



## Tribal Art and Development: An Exploration of Pithora Art of Gujarat

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### ABSTRACT

*Pithora art is a form of folk painting of tribes, residing in eastern Gujarat. It is highly ritualistic painting done by tribal people in order to invoke their God-Baba Pithora. The aim of this paper is to examine the changes revolving around Pithora art form. This study employs content analysis and is based on secondary sources such as books, journal articles, tribal literature and monographs. The main objectives of this study are to describe the ritualistic significance of this tribal art form; to discuss the changes that Pithora art has undergone; to locate the current status of this art form in the context of tribal development and to discuss the contributory factors responsible for change. The impact of changing society is visible in the themes of Pithora paintings. However need of the hour is to preserve their art and use it for the development of the tribes.*

**Keywords:** Tribal Art, Tribal Development, Pithora Art, People- Oriented Approach

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the changes revolving around one of the traditional art forms of tribes of Gujarat. The focus is on the tribals practicing Pithora art. The main objectives of this study are: to understand the ritualistic significance of this tribal art form; to discuss the changes that Pithora art has undergone; and to locate the current status of this art form in the context of tribal development. The research methodology is qualitative in nature and content analysis is undertaken using data from secondary sources such as books, research articles, tribal literature, journal articles and monographs.

In India, 90 million people belong to the indigenous communities known as adivasis or tribals. According to the 2011 census, India has 8.10% of tribal population and about 14.8% of Gujarat's total population is tribal. The term 'tribe' is nowhere defined in the Constitution of India and in fact there is no satisfactory definition. The term usually denotes a social group bound together by kin and duty and associated with a particular territory. Members of the tribe share the social cohesion associated with the family, together with the sense of political autonomy of a nation (Marshall, G. 1994). The traditional abodes of the tribes are hills and forests, and their popular names, meaning either the people of forest and hill or original inhabitants, are: Vanyajati (castes of the forests), vanvasi (inhabitants of forests), pahari (hill dwellers), adim-jati (original communities), adivasi (first settlers), janjati (folk people), anusuchit janjati (schedules tribe) and so on (Vidyarthi and Rai. 1976). Amongst all these terms adivasi is known most extensively.

With reference to Gujarat the earliest mention about the tribes of Gujarat was made in the Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency published in 1899 and 1901. An exhaustive paper on the Bhils of Gujarat with their historical settings was written by Majumdar in 1927. In different issues of the journal of the Anthropological society of Bombay (Mumbai) several papers on tribals and semi-tribal community of Gujarat have been published since 1895. The Gujarat Research Society's journal has also made a valuable contribution on the study of tribal culture of Gujarat (ibid).

Over the past decades it is witnessed that the tribal people are getting assimilated with the rest of the population and this process has been a continuous one. With the process of assimilation arise challenges of retaining, protecting and propagating the cultural elements of the tribes which may face the trepidation of extinction. The integration approach arose due to the inadequacies of isolation and assimilation approach. The integration approach has been advocated by anthropologists, social reformers, and tribal study experts as the most effective approaches in bringing the tribes into the mainstream. However the impact of this integration would vary on different tribes and also on the different aspects of tribal way of life.

### Traditional Pithora Art

Pithora art is a form of folk painting of Rathwas, Bhilals, Nayaks and Tadi tribes, residing in and around Chhota Udeipur and Kawat in eastern Gujarat and parts of western Madhya Pradesh. Pithora art is highly ritualistic painting done on the walls of houses of the tribal people. This painting is mainly done to invoke Baba Pithora, who is revered as most

important God. The main painting is done within a sacred enclosure, which is a rectangular space, bound on all four sides by ornate borders. The sacred enclosure contains the pictorial depiction of the mythology of the Rathwas. Generally the uppermost section of the enclosure, above a wavy line with geometric motifs, represents the world of Gods. Just below this line there is the procession of the marriage of Pithoro. Pithoro's marriage with Pithori is one of the most important aspects of the recited and the painted legend. In the center they have a smaller rectangle where they make orange dots with the fingers, called Tipna, which is done at the end of the ritual when the painting is complete. On top, the Sun, the Moon, monkeys and other figures are drawn. Horizontally, there are three rows, and the central row of Pithora and Tipna are the most important. The last row has figures like elephants, with Raja Bhoj. To the right side they paint Khatri horses which are the horses of their ancestors, in a vertical row. The lower half of the enclosure depicts the actual myth of creation wherein the Earth, the mythical farmer, the cowherd, the kings, the bania, the badvo, the goddesses of destiny, the cow and the bull, the various creatures of the forest and the minor deities are shown ([www.indianfolklore.org](http://www.indianfolklore.org))

