

The Role of Gond Painting in Community Development and Cultural Tourism in Patangarh, Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

Gond painting is a significant Indian art form associated with the Gondwana region of Madhya Pradesh. The primary purpose of this art is to reflect the religious, social, and cultural heritage of the Gond tribal community. Gond paintings are renowned for their vibrant colors, lively depictions, and representations of natural landscapes, often inspired by wildlife, the natural environment, and local folklore. A distinctive feature of Gond art is its use of vivid colors, intricate patterns, and symbolic representations that frequently illustrate nature, mythological narratives, and ritual practices. These elements highlight the deep connection between the Gond community, their environment, and their spiritual beliefs. The importance of Gond painting lies in its expression of the community's social richness and its abundant cultural legacy. This research paper explores the significance of Gond painting as a cultural and economic catalyst in Patangarh, Madhya Pradesh. It examines how this traditional art form contributes to community development and promotes cultural tourism, emphasizing its role in preserving tribal heritage and enhancing livelihoods. Utilizing qualitative methods such as interviews, case studies, and data collection, the study seeks to understand whether Gond painting serves as a means of safeguarding indigenous traditions and how it opens pathways for sustainable economic growth and tourism development.

Keywords: Gond Painting, Community Development, Cultural Tourism, Tribal Economy

Introduction

Gond painting is an ancient and vibrant art form deeply embedded within the cultural traditions of the Gond tribal community in central India, especially the Gondwana region. Emerging from the Gonds' oral traditions, religious beliefs, and environmental connections, Gond paintings are not merely decorative but function as vital visual narratives that encapsulate the community's mythology, collective memory, and cosmology. Historically, the Gonds, among India's largest tribal groups, practiced this art by adorning the walls and floors of their homes with symbolic and vivid images during festivals, rituals, and important life events, using natural materials such as charcoal, plant sap, colored soil, and cow dung. This community-driven practice served both spiritual and social purposes, embedding artistic expression into everyday life. Gond paintings are distinguished by their use of vivid colors, intricate patterns, and the employment of lines, dots, and dashes to create textured, dynamic compositions. Motifs commonly drawn from nature—such as trees, animals, and birds—are intertwined with symbols representing prosperity, protection, and blessings. These artistic representations go beyond aesthetic value, embodying deep philosophical and ecological meanings. Nature in Gond art is portrayed as sacred, with trees, animals, and celestial bodies revered as divine manifestations or ancestors. For example, the Mahua tree, frequently depicted, symbolizes sustenance, spirituality, and life itself, reflecting an ecological worldview wherein humans are an integral part of a sacred ecosystem.

The shift of Gond painting from domestic spaces to commercial art markets occurred relatively recently, significantly influenced by artists like Jangarh Singh Shyam in the late 20th century. Shyam's adaptation of traditional motifs onto canvas and paper brought national and international recognition to Gond art, transforming it into a contemporary art form and providing economic opportunities for the Gond community. However, this transition also introduced challenges, such

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as risks of cultural commodification and the struggle to balance innovation with the preservation of traditional themes and techniques. Today, Gond painting continues to thrive, adapting to changing socio-economic realities while retaining its cultural core. In villages like Patangarh, entire communities are engaged in the practice, benefiting from workshops, exhibitions, and collaborations with art institutions that have elevated the visibility of indigenous art forms. Gond painting thus contributes significantly to cultural tourism and local economic development, reinforcing the cultural identity of the Gond community amid the broader pressures of modernization and marginalization.

Patangarh, a village located in the Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh, holds a place of exceptional significance in the history and development of Gond painting. Once a relatively obscure settlement, Patangarh has emerged as an internationally recognized center for contemporary Gond art. This transformation is intimately linked with the pioneering efforts of Jangarh Singh Shyam, a native of Patangarh, who played a crucial role in bringing the traditional visual expressions of the Gond community into the contemporary art world. Shyam's contributions not only elevated the status of Gond painting from localized ritualistic practices to globally appreciated fine art but also created a platform for successive generations of Gond artists to engage with new audiences while retaining their indigenous cultural identity. Traditionally, Gond art was practiced on the walls and floors of homes, utilizing locally sourced natural pigments and materials. It was deeply embedded in the rhythms of everyday life, religious ceremonies, and seasonal festivals, reflecting the community's close relationship with nature and spirituality. However, it was through Jangarh Singh Shyam's innovation that these visual traditions were transposed onto canvas, paper, and other permanent mediums. His adaptations preserved the symbolic depth and vibrant aesthetic of traditional Gond motifs while simultaneously appealing to modern artistic sensibilities. This synthesis of the traditional and the contemporary allowed Gond painting to transcend its original ethnographic confines and enter mainstream art circuits, both nationally and internationally.

