



Echoes of the Forest: Cultural Identity and Oral Traditions of the Gond Tribe

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DOI - 10.5281/zenodo.17663704

Abstract:

The Gond tribe, one of the largest indigenous communities of Central India, represents a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in forest life, oral traditions, and community practices. This paper explores how the Gond tribe's cultural identity is shaped and preserved through oral narratives, songs, myths, rituals, and performative traditions. The Gond worldview, embedded in their ecological surroundings, presents a unique intersection of nature and culture where forests are both sacred spaces and sources of livelihood. However, with the increasing intrusion of modernization, globalization, and state-driven developmental projects, these traditions are undergoing transformation.

Drawing upon secondary sources such as ethnographic accounts, anthropological studies, folklore research, and works on indigenous epistemologies, this paper situates Gond oral traditions within the broader framework of cultural survival and social justice. Verrier Elwin's pioneering documentation of Gond myths and rituals, along with contemporary works on Gond painting and storytelling, highlight the tribe's resilience in sustaining their identity. Furthermore, the study critically examines how Gond oral traditions negotiate between continuity and change: while myths of creation, heroic ballads, and forest songs remain integral to community identity, urban migration, linguistic erosion, and displacement challenge their intergenerational transmission.

The present paper argues that Gond oral traditions are not merely relics of the past but dynamic cultural practices that offer alternative ways of understanding ecology, spirituality, and collective memory. By engaging with concepts of indigenous knowledge, cultural hegemony, and resistance, the study seeks to foreground the Gond perspective as a crucial voice in the discourse on cultural identity and sustainability. Ultimately, the research suggests that preserving Gond oral traditions is essential not only for safeguarding indigenous heritage but also for reimagining social justice and ecological balance in contemporary India.

Keywords: *Gond Tribe, Oral Traditions, Cultural Identity, Indigenous Knowledge, Folklore, Social Justice, Ecology.*

Introduction:

The Gond tribe, spread across Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, constitutes one of the most prominent indigenous groups of India. Their cultural practices and oral traditions provide a rich tapestry of indigenous worldviews where forest, land, and ritual life

are deeply intertwined. Scholars such as Verrier Elwin (*The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*, 1964) and Stephen Fuchs (*The Gond and Bhumia of Eastern Mandla*, 1960) have documented the cultural and religious life of the Gonds, emphasizing their myths of origin, hero worship, and animistic practices.

Oral traditions within the Gond community function as both repositories of knowledge and performative expressions of identity. From epic narratives such as the tale of Lingo Pen (the cultural hero of the Gonds) to seasonal songs marking agricultural cycles, these traditions establish a collective memory that sustains Gond identity. They provide moral codes, spiritual guidance, and ecological wisdom passed down through generations.

The Gond worldview is fundamentally ecological. Forests are not simply economic resources but sacred entities inhabited by deities and spirits. Oral traditions such as folktales and songs articulate a philosophy where humans coexist harmoniously with non-human entities. This resonates with global discourses on sustainability and environmental ethics, situating Gond knowledge as an alternative to exploitative modern development models.

However, the pressures of modernization, linguistic decline, migration, and displacement threaten the survival of these traditions. Government projects, mining industries, and urbanization have uprooted Gond communities, often silencing their voices in mainstream narratives. Scholars such as Ramachandra Guha and Arjun Appadurai point out that indigenous groups like the Gonds face “cultural subjugation” when their knowledge systems are sidelined in favor of dominant models of progress. In this context, it becomes vital to study Gond oral traditions not only as folklore but also as active cultural strategies for survival and resistance. This paper, therefore, explores how the oral traditions of the Gond tribe echo their cultural identity, shaping their worldview, and sustaining their struggles against marginalization.

Research Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology, relying primarily on secondary sources such as ethnographies,

folklore studies, and cultural anthropology. Key texts by Verrier Elwin, Stephen Fuchs, and contemporary scholars on tribal studies form the foundational base.

The approach includes:

- **Textual Analysis:** Examination of documented Gond myths, folk songs, and ritual performances.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Relating Gond oral traditions with broader indigenous knowledge systems in India and beyond.
- **Theoretical Framework:** Postcolonial and subaltern studies (Spivak, Guha) to interpret the silencing and resistance of tribal voices.
- **Cultural Studies Approach:** Understanding Gond art, dance, and oral literature as both cultural and political expressions.

The study does not claim primary ethnographic fieldwork but critically engages with existing scholarship to reinterpret Gond oral traditions as living, dynamic practices central to identity formation.