### Ritualistic Significance of Pithora Paintings

The ritualistic painting is believed to bring peace, prosperity and happiness to the family. Fundamentally, the tribal art and crafts correspond to three types, namely, ritualistic- used in rites associated with some beliefs and mystical ideas; utilitarian- usage of objects, social customs and in everyday practices; and lastly, individualistic- made to express feelings and emotions of the craftsmen. Pithora paintings are ritualistic and are characterized by animated figures. The Pithora painting is a means of propitiation, thanksgiving and commemoration of auspicious occasions. As with most tribal art forms, all ingredients used for making Pithora paintings are natural. Vegetable pigments derived from leaves, flowers and other forest produce are mixed with milk to prepare the colors. Unlike other artistic tribes like Warli, the Pithora painters are male dominant. These paintings have significance in the lives these tribals and executing the Pithora paintings in their homes brings peace, prosperity and happiness. In context of tribal art it is relevant to note whether a design is representing anthromorphic (human beings), zoomorphic (animals), phylomorphic (plants), physiomorphic (phenomenon of the physical world), or skeuomorphic (a design based on a feature no longer functional). Pithora art form depicts human forms, animals, plants, sacred and transcendental elements and designs pleasing to the eye.

The main groups of tribes who practice this art of Pithora paintings are the Rathwas. These people are extremely simple and highly religious. For them the presence of their God- Pithora Baba, is extremely important. Anybody who has the Pithora painting in their home is highly respected in the society. The one who performs the ritual is called the Badwa or the head priest. Only males from the tribe are allowed to learn the art. Women are not allowed to practice this art form. Pithora paintings are more of a ritual than an art form. These rituals are performed either to thank God or for a wish or a boon to be granted. The people also invoke Baba Pithora to resolve their problems. The Badwa or the head priest of the tribe is summoned and the problems are narrated.

These problems can be of any nature from sick children, to dying cattle, to failure of crops, to marital or fraternal disputes in the family. The concerned person is given a solution and is asked, by the head priest, to perform the ritual and the painting. The presence of Pithora Baba is considered as a solution to all the problems. A Pithora is always located at the threshold, or the Osari. Three walls are prepared for the painting, the front wall and the two on either side of it. These walls are treated with two layers of cow dung paste and one layer of white chalk powder. Unmarried girls bring in these materials. The colour is prepared using colour-powder mixed with milk and Mahuda liquor prepared from the divine Mahuda tree. The flowers are fermented to distill alcohol and its seeds are used for extracting edible oil. The brush is prepared by either chewing or by beating the ends of a bamboo stick or a twig. There is a lot of singing and chanting along with the process of painting. In the evening before the sacrifice the priest goes into a trance and finds out what has been forgotten in the painting and that too is drawn and painted. After it is drawn they make an outline with a bamboo twig, and fill it with colour. After the painters work a full day, painting and singing, people come from great distances to witness the ritual and by night the entire house becomes jubilant (<http://www.blog.gaatha.com>).

### Changes in Traditional Pithora Art in Contemporary Times

As evident among tribes across India, the Rathwas too are under constant pressure to get integrated with the main stream. In present times the ritualistic art form of Pithora paintings has undergone changes. There is demand from the market and their art form is now used for commercial purposes. However, since Pithora art is revered, there would be some amount of dissatisfaction among the tribals. At the same time impact of money economy, global market phenomena, processes of commercialization have led to the acceptance of the need to alter their art form according to the interests and demands of consumers and market. The changes which the traditional art form has undergone are one, is that they have started incorporating few variations in the composition of the original painting and they have begun to include airplanes, trains, buildings, computers and other so called modern elements or objects from contemporary times which allows them de-contextualize their traditional art form before selling it. Second, is that they have gradually begun to allow their ritualistic art to be used as a wall hanging, or being printed on some cloth though older tribals seem skeptical of using their sacred art on sarees or duppattas. Third, is that the colors used today are those available or sold in the market. Modern brushes have replaced the traditional ones which were earlier made from tender stems of trees. Although some elders may feel dejected with the changes since their art is considered divine and is revered even today, the onslaught on their traditional art is going unchecked.

