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Research Article

Cultural Sustainability and Gendered Knowledge Systems: A Study of Sohrai-Khovar Tribal Art among indigenous Women Communities

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Abstract

This study explores the contemporary transformation of Sohrai and Khovar paintings, an indigenous tribal art form practiced by Santhal women of Jharkhand, through the intersecting lenses of gendered knowledge systems, commodification, and Geographical Indication (GI) recognition. Employing a qualitative case-study approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants 25 women & 5 men including traditional women artists, professional practitioners, and community members. Thematic analysis revealed three major shifts. First, these art forms have moved from ritualistic mud-wall practices associated with agrarian and domestic spaces to market-oriented canvases, exhibitions, and public art installations. Second, the traditional matrilineal mode of transmission, often referred to as the Maa-Beti Parampara, is gradually weakening as younger women increasingly pursue formal education and alternative livelihoods. Third, while GI recognition has enhanced the visibility and commercial value of these art forms, its benefits remain unevenly distributed, largely favouring urban-based artists and institutions over rural practitioners. The study argues that commodification creates a paradox by simultaneously fostering women's economic participation and diluting the ritual, ecological, and community-centred essence of the tradition creating a construct of indigenous feminism. The findings underscore the need for inclusive, context-sensitive cultural policies that safeguard indigenous heritage while supporting adaptive cultural transformation and women's role as custodians of traditional knowledge.

Keywords:

Sohrai and Khovar Art, Gendered Knowledge System, Cultural Sustainability, Commodification, Geographical Indication (GI) Tag Indigenous Feminism.

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Introduction

The state of Jharkhand, located in eastern India, is a vibrant mosaic of diverse tribal cultures where numerous tribal communities, including the Santhals, Munda's, Oraons, Hos, and others live. Jharkhand presents a rich tapestry of traditions, languages, art forms, and social customs deeply woven with the threads of its tribal traditions, festivals, music, dance, art, and cuisine. It reflects a deep connection to nature and a rich heritage that has been preserved and celebrated over centuries. Among these, Sohrai and Khovar art form lies as a treasure trove of ancient art form in the heart of Jharkhand that have been passed down through generation of women. These paintings are more than just vibrant expressions of art, they are testament to the rich cultural heritage and matrilineal tradition of the region. Sohrai painting is traditionally associated with the harvest festival, while Khovar painting is linked with marriage rituals and the preparation of the bridal chamber. These paintings are usually created on the mud walls of houses using natural colours and locally available materials. Their motifs often depict animals, vegetation, fertility symbols, agricultural life, and ritualistic patterns, reflecting the ecological worldview and social values of tribal communities. The term Khovar is believed to derive from “kho” meaning cave and “var” meaning newlywed pair, symbolising the decorated marital space within tribal tradition. The roots of both art forms are often traced to the prehistoric rock art traditions of Hazaribagh, suggesting continuity between ancient visual practices and contemporary indigenous expression.

A significant feature of Sohrai and Khovar painting traditions is their gendered system of knowledge transmission, commonly referred to as the “Maa-Beti Parampara” (mother -daughter tradition). Women function not only as artists but also as custodians of ritual knowledge, cultural memory, and aesthetic heritage. The practice of painting is embedded within everyday social and

ceremonial life, making these art forms important examples of indigenous women-centred cultural systems

In recent decades, however, Sohrai and Khovar paintings have undergone visible transformations due to processes of modernisation, commodification, and global recognition. The paintings, once confined primarily to ritual spaces and domestic walls, are now reproduced on paper, canvas, textiles, and commercial products for wider markets. The Geographical Indication (GI) recognition awarded to Sohrai and Khovar painting as Jharkhand's first tribal art form to receive such status has further increased national and international visibility. While this recognition has created new economic opportunities and contributed to women's empowerment, it has also generated tensions between cultural preservation and market-oriented transformation. The shift from ritual practice to commodified cultural product raises important questions regarding authenticity, sustainability, and the continuity of indigenous traditions.

This study is situated within the theoretical frameworks of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Feminist Cultural Analysis, and Cultural Commodification Theory as discussed by scholars such as Arjun Appadurai and Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff. The study also engages with indigenous feminist perspectives, particularly the work of Audra Simpson, to understand how tribal women negotiate cultural identity, tradition, and economic change.

With this background the study seeks to address the following question: -

How are Sohrai and Khovar painting being transformed from traditional artform to modern commodified art by modernisation, commodification and GI recognition?

