

Elephants in Indigenous Art and Changing Society in Jharkhand, India

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Jharkhand spread over Chotanagpur plateau and Santhal Paragana is a land endowed with rare natural gifts. It came into existence on 15th November 2000 as the 28th state of the Indian union. With an area of the 7,97,714 sq. kms. and about 21 million population, Jharkhand is bounded on the west by Uttar Pradesh and Chhattishgarh, on its North by Bihar, on its east by West Bengal and on its south by Orissa.

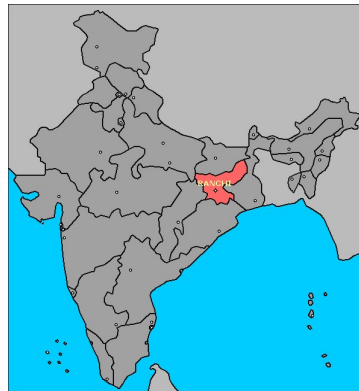


fig.1

NOT TO SCALE

The cultural mosaic of Jharkhand was dreamt about, shaped and polished by generations of communities, which have inhabited this land since time immemorial. Over thirty-two tribal groups such as Asurs, Santhals, Banjara, Bihor, Chero, Gond, Ho, Khond, Lohra, Mal Pahariya, Munda, Oraon, Kol etc. (28 % of the total population of the state), have left their impression on the culture of the region.

In this paper, I focus on the indigenous art and issues of Hazaribagh district in particular. Hazaribagh district is in the north of Jharkhand.

After 1991 census, the district of Hazaribagh has been divided into three separate districts viz. Hazaribagh, Chatra and Koderma. The district derives its name from its headquarters town. Hazaribagh literally means the place with 'a thousand gardens'. A village named 'Hazari' is comprised within the

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Hazaribagh Municipality. The 12 Blocks in the district are: Barhi, Barkagaon, Bishungarh, Churchu, Gola, Hazaribagh, Ichak, Katkamsandi, Keredari, Mandu, Patratu and Ramgarh.

The main rivers of the Division are the Barakar, Damodar, Haharo (in Barkagaon range), Garhi (in Tandwa range) and Barsoti (in Barhi range). The first two are perennial.

Forest plays a dominant part in the economy of the district, Hazaribagh is predominantly forest district. *Sal (Shorea robusta)* is the most famous and predominant species of trees in the jungles of the district.



fig.2

NOT TO SCALE

Elephants in the indigenous art of Jharkhand

Jharkhand is a land with large forest cover and elephant is a very prominent wild animal inhabiting in these forests. Elephant has also been given the status of state animal of Jharkhand. Elephant has been extensively portrayed in the indigenous art of Jharkhand particularly of Hazaribagh.

The indigenous art particularly of Hazaribagh region hail from an ancient tradition in antiquity. In most of the villages of this district one finds thousands of mud-built homes adorned all through the year with the beautiful marriage and harvest murals known as Khovar and Sohrai painting. The entire region has become famous for these painted houses of the Kurmi, Ganju and other ethnic groups, whose origins have been traced to the sacred tradition of the rock paintings found in the surrounding hills.

This is a pure matriarchal art form, where a girl learns the art and the motif from her mother and carries them to her husband's house. These two styles of wall art are particularly done by tribal women during harvest festival and marriages in the family. Women doing these wall paintings are married ones and are called "Devi".

Every family has some special family motifs and pattern which are exclusive to, the family. Every house in the village is painted with breathtaking murals on all the walls, inside and out. The villages of the district like Isco, Kharati, Bhelwara, Barwadi Punkhri etc. showcase their typical wall mural style. Their art has two major and distinct expressions *Sohrai* and *Khovar*, both having their source in the regions rock art.

Like the painted rock shelters called '*Khovar*', the marriage wall and room paintings made during the marriage season [spring-summer] are also called *Khovar*. Here *Khovar* is named after the cave [kho] and bridegroom [var]. The beautiful *Khovar* paintings are made in sgraffito technique in which the house walls are first layered with a mixture of cow dung and mud then coated with manganese black after which a light coating of creamy kaolin earth called *dudhi mitti* is applied and cut while wet with a broken comb creating stark black patterns of the black manganese undercoat. The resulting two dimensional murals are breathtaking in their simplicity and beauty and underline the instinctive ability of complex symbolism in human beings in all their environs.

