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Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 18–27 | ISSN 2050-487X | [www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk](http://www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk)

## Pardhan Gond adoption of new media

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The decline in the traditional role of the Pardhan Gond bard has led to responsive adaptation of the oral narratives to the medium of visual art. This now provides an artistic identity and currency to a significant group, it has brought some members of the Pardhan community from select villages to establish residence in Bhopal, and it renders a case study of empowering tribal cultures to utilize contemporary narrative forms and platforms. Interaction with researchers and participation in national and international exhibitions continues to introduce new applications for Pardhan Gond art that propose to invigorate their practice and widen the appeal for the younger generations. The conceptual framework of the research presented in this discussion is informed by the postcolonial theory of self-representation (Spivak 1988). The methods used were participant observation in collaborative research workshops and semi structured focus group interviews to collect the data for analysis to ascertain the implications of interpreting the oral and artistic practices of the Pardhan Gonds for digital media and animation.



**Figure 1.** *Dancing Peacock* by Venkat Raman Singh Shyam.  
Reproduced with permission from the artist

The diverse Adivasi communities of Central India have been interlinked for hundreds of years and they have practiced complementary occupations. With a population of over four million, the Gonds are one of the largest indigenous societies of the region and history indicates that they were a powerful and well-organised group. Essentially farmers, they became patrons to Pardhan bards who fulfilled a role as the keepers of the Gond myths, genealogies and history. Austrian anthropologist Christoph von Fürer Haimendorf conducted studies on the Gonds published in *The Gonds of Andhra Pradesh* (1979), in which he has defined the relationship of the Pardhan to the larger Gond community as the helper, advisor and chronicler in a role second only to the katora or clan priest. Gond myths of origin and history explain this special relationship between the Gonds and the Pardhans: the Pardhan is described as the youngest of twelve Gond brothers and the only one who is able play the sacred Bana fiddle and awaken the great god Baradev from his slumber in the saja tree.

Haimendorf has detailed how the Pardhans are racially and linguistically distinct from the Gonds, that a Pardhan family is attached to every clan and sub-clan of the Gonds and yet that the Pardhans can neither intermarry with Gonds nor enter the Gond kitchen. The Pardhan minstrel recalls the glory of the Gonds through myths and epics that are passed on

from father to son, and Vajpeyi and Vivek (2008) have explained how they were paid by their Gond patrons to keep this collective memory alive and the importance this had in preserving their communal identity. The Pardhan also collected information on any death in the clan so that the rites of the dead could be performed. All the important stages of life such as the birth of a child, marriage and death were marked by donations and it has been recorded that if these fees were not paid, the Pardhan would place his spear with his fiddle tied to it in front of the Gond's house until a settlement was achieved. The Pardhan also expected to receive a contribution on his annual visit to his patron's house, where the hospitality extended to him included a fire and food. In the evening he would recite the sacred myths and epics, and on leaving, his patron would give a small cash sum and grain or other significant donation of value – such as cloth, bamboo baskets, umbrellas, shoes, cattle or tools. This traditional representation of the Pardhan is evidence of their familiarity with narrative structure and aptitude for interpretation and regeneration of culture.

Invasions by the Mughals and the Marathas had adverse impact on the indigenous cultures. The decline that began in the beginning of the nineteenth century, accelerated with the British who replaced their social systems with their own institutions and these were maintained by the Government

administration that followed. Changing attitudes are alluded to by Vajpeyi and Vivek(2008) who have identified the burgeoning sense that as the Pardhan was living off the charity of the Gond he could therefore be regarded as a burden to progress.

Encumbered by new economic pressures, the Gonds could not continue to support Pardhans and although they were still called to sing and play at ritual occasions such as funerals and Persa Pen feasts, Pardhans could no longer rely on the gifts of the Gonds and they had to look for other sources of income through agriculture and menial work.

