

MASS MEDIA, ETC.

Projecting Adivasi Art as a Film-maker to a German Audience

SUSANNE GUPTA

“A primitive people is not a backward or retarded people, indeed, it may possess, in one realm or the another, a genius for invention or action that leaves the achievements of other people far behind.”

Claude Lévi-Strauss

In 2001, I visited the Hazaribagh district in the newly formed Eastern state Jharkhand. What had inspired my journey was a pioneering study on rock art, which a friend had recommended to me, knowing that I was investigating minority issues and cultural activities of the Adivasi, the indigenous people of India¹. In this study, published in a cheap print by the biggest non-governmental cultural NGO, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, the author Bulu Imam documented so far unnoticed rock art sites in the North Karanpura Valley dating to the Neolithic period². I was excited, that he agreed to guide me shooting some visual material in some remote jungle villages in their direct neighborhood, where a mural painting ritual of Adivasi-women was still practiced by probably its last remaining artists. I am thankful to Bulu Imam, that he has since been sharing with me his immense knowledge about his birthplace and its indigenous people, which he had collected in over 30 years of extensive field research. Since a decade Bulu Imam, a former rogue animal hunter, who turned into an archeologist and environmentalist, has been fighting for international attention and expressing his concern to the UNESCO about a unique human heritage under threat by the expanding coal mining of the Indian state. Facing the vast

destruction of a spectacular treasure in the Damodar River Valley, he began promoting Adivasi culture as a fundamental civil right in 1993 and initiated a loose collective of painters, the Tribal Women Artist's Cooperative of Hazaribagh (TWAC), in order to strengthen and revive a disappearing culture. Its approach is holistic, putting primary effort in keeping the tradition in its ritual context alive. Since the first successful international exhibition in the Australian Museum in Sydney 2000, the projects of the TWAC have empowered the women individually, politically and financially in a society, which still looks down upon them.

The topic around the rock art and village painting of the women was challenging, complex, visually rich and still a blind spot on the map of Indian Art, what convinced us to cooperate in a long-term documentation. We considered this useful in several contexts: as an art film to be shown along with exhibitions of the women, on film festivals, as education and research material for institutions, universities and museums around the world and of course it could serve as an instrument of the women's public concern.

The district Hazaribagh, or 1.000 gardens, is a heavily forested plateau and the home of several indigenous tribal groups, whose lifestyle has changed very little over the centuries that they have been here. Depending on the direction you choose to drive out of the town of Hazaribagh, you come across villages inhabited by Oraon, Kurmis, Ganjus or Prajapatis. The vividly decorated houses in these villages will catch your eye. Their walls, akin to rock painting, depict striking scenes, often geometric patterns like triangles, circles or ovals in red and white or figures best described as metamorphoses, creatures possessing anthropomorphic as well as zoomorphic features. Sometimes animals appear: frogs, snakes, scorpions side by side with plants and abstract natural forms. The initial moment I looked at it, European modern artists at the beginning of the 20th century came to my memory, when they discovered African sculptural objects in search for new avenues of expression, praising them for their formal qualities and lack of illusionist naturalism. Like them I did not know much about the

anthropological significance of these paintings and their function in its local context, but I felt immediately the energetic beauty of those images, a beauty that “can not be surpassed”, to put it into Picasso’s words. My visual experience at that time was clearly mediated and mirrored through European art, experience and reflection. I appreciated the tribal art I saw for its aesthetic value and was sure that a film projection in the West would function that way, too, like a door opener to that fabulous contribution to India’s arts and culture. But that meant also to approach the topic carefully, realizing that “Primitivism” of the 20th century is an ethnocentric term, as “it refers not to tribal arts in themselves but the Western interest in tribal art and reactions to them”³.

Since Rousseau’s noble savage, the “Primitive” had become an instrument of the West for criticizing their own societies, which they saw as deforming. When early 20th century vanguard artists affirmed the importance of gaiety, pleasure, informality, the life of the senses, they were criticizing the repressive and class-conscious conventions of contemporary Victorian morality. “The Cubist artist’s notion that there was something to be learned from the sculpture of tribal people—an art whose appearance and assumptions were diametrically opposed to prevailing aesthetic canons—could only be taken by bourgeois culture as an attack upon its values”⁴. Picasso, Matisse, Braque and Brancusi were aware of the conceptual complexity and aesthetic subtlety of indigenous African sculpture. When they admired it for its simplicity and reduction, they rejected the rules of the past and the “tyranny of the naturalism”⁵. In order to establish new paradigms of representation, they were exploring the new styles and the aesthetic canons common in non-Western illiterate societies. Indigenous Art was influential on Modern Art, but it was primarily a European project. It did not care what the objects meant to the producer, a question that has become relevant today in relation to politics of representation of non-Western cultures. How to deal with that question and how to mediate it, became a major issue in the process of making the documentary “The one-eared elephant of Hazaribagh” (2004).

