

Traditional Paintings Of Dongaria Kandhas Of Rayagada District, Odisha

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Abstract

Dongaria Kandha (a sub group of generic Kandha tribe) belongs to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group of State of Odisha. They inhabit the Niyamgiri Hill range (approximately 55 km long), that touches Rayagada, Koraput and Kalahandi districts of the State. In 21st Century also, this group prefers to live in isolation on the mountain top following their traditional way of life since, time immemorial. Despite efforts of social reformers and government policies, they are still away from availing education, health facilities and other amenities for about last 100 years or so. So, anthropologists, sociologists and reformers have tried to research into the 'contents' of their traditional concepts and activities during normal days and festive occasions to suggest appropriate policy and reformations. They have come to conclusion that the target community believes and relies on bounties of nature, strength of myths and folklores about gods/goddesses/ancestors, and uninhibited life style of work, love, dance, singing, music and festival performances. They are reluctant, and very often resistant to accept change in any form. So, researchers have been doing hard work to study these pre-historic group and to find out the ways to know their past and find pathways for required change in future. Strangely, very few researches have been done so far into their patterns of traditional dance, art and craft which are continuing for ages without much interruption. In this article focus is on their painting which are 'traditional' in content, form and style.

Keywords: (1) Dongaria Kandha, (2) Bana/ Boma / Linga, (3) Banakuda (Tattooing), (4) PVTG, (5) SCSTRTI/ATLC, Bhubaneswar, (6) DKDA.

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I. Introduction

Dongaria Kandhas are a small sub-group of the generic Kandha tribe, the largest tribe of the state of Odisha. After 78 years of independence of India, they are still isolated from the mainstream population and prefer to live a life of self-contentment with their traditional ways of life and social structure. So, anthropologists have shown a lot of interest in the study of these people from the standpoint of evolution of the tribe and their society, customs, festivals, language etc. since the early phase of British period in Odisha. Dongaria Kandhas and Kutia Kandhas (both PVTG) among all Kandhas in general have been treated as 'representative' of 'primitive man' of the area. Books and journals about Kandhas are replete with research data/materials on their customs of human sacrifice, female infanticide, sorcery, shifting cultivation, totemism, socio-economic-cultural life, youth dormitory etc. especially of Dongaria/Kutia Kandhas. But very few researches have been done on their aesthetic performances like art and craft, song, dance, music and folk-lore. Song, dance, music and folklore/myths are part of their daily life whereas art and craft are part of their socio-religious and cultural tradition. Making of traditional icons, figures and motifs of Dongaria Kandhas painting are still continuing in isolation and it is necessary to comprehend the meaning and process of conceptualisation of primitive man with regard to man and nature, supernatural beings in the society, beauty of nature and beautification in human culture.

This article is a small and primary attempt in this direction based on fieldwork among the Dongaria Kandhas of Rayagada district.

Background

Kandhas are the largest tribe of Odisha with a population of 16,27,456 as per 2011 census, compiled by SCSTRTI, Govt. of Odisha (2017). Kandhas are spread over all 30 districts of Odisha. There are several categories of Kandhas like *Dongaria, Kutia, Mausia, Penga, Raja, Languli, Desia* etc. This categorisation has been going on since 1901-05 onwards, spread over 50 years (from Russell and Hiralal to Kishan Sharma and N.Patnaik). Finally, anthropologists have settled into 3 categories namely Dongaria Kandhas, Kutia Kandhas and Desia Kandhas. While first two categories are included in list of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) and rest others are categorised as Desia (transformed/acclured) Kandhas. Available literature shows that most of research works on Kandhas centre around above two primitive groups of Kandhas. It is because traditional concepts, customs, social institutions, personality traits, festivals etc. still exist among these two PVTGs of Kandhas by which one can reach the 'Primitive Kandhas' and suggest policy for future without disturbing their traditions and hurting their sentiments.

Though painting and craft (through various medium, have been a great attraction during exhibitions, fairs and festivals at the district, state and national level, researches on them are limited to few articles, booklets and books only. Age old traditions of Dongaria Kandha painting for expression of their internal urge of aesthetic manifestations through various mediums and forms of icons/motifs deserve in-depth research to know, preserve, highlight and support before it dies. This article is a small step in this line.