#### *Adaptation to Visual Media*

In 1981 a team of cultural researchers from Bhopal arrived at Patangarh village in remote Eastern Madhya Pradesh. Their attention focused on some wall murals by a talented young man called Jangarh Singh Shyam who was subsequently invited to Bhopal where his artistic development was supported - and this ultimately led him to develop a whole new form of artistic expression for the Pardhans. With his own flourishing popularity, Jangarh required assistance in his artistic commissions and so his younger relatives began to follow him to the city. Encouraged by Jangarh, some of them were able to use the medium of brush and canvas to earn a living. They began to depict their myths and deities through visual media, and as they began to paint as a trade,

they were also encouraged to depict popular deities such as Ganesh as saleable commodities. Today a prolific group of about fifty Pardhan Gond artists reside in Bhopal. Some, including Durga Bai and Subhash Vyam, Bhajju Shyam and Venkat Raman Singh Shyam have gone on to achieve national and international recognition through exhibitions, workshops and book illustration.

#### *Animation*

The first link between Pardhan Gond art and stories and animation took place with The Tallest Story Competition (2006), a series of five short animated tribal folktales from Central India produced by the Scottish company West Highland Animation and supported by cultural organisations in Scotland (the Gaelic Committee and Scottish Screen). However, the cross cultural dynamic extended further into the past: the animated film Best of the Best in The Tallest Story Competition collection is based on an adaptation of a Gond folktale sourced from Folktales of the Mahakoshal (1944) collected by Dr Verrier Elwin.

Preliminary research for the film presented the attractive, figurative art style that had been developed by the Pardhan Gond artists as potentially appealing in the animation medium, and a field trip to Patangarh and Bhopal in 2003 brought a small research team into the homes of Pardhan Gond artists who conveyed

enthusiasm towards the idea of painting artwork for animation. A ten day workshop was organised the following year in Bhopal for eighteen artists supervised by Leslie Mackenzie, (Director of West Highland Animation) and documented by anthropologist Dr Michael Yorke. The outlines for the animation characters had been determined by student animators in Scotland through the creation of a storyboard for the short film. This artwork was painted and detailed by the Pardhan Gond artists during the workshop in Bhopal and it was brought back to Scotland where it was animated by the student animators at West Highland Animation.

On completion, the Tallest Story Competition films were dubbed into five indigenous languages, Hindi, English and the original Gaelic. The Adivasi Arts Trust went on to screen the films in schools in Central India where children were delighted by their own local stories, styles and context in animation for the first time. 10,000 children voted to choose the Gond story as their favorite in The Tallest Story Competition, and a Trophy was later awarded for the Best of the Best at the Inverness Film Festival in Scotland in 2007. More screenings were held the following year in the United Kingdom, where the series raised some questions with regard to the limited extent of indigenous involvement in the production. Ongoing contact with the Pardhan Gond artists for projects to promote their art in

the United Kingdom through workshops and exhibitions (2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012) and a seminar and a radio programme in 2010 has strengthened existing links and several of the artists are now members of the Adivasi Arts Trust.

The first animated adaptation of a Gond folktale has inspired further interest from some of the Pardhan artists to consider more of their folk stories from the context of animation. In 2008, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts hosted an introductory Tribal Animation Workshop that brought indigenous artists into contact with young Indian animators from the National Institute of Design. The event, coordinated by Tara Douglas (Secretary of the Adivasi Arts Trust) also attracted scholarly interest, and Dr Roma Chatterji has since published a book, *Speaking with Pictures: Folk Art and the Narrative Tradition in India* (2012) in which she has cited this initiative in support of her concern for the integrity of Gond art and oral content transposed to the animation medium.

Cuteness, bright colours, fast action and the technical sophistication of Disney cartoons produced with huge budgets have now become standard expectations of animation style worldwide; *Roadside Romeo* (2008) *Koochie Koochie Hota Hain* (2010) and *Delhi Safari* (2012) are examples of recent Indian animated feature films of this genre.

