



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### AN ACCOUNT OF DOTS AND LINES- THE GOND TRIBAL ART OF MADHYA PRADESH, THEIR TRADITION, RELEVANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY DESIGN DOMAIN

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#### ABSTRACT

One of the major tribal communities of Central India, the Gond; that inhabits parts of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and parts of Maharashtra. These regions are rich in cultural legacy and have distinctive arts and crafts. Gond people dwell in nature with their inherent artistic skill and represent the magic of colorful forms with dots and lines. This research paper tries to put forward the ethnographic study of Gond tribal art of Patangarh District of Madhya Pradesh, its tradition, present scenario, and the efforts made by various institutions/ government agencies to rejuvenate the heritage and to create livelihood for these artisans.

## INTRODUCTION

Dindori is a district headquarters of Madhya Pradesh in Central India and is part of Jabalpur Division. The district (area: 6,128 km<sup>2</sup>) is located in the eastern part of Madhya Pradesh, bordering the state of Chhattisgarh. Shahdol, Mandla, Umaria, and Munger district of Chhattisgarh surround the Dindori district in the east, west, north, and south respectively. Dindori is centrally located from Bandhavgarh National Park. The Narmada passes through the district. It is situated at a height of 1100m above sea level amongst herbal rich, Maikal mountain ranges. Dindori claims to have the best evergreen Sal forest in Asia. One of the most primitive tribes Baigas reside in the District and they are declared as the "National Human". Dindori has a moderate climate and evenings are pleasant. Undulated lands, mountains, valleys, river streams and thick forest cover gives the entire District a poised look, which attracts many nature lovers and is becoming a famous eco-tourism destination (<http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Germany-to-Jamaica/Gonds.html>). It is divided into seven tehsils, they are- Dindori, Shahpura, Mehandwani, Amarpur, Bajag, Karanjia and Samnapur. The Baiga are a major tribe. Around 64% of the total population belongs to the ST groups. Gond is the second largest tribe, with a population of 4,357,918 constituting 35.6 per cent.

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#### Data highlights: the scheduled tribes

Census of India 2011

Sex Ratio- 984 for all age groups

Literacy rate in Gond Tribe- All persons- 50.3 and Female- 36.4

In 2006 the Ministry of Panchayati Raj named Dindori one of the country's 250 most backward districts (out of a total of 640) (<http://dindori.nic.in/DindoriTourism.html>). Patangarh is the village of legendary Gond painter Jagan Singh Shyam where every family has at least one painter and each and every one's life revolves around Gond art. Jagdish SwamiNathan, a leading artist and poet, who established Bharat Bhawan, met Jagan Shyam in the 1980s and invited him to Bhopal to work on a series on paper and canvas – a unique creation that occupies a pride of place at Bharat Bhawan. Jagan Shyam's exploits set off a revolution of sorts in this once hard explore village. Motivated by this early successes, about 2000 people in the village Patangarh, have engaged themselves in this home-grown painting. Most of the painters use acrylic and water colors now in place of old organic colors.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is an Analytical research which includes information from a range of sources but focuses on analyzing the different viewpoints represented from a factual rather than opinionated standpoint.

### Levels of Education

Literate without educational level	Below primary	Primary	Middle	Matric/Secondary Higher Secondary/ Intermediate	Technical & Nontechnical diploma	Graduate and above
8.4	45	27.4	10.9	7.0	0.1	1.2

Levels	%
Literate without educational level	8.4
Below primary	45
Primary	27.4
Middle	10.9
Matric/Secondary Higher Secondary/ Intermediate	7.0
Technical & Nontechnical diploma	0.1
Graduate and above	1.2

The paper will be with a summation of the findings and a suggested framework for further study on the issue. In order to support the research, some of the images are some self- clicked photographs and some are retrieved from various sources to justify the facts. Gond Artisans were interviewed during their 15 days training conducted at NIFT Bhopal centre in June 2017 as well as a one day demonstration workshop conducted by senior artist Mr Dileep Shyam at NIFT Bhopal under the craft cluster activity in Nov. 2016. Based on the discussion and the observation of the work of artisans produced during the training, the study has been framed; with literature review based on MP State Government reports, TRIFED reports, demographic studies, cultural studies and various journals, reviews, books and articles to substantiate the authenticity of the research.



