



# Sohrai Wall Art Of The Santals: A Visual Chronicle Of Culture And Tradition In The Indian Knowledge System

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**Abstract:** The traditional wall art of the Santals is connected with the Sohrai festival, a traditional harvest festival celebrated by the tribal communities in Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal to mark the end of the agricultural season. Sohrai art is an integral part of this festival, where tribal women prepare intricate and vibrant designs on the mud walls of houses as a showcase of their happiness and thanksgiving to the cattle, which worked tirelessly throughout the year to provide food for the household. As part of the Indian Knowledge System, Sohrai art not only serves as a medium of aesthetic expression but also as a repository of cultural values, oral traditions, and ecological wisdom. However, the impact of modernization, globalization, and urbanization is increasingly evident in Sohrai art. Traditional themes have been replaced by modern themes, and natural colors derived from clay, flowers, and trees are being substituted with synthetic paints for convenience. These changes reflect the community's adaptation to the modern scenario but risk diluting the essence of their indigenous knowledge. In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand how Sohrai wall art portrays the Santal culture and tradition, thereby enriching the Indian Knowledge System, as well as the impact of modernization on this art form.

**Index Terms** - Sohrai Wall Art, Indian Knowledge System, Santal Tribe, Globalization, Indigenous Knowledge.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Sohrai festival, also known as Marangdai or the cattle festival, is primarily celebrated by the Santal, Oraon, Munda, and other tribal communities in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal. This harvest festival spans five days and nights during the month of Kartik (October-November), commencing either on the new moon with Kali Puja or immediately afterward on fixed dates each year (Kerketta, 2024). The primary objective of the festival is *sarhow* (praise) and the invocation of prosperity for household cattle,

agricultural produce, wealth, and the overall health and well-being of the family. The observance of Sohrai varies across villages depending on the *disom*. For example, in the Sikar *disom*, the festival is celebrated during Sohrai Bonga (the month of Kartik), whereas in the Sant *disom*, it is observed during Poush Bonga (at the end of Poush, December-January). Within Santal families, this festival is a time for family reunions, with close relatives, including married daughters and their families, gathering to participate. All family deities are worshipped, and prayers are offered in memory of deceased family members. However, families in mourning due to the death of a family member or close relative within the same year refrain from celebrating Sohrai as a mark of respect for the departed. Unlike other festivals, Sohrai does not involve the worship of village deities at the *jaherthan* (sacred grove). Instead, on the day of *Um Maha*, rituals are performed at the *goththan* (cattle shed) located near the main streets of the village. Each of the five days of the festival—*Um Maha*, *Gel-daka* or *Garaya*, *Dangra Khuntao*, *Kada Khutao*, and *Jale Dasar Maha*—is dedicated to specific rituals and festivities. During these days, the villagers engage in dancing and singing along the village streets, accompanied by traditional musical instruments such as the *tumdak*, *tamak*, *karatal*, and bamboo flute. These cultural expressions provide immense joy, particularly to the Santal youth.

Sohrai art, integral to the festival, celebrates nature, agriculture, and the symbiotic relationship between humans and animals. It is a unique art form passed down through generations, with mothers teaching their daughters the techniques and methods of its creation (Kerketta, 2024). These paintings are considered auspicious, believed to bring health, prosperity, and fertility, while also symbolizing societal values and creation. Traditionally, Sohrai art is created on mud walls, with surfaces prepared using a mixture of white mud and cow dung, resulting in a smooth base for painting. Women predominantly use natural colours derived from clay, charcoal, leaves, and plant extracts, applying them with their fingers, as well as with handmade tools such as twigs and cloth. The designs, characterized by spontaneity and freehand execution, often include motifs of animals such as elephants and horses, as well as birds like peacocks, reflecting rural life and the surrounding environment. Deities like Pasupathi and geometric patterns composed of red and black lines—symbolizing fertility, ancestral lineage, and the cycle of life and death—are also commonly depicted. Regional variations in Sohrai art styles are evident, influenced by local traditions, resources, and environmental contexts. For instance, Kerketta (2024) notes that Sohrai paintings in Hazaribagh district frequently depict cows, reflecting their significance in the local economy and cultural practices. In Gumla district, motifs such as the "Tree of Life" are prominent, while villages along the Damodar River incorporate symbols of aquatic life in their art. Meanwhile, Sohrai paintings in Latehar district often include mythological figures and symbols, further showcasing the diversity and richness of this art form.

As part of the Indian knowledge system, Sohrai art not only serves as a medium of aesthetic expression but also as a repository of cultural values, oral traditions, and ecological wisdom (Mahadevan, Bhat and Pavana, 2023). However, the impact of modernization, globalization, and urbanization is increasingly evident in Sohrai art. Traditional themes have been replaced by modern themes, and natural colours derived from clay, flowers, and trees are being substituted with synthetic paints for convenience. These changes reflect the community's adaptation to the modern scenario but risk diluting the essence of their indigenous knowledge.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand how Sohrai wall art portrays the Santal culture and tradition, thereby enriching the Indian Knowledge System, as well as the impact of modernization on this art form.