Chatterji's critique is justifiable if viewed from the position of the animation industry in India which is dominated by the commercial style of animation developed by foreign companies such as Disney according to a strict artistic and corporate protocol (Kunzle, 1975) displaying characteristics of "Naturalistic style, richness of colour and shading, depth of detail in background, full musical scores, and consistent themes, narrative, and ideologies" (Artz, 2002, p10). From within this frame of reference, adaptation of Pardhan Gond design that removes it from its context amounts to appropriation of cultural property. However, in contrast, the historical application of experimental animation practice as a hybrid art form by Futurists, Dadaists and other modern artists as a way of adding movement to their paintings and graphic designs (Starr, 1987) presents opportunities for its use in support of Pardhan Gond artistic practice.

In India animation production is mostly subcontracted by American, Japanese and European countries (Lent, 2001) and it provides employment to many young Indian animators with qualifications from the growing number of animation institutes that have opened in the urban centres of the country. (Times of India, 2011) This high cost method of production that has led investors to focus on maximum return has resulted in Indian animation companies choosing to adopt tried and tested formulas rather than experiment

with Indian content and folk art forms, and it contrasts animation practice developed by young animators and indigenous artists in the workshop environment.

Tales of the Tribes is a research project that challenges the commercial production process and the absence of indigenous representation in animation with a method for producing a sample collection of animation films in India as partnership collaborations between young Indian animation artists and indigenous communities. It is an initiative that is informed by research on traditional art forms, experimentation with cultural content, and examination of the issues that are implied in this activity.

### *The Collaborative Environment*

Indigenous communities have traditionally told their own story and connected to the past through their folktales (Scroggie, 2009, Smith, 1999). However, a repercussion of globalization is that mainstream television entertainment now supersedes local oral storytelling practices and there is evidence from workshops with young indigenous people that they are losing touch with their own cultural heritage as exemplified by their negligence towards their folklore.

Animation has become a ubiquitous medium to capture the imagination of young people, it can be widely screened and it is viable to dub animation into multiple



languages. In India, animation is primarily targeted at juveniles, which presents the theory that it is a functional medium for inclusive dissemination. As a medium that incorporates dimensions of location, time and sound, it is appropriate for the communication of the multidimensional aspects of folktales to make indigenous culture accessible for both young indigenous and non-indigenous audiences.

The response to *The Tallest Story* Competition has inspired animator Tara Douglas to examine more animation films based on indigenous content produced in collaboration with indigenous artists. Indigenous communities in other parts of the world are stipulating how they are represented, and in countries such as Canada and Australia indigenous people have received support for broadcast, film making and animation. From an American Indian perspective Singer (2001, p2) has written that “Our films and videos are helping to reconnect us with very old relationships and traditions”.

The *Tales of the Tribes* collection that showcases four stories from the Northeast region of India proposes the appropriation of the dominant language of animation for indigenous representation that ensures that ethnic detail is not merely providing local colour but is the central feature that gives a specific reference point through the visual design, music, dialogues and indigenous values

as cultural signifiers in the film (Ashcroft et al, 1989).

The *Tales of the Tribes* will also include a second animated Gond folktale. As scholar of Gond art, John Bowles has expressed hope that this animated adaptation will be created by the artists themselves. (Personal communication, 2012) However, as a highly specialized technical skill, few indigenous artists at present have access to the complex software that is used to create animation to fulfill the sophisticated expectations of contemporary audiences.

Pardhan Gond artists have been involved in the production from its conception, in a pre-production workshop that was held at the National Institute of Design in September 2012. Three Pardhan Gond artists - Venkat, Rajendra and Dileep Shyam were invited as cultural and artistic directors to advise on the choice of story, representation and cultural context and to assist the group of Post Graduate Animation Film Design students to develop a visual plan for the short film.

