

Negotiating Tradition and Change: A Cultural–Geographical Study of Sohrai and Khovar Paintings in Hazaribagh region, Jharkhand, India

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Abstract:

Hazaribagh, Jharkhand, India is known for its two important cultural styles of painting, Sohrai and Khovar; these paintings have historical and emotional meaning to the artisans in that area. This study has investigated the perspectives of the villagers of Isko and Jorakath and their contribution to the evolution of these two types of paintings. Artisans in Isko continue to utilise natural dyes in their paint to make ritualistic paintings, with their purpose largely associated with ceremonial events. On the other hand, Jorakath artisans have moved toward using synthetic pigments in their non-ritualistic works, partially due to the influence of tourism and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This new trend changes the cultural integrity of the paintings because artisans create the paintings, and then they are reproduced commercially, negatively affecting the individual artists' heritage. This paper illustrates an immediate need to protect these artistic forms of expression and provide adequate compensation for artists. The notion of using these forms of artistic expression within an evolving society is emphasised through environmental stewardship, equitable market access, and educational outreach activities to ensure the next generations have access to the legacy of Sohrai and Khovar paintings.

Keywords: Sohrai painting, Khovar painting, modernisation, cultural heritage, Scheduled Tribes, GI tag.

Introduction:

Indigenous art traditions are perhaps the most revealing aspect of socio-cultural studies. They visually present the shared identity of the natives, their intimate bond with nature, and their ritual practices, which have been carried out at certain landscapes for a long time. To give one example, the tribal mural painting of India is deeply rooted not only in the domestic but also in the ceremonial spaces (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1985). Thus, the narrative of culture through art is parallel to the community's daily life in the way spaces are treated or used. The Sohrai and Khovar paintings of the Hazaribagh areas in the state of Jharkhand collectively represent a

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single cultural system, but it appears that the scholars have almost ignored the fact. Sohrai mural mainly depicts the post-harvest season and the worship of cattle. Characters in the painting collectively symbolise fertility, wealth, and a harmonious coexistence between the human world and nature as they always refer to each other. On the other hand, the Khovar mural is one of the marriage rituals only and its traditional place from ritual contexts, raising concerns about the loss of the original cultural essence (Choudhary, 2021; Majumdar, 2020). Besides that, gender perspectives of these practices have also been stressed by scholars, notably how female artists have been instrumental in the cultural continuity and social empowerment of their communities (Singh, 2018).

Against this background, the present research, which is based on field observations in Isko and Jorakath villages of the Barkagaon Block, explores the socio-cultural, economic, and planning aspects of Sohrai and Khovar painting. The study, through the combination of cultural, geographical discourses and material field data, examines how these native wall painting cultures, through the practice of murals, reconcile cultural traditions and social changes under transforming development paradigms.

Study area

This work is based on fieldwork in two tribal and agrarian villages, Isko and Jorakath, in the Barkagaon Block of Hazaribagh District, Jharkhand State, India (Fig.1). These non-commercial villages were chosen because they both have retained the mural art practice, which is a cultural aspect of their respective ethnic groups, but socio-economically and development-wise (modernisation and industrialisation), they are different. Isko, the larger village in the Napokhurd Gram Panchayat area, is located roughly 30 km southwest of Hazaribagh town, with coordinates falling in the range 23°78'03"N, 23°82'71"N latitude and 85°29'03"E, 85°34'67"E longitude. Isko is accessible through Charpahtai Pawrani road up to Barkagaon and then via rural roads between Barkagaon and Hazaribagh. But be aware, those roads get muddy and slippery in the rainy season. Jorakath village in Gondalpur Gram Panchayat lies eastward of Isko with coordinates falling in the range 23°82'60"N, 23°87'79"N latitude and 85°35'24"E, 85°40'14"E longitude. Due to its nearness with Gondalpur coal mining zone, the way of living of the people in the village has been somewhat changed due to the activities of the industry and the way of living and culture are getting impacted by the environment and human society. Both settlements are located on the Hazaribagh Plateau, a section of the Chotanagpur Plateau, and their average altitude is approximately 600 to 610 meters above sea level.

The land in the area is substantially rough with a mixture of hills, flat crests, small hills, and shallow denes. Small aqueducts of water from seasonal showers flow through the area and are the main water source for rain-fed husbandry. Sandstone deposits are typical at Isko, as at the ancient Isko Rock Art Shelter, while Jorakath has a more varied terrain with wooded crests and tended flatlands.

Geologically, the area is part of the North Karanpura Coalfield. The face gemstone belongs to Gondwana conformations, substantially sandstone, shale, laterite, and coal seams. The sandstone at Isko has been necessary in conserving the old drawings and gemstone oils. The soils, which are derived from red, unheroic, white, and black earth, are also the source of the

natural colours used in the original tempera oils.

The climate is tropical thunderstorm, and there are three seasons: a hot, dry summer (March to June), a thunderstorm season (June to September) with about 1, 200 to 1, 400 mm of rainfall, and a cool, dry winter (November to February) during which temperatures can go down to 6, 8 degrees Celsius. The Sohrai jubilee is celebrated at the change of seasons from downtime to the stormy season, while Khoovar marriages are conducted in the dry and stable rainfall of downtime.

