

# The Gond Painting of Prominent Artists (A exploratory Study of Jangarh Singh Shyam, Ram Singh Urveti)

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## Abstract

*India's Gond tribe are renowned by art connoisseur for the vibrant artwork they produce. The Gonds also have a tradition of painting the walls and floors of their huts during important Hindu festivals. They draw scenes from religion and myth, as well as natural objects. Before mass-produced paints were available, natural pigments were used and the tribe's artwork was rarely, if ever, committed to paper. But one day in 1981, everything changed by Jangarh Singh Shyam and Ram Singh Urveti.. Before 1980s, Gond tribal art was all but unknown to outsiders, used only to decorate their homes. Forty years later, it is exhibited in galleries worldwide. This research paper attempt to study of two pioneer artists Jangarh Singh Shyam, Ram Singh Urveti ,who primarily created gond paintings on paper and canvases. This paper also discuss the life sketch and important features of the work of both artists. In their work, animals, plants and scenes from daily life are rendered in a colourful, highly patterned style comparable to aboriginal art.*

*Keywords: Gond Painting, Jangarh Singh Shyam , colourful, pattern, Ram Singh Urveti, trees.*

*Classification-JEL : N35, Y50*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gond painting is one of the tribal arts of Madhya Pradesh. It has a great cultural and religious importance in life of Gond tribe. The word Gond comes from the Dravidian expression Kond, which means the green mountain. The recorded history of the Gond people goes back one thousand four hundred years, but considering that they enabled the areas where rock paintings date back to the visual ethic era their antiserum probably date back even further and many of the Gond customs eco that of them Mesolithic and obvious example of this is the custom of decorating the walls of their houses an activity, which may have its origins in the

cave dwelling traditions of our ancestors. The work of Gond art is routed in their folk tales and culture and thus story telling becomes a strong element of every painting. The Gonds paint their walls with vibrant depictions of local flora fauna and Gods such as Marahi Devi and Fulvari Devi and Bagasur. Needless to say, these are all different incarnations of God of Hindu pantheon. Traditionally, these painting are made in festive vocation such as Karva Chauth, Deepavali, Holi, Nag Panchami and other festive occasions. Gond painting reflects the perception of life of Gond tribes, their faiths and beliefs and the happenings of their day to day lives. Gond artists have made changes in the motifs, colours

and painting base used as compared to earlier days in order to preserve Gond art. They depict various celebrations rituals and man's relationship with nature. The artist use natural colours derived from charcoal coloured soil plants leaves and cow dung. This mystical art form is created by putting together dots and lines and the imaginative use of the line impart the sense of movement to the still images the paintings are an often as a worship of nature, and also mode of seeking protections and warding off evil.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Data and information for this research paper was collected from the artists, who is involved in practice of gond art. Present study was carried out to visit in Mandala district of Madya Pradesh ,Bharat Bhawan, Tribal Museum, Indira Gandhi Rastriya Manav Sangralaya, Bhopal and interviewed of some artists who met in handicraft exhibition in Dilli Haat.

## 3. JANGARH SINGH SHYAM

Jagdish Swaminathan, head of the Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal, played a pivotal role in introducing the tribal Gond art practices to art lovers. Swaminathan was himself a great artist. During interaction with the researcher Mitchell Abdul Karim Crites wrote, "Those were the special days, when Bharat Bhawan was under the supervision of late Swaminathan. He used to send out teams of young people to villages to search for the hidden art/artists amongst the people of the community." While travelling through various villages during a study trip, he came across a wall painting in the Patangarh village, Dindori, Madhya Pradesh. On inquiring about the artist, he came to know that it was made by Jangarh Singh Shyam who was only a teenager at that time. Impressed by the striking style of the painting, he invited Jangarh to work at the newly established Bharat Bhawan. Here, Jangarh Singh Shyam was exposed to different mediums like paper and canvas, to experiment and innovate. His work was then exhibited for

the world to see and admire. At the beginning of 1980s his paintings celebrate the spirit of its tribe. . He was among the first Gond artists to use paper and Jangarh was born into a Pardhan Gond family in the village of Patangarh, Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh. He grew up in extreme poverty which forced him to quit school and try his hand at farming. He grazed buffaloes and sold milk in a nearby town.

At the age of sixteen he married Nankusia Bai from Sonpur village; she was to later become a fellow artist. Swaminathan showcased Jangarh's first sample paintings at Bharat Bhavan's inaugural exhibition in February 1982. Soon Jangarh was employed in Bharat Bhavan's graphic arts department, and he began to live with his family behind Swaminathan's house in Professor's Colony, Bhopal. Jangarh is credited by the critic Udayan Vajpeyi to be the initiator of a new school of Indian art which he calls 'Jangarh Kalam'. The primary subjects of Jangarh's paintings are Gond deities like Thakur Dev, Bada Deo, Kalsahin Devi and others. He also depicts cutout-style portraits of animals. Tigers, deer, turtles and crocodiles crowd his canvases.

