

## **8. Empowering Tribal Women Through Cultural Entrepreneurship: A Case Study of Tribal Art in Chhattisgarh**

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### **Abstract**

*Dhokra art, an ancient craft rooted in tribal traditions of India, has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a traditional tribal art form to a globally recognized commodity. The journey of Dhokra reflects not only the changing dynamics of the craft but also the pivotal role of government recognition and initiatives in elevating its status in both national and international markets. Central to this evolution is the active participation of women artisans, whose contributions have been crucial in shaping the contemporary face of Dhokra art. Women's involvement in this craft, however, is not without challenges, as they navigate socio-cultural barriers in an evolving landscape. Through the case study of this tribal art in Chhattisgarh State, the present study sheds light on the opportunities and struggles faced by women artisans in this field. Furthermore, the contemporary perspectives on gender and craftsmanship in Dhokra art highlight its potential as a tool for women's empowerment, cultural preservation, and socio-economic growth. Through the lens of Dhokra, this exploration emphasizes how craftsmanship can become a pathway for women to gain recognition, achieve economic independence, and contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage.*

**Keywords-** Dhokra Art, Tribal Art, Women Artisans, Cultural Heritage, Gender and Craft, Empowerment through Craft, Government Recognition, Socio-economic Impact, Craft to Commodity, Women Empowerment.

### **Introduction**

Tribal art, also known as indigenous art or folk art, is a visual art practiced by members of a specific cultural or ethnic group. It's a vast field that includes several subgenres and substyles, a wide variety of materials and processes, from paint to clay to textiles to jewellery. In addition

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to reflecting the community's heritage and its connection to the natural world, these works of art typically represent the cultural values, beliefs, and experiences of the people who produce them (West Bengal Tourism). The cultural, social, and spiritual characteristics of tribal communities can be better understood with the help of the artworks produced by these communities.

Art has always held a significant importance in any social order, it is not merely a form of aesthetic expression but a conduit for storytelling, ritual, and community cohesion. Women, as bearers of cultural knowledge and tradition, have ensured the continuity of tribal art through intricate weaving techniques, symbolic motifs, and storytelling traditions passed down through generations (Juthani, 2022). Through an exploration of their artistic endeavors, from intricate beadwork to masterful weaving, women emerge as architects of cultural continuity, imbuing each creation with layers of meaning and significance.

Dhokra art holds significant cultural and economic importance for the communities that practice it (Bajpai, 2021). It preserves ancient artistic traditions while providing a livelihood for skilled artisans, many of whom belong to marginalized or tribal communities. In recent years, Dhokra art has gained recognition both nationally and internationally for its unique beauty, craftsmanship, and cultural significance, contributing to the promotion and preservation of India's diverse artistic heritage (Google Arts & Culture).

Dhokra art is characterized by its rustic and tribal aesthetic, featuring intricate motifs inspired by nature, mythology, and everyday life. Common themes include animals, birds, folk deities, and tribal symbols. Each piece is unique, as it is entirely handmade and may incorporate slight variations in design and finish.

Dhokra art is not only a reflection of the rich cultural heritage of the tribal communities in Chhattisgarh, but it is also a living testament to the resilience and creativity of these communities. While the history of this art form has been shaped by many, it is the women within these tribes who have played an instrumental role in ensuring its continued relevance. As traditional societies evolve, women's involvement in crafting and preserving these art forms becomes increasingly central, marking a crucial intersection of cultural legacy and gendered labour.

## **History, Evolution, and Practice of Dhokra Art**

Dhokra art, also known as Dhokra or Dhokra casting, is a traditional form of metal craft practiced by indigenous tribes in India, particularly in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh. This art form has a rich history dating back over 4,000 years and is regarded as one of the greatest heritages from the Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro civilizations. The dancing girl of Mohenjo-Daro is among the most well-known examples of Dhokra art worldwide.

The name "Dhokra" is believed to have originated from the Dhokra Damar tribes, who are the traditional metalworkers of West Bengal. Tribal communities like the Malhar, Saora, and Ghadwa also practice this art form.

Dhokra art is the famous art of Bastar, Chhattisgarh, a state of east-central India, whose rich tradition of craft and culture has always attracted art lovers from all across the world. This art is influenced by tribal themes related to animals, mythical and human creatures, and nature.

The art form has experienced a dynamic evolution over millennia, reflecting various cultural, social, and technological shifts. It has preserved its core lost-wax casting techniques while incorporating influences from Hindu mythology and Islamic art due to historical interactions. In contemporary times, artisans have adopted modern tools and materials, resulting in innovative creations that blend traditional craftsmanship with modern artistic expressions. Enhanced recognition through governmental support and global market integration has further elevated Dhokra art. Concurrently, preservation initiatives, including skill development programs and artisan cooperatives, strive to safeguard this invaluable cultural heritage, ensuring its continuity and vitality for future generations.

