



SOHRAI PAINTINGS: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This is an ethno historical study of a ritualistic mural art form known as Sohrai, which is mostly practiced by Santal and Kurmi forms of the Hazaribagh region of Jharkhand, India. Using a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach based on the history of art and cultural anthropology, the research focuses on the analysis of the traditional techniques, the socio-cultural meaning, the historical development, and the current issues of this tribal type of art. Based on the information obtained in the field during ethnographic research, in archives, and in examining visual and material culture, the paper contends that the Sohrai paintings represent a vibrant living tradition at a crucial crossroads. As it deals with the dangers of modernization and economic demands, Sohrai is also experiencing a transitional adaptation to the world of modern art and commercial. The results highlight the importance of community-based preservation approaches that can strike the right balance between the value of traditional knowledge and the need to be innovative in a sustainable manner and provide a model that can be applied to other at-risk tribal arts in India.

KEYWORDS: Sohrai, tribal art, Jharkhand, Santal art, cultural preservation, mural painting, Indian folk art.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Tribal Paintings

Painting is an exquisite expression of human thoughts and culture. For drawing and painting human being draw their inspiration mostly from the nature and society. Art in Indian context is mostly emerged from the prehistoric period when men placed a colored dot on a mud surface (Gupta, 2008). "Starting from the Mesolithic Period (about 8000 Years BP) there is a definite evidence of the artistic ability of the people to draw paintings and engravings in the rock shelters in several parts of India." (Chakravarty, 1984; Mahapal, 1984; Nesmayer, 1983; Tribhuwan & Finkemaver, 2003 and others). Tribal painting has a direct connection to the ancient art forms, showcasing vibrant traditions and revealing the hidden meanings of tribal symbols as a cultural expression. Tribal paintings reflect their way of life, cultural patterns, philosophical beliefs, memories, and geographical diversity. Among the many tribes in India, some are renowned for their exceptional artistic talents. In India, the visual art created by adivasis, tribes, and natives on various surfaces like walls, cloth, and wood is known as Indian tribal painting. Tribes such as the Sauras are particularly known for their intricate paintings

and each showcase the rich cultural heritage and artistic skills of these indigenous communities. These paintings serve as graphic representations of their customs and daily activities.

One of the most fundamental forms of art in tribal societies is wall painting, also known as murals. While the exact origins of this art form are difficult to pinpoint, it has been practiced for centuries. Wall painting is not just a creative expression, but a ritual in itself. In tribal communities, wall paintings are a significant part of various auspicious occasions such as marriages, harvest festivals, and other celebrations. During these events, when the tribals repair or whitewash their surroundings, they take the opportunity to create new designs or refresh existing ones with vibrant colors. One of the key features these paintings is the simplicity. These murals often depict the simple beliefs of the community, offering insights into their myths, religious beliefs, local heroes, epics, customs, and rituals. The purpose of these paintings is not to earn a living, but to seek divine blessings for fertile soil, healthy offspring, and protection from malevolent forces. Overall, wall painting in tribal societies serves as a powerful form of cultural expression and a means of connecting with their traditions and beliefs.

The transition of paintings from rock walls to local households, paper, and cloth marked a significant shift in the art form. This change allowed art to reach a wider audience and become more personal. Tribal and folk paintings predominantly utilize mineral, earth, organic and alchemical colors, each with its own unique production process.

Mineral pigments are obtained from rocks and stones, including semiprecious stones like malachite, lapis lazuli, and ultramarine. Earth surface deposits, such as ramraj-yellow ochre and geru-red ochre, are also used to create pigments. Organic pigments come from plants, animals, or insects, like red lac from insects and neel or indigo from plants. Alchemical pigments are produced through chemical processes, such as sindur. Following India's independence, Indian tribal and folk paintings gained recognition and were showcased in various national and international exhibitions alongside contemporary art. To make these artworks more commercially viable, the size of the paintings was reduced, and the medium shifted from walls and floors to paper and fabric. Themes were also simplified to suit the smaller canvas. While the content and style remained consistent, the artists sought to infuse new themes into their traditional work as they gained exposure on the world stage. This evolution led to a unique blend of traditional techniques and contemporary subject matter, resulting in a fresh and dynamic artistic expression. Tribal paintings did not receive an adequate artistic recognition due to lack of proper patronage, unavailability of records on tribal scripts which led to improper documentation of tribal painting tradition in India. There is an urgent need to document tribal paintings (Ghosh, 2014; Copper, 2014).

