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Artistic Agency in the Contemporary Indian Anglophone Picturebook: A Study of
Pardhan Gond Aesthetics and Tara Books

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Samarth Singhal

June 2024

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June 2024

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family in India and community in the USA; and the storytelling family of Jangarh Singh Shyam that bravely continues to create.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Artistic Agency in the Contemporary Indian Anglophone Picturebook: A Study of
Pardhan Gond Aesthetics and Tara Books

by

Samarth Singhal

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2024
Dr. Jennifer Doyle, Co- Chairperson
Dr. Ruhi Khan, Co- Chairperson

My dissertation traces the valences of a moment in contemporary Anglophone publishing in India that is slowly marking the presence of an articulate Indigenous voice. In contemporary India, the Adivasi—sometimes called tribal or Indigenous, each term mired in a painful history—exist in a perpetual zone of disenfranchisement. With increasing encroachment upon traditionally held resources and occupations, Adivasi individuals have had to negotiate an exponentially threatened lifeworld. However, there is resistance to be found. A complex picture of Adivasi creative intervention emerges, challenging any attempt to speak for the Adivasi body by the dominant order. I examine the possibilities of one such intervention via the contemporary Anglophone picturebook published by the alternative publisher Tara Books. Tara Books has established itself as a publishing house

reputed for its significant and sensitive collaboration with more than one Adivasi community.

The first chapter locates the 2014 *Creation*, illustrated by Pardhan Gond artist Bhajju Shyam, as a site of a self-representation in response to anthropological and visual appropriation of the tribal body, while chapter two examines Bhajju Shyam's 2004 *The London Jungle Book* as a reversal of the colonial-ethnographic gaze. Chapter three examines the 2009 *Flight of the Mermaid*, also illustrated by Bhajju Shyam, to trace the possibilities of understanding Pardhan Gond art as an example of speculative aesthetics. The fourth chapter discusses Durgabai Vyam's 2005 *Sultana's Dream* and 2010 *The Churki Burki Book of Rhymes* to focus the picturebook on gender. Women's labor is understood to be the "alphabet of Gond art" but its recognition is missing in the list of Pardhan Gond practitioners today. Using literary analysis, visual analysis, and ethnographic interviews of the artists, the study builds on the pioneering work of scholars Michelle Raheja, Saloni Mathur, Jyotindra Jain, Roma Chatterji, and Aurogeeta Das and breaks new ground by applying their approaches to the medium of the picturebook, at an intersection of Adivasi studies and postcolonialism, with a focus on the visual material object of the picturebook.

Yet, Tara Books is a niche publishing house with a limited English-educated urban metropolitan audience. While some of their books can be bought and delivered via Amazon, only a few bookstores in urban glamorized India sell their books. This politics of accessing the Pardhan Gond picturebooks cautions us about any presumption of the Anglophone Tara practice as a democratic art that may persuade large populations. Nevertheless, the picturebook imagines a self-represented past and a self-articulated future

for the Adivasi artist. By clarifying the extant discourses that coerce the Adivasi body, art, and voice into a bind of primitivism, and by investigating how an agential response can be imagined within the picturebook, my dissertation helps understand how an ostensibly limited medium may be deployed strategically by Adivasi individuals.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Adivasi Art and Agency	1
Adivasi Representation	7
A Pardhan Paints.....	23
(Postcolonial Primitivism)	37
Tara Books	46
Art in Neo-liberal Postcolonial Primitivist India	53
Art in the Picturebook.....	62
Seeking Agency	66
Methodology	77
Chapter 1 Creating Art, Crafting the Artist: Bhajju Shyam’s Autoethnographic Picturebooks	86
From Visual Primitivism to Postcolonial Primitivism: Colonial Illustration, 20 th Century Painting, and 21 st Century Display	96
The Autoethnographic Picturebook	110
The Collaborative Picturebook	134
Chapter 2 What do Picturebooks Want: The Case of Bhajju Shyam’s <i>London Jungle Book</i>	159
Indigenous Art in the Indian Picturebook	168
Kipling and Bhajju Shyam.....	174
Publishing the Picturebook.....	186
Adivasi Visuality: Turning to Control.....	210
Chapter 3 The Indian Anglophone Picturebook as Speculative Fiction: Bhajju Shyam’s <i>The Flight of the Mermaid</i>.....	228
A (non) Linear Future	236
The Child and the Super-natural	244
The (Futurist) Adivasi Mermaid	256
The Pardhan Mermaid.....	267
Chapter 4 The Gendered Picturebook: Durgabai Vyam’s Art for Tara Books	282
Absent but Present.....	288
Present but Absent	317
Conclusion Ambivalent Adivasi Storytelling in the Prudent Picturebook	340
Bibliography	346

List of Images

Chapter 1

Fig. 1 *Santhal Maiden*, Mukul Dey, Etching and Aquatint on Paper, National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi. Personal Photograph.

Fig. 2 Bhajju Shyam's Mural at The Lodhi Art District, New Delhi. Personal photograph.

Fig. 3 Bhajju Shyam's Self-portrait with *Bana* and animals, *Untitled*, Ojas Art Gallery, 2022. Personal photograph.

Fig. 4 "The Unborn Fish" *Creation*. Art by Bhajju Shyam for *Creation*, Original Edition © Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com.

Chapter 2

Fig. 1. "Working for the Stomach a" *The London Jungle Book*. Art by Bhajju Shyam for *The London Jungle Book*, Original Edition © Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com.

Fig. 2 "Working for the Stomach b" *The London Jungle Book*. Art by Bhajju Shyam for *The London Jungle Book*, Original Edition © Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com.

Chapter 3

Fig. 1 "A 'dash'-ing Gond deer", *A Brush with Indian Art* p. 95. Art by Aniruddha Mukherjee, text by Mamta Nainy, for *A Brush with Indian Art*, Original Edition © Puffin India.

Chapter 4

Fig. 1 "Arrows on the Sembar", *The Nightlife of Trees*. Art by Durga Bai for *The Nightlife of Trees*, Original Edition ©Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com.

Introduction: Adivasi Art and Agency

“Using ‘folk art’ styles for children’s book illustrations is popular in India today and traditional stories are increasingly being seen as symbolic capital by artists who are turning to these narratives as viable subjects for Gond art” (Chatterji 120).

“I am writing this in fear” (“Jangarh’s Letter to His Mother” qtd in Jain *Conjuror’s* 114).

In 2010, Sotheby’s sold Jangarh Singh Shyam’s 1988 *Landscape With Spider* for \$31, 250. Such a price fetched by an Indian Adivasi creator has been described as “a first for an indigenous artist” by the *Indian Express* (Fernando par. 1). But not everyone could applaud the price beyond a point. In 2011, artist and journalist Debu Barve pointed out that owing to tribal art still being considered craft or merely decorative, it is not being taken as seriously as it should be.

It appears that the global art market has so far also not recognized Indian tribal art with the same regard that it holds for tribal art from Africa or Oceania, according to Hervé Perdrille, curator and art collector from Paris. Perdrille, who is an expert in the subject and specializes in the collection of tribal art from India, points out that Jangarh’s work for the September 15 auction is estimated to fetch between \$20,000-30,000, which is several times lower than that of legendary Australian tribal artist Clifford Possum’s auction record of \$2.4 million. (Barve par. 6)

\$31,250 is minuscule number compared to a “record \$2.4 million”, obviously. Yet something unexpected happened over time. Less than 15 years later in 2023, prominent Mumbai gallery Pundole’s sold a 2001 acrylic on canvas on serigraph by Jangarh Singh Shyam, titled *Krishna Lila*, for \$90,000. A 200% increase from the 2010 \$31,250 sale! *Krishna Lila*, translated roughly as the play by the deity Krishna, is thought to have been completed just before Singh Shyam’s untimely suicide in Japan in 2001. Debu Barve and

Herve Perdriolle's fears were dramatically assuaged in 2023. An exponential increase in the selling price of one of India's most reputed Adivasi artist's works is not a joke. Looks like it is being taken quite seriously now. Indeed, this seriousness is a mark of the subsequent popularization of the artform after Singh Shyam's death. It coincides with the display of "Gond painting" across multiple media- books, children's books, picturebooks, films, murals, oils and acrylics on canvas, masks, wall hangings, restaurant décor, fridge magnets, textiles, and bags. However, as the value and visibility of Gond painting has increased, so have the pressures exerted on Indigenous individuals in India.

Jangarh Singh Shyam, acknowledged as the progenitor of "Gond painting" rose to fame in the 1980s when he moved from Patangarh in the state of Madhya Pradesh (translated as Central Region), his village, to Bhopal, the capital city of Madhya Pradesh. He was sought by scouts sent by the Indian modernist painter J Swaminathan in the latter's efforts to create Bharat Bhawan (translated to India House), a newly constructed arts center, designed by Charles Correa. Jangarh Singh Shyam crafted the idiom of Pardhan "Gond painting" at Bhopal's Bharat Bhawan. Vivid colors, usage of Gond symbolism like anthropomorphic trees, worms, snakes, birds; and shapes that signify Gond deities are the most prominent elements of what is now popularized as "Gond painting", as set in motion by Jangarh Singh Shyam. Most Pardhan Gond artists reside in Bhopal now and trace their artistic inspiration to Jangarh Singh Shyam. In fact, most of them happen to belong to the same family as Jangarh Singh Shyam. Jangarh Singh Shyam was the first to translate oral Pardhan stories to a visual medium, and moreover, he was the first to give visual form to some Gond deities, who only existed as local memorials, or even stories. As I discuss

shortly, the artform began as murals, went to oils on canvas, and is now displayed via the picturebook and graphic narratives in collaboration with more than one publisher.

The contemporary Anglophone picturebook is a site for a problematic display of Adivasi aesthetics but is also instrumentalized by the artist as a response to said display. My project titled “Artistic Agency in the Contemporary Anglophone Picturebook: Tara Books and Pardhan Gond Aesthetics” is an articulation of the possibilities of and in the contemporary Anglophone Indian picturebook, when illustrated by Indian Indigenous artists. At the core of this project are a group of related queries—Can books help imagine an equitable future? How are books made? What can be seen in books? Who decides? —that can be expressed in one central research question, i.e., what can the Indian Adivasi Indigenous artist *do* as they create art? I think artistic agency is gleaned in a response to this question. The artist makes an instrument out of the picturebook to narrate their story on their terms, and strategically chooses words and images to look back at a primitivist colonial and postcolonial gaze. This reversal of vision enacts a sovereign future where decisions are Adivasi-led. At the same time, the artist navigates their own identity in their work- gendered, rural to urban, or Adivasi.

Artistic agency then is about the management of self-representation as both individual and community. As I observe, the artist is incessantly interceding with multiple contexts and collaborators that exploit their powerlessness. The epigraphs that I began this essay with encapsulate the problem. Sociologist Roma Chatterji observes that Adivasi creators are harnessing “symbolic capital” (Chatterji 120) by collaborating with publishers. At the same time, despite this well-intentioned collaboration with the powerful, Jangarh Singh Shyam wrote in his last letter to his mother that he was writing and working in fear.

This was in one of the two letters he sent off just before his demise in 2001, at the Mithila Museum in Japan, a museum ironically created to foster and enliven encouragement of Japanese as well as Indian folk art. As I discuss shortly, artists in his family also create art in fear born out of various factors. Thus, especially under duress as in the perpetual violence against Adivasis in India, artistic navigation lies along an axis. At either end of this axis are a clear denial and lucid consent: a refusal to compromise and a willing interpellation for self-representation. For Pardhan Gond artists illustrating the picturebook, agency lies in a tactical play between voice and voicelessness, speech and silence, and visibility and invisibility. In the background are heard the incessant thump thump of pressures like a proliferation of imitation of “stereotypical” Pardhan Gond art, imprecise identification of the artform, Hindu nationalism appropriating Adivasi ways of life, physical and material violence, and rampant commodification of the art. Artistic agency in the contemporary Anglophone picturebook is this negotiation that must necessarily undulate between two opposite poles. But the artist distinguishes herself/himself in controlling this parley. Using the resources they have—art, medium, collaborator, market—they craft a dialogue with their background. I hope to discuss such a dialogic agency that articulates Adivasi bargaining possibilities in the Indigenous-illustrated picturebook. To explain how agency works in the Adivasi picturebook, I propose that agency takes multiple forms. Across my chapters, I discuss how agency and sovereign self-representation is visible in the picturebook as autoethnography, as a specific “Adivasi visuality”, as a speculation upon a generative future via “Adivasi futurism” versus primitivism in representation, and finally as Adivasi feminism.

Recovering a sense of artistic agential self-representational sovereignty is imperative. Seeking agency is a way for the Adivasi artist to re-claim a right to represent from an insider's perspective. Another term for this perspective is "sovereignty". Representations of Gonds, Pardhans, and Adivasis in general are overwhelmingly dominated by the outsider- British or Indian. Cultural production has been disproportionately skewed. Rudyard Kipling's 1894 and 1896 *The Jungle Books* represent the Gonds as mysterious inexplicable elements of the Indian jungle. Anthropologists like Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hivale represent the Gonds and Pardhans with fond affectionate derision. Painters like the members of the Bengal School paint the Santhals from Eastern India as exemplars of anti-colonial pastoral vitality, in opposition to colonial metropolitan intrusions. Upper caste/upper class publishers and illustrators "use" Gond painting to illustrate how "fabulous" folk art can be, both simple and extraordinary at the same time. Filmmakers like S S Rajamouli, whose *RRR* won an Oscar in 2023, represent anti-colonial Gond resistance as animalized, noble, and juvenile in the big city, aware of its failings in an urbane environ. Instagram users can create art that looks like "Gond painting" without acknowledging their position in the scenario. Most importantly, as I discuss shortly, Jangarh Singh Shyam's encounters with the art world foreground the unceasing primitivism in understanding of art, artist, and community. Even in the context of the slowly burgeoning field of Adivasi studies, historian Prathama Banerjee asks how we can demarcate an "Adivasi studies" when the terms of the debate have been set by somebody else, usually an outsider. Adivasis continue to be seen as "purely ethnographic subjects" (2) and are thus "doubly disadvantaged, because they have not been able to claim alternative archives and alternative histories of their own, unlike some other subaltern

subjects such as Dalits” (2). In this scenario of loss of control, sovereign reclamation is urgently needed.

Indeed, scholars are also interested in the reclamation of representation and land and complex ways that narratives can be understood globally. “Sovereignty” is a particularly powerful term that has emerged out of debates in Indigenous studies. Various self-determination, a relationship to people and borders, and a response to gendered biopolitics, sovereignty is a crucial concept in global Indigenous studies. When I use words like power/vulnerable/threaten, I am thinking about sovereignty. Film and Indigenous studies scholar Michelle Raheja argues for an extension of the “boundaries of discourse around sovereignty to the arts” (“Visual Sovereignty” 29). For Raheja, this means paying serious attention to what she calls “visual sovereignty”, where artists can “deploy individual and community assertions” of what reclamation and representation means to them, and at the same time, imagine “flexible and humorous” means of representation (29). I find Raheja’s discussion of visual sovereignty helpful in the context of the Adivasi picturebook. I read the picturebook as a means of calculated individual and community representation deployed by the Adivasi artists. In fact, in Raheja’s reckoning, the Adivasi picturebook would be an example of “visual sovereignty” as it makes visual autoethnography possible. It also presents a fruitful collaboration between the dominant and the dominated and can even communicate strategy from one artist to another. My project is an attempt to discuss this artistic weaponization. But before I discuss the form of Pardhan Gond art, its history, and its collaboration with upper caste/upper class individuals, it is important to ask where and how the Indigenous in India are narrativized. I conclude

this introductory essay with a description of my Methodology and my own implication in the work I have undertaken.

Adivasi Representation

I use the term “Adivasi” frequently in the dissertation in deference to national commonplace usage in contemporary India. But mostly I use the words “tribal” “Indigenous” and “Adivasi” interchangeably in the dissertation, as all three terms indicate crucial moments in the Indian discourse on Adivasi communities. However, these terms are separate if related. Sociologist Amita Baviskar (“Adivasi Encounters” 5106) and anthropologist Pinky Hota (“Money, Value, and Indigenous Citizenship” pp. 259-60) observe that this terminology is contested; the three words “tribal”, “indigenous”, and “Adivasi” carry their own histories of cultural imposition. Indeed, J Swaminathan’s *The Perceiving Fingers*, the catalogue created at the inauguration of Bharat Bhawan, succinctly describes the sociological consternation in defining the Adivasi. Andre Beteille, one of the most well-known sociologists of India, is quoted as saying, “In India, we cannot have a readymade definition with which one can go into the field and locate a tribe. The greatest emphasis has to be placed on an historical perspective” (Swaminathan 10). Shyama Charan Dube, veteran anthropologist who studied the Kamar tribe in Madhya Pradesh, adds a material dimension to the debate. He warns that categorization of what constitutes a tribe is based on a “political criterion”, as the constitution allows some communities to be “scheduled” as a tribe, thus making members of the community eligible to “special protection and privileges” (Swaminathan 10). Further, following the inadequate assumption that all tribal societies exist outside the hierarchical Hindu caste system, or indeed outside Abrahamic or Hindu religions, Dube informs us that “Muslim inhabitants

of Lakshdweep” have been scheduled as a tribe. Similarly, “native inhabitants of the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh (who constitute an agglomeration of several Hindu castes that have been lumped together as the Kinnaura) are now classified as scheduled tribes” (Swaminathan 10). Dube admits that this list is not final but his point—that categorization is arbitrary and naturalized—is well noted.

Each term of designation encounters problems. Defining indigeneity or classifying communities reveals the classifier’s bias. For example, writing about the connotation of primitive savagery that accompanied British social categorization of “tribal” communities, Pinky Hota avers, “The tribal as primitive then carried over from colonial times to the formation of the modern Indian state to become firmly encoded in the epistemological and legal categories of state recognition” (260). In a putative effort to recognize and redress the historical injustice of the land distribution of tribes, the contemporary state offers reservation of seats in employment and education to members of communities scheduled in the Indian constitution as a “tribe”. The official designation for such purposes is Scheduled Tribe (ST). At the same time, Amita Baviskar reminds us that the term “Adivasi” is a social fact in India (5106). But the term itself has been, and continues to be, embattled. It is a newer term compared to “tribe”. Historian Asoka Kumar Sen observes that the term “adivasi” was first used by intellectuals in 1938 in Chota Nagpur (in Eastern India, covering parts of modern-day Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha) in the formation of the “Adivasi Mahasabha” (translated as Adivasi Grand Gathering) to “put forth the claim for special political status” (5). But the term, as Baviskar notes, is here to stay.

At the same time, not all concur with a nation-wide applicability of the term “adivasi”. 20th century nationalist sociologists and historians disagreed with words like

“Adivasi”, blaming a racist colonial system of social classification. For G S Ghurye, Adivasis were “backward Hindu” or “in a state of progressive absorption into the Hindu fold” (Sen 6). While an argument can be made that caste Hindus and Adivasis lived in a cultural traffic with each other before the British and that it would be difficult to separate the two¹, it is important to remember that some epic Hindu stories and scriptures make villains out of hill and forest dwellers who look different and have different customs and languages. Words like “raakshas” or demon and “asur” or devil/fiend have been used for these groups.

On the other hand, “Indigenous” is a term that does not always do historical justice—some communities have been itinerant and thus cannot qualify as stable dwellers. Itinerant communities were often criminalized by the British. Sociologist Virginius Xaxa, in an oft-cited 1999 essay “Tribes as Indigenous People of India”, carefully lays out the methodological problems in crafting a single appellation for the diverse communities in India. Xaxa recounts that anthropology and administration, pre and post Indian independence, have been more concerned with identification of tribes than with a strictly formulated definition. Some criteria like “geographical isolation, simple technology and condition of living, general backwardness to the practice of animism, tribal language, physical features, etc.” have been proposed but have been rendered impracticable as some criteria are applied to some contexts and not to others (3589). Xaxa argues that all these criteria lead to the idea that the tribe is an anthropological “stage”, meaning that once a tribal community is “modern” or Hindu-ized as mainstream, they may cease to be

¹ Swaminathan, for example, makes a fantastic analysis of Gond origin myths and how the Aryan Shiva becomes both Mahadeo and Lingo, the originator of the Gond tribe. Swaminathan interprets this as a negotiation between a Gond and Hindu worldviews.

considered tribal. The term “indigenous” may refuse some of these issues, and connects Indian indigeneity to global movements for self-determination, but as Xaxa observes, it gives “rise to other problems” (3590). For example, according to the ILO and the UNO resolutions that Xaxa cites, Indigenous peoples are communities who were conquered, marginalized, and retain some measure of cultural memory and self-governance. But the nature of internal movements in South Asia has been so numerous that it is difficult to pinpoint and differentiate which community may have been original inhabitants. The Dravidians were apparently pushed by the Aryans in South Asia, and yet have not been labelled “indigenous”. Xaxa restates the question, “Given this, how far back should one go in history to determine people who are native and who are immigrants” (3591). For instance, the Mizos and the Nagas in the North East of India are Indigenous nationally but not to the region. Similarly, the Oraons and the Mundas have legitimate Indigenous claim in the state of Jharkhand, but what about their migration to Assam in the last century? Xaxa proves that unlike European colonial conquest, the migration of Aryans cannot be a temporal disjunction to demarcate who may/not be Indigenous in India. Indeed, the study of tribes and their identification first began with the British and is thus affected by British presumptions. If so, Xaxa argues, terms like Adivasi and Indigenous allow a language of rights to emerge, for it is incontestable that Adivasi communities have borne an unfair burden of “development”. This is the way out of the definitional conundrum- the idea that contemporary India has witnessed the theft of natural resources and ways of living for many communities, in the name of “development”, and should therefore aid empowerment. Usage of the term “indigenous” or as Xaxa notes, its “native equivalent”, Adivasi, allows the debate to move into the language of rights. G N Devy, one of India’s foremost

commentators on tribal cultural affairs, has moved from using the word “tribal” to “indigenous”, in an effort to add his voice to global movements in indigeneity. Following these debates, I use all three terms- tribal, Adivasi, Indigenous- in the dissertation to emphasize that these debates are not at an end and the concerns they bring up are very much present.

Terminological confusion notwithstanding, in 21st century India, proponents of the current dispensation argue that a new India has arrived, perhaps even that an Adivasi-led future has arrived. The current President of India, Droupadi Murmu, is an Adivasi Santhal from Odisha. She has been the Governor of Jharkand, the Indian state carved out of a tribal demand for a separate tribal-ruled state in Eastern India. The President occupies an important administrative position in Indian polity, but all decisions are usually taken by the Prime Minister in consultation with a cabinet of Ministers. The President’s name and signature formalize documents and bills. This is an important national position. It is genuinely commendable that she holds the position. But the name and signature are considered a ceremonial formality. It is admirable that she is the first Adivasi individual to be the President in independent India, but the nature of the position and the continuing violence against Adivasis in India makes her appointment tokenistic. Her predecessor, Dr Ram Nath Kovind, is a Dalit lawyer from North India. Dalits are the lowest in the caste hierarchy, beyond the pale of the fourfold system of Hindu social classification. Adivasis and Dalits both bear the burden of religiously sanctioned dispossession in India. The current party in power consciously chose to elect individuals from vulnerable communities to a figurehead official position. The regime wishes to appear equitable and inclusive. Indeed, Vishnu Deo Sai, a member of the Kanwar tribe in Chhatisgarh, has been chosen as

the first tribal Chief Minister of the state of Chhatisgarh. The central government, across party lines over the last six decades, has been in a constant civil war in Chhatisgarh- tribals who oppose capitalist intervention are branded as guerilla Maoist insurgents and face state sponsored violence. One would assume that a tribal Chief Minister would “represent” Adivasi interests and sensitively push for recuperation of Adivasi loss in Chhatisgarh. One would hope that he opposes billionaire capitalist Gautam Adani’s attempt to deforest Hasdeo Arand in Chhatisgarh- one of India’s most dense forests under which lie 5 billion estimated ton of coal- but Adani has received the “green” signal and forests have begun to be cleared, despite stiff local tribal opposition (Khambata pars. 1-3; Paliwal pars. 1-4). The area just happens to be populated by about 10,000 individuals from mostly Gond and Oraon tribes. Further, even as Droupadi Murmu is the President of India, her political party, the Bharatiya Janta party (BJP), ensured that the Santhal Adivasi Chief Minister of Jharkhand, Hemant Soren, was raided by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and forced to resign his post. An Adivasi-led future is then a matter of tokens and failed promises instead of real transformation.

Mere political election and appointment is not the end game. While representation matters for party politics, the goal is a more permanently equitable world where there is no need for tokenism. This is also not to say that Adivasis in India are eternal victims of violence. Ram Dular Gond, a member of the Gond tribe, a political representative from the only tribal political seat in the state of Uttar Pradesh, belonging to the BJP, has just been convicted in a case of rape and harassment of a minor girl, and been given a 25 year prison sentence (Rehman pars. 1-2). The perpetrator has been given due process and has been found guilty. At the same time, Brij Bhushan Singh, not an Adivasi, also a leader of the

ruling party, has not been imprisoned despite allegations and concrete evidence of sexual harassment of female athletes. Former president of the Wrestling Federation of India, he remains scot-free even after Olympic medal winning wrestlers have returned their medals protesting the inaction. The Adivasi and non-Adivasi, both members of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) or the “Indian People’s Party”, at the national center, have received different treatments. My point is that while it is constricting to imagine Adivasis as perpetual victims, it is also true that Adivasi individuals find that legality becomes more stringent against them. In fact, it was the Adivasis who were turned criminal overnight in British India, thanks to the Criminal Tribes Act. In independent India, these tribes are now accommodated under the Habitual Offenders Act- as whole communities continue to be harassed by courts and police in the assumption that they are born criminals. Indeed, identity-based atrocities continue unabated against the Adivasi and within Adivasi communities in India. In July 2023, a man in the state of Madhya Pradesh, Central India urinated on the face of an Adivasi man (“Madhya Pradesh- Home of the Indian Man” pars. 1-3). The incident was recorded and shared widely online. The perpetrator, allegedly belonging to the ruling rightwing political party in the state, smoked a cigarette and was allegedly drunk at the time. Since then, the Chief Minister of the state has apologized to the victim and the perpetrator’s illegal house has been demolished.

As identity-based atrocities continue unabated, identity-based gatherings are an essential aspect of Adivasi life in India. Politically speaking, Adivasis have organized themselves for centuries. The Santhal *hul*, covered extensively by historian Ranajit Guha and art historian Daniel Rycroft, was an instance of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist rebellion organized months before the 1857 “first” war of Indian independence. The

Adivasi Mahasabha (Adivasi Grand Gathering) was constituted in Chota Nagpur in 1938. Komaram Bheem, a Gond leader from Adilabad who led armed warfare against the British for 12 years between 1928 and 1940, was recently given a grand cinematic silo in the epic film *RRR*, directed by S S Rajamouli. *RRR* won an Oscar at the 95th awards ceremony in 2023. Historian David Hardiman also refers to the cult of the Goddess that was utilized by Adivasis in Western India in the early 20th century for complicated purposes (*The Coming of the Devi*). Heera Singh Markam, charismatic Gond leader from Chhatisgarh, inaugurated the Gondwana Gantantra Party (GGP) or the “Gondwana Republic Party” in 1991 on a promise for a separate state for the Gondi speaking Gonds, called “Gondwana”. Demand for a separate statehood has galvanized Gond Adivasis in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhatisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh, but it has not garnered enough national political support. It remains an unfulfilled promise. Further, independent news outlet *The Wire* reports that the Bharat Adivasi Party or the “India Adivasi Party” is beginning to extend its base in Southern Rajasthan’s tribal districts, in anticipation of the 2024 national general election.

However, political or communal Adivasi organizations, and indeed Adivasi creations in general, are not immune to being harnessed by the powers that be. Telangana’s Nagoba Jatra, “one of the largest tribal fairs in the world”, hosted thousands this year. Traditionally a gathering of Gond forest clans, *The Wire* reports that the festival is “now owned by plain area tribals and even Hindus” (Rahul pars 1-3). Incidentally, the fair takes place in Adilabad district, which became the site of rebellion by Komaram Bheem, the Gond leader who has been given a new avatar in the Oscar winner film *RRR*. Coincidentally, like the real life fair, the reel hero in Adivasi hero in *RRR* allows himself

to be willingly appropriated by the upper caste English speaking urbane freedom fighter. Not just events and stories, but art also finds itself harnessed. Habibganj Railway Station, a secondary junction to the main Bhopal Junction that serves the capital city of Madhya Pradesh, has seen a makeover under the BJP state government. Gond art adorns the walls and the entrance of the railway station. The name of the station has been changed from the obviously Islamic “Habibganj” to “Rani Kamlapati”. The naming is significant. The newspaper *Times of India* describes Rani Kamlapati, or Queen Kamlapati, as a “Gond queen” (“Rani Kamlapati- Things You Must Know” pars 1-4). Edutech platform “Unacademy” describes Queen Kamlapati as “the last Hindu queen of Bhopal” (“Rani Kamlapati- The Last Hindu Queen of Bhopal” par. 1). How can she be both Gond and Hindu? Is not Adivasi religion a different identity compared to caste Hinduism? Moreover, why is an Islamic name reneged to make way for a confusion between Hinduism and indigeneity? Queen Kamlapati was a Hindu queen who married into the family of the most powerful Gond ruler at the time. Betrayed by her friends, she gave up her hold on what is now Bhopal city as a tribute to her Muslim friend, “Dost” Muhammad Khan, a general in the Mughal army who then laid the foundations of the current city of Bhopal. The name change of the railway stations, which is a crucial median point between trains from the North and South, then signals many sentiments- that Islamic names, given the Mughal “invaders” are unacceptable, that the last non Islamic ruler of Bhopal must be honored, and that it is acceptable for Hinduism to appropriate Gond and Adivasi identity. After all, sociologists have discussed the nationalist tendency to assume that Adivasis were simply “backward Hindus” and needed to be brought back into the Hindu fold. Delicately crafted Gond art becomes the background for these publicly displayed statements of exclusion at

an important railway station in Madhya Pradesh. Appropriating Adivasi art for fundamentalist purposes then serves as an acknowledgement and elevation of Adivasi identity, not simply at the cost of an abnegation of an Islamic past, but crucially, an intentional confusion of a difference between Adivasi religion and caste Hinduism.

Moreover, appropriation of Adivasi events and creations is not the only curtailment that communities and artists face. Adivasis in Central India are victims of violence that is unfortunately linked to identity-based dispossession. The Gonds roughly number 12 million and are largest tribal group in India currently. The Gonds, many of whom speak the language Gondi, reside in Central India, in the modern-day states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha, Chhatisgarh, and Uttar Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh, in fact, has a local political seat dedicated to the Gonds, as part of national affirmative action. This is also why a demand for a separate Gondwana state focuses on these areas. But tribal areas happen to be rich with forests and minerals. Unsurprisingly then, they have become sites of intense contestation between tribals and state and non-state actors for land for coal or bauxite mining. As a consequence, many of these areas do not simply suffer from state sponsored violence, but also poverty. Writing of 21st century Central India, political scientist Sudha Pai confirms that “tribal majority areas which overlap with the country’s major forest areas are also areas with highest concentrations of poverty” (360). Citing a 2011 UNDP report, Pai says, “Human development reports show that a large majority of them live in mud, stone, and thatch homes with no toilets relying on handpumps for drinking water. A major problem is also lack of employment, the only employment being collecting wild honey, forest produce or working in the fields of affluent landowners” (360). The violence is endless. Additionally, the displacement caused by big

dam projects intended for “national purpose” and the steady displacement caused by state control of forests only intensifies threats to life, livelihood, literacy, shelter, and dignity listed above. No wonder that the promise of “development” for the tribal holds so much power today.

Indeed, dams have been sites of material and discursive contestation. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (translated as Save Narmada Movement), became a lightning rod for a curtailed conversation on the sociopolitical context of Adivasi identity to be conducted in the last decade of the 20th century. Proposed almost six decades ago, the dam on the Narmada River was intended to be a source of water for farms and cities. Beginning in Madhya Pradesh at Amarkantak, the Narmada River flows toward Gujarat. It is thought to be divine by the Adivasi who live by it. The dam ran into controversy as soon as it was proposed. Spearheaded by upper caste and upper-class activists, the Adivasis who would be affected by the dam would be asked to appear for interviews to make an effective argument against the building of the dam. While state policy systemically excludes the Adivasi when convenient, it will include the Adivasi in conversations and photo-ops to “develop” their poverty when needing to appear benevolent. Similarly, when activists embedded in a caste and class nexus attempt to “save” the Adivasi, it unwittingly encourages a concretization of an impoverishment. In the process, it is the Adivasi who must bear the burden of “development”. The conversation was re-ignited by activists like Nafisa Ali and author Arundhati Roy in the 90s, but as the millennium closed, the Supreme Court judged the dam to be ethical and beneficial and the dam was finally inaugurated in 2017. Tabassum Ruhi Khan, media scholar, notes the skewed nature of the mediated discourse around the long-standing controversy of the Narmada Dam. Khan quotes Roy to

discuss the consequences of the dam, “it flushes out ‘like rats’ the indigenous and tribal populations from their forested homes, bringing them to the doorsteps of urban poverty and degradation” (195). Roy’s ironic glee at the plunder of India’s tribal and marginal populations is an argument for a re-vision of the process that has led to the eventual building of the dam and the consequent submergence of villages. As Roy fulminates against the ceaseless destruction that is masked by development, Khan describes how B G Verghese, veteran journalist, interrogated Arundhati Roy’s credentials and argued that Roy’s stance will condemn the Adivasi to the “boondocks of history” precisely because the dam would have helped everyone. He uses the logic of development to argue for how the dam would ostensibly benefit the tribals. Khan reminds her readers that Verghese chooses not to answer the crucial question—why must the Adivasi be expected to give up their homeland in favor of urban middle class’s water supply? Indeed, Khan’s larger intent is to locate the debate within the mediated “hegemony of the middle classes” (205). As Khan points out, this hegemony systematically excludes the Adivasi voice. The Adivasi is visualized as appearing sporadically to bolster arguments on either side. In other words, the Adivasi is asked to appear as primitive Adivasi just so the dam can be built or not. What can Adivasi do? Discussing agency in this debilitating scenario is urgent. What artistic recourse remains when the Adivasi must perform their identity unceasingly?

One could argue that the Adivasi artist will also perform by creating art. Artists like Bhajju Shyam and Durgabai Vyam are certainly creating. Their careers are prolific. If the Adivasi is systematically un-voiced at all levels of society, then the fact that this art exists and continues to flourish is commendable. After all, Pardhan Gond art is instantly recognizable. However, the argument becomes suspect when the artist feels they must

perform indigeneity in art especially when larger forces wish to use it. For example, it is a mark of the popularity of Gond art that it is being aggressively utilized to stimulate Madhya Pradesh's tourism and further its unique position as a cornucopia of regional ethnic flavors. A friend observed that thanks to the artform's popularity "Gond is gold" in Madhya Pradesh. Indeed, Gond painting has now become a way for the Madhya Pradesh (MP) government to build its own identity as a tourism destination. The MP tourism website lists the categories that are on offer in MP- Adventure, Culture, Heritage, Nature, Rural Experiences, Spiritual, Wildlife ("TVCs of Madhya Pradesh Tourism"). These categories fit neatly into the vision of *another* excitement immanent in "gond painting". In fact, MP Tourism is known for having commissioned technically sound well-made advertisement films encouraging regional identity through tourism. The latest film, released in the summer of 2023, is animated using "Gond painting", and purports to visualize "the abundance of things to see and experience in Madhya Pradesh" ("TVCs of Madhya Pradesh Tourism"). The film features an old woman onstage who narrates mythical stories. Each story narrated by her takes the viewer through an animated world full of adventure, excitement, and wildlife via the medium of Gond shapes and colors. The old staged narrator is adorned with recognizable tribal tropes- chunky silver jewelry, tattoo on the chin, and even colorful tribal clothing. The plot of the film is about taking multiple births and reincarnating as different Gond animals like a tiger, a monkey, or a butterfly to see the delightful abundance of MP. The short film successfully advertises MP by utilizing Adivasi art.

But not all remediation and utilization of "Gond painting" is successful. Sociologist Roma Chatterji's caution about the remediation of Pardhan Gond storytelling to animated

film is relevant in this regard. In her *Speaking With Pictures*, Chatterji admits that Pardhan Gond stories are being transformed to fit the demands of tightly emplotted animated film. She writes of an animated film that was created in collaboration with the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and Pardhan artists, that attempted to animate a Gond mythical story. She observes that it was not successful in mediating the depth and presence of Pardhan Gond visual art. She cautions, “Yet without the iconic framing that gives the images their distinctive aura, the figures look like paper cut-outs that are made to move by an external force” (254). Perhaps Chatterji means that the medium of the animated cartoon film was unable to do justice to the dynamism easily felt when viewing Pardhan Gond canvas paintings. I bring her work here to distinguish the MP tourism film from the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (IGNCA) collaborated film that she writes about. The tourism film was composed almost a decade after Chatterji details her experiences. Chatterji notes an awkwardness in the IGNCA film but the MP tourism film is not awkward at all. It uses technical finesse, an apposite soundscape, and transports the viewer to a world of “primal” stories. In fact, as opposed to conventional animation, cutout animation in the MP tourism film works neatly to provide dynamism to “gond painting” canvases. These animal tales, purportedly timeless, give the sense that MP is the cradle of an older world for modern purposes. In other words, it appropriates indigeneity by proffering an old-world charm using a popular Adivasi artform. Slick intermedial storytelling then has arrived. It appears to be Adivasi-led. But it remains tokenistic. And in the last instance, it makes a commodified marionette out of the artform.

Rendering bodies and artwork into tokens and marionettes that can be moved at will is part of a complex movement that the Indian nation is organizing and has organized

in the past. Systemic disenfranchisement coupled with the promotion of heritage and traditional crafts genuinely renders the creator of art and bearer of “heritage” into a puppet; the puppet is lacking real material support and is expected to move at another’s bidding. In opposition to this appropriation, one could argue that intermedial storytelling aids opportunity for the artists. For instance, Roma Chatterji mentions that intermedial storytelling may be inadequate, but it leads to creativity and innovation by Adivasi and folk artists, opening material and artistic avenues for agency. Where lies agency?

I am interested in how what is erroneously tagged as “Gond painting of Madhya Pradesh” transforms the Anglophone picturebook in 21st century postcolonially primitivist neo-liberal India, especially when intermedial storytelling and display is neither awkward nor inadequate anymore. It is part of a well-oiled agenda. As the context is overwhelming, agency must also be a matter of calculation. This is why I argue that the Adivasi Picturebook, as conceptualized, produced, and printed by Tara Books, located in the southern city of Chennai (formerly Madras), in collaboration with Adivasi artists, is situated in a complex of Adivasi struggle and agency. The struggle and agency can be evinced in the tactical deployment of the medium to imagine and illustrate a response to Indigenous marginalization in contemporary India. But it is not always a declaration of activist protest. It is a strategic act that displays a heightened sense of self awareness. I call the Adivasi-illustrated text an “Adivasi picturebook”- the term is useful for encapsulating the multiple valences that determine the agential efficacy of the medium when illustrated by Adivasi artists. The Adivasi picturebook appears to the metropolitan English-speaking viewer as a translation of more than one language into English, as well as a transmutation of media and visual art. Its reach and production are limited, but its transformation of

existing material is potent. It is an object that crafts an intervention into omnipresent Adivasi vulnerability and is in turn crafted by a publishing scenario. This is possible because the Adivasi artist self-consciously uses the picturebook to narrate a particular visual story.

Tara Books' picturebooks intentionally collaborate with Pardhan² Gond Adivasi artists. The Adivasi group that Tara most collaborates with are the Pardhans. 16 out of the currently listed 85 Anglophone non-fiction titles on the Tara website are a collaboration with various Pardhan artists. 16 out of 85 is a little less than 20%. In other words, one fifth of the output of an alternative independent publisher like Tara Books is illustrated by and features the work of Pardhan artists. This is a common phenomenon in the oeuvre at Tara Books. As I have mentioned, folk and Adivasi art is now being "tapped" by publishers. Chatterji, in fact, discusses "new sites of performance and display", which have been enabled by Jangarh Singh Shyam and his family's pioneering work. This is possible now that "traditional adivasi art" has become a "marketable resource" (*Speaking* 119). For Roma Chatterji, two examples of these sites are animated films and illustrated books or picturebooks. The picturebook, I observe, becomes a barometer. It registers power relations between Indigenous artist and their context. The context here refers to the publisher,

² Shamrao Hivale introduces the Pardhans thus, "In the old days they were probably the official genealogists of the Gond courts. They acted as priests and diviners. They were the musicians of the tribe, retaining in their memories and constantly recounting the glorious history of the ancient Gond kingdoms. Their women acted as midwives to the Gonds, and tattooed Gond girls" (1). He continues, "With the collapse of the Gond kingdoms, the Pardhans shared the failing fortunes of the race...They were driven to crime and sank in the social scale. Later they recovered themselves and today the Pardhans remain, what apparently they always have been, a tribe of witty, charming, intelligent people, whose fundamental interest is in music and song". Hivale follows this up by introducing the Pardhans' "intimate and peculiar" relationship with the Gonds- "Through their relation as ritual beggars, they stand in a position of economic dependence upon them" (1).

dispossession, visual and textual misrepresentation, and a general essentializing primitivism. Prudently crafting the picturebook, the artist can register dissatisfaction with the unbridled puppeteering that Adivasi art and bodies are subjected to. But who are the Pardhan Gond artists illustrating the Adivasi picturebook?

A Pardhan Paints

It is clear by now that Adivasi bodies in India face relentless trauma. Is Adivasi art facing a comparable trauma as well? Adivasi art is either defined as “craft” or often lumped with “folk” art- and sometimes the boundaries are fuzzy. In fact, in the application to request a Geographical Indicator (GI) tag for an Adivasi artform like “Gond painting”, the applicant uses the word “folk” numerous times to describe the stakes of Gond art as it depicts “folk” tales and animals (“Gond Painting of Madhya Pradesh: GI No. 701”). This is not a coincidence. The story of the “re-discovery” of folk and Adivasi art is contemporaneous. The story of Mithila art is central to this rediscovery, but its own history offers a template to temper any excessive celebration or mourning of the remediation of Pardhan Gond storytelling. I am paraphrasing this story from art historian Aurogeeta Das’s study of Jangarh Singh Shyam, titled *The Enchanted Forest*.

A renewed attention to folk and Adivasi art involved an introduction of newer media to communities. W G Archer, the colonial 20th century administrator and collector, whose wide-ranging work has been essential reading for students of Indian art, visited the region in Northern India called Mithila (part of the modern-day state of Bihar). He wrote about it in 1949 in a recently founded magazine called *Marg*. *Marg* was led by Mulk Raj Anand, a founding member of the Indian Progressive Writers’ Association (IPWA). Archer’s essay in *Marg* was read by Pupul Jayakar, who acted upon it in 1966-67 when the

area was struck by a famine and sent artist Bhaskar Kulkarni to encourage the women of Mithila to work with paper. Jayakar was then the Chair of the Handloom Development Board and the Handloom and Handicrafts Export Corporation. When W G Archer wrote about Mithila art, these were “mural on interior domestic walls” (Das 27), “created to bless newlywed couples in the conjugal chamber, known as *kohbar ghar*.” (27) Das avers that the shift from wall to paper also meant a shift in subject matter. Indeed, Jyotindra Jain’s excellent biography of the prominent Madhubani artist Ganga Devi, attests to this shift in visual vocabulary via a shift in medium (*Ganga Devi* n.p.). The folk form now includes “traditional *kohbar ghar* compositions” along with “socially engaged commentary...with a strong feminist focus” and “myths and local legends” (Das 27). A fresh lease of life led to the usage of newer media by Madhubani artists and innovation in subjects of the art. This would make it seem that the “recovery” of this artform is a matter of celebration only.

But, while we celebrate the re-emergence of folk and Adivasi art on the national stage and its popularization on the international stage, we must remember the faultiness that constitute any founding story. David Szanton, scholar of Indian folk arts, writes that there has been a distinctly willed oblivion of lower caste and Dalit artists from the Mithila region. Szanton, in fact, argues that this oblivion in favor of Kayastha Mithila women constitutes the narrative of Mithila art itself. This is why the valorization of origin story like Mithila’s needs to be tempered. In fact, Aurogeeta Das compares Gond and Warli tribal art, whose stories of rediscovery are similar (*The Enchanted Forest*). Jangarh Singh Shyam from the Pardhan community and Jivya Soma Mashe from Warli were contemporaries. Like Pardhan Gond art, Warli murals were created by women, but the most reputed artists were and are men. The most well-known Warli artist, Jivya Soma Mashe—who was also

invited to the landmark *Magiciens de la Terre* like Jangarh Singh Shyam—rose to prominence displaying talent that he had learnt from his community. By 1976, Chemould gallery in Bombay had decided to display Jivya Soma Mashe’s work. This was radical, as Chemould had a reputation for being intimate with the heavily modernist Bombay Progressives. A global movement toward new museum practices³ influenced the encouragement offered by prominent galleries, and the efforts of artist-curator-administrators like J Swaminathan in the 1980s. Again, it is commendable that a new artform celebrating Adivasi creators appeared and was displayed. But what about the women who worked on the murals as part of their cultural household duties? Further, is it fair to say that as Pupul Jayakar’s initiative launched the artistic careers of Mithila women, Swaminathan’s work launched the genre of Gond painting? To reiterate, these founding questions determine the attitude one takes toward the popularization of any artform. Indeed, this is part of the gap in scholarship that I wish to address- the question of women’s labor and the ambiguous nature of collaboration.

Bhajju Shyam (1971-) and Durgabai Vyam (1973-), the artists I am writing about, belong to the family and legacy of Pardhan Gond painting inaugurated by Jangarh Singh Shyam. Many creators of “Gond painting” active today belong to this extended family of Jangarh Singh Shyam. Ramsingh Urveti, also from the same community, is the senior most Pardhan Gond artist after Jangarh Singh Shyam. According to art historian and anthropologist Jyotindra Jain, Jangarh’s name is a variant of *jangan*, short for *janganna*, referring to the Indian Population Census (*A Conjuror’s Archive* pp. 7-8). He was called

³ Gita and Arun Wolf also refer to these developments in the 2015 *Between Memory and Museum*.

Jangarh because the Census officials had arrived the morning of his birth for data collection and the villagers decided to name the child after the Hindi word for Census. This was probably the 1961 census of India. But like the founding story of Mithila and Warli above, the story of Singh Shyam's naming after the Census demands caution. The Census has been both friend and foe. Anthropologist Shamrao Hivale, in *The Pardhans of the Upper Narbada Valley*, refers to the 1931 census conducted by the British Indian government to corroborate the general pre-1947 official tendency to think of the Pardhans as a "criminal tribe". The census then, inaugurated by the British in colonial India, gave the progenitor of Pardhan art his name, and ironically criminalized the progenitor's community.

Singh Shyam was born in a Pardhan household. Pardhans⁴ have traditionally been oral storytellers, and thus heritage bearers in a sense, of the larger Gond tribes in Central India. The Gonds, as I have noted, are the largest tribal group in contemporary India. The Pardhans are allied to the Gonds in that they would traditionally make regular tours in nearby areas to Gond households. They would invoke the most prominent Gond deity, Bada Dev or Big God, and sing songs as they blessed the house of their Gond host. Only the Pardhan was allowed to invoke this deity by playing the sacred instrument *bana*. The

⁴ I reproduce Hivale's discussion about the term "Pardhan" here. "The word Pardhan itself comes from the Sanskrit and means a Minister, sometimes a Prime Minister. The Gondi word seems to be Pana". He lists more names- Pathari, Desai, Parganiha, Mokasi or Bhau. He continues, " For all these words the Pardhans have fantastic derivations. Pana is traced to *pahuna*, a visitor. Pardhan is said to mean 'one who eats other people's rice- *para*: 'others' and *dhan*: 'rice'. Another derivation is from *par*: 'embankment' and *dhan*: 'rice', and refers to a tradition that the first Pardhan was born on the embankment of a rice-field. Pathari is said to mean 'on who lives on a *pathe*, flat tableland' or 'one who worships a Pat' or hill-god. Desai is supposed to mean 'one who wanders from *des* to *des*, from country to country.' Mokasi is a synonym for Mukhiya or chief, and Bhau means 'elder brother'" (pp. 2-3).

bana is the instrument blessed by the most prominent Gond and Pardhan deity, Bara Pen. Bara Pen⁵ must be propitiated by the Pardhan before and during the performance. Shamrao Hivale, one of the only two anthropologists to write a book about the Pardhans (as opposed to the Gonds), describes this ritual connection between the Gonds and the Pardhans as a “relationship of economic dependence” (Hivale 50). Hivale begins by calling the Pardhan a “ritual beggar” but later qualifies his words thus, “It would be wrong to call the Pardhan a beggar or describe his Mangteri tour as a begging expedition. The Mangteri is rather the collection of dues, the realization of a debt or the inheritance of a rightful share of property from a near relation” (Hivale 50). The Pardhan performs a ritual “mangteri” tour every third February, to a select number of Gond households “who belong to his own clan”, and plays the sacred *bana*, as he sings Gondwani, songs of Gond ancestors and kingdoms, or Pandawani, songs inspired by the “great Hindu heroes of old”. This performance is an opportunity for exchange. In exchange for the song and divine blessing that are made possible by the Pardhan, the Gond ritually makes the “dan”- which Hivale variously translates as due, realized debt, and rightful inheritance. It literally means “offering” in Hindi and Sanskrit. These customs are still followed amongst the Gonds and Pardhans, I am told by the artists, but I am also told there is a decline in the custom. Scholars have noted how contemporary Pardhan Gond visual art can be traced to these divinely ordained bana performances, as well as mural and floor art traditions, and maybe even masks and tattoos that community members use (Vajpeyi n. p.; Das *Enchanted* 25). The phrase

⁵ Bara Dev and Bara Pen are one and the same.

“Pardhan Gond” is used to signal the Pardhans’ traditional social role and emphasize their connection to larger Gond groups.

Jangarh Singh Shyam’s move to the big city and his insertion into the art world is now a matter of canonical awe. Born in 1961, Jangarh Singh Shyam was noticed by a team of scouts sent by curator and arts administrator J Swaminathan⁶ – also one of India’s most notable “modern” painters – to the interiors of the state of Madhya Pradesh. Jangarh Singh Shyam was invited to the capital city of Bhopal and encouraged to reside and work for Bharat Bhavan (translated as India House), a multi-arts center designed by renowned architect Charles Correa, in order to help Swaminathan with Roopankar, the museum of “tribal arts” housed in Bharat Bhavan. Swaminathan gave Singh Shyam a job as an “attendant in its graphic studio” (Jain *Conjuror’s* 32). The artist would work at the museum in the day, learn skills, and create his own art in the evenings. As Singh Shyam worked on his art, he helped Swaminathan set up a museum that intended to bring tribal art—

⁶ In the “Preface and Acknowledgement” to his 1987 *The Perceiving Fingers*, Swaminathan briefly describes Bharat Bhavan and the story of its establishment. *The Perceiving Fingers* is a series of reflections on the questions activated in the establishment of Bharat Bhavan and Roopankar, followed by a catalogue of Roopankar’s collection. Swaminathan calls Bharat Bhavan “unique experiment”. Bharat Bhavan houses Roopankar, Museum of Fine Arts, “a constituent unit of Bharat Bhavan” (4), that has two wings, “one for urban and the other for folk and Adivasi art where works in its permanent collection are on display” (4). The task of collection and documentation of Adivasi art was enormous and Swaminathan is justly indulgent in his description of the work involved, “Thousands of kilometers were covered by jeep, on bicycles, on bullock-carts and by foot. It was a great adventure for the students and all of us: we were taking a bath of humanity every day. We were irrigated by the cultures of our peoples and were reborn” (4). Swaminathan waxes eloquent here as he writes of the irrigating bath of humanity- but the scale and scope in a state like Madhya Pradesh- which is home to the largest number of adivasis in India- is unimaginable and commendation is due to Swaminathan and his team. Swaminathan is also keenly aware of the limitations of a catalogue like *The Perceiving Fingers*. He admits that it “deals only with Adivasi art, that too only certain aspects of it, and does not cover the vast field of folk art” (4). Any text that purports to deal with all folk and Adivasi art of India would be necessarily limited.

pejoratively termed “primitive” by many over the course of the 20th century—and modern art together in a contemporaneous exhibition. Swaminathan desired that the museum allow tribal and modern art to exist simultaneously and contiguously without hierarchy. To some extent, this initiative was radical and successful. Katherine Hacker, art historian, and K G Subramanyan, one of India’s most prolific artists, write about Swaminathan’s initiative in glowing hues. For Hacker, “...Swaminathan troubled the stereotypical cultural framing of an Adivasi worldview based on ritual praxis” (196). Speaking of Swaminathan’s Bharat Bhavan and the sustenance of “traditional” art in autochthonous contexts, K G Subramanyan parenthetically comments in *The Living Tradition*, “A collection that a close friend of ours has built of these in Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, in an incredibly short span of time, has been an eye-opener to many skeptical observers who once thought that outside of the museums and galleries very little of these existed” (62). But it was successful only to an extent, as I will discuss presently.

The near mythical story of Singh Shyam’s placement and concretization in the art world is deserving of both praise and pause. Jangarh Singh Shyam is often written about as the originating point of the artform. He is credited with having mediated an oral and performance Pardhan tradition onto paper and canvas. He installed his Adivasi deities from narrative to visual form for the first time. Curator Mitchell S Crites discusses Singh Shyam’s path-breaking orchestration of Adivasi deities from oral narrative to visual thus, “This deliberate act of worshipful creation clearly frightened and excited him at the same time” (Das *Enchanted* 9). Crites in fact dedicates the book to the artist’s “protean and fertile creativity” (9). Art historian Aurogeeta Das also introduces Singh Shyam’s versatility in similar terms,

“During his relatively short career, Jangarh’s achievements ranged from mastering illustration for *Chakmak*, a children’s journal produced by Eklavya, a local foundation (often in black and white), to ambitious commissions, such as painting large, vibrantly coloured murals in the grand courtyards of Vidhan Bhavan, the seat of the Madhya Pradesh state legislative assembly, designed by renowned architect Charles Correa...”
(*Enchanted* 16)

Das⁷ goes on to mention Jangarh’s work creating “landmarks” for Khajuraho’s “millennium celebrations”, map illustration of Khajuraho, “and crafts for the Dastkari Haat Samiti in Delhi” (16). Singh Shyam crafted a new artform. But this should not be understood as Singh Shyam crafting a new artform in a void. As Das also notes, not just extant mural practices, but oral and performance practices, and even floor and wall art called *digna*, contributed to a composite worldview that enabled Jangarh Singh Shyam to script his gods and culture on another medium.

However, it was the women of the community who created *digna*, or wall and floor art, for auspicious occasions like births and marriages. In fact, curator and collector John Bowles mentions Dukhala Bai of Sadwachappar village (*Painted Songs and Stories* 20), who was requested by Shamrao Hivale and Verrier Elwin to create clay-reliefs on the buildings of the health and school facilities they had organized. Apparently, she passed her art on to Adhara Bai Shyam, who then passed her knowledge to her son, Jangarh Singh Shyam. Adhara Bai Shyam’s husband and Jangarh Singh Shyam’s father had been a cook

⁷ Aurogeeta Das proves that that Pardhan Gond painting is sourced from mural traditions of the Pardhan Gond community. She traces the origin of this idea, and asks why scholars seem to have ignored the community’s extant tradition of visual art. She describes extant practices, “visual traditions consisted of primarily wooden sculptures, reportedly painted masks and some clay relief decorations in domestic spaces. Painting was restricted to extremely simple and geometric forms, done on walls and floors, usually only by women.” (*Enchanted* 25). I intend to discuss this in Chapters 1 and 4 of this project.

at Verrier Elwin's household. Das does not take this connection between women and art forward, and her elucidation needs more material. Bhajju Shyam too, has recently claimed in *Creation* (2014) and *Origins of Art* (2019) that digna is the "alphabet of Gond art". I devote Chapter 4 to this riddle- did Jangarh Singh Shyam create this art all by himself or did generations of unnamed women make Jangarh Singh Shyam's innovation, or re-invention, possible?

I ask what makes Jangarh Singh Shyam's inventive "protean" (Mitchell Crites qtd in Das *Enchanted* 9) creation possible not to denigrate his understandably monumental position in the re-invention of the art he championed or to invalidate the asphyxiating compulsions he felt in his negotiation of the art market, but to bring attention to other aspects of the artform that are important. For example, it is difficult to say if the artform would have taken the shape that it did without Swaminathan's aid and encouragement, or even the stencil that women's digna provided to his imagination. Women's labor was the source of his art and Swaminathan's "patronage" was perhaps as important as Singh Shyam's protean ability to master skills, media, and display. In fact, Aurogeeta Das recounts Jangarh's embarrassment at being singled out by Swaminathan's scouts when there were women in the village who did art habitually (*Enchanted* 25). The question of women's patriarchal and artistic labor, as well as the ethics of collaboration become important to the question of what Indigenous artists do as they work. There is no doubt that Singh Shyam brought his sense of wall art, song, and communal storytelling to oils on canvas and became the source for what is now sometimes called Jangarh Kalam⁸, a newly

⁸ The word *kalam* literally translates to pen in Hindi and Sanskrit. "Jangarh Kalam" thus is the pen of Jangarh, or the Jangarh School—the creative oeuvre made possible by Jangarh, that includes all the work of Pardhan Gond artists.

crafted tradition of paintings determined by themes and aesthetics of Gond art. Udayan Vajpeyi notes this move from song and performance storytelling to pictorial form, "...Pardhaan painting is highly musical in its composition , in the interrelationship of its elements" (n. p.). But asking questions of the now established script of Jangarh Singh Shyam's genius is only a fillip to a fuller understanding of the artform.

At the same time, his recorded experiences with the art world are a cautionary tale for his successors and his legacy. His experiences illustrate a life of manual labor and poverty before the move to the big city, and ghastly discrimination after an entry into the art world via the big city. In fact, his life exemplifies a painful primitivism. He was unable to complete his secondary education and sought work laboring in others' fields or digging road or "transporting soil" or "drought relief labour" for "daily wages" (Bowles 22), before being encouraged by Swaminathan. Despite Swaminathan's noble intentions, Singh Shyam's "modern" academy-trained colleagues at Bharat Bhawan did not appreciate being associated with him. Jyotindra Jain mentions academy trained artists verbally abusing Singh Shyam: the abuse stemming from their sense of being better or more cultured. Sometimes they would sell his paintings for him as a "favor", for he could not speak English and thus perhaps could not bargain for himself. They would then pocket much of the money themselves (Jain *A Conjuror's Archive* 22). Indeed, the nadir of such experiences is a gruesome story narrated by curator Mitchell Crites and corroborated by art historian Jyotindra Jain, which has curiously not received enough attention. A prominent Delhi gallery wished to exhibit Jangarh Singh Shyam's work. They invited him to Delhi and asked him to appear for a photo-op for the exhibition catalogue. But they asked him to strip his jeans and pullover off, and costume himself in a loincloth, turban, and a spear for

the photograph. Singh Shyam was shocked. He narrated his tale tearfully to Mitchell Crites; who promptly rushed to the gallery and manhandled the curator for having humiliated Jangarh Singh Shyam this way⁹. The curator clearly did not think that Western clothing was appropriate- they wished to capture the artist in an “authentic” Adivasi costume. This would have made the exhibition bona fide. The demand was obviously that an Adivasi artist perform his indigeneity authentically. This is the toll that primitivism still demands.

However, the most painful aspect of his life—also a consequence of primitivism—is unfortunately his untimely demise. Writing about the incredible move in Jangarh Singh Shyam’s life, art historian Kavita Singh affectionately said that he was not supposed to be an artist- he did not go to art school, he did not do “modern” art, and lacked cultural capital that sticks to privileged bodies (“Jangarh Singh Shyam and the Great Machine” par. 2). It was a host of factors that had led him on his incredible journey, and it seems, as incredulously cut it short. Jain recounts that “On July 3, 2001, Jangarh Singh Shyam

⁹ Jain in *Other Masters* provides a short summary of the story, while Crites’ description in a magazine review of a Jangarh retrospective is explosive. Jain writes of a conversation with Jangarh, “He was in Delhi and I requested him to pose for a photograph which I wanted to include in this book. In a matter-of-fact manner he asked me whether he should shed his T-shirt, pullover and trousers in favour of his tribal loin-cloth. Seeing me astonished by this offer, he clarified that a few days before an art gallery in Delhi had held an exhibition of his paintings and for a blurb photo he was made to pose as a bare-bodied tribal wearing a mere loin-cloth, hence his offer to bare himself. For Jangarh, his urban host’s proposition was nothing extraordinary, because, as he had once explained even his name Jangarh owed its origin to the Census (*janaganana*) of Indian authorities” (*Other Masters* 8). Indira Lakshmi Prasad in her 2018 *Art and Deal* review of a Jangarh Singh Shyam exhibition quotes Crites, “ One day he came to the house to show me his work and began talking about an exhibition he had in Delhi, and then began to weep. He said...made me hold a spear. Enraged by this, I went with him to the gallery, found the director, pushed him against the wall and said ‘If you EVER do that again, I’ll kill you’ I’ll never forget it” (Prasad 50). Jain and Crites differ in their attitude towards Jangarh’s recital of the event and their own feelings. Jain is almost philosophically distant as he continues to explain Jangarh’s lack of perturbation owing to the story his name but Crites narrates Jangarh’s weeping and explodes.

reportedly committed suicide while doing an artists' residency at the Mithila Museum in Oike, Tokamachi, in the Niigata Prefecture of Japan" (*Conjuror's* 113, Italics mine). I emphasize the "reportedly" in Jain's words because questions persist about what happened and how. John Bowles reports that Singh Shyam's family felt his passport had been confiscated at the artist's residency (*Painted Songs and Stories* 24). His widow, Nankusia Shyam, told me almost tearfully that "They would not release the body to us!" (N. Shyam, Personal Interview 2022). Indeed, Jyotindra Jain as the Director of the Crafts Museum in New Delhi had to intervene with the Indian and Japanese governments to encourage them to release the artist's body so it could be brought home to his family. Jain continues, "It appears that when his hosts commissioned additional work from him and extended his visa for another three months, Jangarh...panicked..." (*Conjuror's* 113). Jain reproduces facsimiles and translations of the last two letters that Singh Shyam wrote- one to his mother and one to his wife. A panic is certainly audible in the artist's last words. He complained to his mother, "Board and lodging is fine but I don't like it here anymore" (115). He says he cannot express himself fully owing to felt surveillance, "...don't put anything inside (the aerogrammes). I am not able to write in full detail (illegible) they see (read everything)" (115). The artist ended this letter with some abjection, "I am writing this in fear" (115).

I mention this letter to bring attention to Jangarh Singh Shyam's mistreatment at the hands of an unforgiving context. He was indubitably a trailblazer, and his demise has, in a grotesque irony, cemented the place of "Gond painting" in the Indian art scene. However, the felicitation came at an extortionate price. Jangarh Singh Shyam's experiences with a harsh context are a cautionary tale, but they are also indexes of the primitivist

stranglehold that Adivasi tribal artists continually bargain with. Elements in Singh Shyam's story- the purported lack of cultural capital, the "authentic" costuming of the Adivasi body, the inability to speak a global language, the financial exploitation at the hands of colleagues, the verbal abuse, and finally exploitation by the museum leading to death- are in fact intimately related to primitivism and its omnipresence in the discourse of indigeneity in India.

Pardhan Gond scholarship is indeed haunted by the specter of primitivism and its concomitant accoutrements like the deeply embedded binary between art and craft which neatly transpose themselves on to modern and tribal/folk, and in the last instance, lead to the denial of dignity to Adivasi/folk creators. But current scholarship ignores some key aspects about the meaning and popularization of the artform. For instance, there is concern about commodification and infantilization of the art, but more work needs to be done in this respect. Scholars also mention that the artform and others like Warli originated in the hands of women as part of domestic rituals, but this has mostly only been parenthetically indicated. As importantly, while it is true that Jangarh Singh Shyam broke multiple ceilings, scholars have not read this rupture *in* his art. The conversation is about formal details, Gond symbols, biographical history, and contextual understanding. These are the gaps I hope to fill as I make an argument for Adivasi agency.

Nevertheless, my work is possible only because scholars have discussed extremely important concerns in the formal and historical domains. I have mentioned art historian Aurogeeta Das's *The Enchanted Forest* and sociologist Roma Chatterji's *Speaking with Pictures*. Curator J Swaminathan, art historian and sociologist Jyotindra Jain, artist and historian Gulammohammed Sheikh, curator and collector John H Bowles, and art

historians who have contributed to booklets issued by the national academy of the arts, the Lalit Kala Akademi, have all established a way of reading “Gond painting”. It must be noted that my project is not an adumbration of painting per se; I am interested in the medium of the picturebook as conceptualized and realized by Tara Books. But it is important to re-trace how Pardhan Gond painting has been theorized before one may begin discussing the usage of Pardhan Gond visual art in the picturebook. J Swaminathan’s *The Perceiving Fingers* was published in 1987 by Bharat Bhavan with a grant from the All India Handicrafts Board. Bharat Bhavan published this text to mark its inauguration. The collaboration between a museum and the national Handicrafts Board indicates the now indelible relationship between Adivasi art and crafts or handicrafts in India. The Surajkund Crafts Mela (*mela* translates as fair), the annual crafts fair held at Surajkund, near New Delhi, was one of the more prominent platforms where Jangarh Singh Shyam displayed his art.

Jyotindra Jain’s writing and practice takes Swaminathan’s intent and spirit forward. *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India*, first published in 1998 and edited by Jyotindra Jain, accompanied the exhibition *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India*, held in 1998 at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi. Curated by Jain himself, then the Senior Director, Crafts Museum to mark the 50th anniversary of India’s Independence, the exhibition aimed to question the hallowed status of the “master” in art history. The idea was to include the five artists: Jangarh Singh Shyam, Jivya Some Mashe, Sonabai, Neelamani Devi, and Ganga Devi—variously categorized as “folk” or “tribal” artists—within the prestigious purview of a master. This was to imagine the opening up of the category of a “master”. Jain’s 2018 *Jangarh Singh Shyam: A*

Conjuror's Archive is an excellent exploration of the multiple forces at play in the development of Jangarh Singh Shyam's multifarious talent. Referring to his long acquaintance with Adivasi artistic appropriation and Jangarh Singh Shyam himself, Jain argues that immense pressure was felt by Singh Shyam despite J Swaminathan's best intentions. This pressure enhanced and harmed his art. It helped invent Pardhan Gond painting but also created a market that was interested solely in a particular meaning of his art. Jain asks his readers to understand that Jangarh's meteoric rise and legacy must be seen as expansive but pierced by pressures beyond control.

(Postcolonial) Primitivism

Jangarh Singh Shyam's numerous encounters with the all-pervasive presumption that he should remain authentically Adivasi are examples of primitivism. Both the art and the figure of the artist have been asked, and continue to be asked, to conform to some essentially pure primitivism. As we see, any deviation from primitivism is noted and the artist is verbally or non-verbally reprimanded. Indeed, as I complete this dissertation in 2024, personal conversations in urban middle class Delhi spaces point me to the incessant primitivism present in India today. In August 2023, a prominent dentist in South Delhi, after inspecting my teeth, was curious about my work as a PhD scholar. He was surprised when he learnt I am writing about Adivasi art. He frowned and asked me why I am writing about such a thing? When I clarified, he exclaimed, "So they are not those spear-holding half naked jungle dwellers!" and chuckled loudly to me and his assistant. He probably thought this expression helped me make sense of this project. A few months later, in January 2024, I had enrolled myself in a swanky gym, also in the heart of South Delhi. Complete with state-of-the-art equipment, a sauna, and showers, it was the best the city

could offer. The gym prides itself on its exclusivity. My trainer was curious about my PhD work and would ask me about research as we worked on squats, deadlifts, and other sundry routines. On a particularly bad day, when I was unable to lift a heavy weight, he yelled at me, “No, you are doing it wrong. Move it *this* way! I will make sure I will make an Adivasi out of you!” and laughed to himself and his assistant, as my eyes widened in disbelief. He meant that Adivasis are blessed with supernatural primeval strength in their mythical forests.

Yet, imagining the Adivasi in an undifferentiated forest, preserved duly, is a political compulsion. On January 23rd 2024, the nation woke up after a glorious few weeks of consecrating the child incarnation of the Hindu god Lord Rama at the January 22nd consecration ceremony at the new grand temple built at the deity’s birthplace in Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh. The same enabler of Adivasi metamorphosis gym trainer’s assistant later told me that he had proudly been part of a “rally” in celebration of the temple in his part of Delhi, and asked me if I had been part of one too. New Delhi was saffron by this time- Resident Welfare Associations and Traders Associations had ensured that the deep orange flags bearing the image a blue adult warrior Lord Rama dominated the city at all heights and angles. On January 26th, as the nation celebrated its 75th Republic Day, the cityscape was a study in contrast- saffron flags peppered by the national tricolor flag. I thought of how laughter at primitive Adivasi in forested landscapes and celebration of a martially Hindu India co-existed in the same person. But it did co-exist, and this is only one example. It is as if celebrating a Hindu utopia for a global India flush with “modern” amenities goes hand in hand with expressing disdain toward Adivasis. Urban India then romanticizes the Adivasi, imagining them in distant lush forests. As 21st century India lunges toward a new

government in 2024, the discourse on primitivism is only louder. I call this “postcolonial primitivism”. It would have been ideal had primitivism been eliminated in independent India. But matters have only worsened and owing to the central government’s attempts at concretizing a monolithic Hindu nation, Adivasis are being allocated a sequestered seat in the auditorium of the postcolonial nation.

