

# Primitive Accumulation

## The Political Economy of Indigenous Art in Postcolonial India

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1. The most commonly used term in India for indigenous people is ‘tribal’. This is also ratified legally through the classificatory system used in the Indian Constitution that lists the ‘scheduled tribes’ of India. *Adivasi* is the nativized/Hindi word for an indigenous person and an increasingly popular term in academic and political discourse. I have italicized the word *adivasi* only in the first instance. Although they are divided among numerous sub-groups, Gonds are the second-largest tribal group in India. More than 10.5 million Gonds are spread across six contiguous states.
2. For a discussion of some of the conflicting accounts surrounding Jangarh’s death, see John H Bowles, *Painted Songs and Stories: The Hybrid Flowerings of Contemporary Pardhan Gond Art*, India National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage Madhya Pradesh, India, 2009, pp 24–25.
3. Here and throughout the essay, after the first instance, I will refer to the artists by their first name. This is with a view to avoiding confusion as Shyam is among the most

On 3 July 2001, a small newspaper column in India reported that thirty-nine-year-old Jangarh Singh Shyam had committed suicide in Japan. Jangarh was a tribal or *adivasi* artist (who belonged to the Pardhan clan of the Gond tribe from central India), working on a contract at the privately owned Mithila Museum in Niigata, Japan, where he had been brought to produce a body of work for a monthly salary of about twelve thousand rupees (approximately 150 pounds sterling today).<sup>1</sup> Although not much is publicly known about the personal circumstances leading to his death – whether his suicide was the culmination of a nagging depression or loneliness in a foreign land, or an act of desperation, if not resistance, against the exploitative conditions of the globalized production of *adivasi* art – his death was both a catastrophe and an opening.<sup>2</sup> The demise of a brilliant young artist on the cusp of achieving global fame was tragic enough. But Jangarh was also a mentor and breadwinner for numerous family and clan members whom he had brought to the city to encourage them to become artists in their own right.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Jangarh’s rise to prominence – from the jungles of central India, where he carried and sold wood to earn a living, to being ‘discovered’ and brought to Bhopal (the capital of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh) when he was just twenty-one years of age at the behest of artist, art critic and patron Jagdish Swaminathan, to becoming a celebrated ‘indigenous’ painter whose work adorned state legislative buildings and who went on to gain global currency in the international art market – was already spectacular, and the stuff of fairy tales.<sup>4</sup> But what was most remarkable, although not unheard of within the dynamics of a globalized art market, was that his death finally made his art worth accumulating for upper-middle-class art consumers in India, and for those collecting and trading in indigenous art globally.<sup>5</sup>

Jangarh’s death, then, is in equal measure as fascinating a story as that of his art and of his life and career as an artist. It raises a set of

common surnames among the Pardhans. This gesture, however, is also a tribute to the non-hierarchical and informal manner in which the Pardhan Gonds address each other.

4. The story goes that in 1981, when Swaminathan took over as director of the Roopankar museum and art gallery at Bhopal's newly created cultural centre called Bharat Bhavan, he sent out teams of young artists to look for talented folk and adivasi artists from various parts of the state. Vivek Tembe, member of one such group, 'discovered' Jangarh after seeing one of his paintings on the mud wall of a hut in the village of Patangarh. See Jangarh's own account of his life and career to the India-based British journalist Mark Tully, *No Full Stops in India*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1991, p 277. See also Bowles, op cit, p 22.
5. Anecdotal evidence certainly suggests this, even though it may be difficult, as yet, to garner 'hard' data on the economics of Gond art. At the Tribes shop (set up by the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited, a division of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs) in New Delhi, Jangarh's paintings are considered 'too valuable' to be priced! At the same time, other Gond artists' work had been reproduced on hundreds of T-shirts, coffee mugs, cards, bookmarks, etc in the Tribes showroom.
6. Wagish Shukla, 'Death and the Pen', in Udayan Vajpeyee, *Jangadh Kalam Vivek: Narrative of a Tradition – Gond Painting*, Vanya Prakashan, Bhopal, 2005, p 6. Translation from the Hindi here and throughout this essay is mine.
7. Ramachandra Guha, 'A War in the Heart of India', *The Nation*, 16 July 2007
8. For a critical reading of the latter two figurations – the tribal as victim and warrior

issues that this article seeks to explore. These concern, among other matters, the globalization of indigenous art production, the politics of the postcolonial state's relationship to tribal or adivasi art and the aesthetic challenges of interpreting adivasi art in today's world. Like Jangarh's death, responses to these issues are typically rendered in a tragic mode that mourns the evisceration of cultural authenticity under the onslaught of global capitalism. So, for instance, the writer Wagish Shukla writes quite bitterly and angrily about the predicament of Gond art in globalization: 'the Pardhans have been forced by circumstances to sell their gods. Their oral traditions, their gods are represented in paintings that are now displayed in art galleries and drawing rooms.'<sup>6</sup> What I want to suggest below is that the art itself offers an allegory, however partial and incomplete, of the process by which it enters the world and is both transformed by it and transforms it. In other words, in this article I depart from accounts that see adivasi or indigenous art as having been simply ravaged and desecrated by commercialization; instead I look at how the art itself exposes that process of commodification and accumulation on a global scale, and offers resistance to it. I attempt to hitch formal discussions of indigenous art both to institutionalized forms of power from which it is often excluded or in which it is selectively appropriated, as well as to the political and social processes in which it is embedded and of which it is a critique.

