

NATURE- THE CRADLE OF TRIBAL ARTS AND CRAFTS

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Abstract

The word 'Tribal' denotes a social group, comprising of series of groups, families, clans or generations, wherein their way of life still shows a particular deep-rooted inheritance and relation to an ancient past and by 'Tribal art' we mean artifacts and objects which have been practiced and produced directly by members of a specific tribal community. The name Adivasis is used in some of the states to refer to some of the tribal people expressing the meaning that people who have lived here from the beginning or from earliest times and in India there are millions of tribal people still living and thriving in the states of Madhya Pradesh, eastward to Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Assam, North-eastern states such as Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. There are some smaller groups of tribal people who live in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Mysore, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. These tribal people have produced a fascinating repertoire of their arts and crafts which have germinated from the womb of Mother Nature and present a rhythm of life and heartbeat of the Earth.

Keywords:

Adivasis, Gonds, Oraons, Murias, Lambadis, Vanjaras, Gadabas, Santhals, Riangs, Hajong, Bodo, Miri, Endi, Bodo-Kachari, Todas, Juangs, Saoras, Khonds, Baiga, Juangs, Saora, Munda, Wanchos, Konyaks, Phons, Papier mache, Dokhras, Warlis, Saoras, Pithora, Bhil, Bastar, Cire-perdue.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Dr. Kavita Singh,
NATURE- THE CRADLE
OF TRIBAL ARTS AND
CRAFTS,
Artistic Narration 2017,
Vol. VIII, No.2, pp.1- 12
[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=485](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=485)

Nature in all its winsomeness surrounds the tribal men and women helping them to fulfill their urge for expressing their love for beauty. The sparkle of the green fields, the warmth of ripening corn, the colour and grace of birds and animals moving in the woods; the sweetness of the wild flowers and budding leaves, the aromatic scent of the earth after the rains, when peacocks dance, and the soothing songs of the rivers and waterfalls are all redolent with bright inspiration. Against this background, the tribals weave their legends and tales and continue the ongoing evolution of their expressions, observations and their lifestyles seeped in the very soil of the Mother Nature. The word 'Tribal' denotes a social group, comprising of series of groups, families, clans or generations, wherein their way of life still shows a particular deep-rooted inheritance and relation to an ancient past¹ and by 'Tribal art' we mean artifacts and objects which have been produced and practiced directly by members of a specific tribal community.² The name *Adivasis* is used in some of the states to refer to some of the tribal people expressing the meaning that people who have lived here from the beginning or from earliest times and in India there are millions of tribal people still living and thriving in the states of Madhya Pradesh, eastward to Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Assam, North-eastern states such as Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. There are some smaller groups of tribal people who live in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Mysore, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Himachal Pradesh.³

Many of the tribal people are descendents of chiefs and warriors, of artisans and builders, of dancers and musicians, of priests, seers and healers. The *Gonds* of Madhya Pradesh are believed to be descendents of ancient rulers who lorded it over the forest areas. Though the majority of tribals today are engaged in agriculture and other pursuits such as creating a variety of crafts specific to their tribe and clan but one of the outstanding traits noticeable among a large number of them is their clan cohesiveness and traditions and there is a vocal approach in asserting their rights in continuation of their traditions amongst themselves as a whole. The epicenter of their cultural uniqueness remained restricted to their cluster of villages and habitats where the plank of their lifestyle was based on close-knit family and clan living.

A brief comparative account of the relationship between certain representative culture and craft patterns and ornament in the ancient past, and that of tribal India, will reveal a distinct sustained inheritance. This is of particular significance in other countries also, where tribal and clan groups have carried on to a marked degree and unbroken saga of refinements and customs of their ancestors, who lived in such far removed areas. We find, for example, that all the world over, ancient civilizations have left to posterity many examples of man's creative achievements in the shape of his arts and crafts, scripts, ritualistic

emblems, religious codes and several implements. As these objects have been gradually excavated, they have been the means through which the chronological stages in man's cultural development have been discovered.⁴ All this suggests that influenced by an unconscious remembrance of the past aesthetic traditions, which have lingered through generations, the tribal peoples in India display a special sense of imaginative thought and a guided approach to nature as whatever they practiced or created seem to have come from the bounties of Nature and the environs where they lived. The love of Nature appears to have become an inherent characteristic with the tribal peoples since time immemorial.⁵

