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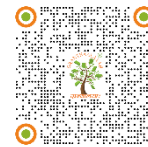
UNVEILING THE CHALLENGES OF GOND ART IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the uncharted territories of Gond art from Madhya Pradesh, India, revealing the rich narratives and musical traditions that underpin this ancient art form. Moving beyond the widely recognized paintings, this research shines a light on the stories, myths, and legends that give Gond art its depth and meaning. Through interviews with Pradhan artists from the Gond tribe, this study exposes the concerns of the community, as their traditional art is being adapted globally, often stripped of its cultural context and significance. The paper argues that the true essence of Gond art lies not just in its visual aesthetics, but in the intricate web of stories, songs, and rituals that breathe life into the paintings. By highlighting the voices of the Gond artists, this research aims to reclaim the narrative of Gond art, celebrating its complexity and promoting a more nuanced understanding of this vibrant cultural heritage.

Keywords: Gond Art, Madhyapradesh, Tribe, Artist, Gond Pradhan

INTRODUCTION

The Gond are one of the largest indigenous tribal communities in India and are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe under the Constitution of India. They primarily inhabit the forested and hilly regions of Central India, with significant populations in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh [Elwin \(1942\)](#), [Füerer-Haimendorf \(1982\)](#). Historically, the Gonds established several Gond kingdoms, indicating a well-developed socio-political organization prior to colonial intervention.

The Gond community traditionally depends on agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Their close relationship with forests has shaped their cultural practices, belief systems, and economic activities. Linguistically, the Gonds speak Gondi, a Dravidian language, though bilingualism is common due to interaction with dominant regional languages such as Hindi, Marathi, and Telugu [Singh \(1994\)](#). Social organization within the Gond community is based on clans (gotras), which regulate marriage, kinship, and ritual practices.

Gond art has emerged over the past few decades as one of the most internationally visible indigenous art forms from India. Characterized by vibrant colors, intricate patterns, and depictions of flora, fauna, and cosmological elements, Gond paintings are now widely circulated through galleries, museums, design products, and digital platforms. While this visibility has brought recognition and economic opportunities to some artists, it has also led to a partial and often reductive understanding of Gond art—one that prioritizes visual appeal over cultural context.

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Traditionally, Gond art is not an isolated visual practice but part of a larger cultural ecosystem that includes oral storytelling, music, ritual performance, and social pedagogy. Central to this ecosystem are the Pradhans, a subgroup within the Gond community who function as hereditary bards, ritual specialists, and custodians of collective memory. Pradhans narrate myths, genealogies, and moral teachings through song, often accompanied by the *bana*, a stringed musical instrument. They also perform ritual roles akin to priests or pandits within the community, officiating life-cycle ceremonies and seasonal rituals.

This paper focuses on Patangarh village in the Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh, where Gond tribes and Pradhans have traditionally coexisted. It examines how contemporary transformations—particularly the integration of Gond art into the global art and craft industry—have altered the roles, livelihoods, and social responsibilities of Pradhan artists. The study asks: What is lost when Gond art is detached from its narrative and musical foundations? And how do livelihood pressures reshape indigenous cultural practices?

Figure 1



Figure 1 Patangarh Village, Dindhori District

Source: Knocksense Editorial

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarly engagement with Gond culture has historically emphasized anthropology, folklore, and tribal religion. Early ethnographic work by Verrier Elwin documented Gond myths, songs, and ritual practices, underscoring the centrality of oral traditions in Gond social life [Elwin \(1949\)](#). Elwin highlighted the role of Pradhans as living archives of Gond history, responsible for preserving genealogies and cosmologies through performance.

Subsequent studies on tribal art in India have often framed indigenous creativity within the discourse of "folk" or "primitive" art, a categorization that risks marginalizing its intellectual and cultural complexity [Guha-Thakurta \(1992\)](#). The work of J. Swaminathan was instrumental in bringing Gond visual art into the modern Indian art movement; however, critics have noted that this transition also marked a shift from community-based meaning-making to individual artistic authorship and market-driven production [Mitter \(2001\)](#).

