

An Enquiry into Santal Wall Painting Practices in Singhbhum¹

Gauri Bharat

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Architecture, CEPT University, Ahmedabad, India
PhD Candidate, Department of Art History, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

Abstract

In this paper, I examine wall painting practices among Santals in the erstwhile Singhbhum region² in order to highlight local differences between visual forms and practices. I argue that developments in painting tradition must be contextualised within larger social, economic and political conditions of the locality at large, which in turn must be seen as part of a larger trajectory of transformation in regional Santal architecture. By examining local variations through the framework of processes of making, this paper makes a case for a nuanced understanding of traditional Adivasi built environments not as static, ahistorical architectural objects as characterised in traditional architectural discourses but rather, as dynamic entities meshed within complex transformative contexts.

Introduction

As W.G Archer remarked about Santal houses, ‘the mud walls have a hard cement-like precision, a suave and solid neatness, and the roofs, softly thatched or ribbed with tiles, compose a vista of gently blending curves. Even in the rains the walls contrive to keep their trimness. Of all the other tribes of eastern India, none has quite the same relish for neatly ordered houses, the same capacity for tidy spacious living or the same genius for domestic architecture.’ (Archer 1974: 20) While Santal architecture varies considerably across different parts of eastern India, Archer’s statement certainly holds true for the eastern Singhbhum region, which is the area under study in this paper.³ Compared to the architectural traditions of other Adivasi communities in the region, Santals are locally

¹ A version of this paper was presented at “From floor to ceiling – Symposium on South Asian floor drawings and murals,” held at the University of Westminster, on 27 and 28 October 2013. I would like to thank my PhD supervisors Dr. Daniel Rycroft and Prof. John Mack from the University of East Anglia for their comments on this work.

² Erstwhile Singhbhum district has been divided into East and West Singhbhum and Seraikela-Kharsawan districts belonging to Jharkhand state.

³ Among the local population in Singhbhum, it is widely accepted that Santal dwellings are the best examples of workmanship and decoration in the region. In a study of their houses in Bolpur in West Bengal however, Dey does not suggest a similarly superlative sense of craftsmanship. In fact, he even points out that practices such as application of bright colours on walls is unusual. This suggests that building practices and traditions vary and Santal dwellings may not be equally outstanding architectural examples in other places as they are in Singhbhum (Dey 2007).

renowned for their craftsmanship and precision in building, plastering and decorating their dwellings (Fig.1). In this paper, I examine Santal wall paintings in three different localities of Potka, Ghatsila and Kandra within the east Singhbhum region and highlight the differences in both practices and visual forms of the paintings. I argue that the shifts and developments in painting tradition in some villages must be contextualised within larger social, economic and political conditions of the locality at large and seen as part of a larger trajectory of transformation in regional Santal architecture.



Fig. 1: Views of Santal houses

The paper draws from my on-going doctoral research into conceptions of space and place among Santals in east Singhbhum. In my research I examine the processes of production, use, transformation and signification of Santal dwellings in order to construct a Santal architectural history. Compared to dominant architectural history narratives that focus largely on built forms as objects, I examine architecture through the lens of processes. This allows the construction of an architectural history that is empirically situated within the lives and times of the inhabitants and contextualised in relation to the region rather than being focused on aesthetic or formal evaluations alone. What is interesting is that in this process, not only is the architectural object re-imagined as a transforming (rather) than static entity, but so are the contexts. This is an important shift from traditional architectural histories where society is often considered as a fixed stratum from which architectural forms draw meaning.⁴ The context of Singhbhum is not a mute backdrop to architectural transformation but becomes implicated as the milieu within which Santal architecture and by extension Santal lives and experiences are shaped in particular ways. In short, by examining Santal built environments through the framework of processes of making, this paper makes a case for a nuanced understanding of traditional Adivasi built environments not as static, ahistorical architectural objects as

⁴ For a discussion on the relationship between architecture, culture and society in academic scholarship, (see Crysler 2003).

characterised in traditional architectural discourses but rather, as dynamic entities meshed within the complex, transformative context of Singhbhum.