### Factors Responsible for Changes

The factors responsible for changes in the pithora art form are due to assimilation, modernization and globalization. In their eagerness to be included into the mainstream the tribals are adopting the ways and means of caste communities and in the process moving away from their cultural roots. The course of modernization has led to development of means of transport and communication which has propelled contact with and influence of the outside world on them. In addition, the advent of globalization has opened up market economy and created avenues for using tribal art and craft for commercial purposes. As a result of the impact of globalization these tribals are utilizing their art form for commercial purposes. The modern world with its facades, deceptions, economic interests, with its ceaseless acquisitive strife for possession of wealth and power, not as a means to higher ends, but as ends in themselves is strikingly different from the sense of commercial innocence of tribal way of life, though much of which may already be changing, due to the constant interaction with the so called 'civilized man' (Venkatachaliah, 2001).

This understanding of the practice of Pithora art allows us to appreciate the significance that this art form holds for its people. By juxtaposing the ritualistic relevance of this art form along with the usage of its paintings for commercial purposes we can understand the sentiments attached behind this art form which may lose its traditional value with the changing times. The religious beliefs, ritual and the social organization of a tribe may greatly influence art. In case of Pithora painting, preserving the art form through its commercial usage may be one way of propagating it, however it is important to take into account the sentiments of the people. The benefits of its commercial use should directly reach the tribes practicing this art form.

Situating this in the ongoing debate related to the approaches employed to deal with the tribal people brings into focus the three approaches advocated so far-isolation, assimilation and integration. Both exclusion and partial exclusion from mainstream have yielded dismal progress in the condition and situation of tribals. Assimilation of the tribes with the mainstream has been advocated by scholars, anthropologists and social workers; however the process has been slow and disjunctive. Hence the need of the hour is integration of the tribes with mainstream and an emphasis on people-oriented approach.

### Tribal Development: A People-Oriented Approach

The consequences of tribal people integrating with the outside world may lead to certain unwanted consequences such as loss of identity that assimilative processes bring with them; loss of life in the lap of nature and a more ecologically balanced life; and most importantly loss of rich store house of tribal art, culture, traditional wisdom and tribal medicine. The rich cultural world of tribal arts is an invaluable component of the mosaic of Indian art. The fact remains that they cannot forever remain unaffected by what goes on outside their tribal world. How can a delicate balance between continuity and change, modernity and tradition and the brave new world outside and the traditional life-style of tribes be achieved? How can the rich heritage of tribal Art, music, folklore and legend, traditional knowledge be preserved? The National Policy on Schedule Tribes recognizes that a majority of Schedule Tribes continue to live below the poverty line, have poor literacy rates, suffer from malnutrition and diseases and are vulnerable to displacement. It also acknowledges that Schedule Tribes are repositories of indigenous knowledge and wisdom in certain aspects. Though the National Policy on Schedule Tribes aims to bring Scheduled tribes into the mainstream of society through a multi-pronged approach for their all round development there is dearth of commitment to translate the constitutional provisions into reality (<http://socialjustice.nic.in>). On the path of tribal development it is necessary to focus on specific tribal groups instead of a general plan of action for all the tribes. Each tribe with its history, evolution, way of life and stage of development will necessitate people-oriented approach.

### Conclusion

Any unique cultural factor of the tribes has to be utilized for their own economic or social benefit. The question is how can this be done? Integrating them into the mainstream without making intensive efforts to preserve their cultural identity would prove detrimental to their development. It is necessary to protect, preserve and propagate the tribal culture. For this purpose Government and NGOs have to make concerted efforts to ensure that cultural identity of the tribal group does not vanish in the name of tribal development. In the past policies have been formulated on paper however it has not reached the grassroots. Since the tribal people cannot remain unaffected by the outside world the need of the hour would be create policies which would ensure the protection of their culture along with relevant developmental plans. Protection of the tribal interests should be the top most priority for policy makers and government grass root workers. There is a need to have a conducive debate on the right of the tribal people over their indigenous cultural elements and practices. There is a need to take effective steps for protecting the 'common heritage' of the tribes and at the same time help them to use this art form for their own socio-economic development. An in-depth empirical study of the Pithora art may bring about newer insights regarding the ways to use their art form for their own development and progress along with preservation of their art form.

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