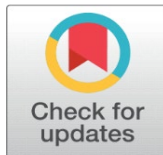
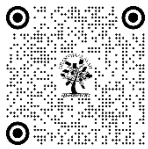


# DECONTEXTUALIZING THE DIVINE: ETHICAL CONCERNS IN THE COMMODIFICATION OF DHOKRA DEITIES

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DOI  
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.4822](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.4822)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

The appropriation of Indigenous art by elite designers and visual artists in India has raised significant ethical concerns in contemporary discourse. Indigenous art forms, deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual traditions of India's tribal communities, are increasingly integrated into mainstream design and visual arts without proper acknowledgment, consent, or fair compensation. This practice often results in the erosion of the cultural context and significance of these artworks, reducing sacred and symbolic expressions to aesthetic commodities in high fashion, home decor, and commercial visual art. The ethical concerns surrounding this trend revolve around cultural appropriation, exploitation, and the misrepresentation of Indigenous identities.

A particularly pressing issue is the adaptation of Dhokra bronze deity idols for global markets. Dhokra art, an ancient metal-casting technique practiced by tribal artisans in India, holds deep spiritual and historical significance. Traditionally, these artifacts are not merely decorative; they serve as sacred symbols that embody religious and cultural values passed down through generations. However, with the increasing commercialization of Indigenous art, these spiritual objects have been repurposed for mass consumption, leading to the dilution of their cultural meaning. This process not only alters the original intent behind the art but also results in the economic marginalization of Indigenous artisans, who often do not receive fair compensation for their craftsmanship. The commodification of tribal heritage raises concerns about the ethical responsibilities of designers and artists and the extent to which they should engage with Indigenous art without reinforcing historical patterns of exploitation and cultural erasure.

Beyond the ethical dilemmas of appropriation and commodification, this paper also examines the broader implications of these practices concerning power dynamics and legal frameworks. Many Indigenous artists and communities lack the legal protections necessary to safeguard their cultural expressions, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by elite designers and corporations. The absence of clear intellectual property rights for Indigenous artworks allows for unchecked use and replication without consent. Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional approach, including the establishment of ethical guidelines that promote collaboration, informed consent, and fair compensation. Additionally, legal reforms aimed at protecting Indigenous intellectual property rights could help prevent unauthorized use of traditional art forms while ensuring that tribal communities retain agency over their cultural heritage.

This study highlights the urgency of ethical considerations in the adaptation of Indigenous art and advocates for responsible practices that respect the cultural and spiritual significance of traditional artworks. By fostering a more equitable relationship between Indigenous artists and the global art and design industries, it is possible to create a framework that prioritizes cultural integrity and social justice.

**Keywords:** Ethics in Art, Tribal Art, Indigenous Art, Dhokra Art, Culture Commodification

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Dhokra art, an ancient form of metal casting practiced for over 4,000 years, is deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual fabric of Chhattisgarh, India. This traditional craft employs the lost-wax casting method, a meticulous and labour-intensive process. Artisans begin by creating a clay core, which is then intricately patterned with wax ribbons. This wax model is subsequently coated with a mixture of clay, ashes, brick dust, and hay/ wood dust. Upon heating, the

wax melts away, leaving a cavity into which molten metal, typically an alloy of copper and tin, is poured. After the metal solidifies, the outer clay shell is carefully broken to reveal the final artifact.

While Dhokra art is prevalent in various Indian states, including Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, and West Bengal, it holds a distinctive position in Chhattisgarh due to its profound connection with the tribal communities, particularly the Ghadwa and Jharekha tribes. The term "Ghadwa" itself signifies "giving shape" or "creating," reflecting the artisans' role in crafting these intricate pieces. These artisans have preserved and transmitted traditional techniques and motifs through generations, ensuring the continuity of this ancient craft.

The artifacts produced encompass a diverse range of items, such as jewelry, figurines, and ritual objects. Notably, deity idols hold profound spiritual significance for tribal communities. These idols are not merely decorative but are imbued with deep meanings, symbolizing fertility, protection, and divine femininity. For instance, traditional Dhokra sculptures often depict deities like mother goddesses, clan gods, or regional deities/spirits revered by the tribes, serving as symbols of spiritual belief and protection.

Despite its rich cultural heritage, Dhokra art faces challenges in the modern era. The increasing commercialization of this art form has led to a detachment of these objects from their original cultural contexts, reducing them to mere commodities for global markets. This shift not only diminishes the spiritual and cultural significance of the artifacts but also impacts the economic well-being of the artisans. Studies indicate that "although there is a strong demand for Dhokra products in international and domestic markets, artisans often struggle with production due to higher costs of raw materials and traditional production technologies. Marketing challenges, including the presence of intermediaries and limited connectivity to markets, further exacerbate their economic hardships" (Mahanty et al., 2023).

Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional approach, including the establishment of ethical guidelines that promote collaboration, informed consent, and fair compensation. Additionally, legal reforms aimed at protecting Indigenous intellectual property rights could help prevent unauthorized use of traditional art forms while ensuring that tribal communities retain agency over their cultural heritage. By fostering a more equitable relationship between Indigenous artists and the global art and design industries, it is possible to create a framework that prioritizes cultural integrity and social justice.

## 2. CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DHOKRA ART IN CHHATTISGARH

Dhokra art in Chhattisgarh holds profound spiritual significance, deeply intertwined with the tribal communities' belief systems and rituals. The deity idols crafted through this ancient metal-casting technique are not mere decorative items but are revered as sacred embodiments of the divine. These idols play a central role in tribal ceremonies, serving as focal points for invoking deities' blessings. A prevalent theme in Dhokra art is the depiction of female deities symbolizing fertility and divine femininity. Dhokra artisans traditionally craft intricate representations of religious and folk motifs, deeply embedded in the local myths and beliefs of tribal communities in Chhattisgarh. These motifs often include a range of deity figures, each adorned with symbolic props that express the nature and character of the deities. Among the most revered are the mother goddess figures, who represent key spiritual and social roles such as femininity, fertility, protection, and creation. The representation of these deities is not merely aesthetic but conveys layers of cultural significance and spiritual symbolism rooted in tribal cosmology. Mother goddesses are central to numerous regional festivals, including Hareli (an agricultural celebration), Madai, Pola, Dashhar, Diyari, and Nawakhai. These festivals often coincide with the agricultural cycle or forest-based activities, signifying the goddess's roles in ensuring prosperity and protection. During such occasions, the mother goddesses are adorned with offerings like grains, fruits, flowers, coins, and weapons, symbolizing abundance, prosperity, and spiritual strength. In many depictions, goddesses like Kali and Durga appear as monovalent deities who are protective, fierce, and heroic. In the local context of Chhattisgarh, Khandakankalin, Nathal Dai, and Ban Devi are examples of such protective goddesses. Conversely, benevolent goddesses such as Laxmi and Parvati are symbolic of fertility, nourishment, and wealth. Local manifestations of these figures include Mawali Mata, Bahuriya Mata, Telangin Mata, and Bamleshwari, who are widely worshipped for their nurturing attributes. These Dhokra idols not only function as spiritual tools but also act as visual narratives that preserve indigenous knowledge systems, religious ideologies, and ecological values across generations. They embody a visual language through which communities articulate their reverence for nature, womanhood, and divine intervention in everyday life.

The creation of Dhokra artifacts is considered a sacred act. Artisans often perform rituals and prayers before commencing their work, underscoring the spiritual essence infused in each piece. During tribal festivals, these artifacts are prominently displayed and used in various rituals. For example, during the "Hareli" festival, marking the beginning of the agricultural season, Dhokra idols of deities are worshipped to seek blessings for a bountiful harvest. Similarly, during the "Matar Puja" festival, dedicated to the mother goddess, Dhokra idols are used in rituals to honour the divine feminine and seek her protection and blessings. The use of Dhokra artifacts in these rituals highlights their significance in preserving the cultural and spiritual identity of the tribal communities.

In essence, Dhokra art serves as a tangible link to ancestral traditions and beliefs, ensuring the transmission of cultural heritage to future generations. The artifacts embody the spiritual and cultural values of the tribal communities, playing a crucial role in their rituals and daily lives.

### 3. COMMERCIALIZATION AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

Ethics in Indian visual art is a complex and multifaceted subject that intricately weaves together cultural, religious, and social values. Deeply rooted in traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, Indian art often embodies moral and ethical principles. For instance, the depiction of deities adheres to strict ethical guidelines to ensure respect and reverence. Ethics in Indian visual art is a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, freedom and responsibility. Artists must navigate these complexities while respecting cultural values and addressing contemporary issues. As Mitter (2001) observes, the ethical dimension of art in India is not just about what is depicted but also how it is depicted and who it represents. The portrayal of gods and goddesses in sculptures, paintings, and other art forms is not merely an aesthetic endeavour but also a moral obligation to uphold the sanctity of religious beliefs.

However, contemporary Indian art has encountered ethical dilemmas, particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as caste, gender, and politics. Artists like M.F. Husain have sparked controversies for their unconventional portrayals of Hindu deities, leading to debates about the boundaries of artistic freedom and cultural respect. Geeta Kapur (2000) discusses how such instances raise questions about whether art should challenge societal norms and provoke thought or prioritize respect for cultural and religious sentiments. The ethical responsibility of artists in India also extends to issues of appropriation and representation. The use of tribal or folk-art motifs by urban artists without proper acknowledgment or understanding of their cultural significance has been criticized as exploitative. Tapati Guha-Thakurta (2004) examines how this raises questions about the ownership of cultural heritage and the ethical implications of borrowing from marginalized communities.

