

# **Revisiting the Adivasi Aesthetic of the Jungle Mahals, Eastern India**

**Nirmal Kumar Mahato**

Associate Professor in History

&

Deputy Director, Centre for Environmental Studies  
Vidyasagar University, Medinipur

## **Abstract**

On the occasion of the *bāndnā* festival, the Adivasi people of the Jungle Mahals make murals on their mud walls and draw floor paintings. As their art represents the environment in the abstract form it may be regarded as landscape aesthetic. For the Adivasi, reality has a different meaning. This paper deals with some of the issues like the Adivasi symbol, reality, and contemporaneity. Their murals, wall, and scroll painting expresses various meaning of human and non-human entangled relationship and these are regenerated during their festival.

## **Introduction**

In the mid-eighteenth century, the term 'aesthetic' has been used in modern philosophical discourse by German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten who conceptualizes aesthetics as science where 'things are to be cognized by means of senses'. Here, he includes beauty as 'the perfection of cognition by means of the senses as such' (Iseminger 2004: 1-3). 'Art is the abstraction of a form', as Bernard Lonergan defines, 'where the form becomes idealized by the abstraction. And the form is not conceptual. It is the pattern of internal relations that will be imminent in the colours, in the tones, in the spaces' (Lonergan 1993: 218-19). Though art and aesthetic are different concepts both are connected by what is called aestheticism. Here arts carry a unique type of aesthetic value where beauty is a key illustration revealed in an aesthetic state of mind (Iseminger

2004: 1-3). One of the main features of art is that, as Richard Linn argues, it ‘essentially functions as aesthetic’ which would be beautiful or attractive (Lind 1993:18). Pablo Ruiz Picasso and other European artists mentioned the power and vitality of ‘tribal’ art. They treated the ‘tribal art’ as a ‘highly economical and reductive rendering of complex concept’, not as ‘simple’, ‘childish’ or art of the people of ‘underdeveloped’ intelligence (Swaminathan 1987: 32-33). It is also presumed that in Adivasi art perspective is absent as the Adivasi artist don't have the idea of perspective. In the classical sense, as Sir Herbert Read argues, very few ‘tribal’ arts may be regarded as beautiful but it has vitality. It is more vital than beautiful. It is individualistic in origin before its appearance in the communal system as a symbolic sign. However, Franz Boas observes the aesthetic value of ‘tribal’ art. He comments:

‘We have seen that in the art of Primitive people two elements may be distinguished, a purely formal one in which enjoyment is based on form alone and another one in which the form is filled with meaning. In the latter case, the significance creates an enhanced aesthetic value, on the occasion of the associative connections of the product or artistic act’ (Quoted in Smith 1961: 125).

This paper intends to deal with some of the issues like the Adivasi symbol, reality, and contemporaneity, which have not received adequate attention in the earlier studies (Mahato 1987, 1992, Rycroft 1996, Mahato, 2015, 2020). The Adivasi people decorate and paint their mud-washed walls and also the floor with various designs and natural colours, which were collected from their local area. Their beliefs and expressive art has been formed from the symbiotic relationship with their forested landscape. Adivasi women have a key role in the formation of the domestic mural and floor paintings.

### **Study Area: The Jungle Mahals Region**

During medieval times the term 'Jungle Mahals' was well known. Though there had been no administrative unit as Jungle Mahals between the periods of 1760-1805, some of the woodland regions of Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura, Midnapore, and Manbhum were known as Jungle Mahals. In 1805, the district of Jungle Mahals was formed comprising the parganas and mahals such as Katlas, Habila, Jhalda, Jharia, Jayapur, Mukundapur,

Kismat Nwagarh, Kismat Chaontly, Torang, Tung, Nagar Kaisi and Patkum. From Burdwan district, Senapahari, Shergarh, and Bishnapur (except the police jurisdiction of Kotulpur and Balsi pargana) were included in the Jungle Mahals. Chhatna, Barabhum, Manbhum, Supur, Ambikanagar, Silapal, and Bhalaidiha were disintegrated from Midnapore and incorporated into the Jungle Mahals (Sen 1984: 2-3). Though the district existed up to 1833 the woodland region of southwest Bengal is still culturally known as Jungle Mahals region. The term 'Jungle Mahals' loosely implies the southwestern part of Bengal comprising the hill areas of Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia, West Midnapore, and Jhargram districts of West Bengal. This area remains on the margins of a rationally governed polity. Presently, this name is known as a distinct presence-an area, an economy, and a particular form of contentious politics.

