

The Paradox of GI Tagging: Exploring Warli Art's Commercialization, Its Implications for Tribal Upliftment and the Role of Indian Knowledge System

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1. Introduction

The Government of India brought in the Geographical Indication Tag into force in 2003 to protect the distinctive products of India within the nation. This was in view of the various unique methods of creating a product or an artform which has been passed down over decades within the family or a community. It primarily includes crops, textile, artforms, toys etc. The Darjeeling Tea from West Bengal and Alphonso Mangoes from Maharashtra to name a few have benefitted out of it immensely. But there is a flipside to it as well, noting the number of these GI tagged products losing its authenticity and uniqueness.

Warli art is the quintessential element of the tribal knowledge system, geographically located on the northern outskirts of the Sahyadri Range in Maharashtra, India, specifically around the districts of Thane and Palghar. It comprises geometric figures used to form various shapes. These paintings depict different scenarios, events, or human activities such as celebrations, animal husbandry, pottery, hunting, etc., which are symbolic of the tribe's oneness and uniqueness. Tarpa, a peculiar instrument popular in this culture, is also depicted in the paintings. It is generally drawn on walls and windows of the houses celebrating any festival or a marriage (*Lagna Chawk and Dev Chawk*). The background is of red-ochre shade generally made of bark and brick powder on which the figures are drawn in white which is made of rice powder and gum. Bamboo sticks are chewed at one end and used as a brush for this. These paintings majorly show men and women intertwined and dancing symbolic to uniqueness and unity.

The local Adivasi Yuva Seva Sangh with the help of NGO Ayush, through its constant appeal and efforts, have managed to get the Geographical Indication (GI) Tag under the Intellectual Property Rights for Warli Painting. However, it is questionable whether these artisans actually receive those benefits, in contrast, commercialization and GI Tag often benefits the middlemen more. The Indian knowledge system has deep embedded concepts which revolve around the Art, Artist and Collective Welfare. An Model based on Indian Knowledge System focusing on education, training and dissemination of information and legal protection to the extinction art form and its preservers.

The protection of such indigenous art forms not only depends on the legal protection but also through elevating it through commissioned work which can be used at various platforms for a better reach, fair monetary compensation of a level of that of an artist and not as labourer, encouraging representation through various cultural festivals (e.g. The Chickoo Festival) at national and international level. These are not just mere artforms but embodiments of history, culture and nature. By the art and the artist, we safeguard a part of our culture.

B) Objectives of the Study

- ❖ To examine the role of GI tagging in the commercialization of Warli art
- ❖ To investigate the implications of Warli art's commercialization on the socio-economic status of the Warli tribe
- ❖ To analyze the preservation of traditional knowledge and cultural authenticity in Warli art post-GI tagging
- ❖ To explore the intersection of Warli art and Indian Knowledge Systems

- ❖ To propose a sustainable marketing model for Warli art that balances commercialization with cultural authenticity

2. Literature Review

According to Rangnekar (2004) and Das (2010), many tribal and indigenous art forms have been protected under the Geographical Indications and Goods Act, 1999. The sole purpose is not just to commercialize the art form and mint money out of it but also to safeguard the vanishing tribal knowledge system and carry it generations ahead.

As per the reports of Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation (TRIFED) and studies by Shukla (2014), the GI Tag has been instrumental in increasing the revenue as well popularity across the borders however this artist empowerment claims are not very prominent in many of the studies suggesting the commercialization may not have benefited the ground level.

As per studies by Babu and Bhat (2007) and Menon (2018) the tribal communities lack legal literacy and have access to minimum institutional support. It is majorly the external agencies churning profits out of it for example GI Tags for Bastar Iron Craft (Chhattisgarh) and Pochampally Ikat (Telangana) has seen commercial success but none to the artisans.

Jena and Grote (2010) mentioned in their research that organized middlemen and commercial businesses extract more out of this IP benefit than the actual one who is supposed to be. Rao and Dev (2013) stated that the middlemen and business must help fair linkages and help and educate the ground level artists and artisans to reduce the disparities.

Cultural commodification, as per MacCannell (1976) and Greenwood (1989), causes loss of the true essence of the art form or the practice making it an industrialized product with no human touch. This makes it just another printable or clonable piece of product.

Indian Knowledge System refers to indigenous body of knowledge developed by a community and transmitted orally or through ancient scripture or inscriptions. These range art forms, medicines, agricultural practices, lifestyle, eating habits etc. According to Radhakrishnan (2012) and Sharma(2017), these systems have existed for ages and its utility and efficacy can still be seen across different practices.

Gupta (2003) argued that artforms like Warli cannot be registered under the conventional Intellectual Property Rights. Such artforms are not individualistic but belong to the community which is spread across Maharashtra and some parts of Gujarat. A fixed origin story, legalization and documentation contradicts the very nature of oral transmission of this knowledge.