## POSTCOLONIAL PROJECT

It is necessary, however, to frame Jangarh's story, and what I think are the political and theoretical stakes of considering adivasi art in postcolonial India, within a larger historical narrative. While there are competing definitions of 'adivasi', and of the historical roots of adivasi groups, especially in relation to Hindu caste categories, it is no secret that more than half of India's eighty million adivasis live below the poverty line, lacking access to basic education, healthcare, employment and state support of any kind. Their impoverishment is only compounded by the fact that they live 'amid India's most verdant forests, alongside India's freest-flowing rivers and atop India's most valuable minerals'.<sup>7</sup> In postcolonial India, these areas have predictably become key sites of economic exploitation in the name of development and capital accumulation. For this, tribal peoples are routinely displaced in disproportionate numbers to make way for dams and mines that largely benefit urban middle classes, national elites and transnational corporations.

The figure of the adivasi in Indian history and culture can be traced quite productively from the British colonial archive (where it is figured as 'primitive') through its circulation in postcolonial articulations of modernity (where it is figured as 'backward') to the adivasi's current appearance as a conflicted figure of threat to national security (as a Maoist) and of a transnational ethics (where it is figured as heroic victim and warrior in the war against global capitalism and state repression, and as a figure of anti-imperial solidarity).<sup>8</sup> Pushing the colonial archive into the postcolonial period requires one to examine how this figure circulates – in official and bureaucratic policy and discourse, in public culture, in cinema, art

in the struggle against globalization – see Rashmi Varma, ‘Developing Fictions: the “Tribal” in the New Indian Writing in English’, in Amitava Kumar, ed, *World Bank Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2002, pp 216–233.

and literature, in academic fields and institutions – as a complex of sedimented images of primitivism and backwardness, insurgency and deprivation – against which ‘modern’ citizens define themselves. These images also shape questions of sovereignty and global citizenship with reference to the rights of indigenous peoples within nation-states and globally in the form of transnational movements of indigenous peoples.

Adivasis thus embody a key paradox of Indian modernity. On the one hand, the figure of the modern, national tribal provides an alternative vision to the degradations of colonial rule that systematically decimated tribal culture and material life (but not its spirit), and thus produced the tribal as a figure who needed to be protected and redeemed. On the other, the adivasi becomes the object of postcolonial development and the postcolonial state’s lure of modernity. This complex and divided view can be seen filtered in state discourses on tribal ‘welfare’ and administration, state rituals and institutions such as Republic Day celebrations at which India’s adivasi heritage is show-cased, state-sponsored cultural spaces such as adivasi museums and tribal arts festivals set up to preserve tribal dialects and arts, as well as the national project of constitutionalizing difference and rights, and of preserving, saving (to be protected from ‘outsiders’) and integrating tribal culture within a social justice framework in line with the national idea of ‘unity in diversity’.

In recent decades, however, adivasis have emerged as political protagonists in their own right, whether as actors in the Maoist-led peasant uprisings against state repression and failure of the developmental idea, in labour and environmental movements against the exploitation of adivasi resources, in sectarian or communal politics as antagonists of a secular ideal or as victims of a majoritarian Hindutva, or in more mainstream political struggles for representation on the basis of tribal identity, such as for the states of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. It is in the context of this complex and long engagement with the figure of the tribal in India, one that can only very simply be sketched here, that indigeneity emerges as a constitutive feature of national modernity in India.

But the contradictory projects glossed above have to be looked at in view of tribal claims to political and artistic representation if one is to gain a meaningful view of Indian modernity. This is particularly challenging in a neoliberal global order in which the tribal is always already a commodity or an image, or a figure embodying the problematic of representation itself.<sup>9</sup> Crucially, it is also a figure that calls for rethinking the relationship between aesthetic representation and political power, and that between adivasi art and the ceaseless production of a commodifying world culture. In other words, the question of adivasi identity has to be articulated with the question of political economy such that the conditions of possibility for the commodification and accumulation of Gond art can be better understood.

### **PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION: FRAMEWORK AND METAPHOR**

While there already exist more fulsome accounts of the tribal mythologies, origin stories and the hybrid nature and technique of the Gond art that Jangarh pioneered, any critical interpretation of the art must also

9. See the work of Subaltern Studies historians, *Subaltern Studies*, vols I–XII, Oxford University Press, Delhi, for a critical approach to the representation of tribals in colonial and nationalist histories of India.

10. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I: The Process of Capitalist Production*, Frederick Engels, ed, translated from the 3rd German edition by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, International Publishers, New York, 1967. See especially 'Part VIII: The So-Called Primitive Accumulation', pp 713–774.
11. In Marx's own words, 'the so-called primitive accumulation ... is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it.' Ibid, pp 714–715. For Marx, the history of this 'expropriation' is 'written in letters of blood and fire', ibid, p 715.
12. Sandro Mezzadra, 'The Topicality of Prehistory: A New Reading of Marx's Analysis of "So-called Primitive Accumulation"', *Rethinking Marxism*, June 2011, vol 23, no 3, pp 302–321. Marx wrote of how 'the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation.' See Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, op cit, p 751.
13. Marx had noted the particular violence ('most frightful') meted out to 'aborigines' in the colonies. Ibid, p 753. Michael Perelman has noted that there are in fact

draw upon the material/economic and symbolic life situation of its emergence and presence in postcolonial India and beyond. The discussion on primitive accumulation in Marx and in the work of subsequent commentators opens up ways to track the cultural economy of adivasi art in postcolonial India.<sup>10</sup> In turn, the politics of the accumulation of tribal/primitive art in India (and its related commodification and consumption) offers a critical perspective on Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation in the pre-history of capital in which the producer is *violently* separated from the means of production and dispossessed from his or her land and labour, from life itself.<sup>11</sup> Primitive accumulation thus involves a coerced enclosure of the commons for the establishment of the rule of private property. In this, 'the centrality of a confrontation with colonialism' must be registered, for of course colonialism constitutes a key moment in the violent history of enclosures in India and elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> One can therefore extend Marx's economic concepts into the domain of indigenous art where the primitive is both a metaphorical marker of the untameable savage to be ruled by colonial violence (primitive 1) as well as constituting that which is before capital in a historical sense (primitive 2).<sup>13</sup>

By critically assessing how primitive accumulation is not consigned to the pre-history of capital but is in fact integral to the political economy of development in a postcolonial state such as India, particularly as it pertains to tribal lands, resources, labour, culture and life, we can begin to place the political meaning of the practice, circulation and accumulation of Gond art in the context of larger political and economic processes shaping the world today. The doubled sense in which indigenous art, like indigenous knowledge, lands and resources, is wrenched from its producers and forced into the capitalist process is central to the discussion below.

Among others, David Harvey's account of primitive accumulation as an ongoing 'accumulation through dispossession' offers a necessary and key re-reading of primitive accumulation as an essential ingredient of the continuing force of global capitalism.<sup>14</sup> Now new enclosures proliferate and colonize all kinds of commons, from land and water to knowledge and art, as ever-new forms of economic crises of accumulation grip the world and threaten profit. Harvey's argument that capitalism creates an 'other' that it can then violently subsume is particularly relevant for adivasi art as it struggles to find a place within established art institutions such as the museum and the global art market while also standing out of place within them as other, either excluded and annulled, or colonized and commodified.<sup>15</sup> Its accumulation as a certain kind of affect towards a distant past enables national and transnational profiteering in the cultural realm, even as its accumulation as 'primitive' or exotic art (that is also a commodity) in the contemporary world opens up new spheres of trafficking in art in general.

But central to the question of how the tribal is incorporated as a cultural symbol is also that of how tribal art itself can be recognized as a site of the changing nature of social relations and labour under neoliberal capitalism, as well as of negotiation and rebellion within and against it. In the readings I offer below, I interpret Gond painting as not only referencing the continuous accumulation through dispossession, but in fact as providing allegories of this political-economic process, in the ways in which the art and the social context of its making critically

three senses in which we can take Marx's use of 'primitive' in 'primitive accumulation'. He writes of how 'The very sound of the expression, primitive accumulation, drips with poignant echoes of human consequences. The word "primitive", first of all, suggests a brutality lacking in the subtleties of more modern forms of exploitation. It also implies that primitive accumulation was prior to the form of accumulation that people generally associate with capitalism. Finally, it hints at something that we might associate with "primitive" parts of the world, where capital accumulation has not advanced as elsewhere.' See Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2000, p 2.

14. David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003. See also Perelman's *The Invention of Capitalism*, op cit, where he makes a case for 'treating primitive accumulation as an essential theoretical concept in analysing the ongoing process of capitalist accumulation', p 4.
15. Rosa Luxemburg in *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1951, clearly observed this when she asserted that in order to exist and develop, capital needs a milieu of non-capitalist forms of production.
16. In India, Verrier Elwin is credited with having been the first scholar to have used the word 'art' for Gond visual expressions, seen otherwise to be inseparable from daily life rituals and practices. This is a double-edged move as it both adds aesthetic and

register the multiple temporalities of violence and dislocation integral to global capitalism.

Any historical consideration of adivasi art of course conjures the accumulation of primitivism and its cultural resources throughout the history of modernism and that of capitalist industrialization incubated in Europe. Primitive culture in the work of artists such as Gauguin and Picasso was celebrated as authentic and timeless, and hence immune to the depredations of modernity. The Surrealists juxtaposed tribal objects with machines to draw attention to the barbarism of capitalist modernization. Yet, even in these seemingly sympathetic appropriations of primitive cultures, their art and ritual objects, the tribal remains outside history. The emergence of Gond art has to be understood against the backdrop of this long (mis)engagement with primitive culture and art in the history of the modern world.<sup>16</sup> This requires a radical shift of perception, one that is resolutely grounded in the material conditions that produce primitivism in the first place such that the primitive is first colonized, then annihilated and then appropriated as a loss. It is in this vein that in his consideration of Gond art, Udajan Vajpeyee is at pains to break the Eurocentric lens, and I would add a narrowly formalist lens, that has been used to view Indian folk and tribal art, a lens that deliberately obscures the 'contemporaneity' (or 'samkalin'ta') of the latter. Critical work needs to be done to restore adivasi art to history, and adivasis to agency in the long and complex drama of capitalist modernity.