This region is inhabited by Adivasi and semi-Hinduised communities and had less Brahmanical influence. As the region was infested with forest and hills the upper caste of Hindu settlement was very little. In the 1872 census, the total number of the 'tribal' population was 44,889 in Bankura where the Santals and semi-Hinduised populations were 25378 and 121743 respectively. The upper caste Hindus (Brahmin, Baidya, Kayastha etc.) numbered 72704. In Birbhum, 'tribes', semi-Hinduised communities and upper-caste Hindus numbered 16276, 181147 and 59418 (Sen 2013: 32-33). In Midnapore, the percentage of 'aboriginal' population and 'semi-Hinduised aboriginal' population in 1872 was 5.4%, and 9.6 % (Hunter 1876:49-51). Though the Bhumij were the largest single ethnic group in the erstwhile Jungle Mahals in the late nineties in the eighteenth century they became a minority in the seventies of the nineteenth century. In Manbhum, according to the 1872 census, Kurmi, Santal and Bhumij were figured as 241006, 197730 and 109016 respectively. After the Santal *hul* Santal population migrated to Malda, Birbhum, Assam and other regions (Sen 2013: 32-33). In 1901, the percentage of Santal population in Birbhum, Bankura and Midnapore was 7%, 29%, and 23% respectively. The Bhumij population in Bankura and Midnapore were 2.6% and 6.4% respectively (McAlpin 1909:3). According to the 1901 census, Kurmi, Santal, Bhumij and Bauri alone amounted to half of the total population in Manbhum district (Coupland 1911: 76). In Birbhum, according to 1931, the Santal and Kora population were 64079 and 8993 respectively (District Gazetteer Birbhum 1975:120-45). According

to the 1961 census in Purulia ‘tribal’ population constitutes 20% whereas the Santals constitute 10%, Mundas 8.4% and Oraons 4.3% (West Bengal District Gazetteer Purulia 1985:119). In Birbhum, ‘tribal’ population constitutes 7.39 % ( District Gazetteer Birbhum 1975: 169). In Bankura, the Santals constitute 9 % ( District Gazetteer Bankura 1968:135-40). According to the 1971 census, the total number of the scheduled tribe in Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore districts are 313792, 228605, 125250 and 442963 respectively whereas it in the 1981 census, 348475, 278191, 145133 and 153300 numbers for Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore district respectively (Bhowmick 1985: 8-9).

As the Jungle Mahals region is a part of Gondwana land, the oldest part of the Earth, various minerals and soils, such as red oxide (*geru māṭi*), zinc oxide (*dhāba māṭi*), yellow ochre (*cunch māṭi*) are found in the region. Nature is an important repository of materials required for making art objects. Adivasi people collected their materials from their surrounding environment. Black colour is prepared from black soil. Also, ink and soot are used for black colour. Some of the colours are prepared, such as green from the leaves of broad beans (*sim*), blue from indigo, yellow from turmeric, and red from lac dye, and red oxide (*geru*) is used for preparing red colour (Mahato 2015). The jungle with its biodiversity was of importance to the Adivasis in terms of their material needs, rituals, religion, food, etc. This man–nature relationship formed a symbolic construction of nature. The forest and foliage motif which became important features in their living aesthetic tradition stimulate productivity for them (Damodaran 2002: 90-91).

The place of Adivasi art is in the open space. They made the primary layer is made with sticky clay mixed with pieces of paddy husk. After that, some layers of alluvial and coarse clay are pasted. They made it smooth by rubbing shiny pebbles and squeezing *cihar bākar* (the dried skin of wild large beans). For ground preparation, a layer of the finest clay slip or excreta of small earthworms is collected from the paddy field. Before drying the surface, they used to draw paintings. At first, they used to apply a background colour. In this method, they prepared the space for the ground for painting (Mahato 2015). They used to select the centre space and after that, they covered all the picture space with various forms and patterns.

### Regenerative festivals, Landscape Aesthetic and Human-non-human entanglements

Adivasi artists draw their art painting on walls and floors and they also make a mural on the walls. In their visual art, they illustrate the objects of the physical environment and exemplify the spiritual world. Forest not only provides them livelihood but also is regarded as a source of kinship relation and their spirit world. Their art may be regarded as landscape aesthetic as it illustrates the environment in abstract form. The socio-religious context is also very important in making Adivasi art because all Adivasi festivals invoke fertility and regeneration. The Adivasis make their art on the simple mud house architecture with tiles or thatch. They cleaned and decorate their inner and outer walls and the floor on the occasion of *bāndnā* / *sahrāi* festivals (harvest festival/ harvest joy). A Santali song (Mandi 2017: 70) reflected the phenomenon:

*bhit piro arā duor*  
*delāng ptang patang ā*  
*hesech seckrech sahrāi doina seterenāre*  
*ni chando ābāboisoi*  
*heseg sekrech sahrāi doinā seterenāre*  
(Joyful *sahrāi* festival is coming  
We are to clean and decorate our house, wall and courtyard  
This month is a Full Moon, next month is New Moon  
When *sahrāi* festival is going to be held).

