



**Reading the Crisis of the
Anthropocene in Pardhan Gond
Pictographic Tribal Traditions**

Eurasia 2022



The Song of Niyamgiri

The deep reverence that the “Dongria have for their gods, hills and streams pervades every aspect of their lives. Even their art reflects the mountains, in the triangular designs found on village shrines to the many gods of the village, farm and forests and their leader, Niyam Raja.

They derive their name from ‘dongar’, meaning hill and the name for themselves is Jharnia: protector of streams

The Dongria live in villages scattered throughout the hills. They believe that their right to cultivate Niyamgiri’s slopes has been conferred on them by Niyam Raja, and that they are his descendants.”

<https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/dongria>

Who are the Adivasis?

These are communities “bundled together by the colonial government within the term ‘tribe’... The historical, linguistic and cultural differences among these communities were so vast and complex that it would have been impossible for any rational scheme of sociological classification to place them in a single conceptual category.

While all this was happening in India's political history, already a branch of Orientalism in Europe had emerged in the form of Anthropology, perhaps more appropriately ‘savageology’. Some of the attributes discussed in ‘savageology’ were applied to the Indian ‘tribes’, and tribes came to be seen as necessarily primitive.

By the end of the 19th century, the concept of tribe and the notion of criminal tribes had received acceptance even among educated Indians... As a result, when the 1891 version of the CTA was enacted, or when in the following year the register of forest codes was prepared, there was no evident protest from any quarter. By the turn of the century, the tribe had come to stay as an unchallenged category constitutive of the primitive in Indian society.” GN Devy

"The official and popular perception of adivasis is merely that of isolation in forest, tribal dialect, animism, primitive occupation, carnivorous diet, naked or semi-naked, nomadic habits, love, drink and dance. Contrast this with the self-perception of Adivasis as casteless, classless and egalitarian in nature, community-based economic systems, symbiotic with nature, democratic according to the demands of the times, accommodative history and people-oriented art and literature." CR Bijoy

The Pardhan Gonds and the *Bhimayana*

“The adivasi community's tribal ecology is “able to flaunt an alternate holistic structure” through the use of Gondi art, its democratic communal ethos provides a more habitable space for imagining the annihilation of caste than the realist modernist ethic would. "This importation of a tribal ecology of subsistence and communal life blending into a Dalit psychosphere might provide a healing touch, since the tribal is (theoretically at least) totally removed from the Hindu anxiety of pollution and purity. In fact, the popular stereotype of the tribal as a denizen of hills and forests is a person with martial dignity and independence.”

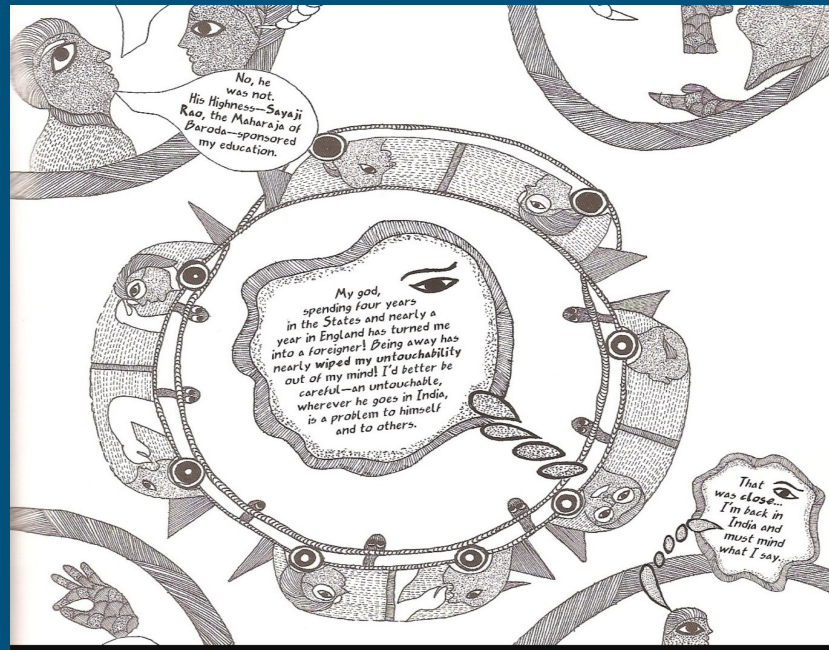
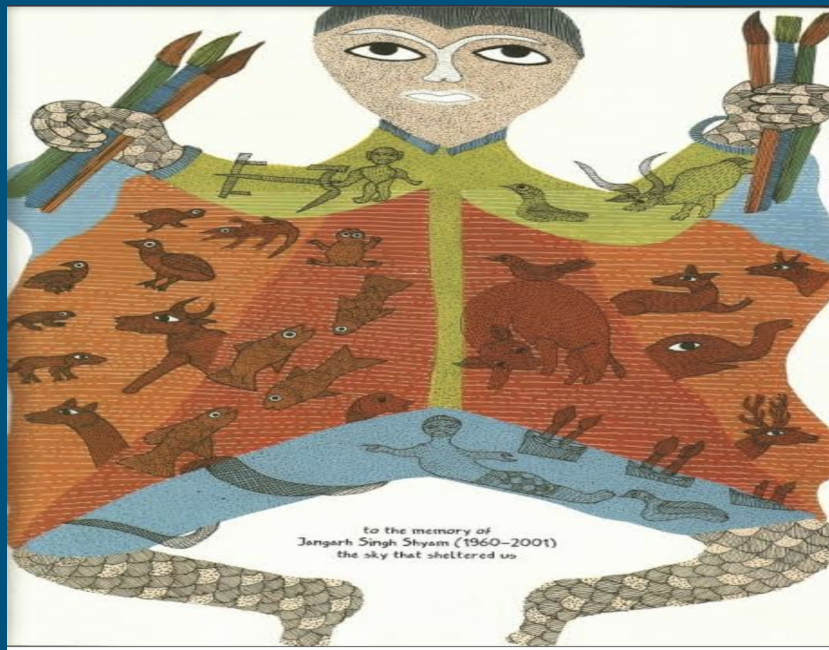
Nandini Chandra

Traditions and Aesthetics

“In the beginning it was very difficult to adapt this story into a graphic novel, as the Vyams had never done sequential art,” says Anand the publisher.