Recent scholarship has increasingly interrogated the commodification of tribal art and its implications for cultural integrity and livelihoods. Studies on indigenous livelihoods suggest that while art-based income can provide economic resilience, it may also lead to cultural displacement when traditional roles are reconfigured to meet market demands [Xaxa \(2014\)](#). In the context of Gond art, this tension is particularly visible among Pradhans, whose ritual and pedagogical functions are not easily translated into commercial art practices.

Culturally, the Gond tribe possesses a rich tradition of oral narratives, ritual practices, folk music, dance forms, and indigenous art, all of which play a significant role in maintaining social cohesion and cultural continuity. Scholars have noted that Gond society exhibits a strong integration of livelihood, religion, and ecology, where economic activities are deeply embedded within cultural and spiritual frameworks [Elwin \(1942\)](#).

Social Structures : The Pradhan are a distinct sub-group within the Gond tribal society and are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in several Indian states. Anthropological studies describe the Pradhans as traditionally occupying the role of priests, ritual specialists, bards, and genealogists within the Gond community [Fürer-Haimendorf \(1982\)](#). Their primary social function was to conduct

religious ceremonies, perform ritual songs, and preserve the mythological narratives and genealogies of Gond clans through oral traditions. The Pradhans played a crucial role in sustaining the religious and cultural life of the Gond community. They acted as mediators between the spiritual and social worlds, ensuring the transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations. While their ritual status accorded them cultural importance, Pradhans were also engaged in agriculture and forest-based livelihoods, similar to other Gond sub-groups, indicating that ritual specialization did not exclude them from economic production [Singh \(1994\)](#).

In the contemporary period, the Pradhan community has gained wider recognition due to its association with Gond art, a form of indigenous visual expression characterized by intricate patterns, use of dots and lines, and themes drawn from nature, cosmology, and everyday life. Scholars note that the global visibility of Gond art can be largely attributed to Pradhan artists, particularly Jangarh Singh Shyam, whose work brought international attention to Gond visual culture [Jain \(2018\)](#). This artistic tradition has emerged as an important source of livelihood and cultural identity for many Pradhan households.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOND AND PRADHAN COMMUNITIES

The relationship between the Gond and Pradhan communities is best understood as one of cultural interdependence rather than hierarchical separation. The Pradhans are not a separate tribe but an occupational and cultural subgroup within the broader Gond society. While the Gond community historically engaged in agrarian and forest-based economic activities, the Pradhans supported the social system through ritual, artistic, and cultural functions [Elwin \(1942\)](#).

In recent decades, processes of modernization, market integration, and state-led development interventions have altered traditional roles and reduced occupational distinctions between Gond sub-groups. Both Gonds and Pradhans in some villages in M.P. Chattisgarh today faces similar challenges related to livelihood insecurity, access to education and healthcare, land rights, and cultural preservation. However, the growing recognition of Gond art and cultural heritage has also created new opportunities for livelihood diversification, particularly for the Pradhan community.

The Gond tribe, one of India's largest indigenous communities, primarily inhabits central states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Odisha. Among the Gonds, the Pradhan community holds a notable place, historically recognized for their roles as village chiefs and custodians of Gond culture. The Gonds boast a rich cultural heritage characterized by unique traditions, art forms, and oral histories that trace back to the 14th century when they established significant kingdoms in central India. However, this vibrant community faces a myriad of challenges, including socioeconomic marginalization, cultural exploitation, and environmental degradation, which threaten their traditional way of life and identity.

