

# **Bhil Art: A Critical Literature Review on Tradition, Expression, and Cultural Preservation**

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## **Abstract**

This critical literature review delves into the rich cultural tapestry of the Bhil community, India's second-largest tribal group, with a focus on their art, traditions, and cultural preservation. The exploration spans regions in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra, emphasizing the distinctiveness between Bhil's in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh, and Choti Undri and Badi Undri near Udaipur in Rajasthan. The study traces the historical roots of Adivasis, the colonial reclassification of Adivasis as tribes, and their current recognition as scheduled tribes' post-independence. It sheds light on the Bhil community's diverse rituals, songs, dances, and unique practices, such as Pithora painting, depicting the Bhil creation myth. The literature review synthesizes information from various sources, providing a comprehensive overview of Bhil art and its significant contributors. Notable Bhil artists like Bhuri Bai, Prema Fatya, and Jor Singh play a crucial role in raising awareness about Bhil life and culture through their artwork. The paper aims to present a critical analysis of nine scholarly works published between 2021

and 2023, focusing on the revival of Bhil art and the Bhil community. Additionally, it incorporates primary research, where two paintings by Bhil artists are implemented in the creation of a magazine cover, selected by fifteen academicians from fashion and interior designing institutes in Gwalior through a survey method. The methodology involves a combination of quantitative research which include secondary and primary research. Secondary research draws on extensive literature reviews using online research databases and various platforms like Google Scholar. Primary research includes the study of ten paintings by five Bhil artists and the implementation of two paintings in the magazine cover creation using acrylic markers. The selection process involves academicians, adding a practical and applied dimension to the integration of Bhil art into contemporary mediums. The review paper culminates in a discussion of findings, highlighting key themes and insights from the nine selected works. It emphasizes the innovative approach of implementing Bhil art on a magazine cover, bridging academic discourse with public engagement. The chosen paintings symbolize the Bhil community's connection to nature, ancestral stories, and cultural heritage, reflecting the dynamic role of Bhil art in cultural preservation. The study concludes by underscoring the importance of Bhil art as a form of artistic expression that transcends boundaries and mediums, contributing to the global recognition of India's tribal heritage.

*Keywords:* Bhil art, Revival, Qualitative Research, Review, Magazine.

## **1.Introduction:**

The origins of India's Adivasis trace back to the pre-Aryan era, during which they held sway over the hilly landscapes of the Subcontinent. However, across centuries, those possessing literacy gained prominence over those rooted in oral traditions. In the colonial era, Adivasis were reclassified as tribes, and post-independence, they are recognized as scheduled tribes. The essence of tribal identity was often viewed as a developmental stage rather than a distinct societal type. The establishment of educational institutions brought a focus on the socio-cultural roots of specific communities, resulting in non-Adivasi children lacking knowledge of Adivasi culture and Adivasi children being deprived of pride in their heritage. (Sangrahalaya)

## 1.1 The Bhil Community

The Bhil's, the second-largest tribal community in India, inhabit regions across Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra. This exploration delves into the Bhil's residing in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh, as well as Choti Undri and Badi Undri near Udaipur in Rajasthan. The focus is on Bhil artists who articulate their narratives through paintings. Certain Bhils can trace their lineage to Eklavya, renowned for his superior archery skills compared to Arjuna, the Mahabharata hero. Some scholars even suggest that Valmiki, the chronicler of the Ramayana, may have been a Bhil named Valia.

