

Preserving Tradition: Impact of Modernization on Pithora Art and its Significance in Contemporary India

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the tribal art of India specifically focusing on the Pithora Art. The tribal art comes from our ancestors to us and we have an obligation to preserve it in the same manner as our ancestors did. India has a rich history of exquisite tribal arts. While many of these survived and thrived over time, many of these are no longer exists. Pithora art is one of the endangered art forms which is practiced by the Bhil and Rathwa community in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. It is a mesmerizing fusion of symbolism, myth and vibrant colours. The objective of the paper is to study the impact of modernization and the study finds that modernization has both positively and negatively affected the Pithora Art. Enhanced recognition and accessibility, economic empowerment and urban adaptation are the positive impacts and on the other hand loss of authenticity, diluting ritualistic significance and reduced community involvement are the negative impacts of modernization on Pithora Art. The Tribal art is currently being practiced by some of the renowned artists namely Chhilyabhai Rathwa, Paresh Rathwa, Buri Bai, Chanchal Soni, Shanta Bhuria etc, but this paper mainly focuses on the journey of the Padma Shree awardee artist Bhuri Bai, who incorporates modern elements such as computers, trains, airplanes, and buses in her artwork. She also used her brush and colours to break taboos that had existed for ages. Another objective of this paper is to analyse the initiatives taken by the government to preserve the Pithora art form. The Indian government along with the state governments and cultural organizations have taken several initiatives to preserve Pithora art, including several schemes and yojanas, opening of tribal research institutes in different states and granting the Geographical Indication (GI) Tags.

Keywords: Bhil and Rathwa community, Indian government, Modernization, Pithora Art, Tribal Art.

Tribal Art

Tribal art is a form of fine art created by indigenous people from various regions and cultures worldwide. It is often characterized by the use of vibrant colors, elaborate patterns and striking motifs that are influenced by both the natural world and the local cultural traditions of the communities who produce them.

Around the world there are several tribes and each has its own distinct art forms and culture. Here are a few prominent Indian tribes with their traditional artistic expression.

Tribal Art	Tribes	State
Warli art	Warli tribe	Maharashtra

Gond art	Gond tribe	Madhya Pradesh
Saura art	Saura tribe	Orissa
Bhil art	Bhil tribe	Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan
Pithora art	Rathwa and Bhil tribe	Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh

Bhil tribe- One of the biggest and oldest tribal community in India is the Bhil tribe. They are mostly found in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. They are renowned for their colorful, symbolic and nature-inspired art work.

Bhil art and Pithora art, both tribal art forms practiced by the Bhil community in India, but their style and areas of emphasis are different. Bhil art generally uses bold, geometric patterns and vibrant primary colors to depict rituals, day to day activities and their connection with nature. Whereas, Pithora art is a particular type of wall painting created by the Rathwa and Bhil community that has a sense of symmetry, repeating patterns and intricate storyline. Pithora art often depicts mythological themes and the worship of Pithora, a deity associated with marriage and fertility.

Bhil Art by Bhuri Bai



Fig.1 Source- mojarto.com

Pithora Art by Bhuri Bai



Fig.2 source- <https://openthemagazine.com/>

Introduction of Pithora Art

Pithora Art is a typical tribal art style that is primarily practiced by the Bhil and Rathwa communities in Gujarat and certain regions of Madhya Pradesh. For these tribes, the painting has deep cultural and spiritual importance; it is more than just a work of art. Often found on the walls of rural homes, the Pithora murals are meant to call upon the blessings of gods and goddesses for fertility, wealth, and health. For the Rathwa and Bhil tribes of Gujarat, Pithora Paintings represent much more than just vibrant pictures on walls. The paintings were created for a number of purposes, long-term illness in men, women and children, failed

crops or other domestic problems or they mark the arrival of a fortunate event such as festivals, marriages or births in the family or society. Pithora was performed either to give thanks to God or to request assistance. When their prayers are answered, they paint a picture of Pithora on their walls as a token of appreciation to "Baba Pithora." In a household, Pithora baba's presence is seen as fortunate. A Pithora can always be located outside the first front wall, at the threshold, or the "Osari." The people who paint paintings are called Lakharas, and the people who record the paintings are called Jhokaras. During the painting process, the artist frequently enters a meditative state or offers prayers, which is considered a holy act of establishing a spiritual connection. During the winter season, Pithora is celebrated. The procedure starts a week before the actual painting. They call Badwa first, then invite their family members. During the painting days they eat khokari (traditional food) and oil only. According to tribal mythology and the ritual's objectives, the gods, animals, and symbolic elements are painted. A final ceremony is carried out after the painting is finished in order to express appreciation and ensure the gods' blessings.