3. Research Questions:

After going through the existing literature at national and international level, researchers have identified the following questions. This study attempts to investigate these research questions and then offers a set of suggestions with the marketing model.

- 1) Whether or not, the Warli artisans are aware about the technical aspects of GI and its implications for the Art of Warli paintings?
- 2) Whether or not, there is a social and cultural impact of GI and its implications on commercialization of Warli paintings?

4. Methodology

A) Sampling method:

- Universe: Artist involved in Warli paintings
- Population: Artists involved in Warli paintings from Thane and Palghar district
- Sampling Frame: Not available
- Sampling Method: Nonprobability sampling
- Sampling Technique: Snowball sampling

B) Data Collection

● **Primary data:**

As many of the artists involved in Warli paintings are from remote areas and have limited exposure to formal education, researchers adopted a survey method. The open-ended questions were asked to the respondents with the help of a local translator.

● The survey questions primarily focused on

→ Technical knowledge about GI registrations

→ Dilution of culture

→ Challenges currently faced by artisans Other aspects of Warli art

● **Sample Size for Primary Data:**

Researchers visited 120 respondents including the artists, middlemen and the NGOs to understand their perceptions and views on the above mentioned areas for finding out answers to research questions.

● **Secondary data:**

The researchers used published articles from newspapers, research articles for understanding the landscape of Warli art. Also, various government reports were also helpful during the study. Other published resources, such as research papers and books at national and international level were used.

5. Findings & Analysis

A) Disconnection Between GI Registration and Tribal Involvement:

The tribe is well aware of the IP protection under which their artform is covered. To a large extent their belief is that they are involved in the process. The fact they are not aware of is the GI Tag brings authority and ownership of the artform restricting the further changes to it. The Warli paintings, unlike other indigenous art forms, is constantly undergoing changes like addition of new elements and events in the painting courtesy artists like Padma Shri Jivya Soma Mashe, Dilip Rama Bahotha and others.

B) Cultural Dilution in the Global Market:

Commodification culture reduces the rare artforms into a mere saleable product with no appreciation and unique proposition. A lot of instances demonstrate the undue advantage extracted out of tribal and rural labour. Warli prints can be easily spotted on wearable textiles, embroidery, curtains, wall artifacts at upscale properties, handbags etc. There is absolutely no point of differentiation that makes the original work stand out. Commercialization has given it an exposure at a very nascent stage which resulted in easy adaptation by a layperson. The incubation period for the art form to grow and create its foothold in the market was not sufficient. There are instances where the Kolhapuri Chappals and similar products when cloned resulted in widespread outrage because it already had its run in the national markets for a long time before anyone could replicate it.

C) Limited Local Infrastructure and Support:

'Authorized User'- is an alien term for most of the Warli painters. Under the Geographical Indication and Goods Act, 1999, any artisan to use GI Tag, they must be identified as an authorized user by a supporting body or an NGO. There is not much infrastructure available to educate the Warli painters about this protocol. This nullifies the whole purpose of the IP rights. It protects the heritage from the actual keepers of the heritage.

D) Disparity in benefit distribution:

The study helped to unravel the disparities between the different interest parties caused due to the GI Tagging. The focus area other than the artisans were the companies, institutions/NGOs and middlemen. The responses were codified and identified into three main sentiments - Exploited, Empowered or Mixed Response. The artists mostly felt empowered but there is also a sense of dependency. This clearly signifies that there is exposure and appreciation to the art but not

noteworthy monetary benefit. The institutions mostly viewed it as empowering but it is unclear in the holistic view as it may appear as a twin-edged sword i.e. providing market access and taking away the profits. The companies do not show any strong perception of empowerment or exploitation alone which may be due lack of sensitivity towards the tribe as it is just another component of business. They may consult mixed artists or just take up an individual motif. When business approaches the Warli artform just as a piece of asset and not a socio-cultural symbol, it results in a mixed bag reaction leading to a feeling of apathy. The asymmetries of power-benefit relationship reinforces that although artists and middlemen play key roles in the commercialization of Warli art, public perception often leans toward ambiguity or exploitation, largely due to the dominant role of intermediaries and the absence of consistent institutional backing.

