

# Tribal Wall Arts and Paintings of Malda and South Dinajpur: A Socio-cultural Study

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## Abstract

Arts and paintings are imbibed in Indian cultural ethos and practices. And tribal wall arts and paintings have a glorious heritage. These are accomplished by the ethnic communities of the nation. The main themes of this genre of art include birth, death, marriage, farming, hunting, celebration etc. Simultaneously, these works of arts and paintings bring out various elements of myth, folklore and realism. This indigenous tradition passes from generation to generation, telling and retelling the facts and facets of human life. Thus very often many unheard stories are made heard to all through these silent but eloquent modes of culture i.e. arts and paintings. The chief objective of this paper is to introduce various tribal arts and paintings of Malda and South Dinajpur through some pictorial descriptions. All these aesthetic works are accomplished beautifully on mud walls of houses of the tribal people. This socio-cultural study opens up the ways of discussing the forms and features of tribal arts, drawings and paintings today in a regional as well as the global context. For this, both the primary as well as the secondary source of materials is taken into account.

[**Keywords:** ethos, practices, tribal, aesthetic, socio-cultural, regional, global]

The tribes or the tribal people are very close to nature. They are the indigenous community of any country. Nature is the living inspiration to them as they live in the lap of nature. They are absolutely pure and positive in their attitude and aptitude towards every natural phenomenon. Nature that appears as a mother figure in the truest sense of the term is an infinite source of solace and contemplation to the tribal population. They collect wood, medicine, honey and many other commodities directly from the nature. Consuming or selling those things, they earn their livelihood peacefully. Most of the tribal people work in fields. They join their hands in productive works, like hunting, cultivating and animal farming etc. Simultaneously, they extend their hands in arts and paintings during their time of leisure.

In the vast arena of contemporary Indian art, tribal wall arts and paintings deserve more documentation and attention for having their distinctive position and popularity. Tribal arts belong to the category of folk arts. Indian folk arts include paintings, rural decorations and reliefs on mud walls, ritual decorations, embroideries, tribal metal castings, wood carvings, terracotta images, painted clay and wooden figures, toys and floor decorations etc. Pran Nath Mago (2017)

observes that “the tradition in folk-art reflects the continuous play of line and colour which is native to the mind of India” (p.97). There lies unity, continuity and spirituality. Mago (2017) also writes:

The growing interest of contemporary Indian artists in folk art and culture requires to be seriously studied. We must remember that folk arts had both a practical and spiritual purpose and were not merely a leisure-time activity. We must note, too, that the development of folk-arts had been determined by social and geographical environments. The images, motifs and symbols of folk-art are the manifestations of values held dear by people at a particular period of their history. They are features of the past, and having continued up to this day, they are not meant to serve merely as creative stimulants, but are to be regarded as the hallmarks of a particular culture – its way of life, its beliefs, its rituals. (p.102)

A remarkable portion of Indian population is the tribal community or the Adivasi. The majority of the tribal people live in rural areas. They are noticed primarily in forest areas, foothills and so called marginalized places around the world. They are the backward classes in respect of education, health and wealth etc. Hence, the development of the tribal communities has been a global concern now-a-days. As per Census of India 2011, the total population of West Bengal has been 9, 12, 76, 115 and 5.8% of this population belong to tribal community. So, the number of total tribal population is 52,96,953 and there are almost 40 types of Scheduled Tribes among them in West Bengal. The number of tribes and population varies from time to time. They were primarily noted as castes. As per the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Amendment) Act, 1976, there were 38 types of Scheduled Tribe communities in West Bengal. (Bandyopadhyay, 2014, P.45) In fact, Santal is the predominantly major tribal community of West Bengal. As per Census of India 2001, the total tribal population of West Bengal has been 44,06,794 and the number of Santal population is 22,80,540 constituting more than half (51.8%) of the total tribal population of the state. Then comes Oraon (14%), Munda(7.8%), Bhumij(7.6%), Kora(3.2%), Lodha(1.9%), Mahali(1.7%), Bhutia(1.4%), Bedia(1.3%), Savar(1%) etc.

