

Stitch by Stitch: Sujni Artisans' Role in Preserving Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the role of women artisans in preserving intangible cultural heritage through the traditional craft of Sujni embroidery from Bihar, India. The paper highlights the intricate interplay between cultural practice and artistic expression, and how Sujni embroidery encapsulates narratives, traditions, and symbols through its meticulous stitches. The study examines the contributions of women artisans as custodians of intangible cultural heritage, tracing their role in sustaining Bihar's legacy. It acknowledges the socio-cultural implications of the craft, as women artisans engage in the craft as an act of preservation and agents of continuity. The findings reveal the valuable contributions of women artisans in sustaining cultural tradition through Sujni embroidery and emphasize how crafts can provide insights into the way of life of the people who created them. The paper suggests that empowering women artisans through training, education, and access to resources and markets can lead to sustainable cultural heritage preservation and encourage social cohesion. The study concludes that collaborative efforts between women artisans, policymakers, and other stakeholders are essential for promoting cultural heritage preservation.

Keywords: Women artisans, Sujni embroidery, Craft tradition, Cultural heritage preservation, Bihar, India

INTRODUCTION

The Sujni craft, an embodiment of artistic expression and cultural heritage, takes on profound significance as a conduit between the past and the present. Originating from a specific region in Bihar, Sujni embroidery goes beyond simple ornamentation; it encapsulates the very essence of the cultural milieu it represents. Employing meticulous needlework and a nuanced interplay of colors, Sujni artisans embed their creations with narratives, symbols, and beliefs characteristic of their cultural identity (Rai and Masih, 2022).

Within the context of Sujni craft, the preservation of cultural tradition encompasses both tangible artifacts and intangible aspects of community identity. This craft manifests as a tangible embodiment of customs, rituals, and traditions that may otherwise remain obscured. Its role as a repository of lived narratives allows it to operate

as a living archive, effectively transmitting historical narratives to present audiences, thereby establishing a temporal continuum. This preservation role is carried forward by women artisans who function as instruments for the transmission of intangible heritage. By honing their craft, they facilitate the transmutation of cultural intangibles into palpable artifacts (Crafting a Livelihood, 2013).

The essence of Sujni craft's significance lies in its role as a medium for the transmission of knowledge. Often the custodians of Sujni craftsmanship, women artisans embody the role of cultural disseminators. They create networks and communities around their craft. Collaboratively sharing their skills, narratives, and experiences, they cultivate a sense of solidarity and unity. This collective engagement extends beyond their craft, culminating in social cohesion that strengthens the community's fabric. With every stitch, they relay stories

of historical occurrences, folkloric anecdotes, and divine beliefs, embodying the intergenerational connection between past and present. By perpetuating these narratives, they not only pay homage to their cultural legacy but also sustain the dynamism of this legacy amidst the ever-changing world (Yang *et al.*, 2018).

Women artisans, who dedicate themselves to mastering the intricate Sujni craft, find empowerment in their ability to contribute to cultural preservation. The craft grants them a platform to express their creativity, enhance their skills, and gain a sense of accomplishment. In societies where gender roles might have limited their opportunities, mastering this craft allows them to challenge traditional norms and emerge as leaders within their communities. Through their work, they assert their identity, challenge gender norms, and find a sense of purpose that extends beyond the confines of their immediate surroundings. Gaining acknowledgment for their skills, they contribute to local economies through participation in markets and entrepreneurial ventures.

In addition to the pivotal role of women artisans in preserving cultural heritage through Sujni craft, their role also encompasses the preservation of intangible legacies, the assertion of identity, the empowerment of women, and the fostering of socioeconomic development. Beyond the craft's cultural significance, these artisans contribute to their families' financial stability through entrepreneurial activities. They also participate in exhibitions and fairs across India in cities like Patna, Kolkata, Delhi, and other cities not only showcasing their craft but also boosting their families' livelihoods by selling their products in the exhibitions. Their contributions operate as a bridge between historical narratives and contemporary realities, threading the tapestry of culture through time (Fleming, Charlotte, 2013).

