

Gond Art in Select Graphic Novels: Representing the Marginalized

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Abstract

Gond art, a traditional tribal art form from Central India, has historically served as a means of storytelling, cultural preservation, and spiritual expression. Initially confined to the walls and floors of Gond homes, this art form has now transitioned into contemporary mediums such as canvases, graphic novels, and art books. While this transformation has expanded its reach and global recognition, it has also raised concerns about losing its indigeneity and cultural significance. This paper explores the journey of Gond art into the domain of graphic novels, analyzing its impact on the artists' cultural identity, economic position, and artistic integrity.

Graphic novels like *Finding My Way* by Venkat Raman Singh Shyam and *The London Jungle Book* by Bhajju Shyam are crucial texts that bring forth these concerns. *Finding My Way* portrays Gond artists' marginalization and struggle to gain recognition, depicting their economic hardships and societal neglect. It also critiques the hierarchy within the Gond community, showing how caste-like structures have emerged due to external influences. On the other hand, *The London Jungle Book* offers a unique reversal of perspectives, where Bhajju Shyam, a marginalized artist, reinterprets London through the lens of Gond imagination, using motifs and symbols rooted in his indigenous culture. This work challenges mainstream perceptions of urban life and subverts the traditional exoticization of tribal art by allowing a Gond artist to narrate his own experiences.

Keywords: Identity, Society, Art.

Introduction

In India, more than 600 tribal communities and ethnic groups contribute to its cultural diversity. “According to the 2001 census, India has a tribal population of 8.2% of its total population” (Gramin Vikas Seva Sanstha). Each tribe has its own unique art forms. However, there is no specific definition of the term ‘tribal art’ but in simple words, it is related to anything that is produced by indigenous people belonging to any tribe (Singh 2). Warli, Madhubani, Bhil, Santhal, Patachitra, Khobar, and Gond paintings are the popular tribal art forms in India.

Gond is one of the tribes in India. “The word ‘Gond’ comes from the Dravidian expression of kond, meaning ‘green mountain’. Green Mountain is a reference to the Vindhya and Satpura mountain ranges where most of the Gond people reside since the 14th century” (Arur and Wyeld 5). The Gond art form, practiced by the Gond tribe, is primarily found in central India, particularly in Madhya Pradesh. Through their art form the Gond tribe communicates their cultural and tradition to the new generations. This art form is primarily drawn on the mud walls of their houses. Nature remains the primary inspiration for Gond artists, helping them stay connected to their roots. This art remains outside the mainstream for a long period.

From the mud houses of the Gond tribe, the art form has travelled to the art galleries. Now it is discernible in picture books, art books, and other forms, which give this art form an opportunity to express its beliefs and thoughts to the mainstream art world. The Gond artists, for a long time, used traditional natural colours, but with the introduction of their art form to the mainstream, they have started using artificial colours. The significant platform that has given the Gond artists recognition in mainstream society is the graphic novels. The Gond artist Gareeba Singh Tekam says, “Gond artists are no longer faceless, nameless, unknown artists but have mark with their own unique individual artistic identities in the global art market” (Nigam 1). Thus, their traditional culture becomes a theme in contemporary art.

“The diffusion of modern culture, spreading of education, search for better avenues of employment, process of adopting modern life styles and regular interactions with people beyond their own community have gradually brought enormous changes in the socio-cultural lives of the Gonds” (Padhi and Goswami 3)

Gond Art and Graphic Novels

The artists are losing their indigeneity becomes the chief concern when Gond art starts contributing to graphic novels. So, what is indigeneity? Aurogeeta Das addresses this in an article, saying it is difficult to restrict “indigeneity” to a single definition. She says, “Is it something created by indigenous peoples; can it be created by the non- indigenous; or is the label limited to certain thematic concerns, sources of inspiration and specific formal idioms?” (Das 29). There is no specific answer to these questions and no particular definition. Nonetheless, according to Das, what makes indigeneity distinctive is that it is “loaded with real and perceived socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic meanings” (Das 30). This is discernible in the Gond tribe’s art, as it has emerged from their daily life, beliefs, rituals, customs, myths, legends, and folktales. Each Gond painting has a story behind it, or it has been influenced by the artist’s beliefs. The art form is culturally rooted. Jangarh Singh Shyam was the first Gond artist to move away from the traditional painting style upon leaving the village. Instead of painting conventional subjects such as trees, plants, birds, animals, and rivers, he painted an airplane. Das mentions, “The Pardhan Gond artist Jangarh Singh Shyam, for example, was reportedly anxious about ‘losing’ his indigeneity” (Das 29). The indigeneity of the Gond artists stems from their way of life, which is rooted in their rituals and customs. Hence, when they are away from their community, they might lose their indigeneity. Many Gond artists who live in the city seem to adopt mainstream styles, but some maintain traditional art forms to satisfy their patrons and meet market demands.