Patangarh's emergence as a hub for Gond art is not merely the result of individual genius but also of a collective community effort. Following the international acclaim achieved by early Gond artists, many families in Patangarh began to engage systematically with painting, turning the village into a thriving center of artistic production. Workshops, exhibitions, and collaborations with galleries and cultural institutions have further reinforced Patangarh's reputation as the nucleus of Gond artistic innovation. The village has thus become a living repository of evolving Gond traditions, where new artistic talents are nurtured within the broader framework of ancestral knowledge and communal creativity. Furthermore, Patangarh's development as an artistic hub has had significant socio-economic and cultural implications. The practice of Gond painting has become a vital source of livelihood for many in the village, contributing to community development and enhancing educational opportunities for younger generations. Cultural tourism linked to Gond art has also begun to flourish, attracting visitors interested in authentic indigenous artistic experiences. Through these dynamics, Patangarh embodies the possibilities of sustainable rural development rooted in cultural heritage.

Objectives of the study:

- To assess the socio-economic impact of Gond painting on the livelihoods and social cohesion of the Patangarh community.
- To evaluate the contribution of Gond painting to cultural tourism development and visitor engagement in the region.
- To examine how Gond painting practices facilitate the preservation of indigenous heritage and community empowerment.

Review of Literature

Usha Rana (2025) explores the evolution of Gond painting through the experiences of female artists from Patangarh Mal, Madhya Pradesh. The study highlights their shift to modern canvases and global recognition, while facing patriarchal barriers, limited literacy, and mobility. It also notes their adaptation to technology and ongoing gender disparities. The 2017 paper by Shobha Bora and Sakshi explores using traditional Gond painting motifs in apparel design. Originating

from Madhya Pradesh's Gond tribe, these colorful, symbolic patterns were adapted using computer-aided design for screen printing. The study found high aesthetic appeal and consumer acceptance, showing potential for modern fashion integration. Goswami and Yadav's study explores Gond painting as a semiotically rich art form rooted in tribal culture. Using visual semiotics, they interpret nature-based motifs as symbolic communication. The paper highlights Gond art's evolution amid commercialization, emphasizing the balance between tradition and modernity, identity, and intellectual property in contemporary practice. Singh and Rao (2015) document the transformative role of Jangarh Singh Shyam in the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that his formal training and subsequent translations of traditional motifs onto canvas catalyzed Gond painting's recognition as a contemporary fine art form beyond its ethnographic milieu. Purohit (2012) investigates the socio-economic trajectories of tribal artisans in Madhya Pradesh, revealing that engagement with Gond painting has significantly increased household incomes, diversified livelihood strategies, and empowered women through cooperative art collectives.

Methodology

This qualitative study examined the role of Gond painting in Patangarh's cultural and economic life through interviews, case studies, and field observations. It explored artists' practices, tourism interactions, and innovative initiatives. Thematic analysis of diverse sources revealed key themes of cultural preservation, socio-economic impact, market linkages, and sustainable tourism development.

Cultural Preservation

Gond painting serves as an enduring conduit for the transmission and preservation of tribal heritage, functioning both as a visual chronicle of Gond cosmology and as a dynamic medium through which communal narratives are reenacted and revitalized. Embedded within each composition are layers of mythological and ecological significance: the recurring depiction of the Mahua tree evokes ancestral reverence for a species central to ritual, sustenance, and communal identity; the sinuous portrayal of rivers and animals encapsulates foundational creation stories that articulate the tribe's symbiotic relationship with the environment. Through the purposeful arrangement of dots, lines, and motifs, artists encode ritual knowledge—such as fertility rites, seasonal cycles, and spirit invocations—into a syntax legible to community members yet adaptable to contemporary forms. This pictorial lexicon ensures that oral traditions, which might otherwise erode under the pressures of modernization and linguistic shift, remain accessible across generations. Furthermore, the performative act of painting itself, often undertaken collectively during festivals or life-cycle ceremonies, transforms heritage conservation into a participatory ritual, one that reinforces social cohesion and affirms shared identity through collaborative creativity.

Local artists are pivotal to the sustenance of these ancestral techniques, embodying a lineage of craft knowledge that is meticulously transmitted through experiential learning and communal mentorship. Novice painters typically undertake extended apprenticeships under master practitioners, gaining proficiency in every stage of production—from the harvesting and preparation of natural pigments to the ritualized invocation of motifs before brush meets surface. Apprentices learn to extract dyes from indigenous flora—such as tamarind bark, mahua flowers, and charcoal from sacred fires—thereby preserving ethnobotanical knowledge intertwined with spiritual practice. This hands-on pedagogy occurs within communal spaces: courtyards shaded by banyan trees, family homesteads where generational dialogue unfolds alongside brushstrokes, and cooperative workshops that convene veteran and emerging artists. Through these interactions, apprentices internalize not only technical skills but also the narrative and philosophical frameworks that confer meaning upon each design element.

