Indigeneity and its Discontents: in conversation with Pardhan Gond nature-culture

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Declaration

I, Riti Agarwala, hereby declare that the contents of this dissertation, <i>Indigeneity and</i>
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Master of Philosophy in Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Kolkata. The

research has been carried out under my supervision and I recommend it for examination.

I further certify that neither this dissertation nor a part of it has been submitted

to any other university for any diploma or degree.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Situating Pardhan Gond art



Fig. 1.1.- Ramesh Hengadi's City Life (acrylic on cotton cloth)

When one beholds such presentation of art with lines and dots, decorated by symmetrical, minimalistic forms of humans, all arranged in a pattern on a muted background like cloth, it is immediately identified as 'tribal' or 'folk' art. Visual art depictions from tribal communities are stereotypically associated with an inherent sense of 'primitivism' which problematises the entire oeuvre of tribal art and its evolving avatars as a part of the 'modern' project. However, before delving into the nuances of 'primitivism' there are certain noteworthy subtleties that characterise 'tribal' and 'folk' art, the 'visual' and decorative art of the tribal world which we

should think about while reading and interpreting such forms of art and cultural practices.

The Museum of International Folk Art, acknowledges the fact that folk art does not conform to one definition and further goes on to enumerate various concepts that the museum considers important in collecting and displaying folk art. Accordingly, folk art is that which is- handmade, traditional, 'is of, by, and for the people; all people, inclusive of class, status, culture, community, ethnicity, gender, and religion' ("What is Folk Art?"). Folk Art-

- may be utilitarian or decorative
- may be decorative or reserved for high ceremonies
- may be learnt formally or informally
- may include intangible forms of expressive culture like dance, song,
 poetry, and foodways
- may be made for use within a community of practice or it may be produced for sale as a form of income and empowerment ("What is Folk Art?")

Given the fluid categories of 'folk' art, there is always a tendency to lump 'tribal' along with the 'folk'. Both the terms are intimately connected to other overlapping categories like- 'naive art', 'outsider art', 'self-taught art'.

The words 'tribal' or 'folk' came into prominence with the colonial rule in India. However, with practice, the 'folk' and 'tribal' art categories have come to implicate different things in a given context.

Though folk art is not easily amenable to definition, it is, on the whole a much larger genre of art work practised by original learners and practitioners or people influenced by tribal or rustic art. Whereas, tribal art expresses intensive use of varied

symbolic registers. It is ritualistic and sacred; something which inhabits the private realm of a tribe. Folk art might be drawn from tribal culture; it is rather a 'commodification' of tribal art in certain ways. Folk art might also become a part of 'popular culture'. The differentiation of 'folk' and 'tribal' does not seek to establish discrete categories, it is rather an attempt to understand the convergences and divergences of these terms in our culture.

The acknowledgement of 'folk art' is in itself a marker of institutional recognition. Institutionalisation indicates 'the way in which disciplinary fields are carved up by subjects as art history, folkloristics and anthropology.' (Chatterji 5). Institutionalisation can hence be perceived as a step towards the 'modern' reformation of tribal art. Although tribal and folk art has refashioned itself with the demands of 'modernity', there is always a tension between the 'mainstream' and the tribal/folk forms of art generally considered as 'minor' or 'non-canonical'. Besides this, it is not an easy move for artists from the tribal community to accommodate themselves within the narrative of institutionalisation. Venkat Raman Singh Shyam, a renowned Pardhan Gond artist opines-

The difference in how our arts are assessed has more to do with verbal sophistication rather than artistic talent. The non-tribal artist can express himself in a language and an idiom that does not come naturally to a tribal artist- and here [in India] that means English. I may be able to express myself clearly in Hindi, and have a clear idea of what I'm doing, but how many in our art world can follow Hindi? I feel rather ashamed to say this, but this is the truth. (qtd in Bowles 8).

The multi-faceted nature of folk art in relation to the tribal community, the museum culture in cities, the market scenario in which they are sold unravels various

avenues of introspection. The disappearance of folk art under the developing influence of 'globalisation' is a common claim. However, is it the same reality for us or is it rather the fact that globalisation has altered the re-presentation of folk art in various ways and given rise to new 'cultures' of composing and interpreting such art?

Folk art becomes a discursive space which calls for a multi-disciplinary engagement when read alongside the literary climate of our times – considering the innovations in genre, the media of expression for folk art/literature /culture and the upcoming theoretical innovations. The way in which the art of adivasi communities has widened its horizons, trying to dissolve boundaries between the 'folk' and the 'cosmopolitan', a combination of discources and counterdiscourses would help us interpret and re-read our perceptions of folk art.

In defining disciplinary boundaries from which folk art is addressed, Veena

Das opines-

Art historians ask questions about style, line, colour, composition, while sociologists and anthropologists ask questions about institutional changes such as state patronage, emergent art markets or commoditisation of folk art that has turned ritual objects into marketable commodities. (xix).

My concern being Gond art, it is important to situate Gond art amidst all such narratives of studying visual cultures. The Gond art we see today in books, museums and exhibitions was never an in-built culture in the community of Pardhan Gonds. The Gonds painted their walls with patterns (digna), the Pardhan Gonds sang their stories of origin reviving their tradition. Visual art on paper or canvas of any kind was never practised by the Gonds until 1980s when Jangarh Singh Shyam was taken from Patangarh to Bhopal by J.Swaminathan to paint in the Bharat Bhawan. Gond art was

not a community art as such. Roma Chatterji in reviewing the Gond art exhibition in September 2006 at the Lalit Kala Akademi in Delhi claims- 'Unlike other folk art exhibitions that I visited till then in which exhibits are classified on the basis of function and region, here paintings were grouped according to artists' names.'(1). The authority of the 'author' in this 30-year-old folk art tradition perhaps makes it an example of one such folk art which has been shaped by the modern institutional space. Venkat Raman Singh Shyam in *Finding My Way* himself confesses the reality that has given a renewed consciousness to the Pardhan Gond art form. According to him (in the words of S. Anand)-

If we assume that art shows us truth about the world, a moment of truth, then its commodification- putting a price on how well the truth is expressed- is in fact a commodification of truth. Such art- whether a song, poem or painting- ceases to see the truth, or atleast the whole truth. It begins to see only that truth which can be commodified . . .Art did not have an independent, haloed existence. Art was not possessed, glorified; it was communal. It was born to die. Like us. Yet it shared the aura that all life had. That's a history- a relationship between life and art- that even Pardhan Gonds have largely forfeited. That's also the story . ("Songs of the World").

Finding My Way, the autobiography of the Pardhan Gond artist (Venkat Raman Singh Shyam) hence tells us that it is not always a prosperous choice for an 'artist' to adapt to changes for the sake of livelihood. The emerging contemporariness in art has forced the Pardhan Gonds to adapt to these changes and it is ironical that the language of the contemporary art world is perhaps the only way for folk artists to reach out to large spectatorship.

The art world's elite language constituted of jargons of museums and academia is the backdrop to view and explore the Pardhan Gond art. The very beginning of this art was within the peripheries of the museum/ for the elite viewers. Being in the precarious position of belonging to the elite and yet remaining subaltern in art history it is interesting to read the manifestation of Gond art in genres of various kinds which in turn exposes the cultural niche, the role it plays for the mass.

In transforming it to forms like picture books, movies- is it an attempt to transform such art into popular culture? The Pardhan Gond practitioners do draw monetary benefits from materiality of such cultural objects/ form of art. However how far does it raise or alter the position of their representation in the repertoire of folk art or how does its place in the hierarchical divisions of society get modified? Does the 'primitive' culture lose on its own 'aura' by practicing such form of 'modernity'?

It was and still is practised by individual artists in their own style. Each artist paints his or her own vision of Gond stories. The practise of art is not community based overtly, nevertheless, the stories they depict through their art convey their sense of 'belonging' to the Gond community. Alike most tribal artists, the Pardhan Gonds have a deep attachment to their land. Though the 'modern' Pardhan Gond artists practise art in cities, they never forget to go back to their village and community once in a while. They always visit their roots to remain a part of their tradition and culture and to baptize their upcoming generation with the touch of their culture and tradition. As Kalawati Shyam opines in one of her interviews with Punjab Lalit Kala Academi that- although they are urbanised and settled in the city, it is not that they are perennial painters of Gond art in the city. They do work on orders, however, they also visit their village and place of nativity when they do not work in the city. In the village they live their life as they always do- mostly working in the fields, and the

other reason she puts for visiting her village is that the children too should remain attached to their roots. It speaks of a fear of loss of their tradition at the same time it also intimates to us their keen awareness of the fact how traditions and cultures risk silent erasure when it is not imbibed properly by the present generation.

The emergence of Gond art and its resurrecting forms in contemporary times helps us reflect on how-'Art worlds are established by the circulation of a certain kind of discourse that comes to support the apparatuses of the state and the market.' (Chatterji 5).

Today tribal and folk art is very much a presence in visual studies; graphic novels, picture books and many other forms of literature. Many of the tribal art forms have been practised in their place of origin but have taken time to reach wider readership. It is perhaps because Pardhan Gond artists have mostly been following Jangarh Singh Shyam's footsteps in working for museums and exhibitions that they have been able to easily transcend boundaries. It is not that other tribal art forms like Warli, Bhil, Patua/ patachitra have not found their places. However, the trajectory of Gond art perhaps made it easily adaptable to numerous 'modern' media of representation.

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Chapter 2

Becoming the Pardhan

2.1 The Pardhan Gond art and artists





Fig.2.1. Venkat Singh Shyam's depiction of the creation and *karma* of the Pardhan Gonds

We all leave behind such stories as art: as songs that have morphed over time; as scratches on rocks that have shaped memory; as signs on pots that have become language; as an intricately carved wooden comb; as paddy we learnt to grow; as mahua, beer, sake, toddy, wine

What to sing? Where to begin? He begins with the song of karma, of creation. He offers the world painted songs . . . (V.Shyam and Anand "Songs of Life" np.).

The Pardhan Gonds, a part of one of India's largest tribal community of the Gonds, began their life as wandering minstrels who sang their legends, myths and stories to other tribe members. The Pardhans play the role of story-tellers primarily through their songs played using the instrument 'bana'. On behalf of their tribe they

are given the 'responsibility' to preserve and spread Gond stories and keep the tradition alive through their art.

The genesis of the Gonds can be traced back to the story of seven primal Gond brothers. Amongst the seven brothers six were married and the youngest was unmarried. When the brothers were confused about sharing the harvest, the youngest brother was sent in search of Bada Deo (the creator) to find a solution to their problem. The youngest brother in the course of waiting for his creator is drawn to the artistic urge inherent in the living spirit of nature- the spider weaving its web in intricate pattern. As the younger brother sighs, the gossamer turns his breath into music. Bada Deo emerges from the Saja tree hearing the music played by this Gond and asks him to make a 'bana' using the wood of the khirsari tree, a bow from the surteli tree and the hair of the horse. The bana would be the instrument which would help him survive. Through the bana he would reach out to his world, make music and sing stories to them. This is how he 'becomes the Pardhan'.

The story however has variations with certain key elements that recur in all creation stories of Pardhan Gonds. Another story cited by Aurogeeta Das in *The Enchanted* Forest, her elaborate work on the Pardhan Gond artist Jangarh Singh Shyam, goes this way- The Gonds had seen a white horse galloping across the field and destroying the young shoots of the jute they had planted. The Gonds frightened the horse away and later recognised that it was Bada Deo who came in the disguise of the white horse. Again it is the youngest brother who plays the bana and pleases Bada Deo who then emerges from the Saja tree to bless him and reappears whenever he plays the instrument (bana). Henceforth the six brothers too agreed on the seventh brother being the storyteller, the singer of stories of their tribe. The seventh brother hence came to be identified as the Pardhan Gond.

The Pardhan's forte was hence playing songs. Alike 'bana', the instrument which is considered sacred to the Gonds, the Pardhan too is the 'extraordinary' among the 'ordinary' as they are the ones who help the Gonds reach out to their gods by evoking Bada Deo through the 'bana'. The Pardhans have a very special position among the Gonds; they unite the tribe by recounting their collective memory and they are considered to be the manifested form of divinity and art in a singular medium. According to UdayanVajpeyi- 'In a way the story-singing of the Pardhan does what according to Anandavardhan poetry is supposed to do: 'establishing the extraordinary in the ordinary''. ("Jangarh Kalam")

However, the situation of the Pardhan Gonds has changed with time. Previously the Pardhans had patrons from within the larger Gond community, the relatively prosperous Gonds, who paid them enough to sustain their existence as story-tellers of the tribe. However, in the present situation when such stories are shrouded behind other prioritised narratives of the nation, the possibility of such patronisation has vanished. Hence, many of the Pardhans now are becoming urbanised in order to make a livelihood. They are paid by their urban, metropolitan patron- whom John Bowles calls- 'ethnic arts and crafts'. All this has created a symbiotic relationship between the urban and the rural. The city gives the Gonds opportunity to earn, the urbanscape on the other hand receives newer representations from an otherwise marginal culture.