In what ways does the matrilineal transmission of knowledge (Maa-Beti Parampara) shape the cultural sustainability of these art forms?

How has the GI recognition of Sohrai and Khovar paintings contributed to uneven distribution of economic and cultural benefits among artists also negotiating tensions between cultural preservation, economic empowerment and market oriented transformation?

Literature Review

The study of the indigenous Sohrai- khovar artform has drawn the scholarly attention particularly focused on understanding the cultural, ritualistic, artistic, and developmental perspective in fact a specific interest has been shown to its historical emergence in the state of Jharkhand and its manner of practice among the walls of mud considering it as to be a mural art. It have been documented as significant expressions of tribal identity whereby sohrai features with agrarian cycles and festivals and khovar features as in the marriage room among the marriage ceremonies in the honour to decorate the groom's house. Scholars have explored the materiality and process of Sohrai and Khovar paintings, highlighting the use of natural pigments, locally sourced materials

which showcases the intimate relationship between art and environment. The studies have often interpreted the motifs such as animals, plants, and geometric patterns as symbolic representation embedded within indigenous cosmologies. A substantial body of scholarship recognises the gendered nature of Sohrai-Khovar art, traditionally sustained by women through the *Maa-Beti Parampara*, an intergenerational system in which artistic skills, ritual meanings, and cultural knowledge are transmitted from mothers to daughters. However, portraying women merely as custodians of tradition risks romanticising their cultural labour while overlooking questions of authority, recognition, and control over artistic knowledge. A feminist analysis therefore requires examining whether women's central role in cultural transmission translates into meaningful social and economic agency. Modernisation, globalisation, state interventions, and commercialisation have further transformed Sohrai-Khovar practices. Although market expansion has increased the visibility of the art and created income opportunities for women, it has also shifted paintings from ritual mud walls to canvases and commercial spaces, potentially altering their cultural meanings. Appadurai's (1986) concept of "regimes of value" explains how cultural objects acquire new meanings through circulation and exchange, while Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) demonstrate how culture and ethnicity become marketable resources under globalisation. Thus, commercialisation should be understood as an ambivalent process that may simultaneously promote economic opportunities and contribute to the decontextualization and standardisation of Indigenous cultural practices.

Rege's (2006) feminist standpoint perspective provides a useful lens for foregrounding marginalised women's situated voices, although Dalit and Santali women's distinct socio-historical experiences should not be conflated. Applied critically, this perspective positions Santali women as active cultural knowledge producers rather than passive beneficiaries of cultural promotion. The key concern, therefore, is whether the growing commercial and institutional recognition of Sohrai-Khovar strengthens women's authority and access to economic benefits or merely enhances the market value of the art while its original practitioners continue to struggle for recognition. Post-2020 studies on Indigenous arts and traditional crafts have increasingly highlighted this tension between livelihood development and cultural continuity. Khan (2022) observes that Indigenous arts and crafts in India face challenges related to market competition, imitation, inadequate infrastructure, and weak intellectual-property protection. Bardhan and Bhattacharya (2023) further emphasise the potential of traditional crafts to contribute to women's empowerment, community resilience, and sustainable livelihoods. Recent studies of women's traditional craft practices also indicate that product diversification and market adaptation can generate economic opportunities while simultaneously transforming the inherited form, function, and meaning of cultural practices.

Despite these contributions significant gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing research tends to focus on either the aesthetic, and ritual aspects or the economic potential of these paintings also the wider focus has been given on the developmental perspective. Even there is a lack of comprehensive analysis that brings together gender, cultural sustainability and contemporary transformation

within a single framework. There also remains a limited analysis with how the gendered system shapes the authority, creativity, and cultural continuity within tribal societies. Even a less focus has been given upon the nuanced ways in which women artists negotiate tradition and change. While maintaining cultural identity in the face of global recognition remain underexplored. The question of cultural sustainability is insufficiently theorized though many studies celebrate the preservation and promotion of these artform, they rarely interrogate the tensions between preservation and transformations which is actually leading to a gap in understanding whether the cultural forms of recognition contribute to sustainable cultural continuity or lead to commodification of the art.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the contemporary transformations of Sohrai and Khovar paintings, with particular focus on their women-centric nature, the implications of Geographical Indication (GI) recognition, and their relationship with the sociocultural development of the Santhal community, especially in relation to women's artistic tradition. The study also investigates the effects of commodification on the authenticity, cultural value, and sustainability of these traditional art forms. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate for this research as it enables an in-depth exploration of cultural practices, meanings, and lived experiences. Given the study's emphasis on gendered knowledge systems and indigenous artistic traditions, qualitative methods allow for a nuanced understanding of how these art forms are practiced, perceived, and transformed in contemporary contexts. This approach prioritizes participants' perspectives, thereby facilitating a more holistic and contextually grounded interpretation of the subject. The study was conducted at Sundar Nagar village of East Singhbhum district and the fieldwork was carried out for a period of one month.

