



Negotiating Culture And Identity: Women's Role In Sustaining Godna Art Among The Santhals

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Abstract: Tribal art has long been recognized as a powerful repository of cultural identity, historical memory, and community cohesion. Across various indigenous groups, women often play a critical role in sustaining these artistic traditions, navigating the delicate balance between preserving ancestral customs and responding to social change. This article investigates the role of women in preserving Godna art, a distinctive tattoo- and body-art-based tradition, among the Santhal tribe of eastern India. The study identifies how women act as both custodians and innovators of Godna art. They maintain customary motifs and techniques while simultaneously adapting them to contemporary tastes, thereby ensuring their ongoing relevance.

However, women practitioners face several challenges in preserving this vital art form. The dominance of modern fashion trends has led some younger generations to perceive Godna art as archaic, resulting in diminished interest in traditional designs. Furthermore, socio-economic constraints, coupled

with limited institutional support, pose obstacles to the sustainable practice of Godna. In some cases, the patriarchal social structures and cultural norms constrain women's mobility and entrepreneurial opportunities, thereby creating barriers to the transmission of skills. Despite these challenges, this study uncovers that many Santhal women remain resilient, employing adaptive strategies such as forming cooperative groups or using digital platforms to reach broader audiences.

By examining the interplay between cultural heritage, gendered responsibilities, and modern socio-economic pressures, this research offers fresh insights into the survival of tribal arts in a rapidly transforming society. The findings underscore the crucial role played by Santhal women in safeguarding Godna as both a traditional and evolving form of expression, illuminating how indigenous artistic practices can endure when communities are equipped with the necessary agency, resources, and institutional backing. In conclusion, this article advocates for context-specific

policy measures and community-based initiatives aimed at enhancing women's artistic autonomy and preserving tribal heritage.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Tribal communities around the world have rich, multi-faceted cultural expressions that manifest in various art forms, paintings, carvings, sculptures, tattoos, dance, and music. These art forms serve as cultural signifiers, carrying the collective memory, history, and identity of indigenous groups (Patnaik, 2014). Among such communities, women have historically assumed pivotal roles in creating, preserving, and transmitting artistic traditions (Mohanty, 2019). Their active engagement offers a lens through which to understand the enduring cultural values of a community and the forces that shape their transformation (Roy, 2018).

One such art form is Godna, a tattoo-based practice that has a long and storied history among tribal societies in India. Godna motifs vary across tribes but generally reflect socio-religious beliefs, communal identities, and personal aesthetics. Within the Santhal tribe, one of the largest tribal groups in eastern India, Godna art is significant for both its historical functions and its contemporary adaptations. Traditionally, Godna signified tribal identity, social status, and spiritual protection (Murmu, 2020). While this art form is increasingly influenced by modernity, globalization, and shifting cultural values, it remains an essential component of Santhal heritage (Danda, 2016).

Against this backdrop, women's contributions to preserving Godna art remain underrecognized. Most scholarly discussions have predominantly focused on men's contributions to tribal culture or on more broadly visible art forms such as dance and music (Sinha, 2017). Women's participation in Godna,

Keywords: Tribal art, Godna, Santhal tribe, Women's role, Cultural preservation, Indigenous traditions, Gender studies

encompassing responsibilities like design conceptualization, tattooing, teaching younger generations, and its application on the client, has received comparatively little attention (Lahiri, 2021). This article aims to fill that gap by providing a detailed investigation into the role of Santhal women in sustaining Godna art, the challenges they encounter, and the adaptive strategies they employ to remain culturally and economically relevant.

3.2 Roles of Santhal Women in Godna Art

3.2.1 Custodians of Traditional Motifs

Women in the Santhal tribe have long served as the principal custodians of Godna's traditional motifs, ensuring that these ancient designs retain their historical and cultural resonance. Generational knowledge transfer typically occurs within a matrilineal framework, wherein grandmothers and mothers pass down the meaning, symbolism, and application techniques of specific patterns to their daughters. Many of these motifs carry profound spiritual and socio-historical significance, commemorating ancestral origin stories, tribal myths, or sacred animals believed to offer protection and blessings. As a result, the responsibility of safeguarding these motifs becomes both a familial duty and a communal obligation.