The ritualistic function of Pithora art is a reflection of the tribes' strong ties to their ancestral heritage, natural environment, and spiritual beliefs. In addition to preserving the continuation of their customs, it also protects bonds in the community and validates their identity. Pithora painting is fundamentally done to conjure Baba Pithora, who is respected as the most important God. The primary painting is done inside of a hallowed fenced-in area, which is a rectangular space, bound on each of the four sides by luxurious outskirts (Thakur S, 2016).

Under this ancient traditional tribal painting style, various types of picture panels are combined according to a well-planned plan and all types of Pithora picture panels have been accepted in this community; Among those various types of picture panels, the depiction of a narrative painted panel combining "Seven Horses" has been the most exemplary (Katiyar, 2024). 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 (Singh. K, 2017).

Pithora is a highly ritualistic painting done on the walls by several tribes such as the Rathwas and Bhilalas who live in the central Gujarat, in a village of Vadodara called Tejgadh (Sharma E. 2015). It was observed that though the Pithora painters lived in different villages, there was no difference in their work. All of them painted the same style. It was however, not impossible to distinguish the paintings of one Pithora painter from that of another (Karolia A, et.al; 2017).

Pithora art refers to the religious, mythological and ritual paintings traditionally painted on the walls of their houses by the Rathwa, Bhil, Bhilala and Nayak tribes inhabiting the border region of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh (Katiyar 2024).

Pithora paintings are religious wall paintings that the main elements are horses, in their belief the horse is the vehicle of God for coming to village and help them. Performance of Pithora painting in Rathwa house brings peace, prosperity and happiness. The Pithora paintings are more a ritual and performance to thank God or a wish for solving problems. (Giri.D 2021)

REPRESENTATION OF SYMBOLS AND DEITIES



Fig.3 Pithora Painting on wall
Source- kalankit.com.

In Pithora painting animals, elements of nature, and deities are prominent figures. The elements used in Pithora Art are symbolic, acting as a visual language that expresses the community's relationship to everyday life, mythology, and the natural world. Paintings depicting gods and horses are frequently seen alongside scenes from mythological tales and folklore, as well as scenes from everyday tribal life, such as farming, hunting, and nature. It was revealed that all the motifs were inspired from environment and each motif had its own importance and they all assisted in completion of the wall. The investigator found that the place of every motif was fixed (Karolia A, et.al; 2017).

There are more than hundred elements depicted in a Pithora art, and each one has its own distinctive artistic meaning. Therefore, I would describe the primary depiction. Baba Pithora is the central deity in Pithora art, symbolizing wealth, protection, and the fulfilment of promises. He is often depicted riding a horse with a parakeet (parrot) in his left hand. Devi Pithori, his companion, is revered as the goddess of fertility and shown riding alongside him, adorned in ornaments and holding a tribal flag. Lord Ganesha is always depicted first in Pithora paintings, riding a blue horse and holding a hookah, symbolizing protection from wild animals.

Rani Kajal is honoured as the tribe's mother figure or Kuldevi, often depicted on horseback with a comb in hand. Baba Indra, or "Baba Ind," is the guardian of cattle and rain, while Raja Bhoj, portrayed riding an elephant, symbolizes kindness, agriculture, and livestock care. Rajya Ravan, a multi-headed protector, is shown holding a snake and sword, guarding against dangerous creatures. The "Purvaj na Panch Ghoda," or ancestor's five riderless horses, symbolizes family lineage.

Celestial deities like Huriya-Dev (Sun God) and Handaryo-Dev (Moon God) represent the divine realm. Nature and its messages are reflected in symbols like Kali Koyal, a cuckoo holding a scorpion to warn against natural dangers, and Kikiyari, the owl messenger of eclipses. Decorative elements include Heem (a triangular-patterned border symbolizing mountains), Ashad (a wavy line representing rivers or village boundaries), and Jhapu (a circular entrance often adorned with tigers and deer, symbolizing divine energy and purity). These intricate depictions blend spirituality, nature, and cultural heritage into Pithora art.

Objectives

The objective of this research is to examine how modernization has affected Pithora Art and the initiative taken by the Government to preserve it. Additionally, this paper investigates the ritualistic purpose of Pithora art, the depiction of symbols and deities, and the production method.

Research Methodology

This study is exclusively based on secondary data to investigate the cultural, historical, and artistic aspects of Pithora art in Gujarat. The analysis is based on sources like books, journal articles and tribal literature.