## A PRESENT ABSENCE

The story of Jangarh and that of his art and his community is an archetypal story of dispossession.<sup>17</sup> It is also a little-known story. The Pardhan Gonds of central India were traditional singers, storytellers and community priests who had the privileged role of invoking the Gond deity Bara Dev for the well-being of the community. As such, they played the role of oral historians and keepers of the 'collective memory' of the tribe. For their special talent they were rewarded with the patronage of Gond households and rulers (whose rule lasted for about 1400 years). But as British rule entrenched itself in the Indian heartland, the power of the Gond rulers declined, and the Pardhan Gonds began to lose their economic lifeline and traditional support for their stories and songs.<sup>18</sup> As the twentieth century rolled along, the Pardhan Gonds became landless farmers, wage labourers, casual workers in government-run drought relief schemes and part of the urban poor. Far from being a story of development, this is one of immiseration and dispossession.

Yet, a state project devoted to accumulating its cultural capital by harnessing adivasi culture propelled some of the Pardhan Gonds into the by-lanes of Bhopal. The city (an erstwhile princely state that acceded to the Indian union in 1949, was then absorbed into the state of Madhya Pradesh and became its capital city) is unique in India in terms of the concentration of institutions and spaces devoted to the tribal arts found here.<sup>19</sup> It is the site of the National Museum of Mankind, the Adivasi Lok Kala Parishad (Tribal People's Arts Council) and Bharat Bhavan, an arts centre established to spearhead the rejuvenation of tribal, folk and contemporary visual and performing

economic value to what in many instances was everyday practice, and instantiates a separation between the everyday (use-value) and art (exchange-value). See Verrier Elwin, *The Tribal Art of Middle India: A Personal Record*, Oxford University Press, London, 1951.

17. See Vajpeyee, *Jangadh Kalam*, op cit; and Bowles, op cit.
18. The social worker, writer and associate of Verrier Elwin, Shamrao Hiwale, who lived in the village of Patangarh for several decades, made this interesting observation about the non-materialistic nature of the Pardhan Gonds: 'To the Pardhan a song is more important than a sack of grain and this is ultimately true even though the Pardhan insists on getting what he can from the material world.' Shamrao Hiwale, *The Pardhans of the Upper Narbada Valley*, Oxford University Press, London, 1946, p 11. Quoted in Bowles, op cit, p 20.
19. While adivasis form about eight per cent of India's population, they constitute about twenty-three per cent of the population of Madhya Pradesh.
20. Opened in 1982, Bharat Bhavan is a unique arts establishment and experiment in postcolonial India. It combines collections of visual art, theatre, cinema, music and spoken word, and is a space that is devoted to the practice of art and not just its museumization. Although set up by the government of Madhya Pradesh, Bharat Bhavan is run by an independent trust that of course has had its own set of controversies in the recent past. See <http://bharatbhawan.org/html/roopankar.html>, accessed 9 November 2011.

arts in the state. Bhopal has thus played a key role in nourishing the talents of several adivasi artists, including the Pardhan Gonds. Having been discovered as indigenous artists, their work has been exhibited in state legislative buildings, art galleries, ethnographic museums, and in the city's unique arts complex, Bharat Bhavan, designed in 1982 by the famous architect Charles Correa. Although Bharat Bhavan advertises its art gallery Roopankar as 'the only museum of its kind in India which houses contemporary folk and tribal art together with urban art', a visit to the gallery reveals that there too the separation is maintained in the form of two distinctive sections – one for modern Indian art understood to be 'urban' and one devoted to folk and tribal art thought to have roots in the village.<sup>20</sup> Even so, Bharat Bhavan is unusual in having opened its doors to adivasi and folk art to be viewed seriously in a gallery format. In an interview with the journalist Mark Tully, its then director, the artist Jagdish Swaminathan laments the lack of pride Indian intellectuals have in the nation's tribal heritage, and speaks out against what he calls a Leftist perspective towards adivasi art that sees the art as backward and as emanating from superstition. Disarmingly, Swaminathan says:

The stupid fools don't know what effect Picasso's discovery of tribal art had on Europe. Where would we be now, artists like me, without that? ... You know, we (Bharat Bhavan) were the first people to collect the work of tribals as art, not as folkcraft. When we sent an exhibition to Japan, I was criticised for not explaining where the tribals came from and who they were. I said we are running an art exhibition, not an exercise in ethnography or anthropology.<sup>21</sup>

Here, we can see Swaminathan both affiliating himself with international modernism's attraction towards primitive art and making a distinction between art and ethnography, one whose boundary lines seem so permeable when it comes to adivasi art. It is this dual sense of an international sensibility that valorizes the tribal as modernity's other, combined with a progressive commitment to take adivasi art seriously as art, on its own terms, that informs the design, the layout and the substance of Bharat Bhavan's art collections. In a different setting and using a decidedly ethnographic framework, the National Museum of Mankind in Bhopal utilizes, as the Museum website puts it, an 'open, freewheeling, flexible plan' that consists of a combination of indoor exhibition areas, with vast open spaces dedicated to various groups, including exhibits such as 'tribal habitat' or adivasi life and culture.<sup>22</sup>