During my research I met the Bihors, a nomadic hunter and gatherer community living in the Hazaribagh district. They say that it was their ancestors, who did the cave paintings which can still be seen in the area and used iron oxide earth for the colors. Even today they paint similar forms with wooden sticks in the sand. The rock shelters tell their silent history and can be read as symbols of an Adivasi identity, holy messages and shamanistic perceptions, a spiritual connection of the territory with the ancestors. The latter is of relevance for the Adivasi movements, who are constructing a new identity, which is contextualizing their concerns: land issues, minority rights, social deprivation and discrimination. In the name of development, progress and modernization, millions of Adivasi have been displaced from their homeland, natural resources been plundered and they have been left behind without future perspectives and compensation. In the social-political struggle for justice, participation and rehabilitation, those cave paintings are the last proofs that the land once belonged to them and that they have cultivated it long before the Aryans-, the Moghul-rulers and the British colonialists entered the area.

The indigenous women who can be seen in the documentary “The one-eared elephant of Hazaribagh” are calling the rock art caves “Khover”, because they are associated with marriage throughout Middle India. “Kho” in the local tribal dialect means “cave” and “var” signifies a bridal couple. Khover is strictly speaking the bridal room and Khover murals are the ceremonial decorations of these rooms in the bride’s house, prepared during the marriage season from January to May each year. Similar traditions can be found in other parts of India. But the ritual art varies from region to region in terms of content, materials, techniques, styles and the occasions for which images are produced. The art of Mithila of Hindu-women from Bihar, transferred on to paper is probably the best known in the Western art scene. The Khover art form and Sohrai, the harvest art of Hazaribagh are a renewed tradition, linked with the seasonal cycles and so implicitly linked with specific feminine symbols of sexuality, fertility and the marriage ritual. They are often connected with worship and a cult of a mother goddess,

which might point to a matrilineal society in the beginning. The many trees—mango, coconut and date—in the art works are fruiting. Many of the animals are sucking, others are pregnant. The betel leaf, which is used as an aphrodisiac, a steroid and also to redden the lips, recurs in the images as does the eight-petal lotus, symbol of Asdala, a virgin goddess. Thus in many images, one can see the representation of sexuality from a uniquely female perspective. The bridal rooms are often decorated with forms of birds, like the peacock and the dove, and plants such as the date palm are painted by the women of the family, chiefly the mother and elder sisters. From the Khovar room, the bride leaves her mother's home and is received in her husband's house in a similar room. From her mother-in-law she learns icons particular to her husband's village and brings with her the sacred forms and icons, which she has learned from her mother and aunts in the home village. Thus a flowing tide of forms continues.

Bulu Imam and I felt that a film, burdened with a lot of textual information, would narrow the angle and address only a small audience. While shooting the documentary, it was clear that it was not going to be an ethnographic film with commentaries of an outsider. Instead the viewer would watch the performance of Adivasi women. He or she would meet Philomina Tirkey and Parvati Devi, two women painters at the place and Bulu Imam, the Cooperative founder, would follow them, listen to them and observe them in their daily life and work. The camera comes back again and again to the same wall, which is painted by the women for the harvest festival Sohrai, thereby unfolding the process of creation with its links to agriculture and nature, till today the major sources of reproduction of many Adivasi in Jharkhand. One of the film's last sequences depicts the artists Philomina and her daughter Juliet at the annual UN Conference of the Indigenous Working Group in Geneva, appealing to the international audience to protect the environment and pointing out, how Adivasis face their destruction. One of the strategies of the "montage" has been to develop the "story" and the context visually and to form a narrative structure of "suspense" in order to invite a

curious audience to make their own discoveries and observations. Moreover, this approach provides space to evoke further important questions around indigenous art and related issues of state policy towards Adivasis without demonstrating and shouting: What happens when paintings move from one cultural context to another? What does it mean when ritual art is turned into an object of sale? Does it affect the personal identity? Do the paintings, now a commodity, differ from traditional wall painting, and does this affect their initial meaning? Can art be an effective instrument of emancipation for Adivasi women? And can it be a tool to sensitize an international audience for environmental issues at their home?

The title of the documentary was also chosen, because it refers to a key sequence in which an Adivasi woman explains in detail her own painting and perception of an elephant on the flat, two dimensional wall. For the first time, the women of Hazaribagh performed their skills in front of a camera and spoke for themselves to an audience. That made it often difficult to formulate an adequate question to them, because they were not used to reflect on aesthetics publicly. Like other cultures without a written language, the women, of whom the most are illiterate, referred their activity to the term of “writing”, which they understand as an act of realizing the world. I remember quite well a statement of Sugya Devi. Asked about the criteria for quality in her work, she replied: “My work is good, when I feel it is myself.”