The Gonds are spread across Gujarat, Maharastra, Madhya Pradesh. The tribes have been changing places due to their practice of shifting agriculture. Hence, the Gond way of existence has been influenced by the places to which they have migrated. Their stories get modified according to their experience.

Transformations in their art form is often perceived as a material need for the Gonds to earn their livelihood, however, irrespective of the reasons of change and transformation, the Pardhan Gond art has been re-created in its transforming aesthetics- from the subjective individual artist to the larger shifts in the genre. Such transformation in art echoes E.H Gombrich's words-'Works of art are not mirrors, but they share with mirrors that elusive magic of transformation which is so hard to put into words.' (5).

In order to study the Pardhan Gond art in the contemporary setting it is important to probe into 'the efficacy of extra-cultural interventions into an individual artist's operative and relatively well- grounded indigenous cultural tradition, and asks how the latter interacted with the new, while intentionally re-inventing itself . . .' (Jain 13).

The Pardhan Gond art in the present is a mélange of heterogeneous narratives. The culture of visual representation in the Pardhan Gond tribe is often traced back to wall paintings (bhitti chitra), digna (floor painting), clay relief decorations in the domestic space, wooden sculptures, painted masks and certainly tattooing which still continues to inspire the Pardhan Gond artists to paint their canvas. However, there are controversies on which was the earliest form of visual Pardhan Gond art form.

The recognition of the tribe and its potential art form is often hailed back to the British anthropologist, Verrier Elwin who helped the Gonds find a representative space as people who had their own myths, stories, art, philosophy. Elwin's work in central India at the beginning of the 20th century aided in expanding the definitions of 'primitive' art, which 'had acquired a brief vogue; but it was trendy only as long as it featured in the work of a great modernist master like Picasso.' (Mishra 14).

Another watershed moment in the history of the Pardhan Gond storytellers came in the 1980s when a group of selected art college graduates and young artists familiar with the state of Madhya Pradesh were sent to its alleys by J.Swaminathan, the Indian painter and curator, as he began the task of setting up the Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal with special focus on 'tribal arts'. It was then that the 'saint-like Swaminathan arrived in 1981 in a sarkari jeep to personally invite Jangarh- who had gone swimming and fishing- and take him to Bhopal' (V.Shyam and Anand, "Songs of Art").

It is important to note that the hunt for 'tribal art' in the 1980s was grounded to a socio-political narrative. The urge to seek out exemplars of 'tribal art' like the Pardhan Gond in the 1980s is reminiscent of similar 'hunt' initiated by the Lalit Kala Akademi in 1969 when the Akademy researchers travelled to parts of India to gather knowledge about the 'little-known aesthetic traditions' and realised the need for them to be documented. Such an excavation was initiated when India was grappling with issues relating to 'cultural identity' and 'aesthetic coherence'. The 'tribal art' hence helped to create the notion of a diverse nation. Jyotindra Jain, an eminent Indian art and cultural historian opines-

What was happening at Bharat Bhawan at that juncture was a fervent hunt for a "modernist aesthetic" within the tribal visual expressions but isolated from the artists' ethnographic background, thus missing the crux in how the tribal artist was not merely a mute observer in a fast changing and modernising India, but was, in fact, ready to reflect their immediate social and political predicament in their work- a sign of true contemporaneity. (19)

Partha Mitter adds yet another dimension to this debate. Mitter relates the urge to represent the 'primitive' in the Indian aesthetics in terms of the western canon.

According to Mitter –

In the global arena, all Indian and other non-western artists suffer from a 'time lag', because their work is set against the 'originary' discourse of western modernism. Externally, this hegemonic teleology of the western canon has been central to the anxiety of non-western modernism, and Indian modernism in particular . . . [the] romantic primitivism of the 1920s . . . drew attention of elite artists to the children of the soil as well as the 'indigenous' (adivasi) communities that had co-existed within Hindu society since time immemorial . . . (Mitter xiii).

However, one should be aware of stepping into the Western concept of Modernist Primitivism as 'Indian modernism' is one which 'has developed without an avantgarde. A modernism without disjunctures . . .' (qtd. in Dutta 53). The backdrop , the historiographic framework which fuelled the portrayal of marginal tribal art of the 'other masters' was thus derived from multiple factors.

The 'discovery' of Jangarh Singh Shyam brought international fame to what we now call 'Gond art', it gradually 'urbanised' the 'art' of the Pardhan Gonds, brought more opportunities for the otherwise poor Pardhan Gonds to earn their livelihood in the city. However, the beginning of a fresh phase of life and art came with its own risks. The Pardhan Gond artists are generalised as followers of Jangarh and often the generic name 'Gond art' has blurred the boundaries between the 'Gonds' and the 'Pardhan Gonds'.

Venkat Raman Singh Shyam, as Aurogeeta Das claims, is one of the foremost Pardhan Gond artist who denies their obligation towards following the 'Jangarh Kalam' and also rejects the category named 'Gond art' as 'no other branch of the Gond have taken up painting in this manner; only the Pardhan are professional artists.' (Das77). The Pardhans stood highly respected as the manifestation of the artistic impulse of their tribe. Shamrao Hivale, known for his contribution to Indian anthropology and also as Elwin's associate, distinguishes the 'Pardhan' and the 'Gond' as binaries; it gives us a sense of the 'gap' that defines the Pardhan-Gond relationship. According to Hivale- 'The Pardhan is a romantic. The Gond is a businessman. The Pardhan's devotion to his *bana* (the sacred fiddle, which is the home of Bara Pen) fills his life with poetry and the stolid steady Gond looks dry and arid beside him.' (qtd. in Jain 15).

2.2 Jangarh Singh Shyam: one of the 'other masters'

It is not to deny the individual subjectivity of the Pardhan Gond artist in the contemporary scenario; nonetheless, Jangarh Singh Shyam with his 'chameleon-like versatility' infused a new life to their tribe and its art form through his unique aesthetic idiom. Venkat Raman Singh Shyam in his autobiographical tale *Finding My Way* reveals to us the significance of Jangarh for a Pardhan Gond artist-

... We have Jangarh as Lingo who seems to have liberated us Gonds from the caves of Patangarh, Barbaspur, Garkamatta, Sijhora and Sanpuri only to land us in a new cave: Bhopal . . . This is where the cavernous art market drew us into its own darkness. This is where we

learnt to farm our souls: learnt to sell our art, sell our stories and a little bit of ourselves so that we could make art.

Jangarh, like Lingo, climbs the endless ladder that sprouts from the earth and goes beyond the sky. With their art they both ascend to a place that is no-place. Their stories become myths. Myths become them.

(V.Shyam and Anand "Songs of the Self" np.)

Understanding the genre of 'Jangarh Kala' perhaps will offer an enhanced understanding of the 'contemporaneity' in Pardhan Gond art. In order to study representative works in this genre, one need to probe through the significant reference points in the genre. Jangarh can be referred to as one of the 'founders of discursivity' in the genre of the Pardhan Gond art. As Michael Foucault asserts-The 'founders of discursivity' are authors in a broader sense of the term- they are 'founders' of a 'theory . . . tradition or a discipline within which new books and authors can proliferate' (Foucault 1632). Founders of discursivity or 'transdiscursive authors' have produced 'the possibility and the rules of the formation of other texts' (Foucault 1632).

Jangarh's art became the 'spiritus mundi' for generations of Pardhan Gonds who followed him. He is therefore regarded as the chief architect of the genre. Jangarh could cast his vision on any medium with an astonishing ease- from wall murals to paper and canvas, natural colours and charcoal dust to bright colourful acrylic paints, clay reliefs to screenprints, etching on paper to reliefs on fibre glass. The form or medium of art never seemed to be an impediment for Jangarh for whom the urban atmosphere was a sudden change in the accustomed rural life. Jangarh

himself adapted the urban practice of creating art in the studio and engaged people from his community as 'apprentices' in his piece of work.

In spite of his short career, his fluency with the medium of art helped him create a highly varied repertoire of work ranging from making illustrations for the children's journal *Chakmak* to painting the grand courtyards of Vidhan Bhavan. Aurogeeta Das opines that Jangarh's work 'has enduring appeal because not only is it technically acrobatic and thematically engaging but also because he was a brilliant colourist and a master at innovative patterning' (16).

Jangarh mostly depicted nature and the 'formless' Gond gods and goddess in his work of art. Jangarh sketched and drew in monochrome as much as he did in the colourful media. However, Jangarh has also been criticised for being repetitive. Jangarh's 'paintings increasingly featured repetitious embellishments that conveyed jadla [inertness], and became more superficially appealing and- in a aword-decorative' (qtd in Bowles, 24). It is often a similar generalised allegation of repetition in patterns that the Pardhan Gond artists face even today.

However, the 'evolving context' has brought more fluidity to the narrative of the Pardhan Gonds. Complicated use of patterns, colours, shapes and figures alongside translated narratives blends in the self-reflexive canvas of the Pardhan Gond artist. It is this variety unfurled by the subjective artistic endeavours that I would like to bring forth through the texts I have chosen.

The notion of the tribal people as forest dwellers, which is often held as a template to the understanding of the tribal experience is something that we are made to think about in *The Night Life of Trees*, a collaborative project involving Ram Singh Urveti, Bhajju Shyam and Durga Bai, few of the finest living artists of the Pardhan Gond tradition. The trees in this sumptuous book of art and folklore, silk screened by

hand on black paper, introduces the reader to the Gond world where various aspects of life fuse in the form of a tree in various colours and patterns. Trees become the repository of symbols which tell us stories about the practical, spiritual, mythological life of Gonds. Stories relating to the creation myth of the tribe find vivid expression in Bhajju Shyam's *Creation* which is distinctive in its approach towards the Gond myth of creation. The contemporary and the Pardhan intermingles with ease in the narrative of Venkat Raman Singh Shyam's *Finding My Way* whereas a completely different portrayal of the 'contemporary' is found in Bhajju Shyam's *The London Jungle Book*, which unfolds a reinvention of the Pardhan Gond art and artist in the form of a visual travelogue.

The above mentioned texts, whether in collaboration or as singular productions, bring to us a concoction of not only the changing forms of Pardhan Gond art but also the fluidity in identity which every artist genially expresses through his visual vocabulary. This in turn helps us revisit and rethink questions we have been engaging with- that of genre, of folk/tribal art, production and re-production of such art.

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Chapter 3

Re-reading the Institutionalisation of the Primitive

3.1 'Primitivism' and the 'primitive'

Primitivism is a contentious concept which has attracted debates and arguments of various kinds from numerous disciplinary perspectives. Though 'modern primitivism' often becomes the most emphasized form of 'primitivism', it has its history before and after it- 'From antiquity through to the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, and the Romantic period, to the beginning of the twentieth century and even up until today, primitivism has played various roles in philosophy, history, the sciences, literature and art history' (Geertz 38).

Besides the critical strands from which primitivism is often read, like 'American primitivism', 'evolutionism', 'neo primitivism', 'postmodern primitivism',
there are environmentalists, anti-civilisation(al) thinkers who have re-read the idea of
the 'primitive'. However, here my concern being the Indian tribal or folk art
(specifically Pardhan Gond) I would like to delve into how primitivism as a concept
had touched and spread through the colonial encounter with the West and has
thereafter developed in relation to continuing debates about the 'primitive' in the
present. As Armin W. Geertz asserts-

The term "primitive" is anathema in anthropology today, but it is still being used in non-Western countries such as India, China, and Japan. And its euphemisms can be found, for example, in African scholarship. It has been argued that all cultures have concepts of the primitive as a

necessary ingredient in formulating their own identity. And so it is with the West. (52)

Folk or tribal art is often associated with 'primitivism'. Primitivism has its own genealogy and it is intriguing to explore how this 'ism' word as an attitude has been variously used and contextualised with time and space. The word 'primitivism' gained prominence in the mid-20th century. 'Primitivism', considered to be a derogatory word, has a translucent position as a theoretical jargon in academia; nevertheless its presence, influence and constant reference by scholars of various discipline draws our attention to how such narrative haunts our understanding of art and literature- here of folk/ tribal art largely.

A O Lovejoy and George Boas in their notable work *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* claim that-

The history of primitivism is in great part a phase of a larger historic tendency which is one of the strangest, most potent and most persistent factors of Western thought – the use of the term 'nature' to express the standard of human values, the identification of the good with that which is 'natural' or 'according to nature' (qtd. in Lagana).

