

Sohrai Folk Art Practices: Motives and Designs of Santal Community in Purulia, West Bengal, India

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Abstract: *This article aims to document and analyze the unique artistic practices and cultural significance of Sohrai folk art among the Santal community in Purulia, West Bengal. Their ancient arts practices and the pre-historic arts are aesthetically interconnected over the centuries. This long tradition of endless artistic expressions of Folk and Rural Arts can be seen also in Modern India. Gradually, these art forms are gaining recognition in the global market and art world. These art forms have influenced many contemporary artists to explore the new horizon and possibilities in Visual Arts. Folk and ritualistic arts are the integral parts of the Santal society. Their aesthetics and sustainability show their sensitivity towards the Mother Nature. It has significantly contributed in the development of human civilization and their artistic perceptions. The tradition has never changed over the decades but the main principle and aesthetic perception remain primitive and rustic. Women are the centre of such art practices. These arts were created for harvesting festivals, traditional rituals and marriages throughout the generations. However, their creativity and artistic expression remain unaffected by irregular practice. These artistic practices have persisted over centuries, adapting through migration and cultural changes. Their ancient design and motifs can be seen in their rural art practices. Understanding these practices is crucial for preserving cultural heritage and highlighting the artistic contributions of rural women, especially as traditional art forms face decline in the wake of modernization.*

Keywords: Rural Arts, Sohrai Tradition, Santal Community, Aesthetics, Sustainability

1. Introduction

The legacy of artistic expressions of *Sohrai* Folk Arts of rural Santal women is now getting recognized worldwide. Many NGOs or the Govt. is working for the upliftment of this contribution. Exposures on global platforms are motivating rural women to showcase their various artistic expressions of the women of Purulia near Damodar River in Bhurkundabari, Neturia, Kashipur, Hathmara and Ayodhya hill areas etc. My area of research is particularly focused on major parts of North Purulia.

This research started with an ethnographic research method. Since my childhood I have been wondering about the artworks which are done by the rural women with the artistic handling of fingers tips. It is not feasible to cover every village in Purulia due to its size. Purulia district has 4 major subdivisions and each block has approx. 5 blocks and each block has several villages.

There are 6 blocks under North Purulia sub divisions.

- 1) Neturia
- 2) Raghunathpur II
- 3) Raghunathpur I
- 4) Para
- 5) Kashipur
- 6) Santuri etc.

As we found in mud houses many murals are made permanently and few are made for the occasional and ritual purposes. For permanent purposes they create the relief panel or the borders of the main entrance of the houses. At the entrance of the house the borders mainly go vertically from both the sides and close it with a horizontal border on top of

the entrance. The upper horizontal border continues all around the mud houses almost in every house. But the design on the entrance border we found different decorative designs to enhance the beauty of the entrance. As every tribe considers their houses as a '*Garh*' means a fort or palace. These mud houses may be regarded as palaces for farmers and indigenous people.

Sohrai Arts

Sohrai is the harvest festival. This is the biggest festival among Santal tribes they consider as majestic as elephants on earth. It is a form of thanksgiving to cattle and ancestors. Among Santhals and Kurmi, the agricultural communities they worship during the November month of *Kartik Amavasya* and after the 2nd day of Kalipuja, they celebrate the *Sohrai* among Santal communities. Some parts of Bengal they celebrate in January month just before the *Makar Sankranti*. Throughout the year, farmers work diligently, supported by their cattle in agricultural activities. Cows provide milk, butter, sweets, cow dung and their graceful motherly presence for the family. That's the reason agricultural communities worship them and gives them care and respect these days especially at most.

As per the Santal belief *Sohrai* word come from the '*Sarhaw*' word which means thanks and whenever they invite their siblings and the relatives during festival, they say "*Marang dai newta le hech akana or marang dai le nenda seter akadea' Ma tobe hech seterok' tabon pe*".

Means we came here to invite our elder sister or we have decided the day of elder sister. So, please come to celebrate her day.

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Figure 1: Map of Purulia district, W.B., India

Photo: Wikipedia

As they believe they cannot take the name of elder sister because it's like disrespect to elders. They address their elders with dignified designation. And they have another belief that the elder sister of Santal had married to Supreme Being "*Marang Buru*" some people denote him as Lord Shiva and she come with her Lord and other members. Thus, *Sohrai* had started to remember all the heavenly spirits and creatures. Living and non-living beings. Some legends state that *Sohrai* refers to the elder sister. Santal cleans houses, interior and exterior just to welcome their elder sister and the Lord of Great Mountain '*Marang Buru*' during this harvest festival and they decorate the houses and floors with beautiful motives, designs and ritualistic arts.