These museum spaces, along with the large murals that adorn the state legislative building, the Vidhan Parishad, and the Gond motifs one sees on public walls along roads in the city, give the impression of Bhopal as a city in which its adivasi culture provides a particular kind of cultural capital, whether as tourist attraction or as a constant reminder of a rich and varied heritage of the state (the national idea of unity-in-diversity on a regional scale). However this sits uneasily alongside popular desires for economic development, particularly those fulfilled at the cost of the very survival of the adivasis, as evidenced in the displacement and dispossession that has resulted from the dam project, part of the Narmada Valley Development Project. It is from Bhopal, then, that Gond art has travelled to crafts markets and museums in the national capital, and to

21. Mark Tully, *No Full Stops in India*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1991, p 271

22. [http://www.igrms.com/igrms\\_eng.html](http://www.igrms.com/igrms_eng.html), accessed 9 November 2011

galleries in the country's other metropolitan cities, and has begun to find increasing representation in museums, galleries, festivals and auction houses abroad.

But any attempt to chronicle the history of Gond painting flies in the face of ideas of authenticity and tradition, notions that are typically at the centre of discussions on indigeneity. For the art historian Vajpeyee, Gond paintings are best described as painted songs in which spoken songs, sung words and prayers are all translated onto the canvas.<sup>23</sup> As the first artist from his village, it is credited to Jangarh that he translated the rich storehouse of the 'gods and goddesses, trees and plants, rivers and springs from the music of the *bana* to picturization'.<sup>24</sup> The painter Gulam Mohammed Sheikh has described the system of patterns used in Jangarh's paintings as evoking movement, 'embodying as if through repeating a chant'.<sup>25</sup> An important fact to note is that none of the Gond deities had ever before been depicted visually. Bowles argues that it is through the 'excitement and force of his creativity' that Jangarh gave 'form and colour to what was previously invisible'.<sup>26</sup> As Jangarh tells Tully in a conversation, 'I used to see people when the gods took possession of them and that was how I got the idea of what the gods looked like'.<sup>27</sup> The Pardhan Gond painters have also borrowed freely from the repertoire of so-called Hindu images, creating their own versions of deities such as Shiva, Krishna and Ganesh. Elwin, too, had noted this absence of a pure Gond artistic expression. He saw it as always already borrowed from other traditions and then transformed and made into something new.<sup>28</sup>

But even as Gond art draws upon traditional stories and songs based on adivasi mythology and remembered village landscapes, aspects that are considered to be vital to the continuing survival of adivasi cultures against the onslaught of exploitative development, Gond painting is very much a constructed tradition, one that had its roots in the village but came into its own, flourished and was nourished in the city of Bhopal. As the art historian Kavita Singh points out:

Jangarh ... was not a traditional artist; he was not born into a family of traditional artists; he was not in fact from a community that was meant to have artists at all.<sup>29</sup>

In an interview with Tully, Jangarh comments on how he 'actually started by copying (my) eldest brother, who made animals out of clay ... I just copied other artists in the village, and then I got some ideas of my own'.<sup>30</sup> Having initiated this 'tradition' of painting, Jangarh drew members of his extended family and indeed of his village to Bhopal. Even as there is a fairly constant traffic between the city and the village that orders and shapes the lives of many of these Gond painters, it is from here, this city, albeit geographically at great distance from the village of Patangarh, that the village is re-imagined and remembered, and translated through the medium of colour onto canvas both for and by the Gonds themselves and for the world outside. The primacy of the ever-vanishing village in the city as a source of memory and creative inspiration was underscored by Jangarh in his conversation with Tully, who asked him if he, Jangarh, had thought he would 'learn more about art by going to Bhopal'. Jangarh's firm answer to Tully was:

23. Vajpeyee, *Jangadh Kalam*, op cit, p 72

24. Ibid, p 59

25. Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, 'The World of Jangarh Singh Shyam', in Jyotindra Jain, ed, *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India*, Crafts Museum, New Delhi, 1998, p 25

26. Bowles, op cit, p 23

27. Tully, op cit, p 278

28. See Elwin, op cit.

29. Kavita Singh, 'Jangarh Singh Shyam and the Great Machine', *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts*, vol 53, no 2, December 2001, pp 61-64

30. Tully, op cit, p 278

No . . . I don't take advice from any city artists. I also tell other tribals who come to Bhopal not to copy but do their own work. The point of going to the city is not to change your art but to sell it.<sup>31</sup>

It is to Bhopal, then, that Jangarh's clan members came to assist him in the big mural projects he had undertaken for state institutions and for a growing number of individual commissions. But he also encouraged them to become artists in their own right, to draw on their individual and collective memories of the village and to forge a unique style. Over time, many of these artists have gone on to achieve national and international fame of their own and their work is now increasingly present on the global stage, whether in Sotheby's auctions or museum spaces in London and Paris. Gond art seems to have 'arrived'; it has at last become worth displaying and accumulating. But it is not only the story *behind* the arrival of Gond art on the world stage but of the art itself, how it enters the circuits of global capital through the force of primitive accumulation in the double sense that frames this essay, that is of crucial significance for understanding its predicament in the world today.