With globalization and rising interest in ethnic and "exotic" decor, Dhokra artifacts have become popular in luxury markets, galleries, and even fashion industries. This visibility has increased awareness of the art form but has simultaneously led to its commodification. As demand has grown, mass production has replaced individualized craftsmanship, eroding the authenticity and spiritual essence of Dhokra works. Artisans, driven by economic necessity, often compromise on the quality and symbolic depth of their pieces to meet market expectations. The focus has shifted from sacred symbolism to aesthetic appeal, causing these spiritual icons to be viewed as mere decorative objects.

The transformation of sacred objects into commercial goods highlights a central debate between cultural appropriation and appreciation. Cultural appropriation, as observed in the case of Dhokra art, involves the unacknowledged use of tribal motifs and forms by commercial designers and corporations, often without any benefit or recognition to the original creators. These practices not only strip the art of its cultural context but also reinforce existing social and economic disparities. On the other hand, cultural appreciation requires respectful engagement with tribal artisans, equitable compensation, and the preservation of the cultural narratives embedded within the artwork.

Exploitation in the commercialization process is often economically oriented. Middlemen and corporations profit significantly from the sale of Dhokra artifacts, while the actual creators receive mere wages. This system reinforces poverty among tribal communities, many of whom rely on Dhokra art as their primary livelihood. The commercialization process frequently bypasses fair compensation and fails to ensure that artisans have control over how their work is marketed and sold. Artisans have little to no legal recourse when their designs are appropriated or misrepresented due to the absence of intellectual property protections that are considered communal ownership, a characteristic inherent in many tribal art forms.

Despite these challenges, several initiatives are attempting to preserve the traditional integrity of Dhokra art while providing ethical avenues for commercialization. Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have taken

steps to empower tribal artisans and offer them a fair share in the marketplace. The Chhattisgarh State Handicrafts Development Board has implemented programs that include financial support, training workshops, and national exhibitions to promote awareness of the cultural significance of Dhokra art (Chhattisgarh State Handicrafts Development Board, n.d.). By creating platforms for artisans to showcase their work, these initiatives reduce the role of exploitative middlemen and provide artisans with direct access to consumers.

Moreover, the Dhokra Artisans Cooperative Society is working to enhance artisans' bargaining power by enabling them to sell their products collectively. Such organizations are vital in advocating for fair wages, ensuring better working conditions, and protecting the traditional knowledge systems from which Dhokra art originates. By empowering communities at the grassroots level, these cooperatives foster a sustainable model for the craft's survival while upholding the dignity of the artisans (Dhokra Artisans Cooperative Society, 2020). Another notable initiative is TRIFED (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India), which operates under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Through its "Tribes India" platform, TRIFED markets Dhokra and other tribal products across India and abroad. The goal is to ensure that artisans receive compensation while promoting ethical sourcing practices that value traditional methods and cultural integrity (TRIFED, 2023). Despite its efforts, TRIFED and similar organizations still face limitations due to logistical challenges, inadequate marketing infrastructure, and a lack of widespread consumer awareness.

Educational campaigns and consumer awareness programs can significantly influence the ethical engagement with Dhokra art. Consumers, when informed about the cultural context, history, and labour behind these artifacts, are more likely to make conscious and respectful purchasing decisions. These efforts need to be supported by academic institutions, media, and cultural organizations that can disseminate accurate information about Dhokra's significance and promote cultural sensitivity in commercial spaces (UNESCO, 2021).

Collaborations between contemporary designers and Dhokra artisans can be effective, but only when conducted ethically. Such partnerships should involve mutual respect, shared decision-making, and equitable profit-sharing. A notable example is the partnership between tribal artists and Indian fashion designers, where traditional techniques are incorporated into modern designs without erasing the contributions of the artisans. These collaborations must prioritize agency, consent, and transparency, allowing artisans to retain ownership over their cultural narratives. Addressing legal frameworks is also crucial. Current intellectual property laws in India primarily focus on individual rights, which is inadequate for safeguarding collective cultural heritage like Dhokra. Policymakers must reform existing laws to accommodate the communal ownership model and provide legal recognition to indigenous knowledge systems. This includes granting Geographical Indication (GI) tags to protect authenticity and origin while deterring unauthorized reproductions. Dhokra art from Bastar has already been granted a GI tag, which offers some protection, but more work is needed to ensure its implementation translates into tangible benefits for the artisans (India GI Registry, 2008).

Technological tools can further support artisans in promoting and protecting their work. Online marketplaces, when operated with ethical frameworks, can help artisans reach global audiences while ensuring they remain primary beneficiaries. Blockchain and digital watermarking are being explored to protect authenticity and trace authorship, offering modern solutions to age-old problems of attribution and imitation ("World Intellectual Property Organization", 2020).

