‘We paint stories we heard from our ancestors’: Intangible heritage of the Pardhan Gonds of Central India

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ABSTRACT

For more than a decade now, the art markets in India and abroad are taking keen interest in artworks made by ‘Adivasi’ or ‘Indigenous’ artists from India. The Gonds are one of the largest Adivasi groups in India, one of the over seven hundred ‘Scheduled Tribes’ in the Indian constitution, a category that affirms their histories of displacement, dispossession and cultural marginalisation. In precolonial times, the Pardhan Gonds of central India served as itinerant bards and genealogists for their patrons among the Gond communities. The Pardhan Gonds now paint their oral songs and stories, and these painted artworks are increasingly in demand across diverse audiences in local and global art circles. In this article, I think about the oral stories, songs and decorative wall art patterns as longer histories in which contemporary Gond visual art is situated. Building on my ethnographic research, I propose that these visual and oral expressions speak of proximate relations with the natural environment and are imbued with emotions of reverence and devotion towards the natural world. Thinking of these relations and emotions as the intangible cultural heritage of Gond Adivasis, I ask, how is this knowledge shared, and how are relationships of interdependence with the natural world produced in everyday life? I discuss an oral story about the Narmada River and then the decorative wall and floor art patterns called *digna* and examine the close relationship between the two. I argue that it is in the repeated telling of stories, and in the patterns and seasonal iterations of *digna*, that one can see the everyday work of producing enduring relationships with one’s environment. Thinking about oral stories in conjunction with *digna* also helps understand the crucial point that these relationships with the natural environment are not motivated by sensibilities of protection and preservation, but imagine interactive and respectful relations with features and materials in the environment. Spiritual and devotional relations coexist with necessary routine interactions and utilitarian relations. This intimate and embodied knowledge that generates creative coexistence with the more than human environment is a valuable intangible heritage, not just for Gond people but for everyone concerned with sustainable human lives on this planet.

Keywords

Indigenous intangible heritage, Adivasi cultures and oral stories, environment and aesthetics

Introducing Gond art and a changing landscape

At the 2018 edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, the first contemporary arts biennale to be held in India,[1] *artists Durga Bai Vyam and Subhash Vyam created a series of art installations based on a Gond oral story about the Bamboo Maiden ('Basin Kanya'). In the media coverage, curators highlighted a vision of 'inclusion' and 'dialogue' (A. Dube 2018) for the biennale. A promotion video shows Subhash Vyam guiding wall installations of the art pieces. His voice accompanies the visuals:*

> *My name is Subhash Vyam. My village is near Dhindhori district, Amarkantak [...] we are from the Pardhan Gond caste and we do a type of painting called Gondi Bhittichitra (Gondi wall art) [...] we call it* digna. *(*Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2018)

I see Durga Bai Vyam, his wife, outlining fish scales like patterns in black on a two dimensional human figure cut out from a wooden plank. In the next frame, sitting across a table, Subhash speaks with emphasis. (Field notes, March 2019)

For more than a decade now, the art markets in India and abroad have been taking keen interest in artworks made by 'Adivasi' or 'Indigenous' artists from India. The Gonds are one of India's largest Adivasi communities. In precolonial times, the Pardhan Gonds of central India served as itinerant bards and genealogists for their patrons among the Gond Adivasi community (P. Dube 2018). The Pardhan Gonds now paint their oral stories, and these painted artworks are increasingly in demand across diverse audiences in local and global art circles. Madhya Pradesh state's capital city, Bhopal, is today home to many Pardhan Gond artists who have relocated there from their villages. Dots, dashes, swirls, loops and other minute patterns fill up thick, sinuous outlines of animals, plants, birds and mythical beings on vibrantly painted canvases. As these painted songs and stories travel as 'art', finding audiences in international galleries, museums and biennales, expanding networks of circulation are seen as repositioning Adivasis as 'contemporary' artists.