The research is based on both secondary and primary sources of data. Secondary data were collected through an extensive review of existing literature, including academic journal articles, books, magazines, newspaper reports, blogs, government publications, and relevant online platforms. This review provided the theoretical and empirical foundation for the study, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the historical evolution, ritual significance, and socioeconomic dimensions of Sohrai and Khovar paintings. It also helped identify key debates surrounding GI tag recognition, women's agency, and the commodification of indigenous art practices. Primary data were collected through field-based qualitative methods. A semi structured interview was designed in accordance with the research objectives to guide the data collection process within a sample size of 30 respondents among them 25 respondents are female and 5 respondents are male who are identified through group meetings, contacting with NGOs, and getting personal reference of the artist, hence the study involved purposive sampling to select participants who possess relevant knowledge or direct involvement in sohrai-khovar painting. The women respondents consist of professional artist, homemakers who are practising the art as their hobby, traditional artist performing the painting occasionally, college girls practising as their interest area, few respondents are from artistic organisation who are earning

by selling the artistic craft and design, whereas the male respondents are basically the supporters in their work, few men are traditional old people who are aware of the actual emergence of this living legacy. However, during interactions with respondents, the use of regional language was focussed and the research approach remained flexible, allowing for open-ended discussions and the emergence of new insights. This adaptive strategy enabled the researcher to capture participants' experiences, interpretations, and reflections in greater depth, thereby enriching the overall quality of the data. A case study method was adopted to facilitate a detailed and context-specific examination of the research topic. By focusing on a relatively small number of respondents, the case study method allows for an in-depth understanding of individual perspectives and community practices. It also enhances the validity and applicability of the findings by situating them within the lived realities of the participants. Through this method, the study is able to document and analyses the intersections between tradition, gender roles, education, and market influences.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis following the framework developed by Braun and Clarke. The analysis involved six stages: familiarisation with the interview data through repeated reading, generating initial codes, searching for recurring themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and finally writing and interpreting the findings. Coding was conducted manually using interview transcripts, field notes, and observational data. Key statements and recurring ideas were highlighted and grouped into meaningful categories through a pen-and-paper and word-processing method. Manual coding enabled close engagement with the data and allowed themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives while maintaining contextual depth and interpretive flexibility throughout the analysis. The study applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures. Member checking was conducted through informal participant verification of interpretations. A reflexive journal and detailed audit trail were maintained throughout the research process. Peer debriefing with academic mentors supported analytical consistency, while triangulation of interviews, observations, and secondary sources strengthened the reliability and depth of the findings.

Findings

From ritual surfaces to commercial canvases: The Decontextualization of Sohrai

The findings indicate a significant shift in the material and spatial context of Sohrai painting. Traditionally practiced on mud walls during specific ritual occasions, Sohrai has increasingly transitioned to alternative surfaces such as cemented walls, canvases, paper, textiles, and public infrastructures. Participants emphasized that earlier the art was intrinsically tied to domestic and ritual spaces, whereas in contemporary settings it is being produced for decorative and commercial purposes,

Murals and Canvases

Many of the women artists explained – “Earlier we painted this only on our walls and during festivals. Now, people ask for canvases to decorate their galleries, houses, ceilings. Even the government is asking to paint this in railway station, public parks, government schools etc” This transformation is closely linked to processes of urbanization and rural development. Migration to towns and the replacement of traditional mud houses with permanent (pucca) structures under housing schemes have reduced the availability of traditional surfaces. Even one of the respondents mentioned “The decline in mud houses resulted in diminishing of the murals”. Additionally, the fragility of mud-wall paintings, especially during monsoon seasons, has encouraged artists to adopt more durable materials. However, this shift has altered the cultural essence of the art form, as paintings are increasingly detached from their ritual context and reproduced using synthetic colours instead of natural pigments. While this reflects adaptability and innovation, it also signifies a gradual dilution of traditional meanings.