The term "Bhil" has sparked various speculations. Some scholars propose it as the Dravidian term for "bow," while others argue it originates from the Tamil word "bhilawar," meaning "bowman." As other tribal communities also used bows, "Bhil" became a generic term, overlooking the nuanced distinctions and rich diversity within each tribal community. Notably, disparities exist between the Bhil's of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, encompassing variations in deities, songs, dances, and stories. Although both communities' erect memory pillars for ancestors, they use different names, with Madhya Pradesh referring to them as "gatlas" and Rajasthan using "cheera" for men and "matlok" for women. (dangidushyant)

## 1.2 Bhil community in Madhya Pradesh

The cultural richness of the Bhil community in Madhya Pradesh finds expression in various aspects of their lives, including rituals, songs, dances, community deities, tattoos, myths, and lore. Their homes showcase a natural sense of aesthetics, with annual plastering and decoration of walls using simple, homemade materials such as pigments from plants and brushes made of rag or cotton swabs attached to neem twigs. The Bhil cultural practices involve ceremonial induction of newborns, where the child is laid on maize, and specific customs, like touching grain and presenting gifts. Various forms of marriage exist among the Bhil's, allowing flexibility in life partner selection.

Bhil festivals involve singing songs to invoke blessings, and their gods and goddesses are integral to daily life. (Roy) Pithora painting, a revered ritual among the Bhil's of Jhabua, narrates the Bhil creation myth through depictions on walls. Nature-centric, Bhil life encompasses paintings of the Sun, Moon, animals, trees, and mythological figures. The Bhil's' agricultural economy is impacted by monsoons, leading to migration for construction work during non-agricultural

seasons. Notable Bhil artists like Bhuri Bai and Prema Fatya contribute to raising awareness about Bhil life and culture through their artwork.

## 2. Objectives:

- This paper aims to provide a comprehensive review of nine works published in 3 years (2021-2023). These works focus on the revival of Bhil Art painting and community.
- The study also focuses on the implementation of the two paintings of the Bhil artists in the creation of magazine front cover which is selected by the fifteen academicians from the fashion and interior designing institutes of Gwalior through survey method.

## 3. Methodology:

This review paper relies on quantitative research based on primary and secondary sources. In Secondary sources, an extensive literature review to gather detailed information about various initiatives aimed at revival of Bhil paintings and its community. The research spans the past three years (2021-2023), and online research databases including Google Scholar and documents from different websites were utilized to access a range of materials such as research papers, review papers, conference proceedings, Ph.D./Dissertation theses, and related texts. Additionally, books, newspaper articles, reports from government and national institutes, as well as websites, were consulted. Primary research includes the study of ten paintings of five artists (two paintings of each artists) and implementation of two paintings by the author in the creation of a magazine cover using acrylic markers. The selection process of the paintings involves fifteen academicians from the Fashion and Interior Designing Institute of Gwalior, employing a survey method to choose the two most suitable paintings from group one and two. This primary research adds a practical and applied dimension to the exploration of Indian folk paintings' integration into contemporisation.

**Table 1: Tribal Bhil Art Literature Review (2021-2023)**

S. No	Title of the Study	Discussion
1.	Tribal Traditional Practices and	Rachita Biswas explores the unique art of the Bhil tribe in Madhya Pradesh, emphasizing its distinctive concepts, picturization, and

	Beliefs: The Radiant Art of Bhil's in Madhya Pradesh	execution. The article highlights Bhil art's imaginative portrayal of daily life, emotions, and cultural ethos, distinguishing it from other tribal art forms like Gond art. Renowned Bhil artists and the late-blooming recognition of Bhil art are discussed, along with the support and promotion of tribal arts by organizations like Bharat Bhavan and TRIFED. The conclusion emphasizes the rich cultural heritage expressed through Bhil art and its global recognition. (Biswas, 2023)
2.	'Kalakarm Curriculum': How can illustration facilitate art in education?	The literature review explores the author's journey as an illustrator and educator in the Indian art education landscape. It focuses on the 'Kalakarm Curriculum' project, discussing the roles of the author as both illustrator and educator in developing a distributable resource. The primary research conducted at government and low-income private schools in Delhi shapes a workable brief for addressing art education issues. The project is anchored in understanding the aspirations and challenges of educators, documented through conversations, observations, and workshops. The use of illustration in documentation becomes crucial in conveying the project's essence and making it accessible. The end goal is to envision a particular form of art education that can be transferred from the author to educators and, eventually, to learners. (Gupta, 2023)
3.	A study on different dimensions of Bhil tribal community of Salrapada Village in Sailana Block of Ratlam District in Madhya Pradesh	This research explores the social structures and systems of the Bhil tribe in Salrapada village, emphasizing their cultural practices, beliefs, and challenges. The study delves into the historical background of Bhil's, their concentration in Madhya Pradesh, and the impact of historical events on their community. It discusses unique aspects such as language (Bhili or Bhilodi), caste, clans, and practices. The Bhil tribe's social life, including marriage customs, food habits, and festivals, is comprehensively examined. The study also addresses the economic conditions, poverty framework, and the role of Nyotra, an indigenous

