

# **Geographical Indication Protection of Sohrai and Khovar Paintings of Jharkhand: Cultural Heritage And Sustainable Tribal Livelihoods**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Cultural expressions which have been practiced traditionally tend to meet problems of misappropriation and commercialization when they are adopted and spread to the broader markets beyond the local communities. The native art forms especially the ones practiced in the tribal societies are directly related to their geographical origin, cultural identity and knowledge systems in the community. Legal protection is needed in such instances as it is important that such traditions are maintained and the communities that come up with the traditions are compensated with economic gains. Geographical Indications (GI) have become such a significant intellectual property tool enabling to connect uniqueness of product with its place of origin and preventing its abuse or imitation.

The paper is an analysis of the importance of GI protection as compared to the traditional Sohrai and Khovar paintings of Jharkhand. The study will be about the way these forms of art are more than the art form and capture the cultural practice, social tradition, and environmental knowledge of the communities dwelling in the tribes. It also evaluates the Indian legal system that regulates GI protection within the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, and assesses how it has helped in protecting the local cultural heritage.

Another socio-economic implication of GI recognition also emerges in the piece, this being creating livelihood opportunities to tribal women artisans but at the same time, ensuring that these traditional forms of art are not compromised.

## **KEYWORDS**

Geographical Indications, Sohrai Painting, Khovar Painting, Tribal Art, Cultural Heritage.

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## INTRODUCTION

### A. Background and significance of tribal art traditions in India

Indian tribal art is the indigenous art depicting its culture, traditions, aesthetics, lifestyle, and cultural practice. The art has not evolved in the classical sense of art as traditionally understood but coexists with it in the bio cultural realms of life activities and beliefs, traditions, rituals in relation to festivals and seasons and agricultural products and harvests in these societies, art acts as a live form of documentation of oral culture of the community, as a memorial purpose and as a way of expressing their social and spiritual lives and beliefs their connection to nature, animals, forests, agriculture, things heavenly, etc., is often the source of tribal art.<sup>2</sup>

Indian tribal communities have established their own art forms such as Warli Painting in Maharashtra, Gond Painting in Madhya Pradesh the Sohrai art and Khovar art traditional wall painting of Eastern India, especially in Jharkhand, hold a significant role in the cultural life of the tribes the Santhal, Munda, and the Oraon tribe use Sohrai art specifically it is traditionally practiced by women who paint the mud walls of houses using natural pigment red earth, and charcoal and plant soot.<sup>3</sup> The wall paintings are undertaken most usually during the festival of harvest and festive seasons that has become a kind of prayer to the deity of cattle giving thanks to its natural fertility and to secure the fertility of soil and to promise prosperity and rich harvests. In order to speak about the necessity of their proper protection and acknowledgment as some other, it is necessary to go to the roots of these traditions.

### B. Emergence of Geographical Indication protection for cultural products

Geographical Indications (GIs) has become a significant innovation in the context of the intellectual property law, in that it protects cultural and traditional products in the past, various products became famous due to their unique features that were related closely to their geographical background and the old-fashioned production the ancient cultures tended to associate products with a specific place and it aided in building their reputations and

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<sup>2</sup> 'Indian Tribal Art: A Vibrant Expression of Culture and Tradition' (Tribal Study, 6 July 2025) <https://tribal.study/tribal-society/indian-tribal-art-expression-culture-tradition/> accessed 5 June 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Sunil Kumar Tiwari, "'Sohrai Art is Soul of India": President Droupadi Murmu – Sohrai Art of Jharkhand Shines at Rashtrapati Bhavan during Kala Utsav 2025' (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 26 July 2025) <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2148875&reg=3&lang=2> accessed 5 June 2026.

authenticity in the trade.<sup>4</sup> As an example, some of the wines in ancient Greece and Rome were appreciated due to their relation to certain geographical areas. As it evolved, the mechanism of preventing imitation and abuse of this or that geographically specific products gave rise to the institution of law.