Crucially, the preservation of traditional motifs is not limited to technical replication. *Women also serve as oral historians, linking each symbol to the community's collective memory.* A spiral may represent the cyclical rhythm of life and death, a geometric pattern might depict fertility, and a particular form of floral design could reference a revered deity. By narrating the stories behind these symbols, elder women ensure that each new generation gains a holistic understanding of the art

form, not only mastering the visual aspect but also internalizing the deeper cultural underpinnings. In this way, women act as living archives of Santhal heritage, preventing the erosion of ancestral knowledge that often accompanies modernizing influences.

3.2.2 Innovators and Adaptors

Although deeply rooted in tradition, Godna art is far from static. *Santhal women play pivotal roles in evolving these motifs to respond to contemporary tastes and circumstances.* Younger practitioners, exposed to modern fashion trends and the global tattoo industry, frequently experiment with new color palettes, altered proportions, or hybrid motifs that merge traditional designs with contemporary imagery. For instance, a classic floral pattern may be stylized to match broader aesthetic preferences, while certain mythological symbols might be paired with modern script to create a fusion of old and new. This creative blending ensures that Godna remains both culturally significant and visually appealing to younger generations who might otherwise lose interest in strictly “old-fashioned” designs.

Innovation also extends to the materials and methods used. While traditional Godna relies on rudimentary tools and natural pigments, some women have embraced safer and more hygienic practices by introducing sterilized needles, protective gloves, and medically approved inks. These adaptations have widened the appeal of Godna beyond the local community, attracting potential clients from nearby towns or even urban centers. In many cases, women have found that such innovations help them earn supplemental income, thereby enhancing the economic sustainability of Godna. *By balancing respect for heritage with openness to innovation, Santhal women exemplify cultural adaptation* that preserves the essence of Godna while enabling it to thrive amid changing societal landscapes.

3.2.3 Transmission of Skills

The transmission of Godna-related skills occurs through a nuanced interplay of formal and informal learning processes within the Santhal community, and women are the primary facilitators of this exchange. From a young age, girls are encouraged to observe and participate in basic tasks, preparing natural inks, cleaning tools, or assisting senior tattoo artists in organizing communal sessions. This experiential learning approach ensures that each new generation becomes familiar not only with the technical dimensions of the art form but also with the cultural and spiritual values that underlie it.

As their involvement progresses, novice practitioners receive more direct mentorship from experienced women tattooists, often mothers, aunts, or grandmothers, who provide hands-on guidance in motifs, placement techniques, and aftercare practices. These personal tutorials delve beyond simple instruction: mentors emphasize the symbolic weight of each motif, the ethical considerations of placing a tattoo on another person, and the importance of maintaining cleanliness and sensitivity during the process. *Additionally, apprenticeship-style learning often happens alongside village festivals and rituals, where the atmosphere is ripe for collaborative engagement and real-time feedback.* In this way, women function as culture-bearers and skill-transmitters, ensuring that the craft’s authenticity remains intact even as they encourage experimentation and personalization among younger Santhal artists. By connecting past knowledge with contemporary realities, *women effectively bridge generational gaps and secure the longevity of Godna traditions within the Santhal tribe.*

3.2.4 Fostering Community Cohesion

A defining characteristic of Godna art among the Santhal tribe is its communal dimension, and women stand at the heart of this collective experience.

Tattooing sessions frequently occur in group settings, during village fairs, seasonal festivals, and even informal neighborhood gatherings, where multiple women come together to share resources such as inks, needles, and stencils. The process itself is often accompanied by singing, dancing, and storytelling. These performative elements serve multiple functions: they heighten the sense of celebration, enhance group solidarity, and transmit oral narratives that encapsulate community values, historical events, and mythical origins.

In these communal settings, women also exercise leadership by organizing and directing the flow of activities. For instance, experienced tattoo artists may mentor younger or less experienced practitioners, demonstrating the correct placement of motifs or the layering of colors. Throughout these sessions, moral and cultural instruction naturally intertwines with technical training. Women emphasize the necessity of precision, care, and respect for the individual receiving the tattoo, underscoring how Godna is not merely a personal decoration but a shared cultural treasure.

Moreover, these gatherings foster a bond among participants beyond the immediate act of tattooing. Once a session concludes, women often remain in close contact, discussing ideas for new motifs, coordinating future communal events, and supporting each other in everyday life. This collaborative ethos ***strengthens social networks and promotes a collective sense of responsibility toward preserving Godna's tradition.*** In this way, Santhal women transform each tattooing event into a microcosm of community building, demonstrating how art can be a powerful vehicle for social cohesion and unity.