In a style that has become iconic of Gond art, Pardhan Gond artists intricately depict relations between animals, birds, plants and humans, painting the natural world with a striking imagination and closely observed details. Gonds, like many Adivasi people on the Indian subcontinent, have nurtured proximate relations with their natural environments, and these intimate encounters and coexistence are inscribed in their oral stories, songs and everyday practices. As contemporary Gond artists paint artworks that depict a close association between the human and the more-than-human world, they find inspiration in their stories, ritual practices or *"riti-rivaaz"* and ordinary everyday life, or *"rehen sehen"*, as many described to me in conversations.[2]

With this article, I aim to situate contemporary Gond art in longer histories of everyday practices that draw upon memory and proximate relations with the natural environment. Contemporary Gond art is then situated within a larger field of what can be described as the intangible heritage of Gond Adivasi people. I propose that we think about Gond intangible heritage as a field that includes the oral stories, songs, wall art patterns and other forms of visual and oral expressions that emerge from and reproduce intimate and devotional attitudes towards the natural environment. In the spirit of the definition of intangible cultural heritage given by the United Nations, I think about the intangible heritage of Gond people as a set of 'practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith that [they] [...] recognize as part of their cultural heritage'[3]

A larger work on the intangible cultural heritage of Gond people would involve a discussion of their songs, stories, dance forms and tattoos, among other aspects. In this article, however, my purview is quite limited and specific. I propose that the intangible heritage of Gond people can be understood as an expansive category that also includes the realm of emotions – the spiritual connections and emotions that permeate the relations with the natural world and are generative of cultural practices, rituals and other forms of embodied traditional knowledge. I ask, as intangible cultural heritage, how is this knowledge shared, and how are relationships of interdependence with the natural world produced in everyday life? To explore an answer, I discuss an oral story about the Narmada River and then the decorative wall and floor art patterns called *digna*, and I examine the close relationship between the two.

I think about *digna*, stories and Gond art as cultural traditions that are repositories of intangible cultural

heritage, and I argue that spiritual relationships with landscapes and environments are made and experienced through shared stories and decorative everyday practices like *digna*. The stories narrate a form of living and relating to the natural environments that infuses life in the non-living and gives it an active, living presence imbued with a moral and spiritual force. With *digna*, intimate relationships with the environment are made and experienced through specific materials – which are established as sacred and divine in regional cosmologies through orally shared stories. It is through repeated interaction with these materials and the routine practice of making d*igna* that intimate, everyday relations with the environment are nurtured and experienced with emotions of reverence and respect. Thinking about oral stories in conjunction with visual and material culture helps understand that, in the Gond Adivasi world views, the necessary routine interactions and utilitarian relations with the natural environment coexist with the spiritual and worshipful relations.

I develop my argument in four parts. First, I begin with an introductory note on Gond art, and an overview of the article. In the section that follows, I produce my translation of a Gond oral story about the Narmada River and discuss the intimate and emotional relationship with the natural world that the story narrates, which my interlocutors feel in their knowledge and narration of the story. In the next section, I take you to a small Gond village in Dhindhori, Madhya Pradesh, where I first witnessed the making of *digna*. I introduce the reader to the process of making *digna*, as well as the colours and materials involved. Finally, I build on this analysis of the story and *digna* to argue that cosmological world views, traditional knowledge about features of the natural environment, the Narmada River in this case, and respectful attitudes towards the natural environment are inscribed in the oral stories and *digna*. It is through the retelling of stories and through routine practices like the making of *digna* that devotional attitudes and emotions of reverence towards the landscape are performed, experienced and reproduced. It is a form of religiosity and devotion that is expressed and experienced through interacting with material forms in which the divine being and presence is known to manifest.

This article builds on long-term ethnographic research that I conducted between 2018 and 2020 with a group of Gond artists in their workshop-homes in Bhopal and in their villages in Dhindhori district of Madhya Pradesh.[4] I had been doing fieldwork for my dissertation in Bhopal and Dhindhori before the Covid-19 pandemic for over 18 months and have continued the work remotely with some artists during the pandemic.

Aestheticising Adivasi lives and culture?[5]

Often called the father figure of Gond art, Jangarh Singh Shyam was the first Gond artist to be trained and recognised in urban art circles. In the early 1980s, he moved to Bhopal from his village Patangarh. Jagdish Swaminathan had just taken over as the founding director of the Roopankar museum and art gallery at Bhopal's newly created cultural centre called Bharat Bhavan. Swaminathan, or 'Swami Ji' as he is fondly remembered, was a renowned Indian artist whose work positioned him as a radical counterpoint in the making of Indian modern art (Hacker 2014). At Bharat Bhavan, he led the movement to rethink the place of folk and Adivasi arts in the pantheon of modern Indian art. Among his many efforts to carve a space for Adivasi art beyond the available ethnographic models, or within the anonymising tradition of Indian 'crafts', Swaminathan sent a team of young artists to look for talented folk and Adivasi artists from various parts of the state to exhibit and celebrate individual creativity. Many versions of a story I heard repeatedly in cafes, offices and living rooms in Bhopal narrates how one such group 'discovered' Jangarh through the sketches he had made on the walls of his house with coal and mud.