On the international front, the concept of GI protection was further enhanced through the signing of accords including the Paris Convention and subsequently the TRIPS Agreement, which recognized the geographical indications as an important type of intellectual property rights.<sup>5</sup>

In India GI protection has gained a different meaning of protecting traditional knowledge and cultural heritage of regional products, e.g. handicrafts and native form of art.<sup>6</sup> GIs have the benefit of preserving cultural identity by legally registering the origin of such products on a geographical basis and in addition, it has generated economic opportunities to the local communities.<sup>7</sup>

### C. Purpose and Scope of the Article

Having a glance at this relation between culture, tradition, and protection through laws, we may be interested in knowing the purpose of traditional art forms such as Sohrai and Khovar in tribal communities such paintings are not made as mere artwork; they are a living culture which contains the tales, beliefs and also environmental knowledge of people executing them through oral knowledge and everyday practices, such art forms have been maintained by tribal women across generations, and the techniques, motifs, and meanings have managed to reach the present days among the people such type of artworks demonstrates a strong connection between people and the surrounding environment, whether it is animals, nature, or even

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<sup>4</sup> Md Tanweer Alam Sunny and RP Chaudhary, 'Geographical Indications – An Evolving Law to Protect Traditional Knowledge in India' (2024) 14(6) *IPE Journal of Management* 121, 122.

<sup>5</sup> Basavaraj M Kubakaddi and KM Krishna Sekhar Sarma, 'An Analytical Exposition of India's Geographical Indications Law: From TRIPS Compliance to Socio-Economic Realities' (2025) 5(5) *Indian Journal of Integrated Research in Law* 1078, 1079 <https://ijirl.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/AN-ANALYTICAL-EXPOSITION-OF-INDIAS-GEOGRAPHICAL-INDICATIONS-LAW-FROM-TRIPS-COMPLIANCE-TO-SOCIO-ECONOMIC-REALITIES.pdf> accessed 5 June 2026.

<sup>6</sup> Kaustubh Kumar, 'Geographical Indications in India: Protecting Cultural Heritage in a Global Market' (Khurana & Khurana, 27 August 2025) <https://www.khuranaandkhurana.com/geographical-indications-in-india-protecting-cultural-heritage-in-a-global-market> accessed 6 June 2026.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

agriculture, so in areas like Jharkhand, they are very significant in community life and cultural identity.<sup>8</sup>

When traditional art forms are widely disseminated outside the local surroundings, a very significant question comes in mind, who safeguards them and who is their owner? Naturally, in recent years the popularity of the indigenous art has expanded, which heightens the threats of imitation, commercialization without permission, and loss of authenticity that is why it is important to think over the ways in which legal mechanisms, especially Geographical Indications (GI), will be able to support the origin and cultural value of such traditions.

Sohrai and Khovar paintings of Jharkhand are artwork shows the rituals, traditions, and environmental knowledge of the tribal people who produce them.<sup>9</sup> GI recognition may be used to preserve their authenticity as well as providing economic prospects to tribal women in the arts. In this view, the research connects the cultural value of tribal art to legal means of its protection to ensure that the traditional systems of knowledge are conserved and honoured.

## **CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SOHRAI AND KHOVAR PAINTINGS**

### **A. Origins and artistic techniques**

An important cultural and historical heritage of the tribal people of eastern India is the traditional mural paintings of Sohrai and Khovar of the Hazaribagh district of Jharkhand such forms of art can be traced back to the prehistoric art of the region. The ancient artistic practices of the region gained a lot of publicity in the year 1991 when the Isco rock art shelter estimated to be 10,000 B.C. was discovered by Bulu Imam, the Convenor of the INTACH (The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) Hazaribagh Chapter. Further, trips to the nearby villages like the Khovar, Kharati, Pipradhi and Jorakath showed that there was still an old form of mural art in the area, called Khovar, which extended to the Prajapati and Kurmi groups alike at around the same time, another tradition of mural in the village of Bhelwara in the block of

<sup>8</sup> Mala Chandrashekhar, 'Sohrai-Khovar Tribal Art: A Reflection of Jharkhand's Rich Folklore and Tradition' (The Cultural Heritage of India, 30 September 2023) <https://cultureandheritage.org/2023/09/sohrai-khovar-tribal-folk-paintings-of-jharkhand.html> accessed 6 June 2026.

<sup>9</sup> 'Hazaribagh Khovar and Sohrai Painting' (Arts of the Earth India) <https://www.artsoftheearthindia.in/category/Khovar%20and%20Sohrai%20Art:%20Traditional%20Tribal%20Paintings%20of%20Hazaribagh> accessed 7 June 2026.

