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Walking a Tightrope

INDIGENOUS INDIAN ART AND ITS RECEPTION

Aurogeeta
Das

Indigenous¹ arts' contribution to the cultural history of India has been due equally to individual, often serendipitous, encounters, and through institutional, often

policy-oriented, research and support. To prepare for an exhibition of votive offerings and icons, the Lalit Kala Akademi's researchers travelled extensively across India in 1969, discovering – and recognising the value of – diverse aesthetic traditions that remained undocumented. A policy-driven programme to systematically survey India's indigenous arts was consequently begun, instituted in the Fourth Plan (1970).²

In the 1970s, Bhaskar Kulkarni, an artist and researcher, particularly encouraged those he discerned as possessing talent to paint on paper, partly in the hope that the sale of paintings would provide such artists with a supplementary source of income. It is possibly this process of distinguishing artists with greater talent that led to Jivya Soma Mashe's exceptional career. Mashe, a painter from the Warli tribal community in the state of Maharashtra's Palghar district, recalled, during an interview with me in December 2014, that five Warlis were initially invited to paint on paper. Mashe had already moved away from the ritual paintings historically created exclusively by women on the walls of Warli homes for sacraments of life (especially weddings) and festivals, using rice paste. The walls are traditionally washed with cow-dung water in preparation for the ritual painting. Cow dung and rice flour or paste both carry sacred connotations for cultures across India. Cow dung's perceived prophylactic properties are sacralised through its use in religious rituals; rice flour and paste are believed to be symbolic of agricultural/material abundance and, by extension, of fecundity — both of the earth and of the woman. Even when there is a shift in materials and supports, transferred practices frequently retain residual symbolism, most often due to the continued use of traditional motifs but, increasingly frequently, even when these are rejected in favour of other idioms. There are comparable incidences of such transference – from ritual

and narrative arts to commercially sold paintings on paper – among the Mithila folk and Gond tribal artists (in the states of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh respectively). Kulkarni also played a role in Mithila art, following colonial British official William Archer's 'discovery' in 1934 of Mithila's mural paintings, which were revealed when domestic walls fell during an earthquake. Later, in the 1960s, commissions by Pupal Jayakar, then chair of the Handloom Development Board and the Handloom and Handicrafts Export Corporation, also encouraged recognition of Mithila art.³ In Madhya Pradesh, director of the multi-arts complex Bharat Bhavan, J Swaminathan's equivalent search led his talent-spotters to Jangarh Singh Shyam, an artist from the Pardhan sub-tribe of the central Indian Gonds.⁴ Several decades before Swaminathan's 1981 arrival in Madhya Pradesh's capital Bhopal, Englishman Verrier Elwin had already studied Gond culture and published on the subject, *The Tribal Art of Middle India: A Personal Record* (1951). Elwin began his career as a Christian missionary but became a self-trained anthropologist and tribal advocate. After Elwin and Swaminathan came American John H Bowles, whose collecting activities in the late 1990s led to curatorial and scholarly efforts in the USA, focused on Gond art.

The patronage (in its widest sense) of indigenous Indian art by foreign officials, scholars, collectors, dealers and curators should not be underestimated. The exhibition activities of Paris-based dealer and collector Hervé Perdriolle in the late 1990s and the early 2000s and, to a lesser extent, of his compatriot Christian Guillaud followed the patronage of Warli art by Gallery Chemould in Mumbai, which began exhibiting paintings by Warli artists – particularly Jivya Soma Mashe and his son Balu Jivya Mashe – in 1976 and Yashodhara Dalmia's monograph on the subject, *The Painted World of the Warlis: Art and Ritual of the Warli Tribes of Maharashtra*, first published in 1988. Frenchman Yves Véquaud, American Raymond Owens, German anthropologist Erika Moser (and currently, American anthropologist David Szanton) played a substantial role in supporting Mithila art through scholarship, documentation, exhibitions and guidance in India and abroad. For example,



Jangarh Singh Shyam. 'Fish', 2001. Acrylic on concrete board, dimensions not available. Image courtesy the Mithila Museum, Oike (Japan). Photo: Aurogeeta Das. This is the last work completed by the artist.



Sukhmani Dhurve. 'Threshold Digna', 2014. Acrylic on card, 25.5 cm x 36.2 cm. Private collection (UK). Image courtesy the artist. Photo: Aurogeeta Das.

the US-based Ethnic Arts Foundation and Szanton, Joe Elder and Parmeshwar Jha's founding of the Madhubani-based Mithila Art Institute (initially from funds provided for in Owens's will) secured greater financial returns for Mithila artists. Crucially, these organisations also promoted quality among the painters, with the aim of minimising mindless reproduction for a seemingly insatiable – and unfortunately, often indiscriminating – tourist market. As we shall see below, there exists a sad, but economically understandable, tendency among indigenous artists to sacrifice quality for prolificacy.

Crucially, the absence of critical discussion among scholars about what constitutes quality in indigenous art remains a matter of some concern. Should such a discussion be taken up seriously, it is imperative to involve the artists themselves. There is little understanding of the distinct sources of inspiration that these arts draw upon. Moreover, indigenous artists are acutely aware of being excluded from discourses about their work and are increasingly keen to participate in such debates; they should, in the near future, be able to contribute to the art historical narratives that feature their traditions. However, while art theorists and other artists are able to express themselves in globally prevalent languages such as English, indigenous artists must rely on linguistic translators to communicate their thoughts to wider audiences. For example, Bowles quotes the Gond artist Venkat Raman Singh Shyam (Jangarh Singh Shyam's nephew) as having explicitly stated that linguistic issues cause barriers that can seem insurmountable (Bowles 8). In a scenario where art is routinely deconstructed and verbally critiqued and contextualised for audiences, linguistic barriers exacerbate the existing disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous artists. That said, a new generation of indigenous Indian artists is now on the rise: more articulate, globally mobile, with greater exposure to the world and newly acquired technological skills. Mashe has travelled to Europe, the USA and elsewhere in Asia and, for decades now, his family has been travelling annually to Japan for months-long