II. Literature Review

So far as available literature is concerned, there are a few articles/booklets and only one book (edited) on art and craft of Kandhas of Odisha. There is no book written exclusively on art and craft of Dongaria Kandhas, even though they have maintained age-old tradition of painting through various mediums.

As per available literature, British and administrator, Russell and military officer like Campbell/MacPherson have highlighted the incidents of human sacrifice and rebelliousness of Kandhas since 1836-1853. Thereafter anthropologists like Risley, Dalton, Thurston, N.K.Bose etc. studied the socio-religious life and structure of tribes (including Kandhas). In between 1901-05, Russell and Hiralal threw light on Kandhas in nutshell.

But most of them focused on social structure, dress, customs etc. Their sole purpose was to divide and rule or convert them to Christianity.

It is Gopinath Mohanty, the first Gyanpitha Award winner of Odisha published his book 'Amritar Santan' (1946) which highlighted the positive and sensible aspects of Kandha life (mostly Dongaria Kandhas). This book describe and delineates life style, philosophy, social relations, religious festivals/festivities and daily lyrical life of Kandha. He has summed up his observation about Kandhas while a Kandha woman 'Puyu' does not accept 'defeat' even though divorced and driven out of home. She says, 'Life is a 'taste' by itself; there is nothing called sorrow in life; yes! there is no death'. Kandha is a fighter and fearless throughout life. He wants to live a life of hard work, harvest and spend time with joy of music, dance and song. This book changed the entire scenario of research and literature after that. The image of cruelty and ferocity about Kandhas took a turn towards many positive aspects of their life and society. This novel was based on field work of 12 years of the writer.

In the year, 1951, Verrier Elwin published his pioneering book named "The Tribal Art of Middle India : A Personal Record" which highlighted beauty of tribal gods/goddesses, festival, dress, art and craft etc. of *Kandhas, Gonds, Saora, Gadaba, Santhals* etc. So far as documentation on any particular tribal art of Odisha is concerned, Eberhard Fischer and Dinanath Pathy started research on Saora painting of Southern Odisha in 1970-75, which was in dying stage at that time. After that collection/documentation of Saora painting by them, writings/research/exhibition/painting etc. followed by which Saura painting, *Idital* started occupying a place in museums and festivals of State and Center. Subsequent researches on art of different tribes of Odisha were done by eminent scholars like Khageswar Mohapatra, Jagannath Dash, Damayanti Besra, Naku Hansda and others.

Besides the book "The Painted Icons : Wall Paintings of Sauras of Southern Odisha" by Dinanath Pathy, 1981, articles were published on art of *Santhals, Gond, Kishan, Kandha, Munda* tribes in government and private journals. First compilation of book on tribal art of Odisha, named- 'Tribal painting of Odisha" by Rabindranath Sahoo saw the light of world in 1991. In this small book one can get an insight into varieties in art form of tribes like Kandhas, Gond, Saura, Kisan, Pandi Bhuyan, Juang and Santhal. It springs surprises the reader that different tribes of Odisha can paint and have a tradition of painting. In the year 1982 first book on socio-cultural development, including art/festivals of Kandhas was published by N.Patnaik/P.S.Das Patnaik (The Kandhas of Orissa : Their Socio-Cultural Life and Developed) 1982 where one can get both description and some actual paintings of Kandhas. But like Verrier Elwin, famous author Cornelia Malleberian in her books 'Tribal Art of Odisha' and 'Vanishing World of Tribal Art' (1985) predicted the bleak future for tribal art, including that of Kandhas. First book (edited) exclusively on 'Art and Craft of Kandhas' was published by CPSW,

by R.N.Dash (editor) in 2006. It highlights different aspects of art/craft of different types of Kandhas. But there is not a single picture from field work so that no reader can guess the 'actuals' in field.

