

The Journey of Discovering and Preserving Heritage

Mary Girard¹

Abstract

In researching *Among the Original Dwellers* (2019), I found myself on a journey of discovery of my lost heritage. In the process I also discovered the Adivasi of Chotanagpur. The book is of the life of my great-great-grandfather, Ferdinand Hahn, a German missionary in 19th century British India. My journey led to an encounter with the Christian Adivasi of Jharkhand, who were keen to learn more about the history of their people. This encounter helped me write more authentically about the Adivasi. Since their culture is predominantly an oral tradition, I wrestled with many questions. How is their heritage and history accessed? How is oral tradition preserved? Where is the Adivasi literature? In response the author offered various impromptu writing workshops that were received with great enthusiasm. This article describes how such workshops are helpful in jogging collective memory and could play an important role in shaping Adivasi literature.

My family had little to no knowledge of the ancestors who first connected us to India. Four generations of my family worked as missionaries in India, I am the fifth generation who had the good fortune of spending most of my childhood in India as an expatriate. Discovering my ancestor's story led me to learn of the Adivasi. As an author my journey continues to explore cross cultural relationships and questions related to the preservation of heritage and the restoration of forgotten histories.

The full details of the life and legacy of my great-great-grandfather can be found in *Among the Original Dwellers: Remembering Ferdinand Hahn* (Girard 2019). For context, I will briefly summarise Ferdinand Hahn's life that began as a simple German shoemaker in Prussia. In 1868 he ventured to India to begin a life as a missionary with the Gossner Mission in Chota Nagpur where he lived in Ranchi, Chaibasa, Lohardaga and Purulia. Over 42 years he accomplished various works from education to medical work. He is remembered by the Adivasi and scholars of Adivasi studies for his work in linguistics and ethnology, writing the *Kurukh Grammar* (Hahn 1900) and recording Oraon folk tales in *Insight into the Spirit World* (Hahn 1905). The Gossner churches that

¹ Mary Girard is an independent scholar, who studied at the University of Wisconsin, currently lives in Madison, Wisconsin. She spent her formative years in India as the daughter of an American medical missionary. Three other generations in her family were also missionaries to India. After a life of working in the non-government sector as a consultant and administrative assistant, Girard has turned her attention to Adivasi and Christians studies. After publishing her first book, *Among the Original Dwellers* (Girard 2019), she is now working on a novel about the relationship between a missionary woman and an Adivasi woman in the 19th century. Email: maribeti2004@gmail.com; website: www.amongtheoriginaldwellers.com

he was instrumental in establishing, today total around 800,000 congregants, 90% among them are Adivasi. Through my research I rekindled the ancestral relationship with these Christian Adivasi that was, at least for my family, interrupted by World War I when my branch of the family migrated to the United States.

Other researchers will be delighted to find an abundance of on-line resources about the Adivasi in the 19th century. Minutes of missionary meetings, correspondence and various articles are readily accessible. Alas, much of it is in *Kurrent* (old German). The German missionaries did much to record the histories of the Adivasi, at least as they understood; just as the Scandinavian missionaries had done for the Santal (see Carrin and Tombs-Lyche 2008). A very small amount is in English or Hindi. Access to these materials are available through Evangelisches Landeskirchliches Archive in Berlin (ELAB)/Archive of the Berliner Missionswerk (email: elab@ekbo.de; website: <http://kab.scopearchiv.ch/suchinfo.aspx>).

For the biography, I relied on these original German sources and had to learn how to read and tediously translate (with the help of Google translate) the materials I had collected. My 91 year old father, Theodore Feierabend, was more than willing to take on the tedious work and has completed translating histories written by Ludwig Nottrott (1895), Ferdinand Hahn (1907) and Walter Holsten (1949) and a myriad of other smaller articles. These are important histories of Adivasi Christianity and Adivasi culture in general, as seen through the German bias none-the-less important original documents. These English translations will be published in India to make them more readily available. From there whatever is useful can be translated into Hindi and other tribal languages.

There are many similar challenges to studying Adivasi history and cultures. How do we access histories that are often handwritten or in other languages? How do we discover and capture the oral stories that are passed on within families and clans? How do we interpret conflicting narratives? Can an outsider write authentically about the Adivasi? How can we encourage more Adivasis to write about their own culture and heritage?