This research investigates the role of women artisans in preserving cultural heritage through Sujni craft, examining their contributions, and cultural significance of the craft. The research uses secondary research to explore the multifaceted connection between women artisans, Sujni craft, and cultural preservation.

Literature Review:

Culture: An Inherited Legacy:

India hosts around 7 million local artisans whose income relies on craftsmanship as per the Handicrafts Census carried out during the eleventh plan. The handicraft sector is prominently shaped by women

artisans, who comprise 56.13% of the total artisan population in India (DCH).

In India, approximately 63% of artisans are engaged in self-employment, with the remaining 37% functioning as wage earners. The transfer of traditional expertise and craft proficiency occurs across generations, involving entire families and communities in the production process. Around 71% of artisans work within familial units, and an additional 76% credit their choice of profession to the acquisition of skills within their families (Crafting a Livelihood, 2013).

Handicrafts serve as distinct cultural expressions, encapsulating the traditions and heritage of a nation. India's handicrafts exhibit diversity, cultural richness, historical depth, and vibrant dynamism. The historical continuity of handcrafting from ancient to contemporary times highlights its enduring significance. Passed down across generations, handicrafts have transcended time, embodying cultural narratives, they have gained international recognition, disseminating Indian artistic traditions globally (Indian Retailer, 2021).

Cultural heritage is closely linked to specific geographies. The ethnic historical memory and cultural connotations that it carries are important aspects of the place's identity. As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasizes, 'communities, groups and, where applicable, individuals should never be alienated from their own intangible cultural heritage' (UNESCO, 2015).

As proposed by Auclair and Fairclough (2015), cultural heritage emerges as a fundamental pillar of cultural sustainability, embodying a cyclical progression deeply embedded in the construct of society. Their perspective emphasizes the inherent dynamism of cultural heritage, presenting a departure from conventional perceptions that often portray heritage as static and solely concerned with the safeguarding of historical narratives. Instead, their notion emphasizes the ongoing evolution of heritage as an active engagement between past and present, subject to the influences of social dynamics and contemporary contexts. By acknowledging the dynamic nature of cultural heritage, this perspective provides a nuanced understanding of how heritage is not isolated in the past but continuously reshaped, revitalized, and reinterpreted by each generation.

This is further substantiated by the study undertaken by Härkönen *et al.* (2018) who offer a redefined perspective on heritage, portraying it as a trans-

generational phenomenon that traverses the boundaries of time and spans across multiple generations, portraying it as an ongoing narrative that transcends time, transmitting historical narratives and cultural traditions from one era to the next. This interplay between historical narratives and the present underscores heritage's fluidity and its ability to remain significant across time. The study highlights how heritage is interwoven with the human experience, serving as a bridge connecting different eras and communities, enriching our understanding of its impact on shaping identities, preserving cultural legacies, and fostering connections across generations.

When cultural heritage is alienated from its people, it loses its meaning and significance. It is important to safeguard cultural heritage so that it can continue to be enjoyed by future generations. This can be done through a variety of means, such as education, documentation, and public awareness campaigns.

The intangible values, aesthetic qualities, and historical spirit encapsulated within cultural heritage are profoundly entwined with the spatial context from which they emerge. This connection is further underscored by their close association with the specific ethnic groups and communities that have contributed to their creation. This perspective emphasizes the inseparable relationship between cultural heritage and its surrounding environment, as well as the profound role played by distinct cultural groups in shaping and preserving these heritage elements. This interconnectedness highlights the intricate interplay between heritage, space, and cultural identity, enriching our understanding of the profound significance that cultural tradition holds within the fabric of societies (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). For example, the handicrafts are closely associated with a particular region, where it has been practiced for centuries. The crafts reflect the region's rich cultural heritage and it is an important part of the identity of the community living there.