Jangarh Singh Shyam combined traditional songs, stories and geometric wall-art patterns to invent a style now recognised as Gond art. After working at Bharat Bhavan for a few years, Jangarh earned tremendous fame in museums and art circles at home and abroad. After a short but very influential career, he ended his life in 2001 at a museum in Japan during an exchange art-residency programme.[6] Most of the Gond artists practising today are his extended family members, and he lives on in their everyday lives, as they refer to their work as *Jangarh Kalam* ('Jangarh's pen'), paying tribute to a style and a lineage that began with him. During his lifetime, many extended family members moved to Bhopal to work and train with him. The 'Jangarh school' has now expanded to a group of about 20 families that primarily live in Bhopal and work with state and non-state actors to produce and circulate Gond art across translocal networks. They paint two dimensional artworks or objects with animals, trees, humans and birds that coalesce into one another in a style

that is now iconic of Gond art. The artists then laboriously fill the outlines with colours and intricate motifs of dots, dashes, swirls or loops. Each artist has a distinctive signature pattern asserting their individual artistic identity, as their oeuvre expands to canvas, illustrations, sculptures and video installations and enters into circuits of global capital in varied forms. Many artists are also increasingly working with publishing houses, conceptualising stories and illustrating for books.[7]

Thinking about longer histories

As Gond art and its visual vocabulary gains recognition and finds buyers across art markets, there is a growing influx of new artists migrating from their villages to Bhopal to train, find new work or, as is often the case, help more established artists with their projects. There is a growing conversation among the artists around the search for the 'origins' of Gond art. Many artists I interviewed during my research talked about the emergence of Gond art not as a sudden event in the history of Gond people but placed it within their longer histories, traditions and cultural practices.[8] I understood this search for roots and origins as a discomfort with the current frames in which their artistic expression is understood and their attempt to bring into focus some overlooked dimensions of their work, lives and histories. I also encountered some discomfort with the term 'Gond art' as a blanket category that does not recognise the internal subgroups and differences within the community.

In search of what the artists describe as the roots of their artistic practice, they argue that *Bhittichitra*, or wall art, is a traditional artistic practice with which they identify their work and where they see the roots of Gond art. As my interlocutors articulated the importance of wall art and oral stories as 'origins' and 'roots' of visual creative expression, I propose that it is helpful to understand their deliberations as a search for a more expansive category that captures the larger context, the cosmological world views, emotions and experiences in which their artworks are situated. Depicting lives in natural environments, these artworks are not only an expression of an intimate relationship and coexistence with the natural world but also emerge from the particular emotions that they feel for the landscape. Attitudes of reverence and religious devotion for particular features of the environment are the basis of a whole gamut of oral traditions, rituals, everyday practices and these artworks, which are, together, a repository of traditional knowledge and lifeworlds of the Gond Adivasi people.

The story of a furious river

In her work on Rajasthani folk tales, Ann Gold (2001) pays attention to the cultural constructions of the natural environment in rural Rajasthan. She finds an almost conscious pastoral landscape with moral and political continuities between the human beings and their environments. In the folk stories that she collects, interactions between humans and non-humans have shared moralities and a mutual understanding of social norms and values. She notes 'there seems no boundary between geophysical and cultural existence. Anthropomorphism does not stop with organic life but extends even to rocks' (Gold 2001, 121). In my own experience of collecting Gond oral stories, I have noticed something similar. Gond oral stories and songs weave together a form of life that connects the geophysical world with the moral and spiritual lives of its inhabitants. The mythical world and the world of deities is not distanced from the lived physical world of humans. This proximity inspires devotional attitudes towards the natural environment and shapes the social, moral and spiritual lives of actors.[9] In the following paragraphs, I offer my translation of a Gond oral story about the birth of Narmada River. I also capture some of the moments of narration to show the deeply emotional ways in which stories and storytelling are experienced by the storyteller. Proximate relations with a divine natural environment and a deep faith in this divinity infuses stories and storytelling with a force that is experienced in deeply affective ways.