In 'Crafts of India, handmade in India' by Aditi Ranjan and M P Ranjan had mentioned that the name itself comes from an ancient word, 'Soro', which literally means to drive with a stick. It is the festival of the early winter months when the paddy has ripened and is about to be harvested.

Similarly in the Kurmi community they call it '*Bandana*' which could be derived from '*Vandanam*' in Sanskrit means praising. Through these days they show their respects and gratitude to the cattle for their hard works.

2. Data Source and Methodology

This research data is collected from primary and secondary data sources. I have taken interviews, semi structured interviews, field visits, photographs and video recordings. I have collected information over the phone and clarified the doubts about the festival's details from my mother Smt. Maku Tudu and uncle Sri Kalicharan Hembrom and the elder brother Bimal Baskey. I have also collected many information from my uncle Sri Ramchandra mandi and aunty Smt. Nandi Baskey. So, the main part of the rituals and the activities of festivities are their collaborative approaches.

The secondary data was collected from the book titled '*Purulia Jelar Lokosanskriti*' by Dr. Subhash Ray. He had mentioned many local festivals of Purulia with details and folk songs as well. I have also taken the references from the online articles of '*Rural Women Artists: A Visual Analysis of*

Mural forms of Santal Pargana, Jharkhand India'. It was a collaborative article of mine with Pallavi Rani and D. Uday Kumar. This article had been published in the Journal of International Studies.

I have visited the village Bhurkundabari which is located in Neturia block of Purulia district. It is approx. 35 Kms in distance from the Raghunathpur headquarters. It is situated near the banks of Damodar River and its the geographical demarcation of border between Jharkhand and West Bengal. In this village many beautiful wall art murals were seen and the relief works and wood carvings as well on the doors. I will be highlighting those carvings as well. My major focus will be on the designs and patterns of art works of *Sohrai* and the wall reliefs sculptures.

I visited many places in Purulia like Joradih, Prabhatpur, Namobathan, Gobagh near 'Garh'Panchkot and Balarampur near Gorgaburu (Ayodhya Hill rang) as well. I have captured many photographs and this research also went through many years of data gatherings. This project is undertaken with the guidance of Dr. Rajiv Mandal.

Women from my grandmother's generation or I must say after the Post- Independence generation women had seen those glory in the 19s and 20s but now the scenario is totally changing. These rural mural arts only can be seen in a few mud walls of Purulia. Concrete buildings or walls do not showcase these kinds of creativity any more. Their walls resemble those of buildings in Indian cities. Only in the huts and mud houses they showcase their hidden artistic expressions and skills through harvest festivals, Baha festivals (Spring Festivals) and marriages.

Now new generations are not showing their interest due to the handworks and the intricacy involved with it. They do not feel proud of their tribal identity which needs to be preserved and continued by the younger generation. Globalization and technological change are rapidly transforming India, with the internet increasingly influencing younger generations. They are engaged in digital devices and it impacts their creative thinking ability. We are now more dependent on mobile devices than self-learning or exploring on nature. AI and other apps are driving us so much where we need to switch to our roots, study the cultural legacy and the old traditions. We need to visit and look back to the traditional Kohbar Arts and *Sohrai* Arts of Ramgarh Hills and Hazaribagh caves. These are the actual ancestry of the arts among all the agricultural societies of Bihar, Jharkhand, Bengal and Orissa as well.

Isco Roch Shelters which had been found in 1990 in nearby caves, Hazaribagh, Jharkhand. After studying these findings, I thought I must focus my research on the unexplored or untouched areas of Purulia. So, I finally visited north parts of Purulia i.e. Bhukundabari, Neturia and Namobathan and Joradih among the Santal Community. They create these art forms after the *Kalipuja* (Mid-October to Mid-November) in *Kartik* Month and it continues in several parts of Bengal as well in *Agrahan* Month. The Santal community who annually create these folk arts called *Sohrai* Arts in Diwali and in January during harvest festival. I have focused my research area in the Purulia district only. Which are quite unique

interns of relief wall arts and design and patterns of *Sohrai* Arts.