Bishungarh was discovered, pertaining to the Sohrai harvest festival, made a few days after Diwali.<sup>10</sup>

Conventionally, the winter harvest festival celebrated soon after Diwali, on the other hand, is linked to Sohrai painting once the earlier layers on mud walls have been washed away by the monsoon season, houses are repainted and replastered in natural pigments like haematite red oxide (an iron-rich mineral that gives a red colour), kaolin white clay, manganese black earth, and yellow ochre (a natural earth pigment) these colours are gathered on hills, banks of rivers and forests and processed in the old-fashioned ways.<sup>11</sup>

Khovar paintings, on the contrary, are related to marriage ceremonies and are typically painted in the bridal room. The word Khovar came out of the word Kho (cave) and Var (husband) which is a representation of the holy marital area they are painted using a sgraffito (a process of scratching the upper layer to expose the layer beneath) with a comb-cut technique, the first step of this technique requires women to put a layer of manganese black earth (a dark mineral pigment that occurs naturally) or ochre on the wall once dry a layer of kaolin creamy white earth (a fine white mineral of clay, used as pigment) is applied and then these are scraped with bamboo or plastic combs or fingers to give detailed designs and contrasting lines and shapes.<sup>12</sup>

Animal, birds, lotus flower, elephants, and religious symbols like Pashupati (lord of animals in ancient Indian iconography), Kamla Baan (forest of lotuses) and the Tree of Life (symbol of fertility and continuity), are all themes found in Sohrai murals.<sup>13</sup> Women paint with cloth swabs, fingers, or chewed twigs of the saal tree (*Shorea robusta*, a species of forest tree) called datwan (a tooth-cleaning twig).<sup>14</sup>

Such paintings are maintained in a matrilineal culture in which the knowledge and techniques are transferred to mothers to daughters or daughters-in-law, the colorants employed include Kali Matti (manganese black soil), Dudhi Matti or Charak Matti (white clay soil or lime soil) and Lal Matti or Geru (red ochre clay and rich in iron oxide) and Pila Matti (yellow ochre soil),

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<sup>10</sup> Justin Imam and Alka Imam, Sohrai and Khovar Art of Hazaribagh, Jharkhand (VIRASAT Trust 2020) 1–2 <https://www.folkartopedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Delhi-Sohrai-and-Khovar-art-of-Hazaribagh-Jharkhand-2020.pdf> accessed 7 June 2026.

<sup>11</sup> 'Sohrai Painting' (IMPART Encyclopedia, 21 April 2022) <https://imp-art.org/articles/sohrai-painting/> accessed 7 March 2026.

<sup>12</sup> Indrajit Roy Choudhury, 'Khovar: Murals of Memory & Matriarchal Wisdom in Jharkhand' (Indrosphere, 15 September 2017) <https://indroyc.com/2017/09/15/khovar-ancient-mural-art-of-jharkhand/> accessed 8 June 2026.

<sup>13</sup> Pratiksha Sarika Bara, 'The Sohrai-Khovar Folk Arts of Jharkhand Are Enhancing the Position of Adivasi Women' (Adivasi Lives Matter, 21 October 2022) <https://www.adivasilivesmatter.com/post/the-sohrai-khovar-folk-arts-of-jharkhand-are-enhancing-the-position-of-adivasi-women> accessed 9 June 2026.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

and this points to the ecological knowledge that was prevalent at the time in relation to the use of natural resources.<sup>15</sup>

### B. Symbolism of Colours in Sohrai and Khovar Paintings

The colours used in Sohrai and Khovar paintings are very symbolic and are used to depict culture and religion of communities in tribes. Red lines are commonly drawn in Sohrai paintings, and they represent the blood of ancestors, fertility and prosperity in agriculture. Black lines symbolize Lord Shiva that is the divine power and protection. The external boundary lines mean the protection and stability in the home. White lines, which are traditionally cooked of a mixture of rice and milk, represent food, nourishment and plenty in the end.<sup>16</sup>

According to Khovar paintings, colours are used in relation to fertility and the transformation of male and female ideals. The wall is first slathered with white clay, the seed of the father. Black pigment is then applied before it is dry, which represents the blackness of the womb of the mother. The patterns of the designs made in this overlaying process are symbolic in signifying fertility, continuation of life and the sacredness of marriage.<sup>17</sup>

### C. Role of Indigenous Women Artisans in Preserving the Tradition

The traditional mural art of Sohrai and Khovar of the Hazaribagh region, Jharkhand is preserved and passed along by the native women these are the arts that are mostly practiced by women who are native and local like Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Kurmi, Prajapati and so on.<sup>18</sup> Traditionally, knowledge on techniques of painting, motifs and symbolic meanings is passed to the daughter by the mother, in a matrilineal system, which is widely referred to as the “Ma-Beti Parampara”, women have been the main guardians of these artistic traditions through this knowledge transfer amongst generations.<sup>19</sup>

Painting practice is connected with every day and ritual life of women in these societies on special events like Khovar paintings are done on mud walls of their houses like the Sohrai