The concerns that arise with the use of Gond art in the context of modern issues include the loss of uniqueness in motifs and the cultural significance associated with their art, which Gond artists are unfamiliar with. Critics talk about the decontextualization of tribal motifs and patterns. They provide an example of how, nowadays, tribal motifs are used as decorative patterns on walls and fences in urban settings. There are many buildings and walls in urban spaces where Gond art is painted for aesthetic purposes. Due to this, these motifs lose their cultural significance and original meaning. Thus, it appears that one characteristic of the visual in contemporary usage, will be an often un-informed appropriation at the popular level. This type of appropriation is evident in the select graphic novels under discussion.

Marginalization in *Finding My Way*

The graphic novel *Finding My Way* by Venkat Raman Singh Shyam and S. Anand portrays Venkat Raman Singh Shyam's journey and hardships in search of his identity as a Gond artist. Through his journey, experiences, and things he witnessed in life, he portrays the marginal position of Gond artists. This book not only brings out the marginality of the artist but also the marginal position of his community and the art they practice. Since Gonds are not a part of the mainstream, their art is also on the periphery. Therefore, Gond artists struggle to earn a livelihood through their art, and Venkat Raman Singh Shyam is no different. Since his art was not valued and recognized, he even painted signboards to stay connected with art but gave it up after some time and started pulling a rickshaw to earn money. The artist's journey symbolizes the hardships these tribal artists face because of the marginalization of their art. Along with the problems of Shyam's life, the authors have chosen to bring out the issues the Adivasi community has to endure.

The book gives the example of the celebrated Gond artist Jangarh Singh Shyam to show how tribal artists are oppressed. Jangarh's art was valued, but as an artist, he was not. Venkat Raman Singh Shyam points out how Jangarh said that organizations established to support tribal and regional art "treated us as artisans, not artists" (Shyam and Anand 25). Jangarh's art was appreciated; because of that, he also received a contract from The Mithila Museum in Japan. For this contract, he went to Japan on a three-month trip and after some time, he hanged himself there. According to Japanese authorities, Jangarh had lost his mental balance, but his family and friends believed that he was made to work day and night and could not handle the pressure. The Indian government chose not to investigate his death because of his marginal position. His dead body reached India after ten days after the efforts of his family and fellow artists. The authors also highlight that, considering how talented an artist he was, he was paid significantly less for his work there. This shows how tribal artists are not valued and appreciated the way they deserve.

A 2017 article published in *Scroll.in* examines the uncertain circumstances surrounding Jangarh Singh Shyam's death. The author, Zinnia Ray Chaudhary, refers to several news accounts that questioned why an artist of Jangarh's calibre had to accept such minimal payment for his work. Chaudhary observes that Jangarh agreed to the offer as a reflection of

his financial struggles, despite his growing fame—a condition she notes is common among many tribal artists in India. According to her, “The artist agreed, a sign of his struggle to make a living despite his growing popularity (as is the fate of most tribal artists in India)” (Chaudhary 1). This observation underscores the persistent marginalization of indigenous artists, whose contributions, though celebrated internationally, continue to receive inadequate recognition and compensation within Indian society.

Venkat Raman Singh Shyam himself struggled to survive on his painting talent. He mentions how the government is of no help to the tribal artists: “The government’s ‘fixed rate’ for artists was less than what a daily-wage laborer made” (Shyam and Anand 30). Because of this, he says, “I worked as a dehadi, footloose labourer” (Shyam and Anand 31). Several Gond artists migrate from their villages to Bhopal in the hope of earning a living and gaining recognition for their art. However, many of them end up disheartened, as their work often goes unnoticed, forcing them to return home or take up small, unrelated jobs to make ends meet.