He achieved fame quickly when, in 1986, merely five years after his 'discovery', the twenty-six year old was conferred the Shikhar Samman (the Summit Award)— the highest civilian award bestowed by the Government of Madhya Pradesh. He was subsequently commissioned to do the exterior murals for Vidhan Bhavan—the new legislative building in Bhopal designed by the renowned architect Charles Correa. In 1989, his art was displayed in the Pompidou Centre's Magiciens de la Terre (Magicians of Earth) exhibition in Paris. He went on to do residential stints at the Mithila Museum in Tokamachi, Japan. Jangarh Kalam is an adaptation of the Pardhan music. The transformation of music into visual form. The peculiarity of Pardhan music is that it has the disturbed equilibrium of music notes. That music like most Adivasi music, assumes form in disturbed equilibrium. It has neither the

harmony of Western classical music nor the melody of Khayal (Natyā).

Jangarh used lines of coloured dots to create shapes and patterns in his paintings. The dots were inspired by the tattoos that form a part of Gond life. Jangarh also used other techniques like “fields of dense cross-hatching, tightly drawn comb-lines, rows of tiny ovals, bands of dots, sometimes accompanied by narrow squiggles and small irregular amoeba-like forms”. His paintings have employed peripheral contours of radiating lines to suggest power or movement. Jangarh Singh Shyam as an artist not only reinvented the art form of painting but, also encouraged his tribe members to practice the Gond art. He proposed a unique idea; he encouraged all budding artists to have a distinctive pattern of their own; in their painting which will be like their signature style. Jangarh Singh Shyam's signature pattern was 'dots'. He had both maturity and vision, he laid the foundation of this art form in a manner that it is sustainable both for the art and the practicing artists. Today, the signature pattern made by each Gond artist, gives them a unique identity in the contemporary world of art such that they can easily be recognised and differentiated from other Gond artist in their own community. He insists on 'Jangarh Kalam' or the 'Style of Jangarh' as a more accurate name since such 'Gond art' did not exist before him. Other than propelling the now varied and vibrant school of 'Jangarh kalam', Jangarh is also duly credited for being the harbinger of new perspectives, talent and stylistic innovations within that school. He introduced his extended family to his studio and artistic practices in Bhopal. His house in Professors Colony became a hub for several Pardhan Gond artists who migrated to the city hoping Jangarh would show them the way. Some of them further extended the style to sculpture as well, notable among whom are Gangaram, Ram Kumar Shyam and Sukhnandi Vyam. When Sukhnandi exhibited his work in the gallery in Delhi in 2010, Caravan magazine said that his “work challenges many cultural binaries we tend

to accept unquestioningly: metropolitan and rural, traditional and (Post) Modern, art and craft”. Jangarh brought his brother-in-law Subhash Vyam and his wife Durgabai Vyam to his house in Bhopal. Today, Durgabai has emerged to be one of the most well-known Pardhan Gond artists with many books to her credit, most of them published by Tara Books, Chennai.

In 2001, Jangarh was found hanged in his room, aged only 37. His death shocked the art world. Stories began to spread that he had been coerced into doing the residency for a low monthly fee. Jangarh is survived by his wife Nankusia Bai and two children Mayank Shyam and Japani Shyam—all acclaimed practitioners of Jangarh Kalam. Jangarh's daughter Japani Shyam was given the Kamala Devi Award in 1999, at the age of eleven. She works on motifs of animals and birds and visual examinations of Gond rituals. After His son Mayank Shyam, also an artist, has moved away considerably from the first-generation iconography and style of Gond art and focuses on geometrical patterns. Jangarh's death, Nankusia Bai continued to work at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal. Her independent creations have been exhibited in Dubai, Japan and Sri Lanka. In 2002, she was presented a state level award by the Madhya Pradesh Hasta Shilpa Vikas Nigam.

#### 4. RAM SINGH URVETI

Ram Singh Urveti a well-known Gond tribal artist born in 1970 in the village of Patangarh in the Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh a central Indian state. He took birth in a large family of eight brothers and sisters whose mother had passed away when he was only one year old. His father managed to raise all the eight by himself. Like most other tribal artists, he had had no formal education in art. He learnt to sketch and draw on the floor and walls of his home as a child. In 1990 Ram Singh married Satrupa, and the very next year, he had to come to Bhopal in search of work. He took to painting as a passion and profession as a young man

inspired by legendry Jangarh Singh Shyam. The imagery is inspired by the stories that he has grown up hearing. The various rituals followed by the Gond community to which he belongs, whose life depends on nature, appears in compositions that entail reverence for goddess mother earth, tree of life, birds, animals and flora and fauna.