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Prity Kumari and Rabindranath Sarma, ‘A Study on Significance of Sohrai and Khovar Painting: From the Development Perspective’ (2024) 8(1) Metszet Journal 137 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368789695\\_A\\_Study\\_on\\_Significance\\_of\\_Sohrai\\_and\\_Khovar\\_Painting\\_From\\_the\\_Development\\_Perspective](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368789695_A_Study_on_Significance_of_Sohrai_and_Khovar_Painting_From_the_Development_Perspective) accessed 10 June 2026.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* 138.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Women Keep it Alive’ Deccan Herald (17 February 2018) <https://www.deccanherald.com/features/women-keep-alive-1920843> accessed 9 June 2026.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

harvest festival and the marriage ceremony. The paintings are created using natural colours by the use of the available materials in the area like red and yellow earth and white clay and black soil, simple instruments like fingers, twigs, cloth swabs or broken combs are normally used by women to form elaborate patterns and motifs.<sup>20</sup>

Besides maintaining artistic skills, women artists also consider the existence of the value of culture through the paintings. They preserve the living tradition of Sohrai and Khovar art, and preserve this valuable dimension of tribes culture by training young generations and engaging in the common practice of the wall painting process.

## **GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION PROTECTION AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR SOHRAI AND KHOVAR PAINTINGS**

### A. Concept and Legal Framework of Geographical Indications in India

Geographical Indications (GIs) constitute a type of intellectual property, which denote goods as being produced in a certain geographical location where it is essentially attributable to their place of origin that a certain quality, reputation, or other attribute of the product. GI protection is significant in saving the traditional knowledge and culture of a given area and economic interests of the local producers. The cultural products, Sohrai and Khovar paintings of Jharkhand, are classic examples of tribal art whose particularity is highly connected with the geographical and cultural specific of Hazaribagh region. These paintings depict native knowledge, natural pigments, as well as ceremonial traditions passed down through generations by the tribal communities.

Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) under the World Trade Organization (WTO) is the main international framework that provides protection to Geographical Indications. Article 22 of TRIPS Agreement describes a geographical indication as a signification that identifies a product that originates in the territory of a member country that a particular quality, reputation, or other attribute of a product is fundamentally attributable to the country in which it is produced, it also provides the obligation of member states to offer legal avenue to forestall misleading usage of geographical indications and unfair competition actions.<sup>21</sup> Article 23 of the TRIPS Agreement offers further protection to the wines and spirits since the use of geographical indications will be prohibited even in cases where the true origin

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> TRIPS Agreement, art 22.

of the goods is marked or in cases where such terms as kind, type, or style are used.<sup>22</sup> The TRIPS Agreement in Article 24 presents some exceptions such as prior use; a circumstance where the indication has become a generic term.<sup>23</sup>

India passed a law that was named Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999 that came into force in 2003 to fulfill its international obligation of the TRIPS Agreement. The Act provides a sui generis framework of registration and protection of the geographical indications in India. Geographical indication as goods or products originating in a specific territory, region or locality where a quality, reputation or other attributes of the goods are essentially due to its geographical origin.<sup>24</sup> The Act gives a legal framework of ensuring the only producers who can use the registered indication is one within the specified geographical area.

The Act also stipulates the procedure of registration of geographical indications. The Act under Section 11 permits any association of persons, producers or organization representing the interests of producers to seek registration under GI, the application should contain the information concerning the geographical location, evidence of origin, and the unique features of the goods which identify them with this geographical location.<sup>25</sup> The GI is then registered in the register held by the Geographical Indications Registry at Chennai, which was established under Section 5 and 6 of the Act having accepted the application, the Act also enables the producers of the region to be listed as authorized users, where the producers are permitted to use the GI in relation to its products.<sup>26</sup>

There have also been judicial rulings which have helped in augmenting protection of geographical indications in India. In *Tea Board of India v. ITC Ltd.* (2011)<sup>27</sup>, the court noted that the reputation and goodwill of Darjeeling Tea is a product that should be safeguarded because it was the first GI registered product in India.

These examples reflect the importance of GI laws to protect the regional products and traditional cultural expressions. The identification of the indigenous art styles such as Sohrai and Khovar paintings under the GI framework assists in protecting such traditional practices

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<sup>22</sup> TRIPS Agreement, art 23.

<sup>23</sup> TRIPS Agreement, art 24.

<sup>24</sup> Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act 1999, s 2(1)(e).

<sup>25</sup> GI Act 1999, s 11.

<sup>26</sup> GI Act 1999, ss 5, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Tea Board of India v. ITC Ltd.*, 2011 (48) PTC 169 (Cal).

against commercial exploitation and also in the establishment of such traditional arts benefits to the original artisan communities.