3.2.5 Preserving Personal Identity and Marking Life Stages

Beyond its community-wide importance, Godna also serves as a ***profound marker of individual identity, particularly for women who navigate various life stages within the Santhal cultural framework.***

Puberty, for instance, is a key transitional phase in many tribal societies, and the introduction of certain tattoo motifs upon a girl's body can denote her readiness to embrace adult responsibilities. These motifs are often imbued with blessings for fertility, prosperity, and protection, signals that the community recognizes and supports her shift in status.

At the time of marriage, women traditionally receive additional tattoos that highlight their new roles as wives and potential mothers, symbolizing the convergence of two families and the responsibilities of upholding familial honour. Some motifs may represent the lineage of the groom's family, thus visually inscribing the bride into her marital clan's heritage. Similarly, childbirth can trigger another tattooing ceremony, celebrating fertility and the continuation of the familial line. These tattoos often incorporate protective symbols intended to shield both mother and child from malevolent forces or misfortune.

Santhal women thus treat tattoos as living documents of their personal journeys. Each motif or design added to the body archives a chapter of their life story, recording rites of passage, affirming communal blessings, and cementing family bonds. By elevating these symbolic designs as central to personal identity, the Santhal community underscores the notion that Godna is not just an aesthetic enterprise but a rich tapestry interwoven with personal growth, social recognition, and communal history.

3.2.6 Incorporating Godna into Rituals, Festivals, and Cultural Sanctity

Godna extends beyond individual rites of passage into the broader sphere of collective ritual life. Seasonal festivals, harvest celebrations, and religious ceremonies often witness a renewed focus on tattooing or the refreshing of existing designs, ensuring that these events become occasions for cultural revitalization. ***Women typically orchestrate these sessions, preparing dyes, organizing tools, and performing the actual tattoo work.*** While men also partake in various rituals, women largely steward the symbolic dimension of Godna, reminding participants of each motif's spiritual and cultural significance.

Within these festive contexts, Godna often transforms into a medium for honoring deities, nature, and ancestral spirits. Designs may depict sacred animals, cosmic symbols, or mythological figures believed to confer divine protection or blessings. The act of tattooing during these celebrations is frequently accompanied by songs dedicated to tribal gods or ancestors, thereby weaving spiritual reverence into bodily expressions of faith.

Crucially, ***women in these roles also function as cultural custodians who guard the sacred boundaries of Godna.*** They monitor the authenticity of motifs, discouraging superficial or commercialized adaptations that might erode the art's deeper meaning. By actively choosing which motifs to share publicly and which *to keep exclusive to family or lineage-based traditions*, women regulate the flow of cultural knowledge. Through this careful curation, they ensure that Godna remains a revered art form, anchored in the tribe's spiritual worldview and shielded from exploitative or disrespectful uses.

3.2.7 Bridging Generational Divides and Safeguarding Local Ingredients

Another vital contribution of Santhal women is their role in bridging the generational divide through the transmission of ecological knowledge tied to Godna. In many villages, the responsibility for sourcing and preparing traditional tattoo inks falls primarily on women, who possess a nuanced understanding of the local environment. Knowledge of medicinal and colouring properties of herbs, tree barks, leaves, and roots is passed down from grandmothers to mothers and then to daughters, preserving a lineage of plant-based expertise.

This ecological knowledge transcends mere practicality, it embodies a deep respect for the land and the interconnectedness of all living things. By harvesting plants sustainably, women demonstrate stewardship of natural resources, ensuring that crucial ingredients remain available for future generations. ***This cyclical transfer of knowledge empowers younger community members not only to continue the tradition of Godna*** but also to recognize the broader cultural, spiritual, and environmental significance of each botanical resource. For instance, certain herbs may have antiseptic qualities that reduce infection risks, reflecting a fusion of cultural wisdom and practical health considerations.

Finally, by serving as both guardians of tradition and adapters to modern contexts, women mitigate generational gaps that might otherwise erode cultural continuity. Younger generations, who may be skeptical of traditional practices due to changing social norms or external influences, often develop renewed interest when they see Godna adapted to contemporary settings, such as stylized motifs or collaborations with modern tattooing techniques. By highlighting the art form's ecological roots, spiritual foundations, and capacity for innovation, ***Santhal women construct a dynamic cultural bridge.*** They

guide the tribe in preserving the sanctity of Godna while simultaneously ensuring that it remains relevant and sustainable for the generations yet to come.