Jangarh Singh Shyam. 'Bada Dev (The Great God)', 1989. Acrylic on paper, 37.8 cm × 51 cm. Image courtesy the Crites Collection (India). Photo: Robyn Beeche. Exhibited at Sakahàn, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2013.

residencies at the Mithila Museum in Niigata Prefecture, set up by Japanese musician Tokio Hasegawa. Thanks to Hervé Perdrille's efforts, in 2003 an exhibition in Düsseldorf celebrated Mashe's paintings alongside work by British artist Richard Long, which had been created specifically as a response to Mashe's paintings. This has often been cited as a collaborative exercise. During an interview with the artist at his home in Maharashtra in December 2014, when I asked Mashe what he thought of

his collaboration with Long,⁵ he looked nonplussed and answered 'Well, he walked a lot [in our village] and he created work that seemed interesting but I did not really understand it. I liked it but it was not a collaborative effort. He did his thing, I did mine.'

In the Düsseldorf catalogue, Perdrille writes with wry humour of the problems of translation and interpretation. Linguistic barriers are now being overcome; this helps indigenous artists face the challenge of straddling both worlds. It is only a matter of time before they define their identities to international audiences, articulate without mediation their distinct artistic concerns and negotiate with the modern world on their own terms. Indeed, this has already started to happen. Venkat Shyam increasingly addresses international audiences in English, reading off his laptop. Last year, via email, Mashe's grandson corrected my interpretations of his family's works for a show in the USA. I look forward to the day when our roles as advocates of indigenous art will become redundant, so that we may be able to enjoy in unadulterated fashion our roles as scholars, art historians and curators. Until then, this need for mediation compels patrons of indigenous art to serve additionally as translators. In order to grasp the myriad nuances of indigenous artworks, patrons must not only learn the language and culture of those whose creations they collect and/or study, but also turn into quasi socio-cultural translators.

To explain the socio-cultural complexities inherent in indigenous artworks, I should like to first trace the history

of exhibitions in India and abroad, where such artworks have been showcased. Thanks to discerning patronage in the 1980s, artists like Jivya Soma Mashe (Warli), Baua Devi (Mithila) and Jangarh Singh Shyam (Gond) emerged as pillars of India's indigenous art scene, especially after their inclusion in the seminal Centre Pompidou exhibition, *100 Magiciens de la terre* (Paris, 1989), curated chiefly by Jean Hubert Martin. *Magiciens* marked a global turning point for these artists. Mashe, despite being invited to exhibit and being featured in the original catalogue, did not actually make it to the exhibition; this is reflected in Centre Pompidou's twenty-fifth anniversary commemorative events and accompanying catalogue, *Magiciens de la terre: retour sur une exposition légendaire*, published in 2014. Happily, however, Mashe's absence did not affect the rewards he reaped from being invited. Martin famously used the word 'magicians' in the show's title, in a deliberate effort to avoid engaging with debates about what constitutes 'art' and who may legitimately lay claim to being 'artists'. Viewed from a particular perspective, he was of course rejecting or at the very least challenging Western art world definitions. Despite his attempts at circumvention, and perhaps especially because of his reluctance to argue these definitions, the fact that he staged a large-scale show in a venue such as the Centre Pompidou resulted in him being forced to confront the questions that the controversial title highlighted. Ironically, *Magiciens* was a reaction to the Museum of Modern Art's (MOMA) exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* in



Gallery installation shot of *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India*, 2015. William Paterson University (WPU) Galleries, Wayne (USA). Image courtesy WPU Galleries. Photo: Emily Johnsen.

