



# Indigenous Asia, knowledge, technology and gender relations' discursive invisibility

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## Summary

The author states that women artisans in practising their craft in rural India have not attempted anything new or acted outside cultural history. Historically, they have always worked, however determined by factors of class, caste, gender, race, and economic position in different periods. Women have acted and articulated their point of view from different places and positions within society and culture.

To understand the art of rural women, it is important to note that painting, sculpture, bas-relief, embroidery such as *kantha*, and floor decoration (*rangoli*), among others, are practised by women in their daily lives even as they apply their art on to the surfaces of the walls and floors of their homes. They practise art while celebrating significant events and rituals such as those of birth, puberty, marriage, death, and festivals related to nature. The primary purpose of most of this art has been to beautify and to ask for blessings from the gods for the protection of homes, husbands, and children seen as central to women's existence. Women's artistic activities have been centred on the home, unlike the arts of men. For example, the ritualistic or decorative arts of women are not commercially oriented nor intended to endure, whereas men work as professional painters on such things as the murals of temple walls which are intended to last decades.

In the *Warli* tradition, the paintings of weddings are executed on the inside walls of the kitchen, regarded as the woman's domain. The household god is kept in a loft above, along with the produce from the fields. It is here that the women gather, not only to cook but also to change their clothes and chat with the freedom not felt in any other part of the house. On the one hand, tradition

defines the woman's space (the kitchen/home) and gives her freedom; on the other hand, it restricts and confines her.

In working with *Adivasi* men and women artists, the author's intention has been to re-read the position of the *Adivasi* artist's place in the history of art, and to emphasise the 'discursive invisibility' of women. Her interest is histories and their relationship to the women that narrate them and the conditions and circumstances under which they create art. This account provides a framework for the understanding of the significance of the various positions and stands women have taken from a position of 'difference' to establish and validate their sense of being a woman and a creative being.

The relationship between craft communities and *Adivasis* is fluid and constantly being negotiated. The *Gadba* (*Adivasi*) community has a rich tradition of bell metal sculpture in which training has been through apprenticeship. The art reflects their bonds with tradition and the idioms inherited from the past. The craft community includes ironsmiths and potters; woodcarvers do not necessarily have a continuous link with traditional carvers. In most cases, ironsmiths have attended training programmes sponsored by government organisations/NGOs and handicraft boards to acquire the skills of carving stone and wood. These artists cater to the needs of local communities, state/national cottage emporiums, as well as to independent urban and foreign clientele. They accept commissions to make religious icons, decorative objects, domestic furniture, and doors, among others. The demands of mass production, however, deny them the scope of either remaining true to their inherited artistic legacy or of creatively experimenting in art after being exposed to new and contemporary situations.

It is interesting to note that sponsored training programmes in crafts such as wood, stone, bell metal, terracotta, bamboo, weaving, and jewellery designing have occasionally included women. Despite learning these skills, however, they either remain helpers of male family members or discontinue practising their art altogether. Women are not engaged as paid assistants in local workshops and must, therefore, take on other paying jobs; women in one area have been helping their family's craftsmen throughout, but domestic, financial, and other social responsibilities prevented them from getting the time to make it a specialisation. Women interested in pursuing work independently (after learning the skill) find that artistic activity does not generate immediate funds for household expenses or for investing in raw material. Instead, they are forced to look for a daily wage doing something other than craft and earn less than assistants receive in craft workshops. The research revealed that, given the opportunity, women would like to practise their craft full-time and function as independent artists.

On one of the visits to Mumbai by *Adivasi* artists from Bastar district in 1996, while discussing the obvious absence of women artists from their region and



the changes in their art forms, the author was struck by how commercialisation and the interaction with urban culture have brought about changes in their aesthetic attitudes. While sharing the experiences of the author's earlier projects, especially *Images Re-drawn*, done in cooperation with a contemporary sculptor from Mumbai, the idea of working side by side with Adivasi artists at *Shilpi Gram* was born. *Shilpi Gram* is an institution conceived and built by the Adivasi sculptor Jaidev Baghel and his associates for local artists to interact with one another and with visiting artists and professionals.

The first phase of the project, *Modes of Parallel Practice: Ways of Art-Making*, was developed with four artists working in wood from Bastar, an art historian, and the author, funded by the India Foundation for the Arts. In this workshop environment, Adivasi artists such as Rajkumar, Shantibai, Raituram, and others wished to explore work that did not follow the dictates of the mass production of craft. Shantibai also wanted to work independently, as she had been an assistant to her husband Raitu for 15 years. The author, keen to further her understanding of the representation of the woman's body in the art of this region, looked at references and comparisons from Mayan, African, and Indian primitive art. Her interest was to look at the cultural/historical context in which art is produced. The art historian Bhanumati Narayan's interest was to document this experiment by keeping a journal.

