

Gond paintings: A historical evolution

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ABSTRACT

Folk art forms in India are a reflection of the social and cultural identity of a group especially a tribal group. *Gond* paintings are one of the distinguished forms of the folk and tribal art, which is practised by one of the largest tribes in India with whom it shares its name. This tribe resides in the heart of the country in Madhya Pradesh. For many years, traditionally the *Gond* art was done on walls, but within time it is now being practiced on other mediums such as canvas and paper. Over the past decade this art form has received worldwide recognition and fame. The attention that *Gond* art has been receiving is largely due to the work of Jangarh Singh Shyam, who was one of the first *Gond* artists to exhibit and be recognised internationally. This paper attempts to study and document the history and origin of *Gond* paintings, with a focus on contribution of the legendary artist, Jangarh Singh Shyam. The paper also discusses the salient features of the work of Jangarh Singh Shyam as observed by collectors of his artwork. The method used for collection of data was purposive sampling technique and tools employed were semi structured interviews for artists and collectors of this art, supported by participative observation.

Key Words : *Gond* paintings, Jangarh Singh Shyam, *Gond* tribe

INTRODUCTION

India has always been known for its vast artistic traditions which are rooted in its ancient culture. The tribal art forms a significant component of this repository. Tribal art derives its substance from nature, depicting birds, animals and plant life. It is the simplest form of expression, which includes basic lines and curves but the profoundness of the motifs is overwhelming. Even today, tribal arts exhibit the freshness of nature and youthful energy. The tribal arts of India are fundamentally simple, yet colourful, vibrant and showcase the country's rich heritage (Gupta, 2014). There are numerous tribal groups living in distant areas of the country. Among these tribes, *Gonds* are the largest tribal group living in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. They are a heterogeneous tribal group with various sub-clans. The word '*Gond*' comes from the Dravidian expression of *kond*, meaning 'green mountain' (Anonymous, 2014). Green mountain is a reference to the Vindhya and Satpura mountain ranges where majority of the *Gond* people reside since 14th century (Arur and Wyeld, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

Gond art is known for its exotic beauty and folklore depiction, an imprint of its ancient culture. *Gond* patterns are among the most elaborate and complex patterns of tribal art form. The information available on *Gond* art regarding its history and origin was scanty and scattered therefore, a need was felt to study the origin and history of *Gond* paintings. For selection of the area, the pilot study revealed that many artists from *Gond Pardhan* community are living and practicing the *Gond* art form primarily from their homes in the city of Bhopal since last 20- 30 years. Purposive sampling technique was followed and selected artists who practice the *Gondart* in Bhopal were then interviewed to gather knowledge about this art form. For selection of sample *Gond* artists from two age groups were selected- above the age of forty years and below the age of forty years. The artists above the age of forty were those who were directly related or associated with Jangarh Singh Shyam, the pioneer *Gond* artist. Artists below forty years of age are the young generation of the artists who are the present practitioners of this art form, having grown up watching, Jangarh and other senior artists practicing it. A total of five artists above the age of 40 years and sixteen artists below the age of forty years were selected.

People associated with this craft either as scholars, promoters and/ or collectors of this art form were also interviewed to gather in-depth and pertinent information. Various museums and galleries where *Gond* art is exhibited were also visited to study and document the pieces displayed and/or stored.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

History and origin of *Gond* painting :

Gond community settled in Gondwana region around ninth century (800-900) AD. From 14th to 16th century they ruled large parts of central India, most of them were in Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra (Vajpeyi, 2008). They even challenged the British during their regime to retain control. *Gond* dynasty was powerful and culturally significant during this period. They built many forts, lakes, temples and palaces etc. No literature from the period is available but as all art forms were flourishing around this period, it is likely that painting on walls for purpose of decoration may have started around this time. However, after Muslim invasion in fourteenth century, they were forced to flee to the surrounding forests of the Vindhyas and the Satpura region (The India Craft House, 2012). Their art forms in all likelihood continued but they were no longer in public eye.

Presently *Gonds* are one of the largest tribes in Central India predominantly centred in Madhya Pradesh. The *Gond* culture and practices have been inherited from their Mesolithic ancestors. The tradition of decoration of the walls and floors of their house may have initiated in cave dwelling culture of their forefathers. Traditional *Gond* art include songs, dance and wall paintings. *Gond-Pardhan* community are the primary practitioners of the *Gond* art painting. They did it on walls of the houses, it was known as *bhittichitra* (Fig. 1), where *bhitti* means wall, it was mainly done by women folk. *Bhittichitra* was for decoration of their houses, and was only done on special occasions like weddings, child birth or on festivals like *Dussehra*, *Nagpanchami*, *Hariyaliand Deepawaliand* there on it remained on the walls throughout the year. On these occasions, they used to paint on walls called *bhittichitra* and on floor they used to make specific patterns and symbols known as *dhignas* which most likely evolved into *Gond* paintings. Some experts believe that some of the patterns in *Gond* painting have been derived from *dhignas*. It is the brilliance and richness of

these patterns which captured many eyes. Today their art and culture is being rediscovered both by Indian and International markets. The attention that *Gond* art is receiving worldwide is largely due to the work of Jangarh Singh Shyam, who was one of the first *Gond* artists to be recognised and exhibited his work internationally.