1.2. Sohrai Paintings

Sohrai is a very ancient ritual mural art that is directly connected to the agricultural cycles and cosmologies of the tribal population of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, specifically to the Hazaribagh district of Jharkhand (Mookerjee, 1939; Ray, 2020). These are not only decorative paintings, traditionally applied to the mud walls of homes by women during the eponymous Sohrai harvest festival after Diwali, but also filled with a ritual intent, as requests to the goddesses to give blessings to cattle and farmland (Roy, 2021). The art is marked by unique use of natural colors, geometric accuracy, and iconography which is rich with flora, fauna, cosmological signs, and tribal totems (Singh, 2018). Geographically, though Hazaribagh is its epicenter, the art can be found in neighboring tribal areas making it an important cultural landmark of the indigenous people of the region (Dalmia, 2008).

1.3. Historical Context - Sohrai paintings

Sohrai Painting is a traditional art form associated with the harvest festival. The term "Sohrai" comes from an old word "Soro," meaning to *handle with a stick*. This art is originating from the East Indian state of Jharkhand. This traditional practice is deeply rooted in the

culture of rural communities in regions like Santhal Pargana, Lathehar, Hazaribagh, and Gumla. This art form is typically observed during the winter month when the paddy is fully grown and ready to be collected, making it closely connected with agriculture. In the Bhelwara area, the Kurmi people have a unique tradition where they take their cattle to the jungles early in the morning for grazing. They then wash their cattle in forest ponds and bring them back home for ceremonial purposes. During this ceremony, the cattle are welcomed with specially painted carpets called Aripa. The Sohrai festival is significant as it symbolizes the domestication of wild cattle. The origins of this event are linked to Ram, an ancient king of tribes who may have been depicted in the Ramayana or as Parshurama in the Indus king lists. Sometimes, the festival is also associated with Pasupati deity, the lord of animals. (Rajak, S. 2019.) It serves as a crucial medium for cultural expression and is essential for preserving and passing down tribal traditions from one generation to the next, particularly by rural women artists. These paintings showcase a matriarchal heritage where mothers pass down the art form to their daughters. The theme of mother-child relationships is a common subject in these artworks. The colors used in Sohrai Painting, such as red, black, yellow, and white, are natural earth tones sourced from the environment or bought from local vendors. Paint is applied using chewed twigs as brushes and cloth rags for the base coat. The artwork in Sohrai often features motifs inspired by nature and daily village life, created using natural pigments on the walls of earthen dwellings. Jharkhand is home to over thirty distinct tribal groups such as Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, and Hos, with Sohrai art being a key component of the state's cultural heritage.

1.4. Connection between ISKO Rock Arts and Sohrai Paintings

In 1991, Shri Bulu Imam uncovered a rock art site in ISKO village, located in the Barkagaon block of Hazaribagh district. The rock arts, according to ASI are from the Paleolithic age dating back to 3000-7000 BC, were brought to light. After the discovery of the ISKO rock arts, a striking similarity was noticed between the motifs in the rock arts and the paintings adorning the walls of local homes. This discovery suggests that the rock arts of ISKO may have influenced the creation of Sohrai paintings or that the rock arts were passed down as a cultural legacy from the inhabitants of ISKO to the local people, eventually spreading throughout Hazaribagh (Imam, B. 2011). The evolution of Sohrai paintings is deeply entwined with the agrarian lifestyle and animistic belief systems of the Austroasiatic-speaking tribes of the region (Vidyarthi, 1963). While the precise origins are undocumented in written history, archaeological parallels can be drawn with prehistoric rock art sites in the same geographic region, suggesting a continuity of symbolic expression (Neumayer, 1993). The art form has historically been transmitted orally and practically from mothers to daughters, remaining largely confined to the domestic, ritual sphere until the latter half of the 20th century (Roy, 2021). Early scholarly documentation began with the work of anthropologists like W.G. Archer in the mid-20th century, who noted tribal arts as part of broader ethnographic studies (Archer, 1973). Systematic art-historical attention, however, is a more recent phenomenon, spurred by India's post-independence cultural projects and growing global interest in indigenous arts (Dalmia, 2008).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gupta (2008) in her book *"Indian Folk and Tribal Paintings,"* explores the diverse styles and surfaces of folk and tribal arts in India. She looks into the unique and vibrant art forms that have been shaped by social change, providing a secure livelihood for many artists.