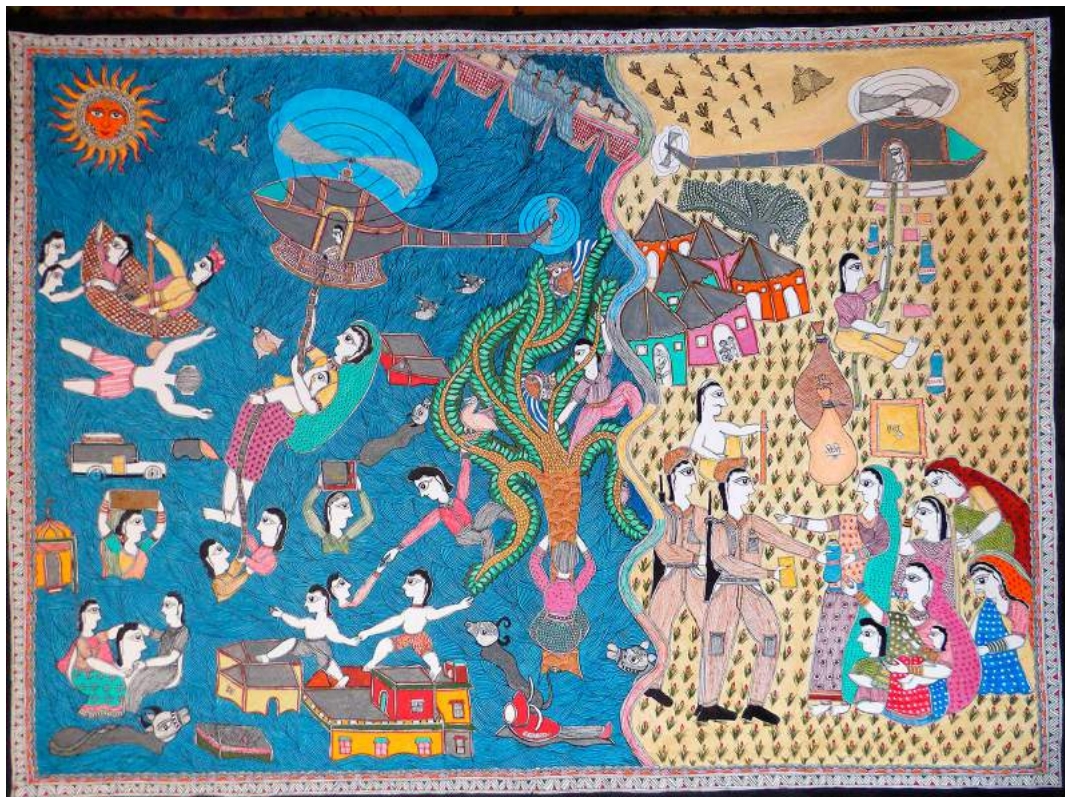


Painted Songs and Stories: Contemporary Gond Art from India exhibition, 2015. Radford University Art Museum, Radford (USA). Image courtesy Radford University Art Museum. Photo: Steve Arbury.

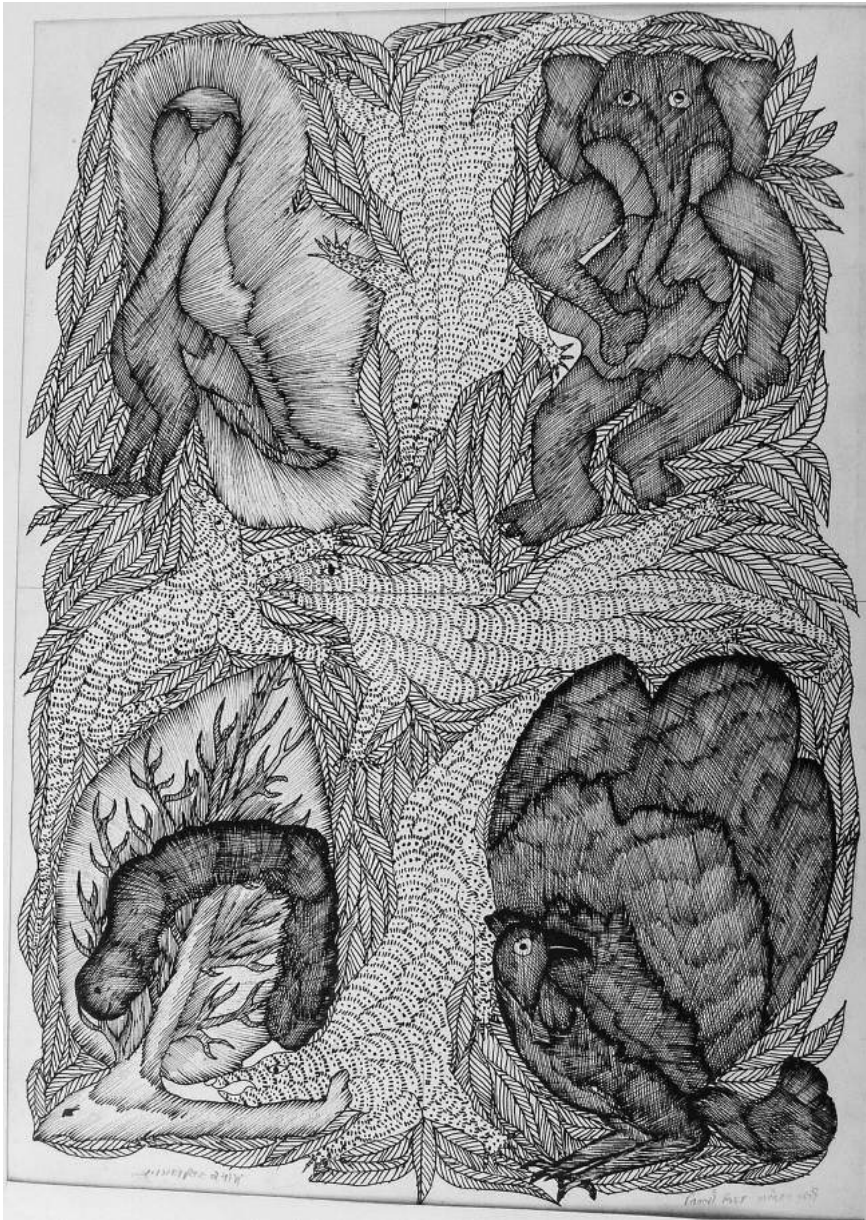
New York in 1984, which treated indigenous artists as being mere inspirational – and moreover, *anonymous* – fodder for modernists such as Picasso. Although perhaps well intentioned, *Magiciens* was nevertheless critiqued heavily at the time for being distorted in its representation of artists from so-called global centres of art and those from the peripheries.⁶ By choosing only indigenous artists from the so-called peripheries, Martin inadvertently suggested that artists from the peripheries did not engage with those subjects that modern and contemporary artists from global art centres did.

With its preponderance of indigenous art (about half the artists), one of the debates that a show such as *Magiciens* might easily raise even today is the question of authenticity, which inevitably follows the transfer from ritual to art. Does an art form based on former ritual intent remain authentic when it takes place in a contemporary art space and context? In a recent example of curatorial excellence, Bowles commissioned a *digna* (a Gond floor-painting) by Saroj Shyam, which took place against a backdrop of contemporary Gond paintings displayed at the *Painted Songs and Stories: Contemporary Gond Art from India* exhibition at Radford University Art Museum, Virginia in 2015. Significantly, Saroj Shyam requested that candles be brought in to light the Diwali *digna* she had chosen to create, suggesting that she enjoyed making it in a museum space, provided she was allowed to infuse it with a degree of ritualism. One could argue that her desire to ritualise the museum space introduces the idea that art could combine the museological and the spiritual. During an

interview following this commission, Saroj explained that she regarded it as a mark of respect for her work, and that she saw no conflict between creating *dignas* in domestic threshold spaces or in a museum; her only concern seemed to be the potential of letting down ‘audiences’, indicating a new awareness of who views her work when it is showcased in a museum space. While most of the materials used were traditional (clays carried from India and cow dung sourced from neighbouring Virginia farms), she compromised on candles in glasses in lieu of earthen lamps; after all, rituals are never static, perhaps especially in form and material. If formerly ritual expressions were an essential component of indigenous ways of life, then it is not illogical for them to be made in a museum space, for White Cube spaces seem to be considered the new temples of modern and often, increasingly, secular societies. If financial constraints make the economic incentives being offered for such commissions too attractive to refuse, surely such economic considerations form part of contemporary indigenous



Jitendra Kumar. 'Kashmir Floods', 2014. Acrylic on paper, 55.88 cm × 76.20 cm. Private collection (UK). Image courtesy the artist. Photo: Aurogeeta Das.