There are two interesting factors about tribal crafts that are noteworthy. First, each tribal region produces something peculiar in design and form that has the stamp of a mystic ideology of its own, and reflects the life and characteristics, as well as the religious beliefs and observations of its people. Each group has its own festivals, legends, customs, taboos, rituals, superstitions, institutions, dances, songs, music and past reminiscences of their particular clan that have left an indelible impact on the artistic impulses of the group. The other interesting feature is that each tribal group seems to emphasize same particular form of creative expression among their many talents. The *Murias* of Madhya Pradesh, for example, have ornamental hair combs for their women beautifully designed with nature motifs, **(Plate No.1)** and finely fashioned wooden tobacco cases carved with geometrical symbols. The *Gadabas* of Orissa, the *Vanjaras* of Rajasthan, and the *Riangs* of Assam, have an assortment of ornate silver jewelry. The *Lambadis* of Andhra Pradesh have coloured embroideries with shimmering mirrors inset in patterns. **(Plate No.2)** Tribal groups in Bihar have indicated a special aptitude for weaving saris and shawls with chaste geometrical patterns on their borders, just as several groups in Assam and north-east in Nagaland and other regions of north-eastern India have coloured ensembles of woven fabrics with most original geometrical and symbolic designs, all done by women. **(Plate No.3)** The *Santhals* of Bihar specialize in strong pictorial wood carvings on their marriage palanquins and musical instruments **(Plate No.4)**, while the *Juangs* of Orissa and the *Gonds* of Madhya Pradesh carve their doors with dynamic motifs from the contemporary scene.⁶

Amongst the tribal peoples, influenced by generations of certain design patterns and motifs that have come down through the ages steeped in customs, ritual, beliefs and environment, a familiarity and fondness for these design motifs and patterns have grown in the mind, and cling to it, becoming in time the accredited decorative forms, and gain group sanction. For example, as mentioned by Verrier Elwin in writing of the artistic and creative work of the people in North-eastern states, "*The arts are part of the mythology and draw their vitality from very ancient roots. Many of the traditional designs are*

symbolical in meaning and, though today only a few older women understand them, the whole structure, symbolism and detail of the designs are deeply rooted in the tribal consciousness. The same may be said of the music, the dance, the wood carvings, the ornaments, utensils and even weapons. They are a part of the heritage; they spring up in an ever new awakening; this is why the people have a fresh, original and very precious gift to bring to India."⁷ Their main quality is that they are self created and have not been guided by extraneous accepted art standards and formulas, having grown from within themselves.

Nature has played big part in inspiring the tribal craftsman to reproduce its many beauties. In fact, Nature seems to have set the pattern for almost every creative urge and artistic endeavour, not only among tribals in India but throughout the world. The instinct in man since early times has been to study his surroundings and he has both consciously and unconsciously absorbed a great deal in this process. This has filled him with many original ideas and thus satisfied his inner yearning to express himself in visual form. Amidst the overwhelming material or pattern, the attendant raw materials, and the colours all around him, he found that he could harness every facet of life, faith and special artistic needs to the abundance of Nature.

Nature therefore became pre-eminent, always the guiding hand. Thus it is that we find in each region that though people have Nature's inspiration in common, they possess the ability to express themselves very differently, according to the special ingredients it provides them wherever they live that is the local flavor is due to the availability of particular raw materials required in creating these artifacts. The tribals have an uncanny sense of design where they have aptly used their skills in using wonderful elements of unity and symmetry, the harmony of line and curve, and their combination, in a balanced proportion taking cues from Nature. It is not surprising to find that geometrical forms have a very old origin, have been used by man in all ancient civilizations. Significantly enough, Nature provides practical examples of most geometrical shapes- the rotundity of the Moon, the Sun, the ovals and triangles of various leaves and plants, the curves of branches and petals, the arc of the sickle Moon and the rainbow, the vertical and horizontal flight of a bird or a swimming fish, and the stars composed of five triangles meeting at an inner central point.⁸ The tribal man has used these elements of art found abundant in Nature in a very effective way.

