

Kathotiya Tribal Village: Identity, Indigenous Knowledge System, Rock Shelter Paintings and the Impact of Modernization in Sehore District, Madhya Pradesh

Dr. Rakesh Kumar¹, Mohammad Danish Majid²

¹Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences
RKDF University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

²Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management
RKDF University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

Abstract

The Kathotiya Tribal Rock Shelter Paintings, situated in the Sehore district of Madhya Pradesh, represent a significant repository of indigenous cultural heritage, traditional knowledge systems, and evolving tribal identities. This paper examines the historical and cultural significance of these rock art traditions, focusing on the demographic and socio-cultural profile of the surrounding tribal settlements within the Anwali Kheda region, including villages such as Anwali Kheda, Rabiyaabad, Lasudlya Bazyaft, Kota-Karar, Ammay, Bawlikheda, Beel Khed Khurd, and Khari.

Predominantly inhabited by Scheduled Tribe communities, these villages function as custodians of cultural practices reflected in the rock shelter paintings. The artworks portray spiritual beliefs, social organization, subsistence patterns, and ecological knowledge rooted in tribal life. Demographic analysis based on the Census of India (2011) reveals notable variation, with village populations ranging from 38 to 1,705 and sex ratios ranging between 893 and 1,029 females per 1,000 males, highlighting diverse social structures.

The study also explores educational conditions within these communities. Literacy rates vary widely, from as low as 7.35% in Bawlikheda to 60.77% in Khari, indicating persistent educational challenges alongside emerging signs of progress. High levels of illiteracy continue to impact social and economic development.

Beyond their artistic value, the Kathotiya rock paintings serve as enduring records of indigenous knowledge, depicting hunting, agriculture, rituals, and mythological narratives. Despite the pressures of modernization and urbanization, these paintings remain symbols of cultural resilience. The study emphasizes the need for integrated approaches to heritage preservation, education, and sustainable development to protect both the cultural legacy and livelihoods of these tribal communities.

Keywords: Tribal Communities, Rock Art, Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Identity, Modernization, Education, Sustainability, Madhya Pradesh.

1. Introduction

The Kathotiya village, located near Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, reflects a close relationship between natural and human values within a culturally and ecologically significant landscape. Situated in the Vindhyan scarplands at the northern fringe of the Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary, the region is rich in biodiversity, including a resident tiger population and several mammal species such as barking deer (Forest Department of Madhya Pradesh, 2018; Rodgers & Panwar, 1988). The landscape represents a transition between Sal and Teak forests and supports traditional rain-fed agriculture, including millet, maize, and rice cultivation.

Kathotiya Range forms part of the Ratapani Sanctuary, a protected area established in 1978 and spread across approximately 700 sq. km in the Sehore and Raisen districts. The sanctuary comprises forest types ranging from open to dense canopy cover within the Narmada Valley Ecoregion, contributing to ecological functions such as carbon sequestration and water regulation (Forest Department of Madhya Pradesh, 2018).

The cultural significance of Kathotiya is equally profound, with rock shelters containing prehistoric cave paintings dating back over 16,000 years. These paintings provide valuable archaeological and anthropological insights into early human life, belief systems, and environmental interaction (Mathpal, 1984; Chakravarty & Bednarik, 1997). Traditionally, local tribal communities practiced hunting and gathering but have gradually shifted toward agriculture, with forest produce continuing to supplement their livelihoods (Elwin, 1943; Xaxa, 2019).

Despite its importance, the site faces increasing pressure from tourism and lacks adequate protection measures. Balancing heritage conservation with sustainable tourism management is therefore essential to preserve both the natural and cultural heritage of Kathotiya for future generations (UNESCO, 2012; Agrawal, 2005).

2. Paintings of Rock Shelters

Kathotiya is a significant prehistoric rock art site comprising multiple rock shelters, some containing more than forty visible paintings. The paintings are executed mainly in red, white, and green pigments, with green appearing prominently across several panels. Due to prolonged weathering, many images have faded and are often discernible only through digital enhancement techniques such as D-Stretch (Harman, 2008; Bednarik, 2013).

One of the most prominent shelters at Kathotiya features large rock overhangs and two distinct levels, with the upper level displaying some of the earliest paintings. This level includes elongated human figures depicted in green, often shown as dancers positioned in S-shaped postures and facing each other, possibly engaged in ritualistic performances involving singing or chanting (Mathpal, 1984). Other motifs include a large ostrich-like bird and several anthropomorphic figures. The green paintings are frequently overlain by red and white figures representing hunters, wild animals such as bison and

wild boar, and geometric designs, indicating successive phases of artistic activity (Chakravarty & Bednarik, 1997).