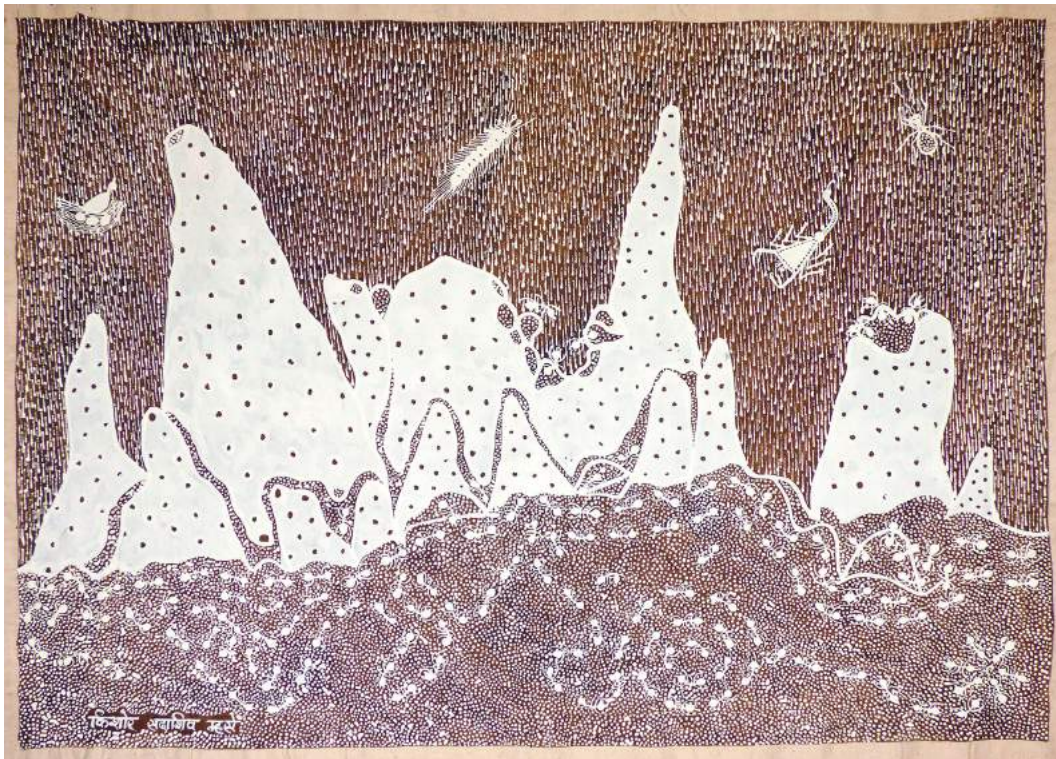
Jangarh Singh Shyam. 'Tilli Bird, Worm, Ganesha and Bird', 1995. Line drawing on paper, 34.2 cm × 49 cm. Image courtesy the Crites Collection (India). Photo: Robyn Beeche. Exhibited at Sakahàn, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2013.

reality? It is up to the artists to determine how they wish to negotiate their artistic activities in contexts that extend beyond their traditional way of life. Gond artist Sukhmani Dhurve explained to me that she stood her ground when derided by other Gonds for transferring *dignas* to paper, insisting that she was as much of a Gond as they were, with the right to make her own decisions regarding painting commercially.

