Traditional handicrafts of the *Gond* tribes of Vidarbha, Maharashtra

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Received 17 September 2007; revised 29 October 2007

The Vidarbha region of Maharashtra State consists of 11 districts having a large, proportion of tribal population. Gadchiroli (38.75%), Chandrapur (19.70%) and Yavatmal (21.47%) districts have a larger percentage of tribal population as compared to other districts. In these districts, *Gonds*, *Pardhans* and *Kolam* are major tribes followed by *Korkus* and others. *Gonds*, who are numerically predominant, are a part of *Gond* tribe accounting for one of the major tribal groups in India followed by *Mundas*. Traditional knowledge of handicrafts among *Gonds* in general and among *Gonds* of Chandrapur and Gadchiroli districts in particular, attracts attention. An attempt has been made to present the traditional knowledge and skills, specially related to woodcraft and bamboo craft of *Gond* tribes of Vidarbha region.

**Keywords**: Maharashtra, Vidarbha, *Gond*, *Madia-Gonds*, Handicrafts, Woodcraft, Bamboo craft

**IPC Int. Cl.**: D01

The Vidarbha region of Maharashtra State consists of 11 districts with a large tribal population. Among the major tribes in this region, *Gonds* form the largest group and has its ethnically related tribes like *Pardhans*, *Kolams* having some cultural similarities. They are from the *Dravidian* group, while *Korkus* from Amravati district are from *Kaularian* group of tribes. *Banjara*, which has its main habitat in Yavatmal district is classified as a nomadic tribe in Maharashtra and displays altogether different characteristics as well as level of acculturation. *Gond* tribe has sub-divisions or sub-tribes, mainly *Raj-Gonds*, *Madia-Gonds* (or *Maria Gonds*), *Dhurve Gonds* & *Khatulwar/Khatole Gonds* and *Naik Gonds*. *Madia-Gonds* and *Kolam* have been classified as primitive tribes, due to low levels of acculturation as compared to their co-tribes or other tribes. The third primitive tribe from Maharashtra is *Katkari*, which is from western Maharashtra. Almost all tribes have traditional knowledge of medicinal herbs, astronomical bodies, primitive agriculture, multiple uses of trees & plants and skills like metal works, woodwork (including bamboo handicrafts), bunding, musical instruments, dancing, singing, masks, archery, fishery, oil extraction, etc. Attempt has been made to document their knowledge and skills regarding wooden and bamboo handicrafts. The information pertains mainly to *Gond* tribes particularly their primitive group, *Madia-Gonds* from Gadchiroli district. There is an urgent need for data collection as well as an action programme for identification of traditional skills with action for developing them on modern lines.

**Methodology**

The data is not the result of any structured research project but is based on participant observation. In general, anthropological method of study was used. Special training programme for giving modern touch to their traditional skills were organized for *Madia-Gonds*. The research and action area has been the Etapalli tehsils of Gadchiroli district, and in particular *Madia-Gond* villages, viz. Krishnar, Alenga, Etapalli, Burgi and Kandodi. Traditional Knowledge about woodcraft mainly includes wood carving and bamboo handicrafts. These are primarily for use either in daily life or for certain ceremonies, lifecycle rituals, festivals, etc. Though almost all *Madia-Gond* families possess skills related to minor woodwork and bamboo work, these are limited to cutting wood and preparing shafts & rafters for huts, bullock carts, plough, basket making, mat making, etc. These were primary skills necessary for satisfying their domestic as well as agricultural needs. However, when it comes to specialized skills like wood carving, etc. one has to identify artisans, who have inherited such skills in their families for generations. In a few cases, they have learnt them from other artisans.
Wood carving skills

Pog-gota
This is a tobacco-box (in Madia language, Poga = tobacco and gota = a small box), which is carved out from the wood of Shivan tree (Gmelina arborea Roxb.; Verbenaceae). Madias call it as Kotam Kursi in Madia dialect. This wood is preferred as it is soft and it is believed that when tobacco is kept in it, it gives a better 'kick' to the chewer. Alternately, wood of Ber (Ziziphus jujuba Mill.) also used, but this is not popular. The carving is very nice with different shapes and forms with drawing of lines on it. Designs of these poggotas are similar to some of the latest figures. There is no joint and except the lid, the box is one single unit. There is a small hole, through which a string is put and kept around neck, so that it hangs like a necklace when at work (Fig. 1). Combs are very popular among Madia women. These are also carved in wood. While dancing, along with other ornaments and decorative articles, women sport these combs on their heads (Fig. 2).

Moond
In Modia-Gond culture, in every marriage a marriage pillar, called Moond is a must, and is at the center of the altar, where the marriage ritual is performed. The Moond is usually a branch or trunk of Salai tree (Boswellia serrata Roxb.), a tree of religious significance. It is believed that their Lord Phersapen, i.e. Bada-Deo (Mahadeo) has his abode on this tree. There are some artisans, who possess the skill of carving these moons and there are so many chain like structures, which are carved out from a solid trunk without a single joint. An artisan usually takes 3-4 days for carving a Moond (Fig. 3). One Madia Gond family from Kandodi (Madavi household) is expert in this carving of Moonds.

Bamboo craft
Their traditional knowledge about bamboo-work includes, cutting a bamboo without damaging the roots of bamboo cluster and cutting the single bamboo into desirable pieces from its nodes, cutting fine strips and flakes of raw bamboo and then weaving them into mats, making baskets and doors from green bamboo without using a single nail or hinges, purely from bamboo material. Even bottles for carrying oil or toddy are prepared from thick bamboo. They are aware of the tensile strength of bamboo and even produce fire by rubbing two dry bamboos. Its extensive use for preparing houses, huts, etc, is inherited for many generations. Sharp knife for cutting vegetables, bows and arrows, etc. are also prepared from bamboo.

Marketability and development
The problem with the Media-Gonds is that all this traditional knowledge and skills in wood-craft and bamboo-craft is only for their own use and for satisfying their community needs. They never thought of marketing their products. Similarly, the diversity of forms and types and sophistication required for marketing such product in national or international markets is absent. With this end in view, handicraft skill development programmes for the Madia-Gond boys and girls were organized at different places through different agencies like Tribal Research and Development Council (Warora, Dist. Chandrapur), Bhartiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh (New Delhi & Nagpur), Department of Continuing and Adult Education, Nagpur University, Nagpur; Sampoorna Bamboo Kendra (Lavada, Tah Dharni, Dist. Amravati), and CIDBI & GSB of IOWA State University, USA. Different articles like pen stand,
soap cases, mobile phone stand, letterbox, flowers & bouquets, bangle stand, table mats with variety of designs, show articles like fish, ship, petromax, wall hangings, etc. were prepared by them (Fig. 4). Even construction of a modern/bamboo house was taught to tribal youths. The traditional knowledge of the Gonds from Vidarbha needs to be harnessed, developed and opportunities should be given to them to display and sell their products at metropolis so that they can get proper return, both in terms of appreciation and money for their skilled labour.

**References**