Figure 1. Tribal women with their traditional paintings

### Background

Thus imitation of earlier traditional chitras is the fundamental Gond painting. The Pardhan Gonds are a clan of the large Gond tribe of Dravidian origin inhabiting Central India. The word Gond originates from Kond, means Green mountains in Dravidian folk lore. Gond, thus called themselves Koi or Koiture, but others call them Gond for they are living in green mountains. The land surrounded by an untouched absolute natural beauty which might had been the source of livelihood as well as inspiration for all living beings. Gondi people ancestrally followed the non-canonical art forms handed over to the generations through ritual, oral (stories/ kathas) being discoursed occasionally. They traditionally served the larger tribal community as musicians, bardic priests and keepers of

genealogies and sacred myths. With declining support for their traditional role Pardhan Gonds have adapted their oral traditions for the visual medium has already been adapted from auspicious designs on the walls and floors of mud huts for acrylic paintings on canvas, pen and ink drawings, illustration, and large scale murals. The Gond people believe that perceiving a good image precipitates good luck. This belief led the Gond people to decorate the walls as well as the floor of their houses with traditional motifs.

### The Pardhans

The Pardhan Gonds were the illustrious story tellers of the Gond Tribal community. To them was entrusted the vital task of passing down folk-lore and tribal stories, in the form of song and to the accompaniment of the stringed 'Bana'. Gond art, in an almost literal sense then, is the translation of these songs into images of good fortune. The Pardhan Gonds are musicians, genealogists and story tellers. They plead and invoke the God Bada Dev under the Saja tree by playing the musical instrument - the Bana and record the Gond patrons' lineage in songs. They are invited on all important occasions to sing and perform during marriage ceremonies, births, deaths, and so on. According to Ain-e Akbari, there were four separate Gond Kingdoms situated in the northern, central and southern parts of India. With the advent of Mughal and company power in India, they were gradually deprived of their kingdoms and their land and their existence was truly vulnerable. The Pardhans' practice of music and song was lost during Mughal rule and continued to sink during the British rule when members of the Gond tribe clashed with British colonialists. There was also an attempt to strip the tribal's of their wealth with stringent revenue taxes and land laws. In *The Folk Songs of Chhattisgarh*, (1946), translated by Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hivale, one song goes:

“In this kingdom of the English  
How hard it is to live  
To pay the cattle tax  
We have sell a cow  
To pay the forest tax  
We have to sell a bullock  
How are we to get our food?”  
(Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2008).

Gonds voiced their agony through their songs. Through their festivals and rituals, songs and dances, they remained ingrained in their culture. But their young men started moving out towards cities in search of livelihood. When the social standing of the Gonds dwindled, the provisions they formerly made for the Pardhans as the chroniclers of family histories

and mythologists died out. The Pardhan community gave up past bard traditions and had to unfortunately resort to manual and menial labor in order to survive.

### Folk Lore- Source of inspiration

With the inherent belief "viewing a good image begets good luck" the Gonds are decorating their houses and the floors with traditional motifs. Digna and Bhittichitra are painted on grounds and earthworks of their houses. These are not just adornments, but also the instantaneous expressions of their preconceived religious gushes and devotions. The grounds and walls become their canvas and a unique biosphere originates taking form of countless decorative paintings.



Figure 2. Acrylic on canvas, Rajendra Shyam



Figure 3. The Peacock and its Ugly Feet Rajendra Shyam

Themes of Gond paintings are based on the local festivals like Karwa Chauth, Deepawali, Ahoi Ashtami, Nag Panchmi, Sanjhi etc. Goddess such as Marahi Devi and Phulvari Devi (Goddess Kali). Horses, elephants, tigers, birds, Gods, men and objects of daily life are painted in bright and hues full of life. For every occasion a new painting or *Digna* or *Bhittichitra* (frescos) is created.



