Reading a newly emerging art culture: The Pardhan Gonds

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Abstract: *The Pardhan Gonds constitute a part of one of India's largest tribal communities, the Gonds. The study of specialised knowledge systems and lifestyles of adivasis have often been attempted from various disciplinary perspectives. Identified and championed by the British-born Indian anthropologist, Verrier Elwin, the Pardhan Gonds are not among the 'lesser-known'. However, the transformations in the artistic community have given them a dynamic identity. My paper thus aims to study the artistic community of the Pardhan Gonds through their stories and cultural narratives alongside shedding light on the larger categories of folk and tribal art by referring to the currently emerging Pardhan Gond art system, which is not just found within the frames of the museum but also in the form of books, art prints. Art forms of such kind are abounding in India- be it Maithili, Warli, Tanjore, Pattachitra or Rajasthani miniature, none can be generalised as such art forms have a genealogy of their own.*

The appreciation of the adivasis in this respect is likely to be identified as yet another form of 'essentialisation'. However, in between these discourses and counter-discourses, representations from such communities perhaps offer new space to discuss resistance and revival of subjugated knowledge.

Keywords: *Pardhan Gonds, folk art, tribal art, art culture, visual and oral narratives.*

Introduction

Gond art has been read variously over time. However, with the vogue of graphic novels, picture books and other visual texts becoming highly reader-friendly, the production and readership of Gond art, permeating and spilling over the

peripheries of generic boundaries, is an interesting phenomenon. These books as end-products seem to defeat what is generally believed to be 'adivasi' art (often stereotyped as 'craft') though they emanate from adivasistories. My paper would focus on the stories of emergence, change and development of the Pardhan Gond community drawn from the secondary resources that we, as readers and spectators of art receive.

Understanding 'Folk Art'

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 the collection and display of 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 food ways
- may be made for use within a community of practice or it may be produced for sale as a form of income and empowerment
  (Museum of International Folk Art 2019:np)

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". 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 2016: 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. (Bowles 2009: 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 discourses and counter discourses 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-
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> 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. (Das 2016: xix).

My concern being Gond art, it is important to situate Gond art amidst all such narratives of studying visual cultures. In order to study the Pardhan Gond art in

the contemporary setting it is necessary 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 2018: 13).

The Pardhan Gonds: The Rise of the Gond Art Community

The Gond art we see today in books, museums and exhibitions was not 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. (Jain 2018: 19)

Gonds get recognition and the 'hunt' begins

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 2009: 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 2016: np).

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 bedocumented. 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. (Jain 2018: 19)
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> 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 –
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> 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 2018: 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 avant-garde. A modernism without disjunctures . . ." (Dutta 2018: 53). The backdrop , the historiographic framework which fuelled the portrayal of marginal tribal art of the "other masters" was thus derived from multiple factors.

Jangarh Singh Shyam paving way for recent developments

The "discovery" of Jangarh Singh Shyam brought international fame to what we now call "Gond art", it gradually "urbanised" the "art" of the PardhanGonds, 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 "Gondart" as "no other branch of the Gond have taken up painting in this manner; only the Pardhan are professional artists." (Das 2017: 77). 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" sassociate, 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." (Jain 2018: 15).

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."(Chatterji 2016: 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 . (V. Shyam and Anand 2016: np).

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.

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 2016: 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 re-presentation.

Exploring details through the story of the Pardhan Gonds

Stories related to the artistic profession of Gonds: 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 thetribe 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")

Changes with time

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 and are paid by their urban, metropolitan patron. 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." (Gombrich 1969: 5).

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 (bhittichitra), 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.

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 and it is thus that I have considered Jangarh as a separate area of introspection. 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 2016: 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 needs 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 2001: 1632). Founders of discursivity or "transdiscursive authors" have produced "the possibility and the rules of the formation of other texts" (Foucault 2001: 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 screen prints, 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" (Das 2017: 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 word- decorative" (Bowles 2009: 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 intermingle 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*.

The genealogy of the Pardhan Gond art, whether in collaboration or as singular productions, brings 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, rethink and engage with questions of genre, of folk/tribal art, production and re-production of such art.

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