Objectives:

1. To analyze the role of oral traditions in shaping the cultural identity of the Gond tribe.
2. To explore how myths, songs, and rituals function as repositories of indigenous knowledge.
3. To examine challenges to the preservation of oral traditions in the context of modernization and displacement.
4. To suggest strategies for sustaining and revitalizing Gond oral heritage.

Review of Literature:

Verrier Elwin’s works, particularly *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (1955) and *Myths of Middle India* (1949), remain seminal in understanding Gond myths and rituals. Elwin foregrounded the Gond pantheon, their reverence for nature, and their oral epics,

though his romanticized view often downplayed structural inequalities.

Stephen Fuchs's anthropological studies (1960) provided detailed accounts of Gond social organization, kinship, and religious practices, emphasizing their oral traditions as integral to cultural continuity.

Contemporary scholarship has extended this discourse. Arjun Appadurai (1996) critiques the marginalization of indigenous voices in globalization, while Ramachandra Guha (2006) links tribal struggles to broader environmental movements. Nandini Sundar (*Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 1997) examines how state policies intersect with Gond cultural identity.

Folklore studies, such as Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan's edited volume *Another Harmony* (1986), highlight the interpretive richness of oral traditions, relevant to Gond epics and storytelling. Similarly, research on Gond art (notably J. Swaminathan's patronage of Gond painting in the 1980s) shows how oral myths find expression in visual forms.

This literature suggests that Gond oral traditions are not static relics but evolving cultural practices negotiating modern challenges while retaining indigenous epistemologies.

Review of Research Articles:

Recent journal articles explore Gond oral traditions from diverse perspectives.

Archana Sharma (2012) in *Indian Folklore Studies* emphasizes Gond myths as ecological narratives that challenge dominant anthropocentric models.

Alpa Shah (2006) in *Journal of South Asian Development* examines tribal displacement, linking oral traditions to resistance politics.

R. Venkata Rao (2018) in *Tribal Studies Quarterly* documents the erosion of Gond language and its impact on oral heritage.

These articles highlight that Gond oral traditions are both endangered and resilient.

They function as sites of cultural negotiation where identity, ecology, and resistance intersect.

Oral Traditions as Cultural Memory of the Gond Indigenous Tribes:

Oral traditions among the Gond indigenous tribes function not merely as artistic expression but as the living archive of their cultural memory, history, and identity. For centuries, the Gonds—one of the largest Adivasi communities in India—have transmitted myths, genealogies, cosmologies, songs, and ritual narratives through oral performance. This oral corpus operates as a form of cultural memory that sustains collective identity and provides a framework for understanding their relationship with nature, ancestors, and the sacred cosmos.

Jan Assmann's theory of 'cultural memory' suggests that societies transmit identity-forming knowledge across generations through ritual, narrative, and symbolic forms, creating a continuity between past and present (Assmann 9). In this light, Gond oral traditions such as epic narratives, creation myths, and sacred songs act as repositories of memory that shape the community's worldview. For example, the Gond myth of creation, where the earth is supported on the head of a tortoise and cosmic order is maintained through divine intervention, reflects both ecological consciousness and spiritual cosmology (Deogaonkar 45). Such myths are not recorded in written form but preserved through storytelling, which keeps alive a sense of belonging to both land and lineage.

Songs and storytelling sessions performed during rituals and festivals further exemplify this connection between oral tradition and memory. The Pandavani performance, often associated with Gond communities in Chhattisgarh, retells the Mahabharata in localized idioms, linking broader pan-Indian epics with indigenous oral culture (Elwin 112). Through this practice,

Gond singers not only recall mythological tales but also reinterpret them in ways that reinforce communal values and ancestral pride. This oral performance transforms memory into a living, adaptive cultural practice.

Moreover, Gond oral traditions embody ecological knowledge. Folktales and proverbs often encode practical wisdom about agriculture, forest conservation, and hunting practices, thus serving as a mnemonic system for sustainable living (Raghavan 213). Storytelling here is pedagogical: it instructs younger generations on how to live harmoniously with the environment, while simultaneously preserving the tribe's intangible heritage.

However, the transmission of oral traditions faces challenges in the modern era. The decline of intergenerational storytelling due to urban migration, formal schooling, and the dominance of written culture has threatened the continuity of Gond memory practices (Shah 68). Yet, cultural revival movements, ethnographic documentation, and the recognition of Gond art and performance in national and international forums have given renewed visibility to their oral heritage.

