

## Sohrai Art: A Cultural Reflection in Santali Wall Painting

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### Abstract:

The earliest evidence of artistic consciousness and painting in Indian civilization can be traced back to the prehistoric cave paintings which found on the walls of sites like Adamgarh and Bhimbetka. Later, the wall paintings of the Ajanta and Ellora caves clearly demonstrate the significant advancement of artistic expression over the time. Even though human civilization evolved beyond cave life into more sophisticated urban societies, the tradition of wall painting has continued to this day. This enduring legacy is vividly reflected in the wall art found in the homes of tribal communities. In the *Rarh* region, the Santal people one of the major indigenous groups adorn the walls of their homes with vibrant paintings and geometric patterns during their Bandna or *Sohrai* festivals.

**Key Words:** Santals, *Rarh* region, *Sohrai* festival, wall painting

India is a land of immense diversity. This diversity is not limited to its geography alone, but extends across its people's skin tones, castes, languages, religions, societies and cultures. The stream of this diversity has been flowing ceaselessly since ancient times. Almost every state in India possesses its own distinct cultural identity. In fact, in the Indian society, nearly every community and tribe uphold and follows its unique social customs and cultural traditions. One of the most significant expressions of this culture is found in the art of painting particularly wall paintings. The walls of Santal homes, adorned with vivid depictions of animals, birds, vines, leaves, and geometric patterns, seem to echo the rich legacy of ancient civilization. These artistic expressions not only beautify their surroundings but also serve as a visual continuation of India's age-old cultural heritage.

The Santals are an Austro-Asiatic ethnic group of the Munda linguistic family, indigenous to the Indian subcontinent. In terms of population, they represent the largest tribal community in both Jharkhand (27,54,723) and West Bengal (25,12,331). Significant Santal settlements are also found in the states of Odisha (8,94,764), Bihar (4,06,076), Assam (2,13,139).<sup>1</sup> According to the Census of India 2011, the Santals constitute the third-largest tribal group in the country, following the Bhils and the Gonds. The total Santal population in India is 6,57,0807, of which 25,12,331 reside in West Bengal. Although the Santals are present across nearly all districts of West Bengal, their concentration is highest in the *Rarh* region. Geographically, the *Rarh* region stretches from the western banks of the Bhagirathi River to the eastern fringes of the Chotanagpur Plateau.<sup>2</sup> This includes parts of the districts of Murshidabad (51,351), Birbhum (2,06,329), Purba and Paschim Bardhaman (3,75,263), Bankura (2,98,992), Purulia (3,39,094), Paschim Medinipur (5,35,441), Hooghly (1,53,809).<sup>3</sup> Approximately 80% of the total Santal population in West Bengal resides in these districts within the *Rarh* region.

The Santals are primarily an agrarian and festival-loving indigenous community. According to the Census of India 2011, approximately 80.9% of the Santals in West Bengal are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Among them, 18% are cultivators, while a significant 62.9% work as agricultural labourers.<sup>4</sup> Naturally, agriculture lies at the heart of their socio-cultural life, shaping their festivals, rituals, music, dance, and overall cultural identity. One of the most significant agricultural festivals of the Santals is *Sohrai* (also known as *Bandna*), which they celebrate over any five consecutive days between *Kali Puja* and *Poush Sankranti* (mid-October to mid-January). The festival is deeply rooted in agrarian life and is marked by various rituals intended to honor and protect cattle and to express gratitude for the harvest.<sup>5</sup>

A unique aspect of the *Sohrai* festival is the vibrant wall paintings that adorn Santal homes during this time. The walls are decorated with colourful designs and motifs often featuring animals, birds, plants, and geometric patterns collectively known as *Sohrai paintings* or *Sohrai art*. These murals are not merely decorative but are also powerful expressions of the Santals' cultural memory and agricultural worldview.

The households of the Santals are typically well-kept and orderly, but during the '*Sohrai*' or '*Bandna*' festival, their homes take on a renewed vibrancy. Starting a few days before *Kali Puja*, Santal villages become immersed in festive preparation. All family members participate in cleaning the house, courtyard, and surrounding areas. Any damage to the walls caused by the monsoon rains is repaired with a fresh coating of clay or river silt. To prepare the walls for painting, a smooth surface is created by applying a mixture of red earth, white clay, and sometimes even indigo dye used for textiles. The wall is then divided into three horizontal sections: the lower portion is usually painted in red or black, the upper portion in white, blue, or another light shade, and the central portion is reserved for the main artwork and motifs.<sup>6</sup> To maintain symmetry and proportion in the composition, borders are often outlined using strings or ropes. In addition to two-dimensional paintings, relief figures are sometimes created using clay to give a three-dimensional effect.