The paintings vividly portray aspects of prehistoric life, including hunting, gathering, and ceremonial practices. Human figures are often larger than animals, emphasizing their cultural significance. The presence of superimposition—such as a pregnant female bison painted over green dancers—suggests narrative continuity and symbolic interaction between humans and animals (Bednarik, 2010). Hunters are commonly depicted carrying weapons like spears and bows, reflecting subsistence strategies and social organization.

The recurrent use of green pigment may hold symbolic meaning related to fertility, regeneration, or spiritual beliefs, although its precise significance remains speculative without further ethnographic correlation. Overall, the Kathotiya rock paintings provide valuable insights into the artistic traditions, belief systems, and evolving cultural expressions of prehistoric communities in central India (Agrawal, 2005).

3. Literature Review and Research Gap

Tribal communities in India have been extensively studied within anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, with particular attention to indigenous art forms such as rock paintings. Scholars argue that tribal art functions as a visual expression of social organization, religious belief systems, and ecological knowledge. Chatterjee (1958) emphasizes that tribal art is deeply embedded in tribal cosmology and reflects a close relationship between humans and nature. Similarly, Pritam (1985) highlights the role of tribal art in preserving cultural memory and transmitting historical narratives across generations.

Rock art studies have further contributed to understanding prehistoric cultural expressions. Research on Kathotiya by Popil (1917) underscores the site's archaeological and anthropological importance, noting that the rock shelters contain paintings dating back over 16,000 years, offering insights into early human cognition and cultural continuity. Studies focusing on symbolism in Indian rock art, such as Pathak's analysis of green imagery, suggest that the use of green pigment may be associated with fertility, regeneration, or spiritual beliefs (Pathak, n.d.). Ethnographic observations by Chaudhary further note that Bhil communities in the region regard rocks as sacred groves and conduct rituals and festivals around them, reinforcing the spiritual significance of rock shelters.

In parallel, demographic studies of tribal populations in Madhya Pradesh have examined socio-economic conditions, education, health, and land rights. Sharma's (2001) work on tribal communities in Sehore district provides valuable insights into literacy disparities and development challenges faced by Scheduled Tribes.

Despite these contributions, a significant research gap remains. Existing studies largely examine either demographic conditions or cultural heritage in isolation. There is limited integrated research that connects demographic changes with cultural identity as reflected in rock art traditions. Specifically, the relationship between demographic shifts, tribal identity, and the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage in Madhya Pradesh remains underexplored. This study seeks to bridge this gap by integrating

demographic analysis with cultural interpretation to better understand the resilience of tribal communities amid socio-economic transformation.

4. Research Objectives

1. To examine the demographic characteristics—including population size, literacy levels, and sex ratio—of the eight tribal villages surrounding the Kathotiya Rock Shelters.
2. To analyze the relationship between demographic trends and the continuity of tribal heritage, with specific reference to rock paintings as repositories of indigenous knowledge.
3. To assess the influence of socio-economic factors such as education, health, and economic conditions on the preservation of tribal culture and identity.
4. To identify the challenges and opportunities associated with sustaining tribal traditions amid modern socio-economic transformations.
5. To evaluate the role of the Kathotiya rock shelters as sites of cultural memory and resilience in the context of demographic change.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques to examine the demographic and cultural dimensions of tribal communities surrounding the Kathotiya Rock Shelters.

a. Demographic Analysis

The quantitative component is based on secondary data drawn from the **2011 Census of India** for the eight villages in the Kathotiya region. Variables such as population size, sex ratio, literacy levels, and age distribution were analyzed to identify demographic patterns and socio-economic disparities, particularly in education, gender balance, and access to basic resources.

b. Fieldwork and Qualitative Inquiry

The qualitative component involves fieldwork and semi-structured interviews conducted with tribal elders, community leaders, and younger members of the villages. These interactions aim to understand local perceptions of cultural heritage, identity, and the significance of rock paintings in preserving indigenous knowledge.

In addition, ethnographic observations were undertaken at selected rock shelter sites to examine their contemporary use in rituals, community gatherings, and cultural transmission. This combined approach enables a holistic understanding of how demographic changes interact with cultural continuity and heritage preservation.

6. Demography of Kathotiya Tribal Villages (Census 2011)

The Kathotiya cluster of villages—Anwali Kheda, Rabiyaabad, Lasudlya Bazyaft, Kota-Karar, Ammay (Gram Panchayat: Anwali Kheda), Khari (Gram Panchayat: Khari), Beel Khed Khurd (Gram Panchayat: Lilakhedi, Sehore District), and Bawlikheda (Tehsil: Huzur, District: Bhopal)—represents a predominantly tribal region with distinct socio-economic characteristics. The demographic data presented below is based on the **Census of India, 2011** and highlights key population trends across these villages.