Textiles

The rich assortment of tribal artifacts include masks, utensils, weapons, basketry, textiles, wood carving, metal work sculptures, clay toys, floor and wall paintings, ornaments and headgears, musical instruments and their specially designed hutments and articles of

daily use. In all the north-eastern states of India, the tribal women are superb artists of the loom. Using various types of portable looms, they sometimes introduce the style of using the needle to follow the warp weft in their flow, and thus create the mode in which this added decoration appears as part of the weave. Motifs taken from Nature and geometric forms are also to be seen frequently, specially the diamond shapes. In Assam the old custom that every bride is expected to weave her own wedding garments is still prevalent till today.

Here is the beautifully patterned '*Pag*' head-cloth for men and '*Patani scarf*' for men and women of *Hajong* group of Assam, the former with its heavy border of ornate geometrical patterns, the latter having diamond shapes intricately conceived and offsetting the star designs on the main body of the fabrics. Colour plays an important part in all these fabrics and their designs. Horses, elephants, butterflies, peacock, tigers, fish, dolls and legendary figures appear to be frequently employed in these textiles used for draperies, shawls, stoles and head-cloths as well as bags that form together their costume ensembles.⁹

Wood Carving

As tribal people live for the most part in mountainous and forest regions, it is not surprising that they have used wood for many purposes since past ages. Wood is perhaps the most wonderful gift to tribal artisans for expressing their love of beauty, and imprint on it their clan history, animating it with their own particular legendary motifs and figures. Their exploits, and the flora and fauna that are pertinent to their way of life and environment are all pictographically expressed. The tribal people therefore have a rich heritage in this very old craft of wood carving, and it has played a big part in their homes, ritualistic symbols, marriage palanquins, musical instruments, tribal chiefs' chairs, and many other objects of daily utility. Fascinating geometric forms and themes from Nature and environment are also favoured by the *Juangs*, *Saoras* and *Khonds* of Orissa for their doors. They use zigzags and entwined circles on the sides of their panels, and human figures, animals and birds on the actual panels.

Santhals of Bihar depict their dances and environmental scenes which have features such as riders on horseback, riders on elephants, men in fishing boats and among animals and birds, there are the deer, peacock and small birds like sparrows, fish and frogs. Their wooden marriage palanquins (known as '*rahi*') are decorated in this similar fashion. Each artifact created by them on wood defines their deep love for Nature.¹⁰

In Arunachal Pradesh, fine wood carving is done amongst the *Wanchos*, *Konyaks* and *Phons*. (**Plate No.5**) The carvings have warriors with guns, tigers sometimes two-headed with tusks or horns, elephants, monkeys, dogs, dancing couples, tigers or frogs

eating the Moon or warriors. The chief's headgear called 'Morungs' is designed in the shape of hornbills.¹¹

Basketry

Yet another raw material freely available to the tribals is bamboo and tall grass with natural fibers as well as bark of certain trees has been used in many diverse ways since centuries. In Manipur, especially tribal women weave pretty baskets from the date and palm leaves, grasses and reeds, with attractive floral and geometrical patterns, motifs like checks, lines, spirals and circles. The shapes of the baskets vary due to multi-purpose as they are an essential part of the home and household. Just as fine wooden tobacco cases are made in Bastar, Madhya Pradesh, by *Murias* so in Orissa, the *Kuttia Khonds* design slim tobacco cases from bamboo and these are decorated with grass weaves in numerous geometrical forms. In Madhya Pradesh also the tribal craftsmen make finely woven hunting baskets.¹² **(Plate No.6)**