The paintings are rich in visual symbolism featuring floral and geometric motifs, vines, scenes from hunting life, and at times, narratives from mythological stories.<sup>7</sup> These '*Sohrai paintings*' are not merely decorative expressions but are deeply embedded in the collective memory, cultural beliefs, and agrarian lifestyle of the Santal community. They serve as a vibrant testament to an indigenous aesthetic that continues to thrive in harmony with nature and tradition. Images of 'cattle' and 'ploughs' also find an important place in their wall art, symbolizing the tools and agents of a good harvest central to their agrarian life. Along with agriculture, their long tradition of hunting animals is also reflected in their wall painting. Below mention picture number one and two reveal their traditions of hunting and agrarian life.

**Picture No. 1 & 2: Santati wall arts: Picture of ploughing the land and hunting the animals<sup>8</sup>**

In the wall paintings of the Santals in the *Rarh* region, the ‘lotus flower’ frequently appears as a prominent motif. The primary inspiration behind this lies in the belief that the lotus is the sacred flower upon which ‘Goddess Lakshmi’, the deity of wealth and prosperity, is seated. Additionally, the lotus holds national significance as the ‘national flower of India’, further enhancing its symbolic value. Alongside the lotus, the ‘peacock’ is also a highly favoured image among the Santals. As a community deeply connected to nature and engaged in nature worship, their paintings often feature an abundance of flora and fauna trees, birds, animals, creepers, and leaves all depicted with great affection and reverence. Interestingly, animals and birds are often depicted in pairs, a deliberate artistic choice meant to symbolize ‘a happy family’ or ‘a harmonious marital life’. Instead of painting, figures of various animals, birds, and plants are often made from clay on the wall, and then the figures are painted, like below mentioned wall arts.

**Picture No. 3:** Santati wall arts: picture of peacock <sup>9</sup>



Geometric patterns hold a significant place in the wall paintings of the Santals. These artworks often combine simple geometric shapes, such as squares, circles, and triangles, with carefully applied colours, enhancing the overall beauty and depth of the walls. The precise use of light and various shades brings these patterns to life, making them visually striking. Occasionally, the geometric patterns are drawn in ‘three-dimensional’ forms, further adding uniqueness and charm to the walls.

**Picture No. 4:** Santati wall arts: related to social media. <sup>10</sup>



With the passage of time, globalization and the influence of the internet have significantly impacted modern societal life, and the Santals are no exception. These changes are clearly reflected in their traditional wall paintings. Where once the Santals would use natural materials to create colours, today they purchase paint and brushes from the market. In contemporary Santal wall paintings, various aspects of modern life are also depicted such as symbols representing YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Google, and more. Additionally, popular cartoon characters from TV serials are being painted on walls. In this way, the Santals are not



only preserving their ancient heritage but also incorporating elements of modernity and technology into their art. This reflects both the continuity of their culture and their adaptation to the modern world.

**Conclusion:**

Cantered around the *Sohrai* festival, the wall paintings created by the Santal community are not merely expressions of their cultural identity, but also vivid depictions of various aspects of their everyday life. These artworks reflect traditional practices such as agriculture and hunting, while also capturing the growing influence of modernity, the internet, and globalization. Thus, these wall paintings serve not only as aesthetic expressions but also as significant mediums through which the Santals adapt to and articulate their place within a rapidly changing world.

**References**

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  - <sup>3</sup> Census of 2011, ST-19-PCA-A11-APPENDIX.xlsx, retrieved on 25/08/2025.
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  - <sup>5</sup> Kamalendranath Mandi, Santal Pujo-parban, Dreemland apartment, Tamluk, Purba Medinipur, 2017, pp. 66-74.
  - <sup>6</sup> Interview with Khagendranath Murmu, Shulibona, P.S- Chhatna, Dist. Bankura, WB, on 21/01/2024.
  - <sup>7</sup> K. S. Singh, *The Scheduled Tribes*, O.U.P. New Delhi, 1994, p.1045.
  - <sup>8</sup> Picture No. 1 & 2, clicked by Sankar Tantubay, Shulibona, P.S- Chhatna, Dist. Bankura, WB, on 21/01/2024.
  - <sup>9</sup> Picture No. 3, clicked by Sankar Tantubay, Shulibona, P.S- Chhatna, Dist. Bankura, WB, on 21/01/2024.
  - <sup>10</sup> Picture No. 4, clicked by Sankar Tantubay, Shulibona, P.S- Chhatna, Dist. Bankura, WB, on 21/01/2024.