Overall Demographic Profile

Particulars	Total (All villages)
Area(In Hectare)	2731
Households	1,119
Population	4,316
Scheduled Tribes	3,447 (80%)
Scheduled Castes	568 (13%)
Literacy Rate	38%
Sex Ratio (avg.)	928/1000

Table 1. Villages included: Anwali Kheda, Rabiyaabad, Lasudlya Bazyaft, Kota-Karar, Ammay, Bawlikheda, Beel Khed Khurd, and Khari

6.1. Population and Households

The total population of the eight villages is **4,316**, residing in **1,119 households** over a combined area of **2,731 hectares**. Settlement sizes vary considerably, ranging from very small hamlets such as **Kota-Karar (population: 38)** to larger villages like **Khari (population: 1,705)**, reflecting uneven settlement patterns.

6.2. Sex Ratio

The average sex ratio across the villages is **928 females per 1,000 males**, slightly lower than the rural average of Madhya Pradesh (931/1000). **Bawlikheda (1,029)** records the highest sex ratio, followed by **Lasudlya Bazyaft and Kota-Karar (1,000 each)**. In contrast, **Ammay (873)** and **Anwali Kheda (893)** show comparatively lower ratios.

6.3. Tribal and Caste Composition

Scheduled Tribes constitute the dominant population group, accounting for approximately **80%**, primarily belonging to **Gond and Bhil communities**. Scheduled Castes form about **13%** of the population and are mainly concentrated in **Anwali Kheda and Rabiyaabad**.

6.4. Literacy

The overall literacy rate of the region stands at **38%**, significantly lower than the rural literacy average of the state (65%). Villages such as **Lasudlya Bazyaft (57.1%)** and **Kota-Karar (57.9%)** perform relatively better, while **Bawlikheda (7.3%)** exhibits severe educational deprivation. A notable gender gap exists, with **male literacy averaging 48%** compared to **female literacy at 30%**.

6.5. Child Population (0–6 Years)

Children aged 0–6 years constitute approximately **20–22%** of the population, indicating a young demographic profile and emphasizing the need for strengthened early childhood education and healthcare services.

6.6. Key Observations

The villages exhibit a scattered settlement pattern, with extensive forest cover—particularly in villages such as Ammay (577.7 hectares)—suggesting continued dependence on forest resources and subsistence

agriculture. Persistent gender disparities in education, low literacy levels, and a high proportion of Scheduled Tribe population underline the urgency for targeted interventions in education, health, sanitation, and livelihood development, especially in villages like Bawlikheda and Beel Khed Khurd.

7. Major Outcomes and Findings

a. Demographic Trends

The study reveals significant disparities in literacy and health outcomes across the villages. **Khari** records the highest literacy rate (60.77%), while **Bawlikheda** remains largely illiterate, with approximately **92.65%** of the population lacking basic literacy. Variations are also observed in sex ratios, indicating gender imbalance in certain villages; for instance, **Anwali Kheda** exhibits a sex ratio of **893 females per 1,000 males**. These demographic factors directly influence the preservation of traditional practices, as villages with higher literacy levels show greater participation in educational initiatives and cultural preservation programs.

b. Cultural Heritage and Identity

The Kathotiya Rock Shelters play a pivotal role in fostering **cultural resilience** among the tribal communities. Despite increasing socio-economic and modern influences, the communities continue to engage with rock art as a medium of cultural memory and identity formation. The paintings are perceived not merely as artistic expressions but as enduring symbols of continuity that link ancestral traditions with present-day tribal life.

c. Challenges and Opportunities

The findings identify educational deprivation and economic constraints as major challenges to the preservation of tribal heritage. However, significant opportunities exist through the promotion of **community-based heritage conservation initiatives**, particularly those involving youth participation. Educational outreach and localized engagement with the rock shelters can serve as effective strategies for sustaining cultural knowledge and strengthening intergenerational transmission of tribal traditions.

8. Impact of Modernization and Urbanization

The impact of modernization and urbanization on tribal and underprivileged communities in Bhopal has been profound, producing both positive and negative outcomes. On the positive side, urbanization has improved access to infrastructure, education, and healthcare facilities, which are often limited in remote rural and tribal regions. However, the rapid pace of urban expansion has also resulted in the displacement of many tribal communities, particularly those residing in peripheral areas such as Kathotiya, leading to the gradual erosion of their traditional livelihoods.