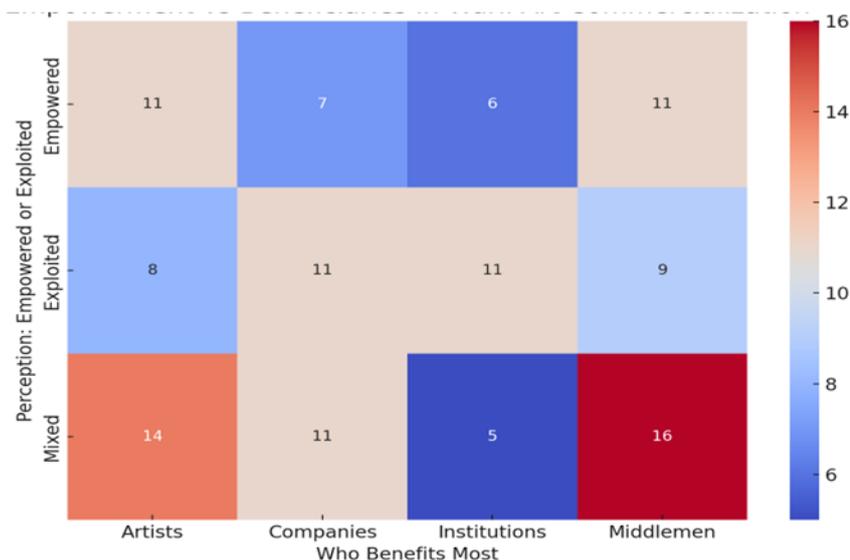


Figure : Empowerment vs Beneficiaries in Warli Art Commercialization

Voices from the Field (Translated into English):

“They tell us Warli painting has become famous, but we still live the same life. We sell it for ₹500, but the shops sell it for thousands.”

- Sita Gavit, Warli artist from Dahanu

“I learned this from my mother and grandmother. But now, people want us to paint what they want-not what we feel.”

- Manoj Vasave, Artist from Jawhar

“We didn’t know we needed to be ‘authorized users’. We thought it belonged to all of us. This is our culture.”

- Sunanda Bhoje, Senior Warli artist

6. Integration of India Knowledge System:

Warli Art form is not just a commodity but a carrier of Ancient Indian Knowledge System. The Epistemology of Warli art, which comprises spiral figures dancing echoing the India ideology found in Maha Upanishads, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, Which means The Whole World is One Family. This is one of its kind of Oral-Visual Knowledge system, which can be carried forward only by the ingenious tribe. The IPR may definitely intend to protect the tribal carriers of this knowledge but may unknowingly sabotage its growth and reduce it to merely a commercial product.