The master of the *Gond* art- Jangarh Singh Shyam :

Jagdish Swaminathan, head of the Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal, played a pivotal role in introducing the tribal *Gond* art practices to the rest of the art admiring public. Swaminathan was himself a great artist. During interaction with the researcher Mitchell Abdul Karim Crites said, “Those were the special days, when Bharat Bhawan was under the supervision of late Swaminathan. He used to send out teams of young people to villages to search for the hidden art/artists amongst the people of the community.” While travelling through various villages during a study trip, he came across a wall painting in the Patangarh village, Dindori, Madhya Pradesh. On inquiring about the artist, he came to know that it was made by Jangarh Singh Shyam who was only a teenager at that time. Impressed by the striking style of the painting, he invited Jangarh to work at the newly established Bharat Bhawan. Here, Jangarh Singh Shyam was exposed to different mediums like paper and canvas, to experiment and innovate. His work was then exhibited for the world to see and admire.

Gond patterns are among the most rich and complex patterns of tribal art forms. Mitchell Abdul Karim Crites, an art collector with a collection of approximately 122 paintings of Jangarh Singh Shyam, describes him as the master of that technique who invented many patterns. Mitchell Abdul Karim Crites said, “His depiction of the Gods, Goddesses and *Rakshas* (devil), also the unique depiction of trees and flowers had never been seen before.” Art collectors and artists of his time thought of him as a genius. His creative genius is evident in his pioneering painting style which was unique. He drew inspiration from within. Jangarh Singh Shyam belonged to the *Pardhan community*, who used to sing, play and perform. Jangarh Singh Shyam became the first one in his community to put down his imagination on paper and eventually gave a new form and life to *Gond* patterns. Later, he also did murals on the walls of *Vidhan Sabha* in Bhopal. In 1989, the exhibition named ‘Magicians of the world’, held in Paris, gave an impetus to Jangarh’s career. It was a very important exhibition, as for the first time his *Gond* paintings were displayed in front of the international world. This was followed by the ‘Other Masters’ exhibition at the Mithila Museum in Tokyo, Japan (1998), which focused on the works of five tribal artists from India. Jangarh Singh Shyam’s works have been described by the director of Gallerie Ganesha in New Delhi as revealing, “...both the animist culture of *Gond* tribe and one of the foundations of Indian thought” (Press trust of India, 2015).

Jangarh Singh Shyam as an artist not only reinvented the art form of painting but, also encouraged his tribe members to practice the *Gond* art. He proposed a unique idea; he encouraged all budding artists to have a distinctive pattern of their own; in their painting which will be like their signature style. Jangarh Singh Shyam’s signature pattern was ‘dots’. He had both maturity and vision, he laid the foundation of this art form in a manner that it is sustainable both for the art and the practicing artists. Today, the signature pattern made by each *Gond* artist, gives them a unique identity in the contemporary world of art such that they can easily be recognised and differentiated from other *Gond* artist in their own community.

Jangarh Singh Shyam passed away in 2001 in Japan. According to his son, Mayank Shyam, he committed suicide in Japan, as he was depressed and homesick. He was intimidated by the city life and people; as he did not understand their language and couldn’t communicate, it furthered his

loneliness. However, his contribution to the *Gond* art is eternal. He was the first to transpose this art form from *dhignas* (tribal decorations) and showcase it on canvas and paper. He was the one who gave life to *Gond* art painting. His work left an impact on the other tribal artists whom he inspired. Thus, many artists consider Jangarh Ji as their role model and strive to keep alive the *Gond* art.



Fig. 1 : *Bhittichitra*

Conclusion :

Gond community settled in *Gond* wana region around ninth century. Their culture and practices have been inherited from their Mesolithic ancestors. The tradition of decoration of the walls and floors of their house may have initiated in cave dwelling culture of their forefathers. It was in 1980's when Jagdish Swaminathan, head of Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal, impressed by the striking style of the painting, invited its painter, Jangarh Singh Shyam, who was a teenager at that time, to the newly established Bharat Bhawan. Here, he experimented and innovated the *Gond* patterns, giving it a new form. The attention that *Gond* paintings presently receive is largely due to the work of Jangarh Singh Shyam, who was one of the pioneer artists, with a unique and engaging style of painting which was recognised and acclaimed internationally.

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