For the Santals, this important festival is held for five days and nights from the rise of the new moon (*amabāshyā*) of *kārtik* (a month of Bengali Calender, November). But there is an exception because some villages perform it on a date fixed by the village council. They apply *kachrā* (*mahuā*/ madhuca indica) oil on the horns of their cattle for five festive days as follows respectively, i.e., *um* (cleaning and beautification), *bongāburu* (worshipping), *ghuntāo* (worshipping agricultural tools), *ghunticheng* and *jāle* (Mandi 2017: 68). A group of people known as *dhāngars* use to visit every house with their musical instruments like *mādal*, *dhol*, *dhamsā* to invoke the cattle population (*gāi jāgā*) through singing invocation songs (*ahirā*). It is a regenerative and harvest festival of the

Kheroal communities as they celebrate the cultivation of good harvest. After cleaning their agricultural tools they decorate and keep these in front of *tulsi thān* (a shrine which is a square shape mud architecture where they keep basil plants) for worship. They also decorate their domestic bulls and cows putting marks of red or colour small circles on their bodies and putting a crown on their horn made of a sheaf of paddy. In this festival, Adivasi people give honour to the cattle which signify the entangled relationship between humans and non-human others. The festival has strong mythological connections.

### Mural

Kherowal Adivasi communities, such as Bhumijis, Mundas, Oraons, and Kurmis every year decorate the inner and outer walls of their mud house made of thatch or tiles and floor with painting and murals on the occasion of *bāndnā* festival (Mahato 2002, Majhi 2002, Mahato 2008). Therefore the religious context is very powerful, which makes the art living. In the *bāndnā* festival, there was a celebration for protection from malignant forces and evil spirits through making different kinds of symbols and paintings. They used both coloured earth and plant ingredients. There are differences in mural techniques, motifs and occurrences of festivals. However, the Santals followed the method of fresco when the mud wall plaster was wet they draw pictures with the various coloured earth for this purpose. They collected three colours which they prize viz, white, red and yellow from their local area. They prepared the black colour from indigenous material, *i.e.*, burnt straw. In their murals, florals and faunas are commonly seen. Flora tends to represent life, while fauna can be represented wealth or social position. Different florals and faunas signify different social symbols. The peacock symbolises virility (Fig.1) while the fish symbolises the female genitalia. The growing plant symbolises a joint family living with peace and happiness (Fig. 2), and the dancing sign symbolises love in dance and music. The murals of a dog, bows and arrows symbolise that the family is fond of hunting (Baskey, 1999:37). The hunting scene (Fig. 3) signifies that male members of a Santal family had participated in *lo bir sendrā*.<sup>1</sup> This narration flows like an intense current in her mind. This abstract idea was transformed into an art form when she

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<sup>1</sup> *lo bir sendra* is the supreme hunt council of the Santals which is generally held after the annual hunt for finalizing pending cases in the lower social institutions of the Santals. Interview with Smt. Sephali Tudu, Vill-& Post- Simlamajua, Purulia District, W.B., September, 28, 2007.

formulated her enormous events and energy after listening to the description (Mahato 2020: 53). Some birds and flowers like *gagar sālo*, *panir-pio*, *maino-miru*, and lotus flowers symbolise bride. This aesthetic tradition induced fertility for them in and afterlife.



Fig 1(fresco): Peacock with susni leaf (Photographed by N. K. Mahato)



Fig. 2(fresco): Growing Plant (Photographed by N. K. Mahato)



Fig. 3 (fresco): hunting scene (Photographed by N. K. Mahato)

Apart from the fresco, the Santals in their painting also depict various geometrical patterns and floral designs applying different colours, such as white, green, red and yellow. Sometimes they draw floral motifs through their fingers covering most of the portion of the wall. Recently they are purchasing different chemical colours from the local markets.

The Bhumij women artist depicts a growing *karam* (*Adina cordifolia*, Rubeaceae) plant motif on their walls. But the Santal girls draw a branch of *karam* plant and fruit as tattoos on their bodies (Rycroft 1996: 77). The *karam* festival is celebrated for good harvest, well-being and prosperity. They celebrate the *karam* festival for bringing soil fertility before their first harvest.