Perhaps the best record of these processes can be found in the paintings themselves. Jangarh remains a present absence everywhere, in all these places, and in the work of other Gond artists, even as he haunts his own art as a spectre of the artist that he was and that he could have become.<sup>32</sup> As such, he is the vanishing and vanished deity to whom all Gond painting is forever in debt. In paintings by very different Gond artists Jangarh figures as a character, not simply because he was the first and arguably the best among them, but also because his figure embodies for them the precarity of adivasi art in the capitalist world. Jangarh embodies the Gond artist who is an original genius, but one whose individuality is relentlessly subjected to the pressures of the commodified signature and an ever-shifting art market.<sup>33</sup> For many Gond artists, the struggle involves a tension between a sense of collective achievement (that makes it *Gond* art in the first place) and the alienating pressure to be individual artists in which the individualized signature is the index of value.

Jangarh's nephew Venkat Raman Singh Shyam offers a critical tribute to his uncle in his painting entitled *Eiffel Tower*. This 2007 painting draws on Jangarh's visit to the 'Magiciens de la terre' exhibition at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1989. The painting registers awe at Jangarh's visit to Paris at a time when no Gond painter had been abroad, even as it depicts the ironies and absurdities of a tribal artist travelling in the West.<sup>34</sup> The deliberate inversion of perspective, in which Jangarh looms over the Eiffel Tower, which is represented as a bird, presents a cautionary tale of an exemplary Gond artist's meteoric rise to prominence. Hot on this zoomorphic figure's tail and swinging by his arm are the other Gond artists who were to benefit from his success. Jangarh's two hands tellingly hold a paintbrush and money (cash) respectively, both necessary for an artist's survival. And just below the Eiffel Tower (or in the foreground) are eyes watching his every move.

This is a painting that condenses all of the contradictions that animate the entrance of Gond art onto the world stage – the steep rise to world fame also bears within it the potential for a steep fall; the juxtaposition of an indigenized, zoomorphic figure and a domesticated foreign capital

31. Ibid, p 277

32. The critic Akhilesh wrote these moving words about the impact of Jangarh's death on the question of art: 'Once again we have begun to look at Jangarh's [sic] pictures. When the shock at the fax received from Japan informing us about Jangarh's death began to weaken, then our way of looking at his paintings became sharper, inaugurating the birth of a new perspective on Jangarh's art. Jangarh is a present absence in these paintings.' See his 'Pradhan ki "Mautein"' (in Hindi), *Bahuvachan* 9, year 3, no 1, 2001, pp 104–112 (translation from the Hindi is mine).

33. In an interview with John H Bowles, Akhilesh had this to say about Jangarh and his art in the last years of his life: 'Jangarh was not able to adjust to living in a city; and that was his downfall as a painter. His paintings increasingly featured repetitious embellishments that conveyed *jadta* (inertness), and became more superficially appealing and – in a word – decorative.' Akhilesh cites pressures to support his family and his extended clan that led Jangarh to take up more and more commissions to produce artworks. See Bowles, *Painted Songs and Stories*, op cit, p 24.

34. Durga Bai Vyam did a series of paintings of aeroplanes in the Gond style to mark her first plane ride and her first visit abroad to the Frankfurt Book Fair. See also Bhajju Shyam, another successful artist, for his response to his own travels in London in *The London Jungle Book*, Tara Publishing, Chennai, India, 2004.





Venkat Raman Singh Shyam, *Eiffel Tower*, 2007, paper, 610 x 882 cm, personal collection of author, photo: Venkat Raman Singh Shyam (published with the kind permission of the artist)

(Paris) with the material force of money and the conversion of art as object of exchange, the use of traditional but innovative brush-strokes with a modernist sensibility that movingly depicts the precarity of human success and achievement. It is, however paradoxically, in its rootedness in a specific history and context that the painting succeeds in going beyond the immediate context of Jangarh's story to tell a larger tale about art in the modern world, especially tribal art in the world. Because, at the same time as the painting affiliates itself with a modernist sensibility, it also draws upon native traditions of storytelling, such as that of the *Panchatantra*, third-century BCE animal fables written in Sanskrit.<sup>35</sup> Like those stories from the ancient world, Gond paintings ascribe the power of thought to all beings in the natural world, from human beings to plants and animals, and imply a reciprocal relationship between the human and the animal worlds. Vajpeyee has written of how each character in Gond paintings is a 'thinking' character ('sochta hua patra'), whether it is an old man or a buffalo, a boy or a parrot.<sup>36</sup> Thus it is that the animal-like tribal artist is also a philosopher contemplating the tenuous nature of fame, celebrity and money in the modern world.

35. See Bowles, op cit, p 62, p 68, where Venkat talks about referencing the styles of modern and contemporary 'non-tribal' artists in his own work.

36. Vajpeyee, *Jangadh Kalam*, op cit, p 11

37. Bowles, op cit, p 32
38. Tully narrates a moment from his visit to Patangarh accompanied by Jangarh when, at the end of an evening, Jangarh began singing a song whose words he had composed himself: 'The earth calls out, "Tell me, Raja, why are you leaving me? You will never find such love in the city as you find in your village"', p 288. In the same set of conversations Jangarh had talked of coming to the city to sell his art. As Vajpeyee points out, for residents of Patangarh someone leaving the village to work outside was nothing new or unprecedented. Jangarh's father had left the village some forty to fifty years before Jangarh's departure, to work as a cook with the writer, anthropologist and Gandhian Verrier Elwin, in Shillong in north-east India, where Elwin was a consultant to the government on tribal affairs. A similar fate befell Bhajju Shyam's grandfather, who left his village to earn a living. These migrant men would manage to send only a pittance to their increasingly poverty-stricken families, p 27.
39. In a poignant moment in his account of his trip from Bhopal to the village of Patangarh with Jangarh, Tully writes of seeing tribals sweating under the weight of the load of wood and stones that they were carrying. He notes that if it was not for Jangarh, he would not have been able to see 'those labourers as men who might perhaps be artists or musicians, who had villages, homes, families and traditions they were proud of', p 284.
40. See Palagummi Sainath's *Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India's Poorest Districts*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2002, quoted in Vajpeyee, *Jangadh Kalam*, op cit, p 71.