Mask Making

Mask making is a popular feature in many tribes in India. In tribal prevailing thought, the attitude of destroying evil forces finds expression in the use of mask, which is commonly used in dance and pantomime. It is often hung outside a house or is reproduced in paintings on the walls. The psychological instinct to use every symbolic means possible to ward off evil spirits making something so fearsome that it will drive away the evil forces who are strong and devilish. By this means a sense of security and serenity is achieved. Most of the masks are made in garish and dull colours and full of animated faces with large furious eyes and threatening jaws. Some masks have comical faces and others are faces of calm mannerism. Amusing shapes of birds and animals are incorporated in these masks. In Madhya Pradesh, tribals wear these masks while performing dances at festivals and make comic gestures with elements of fun and satirical imitation telling legendary folk-tales.

In north-eastern states, masks created by Buddhists are fascinating and very expressive done in ornamental styles. An important stimulus to artistic creation is found in the *Sherdukpen*, *Khamba* and *Monpa* dances these masks are accompanied by elaborate dresses and ornaments. **(Plate No.7)**¹³

Metal Work

The most interesting craft in votive imagery and theme among tribal peoples is perhaps the metal work of the 'Dokhras' known generally as the 'Dokhra' metal work. It is done by the people living in a belt from Madhya Pradesh eastwards to Bihar, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and West Bengal. These unique and delicately designed works of tribal art are done with long practiced *cire perdu* or lost wax process. Besides symbolic

animals and birds like the elephant, peacock and fish which have ritualistic significance, the horse too is popular in all these regions. Similar designs are also found in West Bengal and Bihar where Hindu deity *Ganesh* seated on a designed elephant is also very common.¹⁴

(Plate No.8)

Clay Toys

Turning to clay some charming animals made in this raw material come from Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and parts of tribal areas in Bihar. In the early times these were created as symbolic sacrifice animals and birds and were usually made by rural potters with specifications of tribal needs and requirements particularly the bull, the goat, an elephant and a peacock. Most of the tribal clay objects have some utility purpose behind it and as they are also used as storing urns, pots and pitchers for water and harvested articles or they were also created for the sole purpose of worship and meditation. **(Plate No.9)**

Tribal Paintings

The most popular and engaging tribal art form comprises of many stylized and iconic versions of paintings done by tribal artists, these are *Gond* paintings, *Warli* paintings, *Saora* paintings, *Pithora* paintings, *Bhil* paintings and *Muria* paintings done on walls, floors and paper or parchments using locally made Earth colours or colours made from flowers and leaves ground and mixed with rice paste and gum Arabic as binding agents. To begin with, the subjects of these painting were confined to the images of gods and goddesses, myths and folktales, birds and animals.

Gond Paintings

The *Gond* tribal community developed a unique style of painting using bright colours and simple forms, decorated with dots and lines. Subsequently this style has come to be popularly known as *Gond* paintings. *Gond* painting on paper was started by Jangarh Singh Shyam and Narmada Gond, now this style is widely practiced even on canvas and *Gonds* are teaching their children to carry forward the torch.¹⁵ The love of Nature is apparent in all their works and naturally their canvasses are filled with magnificent depiction of deer, birds, animals, snakes, trees. **(Plate No. 10)**

Warli Paintings

Warli paintings take their name from the *Warli* tribe of Maharashtra. Though spread out in parts of Gujarat and Maharashtra, the *Warlis* are largely concentrated in the '*Dahanu*' and '*Talaseri Talukas*' of Thane district of Maharashtra. The region lies on the Sahyadri Hills north of Western Ghats. *Warlis* relationship with Nature is of respectful exchange. The forces of Nature active in the various seasons are defined in their pantheon, the central place being accorded to the Mother Goddess. As *Warli* people have a tradition of being

cultivators and gatherers growing in single crop, usually paddy for their living or for gathering forest produce and domesticating livestock. Their lives are quite depended on the vagaries of Nature. The paintings are executed inside the huts. Walls are first smeared with cowdung. Red mud is then applied to provide the base texture. Pointed bamboo twigs and thin rice paste are used to draw patterns. Traditionally the paintings have always been done by 'Suvasinis' (married women who are not widows). While the painting session is in progress the 'Dhanaleris' (married priestesses) sing alongside creating a festive atmosphere and thereby they also describe the theme, rituals, folktales etc. and intricate decorative patterns are made in eye catching manner.¹⁶ **(Plate No.11)**