Primitivism as a desire of 'return' to the 'state of nature' has consistently existed in human consciousness perhaps since 'civilising' the human self has made the humankind realise its increasing gap with 'nature'. Primitivism in the West has majorly been the manifestation of the 'romantic longing' for the 'simplicity of premodern existence'. It is hence that Lovejoy and Boas talk of 'chronological primitivism' as 'a kind of philosophy of history, a theory, or a customary assumption, as to the time – past or present or future – at which the most excellent condition of human life, or the best state of the world in general, must be supposed to occur.' (qtd.

in Lagana). In contradiction to 'chronological primitivism', Lovejoy and Boas define 'cultural primitivism' as –

. . . The discontent of the civilized with civilization, or with some conspicuous and characteristic feature of it. It is the belief of men living in a relatively highly evolved and complex cultural condition that a life far simpler and less sophisticated in some or in all respects is a more desirable life. (qtd in Lagana)

Lovejoy and Boas's categorical and classified way of thinking might seem 'simplistic' in certain ways, however being a seminal work which addresses the discourse of 'primitivism' it is still in conversation with the contemporaries.

Primitivism is said to have its roots in the history of Western thought. Primitivism has a long history of its usage. Certain terms and concepts in the 'primitivist' repertoire became significant in interpreting cultural developments with time. Primitivism as a concept has always been re-defined according to the need of the discourse; however as a concept emerging from the West it has apparently bestowed a hierarchy on the Western 'gaze' which continues to rule our perception in many disguised forms. Simultaneously it is significant to consider that though the term 'primitivism' has remained tainted with the concept of racial hierarchisation, the overpowering discourse of 'orientalism', there is much complex intertextuality beyond the facade of such monolithic binarised discourses.

It is by the second half of the nineteenth century that 'avant-garde' chose to 'break down the distinctions between the fine and applied arts, to elevate the craftsman to equal status with the artist and to assert the need for artists also to be craftsmen' (106 MacKenzie). Several reasons for the renewed interest in 'craft' and

'decorative art' (the muse being far removed from the West- in the East) enumerated by a distinguished historian of imperialism, John M. MacKenzie are-

- The 'anxiety' born out of declining craft/art values as industries made such objects a form of 'mass production' hence reproducing 'shoddy uniformity'.
- The 'search for total art, the full integration of architecture and its internal environment or the theatrical union of music, words, costume, design and acting' (106).
- Simplicity in design was a reaction against 'the clutter of mid-Victorian taste by using lighter colours, spare furniture sparsely distributed and pierced screens, reserving colour for bright rugs, textiles or framed prints.' (106).

All of this- the way the West drew from the East certainly raises the question of how the debate of 'orientalism' fits in here. However, the discursive terrain in this case does not allow an outright answer. There were readers, critics and spectators on both sides of such debate. MacKenzie opines- 'It is true that the fresh appreciation of eastern arts was sometimes elaborately fitted into a racial hierarchy, often primarily for popular consumption . . . to satisfy occidental debates about the relationship between industrial production, crafts and design . . .' (106). When designs like trees were being adapted by the West they became a combination of elements/ designs drawn from Hindu, Islamic, Chinese along with the European to cater to the Western taste making it 'exotic' for not only the Europeans but also the Asians.

In India, with colonial expansion, there grew a new form of art called 'Company painting'/ 'Company style'. In it worked a unique aesthetic of exoticising.

There was a want for images which merged the Indian riches of flora and fauna with

Western techniques of art. There was a demand for elegance enmeshed with very quotidian ethnographic themes like that of castes and professions. The 'new canon of beauty' created by colonial influence was reflected in Company art. Where the Western Victorian, Gothic, Ludic architectural styles were employed to alter the cityscape, 'company art' subtly tried to alter the understanding of 'art' among artists and audience. 'Even though landscapes were mentioned in ancient literature, the objective study of natural scenery was a colonial phenomenon initially influenced by the English Picturesque movement.' (Mitter, "Indian Art" 175). The English sense of balance of colours framed the Indian subjects. Instead of gouache, watercolours and shading was often the technique used to paint pictures.

The works of artists like Raja Ravi Varma fused European techniques and Indian sensibilities. However, later all such colonial influences were defied by the Bengal School of art. One of the most celebrated works in this counter-genre is Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Mata*. The nationalist zeal never remained the same in the way artists answered Western influence.

Amidst the cultural symbiosis it is important to notice what Partha Mitter points out about the negative connotations of 'influence' when it came to colonies like India. Where 'influence' had always guided artworks, it was always criticised by the colonial rulers and critics of Indian art. Influence was-

. . . The key epistemic tool in studying the reception of Western art in the non-Western world: if the product is too close to its original source, it reflects slavish mentality; if on the other hand, the imitation is imperfect, it represents a failure. In terms of power relations, borrowing by artists from the peripheries becomes a badge of inferiority. (Mitter, "Modernism" 7)

British art historians like William George Archer favoured the depiction of Indian tribes because here the 'primitive' was in conversation with 'the notion of virility' which stood for 'bold simplicity, as opposed to the weakness of complicated 'feminine' (Mitter, "Modernism" 26). The 'primitive' image of the Indian tribesman was hence a way of self-identification of the colonial master in terms of virility.

Colonial expansion prominently established the myth of the 'noble savage' which too addresses the primitivist debate in a certain way.

The idea of the 'internal savage' was complemented by that of the 'pre-rational', primitive mentality put forward by Levy-Bruhl and other anthropologists. This vestigial Darwinism characterized primitive society as the childhood of mankind on the scale of progress, contrasting the rational (western) man with the 'Other': primitives, women, children, and the mentally ill. The myth of the *naivete* of primitive art, although it belied the fact that strict rules governed such works, liberated European artists from the constraints of the classical canon. (Mitter, "Indian Art" 192).

However, besides the presence of fervent imperialists among the critics, there were critics who appreciated the Eastern art forms over the Western ones, like Owen Jones, Christopher Dresser and George Birdwood. Jones tried to revive the industrial production of art with a new fervour of creative spirit. Birdwood used Indian crafts to attack the filth and squalor spread by industrialisation. There was a sense of 'romantic primitivism' in the approach of George Birdwood.

Primitivism idealism gained new impetus in Europe in the beginning of 20^{th} century when primitivism was one of the prime influences for artists like- Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, Henri Julien Félix Rousseau, Pablo Picasso and

many others. The plurality of decorative art, craft, fine art was merged. Art genres were merged to defy the perception of superiority and inferiority which often characterised the separation of art forms. Art works from Japan, Oceania, Africa and even Native America shaped 'modern primitivism' which was not a formal art movement but a trope which gave alternative vision to the modern artist. Primitivism influenced literary works too, however, it had impacted art most powerfully.

Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich and other abstract painters invested in the primitive a spiritual dimension of human culture they found absent in urban modernity. They viewed the distinction between the primitive and the modern as the difference between spiritual and material dimensions of human existence. The Expressionists, who saw primitivism as a universal phenomenon, sought to bring out the primitive dimension of European culture, in their critique of rationality. (Mitter, "Modernism" 34)

Primitivism as a 'cultural attitude' became a tool (taken from the marginal folk and tribal art forms) to criticise the wave of 'modernism' that had swept the West. The art objects, technique of tribes, non-urbans; of those beyond the peripheries of representation gave a new visual vocabulary to the modernist artists. However, primitivism in this context never meant the championing of marginal art forms as belonging to the mainstream arena of 'modernism'. It was rather a form of aesthetic vigour which was adopted by 'highbrow' intellectuals within an elite class of artists and was thus another re-appropriation and embracing of hierarchies that operated within the periphery of the institutionalised representation of art.

Primitivism as practised in Europe had a sense of multiplicity in the way it was executed. The 'expressive power' was subjective and plural. Robert Goldwater,

an art historian and the first director of the Museum of Primitive Art, talks about plurality in the approach towards primitivism. According to Goldwater, primitivism was characterised by 'romanticism' for Paul Gauguin, it was 'intellectual primitivism' for Picasso and Modigliani and a 'primitivism of the subconscious' in Miro, Klee and Dali. Goldwater accepts that the Western artistic convention influenced by 'primitivism' was highly 'subjective', 'partial' and 'uninformed' in certain ways. However, the Western artist, by 'his concentration on the visual constituents-material, texture, color, and composition [of tribal art forms]- and by his sensitivity to the affective impact of the resultant symbolic form . . . focused attention on the expressive power of the primitive arts.' (Goldwater et al. np.). The inauguration of 'The Museum of Primitive Art' hence marked both a culmination to the treatment of the 'primitive' and a new beginning for the 'non-canonical' and marginalised work of art.

Here I would like to bring into discussion certain manifestations of 'modernist primitivism' in Western art forms so that as we later study how 'primitivism' took shape in colonies like India and how it has gradually came to be associated with the tribal and folk art, we are able to trace our journey in relation to the debate of Western primitivism. As MacKenzie puts it- 'The increasing syncretic arts of recent times represent not so much a break with those of an imperial past as a building upon the contracts which took place during that period.' (108). Modernity created a 'globally 'imagined community' based upon print culture, whose members may never have known one another personally, and yet shared a corpus of ideas on modernity' (Mitter, "Modernism" 11).

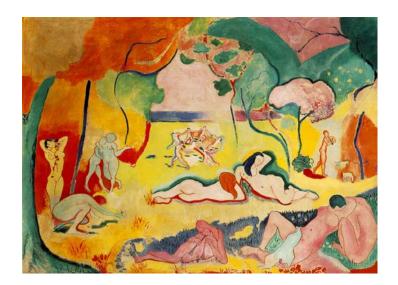


Fig. 3.1. Joy of Life by Henri Matisse. 1905-1906. Medium: Oil on Canvas

Henri Matisse's *Joy of Life* portrays nudity/nude figures, use of bright colours (typical of the Fauves), the mingling of the 'human' and 'nature'- a prelapsarian paradisal bliss- a 'manifesto of happiness'. The simplicity of the human and the nonhuman seems to blend in a jovial mood.





Fig. 3.2. Paul Gaugin's *The Moon and the* Earth. 1893. Medium-Oil on burlap.

Fig.3.3. Sun and Moon- A retelling of folk tales in the form of visual art by Tara Books.

Gauguin's painting depicts Hina, the 'Moon' and Fatou, the 'Earth'- figures drawn from Tahitian mythology. The Hina, the female spirit of the Moon, is looking up to Fatou, the male spirit of the Earth, asking him to grant humans eternal life. Fatou's sternly expressive facial expression is symbolic his denial to Hina's request. 'Gaugin's depiction of Hina and Fatou—marked by great disparity in their size, scale, and coloration—emphasizes their ancient quarrel' ("MoMA Learning"). The depiction of this mythological moment is accompanied by 'dreamlike landscape' setting which is decorated with elements drawn from the natural environment.

Parallel to Gauguin, I have placed the cover page of a recent publication of folktales by Tara Publications concerning the basic natural elements that encompass human life- the 'Sun' and the 'Moon'. *Sun and Moon: Folk Tales by Various Artists* too has given a modern 'form' to the folktales. It is not to compare Gauguin with the picturebook of folktales, but rather to notice how 'modernisation' of the 'primitive' has always been taking place.



Fig. 3.4. Paul Klee's *Fish Magic*. 1925. Medium: Oil and watercolor on canvas on panel.

'Paul Klee said in 1902: "I want to be as though new-born, knowing absolutely nothing about Europe, ignoring poets and fashions, to be almost primitive." (qtd. in Geertz 53). Paul Klee challenged the traditional, admired the non-conformist nature of children's art and was interested in hieroglyphics. In *Fish Magic* (renowned as Klee's largest picture) Klee depicts the intermingling of prime elements of nature- the celestial, the aquatic and the earthly. The intermingling is done on a black background on which the objects appear to be scratched out, which is reminiscent of ancient techniques of cave painting.

The modernist paintings I have referred to, briefly reveal to us the way in which the 'primitive' was accommodated in the vision of the Western artist in the modernist era. Having focused on the specificity of the term 'primitivism' in shaping 'modernist' art practices, it is apt to consider how the Western discourse of the 'primitive' was influenced the cultural atmosphere of colonies like India. In order to understand the dynamics of how 'primitivism' has operated over time, we need to consider not just the source of the concept in the Westerners, rather how the concept was both used and abused by people in power and often mimicked, subverted by practitioners of art and literature in a specific context. In this study hence the colonial exchange would play a significant role as significant cities in colonies acted as 'interlocutors of colonial culture'.

Primitivism in the garb of 'critical modernity' provided a new status to marginal culture which otherwise remained unnoticed. In studying the rise of 'lowbrow' art, Mitter opines that, it was since the mid-nineteenth century that the revival of 'lowbrow' or practical arts of India had formed the central plank of government policy. It was the same tactics of expressing through 'practical arts' that later became popular among nationalists in the course of Indian struggle for

independence. Primitivism, in influencing the people of the Indian colony thus turned into a tool which refracted the colonial gaze back to their own 'selves' and laid bare the contradictions that characterised the Western construct of 'primitivism'.

In India, there were artists like Amrita Sher-Gil who were trying to depict subjective identity in relation to the 'rural'. The rural was embraced as a part of the new vision that characterised the 'nation- building' process. On the other hand, there was another form of consciousness that characterised the 'real'- that of expressing sympathy for the 'underclass'. Be it Rabindranath Tagore, or Sunayani Devi, or Deviprosad Roy Chowdhury, or Jamini Roy or Sunil Janah- each of them produced a 'vision' of the nation in accordance to their own experience. Primitivism was reformulated with time, space, subjectivities and cultural contexts.