It is remarkable that rural women can create intricate wall murals without pre-drawn layouts or planning. Such creation goes very spontaneous and effortless. Their rustic artistic skill mesmerizes all the viewers who all pass by the walls.



Figure 2: Medium: Clay Relief, Size: 10 ft x 5 ft, Place: Bhurkundabari, Neturia block, Photo: Saheb Ram Tudu

Types of *Sohrai* Arts

As per the characteristic of the *Sohrai* Arts we can divide it in two parts:

- 1) Two- Dimensional *Sohrai* Murals
- 2) Three- Dimensional *Sohrai* Murals

In 2D wall *Sohrai* Arts, we generally found that they work on the wet walls of mud houses while giving a wash of paddy mud or *Khodhi Mati* (White Clay). White mud wall, these walls now work as the canvases for rural women and it invites their urges to paint because they generally cannot keep the wall look very flat and monotonous. They start using their aesthetic and creative abilities to break the monotonous and the emptiness of this flat wall. Thus, they come up with different ideas and visualizations. Their artistic expressions and design thinking is mostly influenced by nature, forest and nearby surroundings. In their motifs we find peacocks, parrots, hens, ducks and pigeons etc all the almost domesticated birds and the wild animals. They also give importance to exotic wild animals i.e. Tiger, Elephant and horses.



Figure 3: Medium: Clay Relief, Size: 30 ft x 10 ft, Place: Bhurkundabari, Neturia block, Photo: Saheb Ram Tudu

Use of Flat Border Colour



Figure 4: Medium: Organic Colours, Size: 40 ft x 15 ft, Place: Village Balarampur, Purulia, Photo: Saheb Ram Tudu

We also find that rural women also keep two colours at their wall to make it more attractive and more prominent. They use bright colours with different long stripes to paint and just to enhance the beauty they apply small 4 inches thick strips to divide it from the base colour. Thus, in this kind of wall even without adding any visual treatment by drawing or scribbling they make it much attractive and they add triangular patterns on the stripes as a main border.



Figure 5: Medium: Mud Wall, Place: Village Joradih, Purulia, Photo: Saheb Ram Tudu

The Base of the house which they call '*Pindha*' means seating platform usually kept black or grey as per their treatment. Plinth we may call it. In this base/ plinth sometimes they do clay modeling with different motives with floral and geometric elements. After Finishing of the modeling, they give a cow dung wash with little mixture of any black substances. Thus, the base gives a complete contrast with the main wall. Now sometimes we found rural women do minimum works on concrete houses. It's also very rare that they give entire wall black wash with a mixture of cow dung and rice straw burnt ashes. They scribble motives and designs on it and engrave it with the fingertips just to unearth the lower surface and reveal the beautiful designs.

They make its design look very prominent compared to the white wash coating. Thus, a beautiful piece of art comes out from the wall after it gets dry.

As per the occasion and purposes we can divide *Sohrai* Arts in three parts:

- 1) Ritualistic Arts
- 2) Non- Ritualistic Arts, and
- 3) Utilitarian Arts etc.

Among these few art forms are made permanently and few are made for temporarily only to perform the rituals and attend the festivals. Later they change it whenever it is required as per their need for alteration. Some 3D murals are long lasted till the existence of the mud house and that became the identity of that house. For examples:



Figure 5: Medium: Mud Wall, Place: Village Bhurkundabari, Purulia, Photo: Saheb Ram Tudu

This 3D mural is from the village Bhurkundabari from Neturia block. I have seen from my childhood and the treatment of the wall colours only changes every year but the artistry of these peacocks remains the same in the mud wall. I wonder how the village women still maintain the form of peacocks and peahens.

Design of Rice Flour (Holong Ol):



Figure 6: Design of Rice Flour, Medium: Painting on floor, Size: approx. 23 ft long, Place: Bhurkundabari, Purulia, Photo: Saheb Ram Tudu

1. Ritualistic Murals:

Some of the murals are very ritualistic among the Santal community. They create floral designs while they perform welcoming rituals for the cattle during harvest festivals. They also make these designs on the wall and on the ploughing instruments with the red vermillion dots. They call it *Holong Ol* means the design of rice flour. They create or make a continuous form of some kind of chain ladder which tribal call it *Tore Sutam* (Sacred Threads) through that the heavenly cows had descended on earth from the Milky Way. In Hindi we call it *Akash Ganga*. Through which they defended on Earth and in the remembrance of that sacred day Santal

community created this *Alpana* to remember the auspicious day off these cattle.