[MeMeraki \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#), [Dwivedi \(n.d.\)](#)

Literature on tribal livelihoods in central India further points to structural challenges such as limited access to land, education, and healthcare, which intensify migration and occupational shifts among tribal communities [Béteille \(2008\)](#). These dynamics form a critical backdrop for understanding why many Pradhans have left their villages to work as Gond painters or cultural performers in urban art circuits.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Gond tribe is one of the largest and most prominent indigenous tribes in India, primarily found in central regions such as Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Odisha. Their history is rich and intertwined with mythology, dating back to the 14th century when they established their rule in central India. According to legend, Lord Shiva is said to have created the Gonds, endowing them with a unique language, culture, and traditions that are still preserved today [MeMeraki \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

Traditionally, members of the Gond community, particularly the Pradhan Gond, served as royal bards and oral historians, playing a crucial role in transmitting the tribe's oral histories through mythological tales and historical narratives [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#), [Dwivedi \(n.d.\)](#)

This heritage has shaped their identity and continues to influence their artistic expressions. The Pradhan Gond artists, for instance, have adopted contemporary materials to keep these timeless stories alive through vivid paintings that celebrate their cultural narratives and spiritual beliefs [Wellesley College Davis Museum \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

Historically, the Gonds were known for their agricultural prowess, hunting skills, and military might, which allowed them to establish formidable kingdoms that thrived for centuries [MeMeraki \(n.d.\)](#), [Vedantu. \(n.d.\)](#)

The social structure of the Gond tribe was organized into clans, each with its own leadership, and their livelihoods were closely tied to the forest ecosystem, emphasizing a harmonious relationship with nature [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#), [Vedantu. \(n.d.\)](#)

In recent decades, however, the Gonds have faced numerous challenges, including economic marginalization, land alienation, and cultural exploitation. The decline of the Gondi language, attributed to the dominance of Hindi and other regional languages, poses a significant threat to their cultural heritage [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

Despite these adversities, efforts are being made to promote their art, language, and cultural practices, ensuring that the legacy of the Gond tribe, and particularly the Pradhan community, endures for future generations [Encyclopedia \(n.d.\)](#), [London School of Economics \(n.d.\)](#)

STRUCTURE OF THE GOND PRADHAN COMMUNITY

Social Hierarchy: Within the Gond community, there exists a social hierarchy that influences both leadership and community organization. The society is divided into four main groups known as phratries or sagas, each tracing its descent to one of the divine groups originating from a cave in their creation story. These sagas are further subdivided into clans (pari), which serve as the primary unit of organization within Gond society [Tribal Welfare Research Institute Jharkhand \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

The arrangement of these clans is based on their precedence of emergence from the cave, which also dictates social behavior during rituals and ceremonies [Tribal Welfare Research Institute Jharkhand \(n.d.\)](#)

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The political structure of the Gond tribe is characterized by a combination of traditional governance mechanisms and community-led decision-making processes. The Gonds primarily implement governance through tribal chiefs and the Gond community Panchayati, reflecting a self-managed democratic system that has remained largely intact despite the influences of globalization and modern technology [ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts \(n.d.\)](#)

In the Nuapada district of Odisha, for instance, the Gonds maintain their social order and resolve conflicts through these established leadership roles, ensuring the preservation of their cultural identity within their traditional polity [ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown Author \(n.d.\)](#)

LEADERSHIP ROLES

The Pradhan, or village chief, plays a critical role within the Gond Pradhan community, often appointed by consensus among community members. The leadership of the Pradhan is crucial in mediating disputes, guiding community practices, and upholding traditions [ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts \(n.d.\)](#)

However, the Gond community faces challenges due to its fragmentation and the diversity of tribal groups under the broader Gond identity. This lack of cohesive political unity presents difficulties in resource access and socioeconomic advancement, as leadership roles often lack the collective strength needed to address these challenges effectively [Encyclopedia \(n.d.\)](#)

CHALLENGES FACED BY GOND PRADHANS

The Gond Pradhan community, while rich in cultural heritage and artistry, faces significant challenges that hinder their socio-economic advancement.

SOCIOECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION

Gonds often experience socioeconomic marginalization, which manifests as limited access to economic opportunities, education, and healthcare services. Despite their considerable population, the Gonds are fragmented into diverse tribal groups with little cohesive political identity, complicating their ability to advocate for their rights and resources effectively

[Encyclopedia \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author. \(n.d.\)](#)

The community suffers from high levels of poverty, with many members forced to live in less productive lands in remote areas, exacerbating their economic vulnerabilities [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND IDENTITY

The lack of strong political representation has further marginalized the Gond Pradhans. Attempts to unify the Gonds into a cohesive political force, such as the formation of the Gond Mahasabha in the early 20th century, have not led to lasting political power or statehood for the community [Tribal Welfare Research Institute Jharkhand \(n.d.\)](#)

Although leaders like Heera Singh mobilized significant support for the demand for a separate Gondwana state, these efforts have largely waned without meaningful recognition or action from authorities [Tribal Welfare Research Institute Jharkhand \(n.d.\)](#)

This political fragmentation prevents the community from addressing their needs effectively within broader governmental frameworks.

CULTURAL EXPLOITATION AND IDENTITY LOSS

Cultural exploitation also poses a serious challenge for the Gond Pradhans. As external influences encroach upon their traditional ways of life, the Gonds have increasingly faced pressures to conform to dominant cultural norms, which threaten their unique identity and practices [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

Efforts to protect Gondi culture have been met with limited success, contributing to a decline in traditional practices and knowledge [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

HEALTH AND EDUCATION BARRIERS

Health indicators among the Gonds are concerning, with communities experiencing high levels of unmet healthcare needs and poor health outcomes [Antrocom \(n.d.\)](#)

Limited access to healthcare facilities in remote areas makes it challenging to address these health disparities. Additionally, educational opportunities are scarce, resulting in low literacy rates that further restrict economic prospects and community development [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES AND LIVELIHOOD INSECURITY

Environmental degradation and competition for land exacerbate livelihood insecurities within the Gond community. As traditional lands become increasingly pressured by agricultural expansion and urbanization, Gonds face land alienation and loss of traditional livelihoods, including non-timber forest product (NTFP) collection, which is crucial for their economic stability [19], [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

.This, coupled with the impacts of climate change, threatens their natural resources and the sustainability of their cultural practices.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF GOND PRADHANS

The Gond Pradhans play a pivotal role in the socio-political and cultural landscape of the Gond community in Madhya Pradesh. Their responsibilities encompass a range of duties that are essential for maintaining the welfare and cohesion of their communities.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Gond Pradhans serve as the head of the village council, known as the "panchayat," where they preside over discussions and decision-making processes affecting the community [Encyclopedia \(n.d.\)](#), [AJEEE \(n.d.\)](#)

Their leadership is vital in resolving disputes among community members, aiming to restore harmony rather than strictly enforce customary laws [Encyclopedia \(n.d.\)](#). They often mediate conflicts, imposing fines or excommunication when necessary, while ensuring that the principles of clan exogamy are respected [Encyclopedia \(n.d.\)](#)

CULTURAL PRESERVATION

One of the primary responsibilities of the Gond Pradhans is to protect and promote the cultural heritage of the Gonds. This includes safeguarding traditional practices, languages, and folk traditions that are integral to Gond identity [Tribal Welfare Research Institute Jharkhand \(n.d.\)](#), [Dwivedi \(n.d.\)](#)

. They are often involved in community initiatives aimed at preserving the rich artistic expressions of the Gond culture, particularly Gond art, which reflects their deep connection with nature and spirituality [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#), [Dwivedi \(n.d.\)](#)

SOCIAL MOBILIZATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Gond Pradhans are instrumental in mobilizing community members for various developmental activities. They facilitate programs focused on educational and economic development, working to enhance the capacity of the tribal population [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

This includes advocating for government schemes that benefit tribal families, ensuring that their rights to natural resources are upheld, and empowering them to make informed choices about their livelihoods [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

As custodians of the land, Gond Pradhans have a responsibility to promote sustainable practices among their community members. They encourage the sustainable use of forest resources, advocating for the preservation of ecosystems while balancing the needs of the community [Earth Again \(n.d.\)](#), [Unknown author \(n.d.\)](#)

This stewardship is essential not only for the community's survival but also for maintaining the biodiversity of their ancestral lands. Current Initiatives and Reforms

Forest Rights Act, 2006

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of Gond and Pradhan community members. Fieldwork was conducted in Patan village, Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh, a region with a significant Gond population and a living tradition of Pradhan performance. This research uses a mixed methodology as the researcher also did research with secondary sources like books, articles and research papers.

