

THE MOULDING OF THE MUSE

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Regrettably, before a sound critical framework could be evolved around the phenomenon of Jangarh Singh Shyam as the progenitor of an exceptionally innovative artistic idiom of art now erroneously dubbed ‘Gond School’ or ‘Gond Painting,’ indiscriminate and ruthless market forces came to dominate this genre of art, and Jangarh himself became its first casualty. The sensationalism surrounding Jangarh’s tragic suicide at the age of 40, under perplexing circumstances, and in a foreign country, further led to the consolidation of his legendary status. This spurred the large-scale collecting, museumising and fierce marketing of his paintings, and sadly only promoted an even more intense looking “at” his work rather than “into” it — as “[l]ooking beyond surfaces also means looking into contexts.”³ And the contexts need not always be ethnographic.

There is a whole range of circumstances, contexts, events and mediations associated with Jangarh’s life and his art practice that needs to be critically examined and put into perspective, in order to construct an equitable account of the formation of his prodigious artistic idiom that founded his legacy and developed into a movement.

Part I of this book probes the efficacy of extra-cultural interventions into an individual artist’s operative and relatively well-grounded indigenous cultural tradition, and asks how the latter interacted with the new, while intentionally reinventing itself not “on the basis of its conformity to the cultural tradition, but, rather, with respect to its relationship to extra-cultural reality.”⁴ From this perspective, I shall on the one hand examine aspects of Jangarh Singh Shyam’s cultural inheritance rooted in art and mythology: the adornment of the walls of his community’s homes with ritual clay relief work; the visualisation of gods in the images of their priests into whom they descend; the belief that the sacred musical instrument *bana* is the home of their highest deity; and the peculiar hierarchical relationship of the Pardhans (Jangarh’s community) with the Gonds, for whom the Pardhans served as bards, singing them stanzas of their glorifying epics, which fuse together partly imaginary histories of the lost Gond kingdoms. On the other, I will trace Jangarh’s individual journey to Bhopal, his interactions with modernist cultural

³ Thomas 1991: 9; Introduction
⁴ Groys 2014: 14

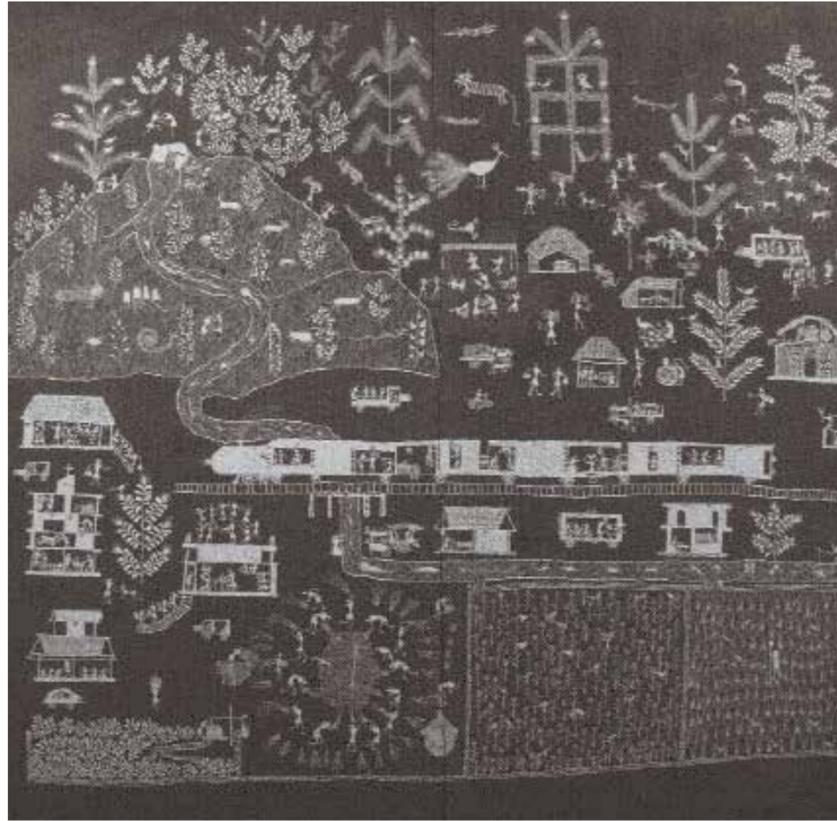


Fig. 7

creation myths showing Yama, the God of Death, as a policeman flaunting his bullet belt, or the god Mahadev being escorted by rifle-wielding security guards (Fig. 9), or Jangarh Singh Shyam repeatedly recounting the memory of the waning forest myths are all examples of this enhanced shift towards the narrative resulting from interventions of extrinsic cultural agency into well-grounded indigenous traditions and reveal how the latter percipiently responded to their “evolving context” and to situations of “conflict and change”³⁴ while continuously reinventing itself.