As an outsider of German-American heritage, I can only truly write about how I, and my ancestors as outsiders, discover and understand Adivasi India; it is always a cross cultural relationship. Discovering and valuing the 'other' has for me a certain urgency to maintain cultural diversity and preserve heritage in an increasingly globalized multicultural environment. 'Diversity has to be strongly celebrated in a multicultural society for there to be peace, progress and stability. [We] have an obligation to support and promote tolerance, liberation and celebration in a society that takes pride in being multicultural' (Gaitskell 2001). India is such a multicultural society and of the multiple narratives, the Adivasi are part of the make up of who and what is Indian.

I had discovered how intricately invested the lives of my ancestors were linked to those of the Adivasi. When I met people in Ranchi, Lohardaga, Chaibasa and Purulia, and also in Chhattisgarh, I had hoped to receive from them more history than I had to share from my research. Though I joined many cultural celebrations and heard many stories, most people did not know the story of their ancestors, just as I had not known of mine. The oral tradition that for generations had been the bedrock of their culture and identity was slipping away, especially for the urban and educated. I asked them, where is Adivasi literature?

Adivasi literature (about and/or by the Adivasis) is developing, many concise materials that I rightfully cannot read since I don't yet know the language. This article is

not a review of that literature. It is clear that Adivasi writers remain under-cultivated (Chatterji 1971). Beyond academic studies by anthropologists, historians, economists, sociologist, and even theologians, I was directed to two important novels written by outsiders: Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (Spivak 2003) and Carstairs' *Harma's Village* (1935). In the past decade an emergence of Adivasi publishing companies are indication of a greater demand for literature about, by and for the Adivasi. Adivaani Publishers (adivaani.org) is 'a platform for indigenous expression and assertion.' The newly formed Adivasi Publications (www.adivasipublications.com) organised by a 'group of Adivasi activists, writers and public intellectuals of India, who envisage to build an intellectual, empowered and prosper Adivasi society,' features Adivasi writers and distributes literature, making it available throughout rural areas.



Photo from Adivasi Publication facebook

The levels of literacy and effectiveness of education certainly impacts the growing demand. Literacy rates for the Scheduled Tribes, according to the 2011 Census, is 59% compared to the national rate of 73%. The rate has not improved, despite the government's efforts to increase rural education. In her study of Oraon women outside of Ranchi, located in villages that share this common grove in Malar (picture), Nijhar Jharia Minz argues that education and 'literacy programs in vogue were in reality ineffective' (Minz 2015) because the education system is irrelevant to Adivasi reality or as Ngugi wa Thiong'o states in *Decolonising the Mind*: 'There was often not the slightest relationship between the child's written world, which was also the language of his schooling, and the world of his immediate environment in the family and the community' (1986).



Malar grove shared by three villages, photo taken by M. Girard 2018

A more 'holistic education and literacy... for the true emancipation of their personhood as individuals and as a community' (Minz 2015) is needed. Education and literacy can only 'stick' if the reader has access to materials relevant to the Adivasi society. Adivasi Literature is an expression, as Thiong'o states, of a 'new era of true communal self-regulations and self-determination ... to seize back their creative initiative in history.'. However, Thiong'o emphasises language as much as the content. 'The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe' (1986). Undoubtedly writing in one's mother-tongue reflects the rhythms and expressions of language and culture. However, in absence of a written language there is only orature to depend on. Kurukh, for example, has only adapted a script in the last decade, and the state of Jharkhand first allowed teaching and testing in tribal languages in 2018. I would argue that multilingualism has been a part of the Adivasi reality, that includes Hindi and English as well as multiple tribal languages. Again, as orature (oral tradition) is slipping away, there is an urgency to preserve cultural heritage through literature.

When thinking of cultural heritage, one may think of UNESCO heritage sites which relate only to the cultural significance of property (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/158/>). A broader definition of cultural heritage includes the objects and property and intangible attributes of a group or society that have inherited a legacy of past generations that must be preserved and sustained in the present for future generations.

Cultural heritage includes tangible culture (such as buildings, monuments, landscapes, books, works of art, and artefacts). It also includes intangible culture traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts intangible culture (such as folklore, traditions, language, and knowledge), and natural heritage (including culturally significant landscapes, and biodiversity) (O'Donnell 2004).

Literature is one means through which people share culture and knowledge. Writing is not the only means through which we can preserve and share cultures, it is perhaps the lowest method for those whose culture is traditionally oral. Dance and song, drama, poetry and celebrations might be the primary tools currently in use for carrying on traditions. Adivasis writing in their tribal languages and in Hindi and English (the languages of Indian education system) is a new tool. The increasingly literate Adivasi must be able to read their own literature, their own stories and affirm their own history, and do so in their own style to counter the 'institutionally prescribed narrativisation' (Kapoor 2004). If they do not write their own story, someone else will.