DATA COLLECTION

In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Pradhan artists, Gond painters, elders, and younger community members.

Participant observation: The researcher observed ritual performances, storytelling sessions, and everyday village interactions to understand the social role of Pradhans.

Narrative documentation: Oral histories, myths, and songs narrated by Pradhans were documented to analyze their thematic and cultural significance.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The data were analyzed thematically, focusing on three intersecting dimensions: cultural meaning, livelihood transformation, and knowledge transmission. The analysis situates local narratives within broader discussions on indigenous art, cultural commodification, and tribal development.

GOND ART BEYOND THE VISUAL: STORIES, MUSIC, AND RITUAL

For the Gond community, art is not confined to canvas or paper. Visual motifs often originate from stories sung or narrated by Pradhans—stories of creation, ancestral heroes, forests, animals, and spirits. The repetitive patterns and rhythmic lines seen in Gond paintings echo the cadence of Pradhan songs, suggesting a deep interconnection between sound, story, and image.

The bana, played by Pradhans during performances, is more than a musical instrument; it is a mnemonic device that structures narrative flow and aids memory. Through these performances, Pradhans educate the community, reinforce moral values, and maintain social cohesion. Their role as ritual specialists further positions them as custodians of spiritual knowledge, responsible for mediating between the human and the sacred.

THE PRADHAN: CULTURAL CUSTODIAN AND COMMUNITY GUIDE

Traditionally, Pradhans occupied a highly respected position within Gond society. They acted as teachers, storytellers, and ritual leaders, comparable to pandits in other Hindu social contexts, though rooted firmly in Gond cosmology. Their authority derived not from formal institutions but from embodied knowledge passed down through generations.

However, interviews reveal a growing sense of loss and displacement. Many Pradhans expressed concern that younger generations are no longer apprenticed in storytelling and ritual performance. As one elder noted, the songs are remembered, but there is no time or space to sing them within the village context.

LIVELIHOOD SHIFTS AND CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT

Economic precarity is a central factor driving change. Limited livelihood options in villages, declining forest access, and lack of institutional support have compelled many Pradhans to migrate to urban centers. There, they often rebrand themselves as Gond artists within the art and craft industry, producing paintings for exhibitions and markets.

While this shift provides income, it also creates a rupture. Pradhans are unable to perform their traditional duties within the village, leading to a weakening of ritual life and collective memory. This phenomenon reflects broader livelihood issues among tribal communities, where survival strategies often come at the cost of cultural continuity Xaxa (2014).

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the global popularity of Gond art has inadvertently marginalized the very cultural systems that sustain it. When paintings circulate without stories, songs, or rituals, Gond art risks being reduced to a decorative aesthetic. Reclaiming the narrative of Gond art requires recognizing Pradhans not merely as artists but as cultural intellectuals whose knowledge systems deserve protection and support.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that Gond art cannot be fully understood or sustained without acknowledging its narrative, musical, and ritual foundations. The displacement of Pradhans from their traditional roles highlights the complex relationship between cultural preservation and livelihood security. Sustainable futures for Gond art must therefore integrate economic support with cultural continuity, ensuring that Pradhans can remain storytellers, teachers, and ritual leaders within their communities. The preservation of Gond culture and identity, therefore, remains an urgent priority amidst the evolving landscape of political and environmental pressures facing this indigenous community. ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts (n.d.), Unknown Author (n.d.)

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