Process of Creation

Making pithora art is ritualistic and communal activity that enhance social ties and cultural heritage. Every step is infused with spiritual meaning to seek blessings for harmony, fertility, and wealth and it has its roots in storytelling, prayer and rituals. A selected wall the Pithora ghod, is first purified using lime, mud and cow dung. This is followed by smoothing and coting with rice or lime. A tribal priest named Badwa conducts prayers and recites mythological stories to bless the process. Lakharas are male artist who use chalk and natural pigments to create layouts that represent the owner's vow (mannat). The design is filled with vibrant colors which have significant meaning like green(growth), red(fertility) and yellow(**prosperity**). Sacred horses, divine symbols, animals, scenes from tribal life and deities like Baba Pihora and Pithori Rani are all shown in the paintings. The process concludes with rituals including communal feasts, chanting, singing and goat sacrifice. Earthen pots, bamboo brushes, and natural colors are among the materials used to preserve the spiritual and cultural significance of this art form.

Contemporary Modification

The style has been modified for wider appeal in modern times to be utilized on paper, canvas and fabrics even though traditional pithora art is painted on clay surfaces and mud walls. Exhibitions, art galleries and even fashion have adopted it (e.g, textile pattern inspired by pithora art). Despite these contemporary modifications, artist still use traditional methods and themes, maintaining the ceremonial and spiritual significance of the art form. Over time, pithora art has also included contemporary components like tractors, buses, cars and automobiles.

Pithora Art is an Indian traditional tribal art form. The state governments of Gujarat and MP are taking steps to encourage Pithora painting and art. Pithora Art has also demonstrated diversity in the art form over the years. Lakharas used to portray 'dhotis,' 'langots,' or 'horses,' but now they also depict 'trousers,' 'bikes,' or 'trucks.' Many state government offices and schools display Pithora artwork on their walls (Jayapriya S, et.al; 2023).

Pithora-inspired designs are popular in both fashion and art, and each artist's interpretation reflects their own cultural background. The uniqueness of Pithora designs is nowadays preserved as creative uses in interior designs, including wall frames, vases, sarees, cushions, and bed linens.



Fig.4 Pithora motifs frame for wall décor
Source- memeraki.com



Fig. 5 Pithora art on silk saree
. Source- bhawanitextile.com



Fig.6 Pithora motifs painted vase
Source- hobbyideas.in



Fig.7 Pithora motifs on cushion
Source- kalanganfarms.com

Modernisation has both positive and negative impact on Pithora art, affecting its methods, arts forms, and authenticity.

Positive Impact of Modernization on Pithora Art

Modernization has brought Pithora Art to international platform, art fairs and exhibitions and has greatly increased its recognition and accessibility. It is now appreciated beyond tribal communities because of its aesthetic and cultural relevance which attracts art lovers, historians and art collectors from all over the world. Additionally, the commercialization of Pithora art has given tribal artist a new source of income that provide stability. Pithora art are currently created by artists on a variety of surfaces including canvas, fabrics and paper and displayed in galleries, urban markets and digital **platforms**.

In order to remain relevant in contemporary context, Pithora art has adapted to urban areas, appearing in home décor, murals, interior designs and even corporate workplaces. Through publications, digital media and academic research modernization has also contributed to the preservation of tribal identity. Government and non-governmental organization initiatives have further supported indigenous art by providing platforms to showcase their artwork. In order to improve durability and convenience of creation, artists have also started experimenting with materials and themes, combining classic colours and synthetic paints and contemporary brushes. Through the combination of ancient motifs with modern storylines this progression has made it possible for this art form to reach wider **audience**.

Negative Impact of Modernization on Pithora Art

Despite its positive outcomes, modernization has also introduced challenges to Pithora art. As metropolitan buyers may consider it to be purely decorative, the commercialization of Pithora art occasionally obscures its spiritual and ritualistic meaning. The modification run the risk of overshadowing the significance of Pithora art in terms of cultural and religion. Additionally, the authenticity of the art form is compromised when natural colours and clay walls are replaced with canvas and synthetic materials. Commercial style may take priority over learning rituals and traditional methods for **younger artists**.

Rituals, music and group participation are all elements of doing traditional Pithora art, which is a communal activity. Contemporary methods, which prioritize individual commissions, frequently lack this element of unity. Moreover, mass production has resulted the demand for modern designs and faster

production which can lead to a loss of authenticity. In order to satisfy consumer demand, artists are frequently under pressure to change conventional designs, which puts the cultural significance of the art at danger.

The factors endangering Pithora art's survival is the lack of interest in studying its symbolic and ritualistic elements brought on by economic hardship, shifting interests among younger generations and urban migration.