Three case study villages are considered in this paper, one from each of the localities of Potka and Ghatsila in East Singhbhum and Kandra in the Seraikela-Kharsawan districts respectively.⁵ The villages are Bhagabandh (lying between Jamshedpur and Ghatsila in the Golmuri–cum–Jugasalai block in East Singhbhum), Bada Bandua (in the Potka Block in East Singhbhum) and Chauda (in the Gamharia Block the in Seraikela–Kharsawan district) (Fig.2).



Fig. 2: Location of case study villages (highlighted text)

The wall painting forms and practices in these villages are representative of those within the localities at large. Further, walls paintings in Bhagaband and Bada Bandua—both located in East Singhbhum—are similar while the wall paintings in Chauda—located in the Seraikela-Kharsawan district—are noticeably different.⁶ Santals in East Singhbhum paint their walls in horizontal bands and typically with coloured clays while the Seraikela

⁵ I use locality in Arjun Appadurai's sense of a 'produced' and relational entity rather than a bounded spatial or geographic one. He argues that localities are a 'complex phenomenological entity, constituted by a series of links between social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts.' (Appadurai 1988: 178).

⁶ It must be iterated here that variations in wall painting practices do not correspond to precise administrative boundaries of the regions discussed here. When speaking of the differences in wall paintings in Seraikela and East Singhbhum, I refer to broad commonalities among villages in these regions and fully recognise that there are subtle variations within the regions themselves.

region has more complex geometric designs or motifs painted and use artificial colours to a greater extent. A starting point for the analysis of these differences is provided by Rycroft's study of Adivasi mural aesthetics in the Purulia district of West Bengal in eastern India (Rycroft 1996: 67-81). He examines a range of art practices such as domestic murals, tattoos, ritual events and performing arts and compares Santal practices to those of neighbouring Bhumij and Kurmi communities in order to explore a broader Kheroal aesthetic.⁷ In the analysis, he focuses on techniques, motifs, and interactions between different Adivasis and Adivasi-Hindu communities respectively. In terms of technique, he suggests that particular gestures of the hand produce particular rhythms of design while in terms of motifs, women draw upon their natural environment and make stylized paddy plants or trees common to the area (Rycroft 1996: 71, 77). He also outlines the interactions through which decorative ideas are interchanged; for instance, Adivasi labourers are hired to paint the walls of Hindu families who are at a higher position within social hierarchy, and in the process bring their own aesthetics of stylized floral motifs to the painting of Hindu dwellings. In short, Rycroft highlights some of the important parameters for examining wall painting practices, i.e., forms and motifs of wall designs, symbolic references to Adivasi environments, similarities of aesthetics across different Adivasi artistic practices, and mobility of these peoples and the spread their motifs to non-Adivasi dwellings as well. Drawing from this discussion, in this paper, I analyze wall paintings in terms of tools and techniques, networks of material resources, villagers' own aesthetic evaluations, and broader social, economic and political changes in the region in order to account for differences in Santal wall paintings and more specifically, the design developments observed in the Seraikela region.

The practice of wall painting

In order to understand the process of wall painting, it is important to begin with the basic construction material of the dwelling and the structure of the wall as a whole. Santal dwellings are built in *murum mati* – a locally available clayey soil – and walls are typically quite thick, ranging from thirty five to forty five centimetres.⁸ Being built entirely in mud, the walls require protection from rainfall, which is done in two ways.⁹ First, the roofs of these houses have considerable overhangs that protect most part of the wall from rain. Second, the smooth plastering and painting further create a surface that allows rain to wash off the wall surface immediately. The process of plastering and preparing the wall for paint is an elaborate one and begins after the wall is built and the

⁷ Kheroal refers to a group of communities including Santals, Mundas, Hos and the 'more Hinduized Bhumij' and 'they all traditionally share the same creation myth, believing they evolved from the male and female Kheroal eggs and together they share an extremely vibrant cultural lifestyle' (Rycroft 1996, 67).

⁸ The thickness is required on account of the structural stability of the wall i.e. *murum mati* as a building material dictates the thickness of the wall, together with the fact the walls are built entirely in *murum mati* and do not have any form of reinforcement within. In other words, if made any thinner, the wall will collapse.