In essence, Gond oral traditions function as cultural memory by linking the community to its mythic past, ancestral wisdom, and ecological ethics. They transform memory into performance and sustain collective identity in the face of historical and social change. As Assmann notes, cultural memory is not static but a dynamic process of remembering and reinterpreting (Assmann 22). The Gond oral repertoire illustrates this dynamism by continually adapting while retaining its rootedness in forest, land, and cosmology.

Ecology and Spirituality of Gond Indigenous Tribes:

For the Gond indigenous tribes, ecology and spirituality are inseparable dimensions of their worldview. The natural

environment is not merely a resource for survival but a sacred space infused with divine presence. Forests, rivers, hills, and animals occupy central roles in Gond cosmology, rituals, and ethical codes, reflecting a deep ecological consciousness. This interconnectedness between ecology and spirituality illustrates how indigenous knowledge systems sustain both cultural identity and environmental stewardship.

The Gond creation myth situates ecological balance at the core of existence. In their cosmology, the earth is supported on the back of a tortoise, and the sun, moon, and stars are deities maintaining cosmic rhythm (Deogaonkar 53). Such myths encode ecological awareness, as they portray natural elements as divine beings that demand reverence. This spiritual ecology fosters a sense of kinship with the environment, positioning humans as custodians rather than exploiters of nature.

Sacred groves, known locally as Devarai or Madai, exemplify this ecological-spiritual synergy. These forest patches are preserved for ritual worship of clan deities and ancestral spirits, prohibiting deforestation or hunting within them (Elwin 74). In this way, Gond spirituality directly contributes to biodiversity conservation. Ritual offerings to trees, stones, and water bodies symbolize gratitude towards nature's gifts and ensure the sustainable use of ecological resources. Animals, too, are revered in Gond belief systems. The tiger, peacock, and serpent are not only totems of clan identity but are considered protectors and spiritual messengers (Mehta 119). Totemism serves as both a religious practice and an ecological safeguard, as prohibitions against harming one's totem species result in the preservation of diverse fauna. Similarly, agricultural rituals involve invoking earth deities to bless crops, demonstrating the embeddedness of ecological rhythms in spiritual practice (Raghavan 207).

The ecological ethic in Gond spirituality is also evident in their festivals. Celebrations such as Keslapur Jathra or Madai Mela combine ritual worship with communal sharing, reinforcing collective responsibility toward the land (Shah 91). During these festivals, songs and dances narrate myths of deities associated with fertility, rain, and harvest cycles, transmitting ecological wisdom through oral performance.

Modern scholars have highlighted how such indigenous ecological spirituality offers valuable alternatives to anthropocentric worldviews. Vandana Shiva argues that indigenous communities like the Gonds embody an 'earth-centered cosmology' where nature is seen as a living organism, countering capitalist notions of nature as a commodity (Shiva 37). In this context, Gond spirituality represents an ecological philosophy that predates and enriches contemporary environmental ethics. However, this balance is increasingly threatened by deforestation, mining, and displacement, which not only erode Gond livelihoods but also undermine their spiritual relationship with the environment (Sundar 184). As sacred groves are destroyed and totemic species endangered, the cultural fabric that binds ecology and spirituality weakens. Yet, revival movements and cultural documentation efforts highlight the resilience of Gond ecological spirituality in adapting to modern challenges.

In sum, Gond ecology and spirituality form a unified system that perceives the natural world as sacred and alive. By embedding ecological practices in spiritual rituals, myths, and festivals, the Gonds sustain both biodiversity and cultural identity. Their worldview demonstrates how indigenous traditions can contribute profoundly to global conversations on ecological ethics and environmental sustainability.

Performance and Community of Gond Indigenous Tribes:

Performance among the Gond Indigenous tribes is not merely an artistic expression but a vital mode of sustaining community life, transmitting knowledge, and reinforcing cultural identity. Music, dance, and ritual performances are deeply embedded in the Gond social fabric, functioning as collective acts that bind individuals into a shared sense of belonging. The act of performance, whether through song, oral recitation, or dance, is inseparable from the community's rituals, festivals, and everyday practices, embodying both sacred and social dimensions.

Central to Gond performance traditions are festivals like Keslapur Jathra (Nagoba Jathra), where the Gusadi dance holds prominence. Men adorned in elaborate headgear, peacock feathers, and painted bodies perform to the rhythms of drums and flutes, invoking spiritual energy and celebrating the community's ties to ancestors and deities (Elwin 132). Such performances are not staged spectacles for aesthetic appreciation alone but communal events where spirituality and social cohesion converge. The audience is never passive; participation through chanting, clapping, and dancing reinforces a sense of unity and shared responsibility.