Figure 4. Kaushalprasadtakam



Figure 5. Acrylic on canvas by Durga Bai



Figure 6. Jangarh Singh Shyam

However, in the last three decades, the voiced traditions of Gond iconography took visual forms in vibrant hues and the legends *digna* or *bhittichitra* has been embodied in modern context. Gond art is alive and echoes with stories from Gond traditions and mythology. One of their most endearing stories is that of Lord Shiva and his encounter with the Mahua tree. Rupendra Shyam in his peerless style paints a beautiful Mahua tree laden with fruit, crowned by a parrot and flanked by a fabulously dynamic boar and tiger. As stated in Gond Chitrakala - tribal painting, Handmade in India, Editors- Aditi



Ranjan, M.P.Ranjan, Publisher- handicrafts development corporations(COHANDS) New Delhi, DCH, Ministry of Textiles.

“Village deities such as Marahi Devi, Phulvari Devi, (Goddess Kali), Sanphadki snake, Phulchukki chiriya (bird), Sarpoti tree are the subjects of the paintings. The paintings are votive in nature and celebrate the birth of Krishna, venerate trees, birds and beasts, seek protection for the wellbeing of the family and ward off evil. The predominant theme is veneration of nature and the symbiotic relationship between birds and snakes, peacocks, beasts and trees, ...”

Numerous Gods and Goddesses, strange and exotic birds, flying snakes, tigers, dogs and cattle, breathtakingly beautiful trees and several other entities who inhabited the age old songs of the Pardhans are few of the wonderful themes of Gond art. The story telling tradition with musical notes and lyrics is therefore, what is amazing is that all of these originally existed as notes and lyrics revealed in the form of wonderful lines and dots patterns on surfaces.

### Style

Gond art is basically linear art with a wide variety of lines and small dots. Gond artists draw the outline with utmost care. Similarly the filling is also done with thin and tiny strokes and dots. After the flat color application is completed then the lines with other colors are added which totally transform the imagery with utmost perfection. Eyes of the spectator harmoniously slip from one point to another with the flowy movement of lines. Dots and dashes add minute details to art work. Bright and vivid color scheme increase the beauty of folk lore. Earlier the colors were extracted from natural objects, such as charcoal, colored soil, plant sap, leaves and cow dung; especially yellow from chhui mitti and red from hibiscus flower. Gond paintings preserve a remarkable resemblance with Aboriginal art from Australia as both styles use dots and tiny lines to embellish the art work.



Figure 7. Gond artist at work

Now, the surfaces have changed from walls and floors to paper and canvas; so the medium has also changed from natural pigments to acrylic colors. Painters have become the story teller's and the medium of expression is simply paintings which are now widely celebrated. Selection of theme from folklore to the depiction of legend in colors with line, dashes

and dots to create a rich visual narrative is actually a treat to eyes.

## DISCUSSION

### Current status- Trying to mark the position in global market

Speaking about the Gond art, the well-known traditional Gond artist Venkat shares, “This mystical art form is known for its style, which is created by putting together dots and lines. These imaginative uses of the lines impart a sense of movement to the still images. In the eyes of a Gond artist, everything is sacred and intimately connected to nature - flora and fauna, humans and Gods.” “Originally these paintings were done on the walls, but we are rekindling the art forms with their contemporary understanding. We are experimenting with the new mediums with new thoughts while keeping the style intact,” the artist adds (Ranjan, Aditi). The legendary Jangarh Singh Shyam experimented for the first time and started drawing potters, weavers and basket sellers. He intermingled them in his own unique way with nature and wild life, with snakes, peacocks, monkeys, lion, boar and a stag whose antlers matched the spreading foliage of the trees, with his distinctivestyle of tonal and divergent colour blocks created with dotted sections. Modern Gond paintings are not painted on walls and floors and are instead painted on canvas. Due to the scarcity of natural colors in the current age, Gond artists have started to use poster colors. This combined with the use of canvas has made modern Gond paintings much more vivid than its traditional counterparts; but at the same time, the art is declining because the artisans are not able to make their work commercial and functional. In last few years, even after Government's huge efforts, the artists are not able to sale their product (paintings) as they are loose canvases or sheets which are intricately prepared and thus not affordable by customer or a matter of one time purchase. Furthermore, still lacking is proper training and grooming and, most importantly, a steady market, the lack of which threatens to kill off a once-flourishing art. Most of the villagers said they are not exposed to the market in comparison to some painters who went to bigger cities.