India- A realm of deep cultural heritage:

Craft practices in India are intricately interlinked with the broader fabric of community social practices, religious rituals, celebratory festivals, and the unspoken reservoir of knowledge that collectively constitutes our cultural legacy. This interwoven relationship underlines how craft is not merely a standalone creative pursuit but a dynamic and integral part of the cultural tapestry. Through its symbiotic connection with social traditions, craft not only reflects the ethos of a community but also

contributes to the preservation and evolution of cultural identity. This interplay between craft and culture showcases how creative expressions are deeply rooted in the multifaceted dimensions of society, and their continued practice serves as a conduit for transmitting cultural heritage across generations (Donkin, 2001).

Handicrafts are thus the tangible expressions of a community's history, values, and creativity. They are often passed down from generation to generation, and they can provide insights into the way of life of the people who created them. Handicrafts can also be used to promote cultural tourism and to generate income for local communities.

The historical significance of the Indian state of Bihar is a testimony to its rich arts and crafts tradition. It is renowned for its enduring practices, rituals, and art forms that have seamlessly transcended generations and continue to thrive in contemporary times. The state's festivals, such as Chhath Puja, folk art like Madhubani painting, architectural marvels like Nalanda University and Mahabodhi Temple, are vibrant testimonies to its living heritage, with communities actively participating and passing down these traditions with fervor. By cherishing these age-old practices, Bihar not only honors its past but also cultivates a dynamic cultural narrative that remains relevant and cherished in the present day. The state's artisans have mastered the creation of artistic goods that enjoy robust demand both locally and internationally. Notably, the artisans display a combination of skill, precision, and practicality in their creations. The handicraft industry has emerged as an economic lifeline for many impoverished and landless individuals (Tyabji, 2016).

One of Bihar's prominent handicrafts is Sujni embroidery, a textile expressive craft that has received Geographical Indication (GI) protection. The GI registration underlines its cultural significance, positioning it as a distinctive textile item. Originating from various geographical regions within Bihar, which transcend socio-economic strata and religious identities, these female artisans predominantly practice their embroidery craft within the intimate settings of their homes. Traditionally crafted from repurposed fabric, Sujni embroidery (Fig. 1) serves as a testimony to the remarkable expertise and resourcefulness of women who ingeniously transform worn and discarded fabrics into intricate and unique embroidered creations, fulfilling the practical needs of their households and families.



Source : Photographed by Author

Fig. 1 : A woman artisan displaying Sujni products

Sujni embroidery now employs easily available materials, employing simple stitches to create motifs that narrate stories (DCH; NIFT craft cluster report, 2017). While the earliest instances of Sujni embroidery trace back to the mid-1920s, indications strongly suggest that this culturally significant embroidery tradition boasts roots that span across numerous generations, fostering a legacy of skill and artistry passed down through time (UMSAS, 2013).

Significance of the study:

Handicrafts are a medium to our cultural heritage. When handicrafts are lost, we lose a part of our history and identity. We also lose the knowledge and skills that are needed to create these objects. Hence, the preservation of handicrafts is essential as it helps to ensure that these important cultural expressions are not lost.

This research reveals the often overlooked role of women artisans as guardians of intangible cultural heritage, particularly within the realm of the traditional Sujni embroidery craft in Bihar. By analyzing the socio-economic impacts of women's engagement in Sujni embroidery, the study enhances our comprehension of how traditional crafts like Sujni can effectively serve as dual instruments, safeguarding cultural tradition while simultaneously fostering economic avenues within Bihar's artisan communities. The study's revelation of the interconnected relationship between cultural heritage and artistic expression underscores the lasting relevance of these practices amid the dynamic changes of contemporary society. In doing so, the research provides

a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how women artisans contribute to the convergence of tradition, livelihood, and the perpetuation of cultural continuity through their dedicated preservation of the Sujni craft in Bihar.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs secondary research methods to investigate the contributions of women artisans to cultural heritage preservation through the practice of Sujni embroidery.

Literature review was done through research articles, reports, and online sources followed by data collection through academic databases, government records, and craft cluster reports.

Qualitative content analysis was used to identify recurring themes, narratives, and valuable insights pertaining to the contributions of women artisans, their crafting techniques, cultural symbolism, and the broader implications of their involvement in upholding the legacy of Sujni embroidery. The research explores the invaluable contributions of women artisans in the preservation of cultural heritage through the medium of Sujni embroidery.