		<p>financial system. Additionally, it sheds light on political representation and development issues faced by the Bhil tribe. The conclusion emphasizes the need to preserve cultural heritage while addressing modern challenges and provides recommendations for development interventions. After observing the Bhil tribe's lifestyle and challenges, the study suggests several recommendations. These include the establishment of Farmer Producer Organizations to support cotton cultivation, providing skill-based training for alternative livelihoods, addressing issues like migration, illiteracy, and alcoholism. The study also recommends initiatives to ensure better health for women by prohibiting child marriage. Acknowledging the role of the host institute (The DHAN Academy) and expressing gratitude to the community and DHAN Foundation Sailana, the study highlights the importance of community involvement and financial support for sustainable development. The references provide a foundation for understanding the Bhil tribe's context and practices. (Ranjan, 2023)</p>
<p>4.</p>	<p>A Review on Religious Belief and Culture of Bhil Tribe of Indi</p>	<p>This research delves into various aspects of the Bhil tribe, an indigenous community in India. It covers their geographical distribution, language, education, religion, and cultural practices. The study provides insights into their historical background, classification as scheduled tribes, and the challenges they face, particularly in education. The article explores tribal religions, including animism and beliefs in various deities. It also discusses the unique cultural elements, such as tribal art, music, dance, and pottery. The importance of community life, kinship relations, and social management within the Bhil tribe is highlighted. Overall, the review sheds light on the rich cultural heritage and challenges faced by the Bhil tribe in contemporary India. (Shruti Damor, 2022)</p>

5.	Socio-Cultural Lifestyle of Tribes: Gond, Bhil and Santhal	The review portrays the intricate connection between tribal lifestyle and their rich cultural expressions, emphasizing the dominance of Gond, Bhil, and Santhal communities in the central tribal belt of India. While these communities predominantly rely on agriculture and labor work, the new generation is gradually embracing education and modern jobs. The cultural transformation is evident in the impact of communication, exposure, marketization, and modernization. The evolution of art and craft is marked by changes in themes, raw materials, and technology, shifting paintings from traditional walls to professional canvases. Festive celebrations have transformed into stage performances, yet tribal communities maintain a strong bond with their roots, preserving cultural awareness and traditions. Despite economic backwardness, the Gond, Bhil, and Santhal communities are actively involved in preserving their cultural identity, language, art, and craft amidst evolving lifestyles. (Om Prakash Kumar, 2022)
6.	Bhil Art – The Magnificent Expressions of Mundane Themes by Bhil Community	The article explores the magnificent expressions of mundane themes through Bhil Art, emphasizing its cultural significance and unique features. Bhil Art, rooted in tribal heritage, serves as a medium to convey ancestral stories, often tracing back to legendary figures like Eklavya. The paintings, characterized by dotted patterns, use natural materials, symbolizing the tribe's connection to nature. Displayed on walls and ceilings of Bhil households, these artworks are also showcased in anthropology museums. Prominent Bhil artists like Bhuri Bai, Lado Bai, Sher Singh, Jor Singh, and Gangu Bai contribute to the rich legacy. Bhil Art has evolved, adapting to modern mediums and gaining recognition globally, reinforcing the liberating nature of artistic expression. (Chadha, 2021)
7.	THE CREATIVE TRIBAL BHIL ART	The study by Mrs. Anjali Khot focuses on the oldest form of tribal art in India, Bhil Art. It delves into the history of the Bhil tribe,