In fact, the new nation is a reuse of the old. It is revitalizing of the nationalist anti-colonial motivation described by postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee and art historian Partha Mitter- but for crucially different ends. It wants to be composed of “vanvasi” or forest-dwellers, not “Adivasi” or first dwellers. More than one government policy has been put into place to cement forest dwelling as the only way to define the Adivasi. The dilution of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) that crucially allowed local Adivasi leaders to consent (or not) to coal or bauxite mining on their land, for instance, is a case in point. This dilution was parallel to the tacit consent managed by billionaire industrialist Gautam Adani to mine Hasdeo Forest for coal. The Van Dhan Yojana (Forest Wealth Scheme) intends to purportedly encourage Self Help Groups but paints the Adivasi as incessantly roaming in forest confines. More insidiously, the Viksit Bharat (Evolved India) campaign intends to set up special schools for Adivasi children. It is unclear who will teach and what will be taught in these schools. If global precedent cautions us in any way, then special schools can be easily weaponized for propaganda and material and psychological violence.

I call this “postcolonial primitivism”: a concerted effort that strains to push the Adivasi into a rural dystopia, replete with gratitude for national attention and affection, but devoid of protest. Historically speaking, this has occurred in the past. Epic tales like the *Ramayana*—the protagonist of which was “consecrated” in a heavily publicized ceremony

on January 22nd 2024 at a “grand temple” inaugurated by the Prime Minister—are examples of stories that demonize the Adivasi. According to renowned Adivasi writer Ushakiran Atram, who espouses the language of the Gonds, Gondi, the demon villain in the epic *Ramayana* was a Gond king and has been villainized owing to his Adivasi status. “Before the Aryans arrived, according to Gond folklore, this land was ruled by many great kings... The Aryans have not just appropriated Ravan but also portrayed him as a Brahmin” (par. 1). Contemporary India is only witnessing an acceleration of this appropriation, in the form of postcolonial primitivism.

Artist Nandalal Bose’s re-ascension at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) signals this national transformation in the form of appropriation. I call it a “neo-swadeshi” nationalism, specific to 21st century India. In 2022, marking 75 years after Indian independence, Nandalal Bose’s re-centering at the cost of modernist Amrita Shergil marks the victory of the Bengal School of Art. But it is really the victory of the *swadeshi* upper caste painter painting the naked dancing “healthy” Adivasi with a nationalist brush. In other words, the work that the Adivasi body is called upon to do is that of being available to the upper caste and nationalist government for propaganda. In some ways then, there is a return to early 20th century swadeshi nationalism, as described by Partha Chatterjee in *The Nation and Its Fragments*. Chatterjee writes that nationalism during the British rule, especially mobilizing around the swadeshi movement, was shaped by a growing emphasis on “tradition”, manifesting in a difference between “the material and the spiritual” (Chatterjee 7). The material was the outside world controlled by the British. The spiritual, or religious/traditional, was the inner domain. Chatterjee discusses the inner domain as the site for a creative and powerful anticolonial nationalism. However, there is a crucial

difference between the early 20th century and the 21st century. The “inner” that was for Chatterjee intimately related to displays of religiosity galvanizing the private, is now in 2024 the most public manner of expressing national identity. In the 21st century, in the last decade, a “neo-swadeshi” affect has become commonplace. It is mediatized as a glorification of timeless Hindu tradition; and expressed in anti-colonial terms against the corrosive effects of Anglophone globalization. Taglines like Start Up India, Make in India, and the triumphalist coverage of the Ram Temple consecration in January 2024 evince this neo-swadeshi nationalism.

But most importantly, postcolonial primitivism is in the *guise* of neo-swadeshi nationalism. A resurgence of neo-swadeshi monolithic Hinduism hides a malignant threat around the very definition of indigeneity. The postcolonial Indian state must accord primitivism to the Adivasi to make itself concrete. As a corollary of perpetuating an apparently Hindu timelessness, the “Adivasi” must necessarily be visualized as “vanvasi”. For if the Adivasi or primary resident existed before caste Hinduism, monolithic Hinduism would be revealed as not timeless, but quite clearly temporal. In other words, postcolonial primitivism must be encouraged to concretize neo-swadeshi fundamentalist nationalism. This means the “Adivasi” must peremptorily be contained in a primitivist term like forest dwelling “vanvasi”. This is a move toward a wilful Hinduization of the Adivasi.

Indeed, Adivasi studies has been concerned about the Hinduization of Adivasis in India (Xaxa ; Baviskar “Adivasi Encounters”; Dasgupta *Reordering*). Baviskar writes that Adivasis of the Narmada valley have seen multiple waves of Hinduisation since the 1990s. “Hinduisation's current wave is manifested in the mushrooming of roadside temples all

over the Narmada valley in the 1990s” (5108). While the mid-20th century has seen some “remarkable harnessing of Hinduisation for Adivasi ends”, now the mobilization by the Sangh Parivar or Collective Family—the larger fundamentalist alliance that aids the Hindu right-wing government at the center—is about “recruiting adivasis to political Hinduism” (5108). The assumption that Adivasis are backward or “savage” and an implicit desire to maintain the Hindu purity of India, lead to arguments “against attributing a distinctive religious identity to the adivasis, claiming that they were ‘backward Hindus’ (Ghurye 1959)” (5107). In 2024, the phrase “backward Hindus” has been weaponized and transmuted to take shape as “vanvasi” or forest-dwelling backward Hindus. Current majoritarian nationalism then insists on appearing as benevolent to “backward Hindus” or “vanvasi”, as long as they can be “conscripted” (Baviskar “Adivasi Encounters” 5106) *as* vanvasi under monological Hinduism. I witnessed this first-hand, as Pardhan Gond artists used Hindi words like “hawan” (chanting accompanied by consecrated offerings in the sacred fire), “puja” (worship), “devta” (Gods) when sharing a sense of their rituals with me. These are words that I have grown up using in the context of Hindu worship and rituals— but the artists used these words to describe the Adivasi Pardhan mangteri tour. Have they ceded in their mind, or did they choose to use those words before me and my obviously Hindu name? I do not know. The renaming of Habibganj railway station to Rani Kamalapati railway station in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, is a symptom of this tendency. The renaming, as I have noted, couples Islamophobia with Indigenous appropriation under the guise of Hindu glory.

However, it would be a mistake to only credit postcolonial India with detrimental primitivism. Primitivism, indeed, has been a nodal point of global conversations around

indigeneity and Indigenous art, whether celebrated or critiqued. Adivasi studies scholars like political scientist Uday Chandra and historian Prathama Banerjee, for example, discuss how the discourse of Adivasi studies has had to reckon with primitivism from the 19th century onward to post-1947 India to 21st century India- affecting postcolonial national policy as well as casting serious doubts over the possibility of “Adivasi studies” in the first place. The discourse of primitivism is omnipresent in any conversation about tribal art as well. Cultural anthropologist Shelly Errington’s seminal 1994 essay “What Became Authentic Primitive Art” is a useful point of entry into the pejoration that the label of primitivism produces when applied to art objects. Errington avers that the concept of primitive art was legible by the turn of the 20th century and entered mainstream art discourse and exhibitions by the mid-20th century. As “authentic” primitive art accrued market value, it generated debates about objects possessing more or less authenticity; the status of an object as authentic tribal art became integral to its market value. This, unfortunately, did not encourage a debate about the significance of authenticity in the first place- in other words, did not lead to a revaluation of primitivism or even a rethinking of the category of “art”¹⁰. Instead, it reified the Orient as a silent source for “other” inspiration

¹⁰ To articulate the movement of objects between tribal and art-market contexts, Errington clarifies a distinction between “art as intention” and “art as appropriation”. Art as intention is art intended to be art in the way contemporary audiences understand art, but art as appropriation is art museumized or sold or displayed as “art” when it does not originate as art. It attains the status of art “by being removed from a context of use and performance” (207). This raises questions about how art objects are construed as they are organized, sold, and collected. The assumption that “art is primarily mimetic” (209) gains ascendancy as “optical naturalism emerged and crystallized” (208) thus constituting a pivotal element of the definition of “art” in European art discourse. This is the context in which modernist interactions with primitivism arose.

that could be discarded at will. In a telling comparison, Errington collapses primitivism and New Age Primitivism to bring in Edward Said's complex idea of the Orient.

It seems to me that these attitudes--- the one that views Primitive Man as obsessed with ritual and terrified of spirits, and the one that views primitive man as living harmoniously with nature and as in touch with higher realities--- are each other's flip sides. Both should be called *primitivism* because both make the same moves that Edward Said implied were characteristic of "orientalism": the moves of dichotomizing, otherizing, and essentializing. (215)

"Dichotomizing, otherizing, and essentializing"—these are the pitfalls of the imposition of meaning and monetary value by systems of power that refuse to sincerely engage with "primitive" art. Errington juxtaposes a narrative of art and a narrative of knowledge production here to arrive at an understanding of the network of power that produces meaning and monetary value. This narrative weaponizes a slippage from "primitive man" to "primitive art" to "authentic" primitive art that distorts meaning. Orientalist vantage points limit the meaning of cultural artefacts, not only organizing them as art but valuating a particular kind of art.

While primitivism is crucial to the Adivasi discourse and Adivasi art, the question is how one can imagine an alternative to primitivism. Indeed, essentialisms around "primitive" art that appeared authentic, or what Errington calls "art by appropriation" (versus "art by intention") abounded, as indigeneity was appropriated by modernist painters like Pablo Picasso. This must also be credited as influencing how tribal art was received in pre and post-independence India. J Swaminathan observed this in the late 20th century conversations about "tribal" and "art" around him, most notably in *The Perceiving Fingers*. Pithily capturing the discursive limits of Adivasi artistic classification, Swaminathan notes, "When we talk of tribal art, we at once think of the 'primitive'---

something removed from us by an ocean of time, something which even though created amongst and alongside us, as belonging to a submerged archipelago within the mainstream of what we consider to be our present day culture” (7). This is a reference to the hierarchized notion of art that has permeated museum and art history—that Adivasi or indigenous and tribal art is primitive, simplified, inherently moored in a temporal lag, and not sophisticated enough. Indeed, this tendency explains Jangarh Singh Shyam’s encounters with his context. It is these assumed hierarchies devolving on both art and the artist that impacted how his work was read and how his life and suicide have been evaluated. However, this is only one grasp in a set of pincers. Going by this thrust in primitivism, one may assume that primitivism would be eliminated if the tribals just stopped lagging. In other words, if only tribal individuals embrace the all-encompassing scenario of “development”, hierarchies would cease to be. But this presumption is the other grasp of the pincer against the Adivasi- as dangerous as the presumption that they are primitive. The discourse of “development” is precisely how an intrusion into tribal resources has been justified in India. It is appropriate if the word “development” be replaced by corporate capital, for indeed some tribal resistance in India has been against the appropriation and conquest of land, labor, water, and forest by corporations. In response, Adivasi political organizations like Gondwana Gantantra Party (GGP) or Gondwana Republic Party, have asked for a separate state for Gondi speaking people, called Gondwana. Gondwana, meaning of the Gonds, refers to the central Indian region covering parts of modern-day Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhatisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha. Political mobilization by charismatic Adivasi leaders like Heera Singh Markam (who established the GGP) in 1991 is especially important now as

national policies are slowly but surely attempting to stifle the Adivasi into pre-established pastoral silos. Neither scenario benefits the Adivasi; the primitive lag curses them to a spectacle of preservation and incessant development is another name for the dilution of sovereignty over land and water. How then can one imagine an Adivasi demand for equity, especially in the medium of art?

My project asks how the above demand for equity can be articulated in the picturebook. Primitivism, whether as 20th century appropriation or postcolonial primitivism, *describes* the art. But what does the picturebook do? The brief review above offers a context for the presumption that tribal aesthetics may be traumatized as “primitive”. This is central to the question that my project addresses: the agency of the Adivasi artist in the production of picturebooks by Tara Books despite primitivist derogation. As the review above clarifies, a lineage of thought and artistic production exists that has sometimes not attempted to genuinely apprehend the art or the artist determines institutional and academic responses to tribal art. I think it is germane to keep this lineage in mind as the project elaborates upon artistic agency in the face of a hostile context, in the lives and works of Jangarh Singh Shyam’s successors Bhajju Shyam and Durgabai Vyam. The study of the picturebook reveals multiple pressures exerted on Adivasi artists.

Tara Books

Picturebooks can provide a platform for Adivasi artists to display their labor. Adivasi-illustrated publications by Tara Books sometimes cover themes like anthropomorphism as in the 2006 *The Night Life of Trees*, magical beings as in the 2011 *I Saw A Peacock With a Fiery Tail*, mythological tropes as in the 2015 *Sultana’s Dream* 2015, and folk stories like 2017 *Sun and Moon* that display a manipulation of space and

time. Sometimes, these picturebooks chronicle stories of creation in a particular Adivasi tradition like the 2014 *Creation* or the relationship of an Adivasi community with a resource like water as in the 2018 *Water*. Their subjects are chosen to create a sophisticated palette of Adivasi tales.

In fact, Gita Wolf and V Geetha maintain and have cemented an active collaboration with Adivasi artists by regularly publishing historically sensitive documents that narrate artists' stories in their voices. The 2015 *Between Memory and Museum* was one such initiative. It is a collection of comments and visual art that explores what is remembered and how, when Adivasi cultures enter the museum. The argument lies in its structure and the editorial choices made by Gita and Arun Wolf. It begins with a brief review of the events that lead to a re-vision of museum practices in post-1947 India. A reckoning in global anthropology and museum studies culminated in the Guwahati Declaration of 1988 which emphasized the museum's intent to be "inclusive". Thus, the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS, trans. Indira Gandhi National Museum of Humankind), also in Bhopal, was conceptualized. Its agenda was to inclusively re-create and preserve Adivasi culture in a sustained dialogue with Adivasi artists. The museum showcases outdoor exhibits of "indigenous and folk architecture and ways of life" (*Between Memory and Museum* 12) and "art and artefacts" in its galleries" (12). It is the ensuing dialogue between Adivasi artists and the IGRMS that led to *Between Memory and Museum*, published by Tara Books¹¹. Tara Books honed this intent to describe in its 2019

¹¹ Gita Wolf and Arun Wolf have provided the text, while the artists have provided the images. Each block of text is offset by an artist's rendition of either the museum or a memory, sometimes mythic sometimes mundane. One section ends with a hopeful evaluation, "The museum emerges as a burdened, yet hopeful historical institution- a kind of 'tradition'- that needs to be re-imagined in the contemporary world" (*Between* 15). This

retrospective *Origins of Art: The Gond Village of Patangarh*. Patangarh in the state of Madhya Pradesh is home for Pardhan Gond artists; it is where Swaminathan's scouts first encountered Jangarh Singh Shyam's wall-art. *Origins of Art* intersperses art by various Pardhan Gond artists, Bhajju Shyam's thoughts on Patangarh's life and art, and Kodai Matsuoka's (a Japanese photographer) words and photographs of Patangarh. It is a tribute to the source of Pardhan Gond storytelling. Bhajju Shyam calls Patangarh "Patan" affectionately. "Patan was well-known, throughout history, for different reasons. Our deity, Thakur Dev is said to reside here. The famous anthropologist Dr. Verrier Elwin made it his home, and settled here after he married a Gond woman¹². But it was my uncle, Jangarh Chacha, who was most influential for the future of Patangarh and Gond art" (*Origins* 17)

Gita Wolf and V Geetha, founder editors at Tara, cherish the physicality of their picturebooks. Indeed, the manner of publication by Tara Books forces the tactile corporeality of the picturebook to come to the fore. Gita Wolf, one of the two founder-editor of Tara Books, describes the delightfully "physical" history of Tara Books in a 2010 *World Literature Today* article. She recounts how in 1996, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, she had decided to facilitate handmade silkscreen copies of their first book, *The Very Hungry Lion*. And that has made all the difference. This was also the beginning of a stalwart relationship between an editor and a printer. C Arumugam, heading AMM Prints, has been the backbone of Tara's silkscreen process, and has managed a community of colleagues

is a heavy burden to bear, borne both by the museum and the Adivasi artist. Gita and Arun Wolf, however, attempt to synthesize the two by eschewing heavily "academic" language and let the art and the artists speak for themselves without labelling the art as editor-curators.

¹² In fact, Jangarh Singh Shyam was distantly related to Verrier Elwin's Gond wife, Lila.

who help craft each copy with care. Wolf's pride in their "handmade books enterprise" is entirely justified. She also provides a sense of numbers here, "The statistics are astonishing. They've (the printer artisans) created more than 180,000 books, which require eleven million impressions, or individual "pulls" for each colour" (80). Each copy carries perfection, and Wolf wonders if they are the only publishing house in the world that can orchestrate these numbers working by hand. Perhaps they are.

While Tara's pride at the successful mingling of the physical book with Indigenous art and a sustainable model is understandable, their books, oddly enough, reverberate with expensive luxury. It is indeed part of the Tara vision to foreground the physical book. So much so that they refused to send an e-book of *The London Jungle Book* to the bookstore at the California college I have taught at, when I requested the book to offer a course comparing Kipling's *The Jungle Books*, Disney's 1967 *The Jungle Book*, and Bhajju Shyam's *The London Jungle Book*. Instead of an e-book, they wanted to send 25 copies of *The London Jungle Book* for my students, but of course we had no funding for such princely luxury. The question now is- who can make luxury and who can buy luxury? On the one hand, Tara Books can make bold editorial, compositional, and collaborative choices because they are a small, independent publisher that has somehow sustained itself for three decades. Their achievement partly lies in being able to weld Indigenous art with creative themes in a format that is ostensibly fair to the artists as well as sustainable for the publisher. Nationally, Tara is considered an "alternative press" compared to books published by the National Book Trust (NBT).

On the other hand, Tara picturebooks are sold at elite bookstores in upmarket areas in urban metropolitan centers. They are priced sometimes exorbitantly compared to the

affordable fare created by the NBT or the more recent and humbly priced Pratham Books¹³. Their work must be sold at boutique scenarios out of necessity. After all, their production process is artisanal. Moreover, the key members of the Tara team are emphatically elite. Gita Wolf and V Geetha possess immense cultural capital. The Tara team regularly makes international travel to publishing events across the world. They are comfortable speaking multiple languages and interacting with Adivasi artists as well as the upper echelons. My interviews with them took place in English inside their office. As Tara Books publications are coated in a lush aura, they are restricted to a small class of international readers and buyers. Thus, in the Tara publishing matrix, elite editors are creating pleasing objects for a small coterie of wealthy consumers.

However, opulent physicality increases the price, and automatically renders the picturebook's ability to influence viewers less potent. The glossy execution of a pricey picturebook has consequences for the Adivasi art in the picturebook too. Materially speaking, the Tara picturebook is simultaneously a platform to display art and an artistic object itself. A Tara picturebook displays art upon its surface but the surface is a particular affective experience. Of course, the process of apprehending any picturebook demands not simply oral, aural, visual cues but also tactile cues. It is held and touched by caregivers and children alike. It ensures a lively interaction between the handler and the text. But, Tara texts are more than just tactile. They are sturdy- they can also be packed easily as gifts. Each Tara book is a venture per se. It makes readers and handlers *feel* the grandeur. I think this feeling of staunch luxury in artistic finish emphatically qualifies the Adivasi content

¹³ Pratham Books, founded in 2004, describes themselves as “a nonprofit publisher introducing children to the joy of reading” (“Who We Are”).

of the picturebook. As a Tara text materially announces itself as a lavish sensual experience, I submit that an extra value is added to the exchange value immanent in the sumptuous Tara picturebook. A text of this sort combines aesthetic and sensual value with the value of the art it houses. And this is what makes all the difference for the non-elite Adivasi co-producer of the text!

An Indigenous “value”, abstracted from Adivasi artistic labor, adds to the splendor of the picturebook. I should note that this abstraction does not take away from the sincere collaboration that Tara practices. It also does not mean that Adivasi artistic labor is a matter of alienation, as I show in the dissertation. The point is that the value of indigeneity in the picturebook is indispensable to the splendor it is embedded in. As readers feel the grandeur of the Tara picturebook, it is easy for them to imagine a grand hegemonic view of the artist who has labored over the visual experience. Perhaps this hegemony is an affectionate disdain that appreciates and derides the Adivasi co-producer? After all, the splendor creates a physical and economic distance between the magnanimous buyer of the picturebook and vulnerable illustrator. Some Pardhan Gond scholars have indeed taken this into account. Postcolonial theorist Rashmi Varma, writing about the “primitive accumulation” evident in the appropriation of Pardhan Gond aesthetics, opines, “...Gond painting is very much a *constructed* tradition...(that) was nourished in the city of Bhopal” (754, Italics mine). Borrowing from Marx and David Harvey, Varma describes “primitive accumulation” as not only extraction of Adivasi artistic labor for monetary gain, but also puns on “primitive” in a heavy gesture toward the history of social and artistic classification of Adivasi art. The Tara picturebook purveys economic luxury combined with a romantic view of distant Adivasi labor. It is most certainly commendable that Wolf and Geetha have attempted to

inaugurate an aesthetic revolution by sincerely directing attention to the richness and diversity of India's Adivasi and folk visual cultures. Their continuing collaboration with Adivasi and folk artists is important because it provides a genuine platform for artists to create without the pressure of a big publishing house with its attendant restrictions. Yet, commendation cannot prevent critique. Does the luxurious aura emitting from a Tara picturebook restrict the Adivasi artist's ability to touch the viewer into a more nuanced appreciation of the artform and its meaning?

But this apparent inability to galvanize the reader is exactly why I am interested in exploring the political stakes of the use of Adivasi aesthetics within the picturebook. If an upper-class collaborator like Tara can *only* communicate with an elite audience, how do we reconcile the prominence of tribal art in this restricted medium given the searing pain of unceasing Adivasi disenfranchisement? How do artists themselves understand their role in the production of picturebooks, and the creation of Adivasi art in general? Especially as Jangarh Singh Shyam found that despite stupendous success and unceasing collaboration with individuals in the art matrix, he could succumb to these very pressures. His "protean" ability to traverse life-worlds, media, and marketplaces, was accompanied by inherent difficulties. One must ask if/how these difficulties manifest in contemporary India. Indeed, some scholars of Pardhan Gond painting have also begun to ask where the contemporary Adivasi artist is to be found in a 21st century matrix of publishers, curators, and governments. I mentioned at the beginning that representation matters but Adivasi art is susceptible to appropriation by the powers that be; that art and artists are vulnerable to being marionetted as the strings are pulled by others. I have mentioned a romantic distance between the wealthy buyer and the Adivasi art worker of the picturebook. Art historian

Annapurna Garimella's 2020 "A Tree Grows in a Painting: Tribal Artists and the Museum" also exhorts caution as it appears that publishers may be appropriating Adivasi art. As she mentions the prolific commissioning of Adivasi artists for publishing houses, Garimella expresses concern for the shift in audience of Pardhan Gond storytelling.

Through these publications, the artists seek to practise their artistry, earn a livelihood and communicate to people outside their linguistic, cultural and geographic community the richness of their stories... These books are about Pardhan-Gond memories but are not meant for them. What does it mean for artists to paint their inherited stories for an audience that consists not of customary patrons (as the Gonds were to the Pardhans) and co-inhabiters of the forest, but for collectors, institutions and consumers? Further work needs to be done to address this question. ("A Tree Grows" n.p.)

It is true that the Adivasi artists are not the consumers of these picturebooks, As Garimella points out, this is a difficult idea. The Adivasi co-producer is not the eventual consumer of the art s/he creates. In other words, the "subaltern" artists speak, but who listens and why? The Tara picturebook, precisely because of its material nature and its boutique circulation in the political economy of media, reaches a limited audience. As the putative viewer of the picturebook is the metropolitan English-literate child and respective caregiver, the Adivasi artist is placed precariously in the matrix of circulation.

Art in Neo-liberal Postcolonial Primitivist India

The precarious placement of Adivasi art needs to be explored in a larger scenario of expropriation, if we are to ask how Bhajju Shyam and Durgabai Vyam's collaboration with Tara Books is an effective argument for an agential intervention in the Anglophone picturebook. Indeed, the complexity of the dominant environment about Pardhan Gond painting is generally accepted amongst scholars of Pardhan Gond art. Jyotindra Jain, for example, exercises caution in writing about the art world's reception of Jangarh Singh

Shyam, and by extension, Adivasi art. He writes that in an unhappy contrast to J Swaminathan's search for "dignity" for tribal artists, modernist artists did not enjoy being displayed alongside tribal artists at Bharat Bhawan and so "a separate wing was created at Bharat Bhawan to house the folk and tribal art collections" (*Conjuror's* 18). This, coupled with "Swaminathan's tenacious segregation of the ethnographic background of tribal art", in favor of the "aesthetic qualities" of the artwork (*Conjuror's* pp. 16-19), provides a radical contrast to the well-meaning efforts of Swaminathan to craft a contemporaneous "living tradition" (Subramanyan). Thus, even the museum that apparently aided Jangarh Singh Shyam could not help but appropriate him and his work.

If so, then seeking Indigenous sovereignty, or Adivasi agency, requires a thorough investigation of the process of creation, understanding of ownership of art, and ability to sell said art. This is especially significant as tokenistic representation, postcolonial primitivism, and political harnessing of the artform is on the rise. Pardhan Gond art is now objectified. Social media, urban leisure, and museums and historical sites in the country have begun to use Pardhan Gond art for questionable purposes. For instance, popular social media like Instagram (in connection with monetization platform Patreon) has become a suspect repository for a recovery and archiving of "Gond painting". Handles like "loksutr" "opsartgallery" "gondwanaartproject"¹⁴ pay regular attention to Adivasi art. At the same time, a user like "urvashiadhye" creates folk and Adivasi art without acknowledging her social location. Her bio reads, "Madhubani and Gond inspired paintings" (Urvashiadhye).

¹⁴ An insistence on a separate stipulated Gondwana state may be an unfulfilled dream, but it has given inspiration to Community and Craft Development Federation (CCDF) to run a long standing project promoting community and Indigenous art called "The Gondwana Art Project".

Is she from Mithila, the birthplace of Madhubani art? Is she Gond, Pardhan, or Adivasi? How is she able to claim the right to re-represent/represent Adivasi and folk art if she does not belong to Mithila or is not part of Jangarh Singh Shyam's family? It is unclear. Pardhan Gond art is being subject to easy reproduction. Parallel to this reproduction is the augmentation of objects that utilize Pardhan aesthetics. Pardhan artist Sukhnandi Vyam, for example, completed work on a tribal art calendar in January 2024 (Vyamsukhnandi). The calendar is another platform that not only sells itself but also the art that it displays.

While the art is reproduced via commodities, class is also a crucial marker of the urban display of Pardhan Gond art in India. A new exhibition venue for viewing art, the "Inherited Arts Forum" has now come up in New Delhi's Lado Sarai area, already populated by designer wear stores and posh art galleries founded and funded by elite Delhi residents. Pardhan Gond art is now used as café décor. Blue Tokai, a proliferating roastery that started in 2013, is part of a cohort of artisanal coffee chains in India including names like Third Wave Coffee. After the first Starbucks opened in New Delhi in 2014, and now the first Tim Hortons in New Delhi—indeed after Café Coffee Day, Barista, and Costa Coffee made their appearance in the 2000s—Blue Tokai offers a gleaming caffeinated rendezvous where consumers can chat, get work done on laptops, conduct meetings, or just spend time by themselves reading and texting/browsing on their smartphones. Writing about this "culture" in 21st century New Delhi, Tabassum Ruhi Khan calls it a series of "middle class activities of leisure and consumption" (*Beyond Hybridity* 145). Blue Tokai's revenue jumped 70% in the 2023 financial year (Rajan par. 1). But crucially, they have refurbished their packaging and store décor to include "unexplored artforms in illustrations" ("Packaging" n. p.). So far, I have counted "Gond painting" and "Madhubani

painting” as their preferred artforms. Neither Gond nor Madhubani artforms are “unexplored”- they are in fact the most recognizable folk and Adivasi artforms from India- the other two being Warli and Patachitra. But there is some “value” in pretending “Gond painting” is “unexplored” in 2024. Blue Tokai is selling the right to call something unexplored as they sell coffee whose pricing begins INR 300; in a nation where the daily per capita income is roughly INR 600, according to the International Monetary Fund (“GDP Per Capita, Current Prices”). Pardhan Gond art is a prop for a neo-liberal experience of “modernity”.

Older elite institutions in Delhi and Bhopal have become sites of display too. The India International Centre, well known for promoting art, literature, culture, and located in the most sought after government residential locality, also hangs MP Tribal art by the exclusive members only Diner’s Area. Jangarh Singh Shyam famously hand painted the murals at the Bhopal Vidhan Sabha, the venue for the State Legislative Assembly at Madhya Pradesh. His widow, Nankusia Shyam’s art graces the display gallery next to the Dilli Haat, at the INA metro stations as well as the Bhopal airport. Pardhan Gond art, and other popular folk and Adivasi artforms, are prominently sold at Delhi Haat, a commercial art, food, and heritage center in Delhi established in 1994. The Surajkund Crafts Festival, and the recently inaugurated Aadi Mahotsav in Delhi, are also other venues for urban art connoisseurs to bargain with artists themselves. Indeed, I met Padma Shri awardee and Adivasi Bhil art doyenne Bhuri Bai (who was also “discovered” by Swaminathan at Bharat Bhawan) at the latest iteration of Surajkund Crafts Mela in 2024.

Reproduction as appropriation was the cornerstone of primitive art in the 20th century, as argued by Shelly Errington. In the 21st century, reproduction as

commodification has reared its head. Sites of display are sites of art visibility, but they also happen to be sites of sale. Art, artistic merchandise, and most importantly, indigeneity; all are sold here. I own a fridge magnet with Pardhan print, which I bought at a Tribes India store in Central Delhi. Tribes India is the official commercial platform of the Government of India to promote and sell tribal heritage. Coffee, art, textiles, shawls, bags, and showpieces are sold at these stores. I bought an expensive bookmark and a thick plastic bag with Pardhan print at the Museum of Art and Photography (MAP), Bengaluru- also called the Silicon Valley of India. It was forbiddingly expensive, like the coffee at Blue Tokai. Another term for this set of practices is “commodification”; Pardhan Gond scholarship has hinted at it (Bowles; Chatterji *Speaking*; Garimella “A Tree Grows”) but not taken it forward. I observe that in cafes and dining areas for instance, the display of indigeneity lends an “ethnic” flavor to the caffeinated social experience that the space offers. The consumer that the space is meant for is somebody who has leisure time and money and can also tangentially appreciate the folk or Adivasi art- perhaps as distant, whimsical, and cutesy. Blue Tokai can then claim that they have collaborated with a vulnerable community, perhaps, as part of a CSR initiative, without really taking on the messy task of reparation. The link on their website to their philosophy of “packaging” is dead. The servers at their café stores did not speak to me beyond terse responses like “Oh yes, this is folk art. But sorry Sir, we don’t know much about it” (December 2023). This is a consequence of commodification- the artform has become *convenient*- it can be vaguely recognized by the public, it can be sold as “unexplored”, and it adds real value to the décor of a place, distinguishing it from other leisure experiences in a big city. It is, as the Blue

Tokai website proudly professes, about packaging. Is the Tara picturebook also about packaging when it adds inexplicable Indigenous value to the luxurious picturebook?

As purposeful harnessing of Pardhan Gond art continues rampant, the question is this- what happens to the meaning of the art and the artists who create this art that finds itself so conveniently appropriated? I have noted that non-tribal perhaps upper caste individuals are exploiting Pardhan Gond art by creating work like it, sometimes on social media like Instagram and making money off it using Patreon. In the art world, imitation Pardhan Art is on a steep rise as well. At the same time, there seems to be reproduction of similar patterns amongst artists of the community. Some curators have complained that now the artform displays “sameness” or “samaanta”, in that it seems like all Pardhan Gond artists are doing the same thing. It is the commodification of the art that enables this reproduction. As I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, I suspect that the ostensibly “basic” “simplified” form of Pardhan Gond art renders it easier to reproduce, mimic, and in the last instance, appropriate for non-Pardhan profit. It is noteworthy that the “simplicity” of folk or Indigenous art is squarely an aspect of primitivism, as Swaminathan reminds us. Given the commodification of art and artist based on identity, what can the artist do? Whither agency? The art now signifies a loss of meaning and a loss of control over its creation. Therefore, asking where artistic agency lies becomes crucial. A question a la Walter Benjamin mechanically emerges- what is the *work* of art and artist in the age of mechanical or manual reproduction? Especially as it is serenely sold as sylvan memorabilia.

Agency can partly be re-centered in descriptions of art and its curation. For instance, the Madhya Pradesh Government was requested by the regional “VANYA- Tribal Affairs Department” to “fix” the artform as “handicraft” in 2022 by granting the artform a

Geographical Indicator (GI) tag (“Application Details”). A GI tag ensures a national acknowledgement of a unique identity. It also specifies who can use or create the “good” that has been tagged. A GI tag is meant to authorize the creators of a particular product, say agricultural, food, spirit, or in this case, “handicrafts”. The Hindustan Times reports that prominent artists like Bhajju Shyam endorse this tag and civil servants welcome the move to cement a regional identity of Patangarh, the village that is the source of this art, in Dindori, the district in Madhya Pradesh (Agnihotri pars. 2-3). But the GI tag also authorizes creators of the “good”. Classified as both handicraft and a good, it is now named “Gond Painting of Madhya Pradesh” according to *ipindia.gov.in*, the official website of intellectual property in India. The artform was fixed as intellectual property by 2023 and the website lists 100 artists who can authoritatively create and sell this art. The website now lists the concrete name and logo for the art- “Gond Painting of Madhya Pradesh”. As noted with the MP tourism television commercial, this is an acknowledgement of pride, regional, and tribal identity. In 2022, the Government of India specifically requested that the name of the artform be fixed as “Gond Painting of Madhya Pradesh”, and not “Dindori Gond Painting”, which the applicant had suggested earlier in 2020. In other words, the identity of the state was promoted over the identity of the district in which the artistic geographical source, i.e. Patangarh, is located (“701 GI Amended Application”).

But the GI tag is also an attempt to check the proliferation of art. The website lists the “handicraft goods” that can be created under three classes- 16, 20, and 25 (“701 GI Amended Application”). I am reproducing the lists here because they succinctly describe commodification. “Class- 16- Posters, Greeting Cards, Books, Wallpaper, Stationary (sic), and Related Products”, “Class- 20- Walls, Photo Frame, Wooden Items, Decorative

Products, Different Type of Hangings, Furniture's (sic), etc.", "Class- 25- Cloths & Apparels, Canvass (sic), Banner, Curtain & Covers & Similar Textiles". The document goes on to describe the artform- how it came about, the major themes it illustrates, and how it is an expression of traditions of the people. The GI tag is a material endorsement of the artform as well as an attempt at commodity control, aimed at helping the Adivasi.

Yet, the nominal aid above is ambiguous. The "fixing" is erroneous. The source of the art is certainly Madhya Pradesh, but the labor of art has not been performed by Gonds. It has been performed by the ritual bards of the Gonds, the Pardhans. Calling it "Pardhan Gond" art is more accurate. Unfortunately, the artform is now officially acknowledged as "Gond Painting of Madhya Pradesh". If the aim is to sensitively preserve artistic and familial Adivasi control over the unchecked reproduction of the art, then an accurate identification of who creates the art should be a primary agenda. A discussion of terminology is crucial to understand who can claim ownership of the art. It is undeniably true that the Gonds have received more scholarly attention than the Pardhans. Only two full length ethnographic studies of the Pardhans have been published- Shamrao Hivale and Umesh Chandar Misra. On the other hand, ethnographers like Verrier Elwin, Christoph von Fuhre-Haimendorf, Reverend Stephen Hislop, and Russell and Hiralal have liberally discussed the Gonds in Central India. It is also true that Jangarh Singh Shyam's collaboration with Bharat Bhawan's J Swaminathan cemented the "Gond" in the naming of the artform. However, a term like "Pardhan Gond" respects the community that actually works with the form. I use the term "Pardhan Gond" to refer to the artform in the dissertation. Curator Vivek Vajpeyi favors the term "Jangarh Kalam" to describe the monumental position of Jangarh Singh Shyam in the story of the form (n. p.). Jyotindra

Jain, on the other hand, argues that Jangarh Singh Shyam may have been instrumental in initiating artistic experiment, but the art form cannot be seen as only his (*Conjuror's* 14). In fact, Jain also firmly believes that “Gond painting” became a term used for convenient marketing of the new form- when actually it was the Pardhans who labored toward this art, going so far as to call term “flawed and inaccurate” (14). Jain prefers “Jangarh Idiom” to recognize Jangarh’s individual contribution leading to a broader movement. Sociologist Roma Chatterji too, uses the phrase “Pardhan Gond” when writing about the artists themselves, if not the artform (*Speaking*). I think Jyotindra Jain meticulously diagnoses the issue at hand- an accurate representation should demand accurate identification. Aurogeeta Das too discusses the number of terms that have been proposed- and expresses reservations about all (*Enchanted* 75-78). In this scenario, it is more accurate to say Pardhan Gond art. This recognizes the Pardhan labor that led to this artform, acknowledges the currency of the more popular “Gond”, and does not restrict itself to a single originating source like Jangarh Singh Shyam.

The question of meticulous identification is also important in museum catalogues and descriptions. In contemporary fundamentalist India, real questions are now being raised at the usage of terms like “Indigenous” or “Adivasi” for tribals across the country. For example, the terms Adivasi and Indigenous were elided in the catalogue for “Deshaj”, an exhibition of canvases by folk and Adivasi artists, at the Indian Art, Architecture, Design Biennale, inaugurated in December 2023 at the historic Red Fort. One of the most iconic monuments of India, the Red Fort is also where the Prime Minister addresses the nation every January 26th, when India celebrates the drafting of the constitution that crafted India into a Republic. Curated by Anubhav Nath, the founder of Ojas Art Gallery (coincidentally

located a few feet from the Qutab Minar, another historic monument, in South Delhi, barely a kilometer or two from Lado Sarai where lies the “Inherited Arts Forum”), the exhibition featured the work of Jangarh Singh Shyam, Bhajju Shyam, Durgabai Vyam, Bhuri Bai, Santosh Kumar Das, and Mayur Vayeda and Tushar Vayeda. The term “deshaj” is from Hindi grammar, and it is a collation of two words “desh” meaning country and “upaj” meaning creation. As a grammatical concept, it refers to words in Hindi that are of “native” origin. It would seem appropriate that Indigenous art is described as of “native origin” in India. After all, the exhibition featured the work of artists described as “folk” too. “Native origin” can include both folk and tribal artists. It is admirable that the walls of Red Fort were literally painted on in the vibrant colors of “Gond Painting”. But a precise identification was missing. Eliding “Adivasi” or “indigenous” is akin to using a term like “vanvasi”, a symptom of denying indigeneity and extracting land control from the Adivasis. If neither the government nor the curator is identifying the art precisely, what can the alternative publisher do?

Art in the Picturebook

I have mentioned that Tara Books are produced with artisanal care and physical perfection. They feature Adivasi art printed gloriously. But the books are sold and bought. They are used as gifts. They are both art facilitators and objects unto themselves. Indeed, picturebook scholarship has also taken cognizance of how picturebooks themselves become art *objects*- a means to display, becoming art itself, as well as a matter of purchase and sale. I use the term “picturebook” after picturebook scholars, Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, and Sylvia Marantz and Kenneth Marantz. An older variant of the spelling, “picture book” does not do justice to the peculiar conglomeration of text and image in the

picturebook. Marantz and Marantz remark, “The potency of the pictures in contributing to the story rather than the number of pictures per page becomes the test. Note that we spell “picturebook” as a single word to identify these special qualities...We use it also to call attention to our claim that picturebooks are art objects rather than literary artifacts” (*Multicultural Picturebooks* vii). It is this primarily artistic and visual presence of the picturebook that renders it unique in its apprehension of the world. My reading of the picturebook first notes the visual, and then the textual.

I am interested in the signification of the work as image to bring attention to the Adivasi illustrator and Adivasi labor that goes into the picturebook. Throughout the dissertation, I have cited the picturebooks using the names of the Adivasi illustrators. Perry Nodelman, the first to theorize the picturebook in the West, accurately observes that many picturebooks begin as text and are then visual (*Words About Pictures* n. p.). This might be understood as the primacy of text over image in the picturebook. It is true that Nodelman accords a secondary status to the illustrator compared to the author. I depart from Nodelman here because the Tara Books process is more dialogic than this. Moreover, the Tara picturebooks are pedagogic. They teach the exuberant existence of Adivasi and folk visual cultures. But more than celebrating diversity, they have the potential to offer a corrective to Adivasi representation. They present a way of seeing Adivasi art. The Adivasi picturebooks are a tribute to the innovation and skill of artists like Bhajju Shyam and Durgabai Vyam. Indeed, Martin Salisbury and Morag Styles, illustrator and children’s fiction scholar respectively, argue that picturebooks are an instrument of integration—a “means by which we integrate children into a culture” (*Children’s Picturebooks* 75) or even help the child read words more deftly. But the picturebook is not only meant for

children. Tara Books' texts prove that the picturebook has more than one set of readers, that while children are important to picturebooks, there are other stakeholders in the structure, and this is a general agreement in contemporary picturebook studies now. In the Tara process, the Adivasi artists are stakeholders as much as the audience.

While Tara Books indeed practices a new didacticism (and I devote part of Chapter 2 to this newness), owing to an intimate link between children and picturebooks, the picturebook's position midway between child readers and adult readers makes any study more complex. Nilanjana Gupta and Rimi Chatterjee describe the conundrum of children's literature, "The basic paradox that underlines all discussions about children's literature is, after all, the fact that the literature is written by adults, published by adults and bought by adults, while the child consumers have very little to say about the entire process" (*Reading Children* 4). The field is attempting to move beyond this idea. Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles's groundbreaking work in the 2003 *Children Reading Pictures* contests this by proving that children bring sophisticated insight into their experience of encountering picturebooks; but the basic "paradox" remains paramount even now.

Here is the problem- if it is the adults who define the production and consumption of texts, then it is axiomatic that adult biases will make their way into the picturebook. In other words, if the adults disdain Adivasi art, then perhaps the art *object* that is the picturebook, will also disdain Adivasi art. And for our purposes, this means that the novel didacticism that Tara Books operate with is made futile. Adivasi art, when displayed inside the artisanal picturebook, by a publisher putatively creating for children, can be infantilized. This is a problem of signification. I devote space to this problem in Chapters 2 and 3. The crucial paradox of children's literature encourages the assumption that Adivasi

art is only fit for children and therefore it cannot be taken seriously. This impacts the reception of the thematic content as well. Perhaps the picturebook only carefully and affectionately demeans the art it purports to support? Art historian E H Gombrich referred to this tendency decades ago.

One of these facts is a certain kinship between child art and primitive art that had suggested to the unwary the false alternatives that either these primitives could not do better because they were as unskilled as children or that they did not want to do anything else because they still had the mentality of children. Both these conclusions are obviously false. They are due to the tacit assumption that what is easy for us must always have been easy. (*Art and Illusion* 17)

Gombrich disagrees with this notion- he is *describing* it to let readers know of the error of such a notion. But that does not do away with the problem. More recently, a scholar like John H Bowles has described the “belittling” consequences of the “charmingly decorative or child-oriented imagery” found in the collaboration between Pardhan artists and Indian children’s publishing (pp. 40-41). I began by discussing how the Tara picturebook is both objectified and objectifies art. But now there is a problem of generic classification.

Both commodification and infantilization can be laid at Tara’s door. As noted, scholars have hinted at this but have not taken this forward (Bowles; Chatterji *Speaking*; Garimella “A Tree Grows”). What can be the way out? Seeking an escape from these tendencies is impossible. I propose that the self-aware artist makes the matrix work for her/him. The artist is a co-author and co-producer, who understands the stakes of creation and representation very well. She bargains with the medium to tell her story. At the same time, in the last instance, her art becomes a “handicraft good” that enhances the luxury of a Tara picturebook. But that is the overwhelming nature of global capital. In a grotesque

irony, this capital is what makes collaboration between wealthy alternative publisher and Adivasi possible in the first place. Chatterji and Garimella insist on the income-generation that collaborations can lead to- and that is certainly one way to mitigate commodification and infantilization. Bowles, as I will discuss shortly, tangentially refers to a “strategic positioning” of the artist in such a scenario (31). I support such a reading. I add that the ethical publisher does what they can in ally-ship. I show that Tara’s compositional choices and new wave pedagogy partly recuperates this classification. But the stakes are obviously higher for the artist than the publisher. It is the labor of the artist then to find an assertive way out of this classification. He does so in his own way, by attempting to take control of the meaning. He too is only partly successful as generic neutralization in the commodified picturebook cannot simply be wished away. Like Blue Tokai, the Tara picturebook proffers a leisurely encounter with the Adivasi after all.

Seeking Agency

Curator Anubhav Nath and Bhajju Shyam present a collaboration comparable to the collaboration that Tara Books and Bhajju Shyam have managed. Anubhav Nath, the curator of the exhibition *Deshaj* at the Red Fort as part of the Indian Art Architecture Design Biennale in December 2023, is a frequent gallery collaborator of Pardhan Gond artists. In fact, it is he who motivated Bhajju Shyam to collaborate with St+rt, which led to the mural “Delhiwallas” at Lodhi Arts District, New Delhi, which marked a pointed shift in Bhajju Shyam’s oeuvre and the oeuvre to Pardhan painters in general. Indeed, after the mural, Anubhav Nath hosted an exhibition *Untitled* in 2022 at Ojas Art Gallery, where Shyam explicitly played with self-portraiture. I discuss in Chapter 1 how self-portraiture is ever present in the works of Western and “modern” academy trained Indian artists, but

curiously absent in the work of folk and Adivasi artists. Anubhav Nath has also been instrumental in encouraging publication of books featuring Adivasi and folk art, as well as ensuring that their works are acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago in the USA, for instance (“The World Sits on My Toenail”). And yet he decided not to use the words “Adivasi” or “Indigenous” at Deshaj. Not just the gallery owner and curator, but the artist has made such linguistic decisions as well. Bhajju Shyam’s speech at his investiture with the Padma Shri award, the fourth highest civilian award in India, is a testament to such decision-making. His speech was not made in Gondi, the language that he has grown up speaking. Instead, it was in Sanskritized Hindi, the state sanctioned language that is a potent vehicle for Hindu fundamentalism. I think Bhajju Shyam, as an artist from a vulnerable community chooses to use the language expected of him under the current dispensation. Similarly, Anubhav Nath, when curating for a national event like the India Art Architecture Design Biennale follows suit. In contemporary India, both vulnerable artist and upper caste/class well-meaning collaborator must choose wisely.

Given the increasing realization of such difficult choices, I argue that Adivasi artistic agency is necessarily artistic *strategy*. Strategy is visible in naming and identification of the art, but it can be gleaned in the form and content of the art as well. The Adivasi artists make well-calculated choices as they render their worldview in the picturebook, as part of their collaboration with Tara Books. In the context of proliferation of imitation, imprecise identification, Hindu nationalism, physical and material violence, and rampant commodification, the artist must astutely contemplate the perceived limits and possibilities of their own identity-based position in the matrix of power. Indeed, as I observed at the beginning, artistic agency lies in a tactical play between voice and

voicelessness, speech and silence, and visibility and invisibility. It is this ambivalence that defines their control over the artwork. Sometimes it appears as a direct rejoinder, sometimes a gentle nudge, other times a strident critique, or even a non-utterance. I read the Adivasi picturebook to demonstrate these ingenious Indigenous choices. Curator and collector John Bowles discusses a similar tendency in another Pardhan Gond artist Suresh Dhurvey's work. Bowles parenthetically calls this "strategic positioning", an attempt by the artists to engross their patrons and perhaps take some responsibility for its sale. In Suresh Singh Dhurvey's own words, presented as a translation by Bowles, there is a clear sense of choice. "I strongly believe that an artist should paint according to his own thinking, rather than according to what the client wants. It is for the client to purchase a painting if he likes it. But I do take into account the positive feedback that I get from the clients" (Bowles 31). Dhurvey's justification for his practice is an embrace of a nuanced and material perspective that balances the market as well as individual creative flow. This is to say that Pardhan Gond Adivasi artists imagine a sophisticated relationship to their art and buyers of art and strive for an equilibrium under immense pressure.

Moving between a unified self and a cohesive community, Adivasi artists are self-conscious creators who are encouraged by publication houses and collaborators. In the process, they fashion for themselves a space for assertion. I observe this space in the self-reflexive self-representation that a reading of the artwork recovers. I argue for artistic agency via self-representation for two reasons. The first is that the Adivasi illustrator must be seen as an author and producer of the text. Their labor is essential to the final product of the picturebook. Their time, their creativity, their ideation and their re-invention of the repertoire of Pardhan Gond cultural texts is the work they put in in a dialogue with Tara

Books. A reading for self-representation then gestures to this Adivasi labor. It indicates their own attitude to their navigation. Self-awareness, in this case, is a direct symptom of this dialogic self-representation. The second reason, related to the first, is that artist is recounting a story they think is worth illustrating. This is crucial because the discourse of primitivism renders stories from the outsider more important than stories from the insider. Self-reflexivity is a point of entry into how a co-producer of the picturebook views their art. Since I am also using ethnographic interviews to arrive at a sense of artistic agency, seeking self-aware self-representation emphasizes the voice of the artist as author and producer. Texts like *Creation*, *The London Jungle Book*, *Flight of the Mermaid*, *Churki Burki Book of Rhymes*, *The Nightlife of Trees*, and *Between Memory and Museum* are examples of discursive ruptures. Historian Asoka Kumar Sen calls such a process in literature an “Adivasi self-fashioning”- where Adivasi storytellers, communities, and organizations portray their demands in terms of myth and landscape to re-narrate their stories. In the last instance, agential self-representation is a reclamation of the right to represent; it is about power that has been systematically stolen and remains a distant dream- whether materially or in outsider representation. In the picturebook, a self-fashioning then gestures to a possibility of strategic representation that stages a recuperation. I hope to read this Adivasi recuperation. But disenfranchisement is concurrent, and recuperation is only retrospective. In a different but related context, Indigenous studies scholar Jodi Byrd poignantly describes the tragedy, “...there is a difference between recovered and having never lost in the first place that stands in breach still...” (*The Transit of Empire* xi)

The Adivasi picturebook is a stellar example of recuperation in an intelligently maintained equilibrium. It raises questions and brings attention to the multiple levels of

labor inherent in the composition and publication of the picturebook. Both postcolonialism and Adivasi studies carve out a space for “subaltern” tact as tactic. A term like “strategic”, for instance, invokes the now canonical concept of “strategic essentialism”. Gayatri C Spivak discusses a “strategic essentialism” that temporarily aids the conceptualization of marginalized groups in state policy and activism, in full consciousness that the essentialism is both temporary and strategic (“Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution” 11). For our purposes, the strategy lies in the subaltern articulating for themselves an agency that imagines an intervention in the political economy; a political economy that is designed to “craft” a community that is immobile. The artist turns the picturebook into strategic essentialism, interrogating staid notions of what constitutes art and agency.

Recent sociological work in Adivasi studies also corroborates this understanding of Adivasi agency as strategy. Pinky Hota describes “scripts about money, value, and indigeneity” (253) to cull a sense of how Adivasis from Kandhamal in the state of Odisha respond to their essentialization in state-led developmentalist experiences. Hota writes that tribals “reappropriate and subvert” discourses as a “strategic political tactic of indigenous citizenship” (254). This is in a context of a “nationwide surge in the strengthening of tribal identity” beginning in the 1990s, which has included the creation of new states based on tribal identity, legal acknowledgement, as well as reservation of seats in state-administered educational institutes and civil services (Hota 273). In Hota’s work, Kandhamal Adivasis display a clear and sophisticated understanding of money and its workings, and some tribal leaders when elected to government posts also accept bribes to ensure adequate resources for their community members. This is precisely what I mean by an ambivalence situated gracefully between stringent refusal and willing interpellation. It is a foreclosure to imagine

that the Adivasi must always parade in protest. Protest comes in more than one shape and size. It needs to be contextualized. What appears as willing subjection might be tactical, and what appears as a severe critique might as well be nuanced as a neither/nor. It is more helpful to discuss how any oppressed community manages expectations and creatively intervenes to chart their own trajectory. This might also be seen as an ambiguous play on the identity of the oppressed. For example, Amita Baviskar, writing about the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), argues that, as part of the anti-dam movement, the Adivasis decided to “self-consciously perform stereotyped roles” hoping “to gain their own ends” (“Adivasi Encounters” 5110). Baviskar suggests that this is a matter of positioning that is somewhat calculated to engage with the struggle against dispossession. This need not be a ploy. I think that the picturebook is also strategic, and by deciphering clues left by the artists, one may discern this strategy in moments of artistic self-awareness.

However, self-awareness should not be used as a stick to beat the artist with. If the artist compromises, it is a mark of academic privilege to expect the artist to always assert themselves in recognizable ways. Neither should the artist be berated for knowingly ceding, nor should we expect them to not compromise. For the artist, the goal is to bargain with and maintain equilibrium. Cultural theorist Nandini Chandra spends some time on the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) series proving that artists that belong to marginalized communities may choose not to use the medium for radical revolutionary purposes. The ACK, translated as “Timeless Picture Tales” (translation mine), is iconic for establishing its place in the Indian publishing world in a troubled context. Chandra argues that the editor and creator of ACK intended to “consciously...create a body of reading material for the

new citizens of India”, as he published the first “indigenously¹⁵ produced comic book” (Chandra 15). In an analysis that embraces cultural studies and visual art studies, Chandra discusses how ACK performs work “to make the transition from Hindu to national seem so natural” (2). What about the illustrators? Writing of Dilip Kadam, the lower caste artist who was also ACK’s most prolific illustrator then, Chandra explains that readers must exercise caution in reading protest and identity.

To identify Kadam as the only Dalit artist in the ACK enterprise would be unfair since he himself treats his dalit identity as incidental... (This scenario) assumes the most commodified form for the Dalit (which is not to say that it is not commodified for others) as Kadam espouses the utilitarian bhakti ethic of regarding his work as worship and is willing to put work and professionalism above all else. (*The Classic* 139-140)

In this scenario, Kadam’s professional choice to not view his work for the comics series—analyzed by Chandra as leaning toward an essentialized Hinduism—as related to his caste identity, is a tactic to ensure survival and work¹⁶. Dilip Kadam’s professional distance is a move to ensure that his professional obligations remain rewarding.

Further, employing an identity-based reading, solely premised on the Adivasi group that the artist belongs to, as in Pardhan Gond, can also be damaging to the notion of agency

¹⁵ Chandra means that the whole effort was managed and performed by Indians in India, not that Indigenous Adivasis were requested to contribute this venture.

¹⁶ My intention is not to conflate the caste oppressed with the Adivasi. Baviskar in fact makes this point elegantly. She is careful to clarify that while subordination and marginalization links the Dalits and Adivasis, “...there is one crucial difference between adivasis and dalits: most adivasis continue to have some access to land, whereas dalits, as former service castes engaged in “polluting” tasks like sweeping, scavenging, leather-work, cremation, and prostitution, do not. The link to land, especially to forested lands, gives the adivasis a certain cultural cachet that dalits cannot claim” (“Adivasi Encounters” 5109). This is not to suggest a hierarchy of dispossession, but to put dispossession into perspective. It would be facile and unhelpful to simply imply that “Hindu supremacists” (5109) oppress both Dalits and adivasis, who are eternally oppressed.

I am describing. Agency is prudence devised multiply, but it should be situated between individual genius and community creation. It is tempting to think an Adivasi artist represents all aspects of the community they are from, or that they are eternally engaged in battle to recuperate historical stigma. This is partly true for Bhajju Shyam and Durgabai Vyam; and I read their self-reflexivity as evidence of their own sense of reclamation of power. However, it is not always accurate to “read” the tribal community in the individual. For instance, many contemporary male Pardhan Gond artists exhort the feminine patriarchal labor that provided a stencil for this artform in murals and digna, but it is unfortunate that most Pardhan artists today are men. These male artists do not represent the female artists and continue to nominally credit female labor while individually asserting themselves. In contrast, the female artists innovate upon received tradition despite the pressure to conform to gendered roles.

Moreover, for the world of art and publishing, Adivasi art has been understood as an effect of an undifferentiated group that denies individuality. Jyotindra Jain argues that the Adivasi artist willy-nilly *becomes* a representative of an “amorphous passive collectivity” (*Other Masters* 9). Indeed, Jain establishes an important link in the history of art and craft in South Asia, arguing that a binary between art and craft is false. The Great Exhibition of 1851, held in London’s Hyde Park, which meant to showcase a successful permutation of art and industry, marked a moment in time when the academy trained artist was now assumed to be “modern”, and the rural craftsman was assumed to be a flagbearer of tradition. This is intimately related to another construct in Art History: the assumption that “anonymity”—expressed as a lack of artistic “signature”—meant an eschewal of individuality. Apparently, South Asian artists only existed as an “amorphous

collective” before the British arrived to differentiate them. Of course, this process was neither easy nor one-sided. In fact, art historian Saloni Mathur proves that the “cult of the craftsman” became concrete over time as it went through contestation (*India By Design*). Mathur writes about a farmer from Punjab, Tulsi Ram, was asked to pretend that he is a craftsman as part of a living exhibition in London. Mathur’s adumbration Ram’s costume as a craftsman throws the constructed binary of art versus craft in relief. As if to say craft was not eternally a matter of authenticity- it was about the pretense of authenticity.

Another aspect of Adivasi art being misunderstood as a stellar example of community craft is the misconception that tribal art is a collection of sameness. Art historian Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty¹⁷, in his foreword to the Lalit Kala Akademi booklet on Gond Painting, warns that the next generation of “Pardhan Gond” artists must “move beyond the Jangarh Patangarh Kalam” to avoid a “repetitive rut” (“Foreword” n. p.). Curators have told me that Pardhan Gond art is indeed showing signs of “samaanta” or sameness. This is a concern felt in more than one scholar’s work on Adivasi and folk art. As more Pardhan artists from the family join the list of legitimate creators, there is a real danger of them being subsumed into an “amorphous passive collectivity”. Indeed, this is reminiscent of the easy reproduction and imitation of Pardhan Gond art that aids commodification and non-Pardhan profit. However, while the danger is real, artists continue to agentially direct shifts and moves in their repertoire- this not only encourages newness in their visual vocabulary but organically devolves individuality upon them. I read

¹⁷ Chakravarty has been an administrator at Lalit Kala Akademi, National Museum, as well as the IGNCA. Moreover, he has edited at least six books on Indian Indigenous art and languages with G N Devy.

the individual in the innovations that Bhajju Shyam and Durgabai Vyam practice. Durgabai Vyam's experiment with the pigment and hue black, Bhajju Shyam's work with linework and visualization of Adivasi deities, as well as with the form of the art itself- are all instances of individual artists making it new. Roma Chatterji too anticipates the "repetitive rut" and claims that folk and Adivasi art now is indelibly open to creative re-invention. Chatterji argues that "artisanal forms of learning through repetition enable creative novelty to emerge not in the mode of purposeful self-expression but by cultivating habits in the form of embodied practices that are responsive to continual variation in the environment" (*South Asian Ways of Seeing* 52).

Nevertheless, it is understandable that scholars have insisted upon the "individual" Adivasi artist. Writing of the Bharat Bhawan scouting experience, Swaminathan reminds readers that art is individual in creation, "Among the various Adivasi communities with whom we established contact, we found that certain individuals in the community were generally recognized as gifted in this direction, and indeed our assessment invariably coincided with the judgement of the people concerned" (36). This means it would be harmful to only think of a tribe as a craft community. It certainly is a community of artists, some of whom are more gifted than others. This would explain why there are individual differences within the same communal art practice. Jyotindra Jain also agrees that any desire to deny individual motivation to folk or Adivasi artists is to cement the whole community to merely creators of "craft", denying them the value that "art" brings. This reifies the material difference between art and craft.

What analytical lens can work here? While we must uphold community and craft as the source of the artform, we must also insist on the value that individuality placed on

the art. This justifies the attention paid to Jangarh Singh Shyam's work, for instance. Scholars have also discussed the contours of the absolute individual novelty seen in Jangarh Singh Shyam's work, and how that novelty is being expanded in his successors' work. Artist Gulammohammed Sheikh emphasizes the now canonical difference between "art" and "craft" but discerns something new in Jangarh's work. Reading his paintings as a "charge" that "emits", Sheikh implies that the changing pattern on figures turns them fluid and capable of mobility and change in volume (*Other Masters* 25). Sheikh's overall argument is that Jangarh's mastery consists of absorbing and being absorbed by convention and newness.

However, while it is clear that individuality must be stressed to prevent the Adivasi artist from being seen as *only* part of an undifferentiated artistic community, Singh Shyam's individual case and dramatic life takes attention away from other artists from the community who are both individuals and community-oriented in their own right. Thus, an approach is needed that is neither fully individual, nor completely identifying the artist with their community. Criticism should be located somewhere in an ambiguous middle. This is why I insist that seeking agency opens a route for creative ability within a context of embodied repetitive labor that craft usually denotes. Analysis, therefore, needs to be based on a spectrum between creative individuality and recurring ritualistic community tradition. Indubitably, the history of disenfranchisement imposed upon Adivasi bodies helps us understand the rationale for the right to self-represent. And individual creative intervention gestures to a "visual sovereignty" (Raheja "Visual" 29). I think it is possible to *read* Pardhan Gond art in the picturebook using both tendencies. Indeed, John H Bowles' explanation of Pardhan Gond painting as a "hybrid" form—a form that always already

absorbed and expanded in osmosis with other styles is a similar idea. For Bowles', contemporary Pardhan Gond art is hybrid in the moment of its conception¹⁸. Between and betwixt the floor/mural/earthen colors and the acrylic/silkscreen/oil in the big city, it absorbed from both. Calling it hybrid acknowledges both the source of the art and the route that Jangarh Singh Shyam chose for it. Reading agency in the Adivasi picturebook must acknowledge both the artist individual and the Adivasi community.

Methodology

Gerald Vizenor, one of the most prominent voices in Indigenous Studies in the USA, discusses a methodological imperative in "Tricker Discourse". According to Vizenor, "trickster discourse" is both comic and communal, but imperative as "tribal narratives have been underread in criticism and overread in social science" (283). True to the spirit of regeneration that comic and community imply, Vizenor imagines trickster discourse as polymorphous- neither hopeful nor tragic, as aggressive as the reader, bearing no malice (285). My proposition that self-representation be an astute event about the Adivasi storyteller might be seen as "trickster discourse" too. As the trickster aids the reading of narrative, the Adivasi artist aids the meaning making of art in the picturebook. I bring Vizenor's idea here, at the close of this essay, because historically speaking, the disciplines of Adivasi studies and postcolonial studies, and Indigenous studies have been at odds with each other. Indigenous studies scholar Jodi Byrd, for instance, describes how

¹⁸ Bowles book *Painted Songs and Stories* came about as a culmination of the first Pardhan Gond painting exhibition in the USA. Also called "Painted Songs and Stories: Contemporary Pardhan Gond Art from India", it was organized by Wellesley College's South Asia Studies Program. It was stated to be "shown at the Davis Museum and Cultural Centre (April 7- June 6, 2010) with a satellite display at the Brookline Arts Centre (April 11- May 7, 2010), before traveling to other venues" (4).

even though Indigenous studies and postcolonial studies developed at the same time in North American academia, postcolonialism did not have time for the Indigenous. In the context of South Asia, Byrd unflinchingly discusses Mahashweta Devi and Spivak's efforts at recovering an Indian Indigenous voice as demonstrating a "colonialist trace that continues to prevent indigenous peoples from having agency to transform the assumptions within postcolonial and poststructuralist conversations" (xxxiii).

Indeed, the distance is felt on this side of the world as well. As I have pointed out at the beginning, a prominent Adivasi studies scholar like Virginius Xaxa distances himself from Indigenous studies in the West by asking questions of how far back in time go to understand Indian indigeneity. This is a consensus in Adivasi studies now- South Asian indigeneity cannot be compared to global indigeneity because the region did not witness "settler colonialism", and migrations have been so numerous that any definition is limited. The stakes are so high that when the first discussions in the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations took place in 1980s, the first report categorically denied indigeneity to Indian Adivasis. The current document now chooses not to define "indigeneity" in any way, partly to "prevent nation states from policing the category as sites of exception" (Byrd xxix) but partly because a definition that elucidates the colonial temporal juncture as the demarcation of indigeneity, say Columbus' conquest, would leave Indian Adivasis in the lurch- because then would not all of colonized India be Adivasi?

But, as I have discussed in the gruesome confusion between "Adivasi" and "vanvasi" in 21st century India, definitional confusion cannot be used as a stick to beat the vulnerable with. Global indigeneity and "Adivasiness" (Sen *Indigeneity* 208) need to be discussed together because identity-based dispossession has not been eliminated globally.

Xaxa resolves his rhetorical question exactly at the question of empowerment and rights. This is why G N Devy has now adopted the term “Indigenous” when writing about Adivasis in India- in order to join the worldwide movement for rights to self-determination. I echo this sentiment. This is why I have chosen to use the tools provided by all three fields- postcolonialism, Indigenous studies, and Adivasi studies. Indeed, it would be naïve to claim that because the Subaltern Studies Collective’s attention to Adivasis can be patronizing, I should not borrow from them. My own work would not be possible without the insights of Ranajit Guha, David Hardiman, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. In fact, the Adivasi picturebook can arguably be a visual extension of Guha’s “prose of counter-insurgency”. While I do not directly work with archives for the dissertation, I have discussed the colonial census and administrative reports and ethnographic archive that Hivale and Guha work with. For Guha, the colonial archive of tribal resistance needs to be oppositionally *read* to reveal a counter-insurgency, an agential countering of the misconception of tribal insurgency. This can be easily applied to the current civil war in Chhatisgarh against the protesting tribals- they are not terrorists. The Pardhan Gond artists have simply taken this forward; while they re-invent the artform, I am also *reading* their work in opposition to the understanding that their work is merely a sylvan utopia.

When I first touched and viewed the Adivasi picturebooks published by Tara, I thought they were beautiful, and that this aesthetic deserved a thoughtful critique. Now I wonder what their aesthetic appeal tells me about the “work” they are enabling. The Adivasi picturebook exists and is being published. This existence despite a studied conspiracy to render the Adivasi absent yet present is an assertion. As noted, I argue for an astute agential intervention in the deployment of the picturebook by the Adivasi artist. I

see the project making an argument in Adivasi Studies and Visual studies. But I have borrowed from Indigenous studies, Art History, Picturebook Studies, Speculative Fiction Studies, and Postcolonialism. I am also borrowing from colonial and post-1947 ethnographies. This is because the picturebook is an object that demands a multi-disciplinary approach. However, I am neither an art historian nor an anthropologist; I borrow from these disciplines when necessary. I have been trained as a literary and visual scholar. The method I follow in my analysis is a combination of literary and visual analysis and ethnographic interviews with artists, gallerists, curators, publishers, and museum administrators. The core question I ask across my chapters is what can the Adivasi artist *do*? This question has dictated my method in the dissertation- I have used analysis and interviews to put together a range of responses about the picturebook that I read as visible in the artistic choices I observe. Since I argue that a strategic self-reflexive self-representation is the crux of Adivasi artistic labor in the picturebook and I ask what the art worker can do, it is imperative that I look to the artists for their voice and direction. What they have told me about the process and meaning of collaboration for them has been the bedrock of my analysis. More than the scholarly borrowings, it is Bhajju Shyam and Durgabai Vyam's sense of their work that lends any validity to this study. In this study, I aim to fulfil gaps in current Pardhan Gond scholarship by inviting: a fuller discussion of commodification of the artform and consequent collaboration between a privileged publisher and Adivasi artist, a discussion of the infantilization consequent upon a children's publisher "using" Pardhan Gond art, and as importantly, a comprehensive discussion of female artistic labor in the matrix of Pardhan Gond art today. My proposal—that agency is strategic and helps us understand sovereign self-representation—allows responses to be

heard to these questions. The study would be meaningless and inadequate without centering the voices of the artists.