In his book "Kandhas and Kandhamal" (2017), the author Raghunath Rath, a dedicated researcher, has included many facts about Kandhas like their pre-history, history, social structure, customs of art/craft (mainly about Kutia Kandhas). But without an actual picture, no guesswork is even possible.

Research Gap

In most of the articles and books about art and craft of Kandhas descriptions about Kandhas art/craft are more without actual pictures from the field. The locals or regular visitors to Kandha villages may guess the reality of their art and craft, but not all. Analysis becomes futile without actual pictures from the field. It is very difficult to get an insight into concepts and conceptualisation behind each icons/motifs of painting, its traditions and meaningfulness for Kandhas in day-to-day life and society. It is not accurately understood, by which further research and documentation become a futile exercise.

Objective

In the above perspective of research gap, it has become necessary to explore how Dongaria Kandhas have developed habit of painting, maintained and continue to do it with same concepts, style and colour for years. It is also to be found out whether the dot, triangle, circle, quadrangle and lines etc. painted by Dongaria artists have any meaning or it is for beautification only.

III. Methodology

To make the research work meaningful with primary data, field study was undertaken in villages like Kadraguma, Mundabali, Hundijhali, Kurli and Khambesi in-between 2021-24 during Maria festival, Chaiti Parav and Ghanta Parav (the main three religious festivals of Dongaria Kandhas) during which each household of the concerned village has at least one piece of painting on outer and inner wall of house along with floor painting. Paintings of wall and floor paintings of other festivals like Mandiarani, Nuakhai, Dusehera and Lahi (goddess of wealth) are also collected. To collect ideas of painting and feelings of painter, methods of participant observation and questionnaire were followed with the help of interpreters. (Priests and volunteers)

Basic Common Facts About Dongria Kandhas To Understand Their Aesthetic Mindset And Artistic Nature

During field work, it transpired that Dongaria Kandhas are more inclined to their socio-religious festivals, customs and traditions. Their main community festivals are *Ghanta Parav* (April-May), *Mandiarani Parav* (July-August), *Nuakhai* (August-September), *Lahi Penu/Sita Penu Parav* (November), *Meriah festivals* (January-February), *Bihan Parav* (March-April), besides these small festivals are observed in-between. But one common factor is found that all festivals are related to either collection of seeds or sowing or harvest or fertility of soil or overall welfare of village (like *Ghanta Parav*).

- [1] Among these festivals, wall paintings and floor paintings are found in every household of the villages linked to community festivals, like Meriah festival which is observed in every 8-10 years. Festivals like *Bihan Parav*, *Mandiarani*, *Nuakhai*, *Dusehera*, *Lahi/Sita Penu* and *Ghanta Parav* (observed every year in fixed month). Besides this, during other socio-religious ritualistic paintings are mainly done on the floor related to that family or families.
- [2] Besides wall and floor paintings, Dongaria Kandha men/women used their body as a medium of painting which they call '*Bana godana*' (tattooing) or *Linga Itina*.
- [3] They use cloth as a medium of painting also. Cloth with knitted icons (all colourful) is known as *Kapadaganda*.
- [4] House of Dongaria Kandha village are known as *Aja* or *Eju* that consists of at least two rooms. Outer and inner walls are used as medium of painting during festival. One 'fixed' painting is always there on inner wall of house along with one or two bamboo winnows hanging over it. Symbol of totem is also found in some house. Motifs painting on outer wall of house change as per importance of festivals of the year. It mainly consists of icons and auspicious symbols. Floor paintings, consists of circles, flower petals, quadrangle, feet of goddesses and welcome symbols (with or without colour).
- [5] Dongaria Kandhas believe that Niyamgiri hill range is the original birth place of Kandhas from which they have spread to other areas. They call 'Creator' as '*Dermu Dhartha*'. Kutebali Penu and Jhankeri Penu are first god and goddess of Dongaria Kandha who created Dharani Penu (mother earth), the main goddess of all Kandhas. They call all their gods/goddesses as '*Penu*'. They have *Bura Penu* (Sky God), *Anda Penu* (Dharma/Sun God), *Mudrabali/Najunu Penu* (village goddess), *Soru Penu* (Mountain God), *Lahi Penu* (Goddess of wealth), *Pijunu Penu* (Rain God), *Bhima* (God of agriculture), *Sandi Penu* (Goddess of Boundary) etc.

