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From Canvas to Community: Art as a Tool for Women's Empowerment in The Kandha Tribe of Kandhamal, Odisha

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Abstract

This article explores the empowerment of women in the Adivasi Kandha community of Kandhamal district, Odisha. Where Kandha women live deeply rooted in cultural arts and traditions yet face poverty, marginalization, and limited educational opportunities that have driven them to improve their economic situation. By focusing on traditional arts, they achieve economic stability, independence, leadership, and social awareness. Art also empowers these women socially while preserving their cultural heritage, serving as a mirror of the tribe's values, struggles, and aspirations, and providing a creative outlet where they express their identity. Drawing on interviews, case studies, and historical context, this paper examines their artistic expressions alongside the social constraints and challenges they face and highlights their vision for a sustainable future. Ultimately, it shows how their resilience, strength, and creativity bridge the gap between culture and socio-economic progress, allowing Kandha women to reclaim their identity and reshape their destinies.

Keywords: Arts, Empowerment, Cultural Heritage, Socio-Economic process, Social Awareness, Sustainable

Introduction

The Kandha people primarily reside across various parts of Odisha and are renowned for their rich cultural heritage. They excel at crafting baskets, trays, mats, and traditional toys, and are also highly skilled in painting, pottery, and intricate beadwork. Among their sub-groups, the Sitha Kandha (also called Sitha Khond or Sita Kandha), stand out for their exceptional basket-making expertise. Drawing on craftsmanship passed down through generations, Kandha artisans create a wide variety of beautifully woven cane and bamboo items that reflect both everyday utility and cultural identity (Dr. Sahoo 2019) ^[1]. These artistic skills have been passed down within the Kandha community from one generation to the next. Their Art is deeply connected to nature, spiritual beliefs and tribal myths. They create new items during festivals and honor of their chief deity Dharani Penu (Earth Goddess), what reflecting their cultural and spiritual traditions. Wearing different kind of ornaments like Sursuria mali (bead necklace), Bala (silver bangle), Gogla (neckband), Naka putuki (nose flower), Pujupaka (hairpin), Kichedka (ear ring), etc. making Tikanguhpa (tattoo), Saris, Dhoti (loin cloth), Genji, Colorful turban to participate in their festivals, (Behura 1983) ^[2]. The Kandha community of Odisha possesses a rich tradition of ornamentation that reflects both aesthetic sensibility and cultural symbolism. Among the various ornaments worn by Kandha women, the Sireni made out of plastic and wood serves as a decorative accessory used during social and festive occasions. The Vinanga crafted from aluminium or iron and the Motanga made solely of aluminium, are important components of the traditional attire, signifying beauty and cultural pride. Hair adornments hold special significance in Kandha culture, the Jhaptang an iron hair clip helps keep the hair properly fastened while the Talmotang a leaf ball placed inside the hair knot gives it a fuller and well-shaped appearance. The Beni made from local grass and worn on the forehead represents a simple yet culturally meaningful ornamentation. During matrimonial ceremonies the Taperi and Kakadi play crucial roles as bridal headdresses. The Taperi is a round ornament made of thin silver plate with one-rupee silver coins attached by small holes and tied around the bride's head, symbolizing prosperity and marital sanctity. The Kakadi composed of two or