While my question led to the method of ethnographic interviews, I am aware that the assumptions of the method saw a significant upheaval by the close of the 20th century. My intention is not to reproduce the power dynamics that the interviewer (me) activates when they are faced with the interviewee (Adivasi artist). Historian and anthropologist James Clifford clearly declared this dynamic to be enmeshed in inequality when he said ethnography “enacts power relations” (Clifford and Marcus 9). Clifford has in mind a reconfiguration of the method; where ethnographers understand that the method can only arrive at a selection, an edited “partial truth” allying it uncomfortably to “fiction” (7). Uncomfortable because ideally the method should be as authentic and truthful as possible, as it purports to “securely represent others” (22). But it is in the consequent inscription, or the writing of ethnography, that power is reproduced. The event of interaction, the selection of narrative content, the writing of the study, and the academic publication of ethnographic research cements the power dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee. It can justifiably be seen as an appropriation of indigeneity. In the case of this project, it would be an appropriation of Adivasi vulnerability and agency for my own upper caste upper class career in Adivasi studies and Visual studies, as the ethnography adds “authenticity” to my work. Or as anthropologist Kim Fortun notes in the foreword to the 25th anniversary edition of *Writing Culture*, “Self-reference as (Paul) Rainbow notes can be just another device for establishing authority” (xiii). As I use the first-person “I” to invoke my experiences with the discourse of primitivism in India, I am discreetly “enacting power relations”, and in the last instance, authoritatively re-centering primitivism. I can only hope that this project

inverts the ethnographer's self-reference that Fortun and Rainbow mock by centering the self-reference of the artists- to foreground the artist's work. I hope that the argument helps understand an Adivasi strategy to negotiate with power.

However, my own class, caste, educational and professional journey totally imbricates me in the matrix I have described hitherto. I studied at a prominent Bhopal school for three years, decades ago. While a student, I had no idea about Pardhan Gond art. As our 10th grade teachers prepared us for the "board exams"- exams conducted by national educational body across India and education boards for the 10th and 12th grades- our teachers would advise us to simplify our answers in the scripts we wrote. What if our answer scripts went to a "tribal area", they would rhetorically ask us. The implication was that tribal teachers are not qualified enough to read our answers with care or intelligence, so we must dumb our answers down. In retrospect, the school catered mostly to well-off students who happened to be Hindu and upper caste, with some Muslim students, and I am sure some "ST" (Scheduled Tribe) students. The teachers were obviously not sensitive to my tribal peers, despite the moral lessons about secularism and equality they insisted on teaching us. I would wonder what a "tribal area" looked like and promptly return to dumbing my answers down. I was implicated in the primitivism I am writing about. I remain implicated. I do not belong the Pardhan Gond community. Born to middle class Hindu parents, and having grown up in Ahmedabad, Bhopal, and New Delhi, I have accumulated both caste and class privilege as an upper caste North Indian academic. I have had the money to apply for and receive a PhD admission to an "international" Californian department of English literary study. My access to these picturebooks is mediated by the salaries paid to me as Assistant Professor at the University of Delhi and a Teaching

Assistant at the University of California. I first came across these books at some of New Delhi's most exclusive bookstores. I was stunned at the sheer weighted beauty of these picturebooks. I wondered why no one was writing about them at the time. I thought I would write about them in some distant future. I have bought "tribal" art objects at Tribes India. I regularly use Tara Books publications to gift my friends, colleagues, and relatives in India and the USA. I sip my coffee and type my dissertation at Blue Tokai and Third Wave Coffee. I first met Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam when a colleague invited them to deliver a talk at the college I taught. This colleague has been instrumental in facilitating my interviews with the artists. The fact that I am pursuing a PhD in the USA also impresses all my interviewees. Curators and publishers assume some familiarity with me and my institutional history- and our conversations are easy. One curator told me, "Sir, this artform will die out in ten years. You complete your work, write your book, and move on to something else". Academics ask me pointed questions about my American academic experience. Some artists have requested that I try and arrange an exhibition of their work in the USA. I cannot. I am implicated and I find that my own intervention is limited.

At the same time, my own experiences around the research sharply clarify the stakes for the project. It is an unbearably divided social reality that creates the conditions for such a skewed political economy to emerge. In a way, my project describes the creative artistic response to these conditions of production. I have divided my study in four chapters, not including this essay and the conclusion. The contemporary Anglophone Adivasi picturebook should be seen as a response to the prerogative of non-Adivasis to relegate Adivasis to "primitivism". The first two chapters thematically address the picturebook as speaking back to words and images that have been composed about the Adivasi, but not *by*

the Adivasi. Chapter one, “Creating Art, Crafting the Artist: Bhajju Shyam’s Autoethnographic Picturebooks” locates Bhajju Shyam’s 2014 *Creation*, as a site of an autoethnographic self-representation in response to anthropological and visual appropriation of the tribal body. At the same time, as the picturebook becomes a commodity, the artist must creatively haggle with a globalizing will to submit to capital, tactically managing the collaborations that globalization gives rise to. Chapter two, “What do Picturebooks Want: The Case of Bhajju Shyam’s *The London Jungle Book*” examines the 2004 *The London Jungle Book* as a reversal of the colonial-ethnographic gaze, that culminates in an all-consuming Adivasi “visuality”. As the Tara picturebook unintentionally infantilizes Adivasi art, despite the best intentions of the publisher, it is the burden of the artist to innovate and gently or stridently arrange a visual control over the image. Chapter three, “The Indian Anglophone Picturebook as Speculative Fiction: Bhajju Shyam’s 2005 *The Flight of the Mermaid*” focusses on speculative aesthetics in Bhajju Shyam’s 2009 *Flight of the Mermaid* to ask how the Adivasi artist may build an effective world in the picturebook. This enables an understanding based on “futurism” in contrast to “primitivism”. This chapter takes forward the question of infantilization in children’s publishing to ask how an Indigenous futurism can help us understand the picturebook as sophisticated and a platform for innovation, and for Adivasi deities to formally and visually emerge. I have pointed out women’s labor is understood to be the “alphabet of Gond art” but its full recognition is missing in the list of Pardhan Gond practitioners today. The fourth chapter, “The Gendered Picturebook: Durgabai Vyam’s Art for Tara Books” discusses Durgabai Vyam’s 2010 *The Churki Burki Book of Rhymes*, 2015 *Between Memory and Museum*, and *The Nightlife of Trees* via narratives of pigment, hue, and form to argue for

an Adivasi feminism in her tactical choices. The aim is to focus our understanding on the neglected voice of the female Gond artist. I then conclude my thoughts in a short conclusion called “Ambivalent Adivasi Storytelling in the Prudent Picturebook”.

Chapter 1 Creating Art, Crafting the Artist: Bhajju Shyam's Autoethnographic Picturebooks

Bhajju Shyam (1971-) is a Pardhan Gond artist from the village of Patangarh in Madhya Pradesh, central India. He rose to international recognition with his *The London Jungle Book*, published by Tara Books in 2004. Bhajju Shyam's endeavor has been to use available media to self-consciously narrate his community's plight and at the same time push mediated representation. *Creation*, published in 2014 by Tara Books, is a picturebook illustrated by Bhajju Shyam and published by Tara Books is an example of a self-representation that pushes back against earlier notions of Adivasi depiction. It is an amalgamation of some origin stories found in the lore sung by Pardhan Gonds. Each doublespread provides text and image to one myth of creation. The chapters titles that constitute *Creation* are- The Unborn Fish, Air, The Potter of the Underworld i.e. the earthworm, Seven Types of Earth, Time, Seasons, The Sacred Seed, The Egg of Origins, The Birth of Art, Death and Rebirth. The blurb at the back of *Creation* proclaims that Bhajju Shyam "gathers together these tales for the first time" and that "by linking the cosmic with the everyday, he expresses the essence of each myth in ten sequential images" (n. p.). Each of these doublespreads brings to thick hand-crafted paper one myth of origin that the Gonds hold dear.

An articulate voice, in the form of images and text, can be heard in an anglophone picturebook like *Creation*. The 21st century anglophone picturebook, illustrated by Adivasi artists, and published by an alternative house like Tara Books is an example of art production that challenges representational infantilization. In exercising a method of artistic self-representation, Pardhan Gond Adivasi artists use the picturebook to narrate their vision of the world on their own terms. This is what I call an "Adivasi picturebook".

It is illustrated by Adivasi artists like Bhajju Shyam and displays their practice. It often privileges myths and stories that have been sung by Pardhan Gond bards. It comes to fruition through a dialogic collaboration between artist and publisher. For instance, sometimes the artist is invited to stay at the Tara Chennai office to immerse themselves in the ideation and creation of the picturebook. Artists report that their impressions and ideas are encouraged by the publishers at Tara. The Adivasi picturebook is deployed by the creator to narrate a Pardhan Gond worldview- thus fashioning an autoethnography. I follow cultural theorist Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* here, “If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations” (7). This is especially crucial as ethnography has historically been the process of narrating an atavistic other. I understand the picturebook as autoethnographic to narrate a reclamation of the Adivasis’ right to represent themselves. However, precisely because the picturebook is autoethnographic, it privileges some narratives over others; and sometimes, as in case of a “silence” around the historical stigma of Pardhan criminality, offers an articulate allegorical gap in place of a direct explicit illustration. I read this indeterminate gap as part of the strategic autoethnography that the Adivasi artist enables. Indeed, the art can also reveal surprising meanings as the allegory becomes clear. Sometimes, the artist maintains a judicious silence around the question of collaboration with billionaire capitalists in a neo-liberalizing India. Pardhan autoethnography is a tactful articulation that can be read as strategically resisting a neo-liberal compliance.

Reclamation is necessary as the Gond tribes have been represented in limiting ways hitherto, whether in ethnography or literature. A belittling characterization exists in disciplines that delineate and describe the Adivasi from an outsider's perspective. But an articulate voice *by* the Adivasi is missing. Gond tribal bodies have been portrayed as a vestigial element that enhances the romantic mystique of the Indian jungle. Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books*, published in 1894 and 1896, portray the Gonds of the Seoni Hills in this way. His work is an expression and a justification of 19th century racism and Indigenous infantilization. Not just literature, but anthropology too treats Gond and Pardhan tribals as essentialized subjects. The oeuvre of Verrier Elwin, Gandhian, anthropologist, and the architect of independent India's tribal policy, and Shamrao Hivale's *The Pardhans of the Upper Narbada Valley* subject Gonds and Pardhan Gonds to derisive affection. This is not a coincidence- 19th century British colonial attempts to manage and regulate Adivasi populations have been discussed at length, including scholars from the Subaltern Studies collective (Guha "The Prose"; Hardiman; Baviskar "Adivasi Encounters"; Rycroft *Representing*; Dasgupta *Reordering*). The British state, for instance, in more than one census report, clearly described the Pardhans as a criminal tribe interested in fraud, thievery, cattle stealing. Furthermore, the Adivasi subject has generally also been etched in art inadequately. The Santhals from Eastern India have been drawn by 19th century British administrators as primitive muscular bodies overpowered by British mettle. Using strategic postures, costumes, and landscapes, these sketches and line drawings concretized romantic primitivism. The early 20th century Bengal School painters like Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij worked with this primitivism as well- but for "swadeshi" nationalist ends. The Santhal tribals they painted or sketched remained

primitive on canvas and were somehow redeemed as exemplars of healthy pastoral nationalism. What emerges is an impoverished attempt by visual art, and literary and anthropological writing to speak for the Adivasi. It seems that essentialism, infantilization, and as I discuss later, criminalization, based on primitivism have dictated representation of the Gonds and the Pardhan Gonds across disciplines.

In this context, the Adivasi autoethnographic picturebook offers a self-aware self-representation that counters essentialism in its very existence. But can this mean that the subaltern speaks loudly and affirmatively, to invoke Gayatri C Spivak's 1988 question, "Can the subaltern speak? What must the elite do watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern?" ("Can the Subaltern Speak" 90). Perhaps the context of contemporary India, an environment of that I have described in the introduction of this study as "postcolonial primitivism"- a concerted attempt in 21st century to revive a primitivist Adivasi- makes it almost impossible for Adivasi speech to attain a pitch necessary for it to be heard? Reading Spivak's essay is an exercise in the awareness of incessant essentialism that the powerful perpetually practice, including intellectuals like me. Postcolonial theorist David Lloyd writes there is an inevitable "sense of dismayed paralysis" (96) that contemplating Spivak's essay entails. If indeed the academic elite reaffirm their own position as they meditate upon the subaltern, then what is the point of said meditation except autoeroticism? The point of Spivak's essay is not that the subaltern cannot speak, but that the academic elite defer subaltern speech in favor of their own utterances about the subaltern. I think the Adivasi picturebook has the potential to dispel this inevitable dismay via an Adivasi autoethnography versus academic autoeroticism audible in the picturebook. Spivak uses the word "elite" to refer to a whole discourse of power in the contemporary

world. Academics are readily culpable. But I wish to extend the term “elite” to include collaborators of Adivasi art as well. Indeed, historically speaking in India, collaborators of Adivasi art have been the powerful elites. The list includes administrators like Pupul Jayakar, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, W G Archer, or an artist curator like J Swaminathan in the 20th century, and publisher Gita Wolf, curator Anubhav Nath, and billionaire industrialist Gautam Adani in the 21st century. To answer Spivak’s second question about the responsibility of the elite- I propose that the Adivasi picturebook be understood as collaboration between an elite managerial body like Tara Books and a non-elite Adivasi artist.

However, collaboration is a difficult process. Not all collaborations are successful. Bhajju Shyam collaborated with a cultural organization that promotes urban graffiti “St+rt” to create a mural called “Delhiwallas” at the Lodhi Arts District in New Delhi. This collaboration has led to self-portraiture in his subsequent work. However, even as 2022 ended, Hanif Kureshi, the owner and founder of St+rt has been accused of abuse by his Indigenous colleague, Aqwi Thami¹⁹. Thami is a multimedia artist, described as a “janjati/indigenous artist from the Himalyas” (“Thami aqwi”). Thus, not all collaborations are successful or lead to long lasting relationships. On the other hand, the Tara collaboration is successful because of the nature of Tara’s “small independent” process, as I will discuss later in the essay. For a text like Bhajju Shyam’s *Creation*, Spivak’s question about the deferral of subaltern speech and elite responsibility need to be discussed in the publication and circulation of the Adivasi picturebook. For instance, the

¹⁹ Thami works in Mumbai and is one of the co-founders of “Bombay Underground”, an initiative that attempts to instill reading in Dharavi Slum in Mumbai by running a library and publishing zines.

authorial acknowledgment in *Creation* on the cover reads, “Bhajju Shyam *with* Gita Wolf” (n. p. Italics mine). Both illustrator and editor are acknowledged. The doublespreads in *Creation* feature a rhythmic pattern- the left page contains text that annotates the image on the right. Bhajju Shyam’s familiarity with the English language is limited, so the text has been translated by Gita Wolf, the founding editor of Tara Books. Wolf’s concluding commentary narrates the process of creation of *Creation*- Wolf says she translates Shyam’s “terse wisdom” from Hindi to English. This leads to a juxtaposition in the design of *Creation*- Wolf’s translation on the left faces Bhajju Shyam’s illustration on the right. Such a juxtaposition is not necessarily a battle for credit as the copyright page credits both Shyam and Gita Wolf- “For the text: Gita Wolf based on the oral narrative of Bhajju Shyam”. The composition of the picturebook brings to fore Bhajju Shyam’s contribution to the work of the book. However, Gita Wolf’s position in the editorial complex is also eternally present. It is present not just in *Creation*, but also most other Tara Books. Gita Wolf has provided the words and the platform for Pardhan Gond artists. The alliance between Tara Books and Adivasi artists to create the Adivasi picturebook is an example of cooperative labor. The editor-artist alliance here intends to subvert the idea of an omnipotent editor-publisher who unilaterally controls all aspects of production, using the artist as one among many tools. An absence of an omniscient collaborator organically devolves more power to the artist leading to an equilibrium of sorts.

The Adivasi picturebook responds to a lack in representation via a self-aware collaborative autoethnography. Yet, in its work with an alternative publishing house like Tara Books, the Adivasi picturebook is also a boutique commodity in a neo-liberalizing India. This leads to a commodification that threatens to jeopardize Adivasi artistic agency.

For example, *Creation* is a slim picturebook but hardbound and solid to touch. As it is hardbound, the price of the picturebook is commensurate with the labor and quality of materials that are used for printing. The price mentioned is “USD 49.95/INR 1500”. Both these numbers are forbidding- a book that costs 50 US Dollars (USD) is expensive in the United States, while 1500 Indian Rupees (INR) is an astronomical sum to pay for a “picturebook”. Picturebooks and illustrated books for children are sold at thousands of railway book stalls and small stationery shops in Indian by-lanes for much cheaper, perhaps for 30-100 INR. Indeed, other alternative publishing houses like Katha²⁰ Books and Pratham²¹ Books price their illustrated children’s publications in the 30-100 INR price range. Tara Books regularly prints “numbered editions” and let their customers know what number they have bought. My copy is number 2984 of 3000. Tara Books’ talented team of artisans, headed by the veteran printer C Arumugam, pulls off a numbered print run with every publication. Some picturebooks, like Bhajju Shyam’s 2009 *The Flight of the Mermaid*, do not get pulled for a second run. My copy of *The Flight of the Mermaid* is a battered second-hand book that I floundered for on Amazon. When I requested a copy at the Tara office, I was told no more copies exist because it is out of print. A Tara publication may only reach limited numbers owing to pricing and quality. It is a matter of luxury. How then, can the subaltern speak in sovereignty, if the Adivasi picturebook is a matter of luxury?

²⁰ Founded in 1988, Katha has published for children and adults, promoting literacy and cultural diversity. Their Head Office is in New Delhi.

²¹ Pratham Books, founded in 2004, describes themselves as “a nonprofit publisher introducing children to the joy of reading” (“Who We Are”).

As Tara Books create boutique products with finite access, it is indeed difficult to claim wide ranging social impact. A luxurious product, by definition, has limited access and cannot be assumed to affect large numbers of people. If yes, how may one discuss subversive transformative potential in a commodity that is accessible to a wealthy few? If only the wealthiest and the most literate families—located in India or abroad—buy these products, what is Bhajju Shyam challenging! Indeed, this would return us to the “dismay” that David Lloyd observes in the minds of academics as they contemplate Spivak’s question. As in if the picturebook’s challenge to limited representation is limited, then how can the subaltern speak?

The market for boutique books pressures the meaning of the artwork. This is not the only pressure exerted on the art and the artist. Another pressure, exerted by the market, is the now stereotyping of “Gond” art- featuring “trees, plants, birds”- that buyers have demanded of Pardhan Gond artists. Bhajju Shyam confirmed that people insist on “ped, paudhe, pakshi” or “trees, plants, birds” (B. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). On the one hand is the pressure of inadequate reach and limited meaning, and on the other is the pressure of “recognizable” tribal content and limited meaning. Both are demands imposed by numbers. Market pressures, as Jangarh Singh Shyam’s story of suicide in Japan shows, may culminate in untimely death. But this does not mean the Adivasi artist is ignorant of or unwilling to acknowledge these impediments. My interviews with Bhajju Shyam -and his own commentary in the 2019 *Origins of Art*- highlight his sharp comprehension of the minatory market. Artists, and Adivasi artists especially, have displayed an acute understanding of how their work is received. In fact, the artist collaborates with individuals and institutions, *in* the foreknowledge of the reach of the book. Sometimes this knowledge

celebrates what the market can do. Shyam admitted to me that he now understands how stories may travel to more people via the book and not the song (B. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). Given pressures of market and meaning, we must enquire if agency is undermined in a political economy that coerces a limited understanding of the artwork, either as luxurious or romantic? Despite these limitations, the picturebook *exists* and becomes a platform for a clear and articulate Adivasi voice. To look for self-representation in a text like *Creation* is to foreground the artist's ability to craft and illustrate stories. I take this further to argue that a closer look at the process of production and the social relations established in production extend self-representation. It is in the way that the Adivasi artist and culturally wealthy publisher negotiate their collaboration that an artistic agency is crystallized. A focus on collaboration reinstates the artist's power not only to create but also manage the work of creation. The Adivasi picturebook then enables a unique artistic practice as it exemplifies an ethical collaboration.

But a discussion of collaboration is possible only in conversation with extant creative effort. This is why this chapter juxtaposes a 19th century newspaper illustration, 20th century painting displayed at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi, a 21st century picturebook, and 21st century oils on canvas alongside Shamrao Hivale's 1946 ethnographic study, *The Pardhans of the Upper Narbada Valley*. The link between all these diverse media is the representation of Adivasi individuals. Primitivism, whether racist or nationalist, has plagued Adivasi representation in India. Curator Vikas Harish clarifies the problem of rendering Adivasi bodies as both exotic and erotic (16). Harish argues that tribal are seen as subjects or "created" versus "creators". I read Bhajju Shyam's picturebook as an agential autoethnography tending toward self-portraiture

precisely to fill this gap. The autoethnographic collaborative Adivasi picturebook re-frames established points of view via self-representation.

This paper discusses the Bengal School of Art in Section 1, “From Visual Primitivism to Postcolonial Primitivism: Colonial Illustration, 20th Century Painting, and 21st Century Display” to understand the stakes of self-representation. The Bengal School, as an example of modern Indian painting, is a dynamic set of works that employ Adivasi representation. I relate this inclusion to 21st century display of modern Indian art at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi. The list of artists on display at the NGMA that I engage with is not exhaustive. But it indicates the scope of contemporary national display and the meanings such a display engenders in 2024, two years after India celebrated 75 years of Independence. The picture of display that emerges is both framed and commented on by Bhajju Shyam’s *Creation*. Section 2, “The Autoethnographic Picturebook” discusses *Creation* as a self-reflexive text, referring to the history of the artform as well that of his community’s historical stigma, however allegorically. I connect Bhajju Shyam’s response to art and ethnography by reading anthropological accounts and images by Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hivale to establish a context of ethnographic work that Bhajju Shyam’s art holds accountable. Section 3, “The Collaborative Picturebook” before the conclusion, parses the material and economic complex in Tara’s collaboration with Bhajju Shyam. In other words, this chapter contemplates the complex availability²² of

²² It should also be noted here that “exhibition” is a wide term per se. National exhibition, contemporary exhibition embedded in urban gallery spaces, and contemporary national exhibition in celebration of India’s 75th Independence anniversary in 2022- are all encompassed in the term “exhibition” for this paper. Tapati Guha Thakurta’s argument that the national displays in museums always leave something out, that “earlier residences” are blunted, is of ongoing significance, “And it is the venue—the ceremonial setting of such art museums and exhibitions—that fixes and enhances these identities. Their designation

the Adivasi body for artistic pursuit in the Bengal School of painting, contemporary national display, and its repurposing in the Adivasi illustrated picturebook.

From Visual Primitivism to Postcolonial Primitivism: Colonial Illustration, 20th Century Painting, and 21st Century Display

The Adivasi appear as primitive subjects in 19th century British illustration. Coupled with a strand of rural romanticism that locates the Adivasi in particular locales, their depiction can now be understood as a tactic to render them voiceless. One of the more dramatic visual presentations of the Bengali Santhals, for instance, is the “Attack by 600 Santhals Upon a Party of 50 Sepoys, 40th Regiment Native Infantry”, published in “The Illustrated London News”²³ in 1856. The illustration foregrounds the Santhals in a pithy portrayal that brings together dark skin color, loincloths draped over taut buttocks, outdated bows and arrows, and simple huts, all framed by leafy trees. The Santhals are a different

as “works of art” can only be achieved through a draining of all prior religious meanings and cult values, even as validation in art history involves returning each object to its so-called original past” (*Monuments* 191). The Delhi Contemporary Art Week, on the other hand, is an example of contemporary exhibition making use of gallery spaces across urban India. It took place in the national capital in the summer of 2022 and became a site for Bhajju Shyam to display his work at Ojas Art Gallery in an exhibition titled *Untitled* (Fig. 3). Ojas was the first gallery to give Bhajju Shyam a show of his own, and Anubhav Nath, the gallery director has worked closely with him.

²³ “*The Illustrated London News*, funded by Herbert Ingram, began weekly publication in 1842 as a primarily conservative leaning paper and was the world’s first illustrated newspaper. Its extensive coverage of the royal family’s tours, lives, and deaths earned the paper popularity. Despite its name, *The Illustrated London News* contained an eclectic and rich collection of world news with features on science and discoveries (from natural science to technological advancements), art and culture, political events, and a special focus on the royal family. Alongside almost every article were accompanying illustrations and later, photographs. Contributors included Robert Louis Stevenson with his story 'Uma; or The Beach of Falesá', a story which ran over several weeks through July and August of 1892, and Patrick Moore, who had a regular feature 'The Sky at Night' during the 1970s and 1980s” (“Illustrated London News”).

tribe compared to the Gonds. They are invoked here to determine a visual lineage that continually conceptualizes the Adivasi body as impoverished- literally and metaphorically. The Santhal “hul” or “hool²⁴” was covered for a few issues by the *Illustrated London News*. Drawn and described by Walter Stanhope Sherwill, the person who managed parts of the “insurgency²⁵”, the Santhals are reduced to a theatrical presentation of the overwhelming physical power of the Santhals barely being defeated by the beleaguered British proponents. One notes the overpowering musculature that is forcefully foregrounded in contrast to the fully clothed soldiers who almost fade into the background. The foregrounding contrast lets the viewer intuitively know that the protesting Santhals are at once overwhelming and primitive- thus justifying both the heroism and the violence that the British soldiers display in their subjugation of the tribal resistance.

The Adivasi is then voiceless and subjugated but occupies a narrative position on the stage of colonial administration. The *Illustrated London News* illustration carefully accords dramatic space to the resisting yet subordinated Adivasis. They must be shown to be both threatening but eventually failing, to cement their mistreatment by martial Englishness. Art historian Daniel Rycroft observes a “visual strategy” in the “deliberate

²⁴ Between June 1855 and January 1856, the Santhals in Eastern India (present day West Bengal and Jharkand), led an armed uprising against the oppressive economic policies imposed by the British in tandem with the local landlords i.e. the “zamindar”, trans. land holder.

²⁵ This insurgency, for instance, has also been covered by the *Subaltern Studies* collective. I use the word “insurgency” here, after Ranajit Guha, who discusses state records and memoirs to re-read these archival sources not simply as mere examples of media coverage of rebellions, but as a “prose of counter-insurgency”. “Insurgency” would be an archival word standing in for a colonizing impulse to record, while Guha’s “counter-insurgency” revises the archive to reveal a direct attempt that superficially mixes “metaphor and metonymy” (“The Prose” 57).

staging” of Sido²⁶, a captured leader of the rebellion (“After-images” 369-70). Writing of the role of Walter Stanhope Sherwill, “an officer in the Company’s Bengal army who had been involved in the movement’s suppression” (“After-images” 367), Rycroft comments that Sherwill’s reports published in the *Illustrated London News* “materialize colonial power” (“After-images” 370). As art in the form of newspaper illustration is visualizing and materializing a conquest of land and bodies, it is important to remember that primitivism is the basis for such a visual material illustration.

However, primitivist representation is not limited to 19th century colonial newspaper illustration. The Adivasi is indispensable to the imagined nation in the 20th century or neo-liberal majoritarian nation in the 21st century. The Santhals were key in the work of the early 20th century Bengal school painters as well. The Bengal School enjoys a revered place in the story of modern Indian art. I believe that 20th century Bengal School painting and 21st century display of painting at national venues offer instances of the necessity of Adivasi visual availability. Adivasi availability for visual art and display was crucial to the construction of anti-colonial resistance in the early 20th century. But it remains important in 21st century postcolonial India as religious fundamentalism is on the

²⁶ One of the four leaders of the rebel campaign.

rise. Many Bengal School²⁷ artists painted the Santhals²⁸ around the Shantiniketan area in Bengal. The oeuvre of the Bengal School artists is one of the most prominent compendia of Adivasi visual availability, including the often-displayed paintings by Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) and Ramkinkar Baij (1906-1980). It is their subjects—sometimes the tribal Santhals—their muted colors, and techniques like Haren Das’s woodcuts, that the tribal Adivasi body appears before the gaze. As the Santhal becomes a subject in painting, they are subjected to a rural lassitude that becomes a bulwark against which to imagine the newly emerging nation. They are tied incontrovertibly to the landscape. Partha Mitter in *The Triumph of Modernism* clarifies that the Indian “modernists idolized rural India as the true site of the nation, evolving artistic primitivism as an antithesis to colonial urban values” (*The Triumph* 10). Mitter reads these artists in a two fold manner- as tending toward

²⁷ The Bengal School of Art flourished in and around the region of Bengal in 20th century Eastern India. The region, and its central metropolis Calcutta, attained cosmopolitan significance with the advent of the British. Rabindranath Tagore’s family and their circle, including Abanendranath Tagore (1871-1951), Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938), Sunayani Devi, Nandalal Bose (1882-1966), Mukul Dey (1895-1989), and Haren Das (1921-1993), are now remembered as contributors to this movement. Understood as an opposition to Raja Ravi Verma’s adoption of western perspective and oils on canvas, the Bengal School attempted a difference in subject matter, composition, medium, and color.

²⁸ Cultural studies scholar Rimli Bhattacharya clarifies why the Santhal community was visually intelligible to the artists in Santiniketan, including but not limited to Ramkinkar Baij and his teacher Nandalal Bose, and Mukul Dey. “Santals lived in the region of Santiniketan and were a daily presence as labourers who cleaned homes, tended gardens, worked on building sites in construction on campus, and who were visible and audible as industrial workers on their way to the neighbouring mills” (*The Dancing Poet* 27) Bhattacharya continues, “Their dancing was a much-appreciated feature of the annual *Paush mela*; but an annual fair, after all, comes with a temporary license. It was a world too alienated from mainstream Bengali sensibilities and could not be acknowledged as a lineage. Yet, it was in Santiniketan that artist-sculptor Ramkinkar Baij (1906-80) created his now iconic and weather-ravaged, often deconstructed and re-assembled, in-site sculptures, ranging from *Santhal Family* (1938) to *Mill Call* (1956)” (*The Dancing Poet* 27).

“swadeshi” nationalism with reference to the Swadeshi²⁹ movement and as a movement toward a nuanced primitivism. According to Mitter, this may be a nationalist modernist primitivism that plays with form, medium, composition as it represents the Santhal, but it is also a disruption of colonial culture (*The Triumph* 12). Mitter argues that for painters like Sunayani Devi and Jamini Roy, the folk Kalighat *pat* (scrolls) acted as sources. This does not automatically render their works an insensitive appropriation of folk. But the triumph of a particular Indian modernism lies in the treatment of the folk in the hands of these painters. A discrepancy emerges in Mitter’s perception of “the invention of the Indian peasant”; on the one hand the Adivasi is painted to subvert unidirectional modernist flows, but on the other the Adivasi is “captured” to make way for an elite community to define nation building. As if to cement the notion that nation building is premised on the visually solidified objectification of the Adivasi.

I am not arguing for the denigration of the Bengal School or indeed a fulmination against Mitter- I argue, instead, that understanding modern Indian painting at the turn of the century is impossible without the bespoke figures of the subaltern Indigenous tribal men and women. Their primitivist representation allows the swadeshi painters to imagine an essential Indianness, against the urban colonial trappings of a metropolis like Calcutta at the time. But this means that even though Santhals are being painted/illustrated by Indians like Haren Das and Nandalal Bose and not colonial administrators like Walter

²⁹ *Swadeshi* refers to the self-reliant/self-rule/self-countried and was inspired from the early 20th century demand to boycott foreign produced goods Mitter translates “swadeshi” as indigenoussness in a similar vein as Nandini Chandra calls ACK India’s first indigenous comics series- their use of the term indigenous does not denote 21st century indigeneity (*Art and Nationalism* 235). Mitter writes of “indigenous manufacturers” to mean art and goods created by Indians (*Art and Nationalism* 235).

Stanhope Sherwill, the vantage point remains external- that of a privileged outsider. In other words, the subaltern is utilized by the elite. This creates a romantic distance between the elite artist and their Adivasi subject. But it is important to question a painterly agency desirous of distant swadeshi proximity to the Adivasi. Undoubtedly, a move to primitivism in modern Indian painting is a clear and forceful move away from colonial modernity. Indeed, primitivism enables generative readings of these works of art, but as Mitter himself cedes, these readings take for granted the othered “worth” of the subalterns in the Bengal School oeuvre. Writing of the “contradictions” in “the word primitivism” (*The Triumph* 33), Mitter proposes, “It is these ambiguities that are open to a rich variety of possibilities, offering the colonized certain modes of empowerment” (*The Triumph* 33). As Mitter shows in his analysis of Sunayani Devi and Amrita Sher-gil’s work, this is undoubtedly accurate. However, and Mitter cedes this unambiguously, this revised primitivism is built on the “invented peasant”. He admits- “To be sure, this elite perception of the worth of the subalterns was necessarily from the perspective of otherness, but no less genuine for that” (*The Triumph* 34). Without disregarding the genuine worth of the so called subalterns, it is crucial to point out that despite the valuation of worth, it is a worth calculated by non-Adivasi individuals.

The elite artist naturalizes a primitivist lens to view the Adivasi. For example, Mukul Dey’s 1916 *Santhal Maiden*, two versions of which are displayed at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi- stages a dark female body against an economical background composed of plain terrain peppered by three shrub bushes and one flowering plant (Fig. 1). The body lacks facial features but is costumed in a white bordered garment, complete with “traditional” anklets and wristbands. What leaps to the eye is the

posture given to the body—a pose, perhaps from a tribal dance—as if the body has moved itself willingly to be painted. Note the crooked arm, the hands on the hips, and the feet arrested in a delicate movement; all gesture toward a stylized, perhaps intentional, representation of a tribal Adivasi body somehow captured by the painter. The tribal woman’s partly pirouetting stride resonates with the flower, which undulates in the breeze. Key elements that are repeated in narratives about the Santhal are brought to visual attention in this work. Moreover, by making the connection between human faceless body and plants, shrubs, terrain both obvious and momentary, the artist naturalizes the Santhal as unequivocally part of the landscape.



Fig. 1 *Santhal Maiden*, Mukul Dey, Etching and Aquatint on Paper, National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi. Personal Photograph.



Fig. 2 Bhajju Shyam's Mural at The Lodhi Art District, New Delhi. Personal photograph.



Fig. 3 Bhajju Shyam's Self-portrait with *Bana* and animals, *Untitled*, Ojas Art Gallery, 2022. Personal photograph.

However, the naturalization of primitive Adivasi-ness has not ceased in the 21st century. It continues unabated in contemporary displays. The personal photographs from the NGMA that accompany this essay are from the summer of 2022. These artworks continue to be displayed at NGMA as exemplars of nationally recognized modernist virtuosity. If 19th century newspaper illustration and early 20th century painting has crafted the tribal for colonial annexation or lyrical anti-colonial nationalism, what does the continuing display of these artworks tell us? The consequences of NGMA’s history, as outlined by curator Vidya Shivadas, are still materializing power in the continuing memorialization of the tribal as primitive. Nandalal Bose’s 2022 exhibition at NGMA, titled *Hastantaran: In Transmission*, and the exhibition of “modern” masters, titled *Kshetragya: The Illuminated*, that includes Abanendranath Tagore and Amrita Sher-gil - all feature the rural and tribal entanglements that animate their art. In 2022, Nandalal Bose— arguably at the forefront of art historian R Siva Kumar’s “contextual modernism³⁰”—received a whole exhibition of his own, while Amrita Sher-gil and Abanendranath Tagore received only a room or two. Why has Amrita Sher-gil been demoted to a room while Bose given a whole venue? It is surprising. Vidya Shivadas

³⁰ *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism* was an exhibition hosted at NGMA in 1997, to celebrate 50 years of India’s independence. Curated by R Sivakumar, it featured the work of four core Bengal School artists- Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee, and Ramkinkar Baij. This paper pays attention to Nandalal Bose. R Sivakumar clarifies the contours of “contextual modernism” in his catalogue to the exhibition- “We see this meeting of man and nature as equals, this solitary contemplation of infinity in the drawings and paintings of Nandala, in the paintings and mural of Benode Behari and in the water colours of Ramkinkar. The second idea was the need to relate art to life, to the community. Taken together they give a broader environmental dimension to the work of the Santiniketan artists, that brought not only art and society but also society and nature together. The closeness to nature and this stress on life-contact made the common man central to their vision of reality and art”.

reminds readers that the acquisition and display of Amrita Sher-gil's works have been pre-requisite to NGMA- they were the core collection that helped NGMA begin its journey as an institution of display. Sher-gil was notoriously dismissive of the Bengal School. But that is not the case anymore. Nandalal Bose's 2022 ascension at NGMA marks a turning point in the debate between Sher-gil and the Bengal School³¹. The "metropolitan modernism" that Sher-gil represented has been overshadowed by the "nationalist cultural discourse" represented by the Bengal School at NGMA (Shivadas 162).

The timing of the Nandalal Bose takeover at NGMA was impeccable. Indeed, it is the timing that evinces a weaponization. Both the 2022 exhibitions *Hastantaran* and *Kshetragna* have been mounted to mark 75 years of Indian independence from British rule³². A takeover by Nandalal Bose acquires hostile undertones as one considers contemporary neo-liberal rightwing India. Nandalal Bose was famously asked to compose posters for the venue at the 1938 Haripura National Congress at the height of the Indian nationalist movement. In fact, these murals had a special space accorded to them at *Hastantaran*. As there is a resurgence of majoritarian nationalism in India currently, a return to Bose may well be a loaded gesture to a nationalist Haripura National Congress moment in the Indian independence struggle. At the height of the Indian independence

³¹ I include Amrita Sher-gil (1913-1941) here not because she was associated with the movement—in fact, she was vocal about her disdain for The Bengal School—but because Shergill and the Bengal School artists were united in their interest in painting the rural. "Sher-Gil was notoriously outspoken against the work of the Bengal school, which she viewed as "cramping and crippling" of creativity and responsible "for the stagnation that characterizes Indian painting today." (qtd in Mathur "A Retake" 527)

³² It appeared in 2022, when I first visited the Nandalal Bose exhibition, that it was to be permanent. But it was promptly taken down to host other exhibitions for the G20 summit. I was then told the Bose works are now in storage and I saw the exhibition space was locked up. While *Hastantaran* and *Kshetragna* may be under lock and key now, 2022 is still important for having memorialized the art.

struggle in 1938, the Indian National Congress held a session at Haripura in modern day Gujarat. Bose was especially requested by M K Gandhi to create mural art for the venue. The intention was to use swadeshi material to display Indian heritage that was inevitably a rural timelessness. The posters, framed by stylized window called *jharokha*, display avowedly essential elements of true authentic India- the drummer, the wrestler, the dancer, the writer, the blacksmith, the courtesan, the tanner, etc. Nandalal Bose's ascension at NGMA is uneasy precisely because it harks back to a pre-1947 moment to lend credence to a current exclusive national imagination. As the NGMA was and is an instrument, it is vital to ask how it was instrumentalized in 2022, and now in 2024. Vidya Shivadas reads the NGMA as both a site and an instrument- it staged Indian self-representation, but it was also used by a newly independent nation state to postcolonially modernize. At the same time, in the late 20th century, its travelling exhibitions ended up bolstering "the stereotyping of differences between the East and the West". The question that this difficult resolution of the Bengal School and Sher-gil debate poses is precisely this- is the new vision that contemporary India proposes for its Adivasi residents going to be about perpetual romantic confinement, as at the time of the Haripura National Congress? After all, as India completed 75 years of independence in 2022, a new national imaginary displaced the Nehruvian discourse of "unity in diversity". This is a majoritarian notion that enclasps unto itself all "diverse" and divergent points of view; not to integrate diversity keeping individual identities in mind, but as glib assimilation into the nationalist neo-liberal objective.

A massive campaign to manufacture consent has been put into place. National exhibitions, display, and the publication scenario can only resonate with this objective. The

“imagined community” (Anderson) that hails the Adivasi in India is a monolith. In this scenario, the imagined Adivasi community that the new nation wishes to interpellate (Althusser) is an undifferentiated pastoral utopia. The current regime is revitalizing the nationalist anti-colonial motivation described by Partha Mitter, but for crucially different ends. It is composed of “vanvasi” or forest-dwellers, not “Adivasi” or first-dwellers. More than one government policy has been put into place to cement forest dwelling as the only way to define the Adivasi. This demarcates the Adivasi into the forest and potentially denies indigeneity as the Indigenous are now forest-dwellers and not first-dwellers. I call this “postcolonial primitivism”: a concerted effort that strains to push the Adivasi into a pastoral voiceless dystopia.

It is imperative to clarify that this does not diminish the contribution of the Bengal School in either aiding a sense of community built on shared culture, or in formal and ideological innovation in art forms. Neither is the Bengal School a monolith that expressly invited artists only to meditate upon a vulnerable community. In fact, a sensitive portrayal is present in the work of a key Bengal school member, Ramkinkar Baij. Baij is known for his revolutionary sculptures, some of which adorn the most prestigious cultural and financial institutions of India. His notable sculpture *Santhal Family* (1938) is part of Tagore’s Santiniketan compound, and it is his work that flanks the gates of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the foremost financial institution in India. Baij’s deconstruction of contemporary Adivasi depictions complicates the notion that all Bengal School painters romanticized the ostensibly primitive Adivasi because the Adivasi was “available” to Shantiniketan. But such a complication is neutralized by the status of contemporary national exhibition in the country’s capital. So while Baij’s practice may hold a different

meaning, a re-ascension of the romanticized Adivasi body at the NGMA gives pause for thought. Adivasi and farmer's bodies are a significant portion of the output of artists exhibited at the National Gallery of Modern Art. Sher-gil, Das, Bose, etc are well regarded as painters who portrayed an India away from urban trappings, but they cannot preclude a sense of romantic longing. This means that the Adivasi remains subjugated in representation in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. It is in this context of non-Adivasi outsiders representing the Adivasi, that the autoethnographic picturebook directs us to an insider's vision, premised upon a self-reflexive Adivasi autoethnography.

The Autoethnographic Picturebook

The last section discussed how the figure of the Adivasi is indispensable to the construction of colonial, anti-colonial, and postcolonial power in 19th century illustration, 20th century painting, and 21st century national exhibition respectively. Indeed, this representation is highly overdetermined. As I have discussed in the 2022 reconfiguration of the NGMA, Adivasi impoverishment is recognizable. But if the outsider has materialized dominance in representation, it is imperative to ask how the 21st century Adivasi artist views these techniques of representation. It is imperative to shift perspective from Adivasi as created to Adivasi as creator. How does the Adivasi artist *do* art and diverge from primitivism? Further, with the popularization of folk forms like Pat and Mithila, and Adivasi artforms like Gond and Warli, how does the artist respond to the demand to create more essentialized Adivasi art? In other words, what does the artist do with the ready recognition of any work as “tribal”? In this section, I offer a method that juxtaposes individual artistic practice with the artist's sense of Adivasi community. I use this method to read both the shifts in the artform and significant silence around

criminalization and Mahua liquor, crucial chapter in the historical perception of the Pardhans. Methodologically, there are two approaches to understanding how Adivasi artists view their practice. The first approach considers the artists' sense of their own position in the art matrix. The other approach considers the source of Pardhan Gond art, i.e. community and forested landscapes. As discussed in the introduction, there are consequences to using either approach. Reading the art as only a community effort relegates the art to a collective craft at the cost of individual signature and innovation. At the same time, reading Pardhan Gond art as only evidence of unique creativity severs the art from the larger politics of identity-based solidarity. I have suggested that a method that can unite both modes of reading must be used to consider the implications of the art in the picturebook. I will briefly discuss both approaches and attempt to consolidate both to examine how the artist composes the autoethnographic picturebook.

My conversations with contemporary Pardhan Gond artists have convinced me of a highly self-aware individualist artistic strategy that charts art demand and responds to it. Bhajju Shyam, for example, easily notes that many Pardhan Gond artists (including himself) give in to market pressures and end up creating more art that features “ped, paudhe, pakshi” (B Shyam, Personal Interview 2022). “Ped” as in trees, “paudhe” as in plants/shrubs, and “pakshi” as in birds in Hindi. Jangarh Singh Shyam inaugurated this impulse to create trees, plants, and shrubs in the 1980s. A cursory viewing of the oeuvres of Jangarh Singh Shyam and Bhajju Shyam would relegate it to a capitalist compromise with the market. As in because buyers demand trees, plants, birds as neat heralds of tribal art, Jangarh Singh Shyam and Bhajju Shyam bow to demand. They create what is requested of them. Bhajju Shyam said to me “karna padta hai”, translated loosely as “one *must* do it”

(B Shyam, Personal Interview 2022, *Italics mine*), referring how he must illustrate the now canonical elements of Pardhan Gond art. Adivasi art, as well as the Adivasi creator, is bound by market forces to essentialize themselves. Such a self-aware strategy has indeed been evinced in more than one Pardhan gond artist. Curator John Bowles describes Suresh Singh Dhurvey, a senior Pardhan Gond artist, as having developed two visual styles. The first is “tribal”, meant for clients, and the second is “accultured” for “personal satisfaction” (*Painted Songs and Stories* 41). The artist devises the picturebook in the knowledge that s/he must produce a particular version of their art. In other words, the artist discerns what is required and arranges their art “in dialogue with those metropolitan representations” (Pratt 7). This is a nice exemplification of how Mary Louis Pratt defines autoethnography. The auto-ethnographer must urgently be aware of and intervene in extant representation. This desire to respond to extant perceptions is a paramount example of autoethnography.

The second approach, also inspired by the Adivasi community, is based on the Pardhan Gond context. Without diminishing the existential pressure on the art and the artist, a different meaning is found in the process of Bhajju Shyam’s *Creation*. Perhaps the transparency of Pardhan Gond art elements is also a reflection of artist’s relationship to land and community. In other words, Bhajju Shyam creates trees, plants, birds because that is the world he comes from. Indeed, in Gita Wolf’s afterword to *Creation*, there is an acknowledgement of the communal source of Bhajju Shyam’s art, and an emphatic reminder of Bhajju Shyam’s willing collaboration with Gita Wolf’s project. Wolf writes the Gonds thus, “They have kept this heritage alive- at least in the last few decades- primarily through their art. From its humble beginnings as patterns decorating the walls and floors of village homes, Gond art has now evolved into a highly complex aesthetic”

(“How *Creation* Came About”, n.p.). Wolf is careful to invoke the threatened home of the Gonds. The note contextualizes Pardhan Gond by referring to “the large scale destruction of forests” as the “fate of many tribal groups” in India. Indeed, colonial and post-1947 history is testament to the invariable destruction of the Adivasi’s relationship to land. Wolf’s words frame the forest and its accoutrements- trees, plants, birds, or what Shyam calls “ped, paudhe, pakshi”, as indelible to the Gond memory of their existence in the landscape of Central India. Gita Wolf’s afterword connects the art to the historical conditions of forests and related livelihood. Alternatively, Bhajju Shyam’s comment- “karna padta hai”- links it to material conditions of current livelihood. Two approaches—communal source and forests as artistic inspiration and political economic individual artistic choice—are used as explanations for the current state of Pardhan Gond Adivasi art.

The two approaches summarized above are not mutually exclusive: they coalesce in the autoethnographic picturebook. The context Gita Wolf’s afterword refers to explains the persistence of flora and fauna in Pardhan Gond visual art. Bhajju Shyam’s comment provides a market-driven explanation. Gita Wolf, in print, and Bhajju Shyam, in personal interview with me, offer two explanations for the persistence above. However, it is possible to *read* both explanations in particular works by Pardhan Gond artists. This is possible via a search for autoethnography and self-representation. For example, creating a painting or indeed a visual vocabulary premised on lush colors and sylvan vibrancy is a tactic to register an acknowledgement of land loss and forced mobilization from a pastoral utopia to an unforgiving city. In a context of migration of Pardhan Gond artists from rural to urban, the nostalgia visible in the shape and color used in the art is strategic. This must be interpreted as critical self-representation.

Juxtaposing the individual artist and the Adivasi community as we read autoethnography into the picturebook allows agency to the Adivasi artist and enables a relationship to the larger context. Jangarh Singh Shyam, and Bhajju Shyam, are attempting to insert themselves or their community in a representation of their life/lives. This is an example of agency exercised by the individual artist, with a communal historical context in mind. While scholars of Pardhan Gond painting have tended to read the Pardhan Gond Adivasi as a representative of a community of storytelling, some read the individual artist—perhaps in an essay toward self-portraiture—into the art. Historian and curator Jyotindra Jain, for example, offers insightful analyses of Jangarh Singh Shyam’s individual works but particularly relevant is Jain’s aside on Jangarh’s sparse use of self-portraiture. Jain mentions that Jangarh Singh Shyam’s *Young Boy Playing a Flute in the Forest* (*Conjuror’s* 71) might be a depiction of Krishna as cowherd as it might be a self-representation in a pastoral setting³³. As has been discussed, an autoethnography is a conceptual response to the practice of ethnography. Owing to ethnography’s ontological problem- that of a privileged outsider presuming the right and might to write the sociological story of another community- an autoethnography becomes a way for an insider to narrate their story on partly their own terms. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Bhajju Shyam turns Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* on their head in his *The London Jungle Book*. An autoethnography may take a visual or literary turn as it parses the terms

³³ Self-portraiture is scant amongst Pardhan Gond artists generally. They seem to shy away from representing their own selves in visual media. Jangarh Singh Shyam’s successor, Bhajju Shyam practices a measure of self-awareness in *Creation*, but in his recent 2022 exhibition at Ojas Gallery in New Delhi, represents himself, mostly in large canvases, amidst jungle animals, playing the sacred instrument *bana*.

available for representation. Mary Louise Pratt, for instance, clarifies that the auto-ethnographer may accede to some terms of the debate in order to be legible. The picturebook is just such an example of the Adivasi artist displaying self-awareness of the outsider's story of Pardhan Gond art.

Bhajju Shyam's *Creation* forces the viewer to reckon with an autoethnography. As I have discussed, seeking self-representation is a fruitful method to unearth artistic labor that is also political labor in Bhajju Shyam's *Creation*. "The Birth of Art" is a doublespread about the birth of Pardhan Gond art. As I show presently, Shyam abbreviates a composite chronicle of the formal and significant shifts of Pardhan Gond art. Two moments in the tale of Pardhan Gond art leap to the eye; two moments in the story of Pardhan art, one moment leading to the other. Bhajju Shyam imagines the art of the community as held up by a deer. The deer has udders and is flanked by a fawn. It would seem it is a doe. But this doe has horns! How can a doe have horns? In the doe's androgynous horns lie the world of storytelling and art-making that the Pardhan Gonds cherish. Decorated walls, music and song, musical instruments (including the prestigious bana and drums), jewellery, farming, baskets, pots and plants dominate the scenario that the doe re-creates in her mind. The doe is illustrated as bearing in her imagination all art in the community. But why a doe, and not a barasingha as in Jangarh Singh Shyam's *Barasingha*? Gita Wolf's transcription of Bhajju Shyam's words read, "It is the women of our community who created the first art. They cleaned their houses and thresholds, and began decorating the floors and walls with patterns, using the five mud colors. These ritual patterns are called *Digna*, and our art evolved from them. Dignas are the alphabet of Gond art" ("The Birth of Art", n.p.). In Bhajju Shyam's words, the origin of Pardhan Gond art lie in the articulation of material

practiced by Gond and Pardhan women. I will address the gendered origin of the art in another chapter. But this explains the doe in the image. The doe represents the women whose hands have created the basis of Pardhan Gond art: which then inspired Jangarh Singh Shyam.

A total world of creation is illustrated in the space made possible by the doe. Indeed, the title of the picturebook *Creation* resonates powerfully with this chapter. There is a similarity in imagining the creation of life and the creation of artform. But the illustration also engages in a formal nod to the process of shifts in the artform. In “The Birth of Art”, we see lines dominating Bhajju Shyam’s illustration. The doe, the house, the musical percussion instruments, and even the tortoise have been carefully lined. In Pardhan Gond art, lines are a marker of unique individuality. Jangarh Singh Shyam is famously remembered as having instructed his family into crafting their own line patterns to differentiate their work from his. In so far as Bhajju Shyam uses lines to sign his art, he accedes to the canon as initiated and practiced by his uncle Jangarh Singh Shyam. In fact, in my interview with him, Shyam clarified that the lines on the doe are meant to imitate Singh Shyam’s line work (B. Shyam, Personal Interview). This means the doe is lined in Singh Shyam’s distinctive individual pattern by Bhajju Shyam. All current Pardhan Gond artists have distinctive linework practices of their own. The nephew mimics his uncle’s creation. His mimicry is an acknowledgement of the history of the artform; after all, Jangarh Singh Shyam, one must note, initiated the art form in the 1980s. Jangarh Singh Shyam is remembered for visualizing Adivasi gods using distinctive lines. The doe in “The Birth of Art” also contains the entirety of creation in her horns. As the doe is stylized in Singh Shyam’s manner- it is inevitable that the doe is compared to Singh Shyam. The doe

imagines all Pardhan Gond art and Singh Shyam *realized* all contemporary Pardhan Gond art. In other words, the female art of Digna (as the doe) and Singh Shyam are both textually and formally credited in this illustration. This is an acknowledgement of the of the transformations in Pardhan Gond art itself- from women's art to Jangarh Singh Shyam's art.

Bhajju Shyam accomplishes an introspective autoethnography that accedes to identifiable elements of Pardhan Gond art. Trees and plants are visualized to be surface upon which a history is stylized. "The Birth of Art" describes the artform utilizing recognizable tribal tropes of "ped, paudhe, pakshi". Yet, the illustration is both personal and communal.. It submits to a readily recognizable mainstream appearance of Pardhan art but appends material. An autoethnography is an admission of knowledge. It states that the individual is aware of the current state of affairs and provides her/his stance on it. Shyam's self-awareness, however, is important for more than a discerning anticipation of the history of the form and his recognition of what his buyers want. The totality of creation seen in Shyam's autoethnographic "The Birth of Art" has only been possible in Shamrao Hivale's ethnography of the Pardhans. Hivale's text, however romantic, creates a complete sociological picture of the Pardhan bards. Bhajju Shyam's illustration is comparable to Hivale's anthropological commentary. Like Hivale, Shyam pictures Pardhan Gond creation in a single text. In so far as Shyam mimics Hivale in the romantic vision of forest and poetry, Shyam's text accedes to anthropology's terms. This is the accession that Mary Louis Pratt mentions in her discussion of autoethnography. Pratt mentions how the autoethnography must after all be necessarily legible to the dominant way of reading. Nonetheless, it is an incomplete accession. Shyam deftly jumps over Elwin and Hivale.

Creation is intended to be a collection of origin myths of the Gonds and Pardhans. But Bhajju Shyam creates a new origin story. He affixes an origin story of the art itself into his narrative. Further, Pardhan Gond storytelling usually narrates stories of mythical origins or local and religious heroes. But Bhajju Shyam's tale of the birth of art marks a departure from extant practice. This could easily have been titled "The Birth of Pardhan Gond Art".

Bhajju Shyam goes further in his attempt to refashion form by referring to another fount of Pardhan Gond art. His illustration is certainly aware about the genre of what has come to be known as "Gond painting". But it also formalizes another practice, i.e. the musical performances that the Pardhans participated in for their Gond patrons, as part of their mangteri ritual tours. These performances included songs sung and the sacred instrument bana played by the Pardhans invoking the deity Bara Deo for their hosts. The bana he illustrates in "The Birth of Art" pithily symbolizes the mangteri tour. The bana is a sacred instrument, made from the Indian laurel tree, and should only be played by the Pardhan singer-storytellers as they invoke the deity. Indeed, Shamrao Hivale's illustrations gesture to a connection between Pardhan visual art and Pardhan performances. His illustrations in *The Pardhans of the Upper Narbada Valley* are a combination of art and ethnography³⁴. What is most interesting however, is not that these artworks have made it to the book via Hivale's pen, but that many of them fulfill a narrative function- the images in Hivale's text are part of an oral story that is being sung or rehearsed or memorialized by

³⁴ The text is replete with strategic photographs of Pardhans engaged in "typical" Pardhan activities like bana playing, water fetching, marital ritual participation etc. The illustrations are presumably by Hivale and depict more varied material. One can only assume that these illustrations were copied on paper, reproduced, and then printed with the book. The subjects of these illustrations are mostly "wall decorations" that sometimes feature human or humanoid bodies, and presumably photography was not permitted either by the resident of the house or environmental conditions.

the Pardhan. “Pardhan wall-pattern, done in mud, of Bodrahin, a fantastic character in the Gondwani songs” (Hivale 56) for example, illustrates an episode from the song of Bodrahin. Hivale calls the bodrahin³⁵ a “fantastic creature” from “Gondwani songs”. The Bodrahin is both illustrated and sung about in the Pardhan Gond repertoire. Indeed Aurogeeta Das makes the connection between Pardhan wall art and contemporary Pardhan art, and has been able to discern a continuity³⁶ between wall art and song art. “The Birth of Art” presents this picture of Pardhan Gond art origins in its entirety- domestic wall art, oral storytelling and musical instrument- all in one world borne by the doe. His art harks back to the songs, images, and performances that influenced his uncle.

Yet, Bhajju Shyam adds an individual twist to this performance tradition: his own narrative function based on his position as the Pardhan storyteller turned illustrator. His intervention lies in the innovative presentation of the story that accompanies the world-bearing doe; it is *he*, as bearer of tradition, who crafts a narrative song to accompany the image³⁷. Pardhan Gond ritual mangteri performances involved songs and tales, as the bard played the bana. “The Birth of Art” and all other doublespreads in *Creation* involve visual art that has been inspired by a total performance and wall art from the community, accompanied by words or textual commentary. There is a pointed admixture of text and

³⁵ Elwin’s *Folktales of Mahakoshal* describes the Bodrahin as having a “navel-stump twenty-four cubits long with a metal cap at the end. She used to wrap it seven times round her waist and on the tip she would tie a phundra, and decorate it with vermilion” as part of the story “The History of Lohabandha Raja” (pp. 91-92).

³⁶“If one studies traditional *digna* (Gond floor-painting) forms alongside Jangarh’s paintings of Gond deities, the formal parallels cannot be denied. The unusual geometry of the deities’ heads is undoubtedly derived from *Digna* forms” (Das *Enchanted* 72-73).

³⁷ His textual song appears to the viewer, albeit translated by Gita Wolf. I devote Section 3 of this essay to discuss the collaboration between Gita Wolf and Bhajju Shyam.

image, like there was an intentional swaddling of song and wall art in Patangarh's mud houses. Like the wall art was juxtaposed with oral narrative, the illustrations are juxtaposed with oral narrative transmuted to textual narrative. This follows the song-and-image combination that Shamrao Hivale and Aurogeeta Das observe. Bhajju Shyam takes on the role of a Pardhan singer-storyteller-illustrator-narrator who performs for audience-viewer. However, the content shifts. His art is creating awareness about his artform. This is not a story of Gond kings or "fantastic creatures" like the Bodrahin; or the misadventures of gods and demigods, sung in the fashion of Pardhan singer storytellers. Instead, it is a story about how stories are created. And this story about a story credits the story of the progenitor of Pardhan Gond art, i.e. Jangarh Singh Shyam. Read via Hivale, "The Birth of Art" recreates a Pardhan performance assemblage. But Shyam's work lies in narrating the story of art versus the story of gods and heroic deeds. He expands his repertoire. In fact, he uses traditional repertoire to comment on the story of the traversing of tradition. Bhajju Shyam then repeats his tradition and simultaneously innovates. This is a stunning event of self-aware autoethnography. Shyam innovates individually and at the same formally brings in a collective tradition. While it features the recognizable tropes of "ped, paudhe, pakshi" or trees, plants, birds and deer; his work, via the picturebook, re-frames the story of his art, thus literally crafting a self-reflexive autoethnography. Bhajju Shyam pushes the picturebook into becoming an Adivasi picturebook. Reading autoethnography into the picturebook then proves this knowledge of the state of the art. But does foreknowledge justify the existence of a pernicious state of the art? I will take this up in the last section of the essay.

The self-reflexive artist utilizes a tactical voicelessness, however. Bhajju Shyam's innovation and communal formal allusions gesture to a pointed self-awareness. Shyam has carefully evaluated what to visualize. As a corollary, he has also evaluated what *not* to visualize. If the picturebook instances articulate subaltern speech, it is necessary that like all speech, some compulsions be omitted. For instance, the British assumed that the Pardhan Gonds were an innately criminal tribe, engaging in criminalized activities like cattle thievery and illicit Mahua liquor production. The autoethnographic picturebook registers a silence around said criminality. It would seem a complete autoethnography is impossible then. Bhajju Shyam performs this totality for "The Birth of Art" but falls short of a complete picture in the picturebook. I think this is actually an appearance of a lack of total expression. Indeed, the silence is an effect of the narrativization of subaltern speech. The picturebook oscillates between silence and pellucid speech, it is constituted by lucid self-narration in some moments, and unclear narration at other moments. This outward lack of clarity needs to be explored and recovery read into the autoethnographic picturebook. A self-reflexive celebration of art tradition is not the only work of the autoethnographic picturebook. The autoethnographic picturebook carries the potential of a more visceral challenge to historical pain as well.

Anti-Adivasi violence was a historical reality in British India and unfortunately remains entrenched in India to this day. The Pardhan Gond archive, consisting of Census and land settlement reports, is composed of statements featuring nefarious delinquency. According to Hivale's reading of the 1931 Census data, the Pardhans were classified as a "criminal" tribe. This is a long-standing debate- more than one community, who were perhaps traditionally mobile, were classified as "criminal" in the 19th century, beginning in

1871. Hivale reproduces some of the stories that British officials narrated of the “criminal tendency” of Pardhans, and even provides a self-narrated story of a former Pardhan thief³⁸. The British notoriously criminalized certain tribes in the 19th century, ostensibly to maintain law and order. The maintenance of law and order, as even a cursory reading of the British India Criminal Tribes Act—latest amendment to which was carried out in 1924—shows, was an involvement with relocation, reformation, penalties, re-education of “criminals”, and a list of “crimes” that distinguish the community from other more peaceful communities. The post-1947 Indian government “denotified” some of these tribes but brought the others under the purview of a “Habitual Offenders Act”. This has only partially been redressed by successive governments. Most denotified individuals have no land under their name. The stigma that this “former” classification and consequent denotification has caused these communities continues in everyday life. Members of these communities are using art to express their plight. Postcolonial literary historian Henry Schwarz, for instance, discusses the plot of *Budhan* a play that enacts the death of Budhan Sabar, a member of denotified community in West Bengal, who died a custodial death in 1998. The play *Budhan* and other plays in the repertoire of the theater company (also called Budhan) dramatize police brutality, collusion between state and non-state actors to foist unsolved

³⁸ Hivale cites “the First Land Revenue Settlement Report for the Seoni district” as describing the Seoni Pardhans as “regular cattle lifters and gang robbers” as well as arsonists. Hivale establishes this tendency of officially imagining the Pardhan as a criminal and is at pains to counter it. He says contemporary Pardhans have “now settled down to agriculture and other honest employments” (14). Most interesting however, is his experience of bringing this up with Pardhan villagers, where he spent close to 14 years. He observes, “The villagers are naturally reluctant to talk about their criminal past...” (16) and explains this reluctance thus- “What is probably true is that the general disturbance of the Gondwana in the first half of the nineteenth century broke up the economic relations of Gonds and Pardhans, and drove the latter to crime” (16). Hivale invokes this as a matter of official record.

crimes on denotified communities, sexual violence, and a general lack of access to resources. The theater company uses the genre of street theater at various venues to encourage awareness of issues pertinent to denotified communities. But this expression is absent in the Pardhan Gond repertoire.

In Pardhan Gond art and writing, I observe a discrepancy between ethnography and the archive, and the discourse of Pardhan Gond art. Shamrao Hivale's anthropology describes the historical categorical presumption of criminality in some detail. On the other hand, in interviews with me and in the art created by Pardhan Gond artists, there is silence. In contrast to the detail found in Hivale's work, none of the artists I spoke to referred to the British presumption of criminality. Our conversations were about stories of creation, rituals, worldviews, and the nuances of their practice. Further, the picturebook *Creation* refuses direct admittance to some of these tales. Stories of unfair presumed criminality and stories of deities Mahadeo and Lingo are absent in *Creation*. This criminality, or even the stories of creation that explain how the Gonds and the Pardhans came to be; are not a part of the oeuvre that these artists have collaboratively created with Tara Books. For example, the story of how clans came to be, that controversially feature Mahadeo (Swaminathan) are absent in *Creation*³⁹. The violence of criminality that Hivale invokes only to exorcise is rendered silent in the stories of *Creation*.

Additionally, neither Pardhans nor the larger tribe of Gonds are considered criminal or habitual offenders by the Indian government today. This was a colonial classification. The Pardhans are not currently listed as "Denotified" or "Nomadic" either ("Draft List"). The Chharas, written about by Henry Schwarz, remain denotified in the state of Gujarat

³⁹ I spend time on this in Chapter 2 of this project.

and the Banjaras, for instance, remain “nomadic” in the states of Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka. The stigma of the currently denotified (Devy *A Nomad*; Schwarz) cannot be compared to the 21st century Pardhans, whose criminality exists in colonial records and perhaps generational stories, but not currently. Pardhan criminality *was* a chapter in the history of the Pardhans, born out of the colonial encounter. Perhaps this is why Pardhan Gond scholars, or the artists have chosen not to discuss the issue.

On the one hand, detail. And on the other hand, silence. However, if the picturebook is autoethnographic, should it also feature controversial and painful stories? Further, if the anthropologist and the archive describe criminality, *should* it appear in the picturebook? There is no clear answer. It is understandable that an artist or a community is unwilling to discuss a criminalized past- there is shame and pain in admitting the narrative mistreatment. If the Pardhan Gond criminalization has partly to do with the practice of itinerant singing-storytelling or Mahua liquor production/consumption so central to the Pardhan way of life- then a re-invigoration of the Pardhan bards via Jangarh Singh Shyam and Bharat Bhawan must necessarily involve the forgetting of the historical trauma of criminalization; a forgetting that appears as silence. Therefore, I read the picturebook as a complicated web of strategic speech and speechlessness- the artist chooses what to illustrate. While the Pardhans do not share the same chronology as the Chharas or the Banjaras, they are victims of primitivist developmentalism. They negotiate with silence in different intensities. In the autoethnographic picturebook, illustrated by the Pardhan Bhajju Shyam, there is an oscillation between speech and speechlessness. Speech, as I have discussed, is evident in the formal maneuvers in the picturebook. But an ostensible lack of speech or silence is also speech.

It may seem unfair to discuss transgressions detailed in the archive. After all, Pardhan Gond artists are busy crafting the picturebook to make visible narratives that they think deserve attention. Why bring up uncomfortable moments in the past? The answer lies in the conditions that compel Adivasi speech into silence. Hivale, for instance, mentions this as a matter of record. Titling his section “The Former Criminal Tradition”, he begins, “In the Districts of Saugor, Jubbulpore and Seoni⁴⁰, the Pardhans were classified, even as late as the 1931 Census, as a criminal tribe and such studies of the criminals of the Central Provinces as those by Gunthorpe and Gayer give the Pardhans an important place in their discussions” (Hivale 13). Hivale ostensibly writes his *The Pardhans* in order to demolish the idea that any tribe may be criminal, least of all the Pardhans. Scholars like Henry Schwarz and G N Devy have discussed Adivasi speech and criminality despite the discomfort it causes. Writing of a different kind of silence, linguist G N Devy discusses the material and cultural causes for a loss of Adivasi languages and a curtailed Adivasi “voice” in governmentality. For Devy, Adivasi silence is seen in an amnesia, loss of cultural memory, and aphasia⁴¹, loss of speech. Devy is writing about Adivasis in general—not denotified tribals only. Devy finds that Adivasi aphasia is dependent on multiple factors—urbanism, external political pressures, dwindling forest cover, and a complex desire to communicate some Adivasi knowledge while retaining control over other kinds of “sacred” knowledge (*A Nomad* 101). Even in situations where Adivasi silence is broken

⁴⁰ Seoni Hills become the setting for Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, a text I take up in another chapter.

⁴¹ Devy first conceptualized “amnesia” in his landmark *After Amnesia*, referring to a loss of cultural memory in post-British South Asia. But he revised “amnesia” to aphasia as he began to get more involved with the Adivasi cause.

in the form of violence perpetrated by Adivasis, against other minorities as in Tejgadh in 2001, after the anti-Muslim Ahmedabad pogrom; Devy is interested in how one minority's violent "voice" in a conflict zone is an expression of an incessant state and non-state violence that is committed everyday against Adivasis (*A Nomad* pp. 39-70). Adivasi silence, for Devy, is both a consequence of political manipulation, and a rationale for fundamentalist manipulation.