Storytelling sessions during the first week established a rapport between the artists and the animators. A selection of folktales from Central India were sourced from publications, others were recalled by the artists who finally chose Manjoor Jhali, (*The Story of the Peacock*). As the Pardhan artists frequently depict peacocks in their paintings they felt confident to design this character from all the

required angles for the animation film, and this has certainly influenced their choice. The story takes the structure of a narrative creation myth from when mighty Baradev is said to have created the world. According to the story, this momentous task took three and a half days, which left the rest of the week for the creation of the most beautiful creature of all, the Peacock. However, just before the separate parts were assembled, the cheeky Tithi Bird, stole the beautiful feet, and exchanged them with his own shabby ones. The story presents a witty explanation for the appearance of the peacock and, as with most tribal stories, it also carries a moral: “To be content with what you have is the message of this story, and it is an important message for us in the village”, explained Venkat. (Personal interview, 2012).

Gonds learnt and adapted easily to Hindi and it has now been mostly adopted as the mother tongue by the Pardhans. Communication with the Pardhan Gond artists to understand the details of Gond stories proves difficult for a British researcher, and in these circumstances recordings are made with a portable device and the stories is translated later. Translation and interpretation is also explicit in the adaptation of oral narratives for animation. Collaboration with animators introduces a film language that is regarded as crucial to enable the film to communicate with audiences from diverse backgrounds. Chatterji (2012) has deconstructed the non-linear form

of visual depiction of myth in Gond painting that contrasts the linear narrative structure of popular storytelling in animation. Translation into the audio visual language involves identifying the main characters and negotiating structural adaptation in the preproduction phase by the team of Pardhan Gond artists and the animators. Where oral stories are epics replete with complex details some simplification is implemented to accommodate the short film format, but a commitment is maintained towards the original meaning of the story and the integrity of the artwork. This is an experiment that advocates the appropriation of the dominant language of animation for indigenous representation over appropriation of indigenous content, and collaboration with the indigenous community that is infused with the impetus for empowerment. The project also encompasses the objective of sensitization of non-indigenous audiences to the value of indigenous culture, and self-reflexive practices, informed by critical thought processes is significant for the integration of the non-indigenous partners in the project.

The young animators are concerned that the film does not become a next step in the commercialization of tribal heritage. The application of their inputs is negotiated by the group. “I am going to try and contribute inputs for the narrative and storyboard from an animation point of view and make sure that visually the Gond story is shown effectively,



that the narrative is not lost and the original story's details are maintained" says Shirin, one of the postgraduate students from NID. (Personal interview, 2012) "This project generates sensitivity in us towards their rich narrative culture and helps us evolve as storytellers," she adds.

The animators have explored techniques to turn character designs created by the Pardhan artists into cut-out puppets. Two methods are available: They can either be painted on paper or acetate and manipulated frame by frame directly under the camera, or the artwork can be scanned and animated using software. 5000-7000 images will need to be created for a five minute film according to the animatic (created by placing storyboard drawings on a timeline with the audio narration and musical tracks). "It is important for us to contribute as much as we can but still remaining true to the art form and not tamper much with it". Elaborating further on the project, animation

student, Jaimeen, has opined how "Using their artworks to tell their folktales is a fairly new tradition. And to animate is to take it to another level. It is like the tradition is evolving in front of us. And that is exciting" (Personal interview, 2012).

This animation project challenges the dominant approach towards tribal culture that has suspended it in time and confined it to archives. This view of stagnation is resented by the indigenous communities who are motivated to develop and express themselves in modern forms, and in support of this, Edwards (1997) has argued that "authenticity does not reside in a past that is unchanging, lacking any internal dynamic." The Tales of the Tribes research explores a new tool for self-representation within the contemporary context and collaboration with animators introduces digital skills and new dimensions for communication and interaction. 🎨



**Figure 2.** A still image from *Best of the Best* (West Highland Animation). Reproduced with permission.

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