“The government should provide us market. Our paintings are not selling. Earlier, Tribal Co-operative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) used to purchase our painting but for last nine months they have not purchased from us,” said Umed Singh Patta, 33, a laborer and a painter (Jaffer, 2016). Although, their paintings have received worldwide exposure and acclaim and adorn the walls and ceiling of prominent institutions in Madhya Pradesh and all over India and abroad, Each region of Madhya Pradesh has a distinctive form of painting. But then one must accept that at the end of the day it is a question of survival. As It was realized that, what is much needed at this juncture is sufficient government and institutional support to ensure that our folk and tribal art and other cultural practices/traditions can be sustained and conserved.

### Sustaining the tradition- efforts made by Government and other agencies

TRIFED (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India Ltd.) under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India has collaborated with the Government

Museum & Art Gallery, Chandigarh Administration to present Aadichitra - A Tribal Paintings & Arts of India Exhibition a unique collection of Tribal Paintings and other tribal arts at Government museum & art gallery, Chandigarh in 2015. The Tribal artists revealed their skill and techniques. The aim was not only to bring tribal paintings from the swoon to the mainstream of art and help tribal artists in earning their livelihoods, but also to restore, preserve and reinforce the tribal art in its forte so that the traditional form, and its essence may suffer least attenuation. "This exhibition presents creative expressions of tribal artists belonging to Gond,..." (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/indore/in-mp-s-patangarh-village-life-revolves-around-gond-art/story-C8LKEffVE9BGCemPI2r8qM.html>). In 2001, Bhajju Shyam, a talented Pardhan Gond tribal artist was invited to London to paint a mural in an upmarket London restaurant. He also beautifully illustrated the Jungle Book that was inaugurated in the London Museum. He has also made it to a radio program on the BBC.

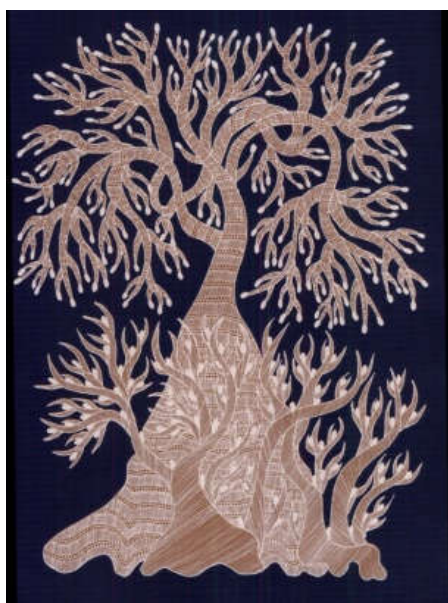


Figure 8. The Night Life of Trees, Painting by Bhajju Shyam, The London jungle Book

Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage has been working with designers and tribal artists in order to bring them together and to create awareness towards the languishing crafts through contemporary designs (Virasat, 2017). In New Delhi "Deep Dharohar" organized by the Ministry of Culture. A book was released entitled 'Living Traditions, Tribal and Folk Paintings of India' published under the matrix of Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat' by the Cultural Mapping team of M/o Culture and Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT). This book joyfully speaks the living traditions of tribal and folk art of India and the lives of tribal and rural people. Ministry of Culture organized the festival at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi from October 13 to 17 October 2017. The festival was drawing upon the rich fount of red, grey and black ware potters artisans, rural sculptors, weavers, and Gondi people and their art (<http://youngintach.org/heritage-alerts-september16.asp>).

