

'Now that the trees have spoken'

Ranjit Hoskote

'Now that the trees have spoken' presents the work of four artists: Bhuri Bai, Ladoo Bai, Narmada Prasad Tekam and Ram Singh Urveti. Their paintings, which are being exhibited in Mumbai for the first time, form part of a collection built up over the last five years by Dadiba Pundole. They way-mark the process of dialogue that this Bombay-based gallerist and collector has enjoyed with the artists, in the course of his research trips into central India.

Born and raised in Madhya Pradesh, the protagonists of 'Now that the trees have spoken' represent that emergent third field of artistic production in contemporary Indian culture which is neither metropolitan nor rural, neither (post)modernist nor traditional, neither derived from academic training nor inherited without change from tribal custom. Indeed, as theorists and curators actively engaged with mapping this third field (including J Swaminathan, Jyotindra Jain, Gulammohammed Sheikh and Nancy Adajania) have demonstrated, descriptions such as 'tribal' and 'folk', although still used as convenient shorthand, are worse than useless.

Generated from the typological obsessions of the colonial census, these labels have long been responsible for a dreadful incarceration. They have reduced thousands of individuals to the happenstance of birth, registering them primarily as bearers of community identities rather than as citizens of a Republic. And, once circumscribed as Warlis, Bhils, Gonds or Saoras, these individuals have had to mortgage their free-floating, self-renewing imaginative energies to the regime of the emporium.

None of the four artists presented in 'Now that the trees have spoken' inherits a primordial 'folk art'. None of them was trained in a fine arts academy. Yet their work has the capacity to surprise us, to compel our attention with its freshness of insight and rendering. In this, they provide enduring testimony to the success of a catalytic experiment in

cultural evolution initiated by the painter and visionary J Swaminathan and the poet and cultural administrator Ashok Vajpeyi. The visual sensibilities and conceptual gifts of these artists were honed in the creative environment of Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal: a seed-ground of ideas and impulses that evolved from the partnership of Swaminathan and Vajpeyi, and a circle of colleagues they drew from various domains of creative and critical expression.

Significantly, therefore, the one artistic expression that does indeed exercise a magnetic influence on the imagination of these artists is that of the late Jangarh Singh Shyam (1962-2001), an extraordinarily gifted artist of Gond origin and a protégé of Swaminathan. Shyam excelled in the melding of diverse mythic and pictorial resources into an unprecedented, entirely contemporary expression that has sometimes been subsumed under the misleading rubric of 'Gond painting', but which the commentator Udayan Vajpeyi has correctly designated as the 'Jangarh style'.

While achieving international recognition for his own art, Jangarh Singh Shyam also opened the door to acclaim for many other artists of tribal background. However, the tragic circumstances of his suicide in Japan in July 2001 only emphasised that the 'tribal artist' had a long way to go before he or she could throw off the shackles of the emporium-dealer-patron circuit.

*

In their art, Bhuri Bai, Ladoo Bai, Tekam and Urveti invite us to reflect on an ecology menaced by the expansion of late industrial activity. The intricately balanced textures of their lifeworld are subject to several debilitating and destructive factors: the vagaries of shifting development policies; the brutalisation generated by schismatic political violence; recurrent conflicts over the natural resources of land, water, fish, birds and animals; and the rivalry among religious groups and ideological activists for control over the tribal population.

But delight, exuberance and an irrepressible radiance remain their chosen states of being. Although anxiety and melancholia play at the edges of their paintings and drawings, these moods are not permitted to overwhelm the leitmotifs of regeneration and plenitude.

Startlingly, perhaps, these four artists remind us that beauty, just as much as reason, hope or violence, can provide motive energy for processes of psychic and historical transformation.

These artists share a gift for conveying an aesthetic experience that is perhaps best glossed with the Sanskrit word *laya*: a subliminal rhythm, a cosmic pattern of energy flow, the rippling-in and rippling-out of the universal breath. Sinuous animals and fabular birds inhabit these frames; real and imagined aquatic and arboreal creatures address us, speaking not only from an ecosystem but also from an ecology of the mind. Bhuri Bai and Ram Singh Urveti, Ladoo Bai and Narmada Prasad Tekam delight in the interplay of finesse and disturbance. They are adept at calibrating the gradations of strangeness: in their epiphanies, trees sing in many voices, their trunks morphing into rivers in flood, swollen with uncontainable memories; snails fly, boars fight tigers over territory; ancestral figures cross vast distances on tireless horses, and turtles carry the legends of dead islands across the oceans.

Their paintings are charged with a powerful, intuitive command over colour as carrier of psychic energy: understated olive greens and glowing lime yellows captivate us here, as do alizarin and saffron fields, motifs rendered in subdued ochre and khaki, grey and blue. Each of these artists demonstrates an enviable attentiveness to surprising contrasts and delicately tuned harmonies. The enduring influence of Jangarh Singh Shyam communicates itself both through the chimeras that populate these works, as well as the travelling lines of stitch-like stipples by means of which the images are often shaped.