Durga Bai is a well-known Gond artist who has created works for many museums and has exhibited at several national and international art events. Her artworks are often appreciated for their lyricism and a fluidity in depiction of stories on canvas. Her work is distinguished in its ability to depict stories with an epic imagination where all the events and characters are present in simultaneity and not succession (Chatterji 2012, 130). This gives the works an ability to tell complex stories on a single canvas. As some of her fondest memories are of her beloved *Aaji* ('grandmother'), a storyteller she idolises, stories have always been an integral part of her life. As I spent more time listening to her stories, I realised that they are also the repositories of an intimate knowledge of the natural world and a moral and spiritual anchor that she has

inherited and lived through repeated listening and telling.

One story that Durga Bai often paints and knows well is the story of the Narmada River. She told me the story on a beautiful winter afternoon. Her husband was out of town, and while all the women in the room were working on some canvas or another, the lack of urgency had put everyone in a chatty mood, ready for welcome distractions. 'Laao aaj Narmada Maiya ki kahani batai det hun' ('Come, I'll tell you the Mother Narmada's story today'), she said, reaching out towards the recorder in my hand. She was more than comfortable with my little recorder by now and spoke into it like she was speaking into a microphone onstage. She would hold it firmly in her hand, her posture straightened, and she would often close her eyes while narrating stories. I would always register my attentive listening and presence in her brief pauses, but when she closed her eyes, I lowered my voice because I could sense that in those moments my presence had faded and behind those closed eyes there was a vivid imagination living the events she narrated.

Reva man and woman discovered the Narmada river in the jungle in the form of a little girl. They adopted the girl as their own and began raising her. They had another daughter named Jahila, and the two girls grew up together in the forest. When Narmada was of marriageable age, Reva arranged for her wedding with Son Bahadur from Chattisgarh. On her wedding day, Narmada and Jahila were together, putting turmeric all over Narmada's body for a wedding ritual. Soon, they could hear the distant sound of music and dance from the forest; the wedding procession was close by. Jahila couldn't control her excitement and asked Narmada if she could dress up in some of her jewels and go see the groom and the festivities, promising to be back in time for Narmada to be ready for her wedding. Wearing the wedding attire and looking like a bride herself, Jahila reached the wedding procession and was mistaken as the bride by Son Bahadur. They decided to get married midway and not go any further. Narmada's worries grew as she heard the wedding music that's played when the bride and groom take their vows. Curious and confused and without her bridal trousseau, she started walking towards the procession with her body covered in turmeric. As the dance and music intensified, she began to run, the turmeric from her body sprinkling all along the way. When she finally reached the spot and saw that Jahila and Son Bahadur were now married, she couldn't control her fury. In her anger, she kicked Son Bahadur with a force that sent him back to Chattisgarh. She held Jahila by her hair and cursed her, that as a river she would always remain dry. The turmeric from her body coloured the earth yellow. That's why the mud near Amarkantak, the site of this episode, is still yellow.

Furious and distraught from her misery, Narmada began to flow towards the ocean. In her anger, she was such a force that the deities that protect the landscape feared that she would destroy the entire region. Narmada started flowing through rocks, forests, hills and caves, uncontrolled. In intense fury, she cut through large rocks and thick forests. Narmada flowed in fury and with uncontrollable force and only stopped when she had met with the ocean. [The story goes on to narrate many other instances of how the deities and others tried to stop the river, and the sites of confrontation are now important sacred sites in the region.]

While transcribing and translating this story, I noticed that Durga Bai's narration was split into two parts. In the beginning, she consciously spoke in a mix of Gondi and Hindi, as she always did with me to make it more comprehensible. However, at the point in the story where the Narmada River gets furious, there was a sharp and clear transition in her narration. As the river got angry, Durga Bai let go of caution in her choice of words and spoke in a Gondi dialect. I was struck by the deep connection that she felt with the events and the story. Her story and the storytelling conveyed the intensity of Narmada's suffering and wrath and brought the divine closer by making her more relatable. The story gave the storyteller a vivid and almost visceral experience of the emotional turmoil in the river's life. In the story, Narmada River flows through central India in fury and misery. A connection is experienced with the river from empathising with her injustice and misfortune. The story humanises the river by imagining her as susceptible to misfortune, injustice and a desire for destructive vengeance. The reverence for this divinity is one inspired by an empathetic understanding. As the various turbulent moments in the river's life unfolded across different geographical points, the story became increasingly visceral for Durga Bai, who could almost sense the river deity's presence, its life and also its expansive flow spread across a vast region in central India. With Durga Bai's faith in the truth of these stories, they become a powerful force, imprints of longer histories, events, time and a guiding anchor that brings a sense of self and continuity. As Durga Bai reminisces

about these stories every day to derive inspiration for her artworks, the stories are an empowering heritage she has received from her *Aaji* and her life in the Gond villages.