The process of creating Dhokra art involves the lost-wax casting technique, which is one of the earliest known methods of metal casting. It is an intricate process where skilled artisans create moulds from a mixture of clay, beeswax, and organic materials. The desired design is then sculpted into the wax mould by hand, incorporating intricate details and patterns.

Once the mould is prepared, it is covered in layers of clay, leaving an opening at the top. The entire mould is then heated in a furnace, causing the wax to melt and drain out through the opening, hence the name "lost wax" casting. Molten metal, usually brass or bronze, is then

poured into the cavity left by the melted wax. After cooling, the clay mould is broken, revealing the solid metal sculpture within.

### **Turning Points- Promotion and Downfall**

A significant turning point in Dhokra art came when it evolved from a traditional tribal craft to a globally recognized art form. This transformation was largely driven by government support, including the National Handicrafts Development Programme and the establishment of state-level bodies like the Chhattisgarh State Handicrafts Development Board. These efforts, combined with the increasing demand for authentic, handcrafted products, allowed Dhokra artisans to expand beyond local markets, especially through the souvenir industry.

In recent times, artisans have incorporated modern tools, such as electronic furnaces and machine-made moulds, alongside traditional methods. This fusion has led to innovative pieces but also raises concerns about maintaining the authenticity of the craft. The use of mass production techniques and modern finishes could dilute the uniqueness and cultural essence of handmade Dhokra sculptures.

To strike a balance, preservation initiatives like skill development programs and artisan cooperatives aim to safeguard the traditional techniques while allowing for innovation. By embracing sustainable practices that honor both tradition and innovation, Dhokra art can continue to thrive economically, ensuring its cultural richness is passed down for generations to come.

### **From Craft to Commodity**

The transformation of Dhokra art into a commercial product unfolded through a combination of traditional and modern factors. Initially valued within tribal communities for its cultural significance and craftsmanship, Dhokra art began to attract broader recognition beyond its indigenous origins. The rise of smartphones and social media platforms played a crucial role in this shift, allowing artisans to showcase their work to global audiences. This digital revolution broke down geographical barriers, enabling direct sales and opening up new markets for the artisans. Simultaneously, the expanding demand for authentic, handmade products, driven by consumers' appreciation for cultural heritage, created further opportunities. Cultural exhibitions and regional art markets also played a significant role, drawing attention to the unique aesthetic of Dhokra sculptures. In parallel, the tourism and souvenir industries provided

a niche for Dhokra art, as travellers sought culturally rich and distinctive mementos. These technological advancements, alongside traditional efforts such as government support and artisan cooperatives, have not only increased the visibility of Dhokraart but also solidified its place in both national and international markets, ensuring its continued growth and commercial success.

### **Government Recognition and Sustenance of Dhokra Art**

The Indian government has played a crucial role in promoting and preserving Dhokra art. Through initiatives like the National Handicrafts Development Programme (NHDP) and cluster development programs, the Ministry of Textiles provides financial aid, training, and marketing support, enhancing artisans' skills and market reach, retrieved from <https://textiles.gov.in>. The Chhattisgarh State Handicrafts Development Board (CGSHDB) supports artisans with infrastructure, training, and promotional efforts, ensuring the craft's sustainability and economic viability.

Beyond government support, NGOs, artisan cooperatives, tourism promotion, and digital platforms contribute to sustaining and expanding Dhokra art. NGOs provide training and market linkages, while cooperatives foster collective marketing and skill exchange. Tourism and e-commerce platforms further boost demand and global exposure.

Empowering women in tribal communities through Dhokra art requires education, financial aid, and incentives. Training programs, school integration, and workshops enhance skills and cultural preservation, while microfinance, grants, and subsidies on materials and marketing encourage participation. Recognition through awards and exhibitions further motivates women artisans, ensuring both the preservation of Dhokra art and their economic empowerment.

### **Role of Women in Tribal Societies and their Contributions to Art Forms**

Dhokra women take an active part in the production process as the creation of Dhokra art is complex and time-consuming. It is the same reason why families are found working as units. Different steps are commonly divided among the family members, with men taking up most of the laborious work. Raw materials are generally gathered from local sources; hence it is a common task shared between both genders of the family. Heavy work such as gathering scrap

metal, working in the furnaces to melt it, and giving shape to it with the mould are activities limited to men.

Women engage themselves in preliminary preparations and creative activities. They are commonly seen laying the patterns on clay moulds and wrapping slender ribbons of beeswax around the mould to give intricate designs to the final product. Thus, minute and painstaking details of Dhokra handicrafts, which make every piece unique and different, must be attributed to the creativity and delicate work done by the women.