([http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables\\_Published/SCST/dh\\_st\\_westbengal.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_westbengal.pdf))

As per Census of India 2011, the total population of Malda has been 39,88,845. Of this, 3,13,984 persons belong to Scheduled Tribes constituting 7.87% of the total population of the district (Bandyopadhyay, 2014, P.46). There are 38 sub-communities among the tribal population in Malda. The main sub-communities are Santal, Oraon, Mores, Mundas and Malpaharias etc. “About 88% of the tribal population are concentrated in the ‘Barind’ areas comprised in four blocks namely, Gazole, Bamongola, Habibpur and Old Malda” (malda.gov.in). The total population of South Dinajpur at 2011 Census has been recorded as 16,76,276. Of this, 2,75,366 persons are Scheduled Tribes that constitute 16.43% of the total population of the district (Bandyopadhyay, 2014, P.46). The most important tribe found in the district is Santal including its numerous sub-clans like, Hansda, Murmu, Hembram, Soren, Baske, Tudu etc.



in a similar way rich in rituals, customs and creeds of indigenous and other people. Like Malda, South Dinajpur too witnessed the curse of Partition. So, in both these regions cultural exchanges and cultural hybridity become very prominent. Each and every community endeavour to preserve the cultural identity, so is the tribal population of Malda and South Dinajpur.



**Tribal Houses in Jhangra, Narayanpur, Malda**



**Figure 2: Meeting and discussion sessions with tribal people in presence of the researchers**

The present work is primarily based on the fieldworks done in the villages of Malda and South Dinajpur. These two districts along with other districts of West Bengal in India bear the stamp of ethnic diversity and cultural multiplicity. If the images mentioned in this article are studied meticulously, it is found that the mud houses of poor tribal villagers are built side by side the *pucca* ones which are owned by the economically better neighbours. In fact, a visitor in the village namely, Jhangra near Narayanpur in Malda, must be astonished to observe how families of different socio-economic ranks and religions reside side by side. In spite of economic vulnerability, these poor tribal people are sincere enough to preserve their cultural resources.



**Figure 3: Tribal Art in Baul, South Dinajpur**

The above-mentioned image is found in Baul, a village in the district of South Dinajpur, West Bengal, India. It exhibits not only the inner reflections of the artist, but also the social and religious changes down the ages. The art work is protruded and can easily be palpable. This work of art is done on a mud wall not from the professional point of view, but from an inner urge and passion of the artist. In this piece of art two beautiful curves are visible. The curves are probably two delicate stems out of which flower and leaves are coming out. In this art work four full grown flowers are noticed. Along with flowers bunches of seeds are also visible. The most significant aspect of the art piece is a prominent sign of Cross in between the two stems. The Cross is fixed exactly at the centre of this art piece. The total setting is very significant and symbolic. The sign of Cross suggests aggression of one religion to another one. The Santal tribe of Malda and South Dinajpur like many other places in India and abroad, belong to an aboriginal society which is neither economically sound nor is intellectually vocal. The Sign of Cross undoubtedly suggests the Christian aggression in the guise of a benevolent saviour. The poor, innocent and mundane tribal people are easily beguiled and befooled by the holy speeches of salvation as well as material gains.



**Figure 4: Tribal Arts and Paintings in Jhangra, Narayanpur, Malda**

This image is taken in Jhangra village, Narayanpur, Malda. It reflects the relationship between nature and the human beings. People always prefer villages to towns for living in direct communion with nature. These drawings of flowers and creepy plants are found abundantly in tribal areas of Malda and South Dinajpur. The artistic beauty of these wall arts and paintings arouses one's aesthetic sense of pleasure. Though the tribal people live in extreme poverty, they simply love artistic beauty. The drawings are, no doubt, soothing to eyes and refreshing to mind. The colours used in these drawings and paintings are bought from the nearby markets. Sometimes, the poor tribal people cannot afford to buy befitting colours. As a result, they are gradually losing their interest in this kind of art works. According to the villagers, the government and the local authorities are not careful enough to preserve these cultural arts and practices.



**Figure 5: Arts and Paintings in Baul, South Dinajpur**

This piece of wall art is captured in a poor tribal house in the village of Baul, in the district of South Dinajpur. The total setting of the image reflects the artist's love of beauty and artistry. This work of art is done on mud walls in a simple manner. The whole wall around the front door is painted in blue, white and red colours. Here very little quantity of colour is added while painting the flowers and other creepy plants. It can be easily noticed that these drawings of flowers reflect well the style of Madhubani art or Mithila art, an art form famous in the Mithila region and its adjoining areas in India and Nepal. This glorious tradition of drawings and paintings in the tribal areas of South Dinajpur is carried on from generation to generation, especially by the women in the family.