	OF INDIA – NEED TO BE FOCUS	<p>their unique painting style, materials used, motifs, and colors. Secondary data from various sources, including journals and books, contributes to the understanding of this traditional art form. The study emphasizes the distinctive characteristics of Bhil paintings, the connection to nature, and the recent shift from walls to paper and canvas. It concludes with recommendations for promoting Bhil Art in the fashion industry, creating employment opportunities, and preserving this cultural heritage. The research highlights the need for awareness and support to ensure the survival of Bhil art in the modern context. (KHOT, 2021)</p>
8.	About BHIL ART	<p>Bhil Art, originating from the Bhil community in Central India, is a captivating form of expression deeply rooted in nature and tradition. Traditionally adorning the clay walls of village homes, Bhil paintings showcase large, un-lifelike shapes filled with earthy colors and distinctive dots, each representing a unique story or symbol. The art form, passed down through generations, reflects the Bhils' agricultural lifestyle and rituals, portraying scenes from everyday life, legends, and religious occasions. Renowned artist Bhuri Bai, awarded the Padma Shri in 2021, exemplifies the resilience and talent within the Bhil community. Despite modern adaptations, Bhil Art maintains its honesty and symbolism, making it a cherished cultural legacy that transcends mediums and boundaries. (Patnaik, 2021)</p>
9.	Mapping the Dots	<p>Shonali Madapa explores Bhuri Bai's artistic journey from a local indigenous artist painting mud walls in her village to a renowned contemporary artist. The article highlights Bhil art's distinct identity through dots, symbolizing ancestors or deities, with each artist having a unique signature pattern. Bhuri Bai's progression to sophisticated dot patterns and the influence of modern tools on her style are discussed. Her paintings reflect a blend of rural and urban motifs, inspired by personal experiences and</p>

		<p>memories. The encounter with artist Jagdish Swaminathan in 1980 marked a pivotal moment in her life, leading to her transition from a manual laborer to a globally recognized artist. Bhuri Bai's desire to pass on the Bhil art legacy to future generations is emphasized. (Madapa, 2021)</p>
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**4. Results and Discussion:**

Inspired by the insights garnered from the Bhil art review paper, the implementation of Bhil art on the front page of a magazine represents a ground breaking step in cultural representation. The synthesis of scholarly findings and visual aesthetics, as emphasized by the authors, brings Bhil art to the forefront of cultural expression. This innovative approach on the magazine's front page serves as a bridge between academic discourse and public engagement, inviting readers to explore the multifaceted dimensions of Bhil art. Dots implemented in the models of the magazine cover by the author characterized by a unique and symbolic use of dots, each carrying multiple layers of meaning. Drawing inspiration from the essential staple food and crop of the Bhil community, maize kernels, the clusters of dots within Bhil paintings symbolically depict specific ancestors or deities. The paper highlights how Bhil art serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a dynamic tool for cultural preservation, allowing traditions to endure amidst the evolving landscape of modernity.

**Table 2: Bhil Artisans of Madhya Pradesh**

Source: IGNC (Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts)

In table:2 five famous Bhil artists paintings studied where the themes of the paintings include-

- a. Theme: A child with chicks
- b. Theme: Two monkeys and birds
- c. Theme: Dev guarding the village
- d. Theme: A bride and groom travel through the forest accompanied by a wedding party
- e. Theme: Cows grazing in the forest while the bagullas give them company
- f. Theme: Bhil youths plucking tamarind leaves for their goats

- g. Theme: Getting wood from the forest
- h. Theme: Bhils offering animals and mahua to Gatla, the memory pillars
- i. Theme: A bird grooms its mates feathers
- j. Theme: Pair of crocodiles