⁹ Protection from the rain is important because the Singhbhum region has heavy rainfall both in the form of storms during the summer months i.e. between March and May and during the monsoon months i.e. between June and August or September.

roofs are added.¹⁰ Plaster is made of very fine *murrum mati*, mixed with cow dung and bits of straw or rice husk.¹¹ The straw or husk serves to reinforce the plaster layer and prevents it from cracking. Women are solely responsible for plastering and painting, and often help in building the wall as well. They apply the plaster mixture on the wall by hand and smoothen it out. When it has set but is still a little damp, women scrub the surface with a stone to make it very smooth. After this surface dries, a thin layer of cow dung is applied as a wash on the wall after which it is ready to be painted.¹²

Only the exterior walls of the dwelling are painted in colours, while the interiors of rooms are usually just painted white (Fig.3). Even within the exterior walls, women pay particular attention to the front elevation that faces the street. This is the first wall to be painted to ensure that they do not run short of colours.¹³ Other walls may be painted with diluted colours or even left plain if they run short. The design scheme broadly comprises horizontal bands of colour with a dark base in the form of a *pide* (plinth used as seat at the base of the wall) and other colours above (see Fig. 1 and 3). The colours typically used are white, ochre, red, black (from burnt straw or even tyres these days) and blue (from mixing chemical indigo with white clay).



Fig. 3: Interior walls of a Santal house
(Note the plain white colour of the walls as compared to the brightly coloured external walls)

While these colours naturally occur in the Singhbhum region, they are not all available in the vicinity of every village. Villagers travel considerable distances to

¹⁰ The walls are constructed using a cob technique where lumps of prepared *murrum mati* are placed directly in the foundations and the wall is built up. Once the lumps are in place, they are smoothened out by hand and allowed to dry, after which the next layer is added. In this manner, the wall is built up layer by layer.

¹¹ This fine clay is usually collected from pond beds or beds of other water bodies in vicinity of the village. Personal conversation with B. Hansdah (Bhagabandh) and M. Murmu (Chauda) in February and March 2013.

¹² Personal conversations with B. Hansdah (Bhagabandh), N. Hansdah (Chauda) and A. Murmu (Bada Bandua) in February and March 2013.

¹³ This rationale was suggested by women in the case study villages themselves.

procure the necessary colours for their walls.¹⁴ The particularity with which most Santals get colours suggests that wall paintings are a significant part of Santal domestic architecture.

Moving to the details of wall designs, as mentioned earlier, two broad categories of designs were observed across the case study localities. First, schemes with only horizontal bands of colour, which may be considered as a generic design scheme used by Adivasi and non-Adivasi communities in the Singhbhum region at large. Within this generic scheme what distinguishes Santal wall painting is the use of a wide palette of colours while other communities typically use red and white alone. The second scheme of wall painting is where elaborate geometric or floral motifs are added within the horizontal bands and this, as I mentioned earlier, is observed in the villages in the Seraikela region. Before moving on to the nature and contexts of these two kinds of design developments, it is useful to understand the techniques and aesthetic considerations in each case.

The designs with horizontal bands are made using ropes that are held tight across the wall and the lines marked. Within these bands, colours are applied with a piece of cloth dipped in the clay or paint mixture similar to the plastering of floors in interior spaces. Women work with horizontal strokes to create blocks of colour at a time and they move across the wall by painting vertical columns of colour. The performance of painting and the resultant effect is very similar to way in which women plaster the floors of the interior parts of their house.¹⁵ They dip a piece of cloth into an ash or cow dung mixture and apply it in horizontal strokes in the floor. As in the case of the wall, they work in blocks until the entire floor surface is covered (Fig.4).



Fig. 4: Floor plastering in internal courtyard.
(Note the horizontal strokes visible in plastered floor)

In both cases, women pay particular attention to using horizontal strokes, producing a smooth and even surface, and ensuring precise edges for the plastered and painted

¹⁴ This was mentioned by many villagers who specified villages where particular colours were found.

¹⁵ I refer here to the plastering of interior floors including the courtyard of the houses, which is done using a piece of cloth dipped in a dung or ash mixture, rather than exterior floors, where a thin layer of cow dung plaster is applied using a broom.

surfaces. It is evident that not only are the techniques of floor plastering and wall painting similar, but that women aim to achieve a similar aesthetic quality as well.