## II. Review of Related Literature:

Pal and Kalam (2023) noted that modernization has influenced the tools and techniques employed in Santal wall paintings. The interviews conducted reveal that the primary reasons for this shift are the cost efficiency and durability of modern equipment and colours. Furthermore, migration to urban areas for employment and the widespread use of smartphones have contributed to changes in traditional painting practices. Srivastava (2021), in his study, emphasizes the need for preserving and advancing this traditional art form. He suggested that young artists should experiment with this art form on an individual level, which would not only give the art a contemporary touch but also help safeguard this artistic tradition from extinction. Kerketta (2024) has focused on safeguarding the Sohrai art traditions of the indigenous people and recommended towards the glamourization of this art form. Khandekar (2020) in her study focused on the impact of globalization on Warli Art and recommended the need to encourage entrepreneurship through education in order for an artist to become self-reliant and generate income through his creations.

## III. Objectives of the Study

The principal aim of this article is to explore the portrayal of santal culture and tradition through Sohrai wall paintings as an important aspect of Indian knowledge system as well as to understand the impact of modernization on this art form.

## IV. Methodology of the Study:

Ethnographic observation was carried out among the Santali community of Hatimara village under Nadihasurulia gram panchayat of Para subdivision of Purulia district of West Bengal. It is situated 24.1 km away from sub-district headquarter Para and 18.6 km away from district headquarter Purulia. The total geographical area of the village is 160.78 hectares with a population of 726 people. Literary rate of Hatimara village is 62.95% and there are about 113 houses in Hatimara village (Census, 2011).

The study focused on seven women from the Santal tribe, employing interpretive and critical paradigms to examine the research problem. According to the interpretive paradigm, social realities do not exist objectively but are shaped by human experiences and social contexts. To comprehend social reality, researchers must understand issues within their socio-historic context, using subjective interpretations of participants' experiences (Bhattacharjee, 2019). In line with this approach, the researchers analysed and interpreted the participants' narratives to explore the process and reasoning behind the creation of Sohrai wall art by Santal women, as well as the impact of globalization, urbanization, and modernization on this art form. Similarly, the critical paradigm offers a framework for researchers to critically analyse existing power imbalances, the erosion of cultural capital, and the loss of cultural identity among ethnic minorities. It also encourages them to act as change agents advocating for an equitable, fair, and sustainable society (Taylor & Medina, 2011;

Willis, 2007). This study seeks to investigate Sohrai wall art as a vital element in preserving and promoting Santal culture and traditions. By positioning Sohrai wall art as an essential part of the Indian knowledge system, the researchers underscore the importance of preserving this art form and the indigenous knowledge of this minority tribal group. To achieve these objectives, the researchers adopted the narrative inquiry method to document the creation process of Sohrai wall art and the experiences of the Santal women associated with it. Narrative inquiry, as described by Savin-Baden & Niekerk (2007), is “an approach that focuses on the use of stories as data... where stories are collected as a means of understanding experiences as lived and told, through both research and literature” (p. 459).

In this study, the narrators comprise seven Santal women who continue to preserve the tradition of Santal wall art. The narrative inquiry was conducted following the guidelines outlined by Sharp et al. (2019). The researchers explained the purpose of the study to the participants and obtained their consent for the interviews. Once consent was secured, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed to facilitate in-depth interviews. During the interviews, the researchers recorded the conversations for later transcription and also took detailed field notes (Sharp et al., 2019). The transcribed data was analysed using open coding to break it down into meaningful segments, followed by axial coding to identify relationships within the data. This process led to the emergence of key themes. The narratives were then arranged in chronological order, contextualized, and analysed with rich descriptions. Subsequently, thematic analysis, as described by Braun & Clarke (2006), was performed to uncover recurring themes, patterns, and key insights within the stories.

## **V. Results & Discussion:**

Like other communities, the lives and art of the Santals also reflect the impact of globalization and modernization. During field studies, researchers observed that modernization has influenced not only the traditional methods of creating Santal wall art but also the themes and thought processes behind these artworks. In the past, Santals used to draw inspiration from their social lives and nature to create wall art on their houses. These artworks beautifully depicted Santal social life, religious rituals, and various animals, birds, and elements of nature.

The tools and materials used for creating this wall art have also undergone changes. In the past, Santals used natural elements like tree sap, cow dung, and mud to create their wall art. However, these have now been replaced by expensive watercolours, which are both cost-effective and longer-lasting. Nevertheless, the walls used as the canvas for this art are still prepared with a special type of clay. This clay is often made by the Santals themselves or purchased from the market. The inspiration that once came from society and nature has now been replaced by the influence of smartphones, where a single touch brings forth countless images from around the world. Drawing inspiration from these images, the Santals have incorporated their expressions into their wall art. As a result, these artworks now feature not only representations of Santal social life and natural elements like animals and birds but also include 3-dimensional wall art, unique colour combinations, and modern influences.