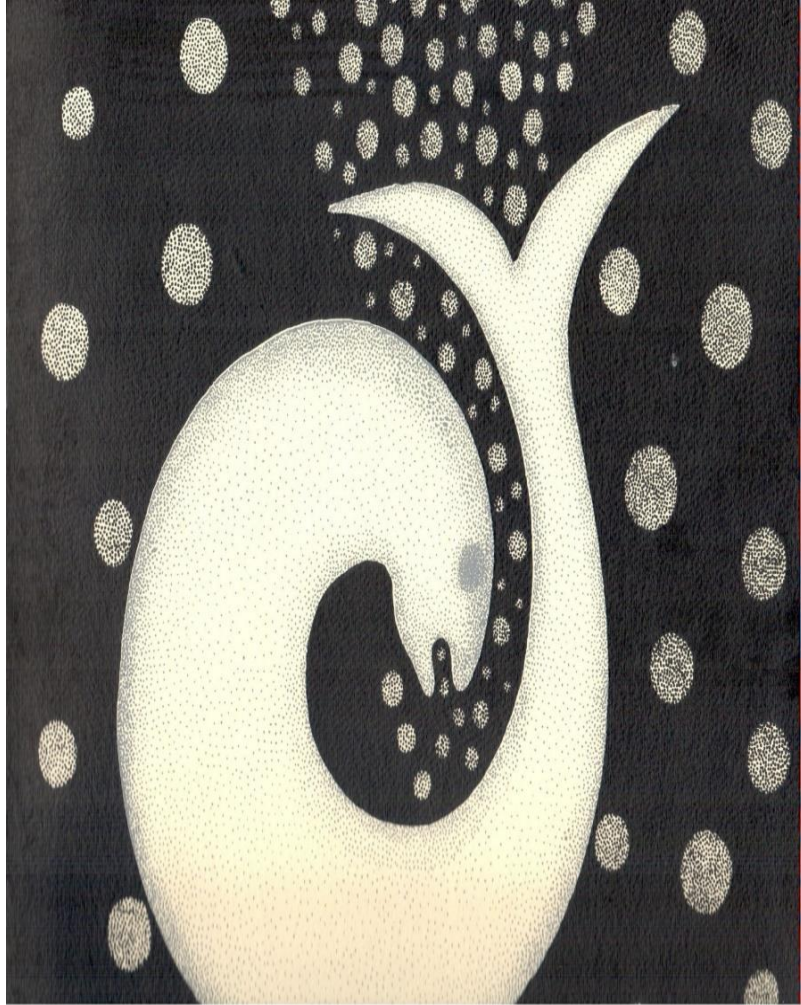


Fig. 4 “The Unborn Fish” *Creation*. Art by Bhajju Shyam for *Creation*, Original Edition © Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com.

I read silence not as a refusal of Adivasi communication, but a refusal of criminalized terms that frame an Adivasi community as always already guilty. While Adivasi studies has diagnosed the factors that constrict Adivasi speech, the field is also interested in recovering this speech. Indeed, it is imperative that forces that have colluded toward Adivasi aphasia be discussed and critiqued. How we shape a critical recovery is up to us. I discuss some of these factors in more detail in the last section of this essay. The silence I perceive is not the silence perceived by Devy. Devy notes Adivasi language loss and exclusion as silence; a silence that is invented by externally mandated set of practices that limit Adivasi speech. The silence in the autoethnographic picturebook, however, is different. It is certainly a consequence of external pressures, but it is not an invented inability to communicate. Bhajju Shyam, as both bard storyteller and illustrator, is an extraordinary communicator. As I have mentioned, he exercises a choice in the manner of storytelling. Indeed, autoethnography necessarily entails artistic selections. It is these selections that can help us understand artistic attitudes to their practice and context. In this case, the artistic may choose to memorialize one aspect of their communal past over another. The villagers' reluctance to refer to this presumption before Hivale, the artists' reluctance to refer to this before me, and artists' refusal to illustrate this, registers an eloquent expressive silence. Thus, reading deliberate silence is crucial for the picturebook.

The historical stigma of criminality is palpable in *Creation*. For instance, the first double-spread in *Creation* is titled "The Unborn Fish". The text reads- "In the beginning, before the creator made the world, there was emptiness...nothing at all. Then came water." Followed by an empty space, Shyam draws a tiny red fish as an accompaniment to a full-page illustration of fish in black and white, and writes, "The fish is the Gond symbol for

water. Here I've painted the form of a fish, but it is still waiting to be born. *This is a fish-shaped emptiness, bubbling in the water*" (n. p. Italics mine). The phrase "fish-shaped emptiness" is interesting because it is a neither-nor. It proffers form but snatches meaning. Indeed, the combination of white and black (Fig. 4) in the fish-shaped emptiness visualizes the play of form and signification. The shape of the fetal fish is set off in the play of white and black. The splotchy bubbles may be air or offspring. Air, as in breath, perhaps even the breath of life. The bubbles might be offspring too- fish eggs awaiting birth. Air or bubbles; each of two possible meanings connote reproduction and new life. The play of form and meaning is intended to give form to two separate moments in time in one simultaneous image. The fish-shapes are empty for now but rich with the promise of the fullness of a future. Not just two moments in one simultaneous image, but the illustration hints at two contradictory moments too. The fish-shaped emptiness is silent for now: but it bubbles with the promise of active speech in the future. Bhajju Shyam illustrates a pregnant silence. Perhaps the bubble is of muffled speech. There is an intentional communication transpiring here. Bhajju Shyam seems to say to his viewers, "Hey, look at me! I am silent!", thus bringing two contradictory possibilities into precise utterance- speech and silence. For how can he be silent when he is saying that he is silent? In other words, this apparent non-utterance is really an utterance.

But could this non-utterance be that of the historical stigma imposed on the Pardhan Gond? Bhajju Shyam clarifies that the fish symbolizes water in Pardhan Gond art. But if *Creation* is re-presentation of stigma, then the unborn fish and the air/offspring are Mahua liquor. The "fish-shaped emptiness" is now the shape of the fetal pot used to distill Mahua flowers. The "bubbling in the water" is the bubbling in the distillation process. The bubbles

that denote air or offspring now connote real and imagined re-generative pleasure in the imbibing of Mahua, however clandestine. After all, the production of knowledge about the Pardhan Gond was intentionally fashioned in the colonial archive. Adivasis from Central, Eastern, and parts of Western India harvest, use, and revere the mahua tree, *Madhuca Longifolia*. The Mahua is used as cattle feed, medicine, and a sweet liquor when the flowers are distilled. Mahua liquor is essential to celebrations of birth and marriages, as well as funerary rites. The British government banned this “indigenous” liquor as immoral and dangerous, in order to boost up their own liquor sales (Mukherjee “Mahua” pars. 1-2). This meant that adulterated illicit mahua liquor was distilled. Multiple Adivasi communities that revered and used the Mahua tree had to cease mahua use or use it surreptitiously, simply to escape criminality. Post 1947, successive governments heavily regulated Indigenous liquor. This sustained the practice of illicit liquor and precluded livelihood, as Mahua could have been gathered and sold. Stringent regulations in delimited regions determined Mahua use post-1947 (Dey pars. 1-5). It is only in the last five years that some of these laws have been softened. Madhya Pradesh has now classified Mahua as “heritage liquor” and some entrepreneurs are teaming up with Adivasis to craft gin-like cocktails made (Nair pars. 1-3).

As Mahua distillation is a regimented secret, perhaps its invocation in the picturebook can be nothing but allegory. And the allegory necessarily functions at multiple levels- an innocent creation myth about the world being fashioned out of water, an innocent Pardhan individual bubbling Mahua and fondly relishing it, and a new Pardhan-led artistic world where older criminalization is intentionally edited out. The Mahua tree which is the source of much Adivasi liquor production and consumption has remained heavily taxed

and policed since the British. This naturally criminalizes the Adivasi for attempting to become an “indigenous manufacturer” of liquor (Mitter *Art and Nationalism* 235). “The Unborn Fish” returns Mahua to the Pardhan Gond repertoire. The fish bubbles silently. It hopes to breathe freely in the future, when it will be generated anew. Henry Schwarz argues that Budhan theatre and documentary films, usually staging themes of atrocities against denotified Adivasis, consistently practice activism with real-world intervention. But unlike Pardhan art, activist theatre—also autoethnographic—embraces the stigma of criminality and stages it in complex ways. It does not use non-utterance as communication. In contrast, a concern with Pardhan criminality is shrouded in non-utterance, however secretively allegorical.

In epistemological practice, the colonial government re-created the Pardhan Gonds using bureaucratic myths of criminality and illegal liquor production. Criminality, via liquor or arbitrary categorization of a whole community was built into archive. Not just that, the colonial government carried out large scale classification of castes and tribes. Virginius Xaxa, one of the most prominent Adivasi scholars in India, clarifies that classification of tribals as “tribes” was solidified by the British based on arbitrary criteria. The British carried out the classification not simply *as* primitive tribe, but also the classification of the tribe *as* criminal. Given the 19th century designation of the Pardhan and their pursuits, the Bhajju Shyam-illustrated picturebook should be understood as a response to the British re-creation of the Pardhan art and livelihood as tendentious. Bhajju Shyam’s *Creation* is an insider’s retort to British re-creation. His “unborn fish” is therefore both fetal and fecund, although it visualizes an emptiness. The bubbles that may be offspring potentially carry the seed of re-created *Creation* story, a revised story of Pardhan

classification- a story that reshapes Mahua into defiant pleasure or a story that offers possibilities despite a constructed origin myth of criminality. The unborn fish, as water or Mahua, bears the promise of communal regeneration via a new myth making.

A novel recreation of origin myth may seem beyond credibility as Bhajju Shyam chooses not to clearly illustrate or comment on this part of his community's history. But that is the point of the "unborn" fish. It cannot be formed or commented on currently. Yet, it is a "fish-shaped emptiness" waiting to appear. A novel mythmaking is indeed the work of the autoethnographic picturebook. As with "The Birth of Art", there is accession to the terms of the aggressor in the appearance of silence: and a new cultural exposition by the annexed. What appears as silence, emptiness, or formlessness is the inability of the aggressor's language to comprehend the voice of the annexed. Instead, a revised myth of origin becomes visible. Especially as the criminality above is/was a myth- in the sense of it being fictional. The British needed to fictionalize the Pardhan Gond as criminal to practice surveillance and extract profit. The criminalization was an example of the paranoid state willing to make tribals as a deterrent example to the rest of British India. As the record's existence in settlement reports and its treatment by Hivale gestures to its own construction, the picturebook must be interpreted as a myth created to revise colonial fiction. In fact, Henry Schwarz, writing of self-aware protest theatre composed by Dakxin Bajrange, a member of the Chara, a "de-notified" tribe, says, "Mythologizing, spectralizing the past in a fervid embrace of the stereotype can open unexpected vistas of the future. Staging stereotype as performance can demystify it" (120). In *Creation*, Bhajju Shyam performs a similar demystification by embracing the stereotype of natural world as a source of the how the world came to be. But the Pardhan world is a historically criminalized world

that also embraces Mahua liquor. Bhajju Shyam is thus engaged in the “creation” of new myths that narrate the story of his community on his own terms.

But is also a non-utterance and it is also a beautiful image. Multiple meanings exist in the image. Therefore, the picturebook *Creation* is as intentionally ambiguous as the archive is intentionally pejorative. This is precisely why medium of the picturebook is autoethnographic, and Bhajju Shyam crafts the autoethnographic picturebook. In the reckoning of Rashmi Varma, postcolonial literary scholar, the story of the Pardhan Gond artform is visible in the art that is generated.

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 dispossession by offering original and situated critiques of those processes. (“Primitive Accumulation” pp. 759-60)

In other words, the story of land loss, stigma, and disenfranchisement may be visible in the painting and picturebooks created by Adivasi Pardhan Gond artists. As I have demonstrated, the picturebook too is a site to enable a shift from “deprivation” to “possibilities, or primitivism to resistance. In the first section of this essay, it was clear that national display is coercing a romantic primitivism on to 21st century Indigenous peoples in India. The nation is fashioning itself as the enabler of Adivasis from developmental deprivation to economic possibilities. But this enabling is premised on a sustained categorical imperative- that the Adivasi remain in a zone of primitivism as evinced in the Bengal School of painting and its 21st century re-enactment after 75 years of independence. But Bhajju Shyam deploys the autoethnographic Adivasi picturebook against normative primitivism, colonial or postcolonial. His autoethnography is not only aware of how the

new nation demands him and his community to perform, but builds on it to playfully to state that he must do what he desires with the form. Using strategic selection of content and form, and a self-reflexive method that acknowledges that sources of his art, he indicates that he understands how the Adivasi is yet again a site for extraction in 21st century India. This is the move from “deprivation” to “possibilities”- Shyam fashions the medium to tell his story and on his visual terms. But what of the editorial complex? Bhajju Shyam perpetuates and innovates on tradition. Nevertheless, a picturebook is produced with the help of publishers and printers, who are embedded in a national financial and visual economy. If the postcolonial nation is primitivist, and the artist negotiates, how does the publisher mediate between these two contrasting desires? How do they aid (or not) the autoethnographic Adivasi picturebook? Further, the 21st century has only seen an expansion of “deprivation” that Varma speaks of- but this only means that the “possibilities”, or the conditions of possibility become even more important. I now turn to these pressures and the publisher’s place in the matrix.

The Collaborative Picturebook

The matrix consists of the artist, the publisher, the printers, and the buyers. I have discussed the artist practicing a strategic agency that plays with eloquent expression and subversive silence. But for an alternative press like Tara Books, the publisher’s vision and practice is important to understand how much the artist can intervene in the final product. Gita Wolf, the publisher, is sincerely aware of the innovation that Tara Books practices. She ensures that credit is given where it is due. She discusses *Creation* in glowing terms, “The result was a consummate narrative, which pulled together a bewildering array of Gond lore” (*Creation*, n. p.). But narrative energy is provided by a vulnerable community

and its inheritance. If so, the question is whether this makes Gita Wolf a preserver of inheritance or facilitator of glorified commodification. I discussed in the introduction of the project that Pardhan Gond art is experiencing increased commodification in neo-liberal India, and how in the last instance, it is indigeneity that is othered and essentialized as Indigenous art is sold across platforms like the picturebook. After all, Gita Wolf's effort makes the autoethnographic picturebook registered in print. Not just that, the locii for the production of the 21st century Pardhan Gond picturebook are the culturally and economically wealthy cities of Bhopal and Chennai. Pardhan Gond art was constructed in Bhopal by Jangarh Singh Shyam; Tara Books commissioned and created *Creation* at AMM Printing Press, headed by C Arumugam, in Chennai. But if facilitation and commodification are the two consequences of Adivasi collaboration with curators and publishers, then the fact of collaboration needs discussion.

What makes the picturebook possible? And what makes the autoethnographic picturebook possible? A limited answer is that it is the Pardhan Gonds who make the Adivasi picturebook possible. In fact, the publisher credits the artist and their community for the picturebook. Gita Wolf informs readers of *Creation* that "The community is heir" to an immense collection of "oral tales". Bhajju Shyam inherits this corpus of storytelling and re-imagines these stories in the medium of the picturebook. Wolf describes Shyam as invested in stories of creation. He is portrayed as a curious and energetic storyteller. "He has always seemed particularly fascinated by accounts of beginnings, and has gone on to explore several Gond origin myths in his paintings" (*Creation*, n. p.) Bhajju Shyam's curiosity about tales of origin is the source of *Creation* but the source of his own curiosity

is the immense cultural wealth that his ancestors have devolved upon him. It is the art form practiced by the Pardhan Gonds that facilitates the Tara picturebook.

However, Gita Wolf and V Geetha's Tara Books are part of a complex force that perform has been globalized and continues to be globalized. Wolf and Geetha are reputed authors and academics in India. Wolf and her team undertake regular travel to international venues to discuss the unique practice of book making that she has encouraged at Tara. Ratna Ramanathan, for instance, designer at Tara for many years, is now the Pro Vice Chancellor at Central St Martin's, a premier design and fine arts school in London. This is to say the managerial team at Tara possesses immense cultural capital. It is this capital that gives them the ability to collaborate with Bhajju Shyam for *Creation* and *The London Jungle Book*. But it is not merely cultural capital. It is a kind of globalized financial capital. It is this globalized capital that makes the picturebook possible. Thus, there are two conditions of production- Adivasi community storytelling and a transnational network of capital that markets the art in exhibitions, commodities, or the picturebook. Ultimately, these conditions affect the artist more than the publisher. I have argued earlier in this chapter that modern Indian painting is constituted by the availability of the Adivasi for elitist representation. Capital in 21st century India also utilizes Adivasi availability. In the publishing complex fed by electronic capital, the picturebook and the publisher are weapons of commodification. The picturebook, as I have discussed, genuinely interrogates power by attributing tactical subversion to the Adivasi artist as they ceaselessly innovate in form and strategically organize speech. But I have also pointed out that the picturebook represents a capitalist compromise with the ready recognition of art as "tribal". Such a ready recognition is an expression of the global capitalist drive to subsume production and

consumption unto itself. Therefore, the boutique luxurious picturebook invites the Adivasi producer into its fold and uses the Adivasi artist to further essentialisms. This would neutralize the challenge that Bhajju Shyam's autoethnography poses. In other words, the collaboration between the two conditions of production above aids the artist but also condemns them to the machinery of global capital.

Collaboration is not simply an alliance between the ideal artist and the ideal curator/publisher. In 21st century India, Adivasi art is a collaboration between the dominated and the dominant. Of course, Adivasi artists are eternally cognizant of the market pressures upon their work and their bodies. However, arguing for the artist's cognizance should not be tantamount to justifying their subordination to capital. As if to say the artist is aware of the desire for a neo-liberal compromise, and so desires the compromise despite its attendant oppression. In other words, admitting that Bhajju Shyam lucidly understands the coercion that the art in the picturebook demands, somehow justifies the existence of the pressure in the first place. At the same time, a relationship between an Adivasi practitioner and a desire for/against submission to global flows is not readily dismissed. This relationship between Indigenous artist and subjugation to capital questions any agency that may be attributed to the artist. Gayatri C Spivak discerns a global-globalizing force that engulfs totally. This affects the book publishing industry as well. In her 2008 *Other Asias*, Spivak writes of the "siliconization of Bangalore, one among India's five megacities" (161). Spivak discusses "electronic capital" as haunting the deceptive modernization of India's growing megacities. As Indian cities expand and consume "rural" India into their fold, there emerges a class that is internationally mobile and aspires to control capital, for the nation and the inter-nation. In Spivak's argument, the Tara

managerial team would certainly count as members of an internationally mobile class. Their effort to publish folk and Adivasi art would count as instance of consuming rural India into their fold. The example Spivak provides is that of suburban farmers (at the outskirts of Bengaluru⁴²) being won over by the World Bank for land prices, despite a state ban on new airport construction near Bangalore. This she mischievously calls a convenient “subaltern will” to submit to capital- which can be used to disrupt any challenge to capital. As if the peasant willfully desires capitulation of agency by selling their already threatened land. The consumption of rural India means that, electronic capital, premised as it is on an apparently expanding network of communications only enables the rural as “theatre” (*Other Asias* 167) or site for “data in the field of genetic engineering” (*Other Asias* 174). She invokes the Subaltern Studies Group here as an implicit failure as she argues that the rural is still a construct as much as the “subaltern”, and by extension the subaltern will to capital-ize.

I find that instead of the rural as a continuing site for failed challenges, it is the rural and *Adivasi* that is a site for challenges. If so, then collaboration between the dominant and dominated, as in the collaborative picturebook, is an example of a constructed Indigenous theatre that aestheticizes Adivasi art only to exorcize it at will. I ended Section 1 at this juncture- a postcolonial primitivism is on the rise. A neo-swadeshi nationalism is striving to appropriate Adivasi art and artist for aesthetics, while simultaneously paring radical politics in the favor of only essentialized aesthetics. In fact, these are all the factors that scholars like G N Devy, Amita Baviskar, and Sangeeta Dasgupta note as complicating Adivasi speech. The complexity is only compounded when the story of Pardhan Gond art

⁴² Bangalore is now Bengaluru.

is considered. The founding of Pardhan Gond art was the collaboration between Jangarh Singh Shyam and “modern” artist/curator J Swaminathan at Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal. It was in the 1980s that Pardhan Gond art appeared to the national and international art scene as Pardhan Gond *painting*. It is in Jangarh Singh Shyam’s and Bharat Bhawan’s *collaboration* that Pardhan Gond art took form in the city of Bhopal. As Rashmi Varma reminds us, this was a tradition that was constructed in the last two decades of the 20th century in an urban setting. This led to a complication of more than one binary—insider/outsider art, urban/rural, artist/artisan, modernist/tribal, art/craft—but as discussed in the introduction to this study, Jangarh Singh Shyam found that with artistic recognition in say France and New Delhi came a painful cohort of pressures that ultimately led to his untimely demise. His art and his self were confronting a whole network that was concretizing itself as the Indian economy opened itself up to American intervention with the 1991 New Economic Policy (NEP), spearheaded by the then Finance Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh.

Bhaju Shyam’s collaborative Adivasi picturebook legitimately disrupts earlier portrayals of the Gonds and the Pardhan Gonds. This needs celebration. But interrogating the contemporary context in which meaning making takes place is crucial to arrive at agency. It is no coincidence that Pardhan Gond took shape as American neoliberal inroads were becoming more concrete in the closing decades of the 20th century. The Adivasi artist’s subjection to categorization also increased manifold in this changing scenario. As Jangarh Singh Shyam’s example shows, the Adivasi artist found a dizzying network to contend with. On the one hand, Jangarh Singh Shyam’s artwork prices jumped from a 2010 \$30,000 at Sotheby’s to the 2023 \$90,000 at Pundole’s; but commodification has also

jumped in the wake of Singh Shyam's suicide. Historian Dan Schiller cautions in *Digital Capitalism* that, "networks are directly generalizing the social and cultural range of the capitalist economy as never before" (xiv). This expansion of the capitalist economy, for Schiller, was a consequence of the intimate collaboration between communication infrastructure and a US-led neoliberal impulse with a global reach. Schiller, in a fantastic analysis drawn from detailed reading of media history, locates this exponential growth of neoliberal enterprise in the last two decades of the 20th century. According to Schiller, this was an "epoch" of "digital capitalism" (xiv). Epochal changes were taking place in the US led cultural colonization as well as in Indian systems increasingly dependent on transnational flows. Spivak's "electronic capital" and Schiller's "digital capitalism" are terms that help identify larger transformations that determine national policy and international relations. Literary theorist Rashmi Varma, writing about the shift from "deprivation" to "possibilities" in Pardhan Gond art, also interrogates the validity of any claim about radical subversion via "primitive accumulation". She puns on Marx's phrase to argue for the contestation that Adivasi artists face, in that the market accumulates Adivasi art and at the same time exhorts primitivism. This is the conundrum now- one must look for ways that the artist and alternative publisher work in a neo-liberalizing Indian economy that accumulates primitivism for profit.

I ask again- who creates *Creation* as a commodity? How? If there are two major conditions of production i.e., Adivasi storytelling and global capitalism, then perhaps there are two strategies of negotiation. Both the publisher and artist negotiate capital- small independent publisher in their attempt to create worthy books and maintenance of principled social relations with the artists, and the artists in their calculated art. Tara Books

take pains to maintain more than cordial relations with the artists. Bhajju Shyam reminisces that Tara always consults the artists respectfully and takes care of them. Artists are not only invited for residencies at the Tara “book building” (as the office is fondly called); but Bhajju Shyam reiterates that “they always treat the artists well at Tara” (B. Shyam, Personal Interview). At their 28th anniversary celebration at Book Building, Gita Wolf corroborated a sense of ideal collaboration by stating that, “The folk and Adivasi artists we work with tell us- we do art, that is what we will do. You make the book, that is what you do”. In fact, Gita Wolf and Ragini- the current designer at Tara- were invited by Seattle-based Elliott Bay Book Company to make a presentation about their work, as part of an informal independent publisher goodwill initiative. Wolf was clear that theirs has always been an ethical collaboration. She recounted that when they first approached some folk and Adivasi artists, they had to spend months working with the artists to make them understand what royalties are, and what to expect in a contract. Apparently, some artists had been surprised that they received more than a one-time payment when they first began collaborating with Tara Books. This editorial pedagogy could easily have been that of ready expropriation. It was not. The publisher has aided the artist in negotiating a dizzying and debilitating network of power- the same network that cannibalized Jangarh Singh Shyam.

While it may seem that the Tara-Pardhan Gond collaboration is utopic, ethical collaboration is not always imagined or practiced adequately. Often, a distorted representation of Adivasi-collaborator alliance abounds as a result of an inadequate developmentalist narrative of national progress. Contemporary Indian media has enthusiastically encouraged such a narrative. Both big budget and small budget cinema

from India, for example, is increasingly returning to the willing abjection of Adivasi characters especially when such characters interact with individuals of the dominant castes/class. The 2022 *RRR*, directed by S S Rajamouli, and featuring Ram Charan and N T Ramarao Junior- scions of major film and political Telugu families-, made \$140 million at the global box office. “Naatu Naatu” won Best Original Song at 95th Academy Awards held in Los Angeles. The contention is that the intertwining of a Gond tribal hero Komaram Bheem, played by N T Ramarao Junior, and an upper caste Hindu freedom fighter, played by Ram Charan, has reduced the Gond tribal to elements of the forest. In one scene, the tribal hero even confronts a tiger, reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling’s canonical Mowgli and in another, bows before the upper caste freedom fighter to acknowledge his ostensible inferiority. This is what I mean by willing Adivasi abjection. Big budget cinema desires to see the Adivasi desiring submission. This is an example of indigeneity as theater. On the other hand, another South Asian film *The Elephant Whisperers* won at the 95th Academy Awards. But it is nuanced in its representation of a refusal of willing Adivasi abjection. Directed by Kartiki Gonsalves, *The Elephant Whisperers*, won Best Documentary Short. It narrates the story of the forest dwelling Kattunayakars, who care for elephants in collaboration with the forest department. The story is told with pathos and love. But it is the repercussions that are of interest. The human protagonists in the film have sent a legal notice to the director alleging that they were promised a house, a vehicle, and a one-time payment for facilitation of elephant care: none of which have been delivered by the filmmakers. The situation remains unresolved. Both films then represent a flawed collaboration. Both provide platforms for characters and figures of Adivasi origin to play their part, but *RRR* does not allow the tribal to transgress beyond a pre-defined primitivist

role, and *The Elephant Whisperers* is still attempting to resolve the contradictions it brings attention to. Fictionalized collaboration in *RRR* and unresolved real-world collaboration as part of the conditions of production that leads to *The Elephant Whisperers* remains inadequate. Contemporary film is uncomfortable with a fair collaboration with Adivasi art and bodies. Herein lies the cost of an entry into the artworld- the artist's Adivasi identity informs all aspects of production and consumption. Material discrimination and humiliation are the stakes of writing about Pardhan Gond art. This highlights Tara's collaboration with Adivasi artists as more nuanced and mutual, both at the level of story and inter-personal contracts.

To some extent, Tara Books' collaborative diligence is a product of labor control that is possible in the office of a "small, independent" publisher. After all, the Tara-Pardhan Gond is an alternative collaboration. Both Adivasi labor and editorial labor co-work to arrive at a product agreed upon. In the public comments that editors Gita Wolf and V Geetha make, one may always hear a note of respectful and meticulous consultation in the process of collaboration with Adivasi and folk artists. Precisely because Wolf and Geetha stand by their vision of promoting local regional Indigenous visual cultures—and women's artistic cultures within these contexts—they can spend the time and resources required to ally with folk and Adivasi artists, as a smaller undertaking than Penguin or Scholastic. There is no doubt that Wolf and Geetha occupy a highly privileged space in the artist-editor alliance. But here, they are expending their privilege to foster a co-working space, in a genuine sense of the term.

Some scholars also note a similar difference between big publishers and independent publishers. In their 2012 *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual*

Storytelling, illustrator Martin Salisbury and children's studies scholar Morag Styles describe case studies of "small, independent publishers" (178) to argue that it is the scale and nature of these publishers in the UK that allows them a measure of control and more importantly innovation in the process and product of publication. Salisbury and Styles offer a laudatory comment about the visual and design newness that enters the children's publishing world owing to "small independent publishers"- "It is no accident that the majority of books awarded the Bologna Ragazzi award for fiction have, in recent years, emerged from small-scale set-ups" (178). The Bologna Ragazzi award ceremony takes place in Bologna, Italy and honors "the world's finest, most innovative picturebooks" ("Bolognaragazzi Awards"). According to their website, "the Awards acknowledge excellence of graphic design, innovation and ability to engage with young readers" ("Bolognaragazzi Awards"). Tara books have received multiple Bologna Ragazzi awards. In 2008 they received it for the Adivasi Pardhan Gond-illustrated *The Nightlife of Trees*, in 2010 they received it for the Adivasi Warli-illustrated *DO!*. But that is not all. In 2012, they received an Honorable Mention at Bologna Ragazzi for the folk Mithila-illustrated *Waterlife* and in 2013 they won the Bologna Prize for Best Children's Publisher in Asia. Indeed, the way Salisbury and Styles introduce this theme is almost a replica of the Tara story. They mention- "They are often created by one or two individuals with a passion for quality visual literature". This is how Tara tells the story of its conception too- it was Gita Wolf and V Geetha who embarked on this journey together. I argue, however, that Wolf and Geetha's endeavor not only encourages visual and design innovation but also offers a clear blueprint for an ethical method to aid artistic agency in publication.

The “small independent” nature of the work allows collaboration. But it is unsurprisingly beleaguered by market pressures. A Tara books publication enables an atmosphere of Adivasi artistic agency thus culminating in a shift in depiction. But such a representation, premised upon a more equitable artist-editor pact, comes at a high price. Tara books are expensive in India and the USA. The blurb for *Creation* clarifies part of the rationale for this limitation of numbered print runs. Printed in light ochre, the editor provides readers with the following information. “This handmade, limited edition book has been silkscreened on handmade paper in our print workshop based in Chennai, India, run according to fair trade practices”. Creating paper by hand and silk-screening the color and design add to the quality of the picturebook. It also increases the labor required to produce the object. This directly affects the price that is attached to the final product. As has been mentioned in the introduction, Tara’s books are boutique objects that are severely limited in their reach. Indeed, this is a question that the editors grapple with as well. At their 28th birth anniversary, I attended their retrospective event in Chennai at their office. V Geetha and Gita Wolf provided a brief history and aims of their output and Gita Wolf joked that they did not know how to sell the books, they knew only how make them. In this context, a joke about the inability to sell Tara books refers to their narrow reach. Perhaps only connoisseurs with time and leisure can buy these books.

But Tara Books have inexplicably managed to keep their vision of the physicality of books alive even during COVID. During the global pandemic, they did not encourage the download of electronic versions of their hand-made books. That would have meant a direct contradiction of their artisanal production process. Instead, they encouraged the home delivery of their products. They have offered regular discounts on both Indian and

international deliveries since then. In fact, they have a robust international clientele. Whenever I have ordered Tara Books from India to the USA, the shipping charges have been almost nil. This is immense because shipping exponentially increases the cost of moving packages internationally. But they have somehow retained control of shipping prices. Their picturebooks may reach only a small number of people internationally but their “network” is extensive. In contrast, Tara Books’ putative inability to reach more people resonates globally with other alternative publishing ventures. Salisbury and Styles describe other publishers who create labor-intensive books. Liz Loveless, for example, also crafts “handmade picturebooks” (151). They write, “Loveless creates hand-printed books in limited editions for children and adults, each one signed and numbered”. In Loveless’s experience, there is an exact similarity to the way Tara Books create and manage some of their books. Silkscreen printing is a hallmark of Tara books and Loveless practices screen-printing too. While they conclude Loveless’s example with an optimistic building up of Loveless’s clients/patrons, they also observe, “Clearly, the question of how to sell the books was, and still is, a key issue” (152). This remains a key issue for Tara Books in 2024 as well.

This may seem like a disparity. How can the accumulation of an international network of buyers and comparatively low shipping costs be in sync with the ostensible inability to sell books? A robust network and low shipping should mean that they are able to print enough books to make a profit, not just to break even. While this may be true, possessing an extensive international network and a limited market are not mutually exclusive. The work that goes into a Tara publication is immeasurable and this is reflected in their prices. Prices dictate that potential buyers are wealthy Indians in India or abroad.

This means that Tara products like the autoethnographic collaborative picturebooks are circulated only amongst an elite international community of individuals who are attracted to the visual and formal innovations that luxurious Tara books manage. Therefore, even ethical collaborations like the Tara-Pardhan Gond alliance allows a pause for thought. In the last instance, every autoethnographic picturebook is coated in wealth. Many of them can be afforded only by the opulent. Bhajju Shyam's collaboration with Tara may a powerful challenge to representation but stands jeopardized by its circulation.

If circulation jeopardizes, a crucial question must be posed- is all collaboration between Indigenous artists and wealthy cultural capitalists a detrimental venture? The autoethnographic picturebook that prudently visualizes and deliberately stops short when needed, is now nothing but a concession to the overwhelming agenda of ready market recognition. Shyam's stunning self-reflexivity would then simply be a gimmick. The bana in "The Birth of Art", which signifies his juxtaposition of twin roles as Pardhan oral storyteller and a print illustrator—a fitting rejoinder to anthropology—would be a symbol drained of its "insurgent" potential (Guha "The Prose"). Or the "The Unborn Fish", which offers a calculated utterance of historical stigma and a promise of a revised myth—a new myth of re-creation outside the colonial archive—would be robbed of its defiance too. The Mahua would ultimately be an admission of guilt and an apology for history. As a corollary, since the picturebook is autoethnographic, it is an "authentic" representation. It transparently communicates what the Adivasi artist wants for their people. So perhaps the artist authentically wants to be received as a creator of quirky colorful art, performing indigeneity for wealthy viewers. This is a desire to be what the nation wants for the Adivasi: the bana and fish are a concession to the neo-liberal Indian nation that desires the willing

subjection of the Adivasi as Vanvasi into a developmentalist paradigm of deprivation. In this reading, as I have pointed out, what circulates is an Indigenous theatre in a capitulation to capital, to invoke Spivak. And the Tara picturebook becomes a platform for high quality transmission of a lost or vanishing or endangered Indigenous cultural heritage. Perhaps buyers participate in a nostalgia for rural/folk/Adivasi artists and a Tara picturebook feeds such a nostalgia. Perpetual deprivation under development, a mistaken Adivasi willingness narrativized, and a temporary restoration of a way of life- all become immanent in the autoethnographic picturebook, illustrated by Bhajju Shyam.

A willing subjection is even more stark when another collaboration is considered- a purported alliance between Indigenous artist and billionaire capitalist. The facilitators at Tara Books move in cultural capital and some wealth, but Gautam Adani, the billionaire industrialist who initiated a collaboration between Bhajju Shyam and Warlpiri Australian artists in 2019 for an installation at his Ahmedabad headquarters moves in immense financial capital: about \$82 billion of capital. *Architectandinteriorindia.com* reports that the Pardhan Gond artist and the Warlpiri artists worked with curator and scenographer Rajeev Sethi's sculpture of spirals placed at the Adani headquarters. Apparently, the artists "devised intimate signatures on Sethi's sculpture evoking a kinetic spiral that coils and uncoils on itself". The report also quotes Gautam Adani as saying that he "did not expect to learn so much about Gondwana the 550 mn year old supercontinent through stories curated by Australian Aboriginal Indian Gond artists" ("Gond and Aboriginal Art"). But the story is not that of mere well- meaning patronage. Journalist Abir Dasgupta, in a detailed investigation, offers a converse to Adani's celebration of artistic confluence. Dasgupta reports that Adani has been influential in slowly infiltrating Adivasi life to

expropriate land for coal mining in Eastern India, as well as in Australia. Dasgupta writes, “When “art meets business” in Adani’s case, it can only highlight the way in which genuine creativity and cross-cultural engagement is bought and paid for to mask the corporate conglomerate’s damaging dealings with Indigenous and traditional communities” (“Adani Group”). Dasgupta then “reads” the collaboration as both expropriation of traditionally held Indigenous resources and an appropriation of indigeneity by Adani as capitalist patron. The question is not why Bhajju Shyam would let his heritage be appropriated- it is a mark of privilege to blame the Adivasi artist for consensual appropriation. The question should be- what conditions motivate the artist to perform this way, and what is the artist able to manage despite these conditions. As I have mentioned, these are the conditions that constrict Adivasi speech and produce the picturebook in the first place- Adivasi vulnerability and global capital.

The picturebook could also be a part of a machinery of global capital that appears to provide a platform for Adivasi expression, like Gautam Adani’s installation, but in reality, strangles Adivasi expression. I have argued that an independent publisher like Tara Books can collaborate ethically with the Adivasi artist precisely because they are independent and can exercise a will to transform. But does this collaboration, coated in a patina of wealth, restrict the artist, actually pushing them to perform their indigeneity for the postcolonial primitivist nation? In other words, the publishers’ will to transform design and content may be in tandem with a narrativized (Adivasi) will to abjection. It is certainly possible to write about the Tara office in Chennai the way cultural anthropologist Mary Hancock describes DakshinaChitra (translated Southern Image), a cultural and art center located near Chennai. For instance, Tara Books take pride their artisanal hand-made

products. A similar emphasis on the romanticization of artisanal labor can be detected in Mary Hancock's 2015 insightful analysis of DakshinaChitra. Hancock describes DakshinaChitra as "a cultural center dedicated to the re-creation of Southern India's pre-modern rural lifeways" (184), established about 30 km from Chennai⁴³. DakshinaChitra is composed of what Hancock calls, "conjunctures of urban and rural, local and global" (184). Hancock is interested in DakshinaChitra's architectural composition, the class composition of the founders and managers, and claims made about the meaning of the site by said managers and the artisans who are regularly employed by DakshinaChitra. Hancock's argument is that DakshinaChitra is an example of neoliberal cultural mediation, premised on a limited regional agenda and tending to an internationalized nostalgia for a vanishing national-homeland in the minds of affluent diaspora Indians. Similarly, the Tara Book Building and the Tara picturebook is also a site for an Indigenous theater to play itself out. For example, one must take one's shoes off at the entrance to the building. A small team of dedicated individuals run the office and the work. To the right is a tiered display of Tara publications. Further in, there is an open verandah, the walls of which have been painted by Bhajju Shyam. Over a flight of stairs is the ideation area and decorated mattresses by a low table. There is a staff kitchen. Atop another floor is where C Arumugam and his team sit. Superficially, both DakshinaChitra and Tara's Book Building are designed to show off their collaboration with folk and Adivasi artisans/artists. The overwhelming contrast

⁴³ In fact Hancock titles her essay "Remembering the Rural in Suburban Chennai: The Artisanal Pasts of DakshinaChitra", thus emphasizing a particular rural remembering that is endemic to the display of cultural heritage. One may take forward Hancock's point to say that the memory of the past is the site for culture to negotiate anxieties emphasized in neo-liberalizing India. The question is how Adivasi artistic agency in *Creation* may be read in this scenario.

between editorial/cultural/capitalist privilege and Adivasi artistic material conditions would force us to imagine that Tara's endeavor is appropriating Adivasi labor and culture, like DakshinaChitra in Hancock's discussion appropriates folk artisanal labor for display. Wolf, Geetha, and part of the Tara team are part of the aspiring internationally mobile class- and arguing for ethical mutual contracts does not do away with the Adivasi theatre that I have discussed, or the rural theatre observed by Spivak. In response, asserting that Bhajju Shyam practices a willing collaboration with Tara books, nurtured in the atmosphere that the Tara editors have intentionally fostered, would only emphasize the willing abjection that has been mentioned.

Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between DakshinaChitra and Tara. Even though both alliances employ members of vulnerable communities for collaboration, Tara Books is more sensitive. Tara's output clearly centers the rural and the Adivasi- and each book takes time to ideate as both artist and publisher take time to absorb the process and intervene. This is possible owing to the "small independent" nature of their work. The editors and the artists find it easier to bridge the sharp difference in privilege. Bhajju Shyam counts Gita Wolf as a good friend, and Wolf confirms this. This is a remarkably different paradigm compared to Hancock's reading of DakshinaChitra. With Tara and Bhajju Shyam, there is a realization of inter-personal relationships developing, in a relationship premised upon consent to labor. Bhajju Shyam's work with Tara Books, limited as it is by the forbidding price of their picturebooks, is a momentous glimpse into a possibility of a resistance against globalizing electronic capitalism. As noted already, Wolf and Geetha have attempted to aid the artists in their foray into the market. And the artists strategize. Bhajju Shyam, for instance, is continually invited to exhibit at art events. He has been

awarded the Padma Shri- the fourth highest civilian award in India- by Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister. He is an agent who speaks for himself and strategically uses examples like *Creation* to tell his story.

Even as it appears to be a bleak praxis, artistic voice helps clarify a measure of resistance. More than the intention of the publisher, it is Bhajju Shyam's art that governs the autoethnographic picturebook. Therein lies the agential negotiation. Speaking to me about how Pardhan Gond art had now become a "jeeney ka zariya", an "instrument of livelihood", and thus he had to create "ped, paudhe, pakshi", trees, plants, birds- Bhajju Shyam had said "karna padta hai", one must do it. I detect a kernel of defiance in his words. The "it" could refer to the pressure of stereotyped art, but also the pressure of being an Adivasi artist in 21st century India, or indeed the pressure of performing indigeneity via sundry collaborations. Bhajju Shyam implicitly alludes to the pressure of appearing to accede to a willing subjection. This is similar to the defiance I have read in *Creation*. Like Bhajju Shyam re-creates a Gond origin myth to obliquely refer to historical stigma of criminality and association with Mahua liquor, his words create a doubled position- doing what must be done, but also distant from what must be done. Indeed, like this is evident in *Creation*, one must read another mythical narrative in "The Unborn Fish". Bhajju Shyam collaborated with billionaire Gautam Adani, despite the latter's history of threatening Adivasi livelihood and dignity, for an art installation about the supercontinent Gondwanaland. Gondwanaland is different from the Gondwana region in India, which comprises regions with significant Gond tribal residence- parts of the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhatisgarh, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh. The Gondwana region in fact derives its name from the Gondi speaking Gond tribals who have populated the area.

There has been a demand for separate statehood of the Gonds, naming it Gondwana in recognition of the Gonds. The demand has not been met yet and has been unable to garner popular political support. At least in Madhya Pradesh, Gond art has been used to usher in more tourism in its usage at airports, railway stations, and at various public parts of the state capital Bhopal, including the Vidhan Sabha (murals famously created by Jangarh Singh Shyam) but separate statehood has not been a prominent political issue. Could “The Unborn Fish” that is “waiting to be born” be the unborn state of Gondwana? There is political precedent in 21st century. The state of Jharkhand was carved out in response to Adivasi demand for a self-managed region. But Gondwana remains mythical at this moment. Perhaps “The Unborn Fish” like a separate state is also waiting to be formed. In our interview, Bhajju Shyam referred to the Gondwana too. Discussing the changes in the artform in Madhya Pradesh, he said “first it was all Gondwana, right” “Pehle toh yeh sab Gondwana hi tha na” (B. Shyam, Personal Interview 2022). While this proves that Shyam acknowledges Gondwana as important to his work, it does not mean that he intends “The Unborn Fish” to be a request for statehood. I am reading his work as a possible visualization of resistance, in spite of the totalizing consensual abjection that collaboration can lead us to.

Nevertheless, Shyam’s acknowledgement of Gondwana and its almost emphatic allusion to an axiomatic past tense- it *was* all Gondwana, after all- does something else. It generatively confuses the supercontinent Gondwanaland with the Gondwana territory in contemporary India. Indeed, Gautam Adani’s comment on the 2019 art installation also conflates the “Indian Gond artists” and “Australian Aboriginal artists” with the supercontinent Gondwana. Adani said he “did not expect to learn so much about Gondwana

the 550 mn year old supercontinent through stories curated by Australian Aboriginal Indian Gond artists” (“Gond and Aboriginal Art”). But “one must do it”, despite the confusion. I mean that the conflation and confusion is productive because Bhajju Shyam makes it work for him. Connecting contemporary Indian Gondwana to a supercontinent, however mythically, re-confirms indigeneity. In a time when indigeneity itself is under interrogation in the proposed difference between Adivasi and Vanvasi, first dweller and forest dweller; harking back to an older primacy is crucial. It is little wonder that a political demand is formalized in the hands of the storyteller who performs an important cultural function- the narration of origin stories to invoke the blessing of the deity Bara Deo. “The Unborn Fish” is a possible origin story seeking the blessing of the powers that be and demanding literal space.

In the form of a prudently silent allegory, Shyam is doing what must be done, but is distant from what must be done. This is precisely how I have discussed autoethnography- as an accession to existing terms and a movement beyond the accession. Shyam’s work, as both utterance and non-utterance, is central to his autoethnography. Mary Hancock also observes a similarly ambivalent compliance in her discussion of the DakshinaChitra artisan. Her interviews with the artisans afford a material critique of appropriation, as she observes that the artisans are sophisticated in their approach toward the site even as they are aware of their appropriated labor. Bhajju Shyam’s sophistication lies in his astute foreknowledge of the aspects of the production and circulation of the picturebook. I have mentioned that self-awareness or foreknowledge might, in the last instance, justify the persistence of incontrovertible capital. But the artist is himself offering an indirect way out of a justification of omnipotent capital. A conscientious storyteller like Bhajju Shyam

directs us. The debilitating aggregate of global capital makes non-compliance supremely difficult- but one can see that that a subversive compliance is possible, even if it is in a mythical allegory. Shyam, for instance, has recounted how many have objected to his wearing a pair of jeans because it is not Adivasi enough, or have raised concerns about him absorbing global art influences because they take him away from what is authentic Adivasi. He narrated how he was taken by the color white in the Parisian Louvre and tried to work with more white in subsequent creations (B. Shyam, Personal Interview 2022). Objections notwithstanding, Bhajju Shyam continues to do what he would like to. This is a strategic compliance, like the strategic autoethnography that is *Creation*. Bhajju Shyam understands the terms upon which “one must do it” and crafts the picturebook, making use of all resources at hand, including his collaboration. This is how the picturebook, and not the postcolonial primitive nation, indexes the transformation from “deprivation” to “possibilities”.

Conclusion

I began the essay by observing a perpetual primitivism for Adivasi subjects in visual art created using Indian Adivasi subjects. In 19th century newspaper illustration created by Walter Sherwill, 20th century modern Indian painting created by the Bengal School, and 21st century national display after 75 years of Indian independence- I have noted a continued subjection of the Adivasi to larger agendas. For example, in contemporary India, a new nationalism, a neo-swadeshi fundamentalism has swept the region. It is embedded in a “forgetting” of nuance around non- mainstream religions or ways of life. This monolithic Hinduism, afraid of ceding indigeneity to Adivasis is coercing an identification with the term “vanvasis” or forest dwellers. Pastoral forested romanticism

on the surface; forest land control in depth. Ceding of land has continued since Independence and the 2022 re-ascension of Nandalal Bose's romantic depictions of Santhals gestures to contemporary majoritarianism. In the Adivasi context, I have called it "postcolonial primitivism". This is part of the larger network of pressures that affect Adivasi art and artists. This is why it is important to read Bhajju Shyam's Adivasi picturebook as an autoethnography. An autoethnography walks with and parts ways from earlier modes of depiction. Bhajju Shyam's *Creation* is necessarily different from the "swadeshi" romantic longing of elite artists. *Creation* does not dramatize human bodies in its stories. The only human bodies that are visible are in "The Birth of Art"- and even they are merely one branch of the tree that is the birth of art. This is a converse of the work of Haren Das, Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij- who highlight the Adivasi body *in* the sylvan landscape. Their work relates these bodies to the forest, in order to suggest an indelible relationship between the two. Pardhan Gond painting and the Pardhan Gond picturebook is also an example of this relationship, but as I have shown with Bhajju Shyam and Jangarh Singh Shyam, lush romanticism is negotiated. In fact, Bhajju Shyam, via the artist-publisher relationship and his potent utilization of the medium completely re-frames primitivism. In the autoethnographic picturebook, Bhajju Shyam uses creation tales to narrate his art and his community- in eloquent speech and silence. In "The Birth of Art", he creates a total picture of his community, as well as the shifts in the artform, to signal a move away from the terms of anthropology. In "The Unborn Fish", he uses an intentional silence to mark another defiant theme- historical stigma of Pardhan criminality, the Mahua liquor laws that turned Adivasis into criminals overnight, and a demand for a separate Adivasi-led state.

In the essay, I have been interested in how an apparent silence appears in the self-aware picturebook around the theme of a colonially constructed criminality: how individual speech works or does not in relation to community history. I have argued that an Adivasi self-representation evinces a challenge to earlier modes of depiction. Perhaps the challenge here is the superficial non-reference to archival representation. I think the autoethnographic picturebook dramatizes this silence via allegory, even when it is portrayed as a silence, as in *Creation*. Thus, it gives voice to a silence and form to ostensible formlessness. By dramatizing unfair representation, it challenges the carceral colonial and post-colonial policies that make existence difficult for Adivasi individuals. In other words, the silence is tactical. If silence is a staged absence, then it is important to discuss what is purposely absented. Indeed, this is why it is pivotal to consider an agonizing archive. Absences in other media that feature Adivasi voices are useful here. Henry Schwarz states that the script for Dakxin Bajrange's play *Bulldozer* promises a "play within a play" (124) but does not really deliver beyond a passing reference in the play to another play that may have been performed. Writing of this absence Henry Schwarz says, "...the absence of the play within a play actually indicates the *need* for the play, instructing us on the *necessity* of aesthetics..." (Schwarz 125, Italics his). For him, this lack of delivery of meta-theatre only sharpens the need for the play in the first place. I too am interested in the meaning and need for the staged silence in the context of self-aware Pardhan Gond self-representation.

The need for the picturebook lies in the beleaguered past of the Pardhans. But a neo-liberal present, intimately related to postcolonial primitivism also pressurizes the Adivasi individual to perform indigeneity, as part of a larger *narrativized* subaltern will to capital subjection. The collaboration between culturally and financially wealthy publisher

and a member of a vulnerable community that leads to the picturebook can also be seen as this globalizing will to essentialism, that, in the last instance, is only about profit. I have discussed how the publisher's efforts might be read as an appropriation. While the publisher's endeavor is both ethical and well-intended, there are always questions about collaboration. Even though *Tara* is different from *DakshinaChitra* and films like *RRR* and *The Elephant Whisperers*, there are questions about how/why the artist thinks "one must do it". I have mentioned that it is Bhajju Shyam himself who directs us to a resolution- he gestures to a subversive ambivalence. An autoethnography is precisely this provocative vagueness, an accession and a departure. This explains the juxtaposition of expression and silence. This is what transforms impoverishment into potentialities. The subaltern can speak and the elite must do what they can to ally with them.

Chapter 2 What Do Picturebooks Want: The Case of Bhajju Shyam's *The London Jungle Book*

Bhajju Shyam (1971-) has illustrated the 2004 *The London Jungle Book*. *The London Jungle Book* is an account of Bhajju Shyam's stay in London and the sights and sounds of the city, in the vocabulary of Gond shape and colors. *The London Jungle Book*, first published in English in 2004, has seen 4 reprints already and has been translated into many languages- including Dutch, French, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish. Each doublespread in the picturebook features a translated comment by Bhajju Shyam. Sometimes the doublespreads are separated from each other by a narrative snippet by him. Shyam's comments have been translated from Hindi to English by Gita Wolf, founder-editor at Tara books, and Sirish Rao, writer and former editor at Tara Books. "Bhajju Shyam returns- after a century- Kipling's gaze with an equal sense of wonder, adventure, humour and directness of expression" (Back Cover, *The London Jungle Book*). Art historian Jyotindra Jain's testimonial above, for *The London Jungle Book* pays homage to the title chosen by Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao for Bhajju Shyam's visual rendition of his stay in London. It is an insider's view of the colonial metropole. Historically speaking, it is the writer or anthropologist outsider who has viewed the colonized hinterland. Rudyard Kipling's 1894 *The Jungle Book* and its 1896 extension, become specters to allude to and rail against in a historiography of the Gonds. Kipling's is the earliest fictional account of the Gonds and his writing exemplifies a flawed narrative availability of the Gond tribe. The Gonds in *The Jungle Book* are quaint entities, almost invisible and inexplicable. Such a scenario continues. Verrier Elwin refers to Kipling's tales primarily set in the Seoni Hills- one of the areas of Gond residence- both in the 1958 *Leaves From the Jungle* and the 1946

Myths of Middle India. A predestined Adivasi availability for textual and visual narratives persists even in the 21st century. In fact, as political scientists, historians, and cultural studies scholars like Uday Chandra, Prathama Banerjee, Sangeeta Dasgupta, and Alice Tilche argue, primitivism remains potent in the discourse of Indian indigeneity today. If primitivism and indigeneity are forcibly connected, how can an insider picturebook illustrated by an Indigenous artist from India confront primitivism via art? Especially as publications by Tara Books is a boutique Anglophone commodity as well as a platform for expression?

A picturebook like *The London Jungle Book* is an Anglophone product. The images have been illustrated by Bhajju Shyam, one of the Gond community's foremost art practitioners today, and it has been published by Tara Books, one of the most prominent alternative publishers in India today. Tara Books first published the picturebook in English and then translated it to other languages. But *The London Jungle Book* per se was conceptualized in Hindi, a native Indian language; then translated into English by Tara Books for publication- and then translated into other languages. Tara Books' choice to solemnize *The London Jungle Book* in English—in a country with limited Anglophone literacy—appears superficially limited. Any number of questions can be posed here. How can the publisher ensure that the Adivasi artist's practice is adequately given space in a pricey object using the English language? Further, is it possible the presumed readership of the illustrated books and picturebook, i.e. children and their didactic caregivers, limit the complexity of an Adivasi picturebook⁴⁴? And if ongoing primitivism affects the

⁴⁴ As explained in the introduction, I have coined the term “Adivasi Picturebook” to refer to the capacity of the contemporary Indian Anglophone picturebook to intervene in an impoverished representation of Adivasi bodies and voices.

Adivasi illustrated picturebook published by a children's publisher, how can the artist ensure that both the picturebook and the art embedded in it turn away from a narrow and infantilized understanding to a nuanced visual creation? Lastly, how can we theorize artistic control in such a matrix of meaning?

I propose that Adivasi artistic control takes the form of Adivasi visibility. Adivasi visibility stands as an interrogation of earlier visual hegemonic practices. Its very presence demands a series of questions. I think *The London Jungle Book* activates the principle of Adivasi visibility by more than reversing a colonial ethnographic gaze, as Jyotindra Jain mentions in the blurb. Reversal is per se a pivotal effort. Bhajju Shyam's art goes further—it turns the colonial and postcolonial discursive gaze upon itself. His art creates a universe completely controlled creatively by the Adivasi artist. As Bhajju Shyam illustrates Big Ben as a Gond rooster or visualizes an Adivasi iteration of Shiva—a prominent Hindu deity—as watching over every diner at the London restaurant where he painted murals; London is disruptively overseen and becomes a prop for the artist. An Adivasi visibility practices a tactical turn as directed by Bhajju Shyam.

Adivasi visibility is agential. It stems from an artist willingly taking on the task of talking back. It punctures unilinear hierarchical narratives. Via a picturebook like *The London Jungle Book* or an illustrated biography like *Bhimayana*, Adivasi visibility cements the place of an artist in publication. It empowers. It re-uses conventional religious iconography and conventional ways of seeing icons. It has the potential to recuperate the flawed staging of the tribal in Kipling and Elwin. Indeed, Indian visual culture studies has

mostly been concerned with what a field of visuality can *do*. An Adivasi visuality is similar to and different from other conceptions of visual experience in South Asia. Religious historian Diana L Eck's "darshan", literally meaning "vision" can be described as a two-way inter-vision between the eyes of deity and the devotee: both deity and devotee are important to accomplish "darshan". Darshan is an instrument of spiritual and embodied fulfilment. It has been discussed as a pivotal concept to understand Indian visual cultures. Scholars are also discussing other modes of visual and embodied apprehension of the world. Christopher Pinney, anthropologist and visual studies scholar, takes this forward most notably in his 2004 *Photos of the Gods*. Pinney argues for the "efficacy" of images. Reading chromolithographs, prints, and photographs across the 19th and 20th centuries, he conceptualizes Indian visuality as determined by a "corporetics"- a corporeal aesthetics (*Photos* 8). Pinney's corporetics is determined by an intentional frontality and theatricality that is a walking away from colonial perspectival imposition and a movement toward an affective sensory experience; an experience that is communal and thus political.

However, visuality for an Adivasi artist is simply not a matter of devotional "darshan" or an appeal to a community via frontal theatricality. A "darshan" of Adivasi art or an Adivasi iteration of Shiva in the picturebook can stifle nuance and stereotype some "essential" Adivasi identity apparently transparent in the art housed in the picturebook. This essential meaning is often understood as a lack. And the lack appears as the lack of verisimilitude. Perhaps owing to assumption that Adivasis are thought to be lagging in modernity, their art is thought to lag behind that of academy trained "modern" Indian artists. This leads to a double marginalization. Adivasi art becomes inferior to modern Indian art. At the same time, Indian art itself has been historically "maligned" in a

comparison between “western” and Indian art. Art Historian Partha Mitter in his 1977 *Much Maligned Monsters*, and the more recent 2007 *The Triumph of Modernism*, also describes the assumption of lack or lag. Additionally, Dipesh Chakrabarty, noted postcolonial scholar and a member of the *Subaltern Studies* collective, considers a similar lack in the field of Indian historiography in “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History”. Words like “lack”, “absence”, or “inadequacy” are visibilized in the work done by historians of India (*Provincializing* 32). So first Western art, then Indian art, and then finally Indian Indigenous Adivasi art. Pinney’s affective sensory efficacy might recuperate the art for Indian viewers but it is more likely that it would harm the apprehension of Adivasi art by pushing it in the hierarchy of Western, modern Indian, and Adivasi art. I will end this paper by suggesting a way out of this harm. I suggest that the turn and complete visual control in the manipulation of a reversed “gaze” helps Shyam depart from the essentializing pitfalls of darshan and corporetics.

Further, there are theoretical concerns about visibility and Adivasi art when seen through the work of other visual culture theorists. The term “visibility” is fraught in scholarship. Nicholas Mirzoeff’s 2011 *The Right to Look*, for instance, distinguishes between visibility and countervisibility. He argues that visualizing power may also activate resistance via countervisibility. Mirzoeff, a noted visual studies scholar, contends that “Visibility sought to present authority as self-evident” (3) as it is predicated on the violent initiation of Western modernity in the plantation and military complex. For Mirzoeff, the right to look demands exclusion and power. Given that Indigenous peoples across the world have borne the brunt of the right to look, why strain a term like Adivasi here? Does “Adivasi visibility” mock vulnerability or make light of artistic agency? By bringing

together both terms “Adivasi” and “visuality”—a gaze that perpetually reproduces Foucauldian power in the visual field, originating in modernity—I hope to redress some of the conceptual misrepresentation borne by the Gonds and the Pardhans. J Swaminathan, artist, curator, and Jangarh Singh Shyam’s first collaborator, observes that Adivasis have been seen as somehow lagging in time (*The Perceiving Fingers*). As I describe an Adivasi visuality, I wish to confront the presumptuous categorization of modernity and the lag. An Adivasi visuality stakes claim in the service of purposeful control. It reclaims Mirzoeff’s right to look. Bhajju Shyam’s *The London Jungle Book* purveys a corrective to colonial representation by re-claiming a right to look. Bhajju Shyam does so not simply as an Indian journeying to the heart of darkness, i.e. Empire, but as an Adivasi artist journeying to the center of the origin of lack, i.e. London. Since English writers and ethnographers have scripted the Adivasi from the outside hitherto, an Adivasi artist like Bhajju Shyam journeys to the origin of the center, as in the origin of the presumption that the Adivasis lack, to script London from inside out.

It is keeping the above reversal of travel in mind that the title of this paper, “What Do Picturebooks Want”, is a reference to visual studies scholar W J T Mitchell’s 2005 *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images*. What could the Adivasi picturebook want, seen in Bhajju Shyam’s journey? Indeed, Mitchell⁴⁵ provides a

⁴⁵ Invoking Mitchell is careful choice Another prominent scholar of visual studies, John Berger, author of the now canonical *Ways of Seeing*, is thanked by Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao in the “acknowledgements” to *The London Jungle Book* and contributes a testimonial for the book on the back cover. Earlier in his eponymous essay, Mitchell proposes a speculative response to his question. He avers that there be a “slight modification” (46) of pictorial hermeneutics toward a “construal of pictures not as sovereign objects or disembodied spirits but as subalterns whose bodies are marked with the stigmata of difference, and who function both as “go-betweens” and scapegoats in the social field of human visuality” (46).

provocative response to the question his title poses, “What pictures want in the last instance, then, is simply to be asked what they want, with the understanding that the answer may well be, nothing at all” (48). In Mitchell’s wake, I think the contemporary Anglophone picturebook wants to be asked what it wants. The Adivasi picturebook is an interrogation in form and content, and thus wants to be read, heard, contemplated. The picturebook’s desire to be interrogated is a point of entry into the agential world of the picturebook, illustrated by an Adivasi artist. It asks its readers to contemplate. Unlike Mitchell, I do not claim that the “answer may well be nothing at all”. The Adivasi picturebook throws Indigenous subaltern storytelling into relief- it is now an enabling of a “subaltern” subject, and in doing so, it evinces Adivasi agency. I should note that the expensive pricing of the Tara-published picturebook prevents any claim about the Adivasi picturebook as a subaltern object per se. Instead, the Adivasi illustrated picturebook is an aid to the subaltern subject and their visual output. The picturebook desires to be interrogated so it can re-direct the reader to the art and the artist. This is the work of the Adivasi picturebook. As Bhajju Shyam deploys his Pardhan Gond repertoire to describe London in *The London Jungle Book*, the Adivasi picturebook becomes a platform for a demonstration of Pardhan Gond storytelling. Bhajju Shyam finds ways to re-present and demonstrate his control over the image in the picturebook.

An Adivasi visuality is a malleable tool that can confront primitivism but also communicate Adivasi strategy. It may maneuver itself to appear as *other* and divergent from non-Adivasi art. As in Adivasi art looks different from “modern” academy-trained art. This difference, as I discuss later in the essay, is not value neutral. It is assumed that Adivasi art is subordinate to modern art and thus lacking. In the case of Adivasi art, the

lack appears as the lack of verisimilitude. Adivasi art has been embattled by a mis-construal –to use Mitchell’s “construal” (46)—of lack/absence/inadequacy. As if “modern” art must sequentially be placed before Adivasi art. This will become important when we consider Bhajju Shyam’s Gond worms burrowing under London in the next section. Adivasi art is embattled, like Indian historiography. Accounting for this battle, it is important that this “lack” be appropriated for Bhajju Shyam via Adivasi visuality. For instance, when I discuss the dog-bus and the fox-pub in *The London Jungle Book*, I ask how the dissolution of difference between the shapes of dog and the fox can be made to work for Bhajju Shyam. Adivasi visuality then is both a practice and a method of reading that uncovers an agential confrontation of primitivism across disciplines.

Adivasi visuality can also be a moving tactic transmitted from one artist to another. While I am interested in art and the picturebook, scholars of Indigenous theory have explored medium specific resistance globally. Noted film and visual studies scholar Michelle Raheja, for example, discusses a “visual sovereignty” as a strategy that “Indigenous filmmakers” have practiced (*Reservation Reelism* 194). For Raheja, visual sovereignty in film allows a genuine collaboration between non-Indigenous individuals and Indigenous filmmakers or crew. As importantly, it allows for usage of technology to appeal to their own communities with respect to issues of language preservation and “the flow of Indigenous knowledge” (196). I cannot claim that the Adivasi picturebook transmits Indigenous knowledge from one Adivasi individual to another. But it is likely that the Adivasi picturebook enables a transmission of Adivasi visuality from one Adivasi practitioner to another. In other words, one artist may note another artist’s tactic to wrest control and then trace their own method of doing the same. For example, I discuss Durgabai

Vyam and Subhash Vyam's work in *Bhimayana* and their formal innovation as pre-figured by Bhajju Shyam's stringent Adivasi depiction of the deity Shiva in *The London Jungle Book*. The Adivasi picturebook enables then a crucial *communication* of strategy from one artist to another. Visuality here is laboriously functioning as a route for artists to chart.

This is not to say that the picturebook always aids the artist in their work. Another aspect of the lack/lag associated with Adivasi art is the eventual signification of this art inside the picturebook. The picturebook is infantilized owing to its inherent connection to children. The danger is that the art housed in the picturebook may be infantilized too. Infantilization not only robs the picturebook of a media specific sincerity, but authoritatively fobs off a diminution upon the Indigenous artist. I think Bhajju Shyam's Adivasi picturebook attempts to battle such an unjust diminution. When seen through multiple scholarly lenses of children's fiction studies, visual culture studies, and postcolonialism, Bhajju Shyam's effort may be unearthed as critical and transgressive of generic infantilization. The turn and reversal to total control are precise epistemological methods that allow a larger scope for analysis. As Edward Said highlights, an orientalizing force has held nuance in check in cultural productions about the Orient. For the contemporary Indian anglophone picturebook, it a double ignominy- orientalism and infantilization- that holds Indigenous art in its thrall.

But the Indigenous artist instrumentalizes both the medium and the artist-editor coalition to benefit their art and story. Ruth A Philipps, scholar of Canadian indigeneity, writes a revised script of contact between well-meaning mentors and Indigenous artists in early and mid 20th century North America thus, "Through these processes of dialogic exchange, the indigenous artist turns modernist primitivism to indigenous modernity"

(“The Turn of the Primitive”). The collaboration between Bhajju Shyam and Wolf and Rao “turns” into an endeavor that is deployed by Bhajju Shyam to rescript and “reverse the anthropological gaze” (“How London Became a Jungle”, *The London Jungle Book*). Shyam “turns” contemporary London icons into Indigenous icons. In Sections 1 and 2, I discuss the problem infantilization and Kipling’s primitivism. In Section 3, I discuss the Anglophonic limitation of a Tara picturebook and how the English language has been repurposed for protest by the marginalized. I then return to Bhajju Shyam’s text in Section 4 to prove that his endeavor is not simply a turn- it is actually a vision of absolute control and claim.

Indigenous Art in the Indian Picturebook

The London Jungle Book is now one of the most popular picturebooks by Tara Books. It is constantly in demand. It was a semi-finalist at the 2006 Independent Publisher Awards under the category “Multicultural Non Fiction”, and has made it to the 2015 United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY) Outstanding International Books Honor List. According to Shikha Singh (“The Dislocations”), literary and cultural scholar, *The London Jungle Book* cemented the relationship between Tara Books and Bhajju Shyam, especially as it marked a collaboration between Tara and an Adivasi artist. The first such collaborative venture between the two was in 2003 with *Beasts of India*; but as *The London Jungle Book* transpired, both Tara and Bhajju Shyam had found a new direction in their careers. Tara Books is now reputed for its work with Adivasi and folk artists. It enables creative innovation in the artform as well. For instance, Jangarh Singh Shyam brought the Old Gods to iconic form in media like paper and canvas. Bhajju Shyam, as we will see in the last section in this essay, takes this manifestation forward.

However, illustrating for picturebooks has medium specific theoretical consequences too. I have mentioned the presumptuous infantilization that binds children to picturebook and childhood to Adivasi art. The picturebook per se is a beleaguered medium owing to this cruel disparagement. Picturebook scholars agree that ridiculing the picturebook for lack of seriousness only reduces the rich vibrancy of the medium. It is a truism that children's fiction in general and picturebooks in particular are composed to be easy reading experiences. Children's fiction scholars like Maria Nikolajeva, Carole Scott, Evelyn Arizpe, and Morag Styles have introduced new approaches to analyzing picturebooks with respect to form and content. In *How Picturebooks Work*, Nikolajeva writes, "Many picturebooks are clearly designed for both small children and sophisticated adults, communicating to the dual audience at a variety of levels" (21). Tara Books' products are usually always sophisticated and easy at the same time. Their output imagines two sets of readers- children and not children. Of course, the problem of children's fiction is precisely this duality. As in because adults are also imagined as surveilling the child's experience, perhaps children's fiction is only meant for adults. This is axiomatic in children's fiction studies now. The genre of children's fiction is conceptually oxymoronic or "impossible" because it can only paint the childhood aspirations of a certain adult, or that such fiction, in the last instance, is meant to mitigate anxieties of supervisors/parents/teachers/caregivers (Jacqueline Rose 1984; 1992). Scott and Nikolajeva depart from this now canonical understanding of children's fiction. Jacqueline Rose anticipates this- she argues that the appeal to a dual audience is an evasion of the central problem—that of adults crafting an apostrophe to imagined children—but while this observation remains valid, the publishing industry also remains immune from such a

criticism. Indeed, while many picturebooks are pushing the boundaries of form and content, some value is still gleaned from capitulating to the infantilization pointed out above. In other words, a dual audience only confirms an adult audience, and therefore it confirms adult biases, and therefore can affirm adult biases against the Adivasi artists who illustrate the picturebook for Tara. While there is a global move away from the children's fiction convention of understanding the genre as giving form to the desires of a secret adult reader, it seems like the secret adult is stubborn⁴⁶.

The "hidden" (Nodelman *The Hidden Adult*) or secret adult delights in the figure of the ideal child who is romantically a "tabula rasa" that must be schooled via a pedagogic picturebook. For the Tara picturebook illustrated by Adivasi artists, the hidden adult romantically connects the child and the Adivasi. Noted children's fiction scholar Peter Hunt diagnoses a certain disdain for children's fiction when he argues that childhood is meant to be a state that one grows away from. As the adult is not a child anymore they may presume that children's fiction is also a genre they have grown away from. Similarly, Indigenous bodies are thought to exist in a civilizational childhood. Anthropologists have often looked to tribes for a primitive connection between the past and the present. For technocratic neo-liberal societies, this might mean that Indigenous peoples are primitive and thus Indigenous art is *other*-worthy of contempt or whimsy. In India, the "lag" that is apparently associated with Adivasi bodies is extended to Adivasi art. Thus, both childhood and Adivasihood (Sen *Indigeneity* 208) are states to either fondly celebrate as "tabula rasa"

⁴⁶ Perry Nodelman, for instance, titles his 2008 book *The Hidden Adult*.

or “noble savage” or to be shunned for being undeveloped and merely savage. The hidden adult in the picturebook enhances infantilization and primitivism.