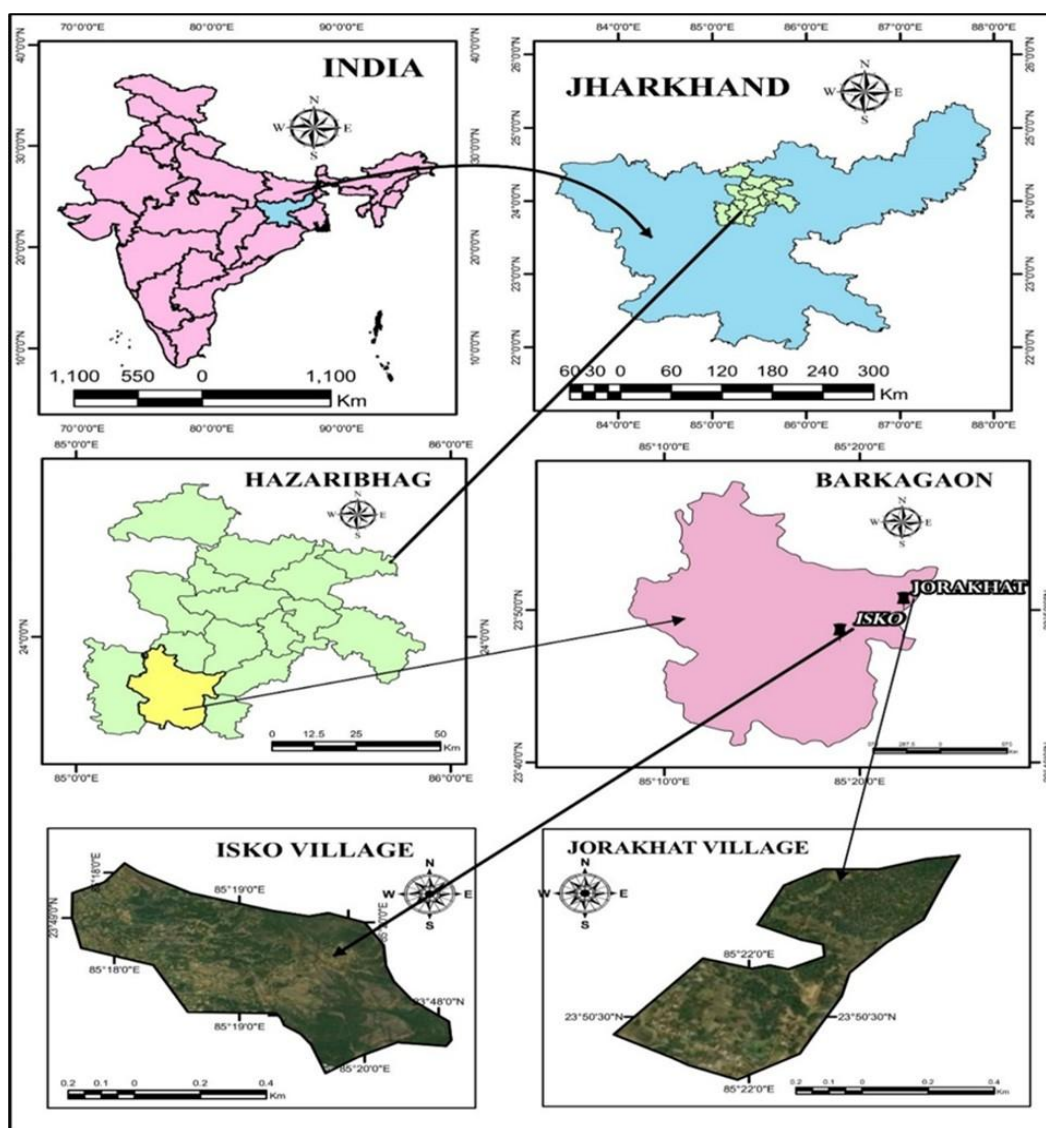


Fig.-1. Location of the study area.

Soils are generally lateritic on mounds and red loamy in hollow areas. While lateritic soils are rich in iron and aluminium oxides but poor in organic matter, red loamy soils are fairly rich and support the civilisation of paddy, sludge, and beats. Importantly, both soil types give essential raw materials for natural colours used in aquarelle art. The natural vegetation is identified as Tropical Dry Deciduous Forest, with Sal (*Shorea Robusta*) being the predominant tree, succeeded by Mahua, Palash, Kendu, and bamboo species. These trees provide us with various benefits such as timber and non-timber forest products, as well as tools, dyes, and raw

materials for tempera oil painting. However, exploitation of mining and agricultural expansion has led to the destruction of the forest dwellings.

The population of both townlets primarily comprises Kurmi, Santhal, Oraon, and Munda communities. Livelihoods are largely agricultural, with women playing a central part in sustaining the tempera oil painting tradition. Isko village remains fairly isolated from artificial influence and continues ritual-rested oil painting practices in comparatively traditional forms. In distinction, Jorakath has endured lower intervention through coal mining-governmental associations and artistic tourism programs, presenting both livelihood openings and challenges to artistic durability.

Even though they are located nearby, the socio-economic differences between Isko and Jorakath present a distinctive comparative framework for examining how local conditions contribute to the resilience and change of indigenous mural traditions at the time of fast socio-economic change.

Objectives

1. To document and analyse the customary styles, themes, substances, and methods linked to Sohrai and Khovar painting in the chosen villages.
2. To examine the cultural and artistic importance of these art forms concerning ritual traditions, seasonal changes, and gender dynamics
3. To assess the effects of globalisation, modernisation, and institutional actions on the persistence and evolution of Sohrai and Khovar painting traditions
4. To evaluate the financial and subsistence factors of these artistic expressions, such as market opportunities, revenue creation, and commercialisation.
5. To examine the differences in cultural practices between Isko and Jorakath villages, considering their distinct socio-economic and environmental contexts.
6. To investigate the future potential of Sohrai and Khovar painting traditions, emphasising sustainability, conservation, and adaptive evolution.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive – logical exploration design to probe the socio-artistic, profitable, and spatial confines of Sohrai and Khovar oil in the Hazaribagh region. A mixed-system approach combining qualitative and limited quantitative ways was employed to capture both existential and measurable aspects of indigenous tempera practices.