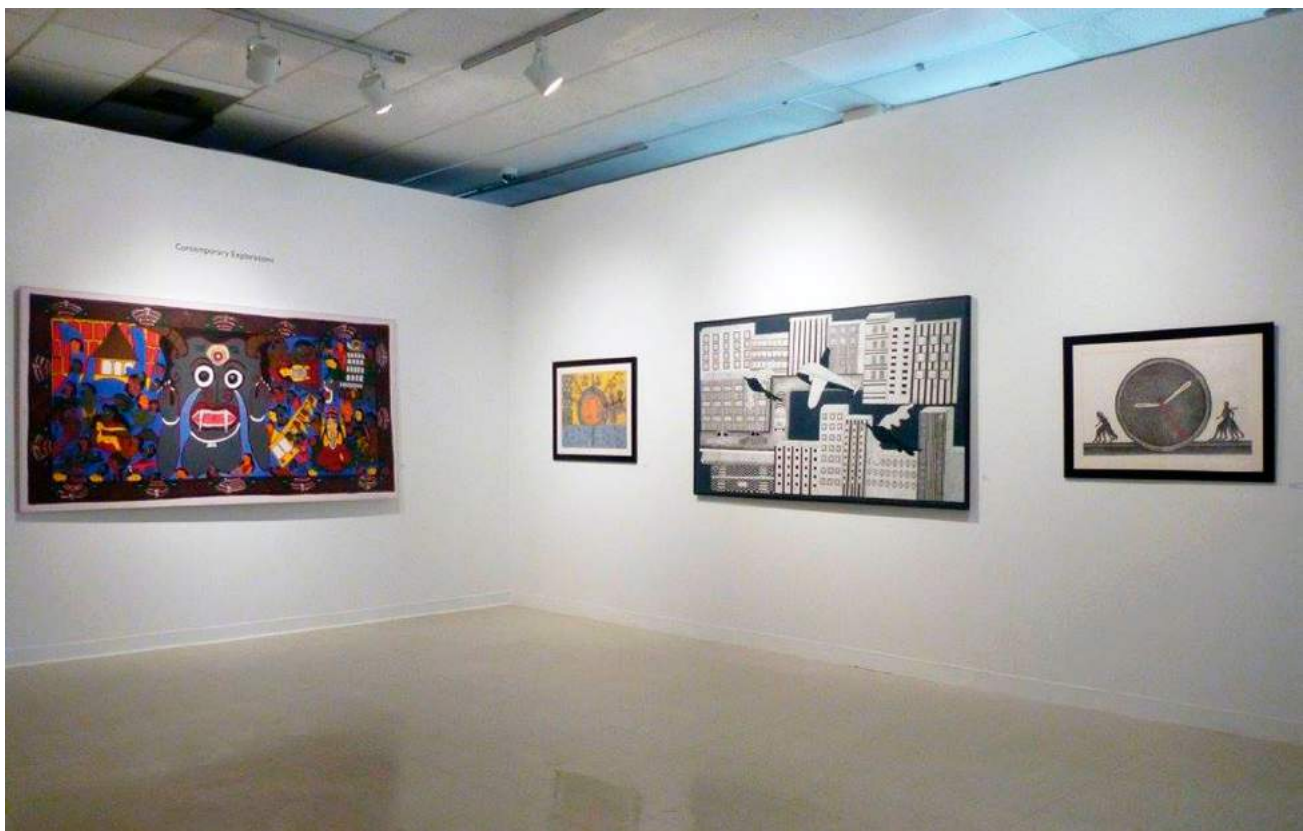
The shift in materials, tools and surfaces can and does occasion stylistic and other changes. I have noticed, for example, that a certain flowing quality in the line-work of Warli artists, which is discernible in the work they make on their walls and even on paper when they use a runny rice-flour paste, tends to be lost when they use acrylic mixed with glue. It is as though one is considered freehand and the other introduces greater structure. Warli artists Vijay

Sadashiv Mashe (Jivya Soma Mashe's grandson) and Shantaram Raja Ghorkhana both agreed with this observation, as I watched them paint during a residency at the Mithila Museum in Niigata in December 2015. This loss of a flowing line is sometimes also apparent in Mithila artworks. A spontaneity that was evident in the early works of the pioneers Sita Devi and Yamuna Devi (especially in their murals) makes me question not only the relative stiffness of their later works on paper but, crucially, the near absence of this organic quality in the works of even immensely talented artists from younger generations, who have perhaps never painted on the walls with traditional materials and tools but instead learned to paint directly on paper, which rests on hard surfaces and where the modern paints are most often applied through a metal nib of the kind that is used to render pen and ink works. It is therefore not only practice but also the mode of transmission (ie how they first learned to use line) that makes a difference in their later line work and brushwork. Sukhmani Dhurve, who only recently started painting on paper, produces astonishingly innovative interpretations of traditional *dignas*. It would be hard to conclude whether – and if so, how – Dhurve's transfer to paper and paint has changed her artistry without making a systematic study of her domestic *dignas*, but it is probably reasonable to assume that her colourful exuberance on paper is absent in her *dignas*, since the latter are traditionally painted in a limited palette of five colours. So the word

'transfer' has a complex meaning in this context and needs to be used carefully. During a conversation with the artist, who was visiting Bhopal in November 2014, it became clear that Dhurve struggles to paint figuratively, producing mediocre paintings when she attempts to do so, both in my opinion and in her own estimation. Also by her own admission, she only really enjoys creating the *digna* paintings. When I met her, I was among her first buyers (possibly her very first) and she had just started to become comfortable with calling herself an artist. That Martin raised the question about what it means to use the word 'art' or 'artist' was important; it was quite another matter that this question went unanswered; that there was no unanimous response to the issues that *Magiciens* provoked. Would Dhurve be called an artist in wider circles or only within a select community of patrons and scholars and even then,



Kishore Sadashiv Mashe. 'Anthills', 2014. Acrylic and glue on mud-washed cloth, 45.5 cm x 61.3 cm. Private collection (UK). Image courtesy the artist. Photo: Aurogeeta Das.



Gallery installation shot of Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India, 2015. William Paterson University (WPU) Galleries, Wayne (USA). Image courtesy WPU Galleries. Photo: Emily Johnsen.



Jivya Soma Mashe. 'Coal Mining Process', 2011. Acrylic on paper, 96.52 cm x 96.52 cm. Image courtesy BINDU Modern, New Jersey (USA). Photo: Sneha Ganguly. Exhibited at Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India, William Paterson University Galleries, Wayne, 2015.

perhaps only with reservations? Even assuming she started painting more prolifically, sold more work (after looking at her paintings in my modest collection, a significant Gond art collector bought her works with considerable enthusiasm) and sustained the quality of her *digna* paintings, how would her work reach wider audiences? How would a show such as *Magiciens*, which galvanised thinking about centres and peripheries, source works from India's indigenous artists? *Magiciens* was significant in establishing what is now an oft-used structure, involving one or a handful of lead curators at the host venue and a team of international consultants or advisory curators with specialist expertise from the regions represented in the show. This strategy has advantages, in that the lead international curators are not obliged to develop expertise in every indigenous art tradition that they seek to represent in their show, allowing the exhibition to be wider in its remit. Unfortunately, this teamwork does not always cut through the curator-artist favouritism that can define national art scenes. So, one might argue, for example that, notwithstanding Baua Devi's fine qualities as an artist, Mithila art ought to have been represented by other senior artists within her tradition who

were arguably as good or even better artists than she was, such as Sita Devi or Yamuna Devi. Alongside institutional policies, the decisions by and the preferences of individual curators have often determined the course of artistic careers both nationally and globally. This may seem self-evident, but the economics of indigenous art indicates that favouritism has a more intense effect than it does within other art communities.