As urban areas expand, forest lands are cleared, agricultural spaces are reduced, and access to natural resources—on which these communities depend for sustenance—is increasingly restricted. This loss of land and resources has significantly affected traditional economic activities and food security.

Modernization has further contributed to cultural transformations, especially among younger generations, who are increasingly abandoning traditional practices such as subsistence farming, handicrafts, and indigenous healing systems in favor of urban employment and modern education. While this shift may offer economic mobility, it often leads to a weakening of cultural identity, as migration to

urban centers creates a disconnect from ancestral lands and traditions. The decline of traditional knowledge systems, particularly in agriculture and indigenous medicine, has left these communities more vulnerable to health challenges and environmental changes.

Moreover, although urbanization presents new economic opportunities, tribal and underprivileged populations frequently encounter exploitative working conditions, low-wage labor, and social marginalization, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty. The absence of adequate institutional support mechanisms in urban settings further intensifies their social exclusion. Consequently, while modernization has introduced certain developmental benefits, it has simultaneously posed serious threats to the cultural, economic, and social fabric of tribal and underprivileged communities in Bhopal.

9. Suggestions for Policy Implementation for Government Bodies

A. Education and Skill Development

Key Issues:

1. Low literacy rates and high levels of illiteracy among tribal populations.
2. Inadequate quality educational infrastructure, particularly in remote villages such as Bawlikheda and Rabiabad.
3. Gender disparities in literacy, with female literacy rates significantly lower than those of males.

Policy Recommendations:

i. Revamping Educational Infrastructure:

1. Construct and upgrade schools in remote tribal areas, focusing on child-friendly learning environments. Schools should be equipped with basic facilities such as toilets, clean drinking water, electricity, and accessible transportation.
2. Establish mobile schools and community learning centers in villages where access to formal schooling is limited. These initiatives may be implemented through partnerships with NGOs and local tribal leadership.

ii. Incentivizing Tribal Education:

1. Introduce scholarships, stipends, and educational grants for tribal children—especially girls—to reduce financial constraints faced by families.
2. Integrate vocational and skill-based training within the education system to provide alternative livelihood pathways in areas such as handicrafts, agriculture, and eco-tourism. These programs should be gender-sensitive and aimed at empowering women.

iii. Improving Literacy Campaigns:

1. Launch adult literacy programs with a special focus on women and the elderly. Involving local tribal leaders can help increase participation and retention.
2. Promote digital literacy by establishing digital learning hubs at the village level or through cluster-based models.

iv. Teacher Training and Sensitization:

1. Provide training to teachers to enhance sensitivity toward tribal cultures and practices, enabling them to link curricula with local traditions, languages, and community values.

2. Introduce multilingual and local-language-based instruction to prevent alienation of tribal students unfamiliar with the mainstream language of education.

B. Healthcare and Nutrition

Key Issues:

1. Limited awareness of basic health practices due to high illiteracy levels.
2. Poor healthcare infrastructure in remote tribal regions.
3. High prevalence of malnutrition, particularly among children and women.
4. Inadequate access to maternal and child healthcare services.

Policy Recommendations:

i. Building Healthcare Infrastructure:

1. Prioritize the establishment of well-equipped primary healthcare centers in every tribal village, staffed with trained medical professionals familiar with local health needs.
2. Introduce mobile health units to provide regular outreach services, including immunization, maternal care, basic treatment, and health education.

ii. Awareness Campaigns:

1. Implement community-based health education programs focusing on sanitation, nutrition, family planning, and disease prevention.
2. Ensure that these programs are culturally sensitive and delivered in local languages by trusted community health workers or tribal leaders.

iii. Improving Nutrition:

1. Strengthen nutritional support programs for pregnant women, nursing mothers, and children below five years, including the distribution of iron-folic acid supplements, micronutrients, and fortified foods.
2. Collaborate with local farmers to promote sustainable agriculture practices that enhance nutritional security and self-sufficiency.

iv. Strengthening Maternal and Child Health:

1. Increase the number of trained healthcare workers specializing in maternal, childbirth, and postnatal care to address high maternal mortality rates.
2. Ensure effective village-level implementation of birth registration and immunization drives.

C. Economic Empowerment

Key Issues:

1. Limited access to credit facilities, markets, and employment opportunities.
2. Overdependence on traditional agriculture, which is often low-yielding and unsustainable.
3. Gender inequality in economic participation, particularly affecting women.