The exploration was conducted in Isko and Jorakath townlets of the Barkagaon Block, Hazaribagh District, Jharkhand. These townlets were intentionally named due to the uninterrupted practice of Sohrai and Khovar, proximity to Neolithic gemstone art spots, and varying degrees of exposure to industrialisation, tourism, and non-governmental interventions. This setting provided a suitable relative frame for analysing durability and change in indigenous tempera traditions.

Both primary and secondary data sources were employed. Primary data were collected through field checks conducted during fieldwork. These included direct observation of tempera oils, photographic attestation of motifs and accoutrements, and mapping of their spatial placement

within homes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with women artists, senior community members, and original artistic facilitators to understand ritual meanings, modes of knowledge transmission, and profitable aspects.

Secondary data were attained from academic books, peer-reviewed journals, government reports, trade publications, institutional documents, and preliminary field reports related to ethnic art, artistic terrain, and indigenous development.

A purposive quota sampling method was adopted to select households actively involved in Sohrai and Khovar painting. Priority was given to female artists due to their central role in artistic production and cultural transmission. Respondents from different age groups were included to assess intergenerational knowledge transfer and changing perceptions of the art forms.

Qualitative data were enciphered and thematically analysed under crucial orders such as artistic significance, modernisation, commercialisation, globalisation, and sustainability.

Quantitative data attained through questionnaires were tabulated and analysed using (Fig. 2). Spatial patterns related to agreement characteristics and cultural distribution were counterplotted using Civilian software (QGIS and ArcGIS) to support geographical interpretation.



Fig.-2: Conceptual framework illustrating the interaction between tradition, modernization, and sustainability of Sohrai and Khovar painting.

Results and Discussion

The results are banded thematically in relation to demographic structure, artistic practices, material use, livelihood confines, and the impacts of globalisation and modernisation on Sohrai and Khovar painting traditions in Isko and Jorakath townlets.

The field check covered 19 homes in Isko and 35 homes in Jorakath laboriously associated with Sohrai and Khovar oil. The coitus composition of repliers indicates a clear dominance of womanish participation, reflecting the unsexed nature of tempera oil traditions. Women constituted roughly 89 of repliers (Fig. 3a), affirming their central part as artistic custodians and interpreters.

The age distribution reveals that the maturity of active painters falls within the 30 – 50year age group (Fig. 3c). Participation from youngish age groups (18 – 29 years) was comparatively lower, particularly in Jorakath. This pattern suggests a decaying of intergenerational transmission, especially where traditional literacy surrounds have been replaced by request-acquainted product systems.

estate composition across both townlets is dominated by Kurmi, Santhal, Oraon, and Munda communities, indicating that mural oil remains deeply bedded within Scheduled Tribe and agricultural social structures (Fig. 3b). These demographic trends accentuate the vulnerability of the tradition in the absence of sustained youth engagement.