An association of Adivasi bodies with unserious childishness is not the only concern. The picturebook has the potential to pedagogically punish the Adivasi. The dominant strain in children’s publishing is an ideal childhood that needs to be taught a way of life via images and words. A study of the picturebook in fact, invokes two related concerns of visibility and pedagogy: what and how does the picturebook teach the child, and what is an acceptable image to show the child and the caregiver. If the caregiver or hidden adult mobilizes the child’s “tabula rasa” to imagine a “noble savage” for pedagogic purposes, then we must ask what is being taught. More than teaching the child a way of seeing art, children’s fiction might teach the child a way of seeing Adivasis in the Adivasi-illustrated picturebook. Indeed, the seriousness of this claim is demonstrated by the fact that most children’s texts continue to romanticize childhood. Picturebook scholars Martin Salisbury and Morag Styles contend, “We may be living in a so-called postmodern age where playfulness, rule-breaking, fragmentation and uncertainty are commonplace (and feature in many challenging picturebooks), but romantic and idealized representations of childhood still appeal to adult nostalgia, and are still represented in many picturebooks” (75). “Adult nostalgia” continues to inscribe the child as an empty slate. The same romantic nostalgia for a lost stage of life automatically reduces the labor and sincerity of Adivasi art when it is sold in the picturebook. This necessitates work that scrutinizes the picturebook as a medium, because the picturebook is an index of visual power and iconic controversy. This is also why more than one discipline must be referred to “read” *The London Jungle Book*- visual culture studies, literary and cultural studies, art history, and ethnography.

The simultaneous existence of interdisciplinarity as well as intentional pedagogy is indeed the hallmark of the Indian picturebook. V Geetha, activist and scholar of caste and gender, and the co-founder of Tara Books, discusses the picturebook as an aesthetic, political, transnational, pedagogic, designated, and visual innovation in 20th century India. In the 2017 *Another History of the Children's Picturebook*, V Geetha and G Jankeviciute describe almost a whole century of aesthetic and publication cultures as they traverse textual travel between Soviet Russia, Lithuania, and India, beginning at the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 to the flowering of Soviet-inspired picturebooks in the India of the 1980s. The Soviet-inspired picturebook was inexpensive and with their unique capacity to *narrate* a story in words, emerged more easily translatable⁴⁷ than text-heavy productions. Moreover, the idea that a text may be consumed by individuals with little or no access to cultural capital was also a motivating factor for the low prices of the books. While this may be a propaganda technique, it did ensure that texts reached more individuals. Geetha and Jankeviciute write, "For artists and designers, the children's book was not a charming cultural object, as it had been in late Imperial Russia; neither was it meant only for a select few. Books of the revolution were for all... Further, the children's book was not only meant for children: it was also an incipient literacy primacy that adult neo-literates could read and use as well" (*Another History* 40). This is not then just a charming whimsy for putative child readers of the picturebook. They are also matter that may be used to teach. The Indianized picturebook then occupies a position between the visual, pedagogic, narrative, and historical. A picturebook like *The London Jungle Book* needs must be understood in

⁴⁷ See Titas Bose for an account of Soviet picturebooks in India ("Reading in Translation").

more than one perspective. However, unlike the picturebooks Geetha and Jankeviciute write about, the Tara Adivasi picturebook is indeed for a select few. It is certainly innovative, agential, and legitimately collaborative; but it is priced prohibitively. It is a “charming cultural object” (*Another History* 40).

Despite the well-intentioned academic habitation of the picturebook across disciplines, the “actual” intended of children’s fiction, i.e. the caregiver, is so intransigent conceptually, that it is well-nigh irrefutable to claim that the picturebook is not serious, like the children it might appeal to, or more perniciously like the Adivasis it might be illustrated by. But if the Adivasi artist is indeed performing a “turn” about such primitivist infantilizing impulses, what is being turned and how it is being reversed? To answer the question, I first locate the art in the picturebook and then read one doublespread in *The London Jungle Book*. I then place the picturebook in the publishing scenario of Tara Books, which will help contextualize the work of the artist. The paper then uses this placement to ask how Bhajju Shyam strategically manages this platform to demonstrate his artistic worldview. Since the Adivasi is subjected to visual availability on predetermined terms, I hope to explain how expropriating a forementioned primitivist conceptual lack for Bhajju Shyam, by way of visibility, is what the picturebook wants. In “Can the Subaltern Speak”, postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak nicely elaborates the notion of “inadequacy” immanent in the work of the *Subaltern Studies* collective. Her argument is that the academic collective speaks for the imagined “subaltern”, oblivious to the narrativization this upholds. Her reading of the young woman’s suicide is meant to unearth subaltern stories, in the spirit of the *Subaltern Studies* collective. Like Spivak, I wish to unearth the Adivasi illustrated picturebook as an expression of subaltern agency. The

Adivasi picturebook must be “construed”- to use W J T Mitchell’s word (*What Do* 46)- as a site of assertion. Doing so, one is in fact countenancing Dipesh Chakrabarty’s suggestion in *Provincializing Europe*- that provincializing Europe must be “the possibility of a politics and project of alliance between the dominant metropolitan histories and the subaltern peripheral pasts” (42). For Bhajju Shyam, London is the metropolitan history that creates a lack where there is not, and in its visual, Adivasi, postcolonial reversal revises the notion of a lack. The Adivasi picturebook, as a collaboration between Bhajju Shyam and Wolf and Rao is a medium strategically deployed to reverse and take control of a colonized post-colonial gaze.

Kipling and Bhajju Shyam

Kipling’s text was the first to fictionalize the Gonds of Central India. But fiction brings in a politics of narrativization. It is now a question of the outsider representing the insider and utilizing them for narrative. In a telling chapter in Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, titled “Letting in The Jungle”, Mowgli orchestrates the jungle animals with the aim of demolishing the village that is attempting to murder his human caretakers. The jungle is coerced into behaving as Mowgli directs, and in a fantastically cohesive masterstroke, all animals pay heed to Mowgli and fulfil his wishes. It is then that the village priest summons the aid of the nearest tribal Gond king, who then presumably sends a priest of his own.

So they sent for the head man of the nearest tribe of wandering Gonds—little, wise, and very black hunters, living in the deep Jungle, whose fathers came of the oldest race in India—the aboriginal owners of the land. They made the Gond welcome with what they had, and he stood on one leg, his bow in his hand, and two or three poisoned arrows stuck through his top-knot, looking half afraid and half contemptuously at the anxious villagers and their ruined fields. They wished to know whether his Gods—the Old Gods—were angry with them, and what sacrifices should be offered. The Gond said nothing, but picked up a trail of the Karela, the vine that bears the bitter wild gourd, and laced it to and fro across the temple door in the face of the staring red Hindu image. (Kipling pp. 223-224)

The Gond priest comes from a “race” of “wise” and “very black hunters”, perhaps the oldest race in India. He is from the deepest jungle, worships Old Gods, and “laces” the door across the Hindu vermilion idol. The Hindu idol has been of no use in the story hitherto. The jungle has been let loose in the village, and the new Hindu gods have been unable to prevent or rectify the disaster that looms large. Kipling’s primitivism here is unquestionable. The Old Gods of the Gonds are perhaps the gods that Jangarh Singh Shyam gave iconic form to in his paintings. Kipling’s sincerity as a storyteller is beyond reproach. His time in India was spent immersed in the language and culture of the subcontinent. His childhood was indeed spent as an “Anglo-Indian” child might expect. The contention is not that his representation of the Gonds as primitive hunter-gatherers accompanied by grotesque gestures and mysterious rituals restricts their narrative movement. That is certainly an urgent and a powerful reading that must be made, especially as the ambivalence of Kipling’s stories and characters becomes clearer. I am interested in moving beyond the limited representation here. What function does the Adivasi’s limited depiction accomplish?

Kipling's portrayal of indigeneity swings between fondly charming and folksy to scathing. In fact, his vision in *The Jungle Book* encompasses a limited *transnational* indigeneity. Stories like "Quiqern" and "The White Seal" present primitive vistas of First Nations and Native American communities. Kipling found himself in England, North America, and India and his tales link the three regions in colonial "intimacies" (Lowe *The Intimacies*). In "The King's Ankus", Gond tribals murder Gonds and non-Gonds alike for the greed of precious stones set on a spear. Apparently, they cannot distinguish friend from foe when faced with greed. Either "wise" or "wizened" (Kipling 268), or fastening "a lean small feathered Gond arrow" (268) on villagers, Kipling's Gonds are stage managed to appear both violent and mysterious and quaint. This indeed is the narrative function of indigeneity in *The Jungle Book*. It exists to emphasize the Indian jungle. Kipling's text is a near perfect elaboration of both the "lack" that Chakraborty discusses and the flawed narrativization that Spivak observes in discourse.

The contention is that narratively speaking, the Gonds are used as a device to encourage and enhance the mystique of the jungle. Kipling's whimsical animals and inexplicable Adivasis, wise and basic by turns, are a function of the jungles that British administrators claimed were an aspect of a ruined India. This was not a coincidence: a claim for a ruined India was a cover; a ready justification for British intervention toward India's "improvement". Postcolonial historian David Arnold makes this point with force, "...the jungle was a ready emblem of India's more general decline" (*The Tropics* 82). These associations justified the use of "good government" to regulate "untamed nature" (*The Tropics* 85-86). A collection of short fiction purportedly about these untamed beasts in untamed jungles would naturally exaggerate the beasts in the jungle. The Gonds are

animalized and become one such category of secretive and impenetrable beasts. They are depicted as a vestigial element that magnifies the inscrutability of the jungle for Kipling's readers. I would go further to say that the performance of animalized othering that the Gond priest embodies in the passage quoted above, is orchestrated by Kipling for the craft of textual storytelling. This availability of the Adivasi for a certain consumption is a problem of narrativization- an example of the subaltern being cruelly spoken for, as Gayatri C. Spivak pinpoints. Other moments in Kipling's text that make a ready narrativization of the Adivasis feature singing, dancing, hunting, and murder of/around Adivasi bodies propelled by some essential Indigenous greed for gold. Kipling is the director of this spectacle of othering and in Kipling's hands, the Adivasi body is rendered only as narrative material. Such a rendition of tribal bodies as mere narrative is related to and reminiscent of the primitivism in visual art. It is now understood that Cubism, for instance, owed itself to the theft of artefacts from Africa and Oceania. As Shelley Errington clarifies, Picasso's impassioned viewing of stolen and violated sculpture inaugurated a revolution in European painting ("What Became"). Both for Picasso and Kipling, indigeneity was appropriated and abstracted as narrative material only.

Indigenous availability for non-Indigenous storytelling was and remains prevalent. But in Bhajju Shyam's 2004 *The London Jungle Book*, the orchestration that has been the prerogative of Kipling, and Kipling's persona Mowgli, is now that of Bhajju Shyam. Bhajju Shyam belongs to the Gond community. And not just that, he is a Pardhan. Pardhans have been the singer storytellers of the Gonds, custodians of the sacred instrument *bana*. As Jangarh Singh Shyam's successor, Bhajju Shyam is himself the bearer of a tradition that his predecessor inaugurated. This means that it is one of the bards of the Gonds who travels

to London to re-write Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. It is only fitting that this journey takes place. Further, Bhajju Shyam's experience of London is not simply a response to Kipling but also to anthropologists like Verrier Elwin and painters of the Bengal School who chose to denude the tribal body in art and writing.

Bhajju Shyam *provincializes* Europe. Dipesh Chakrabarty is hesitant in positing *any* historical formation as exemplifying such a provincializing, but Bhajju Shyam in tandem with Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao manages this. A potent example is the curation of Shyam's rendition of London underground tube system in *The London Jungle Book* ("The King of the Underworld"). In his words that accompany the image, there is surprise in the juxtaposition of the words "train" and "underground". Shyam provides context in an artist's note thus, "He said we would take the train, so I was surprised when he led me down a set of long stairs into a tunnel in the ground" ("There is Another World Below Us"; "The King of the Underworld"). There are not many underground trains in India except the newly built metro rails in metro cities. Most trains speed overground or over bridges and in tunnels. Shyam's art transforms the tube into a system of earthworms. "In Gond stories, we say the world below is ruled by the earthworm", he adds in the artist's note.

The earthworm is indeed the ruler of the nether realms in Gond storytelling. Jyotindra Jain, in *A Conjuror's Archive*, reproduces one version of the story of creation he has heard from Shampa Shah, who heard it from Pyare Lal Vyam. In this version (*Conjuror's* 56), the earthworm is given the title of King. He is referred to as Raja Nal/Raja Kichakmal, "raja" literally translating to King. Many Gond myths narrate the birth of civilization as resulting from the efforts of the earthworm to dig into the earth. A version of the story is that owing to catastrophic floods, the earth is submerged. The supreme deity

creates a crow and asks it to look for solid earth. Almost poisoned by the serpent that holds the world on its hood, the crow finds a crab who takes it to his friend, the earthworm. The earthworm is forced to yield his earth, which is then used by the supreme deity to fashion the world again. The earthworm then, is responsible for the rehabilitation of the world. Kipling's embodied difference dramatized in the momentary resurgence of Old Gods in the dance of the Gond may have delicately hinted at this signification. But his performance of othering exhorts this signification only to exorcize it. On the other hand, Bhajju Shyam's comparison of the tube to the earthworm certainly conveys the significance of public transport in a busy city. It also astutely pins a connotation of a functional transport system- an almost divine sublimation to the underground.

A comparison between Shyam's reptilian tubes and the TFL tube map is in order. There is resemblance between an actual map of the tube and Shyam's rendition. A quick look at the contemporary tube map ("London's Rail and Tube Services") and Bhajju Shyam's rendition establishes a measure of similarity- Shyam's worms are colored similarly and convey a similar sense of hectic multilinear traffic. The story goes that Gita Wolf gave Bhajju Shyam a TFL Tube map as he was working on the illustrations. Yet, there is a difference. There is an eschewal of visual verisimilitude in Shyam's King of the Underworld. Similarity in color and traffic notwithstanding, Shyam's hand softens the acute linearity of the London tube. It is an imaginative map, not an actual map that may guide the seeker. An actual map would have been precise. Shyam's art departs from precision. Such a departure is inherent in the scenario because rejection of pictorial realism is the crux of Pardhan Gond painting. Folk or Indigenous painting in India is identified by its refusal to verisimilitude. This is the rationale for many viewers to imagine it to be under-

developed. In fact, one may even aver that the image reads like a multi-hued reminiscence of crayons. Arguing for a lack of mature artistic development or even crayon-like affect, coupled with a softened linearity takes us squarely back to the infantilization that Indigenous art in India is plagued by. I began the paper by calling attention to a double marginalization of Pardhan Gond art as both Indigenous and Indian. A comparison between the map of the London tube and Shyam's imaginative rendition has revealed the tendency for this marginalization to appear as *lack* of precision and maturity.

How does one understand this appearance of lack? Shyam's *King of the Underworld*, and its presentation in the *London Jungle Book*, turns the picturebook into a picturebook with a difference. This is a provincialized London; an Adivasi London even. While Shyam's Adivasi London is in danger of being perceived as merely immature, its existence in the picturebook re-frames Kipling's London. It is London from an outsider's perspective. Kipling was the outsider writing the Gond, but Shyam is the Pardhan insider re-writing London. This is a decisive *turn* as the direction of ethnography has been historically unilinear. London has hitherto visualized the outsider. Now it is the outsider visualizing London, via Adivasi art. The framing of *The London Jungle Book* is an act of reversal per se.

Yet, the charge of infantilization is almost impossible to reckon with. The charge—appearance of lack—can be traced to the colonial exposition of artistic practices. In fact, the 19th century saw the ossification of a difference between academy trained art and community nursed craft. Art became individual as craft was relegated to undifferentiated collectives. Craft was often allied to “primitive” technology, apparently eternally unchanging. The arrows, spears, and the Gond entities in Kipling are all threads in the same

fabric of primitivist imagination undergirding the “other”. Jyotindra Jain takes this forward to argue that the British anointed themselves as the guardians of Indian art- it was they who found that Indian art was actually craft, and until they arrived to distinguish the individual artists from a mass of rural artisans, Indian art had languished in stagnant torpor (*Other Masters*). Craft and primitivism are always already scripted for Bhajju Shyam.

But the apparently imprecise immature lack is a self-aware tool for the Adivasi artist. I have claimed that Adivasi visuality may also appear as divergent from non-Adivasi art. “The King of the Underworld” struggles with this divergence. The Gond community, via their Pardhan Gond storyteller, is strategizing the appearance of divergence. In my 2022 interview with him, Bhajju Shyam perspicaciously admitted that often he has to bend to the will of the buyer who expects “trees, shrubs, birds” as part of the Gond symbolic repertoire. He shrewdly added that pandering to this tendency is important to put food on the table (B. Shyam, Personal Interview 2022). Shyam’s admission shows that he is astutely aware of this now ineffably permanent relationship between craft and primitivism. The question is how Shyam’s astute awareness of both the content and meaning of his art can help us understand interventionist Adivasi visuality.

Shyam’s discerning sense of his own position is significant to a nuanced apprehension of the artform in the picturebook. Historically considered, the indelible connection between craft and primitivism becomes crafty primitivism in Shyam’s hands. Art historian Saloni Mathur’s *India By Design* offers a closer and a more complicated look at the contestation that became palpable in the solidification of categories like “craft” and “display” in 19th century London. While primitive craft is an always already, Mathur’s chapters on the living exhibition of Indian crafts in 19th century England reveal an always

already resistance to the British imposition of social classification. The poignant story of the Punjab farmer, Tulsi Ram, focusses this contestation. Tulsi Ram travelled to London to seek redress with respect to a land dispute in colonial India. He was forced to don the role of a craftsman in the living exhibition by authorities. His insistence that he meet the Queen became a “problem’ for urban London and did not quite receive its due. He was imprisoned and institutionalized multiple times for being a “problem”. Tulsi Ram’s example is a compelling narrative that shows the process of consolidating craft. Mathur’s analysis re-crafts the apparent timelessness of craft in India, and by extension the now ineluctable relationship between Adivasi and craft, or even the constructed binary between “art” and “craft”. In Mathur’s elucidation of the story, the display of craft is a culmination of processes that force individuals to perform the identity of craftspeople, which then leads to what Mathur calls the “cult of the craftsman”. Craft then, for Mathur, is a performance staged by interested parties. Postcolonial literary scholar Filippo Menozzi (2014) points out the journey that Bhajju Shyam makes from Patangarh to Bhopal to London, has its antecedents in the story that Saloni Mathur focusses. By corollary, it is possible that the possibilities staged by Bhajju Shyam’s *The London Jungle Book* were glimpsed in the 19th century. Tulsi Ram’s story and the performance of craft in the “cult of the craftsman”, gestures to the gaps that any category gives itself up to, in practice. Bhajju Shyam’s journey and his self-articulated rendition of it may be a culmination of the resistance seen in the craftsmen posing in 19th century London. In Bhajju Shyam’s pain staking hands, the storytellers of the Gonds, the Pardhans, re-imagine a conversation between the urban administrative English viewer and the Adivasi viewed.

I take that forward to say that craft in 21st century, via the Adivasi picturebook, is a *strategic* performance that builds on and departs from binary construct between “art” and “craft”. Scholars have rightly pointed out the pernicious consequences of assuming an ossified distinction between art and craft. The distinction led to a stigmatization of craft and turned hierarchical. Bhajju Shyam’s venture into the picturebook crafts the picturebook, or “turns” it, to use Ruth Phillips term for his purposes. This is evident in “The King of the Underworld” too. As Saloni Mathur’s story of Tulsi Ram reveals the violent contestations around craft and display by looking for other stories in the archive, Shyam’s worms make a vision of London accessible. His worms show viewers that another vision is possible; that another story is possible. As the earthworm rehabilitates the world in the Gond myth of creation, Shyam’s earthworm rehabilitates an imaginative world that he activates. The possibility of the existence of another world, a mirror of the tube, but inhabited solely by Adivasi earthworms, proves that neither ethnography is unilinear anymore, nor is it the only story worth noting. His Adivasi earthworms burrow into London’s *soliloquy*. Owing to the simultaneous transpiration of multiple points of view, London now stands visible as more than one. It is not *a* solid unvarying central authority—it is only *one* possible story. Shyam reveals London, the center of English colonization, as under construction. Visualizing London transport as earthworms uncovers the layers of stories that combine to provide England with colonial solidity.

Shyam’s re-presentation of London re-frames it. But how transformative is this re-framing? After all, the Adivasi impressions of London perform a renewed contemplation of the metropole that enabled a display of Adivasi bodies partly by inaugurating a cult of craft. The *London Jungle Book* is arguably productive in that it enacts a transnational

unmooring of Indigenous display. However, such a provincialization continues to perambulate *around* colonial England. As if London obtusely refuses de-centering. If it is not managing a clever re-centering, that is. Dipesh Chakrabarty lays down the grounded proposition that "...Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge" (*Provincializing* 28), thus effecting the subalternity of Indian history itself. He admits that this is a problem not limited to historians, but quotes Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* to argue that the "intertexts" of Rushdie's narrator are coerced to consistently invoke European referents. If so, it is tempting to read *The London Jungle Book* as beleaguered by a similar desire to refer to European referents. In this case, the referent is London and Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. This would mean that despite the visual agency that Bhajju Shyam exercises in the Adivasi picturebook, its position as Kipling's after-effect remains paramount. Kipling's status as ur-text relegates *The London Jungle Book* to that of a response after the fact, that cannot exist without Kipling. Kipling de-centered then is really Kipling re-centered. Kipling is now Chakrabarty's silently loud referent for Bhajju Shyam.

If so, how then can the 21st century viewer think of *The London Jungle Book's* uncoupling from Kipling? Kipling's re-centering undermines any expectation of radical Adivasi artistic agency. Spivak's question about subaltern speech haunts still. It seems like Shyam's intervention is circumvented by the ceaseless memorialization of Kipling's jungles. On the one hand, Shyam exercises an urgent crafty primitivism. On the other hand, it is indisputable that Kipling's position seems unchanged as the purveyor of Adivasi availability. This is a serious charge- and indeed has the potential to reaffirm the double marginalization referred to in this essay. In fact, a deeply uncomfortable realization of circumscription, or *circumscribing*, is evident in the reading of Spivak's "Can the

Subaltern Speak”. For Spivak, the subaltern exists only in narrativization. An older pernicious narrative presumes the authority to speak for the subaltern, thus re-centering itself. This privileges the (privileged) speaker of the narrative. If only privilege is privileged in representation, then each articulation, by the subaltern or the elite, is undermined. Perhaps subaltern speech *will* inevitably be circumscribed. Or in this case, the Adivasi picturebook will inevitably be compromised. Again, how then can subaltern speech unshackle itself from the pitfalls of narrativization- narrative and visual availability?

I think the artist manages an extrication from pernicious narrativization. He plays with the lack by innovating formally. Bhajju Shyam stakes a claim to the art and the narrative. Indeed, unfortunately because the artist must bear the brunt, it is the artist who must strategize. Kipling’s re-centering should not be laid at Shyam’s door. Shyam has done all he can- he has brought his art to bear on a traumatic history and gracefully borne his burden. But Shyam is a storyteller and sings his dissatisfaction in the story he visualizes. Subaltern speech may be *claimed* by the Adivasi subject. This is an instance of an Adivasi visuality; an artist wresting visual availability for himself. As I have pointed out, Shyam’s earthworms display multiple narratives that interrupt London’s soliloquy. These narratives are evident in the inclusion of some elements that were never part of the Pardhan Gond repertoire. A review of the doublespread is in order. Figs 9ab, represent a juxtaposition of older Pardhan Gond visual symbols and an incorporation of newer ideas. The busker (top left) and the no-smoking sign (bottom right) mark the intrusion of modernity into a visual tradition that is erroneously considered eternal. Neither buskers nor no-smoking signs are part of the oral storytelling corpus of the Pardhan Gond bards. Shyam weaves these elements into the Adivasi picturebook. This is not only to satisfy the plot—London

described—but it also an expansion of repertoire. Such an expansion proves that the repertoire is not merely a fixed set of repetitive acts archived for centuries, but a dynamic collective of moves. This is a move toward a circumscribed London. I have mentioned that “Adivasi visuality” may be oxymoronic—bringing Adivasi and visceral modernity together—but Shyam turns the oxymoron into a generative juxtaposition. This movement, or turn, is possible only as Bhajju Shyam assumes to right to tell this story in the form that he desires. This, in turn, renders London less potent. There is no doubt that this is compromised speech, but Shyam’s intervention also lies in taking ownership of his right to represent- as a direct response to what I have described as Adivasi availability.

Publishing the Picturebook

I believe Bhajju Shyam employs an Adivasi visuality. It is now the Adivasi artist who makes the colonial metropole visible and pliable to himself. Instead of the administrator, writer, anthropologist, or painter; it is the previously painted subject who assumes what Mirzoeff calls “the right to look”. But, if each articulation of Adivasi assertion is circumscribed, it is crucial to see how. A series of questions are heard- Whose voice can be heard in the picturebook? Whose labor is visibilized in the picturebook? What does this mean for the medium and the pressures it realizes on the art and the artist? The publisher, in this case Tara Books, makes compositional, marketing, and linguistic choices. All of these constituent elements affect the Adivasi articulation discussed in the previous section. If we agree that each moment of Adivasi articulation is undermined by elite narrativization, then we must interrogate how constituent elements in the picturebook browbeat or support Adivasi assertion. Another way of asking this is- Bhajju Shyam re-creates London, but who creates *The London Jungle Book*?

A circum-scripted primitivist reading is in fact enhanced by the marketing of this art by a publisher reputed to ostensibly cater to children. As I have clarified in the brief note on picturebook studies at the beginning of this chapter, a relationship between primitivized Adivasi individual and an unjustly presumed infantilizing contempt toward children's fiction becomes solidified. A "lack" is encouraged in its commodified marketing of Pardhan Gond art for children in the form of picturebooks, masks, toys, magazines. Scholarship has begun to recognize this link visible in publishing. As I have mentioned in the introduction to this study, Roma Chatterji diagnoses this problem. But what does this mean for the art and the artist? I think this phenomenon eases infantilization of the art via infantilization of the picturebook. Indeed, for curator John Bowles, this easy association is "belittling" leading to a naturalized notion that the tribal artist can only ever create "charmingly decorative or child-oriented imagery" (40-41). These scholarly concerns are legitimate and return us to the question about narrative availability discussed in the previous section. As the Adivasi has been available for representation hitherto, they are now available for marketing infantilized indigeneity in a glossy picturebook.

Moreover, Adivasi artistic agency in the illustration of earthworms and the innovation of repertoire is now in danger of neutralization. Keeping the above concerns in mind, one encounters a misreading of art in the picturebook, premised on the generic categorization of the medium of the picturebook itself. In *The London Jungle Book*, Bhajju Shyam's rendition of the iconic London red bus ("The Comfort of the Familiar" *The London*) will now be misconstrued as nothing more than "child-oriented" (*Painted Songs* 40-41) play of shape and color. Bhajju Shyam's note for the section "The Comfort of the Familiar" reads, "This one doesn't need much explanation. I have turned the number 30

bus into a dog, because like a dog, it was a faithful and loyal friend to me. London buses look very friendly too and fit in with the good spirit of the faithful dog” (“The Comfort of the Familiar” *The London Jungle Book*). I say playful shape because the nature of Pardhan Gond art denies exactitude. This means that the canine bus on the page can also be construed as a fox. Indeed, a few pages later, Shyam illustrates an English pub signboard as vulpine (“Nightlife at the Drunken Fox”). A quick comparison between the canine bus and the vulpine pub emblem reveals a similarity. The shape of the face is almost the same—softly conical. The eyes of the dog and the fox are similarly large and fish-shaped. Additionally, both faces are rendered in the same shade of brown. As the fox and the dog may not be sharply distinguished, they may be misconstrued as playful and child-like, assuming that sharp differentiation between objects is a sign of adulthood. But this means that Adivasi art is understood as presumably unsophisticated. As if to say that since both children and Adivasis cannot make sharp differentiation between a fox and a dog, it is apt that the Adivasi illustrates a book for children. They share a worldview after all. A primitivism around children and around Adivasis has collapsed into one. To some extent, Adivasi artistic control is neutralized by the above accusation of infantilization. The artist may intervene via their art, but the product that is the Anglophone picturebook is ostensibly meant for children. In contrast, one may argue that the Tara picturebook appeals to dual audiences, and perhaps the putative adult will view the art with more nuance. But as Jacqueline Rose reminds us, even dual address is a cover for an adult apostrophe to the ideal child. By corollary, the adult apostrophe stems from the hidden adult. The hidden adult is the one biased against Adivasi art in the first place. Indeed, the publisher’s insistence that the art be sold in a children’s picturebook may sabotage the hard won “turn”

that I have argued for in the preceding section. In other words, when read through political economy, Bhajju Shyam may undercut London but Tara's target audience, wealthy literate children and caregivers, are only interested in the delight offered by whimsically illustrated hardbound books.

Tara's reputation as a children's publisher aids the uneasy categorization and misconstrual. At the same time, they are changing the format of the picturebook, and they are forcing the medium to transform with the art and the intent. The publisher's position might sabotage Adivasi intervention. But can it also aid and encourage this intervention? The format of the picturebook, the intent of the publisher, the language favored by the publisher, and the language used to describe the art when it enters the Tara picturebook- all contribute to a concerted effort by Tara to aid Adivasi visibility. The Indian Anglophone picturebook, ostensibly meant for children, is undergoing a shift, and Tara is at the avant garde of such a shift. I wish to discuss each of the terms: format, intent, and language, and place them in a lineage of colonialism. Tara's avantgardism encourages the Adivasi artistic agency that Shyam wrests in *The London Jungle Book*. I have addressed the class question in Chapter 1. While Shyam and Tara Books exemplify an almost ideal collaboration, it is Shyam's claim that should be centered, and I will return to Shyam's claim in succeeding sections. In this section, I read Shyam's work while placing it in its publication and political context.

Picturebooks are meant to teach something. But some publishers have begun to play with didactic demands made of them. It is commonplace to argue that picturebooks are an instrument of integration—a “means by which we integrate children into a culture” (*Children's Picturebooks* 75) or even help the child read words more deftly. Noted children's fiction scholars like Peter Hunt, Perry Nodelman, Carrie Hintz, and Sibaji

Bandyopadhyay- all diagnose a basic didacticism embedded in the genre of literature for children. Children's fiction is plagued by the weight of demanding that children *be* a certain way. Scholarship has noted this and fulminated against such a tendency- after all, often the didacticism tends toward conservatism and reinforcement of the status quo. Didacticism remains an important practice in the creation and reading of children's fiction. As I have discussed, cultural and linguistic integration may even be an integration into real power relations inherent in a society.

However, Tara's book and website design is intended to enhance a shift in didacticism. This is not a total absence of a desire to instruct. Instead, it is an energetic move into a thoughtful didacticism. Indian children's publishing too has borne witness to a transformation in content. Independent presses like Tara, established in Chennai in 1994, Pratham (Mumbai, 1994), and Tulika (Chennai, 1996) have been consistently creating new kinds of children's fare, and sometimes even intervening in the category. Anurima Chanda, scholar of children's fiction, adds two more names to this list- Young Zubaan (New Delhi, 2004) and Duckbill (New Delhi, 2012) ("Herstory"). Emma Dawson Varughese, scholar of popular fiction and speculative fiction, states that big international publishing houses like Penguin Random and HarperCollins as dominating the literary scene (*Genre Fiction*). It is in this dominated scene that independent presses like Tara Books take shape. Anurima Chanda writes that this new trend of presses and content in children's fiction purports to describe a shift away from a conventional "didactic and moralistic setup" toward a "more pluralized articulation" that attempts to engage with "marginal" voices ("Herstory" 1). Indeed, there is a newer way of didacticism.

At the same time, like the secret reader of children's fiction, older ways of writing and publishing the other remain in place. A big name like Scholastic, known for its ties with schools, has also attempted to teach folk art to its reader-viewers. The 2015 *Fabulous Folk Art: Art and Craft Activities from Across India*, illustrated by Biswajit De, and written by Benita Sen is an example of a contemporary primitivist pedagogic intent. Published by Scholastic- a major player in Indian school books and the children's books market- the book is classified as "Reference/Activity". The alliteration of the book title "fabulous folk", its "Note for Parents and Teachers" requesting "adult supervision" (*Fabulous* 4) and clear step-by-step illustrations taking the reader-viewer-doer through the creation of craft material that mimics folk traditions announce a desire to teach its consumers how to *do* fabulous folk art. But why must folk art be sold as fabulous? The double-spread on Adivasi Warli art ("West to The Warlis!" *Fabulous* 16) calls Warli⁴⁸ a "simple but effective art form" and that since the 1970s, "the characters in the Warli paintings marched off the walls and into people's homes and offices all across the world" (*Fabulous* 16). The Warli-shaped characters that Benita Sen writes as "simple" are animated in the double-spread by Biswajit De. Puppeteered by De, these characters help the child hold up the thermocol and cardboard object for display and use. Placed at the bottom right of the double-spread, the characters triumphantly signal the success of the well-crafted child. At the end of this activity, the child has learnt how to work with materials and s/he should have understood the value of fulfilling art and labor. Of course, qualifying this art form as "simple"- at least in the context of an activity book- may be a nod to the level of difficulty required in undertaking

⁴⁸ Warli's story of re-acknowledgement is seen as comparable to both Pardhan Gond painting and Mithila painting by Aurogeeta Das (*Enchanted* 27-28).

the creation by a child. Perhaps the activity and the art needs to be simple so the caregivers and the children can complete the activity without too much difficulty. This may not be an intentional pejoration practiced by the writer or the illustrator.

It is all simple and fantastic and effective. But therein lies the quandary- why must simplicity of lines be considered any less technical or skillful than figurative verisimilitude? If Adivasi art must be “fabulous folk art”, it goes above and under ordinary art. Yet, this fabulous art is also simple. It is magical. It is also easily achieved. It is extraordinary but does not entail more than ordinary artistic labor. These two attitudes toward Adivasi art in publication- awe at the magic of it and disdain at the making of it- exemplify an insistent primitivism. In *The London Jungle Book*, confusing the fox with the dog then is a primitivist reading of the art. It is easy to misconstrue the art as child-like or child-oriented. The danger is heightened now. Perhaps the child or caregiver would now be integrated into a language of power embedded in primitivism. In an attempt to teach the child about the fabulous diversity of the world, the publication of art may teach inequality. Recent publications insidiously teach their reader-viewer *how* to view and perhaps even how to write about the makers of “magic” art. This is a profoundly disturbing phenomenon- for it has the potential to yet again, reaffirm the double marginalization mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. The mental jump from assuming that folk and tribal art use basic and simplified forms to assuming that the creators are basic bodies that must be denied humanity as their art is sold is *easy*.

In opposition, Tara does not choose to call Pardhan Gond art simple. An alternative didactic integration is the Tara published 2017 *8 Ways to Draw Fish*. Authored by Luisa Martelo and various folk and Adivasi artists, it is an attempt to teach the child to illustrate

a fish. The editors call it an “unusual art activity book” and add that “the child can immerse herself” in the “styles” (Blurb *8 Ways*). Like the 2015 *Fabulous Folk Art*, this unusual art activity book “introduces children to a variety of Indian art traditions” (Blurb *8 Ways*). But that is the end of similarity between the 2017 Tara book and the 2015 Scholastic book. Tara appears not to subscribe to either the dramatic awe or deriding primitivism seen in other recent publications. Even though both the Scholastic 2015 and the Tara 2017 texts intend to teach the child about the diversity of India’s folk traditions, Tara differs from the Scholastic text in the editorial blurb. The blurb concludes by addressing “older children” who may “understand that art is as much about the imagination as it is about depiction” (Blurb *8 Ways*). “Depiction” here might as well be a synonym for “representation”. The editors here acknowledge that the creation and meaning of art lies as much in artistic creativity as in the form of the art itself. The editorial blurb does not use words like “fabulous” or “simple”. The editors are not keen on predisposing the child or caregiver toward the art. Artists like Bhajju Shyam (Pardhan Gond), Subhash Vyam (Pardhan Gond), Swarna Chitrakar (Patachitra), Rambharos Jha (Madhubani) have contributed to the illustrations of fish. All these artists have worked with Tara in the past⁴⁹. The activity associated with this book is “tracing, patterning and colouring”. Note the absence of uncomfortable adjectives like “simplified” or “wilderness” in Tara’s description.

All fish have the same basic shape- head, body, fins and tail. Trace these parts out on the large fish. Complete the bodies of the smaller fish. When you see a fish, you’ll notice that it is always moving. One way to show a moving fish is to not draw its body straight, but show it curved in different ways. (*8 Ways* n. p.)

⁴⁹ Some of Tara’s collaborations are- Rambharos Jha’s *Waterlife* (2012), Subhash Vyam’s *Water* (2018), Swarna Chitrakar’s *The Patua Pinocchio* (2017).

Although Tara intends to instruct as well, it composes its narrative differently. Indeed, a text like *The London Jungle Book* also benefits from Tara's alternative pedagogic intent. The comment that accompanies the earthworms in "The King of the Underworld" "turns" the text into an artist's note, effectively framing the art *in* the voice of the artist. "In Gond stories, we say the world below is ruled by the earthworm...Snakes signify earth in Gond painting, and here I have used snakes for the criss-crossing underground routes of the train...To me the busker appeared to be the only human being who was relaxed in the underground..." ("The King of the Underworld" *The London*) Bhajju Shyam here offers an articulate and sophisticated system of rules that aid meaning-making. He provides a point of entry for viewers. He controls the availability of meaning. This is in direct contrast to presumption of Adivasi availability practiced by Kipling and Scholastic. This is an example of an intentional placement of text and image. Composition is a self-conscious part of Tara's creative process.

The *London Jungle Book* is a compositional study in art. Each image is accompanied by an artist's note explaining the intent and symbolism behind this art. It is composed of images illustrated by Bhajju Shyam and words spoken by him and translated by Gita Wolf. It is the art, printed in whole pages or doublespreads that is brought attention to. The artist's notes are printed small to make way for the images. For instance, for "England is an Emerald Sari", Bhajju Shyam provides a short five-line note, which I am reproducing here.

I decided to show my first view of England from the air as a piece of cloth. I drew the centerpiece using the same pattern that I use to draw the earth in Gond style, but I coloured it like a sari. To show that England is an island, I drew creatures of the sea—fish and turtles—around it, which is the Gond way of indicating water. ("England is an Emerald Sari" *The London*)

Bhajju Shyam's words gesture to a heightened awareness of his art on display. One can almost hear the artist as one views the picturebook. Expository phrases like "I decided to show", "I drew the centerpiece", and "I coloured it like a sari" explain his artistic choices, as if he is walking his audience through an exhibition. Phrases like "Gond style" and "Gond way" are used to explain what is now known as "Gond painting" to his readers-viewers. He holds the reader's hand as he explains drawing the earth in the Gond style or using aquatic animals to depict water describe Gond symbolism for readers. This per se qualifies the text to be a study in art. But the inclusion of Bhajju Shyam's illustrations in all their dramatic glory visually focusses attention on the art itself, to exhibit this via the picturebook. It is then a study in the dynamism of Bhajju Shyam's art. The composition of the picturebook directs attention to the work of Bhajju Shyam, the illustrator.

I have attempted to prove that the Pardhan Gond artist is aided by the alternative publisher with an alternative pedagogical intent. However, this is a thorny proposition. If this is true, then it is implied that the Adivasi artist needs the aid of a well-meaning benefactor or mentor to flourish. The collaboration between Jangarh Singh Shyam and J Swaminathan is a case in point. If it is not true, and if one may conclusively argue that the doubly marginalized art and artist can flourish independently, then one is faced with the prospect of the artist encountering real threats to dignity, stereotyping, and fair valuation. Artists have indicated these experiences in their interviews. Neither position is convincing. The artist needs the collaborator, and they must also incorporate negotiation with the collaborator. The answer may lie in between. In this case, both the artist and the editor wish to employ a new way of seeing, but the editor is more immune to pressures than the artist. In the last instance, it is the artist who must bear the cross of stigma and innovation. This

means that the artist needs more critical attention, and all the aid that s/he can garner, in order to ensure food on the table and a commensurate valuation of their labor. This is why this essay has assumed Bhajju Shyam's work as central to the Adivasi picturebook. And this is also why the last section of this returns to Bhajju Shyam for his artistic formal innovation- for if the artist is beleaguered then the artist must regain control.

Meanwhile, composition, intent, and content are only some of the editorial choices made by the alternative publisher of the Adivasi picturebook. The medium of language also affects the medium of the picturebook. As has been mentioned, Gita Wolf at Tara Books chose to publish *The London Jungle Book* in English. This is not simply a question of hating or loving the English language for its colonial history, even though proponents and detractors galore in 21st century India. The contemporary status of Anglophilia or Anglophobia notwithstanding, the English language is without doubt a colonial imposition. It is part of the same imperial machinery that instituted the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), referred to in Chapter 1, in the first place. G N Devy, activist and academic, in fact connects linguistic violence to violence against Adivasis in general (*A Nomad Called Thief: Reflections on Adivasi Silence*).

The choice of English as a linguistic medium, via expensive picturebooks, for the purpose of re-visioning Adivasi art is then complicated. Could it be that the usage of English, a limited colonial language, reproduces a frame to infantilize the art in? Perhaps the English language, and the economy of access that it instances, frames Adivasi art in order to exoticize it. Alternatively, it is also possible that English serves a nuanced purpose here. Tara's reformist agenda in its publication and marketing is clear. Tara wants to create *The London Jungle Book* in full awareness of its radical innovation. I have discussed the

images in *The London Jungle Book* and how they do the work they are being requested to do. But the textual matter in the picturebook needs attention too. After all, the picturebook is a permutation of text and image. I will now take up the question of the textual to ask what work it does. I then ask how editorial choices of language might affect the artist and what they can do with Adivasi visuality in response. For if Tara is inclined toward an ethical editorial scenario, why choose the English language? Using English gives rise to inherent limitations, both material and ideological. If the agenda is to reform a way of seeing Adivasi art, then a more accessible language like Hindi may work more effectively, given that standardized Hindi is compulsorily taught in North India. Not all Adivasi artists are competent in speaking and writing English. My interviews with the artists have all taken place in Hindi. When invited for panels, Bhajju Shyam chooses a Sanskritized Hindi to address his audience. In fact, the publishing process demands translation from Hindi to English, as in *The London Jungle Book*. Like composition, intent, and content, language is a conscious choice.

English enjoys an ambivalent status in contemporary India. It represents colonization. Yet an English medium education is imperative for prestige and social elevation. It is incontrovertible that the colonizer's language is and has been a significant cog in the well-oiled machine of conquest. It has also been borne out that the English language is unevenly taught and exclusionary. Historically speaking, Anglophone instruction, pedagogy, and writing in South Asia has always been caught in a peculiar political bind. The choice to teach English language and literature to Indians, and the consequent choice to write in English made by South Asians carries its own set of meanings. Postcolonial theorist Gauri Viswanathan's 1989 *Masks of Conquest*, for

instance, historicizes the spread of English language in colonial India. She argues that the establishment of printing presses, linguistic advocacy, and the teaching of English in schools was premised on a sophisticated notion of sociopolitical control via linguistic colonization of South Asia. The “mask” in her title refers to the mask of technological advancement, as encouraged by Macaulay’s Minutes⁵⁰, that was forced upon policies to encourage Anglophone education⁵¹. At the same time, as Viswanathan discusses syllabi and historical developments across 19th century India and England, she remarks that this education intended to promote a “small elite group through education in English” (*Masks* 116). In effect, this mimicked the “men of leisure” who studied the classics in England. This “small elite” group did not exist in vacuum. The British found extant social differences and utilized them for linguistic propagation. In other words, a class-caste nexus was always already the bedrock of the spread of English education in India. Such an exclusion has been baked into the status that English enjoys in postcolonial India.

The English language bears the charm of both class and modernity in postcolonial India, partly a consequence of colonial linguistic policy. But that is only part of the story. It has also been *used* toward political ends. Owing to its imposition by the British, the English language has been embattled by an aspersion of inauthenticity. Since English did not organically transpire in the subcontinent, it is seen as inauthentic. Yet the global accolades afforded to 20th century Indian Anglophone writing have cemented its place in

⁵⁰ Also discussed in detail by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay in *The Gopal Rakhal Dialectic*.

⁵¹ In a pithy introduction to the “beginnings” of English literary study and Charter Act of 1813 and the English Education Act of 1835, Viswanathan remarks, “The tension between increasing involvement in Indian education and enforced noninterference in religion was productively resolved through the introduction of English literature” (38).

the *national* literary discourse. Indeed, other languages like Punjabi, Hindi, and Bengali, and their respective stories of icons and scenarios are intimately connected to debates about authenticity and appropriation as well. But they are also embedded more intimately, or more authentically in the class-caste nexus as well. In *English Heart, Hindi Heartland: The Political Life of Literature in India*, sociologist Rashmi Sadana takes Gauri Vishwanathan's argument forward to describe English and Hindi publishing in early 21st century New Delhi. Sadana strikes an important note contrapuntal to the authenticity debate. While many practitioners and readers assume that English is not strictly Indian—it remains a colonial imposition and has been used as an instrument to punish and plunder Indian populations—practitioners from marginalized communities seem to welcome English as a “neutral” medium for communication, not mired in class-caste nexus evident in languages like Sanskrit or Hindi and its proponents. Sadana offers the example of the Dalit intellectuals like Kancha Ilaiah and Chandrabhan Prasad, who have championed the cause of English. “In this sense, English, even with its colonial past and globalizing power, is in the context of Dalit activism a more neutral language. Its neutrality is premised on more direct access to power, one that bypasses more traditional or engrained social boundaries” (*English Heart* 46). Sadana's point is that networks of power have been forming around a rich terrain of “authentic” Indian languages that become vehicles of further oppression. Authentic Indian languages are then understood to perpetuate caste and class hierarchies. English, in this scenario, despite the “leisure” that Vishwanathan accurately diagnoses in its colonial antecedents, offers a way out of caste marginalization precisely owing to its presumed inauthenticity. Because it is less authentic, perhaps it is less bound by the strict caste rules seen in standardized versions of more authentic

languages. This means that now that English has been “chutnified”—to use Salman Rushdie’s blasé term from *Midnight’s Children*—it is both exclusive and seen as an entry into anti-caste inclusion. English then is propelled into more political ends by individuals who have faced immense discrimination.

The assumed inauthenticity of the English language explains the editorial choice by Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao to publish their collaborations with Adivasi artists in English. After all, the story of *The London Jungle Book* involves translation. In the context of Adivasi activism, the argument holds as great a cogency as with Dalit activism. Perhaps this is why Anglophone publishing on caste issues and tribal oppression are assuming visibility. Indeed, *The London Jungle Book*, as published in English, may be seen in conversation with the provocation that a more recent Anglophone anthology of tribal writing caused in the national literary and political spheres. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s 2015 anthology, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* was banned in 2017 by the Jharkhand state government. Copies of his anthology were confiscated. Shekhar, a Santhal tribal from Jharkhand, lost his employment with the state government as a medical officer as well (Shikhandin n. p.). The controversies that the publication and censorship has generated (Datta “Who is Hansda” par. 1) remind cultural analysts that literature and culture remain indexes of unsaid rules about visibility. The censorship in the state has now been lifted. But Shekhar’s stories hint at one of the factors for controversy. The Hindu, a national English daily, mentions that the story that lead to the aggression is “November is the Month of Migrations”. However, his eponymous “The Adivasi Shall not Dance” is most relevant to the kind of agency described in the introduction of this project. It is a demonstration of the complex refusal that the Adivasi articulates as s/he performs their Adivasi identity for

readers, viewers, ethnographers, painters, administrators, tourists. The story begins with a first-person narrator's description of physical violence⁵²- "They pinned me to the ground. They did not let me speak, they did not let me protest, they did not even let me raise my head..." (Shekhar 169). The speaker in the short story is rendered voiceless. His body is disciplined—"pinned me to the ground"—as he chooses not to exhibit his dance for an audience consisting of industrialists and government officials complicit in the destruction of his village via mining. Bhajju Shyam's case is both different and similar. Like Shekhar, he chooses the book to display his vision of the world. But unlike Mangal Murmu, who refuses to dance and finds his voice and body bound by the system, Bhajju Shyam's characters enter London, exhibit, and execute views of London. These views are explored using the English language.

However, there is a schism in English publishing in 21st century India. The context of Anglophone literary production is more variegated than a heroic story of an innocent language lending itself to revolutionary fervor. While English can find itself used for assertive Adivasi ends, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's instance is only one. Shekhar's text, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, was published by Speaking Tiger, another niche publishing house attempting to facilitate "serious" literary work. Historically speaking, Anglophone Indian publishing has attained significant investment and traction in the last three decades. English writing has been boosted after Salman Rushdie's celebrity and controversy, to the

⁵² A few paragraphs later, the speaker introduces himself- "My name is Mangal Murmu. I am a musician. No, wait...I am a farmer. Or...was a farmer. Was a farmer is right. Because I don't farm anymore" (Shekhar 170). Shekhar's prose is clear and pointed in its placement of the character's social position. Mangal Murmu is a Santhal Adivasi who has been disenfranchised "by a mining company" (Shekhar171).

extent that the biggest literary festival in the country, the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) has become an annual event that celebrates culture and literature. “Literary activity post millennium within India has been shaped by the successful Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF), which takes place annually in Jaipur, Rajasthan” (Dawson Varughese *Genre* 3). So much so that there is a clear divide between Indian-owned presses that cater toward “popular” and those that cater to “alternative” audiences. Emma Dawson Varughese, in her *Genre Fiction of New India*, draws a helpful distinction around the understanding of popular publishing by Indian presses. Dawson Varughese’s explanation offers a route to contextualizing the place of Tara Books. She clarifies terms like “commercial”, “popular”, and “genre” to differentiate the kinds of publishing present.

The terms ‘commercial’, ‘popular’ and ‘genre’ fiction are therefore understood and employed in this volume with the following meanings: ‘commercial’ is understood here as pertaining to large print runs, paperback books with large sales and complementary marketing campaigns; ‘popular’ fiction is understood here to mean fiction that is consumed by blue- and grey-collar workers, interfacing with the contemporary moment (to a greater or lesser degree) and ‘commercial’ in its sales figures. Additionally, for the Indian context, the ‘popular’ is also domestic and (often) employs Indian English. (12)

Tara Books are neither popular nor commercial in the Varughese’s definition. The three terms that Dawson Varughese discusses- commercial, popular, and (later in the chapter) genre- are framed by print runs, sales, accessibility, and a wide readership of blue and grey collar workers who seem to desire variants of Indian English, as opposed to British, American, or standardized variants. Tara Books does not subscribe to this frame of runs, sales, and wide readership. Tara’s readership is limited and their print runs are contingent. For instance, when I asked for another copy of *The Flight of the Mermaid*, I was told there were no copies available because it was printed only in 2009. Many Tara

books are crafted on handmade paper and put together by a dedicated team of artisans. This means quick print runs are impossible at Tara. By dint of their production, Tara books are limited. For a publishing house that mostly creates paper by hand and utilizes artisanal labor to print on said paper, their output is stunning. In 2010, Gita Wolf recounted with pride that, “The statistics are astonishing. They’ve (the printer artisans) created more than 180,000 books, which require eleven million impressions, or individual “pulls” for each colour” (“Outpost” 80). Yet, Tara Books is part of a cohort of “alternative” presses in India that have established themselves in the last three decades with the aim of producing cultural objects that focus hitherto ignored communities of creators. It is this concurrent presence of different kinds of print cultures that makes Tara’s agenda progressive.

Publishing may be thought of as a complicated ecology of media. Some presses are aiding a nuanced depiction of Adivasi individuals, and many are not. Some narrative techniques are almost inescapable for publishing ventures like *Fabulous Folk Art*. Indeed, this inescapability raises more questions. Despite their alternative pedagogic intent, do publishers like Tara genuinely aid nuanced representation? Or does the trading of picturebooks as print commodities reify the process of Adivasi identity essentialization by encouraging the stereotyping of such art as recognizably Adivasi? Gita Wolf and V Geetha do all they can in terms of composition and exposition (as seen in the previous section) to nuance the art housed in the picturebook. But does its exhibition in the book actually mitigate Adivasi oppression? What does the book *do*? The example of the 2011 *Bhimayana: Experience of Untouchability*, published by another alternative press, Navayana, can help understand these questions. I shall briefly discuss Navayana’s *Bhimayana* before taking up Bhajju Shyam’s art again in the next section. While

Bhimayana is not a picturebook like much of output of Tara, it is important to discuss it for a clearer picture of the stakes of Adivasi art in the picturebook as well as other combinations of text-image like the graphic novel.

Navayana too, like Tara, believes in an alternative pedagogy of publication and composition. Published in 2011, *Bhimayana* has been illustrated by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, two of the most prominent Pardhan Gond artists today. Ostensibly not meant for a child audience and sold as a graphic novel, *Bhimayana* is now included in the undergraduate syllabus at the University of Delhi. It narrates the story of B R Ambedkar's experiences with untouchability in his early life. Ambedkar was one of 20th century India's most fierce anti-caste intellectuals. He is known to have converted to Buddhism toward the end of his life as a protest against caste Hinduism. He was also the Chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian constitution. His life and experiences are thought to be an inspiration for current anti-caste activists. The name "navayana" refers to the neo-Buddhism that B R Ambedkar propounded, arguing that Navayana was concerned with social equality. Here, "navayana" means "new vehicle". Founder-editor S Anand's reference to Buddhism to name his publishing house is perfectly intentional. It is meant to invoke the now indelible relationship between Dalits and Buddhism, publicized by B R Ambedkar. This is an example of an alternative didacticism that is visible in Anglophone publishing. Like Tara Books, Navayana's S Anand is committed to a visible socio-political progressive intent.

However, as with Tara Books, Navayana's intent is liable to being circum-scripted. The story of the creation of the graphic novel *Bhimayana* raises questions about visibility, genre, and pedagogy. In the editor-publisher S Anand's own admission, the association of

Adivasi art with immaturity, unsophisticated lines, and basic simplified forms pushes the meaning of the artform to infantilization. In the accompanying editorial note, Anand writes that as *Bhimayana* was being conceived, “some publishers had begun to extensively use Gond art to illustrate children’s books. At Navayana, I had commissioned Durgabai Vyam for a nonfiction book for children in 2007” (*Bhimayana* 100). S Anand, in 2011, implicitly diagnosed the primitivist link between Adivasi art and children’s illustration. This link is more potent when the content of *Bhimayana* is considered. The danger of restricted meanings is not only restricted to the incomplete valuation of Adivasi art. The story of B R Ambedkar is the story of cruel discrimination in the form of caste untouchability against Dalit bodies. An incomplete simplistic valuation of Adivasi art can now be unjustly applied to the anti-caste message of the graphic novel *Bhimayana*- leading to questions about whether Ambedkar’s life experiences have been *rendered* infantile or less serious owing to the artwork used. Does this mean the visibility of Pardhan Gond art “turns” the socio-political anti-caste intent of Navayana and *Bhimayana* into a flippant visual delight? Further, is there a contradiction between a story of caste untouchability and Adivasi art? Scholars are divided about the impact of this medium becoming the message. Some, like English studies academic Aratrika Das, discuss the generative classroom experiences that teaching *Bhimayana* elicits. Others, like contemporary literary scholars Nandini Sankar and Deepsikha Changmai, contextualize Adivasi and Dalit relations in 20th century India to caution against facile readings about Adivasi-Dalit solidarity or complicity.

Bhimayana is created with, and leads to, a specific pedagogy. It is not intended for a child audience. Some Tara Books, “activity books” like *8 Ways to Draw a Fish*, are obviously meant for children. But as I have discussed, a “crossover” text like *The London*

Jungle Book is intended for more than one set of readers. An alternative pedagogy unites both Navayana and Tara. I am interested here in the classroom pedagogy an alternatively produced text may lead to. Aratrika Das, a teacher of English at the University of Delhi, writes about the experience of teaching *Bhimayana* ,“The choice of a tribal medium of narrativisation (Gond art) within a global style of composition (graphic novel) to depict the caste-based atrocities on a Dalit (Ambedkar) becomes the lens through which to read and teach *Bhimayana*” (“When Bhimayana” 176). This allows Das to steer the class discussion toward a productive space where more than one oppression- Adivasi and caste- may be discussed⁵³. A less effusive perspective is offered by literary scholars Nandini Sankar and Deepsikha Changmai. They bring attention to the intricacies of meaning that become

⁵³ It is indeed productive and urgent to critically read how Hindutva fundamentalism has appropriated and excoriated Dalit and Adivasi politics in the 20th and 21st centuries for material benefits. But does it lead to an eventual equation or comparison of Adivasis and Dalits oppression? The intent is not to collapse levels of oppression- to assert that atrocities upon Dalits, and Adivasi disenfranchisement is similar and comparable. The pedagogy around the usage of Adivasi art for a biography of Ambedkar is to focus the perpetual and escalating violence that India has historically sanctioned. Nandini Ramesh Sankar and Deepsikha Changmai discuss a similar objection to the celebration of a collaboration amongst the oppressed caste and the oppressed Adivasi. Their argument is that “the vicissitudes of caste and tribal politics in India interlock in this text into a tense engagement...that forces into visibility more creative alternatives to violently oppositional politics” (Sankar and Changmai 305). “The art of the Vyams offers a residual sense of the casteless and timeless forested spaces that inspire Gond art” (309). Sankar and Changmai remind readers that the “solemn textual material” (311) is “overshadowed” by the art, calling it an “affective disjunction between word and image” (Sankar and Changmai 312). For Sankar and Chagmai, this is indicative of a larger gap between the historical treatment of Dalit and tribal bodies. They cite the example of the Mangs, who are lower than the Mahars- the caste to which Ambedkar belonged- and who are discriminated against by the Mahars. Ambedkar himself, even until 1945, did not endorse a parliamentary representation for tribals owing to their lack of “political sense” (qtd on 325). Some members of the larger Gond tribe participated in the gruesome rape, torture, and murder of the Dalit family in Khairlanji in 2006. It is in this complication of solidarity and complicity that Sankar and Changmai locate a creative possibility- the disjunction between word and image is to be understood as a gesture to any metaphysical abstraction that collapses solidarity based upon essentialized identity.

evident when essentialized identities are related to the practice of reading certain images alongside texts. Aratrika Das's comment serves to celebrate a socio-politically motivated reading of the publisher's intent by drawing attention to the cause for solidarity in 21st century India. But Sankar and Changmai offer a caveat. The caveat proves that as a printed book meant in the field of teaching, Adivasi art in *Bhimayana* is reified as sourced from the "casteless and timeless forested spaces" (Sankar and Changmai 309), now a recognizable trope in Pardhan Gond art. The question they ask is if Adivasi art appears to inhabit "casteless forested spaces" on the page, can it actually find solidarity in the story of B R Ambedkar? This is significant because B R Ambedkar is famously remembered for having publicly stated in the mid 20th century that Adivasis need more time before they can represent themselves politically, as opposed to the Dalits in India.. Sankar and Changmai also mention the Khairlanji massacre of 2006, where Gond adivasis tortured, raped, and looted a Dalit family. Their response is that resistance must be sought in a combination of complicity and solidarity between the form, i.e., Pardhan Gond art, and the content, i.e., caste discrimination.

Even an alternative publisher with the best intent, despite a nuanced classroom discussion, can be hindered in its agenda by external significations of the art housed in the picturebook or the graphic novel.. *Bhimayana*'s example highlights the genuine impediment that obstructs the meaning of Adivasi art. What Sankar and Changmai observe as "casteless and timeless forested spaces" are read differently by Rashmi Varma, for instance. Varma thinks of the forest, perhaps the most regular form of Pardhan Gond art, as a transformation of "deprivation" into "possibilities". Sankar and Changmai locate the forest as a limitation. Sankar and Changmai mean to argue that a "misconstrual" of Adivasi

art affects the content of the art. If, like the illustrated *Bhimayana*, the anglophone Adivasi illustrated picturebook must be compelled into limitations, in spite of a nuanced editorial agenda, where can one locate resistance?

I think the answer lies in an Adivasi visuality managed, in the last instance, by the savvy strategic artist turning the image. Given the misconstrual above, the publisher, editor, and the teacher may accomplish what they can, but there are too many constraints. Eventually, it is the artist who can do something. What can the artist do? This is a return to the question this chapter began with. My answer is that the artist intervenes formally. And as I will discuss in the next section, the artist turns the form toward a calculated Adivasi visuality. At the end of *Bhimayana*, the Vyams are quoted as describing the humiliation they faced as well as the artistic process that has led to *Bhimayana*. Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam narrate their plight at being essentialized and othered by the landlady at S Anand's office. During one of their visits to Anand's office at New Delhi, they were barred from entering by the landlady. The landlady thought they looked like "yokels" and did not allow them inside the building. Even when Anand pointed out Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam are artists of renown, the landlady did not budge. The Vyams say they were "hurt" and could now understand the plight of Dalits in modern India who are also barred from places owing to untouchability (*Bhimayana* pp. 102-3). Out of this sense of solidarity has come success. CNN has declared *Bhimayana* as the one of the top 5 political graphic novels (Calvi n. p.). Success has been possible not only because of the content but also because of the formal innovation brought about in the format of the graphic novel. S Anand reports that the Vyams wanted to depart from conventional spatial differentiation in the format, especially panels. He quotes the Vyams, "We'd like to state one thing very clearly

at the outset. We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is *khulla* (open) where there's space for all to breathe" (*Bhimayana* 100). The Vyams' insistence on *khulla* (open) representation versus closed emboxed panels is an indication of the artistic control that can be exercised in this scenario. Their insistence lead to an innovation in the design of the graphic novel itself, thus concretizing *Bhimayana*'s position on the CNN list.

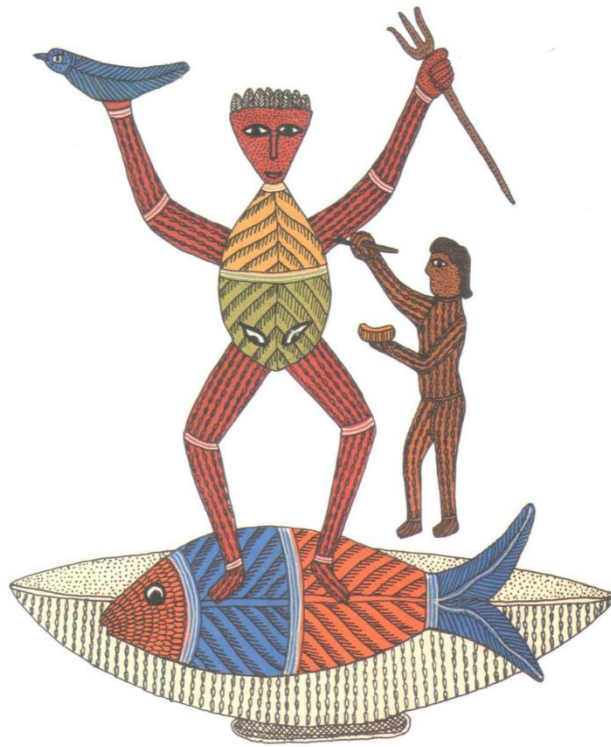
Thus, yet again, it is the artist who must labor to dismantle perceptions about Indigenous art and bodies. The case of *Bhimayana* brings attention to the real pressures inherent in the endeavor to aid Adivasi art. On the one hand, Adivasi artists like the Vyams are profiled and discriminated against for not looking urban chic enough. On the other hand, their work has the ability to innovate formally. This is a laudable feat. But this is a feat despite the rampant degradation of Adivasi ways of life, and as is clear, social exclusion based on outward appearance. As the discussion above clarifies, *Bhimayana*'s example may eventually be the pitting of one oppressed group against another. But this pitting also reproduces primitivism around Adivasi art and artists. Crucially however, as I have discussed, it is the artist who bears the brunt of representation. It is the artist who must be essentialized *as* Adivasi in urban India. And it is the artist who must innovate formally hoping to escape essentialization. This is what the book and the artist can do. In earlier sections, I have argued that Bhajju Shyam's art turns a unilinear ethnographic history upon itself by unmooring London from its hallowed centrality. Doing so, Bhajju Shyam reclaims a right to represent and takes ownership of Adivasi visual availability. But *The London Jungle Book* performs more than a balletic turn with respect to representation. In 2004, it anticipated the pressures the Vyams experiences signified in 2011. In anticipation,

Bhajju Shyam imagined a powerful response to these pressures. This is also what the book does- it communicates visual strategy from one Adivasi artist to another.

Adivasi Visuality: Turning to Control

Like Jangarh Singh Shyam's "old Gods" who were momentarily glimpsed in Kipling and who take centerstage in his paintings, Bhajju Shyam gives form to an Adivasi deity too. He offers an expansive Adivasi visuality. As the Vyams take apart the inhibiting boxes of the conventional graphic novel panels, Bhajju Shyam takes apart the generic limitations of the picturebook. I am arguing that Bhajju Shyam is not merely interested in "turning" the narrative. He is also interested in strategically directing the narrative in self-conscious control. Bhajju Shyam illustrates a scenario where he holds absolute sway. This is the acme of Adivasi visuality. Shyam's vision encompasses the reader-viewers of the picturebook, thus turning the picturebook into a weapon of resistance. The deity he invokes and gives iconic form to—Shiva/Mahadeo/Shankar Bhagwan, all three names referring to the same deity—is not an Old God of Jangarh Singh Shyam (Figs. 1 and 2). Jangarh Singh Shyam, the progenitor of "Gond painting" is now remembered for having innovated by giving visual iconic form to his Gond gods, or the "old Gods" in Kipling's passage earlier in this essay. Bhajju Shyam's Shankar Bhagwan is not one of these "old Gods", but he is an old god nonetheless. Shiva, Mahadeo, Shankar Bhagwan- all refer to the same deity. In fact, if Gond creation stories are considered, Shankar Bhagwan or Mahadeo is the *cause* of the Gonds, the deity whose intervention creates the Gonds in the first place (*The Perceiving Fingers*). Briefly put, according to Swaminathan, Stephen Hislop and Christoph von Fuhre-Haimendorf's versions agree upon this basic story- Mahadeo and his consort Parvati co-create the Gond gods. Mahadeo, for some reason, banishes the Gond gods to a cave. Parvati

becomes aware of their absence and meditates upon the ultimate creator to have them found. The ultimate creator makes the birth of Lingo possible. Lingo is beset by troubles and adventures, but he is finally able to revive the Gond gods and thus set Gond civilization into motion. Mahadeo's will of the Gond gods' banishment is thus countered. But Bhajju Shyam does not illustrate a "Hinduized" Shankar Bhagwan, replete with all markers of Hindu identification. Instead, he creates an indigenized Adivasi Shankar Bhagwan. Returning to the oldest creation God then, Bhajju Shyam poses a question for his viewers- what can an Adivasi Gond god mean in the picturebook when he looks differently and postures differently from more popular Hindu calendar art?

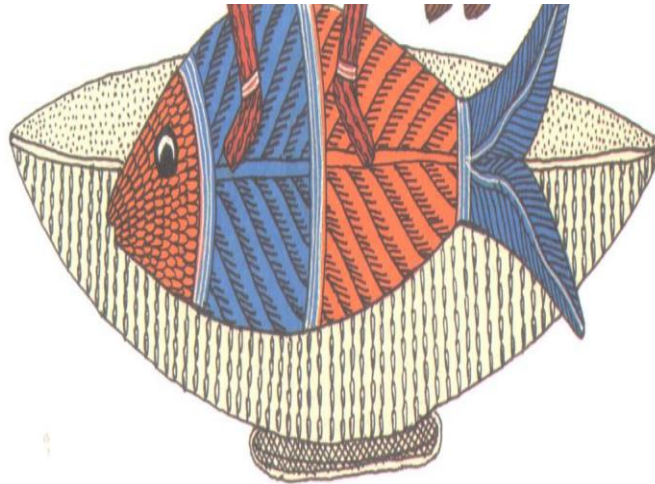


Working for the Stomach

Here I am doing what I do for a living, the reason why I went to England at all. I called this painting 'Working for the Stomach' because it shows me earning my daily bread, and also because I was working in a restaurant. I have shown myself painting Shankar Bhagwan, one of the main Gond gods, on a blank wall.

Shankar Bhagwan is standing on a fish, and the fish is floating in a soup bowl, to symbolise the restaurant. Now my paintings watch over everyone who eats there.

Fig. 1. “Working for the Stomach a” *The London Jungle Book*. Art by Bhajju Shyam for *The London Jungle Book*, Original Edition © Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com.



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Shankar Bhagwan is standing on a fish, and the fish is floating in a soup bowl, to symbolise the restaurant. Now my paintings watch over everyone who eats there.

Fig. 2 “Working for the Stomach b” *The London Jungle Book*. Art by Bhajju Shyam for *The London Jungle Book*, Original Edition © Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com.