L.P. Vidyarthi and Binay Kumar Rai published *"The Tribal Culture of India"* in 1976. This book explains about the social organization, political life, cultural practices, folklore, and art of Indian tribal communities. It also explores the cultural transformations occurring within these tribes and offers insights into approaches, planning, and programs aimed at promoting tribal development in India. The authors categorize tribal art and craft into three types: ritualistic, utilitarian, and individualistic. Folklore holds significant importance in tribal communities, remaining a crucial aspect of their daily

lives. This book sheds light on the enduring relevance of folklore in tribal cultures, emphasizing its enduring significance.

The book by Bulu Imam, titled "*Hazaribagh ChitrakalaShaili*" this book delves into the traditional mural art of Sohrai and Khovar painting, which is skillfully executed by women in the Hazaribagh region of Jharkhand. It provides insight into the historical background of Sohrai and Khovar painting, tracing their journey from walls to paper. This book offers a comprehensive exploration of the rich artistic heritage of Hazaribagh, shedding light on the cultural significance and evolution of these unique art forms.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The contradictory status of Sohrai art is the main research question that is to be answered: on the one hand, it is considered as an essential, intangible cultural heritage; on the other hand, it is exposed to the influence of rapid socio-economic modernization, acculturation, and the loss of intergenerational transfer of knowledge (Bhasin, 2019). This paper will list the traditional methods and symbolism of Sohrai paintings, discuss the historical and modern influences that have influenced its development, and evaluate the effectiveness of the current restoration strategies. What is significant about this work is that it contributes to the academic discussion of sustainable cultural preservation beyond documentation to an interpretation of the art as a dynamic practice of life. These areas include historical context, material practices and contemporary dynamics of market integration and intervention by institutions.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

The proposed research follows a qualitative research design, with the emphasis on an ethnographic and art-historical approach. The methodology is considered to be the most appropriate to reflect the complexity of socio-cultural meaning, embodied skills, and lived experiences of the artist communities- aspects which cannot be fully reached through quantitative research methods.

4.2. Data Collection

Data collection was multi-modal. This research study employed visual analysis, a qualitative research methodology that utilizes artistic mediums to generate and present information. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the perspectives and perceptions reflected in paintings. Primary sources were gathered through the observations of various paintings to record the context of rituals, techniques and community participation. The observational approach is essential for collecting primary data in this research. These methods of data and image collection aid in analyzing art themes, particularly those rooted in the history and traditions embedded in the artwork. The secondary data was analyzed using archival data of the Anthropological Survey of India (Kolkata), the Pattachitra and Tribal Art Research Centre (Hazaribagh), and academic literature indexed in the Scopus and Web of Science databases.

4.3. Analytical Framework

The discussion has been contextualized with the theories of cultural sustainability (Soini and Birkeland, 2014) and theories of material culture (Miller, 2005). It explores the development of the art in the light of traditional innovation, which refers to change being negotiated within the context of cultural authenticity (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Visual analysis is based on iconographic and iconological approaches (Panofsky, 1955) to decipher symbols and place them into their cultural environment.

5. SOHRAI PAINTING TECHNIQUES

5.1. Materials, Tools and Artistic Process

The traditional Sohrai paintings utilize natural pigments that are available locally. The ground color is normally white of kaolin clay (khari mitti), and the outlines and fills are created using red ochre (lal mitti), manganese black (kajal), and yellow ochre (pila mitti) (Roy, 2021). The tools are simple and homemade: brushes made of twigs which are chewed on one end (datwan), cloth swabs, or even the fingers of the artist. Composite of clay and cow dung is then used to plaster the walls to provide a smooth, antimicrobial surface on which to paint (Singh, 2018). The process is a ritualistic. The darker pigments are applied after the preparation and white clay coating of the wall. One unique process is to use the darker color first and then wipe parts to make negative white patterns; the process is thought to simulate cleaning and revealing (Mookerjee, 1939). The motifs are very symbolic: concentric curves (surya - sun), zigzag curves (lehriya - fields, water), animals, e.g. bulls and elephants (symbolise livestock and strength), and shapes of seeds (symbolise fertility) (Ray, 2020). The process of knowledge transfer is entirely oral and kinesthetic and is incorporated into the practice of the seasonal festival.