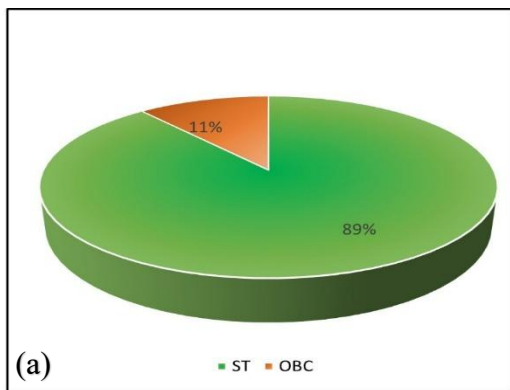


Fig.-3: (a) Sex composition

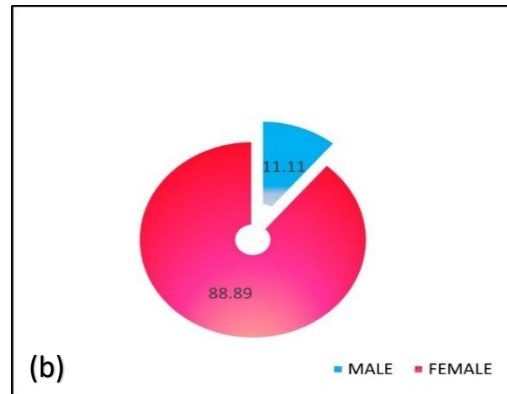


Fig.-3: (b) Caste structure

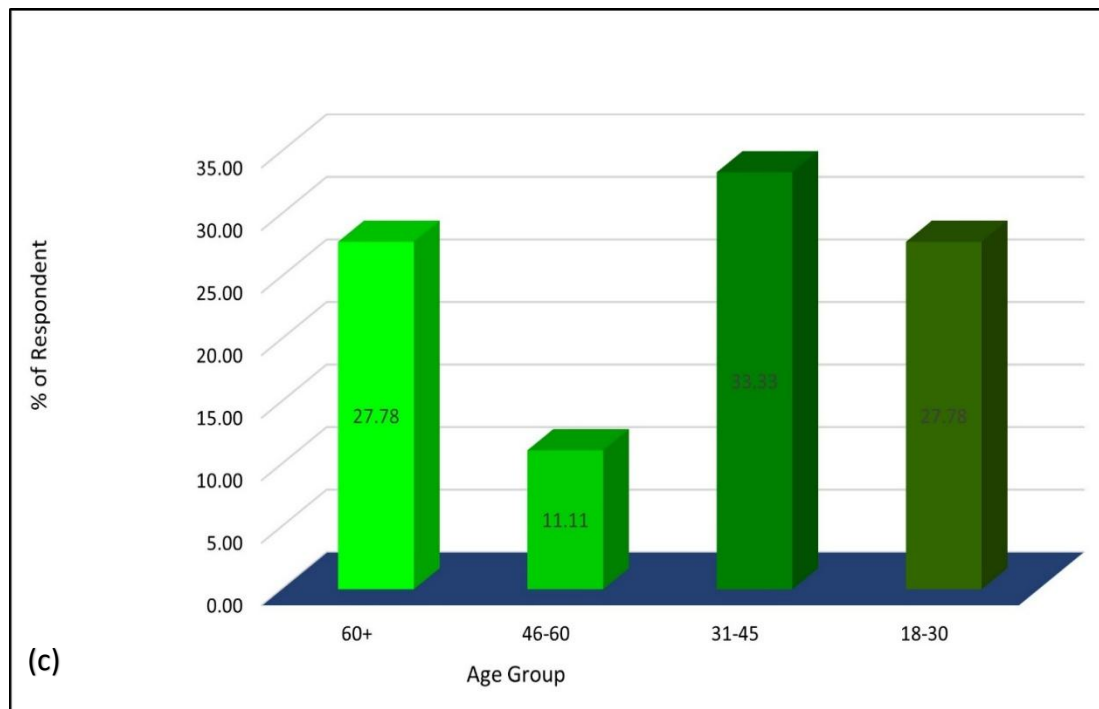


Fig.-3: (c) Age group

Awareness of Sohrai and Khovar traditions remains high in both townlets (Fig. 4a), although factual participation situations differ. In Isko, roughly 94 of homes reported mindfulness, and nearly 78 laboriously rehearsed mural oil during ritual occasions. In discrepancy, while mindfulness in Jorakath was also high (around 90), active participation declined to about 65, reflecting the goods of migration, occupational diversification, and artificial influence.

Traditional motifs proved in both townlets include beast numbers (cattle, mammoths, peacocks), botanical rudiments (lotus, creepers, mahua) (Fig. 4b) and geometric patterns. These motifs symbolically represent fertility, substance, ecological harmony, and social durability

(Fig. 4c). Their association with specific carnivals — Sohrai during the post-harvest season and Khovar during marriage rituals highlights the embeddedness of art within seasonal and ritual cycles.

The findings affirm that Sohrai and Khovar showpieces serve not simply as ornamental expressions but as spatial rituals that structure domestic surroundings and render collaborative memory.

A clear discrepancy emerges between the two townlets in terms of material operation. In Isko, nearly 79 of painters continue to rely on natural colours derived from original soils, including red ochre (gerua mitti), white humus, unheroic ochre, and black manganese. oil tools remain largely traditional, involving cloth hearties, fritters, and handwrought skirmishes.

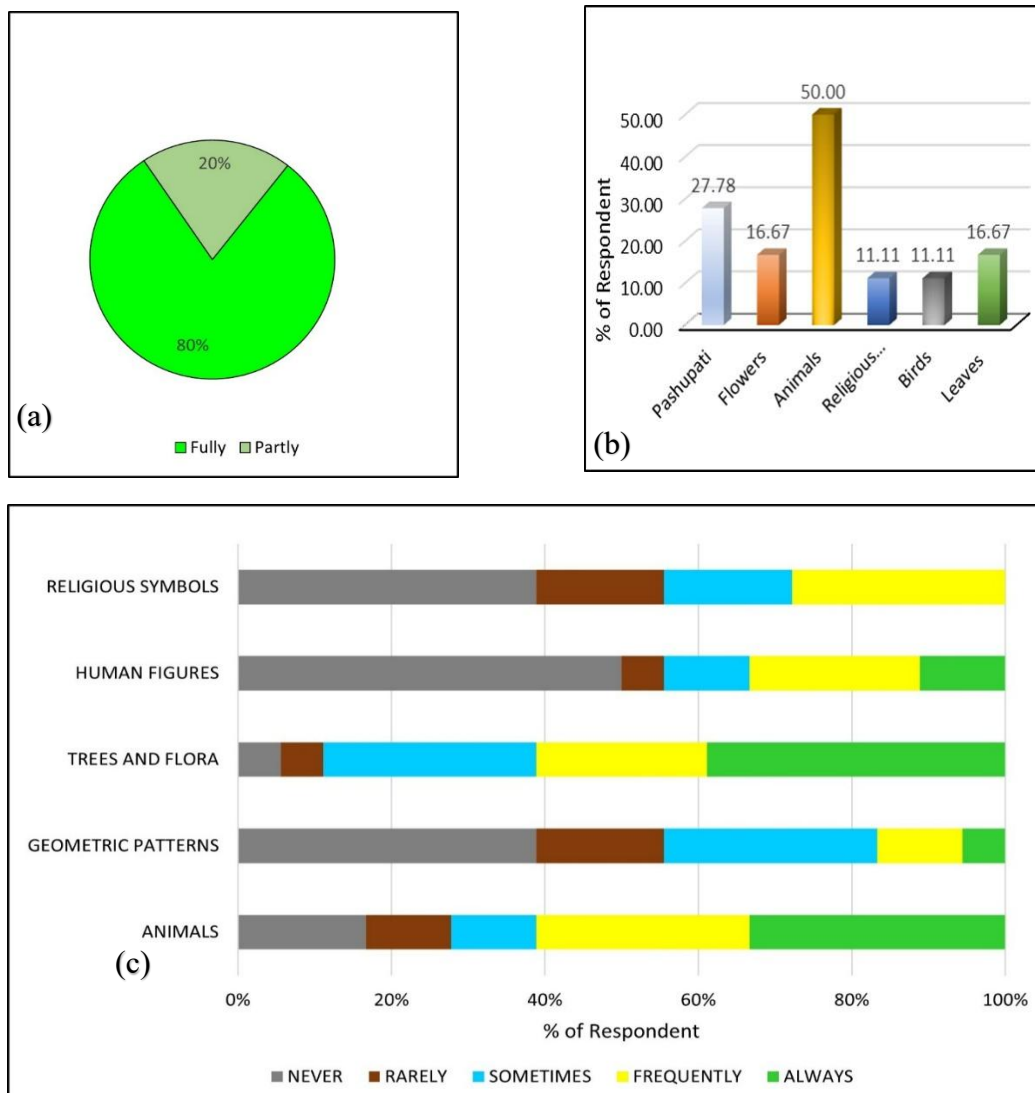


Fig.-4: (a) Awareness on Sohrai Art (b) Most important symbols (c) Frequency of motifs use