Outsiders, like myself and my great-great-grandfather, do write about the Adivasi. As a novice author myself I was glad to cultivate my ability as a storyteller, I had the advantage of participating in several writing workshops in the United States to hone my craft and discovered that writing was a means through which I could explore my own heritage. Could I not share such an experience with others? Writing workshops are one means to cultivate writers, draw together a community of writers, and preserve and restore the oral traditions that are slipping away. Since storytelling is already essential to Adivasi culture and identity such workshops would be less about prescribing how to write and more on safeguarding cultural heritage.

How can we safeguard and manage a heritage that is constantly changing and part of 'living culture' without freezing or trivialising it? Safeguarding them is about the

transferring of knowledge, skills and meaning. In other words, safeguarding focuses on the processes involved in transmitting, or communicating intangible cultural heritage from generation to generation, rather than on the production of its concrete manifestations, such as a dance performance, a song, a music instrument or a craft (O'Donnell 2004).

During my visits to Ranchi in 2018 and 2019 the people I met expressed an interest in restoring and preserving their heritage through writing; traditions and oral stories needed to be written down and shared. I held four different 'Preserving our Heritage Writing Workshops' with Adivasi students and writers in Ranchi. An alternative sample workshop was held at JNU in Delhi, that will be described as a contrasting example. Together, we explored oral stories and memories with hopes of creating a writing community that would eventually publish stories that would capture Adivasi collective memory.

The workshop presentation posed the following question to the participants: How do we ignite memory in ourselves and others? This is a useful prompt to consider as a writer, but also as an interviewer trying to help someone else, such as a grandparent or village elder, to remember a story that they may have forgotten. Below is a general outline of the workshops that can be replicated in any location, in any language.

Basic Elements of Writing Workshops towards Preserving Our Heritage:

1. Individual Writing Exercises
 - a. Earliest memory (5 sentences only).
 - b. List as a group what represents your community/culture
 - i. 6-10 Places/Spaces
 - ii. 6-10 Objects
 - iii. 6-10 Community Values
 - c. Using one from each list write how one (or more) of the values can be understood in the context of space and objects (5 minutes)
2. Creating a community of support for the Individual Writer
 - a. Reading each other's stories
 - b. Critiquing and feedback
 - c. Rewriting & Translation
3. Collective Writing

After collecting 6-10 common cultural objects and 6-10 cultural values. Split the group into common regions and together write about what the object is, how it is used, and if there are any cultural values that can be incorporated



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The writing workshop had five to twelve participants from different tribes and regions, men and women, old and young. The final group had nearly 40 participants, so with such a large group some changes had to be made to guarantee equal participation for all. Together we found that the exercise of writing, reading and critiquing sparked our own memories and began to reflect collective memory. Sample pictures in this article are all from Preserving our Heritage workshops held in 2018 and 2019.

There are a variety of writing exercises that can be used to simply warm up and begin practicing writing. A variety of exercises can be practiced. For example, free-flow writing is a 2 minute exercise to write down whatever thoughts might be in the writer's head. The full two minutes must be spent writing, no correcting, no pausing to think, simply practice writing down thoughts. In these workshops participants were asked to write five sentences of their earliest memory. Each person read what they wrote to the rest of the group. This generated discussion and began the process of generating individual and collective memories.

The second exercise was for the participants to list six to ten key elements (respectively) of their culture or community: places or spaces, objects and community values. There is increasing recognition that conservancy or preservation of history must focus less on the objects or places and more on “intangible values [that] play an important role in how people interact with their social and cultural environments’ (Clark and Johnston 2003). I would argue that values are related to environment and resources or tools, so intangible values to the tangible are necessarily linked.

In making the lists of elements of culture the discussion was over cultural significance as well as vocabulary used to describe places, objects or values. This is particularly apparent if participants are from different regions and/or language groups. The three to five minute writing exercise can incorporate all three elements into a single story; or it can be broken into three separate exercises, writing for two minutes after each list is compiled. For those unfamiliar with writing it is good to do these smaller exercises, writing three separate pieces. Then a final and longer exercise compiles the three stories into one. Examples of written stories in each workshop varied from the multiple uses of a peacock feather to how to put on a traditional loin cloth.