### B. Registration and recognition of Sohrai and Khovar paintings as GI products

On 12 May 2020, Geographical Indication (GI) status was granted to the Sohrai-Khovar paintings under the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, the first GI status to be granted to the State of Jharkhand.<sup>28</sup> Granting the GI registration contributes to the recognition of the special geographical origin and the cultural significance of the Hazaribagh region, the practice of traditional paintings, the registration application was made by Sohrai Kala Mahila Vikas Sahyog Samiti Limited, which is an organisation that represents artisans and also promotes the art form.<sup>29</sup>

This was GI application, filed on 23 August 2019, and registered under Application No. 658 regarding Sohrai-Khovar Painting in Class 16 (Paintings), the application was later registered as accepted in Rule 41(1) of the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Rules, 2002, in the Geographical Indications Journal No. 129 dated 10 January 2020, these were registered under part A of the Register of Geographical Indications, which is administered by the GI Registry in Chennai, under Section 13(1) of the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999.<sup>30</sup>

The GI literature establishes the defining features of Sohrai-Khovar paintings such as their unique visual style, limited natural colour palettes, and typical motives like animal, vegetal and symbolic patterns such recognition also documents that the paintings are created using the local natural materials and using traditional methods that are unique to the geographical locality of the Hazaribagh plateau, these territorial and material features were discussed as being critical in creating the connection between the product and the place of origin which is a primary requirement in GI protection.<sup>31</sup>

GI status gives legal safeguards against illegal use, imitation or confusion of the name Sohrai-Khovar Painting by manufacturers who are outside the recognised geographical region. It is also a guarantee that the registered region only authorizes producers who have registered the GI to use the GI either commercially or promotionally. The acknowledgement will help enforce

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<sup>28</sup> Geographical Indications Journal No 129 (10 January 2020), Application No 658, advertised under r 41(1) of the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Rules 2002.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> GI Act 1999, s 13(1).

<sup>31</sup> Geographical Indications Journal No 129 (10 January 2020) 29–31.

the maintenance of this traditional art form besides strengthening its authenticity and selling price in addition, the GI registration helps in the wider goal of defending traditional cultural expressions and the increased presence of indigenous artistic practices in the intellectual property environment of India.<sup>32</sup>

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ON TRIBAL COMMUNITIES**

### A. Economic opportunities created through GI recognition

The Sohrai and Khovar paintings are now Geographical Indications (GI), and have generated a major economic prospect to tribal population in Hazaribagh region located in the state of Jharkhand. Geographical Indication of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999 has guaranteed the benefit of commercial application of these art forms to the communities that maintain them. It gives exclusive right to the authorised persons in the region so that it does not misuse the art form but the authenticity and reputation of the art form is safeguarded.

The Geographical Indication (GI) recognition is significant in creating economic opportunities to local producers as well as ensuring the reinforcement of the region economies, GI-tag products are perceived to be related to genuineness, cultural heritage and quality, making consumers more confident and willing.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, suppliers can tap niche markets and in many cases are able to get high prices on their commodities. This crimes up the business worth of conventional commodities and brings more revenue to the legitimate manufacturers.<sup>34</sup>

There is also the other important economic advantage of promoting regional development and creation of jobs. The economic gain created by the marketing of GI products is usually not dispersed to other areas outside the specified geographical location since these rights are often restricted to the local community within the specified area, this helps in developing employment locally and aids small scale artisans and craft workers who depend on traditional skills for their livelihood.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Charu Srivastava, 'Jharkhand, One of the States in India, Gets Its First GI Tag on the Sohrai Khovar Painting' (IPPress, 15 May 2020) <http://ipindiaseservices.gov.in/GirPublic/Application/Details/658> accessed 10 June 2026.

<sup>33</sup> Suvrashis Sarkar, 'History and Evolution of Geographical Indication as Intellectual Property in India' (2017) 6(1) International Journal of Scientific Research 530 [https://www.worldwidejournals.com/international-journal-of-scientific-research-\(IJSR\)/fileview.php?val=January\\_2017\\_1484826215\\_169.pdf](https://www.worldwidejournals.com/international-journal-of-scientific-research-(IJSR)/fileview.php?val=January_2017_1484826215_169.pdf) accessed 10 June 2026.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Doris Estelle Long and Vasiliki Zografos, Geographical Indications and Socio-Economic Development (IQsensato Working Paper No 3, 2008) [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1628534](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1628534) accessed 13 June 2026.