In Jorakath, still, roughly 62 of the repliers reported using synthetic acrylic maquillages and marketable skirmishes (Fig. 5b). The shift is driven by factors such as time effectiveness, continuity, and demand. While ultramodern accoutrements enhance marketable viability, they

contemporaneously weaken the ecological relation that traditionally predicated these art forms. This divergence demonstrates how request exposure accelerates material negotiation (Fig. 5a), altering not only fashion but also emblematic depth and ritual authenticity.

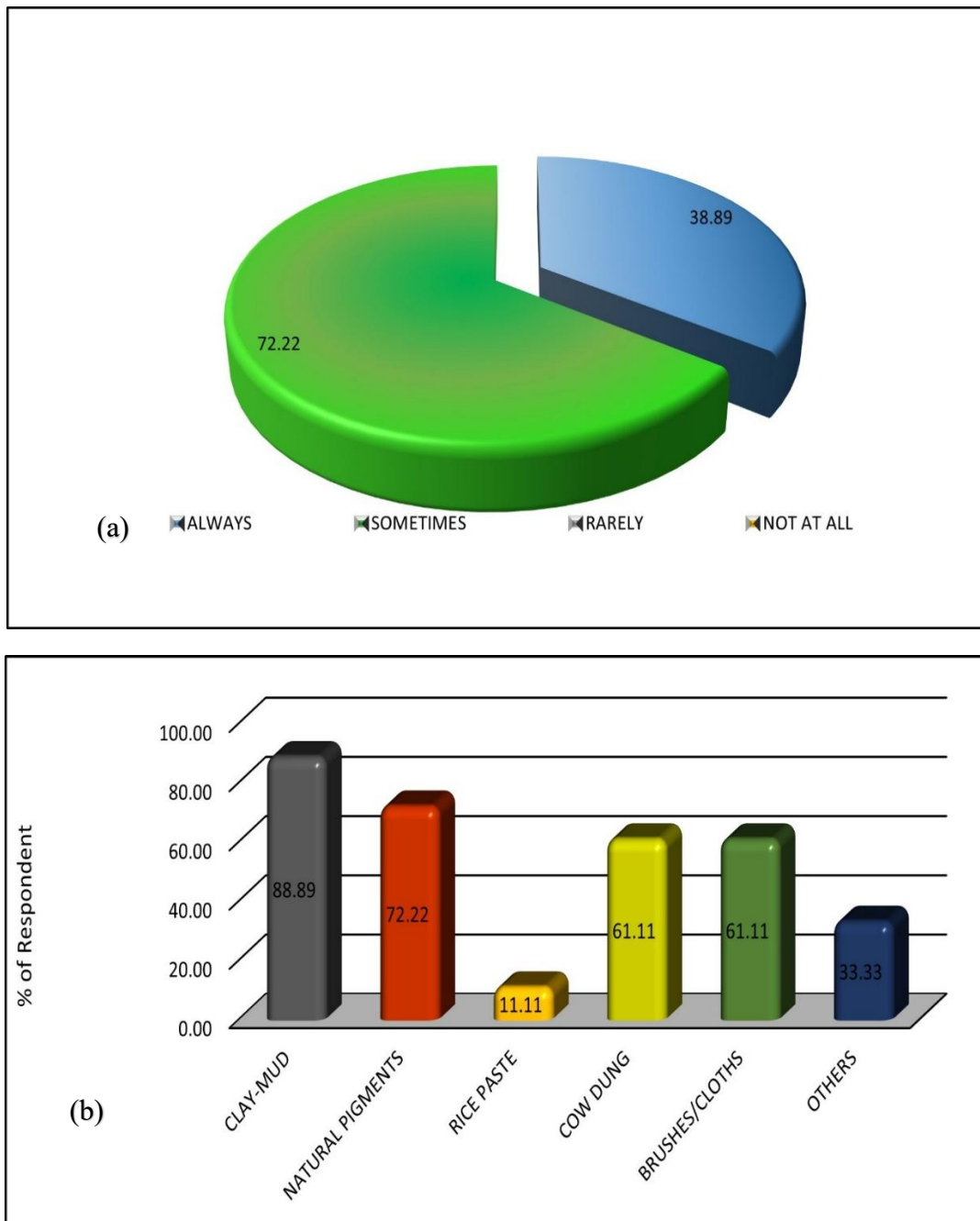


Fig.-5: (a) Painting materials of Sohrai Art, (b) Uses of Traditional colour

Sohrai and Khovar oil contribute to ménage husbandry in the two townlets. In Isko, mural oil remains primarily an artistic practice, with about 32 homes reporting borderline supplementary income (Fig. 6a) from occasional commissions or exhibitions (Fig. 6b). In Jorakath, nearly 48 painters derive income from commissioned workshops, NGO- patronized programs, exhibitions, and sightseer deals(Fig. 6c).