Policy Recommendations:

i. Promoting Livelihood Diversification:

1. Introduce skill development programs supporting alternative livelihoods such as handicrafts, eco-tourism, and sustainable farming. Formation of cooperatives and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) should be encouraged to facilitate collective production and marketing.
2. Support tribal entrepreneurship through access to microfinance and tailored government schemes, enabling participation in agro-processing and market-oriented activities.

ii. Enhancing Agricultural Productivity:

1. Provide agricultural subsidies, technical assistance, and training in climate-resilient and sustainable farming practices, including organic agriculture and water conservation methods.
2. Promote agro-ecological systems that integrate traditional knowledge with modern agricultural techniques to ensure long-term sustainability.

iii. Gender-Inclusive Policies:

1. Empower tribal women through micro-enterprise development, financial literacy programs, and skill training in areas such as handicrafts, small-scale farming, and eco-tourism.
2. Ensure equitable access for tribal women to government welfare schemes related to health, education, livelihoods, and land rights.

D. Cultural Preservation and Heritage

Key Issues:

1. Gradual erosion of indigenous knowledge systems due to modernization.
2. Threats to cultural identity, including the loss of traditional languages, rituals, and artistic expressions such as rock paintings.
3. Environmental degradation and land alienation affecting access to natural resources.

Policy Recommendations:

i. Cultural Heritage Protection:

1. Establish legal protection for tribal cultural and heritage sites, including rock shelters such as the Kathotiya Rock Paintings. Develop tribal cultural centers to preserve and promote tribal art, language, and traditions.
2. Ensure community participation in heritage management by integrating indigenous knowledge and skills into preservation initiatives.

ii. Strengthening Tribal Identity:

1. Promote tribal languages, customs, and rituals through school curricula and community-based programs, including the use of tribal languages as mediums of instruction.
2. Encourage responsible tribal tourism as a sustainable development strategy that generates employment while fostering respect for tribal culture and traditions.

10. Future Scope of the Study

The research on the Kathotiya tribal villages in Sehore District, Madhya Pradesh, offers significant scope for further exploration of the community's cultural identity and its interaction with modernization. Future studies may focus on a deeper understanding of the cultural identity of the Kathotiya tribes, particularly the Bhil and Bhilala communities, and examine how they sustain traditional practices, values, and social structures amidst increasing modern influences.

An important area for extended research lies in documenting indigenous knowledge systems, including traditional agricultural practices, forest management techniques, and ecological wisdom that have been transmitted across generations. Further investigation into traditional healing practices—especially the use of herbal medicine, spiritual rituals, and community-based healthcare—can contribute valuable insights into indigenous health systems and their relevance in contemporary contexts.

Another promising direction is the detailed archaeological and ethnographic study of the Kathotiya rock shelter paintings, which are believed to date back over 16,000 years. Future research may explore their symbolic meanings, stylistic evolution, and connections with tribal spirituality, belief systems, and daily life.

Additionally, the impact of modernization warrants longitudinal analysis, particularly in relation to education, employment, healthcare access, migration, and exposure to external socio-cultural influences. Such studies can help assess how these factors reshape traditional livelihoods and social relations over time.

Finally, future research should focus on identifying challenges posed by modernization and propose sustainable strategies for preserving cultural heritage, traditional knowledge systems, and the natural environment. This comprehensive approach can contribute meaningfully to policy formulation and support the sustainable development of the Kathotiya tribal communities while safeguarding their unique cultural identity.

11. Conclusion

This research highlights the significant relationship between demographic trends and the continuity of cultural heritage among the tribal communities of the Kathotiya region. Despite persistent socio-economic challenges, the rock paintings continue to function as powerful symbols of tribal identity and cultural continuity. The study underscores the urgent need to address educational, health, and economic disparities within these communities in order to safeguard their rich cultural heritage for future generations.

The Kathotiya tribal rock art represents not merely an aesthetic expression of indigenous creativity but a profound repository of cultural memory, resilience, and collective knowledge. These rock paintings embody the belief systems, social practices, and ecological awareness of the region's tribal communities. Both Indian and international scholars have emphasized the critical role of rock art in preserving indigenous knowledge, cosmology, and human–nature relationships. The reviewed literature highlights the cognitive, symbolic, and spiritual dimensions of rock art and demonstrates its importance in sustaining cultural traditions over time. When examined alongside demographic and socio-economic

transformations, the Kathotiya rock shelters offer a valuable framework for understanding cultural resilience in the face of modernization. Overall, this study contributes to broader discussions on heritage conservation, tribal identity, and sustainable development, and emphasizes the need for integrated approaches that balance socio-economic progress with the preservation of indigenous cultural landscapes.

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