The similarities between the floor plastering and wall painting technique is important to note since it suggests a continuity between the two. This continuity may be established by examining the process of transformation of Santal dwellings in the Singhbhum region at large. During the 19th century, typical Santal houses were known as *kumbaha*.¹⁶ The walls of the *kumbaha* were made of panels of branches while the roof was made of leaf thatch and the ground outside the house was plastered to demarcate a social space in front of the dwelling.¹⁷ As communities became more sedentarized towards the end of the nineteenth century, the almost temporary *kumbaha* dwellings began to get plastered in mud and eventually transformed into houses built entirely in mud known as *orak*.¹⁸ One may argue then that techniques of plastering the ground were carried on to the plastering of walls as well and therefore one finds a similarity of practice and aesthetic considerations between the two. Where this continuity becomes even more important is in the nature of design schemes that emerge on walls. I mentioned earlier that the dominant design scheme in two of the three case study localities – and in the Singhbhum region at large – is horizontal bands of colour. Even in the scheme with elaborate designs and motifs, the basic background onto which these details are added are horizontal bands. Considering dominance of bands and the similarities of the bodily gesture through which these designs are produced, one may argue that the horizontality of the design and the aesthetics of precision are rooted in the performance of wall painting itself.

Design developments in wall painting practices in Seraikela

The more elaborate designs observed in Seraikela include geometric shapes or floral motifs added within the basic design scheme of horizontal bands of colour (Fig. 5 and 6).



Fig. 5: Geometric shapes added within horizontal bands in Chauda village in Seraikela

¹⁶ It must be noted that *kumbaha* was the commonly built house type while wealthier families built *ath-chala*, which a large and more elaborate house made of *murrum mati*.

¹⁷ Reconstructed from oral descriptions of *kumbaha* by elderly people in the case study villages who recollected seeing such houses in their childhood.

¹⁸ The sedentarisation occurred through the late 19th and early 20th centuries on account of complex interconnected factors ranging from increasing agricultural practices and reduction in forest cover, increasing industrial activity in the region to introduction of new forms of land and forest legislation. These shifts impacted Adivasi communities in that they increasingly became dispossessed from their land and forests and settled as communities of agriculturists or labourers (Das Gupta and Basu 2012).

In general, different walls of the dwelling may have different designs but the best design and workmanship is reserved for the front wall of the dwelling facing the *kulhi*.¹⁹ What is interesting is that it is only Santal houses in the Seraikela region where such design developments are to be seen while other communities continue to paint their walls in horizontal bands with one or two colours. In order to account for these design developments, it is useful to examine technique once again. I discussed earlier that the horizontal bands are painted in horizontal strokes with a piece of cloth. The elaborate designs schemes differ from the horizontal band schemes in three ways.



Fig. 6: Floral patterns added within horizontal bands in Beltad village in Seraikela

First, they cannot be executed with cloth dipped in colour but require the use of a brush. In some cases the bands of colour that form that background for geometric patterns or motifs are painted with cloth while the details are added by brush while in other cases, the entire wall is painted using a brush.²⁰ Second, the palette of colours observed here is much wider—and indeed brighter—since villagers in this region use artificial colours more than what was observed in other case study villages. Third, in terms of time, elaborate patterns take much longer to execute as compared to a wall with bands of colour can be completed in two or three hours.²¹ Consequently, the development of elaborate designs is not just a shift in forms but in the meshwork of resources and knowledge as well. The question that emerges is how and why did such shifts occur in the Seraikela alone as compared to other parts of the Singhbhum region.

Before moving to that discussion, it is important to iterate that there is a similarity of wall painting tradition across the entire region but that the trajectory of design development diverged in Seraikela. This is seen in the fact that the underlying design scheme even in Seraikela is of horizontal bands. This was evident in cases where an already painted wall became damaged due to untimely rains or when women ran short of

¹⁹ Personal conversation with M.Handah in February 2013.

²⁰ Personal conversations in Chauda village in March 2013.

²¹ Personal conversations with women in case study villages in February and March 2013.

time for painting on account of their other domestic responsibilities.²² In such cases, they painted the walls in plain bands of colour as a temporary measure until they found time to add details or until next cycle on painting. It becomes clear that even with transformations in design the horizontal ordering of walls designs remain important.