**Figure 6: Tribal Arts and Paintings in Jhangra, Narayanpur, Malda**

There were many idols of artistic beauty and splendour in Jhangra, Narayanpur, Malda. Among them, the idol of the gatekeeper carrying a spear in arms draws the attention of the visitors first. People everywhere in the world suffer from insecurity and uncertainty. The tribal people are not an exception. Keeping in mind the question of security, this idol may be erected just beside the front gate of the tribal house. Though it is made on mud walls using clay and some straws, it is sure to remind us of a guard man of the modern-day-society in India and the abroad, where security of the people poses a great threat to our peaceful living and survival on this beautiful earth.



**Figure 7: In the lap of mother, a wall art in Malda**

This figure is about an idol of a mother carrying a baby in her arms. It reflects a familiar picture everywhere in the world. The best relationship of nature is explored in this tribal wall art and painting. A child is best looked in the lap of a mother which is the safest place of all. This beautiful figure is also made of clay with the background of blue muddy wall. A certain quantity of colour is also used for painting where necessary. There is the mark of vermilion which suggests that the woman is married according to Hindu rituals. The lips are red, the hair is black. There is a tinge of redness in the sharee (a kind of cloth) worn by the lady. The curly lines show the folding of the sharee nicely. There is a red bangle in the hand of the woman. The total image bears significance and reminds us of an ideal Indian woman.



**Figure 8: Tribal Arts and Paintings in Jhangra, Narayanpur, Malda**

This figure shows that an idol of Lord Ganesha is erected on the upper side wall of the threshold. It is found in the house of Mr. Amin Soren, a permanent resident of Village- Jhangra, P. O. Narayanpur, P.S. - Old Malda, District: Malda. It is symbolic enough to suggest that the members of the family belong to Hindu community and they believe in idolatry. They worship the idol of Lord Ganesha, god of new beginnings and remover of obstacles. Ganesha is also known as Ganapati, Vinayaka and Binayak among various people. He is one of the best-known and most worshipped deities in the vast area of Hindu pantheon.



**Figure 9: Tribal Arts and Paintings in Jhangra, Narayanpur, Malda**

In tribal wall arts and paintings the animal kingdom includes deer, dog and some birds etc. In the present image, the co-existence of a dog and a deer can be noticed. These animals can be found in the tribal areas in much numbers. Human beings and other animals all are necessary for maintaining the balance of an ecosystem. This piece of wall art propagates the eternal message that people should not do any harm to these innocent creatures. Each and every creation is beautiful. Hence, both the beauty and the beast should be preserved. This image is taken in the house of Mr. Amin Soren of Village- Jhangra, P. O. Narayanpur, P.S. - Old Malda, Dist.- Malda.



**Figure 10: Tribal Wall Arts and Paintings, Jhimuli Road, Malda**

This image shows that a woman is standing with an earthen pot on her head. It may well reflect the daily duty of a woman who is entrusted with the responsibility of fetching water for her family from various places. In tribal areas there is an acute scarcity of drinking water. In some places people are compelled to drink unsafe water. That's why women are engaged in this laborious job for her family. They sometimes fetch water from far away wells or tanks. In an article, Women still carry most of the world's water, Bethany Caruso writes:

“And in many places, water sources are far from homes. In Asia and Africa, women walk an average of 3.7 miles per day collecting water. Carrying such loads over long distances can result in strained backs, shoulders, and necks, and other injuries if women have to walk over uneven and steep terrain or on busy roads.” (<https://qz.com>>women-still-carr...)