In making 'primitivism' as a part of my thought process, I would like to reassert, in tune with Armin W.Geertz's claim-

For the record, I must emphatically state that being critical of positive primitivism is an expression neither of capitulating to the Right nor of supporting chauvinism, colonialism, racism, authoritarianism, or instrumentalism. It is, on the contrary, a celebration of what characterizes us as humans, namely critical rationality. Following social activist Murray Bookchin, I agree that 'until the current antihumanistic tendencies are subjected to serious criticism, we cannot even begin to address the more tangible problems of our time that antihumanism obscures and distorts.' (Olupona 62-63).

3.2 The importance and development of the museum

Museum creates its own identity and meaning in relation to its goal of display, audience and location. Museums might be culture specific, nation specific, species specific- be it any criteria, museums at present have altered the 'ways of seeing'. They are often a combination of materialism coated with abstract ideas. There is a plethora of such 'museum scape' which through their quirky exhibits and ideas inspire us to think about the present culture of 'seeing' and interpreting. The Studio Ghibli Museum in Japan, which tries to resurrect the 'aura' of Studio Ghibli movies, exhibits history, techniques of animation, Ghibli characters, short films along with gift shop, cafe, children play area. The rise of cafe culture in the present decade has interestingly contributed to the art of displaying things and reaching out to the audience. There are cafes whose decors try to create a sort of museum-like-ambience with a different way of involving the audience. One such renowned place is the Legends Motorcycling Cafe and Museum located in Bengaluru. Besides this, different types of museumsdolls museum, kites museum, human brain museum, underwater museum, Museum of Medieval Torture Devices(Amsterdam), Museum of Sex(New York), Iceland Phallological Museum (in Reykjavik), alongside virtual museums, has problematised the idea of 'museum'.

The museum culture in India has evolved differently as compared to the West.

The establishment of museum in India was a part of the colonial imposition. Museum as the preserver of history and heritage was not a familiar concept for the Indians.

Museums came to be the markers of 'identity' derived from the culture of people.

They gradually turned into a knowledge system whose installation not only inspired

curiosity but also served as an 'institution of learning' and aesthetic enjoyment. Though museums served as a point of contact between the colonial rulers and the alien culture amidst which they settled, the natives/Indians were often considered as hindrance to the development of the museum culture.

The introduction of 'art schools, art exhibitions, the processes of mechanical reproduction and other modern institutions in India was part of Westernization, which transformed artists' status and outlook as well as art patronage' (Mitter, "Modernism" 10). Commodification, classification- the coda of museum display made the discourse of 'museum' all the more complex. Art journalism, art criticism and artistic individualism created a space for promoting academic art. 'The growth of art exhibitions, art journalism and the rise of an art-conscious public changed the public's perception of art and the artist.' (Mitter, "Indian Art" 175).

The politics of presenting 'objects' in the museum is a dynamic process. It is bound to change with time as definitions of our subjective understanding of 'culture', 'heritage', 'civilisation' change. Though in the age of digitisation and virtual media, museums are becoming cultural fossils, there are efforts being made with the objective to revive, preserve and re-create museums.

The Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum, for instance, not only presents the cultural diversity of tribal culture including Gonds, Bhils, Sahariya but also houses eclectic thematic presentation, like the origin of age-old games like the traditional tug of war. Such cultural atmosphere encourages a different kind of pedagogy and perhaps draws more children towards exploring museum beyond school expedition trips. The collective past which the museum seems to present hence appears to be visitor-friendly, flexible and synchronises with the perception of the modern visitor.

The culture of 'display' in contemporary times is being used to propagate folk and tribal art forms in various parts of the world. It is not just through museums but through small handicraft start-ups, workshops, that folk art is becoming a part of popular culture.

In relation to the 'anthropology of the senses', Constance Classen and David Howes critique the museum culture in preservation of tribal artefacts as the 'dynamic web of sensuous and social meaning is broken when an artefact is removed from its cultural setting and inserted within the visual symbol system of the museum' (200). Classen and Howes' opinion perhaps reflects the concept of 'aura' articulated by Walter Benjamin, whose "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" has particularly influenced the reading of films and visual studies.-

What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye-while resting on a summer afternoon- a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch (105).

Aura stems from the 'unique quality' attributed to artwork which is 'identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition . . .' (Benjamin 105).

The 'solution' that Classen and Howes put forth is that of 'open-air' museums or 'exotic theme park' attempting to 'create an encompassing cultural and sensory environment, where artefacts are displayed within a mock village' (218). The creation of a mock village might seem to be an alternative to grasp the 'sensibility' of folk art and is not a rare thing in the contemporary culture of 'display'. Pukhauti Muktangan in Raipur (India), for instance, is a museum-cum-culture park that combines the native ethos and sensibilities of Chattisgarh giving voice to the long lost local tales.

In spite of alternative measures taken to preserve the 'aura' of the art object, the fear of 'dis-embedment' from the 'roots' always remains. It is this fear of 'defamiliarisation' that Roma Chatterjee also identifies in her elaborate work on folk art. According to Chatterji-

Recent scholarship, more sensitive to alternative aesthetic systems, is increasingly critical of the way in which the valorisation of the primitive leads to the de-contextualisation of objects shorn of their primary meaning and function and their relocation within modern art worlds (11).

However, these contestations have augmented the growth of folk art and expanded its boundaries beyond the norms of a genre. Misrepresentation and loopholes are certainly a part of every model of representation. Simultaneously transcending the question of 'authenticity' or 'perfection', innumerable alternatives have given way to a rich visual culture in urban spaces. The museum has turned into a space which constitutes subjective space of imagination.

The artists who work through the museum conceive of it differently. I have used two such illustrations from *Between Memory and Museum : A Dialogue with Folk and Tribal Artists* which is a unique attempt to collectively present the difference in perceptions of the tribal artists who work for the museums. The two pictures illustrated below depict contradicting opinions as per the museum culture is concerned.

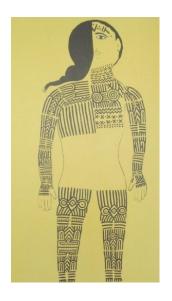




Fig. 3.5. Shanti Bai Marawe's depiction of a half-tattooed woman as an embodiment of the museum culture.

Fig. 3.6. Durga Bai Vyam's depiction of the museum.

Fig-3.5 is an illustration by Shanti Bai Marawe, a Gond 'gudna' maker who has adapted the physical act of tattooing to paper and canvas. She herself describes her illustration-

I've been tattooing since I was 14, and I've taught my daughter how to do it as well. Our community is very poor, we don't own any land. We go village to village tattooing people . . . It's always been a hard life. The museum has our designs on canvas, up on the wall. But there is not much about our lives- the fact that we are nomads, the way we move through forests to reach villages . . . These are things people should know. I'm not sure I can draw all this . . . I'm just a tattoo woman.' (A.Wolf and G.Wolf 35).

Shanti Bai's doubt in the modernisation of tribal art speaks differently to us. The sense of 'void' and 'doubt' is crucial to this transformation in their form of art.

However, we see a different optimism in the depiction of the concept of museum by Durga Bai Vyam, a renowned Gond artist, in Fig. 3.6. She portrays the museum as a 'mother' figure who caters to the need of tribal art communities like the Pardhan Gonds. According to her-

My museum is a mother. I see the museum as a woman who needs to do many things at once- nurture and care for the young and the old, cook, manage household expenses and work in the fields. Women have to hold together a lot of things. The mother- the museum [in the illustration]- is stretching her hand out to all the tribal and folk artists who come to her bringing all the things that are important to them.' (A.Wolf and G.Wolf 105).

It is not to implicate that these are binaries of optimistic and pessimistic attitudes towards the museum as an institution of art, it is rather to create space for introspection- on how the rural folk artists conceive of such 'modernisation' of their art forms. The paintings of Shanti Bai Marawe and Durga Bai Vyam remind us of Walter Benjamin's assertion - 'Art history might be seen as the working out of a tension between two polarities within the artwork itself, its course being determined by shifts in the balance between the two. These two poles are the artwork's cult value and its exhibition value' (106). Though Benjamin wrote the essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Machanical Reproduction" in the backdrop of a different socio-political scenario, the ideological framework is still an intertext to how art, especially folk art, has apparently become a 're-production' of a certain kind which seems repeating itself in its pattern, design, canvas and colours. Nevertheless, such insight does come with complicacies of a different kind. It is difficult to conclude on the permanence and fragility of art objects in relation to its surrounding; and more troublesome to

conclude on whether such permanence or fragility affects the piece of art work to benefit its continual growth.

Arjun Appadurai, a major theorist in globalisation studies, makes significant observations in this respect. He opines that the museums –

Despite their aspiration to the illusion of permanence, they are only momentary aggregations of material, such as paint, bricks, glass, acrylic, cloth, steel, or canvas. These underlying materials are ever volatile, which is why museums always insist that we "do not touch." What is at risk is not just aura or authenticity but the fragility of objecthood itself . . . the very objecthood of art requires action in order to resist the historical processes that turn one kind of thing into another kind of thing unless one is committed to the projectof mainting the work of art . . . The corrosion of history only supports and intensifies the inherent tendency of things to move on to some new state in their social lives. And this is as true of art objects as it is of things in general. (15-16)

Hence perhaps the 'objecthood' of art and its 'aura' often contradict each other and it is this naturally contradicting force that often defeats the 'aura' of the art form transforming it and rendering it in newer forms. As Appadurai puts it-

These newer forms seek to exploit the vulnerability of objects to change, to take advantage of the corrosive effects of history and context, and to incorporate the mortality of the artist and the body into the fabric of the artwork itself. They are therefore fully consistent with the idea that all art is a momentary assemblage of mobile persons and things and that art objects, assemblages, events, and performances vary

only in the intensity of their interest in denying or celebrating the social trajectory to which all things are subject. (16)

The study of primitivism and the rise of museums and visual display culture in India helps us understand to what extent the institutionalisation of culture has given space to the 'marginal' in the representative space of art. Specifically, the onset of museum culture, exhibitions and urbanisation of Pardhan Gond art, Pardhan artists' work and experiences become points of ingress to explore the changing 'knowledge pool' to which they are attached.

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Chapter 4

Traversing the Alleys of Picturebooks

Folk and tribal art has undergone innumerable changes in its form of practice and representation. The 'urban folk' art hence stands separately categorised by scholars of folk art. 'Urban folk' form of art is one among many other variations in the form of folk art. Variations which often defy the definitions of 'folk art' are always being produced and 're-produced'. The meaning, context, practice of folk art changes with its 're-production' in various forms.

The objects of folk art are often used as trendy interior decors for the living space; simultaneously they are also being applied to graphic novels and picture books. It is certainly empowering for such an art form to gain wide amount of variations. Though the 'aura' of an object has a deep relation to the uniqueness of that object from its emerging tradition; how do we perceive of reproduction of folk art when the folk artists are trying to preserve a similar kind of uniqueness through 'mock folk villages'/ performance theatres? Do the modern adaptations of folk art create a dialogue between discourses which today concern literature? Such questions become important when we talk of picturebooks from the folk art tradition.

4.1 Picturebooks

It is not my aim to trace the beginning, middle, and continuing trends of children's literature. However, as the texts I have chosen belong to the genre of picturebooks which is largely a part of children's literature, I think it apt to touch upon the threads of picturebooks and children's literature, specifically our understanding of picturebooks in India.

A picture book is generally held to be a 'book' in whose content the 'pictures' dominate as its text. Whereas, in illustrated books the written text is fundamental to the understanding of pictures; 'illustrations' reinforce the written text. However, definitions always come with a range of contradictory counterpoints. So it is with defining the picturebook too. In the introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks* Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer brings to fore the very basic difficulties in the definition of the picturebook through an etymological contradiction inherent in the word- 'picture book'/ 'picturebook'. According to Kümmerling-Meibauer-

While English dictionaries clearly state that the notion should be written with two words as 'picture book,' scholars working in the realm of picturebook research suggest writing the term as one word in order to emphasize the inseparable unit of pictures and text . . . This becomes even more complicated in other languages, where a specific notion for 'picturebook' does not yet exist. In Spain and Portugal, for instance, the picturebook is still categorized as 'illustrated book' . . . [Hence] These observations point to a discussion which has not yet been fully resolved, but the numerous academic studies on picturebooks have shown that the picturebook in the strict sense of the

term exists and presents a vast corpus which is distinguished by a specific relationship between text and visuals. (3-4)

In spite of variations, there are certain fundamental concepts that characterise a picturebook. As Nathalie op de Beeck puts it-

picturebooks of any era synchronize visual imagery and verbal components in a multipage, interdependent series, and that any picturebook depends upon a satisfying vacillation among signifiers and signifieds. Presumably the juxtaposition of written text and visual imagery necessitates a specific reading strategy, whatever the era. (19) on the primary building blocks of the picturebooks, it is not that the

However, given the primary building blocks of the picturebooks, it is not that the genre becomes less flexible to the 'horizon of expectations' and changing perceptions of the reader, audience and the author with time. Michael Rosen cites how the genre of full-colour picturebook developed with changing social influences. The full-colour picturebook used to be a luxury commodity consumed only by the well-off, but the growing culture of publicly owned pre-school institutions, schools and libraries made such books freely available to a large number of children (Rosen 23). Hence, like all genres picturebooks too have been shaped by the socio-cultural influences of changing times.