In his work on ethics of nature in South Asian environmental history, K. Sivaramakrishnan (2015) discusses how religious and devotional attitudes to nature and their practical and everyday manifestations have been studied as crucial contribution to the understanding of relations to landscape and nature in environmental history.[10] Ideas about nature, its properties and its relation to human life have always deeply informed ethical standards and moral values for the conduct of humans on personal and communal levels of existence. These ethics of nature are practical and shaped by the daily struggle to fashion a life of dignity and meaning but also through attachments to nature as recognised among other forms of life and the inanimate world. Hence, the relationships to nature are both affective and spiritual but also utilitarian, realised and sustained through working with material forms – intimately and viscerally experienced and produced. Drawing upon this work, in the next section, I discuss wall-art patterns called *digna* to show that worshipful attitudes towards a sacred environment coexist with interactive practices and utilitarian relations.

I conclude this section with a brief episode from my ethnographic research where I saw the spiritual and moral force that the natural environment had on my interlocutors. This vignette is a brief moment from a train journey that I took from Bhopal to Amarkantak (the origin point of Narmada River) with some of my artist interlocutors to visit their village.

The arrival of Narmada was sudden and breathtaking. The sound of the train tracks changed to announce the bridge. Before I could turn around to look at the others and their reactions, the river arrived. Spread vast and motionless till as far as I could see. The air had turned cooler and the green of the landscape greener. I froze and stared at this beautiful sight that had suddenly appeared before me. I caught a glimpse of one of my interlocutors with her head bowed down, eyes closed and her hands moving in a quick motion between the window and her forehead. The coins weren't there anymore, but her hands were repeatedly reaching out in the empty space outside the window trying to touch the sight of the river to her forehead.[11] *I saw the murmur of a prayer on her lips. The sight of the river had sent a wave of prayer across the compartment, as everyone came up to the window to look at the river and bow their heads. She opened her eyes but sat transfixed, clutching the window grill and looking at the river for as long as it was in sight. As we passed by and crossed over to the other side, she turned around to look at us, and in that moment, in her blissful smile and her tranced eyes, I saw how the river had affected her.* (Field notes, February 2020)

Digna, colours from 'Narmada *Maiya*'[12]

The bright tent was up and fluttering, the chairs had been laid out and a crowd had gathered outside Bhagat's house in anticipation. The tourists arrived in their three big cars that had visibly driven through hilly trails and dusty fields to reach Bhagat's house. Bhagat gave a small speech and announced that they were going to begin the evening's programme with a demonstration of how digna *is made. Genda Bai had prepared for this and kept wet mud ready for the demonstration. She went to the kitchen and brought out her pot of muddy water. Squatting on the floor, with a rag dipped in coloured muddy water held between her thumb and two fingers, she painted a large square on the courtyard floor. Within this square she made two mirroring patterns and painted them in brick red and ochre yellow. Someone brought her another pot from the kitchen. With a rag dipped in this pot of liquid black mud, she began filling the empty geometric space with black. This was* digna, *painted in mirroring patterns of red, yellow, white and black.* (Field notes, February 2020)

Traditionally, *digna* are the geometric decorative patterns made by coating wet mud on the walls, floor, along the doorway and in different parts of the house. When coated on the walls and floors, made from of a mix of cow dung, mud and husk, the wet mud seeps into the surface. Upon repeated coating and after it has dried up, the colours can be seen distinctly against the brown walls and floors. The colours become brighter and more distinct with each new iteration. *Digna* is traditionally made by women, on and within the walls and floors of the house. It is a way to decorate the house, but it is also associated with refreshing and cleaning by painting the walls afresh. *Digna* could be a ceremonious or an everyday practice but is especially done to register and acknowledge seasons, time, festivities and important rituals.[14]

Genda Bai drew my attention to the materials with which *digna* is traditionally made. She explained to me how she had collected three different kinds of mud from

Figure 1
The patterns and colours that make digna. Photograph taken by the author.

the river bank in preparation for this visit.