## Portrayal of Santal Culture and Tradition

A closer examination of this wall art (Figure 1) reveals how the Santals have preserved their traditional culture. This is a beautiful example of traditional wall art, where the rituals of the Sohrai festival, particularly the *Gohal puja* (cattle worship), are vividly depicted. During this ritual, the household cattle are given a thorough bath, their horns are oiled, and their bodies are decorated with colourful circular patterns. This act serves as a gesture of gratitude towards the cattle, who work tirelessly throughout the year to cultivate the fields, and also as a way to thank nature. By portraying their traditions through art, the Santals not only preserve their cultural identity but also contribute to enriching the Indian knowledge system. The woman who created this artwork shared with researchers that her intention was to present their culture to the world. During the Sohrai festival, many non-tribal visitors come to their village, take photographs, and express curiosity about their customs after seeing the art. This inspired her to create the painting as a way to share their heritage with a broader audience (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Sohrai Cattle Worship in Wall Art**

## Depiction of Santal Music and Dance

Similarly, in the second wall art (Figure 2), we see a depiction of a Santal man and woman dressed in their traditional attire. The Santal man has a red cloth tied around his head, a garland of flowers around his neck, and a *dhamsa* slung over his shoulder—a traditional musical instrument of the Santals. This instrument is primarily used during *Santali* dance performances. The scene captures a vibrant moment of *Santali* dance. The Santal woman is adorned with a garland of flowers, floral headgear, earrings, and traditional saree attire, embodying the essence of their cultural identity. Through this wall art, the *Santali* dance—a vital and inseparable part of Santal life—is vividly brought to life. In this way, the Santals depict their social life, festivals, and rituals through their wall art, preserving and celebrating their rich cultural heritage. (Figure 2)





**Figure 2: Portrayal of Santal Dance through Sohrai Art**

### **Essence of Nature in Sohrai Wall Art**

In this wall art (Figure 3), we observe how the imagery of nature comes alive through the imagination of the Santal artist. The painting features a mother deer with her fawn, a cat, and birds commonly seen in the forest, such as parakeets, mynas, and cuckoos. Through this artwork, the beauty and diversity of nature are vividly portrayed. The santal female artist shared with the researchers that her intention was to depict how God has created everything in pairs—just as a man and a woman together create a family, the forest is the home for animals and birds. She emphasized the importance of protecting the forest as we protect our own families. This wall art beautifully reflects the Santals' love and care for the forest, highlighting their deep connection with nature and their sense of responsibility towards its preservation (Figure 3).





**Figure 3: Natural World in Sohrai Wall Art**

Similarly, in this wall art, we see the image of a peacock, symbolizing how deeply intertwined nature is with Santal culture and daily life. The peacock, a vibrant and majestic bird, reflects the community's reverence for the beauty of the natural world and its harmony with their traditions. The use of bright, vivid colours not only highlights the artistic brilliance of Santal artisans but also signifies joy, and celebration (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Sohrai Wall Art of a Peacock**

### Impact of Modernism on Sohrai Wall Art

The impact of modernization is evident in the wall art of the Santal people. From earlier simple designs, they have gradually transitioned to more intricate and complex patterns. In the following wall art (Figure 4), one can observe how a woman artist, through her work, attempted to create the illusion of a three-dimensional image. At the same time, she chose the theme of roots, symbolizing both their ancestral heritage and their



deep connection with nature. When asked by researchers about the inspiration behind this artistic creation, she shared that while browsing her phone, she came across 3D images, which sparked the idea to beautify her home with this unique artwork (Figure 5). Similarly in (Figure 6) we see how through the art an illusion of 3D brick wall has been created by the santal woman artist.



**Figure 5: 3D image of Roots**



**Figure 6: 3D Brick Wall Image**

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the Santal community has done a commendable job of preserving their society and culture through Sohrai wall art while showcasing it to the world. However, to ensure the continuity of this practice, it is essential to make the younger generation in villages understand the importance of Sohrai art. Unless we succeed in inspiring the youth to take pride in preserving their culture, all our efforts will go in vain. Support from the government and NGOs is also crucial to encourage the Santals to sustain their cultural heritage. That said, modernization and urbanization have undoubtedly brought significant changes to Santal



art. What was once a medium of pure joy and sharing personal happiness with the community has now turned into a form of competition, where the focus lies on creating unique and exceptional artworks. While change is inevitable, if modernization starts overshadowing the cultural essence and traditions of their community, the outcome may not be favourable. Hence, collective awareness and concerted efforts are necessary to strike a balance between preserving their heritage and embracing modern influences.

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