- [6] Each village must have a Dharanighar (for Earth Goddess) in middle and 'Kudi' for Mudrakali Penu and Sandi Penu at opposite extreme of village. Kutebali Penu and Jhankeri Penu are worshipped along with Dharani Penu in Dharanighar, otherwise known as Sadarghar. Mountain god is worshipped at suitable place of designate mountain.
- [7] Each village is administered by decision of village council that consists of Jani (head priest), Pata Majhi (secular village head), Pujhari (assistant priest), Beju/Bejuni (astrologer), Dishari (medicine man or sorcery). They are assisted by Ichhan Jani who assists during sacrifice of animal and Barik (messenger).
- [8] As per myths and folklore, originally Dongria Kandhas are of 13 types namely Kadraka, Wadaka, Jakesika, Kusika, Nisika, Nundruka, Tuika, Praska, Palaka, Pidikaka, Warlika, Wendlika and Pusika. They were staying in 13 'muthas' (group of village) from which they have spread to entire Niyamgiri Hill range.
- [9] Dongaria Kandha believe in Nature in forms of earth, sky, sun, moon, rain, trees, mountain, river etc. and supernatural powers of Creators, gods and goddesses. They worship them to get the required things and when they get first they offer to them in form of worship/obligation. They believe in 'after life'. For them death is just a transition, not an end. They feel safe as long as Earth Goddess and Sky God (Dharma) are satisfied with them. Niyamraja (Niyamgiri hill) is their saviour and they do not think of life or society without these three god/goddess.
- [10] There is no festival of Dongria Kandhas where their is no animal or bird sacrifice. They had a feeling that their gods/goddesses are not satisfied till blood is offered to them. Jani of Hundijhali village said that human sacrifice is performed (now buffalo sacrifice as a token of human sacrifice) at the final stage of all sacrifices because Mother Earth waits for it to be satisfied. If it is not done, swords and axes, meant for sacrificing starts trembling automatically, which is a warning for the village.

These common factors are mainstay of life and society of Dongaria Kandhas. They do not think beyond this.

Data On Paintings Of Dongaria Kandha Artists

- [1] On field observation and interaction with villages it was found that mainly women do paintings (wall, floor and cloth) and men are good in crafts on wood, iron, stone, copper etc.
- [2] Women artists have learnt the art of painting by 'imitation' from elderly women having no training. But they continue doing it for years together as matter of worship, welcome, happiness out of doing beautiful pictures.
- [3] So far as their preparation is concerned, women artists said that once a day is fixed by Jani for any festival/ritual of their community or family, they make up their mind for painting as to how to collect required materials, when to start mud-plaster, what icons/forms to be painted on wall/floor etc. They said floor painting is done to welcome gods/goddesses to place of worship (community or household). Symbols of deities are adorned with motifs of beautification.
- [4] In Dongaria Kandha language, word 'Tirisha' or 'Vira' means colour. Red/Ochre and white colour are main and original colours of these artists which they collect from red and calcarea soil and powder it. Besides these three colours they use *Hinga* (yellow out of turmeric), *Sanja* (Green out of sal leaves), *Binga* (black out of burnt straw). They use above colours and water for an admixture for plastering and painting on wall. Toll oil is used in case of community wall of worship.
- [5] For floor painting, mud, cow dung and different colour powder (*Gunda*) are used. Manjiguda means rice powder. Tirishaguda means red powder. Similarly they use *Hingagunda*, *Sanjaguda*, *Bingaguda* etc.
- [6] In village Kadraguma, it was found that only unmarried girls were doing painting on walls of Dharanighar (abode of earth goddess) on the day of Maria (otherwise called Kedu Parab). When asked, Jani explained that "it is festival of unmarried girls". Previously only a girl was sacrificed and now they remember them this way. "Girls were doing painting after observing fasting."
- [7] On the day of Maria festival. It was found not only walls of the *Dharanighar*, but also that it inner place worship and out roadside wall of each household of village were decorated with different motifs like triangle, quadrangle, circles (all symbolic) plantain tree, sal tree leaves, pitcher etc. (common motifs are discussed in next page)
- [8] Inner floor and outer floor below the verendah of each house were painted with welcome pictures. Welcome pictures were found on entrance of villages also.
- [9] On the day of other festivals like *Nuakhai*, *Dushera*, *Lahi* (goddess of wealth), and *Ghanta Parab* it was found that all houses are plastered and painted with welcome motifs of pitcher, feet of gods/goddesses, creepers, flowers etc. as per capacity of artist. These are not limited to any village but all villages of Dongaria Kandhas on Niyamgiri hill.
- [10] Elderly women were also found to be doing mud-plastering and after it is dried. They were doing painting on 'tip of their finge' called *Lai Linga*.
- [11] Cloth is also a medium of painting through knitting. Dongaria Kandhas love creativity and colour. This natural sensibility is found on *Kapadangada* (colourful shawl) knitted by Dongaria Kandha women. If they