Digna *comes from Narmada* Maiya*', she said. The different colours of* digna *are the different kinds of mud found in this region. Yellow colour comes from* Ramraj Maati *('Ramraj mud') – a kind of ochre mud found near Amarkantak, white colour from* Chuhi Maati *– lime, and black and red are two kinds of mud commonly found in this region. In her words that imbued joy and reverence for the river and* digna*, I saw a deep and intimate relationship between the river and the patterns that were now more distinct and the colours deeper as the mud dried on the floor.* (Field notes, February 2020)

As I dwelled more on what Genda Bai had said to me and the story of the river that Durga Bai had narrated, I saw the meanings and relationships between the story and *digna*. *Digna* are patterns made with mud in contrasting colours. From the colours of the mud that differentiate parts of *digna* to the emotions that the patterns and its making inspire in the maker, *digna* has a deep connection with the river's physical and mythical presence. Durga Bai's story of Narmada *Maiya* is also the story of colours of *digna*. It is in the colour of mud that the agency and presence of the river deity is marked. It is common knowledge that the yellow mud acquired its colour through an event in the life of Narmada. The colour marks an event and a sacred presence that makes it special. Making *digna* brings this mud from Narmada River home and covers the built structure in that mud, an act in which the mud coats and transforms the built environment. As a practice that marks cleaning, seasonal rhythms and rituals, it establishes a recurring relationship between the built structure and the environment. The repeated iterations of making *digna* throughout the year also means that working with mud, finding fresh mud by the river, bringing it home and painting on the walls with it is a continuous relationship between the river and the home. It makes the river and the mud integral to the seasonal, ritual cycles of lives lived in proximity to the river. *Digna* is where the natural and the built environment intersect or the human and the natural world coalesce. The river and its mud enter into a repeated

relationship with the household.

Paying attention to *digna* also highlights how long-term sustainable relations with the natural environment demand repeated work. *Digna* is made with repeating patterns that fade away with time and are redone as a form of care for the house. Making *digna* over and over again is the effort and work of making and sustaining relations with the natural world. *Digna* and the stories that animate and infuse the natural world with a living force reveal the geographical and spiritual interdependencies that shape the lives of people in particular environments. It is in the repeated telling of stories or the seasonal iterations and patterns of *digna* that one can see the work and effort of producing enduring relationships with one's environment. How to live sustainably and respectfully in a natural environment, how to build lives of creative coexistence with the natural world? This intangible knowledge that Adivasi people have nurtured for years is inscribed in the materials and forms that make *digna* and the events and emotions that the stories narrate.

The intangible heritage of Gond people

Scholars of religion and ecology have paid attention to the interrelationship between human ethics, actions and the natural world.[15] This literature conceptualises the Anthropocene as a moral, ethical and spiritual crisis and looks at ecological perspectives and practices that have been a part of religious world views. They argue that religious perspectives take seriously the sacrality of the entire world and an ethical call for a living with care that extends beyond humans. Many have argued for a non-anthropocentric understanding of ethics as the basis of a global environmental ethics based on notions of mutual interdependence and respect. Proximate and spiritual relations with the lived natural environment in cultural traditions like the Gond people are valuable repositories of ways of living and practices that can be a crucial guide in search for ethical and sustainable human lives on the planet.[16]

Gond oral stories and songs, their characters, the events they narrate, the natural colours of *digna*, the process of making it and its annual cycle are all forms of shared intangible heritage of Gond people. This intangible heritage is inscribed in the stories that enliven the landscape and in routine practices like the making of *digna* that nourish creative engagements with the landscape. Making *digna* or telling stories produces the environment as sacred and living. These practices do not distance the nature from the rhythms of the household but rather imagine an intimate interaction with the natural environment and make it accessible to fulfil everyday utilitarian needs. Hence, these relationships are not only sites of nurturing ecological sensibilities and practices but are also sites of varied motivations – from genuine prayers, a visceral imagination and belief in the truth of myths and deities but potentially also of commodification, cultural politics and deepening hierarchies.

I emphasise that we think about stories and *digna* together because, while stories can chronicle deeply emotional and imaginative relations with the natural world, paying attention to *digna* helps us understand better the intangible knowledge and relations with the natural world. It reminds us that Adivasi relations with the more-than-human world or the natural environment around them are not only affective and spiritual but also utilitarian – formed and sustained through consuming, creating and working with materials from the natural environment. Interaction with nature and the use of natural resources in a specific, rhythmic and constrained manner is integral to building lives in particular environments, in relation with the land and the surrounding non-human life.