In many tribal communities, women are skilled artisans who possess knowledge of traditional motifs, symbols, and techniques passed down through generations. They play a crucial role in shaping the aesthetic identity of Dhokra art through their artistic expression. In rural and tribal households where Dhokra art is practiced, women have historically been involved in household-based production units. This involvement allows women to contribute to family income and helps sustain the craft within their communities. Additionally, women often serve as custodians of cultural knowledge related to Dhokra art, transmitting skills and stories to younger generations. Their role in preserving and perpetuating this traditional craft contributes to the cultural identity and heritage of their communities. Through their active participation in Dhokra art practices, women have not only contributed to the economic well-being of their families but also played a vital role in safeguarding and promoting this unique cultural heritage.

According to the International Trade Centre, women make up 70% of the global handicraft workforce. It states, 'In some countries, such as India and Bangladesh, women make up more than 80% of the handicraft workforce. Moreover, handicrafts are often a significant source of income for women, particularly in rural areas where there are few other economic opportunities.' International Trade Centre. (n.d.). Crafts.

Despite the significant contributions of women to the preservation of Dhokra art, their journey has been far from easy. Traditional gender roles in tribal societies often limit women to domestic responsibilities, making it challenging for them to engage in the artistic and economic activities associated with crafting. However, as the importance of their work becomes more recognized, opportunities for empowerment and growth are emerging, even as the challenges



persist. Understanding these obstacles is crucial in highlighting the potential for change in this unique art form.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

Women in Dhokra art face several challenges, including gender biases that limit their recognition and opportunities compared to their male counterparts. They often need more access to raw materials, tools, and financial support, hindering their ability to produce and market their work. Cultural barriers also play a significant role, as traditional gender roles and societal expectations can restrict women's participation and advancement in the art form. Women face a double burden as they balance domestic work and cultural expectations, creating barriers to their professional and creative responsibilities. However, initiatives like women-led cooperatives and online marketplaces have provided new opportunities, enabling them to sustain their artistic practices while achieving financial independence. These challenges collectively impede the full potential and empowerment of women artisans in the Dhokra art community.

Addressing the challenges faced by women in Dhokra art and creating opportunities for their empowerment involves several key strategies. Providing targeted education and training programs can enhance their technical skills and business knowledge. Ensuring equitable access to resources such as raw materials, tools, and financial support through microfinance and grants is crucial. Implementing supportive policies that focus on gender equality and offering financial assistance and mentorship can further bolster their efforts. Facilitating greater market access through participation in exhibitions, trade fairs, and online marketplaces helps women reach broader audiences. Raising community awareness about the value of women's contributions can reduce gender biases and foster a more supportive environment. Encouraging the formation of women-led cooperatives promotes resource sharing and mutual support, while mentorship programs and showcasing female role models can inspire and guide new artisans. These strategies collectively empower women and contribute to the sustainability and growth of Dhokra art.

While the challenges faced by women in the Dhokra art community are multifaceted, there are numerous stories of resilience and progress. One such story is that of Mangmati Jharekha, a woman who has navigated these difficulties and emerged as a beacon of empowerment. Her journey provides not only an individual example of success but also serves as a microcosm of the broader changes occurring within the community of women artisans.

Mangmati Jharekha, from the Baigandi village, is a Dhokra artisan. She has been practicing the art form for almost 3 decades now. The family has been passing down the practice for over 5 generations. She and her 3 sons make and sell Dhokra art for a living. The state government of Chhattisgarh has recognized her dedication to the art and has awarded her with numerous awards and certificates. She has been an active participant in exhibitions and cultural workshops. With the help of her sons, they have set up an online business platform to sell their products both nationally and internationally. She is an active community member who has been motivating other women of her tribe and village to set up their businesses. Mangmati Jharekha's story is a powerful illustration of how women are finding new paths to success within the Dhokra art world. However, her experience is not isolated. Across the country, more and more women are adopting innovative approaches to both the artistic and entrepreneurial aspects of Dokra. These contemporary perspectives reveal a shift towards modernization and adaptation while maintaining the core traditions of the craft.

### **Contemporary Perspectives**

The evolving role of women in contemporary tribal art scenes, including their engagement with new materials, themes, and forms of expression, is a dynamic and multifaceted process. Women artisans are increasingly stepping into leadership roles, not only as skilled artisans but also as entrepreneurs and community organizers. They are taking charge of artisan cooperatives, self-help groups, and NGOs dedicated to preserving and promoting tribal art. Women's leadership is crucial in driving initiatives that empower artisans economically and culturally.

In terms of artistic expression, women artisans are experimenting with new materials while maintaining the essence of traditional Dhokra art. They are incorporating materials such as semi-precious stones, beads, and recycled materials to add a contemporary touch to their



artwork, creating fusion pieces that appeal to a broader audience. Additionally, women are exploring new themes and narratives in their artwork, reflecting contemporary issues, social change, and personal experiences. These themes include environmental conservation, women's empowerment, and cultural identity. Women artisans are also embracing innovative forms of expression, such as larger installations, mixed-media sculptures, and wearable art, expanding the boundaries of traditional Dhokra art and captivating a new generation of art enthusiasts. Through their creativity, leadership, and innovation, women are playing a pivotal role in shaping the future of tribal art, ensuring its relevance and sustainability in the contemporary world.