In contrasting style, there is Durga Bai's rendering of Jangarh's story in a painting she did in 2009. Durga Bai is the leading woman Gond artist, whose husband, Subhash Singh Vyam, is Jangarh's brother-in-law (his wife's brother). Her childhood memories recall extreme destitution and hard labour, until a chance trip to Bhopal led to support from Jangarh in the form of a recommendation for a job for her husband, and artistic encouragement for the couple.<sup>37</sup> In the painting by Durga Bai the scene is local, set in Jangarh's village of Patangarh in the Narmada valley. Jangarh is just another village figure. Combining the full resources of Gond story-telling and its narrative techniques, and her own individual style of composition that includes designs borrowed from everyday objects and her use of bold colour, Durga Bai tells the story of Jangarh's work and art in the village. His 'discovery' by Swaminathan is referenced through the image of the car and the road and the fully clothed and bearded figure from the city. While Jangarh is not depicted as leaving the village for the city, the larger social narrative within which this painting is embedded would suggest so.<sup>38</sup> It is in many ways a familiar tale of the move from the village to the city, in which a tribal artist finds renown and money, but also encounters ignominy and struggle for survival. There is no sense of a definite teleology, however. Events happen within the space of the same canvas, in which the seemingly harmonious rhythm of village life is depicted alongside the presence of the motor vehicle and road. As Vajpeyee suggests, Gond painters paint from the storehouse of memory, as a result of which simultaneous scenes unfold on the canvas and there is no linear narrative as such. Looking further in, what is striking is Durga Bai's use of Jangarh's painting of the popular Hindu deity Hanuman within her own canvas, a veritable artistic sleight of hand that enables Durga Bai to appropriate the great master, even as she herself was an accomplished maker of *digna* or wall paintings in her village. More poignantly, the seemingly placid surface of the painting depicting the rhythm of everyday life in the village is at its core, in its details, also the hard labour of Jangarh's time in the village – carrying loads, working on the field, cow-herding, chopping wood, fishing. It is relentless, continuous labour.<sup>39</sup> The absolute materiality of the painting thus emerges in its representation of back-breaking labour in juxtaposition with the labour of art, both Jangarh's and her own, and the endless possibilities of its appropriation, accumulation and dispossession within the capitalist world in which Durga Bai must live and survive, after Jangarh.

This is a world far removed from the pretty ornamental pictures of the Gond painting purchased cheaply at art fairs and emporia of cottage industries and increasingly adorning middle-class living rooms in urban India (a social fate similar to that of Madhubani and Warli paintings, two folk-art forms now endlessly reproduced and part of the adornment of urban middle-class homes in which foreign-manufactured gadgets sit cheek by jowl with 'ethnic' Indian artefacts). Vajpeyee cautions us about the failure to recognize the price paid by these artists in the process of selling their art to middle-class consumers. He recalls the fate of another tribal artist – the Pithora artist Pema Fatya – who presents a grim example of an artist so exhausted by the demands of elite consumers of tribal art that his life ended in destitution and death, as narrated in Palagummi Sainath's *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*.<sup>40</sup> Thus



Durga Bai Vyam, *Untitled*, 2009, canvas, personal collection of author, photo: Rashmi Varma (published with the kind permission of the artist)

it is that even today many of these Gond artists work for daily wages as housemaids or as guards and peons in the various state institutions in the city and paint only in the hours after work. Typically, the women artists often paint alongside doing housework and assisting with in-filling work in their husbands' paintings.

Radiating from the beautiful pictures of trees inhabited by magical creatures and of peacocks dancing in the rain that appear so frequently in Gond painting is a feeling of loss that emerges not only from the destruction and enclosure of forests and livelihoods, but also of culture and of ways of being. This feeling of loss is only magnified by the distance experienced by the typically urban and cosmopolitan viewer of these paintings from the artist and the artist's own distance from his or her subject matter. Alongside a tenuous joy of something new (this art form) having been founded on the ruins of the past, historical memory for the Pardhan Gond artists lives through the materials of modernity and development, the acrylic paints and the canvases whose quality varies according to what the artists can afford at a given point in time.

## CONCLUSION

In his reading of Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes, Fredric Jameson is interested in what he calls the 'raw materials' of Van Gogh's painting:

... the object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil, a world reduced to its most brutal and menaced, primitive and marginalized state.