S. No	Name	Picture	Paintings	About
1.	Anita Baria		 <p>b.</p>	Anita Baria's 15-year-old daughter, Bhuri Bai, started painting at the age of six, drawing inspiration from nature like her mother. Bhuri aspires to become a painter, following in her mother's footsteps. Recently, Anita's brother-in-law, Vijay Baria, has also taken up painting.
2.	Bhuri Bai of Pitol		 <p>c.</p> <p>d.</p>	Bhuri Bai, the pioneering Bhil artist, transitioned from traditional methods to canvas at the encouragement of J Swaminathan. Starting with a family horse, she marveled at the ease of using poster colors. Now based in Bhopal, she has earned prestigious awards and continues to depict various facets of Bhil life in her art, from nature and deities to modern elements.

3.	Bhuri Bai of Zher		 <p>e.</p>  <p>f.</p>	<p>Bhuri Bai from Zher relocated to Bhopal two decades ago and currently works on a daily wage at IGRMS. Over the past nine years, she has made a mark as a Bhil contemporary artist, specializing in acrylic paintings on canvas.</p>
4.	Gangu Bai		 <p>g.</p>  <p>h.</p>	<p>Gangu Bai, a Bhil artist, draws inspiration from traditional Bhil rituals like gatla, gal bapsi, gad bapsi, and gohari. Her paintings capture the significance of memory pillars, fulfilled vows, and playful pole-climbing contests. Gangu Bai's art reflects the vibrant cultural tapestry of the Bhil community, with nature remaining a prominent theme in her work.</p>
5.	Jor Singh		 <p>i.</p> 	<p>Jor Singh, initially taught by Bhuri Bai, swiftly embraced painting with a focus on aquatic life, inspired by his fishing experiences in Bhopal's Bada Talao. His vibrant art also highlights animals and memory pillars. While employed in the Madhya Pradesh Government's Public Works department, Jor Singh continues to find artistic inspiration in nature.</p>

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In Group 1 -Choose one of the Bhil Art painting to be implemented on the cover page of Magazine.  
15 responses



Figure:1

Source: Data collected by the author using google form

- 66.7% number of academicians selected (Image c) Theme: Dev guarding the village
- 20% with (Image g) Theme: Getting wood from the forest
- 6.7% with both (Image a) Theme: A child with chicks and (Image i) Theme: A bird grooms its mates feathers

In Group 2 -Choose one of the Bhil Art painting to be implemented on the cover page of Magazine.  
15 responses

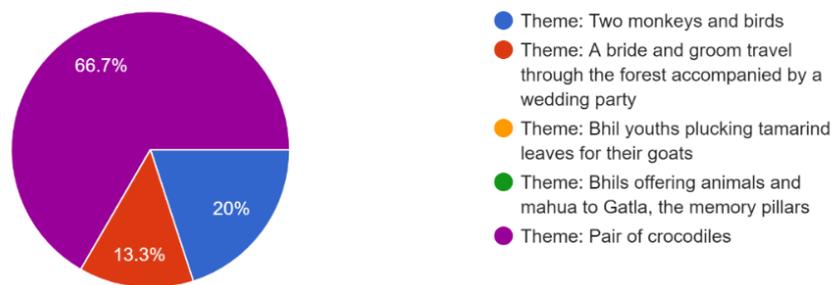


Figure :2

Source: Data collected by the author using google form

- 66.7% number of academicians selected (Image j) Theme: Theme: Pair of crocodiles

- 20% with (Image b) Theme: Two monkeys and birds
- 13.3% with (Image d) Theme: A bride and groom travel through the forest accompanied by a wedding party

From Group one and two there was a tie of 66.7% on (Image c) from table:2 Theme: Dev guarding the village and 66.7% number of academicians selected (Image j) Theme: Theme: Pair of crocodiles. The selected paintings were developed by the author shown in figure 3 and 4, using acrylic pens on 300 gsm watercolour paper and them implemented on the magazine cover page as shown in figure 5 and 6.