The marginalization extends beyond Gond artists to the Gond community as a whole. To illustrate this broader social exclusion, the book cites the example of the dam construction on the Narmada River, which reveals the hardships and displacement endured by Adivasi people during the project. S. Anand writes, “In the course of building the five-kilometre-long Bargi Dam in Jabalpur – affecting 162 villages and submerging eighty-two completely – several Adivasi children disappeared in the Mandla, Seoni and Jabalpur districts” (Shyam and Anand 90). This shows the lack of concern regarding the lives of Adivasis in mainstream society.

The dam is the symbolic of modern constructions and development, is built over the bed of skeletons of Adivasis. The pillar of the dam is painted as having teeth that eat away the lives of innocent workers. This portrayal makes the readers visualize the gruesome conditions of such construction sites. It highlights the workings of the Indian bureaucratic and political system, which oppresses the Adivasis and those at the lowest position in the society.

In the name of development, Adivasis are made to sacrifice their homes, lands, and people because of the biased political and social structure of the society. These are the same people who found edible fruits and vegetables and developed our food culture. He also gives examples of other incidents where people belonging to lower classes, especially migrant

laborers, lost their lives in nuclear plants, construction sites, and other industries. He also mentions how 109 workers officially died during the construction of the Delhi Metro.

Shyam also questions the market forces that prioritize mainstream art over tribal art. He believes that although the mainstream art world provides an array of opportunities to these folk artists, it tries to control their imagination and creativity. This essentializes Gond's art and does not exactly help the artists grow. Shyam points out different terms assigned to tribal art. He says, "Some charitably called this 'vernacular art'; many just happily slotted us under 'folk and tribal art'. Someone came up with 'outsider art'. However, others, trying to be nice, called us the 'other moderns', the 'other masters' and even 'third-field artists'". These terms are a way to keep tribal art and artists outside the mainstream domain and impose a marginal identity on them.

Through this narrative, the artist and the author seek to challenge and reverse the forces of marginalization by foregrounding Shyam's lived experiences. The text familiarizes readers with the myths, legends, and cultural practices of the Gond community, offering insights into their artistic traditions, painting styles, motifs, and everyday struggles. By intertwining personal history with collective memory, the book not only traces Venkat Raman Singh Shyam's artistic journey and hardships but also sheds light on the broader challenges faced by Gond and other tribal artists as they navigate the peripheries of cultural recognition.

A Reversed Gaze in *The London Jungle Book*

The following graphic novel, by Tara Books, *The London Jungle Book*, portrays marginalization differently. This graphic novel portrays the subject, i.e., London, from the perspective of a marginalized tribal artist. This book presents the artist Bhajju Shyam's journey to London, his perception of the city, and his portrayal of this city and his experiences. Bhajju Shyam is a tribal artist who has never traveled outside the country. Wolf and Rao, at the end of the book, in the section "How London Became a Jungle," describe him as "Belongs to one of the poorest and most marginalized sections of Indian society" (Wolf and Rao 43), which clearly shows his marginal identity. This book contains text and graphics that show how he perceived and interpreted what he saw and experienced during this journey. What is important to note here is that this is the perception, interpretation, and portrayal from a marginal position.

Right at the beginning of the book, it is evident from the narrative that this journey is challenging for Bhajju Shyam because, being a marginal tribal artist, he has not experienced the mainstream world. Nevertheless, he attempts to show this world from a marginal position. During this process, he explains the reasons behind his interpretations and imaginations. For instance, he portrays the airport as an eagle because he believes it swallows its prey, humans wanting to travel via airplane. Moreover, he paints the aircraft as a flying elephant and says, “A plane taking off is as much of a miracle as an elephant flying” (Wolf and Rao 20). Most of these imaginations stem from Gond culture and myths. Gonds live in villages surrounded by trees, animals, and nature, crucial parts of their art. That is why Bhajju Shyam perceives the city and its people in the form of things and elements that he has witnessed around him since childhood. Such interpretations involving animals and nature are uncommon for mainstream art, but they represent the world of gonds and gond artists, of which the mainstream is unaware.