Children's literature and its subgenres have had various cross-sections depending on one's interpretative strategy. For instance, picturebooks for some critics imply a return back to childhood nostalgia while for some it is the captivating psychological transformation and maturation of a child to an adult that makes any subgenre of children's literature readable by any reader, irrespective of age.

The picturebook's word and picture has been refashioned over the decades, and we need to engage with such influences and changes in order to understand the

function of the picture-text relationship in our contemporary contexts. In being expressive of childhood, picturebooks behold the existing cultural expression and behaviour alongside hinting at the existing definitions of childhood in a particular cultural, spatio- temporal location. Picturebooks evoke emotional response in children. They are 'polyphonic' in the way they bring together pluralistic voices into a text. Simultaneously, their composition is based on 'a range of influences: the traditions, the arts, the crafts, the popular, the high aestheticism. All these transform the art of picture book making into a language the children/readers of many cultures may enjoy.' (Rao "picture books"). With the change in the re-production of texts, its interpretation based on the socio-political scenario too is bound to change.

Two-dimensional picture stories and illustrations perhaps had their origin in ancient cave paintings. However, picturebooks as a genre grew in the West. The production of picturebooks bloomed in the 1920s with development in the field of lithography. The Western market is still driven by picturebooks of diverse range-starting from concept books, the classic Beatrix Potter to picturebooks like Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris's *The Lost Words*. Picturebooks are innovative and complex formulation of thoughts in a picture-text form whose diversity has been multiplying with time.

Picturebooks are often produced in multiple categories. Alphabet books, counting books, pop-up books, board books- all of these are variations of picture books for children. Publishers often stamp their productions as child specific, age specific and sometimes sex specific as well. Picturebooks which are said to be 'designed specifically for children' raise numerous questions in this respect, it also reminds us of the fine line between what we understand as 'children's literature' and 'literature written for children'. There are works which weren't specifically written

for the children but have ended up being so and vice-versa. How do we then segregate literature? Though categorisation has almost become a necessity in the genre of children's literature, segregating the audience limits the scope of the text. The 'function' of the picturebook depends 'on a reader's interaction with the text, a picturebook might be perceived as an artwork or a tool of literacy, as a zone of safe play or a polarizing political commentary.' (Beeck 25)

Though the target audience do play a crucial role in framing of the picturebooks and segregating them defines how they are presented in the market, segregation is not the overarching factor in reaching out to the readers as-

Reading a picturebook is not only a matter of engaging with the structure and subject matter in the pictures and the text. To the child and to the experienced reader alike, the picturebook is a normative space that signals implied readership, explicit and implicit ideology, and historical and cultural contexts. (Beeck 20)

Debates about form and content of picture books- whether it should be non-digital or handheld, the proportion of words to the text, the importance of author-illustrator/ author and illustrator, about inclusion and exclusion of target audience- perhaps suggests that picture-text relationship is something which is fluid and adaptable. It is to accommodate fluidity in categorisation, form and content that 'crossover picture books' have become widespread. Nonetheless, the 'adultization' of children's literature again raises questions about the very existence of the genre named 'children's literature'- Does this mean that 'adultization' of children's literature or its broadening horizon is dissolving the specificity of the genre? Or is it simply that adults, in a continuum of human experience from childhood to adulthood and further, are rediscovering the pleasures of storytelling in children's books?

4.2 The Indian scenario

Why haven't we been able to take the best from children's literature in English and the best from our narrative and folk traditions to produce a literature that is truly distinctive? Stories from different regions and in different languages — whether classical, regional or ethnic — are replete with songs, verses, proverbs and riddles. Using these and experimenting with them would surely have opened up a whole new way of writing for children, rooted yet free. . . ("Children's Literature").

The above interrogations and thoughts as put down by Radhika Menon reflects the current needs and developing trends in refashioning children's literature in the Indian context. The three key institutions- the publishing industry, the educational institution and the process of nurturing the child have always played a vital role in giving shape to children's literature.

According to the Publishers Weekly 'the Indian book market is the sixth-largest in the world and the second-largest in terms of English language market (after the U.S.)'. However, 'children's literature' as a separate category, a 'genre', in the Indian market took time to flourish. It is still 'growing and fragmented'.

Though visual story-telling has always been a part of children's literature, picturebooks find it difficult to create an impact in the Indian book market; thus it is not a commonplace phenomenon to come across picturebooks composed by tribal and folk artists in wide circulation. However, there are variations in circulation of picturebooks in the Indian market and it is the same for the picturebooks coming from

folk artists. N.K. Krishnanand, an accomplished professional in the Sales Department of Amar Chitra Katha claimed that in India the 'market remains largely a print book market. Reading on digital devices, especially for children, is not as widespread as it is in the West. With books priced so affordably low, there is actually no reason for parents not to buy print books for their children' (Tan *Publishers Weekly*). Similar logic perhaps works behind the low popularity of picturebooks in India.

Anant Pai's Amar Chitra Katha, one of the most popular illustrated series of stories based on Indian folklores, regional tales, mythical stories- stories in which plot, character and didactic message build the narrative, has certainly not excluded regional legends and folklores from its vast repository of Indian narratives. However, depiction of Amar Chitra Katha narratives are driven by didactic messages. Amar Chitra Katha, the representative work in the field of Indian illustrated stories both for children and adult, became an essentialised manifestation of the Indian concept of children's literature as a pedagogical tool. Sandhya Rao, the senior editor of Tulika Books analyses the merits and demerits of stereotypes like the Amar Chitra Katha which have formed the core of an Indian child's reading experience. According to her-

The series shows how potent the packaging of national heritage in comic format can be — both as a cultural commodity and a marketing strategy. Although they use the comic book format, ACK completely bypasses the subtlety and sophistication of the genre and makes the medium the message. The text and pictures are replete with racial, sexist and communal overtones, not to mention the banal writing, poor and often wrong use of language, unedited use of age-inappropriate vocabulary and ideas, plainly chauvinistic or downright

insensitive dialogue, blandly rendered narrative, decontextualised perspective, and so on. Yet, in many circles, ACK constitutes culture in a package . . . Unfortunately, ACK makes readers, young and old, feel they know all there is to know about Indian culture. (Rao "Growing Pains")

Pedagogy alongside innovations in the field of children's literature has changed the understanding and composition of the genre of children's literature. There is an awareness among publishers that to some extent it is their failure if they are unable to unveil the significance of picturebooks to the readers. In spite of the Indian parents favouring the written textbooks over picture books (as they help in improving reading, writing skills and general knowledge of kids), the affinity of the Indian consciousness towards visual narrative is being brought to the fore by numerous publishers by means of picturebooks. The Senior Editor of Tulika Publishers claims that

... Picture books are crucial to the experience of a child, not simply in relation to reading, but to living . . . In India, we don't have to go far to remember. All across the country are examples of visual narrative that cut across distinctions, whether it is the phad scrolls of Rajasthan or the chitrakathis of Maharashtra or the patuas of Bengal or the leather puppeteers of Andhra Pradesh or the yakshagana of Karnataka or the kathakali of Kerala... everywhere, the storytelling culture is dynamic, sophisticated and highly visual. ("Growing Pains")

Thus, the publishers in India try to bring the 'Indian' identity and concerns of Indian nationality to the visual grounds of the picture books.

There are picturebooks which try to impact the sense of social consciousness, social justice and human rights in children. Picturebooks like *I Will Save My Land* talk about the land infringement which takes place in the name of 'development'. Neha Singh's *I Need to Pee* raises awareness for the need of clean and hygienic toilets. *Water Stories From Around The World* in the mould of picture-text format goes beyond the stereotype of 'preaching' the children and adults to take care of nature. The book naturally generates a sense of adulation for nature and its components.

It is not that serious issues concerning our socio-political conditions are totally beyond the fringes of picturebooks. *Gope and Meera: A Migration Story* by Ritu Hemnani and Samidha Gunjal addresses issues like migration based on the experience of Partition (Partition of India in 1947). There is an urge to transcend stereotypespublishing in various languages- dealing imaginatively and sensibly with issues relating to LGBT which might be considered a 'taboo' topic for the children's literature arena. *Mayil Will not be Quiet* by Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran (author-illustrator) is an engaging journey into the mind of a 12-year-old whose dilemmas range from questioning the gender stereotypes to thinking about the stereotypes of popular culture.

In contemporary times, publishing house for children are especially dedicated to achieving certain goals. Publishers like Tulika Books, Eklavya have brought out picturebooks based on tribal, indigenous stories. They have done so keeping in mind the children who come from tribal communities for education. Stories from their own community would perhaps help them find a sense of familiarity amidst the educational ambience. *Karo-Koeli : A Santhali Mythology* retold and illustrated by Gurucharan Murmu, published by Eklavya Books is a unique endeavour in the

bilingual form to depict the tale of Karo and Koeli in short picturebook format. Eklavya's *So Ja Ullu* by Bhuri Bai too is an onomatopoeic verse written in Hindi and drawn in the Bhil style- using dotted pictures and bright colours, to attract the child reader. Bhuri Bai is also the architect of interesting nonfictions for children. Belonging to the Bhil tribe, she has 'authored' a 'visual autobiography' named *Dotted Lines: Visual Autobiography of an Artist* published by Katha Books. Picturebooks like *Bioscope*, which introduces Mithila through Shanti Devi's Maithili art form, and *Mai and her Friends* by Durga Bai, which showcases signature Gond patterns in illustrating the story of Mai and her friends, are exemplars of acquainting the young readers with folk art.

Folk stories, the unfettered nature of the oral narrative tradition is often the medium to create 'affect' which immediately draws us 'emotionally' towards the need to rethink environment in the present century. Folk art and stories are often part of the curriculum in Indian schools. *Khichdi: Ek Lok Katha* distinctively states its pedagogical purpose as a 'big book'. As a 'CBSE recommended' book it is meant to improve children's reading practices both through its form and content. Eklavya Books also provides folktale-based picturebooks as open access to its readers. One such e-book is *What a Song: a bundelkhandi folk tale* with illustrations by Jitendra Thakur. *What a Song* fuses the prevalent oral culture of singing songs in tribal communities, the intrinsic desire of a Bundelkhandi woman to join her community members in singing songs, with a child-like adventurous plotline in which the woman's husband gifts her song in his own words composed out of his journey from the market to home and as the song's lyrics coincides with the silent theft occurring in their house, the thieves flee frightened that the lady had perhaps seen them coming in. Both the plot and pictures intermingle to subtly comment on the lifestyle of the

bundelkhandi people and also keep the child engaged in a certain degree of 'didactivism' which is often propagated through picturebooks. The 'Indianness' in stories is something which most Indian publishers in this genre emphasize. Each step of the publisher towards its audience is a very conscious and thoughtful one.

Tulika Books, a South Indian multilingual children's books publishing house, has categorised picturebooks into – General Picture Books, Wordless Picturebooks, Wordbird Books, Our Myths, Illustrated Classics, First Look Science, Thumb Thumb Books, Baby Bahadur, In Verse, Under The Banyan. They give place to folk stories like the tales of BonBibi in a more generalised all-inclusive category of 'Our Myths', as well as in ancient-storytelling-category of 'Under the Banyan'. The way Tulika categorises its books makes it evident that they are more concerned about storytelling techniques than about the form of picturebooks. Multilingualism, pluralism in terms of cultural identity forms the pivot of Tulika. In the case of picture books, the ones in regional languages sell even less and get very little attention. Tulika designs, produces and markets books within a certain price range. In order to preserve the 'potential vitality' of picturebooks Tulika also publishes innovative forms of picturebooks keeping note of its basic goals. Standup books like *Home* by Nina Sabnani open the windows of visual narratives and makes one feel the vibe of travelling from the exterior to the interior of the domestic space. The story telling technique is reminiscent of the Kaavad, the storytelling box/shrine whose panels present stories from Indian epics, local myths and folktales, which is a form of storytelling in Rajasthan considered to be a 400-years old practice. Nina Sabnani's storytelling house is a radical reinvention of picturebook with a typical sense of 'Indianness'.