3.3 Challenges Faced by Women Practitioners

3.3.1 Changing Cultural Perceptions

In interviews, multiple participants lamented that younger generations increasingly perceive Godna as “old-fashioned” or even “primitive.” The shift in social attitudes is closely tied to modernization, urbanization, and exposure to global fashion trends (Danda, 2016). As a result, the practice of Godna, once integral to the identity of Santhal women, is now at risk of marginalization.

3.3.2 Socio-Economic Constraints

The precarious socio-economic conditions prevalent in many tribal communities further complicate the sustained practice of Godna. Interviews revealed that most practitioners operate on a meagre income, the marginalization of artisans has been so extreme that they are confined to their local areas. The cost of acquiring modern tattoo equipment or quality pigments can be prohibitive (Sinha, 2017). Some participants also mentioned the scarcity of governmental or NGO-led funding targeted at art preservation.

3.3.3 Patriarchal Barriers

Although women lead in preserving Godna, broader patriarchal norms sometimes constrain their entrepreneurial endeavours. Some participants described situations where male relatives discouraged their involvement in the marketplace, citing fears of “cultural dilution” or moral concerns about “women traveling alone.” These attitudes limit women’s ability to expand their market reach and monetarily benefit from their skills (Lahiri, 2021).

3.3.4 Health and Safety Concerns

Traditional Godna procedures often involve

rudimentary tattooing methods that can lead to infections if not performed under hygienic conditions (Roy, 2018). While some practitioners have adapted by incorporating modern sterilization practices, many others lack the resources and training to ensure safe procedures. This discrepancy in hygiene and safety standards has further deterred younger generations from continuing the tradition.

3.4 Adaptive Strategies and Innovations

3.4.1 Forming Cooperative Groups

One of the more notable findings pertains to the emergence of women-led cooperative groups, formed to pool resources and share market information. These groups collectively purchase tattoo materials, exchange knowledge about the latest art trends, and even establish small exhibitions showcasing their work. By operating as a collective, the practitioners reduce individual financial risks and strengthen their bargaining power with local traders (Mohanty, 2019).

3.4.2 Digital Platforms and Online Marketing

A smaller but growing number of younger practitioners leverage social media platforms to showcase and market Godna designs. Some participants reported selling customized designs or handcrafted items bearing Godna motifs through online marketplaces. While this approach remains nascent due to digital illiteracy and infrastructural barriers in remote villages, it has the potential to broaden the audience for Godna-inspired products (Patnaik, 2014). But in a recent article covered by TOI these as is local artisan by the name of Dulari Hansda who has opened a *Godna parlour where she applies the traditional motifs and believes that she does not provide tattoo service but ‘an experience’ of the Santhal culture* as the group of people assisting her in the parlour ; sing the folk tales (Santhal community is famous for their folk lores) and dance and provide an entire experience

with traditional inks but latest tattoo tools .

3.4.3 Incorporating Modern Tattoo Techniques

A few participants have introduced electric tattooing machines into their practice, thus merging traditional designs with modern methods. This not only enhances efficiency but also attracts younger clients who favour professional, standardized tattooing processes. Although this modernization has sparked debate among traditionalists, it demonstrates how adaptive changes can keep Godna relevant in a rapidly evolving cultural landscape (Danda, 2016).

3.4.4 Diversification of Art Forms

Another survival strategy involves transferring Godna motifs onto mediums beyond the body. By adapting designs to textiles, pottery, and canvases, practitioners can generate alternative sources of income. This diversification is particularly appealing to women who face societal restrictions on mobility or direct contact with men outside their community (Sinha, 2017).

Discussion

4.1 Interplay of Tradition and Modernity

The findings offer compelling evidence of how Santhal women mediate between traditional heritage and contemporary demands. While anchored in ancestral knowledge, they are open to experimentation, provided it does not erode the cultural essence of Godna (Murmu, 2020). This complex negotiation underscores that cultural practices are rarely static; they are living entities that morph to align with new social and economic realities (Roy, 2018).

4.2 Gender Dynamics and Cultural Preservation

Gender emerges as a crucial factor in understanding the sustainability of tribal art forms. Women's roles extend beyond mere "keepers of culture" to active

agents shaping cultural evolution (Mohanty, 2019).

Yet, *patriarchal limitations, manifested in restricted mobility or lack of institutional support, pose significant hurdles*. A striking observation is that while women hold extensive knowledge and skill in Godna, *they often have limited autonomy in monetizing these skills*. This paradox highlights an urgent need for policies and interventions that empower women as cultural entrepreneurs (Lahiri, 2021).