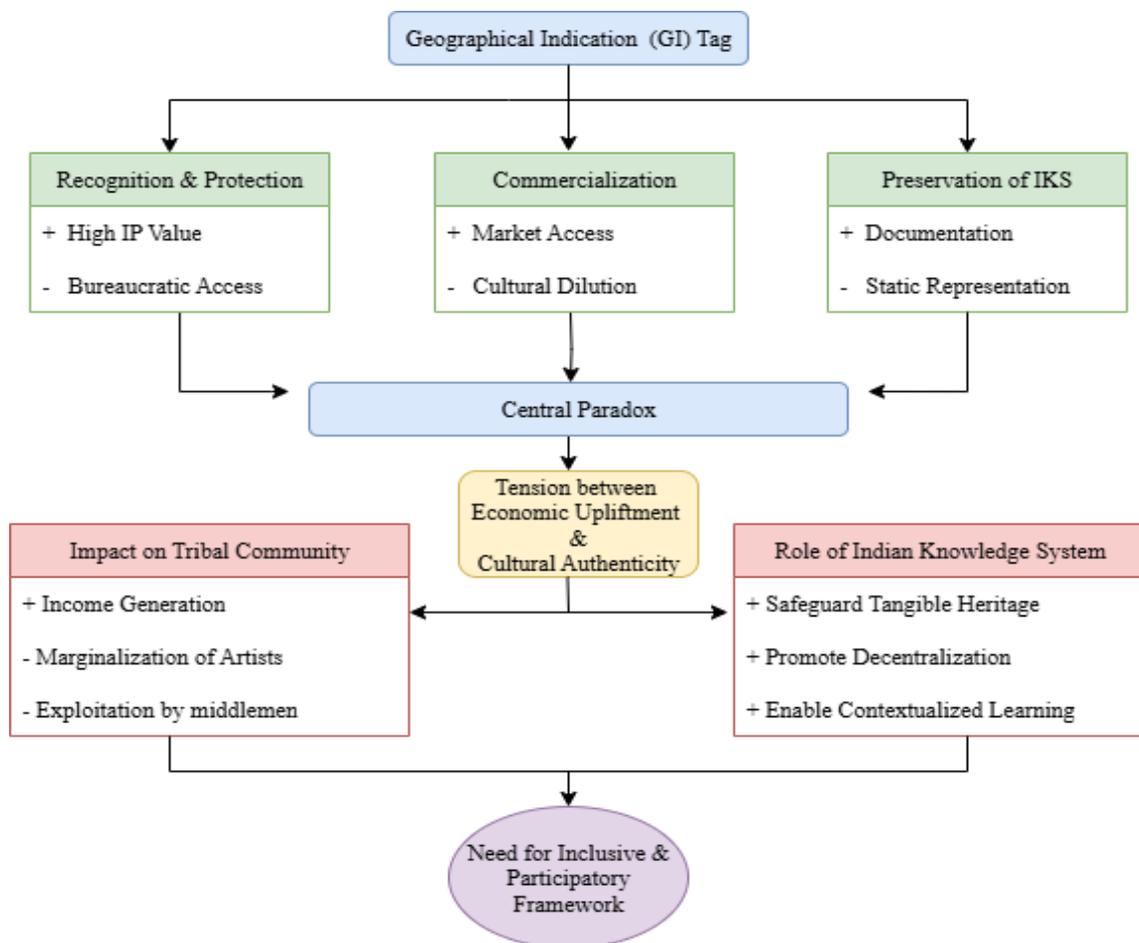


This Art form can further be classified under the Tribal Knowledge System, as they analyze the motifs to be used for birds ,animals, human figures and other elements of nature, making it unique. The art form often gives a message of Collective- Custodianship, which can be applied to GI Tag preventing corporate monopolization. This focuses on the Rigved principle of *Sahabhagita*. This indigenous art form is transmitted down the generations through lived cultures. It is self learnt by the members of the community, especially women, who observe the older generations and paint the walls on special festive occasions. There is no formal school imparting training in this art form, it has undergone many changes, mainly additions of modern motifs by the younger artists. The Warli art is not a solitary production but a collective participation. This echoes the element of *Dharana*, which means sustainability which appears prominently in Upanishads.

The perspective of Geographical Indication emphasises codifying it , thereby making it difficult to sustain. The IPR must protect the art form from dying by creating awareness, empowering the artisans. The principle of *Loksangraha*, as mentioned in the Bhagwat Geeta and *Sarvabhutathita* in Upanishads, social welfare, upliftment of the community come before corporate gains.

7. Discussion

Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) , Commercialization and Indian Knowledge System (IKS) preservation forms the important by-product of GI Tag, yet it comes with its own pros and cons. IPR protects the art form along with it, it brings bureaucracy and red-tapism in the form of ‘Authentic User’ rights. Commercialization reduces it to an ordinary commodity and documentation helps in preserving the knowledge but making it static. These three forces create friction hindering the tribal community upliftment and preservation of the art form which form the central paradox.



GI Tagging and the Cultural-Economic Paradox in Warli Art Model

Instead of a Top-Down approach, there should be a Bottom-Up Participatory model which puts the Warli community in the centre, cutting off the exploitative middlemen.

8. Conclusion

The GI Tag for Warli Art form is a double edged sword- protecting its authenticity and on the other hand pushing it towards commercialization. Tracing its origin back to Tribal Knowledge Systems and the ancient teachings of our ancestors which forms a systematic body of knowledge, the foremost responsibility is to uplift the tribal community, get more tribal youth to acknowledge, accept and hold pride in their indigenous art form and protect any kind of dilution and commodification of the art form.

Orissa Pattachitra, Channapatna Toys, Thanjavur Paintings and many more GI Tagged artforms have fallen prey to use of Printing machinery and over commercialization, inadequate branding, less-to-no support from the state, lack of authenticity enforcement and distinguish between genuine work. Striking a delicate equilibrium between genuinity and earning profits needs to be negotiated.

9. Recommendations

The ancient concepts of IKS must be used as guiding principles like- *Sarvodaya*, *Antyodaya*, *Sahanubhuti*, revering *Shilpashastra*, help balance *Artha-Dharma*, mastering the art of *Yajna*, revive the *Shreni* system for better governance. Set up a *Warli Jnanapeeth- Warli Knowledge Dissemination Centre*, which should be an exclusive tribal youth centre to prevent the authenticity of the tradition. It must promote sustainability, continuity and add to the value over the period of time and create an invaluable repository for the art form motifs and becomes a centre point for all the information. It should serve as a body for disseminating the tribal knowledge and create awareness among them about the Geographical Indication Tag, its purpose and using it to amplify the benefits yet prioritize collective welfare.

Encourage more artists to approach Marketing and Service Extension Centres, participate in various exhibitions across the nation with state support, develop a Warli Specific policy apart from a fragmented support under the Tribal Development Scheme. Creation of Fast-Track Grievance Redressal Cell to resolve the issue of inauthentic production must be of paramount importance. At the same time the local artisans must be educated about the 'Authentic User' Policy.

This can also be added with sustainable practices like use of natural paints, use of natural degradable fibre or jute as canvas. In view of the environmental awakening in the west, an art form which represents nature and is green in its practices will be accepted and promoted. This ensures that the Warli artists get the due recognition, monetary and non-monetary.

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