Figure 1: Sohrai painting in mud walls and cemented walls

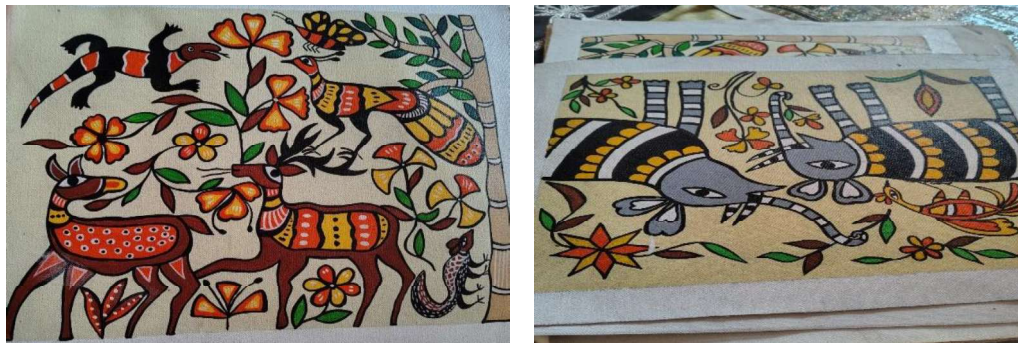


Figure 2: Sohrai and Khovar motifs on canvases

Transformation of Artistic Legacy within Gendered Knowledge Systems

Sohrai and Khovar paintings have historically been embedded within a matrilineal system of knowledge transmission, often described as the “mother-daughter tradition.” The findings reaffirm that women remain the primary custodians of this art form, with skills traditionally passed from mothers to daughters or, in some cases, daughters-in-law. Four of our respondents said – “We don’t have daughters, we are blessed with sons only, so what we will transcend

the legacy to our daughter -in-laws they are our daughters only, which means traditional artist transmitting their legacy.

Jeopardized Women's legacy

This gendered inheritance underscores the cultural identity of the art as a distinctly women centric practice. However, the study reveals a noticeable shift in this legacy. Increasing access to education and employment opportunities has led many young women to prioritize formal careers over traditional artistic practices. Respondents expressed that while there is cultural awareness and appreciation for Sohrai among younger generations, it is often not considered a viable livelihood option. Consequently, the continuity of exclusive intergenerational transmission is weakening. Despite these challenges, older practitioners continue to emphasize the importance of preserving the tradition as a marker of identity. The findings suggest a tension between cultural preservation and aspirations for socio-economic mobility, indicating that the future of the art form depends on its ability to align with contemporary livelihoods.

Commodifying Sohrai Art: Shifting from Cultural Expression to Aesthetic Commodity

The commodification of Sohrai painting emerges as a central theme, reflecting its transition from a ritualistic practice to a market-oriented art form. The findings indicate that Sohrai is increasingly produced based on consumer demand, with customized designs created for urban buyers, galleries, and decorative purposes. This shift has repositioned the art from a culturally embedded practice to a commodified aesthetic object. The study identifies both positive and negative implications of this transformation. On the positive side, commodification has created income-generating opportunities for women artists, particularly those with limited access to formal employment. Many respondents reported that engaging in Sohrai painting has enhanced their financial independence and social recognition.

Commodified values

Collective initiatives, exhibitions, and institutional support have further expanded their visibility. Some of the respondent said “We are simple housewives with not much education but performing this is making us independent and self-reliant also helping us in our financial income” Conversely, commodification has led to the erosion of traditional meanings and techniques. The emphasis on market preferences often compels artists to modify motifs, abandon ritual contexts, and adopt synthetic materials such as acrylic paints. This results in a loss of authenticity and a reduction of the art's symbolic depth. Thus, commodification simultaneously enables economic empowerment while posing a threat to cultural integrity. One of the respondents revealed that – “People are liking the beauty of the authentic designs and they are also ordering us the particular design they are liking and few customised products are also in making”



Figure 3: Customised order cloth and other decorative accessories painted with sohrai

Impact of Geographical Indication (GI) Recognition: Uneven distribution of benefits

The recognition of Sohrai and Khovar painting under Geographical Indication (GI) has significantly enhanced their visibility and cultural value. The findings suggest that GI status has contributed to increased national and international recognition, expanded market opportunities, and a renewed sense of pride among practitioners.