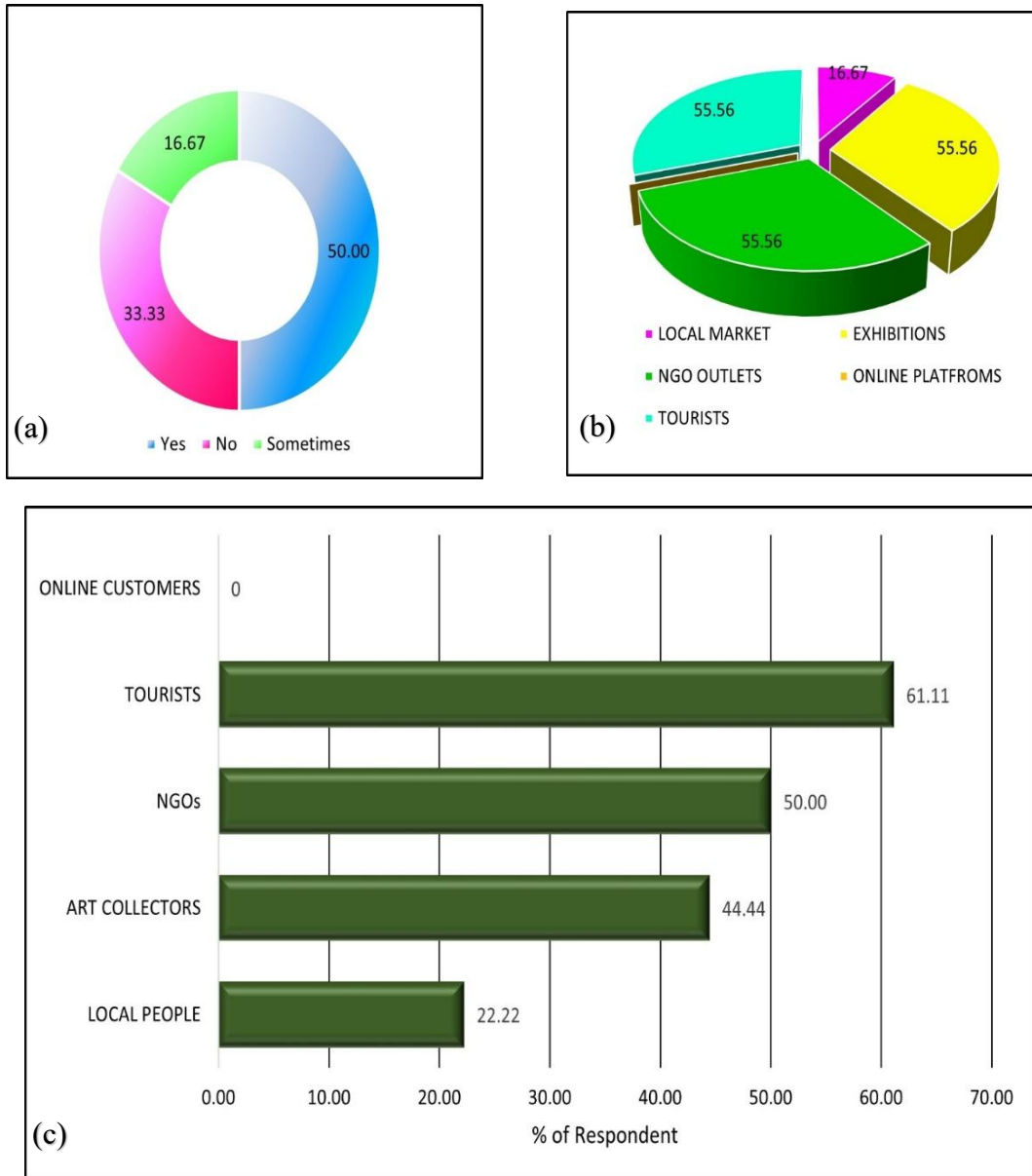


Fig.6: (a) Satisfaction of price (b) Selling platform (c) Painting buyers

Request access is significantly better in Jorakath due to proximity to mining municipalities, NGO networks, and artistic tourism enterprises. Still, 57 of the repliers reported dependence on mediators, leading to reduced profit margins and price dissatisfaction. Across both townlets, only around 40 of the repliers expressed satisfaction with the prices entered, citing undervaluation of labour, skill, and artistic knowledge.

These findings suggest that commercialisation has expanded income opportunities but has not assured indifferent profitable returns.

Roughly 75 of respondents were familiar (Fig. 7a) with the conception of globalisation, primarily associating it with increased visibility, tourism, and external demand. Positive issues include wider recognition through exhibitions, NGO enterprise, and the Geographical Indication (GI) label, which has strengthened artistic branding.

Still, globalisation has also (Fig. 7b) introduced request- driven pressures to modify motifs, colours, and themes. Around 55 per cent of repliers in Isko expressed concern about artistic dilution, compared to 38 per cent in Jorakath. This difference reflects Isko’s stronger ritual anchoring and Jorakath’s lesser marketable exposure. Therefore, globalisation operates as a double- whetted process — enhancing visibility and income while contemporaneously challenging emblematic integrity.