paint on wall and floor on occasion of festivities, they do knitting throughout the year. Interesting features of Dongria painting is motifs on wall of worship and Kapadaganda are almost same with little variation so far as 'Border of Kapadaganda is concerned'.

Tattooing (*Banakuda Or Linga Itina*)

Human body is one of traditional medium of painting of Dongaria Kandhas. Both males and females have at least one tattoo on their body. Women have more tattoos than men. This is done once for all in lifetime of Kandhas. As per views of women, they do it for marriage and out fear of some gods/goddesses and evil spirits. They do it to show it to god of death to avoid punishment. This art of 'etching' on body was earlier done by Kandha women themselves. Now they allow tattooing by a group of women of Scheduled Caste community. Young women do not like 'etching' but modern tattooing as it is less painful. Old practice of tattooing has a lasting effect till death.

Motifs like different flowers, leaves, clan symbols, peacock feather, pitcher, etc. are preferred by women for tattooing. The client can exercise choice of motifs. Male prefer motifs like axe, sword, arrow and faces of gods and goddesses.

Beauty, Picture And Crafts Of Dongaria Kandhas

Urge and sense of beautification of Dongaria Kandhas are not limited to wall, floor, body or cloth. It is reflected on wood, stone, iron, copper, terracotta, heads etc. The sacrificial pillar (*Kadrumunda*) is a bright example of art/wood craft of Dongaria males. They do it over door Jamb, doors, windows, cut, wooden ploughs etc. They have carving on stone for worship or daily use materials. Previously they were preparing their weapons that give a sense of ferocity and identity of Kandha male. They collect iron and copper coins and beads for making necklace. Their terracotta materials are not exactly painting but are pictures of beauty.

Meaning Of Common Icons/Motifs Reflected In Kandha Art

All painters (primitive or modern) and paintings of these Kandhas cannot be same even though themes remain same. Women artists of Dongaria community are no exception to this. Their forms, colour and composition (vary as per occasion). They are simple, traditional, very few and repetitive. But it gives a sense of attachment to nature, respect to traditions of society and sense of inner beauty/beautification. During field study, some common icons/motifs are found on the wall/floor. They are very meaningful for them than to modern man.

Important Icons/Motifs

Dongaria Kandhas do not think beyond the surrounding of nature in which they reside. So far as their painting is concerned, they express their 'feelings' through certain icons/motifs which they have learnt from elders over a period time. Though they cannot paint a human body, cloud, mountain, rain, river, tree etc. as exactly as a modern painter, they paint almost all of them through common 'symbols'/icons. Some of their icons/motifs are discussed below:

Triangle

During the field work among Dongria Kandhas it was found that triangle is the most important icon in their painting. A triangle or a triangle with little modification is used to express different items of feelings/tradition.

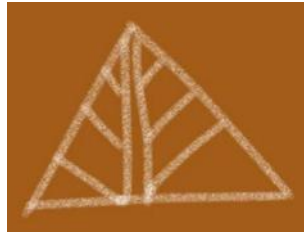
- (i) A triangle symbolises mountain gods (Soru Penu). This icon is mainly done on place of worships (both wall and floor) and cloth.