Recognition restructured traditional meaning

It has also facilitated the integration of these art forms into public spaces, including railway stations, schools, and urban infrastructures. However, the distribution of benefits associated with GI recognition appears uneven. Participants highlighted that government initiatives and promotional activities are often concentrated in specific urban centre, particularly the state capital, thereby marginalizing artists from other regions. This uneven access to resources, recognition, and institutional support raises concerns about inclusivity and equitable development. Despite these challenges, GI recognition has played a crucial role in safeguarding the art form by institutionalizing its cultural significance. It has encouraged capacity-building initiatives such as training programs and workshops, thereby contributing to both cultural preservation and economic development. The findings suggest that while GI recognition has opened new avenues, there remains a need for more inclusive policies to ensure that benefits reach a broader spectrum of practitioners.” We are practicing this work for 8 years but have not got any recognition, amenities, awards, and funds from the state government. We have registered ourselves under Jharkhand kala Sangathan also but still there is no recognition for us rather we got little consideration from Tata groups and they are supporting our art.”

Table 1: Recognition restructured traditional meaning

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example Quote</i>
<i>Decontextualization of Art</i>	Shift from ritual mud wall painting to commercial canvases and public surfaces, detaching the art from original socio-religious context	“Earlier we painted this only on our walls and during festivals, but now people ask for customised canvases, decorative items and cemented walls”. (Professional artist, female)
<i>Jeopardized matrilineal legacy</i>	Decline in intergenerational knowledge transfer from mothers to daughters due to young women’s pursuit of formal education and employment.	“We don’t have daughters so the legacy will transcend to our daughter -in-laws. But they are often built up with different interest quite interested in formal employment. (Traditional artist, female)
<i>Uneven benefits of GI recognition</i>	GI tag increases symbolic value and market visibility but concentrate institutional support in urban centres leaving rural artists undeserved.	“We are not getting any recognition for practicing the art only the registered artist and those who are working under NGOs are aware of the benefits (Artist from rural area, female)

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Sohrai and Khovar paintings are undergoing a multifaceted transformation shaped by processes of modernization, gender reconfiguration, market expansion, and institutional recognition. Rather than representing a simple decline or revival, these changes reflect a complex negotiation between continuity and adaptation, where traditional practices are reinterpreted within evolving socio-economic contexts. One of the most significant shifts identified is the transition from mud-wall painting to the use of alternative surfaces such as canvases, cemented walls, and public infrastructures. Traditionally, Sohrai and Khovar paintings were deeply embedded in ritual contexts, particularly associated with festivals, agricultural cycles, and marriage ceremonies. Their execution on mud walls was not merely a material choice but an integral part of their cultural and ecological significance. However, with the advent of rural development schemes, urban migration, and the gradual replacement of mud houses with permanent structures, the availability of

traditional surfaces has diminished. This has led artists to adopt more durable and market-friendly mediums. From a theoretical standpoint, this shift can be understood as a process of decontextualization, where cultural expressions are detached from their original settings and reconstituted as aesthetic objects. While this transition facilitates preservation in physical and economic terms, it simultaneously weakens the ritualistic and symbolic dimensions of the art. The use of synthetic colours in place of natural pigments further reflects this transformation, indicating a movement away from ecologically embedded practices. Nevertheless, this adaptation also demonstrates cultural resilience, as artists creatively negotiate changing material and economic conditions to sustain their practice. The study also highlights significant changes in the gendered transmission of knowledge. Sohrai and Khovar paintings have historically been sustained through a matrilineal system, often conceptualized as a “mother-daughter tradition,” where artistic skills and cultural meanings are transmitted through generations of women. This system underscores the central role of women as custodians of indigenous knowledge and cultural identity. However, the findings reveal that this traditional mode of inheritance is increasingly under strain. With greater access to education and employment opportunities, younger women are prioritizing professional careers over engagement with traditional art forms.

This shift reflects a broader tension identified in feminist scholarship, where processes of empowerment and modernization can inadvertently disrupt traditional knowledge systems. While education enhances agency and socio-economic mobility, it also alters the value attached to practices like Sohrai and Khovar, which are often perceived as less economically viable. As a result, the continuity of this women-centred artistic tradition is challenged, even as women’s overall status improves. This paradox highlights the need to rethink preservation strategies in ways that align cultural practices with contemporary aspirations.