Shyam curates a contextualized iteration in the Adivasi Shankar Bhagwan/Mahadeo/Shiva. Not just the visual contours of the deity himself, Bhajju Shyam also strategically places this deity by an artist's note that describes his own subject position. Shyam ensures that his reason for staying in London is made clear to his readers. This links both the deity and Shyam's subjectivity. It lets readers know that this deity, inside this picturebook, has been illustrated for a specific event. In other words, a story of production is combined with the installation of the deity. This means that not only is the deity made to appear different, but this difference is explained by Shyam himself. His rationale for moving to London, for creating art, and for creating art for a specific picturebook-all coalesce. In the artist's note by "Art is the Only Language I Have", titled "Working For the Stomach", Bhajju Shyam explains-

Here I am doing what I do for a living, the reason why I went to England at all...I have shown myself painting Shankar Bhagwan, one of the main Gond gods, on a blank wall. Shankar Bhagwan is standing on a fish, and the fish is floating in a soup bowl, to symbolize the restaurant. Now my paintings watch over everyone who eats there. ("Working for the Stomach")

The note emphasizes the astuteness that I have argued for in my reading of Pardhan Gond art in the picturebook. It explains the logic of the art and identifies the central character i.e., Shankar Bhagwan or Lord Shiva, who happens to be one of the most important deities in both the Gond and the caste Hindu pantheon. Readers access Shyam's translated voice explaining how this deity came to be produced *for* the picturebook. As Shyam says "shown myself painting Shankar Bhagwan", he explains that he is demonstrating the process of creating the deity as well as demonstrating the deity himself. Like the multilinear earthworms in "The King of the Underworld" that tunnel into unilinear stories, Shyam's note and demonstration burrows into the story of production of the image.

It is because he must work for the stomach that he curates Shankar Bhagwan. While (as I discuss shortly) Shyam's Shankar Bhagwan is a radical departure from popular Shiva iconography, the fact that Shyam unabashedly clarifies that his Shiva exists to help him sustain his livelihood is disarming. Illustrating the old God may be ground-breaking but it is also crucial that illustration and mural making is an economic activity that puts food on the table. Shyam has been open about the economic nature of the art in my 2022 interview with him. And this is exactly how he described the current status of the art- "jeeney ka zariya" or "mode of survival" (B. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). I have argued that Adivasi visuality is strategic- that it is aware of the divergence between non-Adivasi art and Adivasi art. Here is another example of that strategy- Shyam provides an honest and grounded declaration of his subject position dependent on the restaurant that gave him work and the publishing house that gave him a platform to tell his story.

While this art means a mode of survival to artists, it signifies iconically as well. An Adivasi visuality takes complete shape in Shyam's creative curation. Shyam's Shiva illustration resists popular representations of Shiva by rejecting usual markers of identification. Common markers in Shiva iconography are the trident that Shiva holds, a crescent moon on his top knot, a cobra garland, beads on the wrists, a rivulet flowing from thick matted hair, a blue neck, a tiger skin mat for him to sit on, the bull as his faithful servant, and the lingam-yoni (a combination of male and female genitalia) that devotees worship. Bhajju Shyam's Shankar Bhagwan only makes allusions to one of these markers. His Shiva may be identified as Shiva by the trident he holds aloft in his left hand. But that is the only *Hindu* identifier in the image. The bands on his wrists and feet, or elbows and knees, or even the crown of feathers, for instance differentiate him from the Nathdvara

Shiva or the Shiva of calendar art. In contrast to Shyam's Shiva, Christopher Pinney's Brijbasi Shiva (*Photos of the Gods*) is adorned by the Ganges stream on his top knot, the beads and cobra around his neck, and the tiger skin on his seat.

Yet, there are similarities between Pinney's observations of deities in religious art prints and Shyam's iteration of an indigenized deity in the picturebook. Pinney argues in *Photos of the Gods* that the production of Nathdvara (in the present-day state of Rajasthan) religious images was a specific moment in 1930s anti-colonial visuality. Pinney discusses a staged frontality and symmetry in the visual world that is created in the chromolithographs published by S S Brijbasi printers. In fact, as he reproduces examples of Shiva's chromolithographs, Pinney observes the prints are influenced by both photography and the theatrical stage. His larger argument is that of "corporetics"; that images affect corporeality. It is a thesis of the corporeal. He takes forward Diana L Eck's "darshan" to encourage a reading of image use. Like W J T Mitchell, Pinney is interested in the "efficacy" of images, embodied and ideological. The technical shifts he detects offer instances of a departure from 19th century colonial perspectival imposition. This is to say what the pictures *do* is formally innovate with the implicit aim of evoking what Pinney calls "national feeling", in the wake of Benedict Anderson (*Photos* pp. 90-100). Frontality and theatricality are inherent in Bhajju Shyam's Shiva as well. The Adivasi Shiva's face and body appear directly facing the viewer. His elbows and knees are bent and his limbs are frozen mid-movement. This could be a dance. After all, Shiva is also incarnated as Nataraja, the king and cause of dance and the dramatic arts. Indeed, two limbs in a typical Nataraja illustration that open out to his sides are almost exactly like Bhajju Shyam's

Shiva's hands. The point is that his posture is reminiscent of the stage, like the devotional aesthetics of Shiva in the Nathdvara prints.

At the same time, Shyam is staging gods to confront extant ways of seeing. Both frontality and theatricality can be found in Bhajju Shyam. However, Bhajju Shyam's endeavor is a specific moment in "postcolonial" Adivasi visuality. I say "postcolonial" not only because 2004 was temporally after the attainment of Indian independence, but also because Shyam's work is departure from a "postcolonial" Hindu fundamentalist appropriation of folk and Adivasi deities. Bhajju Shyam's Adivasi visuality is not simply following a visual lineage of activating national and communal feeling, as with Pinney's religious art prints. The formal aspects of his work—frontality and theatricality—are in the service of illustrating an "other" deity. Bhajju Shyam's Adivasi Shiva is also a departure from the strategic *circumscription* of Adivasi icons in the service of Hinduization. While Shiva sometimes wears beads on his hands and feet, they are absent here. Other details are present: in fact, certain elements have been added. A crown of feathers adorns Shankar Bhagwan here. Shiva is usually attired with unkempt matted locks, a top knot, and a crescent moon on his hair. Shyam's Shankar Bhagwan only wears feathers. The absence of some iconic elements and the addition of others proves that Shyam's Shankar Bhagwan is not the Shiva of calendar art. Indeed, Shankar Bhagwan is an Adivasi Pardhan Gond rendition of the Hinduized Shiva. While the trident identifies him and makes visible the connections between Adivasi gods and Hindu gods; all other aspects direct one's attention to a different perspective altogether. Shyam's refusal to illustrate Shiva or Shankar Bhagwan as the dominant Hindu form directly fractures the compulsion to do so. Herein lies a move from the turn to control balletic turn that I note in Adivasi visuality- Shyam not

only repudiates the easily identifiable Shiva, but illustrates a Shiva of his own, perhaps an Adivasi Gond god.

Pardhan Gond storytelling asserts itself in Bhajju Shyam's Shiva. After all, the Hinduization of Adivasi individuals and deities is a longer debate. An Adivasi Shiva, housed in the picturebook, has political consequences. Artist and curator J Swaminathan discusses the tussle around the Hinduization of the Shiva as Mahadeo and Shiva as Lingo/lingam in *The Perceiving Fingers*. Shiva as Mahadeo banishes, but Shiva as Lingo/lingam redeems. One of the most enduring Gond myths of creation tells the tale of Shiva creating the Gonds, banishing them, and then directing human affairs in such a way so that the Gonds are redeemed via an incarnation of Shiva himself. The Gonds then enter a time of prosperity. Swaminathan asks why Shiva as Mahadeo must banish the Gond gods, only to incarnate himself in the story as Lingo -a personification of the *lingam* or the male genitalia- and then offer a corrective to the banishment? The name Lingo is reminiscent of the lingam (translated as phallus), part of the lingam-yoni, or the phallus-womb, a representation of Shiva *bhakti* or worship. There is a discrepancy here: Shiva harms but Shiva incarnate helps. What could explain the simultaneity? Swaminathan reads this contradiction as a confrontation between an Adivasi Shiva and a Hinduized Shiva. Are the Gond gods "pre-Aryan", inhabiting the region before the Aryan invasion, and thus before the social categorization embedded in the Vedic scriptures? For Swaminathan, Shiva as Lingo redeems the Gonds because Gond storytelling is recuperating their version of Shiva; and Shiva as Mahadeo banishes the Gonds because caste Hinduism is trying to manage its encounter with the Gonds. Swaminathan notes this tussle in the working of the plot in the story. Bhajju Shyam takes the tussle to its logical conclusion in his illustration.

But the notion that Shyam's Shankar Bhagwan is a proud display of Adivasi Gond gods has more consequences. After all, the proud display repudiates Hinduization of the deity. This rejection is significant. There is now a scholarly consensus that "Hinduization" has taken deep roots in the political and social world of the Adivasis in India. Amita Baviskar ("Adivasi Encounters") and Sangeeta Dasgupta (2022 *Reordering*) point to the continuing interaction with "Hinduization" that Adivasis in western, central, and eastern India are participating in. Activities like subscribing to Hindu rituals while also participating in Adivasi rituals; or wearing the saffron color and joining the cadre of the many right wing fundamentalist groups trying to "purify" the Adivasis; or even joining the cadres in violent actions against Christianized Adivasis, or "ostracizing" Adivasis who had not conformed to the ideology of Hindu groups- all these can be seen as examples of Hinduization.

While there is concern about Hinduization, scholars carefully explain why Adivasis consciously conform to Hindu imposition. For instance Baviskar writes that in a situation like that of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), where Adivasis were forced to advocate for themselves against the building of a dam in the Narmada valley, it was almost expected of them to perform pre-established notions of the poor Indigenous person, waiting to be saved by the state and private individual ("Adivasi Encounters"). "Hinduization" is almost unwillingly read as a strategic move by Baviskar, when "To be an adivasi in western is to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy" ("Adivasi Encounters" pp. 5106-7). At the same time, this phenomenon is visible across India now. Sangeeta Dasgupta, in her *Reordering Adivasi Worlds*, also diagnoses the Bhagat movement amongst the Santhals of eastern India as a response to the social pressures and a desire for mobility. Anthropologist Alice Tilche,

in *Adivasi Art and Activism*, takes this further when she analyzes the buildings, pedagogy, and curation practices inherent in the display and management of Adivasi art and worldviews in the state of Gujarat in western India. It seems the students and caretakers who are responsible for the display of Adivasi heritage are ambivalent about their relationship to the meaning of this heritage. They understand and cherish the objects in the museum, but they are deeply invested in upward mobility.

And why should not Adivasi bodies be invested in economic possibilities, in a promise of mobility? Upward mobility seems unidirectional in neo-liberal neo-swadeshi India. Scholars agree that a desire for social upward mobility seems to inevitably lead to some “Hinduization”. The fear is the loss of Adivasi identity in terms of language, ritual, imagination in the wake of accession to Hinduization. While these concerns are legitimate, it is also empowering to read Hinduization as strategic indigeneity that can be harnessed by the Indigenous subject to garner support for their sovereign claims. Herein lies the complexity. If Hinduization is unwillingly read as empowering for the Adivasi by scholars, how can one read Bhajju Shyam’s Shankar Bhagwan? Shyam’s deity is strategic but rejects Hinduization. The Adivasi deity’s existence is a challenge per se. All the constituent elements in the image reject Hinduization- here is a Gond god in all his Gond glory. As is now clear, his appearance invokes longer and unceasing debates about Adivasi claims. Swaminathan reads the Gond deity Lingo as an Adivasi Shankar Bhagwan asserting himself. Bhajju Shyam’s Shankar Bhagwan seems to reject Hinduization by rejecting conventional iconography. This is an example of a strident self-expression. Bhajju Shyam’s Adivasi deity is a result of a calculated visuality. Indeed, this is how I have read Adivasi artistic agency- undulating between assertion and submission. If *Creation* instances

strategic communication via allegorical non-utterance, *The London Jungle Book* instances a clear refusal to be interpellated by the powers that be. Agency, as I have argued, must necessarily vacillate between clarity and vagary. Here Bhajju Shyam stakes a clear claim as he eschews appropriation of his gods.

The rejection of fundamentalist appropriation per se is a heroic feat. But the work of Adivasi visuality is not over yet. Bhajju Shyam takes another leap; this time it is from iconographic turn to overwhelming control. Illustrating this god and presenting him in a Tara picturebook creates a visual material space for the existence and display of the god. Bhajju Shyam has contextualized this deity for us in the artist's note, directly linking this god to the Pardhan storyteller's laborious travel to the metropole. This gives the god iconic form, calling attention to his existence. This god has been produced by Shyam for his travel and his picturebook, and then re-produced and contextualized in the Tara Adivasi-illustrated picturebook. Shankar Bhagwan's iconic adornments are not only a repudiation of Pinney's chromolithographs, but also calendar art as discussed by art historian Kajri Jain. In her 2007 *Gods in the Bazaar*, arguing for the material conditions of production and circulation of 20th century calendar art, Jain writes that reading the political economy of print making, turns the image of the god into an object per se- in a sense creating two objects- the image and the calendar, which function simultaneously. The Shiva calendars her book reproduces, all feature similar iconic elements- the cobra, the beads, the river, the trident, and a frontal gaze that activates viewership (Jain 47). Bhajju Shyam's Shankar Bhagwan reneges some of these elements but retains the central element- a direct look at the viewer. Shankar Bhagwan's frontality is similar to the frontality seen in calendar art. But it is more focused. Shankar Bhagwan's eyes are not simply looking at; but instead

looking down. As if the Adivasi deity is superior to all he can see around him. Shyam's artistic note is well aware of this. He concludes his note with a heavy thud, "Now my paintings watch over everyone who eats there." This could mean that *his* art bears witness to the consumption of food inside the London restaurant that had invited him for his mural making artistic labor.

While the illustration presents a self-awareness, it does more. "Watch over everyone who eats there" could mean either of two things- his deity guards the diners or that the deity has been created to submit the diners to his Adivasi will. Could the artist be replacing himself with the deity: could this be an expression of his role in creating the dining experience for consumers in London? After all, his labor has been visibilized in the restaurant and the picturebook. But I am interested in the words used in the expository artist's note to qualify the image. Out of these two meanings—guardianship and custodianship or genuflection to the Adivasi divinity—the former is benevolent and the latter less so. In fact, Felippo Menozzi, scholar of world literary history, regards *The London Jungle Book* as a "custodianship". Menozzi clarifies that the art "is a presentation of Bhajju Shyam as custodian of Gond aesthetics" (157). It is undeniable that Tara via Gita Wolf and V Geetha has taken it upon itself to enable and provide a platform as Bhajju Shyam innovates Pardhan gond art. But that is another meaning of "custodianship". On the other hand, if Bhajju Shyam's Shankar Bhagwan description is to be believed, it is Shyam's art that has become a custodian of a peculiar reading experience in the picturebook as well as a culinary experience in the London restaurant. Now that the deity has been given form, he can now fulfill Shyam's artistic desire for control- by guarding over all the viewers, merely by looking at them. This per se be an example of Shyam turning to control.

However, it is the second meaning, the less benign meaning, that affords a more robust understanding of the control. Shyam imagines an active, agential witnessing for his artwork here. I invite your attention to the preponderance of eyes in this illustration. Note the eyes on the deity's face, on the fish, and even in the self-portrait of the artist. The most crucial pair of eyes that watches over diners however, is the pair located in the groin of the deity. The eyes displace the testicles. This is not insignificant- one of the most enduring stone representations of Shiva is the *linga*, worshipped everywhere in India- the masculine and feminine genitalia in one. The genitalia are not illustrated and neither is the Shivalinga, anywhere in the image. Instead, the eyes of the deity multiply and displace the Shivalinga. It is this displacement that sharpens the argument for visual control. Superficially, the deity has been robbed off of reproductive prowess and the Shivalinga- the most enduring icon of Shiva worship. The deity can neither procreate nor be worshipped. Now what? I think this is a strategy. It is only the appearance of repudiation of reproduction or worship. Both these activities can be managed by the genital eyes. The eyes multiply vision- they can see everything and "watch over everyone who eats there". All the diners and picturebook readers are being reminded of Adivasi envisioning and creations that have enabled their experience. Perhaps eating there is an acknowledgement of Adivasi labor and thus a kind of worship. Perhaps reading the picturebook is also a kind of embodied reverence in the service of the deity. Vision then is reproduced and worshipped. Now, the eyes can watch over all these individuals. Therefore, the active witnessing that this image mobilizes is a vista of absolute control.

An Adivasi artist is making an Adivasi deity *work* in a scenario controlled by non-Adivasis. The deity works just like the Adivasi artist who has worked in the restaurant and

in the picturebook. And this is the *work* of Adivasi visuality. Shyam stages an ultimate vision as a creator and storyteller. The creation of murals for the restaurant and the creation of this art in the picturebook are both limited in their own way by time and material. The restaurant branch, for instance, closed over the 2020 pandemic. And art in the picturebook, as this chapter has discussed, faces many pressures of medium, language, and signification. But these pressures do not negate the value of Shyam's Adivasi deity. In fact, they clarify the stakes of the presentation of the deity in the picturebook. As I have just shown, the deity's existence and presence in the picturebook alludes to longer debates about Hinduization. Thus, Bhajju Shyam's role in enabling a vision of/for the diners, that can be traced in the art here, is an act of reclamation of the artform and Indigenous divinity. This is what his artwork *does*. It claims power in the enactment a strategic arrangement of visual control. This control is beyond a darshanic devout dialogue between deity and devotee, or a devotee corporthetically using the artwork. Bhajju Shyam activated Adivasi visuality when his earthworms burrowed under London to rupture its metropolitan soliloquy.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued for an Adivasi visuality. I have discussed that Adivasi visuality negotiates with the limitations of the publication of Adivasi art by employing both a "turn" and then turning the practice into that of absolute Adivasi control. As Berger and Mirzoeff write, the visual is intrinsic to how the world is understood and indexes a relationship to power. "The King of the Underworld" is a nice example of how this visual power can be harnessed by an Adivasi artist. The earthworms, intrinsic to one creation story of the Gonds, burrow under the unilinear hierarchy of London and show that other visions are possible. But the focus on London retains the primacy of London as a story

worth telling. Shyam's re-vision rehashes a vision of London. As Chakraborty and Spivak observe, the practices of historiography, activism, and writing navigate power- subaltern speech navigates the power of the privileged speaker, or the writer of European history. In other words, Adivasi visuality turns but finds itself returned to the colonial metropole. How then could one seek assertion in Adivasi visuality?

As the picturebook is a comingling of image and text, an analysis of the picturebook must attend to the words and their publication context as much as the shape, size, color, posture, and context in the images. This is why the essay turns to the compositional and linguistic choices of the publisher. If Bhajju Shyam's Adivasi visuality is hemmed in conceptually, what is the work of the publisher in abetting or combatting this hindrance? The essay shows that Tara, as a publishing house, attempts to frame the art in the picturebook with more sophistication than other more popular publishing houses. This is meant to counter the primitivism seen in words like "magical" "fabulous" "simplified" often used to describe folk and Adivasi art in India. However, another choice also comes to the fore. Since the editorial agenda is to nuance representation, why does the publisher use English as the language of publication? English, as the weapon of the colonizer remains vilified as an inauthentic imposition as well as a crucial arrow in the quiver of social mobility. But as I discuss, English is also seen by anti-caste intellectuals as a weapon of caste assertion and mobility, unhampered by caste elitism in more "authentic" Indian languages. This could explain the choice of English in the Adivasi illustrated picturebook.

At the same time, while English can be read in favor of the Adivasi, it does restrict readership. Moreover, English does not guarantee the end of discrimination. An alternative publisher like Tara can afford the compositional subversion by pricing their books high

and continue to create important work. But as the example of Navayana's *Bhimayana* shows, it is the art and the artist (not as much the publisher) that are pressured by the publication. Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam looked like "yokels" to the landlady and could not find accommodation in the capital city. Yet, they persisted. They innovated in the graphic novel as well the Gond artform. It is this pressure and innovation that is the weight borne by the Adivasi artist. Adivasi visuality then, is a way of reading the art despite these pressures on dignity and design. The artist must labor harder and more creatively to confront such a scenario.

The picturebook emerges as a precise site for both Adivasi visuality and power to play out. Bhajju Shyam confronted primitivist pressures before the Vyams, as Jangarh Singh Shyam observed these pressures before him. Like Jangarh Singh Shyam, Bhajju Shyam has crafted *The London Jungle Book* to challenge said pressures. In an image for a doublespread titled "Working for the Stomach", Shyam reveals that not only does his art take a different kind of labor, but that his art can view everybody who eats at the restaurant, and by extension everybody who reads or views the picturebook. More importantly, the deity he illustrates in "Working for the Stomach" is, like Jangarh Singh Shyam's innovation, an iconic visualization of a god. But Shyam's is an Adivasi rendition of a prominent Hindu and Adivasi deity. Shyam rejects conventional adornments of the god, and even the colors and markers of identification of the god. All to illustrate a peculiar Pardhan Gond god. "Working for the Stomach" then challenges the context by the asserting the presence of a subversive deity in the picturebook, aiding an Adivasi presence in the picturebook; a presence that can manage viewership by managing a visuality. Bhajju Shyam's Adivasi picturebook gestures from a turn to a control. His Adivasi visuality is a

potent principle of reading his art that allows us to seek resistance and agency. This is also why the picturebook can communicate strategy from Bhajju Shyam in 2004 to Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam almost a decade later.

This essay began with an invocation of key scholars in visual studies- Mitchell and Mirzoeff- to argue for possibilities staged in the visual art of Bhajju Shyam. The foray into Anglophone politics and publishing intended to contextualize the emergence of alternative presses like Tara. Rashmi Sadana's contrapuntal reading tempers any conversation about the "authenticity" of the choice of English. Notably in contemporary children's publishing, there is visible a didacticism with a difference, seen, for example, in every aspect of Tara's endeavor. Bhajju Shyam's visual art launches itself via the Adivasi picturebook to make an argument against a colonial and postcolonial literary gaze. Other chapters take forward this reversal by considering the 2014 *Creation*, bring attention to the speculative possibilities that inhere in the art of "the makers of magic", and highlight the gendered labor that is invisibilized in a story Pardhan Gond painting. The Adivasi picturebook is a site for these questions to play out.

Chapter 3 The Indian Anglophone Picturebook as Speculative Fiction: Bhajju Shyam's 2009 *The Flight of the Mermaid*

The Flight of the Mermaid, a picturebook published in 2009, is an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's 1837 fairy tale "The Little Mermaid". Bhajju Shyam (1971-) has created the art for the picturebook and Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao from Tara Books, Chennai, have provided the text. The picturebook largely follows the Andersen story but diverges in the usage of visual art. Bhajju Shyam has illustrated the text using his distinctive Pardhan Gond art, often called Gond painting. Shyam is a Pardhan, part of the larger Gond Adivasi community. The Gonds are one of the largest Indigenous communities in India, and the Pardhans have been the oral storytellers of the Gonds- they sang the lore of the community and played the sacred instrument called *bana*. As a community, the Pardhans have seen a number of shifts. According to anthropologist Shamrao Hivale's reading of the 1931 Census data, the Pardhans used to be classified as a "criminal" tribe. The Indian state does not recognize them as a criminal tribe anymore. Further, the Pardhans have now seen an erosion of their storytelling practice (Bowles *Painted Songs*). The ritual singing-storytelling tour that the Pardhan bards would undertake for specific Gond families is not as common anymore. The artform is not limited to a repertoire of songs and stories, it has now expanded to include painting, book illustration, and a plethora of commodities like magnets, fabrics, and décor.

However, increasing visibility of the artform has not meant an increase in the ease of Pardhan artists' lives. Jangarh Singh Shyam, the acknowledged creator of Gond painting, was harassed by his non-Adivasi colleagues and defrauded of his legitimate share of painting sale money. He was once asked to strip and don a loincloth and a spear for an

exhibition catalogue's photo op. He took his own life in Japan in 2001 and it is unclear why. Singh Shyam's harassment, felt by contemporary Adivasi artists in India as well, was born out of jealousy on the part of other stakeholders in the art world. J Swaminathan, artist and curator, describes the Adivasi as forced into a situation of "lag" in the imagination (*The Perceiving Fingers*). Perhaps Singh Shyam's detractors insisted that an Adivasi artist should continue to lag in some essential distant landscape. This is a primitivist tendency.

I observe a primitivism persisting in the 21st century. Sometimes this is clear in the experiences of the artists and sometimes in generic and artistic classification that Adivasi art is bracketed in. In our conversation, Bhajju Shyam told me the Gond painting is now understood as "ped, paudhe, pakshi" or "trees, plants, birds". He added that sometimes one must conform to this understanding and create what the buyer wants (B. Shyam, Personal Interview 2022). His words are a testament to the natural harmony Errington reads as concretely associated with primitive art. Both the art and the artist must submit to external meaning and monetary value. Moreover, Indian Indigenous art—or Adivasi art—like Gond and Warli and folk art like Pata and Mithila is now being increasingly used by publishers in India toward illustrated books and picturebooks. The inclusion of Adivasi and folk art toward children's book illustration is a laudable effort that is not only about the appearance of symbolic capital; for artists like Bhajju Shyam, Ramsingh Urveti, and Durgabai Vyam, this "symbolic capital" (Chatterji *Speaking* 120) can also be harnessed into material capital. Bhajju Shyam and Durgabai Vyam have both received the Padma Shri—the fourth highest civilian award in India—and been part of multiple collaborative projects. They both now live in concrete houses in Bhopal, India. But there are limits to this harnessing. Bhajju Shyam told me that as an Adivasi artist, his choice to wear denim jeans

at public events is sometimes questioned- apparently some people would like him to wear “traditional” Adivasi clothing at such gatherings. It is these associations that link the art, the artist, and the significations attached to both that hinder a nuanced awareness about Adivasi art amongst the wider public. There is an expectation that the art and the artist be primitive. Indeed, there is a naturalized link between primitive children and primitive tribals, dependent on a flawed narrative of progress- from child to adult and from primitive to civilized. I think the genre of children’s fiction and the categorization of fantasy and speculative fiction can emphasize the primitivism that viewers misconstrue as inherent in Adivasi art. As I have indicated in Chapter 2 and demonstrate shortly in this chapter, the inclusion of Adivasi art in children’s fantasy can lead to a perpetuation of stereotyped *othering* when Indigenous artists are seen as purveyors of only children’s fiction or children’s fantasy. What can the artist do? Can the artist intervene to enable a *futurism* in opposition to primitivism?

I argue that a picturebook like *The Flight of the Mermaid* has been created as a site to imagine a shift from primitivism to Adivasi futurism. Adivasi futurism is embedded in an innate sense of sovereignty over Adivasi labor and Adivasi material. It manages a reclamation of artistic control over an imagined future, based on a co-mingling of an unfairly primitivized past and present. Adivasi past and present is shackled by essentialisms that depend on a universal narrative of civilizational development, assuming that the future for the Adivasi would be the present for non-Adivasi communities. An Adivasi-led imagination of the future differs from this universalism and imagines a revisioning of the past as well as control over the future. In this chapter, I discuss Adivasi futurism both as an art practice in Bhajju Shyam’s work as well as a method of reading. An Adivasi futurist

reading primarily asks questions of the role of Adivasi artist as a sovereign producer of meaning. In texts that appropriate Adivasi art or discuss it in disparaging terms, an Adivasi futurist reading asks how the text would have been shaped had an Adivasi artist been invited to collaborate. Adivasi futurism, as a practice as well as an interpretative tool, is in the interest of seeking sovereignty. Sovereignty is a central concept in global Indigenous studies, as communities across the world are attempting a reclamation of their history in the wake of apocalyptic colonization. Sovereignty in Indigenous studies is the asserted control over physical, intellectual, territorial, and artistic domains in the backdrop of apocalyptic colonization. While the South Asian context is different from the North American rupture of settler colonialism, material disenfranchisement and social stigma against Adivasis continues unchecked in India. Thus, asking for sovereignty rights and seeking sovereignty in art is still central to interrogating how an Adivasi artist can oppose primitivism. Indigenous literary and visual studies scholars like Grace Dillon (*Walking the Clouds* pp. 1-14) and Kristina Baudemann (“Indigenous Futurisms”) define Indigenous futurism as storytelling moving toward an Indigenous future. Given that Indigenous artistic production is often misinterpreted as an extension of a primitivism shackled in the past, a reparative Indigenous artistic control must be read in an Adivasi futurism.

In Bhajju Shyam’s case, it is a sovereignty that is visible in artistic and formal intervention. Apprehending the picturebook as an instance Adivasi futurism allows us to understand that Bhajju Shyam delicately illustrates the story as *belonging* to him. This act of willful illustration identifies the story as his, his predecessor Jangarh Singh Shyam’s, and his community’s. As I show, in *Flight of the Mermaid*, when the Adivasi artist innovates linework or *rekha*, he battles the misconception that Adivasi art is eternal and

unchanging. Innovative linework lets viewers know that a distinction between art and craft—where art comes from the academy and craft comes rural artisans following tradition—should not be the frame to view Pardhan Gond art in the picturebook. As Bhajju Shyam illustrates the mermaid as a recognizably Adivasi princess, he *claims* the protagonist as a Pardhan or a Gond princess. This means the journey of the princess mirrors the journey of the Gonds and the Pardhans. The story then does not simply belong to a European storyteller like Hans Christian Andersen anymore. A Pardhan singer-painter-storyteller visually challenges the meaning of the Andersen story. Most importantly, Bhajju Shyam finds inspiration in an Adivasi deity like “Jalhaarin Mata” for the illustration of the mermaid; and then uses this illustration to provide iconic form to the deity a few years later. According a crucial creative position to an Adivasi water goddess shifts the assumption that the power of the story lies in Hans Christian Andersen’s white mermaid. By the time his deity takes form, the story has been completely transformed by the Pardhan artist as powerfully re-claimed by a vibrant tradition with the future in mind.

A future that connects the past and the present is visible in Bhajju Shyam’s art practice. His labor becomes a battle for the past as well as a battle for the future. If Adivasi art, bodies, and resources have been seized by a harmful present, creative challenges wrench artistic control to break the pushing of the Adivasi into a primitive lag stuck in the past, to a glimpse of a future where agential control is possible. An Adivasi futurism is about enabling a sense of author-ity over tradition and community-based ownership. Indeed, globally Indigenous futurism is thought be a conscious artistic act of bringing together “traditional” and new or futuristic elements in order to comment on a particular Indigenous community’s control of their narrative. Imagining the mermaid as an Adivasi

princess emphasizes the story as that of the Gond or Pardhan art/artist, metafictionally visualizing their own story. Scholars of indigeneity like Kristina Baudemann describe Indigenous futurism as “Indigenous storytelling about the future” (117). Bhajju Shyam’s endeavor is not obviously about a realistic or even a fantastic future- the work he has illustrated for does not *image* a clear future for his community. However, its very presence imagines a gesture to that future. Kristina Baudemann writes that in the works of North American Indigenous artists, “...travels to alternate dimensions are imagined on the basis of traditional worldviews”. But this is achieved “By experimentation with visual structure” and it is in this experimentation that “the artists tell stories about the future” (118). Shyam’s agential co-mingling of Pardhan Gond art with a story that is Andersen’s, and his transformation of that story into his own in an innovative use of linework and plot is an example of “traditional worldviews” that are experimented with to intervene in a harmful present. Baudemann continues, “Drawing on both Western and Indigenous cultures, North American Indigenous artists imagine the future as a space opened up by their artwork, as a structure arising from colours and shapes, the form of which is determined by their sovereign, artistic visions” (148). *The Flight of the Mermaid*, and other texts of this sort published as a collaboration between Tara Books and Adivasi artists, must be seen as exemplifying an Adivasi futurist practice.

Additionally, as Bhajju Shyam’s futuristic practice enables “sovereign, artistic visions” (Baudemann 148) confronting primitivism and genre, it is essential that accurate terms be used to explain his labor. For instance, words like “Adivasi” and “tribal” or even “Indigenous” and “futurism” have conflicting histories. I use the terms “Adivasi”, “tribal” and “Indigenous” interchangeably in this chapter as I describe the Pardhan Gond artform.

Similarly, the term “futurism” owes itself to three distinct tendencies in contemporary speculative fiction studies- Afrofuturism, Indofuturism, and Indigenous futurism. Another root for futurism is Italian poet F T Marinetti’s 1909 “The Futurist Manifesto”. But Marinetti’s valorization of masculine progress and speed has now been proved to be distinctly fascist. Other movements may borrow the word but thoroughly separate the future they envision for respective communities from Marinetti’s valorization of fundamentalist violence. Afrofuturism, for instance, has been instrumental in bringing attention to what Tavia N’yong’o calls “tactical fictionalizing” in narratives by African Americans (*Afro-Fabulations*). Lisa Yaszek reminds readers that Afrofuturism imagines control over racist pasts and futures that have been scripted by outsiders hitherto (“Afrofuturism”). Indofuturism, a term coined by Raminder Kaur and Saif Eqbal in 2019 is meant to bring attention to the tradition of superhero narratives amongst urban and semi-urban young adults in India. For Kaur and Eqbal, Indofuturism allows readers of Indian superhero comics to reflect a world of postcolonial yet limited aspiration. Indigenous futurism, coined by scholars of indigeneity Grace Dillon (*Walking the Clouds*) and defined by Kristina Baudemann, asks readers and viewers to “read” sf by Indigenous creators as strategic juxtapositions that narrate a new future.

I am aware that as I propose a futurism—allied to speculative fiction—in reading Bhajju Shyam’s work, I may be misunderstood as encouraging the harms of speculative fiction. That is not my intention. Lest I be confused as promoting a unilinear definition of reality or art, I should clarify that an Adivasi futurism brings varied forms and traditions together to counter a primitivist misreading. I submit a futurism while keeping the generic limitations of sf and children’s fantasy in mind. I borrow the “futurism” in “Adivasi

futurism” from the generative potential in the three tendencies in speculative fiction studies to speculate upon a claim on the future. I discuss shortly that a futurism, sometimes visible as speculative fiction or fantasy, does not always aid the Adivasi cause. Despite this, I propose that the Pardhan Gond illustrated picturebook, like *The Flight of the Mermaid*, be understood as speculative fiction. Adivasi futurism is reparative. It reclaims, it re-creates, re-frames, and it innovates. The contemporary Anglophone picturebook in India, when illustrated by Adivasi artists, animates a generative juxtaposition of a threatened Adivasi past and present with an enabling Indigenous future. An Adivasi futurism simultaneously persists in upholding Adivasi artistic traditions, while consciously making some changes in the form. When a Western story is adapted, as in Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” here, Adivasi futurism issues a challenge. Doing so, a futuristic practice displays a control over aesthetics, leading to a reclamation. This re-scripts a primitivized past thus allowing us to contemplate a complex and joyful future. This reclamation frames the present to include a radical possibility of ownership as the artist deftly manages narrative.

In a related move, some children’s fiction scholars are also studying how children’s fiction and fantasy may be understood as speculative fiction. This paves the path for another route to a sophisticated understanding of children’s fiction, allowing texts to exist along multiple genres and audiences. I think Adivasi futurism allows such a critical understanding to mature as picturebooks may now, and should be, imagined as crafted with thought and complexity. Maria Nikolajeva, one of the world’s foremost picturebook scholars, in fact, criticizes the tendency to divorce children’s picturebooks from a

speculative⁵⁴ consideration. “Children’s picturebooks are normally treated as a separate category, while not only some of them display characteristic features of fantasy but provide vast possibilities for the hesitation that lies at the basis for the fantastic” (“The Development of Children’s Fantasy” 59). She emphasizes the critical treatment of children’s fantasy and children’s picturebooks at the end of her essay in an epigrammatic push, “If we regard picturebooks as a medium rather than a genre...”, then a vast body of work would be considered “more complex than novels” (60). Nikolajeva brings attention to a deliberate jettisoning of this medium from definitions of context-specific composite set of textual practices that may be speculative. An Adivasi futurism can accommodate Nikolajeva’s call to reconsider genre.

A (non) Linear Future

A flawed narrative of progress reifies the Adivasi artist and their creation into stereotyped strangleholds. Linear progress that cannot account for simultaneity of time or divergence from an undeviating story of development will perforce read the Adivasi as stuck in a civilizational stage. A perpetual childhood even. Arguably, a non-linear narrative may shift signification evinced in the art and the artist. In *The Flight of the Mermaid*, through linear labor—or labor of *linework*—Bhajju Shyam deviates from the linearity of history. This is not to say that the art now stands independent of meanings generated by outsiders. This is to say that Bhajju Shyam’s labor produces another set of meanings. Two

⁵⁴ It is in keeping with a contemporary critical consensus that I am using speculative fiction as an umbrella term for fantasy, horror, and scifi in this essay, while discussing the genres of children’s fantasy. Farah Mendlesohn has, for instance, published excellent histories of fantasy and children’s fantasy in the West (*A Short History; Children’s Fantasy*) but she also observes that Attebery’s theory of “fuzzy sets” is now commonly followed (*Children’s Fantasy* 3).

sets of meanings (“Mermaid and Sisters” *Flight*) can now raise questions. By the middle of the picturebook, the mermaid has attained human form by sacrificing her voice. She has been welcomed by the prince and has joined his retinue. She finds life on land a constant novelty but also finds that she is restless. Inescapably, she looks to the sea for comfort in the evenings. It is on one such evening that her sisters meet her and converse with her. Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao describe the scene thus, “One stormy night she saw her sisters on the waves, singing arm in arm. They rushed over to her and said the Sea-witch had told them what she had done.” (*Flight* n. p.) This is a poignant reunion in the text. Her sisters weep at the loss of their sister and her beautiful voice. Note the protagonist’s wavy hair: it is meant to look like the weed of the sea. It extends in five directions, encompassing the sea itself. Bhajju Shyam’s depiction is ironic given the protagonist’s utter loss of control over naval travel when she loses her tail and gains human legs. The irony is intentional. The artist wishes to draw attention to the discomfort that the mermaid princess has been subjected to. To this extent, Bhajju Shyam’s illustration follows the Andersen story. Andersen’s narrator too rues the loss the mermaid has faced. But in the same gesture, Bhajju Shyam walks away from the Andersen story.

The elements of Bhajju Shyam’s art aid his departure and Shyam works with these elements. Pardhan Gond art exhibits a lack of representational verisimilitude. The viewer notes a difference in proportion and perspective- there is no way to know which objects are distant into the vanishing point. The sisters in “Mermaid and Sisters” (*Flight*) cannot be described as “foregrounded”- they are roughly the same size with respect to the protagonist. The shapes of the characters approximate human, piscine, reptilian—and indeed they are easy to identify as such—but cannot be called “exact”. The mermaid sisters

hold each other and appear to sing and dance in the sea. The sisters have surrounded the protagonist. She is the center. This could be an inscrutable dance ritual. Their hands are clasped in each others' and their fish tails move in the water. Perhaps they are moving in unison around the protagonist. But it is unclear if they are dancing or merely floating. The dance evident in the mermaid's bodies could be an expression of the mermaid's mobility in the sea, not necessarily a dance. If it is a dance, perhaps the sisters engaged in a tribal dance, accessible only to members of the community. Another question emerges. The mermaid-human appears to be smiling. This is incommensurate with the plot- the mermaid is upset at her loss at the moment. Why would she smile? After all, the depiction of obvious ecstasy and happiness is not common in Pardhan Gond aesthetics. Emotion may be conveyed through action, not necessarily facial ductility like a smile. Then why does the mermaid smile and why do her sisters appear to be dancing in a tribal ritual?

The answer might lie in a curious convergence and simultaneous conflict between Pardhan Gond aesthetics and Western perspective as defined by an art historian like E H Gombrich (*Art and Illusion*). On the one hand, the formal appearance of Pardhan art turns it into an *other* of precise pictorial realism seen in Western art in general. On the other, the very difference allows us to detect Bhajju Shyam's formal innovation. The sisters appear as if they are performing a dance that is both fantastic and tribal; unreal and beyond recognizable mundane movement. Pardhan Gond art emphasizes the fantasy in form but at the same time only emphasizes the other nature of tribal art and movement. This is a convergence because a departure from pictorial realism has been a characteristic of

Western fantasy illustration⁵⁵. Since Pardhan Gond art also delights in the confounding perspective, exactitude, and verisimilitude, these two tendencies have come together. A comingling has occurred- a departure from verisimilitude, inherent in Pardhan Gond aesthetics, comes together with the confusion of verisimilitude inherent in fantasy illustration. In other words, it is the repudiation of verisimilitude that makes it look like something more than a convivial meeting of sisters. Perhaps, it is a magic circle after all. This move away from realism is easily understood as fantastic or speculative, not realistic. Such a rupture renders it easier to assume that this is primitive or inferior. Hence, the fantasy as denoted by a difference from Western exactitude is played up by Pardhan Gond forms. But more questions crowd as one is confronted by difference. What of the smile?

As Western fantasy art plays with precision, it allies itself with Pardhan Gond aesthetics to stress a convergence. This is a synergy between the fantastic as other to realism and tribal as other to urban Indian and western modernity as a civilizational stage. But what about the conflict between western verisimilitude and Pardhan Gond art's repudiation of the same? The smile on the mermaid's face hints at the conflict. Pardhan Gond art does not draw the human face as mobile. Other visual traditions may illustrate the face as the center of emotion and plot movement- but Pardhan Gond art does not invest in facial mobility as expressions of the character's motivations. The smile appears to be a nod to a different set of aesthetics that demand facial mobility. Even if one were to say that here the smile indicates the mermaid's happiness, one understands that there is no plot reason

⁵⁵ Hackford on the Cadbury "gift-box" artist Edmund Dulac who executed the "East in the manner of the East". Hackford points us to the stylistic departure made by Dulac, "In this early 'blue' phase of his style Dulac recognized that a palette limited in hue, particularly one dominated by blue with its connotations of twilight and dreams, endowed his fantasy world with an atmosphere completely removed from real life" (Hackford 169).

for a smile to exist here. After all, this is a painful moment for the mermaid- she comes face to face with her sisters, who represent her loss. Why would she smile in a moment of pain? In that case, perhaps this is not a smile. Note that the smile is neither wide nor dramatic. It is wispy. Perhaps the smile is ironic. Perhaps the mermaid-human smiles weakly to mock her own fate. Perhaps the smile is a mere line to represent the character's lips and just happens to stretch beyond an expected "dash"⁵⁶. Perhaps it is both a Pardhan "dash" and an ironic smile.

However, as I have noted, the conflict between Pardhan Gond art and verisimilitude can lead us to a formal innovation in Bhajju Shyam's work. In Pardhan Gond art, a line is never a mere line. One also notes the series of short lines that cover the spine of the sisters, the outline of all figures, and the wrinkles on the protagonist's yellow lower garment. Lines dominate the page or the canvas of Pardhan Gond art. In fact, this specific kind of linework is at the core of Pardhan Gond artistic individuality. In Hindi, these lines are called *Rekha*. Each artist was asked to develop their own version of *Rekha* by Jangarh Singh Shyam. In other words, lines or *Rekha* are a clear indication of artistic individuality. For example, Bhajju Shyam's lines differ from Durgabai Vyam's, whose lines differ from Venkat Shyam's. Since Jangarh Singh Shyam initiated this practice of linework and his family solidified it into a "tradition", Bhajju Shyam is conforming to the newly crafted tradition by placing a *Rekha*/dash/line everywhere in his art. In so far as Bhajju Shyam follows his tradition, the smile is a special individual line and not a smile. This per se defies the assumptions around Adivasi Indian art. Tradition is revealed to by dynamic and not set in

⁵⁶ I discuss the Pardhan dash as a recognizable element of Pardhan Gond painting in the next section, so much so that non-Adivasi individuals can use the dash to make their art approximate the elements of "Gond painting".

solid stone. The Rekha was given visibility by Jangarh Singh Shyam and has become a tradition now informing all Pardhan Gond art. “Gond painting” was concretized only in the 1980s, merely 40 years ago. Moreover, according to Aurogeeta Das, the rekha individuates as it “delineates”. (*Enchanted* pp. 64-75). Aurogeeta Das writes of Jangarh Singh Shyam’s lines as an instrument of “delineation”- they gave the effect of movement, they allowed a measure of “aura” to the figures he painted, and they helped him use negative space to compose his images better. She says both Bhajju Shyam and Ramsingh Urveti remember being taught this “delineation” by Jangarh (*Enchanted* pp. 64-75). It is in keeping with the formal functions of the lines as well as the pejoration that Adivasi art is thought to be communal and not individual that Jangarh Singh Shyam perhaps instructed his family-apprentices to innovate upon their own pattern of lines or rekha. Jyotindra Jain also relates the story of the patterns of lines that are a dominant aesthetic of Pardhan Gond art- Anand Shyam too was involved in the delineation of the process of individual signatures, along with Bhajju Shyam and Ramsingh Urveti. Jain says this is what lead to a “school” of painting (*Conjuror’s* pp. 25-27). Individuation shatters the assumption that Adivasi craft stems from an “amorphous collectivity” (*Other Masters* 9). In this case, it stems from individual artists. Indeed, this means the well-crafted Rekha in *Flight of the Mermaid* does not stem from “amorphous” primitive collectives but from futurist individual artists. This artwork here then signifies a South Asian Indigenous futurism, an Adivasi futurism, that practices a productive inclusion to imagine an active future, that is being fashioned by Bhajju Shyam, the illustrator, as he welds together Pardhan Gond signification with matter and within medium that is not Pardhan Gond.

Moreover, while it is significant per se that rekha is a barometer of a dynamic and unique art in the Pardhan art ecology, this is not the only shift that Bhajju Shyam is enabling. I propose that the Rekha on the mermaid-human's face should also be a smile. This would mean that Bhajju Shyam has done what Jangarh Singh Shyam asked his mentees to do—create a new rekha—but has also pushed that line into becoming a smile, an example of *facial* expression. While facial expression is a concession to a different aesthetics, the smile is a tactical concession. It is not only an innovation in the repertoire of Pardhan visual vocabulary, it is also a criticism of the status quo. The mermaid smirks wanly to signal her dissatisfaction with the situation. Bhajju Shyam speaks through the mermaid. Her sarcastic grin is Bhajju Shyam's comment on the lack of agency in the plot at this moment. Later in this essay, I argue that the mermaid is a Pardhan storyteller princess whose journey embodies the story of Pardhan art. If so, her lack of agency in this moment reflects larger pressures faced by Pardhan artists. Her smile then is the artist's acknowledgement of the disabling pressures that Pardhan bodies face, and a gauntlet thrown to Bhajju Shyam's detractors.

The “dash” on the mermaid's face is a polysemous pronouncement about the convergence and conflict between visual traditions as well as an index of formal tradition and innovation. The wanly smiling mermaid also signals Shyam's dissatisfaction with the current disenfranchisement of Adivasis in India. The dash is certainly an individual Rekha. But interpreting the line as both Pardhan Rekha and a smile takes the “delineated” individuation forward. It is line but it is also an instance of facial articulation not seen in Pardhan art. It is both Pardhan and not at the same time. In Bhajju Shyam's hands, the line on the mermaid's face can only be a smile when one realizes that it is another rekha, like

the series of short lines across any figure or abstract shapes in Pardhan Gond art. The short pen stroke is first Pardhan line and then Western smile. This is a fruitful juxtaposition of Pardhan tradition and innovation. The Pardhan line has become polysemous, indeed has been made to be polysemous. The smile is Bhajju Shyam's: it is a manifestation of artistic individuality as initiated by Jangarh Singh Shyam, but it also an example of Bhajju Shyam's shift in the vocabulary of Pardhan Gond art. Thus, Bhajju Shyam has demonstrated control over his Indigenous rekha as well as a Western smile. In fact, Shyam's artwork accompanies text that is distinctly not Pardhan Gond i.e., Hans Christian Andersen, in a medium that is not Pardhan Gond i.e., the anglophone picturebook.

I said that this illustration provides an example of an ambiguous interpretation of Pardhan Gond art; that two sets of meanings can be seen. On the one hand, Pardhan Gond aesthetics are deviating from ostensibly ossified Gond tribal "tradition" to expand the repertoire of visual storytelling. The rekha is first rekha and then an innovated smile. This upholds tradition but practices innovation. This is a clear example of traditional elements re-used to make something new. Indeed, this is a lucid working out Baudemann's definition of Indigenous futurism. Bhajju Shyam's art practices both an inclusion of "traditional worldviews" and an "experiment with visual structures" (Baudemann pp. 117-118). On the other hand, and I devote space to this in the next section, the fantasy of the story attaches itself to the fantasy of the form of the art which attaches itself to the *other* Adivasi artist. In other words, it seems axiomatic that a fantasy story would be illustrated using a "fantastic" form that denies verisimilitude, practiced by an Indigenous artist.

The Child and the Super-natural

In the last section, I argued that Adivasi futurism helps us understand the nuances of ownership that must be read in Bhajju Shyam's controlled innovation upon tradition. But as I show presently, literary and art categories defy the art and even harm it sometimes. Given the problematic nature of generic characterization, how should the Adivasi-illustrated picturebook be acknowledged? A picturebook like *The Flight of the Mermaid* is vulnerable to primitivism both when marketed to children and when marketed as fantasy. Both lenses carry with them a stranglehold that may reduce the full meaning of Adivasi art. Yet, I propose the picturebook as speculative fiction in the service of Adivasi futurism. I am interested in asking how one may think of speculative fiction and art as an act of recovery, and indeed how may the Adivasi artist make a story their own in order to reinscribe its effects. For instance, Bhajju Shyam's words to me display a sharp awareness of how his work might be apprehended- he knows exactly how his work will be seen as merely a collection of pretty "trees, plants, birds" (B. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). Is it possible that his art for *The Flight of the Mermaid* is composed keeping in mind the "ped, paudhe, pakshi"; but it also pushes the easy recognition of "ped, paudhe, paskhi" and primitivism to include a sense of both the past and the future of his community and artform? By bringing together a picturebook ostensibly to both children and caregivers, I wish to ask how an artist like Bhajju Shyam may take back control over categorical epistemic violence that continues to pervade the meaning of Adivasi art. I will return to *The Flight of the Mermaid* in subsequent sections. But before that, it is imperative to see how an inadequate meaning is attached to the art in the picturebook as well other contexts of display.

I observe a link with primitivism when Adivasi art is marketed as children's fiction or when it becomes fantasy. Speculative fiction and fantasy, for instance, activate a distinction between consensus reality and unreality. This distinction has been generically blind to differences of cultural worldview. Speculative fiction scholar John Rieder, for instance, diagnoses the exotic landscapes of emergent science fiction as informed by oriental notions of the other (*Colonialism*). In Rieder's diagnosis, an exotic other and exoticism in a genre coincide. Cultural differences of consensus reality are ignored. This exoticization, I would contend, depends on a particular attitude towards human progress. It depends on a limited idea that assumes progress as linear and teleological and the artistic depiction of this progress as ever finetuned precision of portrayal. Such a progress would entail that Adivasi individuals capitulate to non-Adivasi beliefs and shift their art practice to look more realistic. This means that when contemporary Pardhan art illustrates the world, the art and the artist are always already compared to limited notions of artistic and technological progress. As if to say that it is natural that Pardhan art is fantastic or speculative because it *is* always already a myth-rich denial of verisimilitude.

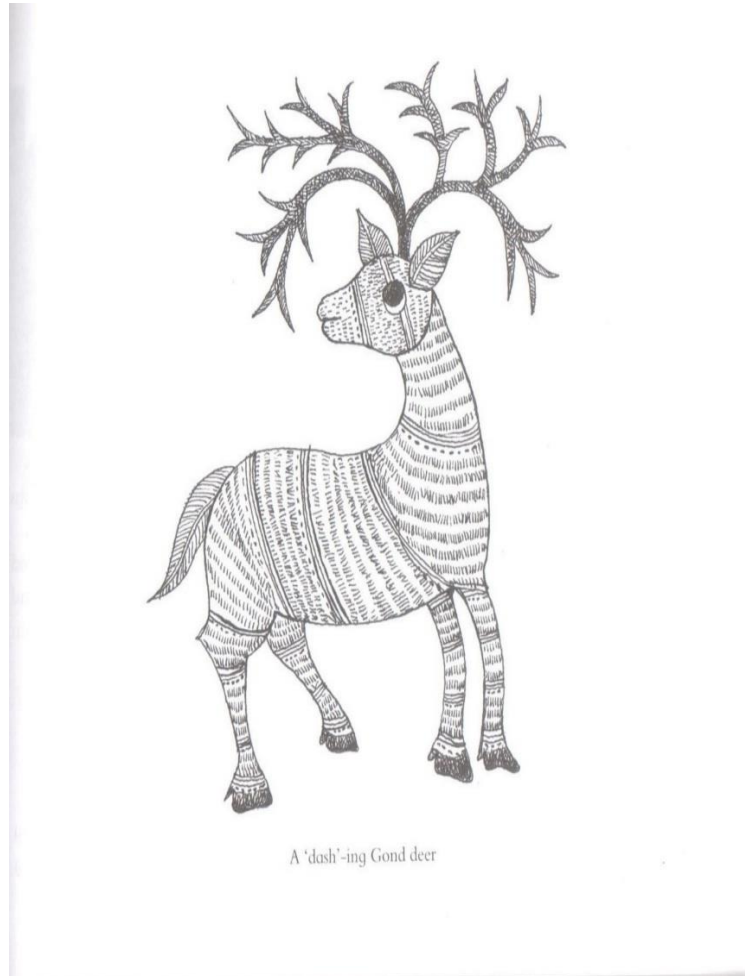
Primitivism spills over into conceptual problems in categorizing Adivasi art as either children's fare or uncritical speculative fiction or fantasy. Another aspect of "exoticization" is the othering of Adivasi art that is visually available- the art *looks* unrealistic. It immediately registers a difference. A difference in verisimilitude is then associated with a child-like absence of skill and training. This makes it convenient to infantilize the art. This infantilization becomes almost organic when picturebooks in particular, and children's publishing in general, become platforms for the display of Adivasi art. I do not mean that a shift in media automatically infantilizes the art. As

Pardhan Gond art has moved from song and mural to canvas and paper, some changes have been brought about with the traversing of the artform from performance and murals to other media. Bhajju Shyam, in our conversation for instance, welcomed the medium of paper. He said paper has allowed their art to reach more people than their song would (B. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). *The Flight of the Mermaid*, like many other texts in the Tara Books oeuvre, is such an example of the usage of the artform not as mural or floor art, but as a book. Scholarship too has celebrated the shifts in medium. John H Bowles (*Painted Songs*), Roma Chatterji (*Speaking*), Annapurna Garimella (“A Tree Grows”), and Gulammohamad Sheikh (“The World”), describe such shifts as enrichment of the artform and the medium. But they also indicate that the shift in medium, which corresponds with the inclusion of Adivasi art for children’s fiction, should be seen with some caution. This is what I mean- how is the art transformed in a picturebook, a medium often mistakenly thought of restricted to a less mature, less serious, less sophisticated group of readers? There is a genuine concern amongst scholars of Pardhan Gond art that the recent trend of publishers collaborating with folk and Adivasi artists may not be as beneficial as previously thought. There remains a clear assumption amongst wider audiences that as Adivasi art is used in illustrating children’s fiction, it is somehow immature, juvenile, or underdeveloped, when compared to “modern” art. This presumption is further encouraged by the commodified marketing and use of Pardhan Gond art for children in the form of picturebooks, masks, toys, and magazines. Bowles clarifies that this tendency encourages the presumption that Adivasi artists only produce “charmingly decorative or child-oriented imagery” (pp. 40-41). All these attitudes are manifestations of primitivism. Seeking a

futurism will allow us to how the artist and the art can work with these manifestations to claim ownership of the art and the medium.

Contemporary publishing and exhibition display catalogues offer instances of the othering and infantilization discussed above. A poignant discrepancy with respect to representation is notable between Tara and other bigger publishers. Puffin, the children's wing of Penguin, published *A Brush with Indian Art: From Cave to Contemporary Paintings* in 2018. Compiled by Mamta Nainy and illustrated by Aniruddha Mukherjee, the book purports to teach its readers about Indian art. Chapter 8, the chapter on folk and tribal art, stands out in its brevity. It is called "The Makers of Magic: Other Folk and Tribal Art Forms of India". Unlike Tara's pedagogic enterprise—which mostly focusses Adivasi and folk traditions—the Puffin book attempts to cover a vast canvas of traditions. Bhil, Gond, Warli, Madhubani- all feature summarily in one chapter. Puffin's is a brief narrative account of each tradition accompanied by Mukherjee's line drawings *in* the style of each tradition (Fig. 1). Puffin's attempt is to show and tell its reader-viewers how each tradition visualizes its themes. There are two crucial differences between Tara and Puffin. The artists invited to illustrate the images differ- Tara tries to collaborate with the folk and Adivasi communities that the activity book describes. Puffin's artist is an illustrator who belongs to the dominant Hindu caste in India. Moreover, some stock descriptions of folk and tribal arts are found in Chapter 8- "the everyday arts", "simplified lines and dots", "basic forms" (86), "rural community", "no set of rules", "tribal or ancient in origin", "depths of wilderness" (Nainy 87). These ascriptions locate the Adivasi art in a matrix of familiar ideological locales- art exists in the village, uses rudimentary craft ostensibly unchanged over time, and is apparently so alien that rules appear invisible. As the elements attributed

to tribal art by Mamta Nainy show, there is a clear return to stock characteristics of primitivism in 2018. The author's account of "the everyday arts" cannot provide the space to cover each tradition with nuance and sophistication. The book traverses too many ideas and must devote only a little time to each aspect of the story of these traditions. This explains the "simplified" picture she paints as she writes about folk and tribal art.



A 'dash'-ing Gond deer

Fig. 1 “A ‘dash’-ing Gond deer”, *A Brush with Indian Art* p. 95. Art by Aniruddha Mukherjee, text by Mamta Nainy, for *A Brush with Indian Art*, Original Edition © Puffin India.

But more insidiously, its pedagogic intent is to teach its reader-viewer *how* to view and perhaps even how to write about the makers of “magic” art. This is profoundly disturbing- for it has the potential to yet again, reassert primitivism. The jump from assuming that folk and tribal art use basic and simplified forms to assuming that the creators are not human enough that must be denied nuance as their art is sold is easy. The ease with which the psychological jump is accomplished appears benign and depends on the concrete essentializing power of primitivism. What happens when Adivasi art is published as children’s fiction? Children’s books, as Peter Hunt points out, are both popular and “marginalized” because “Childhood is, after all, a state we grow away from...” (*Understanding* 1). In Hunt’s evaluation, children’s publishing is based on a presumed narrative of progressing from a state of innocence to a state of knowledge. When Adivasi art, purportedly about Adivasi individuals or stories, is published ostensibly for children, then a dangerous comingling of the innocent child and the “innocent” Adivasi transpires. Indeed, innocence and simplicity are attributes that Adivasis in India, and Indigenous peoples across the world⁵⁷ have been coerced into. The notion that Adivasis are innocent of the ways of the world, that they are perpetual victims, and always being cheated is another facet of primitivism. This is a direct descendent of the racist formulation of the “noble savage” where the savage is constructed as wild yet worthy of redemption. Thus, there is a danger of radical Adivasi intervention neutralized by the infantilization that is

⁵⁷ Pinky Hota’s fieldwork, for instance, articulates how a perceived “simplicity” of Odisha Kandha tribals is strategized pejoratively by caste Hindus and government officials to continue land control. Hota discusses how “simplicity” can also be strategized by the Adivasis themselves in order to show that they are familiar with scripts of financial exchange (“Money, Value”).

inevitably attached to children's literature. This infantilization makes it well-nigh effortless to assume that Adivasi artists can only illustrate quirky or whimsical work in children's magazines or books.

An Adivasi futurist reading can potentially mitigate the infantilization above. The Puffin chapter on "the everyday arts" suggests that simplicity and imitability are related. Adivasi futurism re-claims ownership of culture. A futurist reading would ask why a Pardhan artist was not invited to collaborate with Mamta Nainy on the chapter. In other words, who has the right to claim Pardhan Gond art as theirs to use? Aniruddha Mukherjee is not an Adivasi. He belongs to upper most caste in the Hindu varna system. Unlike a Pardhan artist like Bhajju Shyam or Durgabai Vyam, Mukherjee did not confront the attendant pressures that Adivasi artists face. Note that he illustrates the deer as a Gond artist would, so readers know what Gond illustration looks like. Note how the caption breaks and hyphenates "dashing" to "dash'-ing". The caption explicitly points to the "dash-ing" Gond deer. The hyphen and single quotes in the "dash-ing" tell readers that a series of short strokes, or dashes, usually cover all Gond figures. The caption then puns on "dashing" to let readers know that short dashes are a part of the artform. Puffin, via Mukherjee, is educating readers about the artform. But is this because the linework in Pardhan Gond art is considered "simple" and thus easy to emulate? It is worthwhile that Pardhan Gond art has reached a status that it can be emulated, as "modern" abstract or realistic art is taught to and emulated by students. This is laudable but it also renders the art reproducible with "ease". So, while it is included in a list of legitimate Indian art forms, it is also reproduced and copied infinitely by people who do not belong to the community. This popularizes the

art and makes it more visible and familiar. But it also means that profit and power is eroded at its origin point, i.e. Pardhan artists.

A futurist reading of this conundrum would ask a speculative question; had Puffin worked with a Pardhan artist, could Puffin's Pardhan collaborator have objected to their art being considered simple or rural or wild? If so, how would they have articulated this objection? In my opinion, Pardhan artists craft the picturebook in response to given attitudes. The futurism lies in an intervention despite this complex. An Adivasi futurist text like *The Flight of the Mermaid*, rages against these notions and economic turns by intervening in art and form. At the level of form, Bhajju Shyam transforms the traditional Rekha. At the level of signification, he infuses his mermaid with polysemy to help it swim away in the manner of an articulated objection. I will return to this in subsequent sections.

However, as I have mentioned earlier, primitivism is not only present in an uneasy and naturalized juxtaposition of Adivasi art and children's publishing. The other genre that *The Flight of the Mermaid* falls under- that of fantasy or speculative fiction- can also be detrimental to the consideration of nuance. In fact, key terms used in speculative fiction studies are sometimes found in descriptions of Adivasi art in catalogues. Binaries like real-fantastic are still used to evaluate Indigenous art. A recent touring exhibition held in the USA, titled *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India*, exemplifies my point. Held in 2017-2020 and curated by noted scholars of Indian folk and Indigenous traditions, David Szanton and Aurogeeta Das respectively, the exhibition was demarcated into "four broad categories", namely, "Myth and Cosmology, Nature—real and imagined, Village Life, and Contemporary Explorations" (Das and Szanton 24). The curators frame the narrative in a bifurcation between reality and fantasy. They describe

Gond art for the exhibition thus, “Unifying themes in Gond art include the pervasive presence of nature in their storytelling, *fantastical* animals and trees, and their pantheon of deities” (Das and Szanton 23 Italics mine). One is tempted to query what constitutes “fantastic” animals and trees, and indeed how dependent is the fantasy on the Gond “pantheon of deities”.

The curators continue to rely on demarcations between fantasy and reality when they clarify that representations of Nature in the many versions of India can be both “real and imagined”. Szanton and Das continue, “In these paintings perceptions of nature may be expressed both as shared communal views and as highly individual observations; they can be depicted *realistically*, interpreted narratively, or ritualized and exalted through myth and deification” (Das and Szanton 24 Italics mine). Note how the adverb “realistically” confronts “exalted myth and deification” in the next phrase. Realistic representation and mythical representation are in opposition. This is reminiscent of the “pantheon of deities” that are written as “fantastical”. Myths and gods, perhaps illustrated in a particular form, conform to fantasy. Nature, in this sense, can be either depicted realistically or fantastically. Realistically would mean that it subscribes to verisimilitude, while fantasy would be anything figurative or abstract that denies verisimilitude. This notional difference ensures that Adivasi or folk art floats in a vague region of unreality or fantasy, as if to say it can never be more than colorful illumined fantasy.

An Adivasi futurist reading of contemporary exhibition would ask why these categories find themselves entrenched. What is the function of this discourse, especially as a clear boundary between the real and the fantastic is highly contested in scholarship now. The contention is that what may be consensus reality for one culture may be unimaginably

fantastic for another. Thus, a distinction between real and imagined or real and fantastic is untenable. This difference reaffirms systems that find value in such a differentiation in the first place. A system of this sort only underlines a comparative basis premised on what is unilaterally real. Instead, the scholarly tendency is to identify the limits of genres, or “modes” of storytelling (Wolfe 23). Noted speculative fiction scholar Gary Wolfe refers to “genres of the fantastic”, even as he proves that these genres-fantasy, horror, science fiction- cannot claim limits. “...It would be difficult for any critical approach based largely on narrative formula to accommodate the genres of the fantastic, which are more readily described as collective worldviews rather than patterns of repetitive action” (23). Another noted scholar Brian Attebery famously thinks of these multiple genres as “fuzzy sets” that run⁵⁸ into each other (“Taxonomic Interludes”, n. p.). It is increasingly difficult to sustain demarcated categories of what is real and what is imagined, precisely because “consensus reality” has become a highly heavy-handed term to compare one community’s reality with another’s.

A constructed difference between reality and imaginary is unfair. Yet, it has also been a cornerstone of a comparison that has historically been used to devalue and denigrate Indian art. Currently, this difference is used to essentialize and orientalize Adivasi art. In the realm of visual art like painting and illustration, a boundary between the real and the

⁵⁸ “To avoid this sort of border war, I proposed in an earlier book that all genres are what logicians call fuzzy sets: categories defined not by a clear boundary or any defining characteristic but by resemblance to a single core example or group of examples (*strategies*). This way of thinking about categories is similar to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblances; in both cases, the qualities of the category depend on the prototypes one chooses. One difference between these two ways of thinking about genres is that fuzzy sets involve not only resemblances but also degrees of membership (Attebery “Taxonomic Interludes: A Note on Genres” *Stories About Stories*).

fantastic appears as an intensity of pictorial realism or verisimilitude. The more fantastic, the less real, and less worthy of seriousness. Verisimilitude is now an important tenet of visual representation in India, but it was not always valuable. Anthropologist Christopher Pinney in *Photos of the Gods*, for instance, speaks of perspective and verisimilitude as a colonial imposition. For Pinney, the painter Raja Ravi Verma was a clear and prominent *instance* of colonial perspectival tyranny bearing fruit in the subcontinent, “in short it is Ravi Verma that transformed the Indian imaginary from the realm of fantasy to a historicized realist chronotope” (*Photos* 61). In other words, a distinction between a corporeally real and imaginatively fantastic was constructed by the colonizer. Of course, this is not restricted to the 19th century only. Indian art has been disparaged using the categories of the fantastic even before the 19th century. The notion of a progressively realist narrative of Western visual art privileges the realist over the presumed fantastic immature primitive, as if any culture that has not subscribed to this progressivist notion is barbarous and grotesque in its abnegation of the real. Partha Mitter’s *Much Maligned Monsters* details such attitudes from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries in Indian art history. Precisely because available Indian art refused the terms of comparison it became grotesque, primitive, excessive, and obscene. A constructed discrimination between the real and the fantastic in the colony served to derogate the colony and its artistic merit. As Indian art could be shown to be devoid of realistic value and only gain in grotesque fantasy, it was easy to use this apparent lack in verisimilitude to “improve” India (Arnold) and Indian art. Easy Adivasi art underlines this attitude, it falls victim to a double marginalization- first Indian, then Adivasi. Refusing the terms of comparison, it refuses reality for fantasy, and in the process reneges realist perspective for an other way of representation.

An insistence upon naturalism and imperfectly understood individuality then affects the apprehension of the Adivasi in both children's fiction and speculative fiction. A practice of Adivasi futurism defies this insistence. This is not to say that Adivasi futurism is victorious and the Adivasi artist would now never be denigrated even as they are recognized. This is to say that a manner of reading allows us to uncover narratives of ownership and control. This in turn allows us to re-think verisimilitude, innocence, and primitivism. This resists a reading of the art in the picturebook as only created by perpetual infantilized victims. Adivasi artistic control is a *process* of contestation and futurism unearths this process. Partha Mitter in *The Triumph of Modernism*, for instance, asks readers to consider the appearance of Santal tribal bodies in the Bengal School paintings as an anti-colonial move away from the colonially manufactured urban space. So, while the subaltern Santhal tribal was painted as essentialized, the subject matter signalled a resistance against the British control of Calcutta. In other words, Bengal School painters were anti-colonial in agenda but primitivist in actuality. An Adivasi futurism recuperates this representation. When the insider creates, intention and agenda rest in the hands of the artist; who then agentially illustrates a sovereign vision of their art and community.

The (Futurist) Adivasi Mermaid

In the last section, I discussed how contemporary children's publishing and global exhibition display can enact a naturalized othering of Adivasi art. I utilized the concept of Adivasi futurism as a method of textual interrogation that ultimately leads us to the question of ownership and control. A futurist reading, for artworks that feature the mode or work of Pardhan Gond artists, allows the realization of sovereignty. Or in works that appropriate Indigenous art, it clarifies the stakes of seeking ownership and

acknowledgement. A picturebook like *Flight of the Mermaid*, however, is about the demonstration of Adivasi futurism as an artistic practice by the producer himself. I speculatively asked in the last section- what may have Bhajju Shyam said had he been invited to collaborate with Puffin for a chapter on “the everyday arts”. I think had he been invited, he would have created something similar to *Flight of the Mermaid*. In my interview with him, he said that he makes all the stories he illustrates his own (B. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). Nothing encapsulates artistic agency more than this statement. Indeed, Bhajju Shyam’s mermaid is inspired by an Indigenous deity from his community. Adivasi futurism is also a reclamation demonstrated. In the following sections, I discuss Adivasi futurism in the picturebook via plot elements that showcase a controlled display of Bhajju Shyam’s community-oriented self-presentation.