The protagonists of 'Now that the trees have spoken' display a fluency and assurance in their absorption of motifs from diverse sources; their paintings attest to a complex mutation of narratives from their own past and from elsewhere. Song and story pass into the pictorial image here: Tekam and Urveti's paintings, especially, are alive with images drawn from the ancestral songs of the Gonds, which have been sung, elaborated and passed down by the Pardhans or bards of the Gond community. In Bhuri Bai and Ladoo Bai's paintings, especially, we may detect the luminous presence of styles from mutually distant parts of the Indian subcontinent. They translate, into painting, techniques culled from other arts: they draw on the

delicate stitch-lines of *kantha* embroidery from eastern Bihar and Bengal; on the chain-stitch gestures and peacock motifs of the *aari* tradition, and the distinctive mirror-work of *aabhla* embroidery from the Sind-Kutch border; and on *suf* and *bandhni* patterns.

In the paintings of all four artists, we also find traces of the spatial dispositions of Mithila painting from northern Bihar, auspicious motifs from the *Pithora* stories of the Madhya Pradesh-Gujarat border, the geometricised figuration of Warli ritual painting. And occasionally, we also find references to the work of contemporary paintings by Australian artists of Aboriginal heritage.

This relay of resources arises from the Bharat Bhavan ethos, with its promotion of access and openness to various forms and levels of art. At its peak, Bharat Bhavan hosted an international biennale of art and a world poetry festival, among much other stimulations to the imagination. The collection strategies and workshop culture of its Roopankar Museum also ensured that a broad spectrum of artistic idioms were available to the young artists of tribal origin who were invited from remote districts, by Swaminathan's research teams, to discover and practise art in Bhopal.

The consequent positioning of such artists as 'non-metropolitan contemporary artists' has ensured the circulation of their art in a particular global circuit; this is also how they have become aware of the struggles and contributions of their counterparts in other countries, such as Australia, as we have already observed. The work of the four artists in 'Now that the trees have spoken', and many other artists in their circle, may be regarded as the living legacy of the Bharat Bhavan experiment. It is the best possible tribute to the vision of J Swaminathan.

*

Acknowledgements

This essay owes much to my conversations with the theorist and curator Nancy Adajania, who mobilised attention towards the re-definition and interpretation of the 'folk' and 'tribal' arts in a

benchmark international symposium, 'Should the Crafts Survive?', which she convened at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai, April 1995.

I would also like to thank Prakash Hatvalne, Bhopal-based photographer and researcher, for his patient and detailed responses to my questions about the lives and circumstances of the four artists in this exhibition, and about the Bharat Bhavan ethos.

Select Bibliography

Nancy Adajania, 'Mother Goddess on a Bicycle and Such Other Themes': concept note for the international symposium, 'Should the Crafts Survive?' (Mumbai: National Centre for the Performing Arts, April 1995).

Nancy Adajania, 'Art and Craft – Bridging the Great Divide', in *Art India* Vol. 4 Issue 1 (Mumbai, January-March 1999), pp. 34-38.

Nancy Adajania, 'Past as Resource', in *Art India* Vol. 6 Issue 1 (Mumbai, January-March 2001), pp. 30-37.

John Bowles, 'Songlines from the Museum of Man' (*Tehelka*, New Delhi, 28 January 2006). See: http://www.tehelka.com/story_main16.asp?filename=hub012806Songlines.asp

Verrier Elwin, *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

Madhav Gadgil & Ramachandra Guha, *Ecological Conflicts and the Environmental Movement in India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

Ramachandra Guha, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Ranjit Hoskote, 'Situation and Symbol: A ritual identity and mode of expression under bourgeois cultural appropriation, with special

reference to Warli art', in *The Indian Journal of Social Work* (special issue on 'The Social Construction and Expression of Ethnicity and Identity', guest-ed. Nandini Rao, Vol. 57, No. 1: Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay, January 1996).

Jyotindra Jain ed., *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India* (New Delhi: Crafts Museum & The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India Ltd., 1998).

Pupul Jayakar, *The Earthen Drum: An Introduction to the Ritual Arts of Rural India* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1980) rpt. as *The Earth Mother: Legends, Goddesses and Ritual Arts of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1989/ San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

Geeti Sen ed., *Indigenous Vision: People of India, Attitudes to the Environment* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992).

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, 'The World of Jangarh Singh Shyam', in J Jain ed., *Other Masters* (1998), pp. 17-34.

J Swaminathan, 'Pre-naturalistic Art and Postnaturalistic Vision: An Approach to the Appreciation of Tribal Art', orig. in Ashish Bose, U P Sinha, R P Tyagi eds., *Demography of Tribal Development* (New Delhi: B R Publishing Corporation, 1990), rpt. in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* No: 40/ Special Issue on J Swaminathan (New Delhi, March 1995), pp. 50-57.

J Swaminathan, 'Submerged Archipelago', orig. in Swaminathan ed., *The Perceiving Fingers*, catalogue of the Roopankar Museum (Bhopal: Bharat Bhavan, 1987), rpt. in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* No: 40 (March 1995), pp. 57-59.

Udayan Vajpeyi and Vivek, *Jangarh Kalam/ Narrative of a Tradition – Gond Painting* (Bhopal: Vanya Prakashan/ Department of Tribal Welfare, Government of Madhya Pradesh, n. d. [2006]).

*