Moreover, the GI protection assists in deterring the unlicensed commercial exploitation of historical cultural manifestations. The legal framework ensures that only the recognised geographical region producers are allowed to use the GI label, which protects the goodwill that has been established in the local community and helps them to stay out of unhealthy competition. Good GI ecosystem also leads to rural development by providing sustainable livelihood and decreasing rural-urban migration.

Also, robust GI ecosystem can also aid in curbing the effects of rural-urban migrations because the ecosystem offers sustainable opportunities of livelihood to the local communities. GI recognition promotes economic self-dependence and inclusive rural development by allowing the artisans and craft workers to monetise their traditional expertise and cultural heritage.<sup>36</sup>

#### B. Empowerment of women artisans and community participation

The establishment of Sohrai-Khovar paintings as Geographical Indication (GI) has played a greater role in helping women in the Hazaribagh region of Jharkhand to gain employment and economic empowerment. On 12 May 2020, the Geographical Indications Registry in Chennai gave the traditional tribal art form its GI tag on the basis of Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, this appreciation has helped in increasing marketability and the prominence of the art form, generating a means of livelihood among local women artisans.<sup>37</sup>

The reason behind the growing popularity of Sohrai and Khovar paintings in India and outside the country has largely been enabled by the activities of cultural activists like Bulu Imam, Justin Imam and Alka Imam who contributed a lot in popularising the art beyond the tribal villages in Jharkhand, this has led to the development of villages like Barkagaon where the visitors have come to view and buy these paintings which has become one of the cultural tourism sites.<sup>38</sup> This has paved new economic chances especially to the tribal women who had formerly engaged in the art as a seasonal ritual during harvest and marriage rituals.

Over the last few years, the art has ceased to be confined to the walls of mud houses and has been seen in the open air, e.g. in rail and air stations, urban buildings, in such cities as Delhi,

<sup>36</sup> Bharat Fernandes, 'Indian GI: Local Goes National Goes Global' (Gateway House, 14 January 2022) <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/indian-gis-local-goes-national-and-global/> accessed 13 June 2026.

<sup>37</sup> Prity Kumari and Rabindranath Sarma, 'A Study on Significance of Sohrai and Khovar Painting: From the Development Perspective' (2024) 8(1) *Metszet Journal* 139, 140 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368789695\\_A\\_Study\\_on\\_Significance\\_of\\_Sohrai\\_and\\_Khovar\\_Painting\\_From\\_the\\_Development\\_Perspective](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368789695_A_Study_on_Significance_of_Sohrai_and_Khovar_Painting_From_the_Development_Perspective) accessed 14 June 2026.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Gurugram, Noida, Ranchi, and Bokaro, other efforts by artists like Jayshree Indwar have helped women to get a stronger participation in the industry by establishing organizations to train and hire women artisans, such initiatives have given about 50 women direct involvement in Sohrai painting activities today and more than 200 women have benefited economically through such art-based livelihood programs.<sup>39</sup>

### C. Challenges in market access, commercialization, and benefit sharing

Although there is cultural importance and growing appreciation of Khovar Painting and Sohrai Painting, there are still several structural issues in Jharkhand which artisans in the region are grappling with in market access, commercialisation, and equitable sharing of benefits.

The fact that tribal artisans do not have access to organized markets is a major challenge. Most artists live in isolated villages of the Hazaribagh region, where infrastructure, road system and internet connectivity are underdeveloped. This means that artisans will often rely on the middlemen, like traders, galleries or cultural groups to sell their work, this dependency lowers the bargaining power of these artists and more often than not, artists end up earning a modest share of the market value attached to their work, and not all of the artisans are trained in marketing, branding, and online platforms, which limits their opportunities to deliver products to buyers nationally and internationally in the first place.<sup>40</sup>

Another issue is associated with the commercial reproduction of traditional motifs with no adequate recognition and payment. As tribal art has become increasingly popular, Sohrai and Khovar painting designs have occasionally been copied in commercial goods including fabrics, decorations and home decor, such reproductions are in most instances done without the participation and monetary gain of the primary artisan societies and the matter of misrepresentation of traditional cultural practices is a cause of concern.