Alongside individual preferences that led to Mashe and Shyam's participation in *Magiciens*, the Indian government had also organised shows abroad that featured indigenous arts. Although both Mashe and Shyam achieved widespread fame after *Magiciens*, in fact, both had already travelled and shown abroad, at least a year before *Magiciens* was organised in Paris. In 1988, Mashe and Shyam participated in *Art of the*

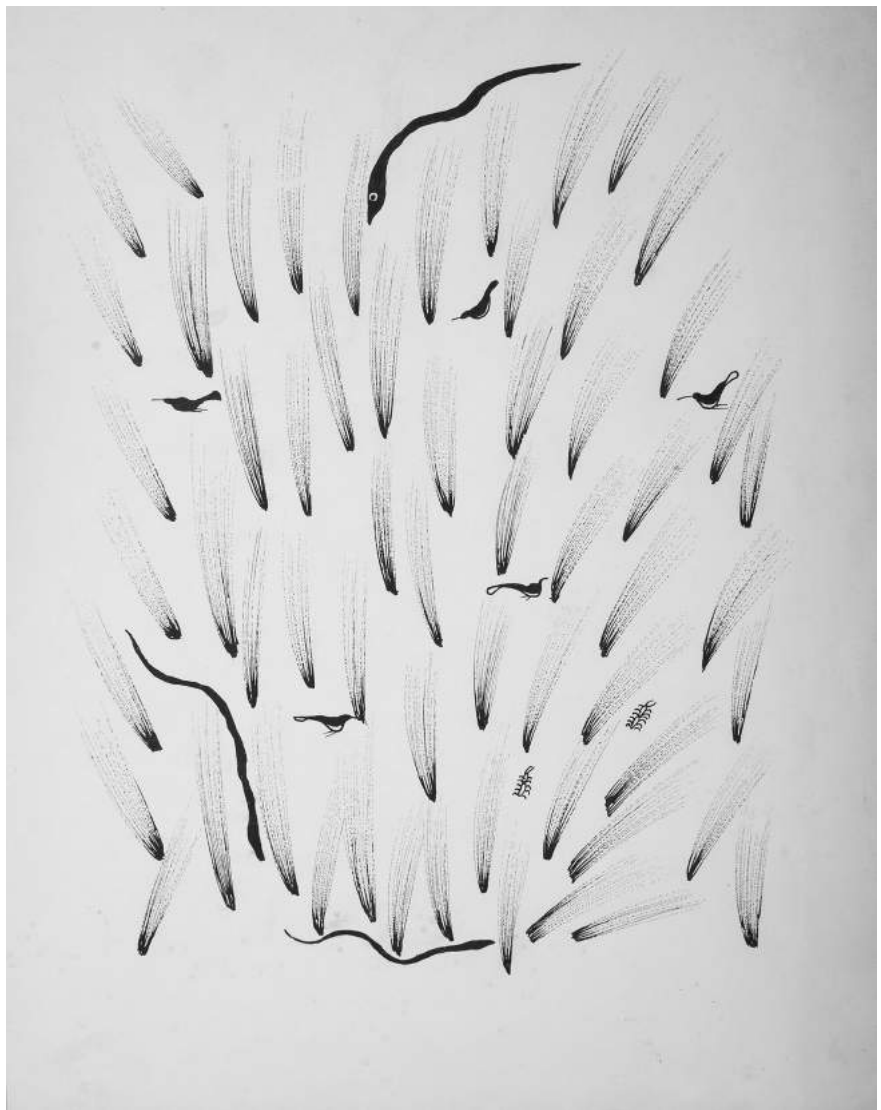
Adivasi (Indian Tribal Art), a four-venue travelling show in Japan. Although they were selected along with many other artists by a curatorial team consisting of J Swaminathan, Jyotindra Jain and the artist Haku Shah, the exhibitions themselves were part of a broader governmental initiative known as the Festival of India, which was the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's brainchild, during the period that Pупul Jayakar was known to be her cultural advisor. Perhaps the Festival of India's governmental associations, its dispersed programming and its nationalistic framework prevented the Japanese exhibitions from launching the artists' international careers in the way that *Magiciens* did. Given the perceived glamour of its Paris venue, the sheer scale of the exhibition, the participation of scores of international artists and the controversies that its curatorial approach sparked, it is not altogether surprising that *Magiciens de la Terre* overshadowed *Art of the Adivasi*. Nevertheless, the Festival of India events did lay some of the groundwork for Mashe and Shyam's later celebrity, by providing them with exposure and by raising some fundamental questions about the context in which they produced their art. Swaminathan's ruminations in

the Japanese shows' catalogue briefly touch upon a conundrum that I would underline as a key concern: how to evaluate the merits of an artistic tradition (whether ancient or modern) and, more importantly, how to accord value to individual artists, when they situate themselves within collective traditions? If Picasso appropriated from African tribal traditions and did not face the charge of being derivative, it is in great part because individuals appropriating from collective traditions seem exempt from such accusations. I would propose that such collective traditions could be compared to modern schools such as Impressionism or Surrealism, where a collective manifesto produced highly variegated expressions from members. While a consciously conceived manifesto is distinct from indigenous Indian artists' often unvoiced membership of a collective tradition, the relationship between collective and individual 'merit' may be similarly recognised.