Khovar is an art practiced during summer marriage season while *Sohrai* is practiced during harvest festival i.e. the onset of winter in which a specific art takes place in praise of the cattle and the lord of animals, *Pashupati Shiva*. *Sohrai* is a painted form done in a traditional manner using the chewed tooth stick of the Sal tree or cotton swabs dipped in colour. The walls are first coated with white creamy kaolin earth called *dudhi mitti* then the image is traced on them with a nail in the clay, then outlining is done with red, black and white colour

These murals reflect survival of powerful streams of inherited knowledge of colour, form and iconography. Each village of the region shows an amazing diversity of styles and techniques depending on the area, the tribe, the caste or the village. If the village is located in a deep valley or in isolated hill forests then the inspiration is diverse and the art is also diverse. Paintings of these isolated villages reflect more of representation of wild life and jungles around them. Along with peacocks, deer, snakes, elephants are also recurrent theme in both *Khovar* and *Sohrai* murals. Elephants are associated with fertility and fecundity. These images are painted into the nuptial room of the newly wedded couple to bring luck and prosperity. Various depictions of elephants in different villages by various painters show the dynamics between village folks and elephants. (Fig 3, a- f) Elephants have always been regarded as symbol of power and prosperity. Hence its depiction is so wide spread. Analysing each of these painting gives us a wealth of information about peaceful co habitation for generations. The forest and villages nearby respected each other's sanctity. But contemporary challenges of urbanization is disturbing this beautiful balance.



fig 3-a



fig 3-b

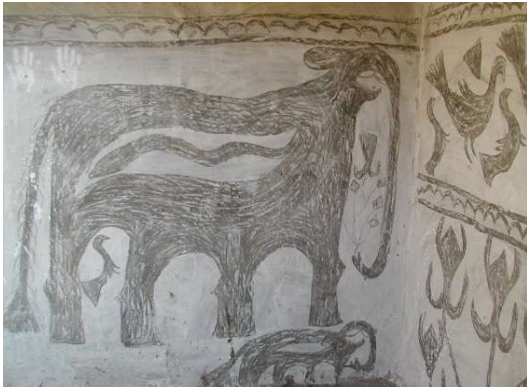


fig.3 - c



fig.3-d



fig.3-e



fig.3 -f

Changes in the society : Contemporary Issues

Man - Elephant conflict

The states of Jharkhand and Orissa in east-central India are sometimes called India's "Wild East" because of the rush by mining companies to exploit the mineral resources of the region. The state of Jharkhand, created in 2001, is home to rich mineral reserves, including uranium, iron ore and bauxite. However, it is the opencast coal mining that feeds India's insatiable need for power that causes the greatest challenges to wildlife. The rapid urbanization, large scale timber felling for Railways, short crop rotation of sal forests for quick economic gains, population increase were responsible for forest destruction. The original habitats have been taken over by machines plundering the forests for coal and iron ore mines. The once green haven are coated in layer of mineral. The rapid urbanization, large scale timber felling for Railways, short crop rotation of sal forests for quick economic gains, population increase were responsible for forest destruction. The original habitats have been taken over by machines plundering the forests for coal and iron ore mines. The once green haven are coated in layer of mineral

dust. The Asian Elephant has declined primarily because of reduction in habitat than captures (Sukumar, R., 1989).

In the state of Jharkhand in India, this rings exactly true. Poaching is not a major issue but the shrinkage of habitat is. With a maximum likely population of 750 elephants in the state. In Jharkhand, the elephants are mainly concentrated in two sanctuaries. One the “Palamu Tiger Reserve” in the North West of the State and the other in the rich natural forests of “Saranda” in the southernmost part of the state. Incidentally, the “Singhbhum Elephant Reserve” is the only elephant reserve in the country, which exists in this forest. With India’s booming economy and increasing population in the first years of the 21st century, the forested links between sanctuaries have become increasingly under pressure. The need to consider these so-called “wildlife corridors” has now come to the fore. Traditional routes of the elephants existed since times immemorial. But rapid urbanization has left the elephant population disoriented. The open – cast mines have drastically damaged the paths that elephants have used to migrate from one area to next. This takes elephants to previously unexplored areas and to human habitats where they put themselves and humans in grave danger. In September 2013, in the Itratongri village of Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, a herd of elephants destroyed fourteen houses and resulted in the death of one individual. For about two weeks the herd camped in the nearby forests and repeatedly came into human habitats in search of water. The changing equation with elephants has had its effect on the depiction in the wall murals.

A general overview of the artisans and their work shows lesser depiction of elephant. It may or may not be essentially because of man- animal conflict. But a continuous and in-depth study may throw some specific light on this. Recently was discovered one village mural which depicted a sickle along with the elephant. Probably it is a symbolic portrayal to ward off the elephant from human habitats by adding protective tool along with elephant form. (Fig 4) These changes in the traditional portrayal needs systemic monitoring and research.



fig.4

Commercialization of traditional art

The characteristics of indigenous art is its deep symbolism, But non indigenous artists are using the style and motifs randomly. Commercial demand for ethnic art has created artworks which exploit indigenous sensibilities. The observation of few years has led me to various artworks which are

random copying of Khovar and Sohrai styles without paying any attention to the traditional stylization. A complete new style is emerging keeping in mind the demand of the market. The figures (Fig 5-6) depicting elephants have been done completely disregarding the traditional form. These were being sold at the Jharkhand pavilion during International Trade fair 2015.



fig.5



fig.6

Thus, it can be summarized that both the elephant and its depiction in indigenous art, face threat from irresponsible human interference. It is high time to consider the importance of these animals in art and nature and definite steps should be taken to conserve their habitats. The beautiful wall art forms of Jharkhand should be in their traditional full splendor with more depictions of this essentially gentle animal.

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