Ultimately, the commodification of Dhokra bronze deities presents a complex web of ethical concerns that necessitate multifaceted and culturally sensitive solutions. At stake is not just an art form but a way of life that encapsulates the spiritual and social identity of tribal communities in Chhattisgarh. Ensuring fair compensation, protecting cultural heritage, and encouraging ethical collaboration are essential to sustaining this tradition. Ethical commercialization is not about halting market participation but about transforming it into a space of equity, respect, and empowerment for the artisans. In conclusion, the preservation and promotion of Dhokra art in the face of commercialization depend on collective responsibility among governments, consumers, designers, legal institutions, and the artisans themselves. As the world continues to seek authenticity and cultural richness, it is imperative to ensure that the custodians of such heritage are not left behind but are uplifted and celebrated for their invaluable contributions.

#### 4. ETHICAL SOLUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMERCIALIZATION

The ethical commercialization of tribal art in India, particularly the Dhokra art form of Chhattisgarh, brings into focus the delicate balance between cultural preservation and economic opportunity. Dhokra, an ancient metal casting technique practiced by tribal communities such as the Ghadwa and the Jharekha in Chhattisgarh, is more than just a



decorative craft; it embodies religious beliefs, ancestral heritage, and communal identity. With the rising demand for Dhokra art in both domestic and international markets, a range of ethical challenges has surfaced, particularly around intellectual property rights, artist recognition, cultural preservation, and equitable compensation. One of the primary ethical concerns in the commercialization of Dhokra art is the lack of legal recognition for communal ownership. Dhokra artisans do not operate in the same way as mainstream artists; their knowledge is passed down orally and collectively developed over generations. However, existing intellectual property laws in India are tailored toward individual ownership, leaving traditional knowledge systems inadequately protected. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), there is a growing need to adapt legal frameworks to recognize and safeguard the collective intellectual property rights of Indigenous communities, especially in crafts like Dhokra, where motifs and techniques are shared (WIPO, 2022).

Additionally, ethical sourcing and fair-trade practices are crucial to ensuring that Dhokra artisans benefit directly from the commercialization of their work. Middlemen often dominate the tribal art market, leading to situations where artisans receive a fraction of the final selling price. This exploitation can be countered through initiatives that promote ethical trade and transparency in supply chains. Organizations like TRIFED (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India) have taken steps by marketing Dhokra under the "Tribes India" brand, which not only assures authenticity but also supports the economic empowerment of tribal artisans (TRIFED, n.d.). Educating consumers and designers about the cultural significance of Dhokra art is another essential step toward ethical commercialization. Many consumers purchase tribal artifacts without understanding the spiritual and social meanings behind the motifs, such as depictions of mother goddesses, clan deities, ritualistic animals, and votive objects, which are central to Dhokra's cultural value. Consumer awareness programs that highlight these aspects can create a more respectful market. As UNESCO (2006) points out, arts education can play a vital role in promoting intercultural understanding and sustainable cultural practices (UNESCO, 2006).

Ethical commercialization also involves direct collaborations between designers and Dhokra artisans, where the latter are not just seen as producers but as creative partners. Such partnerships can help modernize traditional art without compromising its integrity. Finally, government and NGO involvement is essential for creating an ecosystem that nurtures Dhokra artists. This includes providing financial assistance, training in business and digital literacy, and access to online marketplaces. The role of institutions such as the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), the Ministry of Textiles, and the Crafts Council of India is crucial in scaling up such support mechanisms. Without structural assistance, Dhokra artisans remain vulnerable to cultural exploitation and economic marginalization.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The integration of Dhokra art into contemporary visual and commercial spaces presents both opportunities for cultural engagement and significant ethical concerns. While global interest in this traditional craft has generated new economic possibilities, it also risks cultural appropriation, the dilution of sacred meanings, and the marginalization of the tribal communities that have preserved it for generations. Ethical commercialization requires a nuanced, multidimensional approach, one that respects the cultural and spiritual value of Dhokra art while enabling fair economic participation. This involves legal protections for Indigenous intellectual property, equitable partnerships, and fair-trade mechanisms that ensure proper recognition and compensation for tribal artisans.

Long-term collaboration between Indigenous communities and external stakeholders can foster cultural continuity while allowing for innovation grounded in authenticity. Additionally, promoting consumer awareness about the origins and meanings of Dhokra artifacts is essential to combating exploitation and supporting more ethical modes of engagement. Ultimately, sustaining Dhokra as a living tradition demands a shift toward practices rooted in respect, reciprocity, and cultural stewardship. By embedding ethical principles at every stage of commercialization, this art form can continue to thrive, retaining its cultural significance while empowering the communities that have long been its custodians.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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