“We’d like to state one thing very clear from the outset. We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is *khula* (open) where there’s space for all to breathe,” the Vyams

"The ecology of Pardhan Gond art is such that even when dealing with urban subjects we see freefalling animals, birds and trees in landscapes without a horizon. The train becomes a snake, the intimidating fort a lion. The happiness of the people of Chalisgaon who receive Babasaheb Ambedkar is not conveyed through smiling faces but a dancing peacock. An earthmover used by a dalit, who is digging for a well, sheds tears as two cows bear witness“, from the afterword to the *Bhimayana*.
(*Bhimayana*, 'A Digna for Bhim')



The Adivasi Imaginary

“It is difficult to understand, within the commonly accepted Western notions of ownership or property, the Adivasi’s relationship to land, forest, animals, and water as it is rooted in very different conceptual frameworks. They have associations with nature that explain how the natural world offers an insight into the maintenance of being. Belief in both interconnectedness and interdependence has been part of the wisdom of these peoples for centuries, transmitted orally across generations.”

Navjot Altaf Mohamedi

The Memory Archive

“Tribals have an intense sense of shapes and geometry, and an acute feel for the texture of the materials they use to make things. In whatever they build or make, they reveal and highlight the shapes, tones and textures they handle. It’s as though the message of the medium is more important than the message framed in the artist’s conceptual understanding. Hence, every tribal artist conceals his individual identity by foregrounding the medium itself. In their exuberant love for the materials used, tribal creations seem almost like prayerful offerings to the elements that make this world such a mysteriously beautiful place.” GN Devy

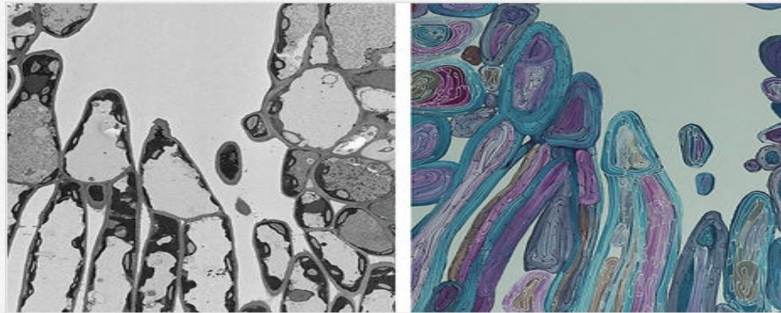
Jangarh Singh Shyam's son Mayank describes what fascinates him the most about his art practice: “The stories of the Gond community, our *reeti-riwas*, traditions and *puja paath*, prayers are what I like to paint in my own style. There are three ‘permanent’ symbols for me. The story of creation began life on the earth. Water is an elementary and vital source of life, so I always depict fish. The open sky above is essential for life, so I depict birds. The earth sustains us and gives us a place to stand on and live, so I paint trees.”

Resonances between Indigenous art and Images captured by Microscopes

<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2018/10/19/resonances-between-indigenous-art-and-images-captured-microscopes>

Sandhills dreaming (artist Vanessa Nampijinpa Brown) and atoms in quartz

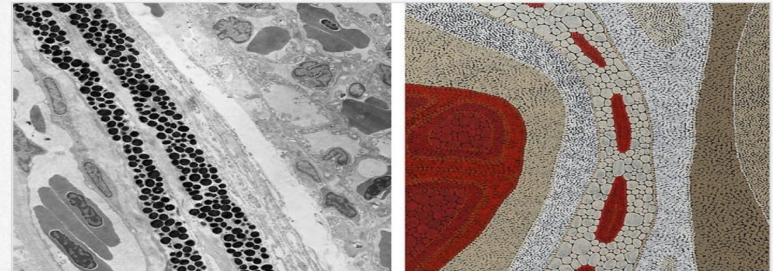
The crystal structure revealed in the micrograph is fundamental to the sand making up the sandhills that Vanessa paints in her story.



Gum Leaf and Gathering Bush Tucker.

Gathering bush tucker (artist Kerry Madawyn McCarthy) and gum leaf cells

The cells in this gum leaf are reminiscent of the rocks and coastal landscape of Kerry's painting. Her people move through the landscape to collect food just as carbon dioxide moves through the leaf spaces to cells, where it is converted to food for the plant.



Fish Eye – Blood Flow and Dry River Bed.

Welcome to the Anthropocene

“At the very moment when it was becoming fashionable to speak of the “post-human” in the blasé tones of those who know that the time of the human is “outdated,” the “Anthropos” has come back – and with a vengeance – owing to the thankless empirical work of researchers whose lack of culture intellectuals like to mock by calling them mere “naturalists.” Despite all their sophistication, the various fields of the humanities, obsessed as they have been with defending the “human dimension” against the “illegitimate encroachment” of science and the risks of excessive “naturalization,” could not detect what the historians of nature have to be credited with bringing to light. By giving a totally new dimension to the very notion of “human dimension,” these historians are proposing the most radical term of all for putting an end to anthropocentrism as well as to the old forms of naturalism; they are thus completely reconstituting the role of human agents. The magazine *The Economist* was quite right to use this slogan on its cover in 2011: “Welcome to the Anthropocene”

Bruno Latour