three narrow silver plates joined at the bottom and decorated with four anna equal to 25 Paisa at the top, similarly adorns the bride's head, reflecting traditional identity and aesthetic grace. The Dipa, a silver or iron hair clip is worn by Kutia Kandha women to press and decorate their hair during festive and matrimonial occasions. Ear ornaments among the Kandhas include the Kiu Kichadaka made of aluminium or iron and worn on the upper part of the ear, and the Olanga, made from aluminium, silver, or gold, which is worn on the earlobe as a symbol of social status and cultural heritage. Neck ornaments include the Saska, a beaded necklace that adds a colorful touch to the costume and the Lebusikding composed of glass beads rupee-coin neck chains, and Putuka, another type of bead necklace that collectively symbolizes wealth and festivity. The Kagdanga, a ring made of brass, iron, or aluminium, serves as an emblem of beauty, while the Baatanga, Muapajanga, and Paola Pajanga crafted from aluminium, brass, or silver are traditional bangles adorning the wrists of Kandha women. The Sadang Pajanga, consisting of glass bangles, is often worn in multiple layers to enhance the aesthetic charm of the hands, whereas the Kaju Mudinga, made from aluminium, iron, or brass, represents another distinctive wrist ornament. Beaded ornaments such as the Japi Saska further add elegance and vibrancy to the attire. Around the waist, Kandha women traditionally wear the Tedi Sikidinga and Toderi both aluminium waistbands as well as the Dumonaka made from cotton string symbolizing simplicity and indigenous craftsmanship. The Japeika and Gatadi waist chains of metallic design serve both ornamental and symbolic functions. Completing the ensemble the Koda and Kalu Mudinga made of brass or aluminium reflect the tribe's deep-rooted sense of artistry, craftsmanship and ethnic identity. Collectively, these ornaments embody the Kandha community's intimate connection with nature, social customs and aesthetic traditions, representing a living expression of their cultural heritage. The above ornaments were worn/ used by the Kutia Kandha people (both male and female) of Kandhamal district of Odisha in India (Mohanty & Ota 2015) ^[3]. The shape and design of the shawl worn by the Dangaria Kandha tribe of Kandhamal district of Odisha is Truly extraordinary. Each layer of the shawl is known by a distinct name such as Kapda, Wata, Kralikana, Hipa, Keri, Kandhba, Kanka, and Karpi (from the lowest to uppermost layer). They use a variety vibrant color in their saris including Kambiti (Red), Aka (Green), Hinga (yellow), and Mirga (Brown). (Sethi & Naik 2020) ^[4]. Art serves as a medium for imparting education to the next generation. In the modern era, after pursuing higher studies the tribal women recommend the government to promote of their traditional art. At the same time a tribal artist residing in a village establishes her identity through their art. These village women artists are the ones who truly preserve and promote their cultural art.

Research Objectives

To examine how the traditional art forms role as a means of empowerment of Kandha women.

To explore the impact of art on Socio-Economy condition of Kandha tribe.

The study Identify different challenges faced by Kandha women on the way of empowerment

Methodology

To collect the data for this research article will follow primary data like – Interviews with Kandha Women, Community leaders, Representative of NGOs, Organizations working with the Tribe, Field visit to kandha community to observe their artistic ideas and understand the Challenges and Success. Secondary data will have collected from Academic Journals, Government Reports, and an Online Sources. This paper has based on the Qualitative, Descriptive and Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology. A survey will be conducted in the Baliguda, Daringwadi and Tumudibandha blocks of Kandhamal dist. Accurate information will be gathered by directly speaking with Kandha women living in the villages and those residing in urban areas.

Sampling

Sampling of this research paper is Purposive Sampling, taken to the girls/ women of Kandha at the age of 18 years old. The sample size is 15- 20 personal depth interview and 3-4 group discussion with the tribal women who are presently engaged with the cultural art.

Art as a Tool for Women's Empowerment in the Kandha Tribe

Approximately 44.70% of the area in Odisha is inhabited by tribal communities. According to the Census of India (2011), the tribal population constitutes approximately 22.8 percent of the total population of Odisha, reflecting the state's significant share of the tribal demographic within India. Among this tribal population, 22.3 percent are males and 23.4 percent are females, indicating a relatively balanced and slightly favourable sex ratio among the tribal communities when compared to the general population. In Kandhamal the male population is 7,90,559 while the female population is 8,36,927. The female literacy rate is 35.57% and the sex ratio is 1059. (Tribes in Odisha at a Glance, 2015). The deep-rooted traditions and cultural vibrancy of the Kandha people in Kandhamal highlight the importance of art in women's empowerment. Women living in rural areas use cultural art forms to address the economic challenges of their Families. Kandha women create paintings on sarees. They often depicting religious motifs through their painting and textile art. In the modern era, the demand for this tribal art is steadily increasing through various events such as Adivasi Mela, Pallishree Mela, Thakurani Yatra, Book Fair etc. it is providing a platform for tribal art to gain visibility in the Global. These women are bringing their culture to the modern world, which is why they are often referred to as the custodians of their community's artistic heritage. In the modern era empowerment of women is considered a central issue. It is a multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept where, enabling women to pursue education and fulfil their daily social needs according to their own will. Additionally, it allows them to establish their identity within their family, society and the nation. (Ms. Das & Dr. Mahapatra 2017) ^[5].

Table 1: Area, villages, ST population, literacy, and work participation in selected blocks

Sl. No	Block Name Area in sq. k.m.	No of Village & No of G.P.	Population S.T.				Female Literacy	Workers/ WPR		
			Total	Male	Female	% of S. T.		Total	Male	female
1	Tumudibandha 283.94 sq. k.m.	222/11	27649	13400	14249	61.28	29. 30	13460 (48.68)	6701 (50.01)	6759 (47.43)
2	Daringwadi 746.80 sq. k.m.	293/25	68896	33215	35681	63.06	39. 61	34844 (50.57)	17084 (51.43)	17760 (49.77)
3	Baliguda 32.28 sq. k.m.	255/14	37466	18246	19220	50.29	40. 53	18871 (50.37)	9537 (52.27)	9334 (48.56)

(Demographic Indicators of Scheduled Tribes in Odisha. Scheduled Caste & Scheduled Tribes Research & Training Institute Odisha, Bhubaneswar, 2020).

Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is one of the significant impacts of art in the empowerment of Kandha women. With the support of NGOs and government schemes locally produced art is being commercialized. Handmade items such as bamboo artifacts, weaving and painting are being sent to the market. It is providing daily employment opportunities to them. These initiatives have bought a new transformation to the tribal art and are helping to preserve traditional art forms. Economic empowerment empowers Kandha women both individually and collectively. In the Kandha society is observed a significant disparity in attitudes of parents between boys and girls. After marriage women are often restricted from going outside. Men can move freely in the

community while women have to abide by restrict rules. However, economic empowerment helps eliminate these disparities and allows women to establish their identity in society. It gives them the opportunity to express their thoughts, dreams, and struggles. Kandha women organize mural painting and collaborative craft workshops in group, that fostering a sense of social and economic unity among them. Working in groups makes them appear inspired, confident, and experienced. This provides them with the opportunity to become leaders in their community. Economic empowerment not only helps them gain independence but also supports the formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs). (Dr. Mohapatra 2014) ^[16]

Table 2: Category of S.T. workers

Sl. No.	Block's Name	Main workers			Marginalise Workers			Non- Workers		
		Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1	Tumudibandha	5123	3549	1574	8337	3152	5185	14189	6699	7490
2	Daringwadi	18861	12061	6800	15983	5023	10960	34052	16131	17921
3	Baliguda	8561	6380	2181	10310	3157	7153	18595	8709	9886

(Demographic Indicators of Scheduled Tribes in Odisha. Scheduled Caste & Scheduled Tribes Research & Training Institute Odisha, Bhubaneswar, 2020).

Art as a Medium of Awareness

Kandha women are empowering people in the process of addressing critical social issues through the medium of art. They use their artistic skills to raise awareness about education, health, environmental conservation, and gender equality. These visual narratives educate the community and motive them for leading to appropriate solutions for those issues faced by tribal people. In tribal communities many diseases are prevalent but due to financial constraints, people often rely on Ayurvedic medicine. Sometimes, the lack of access to proper treatment cause to death in the tribe. Poor nutrition among tribal communities also contributes to health issues. In today's context, art is making people aware in the field of social (Marriage, Dance, Song), Political participation (Citizenship, Leadership, Decision-making), and Economic aspects (Business, Marketing, Government assistance, Craft-making) etc. this awareness is helping tribal communities negative and address these challenges effectively. The rich tribal literature preserved through oral transmission is deeply embedded in the art and craft traditions of tribal communities. Curators play an invisible yet vital role in expanding and safeguarding this literature ensuring that the wisdom, stories and cultural heritage concealed within these traditions are documented and celebrates for future generations. embroidered shawl of Dangaria Kandha known as Kapadaganda, along with the museum documentation of tribal traditional art and wisdom, highlights the rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship of the

community. (Behera 2017) ^[7]

Challenges and Preservation

The women artisans of the Kandha community are facing numerous challenges in showcasing their skills. Issues such as market access, lack of modern training, and social constraints are prominently visible. To overcome these challenges, a multi-pronged approach is essential. This includes policy support, involvement of NGOs, private sector collaboration, improved transportation, market linkages, art-based empowerment programs, and greater community participation. Additionally, digital platforms are crucial for selling local products globally and gaining respect for their craftsmanship. The skill development programme of Kandha women SHGs and Dangaria Kondh Development Agency (DKDA), during the lockdown pandemic helped to revive their income (Majhi 2023) ^[8]. Art helps in preserving the cultural heritage of the Kandha community. In a rapidly globalizing world tribal traditions are at risk of being lost. The people are increasingly drowning to colourful foreign attire and prefer to keep traditional clothing for special occasions. By incorporating some contemporary elements into traditional Kandha art, it is possible to win the hearts of customers. Though this approach not only is the old and new art being kept alive, but it is also fostering innovation and creativity. Around 60% of women in worldwide are engaged in the workforce, a trend also observed in India. Here only 7.2% women being

self-employed, this growth should not only include urban women but also tribal women. In India, Odisha is a tribal state where 45% of the population falls Below Poverty Line (BPL). Therefore, to promote the development of tribal communities, it is essential to focus on entrepreneurship development in the tribal areas of Odisha. (Behera 2017) [7]. To preserve tribal art both the Odisha government and the Indian government have taken several steps.

