial purposes.

E. Legal and Institutional Protection

Legal and institutional mechanisms provide another layer of conservation. Museums, cultural institutions, universities and government departments can support documentation, restoration, research and public awareness. Geographical Indication protection is particularly relevant in the case of Kangra painting, whose registration recognises the association between the artistic tradition and its geographical and cultural origin.²²

However, conventional legal protection has limitations when applied to a living knowledge tradition. A GI can recognise geographical identity and provide certain forms of protection, but it cannot by itself preserve an ageing mural, train a new generation of painters or maintain knowledge of traditional pigments. Similarly, placing artworks in museums may

²² Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999.

safeguard particular objects while leaving the wider cultural practice vulnerable. Legal mechanisms must therefore operate alongside cultural policy, conservation programmes and community participation.

F. Digital Technology and Cultural Preservation

Digital technology creates significant possibilities for documenting vulnerable heritage. High-resolution photography, digital catalogues and searchable archives can record murals before further deterioration occurs. Virtual exhibitions can make works located in remote Himalayan areas accessible to researchers, students and wider audiences. Digital platforms may also preserve demonstrations of traditional techniques and provide educational resources concerning materials, iconography and artistic history.

The Himachal Pradesh Government's Project Srijan provides a useful contemporary illustration. The initiative has used digital platforms to promote Kangra painting and connect traditional artists with wider audiences and markets.²³ Digital preservation, however, should complement rather than replace the physical tradition. A digital image can record the appearance of a mural, but it cannot reproduce the complete material, architectural and community context in which that mural exists.

G. Traditional Wisdom and Modern Conservation Science

The most sustainable approach lies in collaboration between indigenous knowledge and contemporary conservation methods. Traditional practitioners possess practical understanding of materials, colours and artistic processes, while modern conservation science can contribute techniques for analysing deterioration, stabilising surfaces and managing environmental risks. Digital technology can assist with documentation and access, while community participation can maintain the social connection between heritage and place.²⁴

VII. Pahari Art and the Contemporary Relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems

A. Relevance to Sustainable Development

The contemporary importance of Pahari art extends beyond the preservation of cultural heritage. Its traditional practices offer insights into forms of artistic production that

²³ Thakur, N. K. (2021, September 26). Project Srijan takes traditional Kangra art online for wider reach. *Hindustan Times*.

²⁴ UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. UNESCO.

developed through close engagement with locally available resources. The use of mineral, vegetable and other natural pigments reflects practical knowledge of materials and their artistic properties.²⁵ While historical techniques cannot automatically be treated as solutions to present environmental problems, they demonstrate an approach in which artistic production was closely connected with local resources and accumulated knowledge. Their study can therefore contribute to present discussions on environmentally responsible art, sustainable craftsmanship and conservation.

B. Cultural Diversity and Inclusion

Indian Knowledge Systems cannot be understood as a single or uniform body of knowledge. Their richness lies partly in the diversity of regional traditions developed by different communities. Pahari painting illustrates this plurality through the distinctive yet interconnected traditions of Kangra, Guler, Basohli, Chamba, Mandi and other Himalayan centres.²⁶ Preserving such traditions helps ensure that cultural heritage represents regional experiences rather than presenting Indian identity as culturally homogeneous. In this sense, conservation of Pahari art contributes to an inclusive understanding of national heritage in which local identities form an integral part of the wider cultural landscape.

C. Education and Knowledge Transmission

Education can provide an important bridge between traditional knowledge and contemporary society. Pahari art can be incorporated into heritage and art education, Indian Knowledge Systems curricula, museum programmes and community-based learning. Students can engage not only with finished paintings but also with traditional materials, techniques, literary narratives, symbolism and the historical environment in which the art developed. Such an approach is consistent with the wider emphasis of the National Education Policy 2020 on engaging with India's cultural and knowledge heritage.²⁷ Collaboration between educational institutions, museums and traditional practitioners can further create opportunities for experiential and intergenerational learning.

D. Local Knowledge in a Globalised World

Globalisation creates wider possibilities for cultural exchange, but it can also encourage standardisation and commercial reproduction of traditional forms. The appropriate response is

²⁵ Jeratha, A. (1995). *The splendour of Himalayan art and culture*. Indus Publishing.

²⁶ Singh, C. (1982). *Centre of Pahari paintings*. Abhinav Publications.

²⁷ Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India.

not to isolate indigenous traditions from contemporary influences. Pahari art can interact with digital platforms, modern education, tourism and new artistic markets while maintaining its connection with traditional knowledge and regional identity. The challenge is to ensure that adaptation does not detach the visual form from the artists, meanings and cultural practices that sustain it.