#### Individual efforts

Roshni Vyam, one of the finest contemporary Gond artists of her generation, joined NIFT Bengaluru to broaden her

capabilities. NIFT contributed a lot by opening new prospects for her as she studied ethnography and textiles of the world to explore the possibilities of contemporizing the primitive art form with new form of designs and textiles (<http://orissadiary.com/dr-mahesh-sharma-inaugurates-deep-dharohar>). There are Designer who are working with Gond artists and bringing their art form to the main stream art world notably, such as - Padmja Shrivastav, Interior designer and Akamsha Murty, the renowned fashion designer is working with Gond Art.

#### A lodge preserves local art

Tulika Kedia, owner of Singiniawa jungle lodge; due to her love and passion towards sustainable tourism and promotion of indigenous art restored the lodge painstakingly. This way she restored the local art form- the Gond art. Several works from her personal collection adorn the walls of the lodge created by local artists. She says- "They are beautiful representations of the oral traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. These tangible versions of an intangible heritage have led to the propagation and conservation of the ethnic culture of these indigenous communities" (Shailja, Tripathi).

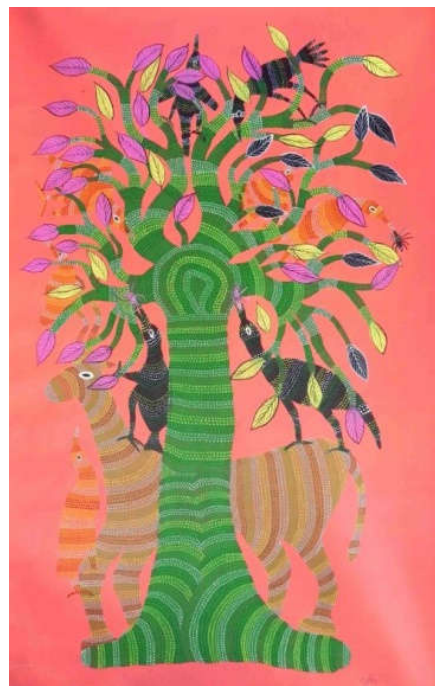


Figure 9. Nature's changing colours, Acrylic on canvas, Ladoo Bai



Figure 10. Nature's Stream, Acrylic on Canvas, Venkat Shyam





Figure 11. Nature can't be better, Acrylic on Canvas, Durga Bai



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.



Figure 16.

Figure 12-16. Product development during the training programme

In 2006 Gond art and storytelling entered the medium of animation in *The Tallest Story Competition*, a collection of animated tribal folktales from Central India produced by a Scottish based Animation Company. The Gond film *Best of the Best* was the most popular film in the series and the following year Pardhan Gond artist Venkat Raman Singh Shyam was invited to visit Scotland to receive a Trophy at the Inverness Film Festival for the film. Since then, several Gond artists have travelled abroad for exhibitions and Pardhan Gond painting has gained popularity in the mainstream art market. Along with all these efforts, there are number of blogs, such as Ethnoflorance Indian and Himalayan Folk and Tribal Art, tribal Cultural Heritage in India Foundation, Tribal art and Govt. agencies such as IGNC, Culture of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and few designers also, who are working for the restoration of Gond art. Bharat Bhavan was decorated by Jagan Singh Shyam himself and The Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (Human Museum) in Bhopal is completely dedicated to Folk and Tribal Art. Now, Tribal Museum in Bhopal also serves the purpose to resonance the indigenous art of Central India. Online Art Gallery Saffron Art made substantial efforts to get folk art its due in art markets. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs, state museums, and private collections are playing their part in reviving the tribal Arts.