5.2. Themes and Motifs of the Sohrai paintings

Sohrai painting tradition features a variety of motifs such as animals, plants, geometric shapes, and a representation of Shiva with a black line symbolizing eternity or fertility. These themes hold deep symbolic significance for society, highlighting the reverence for nature and traditional customs. Sohrai paintings show geometric shapes, animals, and plants that represent the local flora and fauna found in areas where indigenous communities live (particularly in forests). Each motif symbolizes various aspects of life and plays a significant role in their cultural heritage. Some of the motifs and symbolic elements in Sohrai paintings include:

A) Animals and Birds: Animals such as elephants, horses, and birds like peacocks are depicted in Sohrai paintings to symbolize rural life and the environment. Some villages focus on depicting local animals and birds, while others highlight agricultural practices or traditional customs. Common motifs in Sohrai paintings include local mythologies and elements from the natural environment, with each village having its own distinct style. For example, cow images are prominent in the Hazaribagh district due to the animal's significance in the local economy and traditions. The Tree of Life symbol holds great importance in the mythology and spiritual beliefs of tribal groups in the Gumla district. In villages along the Damodar River, Sohrai paintings may feature aquatic life and river landscapes, reflecting the community's connection to the river and its biodiversity. These examples of Sohrai paintings demonstrate how designs and motifs vary from village to village, each reflecting a unique cultural narrative shaped by local folklore and myths

B) Pashupati: The deity Pashupati is a significant motif in Sohrai paintings as it is associated with divine worship and the cyclical nature of existence. After the monsoon rains, the village houses need repairs again, and the paddy fields need to be harvested. The art on the walls, painted by the Devis, is different from Khovar as it honors a male god named Pashupati, who is considered the lord of animals. The name Pashupati means the father or creator of animals. This festival takes place the day after Diwali and is associated with the return of Lord Ram. In the murals, Prajapati is depicted standing on the back of a bull, resembling Sumerian design, suggesting a connection with West Asia, the Sohrai art of the Nile valley, and Warli art. This art is Hinduized and iconic. Prajapati's body is shaped like Shiva's drum (damru), surrounded by a wheel of six lotuses representing the six senses. This reminds us of the mysterious yogi from the Mohenjodaro seal, who was likely the main deity of the Indus valley. Shiva, depicted as the forest god, is shown in the form of a tree called bhelwa or a similar form like the flowery trident.

C) Geometric Patterns and Natural Elements: Red and black lines are used to create geometric patterns in Sohrai paintings, representing fertility, ancestral lineage, and infinity, adding depth to the artwork. Trees, fruits, and flowers are often included in Sohrai paintings to symbolize the relationship between humans and nature, emphasizing the importance of the natural world in rural life.

5.3. Cultural and Ritualistic Significance

Sohrai paintings are an essential part of the harvest festival that contains gratitude to deities towards livestock and a successful harvest. Even the process of painting serves as a community prayer hosted by females, which affirms their place as protectors of environmental and domestic health (Roy, 2021). The art is highly spiritual, and every motif has a protective or auspicious role. This gendered tradition supports the cultural power of the women in the tribal socio-religious framework, but in historical processes, it limited their status as individuals artistically identified in the modern sense (Bhasin, 2019).

6. PRESERVATION EFFORTS AND CHALLENGES

6.1. Government, NGO's and Community Efforts

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Development Commissioner of the Handicrafts are national institutions, which provide skill development and marketing schemes. At sub-national level, the Jharkhand Handicrafts Development Corporation provides platforms in form of craft fairs. Nonetheless, the academics note that these initiatives can be intermittent, not distributed well to the grassroots, and would rather result in commercialised adaptation instead of maintaining the ritual context (Bhasin, 2019; Singh, 2018). The NGOs like Naya sawera vikas kendra in Hazaribagh have played a major role in the organisation of self-help groups of artists, direct market access and training workshops. Community-based projects such as Sohrai Mahotsav held annually in Hazaribagh create awareness among people. Alliances with other institutions such as the Indira Gandhi National Centre of the Arts (IGNCA) have produced documentation works (Dalmia, 2008).

6.2. Challenges in Preservation

The major issues are manifold: the substitution of mud houses with concrete buildings erases the traditional canvas; the migration of young people in search of jobs erases the transmission of knowledge; the use of synthetic and cheap pigments is replacing natural pigments; the economic strain is forcing artists to create mass-produced and derived works to serve the tourist market, thus diluting the symbolic complexity (Ray, 2020; Roy, 2021).

7. EVOLUTION OF SOHRAI PAINTINGS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

7.1. Innovative Approaches to Sohrai Art

Modern artists are experimental in their application of Sohrai geometric patterns to represent the modern urban or social story's on large canvass paintings. These paintings are perceived as contemporary Indian art in the gallery, which creates a new discourse between the world of tribal and mainstream art. This is received ambivalently, as either innovative or criticized occasionally due to the lack of connection between form and meaning.

7.2. Adaptation to Modern Mediums

One of the notable developments is the shift of the murals to a mobile medium like paper, canvas, and cloth. The demand of the market has enabled this shift, which has ensured the survival of the art, but significantly changed its site-specific, ephemeral, and ritual nature (Singh, 2018). Modern painters are also using acrylic and poster paint in addition to or instead of natural pigment.