Fig.8 Traditional Pithora art
Source-Memeraki.com



Fig.9 Contemporary Pithora art
Source-thebetterindia.com

Initiative taken by Indian Government to Preserve Pithora Art

The Ministry of Culture provide various scholarships and support to tribal artist through various schemes aimed to protect and promote traditional art forms. The scheme that provides advanced instruction to young artists in Indian classical music, dance, theatre, mime, visual art, and indigenous arts is the Scheme for Scholarship to Young Artistes in Different Cultural Fields. The Guru Shishya Parampara Scheme, launched in 2003-04, preserves the traditional master-disciple learning system and nurtures talents in music, drama, and other art forms. Similarly, the Young Talented Artists Scheme recognizes individuals aged 18-30, offering a one-time cash award of ₹10,000 to encourage excellence in rare art forms. (Gov.in) Workshops and exhibitions, such as Tribal Art Fairs, the Suraj Kund Mela, and the Adivasi Mela, provide platforms for artists to showcase their artwork. The National Tribal Virtual Art & Culture Portal (ADI KALAKAR Portal), introduced by Tribal Research Institutes, promotes tribal art and culture. Additionally, efforts to protect intellectual property through Geographical Indication (GI) Tags help preserve traditional art forms.

The government has established Tribal Research Institutes in states like Gujarat and launched initiatives like Project PARI (Public Art of India) for the 46th World Heritage Committee Meeting in 2024. This project involves over 150 visual artists, including Pithora artists, contributing to murals, sculptures, and installations. Moreover, online platforms facilitated by organizations like TRIFED enable Pithora artists

to directly sell their work to a global audience, expanding their market reach and ensuring sustainable livelihoods. (Ministry of culture initiates project PARI)

Artist of Pithora Art

Pithora art has received several prestigious awards, proving its creative merit and cultural importance. These honours demonstrate the growing national and worldwide recognition of Pithora art.

Some of the well-known honours and performers connected to Pithora include:

Paresh Rathwa- In 2023 Paresh Rathwa, another well-known Pithora artist from Gujarat, received the Padma Shri in recognition of his profound contributions to Pithora art.



Fig.10 Paresh Rathwa with his work
Source-scroll.in

Hamir Harsingh- A Pithora artist and Author won the coveted Korean Nami Concours 2019 Purple Island prize for his book "Painting Everything in the World," which includes Pithora pictures.

Bhuri Bai- Madhya Pradesh-born Bhuri Bai is a well-known Pithora artist who received the Padma Shri in 2021 for her outstanding contributions to the art form.

Contribution of Bhuri Bai to preserve Pithora Art



Fig.11 Pithora art on wall by Bhuri Bai
Source- <https://bhuri-bai-mobile.webflow.io/>

Bhuri Bai, who was raised in the Bhil tribal community, was heavily involved in the Pithora art tradition and frequently painted on the mud walls of her house when she was merely 5 years old. She was married at a very young age and in 1980 she moved to Bhopal in search of work to support her family. Renowned artist Jagdish Swaminath saw Bhuri Bai's skill while she was employed as a construction worker at Bharat Bhavan, a multi art complex in Bhopal. Her artistic path underwent a dramatic change when he saw her talent and gave her art supplies, encouraged her to switch from traditional wall painting to canvas and paper.

Bhuri Bai gained worldwide prominence as the first women artist of Bhil community to paint Pithora art on canvas, she also adds some modern elements instead of traditional in her art work. Exhibition of her artwork have taken place all over the world including USA and UK. She has won several awards including Padma Shri (2021), the Devi Ahilya Samman (1998) and the Shikhar Samman (1986-87).

Bhuri Bai, who is dedicated to conserving her cultural legacy, has taught Pithora art to her four sons, their wives and two daughters and other community members, she emphasis the importance of women learning this art for cultural survival and self-determination. She currently serves as an artist at Adivasi Lok Kala Academy in Bhopal.



Fig.12 & 13 Modern elements in Bhuri Bai's Pithora art

Source- bhuri-bai-mobile.webflow.io



Fig. 14 Bhuri Bai with her artwork

Source- Indiantribalheritage.org

Conclusion

The study concluded that Pithora art is a sacred art form that is performed sporadically or after the fulfilment of specific vows. In Pithora paintings, there are several motifs that each have a distinct depiction. A common figure in Pithora is the horse, which is a representation of a god or goddess. Over time, a number of contemporary elements, such as automobiles, buses, trains, computers, and airplanes, were incorporated into the Pithora art. The impact of modernization on Pithora art was also determined by the study. Pithora art has benefited from modernization in a number of ways, including increased visibility and accessibility, economic empowerment, and urban adaptability. Once restricted to the walls of the home and painted only occasionally, this art can now be found on canvas, paper, and textiles. It has also been displayed in art galleries, exhibitions, and even fashion. However, it also presents problems for its authenticity and cultural depth, as it has lost its ritualistic significance and traditional techniques.

The study also concluded about the government's efforts to maintain this art through the introduction of different schemes including Scheme for scholarship to young artist in different cultural fields, Guru Shishya Parampara, scheme for financial assistance for promotion art and culture, award to young talented Artist, promotion through workshops and exhibitions like- Tribal art fair, Surajkund mela and Adivasi mela, providing intellectual property protection by granting them Geographical Indication (GI) and provide online platforms facilitated by Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) which helps Pithora artist to reach global market by selling their work.

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