He got a job in the National Museum of Man. Living in Jangarh's house Ram Singh began helping him once in a way, with filling texture in Jangarh's paintings. It was also on Jangarh's insistence that he first worked on a canvas all by himself. One day, very pleased with a painting of his, Jangarh gifted him four stretched canvases and oil paint boxes. Ram Singh was delighted beyond words and sat down to a fresh canvas there and then. He dipped the brush in paint and did a stroke. Ram Singh had no experience of either the canvas or the oil paint. And the colour went flowing in many streams down the canvas. It was neither a very encouraging beginning nor a very memorable experience for him, as the artist stood gazing at the work, wondering where it all had gone wrong. However, it was Jangarh Singh Shyam's mother who soothed his frayed nerves and calmed him down. Her prophetic remark then was: "The way the colours have spread over this canvas, your work will also spread all over the world." And how right she was, as it didn't take long for him to create an indelible impression on the art world!

Once he started painting on paper Ram Singh's work got attention in art shows and soon he was recognized for his beautiful pictorial narrations of Gond religious and social life. Although he uses bright and vibrant colors his black and white work has come to be his signature work in which the intricacy of design exudes dark flames of the mystery of primeval creativity of his tribal world. In his work Ram Singh mostly paints trees but other elements of his universe like animistic gods-goddesses, origin myths, birds, animals and fellow human beings also appear.

Though Ram Singh has never kept count of his paintings, he must have made more than a thousand that now lie in different parts of the world. Ram Singh feels the Gond painting essentially has a very peculiar relationship, with nature. He himself must not have painted a single one that does not have a tree or a bird or an animal. All the Gond artists, work on the main figures with elaborately filled textures like dots or rice strokes etc. Ram Singh's paintings can be recognized by the particular texture he used as fills. He uses the motif of the little arrowheads for filling the figures in his painting. He had heard the elders talk so much of the arrows that were used by the wild animals.

The figures in Ramsingh's painting are also painted in a very peculiar way. They can be called amoebic, in the sense that they seem to change shape constantly; a mountaintop may very beautifully lend itself to a human face. The painting entitled 'the dream of the squirrel' is exemplary in this context. Two squirrels have come to a river to drink water. They are scared all the time of being caught. As they drink water, they dream of turning into a fish, a tree, a bird, but along with it they also see the net cast in the waters for the fish, children throwing stones at the birds. In the end they decide it best to remain squirrels! In the painting, the tails of the squirrels turn upwards to become the fruit laden branches of the tree, on which perch the various birds. The space between the two is at the same time, the lake wherein the fishes swim as well as the trunk of the tree. It's curious to note the ingenuity of the artist to weave the dream of the squirrels with their own bodies. And an appreciation of this particular work goes a long way in telling about the artist.

Thus, today, many talented Gond artists work can be seen on canvases in art galleries internationally. And one of the distinctive elements is the use of signature patterns that are used to infill the large forms on the canvas a certain sense of balance. And symmetric can be observed in the patterns used such as the spiral forms along the trees leaves animals and human



figures painted in several bright colors. The placement of motives showcasing village life and the blending of human figures with rituals and nature depicts the Gonds in heritage. Some other Gond artists who have carved a niche for themselves are Ram Singh Urveti, Bhajju Shyam (author of the much acclaimed London Jungle Book), [16] Rajendra Shyam, Suresh Dhurve and Narmada Prasad Tekam.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Gond tribal art has greatly evolved in the present times for good, thanks to the immensely both talented artists behind the modern Gond paintings, Jangarh Singh Shyam and Ram Singh Urveti. A great interest is shown by the global art community in this art form and recently, an art gallery- the Must Art Gallery, has been created, dedicated to just the Gond tribal

art. Moreover, the government and other institutes have taken it to the world, making them extremely popular, such that these paintings are sold at good prices at a lot of places. The legacy of the legend, Jangarh Singh Shyam, is thus carried by a whole lot of different artists, giving a personal touch to their beautiful works. The Gond art has definitely a long way to go. Skills and creativity in the eyes of the Gond artist everything is sacred and intimately connected to nature thus the unique oral narrative tradition of the Gonds is reflected in their paintings as well. The work of these artists is rooted in their folk tales and culture and thus story telling is a very important element of every painting. However, every artist today has a personal style and has developed a specific language within these narratives creating a richness of esthetic forms and styles.

Fig. 1



Jangarh Singh Shyam (Hanuman)

Fig. 2



Jangarh Singh Shyam (Snake, Drawing)

Fig. 3



Jangarh Singh Shyam (Animal with Tree)

Fig. 5



Ram Singh Urveti (Deer Family)

Fig. 4



Jangarh Singh Shyam (Ganesh)

Fig. 6



Ram Singh Urveti (Nature)



Fig. 7



Ram Singh Urveti (Dity)

Fig. 8



Ram Singh Urveti (Kaliya Mardan)

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