Saora Paintings

Saoras are one of the tribal people of Orissa whose work of art came to the knowledge of art lovers in 1950 when Dr. Verrier Elwin published an article on the *Saora* Pictographs called "ittal" in his book. Traditionally the *Saora* paintings are made in honour of the dead, to avert disease, to promote fertility and on the occasion of certain festivals. The "ittal" may be made by anyone 'who knows how to paint' and the artist need not be a priest but if he becomes adept he achieves a sort of dedicated position and he is known as "Ittamaran" or picture man. Many of the regular "shamans" the "Kuranmaran" of the tribe also combine this art with regular professional duties.¹⁷ **(Plate No. 12)**

Pithora Paintings

Fortunately *Pithora* paintings have come into focus after years of hibernation. Today it is once again seen amongst the finest in tribal art. The *Rathwa* have a very colourful culture and they have come forward to continue this tradition in contemporary form. Chilya Bhai Rathwa of Rangpur Gujarat had emerged as *Rathwa Pithora* painter in 1980s. Traditionally, Pithora paintings are the ritual paintings of *Rathwa Naik* tribes of Gujarat.¹⁸ **(Plate No.13)** *Pithora*, as this form of decorative art is called has animated figures, animals, horses, elephants, deer, peacock, dancing figures in bright lavish colours on light backgrounds.

Bhil Paintings

The *Bhils* are considered as one of the most furious tribes but they have a very colourful culture. During 1980s, Pema Fatya and Bhuri Bai of Alirajpur (Madhya Pradesh) emerged as talented *Bhil* painters. Presently more than a dozen famous *Bhil* painters are earning their livelihood by selling their paintings.¹⁹ **(Plate No.14)** *Bhils* live in deep forests and being hunters depict all sorts of Nature elements which surround them in abundance.

Muria Paintings

The Bastar (Chhattisgarh) is renowned for its rich and varied culture of *Maria* and

Muria Gonds. The art and culture of Bastar span Hindu and local ethnic traditions and use amalgamated social and religious expressions in tribal art of naïve imagination with an element of spontaneity that gives it an enduring appeal. **(Plate No.15)**

Summary:

The study of tribal arts and crafts amply reveals that the essence of tribal art is embedded in the fertile soil of Mother Nature and grows organically enriching the lives of tribals as well as the lovers of tribal art all over the world. In fact the offshoots of tribal art forms grew from the lap of the soil blossomed into flourishing tribal identity listening the lullabies of Mother Earth in all its gratifying moods and affections. We see and feel the very pulse of life flowing through the veins of green glory where tribal people live, work, enjoy and celebrate their aspirations and manifestations of ethnic, social and religious lives.

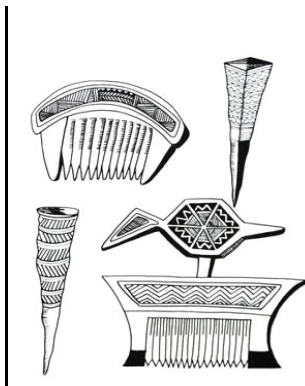


Plate- 1



Plate- 2



Plate- 3



Plate- 4



Plate- 5



Plate- 6



Plate- 7



Plate- 8



Plate- 9



Plate- 10



Plate- 11

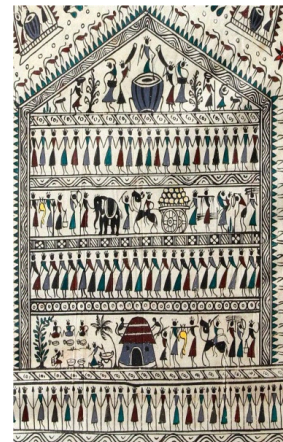


Plate- 12



Plate- 13



Plate- 14



Plate- 15

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