Figure: 3



Figure: 4

Source: Developed by the author

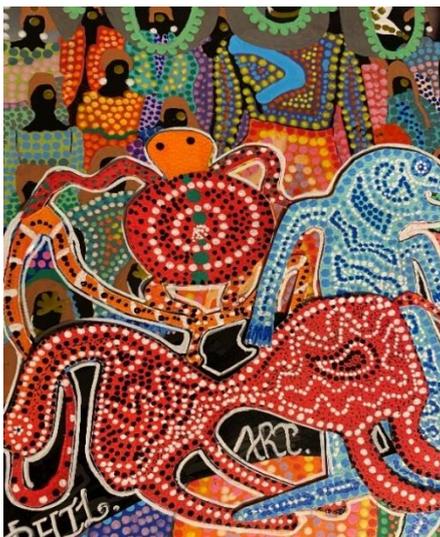


Figure:5

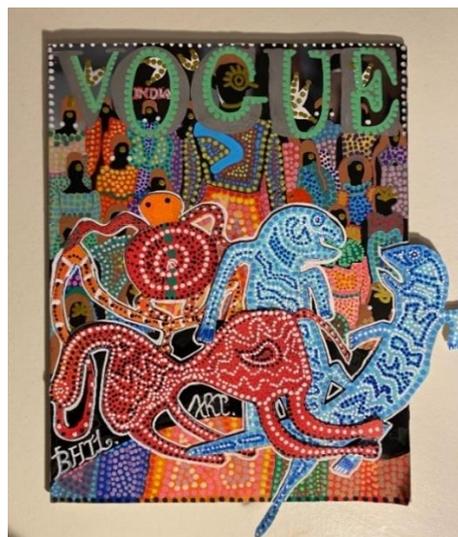


Figure: 6

Source: Developed by the author

## 5. Conclusion:

This critical literature review and primary research present a comprehensive exploration of Bhil art, traditions, and cultural preservation. The Bhil community, India's second-largest tribal group, has a rich cultural tapestry manifested in rituals, songs, dances, and unique artistic practices. The study emphasizes the diversity among Bhil's in different regions, such as Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh and Udaipur in Rajasthan, shedding light on the unique aspects of their deities, songs, dances, and stories. The historical context of Adivasis in India, their reclassification as tribes during colonial times, and their present recognition as scheduled tribes' post-independence provide a backdrop for understanding the challenges faced by these communities. The review paper critically analyses nine scholarly works published between 2021 and 2023, focusing on Bhil art's revival and the community's cultural dynamics. Notable Bhil artists like Bhuri Bai, Prema Fatya, and Jor Singh are highlighted for their contributions in portraying Bhil life and culture through their artwork. The innovative integration of Bhil art into a magazine cover serves as a groundbreaking step in cultural representation. The primary research involving the implementation of two paintings by Bhil artists on the magazine cover, selected through a survey of fifteen academicians from fashion and interior designing institutes in Gwalior, adds a practical dimension to the exploration of Bhil art's contemporary relevance. The chosen paintings, symbolizing the Bhil community's connection to nature, ancestral stories, and cultural heritage, showcase the dynamic role of Bhil art in cultural preservation. The study concludes by underscoring the significance of Bhil art as more than just a form of artistic expression. It is a dynamic tool for cultural preservation, allowing traditions to endure amidst the evolving landscape of modernity. The resilience and talent within the Bhil community, exemplified by renowned artists like Bhuri Bai, are crucial for maintaining and celebrating India's tribal heritage. Bhil art, with its honesty, symbolism, and adaptability to modern mediums, emerges as a cherished cultural legacy that transcends boundaries and contributes to the global recognition of India's tribal diversity. The study encourages ongoing efforts to promote awareness, support, and preservation of Bhil art in the context of contemporary India.

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