**Figure 11: Tribal Arts and Paintings in Malda**

This is an idol of a dancing girl. It is in conformity with tribal cultural practices. Tribal people spend their leisure time in dancing, singing and merrymaking. They are very joyous and innocent in nature. During various pujas and festivals, they perform dance programmes. Both men and women participate and enjoy in dancing and singing activities. Songs and dances help to investigate the cultural heritage of the community concerned. The cultural aspects of Malda and South Dinajpur are famous in Bengal for their richness and variety. One such dominant variety found here is the Santhal dance. “This dance is a replica of the folk dance of Madhya Pradesh.” ([www.capertravelindia.com](http://www.capertravelindia.com)). Birth, marriage, gender issues, land rights, harvesting seasons and glory of nature etc are expressed in these cultural activities. In the article, Folk Dance Drama Gambhira Festival, Aparna Bhattacharya observes:

“Indian folk and tribal dances are basic dances and are performed to express delight and joy among themselves. Folk and innate dances are performed for each conceivable event, to praise the landing of seasons, birth, a wedding and celebrations. The dances are simple with least of steps or movement.” ([www.caleidoscope.in](http://www.caleidoscope.in))



**Figure 12: Tribal Arts and Paintings in Jhangra, Narayanpur, Malda**

This image is taken in the house of Mr. Amin Soren of Village- Jhangra, P. O. Narayanpur, P.S. - Old Malda, Dist.- Malda. It is a typical image of doors in tribal areas of Malda and South Dinajpur. Two idols of women are beautifully erected just beside the passage of the door. These are made vibrant with colourful painting and designing works. Besides, there are some figures of birds like, duck, hen etc in this image. The whole wall art reflects the notion of welcoming the guests – “you are welcome.” The tribal people are, in fact, very generous and they extend their hands of hospitality to others.

People generally like to live in the lap of nature. In the benign influence of nature, people find pleasure and peace and life gets revived and renewed. Nature has a refreshing beneficial power to mould the mind of human beings. One of the chief features of tribal economy is that there is an intensive relationship between the tribal people and the forests. They are the offspring of forest; forest is the nurturing mother to them. In *Ethnographic Atlas of Indian Tribes*, Dr. Mehta writes:

The linkage between the tribal and forests is traditional. Tribals are economically and ecologically inseparable from forests. Be it food, fodder or fuel needs, the tribal inescapably and assuredly depended on his surrounding forests for sustenance even during troubled time of droughts.

(as cited in Mondal, 2017, p.35)

All these beautiful works of art and paintings discussed above reveal that there is an inseparable bond between the human beings and the nature. Regarding the tribal people, this eternal truth is highly reflected in their every walk of life.

Arts and drawings of various flowers, trees and animals on mud walls can be noticed around the front door and other sides of the houses. According to Mrs. Sonali Mardi (Hembram), a resident of Village- Jhangra, P. O. Narayanpur, P.S. - Old Malda, Dist.- Malda , similar kind of drawings and paintings are also noticed in Chirakuti village of Old Maldah, Malda. She has also learnt this art of drawings in her father’s house. But, now-a-days these cultural practices are losing their place and significance, as brick houses are taking gradually the place of mud ones. The villagers are of the opinion that clay and brick are almost of the same price, so it is better to build brick houses instead of the mud ones. As a result, tribal wall arts and paintings are almost on the way of extinction.

India is a multicultural and multiethnic nation. Hence, the variety and diversity is the essence of Indian culture and civilization. Various tribes and races live in this region and they have their own ways of depicting life. But the reality is that tribal people are treated as the ‘Subaltern’ or the marginalized in the eyes of the so-called elite classes. As such, the socio-cultural aspects of the tribal communities are very often neglected in contemporary art and literature. Still, tribal arts and paintings in India have various manifestations and representations from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Mention must be made of Saura paintings, Warli paintings, Pithora paintings and Santhal paintings etc. In short, these works of wall arts, paintings and drawings of various flowers, animals and making of idols etc, discussed in the present paper, are the vivid examples of tribal arts, paintings and cultural practices of Malda and South Dinajpur, West Bengal, India.

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8. Benjamin Hembram, Daulatpur, Dakshin Dinajpur
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10. Nabiul Islam, Chhabghati, Murshidabad
11. Karuna Kanta Mandal, Amriti, Malda
12. Sukamal Kisku, Dakshin Dinajpur

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## Notes:

For location maps, consulted on June 11, 2018,  
<https://www.google.co.in>  
<http://www.indiamapia.com/Malda/Malda.html>  
[https://www.mapsofindia.com/lat\\_long/west-bengal/dakshin-dinajpur-.html](https://www.mapsofindia.com/lat_long/west-bengal/dakshin-dinajpur-.html)

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