The Kurmis usually depicts floral design and a narrative story in abstract forms and figurines. Lastly, they finished the border which is drawn of broad flat colours or zigzag lines. In the painting, basic forms and geometrical patterns are depicted. Some of the forms are commonly seen which were as follows: *chakri* (composite circles or circles intersecting each other), *susni pāt* (*Marsilea minuta* L (Marsileaceae)} drawn diagonally square shape intersect, *jarā pat* (star shape, Fig. 4), *sāluk* ( lily flower Fig. 5), *āmalāki* (stamp impression of palm edge). These symbols signify the entangled relationship between interdependence between humans and non-human others.

There is no use of perspective in their mural paintings. They are not intending to represent the reality that an Adivasi artist sees with her naked eyes. She is representing a parallel reality through symbolism. In the fresco painting, a distance is shown between the hunter and the hunting animal which is shown in a small figure. This is a medium for



transmitting ideas. She does not consider all the figures as the same size. In a finger-drawn painting how lily flowers and birds are shown in a water body (Fig. 5). There was a significant shift that occurred in recent times in mural paintings when they used to apply chemical colours purchased from the markets. They are less interested in frescos with mud soil base applying natural colours but used to draw colourful paintings with geometrical design (Fig. 6), floral motifs (Fig. 7) and human figures.



Fig.4: *jarā pat* (star shape), (Photographed by N. K. Mahato)



Fig. 5: An woman artist drawing *susni* plant (painting), (Photographed by N. K. Mahato)



Fig. 5: lily flowers and birds



Fig. 6: Geometrical motif (Photographed by Avishek Mahato)



Fig. 7: Floral motif (Photographed by N. K. Mahato)

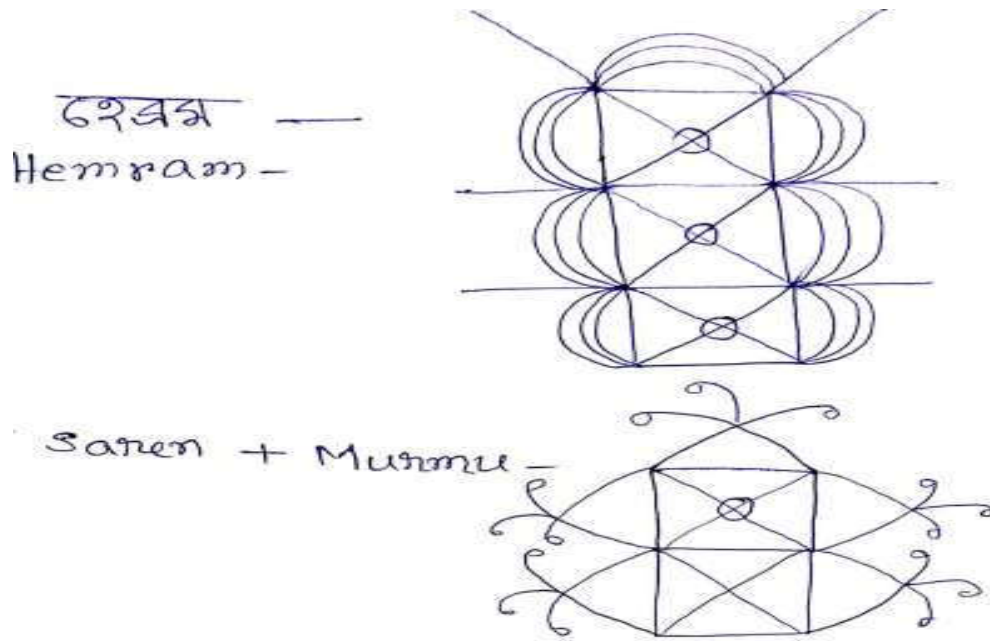
### Floor painting (*cawk*)