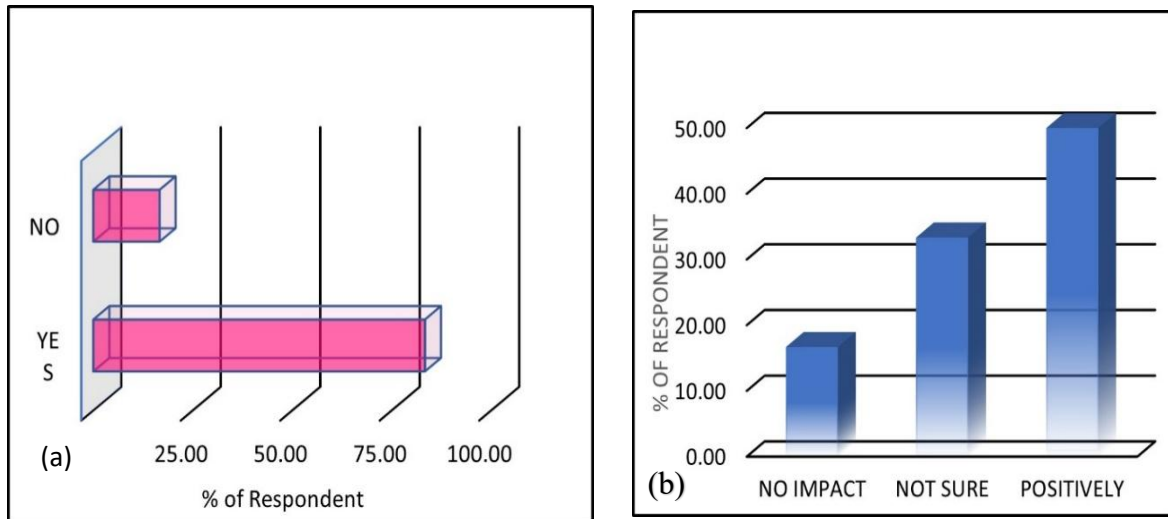


Fig.-7: (a) Knowing on Globalization (b) Effect of globalization on painting

Modernisation has told both material practices and cultural preferences. While 79 of painters in Isko continue to use natural colours, a maturity in Jorakath has transitioned toward synthetic accoutrements (Fig. 8a). Youth preference patterns further support this peak 60 of youthful repliers in Jorakath favouring modernised designs, compared to only 35 in Isko (Fig. 9b). Youth preference of modernization on tradition. The increased frequency of shops, particularly in Jorakath, has contributed to skill dispersion but frequently emphasises productivity and request aesthetics over ritual meaning. Accordingly, traditional designs are increasingly detached from their conventional surroundings.

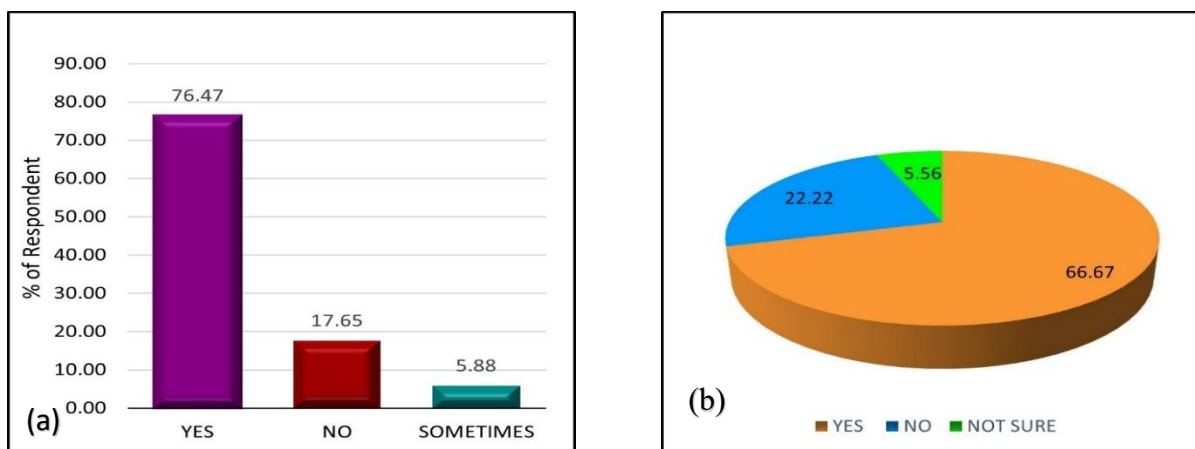


Fig. 8: (a) Use of modern tools (b) Youth preference of modernization on tradition

Traditional intergenerational transmission remains fairly complete in Isko, where chops are passed through domestic and ritual settings. In Jorakath, knowledge transfer has shifted toward

NGO- led shops and competitive platforms, occasionally dissociated from conventional practice (Fig. 9a)

Specifically, 88 of the repliers across both townlets supported the addition of Sohrai and Khovar oil in the academy class (Fig. 9b). This reflects a participatory recognition that institutional education could play a critical part in sustaining these traditions among youngish generations.

The findings reveal two differing sustainability models. Isko represents a preservation-acquainted model, prioritising ritual authenticity and ecological relation. Jorakath reflects a commercialisation-acquainted model, emphasising rigidity, request engagement, and invention.

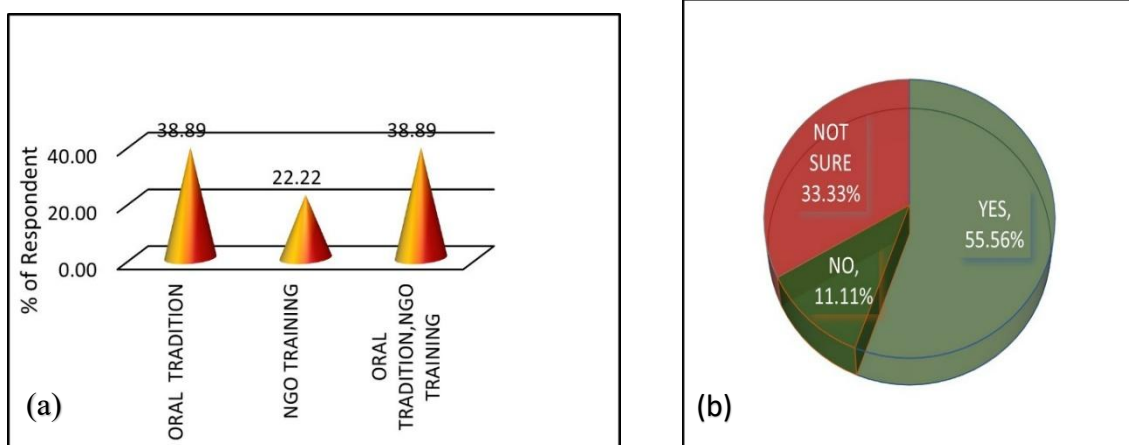


Fig. 9: (a) Transmission process of painting (b) Should this art included in School Curriculum

Long- term sustainability will depend on balancing authenticity with rigidity, maintaining emblematic meaning while responding to contemporary profitable realities. Community- led governance, fair request structures, reanimation of eco-friendly colours, youth engagement, and culturally sensitive institutional support crop as crucial pathways for sustaining Sohrai and Khovar painting traditions (Fig. 10a).