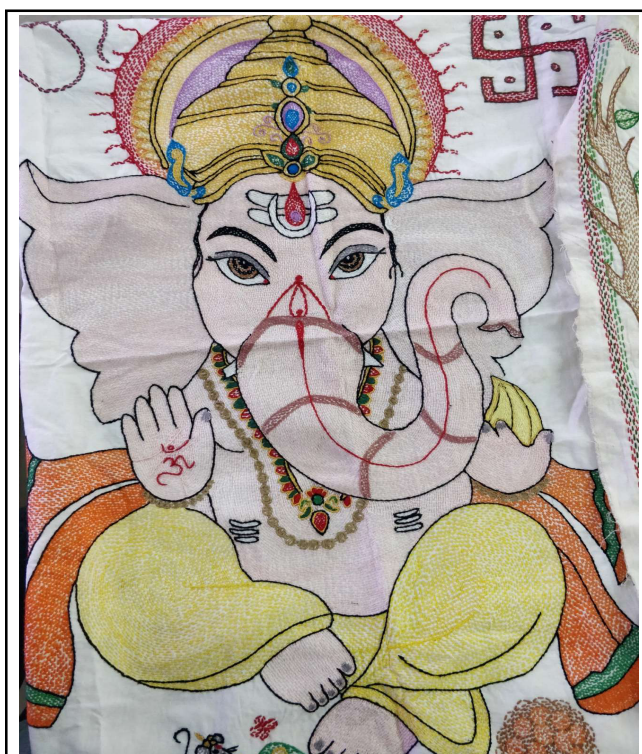
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sujni: An exquisite handcrafted artistry:

Sujni also known as Sujani, Sujini, or Sujuni, is rooted in two historical beliefs. One tradition associates it with the presence of a deity called '*Chitiriya Ma- the Lady of the Tatters*', symbolizing the integration of odd elements into a unified whole. The second purpose was to create a soft coverlet to wrap newborns, simulating the embrace of a mother. The term 'Sujni' is derived from '*su*', meaning facilitating, and '*jani*', signifying birth (UMSAS, 2013). The craft involves women quilting old saris and cloth pieces with delicate running stitches, primarily intended for newborns. Historically, the end product was a quilt, sometimes padded with tattered cloth for added thickness (NIFT craft cluster report 2017; Textile and Clothing).

Sujni holds a long-standing tradition among Bihar's women, distinguished by narrative elements embroidered onto the pieces. These stitches convey personal experiences, struggles, and realities, transforming a simple quilt into a testament of their lives (Textile and Clothing). The craft is mainly practiced in Bhusra village, Muzaffarpur, Bihar, where it has evolved from quilts to

pieces reflecting contemporary societal concerns. Traditionally, motifs drew inspiration from nature, religion, village life, folktales and daily routines. Floral motifs, inspired by the region's lush landscapes, are prevalent in Sujni craft. Marigolds, lotuses, and creepers are frequently depicted, representing fertility, growth, and prosperity. Various aspects of rural life are also portrayed, like scenes from daily routines and village activities such as shopping, fishing, boating, and temple visits, are commonly used. It also captures the essence of festivals like Holi, Diwali, and Chhath, as well as religious depictions like Radha Krishna, Durga and Ganesha (Fig. 2).