Besides, the weakening of these art forms is also a result of social views on conventional art. In most instances, the education systems and life in towns and cities have created the impression that the indigenous traditions are old-fashioned or inferior, this perception change

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> India Craft Summit, Sohrai & Khovar: Community, Concerns and Challenges (YouTube, 22 August 2020) 13:53–15:00 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vP\\_LIP8Q2iM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vP_LIP8Q2iM) accessed 15 June 2026.

will make younger generations avoid learning and practicing them, and the knowledge about cultures will slowly be forgotten by community members.<sup>41</sup>

Such experience in other parts of the world show that traditional art forms can only be better known when well backed by good cultural institutions as an example, we can highlight the example of tribal art promotion in Madhya Pradesh that was done by J. Swaminathan, and the Madhya Pradesh Kala Parishad, with special emphasis on the role of the institution.<sup>42</sup>

Hence, enhancing market access, equitable distribution of benefits, and provision of platforms where such indigenous art traditions can be promoted are all necessary measures that can be taken in order to protect such art traditions.

## **INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT, PRESERVATION, AND POLICY FRAMEWORK**

The maintenance and propagation of traditional arts including Sohrai Painting and Khovar Painting needs prolonged institutionalization and proper policy frameworks. The mural forms are the most significant part of indigenous cultural heritage and a matrilineal tradition where tribal women in the Hazaribagh region of Jharkhand have practiced these mural forms over generations.

Over the recent years, such works of art have been attracting more and more national and international attention their themes and visual beauty have been employed in decorating the general areas like airports, railway stations, flyovers, and government buildings in Jharkhand and this has helped to increase the awareness of tribal art besides allowing the artisans to display their work. As an example, during the G20 meeting in Ranchi 2023, Sohrai paintings were heavily exhibited, so their role as a symbol of the cultural identity of the region is apparent.<sup>43</sup>

There are a number of persons and organisations that have been significant in the revival and maintenance of such traditional forms of art Bulu Imam, an environmentalist and cultural activist, is one of them who has produced much by discovering the Isko Rock Art Site and

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<sup>41</sup> Saumya Gupta, 'Whispering Walls: The Architecture of Memory in Indian Literature' (Historified, 26 April 2025) <https://historified.in/2025/04/26/whispering-walls-the-architecture-of-memory-in-indian-literature/> accessed 15 June 2026.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 40.

<sup>43</sup> Mithilesh Jha, 'G20 Summit in Ranchi: Welcome Foreign Delegates, See Exclusive Pics Here' Prabhat Khabar (Ranchi, 2023) <https://www.prabhatkhabar.com/state/jharkhand/ranchi/g20-summit-at-ranchi-welcome-foreign-delegates-see-exclusive-pics-here-mtj> accessed 19 June 2026.

popularizing the Sohrai and Khovar paintings, both nationally and internationally the artists of tribal women have been empowered and opportunities to access sustainable livelihoods have been created through organizations like the Tribal Women Artists Cooperative and through holding of exhibitions such programs have aided to conserve the cultural heritage of the area besides enhancing socio-economic status of artisans.<sup>44</sup>

The government movements have also been instrumental in popularizing these art forms in 2016, Narendra Modi visited Hazaribagh and had a look at the Sohrai paintings towards the railway station and noted their cultural value. The painting was also featured in one episode of “Mann Ki Baat,” and the tradition gained more national recognition after this realization, several efforts have been made to integrate Sohrai paintings in the open space and infrastructural constructions.<sup>45</sup>

The government of Jharkhand has made efforts to popularize the art by instructing the Sohrai paintings on houses built under Pradhan Mantri Shahri Awas Yojana on the same note, the Ministry of Railways made an effort to beautify the railway stations using these paintings which created more job opportunities to the local artists as well as encouraging cultural tourism.<sup>46</sup>

Another advancement of institutional recognition was that Geographical Indication (GI) status was granted to Sohrai-Khovar paintings by the Government of India in 2020 GI recognition provides products identified to a certain geographical area with qualities and reputation that relate to the origin of products this protection allows preventing imitation and protecting the originality of classic art forms under the international systems like TRIPS Agreement.<sup>47</sup>

In spite of such developments, most artists are still struggling with economic and institutional issues. Research has shown that many artisans do not get much financial aid and in most of the cases, they are only called on board to do government work like painting government buildings or walls therefore, most artists can no longer maintain their livelihoods and may be forced to

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<sup>44</sup> Sweta Kumari, ‘Sohrai Painting: Ancient Tribal Art of Jharkhand Gaining Popularity’ (Vivekananda International Foundation, 29 August 2023) <https://www.vifindia.org/india-positive/2023/august/29/sohrai-painting-ancient-tribal-art-of-jharkhand-gaining-popularity> accessed 19 June 2026.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

move towards cities to seek other forms of income, since the newer generation appears to have little enthusiasm to acquire any form of traditional painting methods.<sup>48</sup>

Hence, effective policy pressures and long-term institutional initiatives will play a crucial role to achieve long term survival of Sohrai and Khovar paintings. Further funding, skill training projects, cultural tourism projects and the partnership projects with the government and other entrepreneurs can make these forms of art to grow exponentially in terms of scope and geographical coverage. These and additional moves would not only safeguard a major aspect of the tribal cultural heritage in India but also provide sustainable livelihood to the communities that still maintain these practices.