In the lifeworld of Gond people, making *digna* and storytelling are practices that produce and sustain spiritual relationships between humans and their environment. It is a reverence that is experienced in proximity and demands repeated, interactive doing. It is an attitude towards nature and environment that focuses on interaction, not preservation, of a distanced deity. Thinking about the stories and the *digna* together helps understand that Gond people's relationship with the natural environment is not motivated by spiritual abstractions or sensibilities of protection and preservation, but rather imagines interactive and respectful relations with specific entities in the environment as alive. The sacrality of the river or the mountain is not entirely an abstract belief or faith in a metaphysical existence. It is a presence that is experienced through living with, performing and producing it in their lives. In the process of making *digna*, the colour of mud, the sight of the river and the touch of river water all have meanings that inspire joy and reverence because the river is not just what is physically and visually there but also that which is known through the stories and myths. A *digna* on the wall is not only decorative but also evokes reverence

that comes from a shared knowledge of divine presence in the mud with which it is made. Hence, as a visual and decorative art, the meaning and beauty of *digna* is deeply situated in the shared intangible knowledge about the natural environment.

Some conclusions and new directions

In this article, I have argued that the artworks made by Pardhan Gond artists are intimately linked with their oral stories, everyday practices and proximate relations with the natural environment. In the first part of the article, I show that Gond oral stories narrate a form of living that transcends the duality of the animate and the inanimate, or between what is physically present and that which is 'imagined' or manifest in more than visual and immediately accessible forms. Storied imaginations of the natural world make the forests, trees, rivers and hills actors in their lifeworlds with agency.

In the second part of the article, I pay attention to *digna*. These are decorative patterns made with mud of different colours collected over the year from forests and the banks of Narmada River. I argue that, from the materials with which these patterns are made to the repeated rhythm of their making, *digna* is an example of the everyday cultural practices that are a repository of knowledge about living in a natural environment with reverence, devotion and creative imagination. Intangible knowledge about living in a natural environment is inscribed in the colours, materials and patterns of *digna*. The seemingly simple, geometric patterns on the walls are symbolic of enduring relations between the houses and the river. It is through embodied interactions like the making of *digna* that relations with the natural environment are produced and sustained.

Digna also shows that proximate, everyday relations with a divine environment are experienced through routine activities and through use of materials like mud and water, which are seen as related to the divine presence. A form of relatedness with the environment and the more-than-human presence in this environment is experienced not through an erasure of difference but through recognising that difference. In imagining the features of landscape as divine, sacred and infused with mythical power, the difference is reaffirmed and magnified. Yet there is a way in which relationships are established with the elements, events and entities in this environment through stories and repeated labour. It is this persistent doing and redoing that *digna* and the stories demand. The impermanence of these acts and practices necessitates the work of remembering, repeated performing and sustaining a relationship with one's environment. It is through the sharing of stories and routine practices like the making of *digna* that intimate relationships with the natural world travel across time as intangible but embodied heritage. I'm thankful to my interlocutors for drawing my attention to their traditional practices of storytelling and *digna*, which helped me understand how Gond artists think about their cultural heritage, its dynamism and its varied spiritual and material sources.

Digna and Gond oral stories speak of a deep relationship between everyday life in the home, one's emotions, the surrounding environment and its seasonal rhythms. These everyday practices carry a knowledge of living with and producing relationships of deep and complex interdependence with the natural environment. This intimate and embodied knowledge of the natural world that guides creative coexistence with the more-than-human features of natural environments is a valuable intangible heritage not just for the Gond people but for everyone concerned with sustainable human lives on a planet in crisis (Ghosh 2022), as environmental disasters become more urgent and pressing.

ENDNOTES

1. *Adivasi* can be loosely translated as 'original inhabitants'. While the appropriate terms to refer to the artists and their work remains contested, my preferred terms throughout this article will be 'Adivasi' or 'Gond people' and 'art', respectively. In 1987, the Indian Council for Indigenous and tribal people was formed and affiliated with the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. In this context, unlike other terms of administrative convenience such as 'Scheduled Tribes', the term Adivasi is a political assertion, and, importantly for my project, my informants used this in our conversations. In the instances where I use other terms like 'tribal' or 'Indigenous', it is to highlight that these are the preferred terms in state vocabulary and the international art networks, respectively.
2. *Riti-rivaaz can be translated as the rituals and ceremonial events that mark special occasions. Rehen-sehen* can be translated as ways of living; it encompasses but is not limited to the everyday practices that constitute living in an environment.
3. According to the 2003 UN Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, intangible cultural heritage is defined as follows:

   > The 'intangible cultural heritage' means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (Article 2.1)