Commodification emerges as another central theme shaping the evolution of these art forms. The increasing demand for Sohrai and Khovar paintings in urban markets, galleries, and public spaces has transformed them into marketable commodities. This shift has significant positive implications, particularly for women artists who previously had limited access to income generating opportunities. Engagement with the market has enabled many women to achieve a degree of financial independence, social recognition, and participation in broader cultural networks. Collective initiatives, exhibitions, and collaborations have further expanded their visibility.

However, commodification also introduces new challenges. The need to cater to consumer preferences often leads to the modification of traditional motifs, simplification of designs, and detachment from ritual contexts. This process can result in the loss of symbolic depth and cultural specificity, reducing the art form to a decorative aesthetic. The increasing use of synthetic materials and standardized patterns reflects this trend. From a theoretical perspective, this can be interpreted as the commodification of culture, where cultural expressions acquire exchange value but risk losing their intrinsic meaning. Thus, commodification operates as a double-edged process, simultaneously enabling

economic empowerment and contributing to cultural dilution. The role of Geographical Indication (GI) recognition adds another layer to this transformation. The GI status of Sohrai and Khovar paintings has significantly enhanced their visibility, legitimacy, and market value at both national and international levels. It has contributed to the recognition of these art forms as valuable cultural heritage and has facilitated their integration into public spaces such as railway stations, schools, and urban landscapes. This institutional recognition has also fostered a sense of pride among practitioners and has opened up opportunities for training, capacity building, and collaboration. Despite these positive developments, the benefits of GI recognition are not evenly distributed. The findings indicate that government initiatives and promotional efforts are often concentrated in specific urban centres, leading to disparities in access to resources and recognition. Many artists in rural and peripheral regions remain marginalized, lacking adequate support, funding, and visibility. This uneven distribution highlights structural inequalities within cultural policy frameworks and raises questions about the inclusivity of development initiatives.

Therefore, Sohrai and Khovar paintings are situated at the intersection of tradition and modernity, shaped by overlapping forces of gender, market dynamics, and state intervention. Their future sustainability depends on achieving a balance between preserving cultural authenticity and embracing necessary adaptation. The sustainability of Sohrai–Khovar art requires policy interventions that extend beyond symbolic recognition and market promotion towards community-centred cultural governance. The GI framework should adopt inclusive mechanisms for registering rural and women artists through village-level artist registries and simplified certification processes, ensuring equitable access to GI-related benefits. Women practitioners should also be formally represented in GI committees and cultural decision-making bodies.

Targeted rural artist support centres could provide access to raw materials, financial schemes, digital infrastructure, and information on government programmes. Women-led cooperatives and producer collectives should be strengthened to connect artists directly with exhibitions, e-commerce platforms, craft fairs, and public procurement opportunities, thereby reducing dependence on intermediaries. Village-based training in digital marketing, fair pricing, financial literacy, intellectual-property rights, and culturally sensitive product diversification should be delivered in local languages and organised according to women's mobility and care responsibilities.

Institutional recognition must further acknowledge Indigenous women as cultural knowledge holders by including them in museums, cultural boards, documentation projects, and policy consultations. To prevent the unauthorised commercial use of traditional motifs and knowledge, community-led prior informed consent and benefit-sharing mechanisms should guide documentation and reproduction.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the small purposive sample size (N=30) limits the broader transferability of the findings to other Santhal communities or tribal groups in Jharkhand and beyond. Second, the research was geographically confined to selected regions of Jharkhand, and therefore may not fully represent all Santhal or other tribal communities. Third, the study offers a cross-sectional perspective and does not track changes over time. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives may involve memory bias or socially desirable responses. Finally, despite maintaining reflexivity and an audit trail, the researcher's interpretive perspective inevitably influenced the analysis and thematic interpretation. Future research would benefit from longitudinal, multi-site, and collaborative ethnographic approaches that include the voices of younger women who have moved away from the tradition.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the contemporary transformations of Sohrai and Khovar paintings by situating them within the intersecting frameworks of gender, cultural change, market forces, and institutional recognition. The findings demonstrate that these indigenous art forms are not static remnants of tradition but dynamic cultural practices continuously reshaped by shifting socio-economic conditions. The conclusion synthesizes these insights to reflect on the broader implications for cultural sustainability, women's agency, and policy intervention like inclusion of GI patterned frameworks to more regional level, building communication with rural artist also engaging policies which will provide them support to get them more consideration. At the core of the study is the recognition that Sohrai and Khovar paintings embody a deeply rooted indigenous knowledge system, historically embedded in ritual, ecology, and everyday life. The transition from mud walls to canvases and other modern surfaces represents a significant transformation in both form and meaning. While this shift has enabled the survival and wider dissemination of the art beyond its traditional spatial boundaries, it has also contributed to the erosion of its ritualistic and symbolic essence. The detachment from mud-wall contexts and the increasing use of synthetic materials indicates a gradual movement away from ecologically grounded practices. However, rather than interpreting this solely as cultural loss, the study underscores the adaptive capacity of practitioners who reconfigure tradition to remain relevant within changing environments.