As we observe the innovative contributions of women in Dhokra art today, it is clear that these shifts go beyond mere artistic evolution. The practice of Dhokrais becoming a tool of empowerment, providing women with economic independence, social recognition, and the ability to influence their communities. The art form has thus transformed from a cultural heritage to a symbol of personal and collective liberation.

### **Dhokra Art- Liberation and Empowerment of Women**

Women's engagement in Dhokra art has played a pivotal role in their liberation and empowerment within tribal societies, providing them with agency, economic independence, and leadership roles. Through their involvement in Dhokra art, women have gained significant economic empowerment. By mastering the craft and actively participating in the production and sale of Dhokra sculptures, women artisans have gained financial independence. Their artwork allows them to generate income, support their families, and contribute to the socio-economic development of their communities. Engaging in Dhokra art has also empowered women to take on leadership roles within their communities. Women artisans often lead artisan cooperatives, self-help groups, and NGOs dedicated to preserving and promoting tribal art. By taking charge of these initiatives, they have become decision-makers, community organizers, and advocates for their cultural heritage, giving them a voice in community affairs and decision-making processes. Women's participation in Dhokra art is instrumental in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of their tribes. By passing down traditional knowledge and techniques to younger generations, women artisans ensure the continuity of this ancient craft.

Through their artwork, they celebrate tribal identity, history, and mythology, keeping alive the rich cultural traditions of their communities.

Engaging in Dhokra art has earned women artisans' recognition and respect within their communities and beyond. Their artistic talents and contributions to preserving tribal heritage have elevated their status and given them a sense of pride. Through participation in exhibitions, workshops, and cultural events, women artisans gain visibility and recognition, breaking traditional gender barriers and challenging societal norms. Moreover, through their involvement in Dhokra art, women have gained access to education and skill development opportunities. Workshops, training programs, and exposure to new techniques have not only enhanced their artistic skills but have also provided them with valuable knowledge and tools to navigate the modern world. This empowerment through education and skill development has enabled women to become self-reliant and assertive members of their communities.

Women's engagement in Dhokra art has led to their liberation and empowerment within tribal societies. By providing economic independence, leadership opportunities, and a means to preserve their cultural heritage, Dhokra art has empowered women artisans, enabling them to break traditional gender roles and contribute to the socio-economic development of their communities.

Despite the significant strides made by women in the Dhokra art community, there remains much work to be done to ensure that these opportunities continue to grow and reach more artisans. As the world continues to evolve, so too must the structures of support for these women, both in terms of access to resources and social recognition. The future of Dhokra art lies in the continued empowerment of these women, ensuring that the next generation of artisans can flourish in an environment that nurtures both their creativity and their potential.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

The evolution of Dhokra art from a traditional craft to a globally recognized art form reflects a dynamic interplay of cultural preservation, governmental support, and market forces. While the commercialization of Dhokra art has undoubtedly opened new avenues for artisans, it is crucial to strike a delicate balance between embracing modernity and maintaining the authenticity that makes this art form unique. Government initiatives, such as the National Handicrafts Development Programme and state-level bodies, play an essential role in ensuring

that Dhokra art continues to thrive both economically and culturally. By supporting artisans with training, financial assistance, and marketing opportunities, these schemes not only secure the future of Dhokra also help preserve its cultural heritage. However, as the demand for authentic, handcrafted goods grows, it is vital to safeguard against the risks of mass production that may dilute the art's intrinsic value. Ultimately, the continued success of Dhokra art hinges on the collective efforts of artisans, policymakers, and consumers to protect its traditional roots while allowing for creative innovation and sustainable growth. The preservation of Dhokrais not just a matter of maintaining an art form, but also safeguarding the stories and identity of the communities that have nurtured it for generations.

Moving forward, it is essential to continue supporting the development of Dhokra art through education and training initiatives that ensure the younger generation is equipped with the skills needed to sustain the craft. This could involve establishing dedicated workshops and programs to introduce new techniques while maintaining traditional methods. Additionally, efforts to expand Dokra's global reach through targeted marketing and collaborations with international art collectors could help sustain its commercial success. However, as this growth continues, it will be important to create frameworks that protect the authenticity of the craft, preventing the over-commercialization that threatens to erode its cultural significance. Future policies should also aim to provide greater access to technology and digital platforms, allowing artisans to sell their work online, thereby reaching a global audience while preserving the essence of the art. The continued recognition and support for Dhokra art will ensure that it remains not only an economic asset but also a living testament to the rich cultural heritage of India.

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