Contextualising the differences in design development

The divergence of wall painting practices into elaborate designs in Seraikela can only be accounted for in terms of the wider social, economic and political changes in the region at large. Beginning once again with technique, a key difference in wall painting in the Seraikela region as compared to other case study localities is the introduction and use of brushes. The use of brushes is both a technical and a conceptual shift. First, it is technical in that it brings about a number of material changes such as in the consistency of colours to be used. It also changes the bodily gesture of painting itself since brushes are typically used in vertical rather than horizontal strokes.²³ Second, it is a conceptual shift given that earlier memories of painting – both in terms of performance and design – must now be negotiated in terms of the possibilities afforded by the new medium of the brush. So even with a brush, women continue to paint horizontal bands, but the bands are now wider in order to be painted in vertical strokes.

The new medium further raises questions about the conditions under which the use of brushes became commonplace in the Seraikela region. Given the otherwise sparse material culture of Santal communities and the primarily paddy cultivating way of life,²⁴ the brush does not naturally feature in Santal daily life. In other words, it is not a skill embedded in the practices of everyday lives of typical Santal families and was obviously acquired by Santal women somewhere beyond the village. One may argue here that women may have acquired the skill of using brushes in the many construction sites and small-scale industrial establishments that dot the landscape of Seraikela. While Singhbhum in general has a high concentration of industrial and mining activity (Karan 1953: 218-19). Seraikela particularly has large numbers of small and medium-scale manufacturing industries where Santals and other Adivasis are employed as labourers. Two factors underlie this equation of Adivasi involvement as construction and industrial labourers in this part of Singhbhum. First, compared to other parts of Singhbhum such as the river valleys of the Subernarakha and Kharkai Rivers, the Seraikela region is less fertile and has lower agricultural productivity. (Karan 1953: 218-19) Therefore, more Adivasi families seek employment as wage labourers in order to earn their livelihood. Second, the nature of wage employment is different in Seraikela as well. Compared to other areas where industrial activities are in the form of mining or heavy metallurgical industries, Seraikela is developing as a small-scale industrial belt and has therefore seen significant construction activity. It is this form of wage labour that creates the possibility of exposure to the use of brushes, which then becomes a part of the Santal domestic art repertoire as well. In short, it is the particular economic and geographic conditions of

²² Personal conversation with D. Murmu in Chauda in March 2013.

²³ That the brushes are used in vertical strokes was evident in close examination of the wall surfaces.

²⁴ Objects found in Santal houses in the case study areas are typically tools such as knives, axes and spades, agricultural implements such as carts, fishing equipment, and domestic items such as utensils.

Seraikela that led to the use of brushes on account of which new wall painting possibilities emerged.

The exposure to brushes however is not sufficient impetus for its use. As the use of brushes and artificial paint became probable and popular, it must have become more easily available as well. Domestic needs and everyday goods used by villagers are typically made at home—as in the case of brooms or fishing traps or purchased at weekly markets – as in the case of clothes and cosmetics. In the case study village of Chauda for instance, Kolabira is the location of a weekly market nearest to Chauda and salesmen set up stalls selling clothes, vegetables, cosmetics, medicines, tools and households essentials. Such markets are held at various locations on different days of the week and villagers usually visited the market nearest to them. Many salesmen at these markets were Adivasi villagers and earned their living by buying goods from Jamshedpur (the nearest urban centre) and selling them at various weekly markets.²⁵ The high mobility of the salesmen allows them to gauge people's requirements quite well and one may conjecture that when brushes and paints began to become popular, they eventually become available in weekly markets as well.

Returning to the designs themselves, a wide range of designs was observed across the Seraikela region.²⁶ These designs, as I mentioned earlier, include bold geometric patterns, floral motifs, and in one example, elaborate sculpted columns as well (Figs. 7, 8 and 9).



Fig. 7: Geometric designs in different houses in Chauda village

What is important to note here is that particular designs are localised within villages rather than being similar or common across the region. In order to understand the

²⁵ Personal conversation with cloth salesmen in Kolabira market in March 2013.