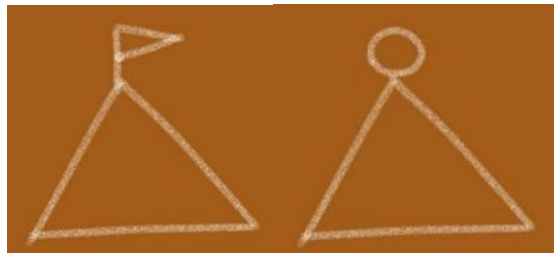
- (ii) A small right-angled triangle symbolises an 'axe' - tools of animal sacrifice and a symbol of identity, powers and pride of Dongaria Kandhas. This is mainly done on wall and cloth.



- (iii) An isosceles (triangle), divided perpendicularly in middle, stripes symbolises leaves and tree. This icon is done on wall and cloth.



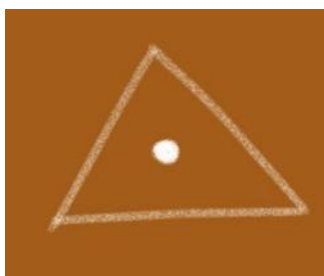
- (iv) A triangle with a circle or a flag over it symbolises a Kudi (tribal temple). It is done on wall/floor and human body. This is not possible on cloth.



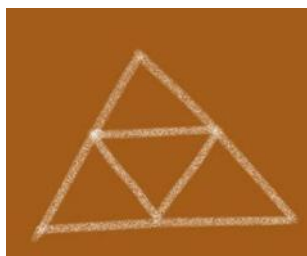
- (v) A triangle with a small darkened circle inside it show their concept of Creation. This is done on wall/floor.



- (vi) A triangle with circle touching all side of it symbolises 'Creator'. This icon is done on community and individual places of worship.



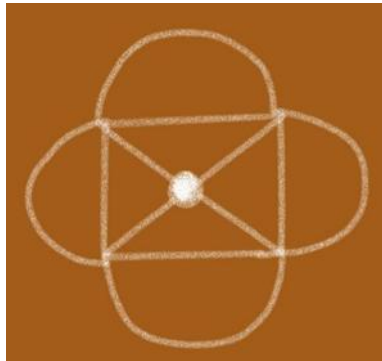
- (vii) Picture of triangle within a triangle is an icon for place of worship that invites all Kandhas gods/goddesses during worship (individual or community functions).



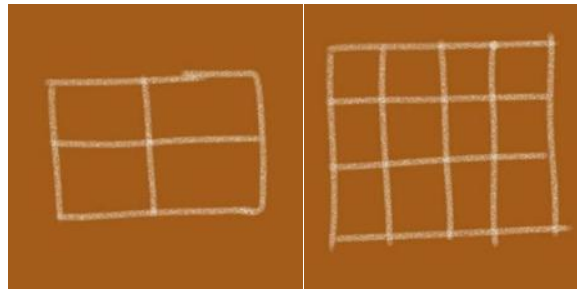
Quadrangle

Next to triangle, a quadrangle is painted to evince different feelings.

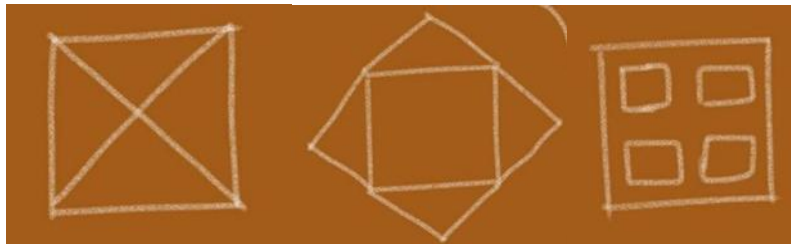
(viii) A quadrangle with four semi-circles on each edge, with diagonals intersecting each other is used for place of worship.