The 2009 *Flight of the Mermaid* is an adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson’s 1837 fairy tale short story “The Little Mermaid”. Bhajju Shyam’s mermaid is a response to Andersen’s white mermaid, which has enjoyed both popularity and notoriety since being adapted. The statue of the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen has been vandalized on multiple occasions⁵⁹. The most recent mermaid controversy, in September 2022, was about Halle Bailey, a Black Hollywood actress, cast as Ariel in the 2023 live action remake of the 1989 Disney *The Little Mermaid* (Romano pars. 1-3). Detractors were upset that an actress of color had been cast in a story not originally intended to feature a character of color. While this is an example of Andersen’s legacy being misused to propagate racist stereotypes—after all, it is difficult to maintain what Andersen’s original intention was or even the

⁵⁹ Edvard Eriksen’s statue, that reposes on a rock at one end of the Copenhagen harbor, has been beheaded, broken, and had paint sprayed on it. The latest graffiti on it read “Racist Fish” in summer of 2020. No perpetrator has been apprehended yet.

sustainable value of such a claim—it indicates the enduring influence of the mermaid as a trope and global symbol. The rationale for the widespread popularity of the mermaid is beyond the scope of this paper—perhaps as cultural studies scholar Philip Hayward argues, many cultures hold aquatic-human hybrids in awe or reverence, and this explains the polysemous nature of the mermaid (*Scaled for Success* n. p.). What interests me here is how Bhajju Shyam innovated a movement away from Andersen, more than a decade before Halle Bailey was considered for a 2023 remake of the “The Little Mermaid”.

Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” is about the pain of shifts and metamorphosis. While Andersen’s short story is also a contemplation of shifts in identity, the mermaid’s racial position is never contemplated by him, let alone challenged. Bhajju Shyam’s illustration is per se a challenge to Andersen’s incomplete contemplation. Bhajju Shyam’s mermaid embodies a shift—she is not white. She is dark, like the earth (*Cover Flight*). This is crucial because even as *The Flight of the Mermaid* appears before the viewer reader, there appears a difference between Andersen’s mermaid and Bhajju Shyam’s mermaid. Already, the mermaid has begun to transform into something not canonical. The difference in skin color signals a shift in identity as well. Bhajju Shyam’s mermaid is not white. She is rescripted to look different. Even before she changes into human, Bhajju Shyam’s mermaid is transformed into a mermaid different from Andersen’s.

Indeed, Andersen’s story is about a transformation from mermaid to human to air—all are shifts in identity. Bhajju Shyam collaborates with Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao to pressure these shifts to their logical conclusion. If bodies and identities can shift in “The Little Mermaid”, how would it be when the mermaid’s racial identity shifts? The cover and composition intentionally aid an Adivasi futurism. The cover features a detachable fish

that can be taken off to view the mermaid floating underneath (*Cover Flight*). The cover can be lifted- it invites tactile engagement. When the fish is detached from the cover, it reveals the dark mermaid, with her stringy hair, swimming with creatures. In the *Cover of Flight*, we see an interaction with the picturebook that appeals to not just vision but bodily engagement, almost a play with the object of art before the viewer or the reader. It brings attention to its own materiality as an object that can be played with. But the playful cover is analogous to the shifts in identity of the mermaid. The mermaid and the fish are each other's obverse here. As one moves and re-moves the fish, one encounters the elegant mermaid surrounded by sea creatures- snake, fish, salamander, sea horse. The cover is playful. It materially interrogates the identity of the mermaid- part fish (as mermaid) or wholly fish (as the detachable fish)? Further, the act of re-removal of the fish begs another question- is the fish, and by extension, the mermaid's oceanic origin, merely a costume to be shorn off when required? Similarly, is the mermaid's European origin also a costume that can be shorn off at will? Bhajju Shyam art practice answers with a resounding yes. The engaging cover is a questioning of the complexity that lies at the heart of identity. As Andersen does not—perhaps cannot—contemplate racial identity, Bhajju Shyam does.

However, Bhajju Shyam takes this movement further. What if the European origin of the mermaid is indeed a costume, and Bhajju Shyam invokes an Indigenous origin for the mermaid? His work is crucial not only because this is a South Asian mermaid, but because this is an Indigenous mermaid. He has not merely submitted to tradition and innovated simultaneously (as seen in the last section in the earlier discussion about the rekha linework) but has indigenized the mermaid. In my interview with him, Bhajju Shyam revealed that he found similarity between Andersen's mermaid and the story of an Adivasi

female water deity, part of the Gond pantheon⁶⁰; and that he illustrated the mermaid keeping the repertoire from his own community in mind. He told me of a goddess that features in their stories- Jalhaarin Mata, translated to Water-Bringer Goddess. One root for the word “Jalhaarin” is “jal”, Hindi for water. He told me that in one story, Jalhaarin Mata transforms herself into an insect and in another story she covers herself in solid water. He continued to tell me how physical transformations- “roop badal lena” in Hindi- are a regular feature of Pardhan Gond stories. Moreover, he finds that Jalhaarin Mata, the Indigenous water bringer goddess, is part of the community’s living tradition and repertoire. I asked him about differences between the story he labored over and the story he tells or hears in his community. I asked him if he felt that such stories were merely stories with no corroboration in lived experience. He refused this. He said these are not merely stories- “sirf kahaani nahi hain”. He added that this may be considered “andhviswaas”- superstition- by some but he and his family have witnessed episodes of demonic or divine possession and exorcism on multiple occasions. As always, Bhajju Shyam was sharply aware of his words and art may be misunderstood; how folk and Adivasi beliefs may be subjected to an interpretation as superstition. This is reminiscent of the mistreatment of both Adivasi and Indian art: they have been understood to be grotesque when confronted by verisimilitude. But Shyam continues to make art anyway. In fact, Bhajju Shyam does more than make art- he intentionally accommodates newness. I continued, “So these

⁶⁰ Jyotindra Jain reproduces some of the images that Jangarh Singh Shyam created when visualizing his gods- Bara Dev (Big God, one of the most important deities in the pantheon and who is said to be especially amenable to the music of the Pardhans), Ratmai (Night Mother), Mehralin Devi, and Narayan Dev (*Conjuror’s*). I have not found any rendition of Jalhaarin Mata by Jangarh Singh Shyam yet. Perhaps Bhajju Shyam is the first to have visualized Jalhaarin Mata.

episodes are not a separate event in life, and just part of everyday experience?” He agreed and offered a fitting addendum to our conversation, “I felt *The Flight of the Mermaid* connecting with my story. I made it my own”. He added, “I make all the stories I illustrate my own” (B. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). In Bhajju Shyam’s hands, Andersen’s story has been made amenable to sharper revision. For *The Flight of the Mermaid*, Bhajju Shyam’s insistence on simultaneous tradition and innovation lies in quietly making *another* story his own⁶¹.

Bhajju Shyam’s statement to me—that he makes all the stories he illustrates his own—is not simply an abstract admission of artistic agency. It is the reclamation at the heart of Adivasi futurism. The story now belongs to him and his community. The deity that he referred to, Jalhaarin Mata, is a subject that he illustrated three years after he illustrated *The Flight of the Mermaid*. An acrylic on canvas (“Jalhaarin Mata” Das and Szanton *Many Indias Many Visions*), it was titled “Jalhaarin Mata” and was mounted in the 2017 *Many Visions, Many Versions* exhibition that I referred to in the preceding section. Wendy Doniger, acclaimed scholar of Hinduism, writes of the “common basic plot” of the story thus, “a woman is swallowed by a fish who rescues her from a watery death; taken from a fish’s belly (by a human fisherman or bird), she is raised in a foster home and eventually restored to her people” (Das and Szanton 35). Doniger mentions the visual innovation

⁶¹ As Bhajju Shyam spoke of cultural differences between self and the other, I queried him about his experience working on *The Flight of the Mermaid*. I asked what he felt as he illustrated a magical story from another culture? Without a pause in the conversation, Shyam replied pat, “Oh but we have many stories like this in our culture!”. Amazed at the neatness of his response, I asked him to elaborate. I was not amazed that stories like this exist in Pardhan Gond storytelling and beliefs. Both cultural and anthropological work done attests to the existence of fantastic stories in Adivasi stories. But I was curious about how he saw his own labor in the cultural translation of this story.

instanced by Bhajju Shyam in his 2012 acrylic on canvas, “human breasts and long hair, but the body of a fish” as the work is “entirely dominated by the figure of the magical fish, bright blue with red highlights” (Das and Szanton 35). Doniger translates the name “Jalhaarin” as “Mother who brings water”. “Jalhaarin” may be broken into “Jal” as in water, “haar” as in bringer, and “in” as a feminine suffix. Another meaning of the word “haar” could be abduction or theft- as in Mother Who Steals Water to Bring it to People, in a Promethean sense. Both these meanings appear in *The Flight of The Mermaid*’s text- the sea witch “steals” the mermaid’s voice, and the mermaid finds herself on land away from her home- a willing abduction. Indeed, Bhajju Shyam illustrates both the mermaid and Jalhaarin Mata as women surrounded by aquatic families. The plate with the mermaid and her sisters in *Flight of the Mermaid* and “Jalhaarin Mata” in Das and Szanton feature human bodies encircled by aquatic creatures.

A story of Bhajju Shyam’s art expands the story of Andersen’s mermaid. A mermaid of color is imagined and illustrated in 2009. An abstract deity is given anthropomorphic form by Bhajju Shyam in 2012. But the seed for Jalhaarin Mata was sown in 2009 as he worked on the mermaid. Bhajju Shyam’s mermaid anticipates the Piscean formal fluidity of the 2012 Jalhaarin Mata (“Jalhaarin Mata” Das and Szanton). Both the protagonists are depicted in intimate proximity to fish or fish-like creatures- actual fish in Jalhaarin Mata’s case and aquatic sisters in the mermaid’s case. As Doniger points out, Jalhaarin Mata possesses breasts while the mermaid does not. The mermaid’s hair is lush and long and she is surrounded by her family; Jalhaarin Mata’s hair opens thickly and her body is shaped like a sinuous “s”. Some visual differences are understandable- after all, the Indigenous deity Jalhaarin Mata inspired Bhajju Shyam’s *The Flight of the Mermaid*, and

the mermaid from the picturebook visually in-formed the illustration of Jalhaarin Mata's form. This means it is the Pardhan repertoire and visual vocabulary that is the origin of Bhajju Shyam's mermaid. Tracing the origin of Bhajju Shyam's influence to a point of Adivasi origin however, signifies that European stories have been reneged for Indigenous inspiration, while maintaining a nominal connection to the Andersen story. Bhajju Shyam reaches deep into the well of Pardhan storytelling to unearth a story that nominally corresponds to Andersen's story about aquatic human hybrids but in the process changes the story Andersen story. Like he sketches an innovative rekha, he re-purposes the mermaid. I have argued that Adivasi futurism re-frames. His deployment of the mermaid and Jalhaarin Mata is an instance of futurism. It utilizes traditional worldviews for novel storytelling. After all, he makes all the stories he labors over his own. He is not only staking a claim on his tradition but working with tradition to stake a claim over a European story.

His effort is an exemplification of how scholarship is now reading stories of mermaids and aquatic-human hybrids; as a juxtaposition of neoliberal and postcolonial anxieties. In fact, recent scholarship has only cemented the complexity of the mermaid's varied but crucial signification globally. Philip Hayward writes that the mermaid has been made into a polyvalent commodity⁶². For Hayward, the mermaid is "portable across cultures" owing to her "distinct appearance" and "related associations" (*Scaled* 3). Hayward also extends the mermaid as a human-aquatic hybrid, thus expanding the set of associations around the mermaid. For instance, diverse communities in contemporary India

⁶² Hayward asserts that the contemporary mermaid emerges out of an almost cacophonous scenario, "Often mischaracterized as hybrids, mermaids (and mermen) are *anything but* coherent entities resulting from the *blending* of heterogenous elements" (*Scaled for Success* 3 Italics in original).

worship, revere, or memorialize aquatic-human hybrids. Vishnu, one of the three primary deities in the mainstream Hindu pantheon, is thought to have incarnated himself as a fish to save the world, as the world completed one temporal cycle. Writing of Portuguese churches in Goa on west coast of India, Hayward argues the polyvalence around the mermaid allows for local resistance to be mounted as craftsmen ended up bringing distinctly non-Christian human-aquatic hybrid elements to church buildings. The mermaid can also be interpreted as a symbol of both sorrow and hope in the contemporary world. Writer and speculative fiction scholar Jalondra Davis adds another layer to Hayward's postcolonial reading of the mermaid. Reading Nalo Hopkinson's 2007 novel *The New Moon's Arms* and Gabrielle Tesfaye's 2018 short film *The Water Will Carry Us Home*, Davis offers a way of reading narratives of aquatic human hybrids by including bodies borne across the Middle Passage. For Davis, both the novel and the short film, bring a sense of radical re-purposing to stories of "crossing merfolk"- her term for the idea that "African people who died while being transported to the Americas to be enslaved live on the ocean" (Davis 52). According to Davis, Hopkinson and Tesfaye parse stories and folklore of aquatic-human hybrids to provide a sense of "memory, survival, and healing" (Davis 55).

As Jalondra Davis contends for Nalo Hopkinson's fiction, Bhajju Shyam's Adivasi futurism via simultaneous tradition and innovation also enables a memorialization and healing. This is the hope and potential in Adivasi futurism. My conversation with Bhajju Shyam also brought attention to the cacophonous and yet enabling mermaid that Hayward and Davis conceptualize. By illustrating the mermaid in his community's artform and coloring it dark like the earth, Bhajju Shyam asserts the existence and validation of an Adivasi mermaid. His endeavor attests that it is possible to revisualize Andersen's mermaid

without affirming its canonicity. Shyam has illustrated an Indigenous mermaid with links to a deity of his community. It is important to acknowledge that his mermaid is an Adivasi mermaid in order to begin rewriting the script for Adivasis. For instance, it is clearer that Bhajju Shyam's mermaid is indeed a Pardhan Adivasi mermaid, similar to the deity Jalhaarin Mata. If so, then the picturebook becomes a story of Pardhan Gond Indigenous tribulation. And if so, then the picturebook is being crafted to enable a positive vision for the community. First criminalized by the British, and then victims of India's economic advancement, the Pardhan Gond community's art and artists have been pushed to the city. They must give up traditional occupations and work as hard to negotiate with the art world, survive in the city, and earn a reputation as artists while at it. Sometimes this ends up in unimaginable tragedy, as with Jangarh Singh Shyam's tragic and untimely suicide. The mermaid's shifts in fortunes and identity then could be an allegory for how the Pardhan Gond community has navigated the multiple attacks that threaten human dignity and comfort.

This is especially important when the mermaid is inspired by an Adivasi deity. In giving iconic form to the deity, Shyam is not only visualizing his gods, but also making it form-al; delineating an allegory for his community. As the god has been given form, so has the story of the Pardhans. But this is also a reclamation of control over storytelling and thus a reclamation of sovereignty. As if he is setting the record straight. This would mean that the artist is employing the picturebook to fashion their own story, and in other words, fashion their own past. Given that their past is under threat of criminalization and primitivism, refashioning their past is an attempt to indicate a measure of control over their future. This is to perhaps narratively ensure that the community finds dignity as Andersen's

mermaid does. But more importantly, it takes into account the injunction laid down by the artist himself. After all, it is Bhajju Shyam who tells us that the stories he illustrates *are* his own; he makes them his own.

Perhaps the editors at Tara Books agree that listening to the artist is important. Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao's decision of working together with Bhajju Shyam on the picturebook carries weight, then. Conscious of this weight, the editors introduce a crucial departure from Hans Christian Andersen's story that enables Bhajju Shyam to completely shift away from Andersen's moralizing tone in his 1837 story. The two elements that I have discussed—the reuse of the Rekha, or line, and the evidence of an Adivasi deity inspiring the illustration of the mermaid—almost organically lead to the third element I wish to discuss: a shift in plot in the inclusion of a doppelganger of the mermaid. As I show in the next section, the shift is part of a series of self-reflexive practices of self-representation that Bhajju Shyam directs in the picturebook. These elements help situate *The Flight of the Mermaid* as distant from the systems of power that have produced and sustained Andersen's "The Little Mermaid". Not just distant, but *The Flight of the Mermaid* is radically critical of these systems. This is aided partly by the intent of Tara Books. Scholarship in children's studies has long seen debates about who children's fiction or indeed picturebooks are meant for (Nodelman *The Hidden Adult*). The current consensus is that each text needs to be studied in context before being termed as solely children or for a mixed audience of children and caregivers (Hunt *Understanding*), and each text contingently may be intended to appeal to more than one audience (Mendlesohn and Levy). This is the agenda for Tara Books as well; their picturebooks and illustrated books are visually innovative and thoughtfully written, meant to engage both children and adults. For

Tara Books, the point is not only to visibilize the rich visual traditions in India but also experiment with the content of a conventional pedagogic picturebook. Bhajju Shyam's Adivasi futurism, an Indigenous futurism engendered in South Asia, instances a pointed experimentation, encouraged by Tara Books. This explains why the editors listen to Bhajju Shyam and introduce a plot shift so he can elaborate upon it as he wishes. In the next section, I discuss a novel plot device inserted by Wolf and Rao into the Andersen story and taken to its culmination by Bhajju Shyam.

The Pardhan Mermaid

Bhajju Shyam indigenizes the mermaid, perhaps even personalizes the mermaid. If, via Jalhaarin Mata, this mermaid is an Adivasi individual, then the story becomes a comment on the painful journey of the Pardhans. But could it be a comment on the journey of the artform itself and maybe a comment on how all Indigenous art has been perceived in the 20th century? As I have remarked, the Andersen story is that of transformation. The fact that an underwater princess must metamorphosize into another identity could be interpreted as an Adivasi individual desiring the respect and reputation of mainstream India, assimilation into a cohesive whole via complete transformation. In *The Flight of the Mermaid*, such a desire for the mainstream via transformation is dramatized in the plot. For example, the mermaid, as a princess of the Pardhans, is received stupendously on land, right after her transformation. Gita Wolf writes, "And sure enough, the mermaid was welcomed in the palace. People marveled at her, charmed by her difference, and the prince grew very fond of her" (*Flight* n. p.). The marvel and charm that succeeds the mermaid's

entry into mainstream may well be the accolades that Pardhan Gond artists receive as they enter the art market⁶³.

The mermaid's reception on land in *The Flight of the Mermaid* is eerily similar to the laurels some Pardhan artists have accumulated in their artistic journey. Indeed, people have "marveled" at them, been charmed by the gorgeous colors and quirky shapes seen in their art, and some have even grown "fond" of the art and the artists. Durgabai Vyam and Bhajju Shyam have each won the Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award in India. But unsurprisingly, it has been a crown of thorns. Accolades have been preceded and succeeded by instances of stereotyping, poverty, and loss of dignity. For example, it is ironic that the artform attained more attention after Jangarh Singh Shyam's untimely suicide in 2001 in Japan. While the Gond canvases of Jangarh Singh Shyam had already gained traction before his tragic demise, it is only in 2010 that a Sotheby's auction fetched about \$30,000 for a 1988 landscape by Jangarh Singh Shyam. Currently, "gond painting" is one of the most visible Adivasi artforms in India and the world. But Bhajju Shyam's experiences with the art world were prefigured in Jangarh Singh Shyam's life as well. As Jyotindra Jain (*Conjuror's*) and John H Bowles (*Painted Songs*) describe, more than one Pardhan Gond artist has had a truncated school education, has moved to the big city for labor-intensive jobs in construction, sometimes even building the museum that they are exhibiting at. Bhajju Shyam has been a security guard in Bhopal. Indeed, more than one

⁶³ See Aurogeeta Das (*Enchanted*) and Jyotindra Jain (*Conjuror's*) for an expansive sense of Jangarh Singh Shyam's accomplishments, and John H Bowles (*Painted Songs*) for an evaluation of the accolades won by Jangarh's successors in a burgeoning Pardhan Gond tradition. In fact, so much so that all Pardhan Gond artists agree that the artform has become a means for economic survival.

Adivasi community is now engaged in construction work in cities. Material poverty and indigeneity find themselves yoked.

It is such a limited understanding of indigeneity that is pre-figured in the plot of *The Flight of the Mermaid*. The story takes a darker turn after the Pardhan Gond Adivasi mermaid's marvelous reception on land- or the big city- to continue with the analogy between the mermaid and the Pardhan community. A few pages later, the prince finds a doppelganger of the mermaid, who happens to be a neighboring princess, and they unite with pomp and splendor ("Princess and Doppelganger" *Flight*). The doppelganger usurps the mermaid's apparently rightful claim to the prince. This breaks the princess's heart, and she bubbles in mute rage. This pressures our mermaid to choose whether she must pierce the prince's heart with a magical dagger. She chooses not to and instead throws the dagger away into the sea. This choice helps her ascend to heaven as a daughter of the air. I have argued that the princess is Adivasi, in fact, a Pardhan or Gond princess. Her reception on land and her consequent heartbreak offer a narrative prolepsis of the pain and indignity that this artform has been through.

But why innovate by creating a doppelganger? The doppelganger is Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao's departure from Andersen in *The Flight of The Mermaid*. Andersen, in contrast, only provides an abbreviated description of the neighboring princess. He says the neighboring princess's "skin was delicately fair" and mentions her eyes and her purity in passing. But Wolf and Rao expand Andersen's brevity. Referring to the Pardhan mermaid, they write, "The princess looked very much like her, and she had a beautiful voice-..." ("Princess and Doppelganger" *Flight*) Not just in outward appearance but even in the attribute of a dulcet voice are the two princesses- one underwater and one land- contrasted.

The Pardhan underwater princess bartered her voice, and ability to speak, in exchange for the ability to walk on land. Wolf and Rao ensure that the unvoiced mermaid is narratively juxtaposed with the doppelganger bride. First juxtaposed, the Pardhan princess is then jettisoned for someone who appears in her *form*. In Bhajju Shyam's accompanying plate, the mermaid is dark like the earth while the doppelganger is turmeric orange. Wolf and Rao insist on a similarity in outward form. But, Bhajju Shyam, in illustrating them in differing colors, appears to argue that there is a clear difference between the Pardhan mermaid and the usurper- that they are not the same.

Wolf and Rao inscribe a juxtaposition between the mermaid and the doppelganger. But Shyam uses a different color for the doppelganger. He re-inscribes the juxtaposition as a dissimilarity. As Wolf and Rao build upon Andersen, Shyam builds upon their departure. Shyam insists on a difference embedded in similarity. This is crucial because it indicates an attitude toward imitation or copying. Shyam's illustration and the different color of the doppelganger allows us to interrogate the existence of the doppelganger in the first place. His intransigence emphasizes a distinction between a real mermaid and a copied mermaid. This is a rich moment in the text, enabled by the image, that puns to multiple contexts in the story of the artform. The discrepancy between appearance and reality is not philosophical here. It is the distance between reality and fantasy and the space between authentic and inauthentic primitive art. The latter, as I show, leads to the contemporary problem of imitation Pardhan art.

Bhajju Shyam's insistence on a clear mark of dissimilarity on the doppelganger is an attempt to create distance between the artform and its inadequate understanding. The doppelganger versus the mermaid now represents two misconstruals- one that Adivasi art is

allied to children and the art they create, and two that Adivasi art is best used for fantasy scenarios because it stems from a superstitious repertoire in proximity with spirits and taboos. Both misconstruals *other* the artform. Indeed, it is Bhajju Shyam who recounts to me that the stories in his repertoire are not “superstition” (Personal Interview, 2022). He is certainly aware of the apprehension of his work. I have discussed how the genres of children’s fiction and speculative fiction, or fantasy have put restraints on a comprehensive understanding of Adivasi art to emerge. Both depend on a stable identity of the viewer who takes joy in the whimsy of the likeness to children and grotesque unreality of fantasy. Puffin’s *A Brush with Indian Art* fishes out a “dash-ing Gond deer” from “the depths of wilderness” (Nainy “The Makers of Magic”) via the upper-caste pen of Aniruddha Mukherjee. Similarly, a constructed difference between reality and fantasy is activated when the artwork comes to be displayed in an exhibition. Maria Nikolajeva defines fantasy as lying in an uncertain space between the real and the unreal (“The Development”). So much so that art catalogues for American viewers written by respected scholars of the folk and tribal arts are compelled to activate a binary between reality and fantasy. Representation, realistically rendered or fantastically fashioned, pulls potently from the meaning of the artwork. As Shyam colors the doppelganger in turmeric orange, he is staging a difference between his version of the art and a newly fashioned art, perhaps by an outsider, who insists on the repertoire being a collection of child-like superstition or fantasy that is not rooted in verifiable reality. By marking out the doppelganger he marks out this insistence on verifiable reality that audaciously describes his world as superstitious or always already overwhelmed by a mythical fantasy. He is saying that if the world resolutely identifies his art as predisposed to primitivist associations, he will create two

versions of his art and delimit the one he does not like. This is exactly how Suresh Singh Dhurvey, a fellow Pardhan artist, describes his art practice (Bowles 31). Bowles calls this “strategic positioning” (31). Here, Bhajju Shyam clarifies both kinds of art to tell us something about the world. While detractors and proponents alike might demonize or deify his art as whimsical, both groups depend on a distinction between reality and fantasy. In response, he creates a real and copy. In his world, his reality does not depend on “verifiable reality” as established by Western verisimilitude.

Nevertheless, this reading is pressured by genre. Shyam manages a deconstruction of reality versus fantasy in the middle of a fantasy story. He marks out a widely understood misconception in the middle of a fantasy story that is already being misunderstood as contributing to the otherness of his art. His art would be othered anyway- turmeric doppelganger or not. The connection between fantasy, childhood, and Pardhan art remains intact in the publication of *The Flight of the Mermaid*. However, an Adivasi futurism recuperates this lack of control owing to generic category. I have argued that Adivasi futurism imagines a control regained. Bhajju Shyam’s self-awareness is an example of such a control. The limited signification of the artwork is inescapable, and the artist knows this well. What can he do then? He can let his viewers know that he is unhappy with the status quo. If non-Adivasi artists can illustrate a “dash-ing Gond deer” with impunity, and sympathetic academics find themselves forced to describe the art in a binary between reality and fantasy, then Bhajju Shyam can creatively instrumentalize the doppelganger for his vision. An Adivasi futurism proffers control back to Bhajju Shyam- he knows his work and life will be misunderstood, he must continue to illustrate, and he can choose to mark the doppelganger out in order to stage an ownership. The marked-out version is not his.

His is the deity-inspired Adivasi mermaid. The other is a fake. And that makes all the difference.

A distinction between real and fake is also the difference between art created by legitimate creator and imitation created by others. It is crucial to identify this distance between art created by Pardhans and art created by outsiders because material indignity and indigeneity go hand in hand in India. Puffin's *A Brush with Indian Art* dramatizes this conundrum. Mukherjee, an upper caste illustrator assumes the right to imitate Gond painting in order to teach it to readers of the book. Scholastic's *Fabulous Folk Art* manages a similar renewal of primitivism. Book illustration for children is one example of this tendency. I see it in painting and other media too, now. Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam were distraught at the rampant imitation now taking place in the country. They emphasized that art lovers and the government need to know the difference between true Pardhan Gond art and imitation.

We were invited to another city for a project. We went and discussed the work. But during negotiation, the manager was upset at our prices. When we insisted, the manager told us he can ask his artisans to create the same art at lower prices. What is this situation? Where have we reached? The government and art lovers need to know the difference. (D. Vyam and Subhash Vyam, Personal Interview, 2023)

While it is commendable that Pardhan Gond art is being published in this way and gaining visibility, the cost is paid by the Pardhan artists. Non-Pardhans, whose social location is unclear, are utilizing the artform to make sales and profit, while the Pardhans are now competing with them. This is a rehearsal of the defrauding meted out to the progenitor, Jangarh Singh Shyam. Bhajju Shyam said to me that the artform is now a "means of livelihood" a "jeeney ka zariya" (B. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). If so,

then imitation art by non-Pardhans who do not belong to Jangarh Singh Shyam's family is taking away legitimate opportunities for Pardhan income generation.

Indeed, income generation for an Adivasi artist is crucial. Sociologist Amita Baviskar goes as far as saying that Adivasis are at the bottom of the social hierarchy in India ("Adivasi Encounters"). Political scientist Sudha Pai confirms that "tribal majority areas which overlap with the country's major forest areas are also areas with highest concentrations of poverty" (360). Pai continues, "Human development reports show that a large majority of them live in mud, stone, and thatch homes with no toilets relying on handpumps for drinking water. A major problem is also lack of employment, the only employment being collecting wild honey, forest produce or working in the fields of affluent landowners (360). Material indignity is forced to inscribe itself on tribal bodies. In this scenario, if art is a means of livelihood in the big city, then its imitation by non-Adivasis is part of a systematic disenfranchisement enacted by state and non-state actors. Given this scenario, Bhajju Shyam's choice to demarcate the doppelganger is a way to signal the difference between an Adivasi mermaid and a copy; a difference between art created by Pardhan and fakes created by non-Adivasis who usurp the rightful inheritance of the Pardhans, as the doppelganger usurps the mermaid's position in the heart of the prince.

As I complete this dissertation in 2024, it is frustrating that the distinction between legitimate Adivasi art and appropriated Adivasi art is reminiscent of an older distinction between authentic and inauthentic primitivist art, that eventually lead to the delegitimization of the Indigenous creators that it was ostensibly "inspired" by. For Shelley Errington, the difference between authentic and inauthentic art is about the art being *considered* more or less authentic. Errington writes that primitive art popularized in Europe

and the world was meant to be an “authentic” copy in actuality. Both authentic and inauthentic art were copies- it was about whether the copy was more or less authentic. Authentic primitive art was art created by European modernist artists that conformed to expectations of what primitivism might be. “Primitive” creators were *used* to produce art: and then the moderns re-produced this art with a flourish, for recognition. A consequence of this reproduction was that the “third-world” or Indigenous creators were hardly ever feted for their ability. I suggest Shyam’s insistence on the doppelganger’s difference directly refers to this history of exclusion. This means that the mermaid is not only a representative of the Pardhan clan, but given the marginalized history of Indigenous creators, she is also a representative of the treatment of Indigenous art.

In *The Flight of the Mermaid*, the doppelganger takes the place of the Pardhan mermaid or Pardhan Gond art/artist. The mermaid/Adivasi artist is then pressured into a difficult choice- killing the prince or giving up her opportunity to come home; or giving up art and returning to the village. Difficult choices have historically been made by Pardhan Gond artists too. Jangarh Singh Shyam’s suicide is a painful example. There is a coincidence between Jangarh Singh Shyam and the mermaid here. I had said that the mermaid story is about metamorphosis. The mermaid transforms into another being all over again- neither water nor land borne, but air borne at the conclusion of the tale. As the mermaid chooses neither water nor land, one notes a palimpsest of the story of Pardhan Gond art. Jangarh Singh Shyam, the progenitor of this art form, left his village behind to help construct and inhabit a newly designed museum in the city. It is his shocking suicide at the turn of the 21st century that ironically cemented the enduring interest and popularity of the artform. This is the path followed by Bhajju Shyam’s mermaid as well. She chooses

neither ocean nor land- neither place of artistic origin nor her place of work; but plunges the dagger in the sea convinced that she would cease to be. But she rises to the heavens. Jangarh Singh Shyam too, unable to give up his profession and unable to return to India from Japan, committed suicide. The mermaid is Jangarh Singh Shyam. In which case, Bhajju Shyam is narrating the story of the artform and acknowledging the complicated legacy of Jangarh Singh Shyam that he has inherited- the mermaid's death is her re-birth and Jangarh Singh Shyam's death ironically lead to increased interest in his community and art. But it is crucial that the mermaid's difficult choice is animated by the doppelganger. It is the copy/fake that propels her to make her choice. The copy appropriates the rightful claim of the original. In primitivism, as explained by Errington, modern painters participated in an unfair economy of appropriation robbing the actual creators of their due. This, as I have explained, was also experienced by Jangarh Singh Shyam. It is this history of loss that Bhajju Shyam chooses to highlight in coloring the doppelganger turmeric orange.

I have discussed how a loss of dignity for the artist and loss of meaning of the image create conditions of a loss of artistic control over the artwork. This is partly due to a lack of accurate cognizance of the source of the art visible in the picturebook or in other contexts. An Adivasi futurism asks who produced the art, and the response leads to a recognition of appropriation of Adivasi art. This is why naming and precise identification have consequences upon the artform. Pardhan Gond art is increasingly being taken up by non Pardhan or even non-Adivasi individuals. If non-Pardhans and non-Adivasis can appropriate the form and use it for their purposes, then we must acknowledge the name accurately to give credit where it is due. Imitation is assumed to be easy based on the

assumption that the artform is basic, simple, or geometric. This further justifies a specious democratization of the art- since national art/craft should belong to all citizens, anybody can learn the artform and use it for income. But this takes economic opportunities away from legitimate creators. Naming the artform accurately then is an attempt to uncover the actual stories that make up the artform. This is also a gesture toward sovereignty, and as I have discussed, a sovereign control is the cornerstone of Adivasi futurism. In the dissertation, I use the term “Pardhan Gond” to refer to an ethos of storytelling and communication that can be found in contemporary Pardhan Gond art. I say “Pardhan Gond” to highlight the Pardhan contribution to an art form that has now been popularized as “Gond painting”. Explicitly naming Pardhan labor gestures to Pardhan control over the artwork. This is in fact the crux of Adivasi futurism- a gesture to control despite a context that threatens to wrest power away from the artist and storyteller. The inclusion of the demarcated doppelganger then is a strategic move by Bhajju Shyam that alludes to multiple contexts. I have read the move as a creative response to the misrecognition of art- as a limited generic understanding, a history of primitivist exclusion, as well as the frustrating presence of imitation. Seeking a futurism, the mermaid is a polysemous ploy to pointedly express distress and discontent. A demonstration of control lies in this strategic expression. Thus, the mermaid’s change in fortunes- from a grief-stricken human to a joyful aerial daughter could refer to the recognition that Pardhan Gond art now can avail of. After her extrication from both land and sea, the mermaid swims in a world theorized by Adivasi futurism. Juxtaposing an Indigenous deity i.e. Jalhaarin Mata with Andersen’s story and mining it by invoking a doppelganger then, pushes the extant story and lets his own storytelling prowess transform the story into a tale about him and his community. The

Pardhan mermaid's acceptance of tragedy and conclusive joy looks to a possible future where trials and tribulations are at an end, and the art and the artist have transformed the world around them. This is Adivasi futurism.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to propose an Adivasi futurism in *The Flight of the Mermaid*. I hope to have proved that a South Asian Indigenous futurism is crucial to a nuanced understanding of art in the medium of the picturebook, oscillating between the genres of speculative fiction and children's fantasy. I have argued that a speculative consideration of the Adivasi picturebook permits the reader/viewer to look beyond the "child-like" whimsy of the art in the picturebook. Instead, an Adivasi futurism interrogates what appears to the reader. It leads to questions like who created the art, how, and what kind of control does the Indigenous creator have over the display of the art?

Bhajju Shyam's creative use of rekha, as we have seen, both follows the tradition inaugurated by Jangarh Singh Shyam, and further innovates upon it. He uses the short lines across his illustrations for *The Flight of the Mermaid*, following Jangarh Singh Shyam's injunction. But he also willfully sketches the line in order to make it mean something else, a smile. That tells us that he is engaging with received wisdom. This is his agential labor that causes the artform to shift. Two levels of innovation are now visible; one is Jangarh Singh Shyam's and the other is Bhajju Shyam's upon his mentor's work. Bhajju Shyam thus ensures that tradition is not understood as static, but it is now dynamic and fluid. A push toward elastic dynamism is not only important per se, in that it keeps tradition alive and malleable. But it is crucial because it is by its very existence a move toward a future. Primitivism attempts to ossify tradition, to naturalize a primitive space for the Adivasi to

display themselves. This is intimately linked to the ossification of the difference between art and craft and the difference between reality and fantasy. As Bhajju Shyam's labor renders received tradition mobile, it proves that Adivasi storytelling can be beyond these categories. Since discourse tries to push the Adivasi into a presumably space of past traditional craft, Bhajju Shyam's agency in *The Flight of the Mermaid* lies in shifting the presumption. This is an Adivasi-led shift. It gestures to a future where stakeholders make artistic decisions. But it also gestures to a future because the form is not static. A static form exhibits the Adivasi as only craft. A dynamic form, managed by Adivasis, pivots away from primitivism, toward a possible glimpse of Indigenous lives. Thus, a futurism. Like his lines, Bhajju Shyam collaborates with his editors to inveigle meaning. His mermaid is not only South Asian, but also Adivasi. This retains a basic outline of the Hans Christian Andersen story while at the same time pulling at its corners to make it work for a different context. If the princess protagonist is Pardhan, then she appears as a character to sing the story of the Pardhan and Gond communities.

But if she is a Pardhan-ified mermaid, then there are deeper consequences. As I have proved, there is a marked resemblance to an Indigenous deity in Bhajju Shyam's illustration of the mermaid. Chronologically speaking, the deity inspired Bhajju Shyam's mermaid illustration; and the mermaid illustration inspired a later deity illustration. The mermaid illustration then is a medium between the concept of the deity and the visual iconic form of the deity. The mermaid illustration makes the illustration of the deity possible: it mediates the creation of the deity. It is Bhajju Shyam's engagement with the story that has led to the visualization of an Indigenous deity. This not only means that an Indigenous deity is at the root of Andersen's mermaid adaptation; but it means that the

story of artistic production of the illustration is pivotal to understanding artistic sovereignty.

An Adivasi futurist reading of Bhajju Shyam's work, necessarily premised upon his creative process, re-imagines Andersen's moralizing story. Shyam's aquatic-human hybrid turns away from both water and land, demonstrating the painful origin of Pardhan Gond art. His insistence that the mermaid visualize her difference from the doppelganger is not only an acknowledgement of his predecessor's untimely death but nudges the viewer to re-story the story of Pardhan Gond art as not simply originating in tragedy but perhaps concluding in acceptance and joy. I reiterate that Bhajju Shyam's visual contribution to *The Flight of the Mermaid* crucially displays a simultaneous tradition and innovation. Even though the words are trans-created by Wolf and Rao from Hans Christian Anderson, his art shifts the received story via inflection, toward a speculative futuristic possibility. The story of the art re-purposes Andersen's homily into a personal political dynamic. Grace Dillon writes about such possibilities, defining Indigenous futurism as "connoting the process of "returning to ourselves", which involves discovering how "personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world" (*Walking the Clouds*). Employing an Adivasi futurism, Bhajju Shyam's text re-scripts an Adivasi past and thus an Adivasi future. He reclaims a tradition and demands ownership. This paper has attempted to read how Bhajju Shyam has illustrated the mermaid as a character from his repertoire of Pardhan myth. I have discussed how the playful cover of the picturebook is a crucial argument in favor of identification of non-canonical mermaid. At once the mermaid is Jangarh Singh Shyam, and the complicated history of the

Pardhan Gond community. The process of “returning to ourselves” is eventually about agency- it involves understanding the control and navigation that Adivasi artists participate in as they illustrate. It is thus indispensable to claim the picturebook as a creative practice of Adivasi futurism.

Chapter 4 The Gendered Picturebook: Durgabai Vyam's Art for Tara Books

Artistic play and experimentation is attributed to the “progenitor” of marketed Pardhan Gond art i.e. Jangarh Singh Shyam. But experimentation is denied to female Pardhan Gond artists in the discourse of the artform. Bhajju Shyam, one of the most successful male Pardhan Gond artists today observes that the eternal alphabet of art resides in the hands of women who decorate the floors and walls for communal events (*Creation; Origins of Art*). Women's ordinary labor then is both gendered and communal. This is not isolated. Most artists who have benefited from the marketing of Pardhan Gond painting are men. While Bhajju Shyam's unambiguous declaration that it is the women's work that creates stencils for future artists to follow in the 2014 *Creation* and the 2019 *Origins of Art* is laudable; commensurate recognition for most women artists from the community is invisible. As if Jangarh Singh Shyam's story of meteoric rise and tragic end has created a peculiarly masculine script that cannot allow for female labor to emerge as individual artistic merit. Bhajju Shyam's illustration in *Creation* neatly describes this script of predicament. His illustration for the “The Birth of Art” in *Creation* depicts a doe with horns. Shyam informed me that the linework on the doe imitates that of Jangarh Singh Shyam. But the doe is life giving and is in tandem with his accompanying comment that women's designs are the “alphabet of Gond art” (“The Birth of Art” *Creation*). On the one hand, women and the doe are formalized as inspiring contemporary Gond art. But on the other, the linework on the doe, or the inscription on the doe is that of Jangarh Singh Shyam's. Bhajju Shyam admitted to me (B. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022) that he lined the doe in Jangarh Singh Shyam's unique style. Two points of origin then- women and Jangarh Singh Shyam. The two women to have attained the status internationally

recognized artists commensurate with male artists like Bhajju Shyam and Venkat Singh Shyam are Durgabai Vyam, younger sister of Jangarh Singh Shyam and Nankusia Shyam, the wife of Nankusia Shyam. Durgabai Vyam is, along with Bhajju Shyam, a recipient of the Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award in India. She contributed to the 2011 Navayana published *Bhimayana: Experiences of Uncouthability*, a visual biography of B R Ambedkar, one of India's fiercest voices against caste discrimination. Nankusia Shyam, and Durgabai Vyam are the only female artists whose presence is most notable. Nankusia Shyam's art graces both Bhopal Raja Bhoj International Airport as well as the metro station gallery next to Dilli Haat in New Delhi. The list of notable male artists is long- Jangarh Singh Shyam, Bhajju Shyam, Ramsingh Urveti, Venkat Raman Singh Shyam, Subhash Vyam, Mayank Shyam, Dawat Singh Uikey, Narmada Prasad Tekam. What could explain this inequality in attention?

I argue that the Anglophone picturebook illustrated by Durgabai in collaboration with Tara Books instances an Indigenous feminism in South Asia. I seek female artistic and narrative labor partly via the lens of pigment, hue, and form in the contemporary anglophone picturebook. I propose that layers of pigment and hue be understood as layers of gendered negotiated labor of/in Pardhan Gond art. I discuss Durgabai Vyam's complex self-presentation and acknowledgement of her own artistic labor, and the manner in which her art and choice of story exposes the political economy of Pardhan Gond art as both masculine and iniquitous. This productively inflects the story of Pardhan Gond art, and re-scripts it from masculine genius to feminine revision. However, her art comfortably espouses a strategic ambivalence and renounces an "either or" to embrace a "neither nor". Interrogating the artistic labor in the picturebook revises the contribution of Adivasi

women as *artists*, given that the female tribal body has been the *subject* of art and anthropology hitherto. Durgabai Vyam's Adivasi feminism is in opposition to the presumption that women be only domestic participants who originate the art- participating in an "amorphous passive collectivity" (Jain *Other Masters* 9)- and then give way to male artists to gloriously innovate. This paper seeks the reclamation of an empowered right to representing artistic labor⁶⁴. The reclamation can resist ready categorization, but it may also re-affirm the categories it sometimes resists. Durgabai Vyam's Adivasi art in the picturebook published by Tara Books refuses to be understood in binaries like community/individual or public/private. Her work originates in women's collective work ritually performed, but it is her singular prowess that allows her to claim the right to represent her context and artistic toil. Frequently illustrating female subjects, her effort uncovers a hidden male-dominated script that engenders a difference between masculine and feminine Pardhan Gond art. Her dexterity and choices clarify why Pardhan Gond art is understood from dual points of origin- nameless Pardhan women and emphatically identified Jangarh Singh Shyam.

However, a reclamation requires a method that can read nuance and allow the complexity of the scenario to emerge. Agency cannot be strident all the time- the patriarchy uses women's agency to reproduce itself. Native American studies scholar Michelle Raheja defines the work of 20th century Hollywood performers Minnie Ha Ha and Molly Spotted

⁶⁴ Political scientist and feminist Radha Kumar's excellent *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990* (1993), introduces "...women's movements, such as the communist-led food campaigns of the nineteen-forties, Chipko, the anti-alcohol and anti-price rise movements of the nineteen-seventies..." as having "... focused on issues which are regarded mainly as 'women's concerns', because they were ancillary to the role of a housewife: water for the home, fuel for heating and cooking, food, money for food.." (3).

Elk “as both a critique of the representational regime of Hollywood and as a vehicle for screening Indigenous subjectivities” (*Reservation Reelism* 53). Raheja examines the performers’ “own ideological investments in playing Indian⁶⁵ characters and the types of roles offered to them in a patriarchal labor and representational system” (51). This is a productive method, for it reads the difficulty of evaluating female agency. Following Raheja’s elucidation, I compare picturebooks illustrated by Durgabai Vyam to varied interviews and narratives of pigment use to explicate how artistic labor becomes subsumed by patriarchal labor and how it is resisted by Durgabai Vyam. But a problem is evident. Distinguishing women’s patriarchal labor from women’s artistic labor is difficult. In this paper, I use “women’s labor” to refer to domestic work undertaken by women of the community for the sustenance of the family, having to do with what political scientist Radha Kumar quotes as “women’s concerns” that are “ancillary to the role of a housewife: water for the home, fuel for heating and cooking, food, money for food.” (*The History* 3). For the Pardhan Gonds of Madhya Pradesh, the Kayasths of Mithila (in modern day Bihar) with respect to Madhubani painting, or the Warlis of Maharashtra with respect to Warli art, the art that women create on the floors and walls is in the service of community well-being, marital bliss, or festive divine worship (Das *Ecnhanted*; Dalmia *The Painted World*; Hivale *The Pardhans*; Jain *Ganga Devi*). Pardhan Gond women have been creating *digna*—floor and wall designs, patterns using available materials—to mark communal celebrations like births and marriages. This is the complexity- artistic labor is performed as part of patriarchal labor that sustains the community. How can we differentiate the two? And yet

⁶⁵ The term “Indian” here refers to the old and now almost rejected term for Native Americans, based on Christopher Columbus’ misrecognition of the natives of America.

the nameless female laborer separates herself from the community to appear as an art laborer enmeshed in the publishing and art market. Artistic labor here then must be both communal and individual- the sketching, mixing of color, procurement of pigment, creative ideation, the adherence to ritual rules of symbol and shape, devotional organization, and general manual embodied effort that goes into creation of art. In the picturebook that is inspired by Adivasi art, artistic labor would include the work of artistic choices that finally appear on the page. For Durgabai Vyam then, artistic labor is immanent in the choices that appear in *Churki Burki*, *Nightlife of Trees*, and *Between Memory and Museum* as inspired by her experience of creating art in domestic spaces during her childhood.

In this chapter, I ask if the use of the pigment and hue black is only accorded to male artists, and what happens when black is denied or granted to the female Adivasi artist. Color is understood as both pigment and hue- pigment is the material that gives rise to color, and hue is the visual affective aspect of color. Art historian John Gage quotes a 1963 definition of color as “the attribute of visual experience that can be described as having quantitatively specifiable dimensions of hue, saturation, and brightness” (*Colour and Meaning* 11). The legibility of pigment and hue thus expands any discussion of aesthetics. I discuss the color black to ask what is illustrated and why/not. Whether black is present in *The Nightlife of Trees* (2006) and *Between Memory and Museum* (2015) or absent as in *The Churki Burki Book of Rhymes* (2010), Durgabai Vyam⁶⁶ distinguishes herself. In

⁶⁶ According to Amazon.com, *Churki Burki* was inspired by the 2008 *The Old Animals’ Forest Band*. While both texts carry Durgabai Vyam’s distinctive effort and a general forest theme- their subjects are different. The former elaborates on one day in the life of Churki and Burki, while the latter elaborates on a day and night in the life of a ragtag group of domesticated animals. The former brings to fore women’s collective labor and the latter animals’ collective labor and a possible future.

Churki Burki, black is conspicuous in its absence: in fact, both women's artistic labor and black are absent. When black is present in totality in *The Nightlife of Trees*, the artistry points to a feminist intent. Even in a text like *Between Memory and Museum*, where the pigment/hue is neither too much nor too less, the artist ensures that artistic, gendered, domestic labor is commented upon. In other words, there is not one consistent will to stringent feminist criticism across all texts. Her intent appears and disappears. This is the riddle- in interviews and some texts Vyam is willing to take on the state of the field, but in a text like *Churki Burki*, she allows explosive hues to take over her use of black and her illustration of women doing art. I ascribe this to a tug between individual endeavor and collective obligations, acutely felt in women's experiences of the world. It is despite this, and because of this ambivalent positionality that I wish to argue for ascribing an intent⁶⁷ that consciously weaves Adivasi art in Durgabai Vyam's work and focus. It may seem counterproductive to include *Churki Burki* in this study- as I point out that there are absences in the text. But it is those very absences that exemplify the problem at hand. Vyam's oeuvre, when seen collectively, instances Indigenous feminism. This paper is divided into two sections, Absent but Present and Present but Absent that discuss color as pigment and hue to describe difficult stories about gender and Vyam's negotiation of these stories.

⁶⁷ I borrow this phrase "ascribing feminist intent" from Deeptha Achar's crucial 2013 essay "Ascribing Feminist Intent: The Invention of the Indian Woman Artist" who herself borrows the phrase from a line in Ashish Rajadhyaksha's catalogue description about a group show composed of the works of Arpita Singh, Nalini Malini, Madhavi Parekh, and Nilima Sheikh in the 1980s in Bhopal. I reproduce part of the Rajadhyaksha catalogue here- "It would be quite wrong to ascribe feminist intent to this show- as it would be to associate the scale and medium used with women artists (Rajadhyaksha 1987)" (qtd in Achar "Ascribing").

Absent but Present

Durgabai Vyam, who hails from the Pardhan clan allied to the Gond tribe in Central India, is the younger cousin of Jangarh Singh Shyam. Durgabai Vyam—whose artwork I am interested in for this paper—has evolved an individual style of her own that builds on her older brother’s innovation within Gond tradition and borrows from styles that she has been exposed to in art workshops around the world. For instance, Jangarh Singh Shyam was interested in animal and abstract subjects, while Durgabai Vyam does not shy away from rendering human bodies. *The Nightlife of Trees* is a demonstration of tree-lore in Gond stories and life-worlds. It was published by Chennai-based Tara Books and led to Durgabai Vyam being felicitated by the Bologna Ragazzi award. In *The Nightlife of Trees* Vyam illustrates human figures in contrast to the other two contributors- Bhajju Shyam and Ramsingh Urveti, both of whom are interested in illustrating plant and animal life. This is to say Durgabai Vyam innovates and takes familial tradition forward.

Identity and identification are important for *Churki Burki*. *The Churki-Burki Book of Rhyme* is an elaboration of a “typical” day in the life of Churki and Burki, two girls in a presumably Pardhan Gond village, possibly Patangarh, the epicenter of Pardhan Gond painting. They wake up, sing, eat breakfast, gather wood, reap corn, negotiate with jackals and birds, sing, dance, and rest after a delicious meal. The preceding chapters have argued that the artist and their community assume paramount representational importance in the Pardhan Gond picturebook. This is the case with *Churki Burki* as well. In 2022, I met Durgabai Vyam and her son Mansingh at the cafe of the Janjaati Sangrahalaya (Tribal Museum) in Bhopal in the morning. I showed her my copy of *The Churki-Burki Book of Rhyme* and we began to talk about the picturebook. Even before I could ask any questions

about the process of working on the book, Durgabai Vyam pointed to one of the protagonists and quipped- “This is me!”, “yeh main hoon” (D. Vyam and Mansingh Vyam Personal Interview, 2022). I was amazed. I would not have known this had I not managed to meet her. As in other chapters in this project, following my conversations with the artist, the picturebook can now be identified with the identity of the artist. It presents a self-insertion. Vyam continued to tell me that this book is meant to be her and her childhood friend, and this is indeed a day in the life of *their* childhood. I had initially imagined this book to be a general meditation on a Pardhan Gond childhood but Vyam’s comment made me think of how she may illustrate herself as a subject in the picturebook. As I demonstrate in this section, this note of autobiography leads to more questions than answers. For example, does Durgabai Vyam illustrate herself as a female Pardhan subject or female Pardhan artist? Like the parrots in the text displace the women’s collective, does Vyam also facilitate a displacement of her artistic self in her self-narration? While I am arguing for a gendered picturebook, seeking narratives of labor and pigment in an autobiographical picturebook forces us to ask what is made audible and why. For example, the invisibilization of black is synonymous with, and I argue, intimately connected to a complex invisibilization of a self-referential insertion of women’s artistic labor.

In *The Churki Burki Book of Rhymes*, the protagonists Churki and Burki spend a regular day in accordance with forest rhythms and survive in the forest. Churki and Burki roam the village and surrounding areas. They are surrounded by roosters, other birds, and munching goats. Their parents “set out to the forest, to gather firewood for the stove” (*Churki Burki* n. p.). Their friends and family sing as they gather firewood. Churki and Burki find the “biggest, most orange pumpkin of them all” (*Churki Burki* n. p.) for dinner.

Then they accompany the father to catch fish for the day. After that, they go to pick corn and negotiate with the jackals who have arrived for the corn (“It’s the Jackals Again” *Churki Burki*). Next, a pandemonium of parrots attacks the corncobs (“But Now There is More Trouble” *Churki Burki*). Churki and Burki jump about to drive the parrots away (“The Parrots Fly Away Quickly” *Churki Burki*). “The parrots fly away quickly. Now it’s really safe to gather corn. /When they have enough in their basket, Churki and Burki set off home. /Dinki runs ahead” (*Churki Burki* n. p.). The parrots and jackals, over a few pages, are imbued with super strength and the rest of the picturebook is devoted to dealing with their presence. The parrots magically attain human sizes from one panel to another. Almost as if they have mammoth proportions in the imagination of the threat they pose. Churki and Burki work together to save their food. As with the jackals, Churki and Burki must work in conjunction by waving their arms and tree branches to drive the gargantuan parrots away. At this point, the picturebook willy-nilly places a collective of parrots in opposition to a collective of Indigenous women. This illustration of young women’s collective labor is contrasted by Vyam with a group of brightly colored enormous parrots. The space in composition is visually accorded to the neon parrots. The girls who gather together to exclude the parrots to safeguard their dinner find themselves paling in opposition. The difference in the sizes of the girls and the birds coerces a comparison; this doublespread illustrates a study in contrast. A collective of laboring female bodies and a cluster of explosively lit parrots are juxtaposed. Could this juxtaposition, given form to by Vyam, entail an authorial artistic intent? Striking colors are present. But a certain color and a certain crucial activity is strikingly absent.

The contrast between crop thieves, i.e., parrots, and an Adivasi female community is exaggerated by the emphatic hues of the parrots. Pardhan Gond art rarely follows naturalistic proportion or exact colors. Size, shape, and appearance may be suggested or gestured to but usually this artform denies verisimilitude. One expects a repudiation of correspondence with exact naturally occurring shapes and appearances. But while there are many colors jostling for space on the page, black is rendered completely invisible. Granted, parrots are not black in “nature”- but Pardhan Gond painting is known for departing from exact verisimilitude. Instead of inky blackness, the parrots are colored with two greens, two yellows, two blues, and two reds. In fact, a flirtation with the polyvalent black is invisible not just here, but also throughout this picturebook. Even the outlines of shapes are dark brown, not black. Instead, the parrots are a site of a pandemonium of color. They grow in affective intensity.

The picturebook, when it becomes a site for Adivasi art, throws stories of Indigenous gendered labor into relief, as seen in the juxtaposition between parrots and Adivasi women. The gendered picturebook is a picturebook employed by the female Adivasi artist. But is the gendered picturebook also a sublimated picturebook? While the picturebook uses Adivasi art and the artist uses the picturebook to strategically display their art, does this process highlight some stories and ignore others? Vyam’s *Churki Burki* is an autobiographical text. If so, we must ask what stories does Vyam allow to be made visible. On the one hand, Vyam illustrates a delightful pastoral world in *Churki Burki* where women labor and sing together. A quick look at all the activities that Churki and Burki participate in is indicative. The girls spend a “typical” day in a Pardhan Gond village and perform daily tasks. But, Churki and Burki do not help their mother decorate the floor or

the walls. No wall decoration or floor painting is depicted anywhere in the story. Instead, their labor is deflected toward activities like food and wood gathering and playing and singing; activities that are squarely part of what Radha Kumar identifies as “women’s concerns” (*The History* 3). Women in *Churki Burki* accomplish all activities—including banding together and banishing threats—but do not decorate the floors or the walls. The one activity Vyam does not illustrate is that of women artistically laboring together, and as we see, women’s artistic labor has been championed as the “alphabet of Gond art” (Shyam *Creation*). In contrast, Vyam pointedly illustrates not only a female experience of vulnerability but also the raw political economy of the art and museum world that expropriates Adivasi art and artists on its own terms, in *The Nightlife of Trees* and *Between Memory and Museum*. Vyam selectively depicts female labor. Across other platforms and texts, Vyam delineates how she and her community members have negotiated the shifts the artform has been through.

But the absent presence of female artistic labor in *Churki Burki* is matched by another absence in the text. Neither the color black is used anywhere in *Churki Burki*, nor is the female labor of artistic creation visualized in the picturebook. The color black—attributed, as we will see, by Venkat Singh Shyam, a well noted Pardhan Gond artist; to a communal inspiration apparently granted to a romantic male child—is sublimated to a gathering of other colors. In other words, *Churki Burki* offers sublimated color and sublimated labor. These absences are instances of unequal attention, and exemplify a tendency in the discourse of Pardhan Gond art. In that while Pardhan Gond (male) artists are inspired by a community of Pardhan women, only the presumably male child may reap the benefits of the color black. Women’s “traditional” labor is acknowledged but quickly

forgotten. *Churki Burki* illustrates this tendency. Women's domestic labor is invoked but not women's artistic labor. This is not to say that Durgabai Vyam never uses the color black. *The Nightlife of Trees* is a picturebook that depicts night time- and is thus mostly covered in black. Vyam uses the black hue there to craft a feminist intervention. Like Durgabai Vyam's utterances in speech, her oeuvre also plays with the certainty and insight of black. But why should the color black and women's artistic labor be connected at all? And how can one explain the invisibility of artistic labor in Vyam's self-representation?

One way to explain this is that Adivasi women have been seen as objects of vision only. Indian art and writing is now taking note of the unfair representation of tribals in painting and other media. Curator Vikas Harish describes the expropriation of contemporaneous folk and tribal art by establishing the problematic history of the visual appropriation of the tribal body. Beginning with photography and its development alongside colonial anthropology, Harish reminds readers of the "eroticization and exoticization" (16) of tribal bodies in general, and feminine tribal bodies in particular. Harish discerns this course in Bombay cinema as well- apparently filmmakers chose sequences set in the rural and recognizably "tribal" landscapes just so the heroine could be dressed in ostensibly sparse and flimsy clothing. This plot and landscape would ensure that the censor board had no objections to the nudity. In Indian visual culture, Harish argues, there has been little space accorded to tribal creators. They have been looked at but not seen as purveyors of visibility. There is a need to recover the Adivasi woman as artist, and not just a subject.

Scholars and curators describe the ethical need for art created by Adivasi women given that art and literature have delighted in the objectification of the female tribal body

hitherto. But how does one begin? The discrepancy between Adivasi woman as subject and Adivasi woman as artist is compounded by the fact that female artists in South Asia -and the world- have had to struggle more in their endeavor to be recognized as artists. Art historian Linda Nochlin's landmark 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", for instance, explains that at any time, a total situation of institutional possibilities, social affordances and personal circumstances determine the career and recognition of artists⁶⁸. In this case, and I discuss this in later sections, personal circumstances and institutional affordances need to be managed sedulously by Durgabai Vyam. For instance, collaborating with the state-led Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) in Bhopal—the vast museum space that wishes to create Adivasi dwelling by the Adivasis for viewing and moving around in—Vyam must always keep in mind that her work is being evaluated but that her conduct is also being surveilled. Similarly, her recent collaboration with the Janjaati Sangrahalaya (Tribal Museum) is ambivalent- exposure of her art for visitors, and exposure to the vulnerability that state forces produce.

Moreover, more scholarly writing has discussed "modern" Indian artists like Amrita Sher-gil and Arpita Singh than Adivasi artists. For non-Adivasi female artists, Indian art history has viewed female creators with a lens that analyzes their personal and political lives in tandem with their professional output. The personal is instinctively political in the work of art historians like Partha Mitter and Geeta Kapur. In *The Triumph*

⁶⁸ Nochlin has returned to the essay in 2021. She remarks how both the academy and the world have changed since 1971 but much work still needs to be done. Griselda Pollock's *Vision and Difference*, another landmark text, describes the limitation of canonical rework, "Token women are merely offered for reintroduction into a canon...and thus will always position artists who are women as marked, othered, as *women* artists" (xx).

of *Modernism* (2007), Partha Mitter terms modernist pioneer Amrita Sher-gil as India's first "professional" female painter and describes Sher-gil's art and life practice as captivating. In fact, Mitter compares Sher-gil to early 20th century Bengali painter Sunayani Devi, part of the prolific Tagore family from West Bengal to distinguish professional painting from painting practiced from within the confines of domesticity. Mitter argues that both Sher-gil and Devi exercised their own versions of primitivism. He implies that Sher-gil almost orientalized her Indian subjects. Devi's primitivism, for Mitter, lay in her untutored naivete. Devi painted as the Swadesh movement was gaining prominence and the Bengal school had already begun painting primitive Santhal tribal women. Geeta Kapur's *When Was Modernism*, on the other hand, is interested in the staged embodied selves of four female artists- Sher-gil and Frida Kahlo, Nalini Malini, and Arpita Singh. Kapur's essay is a series of meditations on each artist's practice, and Kapur reads each as employing her medium in an interventionist manner. Deeptha Achar's 2012 "Ascribing Feminist Intent" takes this forward to ask what it means to look for feminist intent in the contemporary Indian art. She cites critic and scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha's review of a 1987 crucial exhibition staged by four artists- Arpita Singh, Nalini Malini, Nilima Sheikh, and Madhavi Parekh- in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh at Bharat Bhawan in the 1980s. The catalogue was hesitant to "ascribe feminist intent" to the event. Deepa Achar and Geeta Kapur⁶⁹ clearly exhort a reading based on feminist artistic intent in the works of female

⁶⁹ Writing of Arpita Singh, one of the four artists who exhibited at Bhopal's Bharat Bhawan and other cities as part of what Geeta Kapur calls "female solidarity" between 1987-89, "The feminist point of view should however be reinscribed..." (*When* 42).

20th century artists⁷⁰. Achar, in fact, contends that, “The invention of the term ‘Indian woman artist’ can be tracked in part to the critical and artistic decisions by Arpita Singh, Madhvi Parekh, Nalini Malini, and Nilima Sheikh to hold a series of group shows” (20th Century Indian Art 389).

Crucial exhibitions have led to shifts in thinking. The personal is the political, and indeed should be so for non-Adivasi artists. The question is how and where one can locate the Adivasi artist in this critical history of the personal and the political in women’s art. I think one must push at this history to find the Adivasi woman as a legitimate art creator. For example, two notable coincidences can be found in the above scholarly history of describing modern Indian painting and art via Sunayani Devi and the 1987 exhibition. Partha Mitter writes that Sunayani Devi “summoned up the courage to take up painting” after her husband’s “encouragement” (*Triumph of Modernism* 38). This is also how Nankusia Shyam, Jangarh Singh Shyam’s widow describes her first painting. She used almost the exact same words to me, “Maine brush unke jaane ke baad hi uthaaya” (translated as “I picked up the brush only after his passing”) (N. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). This is not evidence of a universal experience of femininity which accords primacy to male artist and then sequentially to the female artist. Instead, this is an example of how

⁷⁰ Scholarship has continued to favor the “modern” female artist versus the Adivasi female artist. Gayatri Sinha’s 1996 edited anthology *Expressions and Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India* sedulously discusses the diversity in the work of women artists. But only two out of sixteen essays even mention the folk or tribal arts- Guha Thakurta’s essay on Meera Mukherjee’s casting and Pranabranjan Ray’s essay on Madhavi Parekh’s art that features a “child’s world”, apparently inspired by the tribal arts the artist saw in her childhood. The more recent and epic 750 pp *20th Century Indian Art*, has a few choice essays on “modern” female artists in India by Saloni Mathur, Gayatri Sinha, Deeptha Achar. There is only one section on “folk” and “tribal” arts by Jyotindra Jain, some of which are his thoughts on Ganga Devi and Jangarh Singh Shyam. Jain has published books about these artists already.

the female Adivasi artist's experience is accessible in the form of an ethnographic interview and not always as a matter of art historical available discourse. Further, Nankusia Shyam's is not the only Bhopal connection in this history. The staged artistic intervention by four artists in fact took place at Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal in 1987, which had already helped Jangarh Singh Shyam attain recognition⁷¹. Bharat Bhavan then became a site for multiple interventions, Indigenous and feminist. It is thus fitting to discuss Durgabai Vyam's work in this unequal story. Her work can easily be traced to Jangarh Singh Shyam, Bharat Bhavan, and Bhopal; and further, it is both Indigenous and feminist.

Speaking of Indigenous feminism, some scholars have inaugurated a conversation about Indigenous women creating art, thus expanding art writing. Art historian and sociologists like Jyotindra Jain and Yashodhara Dalmia have written about female Adivasi and folk creators. Dalmia's *The Painted World of the Warlis: Art and Ritual of the Warli Tribes of Maharashtra* and Jain's *Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting* are respectively about the Warli tribal art of Maharashtra and the Kayastha women of Mithila, Bihar creating Madhubani folk art. Dalmia devotes considerable space to the female contribution to the process of Warli ritual murals and central motif of fertility goddesses in the Warli belief system. At length, she considers how women create these marriage motifs. Jivya Some Mashe, however, the most prominent Warli painter, was a man who learnt from the women around and enabled a popular shift to paper, canvas, acrylic etc. Dalmia does not analyze the meaning of this shift- but is careful to read the

⁷¹ The Delhi-based Dhoomimal Gallery had exhibited Jangarh Singh Shyam's work in 1984, while Japan's Saitama Museum of Modern Art exhibited it in 1988.

cyclical and perpetual invocation of incarnations of a fertility goddess⁷² as a harking back to an older goddess worship that was appropriated by invaders who wished to install their gods. While Jain too considers the origins of the Madhubani form in the “kohbar-ghar” or the nuptial chamber of the newly-weds, most Madhubani artists are women who took to paper in the 1960s, thus translating a shift from walls and floor to paper. Jain argues that Ganga Devi, despite monumental personal and gendered risks, created a pictorial vocabulary rooted in the “kohbar-ghar” but in subject and re-use of motif created a unique formal innovation.

Like Dalmia and Jain, J Swaminathan, Jangarh Singh Shyam’s most well known collaborator and the intellectual architect of Bharat Bhawan, the multi-art site that became the birthplace of Pardhan Gond art, also writes about the “perceiving fingers” of artists. His phrase, “the perceiving fingers”, refers to the innate ability of the body of the folk or Adivasi artist to design and create, especially using newer media like paper and canvas or acrylic and oil. Swaminathan uses this phrase for a “Pahari Korwa damsel” (*The Perceiving Fingers* 60) at the end of his commentary. According to Swaminathan, the perceiving fingers are inspired by and tend toward a “numinosity”, irrespective of the media and materials used. His larger argument is that the “perceiving fingers” create work that tends toward a “script” or a notation that is unlike conventional language. It is difficult to distinguish patterns that can demarcate words or syntax unless the viewer immerses oneself in them. Writing of the Pahari Korwas’s linework, Swaminathan comments that they are “a rediscovery of the world around them, a coding of the experience of a new life, the

⁷² See David Hardiman’s *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* for a fantastic exploration of the early 20th century appropriation of Devi (goddess) by more than one Adivasi community in Western India.

beginning of a new culture”. For Swaminathan, the Pahari Korwas’ “perceiving fingers” and “ease and confidence” (60) with materials, indicate both their anguish at having lost a way of life as well as their apprehension of a new world ahead. Durgabai Vyam’s craft is precisely in her “perceiving fingers” that sedulously perceive the world and her place in it. But while Swaminathan’s argument is germane, it veers toward a biological essentialism. As in the Adivasi artist must be intellectually reduced to their embodied labor and nothing more. Although, as I discuss later in this essay, this should not mean an abnegation of the conversation of the manual work that it takes to create and collaborate in the art world, upon terms set by the art world.