Application of rice flour and red vermillion:

All the agricultural instruments and the ploughing tools are also given the same respect and put some sacred water used to be sprinkled on the first day of *Sohrai*. After the bath they bring a pot of water with them from ponds, rivers or could be from streams or any waterfalls. and design with the three finger tips they draw three lines and put red vermillion as well so that the blessing of house deity and the Supreme being may get granted and keep us healthy, wealthy and wise.



Figure 7: Place: Village Bhurkundabari, Purulia, Picture: Saheb Ram Tudu (2019)

The Process of Wall preparation of Santal Community.

As we all know they make walls and houses by mud for several days. They create a thick wall by depositing heavy stones and the laterite soils from a far field and mix with the leg and keep it overnight and next day they use that clay to build the wall.

The process of wall preparation

There are four stages of preparation of wall surfaces for final painting of the *Sohrai* Arts.

- 1) Applications of *Kankor Mati* (Red Laterite Soil)
- 2) Application of *Belle Mati* (Sandy Loam Soil)
- 3) Application of Cow Dung Wash
- 4) Application of White Wash of *Khadhi Mati* (White Clay)

They collect laterite soil from nearby field from the non-farming land or could be from the hill areas. The soil contains of 50 percent of small particles of pebbles and plasticity malleable clay which actually create hard and stronger surface for base of the wall. It is sticky in nature and women mix it with rice husks and rice straw dust to make it unbreakable.

Sometimes without mixed clay the surface cracked. That's a reason women prepare a mixture of clay with it. Women apply this clay two or three times. After drying the 1st treatment, they apply sandy loam (*Belle Mati*) mixed with cow dung and keep it overnight so that microorganisms can germinate or clay can have much sticky.

After the two layers of application of sandy loam in the wall, they use a stone block to rub it. They also use flat wooden planks to make the surface much smoother and more polished.

3. Application of Cow Dung:

They now take fresh cow dung and with the help of cloth pieces they apply the cow dung wash twice. At the wall they

generally do not apply charcoal or black materials to get the black effect. They keep it simple with cow dung.

4. Application of White washes of White clay:

Rural women generally apply white khadi *mati* or lime-based clay which they get from the nearby ponds or paddy fields. They also get white clay from mining areas and the factory or market as well. They soak it as per their requirements in an earthen pot overnight and next day they filter it in another pot or bucket to use.

If they have collected more white clay then they make cakes to preserve it for future use. The size of cakes could be 8 to 10 inches and height were 4 inches. They dry it on the surface of a leaf plate or in a jute bag as well.

While using the white clay they mixed it with water and they filtered it with bamboo basket or with any net. So that unwanted particles and rubbles may get separated.



Plate 8: Place: Village Bhurkundabari, Purulia
Picture: Saheb Ram Tudu (2019)

They also do this process with other organic colours like red oxide, yellow ochre colour and with other colours if needed.

3. Conclusion

Rural Arts forms are the root of tribal identity, culture and artistic expressions. It has always shared the knowledge, wisdom, oral history and tradition of storytelling through endless visual narratives, interpretations, visual explorations, colour application, aesthetics and new experimentation, symbols, designs and motives. These spontaneous Visual representations and the aesthetics senses had evolved over many centuries in human civilizations and had inspired endless artistic souls across the globe.

Rural women are inspired from nature and their surroundings and the local culture as well. The mural arts forms of each area, mainly dominated by the Natural blocks, motives and design, girls and rural women who all got married to nearby localities had spread the design and the patterns. Similarly, all who came from other parts of Jharkhand and Singbhum had introduced the other new pop traditions of wall painting in Santal society in Purulia district.

The results of these descriptions and the analysis of this art form is to build awareness and to link the designs and aesthetics of this santal community. The study offers insights

into the extraordinary variations that constitute the traditional arts and beauty. Unfortunately, the artistic heritage is vanishing due to the lack of interest and the new govt policy on constructing the concrete building among the Santal villages. I think we need to spread the awareness and importance of these art forms and its new possibilities among the younger generation.

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