²⁶ The analysis focuses on three case study villages visited between January and April 2012. For this discussion however I have also included Mahotabeda - a village from the same region studied by Shah (Shah 2009).

localisation of designs or motifs, one needs to examine the sources of design inspiration and therefore examine women's mobility since it is they who conceptualise and execute these works. On asking where women drew their inspiration from, they often answered that they drew whatever they liked.²⁷ While it is beyond the scope of this study to suggest how particular visual forms emerge in Santal wall paintings or what their relationship to women's everyday experiences of their environments may be, one may safely contend that women draw inspiration from each other given that designs within a village appear similar over time and that women spend most of their time in the village itself. In other words, one cannot conjecture how design innovation occurs in the first instance, but having occurred, it does disseminate within the village on account of women's internal movements. Even neighbouring villages may not influence each other because women have no or occasion to interact with other villages except their maternal homes.²⁸ Consequently, design developments are similar within and largely limited to the vicinity of individual villages alone.



Fig. 8: Floral designs in different houses in Beltad village

The relationship between women's mobility and design development also raises questions about the temporality of the development. In other words, while women draw inspiration from other women, it must be remembered that wall painting is an individual act rather than collective one. Over what period of time then do designs spread and become popular in a village? Considering the process of painting and women's mobility in greater detail provides some cues. During a single season of painting (typically in October or November) women begin painting their walls while simultaneously managing their other domestic and agricultural responsibilities. Given that the walls have to ready

²⁷ Personal conversation with women in Bhagabandh and Chauda in February and March 2013 respectively.

²⁸ During fieldwork, I observed that women often did not appear to know about houses at the end of their *kulhi*. They questioned me about other houses I visited, and when I asked why they did not know, they said that there had no reason to visit other houses far from their own. Women did however walk into their immediate neighbours' houses and as far as the nearest well or hand pump to fetch water. In short, women's movements within the village are restricted to the vicinity of their own homes or the nearest source of water.

before Sohrae,²⁹ the window for completing the painting task is quite small. Additionally, prior to the actual painting, women plan the designs and procure necessary material such as colours.³⁰ So even if women see interesting designs being executed by other women, they are unlikely to be able to modify their own plans and paint new designs immediately. They will typically have to wait until the following year before that can introduce any new designs or elements in their walls. This means that design ideas will require at least two or three annual cycles of painting before they become popular and common in a village.

The possibility of a slow spread of design ideas is exemplified in the case of Mahotabeda, which has unique sculpted columns in many houses in the village (Fig.9). To make this, columns are first built up in square or rectangular forms and are then carved into the desired shapes and painted.³¹ In subsequent years, columns may be repainted but not carved again since that would make the columns weak. In terms of popular building practice, these columns are both unusual, elaborate and time consuming to construct.³² So if one or two families in Mahotabeda decided—at some point in the past—to introduce an element such as a sculpted column and other families wished to adopt the idea, they must have waited until the next cycle of building and painting in order to incorporate it into their own dwellings. In this manner, over a few annual cycles of painting, a complex design idea may spread within a village.



Fig. 9: Sculpted columns in different houses in Mahotabeda village (Image source: Dhaval Shah)

It is useful at this point to look at the aesthetic considerations that underlie the practices and therefore influence the nature of design developments as well. This may be

²⁹ An annual Santal festival that takes place in October or November.

³⁰ As one woman in Bhagabandh pointed out, time for wall painting had to be managed within other domestic responsibilities and in her specific, as the mother of two young children, she did not find the time to paint the walls before the festival.

³¹ As described by villagers in Tirildih village near Chauda, March 2013.

³² Particularly because the addition of columns is usually to *chali* (verandah). So making such columns goes hand in hand with the addition of a space.

done through women's own evaluations of wall painting designs.³³ In order to get people's opinion, I displayed photographs of a set of painted walls (among other images of dwellings and the settlement) in the *kulhi* and invited villagers to pick the wall they considered the best.³⁴ The designs ranged from sculpted columns, patterns with vertical stripes, a floral pattern, and a few geometric patterns (Fig.10 and 11).



Fig.10: Display in *kulhi* in Chauda village

Villagers were unanimous in their choice of a particular wall painted in pink and green designs on a white background (Fig.12).