## CONCLUSION

### A. Principal Observations

As it is revealed in the discussion in this research, such traditional forms of art like Sohrai and Khovar paintings exemplify a distinct crossroads of culture, geography, and knowledge of the community. The artistic traditions provide an understanding of how cultural representations develop in a certain ecological and social setting and they become inseparable with the identity of the communities that perform them. In this way, the usefulness of these paintings is seen not only in their aestheticism but also in the possibility to express the indigenous systems of knowledge, the social practices, and the relations with nature.

Tribal art has gained increased public visibility, which has established new avenues of cultural visibility. Simultaneously, it is also this increased awareness that has also subjected such traditions to the dangers of mis-representation, unauthorized copying and commercial exploitation. Bringing into the marketplace the traditional designs without relevant protection creates serious legal and moral issues of ownership and cultural values. With the growing entry of indigenous art forms into the world market, there is growing concern on how such art forms can be safeguarded in the original form of creation, as well as how the proceeds can be shared among the original creators.

In this regard, the Geographical Indications framework is a valuable legal approach to establish a connection between cultural products and their region of origin. GI protection enhances the

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<sup>48</sup> Prity Kumari and Rabindranath Sarma, 'A Study on Significance of Sohrai and Khovar Painting: From the Development Perspective' (2024) 8(1) Metszet Journal 139, 140 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368789695\\_A\\_Study\\_on\\_Significance\\_of\\_Sohrai\\_and\\_Khovar\\_Painting\\_From\\_the\\_Development\\_Perspective](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368789695_A_Study_on_Significance_of_Sohrai_and_Khovar_Painting_From_the_Development_Perspective) accessed 21 June 2026.

validity of cultural traditions and practices by acknowledging the geographical and cultural origins of a product as well as the communities who help in its preservation. Nevertheless, legal status is not sufficient to ensure the further prosperity of cultural traditions. The social, institutional and economic circumstances that enable the artisans to practice their skills with dignity and security are the determinant of the long term existence of such art forms.

Sohrai and Khovar paintings shows that cultural heritage protection should not be a mere recognition. It demands that it takes a strategy that will appreciatively consider the indigenous knowledge and will not ignore the participation of the people; and that the cultural expressions of the people and lands that produced them will not be disconnected to the people and the land.

### B. Strategies for Sustainable Livelihood and Cultural Preservation

To make Sohrai and Khovar paintings sustainable in the long term, it is necessary to implement a change that has to address both the cultural and economic aspect of traditional art. The conditions of livelihood of the community that uphold a certain culture cannot be divided out of cultural preservation. Artisans tend to keep practicing and working on their skills and transferring them to the next generations when they have consistent income opportunities and institutions that help them sustain themselves in their activities.

A possible approach is the elaboration of community-oriented cultural projects where there is a face-to-face interaction between artisans and the general population. Traditional artists can be given an opportunity through cultural tourism, craft workshops and heritage festivals where they can impart their knowledge and earn the community a good income. Through such efforts, cultural traditions could be enjoyed within their cultural setting and not be isolated to the cultural communities that gave birth to the cultures.

It is also necessary to encourage the younger generations to get involved in the traditional art. Such educational programs which integrate the indigenous forms of art in the local cultural practices and learning settings will be able to create more appreciation towards the traditional practices. The youth will tend to engage in the continuation and creation of these practices when they are made aware of the cultural and creative importance of such practices.

Moreover, sustainable preservation must be made of a moderate nature, both in regard to conservation of tradition, but ensuring that there is the opportunity to adapt to new social and economic situations. The artists must be in a position to experiment with new forms of expression and new markets without compromising on the cultural aspect of their work. The

innovation in the traditional art forms can be supported to make sure that the traditional modes are not stagnant and irrelevant in the modern society.

Finally, Sohrai and Khovar paintings shows that the issue of the cultural heritage protection should be conceived as the collective responsibility. Legal frameworks like Geographical Indications are also a promising basis, although success will rely on further cooperation between communities, policymakers, academicians, and cultural institutions. Through community empowerment and sustainable development programs coupled with the protection of laws, one can conserve these artistic traditions and as important living repositories of the diverse Indian cultural heritage and at the same time ensure their survival to thrive as living artistic traditions.