A central contribution of this research lies in its focus on the gendered dimensions of Sohrai and Khovar painting. The art forms have historically functioned within a matrilineal system of transmission, where women serve as the primary bearers of cultural knowledge. This "mother-daughter" tradition reflects not only artistic continuity but also the broader role of women in sustaining community identity. However, the study reveals that this system is increasingly under pressure due to the expanding horizons of education, employment, and individual aspiration among younger women. While these developments signify progress in terms of empowerment and agency, they also pose challenges to the

continuity of traditional practices. The findings thus highlight a critical tension: the very processes that enable women's socioeconomic advancement may simultaneously contribute to the weakening of women-centred cultural heritage. The commodification of Sohrai and Khovar painting emerges as a pivotal factor in their contemporary evolution. The incorporation of these art forms into market systems has generated new opportunities for income, recognition, and social mobility, particularly for women with limited access to formal employment. In this sense, commodification has functioned as a tool of empowerment, allowing women artists to negotiate new roles within both household and community structures. At the same time, the market orientation of production introduces pressures that reshape artistic practices. The emphasis on customization, aesthetic appeal, and consumer demand often leads to the simplification of motifs and the detachment of art from its ritual context. This duality reflects the broader paradox of cultural commodification, wherein economic viability is achieved at the potential cost of cultural depth and authenticity. The role of Geographical Indication (GI) recognition further illustrates the complex interplay between cultural preservation and development. GI status has significantly elevated the visibility and legitimacy of Sohrai and Khovar paintings, positioning them as symbols of regional identity and heritage. It has opened avenues for institutional support, public representation, and market expansion, thereby contributing to both cultural and economic sustainability. However, the study also reveals that the benefits of such recognition are unevenly distributed, with a concentration of opportunities in urban centres and limited outreach to artists in peripheral regions. This unevenness underscores the need for more inclusive and decentralized policy approaches that ensure equitable access to resources, recognition, and platforms.

Overall, this study emphasizes that the future of Sohrai and Khovar painting lies in navigating the delicate balance between preservation and transformation. Sustainable cultural continuity cannot be achieved through static conservation alone; rather, it requires an approach that acknowledges change while safeguarding core values and meanings. This involves supporting women artists not only as cultural custodians but also as active agents in shaping the future of their art. Policy interventions should therefore focus on integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary opportunities, promoting the use of natural materials, expanding training and educational initiatives, and ensuring fair distribution of benefits across regions.

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Author Contributions Statement

The author confirms sole responsibility for the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis, interpretation, manuscript drafting and approval of the final version.

Competing Interest

The author declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical Approval

The study was conducted following standard ethical guidelines for social science field research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews and field interactions. Prior to participation, each participant was informed about the objectives, purpose, and voluntary nature of the research in a language they could understand. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting interviews, as many participants were more comfortable with oral communication than written documentation. Institutional ethical approval was not required for this study under the applicable institutional guidelines, as the research was limited to non-clinical, non-experimental fieldwork involving voluntary interviews and observations and did not involve any medical intervention, clinical procedure, or experimental manipulation of participants. Strict measures were adopted to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. No personally identifiable information, including participants' names or other identifying details, has been disclosed in the manuscript. Pseudonyms and coded identifiers were used during data organisation, analysis, and reporting. Research records and collected data were securely stored and accessed only for research purposes. Care was also taken while presenting participants' narratives and field observations to ensure that individuals could not be identified indirectly through contextual details. Given that the research involved Indigenous women and community-based cultural knowledge, particular attention was paid to cultural sensitivity and respectful engagement with community. Local traditions, cultural practices, and knowledge systems were approached with due respect, and sensitive cultural information was documented and reported cautiously. Information considered private, culturally restricted, or potentially harmful to the community was not disclosed without appropriate permission. These ethical measures were adopted throughout the fieldwork, data analysis, and reporting stages to protect participants' rights, dignity, privacy, and cultural integrity.

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