Source : Photographed by Author

Fig. 2 : Hindu God Ganesha depicted through intricate Sujni hand embroidery

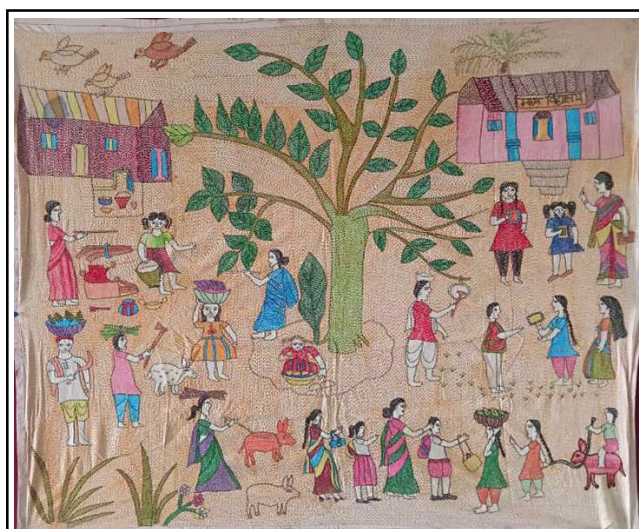
These patterns, often imbued with purpose and ritual significance, served as tokens of affection for family members. For example, depictions of sun and clouds denote life-bestowing energies, symbols of fertility, revered animals, and other representations seeking divine blessings. Traditionally, limited colors were used, with red representing vital blood and life force, while yellow symbolized the radiant sun, and green representing the vibrant spectrum of nature, subtly mirroring the changing

seasons and the emotions they evoke (Fig. 3 a and Fig. 3 b).



Source : Photographed by Author

Fig. 3 (a) : Village Life depicted through Sujni



Source : Photographed by Author

Fig. 3 (b) : Village Life depicted through Sujni

Earthy tones dominate, such as deep reds, warm oranges, and rustic browns, embodying the earth's nurturing embrace. In recent years, artists have begun

to experiment with a wider range of colors, tone on tone embroidery, linear motifs and creating a variety of products using the Sujni craft (Fig. 4).



Source : Photographed by Author

Fig. 4 : Geometric motifs on a Silk dupatta

Additionally, contemporary times have seen the incorporation of unconventional narrative forms into Sujni embroidery (UMSAS, 2013). The visual narratives include depiction of alcohol prohibition in Bihar, village meetings, health education, environmental awareness, AIDS awareness, women's rights, and more (Gupta and Adhikari, 2017).

Remarkably, this embroidery becomes a collective voice against the injustices and challenges women encounter daily—issues spanning dowry-related atrocities, domestic abuse, female infanticide, education for girls, rape, and debt-induced property distress. Notably, Sujni has evolved into a feminist craft that not only addresses societal concerns but also fosters women's advancement. Scenes featuring women as public speakers, judges, entrepreneurs, and earners assume a significant role, empowering women and encouraging their development within the craft's narrative. The craft offers women a means to express their experiences within a patriarchal society (Textile and Clothing).

Sujni embroidery, demanding labor-intensive effort with a stitch count per square inch ranging from 105 to 210, involves a precise running stitch forming the base, over which chain stitches outline motifs (Fig. 5).

Intricate running stitches with colored threads then fill the design. The fabric is usually plain white or off-white cotton, and the threads used for embroidery are of



Source : Photographed by Author

Fig. 5 : Floral motifs done with Sujni hand embroidery

cotton. Different varieties of fabrics are used nowadays as per the demand of the customers (NIFT craft cluster report, 2017).

Economic empowerment accompanies Sujni embroidery, as practitioners earn monthly income of Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 4,000, significantly contributing to household economics and enhancing the livelihood prospects of rural artisans (Gupta and Adhikari, 2017).

Bihar's Sujni embroidery stands as evidence to the intricate interplay of tradition, adaptation, and socio-economic empowerment within the realm of handicrafts. Its evolution from traditional motifs to contemporary narratives signifies the resilience of cultural tradition. In cultures where written records may be scarce, Sujni craft plays a pivotal role in sustaining oral traditions. The craft becomes a living witness to stories that might otherwise fade with time. As the embroidered patterns adorn garments, textiles, and artifacts, they transform into tangible links to the past, allowing the narratives to go beyond the limitations of spoken words (Gaon Connection,

2023).

The research findings reveal the significant contribution of the Sujni women artisans to the preservation of cultural heritage in Bihar. The craft's evolution from its origins as hand-embroidered quilts to contemporary pieces illustrates a dynamic process of preservation that adapts to societal changes while retaining its cultural core. This transition becomes evident when comparing traditional motifs, such as sun and cloud symbols representing life-giving forces, with modern motifs addressing critical issues like gender equality and environmental awareness. The craft's transition from traditional motifs to addressing modern social issues demonstrates its responsiveness to societal shifts while upholding its cultural relevance.