#### **Training of women Gond artisan of Dindori District by National Institute of Fashion Technology Bhopal**

A training workshop which was initiated and funded by Madhya Pradesh Mahila Vitta Evam Vikas Nigam under Tejaswini Rural women empowerment Programme and Technically organised by NIFT Bhopal who formulated the research, analyzed the requirement, designed syllabus for the 15 day training programme and conducted the same at Centre. This training was aimed to develop the range of products, especially women apparels decorated with motifs of Traditional Gond kalam, so that this languishing art can be preserved and the hard working artisans can get livelihood in turn to their enormous efforts of creating a saga of colorful and rhythmic song on surfaces. The idea behind this was to purely provide benefit to artisans and to make them self-dependent in terms of livelihood. While painted canvases are one time purchases, the range of apparels can easily secure their place in today's aesthetically educated customer. Keeping in mind, the 15 days workshop was planned and organized by NIFT, Bhopal at centre. These training modules familiarized the participants with common and essential Fabric painting tools, techniques, extracting motifs, preparing repeats, placing of motifs on fabric etc. It has educate them to use pattern marking on unstitched fabric for apparels (Kurti, Scarf, Stole, Crop Top, Skirt, Dupatta etc.) which will ultimately enhance their designing skills and will help them making their product financially viable. Since this was the first ever attempts by Gond artisans to prepare prototypes for commercial use, few damages and wastages were also recorded. These can be accepted as experimentation and trial of material, style and techniques. However, this was a great achievement to shift the traditional artists from their inherent style and method to a totally new arena.

#### **Observations and suggestions**

1. The biggest strength of artisans is their original and authentic art. The way their stroke flows from flat

coloring on canvas to detailing of any motif. Canvases from small to big all are equal when their imagination takes off. Being surrounded with all kind of plants and trees as well as animals, these people manage to draw every bird in a different style, and that differs from individual to individual.

2. As the world has gone more advanced and upgraded most of the artisans in their rural surroundings, (except from those who came out into metro cities) are still into the old flavor – painting canvases and sheets. They have to move forward with new creativity, which is spreading down their art into textiles and other materials.
3. Secondly. Lack of education- which is making them narrow minded and stops them from sharing and adopting newness for their own products and thus taking the indigenous art style towards extinction.
4. Expanding the real art to the world in different kind of products with modification in design is feasible enough to come to the customer. In this situation, it is fairly reasonable to bring this aboriginal art to be represented to an aesthetically sensitive customer of not only Indian but International market. The Gond Painting is popular enough in its original Canvas style but not in apparel, Accessories and Home furnishing. Thus the world is full of opportunities.
5. Lack of Exposure – what exactly the customer demands, what is the existing market etc. are the major sections which has turned things for these people a little difficult to survive and expand their art. As we have seen other arts like Madhubani and warli art has made their own space in the existing market by commercializing their art form into textiles and other products in a real expanded way. Competing from these arts and continuing working with authentic style of hand paint will take little time but they are capable of competing and make their stand in the current trends.

#### **Conclusion**

The Gond society is agricultural, so the cycle of sowing and harvesting has remain the backbone of legendry narratives, which express each and every emotion of a farming community. Oral narratives, like the *Gondwani* and *Ramayani* hold the community together. The Gond beliefs tells about the greatest of Gods, Badadev, who created the earth and every being on it. There are myths about the Gond kings, trees, the flowers and fruits which are an integral part of their life, each and every *Chitra* originates from the celebrated trees and wild animals with innocent faces and thus creates the Gond imagery itself. Art in India does not depend upon the availability of canvas or paint. Rocks and caves, village walls, the floor, a threshold, palm leaf, wooden plank, or even the human body is space enough to decorate. For colors, the infinite use provided by nature from flowers, leaves or stones to precise their known cultural understanding. Similarly the astonishingly beautiful Gond Paintings; They are so colorful, complex detailed ornamentations which are intricately carved and entwined with nature- as the life of the creators of these paintings are entwined together with nature. Surprisingly, this is the unique aspect of these tribal artisans which they themselves do not realize, but, for that; the whole world of art lovers is fascinated towards! The rich narrative imagery of Gond is now trying to beget its splendor in today's fashion arcade with the range of textiles, home furnishing and accessories. The discussion

proves that with the implementation of suggestions given, their efforts; with the support of government agencies and other organizations may get success in creating livelihood for them and provide them a reasonable place in society.

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