Besides this, there are publications like *adivaani*, which give expression to voices from indigenous communities. They too produce picturebooks based on

indigenous experience. Earth rests on a Tortoise, We come from the Geese are 'Santhal Creation Stories' written by Ruby Hembrom and illustrated by Boski Jain. These picturebooks echo the adivaani objective of creating 'an ongoing intergenerational knowledge, heritage, memory and legacy project, which serves as a wellspring of the authentic Adivasi voice . . . '("adivaani").

Publishers of Children's literature are trying to push boundaries in their own possible way. Publishers like Tara Books, Little Latitude are the ones who have an international acclaim. Little Latitude, renowned for the designing and producing board books, is a Bangalore-based publication house which has diverse contributors-students of National Institute of Design to international authors contribute to the publication house.

Anushka Ravishankar, one of Tara Books' best known authors, opines that-

. . . There is a universal lack of understanding in the value of picture books. People do not understand that the pictures get to tell the story in a picture book. They often regard an illustrated title and a picture book as one and the same . . . People are looking for India-specific content with an Indian setting- where the characters are Indian and the locales are in India- and these are more acceptable to them. However, since the titles are 'made in India', people expect the prices to be very low regardless of the content quality. So there is a disconnect, and publishers have to bridge that.' (Tan *Publishers Weekly*).

Tara Books, known for its visual designing, illustration and picturebooks has worked on both the content and form of books it produces. Tara Books presents

. . . A process-based experience, particularly by means of delicate surface paper and with the additional application of a screen-printing

technique. The production is an example of sustainable design since handmade papers made out of cotton rags and recycled waste paper are utilized. The paper's ink coating is visible to the eye and can be felt by the hand, in contrast to the uniform surface of mass-printed picturebooks (Tara Books 2015). These books not only transmit local cultural heritage via text and image, but also through their handmade look. (Alaca 65)

Tara authors often work in collaboration with tribal and folk art experts to create books which themselves seem to be artefacts. The reproduction of folk art as picture books is itself a comment on the nature of the modification which 'reproduction' entails.

These books are categorised as Illustrated Books, Children's Picture Books, Crossover Picture Books, Book Art and are often available in more than one language. Tara books are often said to be 'beautiful but expensive'. When asked to answer this claim of 'beautiful but expensive', Gita Wolf, the founder of Tara Books replied-

. . . Our books are always set at a price that allows fair compensation to be given to everyone involved in creating them: from the author, artist and book designer to those involved in the production process. We are also very strong on the quality of our production and the ethics of our books. So we're not prepared to cut corners on either quality or environmental impact. For example, many of our books use either handmade or recycled paper. . . ("Interview")

The way books like that of Tara brew up stories of the urban and the rural, local and the global unfurls a fusion of the kind Arjun Appadurai talks ofThe challenge for India's artists and critics is to find pathways through the global market without losing entirely the magic of materiality and the unruliness of the world of things. This unruliness thrives on the ephemerality of the artwork, the plenitude of material life, the multiple forms and futures that the social life of things can take, and the hazy borders between things and the persons whose social life they enrich and complicate. This tension between the rule of the commodity and the unruliness of the thing itself marks the space where Indian art and its makers can find a possible space. . . ("The Thing Itself")

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Chapter 5

Diversity in the Pardhan Gond Expression

Let's start from the dot. In the image Venkat Raman Singh Shyam presents a map showing the location of his village in Madhya Pradesh. The map is not only a cartographic tool used to locate Venkat's origin, it is also the signifier of the basic elements of visual art- 'the coming together of the dot and the line'.

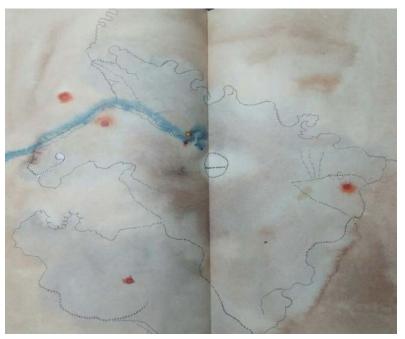


Fig. 5.1. Venkat Raman Singh Shyam locates his village in the map.

The image is an explanation of the semantic significance of the syntax-the dots and lines- as signature elements of Pardhan Gond art. It spells out-

I'm just a dot, but every dot is a circle in itself, every dot is the end, every dot the beginning . . . I'm the circle that's aware of its own axis, aware that the axis is a line, but the line begins with a dot. . . I'm the word that tries not to end the sentence that ends the tale . . . a

beginning that untiringly tries to end endings . . . (V.Shyam and Anand "Songs of Art" np.).

Dots, lines, circles, spheres, dashes, parallel lines, handprints are geometric shapes which have been used as bare minimal tools of composing art since the era of cave paintings. Dots and circles remind us that these shapes are very easily found in nature and also form the preliminary idea of understanding shapes since our childhood. These are the shapes which also determine the very basis of any art form; however their use as 'bare minimum' is still associated with the tribal art forms and hence is often perceived as a 'low culture' method in art. However, there is a need to go beyond these hermeneutic stereotypes. Dots, lines, patterns are not just used to 'fill in' the blank space on the canvas, they are not simple 'decorative' patterns; their strategic use might stretch beyond the 'decorative' formula. Herein we also need to rethink the distinction which is often made between 'visual arts' and 'decorative arts'.

As E.H Gombrich points out, there is an essential difference between the perception of meaning that governs the visual arts and the sense of balance, order, and symmetry that is paramount in decoration. Rhythm and structure, animation, and stylization are the elements that rule decoration, the individual motifs forming an integral part of an overall order. In short, the decorative arts are ruled by the tension between an innate sense of order and creative ingenuity. (157 "Art history")

The transformation of the Pardhan Gond art into picture books/crossover picture books, comics, graphic genre reinforces the 'rules' of decoration- they are driven by motifs, rhythm, structure, dynamism. However, these 'rules' have been

altered with change in media and the narrative content which defines the generic boundaries in which such 'decorative' art forms have begun to be located.

In the mainstream art movements too patterns like the dots have often been used technically to play with the perception of the viewer. Pointillism, inaugurated with the work of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac in the 1880s, was one such aesthetic technique in which dots were used not only to depict a particular texture but also to connote a blending of colours; a play with the colour patterns vis-a-vis the perception of the viewer. Spot painting of British artists like Damien Hirst, appearing in a curtain-form of 'visual candies' uses dots to explore colours. Japanese artists like Yayoi Kusama use dots in a three-dimensional form as 'transcendental symbols'. Interesting use of dots is also found in the works of Roy Fox Lichtenstein, an American pop artist who resurrected the use of dots by applying dots to comic images. He modified the use of the Ben-Day dots according to the need of his art composition.

Similarly, the dotted pattern, which is one of the vital components of Pardhan Gond art, never develops into a similar repetitive 'decorative' idea for all Pardhan Gond artists. Decoration is a 'technology of enchantment' according to Alfred Gell, a British social anthropologist who had done influential work concerning art. This is what makes people to 'like' patterns. They are simply pleasing and have a consumption value in that sense. Nevertheless-

Patterns by their multiplicity and the difficulty we have in grasping their mathematical or geometrical basis by mere visual inspection, generate relationships over time between persons and things, because what they present to the mind is, cognitively speaking, always 'unfinished business' . . . they slow perception down, or even halt it, so

that the decorated object is never fully possessed at all, but is always in the process of becoming possessed . . . (Gell 80-81).

The patterns used in the Pardhan Gond art differ from one artist to another and from one kind of work to another. Sometimes parallel dotted lines are used, sometimes patterns are used at random to 'fill in' the dominant figure in the canvas. These patterns or 'detailing' are used with conscious knowledge about them which deepens the 'allusive quality' of such art. The variety of patterns often merges with the 'affect' the art creates. The narrative content and patterns fuse in the canvas. Circularity, for instance, is the crux to Venkat Raman Singh Shyam's *Finding My Way*. Circular arrowed figures, wheels, pinwheels recur in Venkat's narrative. A pinwheel is drawn at the very beginning of the text as it 'sways both ways. It dances to the song of the breeze' (V.Shyam and Anand "Song of Life" np.). Venkat and S. Anand blow the pinwheel in the direction they want and stories flow from multiple directions forming the narrative.

Bhajju Shyam too paints *Creation* not in the traditional format of telling mythological stories of creation through the Gond pantheon, he paints the pictures trying to address the larger concept of 'creation'- creation of the earth, water, air, seeds, time, art by harping on the 'allusive quality' of patterns. He presents the 'nirakar' (shapeless) as a series of compressed symbols shaped in his canvas. This makes the text reader- friendly and provides more space for the intervention of the reader. One can grasp the superficial layer of the text by browsing the text, with minimal knowledge about the Gond stories of creation.



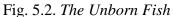




Fig. 5.3. Death and Rebirth

Bhajju's *Creation* starts with 'The Unborn Fish'. Gita Wolf translates Bhajju's idea into words, saying-

In the beginning, before the creator made the world, there was emptiness . . . nothing at all. Then came water. The fish is the Gond symbol for water. Here I've painted the form of a fish, but it is still waiting to be born. This fish is a fish-shaped emptiness, bubbling in the water. (B. Shyam and G. Wolf "The Unborn Fish" np.)

The 'unborn' fish in its prenatal state is presented in the process of being born in a circular motion surrounded by bubbles. The dots on the body of the unborn creature is concentrated in the peripheries and scattered in the surface giving us a sense of 'highlighting' the unborn figure. The bubbles in the picture show motion in two different ways- the upward moving bubbles from the mouth of the unborn fish and the randomly scattered bubbles in the water. The picture itself is presented in binarised colour palette tones. The black and white of the canvas is contrasted by the ash dots that depicts the fish. The notion of 'becoming' or the process of being born is encapsulated in the conceptual use of the circle.

The 'circle' has always had a special significance in the sense that it has been related to the divine, it has 'always represented and still represents eternity, with no beginning and no end. An ancient text says that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.' (Munari 196). Besides the 'symbolic' significance, circle as an 'essentially unstable, dynamic figure' also brings in a sense of movement.

In contrast to the unborn fish, a similar depiction of the fish-like figure is shown at the end of Bhajju's *Creation* (Fig. 5.3). This fish corresponds to the understanding of death and rebirth-

Life exists because there is death- one contains the other . . . every end makes a new beginning possible . . . In Gond villages, when you see smoke rising from a house, you know someone has passed away . . . There is no food cooked in the bereaved household until the third day, when they invite the whole village to a meal of fish. This signals the beginning of normal life again (G.Wolf and B.Shyam "Death and Rebirth" np.).

The fish, as shown in the picture (Fig. 5.3.), is a colourful one with no circular patterns. The background of the fish seems to be identical to a leaf which is perhaps related to it being served as a meal in the bereaved Gond household. The colourful fish, in contrast to the black and white unborn fish seems to convey the experience of lifetime in the form of colours. However, the fish is still coiled in the loop. The circular loop pattern at the end of the book probably suggests the continuum of not only life-death-rebirth cycle but also a continuation of the re-presentation and reinterpretation of 'creation'.

Time-'Day and night, beginning and end, life and death . . . life is measured in time. Time for human beings is made up of day and night. Each is a half of one whole. Human beings themselves are made up of two halves: man and woman . . .'

(G.Wolf and B.Shyam "Time" np.) The Gond myth has specific association of female deities like Ratmai Murkhudi with the night and male deities with the day. In Bhajju's depiction (Fig. 5.4), the outer space beyond the binary of day and night is a black background with red dots perhaps hinting at the infinitude that preceded creation. The tree as the emblem of nature with the circle of time is divided into day and night. The multicoloured dots that cover the entire circle of time seem to be a natural veil to the mysteries of nature. The binaries which are talked about are fractured by the very concept of the circles and dots which convey a sense of movement, a continuum beyond the boundaries of the canvas.



Fig. 5.4. Depiction of "Time" by Bhajju Shyam

A similar circular motion is also conveyed in Bhajju Shyam's portrayal of the 'air'-

Into this place, the creator steamed the breath of life. Air is born. The story goes that when the creator made the world, he sent out a blue crow to search for land. I've thought of these crows as whirling out from the eye of a storm, from the centre of creation . . . (G.Wolf and B.Shyam "Air" np.)

The bright bi-colour depiction of the birds in the air produces two contracting movements- both centrifugal and centripetal; it both pulls in the reader into the vertigo and simultaneously provides the scope to move in the opposite direction. Bhajju's *Creation* unravels the act of creation as a 'process', most of the components of nature are painted to provide a sense of continuity beyond the frozen movement in the canvas. The chain-like pattern which connects the birds is symbolic of the chain of dancers of the tribe. The pattern is employed with a dynamic import in it which animates the process of creation in the canvas.



Fig. 5.5. Bhajju Shyam's portrayal of "Air"

Where *Creation* tells us the stories of creation, variations of it are found in *The*Night Life of Trees which apparently seems to be an anthology of trees inhabiting

Gond stories in various patterns. Each image comes along with a precise story of its own. However, this peripheral relationship which the author tries to create with the reader goes a long way if we try to interpret these images with our understanding of the Pardhan Gond art. The way the trees are named make them alive with stories; they interact with the readers not as mere 'art objects' but as something which both children and adults can identify with. The way each tree comes with its own story prompts to us the 'lost words' of not only the Gonds, but also the humankind's lost sensations relating to the natural world.