4.3 Socio-Economic and Policy Implications

Tribal arts, particularly those maintained by women, risk extinction if socio-economic incentives are lacking. Despite the cultural significance of Godna, many practitioners struggle with subsistence-level incomes and face an uncertain demand for their work. This research indicates that external support, be it through governmental grants, NGO programs, or private-sector collaborations, can make a pivotal difference in preserving tribal art forms (Patton, 2015). For instance, if local administration and cultural bodies invest in setting up workshops, training in modern tattooing and hygiene, and marketing cooperatives, the appeal and viability of Godna could expand dramatically.

4.4 Health, Safety, and Cultural Integrity

The tension between preserving cultural integrity and ensuring health standards emerges as a key theme. Traditional tattooing methods carry health risks, creating a dilemma for practitioners who value authenticity. The introduction of modern tattoo techniques, while potentially beneficial in addressing health concerns, could be seen as diluting the spiritual or cultural aspects of the art (Sinha, 2017). Bridging this gap requires culturally sensitive training programs that combine sterilization practices with respect for indigenous artistic norms.

4.5 Strategies for Sustainable Preservation

The cooperative model, digital outreach, and diversification of art forms all hint at viable paths for sustaining Godna among the Santhal tribe. However, these strategies require supportive infrastructure, reliable internet connectivity, affordable raw materials, and safe communal spaces for collective work. The involvement of stakeholders beyond the tribe, government agencies, NGOs, art curators, and academic institutions, could amplify women's voices and place Godna art on more robust socio-economic footing (Danda, 2016).

2. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study has illuminated the multifaceted role that Santhal women play in preserving and transforming Godna art. Far from being passive recipients of tradition, they operate as custodians, educators, and innovators, constantly negotiating between cultural fidelity and contemporary relevance. The challenges they encounter, ranging from socio-economic constraints to patriarchal barriers, underscore the fragility of indigenous cultural practices in the face of modernization. Nevertheless, the emergence of cooperative groups, adoption of digital platforms, and increasing collaboration with external stakeholders highlight the resilience and ingenuity of these women artisans.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

1. Economic Support and Entrepreneurship Programs

Government and NGOs should initiate small-scale entrepreneurship programs focusing on skill development, financial literacy, and market access to enhance the agency of women practitioners.

2. Educational Integration

Introducing tribal arts into mainstream curricula and vocational training can foster intergenerational dialogue, thereby bolstering youth interest in Godna and related cultural practices.

3. Infrastructure Development

Improved internet connectivity and the establishment of community art centers or tribal museums in remote areas can elevate Godna to a wider audience, both nationally and internationally.

4. Health and Safety Regulations

Local health departments could collaborate with tribal leaders to organize workshops on sterilization and safe tattooing practices. This initiative should integrate respect for cultural traditions with modern health guidelines.

5. Community-Based Tourism

Carefully structured cultural tourism that respects tribal autonomy can create additional income streams for practitioners. Partnerships with tourism boards can highlight Godna as a cultural attraction, ensuring practitioners are fairly compensated.

5.3 Future Research Directions

Further research could employ a comparative lens, examining Godna practices across different tribal communities to identify shared challenges and strategies. Additionally, longitudinal studies focusing on the impact of digital marketing on tribal art forms would help clarify the long-term efficacy of technological interventions. Finally, quantitative research into the economic contributions of women-led artistic cooperatives could provide empirical support for policy advocacy.

5.4 Concluding Remarks

Godna art among the Santhal tribe, as this study reveals, is not merely an aesthetic practice but an embodiment of communal history, spirituality, and identity. In this tapestry of cultural continuity, women's contributions stand out as vital threads, weaving tradition with innovation. By recognizing and addressing the challenges they face, such as socio-economic marginalization, patriarchal norms, and health risks, we can pave a pathway for the sustainable preservation of one of India's treasured tribal art forms. Ensuring that Santhal women's voices are amplified and their artistic endeavours supported will not only secure the future of Godna but also affirm the value of indigenous artistry in a rapidly globalizing world.

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Rajshree Mathpal, Assistant Professor in Sociology department at Banasthali Vidyapeeth, Rajasthan. Guide to Mr. Kumar Vikas in his thesis – *Socio Cultural Changes in Santhal Tribe of Jharkhand (with special reference to endangered tradition of tattooing among Santhal Women)*