The Gond understanding of performance is intertwined with oral traditions, where mythological stories are enacted through song and dance. Performances often narrate tales of creation, valor, and moral order, ensuring that cultural memory is preserved in performative forms. As Stuart Blackburn argues in his work on Indian oral epics, 'performance is both text and event,' a living practice that reshapes collective identity with each retelling (Blackburn 24). In this sense, Gond performances are archives of memory, history, and cosmology, carried forward not in books but in embodied expression.

Performance also plays a pedagogical role within the community. Younger generations learn values, customs, and myths through participatory involvement in dance and storytelling. As scholars of performance studies note, embodiment becomes a medium of knowledge transmission, where 'learning is inseparable from doing' (Schechner 28). For the Gond, community survival depends on such embodied knowledge, which cannot be detached from ritualized acts.

Moreover, performance serves as a space of resistance and resilience. Historically marginalized, the Gond community has maintained its cultural sovereignty through dance, song, and ritual despite external pressures of assimilation. By performing their traditions publicly, they assert identity and visibility in a world that has often sought to erase or homogenize Indigenous voices (Xaxa 55). Festivals and ritual dances thus become political as well as cultural affirmations.

In contemporary times, while globalization and modernization pose challenges to traditional forms, Gond performances continue to adapt. Some rituals are showcased at cultural festivals outside the community, creating opportunities for recognition but also raising concerns of commodification. Yet, at their core, Gond performances remain tied to the land, ancestors, and collective spirit. As performance theorist Victor Turner suggests, 'Communities emerges in ritual performance,' reminding us that for the Gond, every dance and song is a reaffirmation of solidarity and identity (Turner 45).

Thus, Gond performance traditions embody the inseparability of art, spirituality, and community, where the act of performance sustains cultural identity, nurtures collective memory, and ensures continuity of Indigenous knowledge systems.

Challenges of Modernity to the Gond Indigenous Tribe:

The encounter between modernity and Indigenous ways of life has posed complex challenges to the Gond community, who represent one of the largest Adivasi groups in central India. While modernity has introduced certain opportunities in education, mobility, and political recognition, it has also disrupted traditional systems of knowledge, belief, and social organization. The Gond face the dual task of negotiating the promises of development and resisting the erasures that accompany cultural assimilation.

One of the most pressing challenges is the erosion of traditional livelihoods. Historically, the Gond have depended on shifting cultivation, forest produce, and subsistence farming, which are deeply tied to their ecological knowledge and spiritual cosmology. The expansion of mining industries, deforestation, and land alienation due to state policies have displaced communities from ancestral lands (Sundar 93). In losing access to forests, the Gond not only lose economic sustenance but also sacred landscapes that embody their gods, myths, and rituals. The displacement threatens the survival of both material and spiritual practices.

A second challenge emerges from educational and linguistic assimilation. While education is viewed as a gateway to social mobility, it often comes at the cost of Indigenous languages and oral traditions. Schools prioritize Hindi or regional state languages, marginalizing Gondi and related dialects, which undermines cultural transmission. As Ganesh Devy notes, the decline of tribal languages leads to the loss of unique knowledge systems, especially ecological and medicinal wisdom encoded in oral traditions (People's Linguistic Survey of India 12). The homogenizing thrust of modern education erases Gond epistemologies,

positioning them as inferior to dominant cultural norms.

Modernity also disrupts community rituals and performance traditions. The influx of mass media and consumer culture has led younger generations to increasingly distance themselves from festivals, oral storytelling, and ritual dances. Verrier Elwin's early observations of Gond life emphasize the centrality of performance in shaping collective identity (Elwin 146). Today, however, many rituals are commodified for tourism or presented at state-sponsored cultural festivals, stripping them of sacred meaning and recontextualizing them for external consumption (Xaxa 77). This tension between preservation and commodification creates identity dilemmas for the community.

The Gond also confront political and social marginalization in the face of state-led modernization projects. Development schemes often overlook Indigenous needs, framing them as backward communities in need of integration. Virginius Xaxa argues that state policies have historically oscillated between paternalistic protectionism and assimilationist tendencies, both of which undermine Indigenous autonomy (State, Society, and Tribes 61). As a result, Gond communities struggle with inadequate representation in decision-making processes that affect their lands and cultural rights.