Village level

- Offers skill up-graduation training to artisans
- Provide livelihood support by forming SHGs
- Distributes tools and equipment to artisans
- Offer design development and marketing assistance
- Provide margin money assistance to SHGs
- Aajeevika Grameen Express Yojana (AGEY), 2011
- Sampurna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), 25 Sept. 2001
- A Scheme for Promoting Innovation, Rural Industry and Entrepreneurship (ASPIRE), 2015
- Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana launched in 25 September, 2014

State/ National level

- Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana
- Tribal Forest Dwellers Empowerment Scheme
- Adivasi Shiksha Rinn Yojana
- Micro Credit Scheme for Self Help Group (SHGs)
- Preserve tribal art and artefacts at Tribal Museum, Bhubaneswar
- Making Kandha hut and related material
- Organizes exhibitions inside and outside of the state
- Select tribal artisans and promote their traditional art
- National Mission for Empowerment of Women, 2011
- Market Promotion Development Assistance, 2015
- Mahila Coir Yojana 2015- Central Government Schemes
- National Skill Development Mission and Skill India Campaign, launched on 15 July 2015

Findings and suggestion

The art form has a deep cultural significance for the Kutia Kandha it expresses their traditional way of life and cultural identity. (Mr. Mallick & Dr. Mohapatra 2023) [10] If tribal women have gained an independent space today it is through art. Art and Craft are the only mediums through which they have become entitled to this respect and have achieved economic, social, cultural and personal empowerment. However, in the direction of availing these opportunities they are facing many challenges. For instance,

- **limited market reach:** due to living in forests and hilly areas tribal people face road problems, which creates difficulties in transporting their items to the market. In village areas there is no significant market so that goods do not arrive in large quantities. Due to lack of communication people are unable to connect and there is no interaction between the product and the customer.
- **Exploitation by middlemen:** wealthy people buy products from tribal communities at very low prices and take away the profits. If a product becomes popular among people middlemen set up small factories and send workers to produce the goods at low wages. As a result, the artists do not receive fair compensation for

their work.

- **Resource scarcity:** Due to the lack of machines and insufficient training tribal artists are unable to use quality materials in their products.
- **Social barriers:** In tribal society the male is considered the head of the family. According to this tradition he often does not allow the women of the household to go out to earn money. This is because of societal pressure- what people will think or say. As a result, men do not let the women leave the house.

Limited money, skills, machine

- **Sustainability:** Due to lack of funds, tribal women are often unable to continue any work for an extended period. To sustain their work, they require external support. To empower tribal women through art and overcome the numerous challenges that they face we should give attention on four key steps.
- **Successful strategies:** It includes “skill Development Programme”- there is a need to make tribal products attractive and high quality which requires implementing skills development programs. “Market Access”- To nationalize and internationalize tribal products access to broader markets is essential. “Local Recognition and Community Participation”- The community must take responsibility to make these products locally famous. People should participate and contribute to promoting their art. “Cultural Festivals and Exposure”- Tribal Art needs to be showcased to a wider audience so, that cultural festivals should be organized. Additionally, the support of the government and NGOs is crucial to amplify this effort. Therefore, the government should take effective steps to promote tribal art.



(These two women are promoting bamboo art at the Kandhamal Festival)

NGOs

NGOs should engage in discussion with grassroots-level people address their problems and explain how to promote art. They should focus on capacity building among tribal women provide training on “Market access”, “Conduct awareness campaigns”, and ensure proper documentation.

Policy Makers

Officers under the Government of India and the Government of Odisha who are formulating policies related to tribal affairs should focus on the development of tribal art. They should provide financial support and protection for art so, that artists do not have to wonder for money. The artist can focus on work properly and attract customers

through their creativity. To promote tribal art infrastructure should be improved so that more people can work and produce more products. Women should be given social security and legal protection so that they can freely involve themselves in art.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders should work to promote art through corporate partnership, academic research, and community engagement. This will lead to good business, art- based empowerment, cultural sensitivity, and acceptance.

Conclusion

From Canvas to community art has become a tool for women to reclaim their identity, achieve empowerment, challenge social norms, and building a bright future. The journey of the Kandha women very challenging and inspiring. The hard work of these women compels us to realize that art is not just a reflection of society, it is a force for change. The gap between culture and the modern era has been bridged by tribal women through their art. In these busy days wholeheartedly, they are carrying their culture carefully. In one line it can be said that “*women are like mother Earth- Holding the tribal culture in one hand and modern era in the other*”. The time has come when merely launching government schemes is not enough to save this beautiful cultural art. Therefore, it is essential to take individual responsibility, implement government schemes at the ground level and provide personal support to preserve it.

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