E. From Heritage Object to Living Knowledge System

The contemporary relevance of Pahari murals ultimately depends upon a change in the way heritage itself is understood. A mural preserved only as a historic object may survive physically while the knowledge required to interpret or recreate its artistic tradition gradually disappears. Conservation must therefore support practitioners, document techniques, strengthen community participation and create opportunities for knowledge transmission.²⁸

Pahari murals should consequently be approached as a **living knowledge tradition rather than solely as museum objects**. Such an understanding connects cultural preservation with sustainability, education, inclusion and local participation. It also demonstrates the wider value of Indian Knowledge Systems: inherited knowledge can remain relevant not by being separated from contemporary life, but by being transmitted, interpreted and responsibly adapted by succeeding generations.

VIII. Suggestions, Way Forward and Conclusion

The recognition of Pahari mural painting as an Indian Knowledge System requires conservation strategies that extend beyond the physical restoration of surviving artworks. The first priority should be the systematic identification and documentation of mural sites across Himachal Pradesh. Many murals located in temples, palaces and historic structures remain vulnerable to environmental deterioration and changing patterns of use. A coordinated survey, supported by high-resolution photography and periodic assessment, can help establish their location, condition and conservation requirements. A dedicated digital repository should subsequently bring together photographs, historical records, information concerning individual sites and available research material. Such documentation would create a lasting scholarly record while making this heritage more accessible for education and research.

Equal attention must be given to the knowledge underlying the paintings. Traditional methods of preparing natural pigments, selecting materials, treating surfaces and applying

²⁸ UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. UNESCO.

colours should be recorded through collaboration with practising artists. Training programmes, workshops and apprenticeship models can facilitate direct transmission of these skills to younger generations. Such initiatives require sustained financial and institutional support so that traditional artistic practice remains a viable livelihood rather than merely an occasional cultural activity. Pahari art should also receive greater attention in heritage education, art education and Indian Knowledge Systems curricula, enabling students to understand the relationship between artistic practice, literature, spirituality, environment and regional culture.²⁹

Conservation further requires institutional cooperation. Government departments, universities, museums, researchers, conservation professionals, artists and local communities should work within a coordinated framework rather than through isolated initiatives. Local communities must have a meaningful role in identifying heritage priorities and conservation decisions because mural sites form part of their cultural environment. Responsible heritage tourism can generate awareness and livelihood opportunities, but commercialisation should not reduce Pahari painting to disconnected decorative motifs. Geographical Indication protection, particularly in relation to Kangra painting, and other appropriate cultural protection mechanisms can support regional identity and authenticity, although legal protection must operate alongside practical conservation and knowledge transmission.³⁰

The way forward therefore lies in combining **indigenous artistic knowledge, scientific conservation, digital technology and community participation**. Modern scientific techniques can assist in understanding material deterioration and stabilising vulnerable murals, while traditional practitioners contribute knowledge concerning materials, techniques and cultural meaning. Digital tools can document and disseminate this knowledge without replacing the physical and social context from which it emerges. Such an integrated model can make heritage conservation both culturally sensitive and sustainable.³¹

Conclusion

Pahari mural painting demonstrates that an Indian Knowledge System may survive not only in written philosophical or literary traditions but also through colour, craftsmanship, architecture, symbolism and visual storytelling. The tradition brings together artistic skill, knowledge of natural materials, Bhakti spirituality, classical literature, regional ecology and

²⁹ Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India.

³⁰ Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999.

³¹ UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. UNESCO.

representations of social life. Pahari murals therefore function simultaneously as works of art and repositories of cultural memory.

Their conservation cannot consequently be confined to repairing damaged walls or restoring fading pigments. Physical preservation becomes meaningful only when accompanied by the protection of traditional techniques, practitioners, cultural narratives, local communities and the environments within which this knowledge developed. The relationship may thus be understood as **Indian Knowledge System → Cultural Memory → Sustainable Heritage Conservation**.

The experience of Pahari mural painting also offers a broader lesson for the contemporary relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems. Indigenous traditions need not remain static remnants of an earlier age. When supported through education, community participation, appropriate legal mechanisms, digital documentation and scientific conservation, they can continue to contribute to cultural diversity, environmental consciousness, sustainable livelihoods and intergenerational learning. Preserving Pahari murals, therefore, is not simply an effort to protect the artistic achievements of the past. It is an investment in the continuity of a living knowledge tradition capable of connecting inherited wisdom with the needs and responsibilities of contemporary society.

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