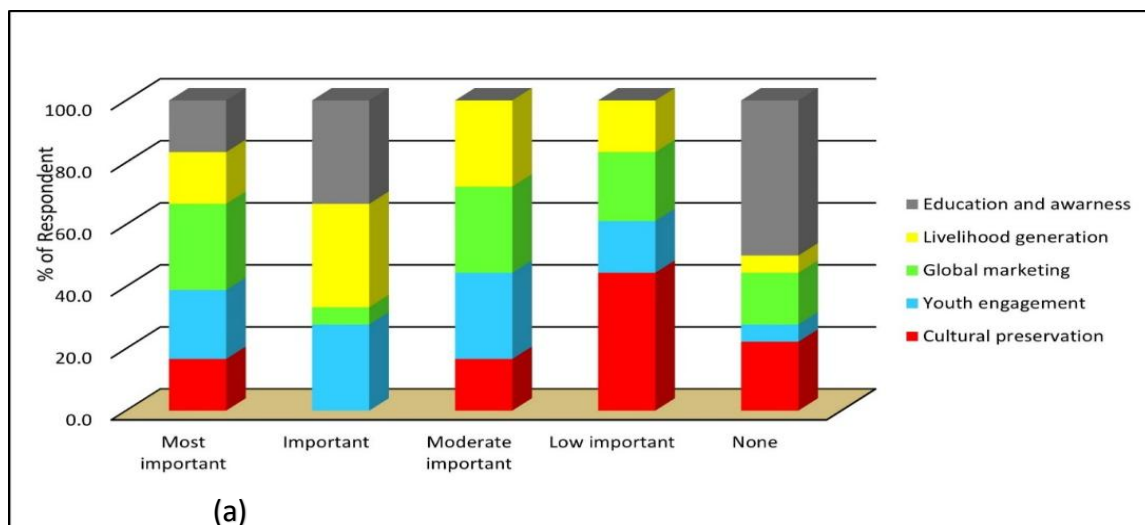


Fig.-10: (a) Order of importance of future development

Conclusion

This study has examined the significance of Sohrai and Khovar mural painting traditions in the Hazaribagh region of Jharkhand through a cultural-geographical and developmental lens. Based on detailed field investigations in Isko and Jorakath villages, the research highlights that these indigenous mural traditions are not merely artistic expressions but complex socio-cultural systems embedded in agrarian cycles, ritual practices, ecological knowledge, and women's creative agency. The findings reveal distinct trajectories of continuity and change between the two villages. Isko demonstrates a relatively preservation-oriented model, where ritual contexts, natural pigments, and familial modes of knowledge transmission remain largely intact. In contrast, Jorakath reflects a commercialisation-oriented pathway, shaped by industrial proximity, NGO interventions, tourism exposure, and market demand. While this transition has enhanced visibility and income opportunities, it has also encouraged material substitution, stylistic modification, and partial detachment from ritual and ecological foundations.

Globalisation and modernisation have thus emerged as ambivalent forces. On one hand, they have facilitated recognition through exhibitions, institutional platforms, and the Geographical Indication (GI) tag, strengthening cultural branding and economic prospects. On the other hand, they have accelerated the dilution of symbolic meanings, seasonal associations, and traditional techniques. The declining participation of younger generations further raises concerns about long-term cultural continuity.

Overall, the study underscores that the sustainability of Sohrai and Khovar painting depends on achieving a careful balance between authenticity and adaptability. Cultural survival cannot rely solely on preservationist isolation nor on unchecked commercialisation. Instead, it requires context-sensitive development strategies that respect ritual meaning, ecological embeddedness, and community control while allowing for economic resilience and creative evolution.

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are proposed to support the sustainable future of Sohrai and Khovar painting traditions:

Preservation initiatives should be rooted in local communities, with women artists recognised as primary custodians of knowledge. Decision-making related to design adaptation, commercialisation, and representation should remain community-controlled to prevent external appropriation and cultural distortion.

Efforts should be made to revive and scientifically document natural pigments, bio-binders, and traditional tools through collaboration with local elders, botanists, and environmental experts. This would strengthen the ecological foundation of the art while aligning it with contemporary sustainability goals.

The formation of artist cooperatives based on fair-trade principles is essential to reduce dependence on middlemen and ensure equitable income distribution. Direct-to-consumer platforms, including ethical e-commerce models, can enhance financial returns while preserving cultural narratives linked to each artwork.

Integration of Sohrai and Khovar paintings into school curricula at local and regional levels can foster early cultural awareness and youth participation. Community workshops,

apprenticeships, and mentorship programs involving senior artists can strengthen intergenerational continuity.

Government and institutional support should prioritise long-term cultural sustainability over short-term commercial gains. This includes funding research on green materials, supporting community museums and mural districts, and facilitating apprenticeships rather than solely market-oriented exhibitions.

The creation of multilingual digital archives containing high-resolution motif libraries, oral histories, ritual calendars, and ecological knowledge can serve as living repositories. Such platforms would support education, research, and controlled innovation without displacing traditional practices.

Hybrid residency and exchange programs that place young tribal artists in urban art institutions while bringing design students into village settings can promote mutual learning. These exchanges should emphasise respect for indigenous knowledge systems rather than assimilation into dominant aesthetic frameworks.

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