In one of the portrayals, Bhajju Shyam talks about being a foreigner for the first time. When he lands in London, everything seems new and alien to him. Usually, people see the Gond art as exotic because they are unaware of its motifs and symbols. Many foreigners visit Gond villages to witness their exotic lifestyle and art. The marginal Gond art, therefore, is the “other” for the mainstream. For Bhajju Shyam, in this case, it is the London city that seems exotic because he is unaware of their language, lifestyle, climate, and culture. This new city and its people become the “other” for the artist. Shikha Singh also talks about “othering” in this context. She says, “In the narrative, the exoticized and mythologized image of the city, the account of the beliefs and cultural practices of the citizens, the culinary tastes and forms of entertainment, as well as the modes of existence that regulate the day-to-day activities, constitute Londoners as Other.” (Singh 71) Wolf and Rao, at the end of the book, highlight Bhajju Shyam’s remark in this context: “Elwin sahib wrote about my tribe, now it is my turn to write about his” (Wolf and Rao 32). To portray himself as the “self” in contrast to Londoners, Bhajju Shyam attempts to make the readers aware of Gond patterns and signatures to familiarize them with Gond culture and thought process. This book can also be seen in contrast with Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, which presented stories of various animals in the Indian jungle, which has often been explored from a colonial perspective. Bhajju Shyam’s narrative subverts that kind of representation and presents London as a jungle. For example, he portrays the people of London as bats who come to life at night.

Another example of Gond interpretation and imagination is the underground railway system in London. The Underground and other such advanced constructions are common to people belonging to the mainstream, but Bhajju Shyam is surprised to see this. He interprets this whole underground world from the lens of Gond myths, according to which the earthworm rules the underground. Using this myth, Bhajju Shyam paints the underground railway as a huge earthworm. Similarly, the bus that takes Bhajju Shyam from his place to where he works is presented as a loyal and friendly dog. All these motifs and symbols help the readers visualize the Gond world and cosmos, which is different from the mainstream. It has taken centuries for an artist from Gond community to talk about himself and his community. Since this tribe and these artists have been marginalized for so long, there were other people from the mainstream who spoke for them, and the identity of Gonds was suppressed. They could not write or recite their histories to the world. However, in this book, Bhajju Shyam tells his own story, which he says in “I Become a Storyteller.” He has presented himself as a bard who tells the stories, songs, and myths of the Gond community. Here, Bhajju Shyam tells his own story to the readers; this story not only presents his journey but also the journey of his community’s beliefs, values, myths, and culture to London.

This migration of Bhajju Shyam from his village to London is also symbolic of the migration of the marginal to the mainstream. Nonetheless, the migration of Gond artists from their villages to cities to establish their identities as artists does not always turn out the way they expect. Many must take up menial jobs to survive in the city because their art and talent are not valued. Although this migration puts them physically in the mainstream culture and lifestyle, it isolates them within this society. Shikha Singh discusses such issues in this book. She says, “The manner in which issues of migration, inequality, and cultural identity are discussed in the narrative underlies the need for nuanced understandings of the cultural politics of storytelling and visual art.” (Singh 70)

This travelogue, therefore, becomes a way for Bhajju Shyam to establish his cultural identity. Since the Gonds have been on the peripheries of Indian society, they have not been able to showcase their art and culture to the world. This graphic novel allows Bhajju Shyam to bring his art and the culture of his marginal community to the limelight and establish his identity as a Gond artist.

Conclusion

The journey of Gond art from the walls of tribal homes to the pages of graphic novels signifies its evolution and the challenges it faces in the modern world. While this transformation has provided a global platform for Gond artists, allowing them to gain recognition beyond their communities, it has also raised concerns regarding the loss of indigeneity and cultural significance. Integrating Gond art into graphic novels highlights both the power of storytelling and the risks of commercialization, where traditional motifs may be appropriated or detached from their original meanings.

Graphic novels such as *Finding My Way* and *The London Jungle Book* serve as powerful narratives that reflect the struggles and aspirations of Gond artists. Venkat Raman Singh Shyam's account in *Finding My Way* sheds light on the socio-economic marginalization of Gond artists, emphasizing the hardships they face despite the growing popularity of their art. The story of Jangarh Singh Shyam further underscores the systemic exploitation of tribal artists, whose labor is often undervalued. Similarly, *The London Jungle Book* offers a unique reversal of perspective, where Bhajju Shyam, a marginalized tribal artist, interprets an urban metropolis through the lens of his traditional imagination, challenging conventional representations of indigenous art.

Despite these challenges, Gond art's presence in graphic novels is a testament to its adaptability and resilience. The intersection of tribal art and modern publishing not only preserves but also reinvents the traditions of the Gond community. While concerns about decontextualization remain, these narratives also offer a means for Gond artists to assert their identities and tell their stories on their terms. Thus, the continued evolution of Gond art in contemporary media should focus on preserving its cultural essence while embracing new opportunities for artistic expression.

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