The Night Life of Trees catalogues transformative patterns in Gond art and its folkloric quality. The tree named 'The Marriage of Desire and Intoxication' presents two trees symbolising 'cannabis' (Ganja) and 'alcohol' (Mahua). According to the legend, the Ganja plant and Mahua tree were human beings once, however due to social taboos they could not get married and did so in their afterlife in the form of life giving force as trees. The beauty of their love made Shankar Bhagwan, the creator, to name them Ganja and Mahua.





Fig.5.6.(left) 'The Marriage of Desire and Intoxication' in *The Night Life of Trees*.

Fig. 5.7. (right) Ganja and Mahua in Finding My Way

Reborn out of abstract qualities of love, desire, the trees are symmetrical to each other and painted in two different vibrant colours. They are both unified in their difference. The animal creature embedded within the tree gives it the 'life' which was bestowed on it both as a source from human love and its presence amidst the vegetal life in the forest. The blending of dualities in Ganja and Mahua is revised by Venkat Raman Singh Shyam in *Finding My Way* where he reflects on how the 'becoming' of his book is the outcome of fusing 'two don'ts together into a do'.

In 'The Night of the Glowing Sembar', the tree features in a green-yellow combination, in a loitering structure. The branches of the Sembar tree, dividing into sub-branches almost resemble an upside-down root-like structure which might be understood as an ideological representation of the continuity of the 'idea' of 'tree' as a representation of life force.



Fig. 5.8. The Night of the Glowing Sembar

The tree is filled, not with dots or lines, but with a leafy pattern which extends the idea of the life of the tree itself, especially as the Sembar tree which is the abode of holy spirits.

'The Tree of the Serpent Goddess' too as an entirety seems to have a dynamic, animated character. The tree itself seems to be alive with the story it embodies. The serpentine structure not only binds the roots of the tree, it also finds an extension in the form of branches and the leaves with a bi-colour pattern of the peacock- feather which adds to it a notion of 'beauty'. It automatically makes its place in the mind of the reader as an icon of the 'terrible beauty'-' Disturb her, and the whole earth shakes with fearful earthquakes . . . '(G.Wolf et al. np.).



Fig. 5.9. The Tree of the Serpent Goddess

Snakes are a common motif used in Gond stories. The tree of 'Snakes and Earth' in *The Night life of Trees* says- 'The earth is held in the coils of the snake goddess. And the roots of trees coil around the earth too, holding it in place. If you

want to depict the earth, you can show it in the form of a snake . . . ' (G.Wolf et al. np.) The correspondence between the snake and the earth also resonates in the story of Basin Kanya (Bamboo Maiden) in which the snakes (seven snakes) are one among the many agents of nature who help the sister-loving brother in his journey to ultimately preserve the soul of her sister whom he killed for the sake of his brothers. The rebirth of the sister as Basin Kanya reaffirms faith in the healing touch of nature. Bamboo is hence integral to the ritualistic practises among the Gonds; be it marriage/conjugal life, death ceremony or mundane activities like making food, bamboos are used for all of them. The balance between human and the non-human world rests on the terms of a contract. In each story the bond results into the restoration of status quo in the environment.

Mythology and folkloric elements of the Gond community get resurrected in each representation. Snakes, bamboo maidens, mermaids are often found in myths of many cultures across the world. This certainly leads us to think about the ambiguous nature of myths beyond any structuralist analysis.

Myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways: as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of esthetic play, or as the basis of ritual. Mythological figures are considered as personified abstractions, divinized heroes, or fallen gods. Whatever the hypothesis, the choice amounts to reducing mythology either to idle play or to a crude kind of philosophic speculation . . . Some claim that human societies merely express, through their mythology, fundamental feelings common to the whole of mankind, such as love, hate, or revenge or that they try to provide some kind of explanations for phenomena which they cannot otherwise understand— astronomical,

meteorological, and the like. But why should these societies do it in such elaborate and devious ways, when all of them are also acquainted with empirical explanations? . . . (Levi-Strauss 207).

When mythology does not match the outright reality of social conditions, it is often claimed to be the means for the outlet of repressed feelings. Where myths offer innumerable permutation and combinations making its narrative consequences unpredictable, it also has an underlying similarity. The mythical plain becomes a bricolage which incorporates one's sense of 'belonging' to a particular tradition. It perhaps provides a fluid ground to the artist to sail from the traditional to the contemporary and vice-versa.

A completely new manifestation of the Pardhan Gond art and artist is beheld in both Venkat Raman Singh Shyam's *Finding My Way* and Bhajju Shyam's *The London Jungle Book*. Both the tales share a commonality of the journey motif in the form of a 'kuntslerroman' and a visual travelogue. The combination of these texts unfurls the inside-out of how myths and other 'objective' accessories of the Pardhan Gond art have changed with its 'reproduction'. It speaks of the way reproduction has made meaning transmittable, hence it is no longer 'a question of reproduction failing to reproduce certain aspects of an image faithfully; it is a question of reproduction making it possible, even inevitable, that an image will be used for many different purposes . . .' (Berger 24-25). It is one kind of re-production when the traditional practice has hopped genres to now reach the picture books, and this hermeneutic endeavour of my research to deal with the transformations in this art form, using the images from the picture book to address a particular individual perception might be read as another kind of 're-production'.

The commonplace political import, subjectivity and postcolonial polemics related to the genre of 'travel writing' get reinvented in the form of pictures and words in *The London Jungle Book*. Nudging the reader to remember Rudyard Kipling's 'classic' Jungle Book, Bhajju's Jungle Book is a story of travel- of a 'tribal man' to the 'urban jungle' of London. The text is an ingenious intermix of the 'naiveté', the nostalgic, the Pardhan Gond view of things. Bhajju's choice of episodes to portray his journey immediately marks out the identity of the author. Initiated by individual fractured emotions, the narrative moves towards the 'wonder' of the 'tribal' man at facing substantial adventures in life- from his suitcase to the flying documents, everything features in Bhajju's journey abroad.

Bhajju Shyam along with another Pardhan Gond artist Ram Singh Urveti was invited to London by the Indian designer Rajeev Sethi to paint the walls of 'Masala Zone', an Indian restaurant in Islington. The decoration of the restaurant might have been a part of the business enterprise for the 'Masala Zone' owner, however it is the 'other' side of the story, Bhajju's two months stay in London, that reaches us through the pages of *The London Jungle Book*.

The fear of 'movement', away from one's own land, to a far off alien land makes him feel '50-50'; half-and-half. The innate contradiction of emotion is projected on his face in the visual depiction- half the face is seen shedding tears and half of it tries to maintain the emotional balance. The foreign is hence that zone of 'spectral geography' where 'the self seems to lose its coherence, its self-hood' (Nayar 59).

The chained pattern which covers the face in Bhajju's depiction of his emotions almost denotes an imprisoned face and communicates to us the uneasy internal turmoil which does not translate into words entirely. This image covering the

entire first page of the book iterates the very basic orientation of human understanding; that- 'Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak . . . But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world . . .' (Berger 7).

The fractured facial expression is drawn with greater detailing again in the another image which depicts how each strand of the individual's existence is deeply rooted to his surroundings. The thoughts tangled in the strands of the hair are presented as 'Gond symbols'-from the Gond language (*Bhasha*) to the forest-everything is engulfed in Bhajju's fear of getting detached. Initially the existence of the 'self' dominates the surrounding and as we zoom into Bhajju's travel episodes, we find how the artistic self, as an observer only becomes a part of the canvas.

The visual contours of the journey narrative painted in retrospect retain the author-narrator's transformation in identity and selfhood as remnants of being self-conscoiusness and self-reflexive. The fear of abandoning 'home' at the very thought of 'London' is magnified in his 'becoming a foreigner'. Bhajju opines- 'Everyone was a foreigner- all kinds of skin colours and all kinds of hair . . . My colour was different, my language was taken away from me . . . I myself had become a foreigner!' (G.Wolf et al. "Becoming a Foreigner" np.). The alienation, which Bhajju's *The London Jungle Book* presents, is in communication with Venkat Raman Singh Shyam's experience as a 'foreigner' portrayed in *Finding My Way*. As individuals both Venkat and Bhajju are subjected to silent alienation as 'foreigners'. Venkat recounts his experience of the Barcelona beach- 'everyone lay there like they had been born. Their skin was their only garment . . . Black, white, brown, all shades. Lounging in their own skin. Fully clothed, it was I who felt naked . . . ' (V.Shyam and Anand "Songs of

the World" np.). It is perhaps the feeling of 'shame' at his own thoughts that made Venkat feel 'naked'. However as an antidote to his 'shame' Venkat links the 'nude' with the ghotul that was once practised by the Muria Gonds of Bastar.

It is interesting to observe how the narrator in the *London Jungle Book* embraces the 'foreign' in his own visual language in spite of the colossal distance between him in the aircraft and the patch of earth visible below as he approaches London. The topographic appearance of England from the air is rendered as an emerald sari of which the sea and its creatures together form the imprints on it. Sari as a cloth canvas signifies the plurality in the Gond storyteller's universe which is reminiscent of the 'song' of the sari in Venkat's 'Song of the World' -

I have woven a fabric so fine

With the wrap of your breathe, the weft of mine

With eight lotuses for spindles, the five elements for thread

It takes nine months to weave this spread

Of starshine, birdsong, earth's russet

I have woven a fabric so blessed

The cloth's red now defines life

This boundless cloth weaves day into night

(V.Shyam and Anand np.).

Sari as the undisputed canvas of artistic expression also hints at the artist's devotion to his 'work'. It is the artist's devotion towards his work of art that helps him

wade through difficulties. So it is with Bhajju. The alienation felt in the foreign land by Bhajju is gradually dispelled by 'work'. The narrator in the course of his 'work' is seen painting Shankar Bhagwan with his trident standing on a fish and bowl which is symbolic of the space (restaurant) in which it is painted. Bhajju finally seems to reemerge as the 'storyteller', the bard who weaves the 'magic circle' around him 'with music loud and long', beyond the encounter with his fractured identity. He concludes the tale by painting himself as a bard, a 'Bhujrukh', the traditional Pardhan Gond storyteller. The 'Bhujrukh' is seen playing his instrument at night and the night sky resounds with Gond stories along with the constant refrain of 'London, London' in the symphony of his song. The psychological journey of self discovery along with the entire process of identification and depiction of the travel experience of the Pardhan Gond etched out in the Gond visual vocabulary makes it an iconic representation of the dynamism that inhabits the Pardhan Gond art form. Bhajju's London is a collage of the human and the nonhuman, of the self and the other, of the home and the foreign. Temporalities fuse in the iconic image of the book resembling the 'temple of time', the Big Ben. The Big Ben is delineated as a rooster, the Gond symbol of time. The dial, the 'big eye' of time reflects the eyes of the rooster.

'you can only fly if the eagle gives you permission . . .'(G.Wolf et al. "Airport" np.) The narrator is wonderstruck at the 'miracle of flight', he is unable to differentiate between the inside of the airport and the inside of the aeroplane. The narrator's curiosity exposes the supposed 'naiveté' in him or perhaps helps us confront our long lost 'naiveté' as fresh explorers of the urban world.

It is intriguing to see how Bhajju uses organic images including the animals and plants to paint his experience of the London exodus. Patterns and shapes in the 'jungle book' obey a different narrative movement in the text, beyond the usual

representation of myths in the Pardhan Gond art form. The airport drawn by Bhajju resembles a 'huge bird of prey. An eagle that swallows humans who line up to be let inside like insects outside a termite hill. The airport is also a place of documents, stamps and seals.' (G.Wolf et al. "Airport" np.). The bird is hence drawn in the style of a stamp. The aeroplane too is viewed as a 'heavy animal' like the elephant and the child-like vigour of the upside-down world is attached to it. Where the Gonds rely on the Mahua tree for their drink, Bhajju is fascinated by how the people decide on choosing their drink; in its course the natural drink- water, is something that one has to ask for specially. The spirit of 'freedom' of the English people at night transforms them into nocturnal animals like bats in the canvas. The template for the pubs has a dual imprint of two foxes sharing one head. The word 'fox' seems to be a common occurrence in the names of English pubs and simultaneously they are important animals for the Gonds. In the picture corresponding to the chapter titled 'Monarchs of Their Own desire', the lovers are portrayed as fish and bird. They appear identical to fairytale creatures and the idea of 'freedom' is embodied in the transformation of lovers into free-willed creatures of the natural world, like birds and fishes in natural surroundings. The Pardhan Gond version of the working women of London as the 'Goddess of London' is also remarkable. The English woman is drawn in the form of a four-armed Indian Goddess with the menu-card, cup of coffee, telephone and a cigarette in her hands. The figure of the goddess is symbolic of her omnipresence and capability to do multiple tasks in a moment. However, the headgear with feathers, the style of clothing and the patterned body of the woman provides an 'adivasi' tinge to the 'Indian Goddess'.