4. The ethnographic research has been supported by the curators and other staff members at the Tribal Museum (Madhya Pradesh Janjati Sangrahalaya) in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. The academic training and ethnographic work for this research has been supported by the South Asian Studies Council, the Department of Anthropology at Yale University and the Wenner Gren Foundation.
5. I'm thankful to Dr. K. Sivaramakrishnan for suggesting this term as a framing concept to highlight the production and making of Gond Adivasi art as a process that aestheticises Gond culture and lives as a separable realm. My artist interlocutors argue for a different framing and understanding of their artistic and cultural practices as situated in larger cosmological world views that are entwined in their everyday lives and ways of living in natural environments.
6. His life and works have received much scholarly attention. For an introduction, see Jain (1998; 2018) and Shyam and Das (2017). In an analysis that is particularly striking, Sonal Khullar thinks of his life as 'a cautionary tale of violence and marginalization amid the widespread celebration of a newly global and postcolonial order in the art world' (Khullar 2015: 70–73).
7. Some very popular books have emerged from these collaborations, such as the illustrated story of the life of Bhimrao Ambedkar called *Bhimayana: Experiences Of Untouchability*, a story told through the artworks of Durga Bai Vyam and Subhash Vyam (Vyam, Vyam, Natarajan and Anand 2011), the self-reflexive, biographical work *Finding My Way* (Shyam and Anand 2016) by Venkat Raman Shyam and *The London Jungle Book* (Shyam, Rao and Wolf-Sampath 2004) by Bhajju Shyam.
8. In the beginning of my fieldwork when I was meeting new artists, many of them gave me their visiting or business cards. I noticed on multiple occasions that, on the older cards, many artists had identified themselves as *bhittichitrakar* ('wall artist'), *digna kalakar* or *Gondi kalakar*. I read this as attempts to voice their ambivalence with the term 'Gond art'.
9. I struggle here, and in other places where I use words like 'imagination', with a peculiar challenge that anthropologists face in running the risk of 'dividing what people join', as Marshall Sahlins reminds us in the inaugural Hocart Lecture at SOAS. Reading from Hocarts's 'Kings and Councillors', he notes 'the human social world is part of a larger world in which boundaries between society and cosmos are non-existent'. (See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heiaa52v9YE for more). I am careful not to convey a separation between the 'real', immediate, physical world and the larger more-than-human, divine world that I encountered while travelling with my interlocutors.
10. For an excellent and comprehensive review of this literature, see K. Sivaramakrishnan (2015).
11. See Eck (1998) for a discussion on Darsan – the essay is about the power and importance of 'seeing' in South Asian religious traditions.
12. *Maiya* is a colloquial way of referring to the river as Mother Narmada. Her words also reminded me that much work on the Narmada River has focused on dramatic losses as a highly conflicted site of the Narmada dam conflict. See Baviskar (1995) and Fisher (1995). Since the river and its surrounding regions have been a part of many political struggles, the rich mythological

universe and cosmological visions associated with Narmada have been understudied. David Haberman (2006) has done a similar study for Yamuna, but the rich narrative traditions around Narmada and the ways in which the river is woven with people's geographical as well as social, moral, ethical and everyday universe is something yet to be studied extensively.

13. *Digna* can be used as both a verb and a noun. I heard people use it in both ways, as *digna banai dei* ('make *digna*') or *Digna kar dei* ('do *digna*').
14. Some women said that they did a fresh coat of mud and some *digna* in the kitchen every other day before cooking. However, *digna* in the rest of the house, which would take a lot more time, was reserved for special occasions and festivities.
15. The Harvard series of conferences from 1996 to 1998 on Religions of the World and Ecology, organised by the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University, aimed to provide a forum for discussions on the role of religion in shaping attitudes towards the environment. The Forum on Religion and Ecology continues the aims, ideas and discussions that emerged from these conferences. A more recent development, the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Taylor et al. 2005), also aims to explore the relationships between humanity, religion and nature, and examines religious perceptions of nature.
16. Thinking about the traditions of Gond Adivasi people and their traditions in this vein celebrates Indigenous and Adivasi world views as instructive for global environmentalist movements. However, this can be mistaken for sounding like romanticised depictions of Adivasi people. In this article, I do not wish to convey romanticising and essentialising depictions, so I discuss that spiritual and affective relations with the natural world coexist with utilitarian and livelihood concerns. In the following section, I focus on the utilitarian practices that also shape particular ethics of being in nature, and they are an integral part of living, practising and embodying spiritual and respectful attitudes towards the natural environment.

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