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In his twenty-year career — from the time of his arrival at Bharat Bhavan in 1982-83 and until his death in 2001, Jangarh produced a formidable body of work, and in the process, evolved an individual language of pictorial expression. Throughout his artistic practice, Jangarh remained explorative and largely experimental. Unlike many other folk and tribal artists who also entered the contemporary art space through various mediatory transactions, Jangarh’s case was different in that he worked at an art institution to which he remained attached until the end of his life, and mostly worked amidst its aesthetic and ideological parameters.

Fig. 7 My Life (detail). Collective memory of the railway line cutting across the Warli villages. Jivya Soma Mashe, 1998, pigment on board, 185 x 185 cm. Collection and image courtesy: Crafts Museum, New Delhi

He was surrounded by staunch modernists. Jangarh often told me that some of them continuously nagged him to continue to be “authentic” by drawing inspiration from his tribal heritage rather than from his urban milieu, while others encouraged him to open up to his immediate urban environment. Jangarh often faced hostile criticism from both camps and had to navigate these aesthetic-ideological positions at Bharat Bhavan. This is where his muse was moulded or, as Swaminathan put it, Jangarh’s art had “blossomed” and “his genius had burst forth here.”³⁵

It was also there that he was first exposed to the magic of bright poster and acrylic colours, and their smooth and sensuous recipient surface of the white paper and canvas offered new possibilities for limitless expression. It was at Bharat Bhavan that he was introduced to the debate around the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘marginal,’ and the experience of becoming the celebrated Other. Having spent almost his entire life away from his native land, memory and nostalgia began to play an important role in his perception of it. The distance to the world left behind, opened up a whole new realm of imaginary homelands from which he re-cast the gods and legends in his paintings. His ability to impulsively transform the real and the memory world into the intuitive lay at the core of his work.

Over the course of the various artists’ camps and workshops held at Bharat Bhavan in the early 1980s, Jangarh began to acquaint himself with paper, poster colours and printmaking. He was so thrilled by the *chatak* (bright) pigments³⁶ that he once famously said: “The first time I dipped my brush in bright poster colours in Bhopal, tremors went through my body.”³⁷

These new materials charged his imagination to no end. The white expanse of the paper gripped and animated him in an almost sensual manner. In an interview with Seema Sathyu, Jangarh discerningly articulated his experience of these new, dazzling colours. He spoke of *mara* vs. *zinda rang*, i.e. dead vs. living colour as an allegory for dull or bright pigments.³⁸ Sathyu recalls that when Jangarh first received sheets of paper and colours “which he had never used before, in one day, he poured out all his creative energy on the new space he was given.”³⁹ Jangarh described his response to this new colour palette by saying that *tilmilati hain aankhen*, i.e. his eyes watered while working with them.⁴⁰ In the same conversation Jangarh has stated that his use of coloured dots “bears inspiration from the *parsa jhad* [a tree], which has flowers with spotted patterns.”⁴¹

The prominent dotted patterns as seen in the works of Jangarh and other Pardhan artists may have been inspired by various sources. Kalavati, Anand Shyam’s wife and an artist in her own right, feels that one of the influences for this pattern might have been the traditional clay relief work (Fig. 10). The continuous dotted

34 Clifford 1991: 215, 218
35 As quoted in Tully 1998: 278
36 Sathyu 1989: 2

37 In a conversation with the author in Delhi in the 1990s
38 Sathyu 1989: 4
39 Ibid.: 1



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Fig. 8 Memory of the Agonising Days Spent in a Cancer Ward at a Hospital in Delhi. Ganga Devi, 1986, ink on paper, 55 x 76 cm. Collection: Crafts Museum, New Delhi. Image courtesy: Jyotindra Jain, New Delhi

Fig. 9 Mahadev being escorted by armed guards. Detail from a Santhal scroll of creation myth. Artist unknown, ca. 1950s, pigment on paper, 21 x 510 cm. Collection and image courtesy: Jyotindra Jain, New Delhi

40 Ibid.: 4
41 Ibid.

As observed by Swaminathan:

There is no tradition among the Gond and the Pardhan of portraying their deities in painting. While simple geometric *chowk* are drawn for the various deities on various occasions, the deities themselves are not graphically represented. Taking his leap from the *chowk*, Jangarh displays an extraordinary versatility in giving the deities their physical form... [H]e has given them all individual characteristics and pictorial visages.⁴⁹

Jangarh created iconographies of his deities from his imagination as well as through his encounters with them in the ceremony of invocation: “But then I used to see people when the gods took possession of them and that’s how I got the idea of what the gods looked like.”⁵⁰ It was these visions of gods that led Jangarh to iconise them holding spikes, tridents and scourges, or squatting on a seat of nails, as the priests in trance would do. In Fig. 11 we see the shaman possessed by Baba Dev wearing the priest’s cap and holding in his right hand a scourge with which he would self-flagellate when in trance. In some images, he portrayed the gods near their shrines surrounded by flags, tridents, oil-lamps, a seat of thorns and *jamara*, young sprouts planted in earthen pots, their growth predicting next season’s crop. Besides depicting his gods in human form in his early works, Jangarh also attempted to paint pairs of birds, fish or reptiles in the form of simple individual representations or in dialogue with each other. Here, the surrounding forested landscape had not yet emerged as in the later narrations of legends (Figs. 12, 13, 14).

A whole range of Jangarh’s early renderings of gods include images of Baba Dev, Phulwari Devi, Narayan Dev, Khairagadhia Dev, Thahi Dev, Mashvasi Dev, Hanuman, Maha Dev, Mehralin Devi, Budha Dev, etc. (Figs. 15 to 19).⁵¹

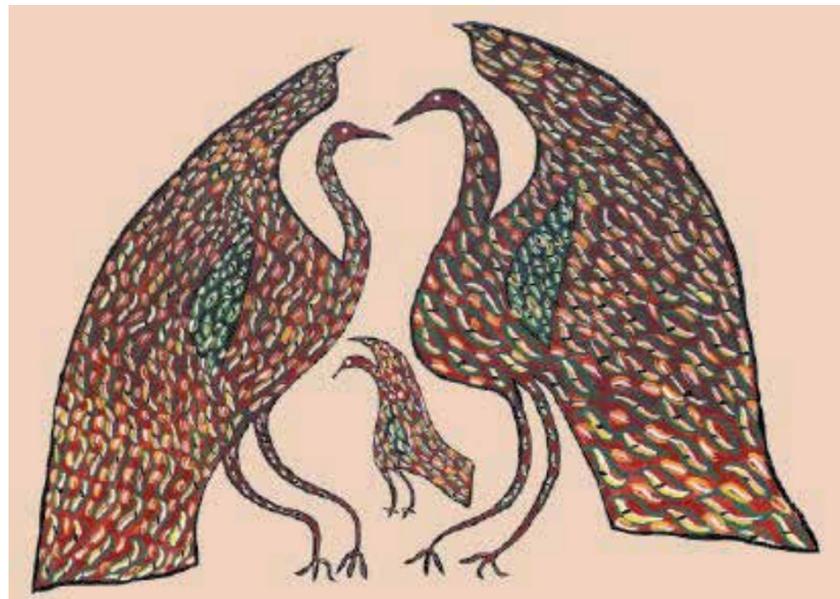


Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

Fig. 12 The depiction of a pair of birds is among the early works of the artist marked by a degree of spontaneity, created during the days of his initial introduction to paper and pigments. Jangarh Singh Shyam, early 1980s, pigment on paper, 65 x 35 cm. Collection and image courtesy: Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal

Fig. 13 A Pair of Birds. Jangarh Singh Shyam, early 1980s, pigment on paper, 60 x 30 cm. Collection: Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal. Image courtesy: Seema Sathya, Bangalore

Fig. 14 A Pair of Fish. Jangarh Singh Shyam, early 1980s, pigment on paper, 71 x 50 cm. Collection: Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal. Image courtesy: Seema Sathya, Bangalore

Fig. 15 Bara Dev or Baba Dev. An early painting, where the influence of dhigna, traditional wall and floor painting of the Pardhan households, is visible, especially in the rendering of the pedestal. Jangarh Singh Shyam, early 1980s, pigment on paper, 45 x 80 cm. Collection and image courtesy: Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal

49 Swaminathan 1987: 47
50 As quoted in Tully 1998: 278
51 Swaminathan 1987: 47