7.3. Changing Themes and Motifs

Even though the traditional motifs are still there, modern topics such as environmental conservation, i.e., the representation of endangered species, female empowerment, and pandemic narratives have started to emerge. This is an expression of how artists reacted to a shifting world, but the level of innovation differs among practitioners.

7.4. Market Dynamics and Commercialization

Sohrai artists have become an important source of income due to tourism and the ethnic art market that has opened a new economic niche to the artist. The visibility of galleries in urban areas and the internet has become more visible through e-commerce. However, commercialization also comes with the danger of creating a culture of a so-called tourist art aesthetic: simplified, colorful, and not attached to its cultural lexicon, which can erode the underlying meaning of the art (Bhasin, 2019).

8. PRESERVATION

8.1. Balancing Preservation and Evolution

The main contradiction is placed in museological conservation -static conservation of form- and support of organic cultural development. The empirical evidence reports that the strongest path is the one that affirms the community agency in negotiating the change. Methodological strategies involve careful recording of fundamental symbolic lexicon and ritual procedures as well as nurturing inventions that have been derived out of but not imposed on the tradition.

8.2. Implications for Cultural Heritage Preservation

The case of Sohrai explains that the preservation of living traditions requires a holistic support of the ecosystem where it continues to be practiced, including language, ritual, environmental knowledge, and socio-economic stability (Soini and Birkeland, 2014). It is evident in the analysis of the shortcomings of the top-down, product-based interventions and the necessity to emphasize process-based and community-based stewardship.

8.3. Successful Preservation Projects

The project called "Hazaribagh Sohrai Painted Village" supported by the district administration and local NGO's is that engaged the village facades in traditional motifs. This project was able to restore the art into an architectural setting, improve community pride, and become a model of cultural tourism, proving that preservation can directly and simultaneously be an economic asset (Ray, 2020).

8.4. Future Prospects for Sohrai Paintings

The possible paths can be divided: one commercial, artistic-decorative stream of art and one withholding and culturally deep practice used in rituals. The opportunities are provided by the integration of Sohrai aesthetics into the fields of design and contemporary art, which depend on the benefit-sharing and reverence to the origins. The key to long-term sustainability lies in the integration of the art into the local educational curricula and creating a sense of community intrinsicity in the practice.

9. CONCLUSION

9.1. Summary of Key Findings

The present study confirms that Sohrai painting is not only resilient but also vulnerable living heritage. Traditional knowledge, centered on women, remains rich but is declining among the younger generations. Preservation efforts by NGOs and the state have had partial success, often pivoting the art toward the market. The art is undergoing an active development as it has been moving to contemporary art is equally offering the opportunity of renewal and the risk of cultural dilution.

9.2. Recommendations

- 1. For Policymakers:** The inclusion of Sohrai and other tribal art education into the state school curriculum of Jharkhand. Develop geospatial tagging and intellectual property to protect the rights of artists.
- 2. For Cultural Institutions:** Instead of the traditional exhibitions move to the concept of long term, collaborative residencies that foster intergenerational discourse on a community level. Encourage the application of natural pigments by provision of supply-chain programs.
- 3. For Future Research:** Carry out longitudinal studies to determine the effect of market integration on symbolic content. Conduct a Detailed scientific analysis of traditional pigments and techniques for conservation of paintings is also recommended.

9.3. Concluding Remarks

Sohrai Art originates from a matriarchal tradition, where knowledge and techniques are passed from mother to daughter, emphasizing harmony between generations. Sohrai paintings are believed to bring good luck and represent themes of creation, fertility, and cultural heritage within the community. This painting is closely associated with the Sohrai festival, marking the start of the winter harvest season and is a key part of the cultural and spiritual identity of indigenous groups in the region. Each artwork reflects a deep spiritual connection and respect for the natural world, showcasing the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. Often, groups of artists, usually women, come together to decorate the walls, promoting social interaction and creating a shared heritage for future generations. Sohrai paintings are strongly associated with wall art, highlighting the deep connection between this art form, local customs, and cultural practices, ensuring that the community's history is respected and upheld through this unique art form. Sohrai paintings are more than art; they are a graphic expression of a worldview, an ecological pact, and a matrilineal legacy. Their future will not rely on museumification but rather on their acknowledgment as a living piece of the contemporary Indian cultural landscape, which should be respected and supported. Such traditions must be preserved to ensure the plurality of human expression and cultural identity in the growing homogenized global milieu.

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