The key question that Jameson asks is this:

... how is it then that in Van Gogh such things as apple trees explode into a hallucinatory surface of color, while his village stereotypes are suddenly and garishly overlaid with hues of red and green? I will briefly suggest ... that the willed and violent transformation of a drab peasant object world into the most glorious materialization of pure color in oil paint is to be seen as a Utopian gesture, an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new Utopian realm of the senses ... which it now reconstitutes for us as a semi-autonomous space in its own right, a part of some new division of labor in the body of capital, some new fragmentation of the emergent sensorium which replicates the specializations and divisions of capitalist life at the same time that it seeks in precisely such fragmentation a desperate Utopian compensation for them.<sup>41</sup>

We see a similar materialization of backbreaking labour or wageless life into colour in the art of the Gonds. The artist Gulam Mohammed Sheikh has noted that Jangarh always recalled 'how awestruck he felt by the brilliance of these pigments – just touching them sent tremors through his hands'.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this is the work of the Gond artists, then: their ability to transform a world of deprivation into a work of memory and possibilities, as seen in the paintings by Venkat and Durga Bai. The art itself is what holds the strongest potential for resisting the forces of commodification and of primitive accumulation as an ongoing

41. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, 1991, p 7

42. See Sheikh, op cit, p 17.

dispossession by offering original and situated critiques of those processes.

The attempt to forge lives as artists in and of the peripheries is of course constantly tested and extremely risky. Gond artists now engage new and different media (including designing furniture, illustrating books, writing story boards for animation and documentary film) and participate in transnational commissions and collaborations, even as many are compelled to sell their images for reproduction on cheap coffee cups and greeting cards or do commission work for tourist resorts, five-star hotels and international banks. But as Bowles pointedly reminds us:

... for centuries the Pardhan Gonds sustained themselves as itinerant performers accepting payment from far-flung patrons, and so the commercial aspect of their recent visual expression through modern media can be seen as an innovative revival of – rather than a simple departure from – their community's traditional pursuits.<sup>43</sup>

But he adds a cautionary note:

While 'strategic positioning' and pandering for profit are (and always have been) lucrative temptations for all professional artists, obviously marginalized tribal artists – who have only recently risen from extreme poverty – are particularly vulnerable.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, even as we might intellectually apprehend the impossibility of the purity of art, tradition, and identity, the imbrication of adivasi art in the circuits of global capital merits an account that renders the framework of the politics of representation (that privileges questions of identity and authenticity) as no longer adequate to this art. For it is within these circuits of primitive accumulation as ongoing dispossession that Jangarh succeeded in carving out an aesthetic space for himself and the artists who have followed him, a space that is at once one of both manoeuvre and critique.

In the two decades of economic boom in India since the early 1990s, art has entered the portfolios of financial investment. As a result, it is now possible for more artists than before to make a living and indeed even to become celebrities and part of the elite social set if they are from privileged backgrounds and are able to secure the right agents and access to the galleries.<sup>45</sup> Adivasi artists still struggle to enter these financial calculations and social registers, marginalized as they are by their late entry onto the commercial art scene. Yet their 'primitive' roots open them up to niche investments, as exemplified by the new crop of 'craft entrepreneurs' in the metropolitan centres. The promotion of adivasi art is now wrested from the state and social sector into private capital.

Gond art offers a particularly enabling site to understand the processes of global capitalism in which it is enmeshed, for it is, all at the same time, quintessentially modern, unmistakably a commodity form, and a critique of the very processes that create a desire and logical necessity for primitive accumulation in the doubled sense. Primitive accumulation is here both a theoretical framework for the process by which this art enters the world, and a metaphor for understanding how adivasi art is commodified and accumulated and how it still transforms its world and ours. As adivasi

43. Bowles, op cit, p 41

44. Ibid

45. David Graeber argues that 'the art world has become largely an appendage to finance capital. This is not to say that it takes on the nature of finance capital (in many ways, in its forms, values, and practices, it is almost exactly the opposite) – but it is to say it follows it around, its galleries and studios clustering and proliferating around the fringes of the neighborhoods where financiers live and work in global cities everywhere, from New York and London to Basel and Miami.' See his 'The Sadness of Post-Workerism or "Art And Immaterial Labour" Conference: A Sort of Review', in *The Commoner: A Web Journal (and Web Log) for Other Values*, posted on 1 April 2008); <http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=33>, accessed 6 January 2012. On this view, the location of Bhopal as a conduit between the village and the global city becomes even more interesting.

46. See Sandro Mezzadra, 'The Topicality of Prehistory: A New Reading of Marx's Analysis of So-called Primitive Accumulation', *Rethinking Marxism*, vol 23, no 3, June 2011, pp 302–321, p 318. See also Negri, who interprets artistic labour as liberated labour, 'a kind of labour freed from the obligation of exploitation, from alienation to a boss, from servitude ... Liberated labour is ... collective essence of the excedence of being', *Art and Multitude: Nine Letters on Art*; followed by *Metamorphoses: Art and Immaterial Labour*, Polity, Cambridge, 2011, p 49.

commons (land, forests, water, knowledge and art) are systematically appropriated by global capital, it is important to keep in view Sandro Mezzadra's pointer that:

The common is something to produce, something that is built by a collective subject that is capable, in the process of its own constitution, of destroying the basis of exploitation and reinventing the common conditions of a production structured on the synthesis of freedom and equality.<sup>46</sup>

Thus it is that the tragic dimension of Gond and other traditions of adivasi art, as they are forced into the history and logic of primitive accumulation, is also the source of their ability to critique and refuse those processes and to offer art as affirmation of possible futures.

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