Sujni embroidery's narrative aspects act as a living testimony to the values and aspirations of the community. Sujni embroidery encapsulates narratives, traditions, and symbols through its meticulous stitches, highlighting the intricate interplay between cultural heritage and artistic expression. Motifs traditionally used to depict fertility symbols or sacred animals have now evolved to encompass symbols of women's empowerment and calls for social justice. The seamless integration of traditional and contemporary narratives demonstrates how Sujni artisans actively engage with the present while honoring their tradition. The craft's narrative elements provide a unique insight into the community's values, struggles, and aspirations. This embodies a process of cultural continuity, where the craft becomes a living archive of societal experiences, passed down to other generations.

The findings reveal that Sujni embroidery, practiced by women artisans, embodies the intricate interplay between cultural heritage and artistic expression. It serves as a bridge between past and present, tradition and innovation. By continually incorporating new narratives and motifs, Sujni artisans ensure that the craft remains a vibrant means of cultural preservation.

Sujni craft not only safeguards traditions but also highlights the need for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage as an essential facet of maintaining cultural identities in a rapidly changing global landscape. The preservation of handicrafts, such as Sujni embroidery, can help ensure the continuity of important cultural expressions and provide insights into the way of life of the people who created them.

The research demonstrates the pivotal role of women artisans in preserving cultural heritage through

Sujni craft; however, the craft also faces challenges like changing societal dynamics, evolving lifestyles, technological advancements, and mass production techniques.

Empowering women artisans through training, design interventions, and access to resources and markets can lead to sustainable cultural heritage preservation and economic development.

These endeavors have the potential to empower women by equipping them with the essential skills and expertise necessary for self-sufficiency through the creation of superior handicrafts. This, in turn, enables them to establish connections with markets and effectively market their products. Consequently, it would contribute to elevating the craft's reputation on both national and international scales, thereby amplifying the prominence of cultural heritage.

Clusters of artisans and collaborative workshops can serve as platforms for skill refinement and knowledge sharing, while the integration of Sujni craft into educational programs increases awareness among the younger generation. Heritage preservation campaigns and empowerment initiatives, including educational interventions and skill enhancement, further fortify the craft's distinct identity.

Craft preservation and women artisan's empowerment requires well crafted policies encompassing training, credit access, and intellectual property rights. Policymakers can play a role by providing funding and other resources for training and education programs, and can also create policies that support the marketing and sale of handicrafts, whereas, women artisans can play a role by sharing their knowledge and skills with others.

Conclusion:

Handicrafts, including Sujni embroidery, are distinct cultural expressions that encapsulate the traditions and heritage of a nation. The historical continuity of handcrafting highlights its enduring significance and its role in preserving cultural narratives. This research reinforces the notion that preserving cultural heritage is not just about conserving the past, but about nurturing thriving communities in the present as it also encourages economic empowerment within rural settings. It attempts to contribute to the growing body of literature on the role of women in safeguarding cultural heritage.

The paper concludes that women artisans in Bihar,

India, play a crucial role in preserving intangible cultural heritage through the traditional craft of Sujni embroidery, which encapsulates narratives, traditions, and symbols through meticulous stitches. Sujni embroidery empowers women, challenges traditional norms, and contributes to socioeconomic development while also promoting social cohesion. The craft grants these women a platform to express their creativity, enhance their skills, and gain a sense of accomplishment. In societies where gender roles might have limited their opportunities, mastering this craft allows them to challenge traditional norms and emerge as leaders within their communities. Through their work, they assert their identity, challenge gender norms, and find a sense of purpose that extends beyond the confines of their immediate surroundings.

Limitations:

The study acknowledges potential limitations, such as the focus on a specific craft in a specific region, and the reliance on qualitative data. The paper focuses primarily on the role of women artisans in preserving cultural heritage through Sujni embroidery, but does not explore other perspectives or potential challenges in cultural heritage preservation.

The paper does not address the potential impact of external factors, such as globalization or changing socioeconomic conditions, on the sustainability of Sujni embroidery and cultural heritage preservation.

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