However, a focus on embodied female tradition threatens to essentialize the gendered body, whether advocated by scholars or practitioners. It also makes it easy to imagine nameless women, as part of a ritualist collective, creating art for limited purposes. Jain, Dalmia, and Swaminathan lean on embodiment of labor in the female body. But embodied “tradition” is a double-edged sword; it legitimizes contemporary creation and de-legitimizes female artistic labor. Indeed, the arduousness of recovery is clear in the particular invocation of female collectives in the writing and interviews of male Pardhan artists. Recently, prominent male practitioners like Bhajju Shyam (*Origins of Art; Creation*) and Venkat Shyam (Pyara Kerketta Foundation) have described the effort of Pardhan pigment and hue across platforms. Bhajju Shyam, one of the foremost Pardhan Gond practitioners today, celebrates a feminine community in the story of Pardhan Gond art, as part of the *Origins of Art*, also published by Tara Books. He exhorts the women who work together to decorate the domestic space with naturally locally available pigments.

Once the ground is prepared, *women* start working on creating decorative designs using a paste of lime and chalk. It is squeezed through the fingers, sometimes with a piece of cloth. Traditionally, these white designs would also be filled in with different earth colors—white, black, yellow, red or green mud. Nowadays, of course, it's hard to source this kind of natural colored earth, so some women have taken to mixing commercial colors into their white paste, especially when they decorate walls. (Shyam and Matsuoka 156 Italics mine)

In Bhajju Shyam's words, Pardhan Gond floor art appears as a strenuous embodied work that finds an end and fulfilment in the communal celebration of a birth or marriage, or the worship of a deity. It certainly inhabits the rhetoric of celebration and pleasure. But there is an absence here. He does not say much about the creativity of such design, apart from the fact that it is admirable that these women are able to create marvelous shapes and designs despite the non-availability of commercial colors. He admits that this has changed as well, that commercial colors are slowly invading the ethos of the village. Apart from creativity, his words deny another crucial artistic experience to the ritual female artists of the community- that of experimentation with material. Writing about his experience of working with Jangarh Singh Shyam in his semi-professionalized atelier, Shyam avers, "Colors were very expensive at the time, so we had to be careful. Sometimes Jangarh Chacha (trans. uncle) would keep adding color to correct a particular mix, and by the end of it all, he'd come up with liters of paint in a color he didn't even want. And then he'd tell us: take this color and go paint that wall!" (Shyam and Matsuoka 197). As Shyam narrates Jangarh Singh Shyam's story, one may sense a tone of artistic experiment and play with the materials. Colors and mixes are sometimes too much and are unpredictable and so uses must be found for them. It is noteworthy that this tone is absent in his description of the labor that women practice when they decorate the floor. In Bhajju Shyam's description, women intently squeeze the cloth and design the walls or the floor. The work of color

attributed to Jangarh Singh Shyam is not the work of color attributed to unidentified women who “traditionally” create art for the household.

Bhajju Shyam’s words in *Origins of Art* evince a delicate nostalgia for the times gone by. This is an example of the masculine Pardhan Gond script I have referred to in this essay. A hint of nostalgia can be found in the words of another artist, Venkat Singh Shyam. In a 2019 documentary on “Gond Painting”; filmed by the Pyara Kerketta foundation, an organization devoted to the education, archiving, and progress of Adivasis in general, Shyam waxes eloquent about the meaning of black for the Gonds. He is careful to remind his viewers that Gond art brings something new to the art world and that it ministers to new combinations between “contemporary” art and “traditional” art. In the same interview, Venkat Singh Shyam (Pyara Kerketta Foundation), discusses black as immensely powerful. As he describes it, the color black is most dramatically valent. It tends to absorb and show the other colors off: it invisibilizes and makes visible at the same time. Venkat Shyam proposes that the color black grants insight to the artist; that it clarifies perhaps even the world for the artist. Venkat Singh Shyam mentions that black shows itself off but also displays other colors by it. He uses the Hindi word “rang” to describe the color- this could mean both hue and pigment. Indeed, his description refers to both- when he says a color on black can set it off, and black on another color can hide- he invokes pigment. When he says black may take years to reveal its insight- he means affective hue. Venkat Singh Shyam’s interview brings attention to the color black, and its tendency to show and hide at the same time. The question for us now- is this eloquent multiplicity of black meant for male or female artists or both?

Interrogating the intended artist-audience and its signification for the fluency in black is important because Venkat Singh Shyam activates a seemingly innocuous difference between “contemporary” and “traditional” art. Indeed, the mobilization of tradition versus contemporary is a staple of the script of Pardhan Gond art. But this mobilization is insidious. For example, do both traditional and contemporary artists absorb the exuberance of black? Who are traditional Pardhan Gond art workers and can be identified as contemporary artists? Venkat Singh Shyam’s difference can also be an unfairly gendered proposition. He clarifies that “traditional” Pardhan Gond art was created on walls using “traditional” materials. For Venkat Shyam, the artform created in Bhopal, however, must be understood as “contemporary”, especially as it uses new materials, media, and was created in the late 20th century. This demarcation appears innocently justifiable until one remembers that “traditional” Pardhan Gond art was created and mobilized by women and “contemporary” city-based painting and book illustration is created and managed by men. Perhaps inadvertently, his distinction between traditional/contemporary reinforces a gendered distinction between the rural and the urban, perhaps even domestic and the market. An opposition between contemporary and traditional is superimposed on a distinction between public and private, and finally masculine and feminine. Thus, some male artists from the community are invested in gendered differences around Pardhan Gond art. Bhajju Shyam accords women’s domestic artistic labor the originary position of the “alphabet of Gond art” but displaces artistic play and experimentation from these originary artists to the man who originated the artform- Jangarh Singh Shyam. Venkat Singh Shyam accords black pigment and hue a playful romantic position as he reminisces about his practice, and then re-invigorates a fairly

gendered debate between contemporary and traditional Gond art. The examples of Indian Yellow and Vantablack show that neither community production nor individuated corporatized pigment creation are free from the complications of power. On the other hand, Bhajju Shyam and Venkat Shyam exhort the community of women who have inspired Jangarh Singh Shyam as they worked on “traditional” art. Black, as pigment and hue, and artistic labor become sites of production of difference between male artist and female artist. It is thus crucial that neither black nor female artistic labor is used and depicted in *Churki Burki*. There is a link then between the use of a pigment or a hue and traditional female artistic labor.

Binaries abound in a discussion of the gendered picturebook. In fact, not just in South Asia, but the transfusion of binaries- masculine/feminine and individual/collective- is evident in global scholarship around Indigenous art as well. Art historian Bill Anthes’ work with Californian Native American art partly resonates with the historical shifts in Pardhan Gond art. Anthes explores “...a set of institutions that trained and supported Native artists-mostly male-...” that were put into place by the first two decades of the 20th century in North America. As in the Pardhan Gond scenario in late 20th century India, Anthes notes the introduction of new media like watercolor, ink, pencil, and paper to communities and a concomitant inequality between patrons and artists. This, Anthes argues, led to an “American formation of modernist primitivism⁷³” (Anthes 94). Anthes cites the example of a gifted native artist Oscar Howe, who articulated his concerns in a

⁷³ In the South Asian context, Partha Mitter makes a similar argument about the refraction of modernism in early 20th century India, which led to a radical re-purposing of primitivism, and according to Mitter, led to a rupture of a unilinear history of modernism.

declarative letter and contrasts this articulation to “a collection of baskets made by Cahuilla and other female weavers from the inland and desert valleys of Southern California” (93). Anthes is interested in the strident self-expression that is accorded to Oscar Howe, a male artist immersed in the institutions and studios around him, in opposition to the ostensibly inarticulate female weavers whose art/craft⁷⁴ makes its way into the water surveyor Emil Paulicek Steffa’s collection. Here, a direct comparison might be made with Pardhan Gond art; a similar narrative arc is visible in Jangarh Singh Shyam and female ritual art practitioners. Why should Oscar Howe, or indeed Jangarh Singh Shyam be celebrated at the cost of marginalizing female artistic labor? Anthes argues that the women’s baskets are “playful” and “thematize their own manufacture and purchase”. For example, one basket in particular, “a thirteen inch-tall olla-shaped form”, was given to Steffa because it depicts Steffa and his wife. Anthes observes that Steffa saw a tradition appearing before him- a tradition that could accommodate innovation- but was limited by Steffa’s own Eurocentrism. Indeed, the archive for “Native American Modernisms” is limited because there is no way to access the “weaver’s voices” apart from Steffa’s words. But this archive offers insight into a less visible and audible development that inflects art writing via gender. The weavers that Bill Anthes hears in his research are radically distinct from Durgabai Vyam’s public self-expression interviews to journalists. Yet, both are united under systems that attempt to deny them articulation. Ruth Philipps 2008 “The Turn of the Primitive”

⁷⁴ This dichotomy between art and craft has now been deconstructed and global folk and Indigenous studies are moving toward the debilitating consequences of this binary. Saloni Mathur’s *India By Design*, for instance, notes the potent construction of this binary in 19th century Britain, which in fact gave rise to the idea that there may be “craft communities” in rural India that could be showcased as living exhibits in 19th century London.

describes a script of the movements in Native American Indigenous Art that is strikingly similar to the way Indigenous artforms in India have been shaped⁷⁵.

Both black and female artistic labor are complex and related; and the categories of traditional and contemporary neatly transform into individual and community, and masculine and feminine. But if biological essentialism threatens to engulf the female artist, should she also be written about like the male creative genius? I have discussed color as it brings to fore the hierarchy of labor around Indigenous art and its gendered exhibition. I wish to push this- is it possible to imagine a method that is a neither-nor, neither absorbed in an invisible female collective nor marked by a unique masculine differentiation? I think a feminist intent is visible in a vacillation between these two opposite ends of the pole. I will briefly compare two stories of pigments from 19th colonial India and 21st century globalized Britain respectively. These stories help understand the stakes of discussing the gendered picturebook in the terms of binaries like individual/collective and masculine/feminine via the labor of pigment and hue. I have discussed how narratives of native collectives and female tribal collectives only serve the hetero-patriarchal status quo. At the same time, an uncritical demonization of individual autonomous artistry yields nothing but a stalemate. This neither-nor is how I have read the difficult juxtaposition of hue and female collective in *Churki Burki*; the text is an example of a basic quandary of Pardhan Gond art, it is an affirmation of gendered contribution to the Pardhan worldview and a consequent exorcism of women as legitimate art workers.

⁷⁵ If a systematic in-audibility has been heard across communities in the world, perhaps it then makes sense to think of global indigeneity.

To reiterate, viewing female artists as part of an organic traditional community relegates them to a curtailed cultural and social role. Indeed, historically speaking, relegating any pigment worker to an “amorphous collectivity” (Jain *Other Masters*) reduces the individual worker to their community motivations. For instance, pigment in recent South Asian art writing has been seen in both material, cultural, and postcolonial complexity. Material historian Jordanna Bailkin writes that the “Indian yellow”, a pigment used to color racialized faces in 19th century British painting attained notoriety at the turn of the century because the story of its origin became part of an investigation (“Indian Yellow: Making and Breaking the Indian Palette”). Authorities were puzzled to find that the pigment was made from the urine of North Indian cows that had been regularly fed mango leaves. This affected the lifespan of the cows- and bovine death was the cost that the cowherds paid for trading cow urine. Bailkin notes that this pigment was a staple in mid-century painting and mysteriously disappeared by the first years of the 20th century. Citing the cow protection movements in South Asia, Bailkin argues that the sale and purchase of the pigment was nipped by the British unilaterally in their effort to appear benevolent to India, and one way to manage this was to appease the cow protectors. Ironically, Bailkin observes, a pigment created in North India which rendered yellow/brown skin perfectly “legible” was made unavailable because the British Indian government wished to appear benevolently legible. In other words, the making of color as pigment was in conflict with the political use of color as hue and was thus unilaterally discontinued. With the benefit of hindsight, the “Indian yellow” was a cruel pigment, harnessed by a community of cowherds, meant finally for racist uses. It is not useful to blame the community of cowherds for the pigment. They made choices then, and blaming

them would mean lumping them together in an unthinking collective that could not bargain. This is similar to the women who come together to create wall and floor art for digna, or who banded together to drive the jackals and parrots away in *Churki Burki*. Instead, one must ask what conditions lead to these choices and how have women negotiated these conditions.

Conceptually, thus, there are pitfalls to reducing female artists to collectives. One alternative to this reduction is to imagine a strident masculine individualism, as with Jangarh Singh Shyam and Oscar Howe in Bill Anthes' work. More contemporaneously, the 21st century contemporary art world offers a cautionary tale about masculine pigment and hue. In 2014, Surrey Nanosystems, a British company, created a coating called Vantablack ("Anish Kapoor- The Vantablack Feud"), sometimes referred to as the "blackest black" (Lee pars. 1-4). Anish Kapoor, British Indian artist renowned for his public art installations like *Cloud Gate* in Chicago (also called "The Bean"), bought exclusive rights to Vantablack and announced that the paint coating would be used for artistic purposes only, used only by Anish Kapoor and nobody else in the world. This incensed the art world and led to a flurry of words⁷⁶. Anish Kapoor reportedly used the pigment for luxury watches before debuting it at the Venice Biennale in 2022, incidentally at a Venice exhibition venue that he now owns. What is more worrying however, is

⁷⁶ Stuart Semple, a British artist, not only publicly condemned Anish Kapoor's assumption of exclusivity but created a pigment called the "pinkest pink" and buyers had to sign an affidavit stating they were not Anish Kapoor and nor were they buying it for Kapoor. Everybody had access to the "pinkest pink" but Anish Kapoor. Currently, Stuart Semple's website *CultureHustle* advertises pigments with titles like "Black 3.0 The Blackest Black Paint in the World", "Big Black The World's Biggest Blackest Black 3.0", and "Black 2.0 The World's Mattest Flattest Black Art Material by Stuart Semple". Semple's response has been a clear and active fulmination against Anish Kapoor's exclusive use.

journalist Sophie Lee's December 2022 description of Vantablack at *culturedmag*, "With practically no light bouncing off the material, Vantablack makes it nearly impossible for the human eye to detect the shape or texture of the object it's applied to, creating the effect of staring into a black hole" (Lee par. 5) Almost as if the car painted with this coating would be invisible to the naked eye. In fact, the Surrey Nanosystems website⁷⁷ describes a range of security applications for Vantablack such as cameras, displays, and sensing when driving in "demanding conditions" ("What is Vantablack"). Security, surveillance, and distant visual control are thus part of the coat of pigment that allows the viewer to see nothing but blackness, a black hole. In other words, the "blackest black" made in a laboratory is to be used exclusively by one artist, and the visual affect or hue of the pigment enables the user to be invisible to the naked eye, leading to security concerns.

The stories above reveal a confusion. The cowherds who harness cows for the Indian yellow at the cost of bovine life created pigment and in the last instance, helped visualize racial differences in art. Vantablack has been "secured" against public use and ironically can be used for "security" purposes. It can hide the user and encourage expensive exclusivity. Neither Anish Kapoor's individual exclusivity nor the Indian Yellow's community production appear as stellar examples of fair use. Both instances are untenable by 21st century standards of ethical usage. Indeed, both carry with them immense potential for exploitation. What does this mean for *The Churki Burki Book of Rhymes*? If 19th century

⁷⁷ The Surrey Nanosystems website describes Vantablack thus, "It was originally developed for satellite borne blackbody calibration systems, but due to limitations in how it was manufactured, it's been surpassed by our spray applied Vantablack coatings...The totally unique properties of our Vantablack coatings are being exploited for applications such deep space imaging, automotive sensing, optical systems, art and aesthetics" ("What is Vantablack" par. 3).

North Indian cowherds chose to pressure cows for pigmented profit, is it just to claim that collectives are wholly inadequate? And as a corollary in *Churki Burki*, an artistic activity deserves to be overshadowed by the parrots and jackals, antagonists who wish to appropriate corncobs for profit? It is not appropriate to argue that the women's artistic selves lose themselves in communal activities. It is also not appropriate to claim that women should somehow go for the alternative, Anish Kapoor's exclusive masculine pigment control. Neither complete absorption in the community nor utter individuation can suffice. In other words, both exclusive individual use and community production become unstable as precise methodological tools to read the gendered picturebook in the 21st century.

Perhaps the problem is in the terms of analysis, i.e., the binary of masculine/feminine and community/individual. Why should the debate devolve into a conflict between individual coherent autonomous masculine creation and communal disjointed feminine co-creation? While this is a ready binary to study Durgabai Vyam's work, it threatens to essentialize the debate into an either/or, thus stifling nuance. As I discuss in the succeeding sections, while Vyam's work stems from a particular gendered scenario, she charts for herself a unique path that ensures her identities—as Adivasi and as woman—are acknowledged. The picturebook has been illustrated individually by Durgabai Vyam and is physical evidence of her art. The content of the picturebook belies her domestic past and leaves the artistic past behind. Perhaps, for the female artist domesticity displaces art? It is noteworthy that Anish Kapoor uses a specific black, the Vantablack, to announce his separation from the world. Durgabai Vyam in *Churki Burki* chooses to eschew black in favor of domestic community in her childhood but also eschews a

representation of herself as an artist. Her work is not about separating herself from her community or the market she is bound to. Instead, my point is that the recovery of an Adivasi women's contribution, laboring artistically, is always already difficult; and asking questions of pigment in an autobiographical narrative can enable such recovery. The terms of analysis help us formulate these questions.

The *pigment* black, as in *Vantablack*, is inadequate. Can reading for the *hue* black recuperate the search for female artistic labor? After all, I have pointed out that the hue black and artistic labor are absent in *Churki Burki*. I have discussed that the hues of the parrots deflect an Indigenous female collective. But I submit that the explosive colors of the parrots are not to be villainized as the culprits- they are a symptom at best. I have discussed how narratives of color and labor coincide with an inadequate gendered binary in 21st century Pardhan Gond art. I have argued that this is evident in the eschewals seen in *Churki Burki*. In her autobiographical story, Durgabai Vyam does not use black anywhere and does not represent herself as an artist anywhere. Instead, the protagonists Churki and Burki do everything else, even to the point of laboring together to eject the multi-hued parrots away. I have asked why this absence of black and women's artistic labor in the picturebook exists. As I have mentioned in my discussion of Anish Kapoor's *Vantablack*, I do not mean that Durgabai Vyam should have used copious black and thus retrieved her artistic past in the picturebook. If black is absent, then the present surfeit of other colors is not meant to demonize the red, yellow, and orange hues of the parrots. That would mean orientalizing hue and reproducing another gendered signification. Indeed, color as hue has been regularly demonized in western art history as seductive, oriental, feminine. Color has historically and culturally been seen with ambivalent suspicion. It

seduces and persuades, it brings attention away from the figure, the gesture, the posture, and pulls attention to itself. Art historian David Batchelor concludes his chapter with these bleak words, “What matters is the show of force: the rhetorical subordination of color to the rule of line and the higher concerns of the mind. No longer intoxicating, or narcotic or orgasmic, color is learnt, ordered, subordinated and tamed” (49). Batchelor’s diagnosis brings attention to an oft-recorded artistic anxiety about the use and meaning of color. At the same time, in the 19th and 20th century colonial Indian scenario, as historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta argues, color has been a tool of extrication from shackles of colonial censorship, as it acquired mythical exuberant undertones in Indian art. “...only too often, the coloring took on loud, fantasied overtones, indulging in the shocking blue complexions of Rama or Krishna, the crimson of sunset skies, the pinks and purples of silken costumes or glittering gold of ornaments. Color in these pictures was clearly stepping beyond the parameters of the real and temporal into a world of mythic exuberance” (Pinney “How Indian Nationalism” pp. 123-24).

Perhaps my worry about the magnanimous hues of the parrots is at once a mirroring of the anxiety Batchelor notes, and can be assuaged by the tactical deflection that Thakurta notes. Color as hue has thus been both a source of feminized fear as well as a source of postcolonial resistance. This double signification only points to the power of hue in art. In fact, both Batchelor and Guha Thakurta argue in favor of a relationship between paranoia and distraction enabled by color and hue. Batchelor discerns this in the rhetorical force mobilized to subordinate color, and Guha Thakurta reads “loud fantasied overtones” (Pinney “How Indian Nationalism” pp. 123-24) as a distraction to deflect colonial censorship. Indeed, my worry could be understood as seductive colors distracting the

viewer from the black outlines of artistic genius. It is possible that my concern may be interpreted as another way of proving that feminine and excessive color detracts from clear meaning; that feminine color takes over the dry unified signification of artwork. After all, in this essay I use words like “uncover”, “reveal”, “hide”, “disappear”; these are words that carry gendered overtones apart from the presumption that I bear some innate knowledge that can peel the unreal from the real. This automatically renders my study as reaffirming that problem of traditional versus contemporary. If excessive hues are a problem, then they are a problem because they are gendered.

Alternatively, the stark absence of black and the excessive presence of red and yellow in the parrots of *Churki Burki* might be read as Tapati Guha Thakurta’s “loud fantasied overtones”. According to Guha Thakurta, the exuberant colors of Indian art helped it appear merely colorful to colonial censors, while the “real” message was successfully conveyed to Indians who readily possessed the visual literacy to “read” these colors. Going by this system, the pandemonium of parrots would really be a coded message meant for the visually literate. Perhaps, the parrots are merely enablers for the women. After all, the women band together only when the parrots attack their produce. The parrots take up visual attention and compositional space, perhaps to let the viewer know that the real enablers are the parrot protagonists of the narrative. In other words, there is no contrast between the displaced women artists and the displacing parrots. One leads to the other—they are the same. In this reading, it is immaterial whether the potency of black has been harnessed. The colorful parrots have arrived and brought with them a new meaning. The parrots are not villains but are actually saviors of the women for it is their intrusion that galvanized an Indigenous female collective.

However, conferring a novel, liberatory status upon the parrots is almost a justification of the invisible female artistic collective. Perhaps reading for pigment, and not hue, is more helpful. Durgabai Vyam's words to me disrupt a glib optimism while reading the parrots. In my interview, Vyam revealed something about the "traditional" black pigment used for wall decoration in her childhood (D. Vyam and Subhash Vyam, Personal Interview, 2022). I should point out that in a personal ethnographic interview, Vyam was comfortable enough to narrate her artistic past, as opposed to a picturebook like *Churki Burki*. We were talking of how the artform has shifted in its move from the village to the city, and Durgabai Vyam mentioned that in the village they would use naturally occurring pigments- leaf extract for example. They would use yellow ochre or "ramraj mitti" and black sand or "kaali mitti". She added that in her youth, Vyam spent time and energy on acquiring a particular "kaali mitti" or black sand, usually found near coal mines. Vyam recounted that she and her friends/family would have to walk 10-20 miles to a nearby coal mine every winter to obtain this black sand pigment so that they could use it for murals in the village.

The mention of mining was a revelation. Central India is a hub for coal mining and has affected the lives of the Adivasis who live there. Mining transforms the land and the lifeworlds of Adivasis. This too is invisible in *The Churki Burki Book of Rhyme*. In the neighboring state of Chhatisgarh, industrialist Gautam Adani has been permitted to fell trees in one of the richest tracts of India, Hasdeo Arand—where both trees and individuals dwell in harmony—for mining coal. This will lead to displacement and immense profit for the mining industry. On the one hand, coal mining leads to the mobilization of collective female labor and pigment use, in the artist's own words. On the other, the source of this

pigment, a pigment meant for “traditional” female art, is the coal mine- also the source of disenfranchisement and displacement.

I began this essay with Vyam’s ambivalence, a denial of an either-or and an espousal of a neither-nor. Indeed, if *Churki Burki* is an autobiographical sketch of a series of moments in the artist’s life, then her textual silence on her artistic labor assumes importance. I am curious about Vyam’s own sense of the coal mines that gives pigment and takes away land control and livelihood. Like the parrots that entail women gathering together, perhaps the coal mine also occupies an ambiguous position. As a visual and literary scholar, I wondered if the parrots in *Churki Burki* could be an allegory for the mine owners? I asked her about the multiple meanings that could be gleaned in the jackals and parrots (perhaps they represent successive governments or industrialists who take the Adivasis’ source of livelihood away)? I asked her if the jackal or parrots could be something other than jackal or parrots? Vyam responded, “Yes, maybe. I am not very good at drawing, so these could be something else” (D. Vyam and Mansingh Vyam 2022). Perhaps she meant that her sketching technique is not exact, not quite conversant with accurate verisimilitude. It struck me with force that this could be because artists and art networks in general may have made her feel that realistic shapes are the revered norm. Could this explain a silence around female artistic labor? Or could her response to my question be an attempt to deflect the implication that industrialists have harmed people and the environment? Durgabai Vyam’s refusal to commit the parrots and jackals to anything other than what they denote expresses the ambivalence I am arguing for. It is difficult to clearly say what the parrots signify. One could speculate that female artistic labor is absent in *Churki Burki* in protest against the mining black. Unhappy that the mine is the source of

color pigment as well as the source of violence against Adivasis in India, perhaps Vyam chooses not to illustrate her artistic self in the picturebook. Perhaps she does not wish to illustrate the mine for its controversy. Indeed, why should we expect the artist jeopardize herself for the sake of visualized strident self-expression? Bringing attention to rituals of women creating art may have brought attention to how women procured pigment from the mine. One could speculate that she did not wish to bring attention to mining by making visible her own story of procuring pigment or her own artistic past. Both questions- about diffidence perhaps expected in a female artist, or invisibilization of mining- lead to the question of conditions of production of the art itself. As I had suggested, neither community nor individual are precise tools for analysis. Instead, the question should be what enables this scenario in the first place.

I propose that the answer lies in Durgabai Vyam's stubborn ambivalence that vacillates between questions and possibilities. There is an intricate intent in Durgabai Vyam's self-representation in *Churki Burki*. While there are speculative questions that provoke, what remains certain is Vyam's desire. Her intent lies in her implication that the parrots are what she intended them to be i.e., a part of her childhood. Her insistence on this personalized meaning ignores the other provocative possibilities inherent in the Pardhan Gond practice and its utilization in the picturebook. This means she actively chooses what is inserted in her autobiographical *Churki Burki* and how she reads her own work for interviewers like me. The absent black indicates the absence of visualized artistic labor, in accordance with the masculine patriarchal script of Pardhan Gond art that invokes women only to exorcize them. One way to explain this artistic obligation is to assert that artistic labor and domestic patriarchal labor coalesce in the hands of the gendered body- or in "the

perceiving fingers” (Swaminathan) of the gendered body. Perhaps owing to the origin of this artform, female artists do not differentiate between domestic labor and artistic labor. Indeed, this is the corollary of Bhajju Shyam, J Swaminathan, and Venkat Shyam’s exposition on Gond practice and Adivasi art in general.

But *Churki Burki* could also indicate a careful choice not to refer to a story of mining. For whatever reason, Durgabai Vyam has decided not to refer to it beyond a point. Narrating her artistic past in an interview, she can refer to it in a story of color. But when pressed to see if the antagonists the picturebook are more than what they appear, she says she is not good at drawing. Both possibilities- a masculine script and *miner* protagonists- point to a calculated assertion in the picturebook. But both possibilities discussed above need not be mutually exclusive. A more balanced view is to assert that Durgabai Vyam’s artwork is both a negotiation of the script of Pardhan Gond art and a negotiation of the material context in which this art is created. Keeping this negotiation in mind, I submit that her insistence on leaving these meanings ambivalent is feminist. Investing the parrots with liberatory glory or extractive potential takes away from her intent to sustain a reading of her art. Her ambivalence may be explained by multiple scenarios. This neither/nor is the feminism I see in Durgabai Vyam’s art.

It is now clear that there exists a hierarchy around labor and color, and the labor of color; and it cannot always be the labor of the female artist to resist eternally. Sometimes direct resistance is impossible. The point is that discourse would keep women limited to domesticity and “traditional” pigment and ritual practice, and not grant them the discursive and material space to experiment and innovate. The artist must choose her experimental re-scripting with care. One notes this ambivalence in the range of texts she works with, in

both interviews and books. For example, *Churki Burki* repudiates the hue black and *The Nightlife of Trees* embraces black. Since I have linked pigment and hue to artistic intent, this means Vyam *chooses* said repudiation or embrace. In other words, the artist experiments! In practice then, despite the explosive deflections of the parrots, the artist proves her genius across platforms. She wilfully appropriates Venkat Singh Shyam's poignant pigment. Her art is a demonstration of the fluid power of black and therefore a demonstration of an innovative artistic experiment. I have argued in the preceding chapters that experiment and innovation in the artform is the cornerstone of the Adivasi picturebook, especially in the picturebooks illustrated by Bhajju Shyam. Durgabai Vyam also manages successful experiments. In fact, in the next section of the essay, I discuss how her illustrations carefully re-view the political economy of manual labor that goes into the act of moving into the city to create art. It is this desire to craft a critique that is the feminist intent in Durgabai Vyam's work. I have mentioned that this leads to a re-scripting of male dominated Pardhan Gond aesthetics. This is evident in the fact that she can move between pigments with ease- with the absence of black in *Churki Burki* and the presence of black in *The Nightlife of Trees*. It is this movement that revises. For Venkat Shyam, the implicit worker with pigment and hue is a male Gond child. But Durgabai Vyam almost effortlessly manages the movement. Her craft lies in the experiments she can facilitate.

2. Present but Absent

This paper has argued that color and female labor must be unearthed to uncover a gendered reading may inflect a male centric narrative of the "discovery" of Pardhan Gond Adivasi art. Durgabai Vyam is able to work with black, relying on her traditional and contemporary art, to experiment with color. Neither Vantablack, nor the Indian Yellow,

nor even the “tradition” that Bhajju Shyam and Venkat Singh Shyam see as the refuge of domesticity can explain Vyam’s innovation. “Kaali mitti” or the black obtained from coal mining only serves to bolster her intent and the meaning the interpretation that she would like emphasized. This exemplifies an art practice that intentionally carves a space for itself: and this is the strategic feminist intent in her work. Hitherto, I have examined Vyam as negotiating with gendered embodied knowledge. As I read *The Nightlife of Trees*, I wish to emphasize said negotiation. *The Nightlife of Trees* provides an instance of Vyam giving visual form to this negotiation. In *The Churki Burki Book of Rhyme*, the absence of inspired insightful masculine romantic black hints at the complex invisibilization of female artistic labor within a story of female domestic labor. In *The Nightlife of Trees*, the black surface becomes a sea of tumult against which the artist must distinguish her self. Her art is defined by a sedulous and stubborn ambivalence throughout. It is her experiments with received tradition (in all its many meanings) that Vyam fixes her challenge. The phantasmagoric and luminous 2006 *The Nightlife of Trees* is mostly all black. Bhajju Shyam, Ramsingh Urveti, and Durgabai Vyam, three best known 21st century Pardhan Gond artists—the second generation of Pardhan Gond artists after Jangarh Singh Shyam—have contributed to this stunning picturebook. As the title suggests, this picturebook is a series of images that showcase tree lore in the Pardhan Gond repertoire. There are no authorial name signatures or indications in *The Nightlife of Trees*. Each doublespread simply offers a textual story/note/comment and an image that accompanies it and overwhelms it. For a picturebook titled *The Nightlife of Trees*, the black as affect is the capacity of the night to enable surreal atmospherics. As opposed to this black being used by the artist for an acrylic or oil on canvas, the artist works *with* the black to enhance their artistry.

A corollary to an ambivalent intent is that sometimes the intent is as precise as a needle point and sometimes as blunt as a pair of weathered old scissors. Ambivalence is imperative in the Pardhan Gond practice and should be so for analysis. In “Arrows of the Sembar”, Durgabai Vyam uses the surreal black ambience to sharply highlight the vulnerability of the female body when faced with murderous patriarchal violence. “Arrows on the Sembar” is a doublespread in *The Nightlife of Trees*. The “sembar” tree is often called kapok or silk-cotton tree in English. The Gonds believe that spirits reside in the sembar tree at night. The sembar has given rise to one particularly gruesome story of female persecution in the Gond worldview. The snippet that Vyam illustrates for *The Nightlife of Trees* is that of a sister tortured by her older brothers. Murdered and buried by her brothers, the girl then transforms into a “new and beautiful tree” (*The Nightlife of Trees*). This is a very brief snippet from the longer story of the “baansin kanya” or the “bamboo girl” about a young woman who escapes into the sembar, is murdered and buried by six older brothers, and then becomes the bamboo tree. The “new and beautiful tree” that the girl grows into is the bamboo tree; and one use for the story is the explanation of how bamboo came to be. Curator and collector John Bowles comments that this is one of Durgabai Vyam’s favorite stories.

For context, I am paraphrasing Bowles’s translation of Durgabai Vyam’s story told to Bowles. A girl, who had seven brothers, accidentally cut her finger on a leaf. She cooked the leaf and fed it to her brothers. The brothers loved her blood-fed food. They thought her flesh would be even more delicious than her blood-soaked leaves. So, the six older brothers decided to kill her. She ran and took shelter in the simal/sembar/silk-cotton tree. The brothers shot arrows at her. The youngest was forced to participate. The older brothers

forced the youngest to cook the flesh of the sister and he was helped by forest animals in the task. He buried his share of the meat. The nurturing bamboo tree grew where he buried the sister's flesh. The brothers "desired" the flesh of the sister and made sure they violated her body with "arrows" before consuming her. In the story, a chance wound lands the sister in jeopardy, and she loses her life- and the sole relief is that she is now a "new and beautiful tree" (*The Nightlife*). Out of death comes life. Why does Vyam choose this particular moment for illustration?

While this may be one of the artist's favorite stories, it is worthwhile to pause here. Vyam chooses to illustrate vulnerability (Bowles pp. 86-88). The moment she gives form to is that of the girl engulfed by arrows that her brothers shoot at her. The title of the doublespread is "Arrows on the Sembar", not "The Birth of Bamboo". The main story makes a parable of how the nurturing bamboo came to be. But Vyam truncates that story and shifts the focus to a different tree. She chooses not the happy ending but a painful moment in the plot, when the sister is stuck in the sembar tree. This is perhaps to say that one of the spirits that reside in the sembar could be that of the victim of soricide. After all, this is a pivotal moment of physical duress before her murder and dismemberment. The brothers first shoot at her and then proceed to violate her further. The emphasis in Vyam's illustration is not then on the nurture of the bamboo tree but a realized consequence of patriarchy: a fear embodied in the sembar tree. Vyam consciously re-members the plot to mark out a moment of susceptibility often felt by women.

Tara's collaboration with Durgabai Vyam cements her as an illustrator of female labor and enterprise, but that indicates nuance as well. It is no coincidence that Vyam's artwork is chosen to illustrate a sylvan story of female persecution in the Pardhan Gond

repertoire. Vyam chooses to work with themes relating to women. Vyam has also illustrated *Sultana's Dream* (2005) for Tara Books, a feminist utopia first published in 1905, a few years before the first publication of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist utopia *Herland* (1915). Tara's 2005 publication marked 100 years of the first appearance of *Sultana's Dream*. *Sultana's Dream* narrates the dream of a young woman named Sultana or "Queen" in Urdu/Hindi: Sultana dreams that she is transported to a land controlled by women. Headmistresses, Governors, Political leaders, and Ambassadors are all women. Traditionally masculine occupations are held by women, while men are closeted in the home and the kitchen. The dream ends with the female scientists averting a catastrophic war, before Sultana wakes up. Durgabai Vyam's illustrations for *Sultana's Dream* do not simply capture the intent of the original author, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, but productively take the story forward. Her art follows Sakhawat Hossain's text but lends a poignancy to the content. Vyam illustrated *The Nightlife in Trees* in 2006, merely a year after marking the centenary of *Sultana's Dream*. On the one hand, she works with a feminist utopia, and on the other, she illustrates monstrous violence that men perpetrate against women. It is almost like she worked on this particular snippet from "baansin Kanya" or Bamboo Girl in *The Nightlife of Trees* to say why a text like *Sultana's Dream* is important. As in, imagining a feminist utopia is crucial because women's bodies are subject to indefatigable patriarchal violence. Therefore, Vyam's oeuvre organically points to her subject, and thus to her intent. At the same time, this intent is complicated and cannot be accommodated by notions of direct protest or our own expectations of what a feminist art practice should be. Vyam abjures the nurture of the bamboo tree to illustrate the macabre violation of soricide in *The Nightlife of Trees*. But she emphatically glories in the nurture

of the museum in *Between Memory and Museum*. As I discuss shortly, Vyam's relationship to the museum cannot be accommodated by a notion that only criticizes the museum for being predatory. Given that the museum initiated her entry into the art world, how can one expect her to protest the predator?



Fig. 1 “Arrows on the Sembar”, *The Nightlife of Trees*. Art by Durga Bai for *The Nightlife of Trees*, Original Edition ©Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com.

“Arrows on the Sembar” is at once Durgabai Vyam’s claim and a principled stance against imperious gendered violence. Unlike her male colleagues, who find themselves illustrating only trees in *The Nightlife of Trees*, Vyam visualizes human bodies. Not just any human body, but she consciously inserts a diminutive female form in the center of the image. In fact, it is Vyam’s telltale mode of illustration that helps me identify “Arrows on The Sembar” as hers. The human figures are shapes that abound in Vyam’s oeuvre. Additionally, the choice of inserting this tale, and of illustrating this pivotal moment of the girl desperately clinging to the tree, is meant to bring attention to the trope of a petite girl attempting an escape from a bigger brutal patriarchy. As if to say that this Freudian violence—pierced by brothers’ arrows—is a possibility in the blackness of the night, that only Vyam can bargain with.

Further, Vyam strategizes the ostensible protagonist of the narrative as an ally- so much so that the sembar tree becomes the girl, anticipating the girl’s transformation into the bamboo tree later in the story. A productive confusion of protagonists ensues. Who is the center of the story- the tree or the girl? The answer is a neither-nor- it is both. As per custom, the faces in Pardhan Gond art do not move in expected ways to register emotion or even intention. It is the posture and costume that inform the viewer of the content of story. A finely decorated cloth drapes over the lower bodies of the brothers, and they are even adorned with anklets. The girl is distinguished by her hair in a bun, her diminutive size, and a shorter tighter skirt. The older brothers’ heads tilt upwards, toward the girl hiding in the branches. Each branch is pierced by arrows. We note that these are arrows that the sembar tree bears. The girl is not illustrated as being pierced. Perhaps the sembar tree is protecting the victim. After all, the image is meant to illustrate a glorious tree replete

with cultural meaning. But the tree serves a mundane narrative function- Wolf's translation of Vyam's comment reads that the "girl took shelter in a Sembar tree". The tree is protective and also pierced- it is both a tree and a persecuted girl.

The terrified girl climbs up the punctured tree and will indeed *become* the tree, memorialized by Durgabai Vyam. The sembar tree is not a background prop for the brothers to shoot at. It is an embodiment of pain. Vyam's signature mode of illustration in a picturebook putatively about the nocturnal splendor of trees turns a Gond myth of the birth of bamboo into protest. The black threatens to swallow the girl and the tree aids her. Vyam is not interested in staging persecution for a voyeur. Instead, she literally highlights the horrifying consequences for women under heteropatriarchy. The intent of *The Nightlife of Trees* is to dramatize the sheer tapestry of the storied repertoire of trees in Pardhan Gond storytelling. Vyam performs that with aplomb. But she bargains with black to register dissatisfaction. Her choice of story- female to tree metamorphosis- and her illustration gesture to a negotiation with the overwhelming blackness of the patriarchal night.

Narratives of the pigment and hue like black describe "difficult" stories about gender (Doyle *Hold It*). I have discussed black as both pigment and hue to arrive at Durgabai Vyam's feminist ambivalence. I have argued that black and female artistic labor are related- and the visualized absence of both in *The Churki Burki Book of Rhymes* is a response to the binaries of traditional/contemporary and masculine/feminine, and asymmetrical conditions of production. Vyam revises a Pardhan Gond script by playing and experimenting with these binaries. She places a diminutive female against the violence of the night in *The Nightlife of Trees*. The Pardhan black is romanticized by Venkat Singh Shyam and given unique form by Durgabai Vyam. However, this is not to say that a surfeit

of black would always point to a clear and pointed intent. Or that whenever black is present, Vyam chooses a strident self-expression. For instance, despite the presence of black in *Between Memory and Museum*, Vyam insistently offers a subdued protest. The 2015 *Between Memory and Museum: A Dialogue with Folk and Tribal Artists*, is a pointed example of a comingling of gendered labor and Adivasi labor via Durgabai Vyam's words and visual art. Her imagination of the museum as maternal and the details in her art that illustrate the political economy of the museum index the complexity of Indigenous feminism. On the one hand, she invokes the museum as nurturing and on the other, the museum is revealed a space of back breaking labor and anti-Adivasi violence. As I have observed, complicated stories need a complex method. For instance, while an illustration of artistic labor in *Churki Burki* is missing—perhaps mining black is so powerful that it cannot be uttered, or that some times female labor cannot bring attention to itself—but Indigenous feminism, as clarified by Michelle Raheja (*Reservation Reelism*) and Bill Anthes (“Making Pictures”) and Jyotindra Jain (*Ganga Devi*), need not conform to a perpetually uniform protest in artistry. A nuanced approach must account for the pressures on the artist.

Between Memory and Museum is a collection of comments and visual art that explores what is remembered and how, especially when Adivasi cultures enter the museum. It begins with a brief review of the events that led to a re-vision of museum practices in post-1947 India. A reckoning in global anthropology and museum studies culminated in the Guwahati Declaration of New Museology in 1988 (Guzy et. al. n. p.) which emphasized the museum's intent to be revisionist. Thus, the Manav Sangrahalaya (translated Humanity Museum or Museum of Mankind) was conceptualized. Apparently inspired by the Museum

of Man in the UK, its agenda was to inclusively re-create and preserve Adivasi culture in a sustained dialogue with Adivasi artists. State authorities sat down with Adivasi artists not only to create the museum but to create traditional Adivasi dwellings on the IGRMS campus. The museum is tiny compared to the vastness of the site- most of the campus is taken with dwellings and vegetation. It is this dialogue that led to *Between Memory and Museum*, published by Tara. Gita Wolf and Arun Wolf have provided the text, while the artists have provided the images. Each block of text is offset by an artist's rendition of either the museum or a memory, sometimes mythic sometimes mundane.

Durgabai Vyam has contributed two illustrations for *Between Memory and Museum*. Pages 126-127, for instance, portray an intentional tripartite composition-artwork, editorial comment, editorially translated artist's note. The left page is entirely taken up by Durgabai Vyam's work spilling on to the right page; and the right page is bifurcated into two blocks of text. The top block is Gita and Arun Wolf's comment, while the bottom block is Durga Bai's explanation of the image. No labelling is visible anywhere on the double spread. One must look to Durga Bai's explanation as a self-labelling. It is her voice—albeit translated by Gita and Arun Wolf from Gondi to English—that provides a narrative to twine the image with. Vyam's museum here is a banyan tree, according to the translated excerpt. The central branch supports the other branches and the activities on the respective branches. The homes on the left and the right refer to the Adivasi homes that have been created by respected Adivasi communities at Manav Sangrahalaya. The bees, animals, and flowers are accompanied by other “scenes” from the museum process, including a pair of disembodied hands playing a percussion instrument, probably a reference to the musical instruments' gallery at the Manav Sangrahalaya. The banyan tree

in Indian culture may grant wishes, and it grants shelter and space to travelers and traders. Vyam's comment insists that the museum nourishes and facilitates; it is a place "where people flock together" like "bees" to "make honey" (*Between* 127). The artist's rendition of the museum is a hub of activity. Vyam states in her note, "Whatever happens in the museum is part of the tree...cars that arrive with visitors, different tribal houses, artists who meet at the canteen to chat and then get back to work...people flock here like bees and make something sweet together-like the honey" (*Between* 127). Vyam affirms the museum. Is this affirmation a distraction? Is there a reality that Vyam hesitates in giving form to? It would be facile to read Vyam's museum optimism as a deflection. It may carry the appearance of a deflection, but like the pigment black, the deflection is a productive site for questions.

Globally, museum studies scholars like Amy Lonetree have contested the paternalistic and predatory attitude of museums toward Indigenous artists. Vyam's understanding of the museum as a site of collective creativity and almost natural organic labor contradicts this strand of museum studies. Amy Lonetree provides an obverse of this impulse in her *Decolonizing Museums*, "Native societies were often defined by functional technology: we are only what we made. Exhibitions also obscured the great historical, cultural, and linguistic diversity of tribal nations by dividing Native people into cultural groups, giving a sense that all tribes are the same or at least the same in one particular region" ("Introduction: Native Americans and Museums" n. p.). Lonetree criticizes a strand of museum practice in America for its inability to "tell the hard truths of colonization" especially with respect to the plunder of American Indigenous people ("Introduction" n. p.). The expectation is that the museum display intense self-awareness via an incessant

critique of the museum. On the one hand an artist like Durgabai Vyam expresses gratitude to the museum. On the other, a scholar takes North American museums to task for invisibilizing their role in exhibiting Indigenous cultures and remains. If *Between Memory and Museum* is the clearest demonstration of a memorialization of female artistic Indigenous labor in print- then what can this tell us about an inflection of a masculine script?

Instead of a deflection, Durgabai Vyam's museum memorializes ambivalence. A sense of brutal nurture even. The museum is natural and organic, but it authoritatively possesses and uses the power to deny or allow entry. Details in the image rebut the productive collective ostensibly nurtured in the museum. The individuals who carry containers on their head, ostensibly to collect honey, are reminiscent of another everyday urban scene- the casual laborer who works on construction sites. Indeed, that is the fate of many Adivasis who leave the rural to arrive in the urban. The guard of the museum, Vyam says, is visualized as a lion- a beast of fear and temperament. The lion is strategically placed at the bottom center of the illustration. Vyam continues to describe the lion-guard, "He won't let you take things in and out" (*Between* 127). Who is this guard and why is he imagined as a figure of authority who precludes mobility? Have guards in these "sarkari" or governmental buildings harassed Adivasi artists because they do not look well-heeled? Gita and Arun Wolf write that a place in the museum is an "important endorsement" (*Between* 24). "In this sense, the museum functions as a guardian of heritage and taste" (*Between* 24). The museum is both guardian of "heritage and taste" and employs guardians who minister to the succor of taste from Adivasis who do not look like they belong. Perhaps Vyam's lion is not a literal guard, but an institution that demands a price of entry and exit.

Jangarh Singh Shyam's story is a cautionary tale for Durgabai Vyam, his niece. His death at the turn of the millennium is attributed to multiple suspicions- but there is scholarly consensus that his death signals the multiple pressures, or a high price of entry, that the Adivasi artist, as outsider, must pay to gain a place in the art world. At the same time, the story of Pardhan Gond art brings attention to the labor of guarding as well. In fact, more than one Pardhan Gond artists have served a guard or night watchman to offices and buildings of culture in Bhopal⁷⁸. Bhajju Shyam's rise to international fame involves the narration of his past life as a watchman of a building in Bhopal. His art does not refer to his stint in Bhopal performing odd jobs. But Durgabai Vyam's art refers to the levels of manual labor- the problem of physical and artistic entry into the museum as well as casual employment that Adivasis must perform in the big city before they are recognized as artists. Furthermore, it is significant that the work of carrying weight for the construction of the museum is illustrated right next to a pair of disembodied hands playing a percussion drum. The museum is a banyan tree and it is the same branch that bears the weight of manual labor and artistic performance. Durgabai Vyam's imagination of the museum invites the viewer to consider the embodied work that a museum takes to build and the intimate

⁷⁸ According to John Bowles, many renowned Pardhan Gond artists began their careers performing immense physical labor. Ram Singh Urveti (*Painted Songs* 27) engaged in "building fences, planting trees" and he "cut grass, dug pits, and transported loads of bricks in a handcart". Suresh Singh Dhurvey worked in the fields and as a gallery guard in Bhopal (*Painted Songs* pp. 30-31). Subhash Vyam and Durgabai Vyam would "dig and transport mud for the construction of a dam in Gorakhpur". Rajendra Shyam, too, has spent time on the field as well as "timbering" (*Painted Songs* 34). Bhajju Shyam has spent time "digging wells and ponds, doing field and road work and planting trees", "mixing and carrying mortar at construction sites", and as a "night watchmen for the Indian Institute of Forest Management" (*Painted Songs* pp. 35-36). Venkat Raman Singh Shyam as well, supported himself by tailoring and cutting weeds (*Painted Songs* 38). He also had to engage in "painting sign boards" and "domestic housework, house painting", "plying a rickshaw, electrician, plumber, mason" (*Painted Songs* 39).

relationship with this story of work and Pardhan Gond Adivasi contribution to the museum. While Bhajju Shyam gestures to the painful history of an Indigenous artform in *Creation*, *The London Jungle Book*, and *The Flight of the Mermaid* via allegory (as I have noted in Chapters 1-3), Durgabai Vyam unflinchingly illustrates the manual embodied effort that is at the heart of the artform. One does not have to *seek* the work- Vyam does the work for the viewer. Durgabai Vyam then chooses to stake a claim at her pace and in her own medium. If hitherto, female artistic labor was dangerously subsumed under patriarchal labor in the domestic space, it has appeared here to “uncover” and “unearth” the public marginalization of the art and the artist. Thereby, female artistic labor has asserted itself as it uncovers the political economy of the artform.

Indeed, if other texts by male artists and even Durgabai Vyam herself do not explicitly invoke female artistic labor, *Between Memory and Museum* does so. In fact, the other museum illustration by Vyam in *Between Memory and Museum* and the accompanying artist’s note features a narration of women’s artistic labor in Vyam’s book oeuvre. Vyam unambiguously notes that she would decorate floors and walls using cowdung and mud in her childhood (*Between* 105). In the accompanying artist’s note, Vyam prefaces her narration of activity and medium with a phrase “Like many other women”. This is a pivotal moment. Vyam decisively claims herself as part of a tradition of “many other women” who are nameless and yet indispensable to the artform. This tradition is invoked here to explain *her* skill in the art, not Jangarh Singh Shyam’s or Bhajju Shyam’s. Unlike *Churki Burki*, which, as I have noted marks a diffident self-representation in the conspicuous absence of women’s artistic labor, the 2015 *Between Memory and Museum* is arguably “strident”. The 2010 *Churki Burki*, we remember, had reneged artistic

labor for domestic labor. That does not seem to be the case here. A story of artistic labor is made visible in her illustrations now, half a decade after *Churki Burki*. But does this mean she observes artistic labor as separate from patriarchal labor?

I have argued that Vyam chooses texts that invite a consideration of the female body negotiating with the world. One of her favorite stories is that of the Bamboo Girl, who pays the price for the birth of a new tree. Continuing upon this theme, on pages 104-5, Vyam feminizes the museum. In Vyam's imagination the museum is visualized as a mother who holds tribal bodies in her careful grasp. Only women surround the museum. The mother museum contemplates the women as they perform patriarchal labor while being subject to the museum. Taking forward the organic naturalization of the museum seen in the previous illustration, Vyam firmly imagines the museum as maternal; a mother who is "stretching her hand out to all tribal and folk artists" (*Between* 105). Her words, in fact, universalize the museum as woman- "a woman who needs to do many things at once" (*Between* 105). The museum is a mother who is nurturing female subjects, who in turn replicate her labor as they care for the young, cook, and pound spices for the day. This image then works at multiple levels- in its illustration as woman and mother, the museum becomes intimate for Durgabai Vyam. It cares for female artists and enables a sustenance of artistic labor.

However, at the same time as Vyam recounts the story of her art, she also recounts "women's concerns" (Kumar 3)- "cook, manage household expenses, and work in the fields" (*Between* 105). In other words, patriarchal labor returns in illustrated intensity to subsume artistic labor's assertion, yet again. Vyam illustrates the museum, a central topos that facilitates the creation and exhibition of art, as maternal. One notes the Adivasi bodies

that find themselves in the nurturing hold of the museum. The museum is instrumentalized for having given much to the Adivasi artists. It would seem then that, yet again, Durgabai Vyam disrupts the scholarly expectation that the artist neatly and loudly demand an utter transformation of the status quo. Neither the museum's brutality nor society's patriarchy are challenged by the memorialization of female labor that this image manages. Vyam seems to comfortably espouse a patriarchal logic that equates nurture with femininity, and nurture with the museum.

How then can we theorize Vyam's oeuvre? We must confront a complex ambivalent intent. On the one hand, we must not forget that in *Between Memory and Museum*, her aim is to provide texts and images for a visual anthology published in a collaboration between her publisher and her museum employer. It would be unfair to expect any radical dissent here- the burden of subversion must not fall on the shoulders of the vulnerable. This is a clear instance of the "condition of production" that enables and disables art in the Adivasi picturebook. The artist must necessarily bow. Nevertheless, on the other hand, the dissent lies in her willful demonstration of her art and skillful use of pigment, form, and subject. Vyam surreptitiously places Adivasi urban manual labor in her illustrated banyan tree-museum as well. Quietly, her art reveals another aspect of the indignity heaped upon Adivasi bodies as they struggle in the big city. This is the inflection of a masculine script that I mentioned at the beginning. While dual points of origin- women and Jangarh Singh Shyam- remain hierarchically located, it is her art that uncovers price of entry into the museum. It is almost as if Jangarh Singh Shyam's life as a pressured fountain of genius and grisly death inside a museum is a warning to his descendants; and Durgabai Vyam illustrates the warning, based on her own embodied experiences in her

own way. Reading for color and labor in Vyam's work shows the script to be what it is- a script! It is on this ambivalent note that I wish to conclude this paper.

Conclusion

I have argued that Durgabai Vyam's art in the picturebook confounds neat categories of masculine/feminine, traditional/contemporary, and finally resistance and subservience. I have discussed how her Adivasi feminism is constituted by a composite ambivalence that ultimately depends on how she must strategize. Nevertheless, seeking Indigenous feminism/s in Vyam's work is a bewildering task burdened by conceptual, archival, and ideological restraints. Globally, scholars are taking up an archival and conceptual recovery of the female Indigenous subject in art and cultural productions. As pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, Michelle Raheja, for instance, has sought "visual sovereignty" in early Hollywood cinema and performance pieces to ask how Native American women crafted careers for themselves "within a patriarchal labor and representational system" (*Reservation Reelism* 51). Raheja writes that "Hollywood's version of American history relies on solidifying a national identity among divergent European ethnic and religious groups against a common, usually male Native American 'other'" (*Reservation Reelism* 50). The 2015 *Native Studies Keywords* directly places the question of female bodily autonomy within the discourse of Native American sovereignty- on the one hand, precisely because land control is intimately connected to biopolitics, agency must necessarily be about physical space and the body; on the other, domestic abuse or attempts to control women's bodies in native communities would be recast as an opportunity to undermine native sovereignty by settler colonial states. A pernicious conflict between bodily autonomy and sovereignty announces a critical stranglehold. Gender then

becomes “difficult”, as clarified by visual studies scholar Jennifer Doyle- the affect and paranoia generated by the conversation precludes an appropriate engagement with the debate. If so, then how does criticism respond to the immobilizing paranoia? Indeed, this is why it is crucial to insist on an intricate artistic intent, and Durgabai Vyam’s oeuvre exemplifies an intricacy.

At the same time, one cannot imagine a complete coincidence between indigeneity in the USA and Canada and indigeneity in India. Although the narrative arc of Indigenous artists, male or female, encountering “settler” (Brody *Indian Painters*; Philipps “The Turn of the Primitive”) or upper caste/upper class well-wishers (Jain *Conjuror’s*; Das *Enchanted*) who “enable” a “flowering” (Bowles) of Indigenous art can be credibly established, a direct correspondence is dangerous. It is certainly possible and perhaps necessary to imagine *an* Indigenous subject across the world for activism and an insistence on global rights. But in the Indian context, South Asian feminist scholarship and Adivasi studies scholars have cautioned against assuming stable discrete female or Adivasi identities. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) for instance questions why signifiers like “female” or “third world” garner immense traction. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interrogates the narrativization that upholds stable identity referents marking the marginalized and how they echo each other in a chamber of powerful and privileged. In both their writing, the “subaltern” individual loses to a will to knowledge.

I am aware that my work may be seen as reproducing these referents. Reading Durgabai Vyam’s art in pre-established terms like community/individual or masculine/feminine might be read as reifying categories that have harmed subaltern utterances. But while a deconstructionist critique is useful, it is unable to propose an

alternative to the critiqued. It becomes a series of questions that preclude, in the last instance, meaningful readings of art and writing. I discuss the narrative of pigment and hue, as well as text and image in Durgabai Vyam's collaboration with Tara not to exoticize her as a female Adivasi creator from 21st century India. I do so to point out that her "subaltern" art speaks to viewers and readers with force despite her identity. As I discuss the explosive coloring of the parrots in *Churki Burki*, my intent is not to assume that this riotous coloring is a distraction from artistic labor. But as the context from coal mining shows, artistic labor also lies in a *strategic* illustration, akin to a "strategic essentialism" ("Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution" 11). I use words like "hide", "uncover", and "unearth" not to denigrate the existence of color as immoral. Instead, I wish to critique a limited understanding of female artistic labor. The use or non-use of red/yellow/green and black respectively, enables us to look for gendered notions of artistic praxis. It is possible that the red/yellow/green of the parrots are a demonstration of a "world of mythic exuberance", as argued by Tapati Guha-Thakurta (qtd in Pinney "How Indian Nationalism" pp. 123-4). This would mean that the attention to the appearance of the parrots is an instance of resistance to postcolonial censorship. But in postcolonial India, embedded in a neo-liberalizing visual economy, such an argument runs the risk of othering Pardhan Gond art yet again. Pausing at the breath-taking color and assuming that it gestures to subversion per se, it is easy to forget that mythic exuberance is also weaponized to essentialize Indigenous art as merely an "underdeveloped" fantasy, thought to be unevolved and inadequate. This is why it is important to connect color to documentary evidence- this allows one to remark upon the possibility that this color invisibilizes. Departing from David

Batchelor's argument about chromophobia, I must clarify that this paper feminizes color not to derogate it, but to ask where labor is located.

I have referred to the exclusive/exclusionary use of Vantablack by Anish Kapoor, to contrast it with the female artistic labor of mixing Gond colors. The pigment and hue of black becomes a cue to look for Vyam's artistic assertion. Vyam's art and her interviews offer a genuinely complicated oeuvre- sometimes transparent, sometimes hidden, sometimes enabling. But it resists sometimes, and is therefore able to uncover a masculine performance of art and storytelling- either by negotiating with black in *The Nightlife of Trees* or by hiding in plain sight in *The Churki Burki Book of Rhyme*, or by actually illustrating the back breaking labor it takes to carry burden on construction sites, or finally- by emphasizing the maternity of the museum. There can be no denial that the museum, as Gita Wolf and Arun Wolf note, is an "endorsement" (*Between* 24), but as her predecessor, the original genius Jangarh Singh Shyam found, the endorsement comes with a price. As Vyam crafts a story about this price, she carves a niche for herself in the Adivasi picturebook.

In *The Churki Burki Book of Rhymes*, the vibrant hues of the parrots and the absence of women doing art may gesture to an inconsistency. I have discussed how the parrots overpower the picturebook in their hue and size to sublimate a articulation of female artistic labor. As I have discussed, the color black and female labor are connected. The parrots do not hide an agential recovery beneath their "loud fantasied overtones". This means the parrots do indeed overwhelm and invisibilize female Indigenous *artistic* labor in the contemporary Anglophone picturebook. This is a core example of strategic ambivalence. For instance, in *The Nightlife of Trees* and *Between Memory and Museum*,

Vyam carefully lays out her vision of women centric visual work. “Arrows on the Sembar” visualizes a female protagonist who bargains with the night. In *Between Memory and Museum*, Vyam sharply throws into relief the political economy of the artform by incessantly referring to the physical and artistic labor it takes create and sustain an artistic life, while at the same time illustrates the punitive museum as a mother. Her feminism lies not in crystallized and consistent fulmination- but a gradual illustration of a whole life. The ambivalence does not mean that Durgabai Vyam has failed to manifest her intent. Indeed, hue and logical gap are a point of entry into the complexity of the recovery. As the essay delves into other texts illustrated by Durgabai Vyam, the recovery is expedited in *The Nightlife of Trees* and *Between Memory and Museum*. Vyam creates a universe that she directs per her desire. *Churki Burki* allows us to begin discussing the problem of recovery. The other two texts give shape to the recovery, lead by Durgabai Vyam herself. Thus, a shift in script is evinced in Durgabai Vyam’s skill. I should point out that the “masculine” Pardhan Gond script is the same script that generates the binary of masculine/feminine in the first place, so her deconstruction of the binary reveals her art’s ambiguity to be a strategy. This means that while the terms of analysis in this essay may be limited, but the artwork has also uncovered the existence of its own conditions of production in the first place.

In this paper, I have established the narrative complexity of discussing a “feminist intent” in the art of Durgabai Vyam, a 21st century South Asian Indigenous Adivasi female artist. Vyam may be ambivalently placed in a spectrum of individual effort and collective inspiration or unique work and community obligation- she is undoubtedly a gifted artist who oscillates between heard and unheard assertion. I hope to have demonstrated that this

appearance of contradiction is really a condition for her art to emerge. She deftly reveals the discourse of Pardhan Gond art to be a script while also ensuring that she chooses what attention she may bring upon herself. It is a calculated ambivalence.

Conclusion: Ambivalent Adivasi Storytelling in The Prudent Picturebook

This dissertation has intended to discuss Indigenous Adivasi art in the Anglophone picturebook. In the process, visual and literary analysis, along with documentary evidence such as ethnographic interviews with the Adivasi illustrators have been used to “read” the Adivasi picturebook as autoethnographic, collaborative, a purveyor of Adivasi visuality, and proffering an Adivasi future upon terms that are set by the Adivasi artist; ultimately appearing as strategic ambivalence. The four chapters have discussed the Adivasi picturebook as an instance of Adivasi artistic deployment. The central question I have asked is what can the Adivasi artist *do* in a neo-liberal Indian nation, as the nation is fashioning itself upon neo-swadeshi exclusion? And how can the artist intervene in the production of sensitive collaborative texts that can anticipate the use and abuse of texts in circulation?

But asking about and seeking active resistance in the picturebook has led me to confront a prudent ambivalence. In self-representation, the autoethnographic picturebook must be strategic- it registers protest but shrouds it in tactical ambivalence. Ambivalence is imperative to ensure life, dignity, and artistic opportunities. I have found that the Adivasi artist manages a well-thought dexterity. As Indigenous sovereignty is globally threatened, the picturebook is a potent site for the contestation around sovereignty to be visibilized. I have discussed how the artist can intervene at the levels of production, ideation, form, and signification. Picturebooks like *Creation*, *The London Jungle Book*, *The Flight of the Mermaid*, *The Churki Burki Book of Rhyme*, *The Nightlife of Trees*, and *Between Memory and Museum* are all examples of Pardhan Gond artists acceding to and also defying the conditions of production that pressure the art into essentialized strangleholds. The

picturebook can be used by the Adivasi artist to visualize resistance against a whole discourse of art, literature, ethnography, and contexts of display.

Adivasi storytelling, tactically illustrated and judiciously memorialized, becomes a vantage point to creatively control the textual and visual texts that have been arranged to stage the Adivasi in a primitivist choke. Reading the picturebook as Adivasi futurism for instance, I have queried how the picturebook has actually come to be. Taking inspiration from *The Flight of The Mermaid* and attaining form because of the picturebook, an Adivasi deity asserts herself. The deity, Jalhaarin Mata, is not given form by Bhajju Shyam until he creates the mermaid in the first place. His championing of innovation within tradition in his visionary use of Rekha gestures to a future where the artist and his community can imagine a “return to ourselves”, in Grace Dillon’s words. Adivasi assertion via deities is also important in *The London Jungle Book*- an Adivasi Shiva is formalized by Bhajju Shyam. This, as I have shown, is part of an Adivasi visuality- a turning away from a presumptuous ethnocentric “right to look” and a “turn” toward a self-representation that recuperates. This is the case with female Adivasi artists too- Durgabai Vyam’s art for Tara Books is a series of experiments that exercises artistic choice- not only exposing the masculine script of the original genius, but also uncovering the painful political economy of the artform.

And who enables the picturebook? The example of the publisher Tara Books is hopeful. It epitomizes a principled collaboration between Adivasi art and a cultural capitalist publisher. Indeed, Tara Books utilize the English language as a political yet neutral medium, in the medium of the picturebook, to better enable an Adivasi politics. Tara Books walk the talk. Tara’s output is truly extraordinary, and artists remember their

time at Tara fondly. Social contracts established between the artist and the publisher go a long way in ensuring a mutual environment of conduct. Even in their website, descriptions, labelling, and textual compositional choices, the folks at Tara Books do what is possible to aid and encourage nuance in the Adivasi picturebook. Tara Books continue to collaborate with folk and Adivasi artists. The most recent collaboration is with Mayur Vayeda and Tushar Vayeda- brothers from the Warli community from Maharashtra. I have mentioned that the Warli artists also learned their art from the women in the community, like the Pardhan Gonds.

But Tara's output remains boutique and luxuriant. In fact, Adivasi labor of self-representation, as has been discussed, also becomes the responsibility of the artist. It is the Indigenous artists who lead the way. As I hope to have shown, the artists demonstrate a calculated endeavor. Agential labor, when recovered, will appear sagaciously equivocating along a spectrum between loud protest and silent subversion. And this is the Adivasi picturebook. Despite the capital, whether cultural or neo-liberal, that creates conditions for the Adivasi picturebook to emerge, I have demonstrated that the niche market for the Adivasi picturebooks (published by Tara) is only one of the many problems inherent in the publication and display of Adivasi art. This strategy of Adivasi "self-fashioning" (Asoka Kumar Sen) is especially important as contemporary display in India is premised upon renewal of primitivism in the national imaginary. Hindu nationalism has appropriated depictions of the Adivasi. A revival of romantic absorption of the Adivasi harks back to an early 20th century swadeshi agenda, where the artistically stylized Adivasi represented a healthy pastoral anti-colonial Indianness. But 21st century revival of primitivism, or postcolonial primitivism, only *appears* to aid the Adivasi. It is an ambush. The eventual

aim is the denial of indigeneity to the Adivasi. Refusing them residential primacy will justify land control, as seen in the dilution of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and an insistence that terms like “Adivasi” and “Indigenous” are logically untenable. Further, in the recent policies inaugurated by the right wing Hindu nationalist government, The Viksit Bharat campaign, the Van Dhan Vikas Yojana, and National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020, the idea is to sustain the primitivism of the Adivasis in India. The Viksit Bharat campaign for instance, promises to set up separate schools for Adivasi students, reminiscent of the reservation schools in North America. The Van Dhan Vikas Yojana promises encouragement of the ownership of forest produce, but this is in contradiction with the dilution of forest rights. The NEP describes an encouragement of Traditional Knowledge and it is unclear whose tradition will be taught, or if bodies will be requested to stick to “tradition” and never innovate to shake themselves off the tradition. The ostensible attention to the Adivasi appears to be mere lip service.

Not just a socio-political push to pressure Adivasi sovereignty, but the future of collaboration remains mired in the intricacies of the market. The market has been both minatory and enabling. On the one hand, Bhajju Shyam’s collaboration with St+rt has given us a sarcastic comment on the city in “Delhiwallas” and led to self-portraiture in his oeuvre. On the other, his collaboration with Gautam Adani has only led to incessant questions about appropriation and an ostensibly consensual will to subjugation, reminiscent of the Gond fighter in S S Rajamouli’s epic cinematic example, *RRR*. Curators, in private conversations with me, have complained of the commodification and the “sameness” that is visible in every Pardhan Gond reiteration taking place now, and even cautioned that the artform is on its way out. Others have opposed this and said it is here to

stay. What remains certain is that the artform is present for now and that artists are doing what they can to work with it. The Museum of Art and Photography (Bengaluru) sells bookmarks and plastic bags with Pardhan Gond prints. Thick paper bags with the Tribes India logo on them carried the sold merchandise at the Aadi Mahotsav 2024, inaugurated by the Adivasi Santhal President of India, Draupadi Murmu. The Surajkund Crafts Mela, one of the biggest platforms to buy and sell art and craft in India, which Jangarh Singh Shyam would frequent, continues to return every Winter. Commodification is unceasing.

The question of commodification also remains irresolute. The Adivasi picturebook, or other kinds of collaborations, will be conducted under even sharper pressure upon art world to conform to national policy and concepts. A primitivist renewal then will probably lead to more strategic collaboration. The nation will sustain its contradictory vision- reviving primitivism while tacitly disproving indigeneity. This will be achieved via well-funded events like the Aadi Mahotsav and Surajkund Crafts Mela to showcase glorious Indian heritage, and the elevation of an Adivasi Santhal to the post of the President. Indigenous postcolonial art and picturebooks then have an impossible task ahead of them. Nuance will be threatened by a neo-liberalizing India that will essentialize the Adivasi even further- guised as a “subaltern will” to capitalist compromise. But as I have demonstrated, there is hope yet, precisely located in Adivasi labor toward the picturebook and other such collaborations.

I have been able to answer what the artist may fashion out of their corpus in the way they desire. My conversations with the artists, curators, gallery owners, art historians, political scientists, and the stunningly generous folks at Tara Books have convinced me of the need for this project. But I am left with many other questions. Given a national push

for Hinduization, how can the artist continue to illustrate and revere their Indigenous deities, especially as nationalism and religious devotion have now become one? How do we understand the Goddess, Adivasi or the Hindu *devi*, in today's scenario? Is there a scholarly term that can help us resolve all the contradictions in words like Adivasi, Vanvasi, Tribal, Indigenous? As the art versus craft debate continues to realize itself as Indigenous art has now found itself a discrete corner in the picture of national display, where is national craft going? In my scholarly journey, these questions will be answered in future projects.

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