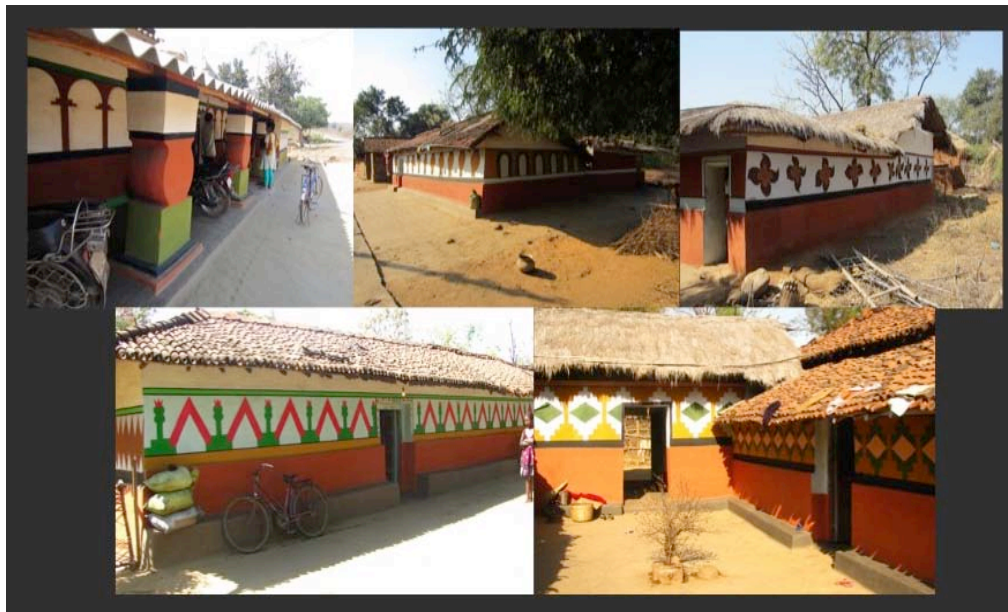


Fig.11: Images of front elevations displayed in *kulhi*

³³ The premise here is that wall painting may be understood as a public gesture by the family, and women – as the practitioners – may be in a position to articulate what a good or bad wall painting is.

³⁴ Photographs and drawings, as a visual research method adopted in all three case study villages, have drawn on 'Chapter 6 – Imagining and representing Santal built environments' of my Ph.D. dissertation.

They explained that the design was good since it did not have crooked lines, not too many colours had been used, and that the design resembled blooming flowers. In another instance, watching me photograph a particular wall, it was pointed out to me that the wall was not particularly well painted since the edges of the blocks of colour were not precise but slightly overlapped each other to create a fuzzy edge.



Fig.12: Wall design unanimously selected by villagers as the best

These evaluations suggest that precision in painting may be an important consideration. One may further contend that straight lines and geometric shapes are also preferred given that villagers appreciated the geometric semblance to flowers rather than a design with flowers itself.³⁵ The desire for geometric forms is an interesting aesthetic consideration in light of the techniques of wall painting and the proposition of its continuities with floor plastering practices. In other words, even when designs diverge and develop as they have in the Seraikela region, an attitude to precision and a preference for geometric forms persist, possibly on account of its continuity to plastering and painting in horizontal bands in the past. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the contents of the wall paintings in any detail, the developments in Seraikela suggest that with shifts in tools and practices, wall painting designs negotiate new motifs in relation to memories of past practices.

Having framed the transformation in wall painting designs between memories of past practices and possibilities afforded by new media i.e. paint brushes, it is important to ask why Seraikela alone became the site of such developments.³⁶ A brief history of the nature of political rule in Seraikela suggests some cues. Compared to Dalbhum and other parts of East Singhbhum that were under colonial governments prior to Indian independence, Seraikela was a royal estate (Hakim 1953). It is a well-known fact that the royal family

³⁵ It is interesting to note that the wall with flowers was a rear wall. Obviously the woman who painted it did not consider it an appropriate design for the front wall of her house.