When asked to read what they had written, many of the Adivasi writers felt compelled to just 'tell' their story, for they are natural story-tellers. I tried to get them to stick to the written word, for that was what we were practicing. Being able to comfortably read drafts of one's written work is one way to grow a writing community, giving each other feedback as writers, and cultivating collective memory.

At this stage of the writing workshops, the emphasis is not on writing skill or style. For Adivasi literature will develop over time its own style and writers must be freed from conforming to the constructs of general society. Still it is beneficial to explore a variety of styles and to pay attention to the rhythm and feel of Adivasi language and culture as the writing is practiced. During these workshops writers were simply capturing what was told, observed or remembered. For this reason, all discussion must be kept respectful and supportive as commonality and differences are revealed, but listeners and critiquers in the workshops are encouraged to express not only what memories were generated but also how a story made them feel.

Sample of earliest memory²:

In my early childhood I used to walk with my beloved father on the village road and sometimes on the way to the village marketplace. In the course of our walking we used to find some offensive stones or thorns or broken glasses or iron nails lying on the way. My father used to remove those articles carefully and put them in such places where no one would be hurt. He told me to do so always for the people and for keeping them safe. I find this early experience deeply rooted in my subconscious mind to the same even today remembering my beloved father vividly. This gives me an inner joy. Today I see the same impact on my beloved son, which inspires me to give thanks to God.



Most of the workshops were with tribal people, so they listed all common places in the village or home (e.g. Akra, sacred grove, field). I was invited to provide a sample of this workshop to history graduate students at JNU in Delhi. It was instructive as a contrast to the Adivasi workshops. Since the students were from different states within India, the only community they had in common was the University itself. These history

² Rev. Dr. Cyril Hembrom: Masters of Theology from United Theological College, Bangalore and a degree of M.D. (Medical) in homoeopathy. He currently hosts the newly formed Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in his home. Cyril Hembrom self identifies as Christian Adivasi, his language is Santali, which identifies him as a Santal.

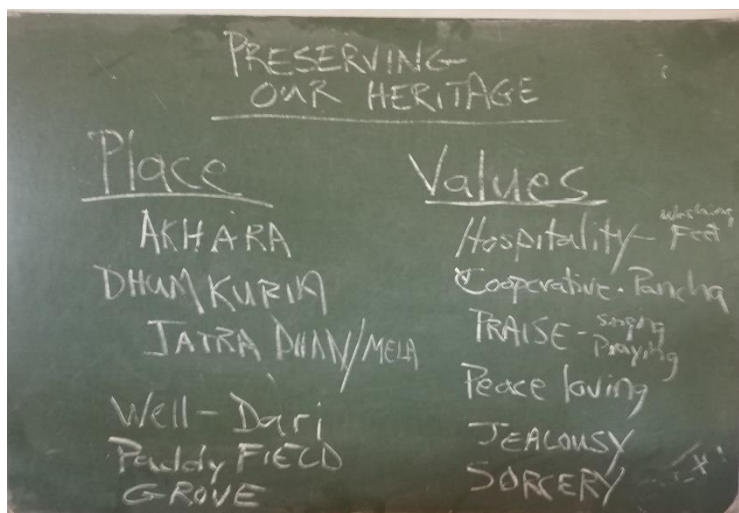
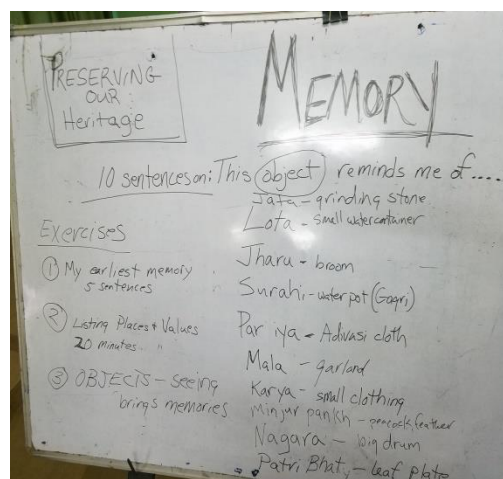
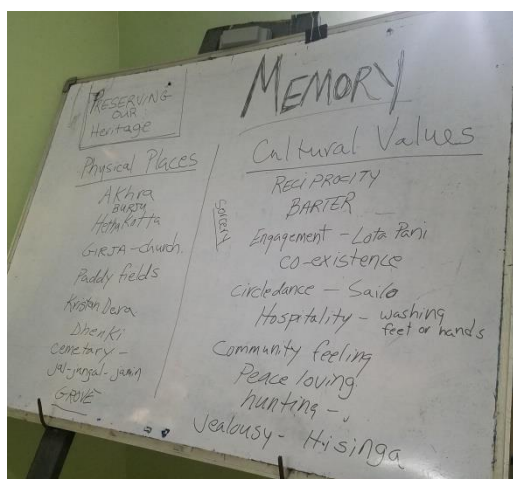
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students considered the challenges of accessing oral traditions by becoming aware of their own challenges in having a common narrative. I cannot help but wonder what their thoughts were regarding their sense of community a month later when ‘goons’ from outside came in to disrupt their community. The benefit of the writing workshop in this context was to discover the scope of community and observe that within any community, once defined, an oral tradition and common heritage is shaped.