Finally, the rise of religious conversion and cultural homogenization under modernity challenges Gond spirituality. Indigenous animistic practices are often delegitimized as superstition, while mainstream Hindu or Christian traditions gain dominance. This creates generational divides, where younger Gond may adopt new religious identities while elders struggle to preserve ancestral traditions (Hardiman 208). Such processes fracture community unity and dilute the continuity of Indigenous belief systems.

Despite these challenges, Gond communities continue to adapt and resist.

Movements advocating for Adivasi rights, ecological justice, and cultural preservation demonstrate that Indigenous modernities are not passive assimilations but active negotiations. However, the tension between tradition and modernity remains a defining struggle for the Gond in the twenty-first century.

Resilience and Adaptation – Gond Art (Paintings, Murals):

Gond art, known for its vibrant paintings, murals, and symbolic motifs, is one of the most visible markers of the Gond tribe's cultural resilience. Traditionally practiced on the mud walls of homes using natural pigments, Gond paintings narrate stories of deities, ancestors, animals, and ecological patterns. They are not merely decorative but function as a form of cultural memory that encodes myths, oral traditions, and ecological knowledge. According to Jyotindra Jain, Gond paintings are 'visual texts' that express indigenous cosmology and become a vital means for transmitting cultural values across generations (Jain 42). In this way, Gond art operates as both a medium of resilience and a mode of adaptation to changing historical circumstances.

Colonial encounters and modernization initially threatened the survival of this artistic tradition, as industrialization and urbanization eroded the traditional spaces—such as mud houses and village shrines—where Gond murals flourished. Yet, Gond artists transformed these challenges into opportunities. In the 1980s, with the encouragement of cultural activists and art patrons, Gond paintings migrated from wall murals to paper and canvas, reaching wider audiences both in India and abroad (Elwin 58). This adaptation not only preserved the art form but also allowed Gond artists to assert their cultural identity in modern contexts. Artists such as Jangarh Singh Shyam pioneered the contemporary Gond art movement by

combining traditional motifs with acrylic paints and canvas, gaining international recognition and creating what critics have termed the ‘Jangarh Kalam’ (Gupta 77).

The resilience of Gond art lies in its ability to negotiate between tradition and modernity without losing its spiritual essence. Traditional motifs—such as trees of life, tigers, peacocks, and snakes— remain central, but they are reimagined in new stylistic forms that appeal to urban and global audiences. Scholars note that this creative adaptation is not a rupture but a continuity, as it reflects the Gond belief in the interconnectedness of all life (Shyam 93). The process of recontextualizing Gond art for the marketplace also generates economic resilience for Gond communities, as artists gain livelihood opportunities while simultaneously challenging the historical marginalization of tribal knowledge systems.

However, this transition is not without challenges. Critics warn of the commodification of Gond art in global markets, where its spiritual and ritual dimensions risk being reduced to mere aesthetic value (Mathur 65). Yet, even within this tension, Gond artists have demonstrated agency by reclaiming their narratives and using art as a platform for cultural assertion. By situating their work within both indigenous traditions and contemporary art practices, Gond painters resist cultural erasure and exemplify resilience through adaptation.

Ultimately, Gond art demonstrates that indigenous traditions are not static relics of the past but dynamic, evolving forms of expression. Through painting and mural practices, Gond communities transform the pressures of modernity into opportunities for renewal. In doing so, they reaffirm their identity, protect their ecological wisdom, and ensure that the echoes of their forest-centered worldview continue to resonate in contemporary cultural landscapes.

Findings:

- Gond oral traditions sustain cultural identity through myths, songs, and rituals, linking community life to ecology.
- Modern pressures (displacement, education systems, media homogenization) threaten their continuity.
- Oral traditions also serve as resistance narratives against state and corporate exploitation.

Suggestions:

- Inclusion of Gond language and folklore in local education.
- Documentation and digital archiving of oral traditions.
- Policy frameworks ensuring cultural rights alongside land rights.
- Promotion of Gond art and performance in cultural festivals.

Conclusion:

The oral traditions of the Gond tribe are vital cultural practices that sustain identity, ecological wisdom, and collective memory. They are not passive relics but dynamic, adaptive, and politically significant. In the context of globalization and displacement, their preservation is not only a matter of cultural heritage but also of social justice. Revitalizing Gond oral traditions requires collaborative efforts from academia, policymakers, and the community itself. Ultimately, the echoes of the forest within Gond oral culture remind us that indigenous voices are central to reimagining a sustainable and just future.

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