Equally, however, the problem lies in how 'creativity' and 'artistic practice' are viewed using distinct lenses in distinct cultures — both past and present. Resistance to according polyvalence and mutability to these terms, combined with a fiercely competitive global market, have done a great disservice to indigenous Indian art and indeed, indigenous art across the world. As Green and Mort have argued,

The deconstruction of the field of art should entail the investigation of the very processes by which its nature and status have been constructed and secured through specific practices at different historical periods. (227)

One should add, in different cultures too. Some of these issues were raised at the National Gallery of Canada's (NGC) symposium, which accompanied a large-scale show of international indigenous art, *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*, in Ottawa in 2013. *Sakahàn* is the only recent effort that matches the scale and influence of *Magiciens*. It followed the model that *Magiciens* helped establish, with three lead curators at the NGC and a team of international advisors in numerous locations. Among others, two *Sakahàn* debates stand out: a) the issues of otherness (the continuing 'us' and 'them' discussions that muffle the voices of indigenous plurality and continue to exoticise indigenous otherness and, thus, attempt to normalise 'us'); and b) the concern that pigeonholing artists into the category of indigeneity further risks devaluing their artistic individuality.



Jangarh Singh Shyam. 'Snake, Birds and Insects in Grass'. Undated. Line drawing on paper, 35.5 cm × 28 cm. Image courtesy the Crites Collection (India). Photo: Robyn Beeche.

To grasp the first issue, one has to question what is understood by indigeneity and, more importantly, what constitutes an indigenous way of life. Assuming it is possible to determine this in a coherent manner without essentialising, there is the further question of what comprises indigenous art. Is it something created by indigenous peoples; can it be created by the non-indigenous; or is the label limited to certain thematic concerns, sources of inspiration and specific formal idioms? The Pardhan Gond artist Jangarh Singh Shyam, for example, was reportedly anxious about 'losing' his indigeneity. At the beginning of his career, Shyam's cousin Narmada Prasad Tekam produced striking examples of indigenous art but later churned out mediocre paintings in large numbers for an apparently undiscerning market. During an interview with the artist at his home in Bhopal in November 2014, Tekam similarly attributed this decline in artistic quality to the loss of his indigeneity. Indeed, when asked whether he could regain what he lost, Tekam seemed doubtful, believing perhaps that city life in Bhopal had eroded the essence of a

way of life that would never be his again (eg living in close proximity to nature and regularly participating in communitarian rituals). Inversely, indigenous artists (especially perhaps those born and brought up in cities) are capable of assuming these qualities on demand, when they deduce what some potential patrons expect. It is not uncommon for indigenous artists to cater (even pander) to patrons, by adopting certain interests or inclinations that are believed to be markers of indigenous authenticity. In this respect, indigenous artists are no different than other artists who seek patrons and are willing to compromise their personal and/or artistic integrity for the sake of securing sales or exposure. At the risk of making artists bristle at this suggestion, one might even debate whether this willingness makes indigenous artists more akin to other professional artists! Notwithstanding what they have in common with artists of all kinds, the distinction here is that indigeneity is loaded with real and perceived socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic meanings. These aspects of indigeneity introduce complexities into any discussion of indigenous art and artists. It can be difficult for indigenous arts researchers to balance a critical approach with sensitivity to the artist's and communities' own discourses.

The late Jangarh Singh Shyam's son Mayank Shyam represents a conspicuous case of an indigenous artist who wishes to shake off his indigenous label and other 'qualifying' adjectives (tribal, Pardhan or Pardhan Gond). This requires courage as it means letting go of a label that can be – and indeed is – regularly employed as a marketing tool by the artists themselves and by those promoting their work. Artists like Mayank, particularly because his art is so distinct from that created by adherents to his father's tradition, are caught between a rock and a hard place; the fact that his art is considered by many to be visually less appealing and thematically less engaging than other Pardhan Gonds' work places undue pressure on him as he comes to terms with his desire to break the family legacy. Patrons and scholars likewise face dilemmas when they are engaged in recognising, accommodating and celebrating the distinct qualities that the indigenous artists bring to their work while at the same time attempting to bridge some of the chasms that the 'otherness' has created: exclusion from contemporary art circles, disparity in prices achieved and under-representation of indigenous art in significant museum collections.

One only has to look at the venues in which indigenous arts have been shown to conclude that constraining labels of 'craft' and 'indigeneity' continue to threaten a nuanced assessment of indigenous arts. With the exception of *Magiciens* and *Sakahàn*, which were showcased in spaces that regularly featured modern and other contemporary arts, significant national and international shows have taken place in the Crafts Museum in Delhi in 1998 such as *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India* curated by its then director Jyotindra Jain and *Autres Maîtres de l'Inde* in 2010 at the Musée du Quai Branly (an ethno-centric museum) in Paris, co-curated by Jyotindra Jain and associate curator Jean-Pierre Mohen. Other potentially comparable exhibits, such as the World Museum's *Telling*

Tales: The Art of Indian Storytelling (co-curated by Emma Martin and Minhazz Majumdar) in Liverpool in 2013 have, for compound reasons – including insufficient budgets for publicity and the dearth of accompanying scholarship – not made an appreciable impact. With due respect to the organisers' valid and strategic reasons for choosing it as a venue, showcasing Warli art at the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum of Childhood in London, in the exhibition *The Tales We Tell: Indian Warli Painting*, unfortunately contributes to this tendency. Exoticisation of indigenous artists is a particular problem: sometimes, cultural otherness alone can attract audience footfall, regardless of the artistic or curatorial merits of an exhibition; other times, indigenous art might be termed as naïve, *art brut*, or is generally infantilised. Notions of valorised hierarchies are almost always embedded in the choice (or the availability) of exhibition venues and the particular frameworks of interpretation that are adopted. The links between Australian and other indigenous art scenes is still an emergent area in my own research and surprisingly little has been written on such connections but, on a more encouraging note, it would appear that, unlike in North America, Europe and Asia, for some time now, major art museums in Australia have included significant and beautifully curated sections of Aboriginal art. This is perhaps why Australian institutions have been more open to showcasing indigenous art from India and elsewhere.