Economic Impact:

Economic activities associated with Gond painting have engendered a range of employment opportunities that extend beyond the traditional confines of artisanal production to encompass a constellation of supportive and ancillary roles. At

the most fundamental level, Gond artists themselves—both men and women—have experienced a sustained increase in income through the sale of paintings on canvas, paper, and other durable media. This commercialization has encouraged many households in Patangarh to designate at least one member as a full-time practitioner, thereby transforming what was once a seasonal or ritual-bound endeavor into a viable year-round vocation. Apprenticeship structures have also proliferated, with young community members undertaking structured training under master painters; such arrangements not only guarantee skill transmission but also provide stipends or apprenticeship wages that contribute to household earnings.

Beyond the core cadre of painters, Gond painting has stimulated demand for a variety of allied professions. Local entrepreneurs have emerged to supply raw materials—hand-collected pigments, brushes, and canvases—creating micro-enterprises that service the artistic community. Frame makers, mounting specialists, and packaging artisans have likewise found new revenue streams in preparing artworks for domestic sales and export markets. The rise of cultural tourism tied to Gond art has further generated employment for guides, workshop facilitators, and homestay operators who cater to visitors seeking immersive experiences. Collectively, these roles foster a diversified occupational landscape in Patangarh, reducing reliance on seasonal agricultural labor and mitigating out-migration to urban centers.

Tourism Development

Tourism development in Patangarh has been markedly invigorated by the emergence of Gond painting as a compelling draw for cultural visitors. In recent years, the village has become emblematic of experiential tourism, wherein travelers seek not only to observe finished artworks but to engage directly with the processes and people who sustain this living tradition. Organized excursions now routinely include guided tours of artists' hamlets, where visitors witness live demonstrations of pigment preparation, brush techniques, and motif articulation. Such immersive encounters facilitate a deeper appreciation of the symbolic lexicon embedded within each composition—whether it be the ritual significance of the Mahua tree or the cosmological resonance of animal forms—and foster meaningful cross-cultural exchange. By situating painting sessions within the quotidian rhythms of tribal life, tourism operators have successfully bridged the gap between gallery display and community context, transforming the act of art-making into a participatory ritual that reinforces both visitor engagement and local pride.

Parallel to these grassroots developments, Gond art from Patangarh has achieved notable success on the international stage. Pioneering figures such as Bhajju Shyam and Durga Bai have exhibited in prominent galleries across Europe, North America, and Asia, where their works have commanded critical acclaim for both aesthetic innovation and cultural authenticity. These exhibitions have not only generated direct sales and commissions but have also enhanced the global visibility of Gond painting, stimulating secondary markets for prints, publications, and cross-disciplinary collaborations.

Conclusion

In Patangarh, Gond painting emerges unequivocally as a multifaceted catalyst for community development, bridging the realms of cultural preservation, economic agency, and tourism advancement. First, the research demonstrates that Gond painting functions as a living archive: through its rich iconographic vocabulary and narrative structures, artists perpetuate myths, rituals, and ecological knowledge that might otherwise be vulnerable to erosion in an era of rapid social change. The apprenticeship models and cooperative workshops documented in this study illustrate how traditional techniques—ranging from the harvesting of natural pigments to the application of emblematic motifs—are actively transmitted across generations, ensuring continuity even as practitioners explore innovative compositional approaches. Economically, Gond painting has reshaped livelihoods within Patangarh. The transition from sporadic, ritual-bound creation to a sustained practice supported by both local sales and broader market linkages has enabled many households to designate painting as a principal source of income. Ancillary enterprises—including pigment suppliers, framing services, and tourism-related hospitality—have further diversified employment opportunities, reducing the village's historical reliance on seasonal

agriculture and curtailing youth out-migration. The synergistic interplay between government initiatives, NGO-led capacity building, and artisan cooperatives has been central to formalizing these gains, providing artists with training, microfinance options, and access to national exhibitions.

From a tourism perspective, Gond painting has become an anchor for experiential cultural travel. Curated visits to artists' hamlets, participatory workshops, and live demonstrations invite visitors into the heart of tribal life, fostering intercultural dialogue and generating direct revenues for practitioners. International recognition—exemplified by the global acclaim of figures such as Bhajju Shyam and Durga Bai, has not only elevated Gond painting's stature but has also fed back into local tourism, creating a virtuous cycle of visibility and economic opportunity. In sum, Gond painting in Patangarh exemplifies how an indigenous art form can simultaneously serve as a guardian of intangible heritage, a driver of socioeconomic uplift, and a beacon for sustainable tourism. The village's experience underscores the importance of integrated support—combining cultural stewardship, economic facilitation, and technological innovation—to ensure that such traditions continue to flourish. Future research might examine longitudinal impacts of digital integration on artist livelihoods and explore replicability of Patangarh's model in other tribal contexts, thereby extending the lessons of this study to broader discourses on indigenous arts and rural development.

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