(ix) A quadrangle divided into equal small squares by vertical and horizontal parallel lines interesting each other symbolises places of gods/goddesses to be worshipped. The nos of such 'places' may be 4, 8, 12, 16.

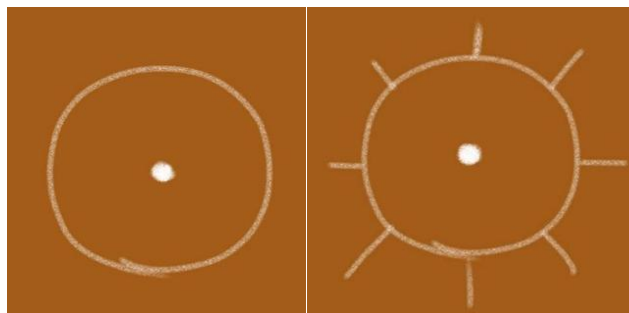


(x) A rectangle or square with several quadrangles inside it show agriculture land. The 'dots' inside such quadrangle show plants. This is called *Horu*.



Circle

A circle is drawn mainly to show sun, human eye or eye of any gods/goddesses. It is done on cloth and floor.



Dots

'Dots' are precious items of Dongaria Kandhas for beautification of motifs or bordering of a painting. This is done on wall and floor.



Leaves

Leaves of different colours are drawn to show their tree gods/goddesses and love trees. Varieties of leaf motifs are seen. It is done on wall and cloth.



Flag/Sword/Axe

Flag with bamboo or Sal log is drawn to show the power of gods/goddesses during Puja and procession. Similarly pictures of swords and axe to show powers of respect to Gods and Goddesses and prowess of the tribe. It is done on wall/ floor and cloth.



Pitcher

A pitcher, small or big, is a necessity during any kind of worship, rituals and social ceremony. It is the main item of floor painting of Dongaria Kandhas.

Winnow

An winnow is symbol of goddesses of wealth (Lahi Penu or Sita Penu) Goddess of wealth.

(xi) It is mainly drawn or kept hanging on inner place of worship of each house.



(xii) In village like Khambesi, a picture of Lahi Penu was seen on wall by tree like icons with a small whitened circle over top of it.

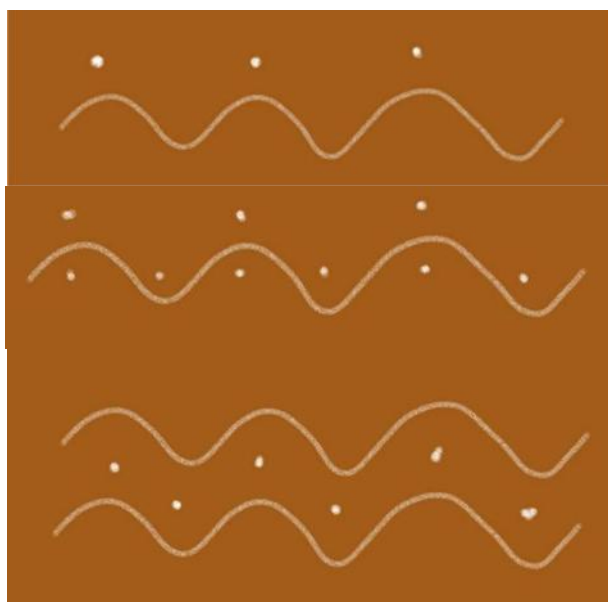
Pillar

Pillars either of wood or small stone are painted only on the walls of community place of worship.



Decorative Motifs

There are different decorative motifs like dots, tilted parallel lines, vertically parallel lines, wavy lines etc. This is done on wall and floor.



IV. Findings

- [1] Field study revealed that whether painting or knitting or tattooing, all icons have a religious influence. Icons on wall, human body or cloth are same in design and form.
- [2] Nature and ideas of 'supernatural' influence Dongaria Kandha painting. Not only in religious paintings all gods and goddesses are from natural and supernatural but also they influence social/ritualistic art. Paintings to them is either worship or welcome or both.
- [3] Pictures of anthropomorphic icons show the beginning of tendency of primitive painters towards worship of gods/goddesses in human form.
- [4] At present, these artists cannot paint realistic painting. But they are natural, spontaneous, devout and joyful painters. Joy of painting is the best price of their lives for which they have kept their traditions alive for centuries.