The symbols of Gond myth- be it the seven snakes, the earthworms or the fish, are resurrected in Bhajju's visual travelogue. The King's Cross station of the London

Tube Underground is presented as a serpentines structure and the Tube as the earthworm is the 'King of the Underworld' who rules it. The stations appear in between the snakes like the spiders sitting on their webs. Amidst all this the Pardhan Gond singer of tales identifies with the figure of the busker and makes place for him, thinking of the busker as a source of poetic relief from the stressed and busy urban life.

Besides this, the display of the segmented cow in the art gallery of London inspires Bhajju to recreate the myth of life and death. He paints the head of the cow in the fashion of a seal and then paints a whole picture of the segmented cow. Half of the segmented cow is surrounded by the snakes and again they are the 'seven' snakes who, like in *The Night Life of Trees*, keep the trees rooted to the earth. Acting as roots to the trees here they also resemble the potential of a new beginning. The other half of the segmented cow is covered with foliage and a newborn bird signifying rebirth. Hence the segmented cow as an object of art gets transformed in the way Bhajju accommodates it in his artistic and cultural arena. As the depiction of the cow bears both the trace of its origin as an object from the gallery and is also representative of rebirth in the frames of the artistic canvas, it too is reflexive of a certain kind of death and rebirth perhaps of symbols and concepts relating to the artistic urge of the artist. The images, thus, lead to multiple readings within and beyond the peripheries of Gond myths.

Bhajju's London as constitutive of 'freedom', working women and 'poor people' who are not as poor as the poor in India concretises his socio-temporal location as a Pardhan Gond artist. The cross-cultural encounter as presented in *The London Jungle Book* is much more than the simplistic equation of colonial domination and subordination.

Moving on to Venkat Raman Singh Shyam's *Finding My Way* we find a radically different way of presenting and composing art. Musing on the very breath that resounds in the Bana, the musical instrument of the Pardhan Gonds, Venkat Raman Singh Shyam weaves his story of finding his way to becoming the Pardhan Gond artist. Venkat's *Finding My Way* is again a shift from the clichéd rendering of the Pardhan Gond art.

Finding My Way, as a kunstlerroman, is a Jugalbandi, a collaborative outcome between Venkat Raman Singh Shyam and S. Anand. Anand puts Venkat to words and also peeps in between the narrative to voice his interrogations and opinions. Anand and Venkat collide in the narrative and re-emerge with their own mode of thinking.

As Venkat acknowledges his companionship with S.Anand he makes us aware of the fact that his story is not just 'his'; it receives a fresh candour by jamming with Anand. Venkat insists that there is a strange 'in-between world' he inhabits. Venkat's narrative is unique in the way he associates his 'search' with finding, recognising, reviewing not only his own self but also the surroundings which locates the self. His visual narrative is infused with the multiplicity of 'seeing'. We find eyes embedded in the walls of the water reservoir, sometimes the eye is embedded in the pot which is symbolic of the disciple who is shaped by the potter (his guru) and sometimes it becomes the pivot of physical balance helping to weigh things. The 'eye' also encompasses the 'I'. Eye becomes the synaesthetic engagement of senses which is summarised in Anand's verse-

I smell with my ears

I taste with my eyes

I see with my hands

I touch with my tongue

I hear with my nose

I know

I am in my senses now (V.Shyam and Anand "Songs of the World" np.)

Venkat totally disregards the mechanism of Western art concepts in his work. He creates a separate breathing space for his community art in spite of its existence as a commercial art object. Art forms like the Pardhan Gond do not 'bear the burden of such a dimensional perspectival tradition- perspective that is always an illusion . . .'

(V.Shyam and Anand "Songs of the World" np.). As Venkat identifies with the modernists like Dali, Paul Klee, Picasso he is confidently assertive about the polemic of his art- 'I know their language just like I know Raza's, Swaminathan's and Husain's, or the languages of the many aboriginal artists in Arnhem Land: it comes with the ability to see beyond the world of appearances: to see space as illusion, and not hanker after the illusion of space . . .' (V.Shyam and Anand "Songs of the World" np.). The dominance of an overarching Western canon is split apart by Venkat's approach to the Western understanding of art and primitivism. In one of his illustrations Venkat paints a selfie of Rembrandt in 'Jangarh Kalam' with a plumed crown with himself in Rembrandt style trying to slit open the frame of the picture with a sabre.

His art is a continuum of the autochthonous self, as an artist he deliberately seeks to fall back in search of his 'tail', to reclaim memories of belonging to the Pardhan Gond community and defeat the tyranny of history. Art creates pockets of resistance to time- past, present and future.

Besides Venkat's rise as a Pardhan Gond artist, Venkat and Anand make the current 'environmental crisis' an integral part of the narrative. Venkat's story is more than just his story. Venkat makes his way through the smoke and smog of the city trying to pin down detailed specks of his experience. From the creation of dams to the expansion of river, Venkat's narrative brings everything into the folds of his art.

The cosmopolitan experience of Bhopal depicts Bhopal's identity as the city where the Bhopal Gas tragedy took place. There is also a subversion of the Vedic ritual of 'purushamedha' as the idea of 'human sacrifice'. This 'sacrifice' comes in the form of self destruction. Humans are scapegoated in their own march towards being 'progressive'. Building heavy industries, nuclear plants, constructing dams and merging rivers are examples of the 'purushamedha' in the recent times.

Anand writes-

I'm eating myself. The human being is a creature of nature- it is on the basis of this cliché that we need to come to terms with the fact that it is in human nature to destroy what nature has wrought. . . . What we call nature is a benign term for a force we don't understand. . . . [it] is a beautiful accident that will end itself. . . . Let us mourn for ourselves now, for we won't be there when we are dead. . . . (V.Shyam and Anand "Songs of the World" np.)

Finding My Way hence, in its polyphonic jugalbandi goes beyond pigeonholing the identity of a 'tribal' persona. It calls for the discussion of both the 'personal' and the 'global'. It is this call that I wanted to reach out in my discussion of the texts. All the texts discussed above, in their own way transcend boundaries to make us think beyond the aesthetic appeal of their generic literature and art.

Like the picture which is incomplete without the 'gaze' of the viewer so is the work of art. We have perhaps forfeited its 'innocence' in the process of doing so, in this bout of discussion. However, let us further speculate on what the 'going beyond', 'transcending boundaries' hints at in this particular context.

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Chapter 6

In Lieu of a Conclusion: towards a new beginning . . .

It was in the 1930s, when in the shadows of Western modernism Verrier Elwin, the British anthropologist who championed the *adivasi* way of life, questioned the possibility of a 'message' from the primitive world to the 'modern' world –

There are many elements in the Gond ethos which should be conserved- their simplicity and freedom, their love for children, the position of their women, their independence of spirit . . . I think that the primitive has a real message for our sophisticated modern world which is once again threatened with disintegration as a result of its passion for possessions and its lack of love . . . (27)

It is still a very strongly held belief that 'Adi-dharm' which

... Unfolds before us a way of life based on egalitarian principles, a continuum of nature, ancestor and human, and a symbiosis between human and animal kingdom ... gives to the humanity ... exactly what it needs at the moment for its very survival ... an alternative way of life and belief that is capable of protecting the planet and the people from the impending threat of anthropogenic disaster. (Mullick x)

These propositions and interrogations cannot be wholly dismissed and neither can they be used as catalysts to ignite the romanticisation of a 'primitive' way of life. Surely, the process of evolution brought its own challenges with time and nothing can ever be labelled as 'sacrosanct'. In spite of all this, 'romanticisation' of the tribal experience should not be discarded without interrogation because romanticisation like intimate romance involves the 'crossing of borders on the basis of passion, into an

unknown, with new companions, to forge a new world, a new life, a new self' (Vohra, "Women"). Thus, we need to think from both the sides of the discursive plain. Neither should we discard the 'indigenous' as a stereotype nor should we conclude that no society can exist in a sustainable relation to the natural world.

The continuous 'change' in the lifestyle of the tribal people is an ongoing process and hence is intertwined with their forms of life and expression. Having discussed visual narratives of Pardhan Gond artists in which nature shapes the content of the art subject, I feel the requirement of addressing the larger genre of 'nature writing' or the forms of 'collective storytelling for survival' in the larger literary domain. As 'the ecological crisis is not only a crisis of the physical environment but also a crisis of the cultural and social environment- of the systems of representation and of the institutional structures through which contemporary society understands and responds to environmental change . . .' (Bergthaller et al. 262), 'popular culture' plays a pivotal role in stimulating public sentiments regarding such concerns.

The Pardhan Gond books with pictures act as a medium to reflect on our environing practices. It is not just owing to the 'decorative' quality of the Gond illustrations that make them attractive to the reader. The Pardhan Gond artist's craftsmanship mingles with the greater needs of the narrative to portray the personal and the social, the changing modes of 'nature' with experience that comes to the surface with an intimate reading of the picturebooks. The garb of nature links the narrative to its symbolic content. The magnification of nature is not a simplistic expression of the tribal way of life. As a part of visual storytelling this aesthetics of visual enchantment in also created by nature oriented visual narratives of the present decade in multiple ways. For instance, Nirupa Rao's botanical illustrations, which are

both aesthetically appealing and scientifically accurate, document the topographical identity of our country with the aim of reaching out to future generations- for kids and adults alike. Rao's illustrations have made their way not to educate the mass in the field of botany, it is rather an attempt to increase awareness and perhaps help people catch a glimpse of nature when they do not have much time to personally engage with it. Similarly, Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City* presents the human cityscape masked by the peripheral creatures of nature, *Lost Words* by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris in the shape of a picturebook brings to the children, especially, the British children, the lost words of nature. Picturebooks like *Pool* by JiHyeon Lee, with soothing colours seems to be a fresh inspiration- 'For Those Who Want To Swim Freely in the World.' In it Lee creates a diversity of animal kingdom underneath the pool, which two children enter defeating the superficial crowd floating on the surface layers of the 'pool'. All such narratives strive to establish a relationship between the human and the nonhuman fostering a sense of 'planetary connectedness'.

Simultaneously, relating to the need to tell stories of collective survival, these stories, especially those of the Pardhan Gonds, bring with them a pronounced sense of place and locale from which the art emanates. This is not to say that the 'local' and 'global' are rigid categories; instead it to observe how the politics of the Pardhan Gond art differs with context and how its journey from the local to global is framed by intricacies, understanding which can create newer reading practices concerning 'environment' and 'literature'.

The need for literature to engage a wider section of the society into communication with the nature-cultures has been increasing. It is one such way of engagement through pictures that the Pardhan Gond art calls for. The way we engage with the 'eco-art' of the Gonds is reminiscent of E.O. Wilson's concept of 'biophilia'

which is 'an innate tendency towards a connection with the natural world which can be nurtured . . . especially during the crucial stages of child development' (78). In the shrinking space of open exposure to natural environment, picturebooks like that of the Gonds perhaps represent abstract plains for the development of 'biophilia'. The individual Gond narratives also prompt to us the need to create and nurture the psychology of expanding the self to include the natural world so that the destruction of this world metamorphoses into the destruction of one's own self. However, these picturebooks do not stimulate a grief of loss born out of the ongoing ecological devastation, as opposed to that it is an optimistic nurturing of nostalgia rethinking one's place amidst nature.

The voice of the Pardhan Gond artist echoes with the subjective assertion of Hayao Miyazaki, a renowned Japanese animator. Miyazaki opines- 'I am concerned, because for me the deep forest is connected in some way to the darkness deep in my heart. I feel that if it is erased, then the darkness inside my heart would also disappear, and my existence would grow shallow' (360). Miyazaki's concern with Earth's current welfare does not confine itself to 'environmental activism'; his is rather an 'environmentalism' which stems from his personal encounter with nature. Such subjectivity in encounter with nature is also the bedrock of the Pardhan Gond vision of art.

The Pardhan Gond artists create a vision of the 'global' from their understanding of the 'local'. Ursula K. Heise asserts that-

... The crucial challenges for artists and writers, and beyond them, for all those engaged with environmentalist thought, is the creation of a vision of the global that integrates allegory . . . into a more complex framework able to accommodate social and cultural multiplicity (21).

The Pardhan Gonds' re-presentation of nature-culture in newer media (here visual art) does contribute to this 'complex' framework of social and cultural multiplicity through its shifting dynamics over time.

Pardhan Gond art in its plurality serves as an intertext to the wider representations of folk and tribal art and to the ways in which nature is being written, drawn and depicted in the current repertoire of nature-writing. Through my research I have learnt to wade through the subtleties that lie beyond the strictures of genres and categories. The visual decoding of the Pardhan Gond art creates space to explore the multiplying forms of visual storytelling which not only add to variety of narratives but also encourage subjective participation in reading and re-writing of literature in newer media.

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