While smaller exhibitions in private galleries frequently constitute little more than a haphazard display of saleable indigenous art, the most interesting exhibitions have been those that are motivated by individuals with a passion for and dedication to indigenous arts. Despite limited budgets, some small exhibitions can invite richer engagement. These include *Through Other Eyes: Contemporary Art from South Asia* curated by Gérard Mermoz (Coventry, 2009); *An(Other) Story: Folk and Tribal Art From India* co-curated by David Schischka Thomas and Saleem A Quadri (Nottingham, 2009) and *Indian Gaze* curated by Nitin Shroff (Sigean, 2012). Yet, even here, we find that the latter two failed to include the individual artists' names in their object labels.

As I have intimated above, one persistent question confronts curators who wish to showcase so-called traditional arts in contemporary spaces, especially where such arts have experienced a shift from ritual contexts: what differentiates a ritual from an art practice? The simple answer would be that it is when artistic intent supersedes ritualistic intent. However, when a formerly ritual expression is adapted to create commercially available art, could this be the case with all indigenous art? If one were to instead consider the qualitative distinctions between master indigenous artists in India (such as Mashe and Shyam) and others who followed, one might conclude that it is only when the creator's artistry supersedes the ritualism of their act that a qualitative difference may be detected. It is noteworthy that both Mashe and Shyam, prior to their discovery by the non-indigenous world, had already – within their own communities – developed a reputation for artistry. Both paradoxically marked departures from their traditional cultures while simultaneously portraying them in exemplified form. This

highlights an over-arching concern in art itself: the ambiguous manner in which innovation, artistic originality and all those elusive qualities of outstanding art, that have perhaps never been satisfactorily and unanimously identified by art historians or theorists (but are nevertheless understood to be present or absent), are recognised, celebrated and validated. To put it succinctly, and somewhat simplistically, there is good and bad indigenous art — as with any art. Taking into account the relative merits and demerits of spontaneous versus informed appreciation, any viewer who is not conversant with the sources of inspiration (artistic and socio-cultural) and the particular idioms of indigenous art (as well as the biographies of indigenous artists) is not necessarily equipped to recognise the qualitative differences between the exceptional and the mediocre. Let me push a little further here: if one were to place the works of the Impressionists before an uninitiated viewer, it is likely that he or she would think they all looked similar. Due to a lack of exposure to and understanding of the particular context in which Impressionist art was created, he or she might likewise be unable to distinguish between qualitatively superior and inferior works. The same logic applies to those viewing indigenous artworks; that such a suggestion has been met with disdain in the past ironically testifies not only to the hierarchies inherent in the consideration of various categories of art but also to a lack of exposure to, and engagement with, indigenous arts.

In the past, I have cited the example of Impressionist and indigenous art to explain my views to the indigenous artists I research, asking them whether they have seen Impressionist art. In the course of doing so, I have become aware of an unvoiced apprehension that occasionally surfaces among both scholars and artists: that increased exposure to the non-indigenous world will prove to be a double-edged sword. If, on the one hand, it gives the indigenous artists the exposure and access that will undoubtedly widen their options (unarguably a favourable outcome), it might also make them lose their ‘special’ qualities, which frequently form the basis of our appreciation of their work. Most scholars recognise that it would be beneficial for indigenous artists to have a broader range of options available to them as artists and as people. By helping these artists gain wider exposure, and by promoting a greater understanding of their work, patrons (scholars as well as collectors) inevitably find themselves in an uncomfortable relationship because it is all too often an unequal one. In a bid to be correct, sympathetic and encouraging, patrons suffer from a variety of anxieties, which impact upon indigenous arts patronage and scholarship in ways that have not as yet been explored sufficiently by researchers. Clearly, indigenous artists often come from backgrounds that require mediation and representation on their behalf. Even the most well-intentioned patrons can and do perpetuate the inequalities of the relationship. Artists often cast patrons in an unreciprocated role of counsellor, banker, guide and/or friend. Patrons who engage actively in the artists’ lives (note that such participation is necessary in order to be granted access to research material within indigenous communities) are obliged to listen to the artists’ problems and take into

account their insecurities. By agreeing to listen to and often fix the artists’ problems, the patrons can inadvertently perpetuate inequalities. The complex aspects of such relationships often determine the decisions patrons make as collectors, scholars and promoters, thereby impacting upon the micro-narratives of art history. An indigenous artist may regard an existing or potential patron as a cash cow, irrespective of the true financial circumstances of the patron; this is particularly the case with foreign patrons due to the belief that all foreigners are financially more secure than the average Indian.

Artists, scholars and collectors all grapple with the issues outlined here and it may be that these roles are not always distinct. Already, we occasionally hear of members of a younger generation among the indigenous who are asking themselves whether to be artists or art historians. I look forward with great anticipation to the rich debates they will undoubtedly bring to the table.

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Notes

- 1 For definitions of the ‘indigenous’ and a discussion on why this has emerged as a strong replacement for words like ‘folk’ and ‘tribal’, see Aurogeeta Das. ‘Projections: Of Umbrella Terms and Definitions: Diversity Within a Framework?’. *Future(s) of Cohabitation*. Guest ed. Bisi Silva. Spec. issue of *Manifesta Journal* 17 (2014): 77–87.
- 2 Jawaharlal Nehru introduced five-year plans during his first tenure as Prime Minister of the modern nation-state of India. Ever since, the Indian economy has been premised on the concept of planning, undertaken by India’s Planning Commission. Aims for the art and culture sectors form part of these five-year plans.
- 3 The name of this organisation is a misnomer, as it sustained scholarly and publication activities far beyond the scope suggested by its title.
- 4 For a fuller account of the discovery of Jangarh Singh Shyam, see Bowles.
- 5 *Richard Long, Jivya Soma Mashe, Dialog*, Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf, 2003.
- 6 See Pablo Lafuente. ‘Introduction: From the Outside In — “Magiciens de la Terre” and Two Histories of Exhibitions’. *Making Art Global (Part 2): “Magiciens de la Terre” 1989*. Ed. Lucy Steeds et al. London: Afterall Books, 2013.

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