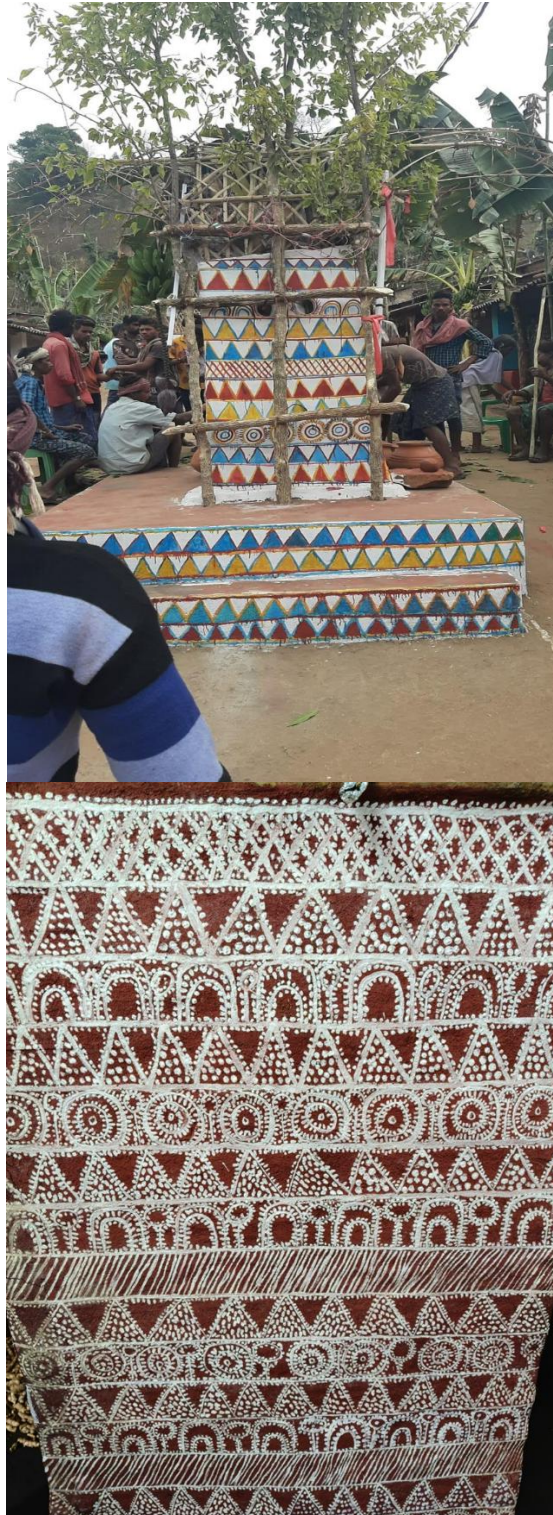
V. Conclusion

Now a days Dongaria Kandhas are in the process of first acculturation and modernisation after the adoption of modern education, various development programmes including pucca building, exposure to market economy, mobile etc. This has resulted in visible change in their ideas and outlook also. It has its impact on tradition of art and crafts too. So frequency of doing wall paintings have come down as it is costly to colour the cement wall again and again. It is also time taking. That was not the case on mud-plaster murals. Age-old spirit of painting for 'worship and welcome' is gradually receding giving place to welcome through 'beautification'. So, primitive concepts, conceptualisation and expression in mural painting will disappear sooner or later as change is inevitable. This is just not a view but visible. So, the treasure of traditional primitive painting of

Dongaria painting should be collected, researched, documented and improved, if possible, through coordinated effort of anthropologists artists and government to understand the natural man and society in future.

There is some meaning in exhuming a skeleton for study but studying living human beings and their natural aesthetic manifestations in the contemporary situations in more justified and meaningful. Let us come 'together' for this noble cause.

VI. Pictures From The Field





Target group of participants with their *Kapadaganda*

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