During this period, the assumption that some experiences are more important than others was challenged, and the emphasis was on looking at the diversity of different creative/human experiences (including that of women) in the process of making art. The shared studio made the participants realise how important it is for each of them to define and represent their own language of expression. The project was seen as a journey of growth, exploration, and experimentation.

For Shantibai, aged 43, the project has helped her realise her creative power and to deal with the issue of self-esteem since she has to constantly fight against the system from which she comes. Raituram, her husband, who is a master woodcarver, reacted violently when she joined the project and wished to work independently as an artist as that meant that she would no longer be available to assist him. Shantibai's own interests, desires, and ability as a creative being was neither considered nor recognised by her own family.

*"In case of an emergency there is no one else who is there for me, whereas Raituram comes from a family of many brothers and sisters and has a daughter from his first marriage."*

Despite having assisted Raituram for a long time, Shantibai has not followed him slavishly in her work. She is open to experimentation and to exploring alternative ways of knowing. She is interested in the narrative mode of representation and, specifically, in transforming her life experiences and

interpretations of myth into images. In doing so, she has begun to recognise herself as an individual and an independent artist.

The environment of the workshop had a huge effect on Shantibai who created several innovative watercolour drawings/paintings far removed from repetitive art forms. She was exposed to other artists, including women such as Sona Bai, Teju, Yamuna Devi, Megha Devi (all from Madhuban, Bihar) and others such as Bawa Devi and Ganga Devi who are well known in Mithila and in the rest of the country. Catalogues and reproductions of these artists' works have helped Shantibai to realise her own potential and have given her access to diverse ways of creating and imagining.

Shantibai has worked on four pillar sculptures and a number of watercolour works which, in certain cases, she treats as preliminary drawings.

Bhanumati, in describing Shantibai's work, writes that in her third and fourth sculptural pillars, where her own life is the theme, Sanmati, Shantibai's friend and ally, is given all the emotional charge when she intervenes at the two major junctures of Shantibai's life. In the extensive drawings done for this pillar, Sanmati is shown echoing her pain when Shantibai, aged six, almost drowned, and again when, at 12 years of age, she enters a bad marriage.

The second pillar is about Madia life as seen by Shantibai while roaming the *tokapal* forests with her grandfather. This pillar works in four vertical panels. Two of these describe the adventures of lovers in the forest, their encounter with a tiger, and their escape. The stories – of how a tiger attacked the couple came from her grandmother.

Shantibai is skilful with the chisel and has some command of relief work in wood. This is the first time that she is working out a vocabulary of her own. The market demand is for products that are stereotypical and limited. The narrative mode, towards which she is moving, is demanding, not just in the working forms and their relationships, but also in the organisation of narrative events on the face of the pillar.

Shantibai says: *"I have tried to tell stories related to my life experiences and myths I know. While helping Raituram it was not so. The scale of my work and access to paper and colours has helped me explore many possibilities. The period spent with all the artists like Rajkumar, Kabi, Ghessu and you working in the project is very important. I feel good..."*

*Reproductions of other artists' works, of Madhubani women artists, and of Warli art are very interesting. Also, knowing about the dual attitude that exists towards women – where they are seen as infinitely creative as well as destructive – is extremely relevant. In Kondagaon, we have experienced a*



*similar witch-hunt practice recently...I would like to see works of art outside Bastar as well. It helps us think."*

Sasha Altaf, another participating artist, says: *"It is the critical use of the myth rather than its celebration that I have been concerned with...I try to imbue my sculpture with iconic power as they interrogate the existing power structure, I revert the notion of 'rootedness in the past' using traditional sources, motifs, materials and ideas towards non-traditional contemporary ends..."*

*I formally pit my work against the questions of sexuality and violence, where the body does not remain the traditional site for the exercise of power, but is positioned as an instrument of resistance."*

## **Conclusion**

The author reminds us that Kondagaon, where the work is taking place, is no longer cut off from outside influences – business communities from outside, government officials, and other professionals from so-called 'civilised' cultures constitute the dominant class here. Educated locals, too, prefer to align themselves with this class. In the process, the poor (including the craft person/artist) are further marginalised and exploited, particularly women.

On the issue of identity, she says, *"Identity is not singular but multiple – one belongs to a particular tribe, caste, class, religion, generation, as well as gender. Adivasis are dealing with the identity crisis caused by the insensitive categorisations of 'Adivasi/non-Adivasi' by the government."*

She warns us of the danger that Adivasis will lose themselves in an amorphous pluralistic mass, get relegated to the lowest levels of society, and lose their identity in an industrialised and developed world. Development schemes are often implemented without the consent of the inhabitants, leaving the Adivasi little or no voice in mainstream decision-making processes. There is also little realisation that the lives of Adivasis/non-Adivasis (from the same economic background) revolve equally around cultivation, waiting for the monsoons, collecting wood and produce from the forest, birth, death, weddings, festival rituals, finding jobs, and so on. As such, there is large-scale absorption of Adivasi and non-Adivasi customs and rituals by one another and clear-cut distinctions between the two cannot be made.