Oral tradition of story-telling is still very much alive and remains powerful. Before looking at some examples from the workshops mentioned here let us remember the purpose as so eloquently described by Joseph Bruchac, a native American story-teller: ‘a story has at least two purposes. The first is to entertain, ensuring it will be heard. This requires awareness and knowledge of the audience – an awareness lacking in any form of recording. Secondly, a story must convey a lesson, one directly appropriate to the needs of the listener’ (2010).

Samples of type of lists made by the Adivasi Participants:

- Adivasi places included: Akhara, Paddy, Sacred Grove
- Objects were items made from leaves, flowers, clay, etc.
- Community Values ranged from hospitality to jealousy





One of my favorite Adivasi stories that emerged from the workshops was of an elderly Ho couple who were on their last handful of rice. They thought they would be eating their last meal when a young boy came to them and reminded them that the leaves of trees outside their home were not only edible but very nutritious. They picked a bunch of leaves and boiled it, till it was only about a handful. The meal kept the old couple alive. The story-teller had heard this story as a child; for him the important aspect of the story was that the couple were left with only a handful. Perhaps the lesson is that even a handful is sufficient. My take on the story was that it represented our writing workshops where the younger generation needs to remind the older and the stories must be made and placed into our hands, for it is lost wisdom that will sustain not only the community but the world.

Since the smaller workshops were held in English, the participants were then asked to translate what they had written into Hindi. While Hindi may not have been their mother-tongue, it is the language they shared and were most conversant in. In the re-writing the participants were prompted to add the senses: smell, sight (such as color), touch, sound and taste. The participants appreciated sharing their writing in their own language along with all the writing exercises that illustrated to them how to ignite their own memory about various aspects of their culture.



The final workshop, at Navin Doman Theological College (NDTC) which is at Malar outside of Ranchi (the same village of Minz' study of Oroan women, mentioned earlier), participants explored both individual and collective writing and storytelling. The lessons were translated into Hindi and writing was done in Hindi. It was apparent that there were many differences from tribe to tribe, village to village, region to region. So that every

participant was engaged in the process, the thirty seven participants were divided into groups of three to five. based on common region.

Each group was to write (or tell) a collective story about any given object collected from around the campus. The objects (such as drum, pot, cloth) were identified with different names and purposes, depending on region even within the same tribe. They were asked to describe where an object came from, its purpose and how it is used and what memories or stories it triggers in the participants.



Again it was easier for the writers to simply tell their story than to read it. An obvious remedy for this is to use their own phone cameras to record themselves or others telling stories and post on social media. Later these recordings can be transcribed and shaped into literature. As of yet, there is still some trepidation among young people and also women to freely use their voices in this way.

The Preserving our Heritage Writing Workshops were meant to generate writing, bring writers together and spark interest in Adivasi to write their own literature. As I am able, I hope to continue to provide these workshops and hope others will duplicate such efforts. Later, I hope to work with the same group to incorporate exercises about the people who most impacted the writer's awareness of their own heritage. The students are encouraged to gather stories from their villages and homes using common objects and places to trigger discussion, memory and stories to eventually be preserved in writing.

These endeavors appear to continue the legacy of Ferdinand Hahn who also attempted to access the Adivasi voice, point of view, culture and heritage. Neither I nor my ancestors could ever claim to speak for the Adivasi. The Adivasi themselves can best communicate their 'pure' or 'authentic' experience or memory. These writing workshops have helped me to authentically write about Adivasi realities through a 'face-to-face ethical encounter' (Kapoor 2004). The main purpose is to provide tools for Adivasi writers to develop their own Adivasi literature.

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