Is Sugya Devi an artist and does she make art? Or is it an artifact, indices of cultural progress, whose producer is assigned the bottom rank of the evolutionary ladder? A relict of a fading past? When the film material was exposed during several exhibitions of the Tribal Women’s Artist Cooperative of Hazaribagh, in which I was involved as curator, co-curator and organizer (Indian Embassy, Berlin 2005/2006; Museum of Ethnology, Portheim-Foundation, Heidelberg 2003; Heinrich-Böll-Foundation, Berlin 2003; Max Mueller Bhawan, New Delhi 2002; Bellevue Gallery, Berlin 2001), I experienced that colonial attitudes still dominate the perception of indigenous images. Some people I met admired them, because they looked abstract

and modern. On the contrary, many complained about the prices asked for the images, putting them implicitly into lower categories, handicraft, folk art, and folklore. They were convinced that the women would profit more when they sell their works for less. I then realized that the place at which images are displayed makes the difference and that choosing the place always has to deal with the value-laden oppositions set up within Western thinking. One is the opposition of art and craft, with art being valorized in an art museum, while craft shown in the ethnographic museum tends to be discredited. “The notion of the great genius artist versus the anonymous producer. The notion of the uniqueness of the artistic image versus the repetition and collective nature of the craft image. The notion of reflexivity in the creative process versus the no reflexive, no thinking, automatic nature of craft production. In this ideology the anonymous producer is the opposite of the individual genius artist with a famous name.”⁶

Another underlying assumption is that of Western art historical scholarship, that original imagery is produced through the personal creativity, inspiration and special artistic vision of the artist. While contemporary western artistic production is a reflexive activity, traditional non-Western image production is not and lacks conceptualization in the art practice. Primitive art is anonymous and creates beauty without consciousness. In the debate concerning anthropologists, art curators and historians, on how non-Western images should be represented, two approaches are conflicting. According to one, the contextual information is fundamentally important. Others, one of them William Rubin, art curator, who arranged the exhibition “Primitivism in the 20th Century Art”, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984, are convinced that art, including indigenous images, should be treated primarily as a visual experience. They focus on the meaning that could be apprehended through the objects themselves, which were consequently shown along with Western pieces and encouraged to look at them within the same art-historical framework. When I was looking for institutions in Germany to show the art works of Hazaribagh, I found that with a few exceptions (see, for example Museum

Kunst Palast Düsseldorf, exhibition “Altäre” (engl.: altars) contemporary art institutions are inaccessible for indigenous Art. I was confronted with the argument that it is not “contemporary”. On the other hand things are changing. Ethnographic museums have opened up to the idea of representing indigenous objects in their social-political context, the crisis, transformation and drastic changes which indigenous societies have to face today. We were fortunate to find supportive co-operation partners like the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation, so that the artists could visit Germany and produce visual images on the spot. They explained what they are doing and answered the beholders’ questions. The exhibition at the Böll-Foundation in 2003 (within the context of the Asia-Pacific Weeks in Berlin with a focus on India) was further contextualized by discussions with Indian and German experts, a film program and documentations on rock art and mining, a concept that found positive responses from the audience. What is more important than to discuss the art or human rights? I think both, the experience of this unique art and the context in which the images are produced, are important to understand the dimensions of indigenous art practice today.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ According to the 1991 Census, there were more than 67.7 million Adivasis—8 % of the total population in India, and they belong to around 577 so-called Scheduled Tribes (STs), of whom most are of proto-Australoid or Drawidian origin. The term “Adivasi” derives from the Hindi/Sanskrit word “adi”—what means “original” and “vasi”—“inhabitant”. Emancipated Adivasi intellectuals started to use the term in the first third of the 20th century in favor of the commonly used terms “tribal” or “tribes”, introduced by the English in the colonial period and which carried connotations of discrimination. Nowadays Adivasis live all around India, even in the big cities. But the centers of their settlements are the foot land of the Himalayas, the Northeast and the Deccan highlands of Chota Nagpur in Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala and Orissa.

² Imam, Bulu (1995): *Bridal Caves. A Search for the Adivasi Khovar Tradition*. Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage, New Delhi.

³ Rubin, William (1984): *The Modernist Primitivism*. In: "Primitivism and twentieth-century art. A documentary history", edited by Jack Flam & Miriam Deutsch. Berkley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, p. 319.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 321.

⁵ Martin, Jean-Hubert (2001): *Altäre. Kunst zum Niederknien*. Düsseldorf: Museum Kunst Palast Düsseldorf, p.8.

⁶ Hart, Lynn M. (1995): *Three Walls: Regional Aesthetics and the International Art World*. In: "The Traffic in Culture. Refiguring Art and Anthropology", ed. by George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers. London: University of California Press, 1995, p. 139.