³⁶ Also, given that all Adivasi communities in Seraikela faced similar circumstances of negotiating design memories and new possibilities, why does one find a profusion of design development among Santals alone? While there may not be satisfactory answer to the question, the design developments among Santal walls paintings definitely does justice to the general belief that Santal craftsmanship in house building is distinctly different from those of other Adivasi communities.

was considered cruel and repressive.³⁷ One example of repression was the implementation of a form of tax which decreed that if any subject of Seraikela possessed anything that was better than the ruler's own possessions, the ruler was entitled to claim it as his own.³⁸ In terms of dwellings, no one was allowed to build or decorate their dwellings better than the ruler's own palace.³⁹ With the merger of royal estates and the Indian Union after Independence in 1947, Santals were no longer compelled to paint their houses in a simple fashion and I argue that this was a trigger for elaborate design developments in the region.⁴⁰ This corresponds to a village elder's observation that the elaborate designs seen on walls today are a recent development and were unheard of two or three generations ago.⁴¹ In other words, in the decades since the dissolution of the royal rule in Seraikela around Indian independence, Santals began to develop more elaborate wall painting designs. Seen against the background of the political climate of Seraikela, I argue that the profusion of elaborate designs may have emerged as a reaction to a history of aesthetic repression in the region. This historical factor considered together with the close correlation between women's restricted mobility and the development of wall painting designs and practices as taking place primarily within villages themselves may also serve to explain why these practices did not extend beyond the Seraikela region as a whole.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examined wall painting practices among Santals in three villages in Singhbhum in order to account for similarities and differences in practice. I attempted to trace the trajectory of transformation of practices and particularly the divergences observed in Seraikela using what may be considered as a cultural ecology perspective. The intention was to examine wall paintings as situated practices rather than as visual forms alone. What this enquiry revealed is ways in which the social, economic and political circumstances of Seraikela may correlate to Santal design and architectural development. More significantly, the study highlights that non-canonical architectural traditions such as those of Adivasis are most usefully examined in terms of processes in order that one takes cognizance of the various interrelations between resources, skills and motivations as employed by Santals themselves and thereby gives greater agency to inhabitants and makers within architectural discourses.

References

Appadurai, Arjun. 1988. 'The production of locality', in *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, pp. 178–99, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁷ Personal conversation with R. Tudu in Chauda in March 2013.

³⁸ This was known as the Nazrana Tax and is recorded by Hakim (1953).

³⁹ Personal conversation with village elders in Chauda in March 2013.

⁴⁰ During discussions with Santal organizations and scholars in March 2014, they concurred with this line of thought and agreed that the repressive rule in Seraikela may have been a trigger for the particular design developments seen in Seraikela.

⁴¹ This was pointed out by the *manjhüi*'s (headman) father in Chauda who recollects having seen much simpler wall designs when he was a child about sixty years ago. Personal conversation with R. Tudu in March 2013.

Archer, W.G. 1974. *The hill of flutes: Love, life and poetry in tribal India : a protrait of the Santals*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press), p. 20.

Crysler, Greig C. 2003. *Writing space—Discourses on architecture, urbanism and the built environment, 1960-2000*. New York, London: Routledge.

Das Gupta, Sanjukta, and Raj Sekhar Basu. 2012. *Narratives from the margins: Aspects of Adivasi history in India*. Delhi: Primus Books.

Dey, Pradipta. 2007. 'Sense of making a home: A study of villages in Bolpur in West Bengal', unpublished dissertation, Ahmedabad: Faculty of Architecture, CEPT University,.

Hakim, Shaikh Abdul. 1953. *Final report on the survey and settlement operations in the Seraikela State, District Singhbhum, 1925-28*. Patna: The Superintendent, Government Printer.

Karan, Pradyumna P. 1953. 'Economic Regions of Chota Nagpur, Bihar, India', *Economic Geography*, pp. 218-19, 29 (3).

Leach, Andrew. 2010. *What is architectural history*. Cambridge: Polity.

Rycroft, Daniel. 1996. 'Born from the soil: The indigenous mural aesthetic of Kheroals in Jharkhand, Eastern India', *South Asian Studies*.

Shah, Dhaval. 2009. 'Comparison of Santal and Bhumij houses', unpublished dissertation, Ahmedabad: Faculty of Architecture, CEPT University, 2009.