On the occasion of *bāndnā* festivals the Mundas, Oraons, Santals, and Kurmis decorate their houses in various ways which are executed exclusively by women. In this festival, arts are regenerated. Sometimes harvest Goddess feet and sometimes a sign of fertility are elaborated with floral design. This type of floral design is called *cawk purā* drawn during the time of *bāndnā* festivals. The floors were given a coating of *guchāti māti* (a type of brown soil) and later on cow dung. The paint is prepared by mixing the dyes (leaves of *gāmār* tree and *ṭila* (sesame) with rice paste. The liquid paint is dripped by the fingers drawing a series of lines at ease and derives a large size of geometrical shape on black floor plastered which is prepared by mixing cow dung with burnt straw. Sometimes only cow dung is applied on the floor and courtyard. This process is known as *cawk purā* (Fig 7). In this approach of the floor, painting involves interlacing lines of dripping paint that seem to extend unending arabesque (Mahato 2020: 52). It is not rigid like the Bengali *ālponās* and *rangoli* paintings of Maharashtra but had an unforced rhythm (Mode, 1985). The Oraons, Santals, Bhumijis, Mundas, and Kurmis painted *cawk* during their regenerative religious *bāndnā* festival. As Daniel J Rycroft comments: ‘The women’s notions of visual beauty, as channelled into their purifying floor and wall designs, change with social cross-section or caste and economic hierarchy’ (Rycroft 1996: 80). Each Santal totemic clan (Fig 8 & 9) has a separate geometrical pattern of *cawk* which is drawn during their *bāndnā* festival.<sup>2</sup> Adivasi art form illustrates the mark of the totemic identity of the Adivasis.

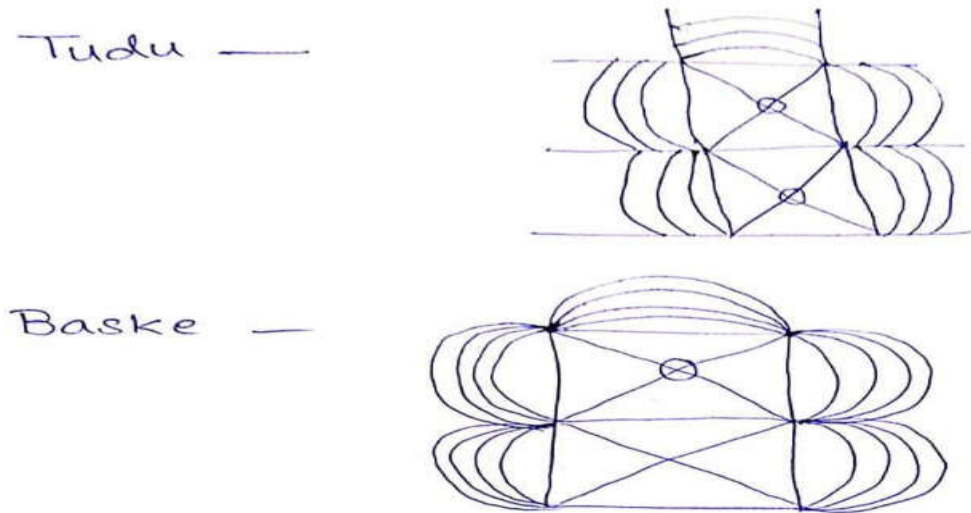


Fig 7: *cawk* or floor painting (Photographed by Ranjit Mahato)

<sup>2</sup> Artist Smt. Manjuri Murmu, Village- Chere dungri, Bandowan P.S., Purulia Dist, W.B. informed about separate geometrical patterns for each clan.



**Fig 7:** Geometrical pattern of *cawk* for the *Hemram*, *Saren* and *Murmu*, (Drawn from photographs by Kunti Mahato and Ranjit Mahato)



**Fig 8:** Geometrical pattern of *cawk* for the *Baske* and *Tudu*, (Drawn from photographs by Kunti Mahato)

### Earthworm, Adivasis, and their Scroll Painting

In the creation myth of the Adivasis, the earthworm acquired an important place (Fig 9).<sup>3</sup> When the earth was full of water the Almighty God (Thakur Jew) appealed to different water faunas such as crocodiles, and prawns to make the earth in the formation of land. Among them, only the earthworm was successful to perform this great job with the help of the tortoise. Thus both the earth and the earthworm acquired a significant place. It possessed immense power. According to their worldview, all the earth's soil was produced by earthworms. It has been reflected in the Adivasi scroll painting. The earth produced by the earthworms was very popular among the Adivasis as they used it for cleaning their hair. They also used it for the decoration of their houses. The medicinal properties of earthworms are recognized in different parts of the world. These are used in curing different diseases such as asthma, hypertension, epilepsy, and snake and spider bite. According to their worldview, the human is not considered above the earthworm as it provided for the habitation of human beings, faunas, and floras. Thus, the Adivasi worldview is contrary to the European worldview where human is placed above animals. It illustrates the entangled relationship between animals and human beings.



Fig 9: Earthworm depicted in Scroll painting, Artist Anil Chitrakar, Susunia (Photographed by N. K. Mahato)

That visual aesthetic tradition also expresses the relationship of the Adivasi women to their natural environment. The artistic expression of the relationship between Adivasis and the nature of the past has always been kept in the minds of Adivasis despite the

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Smt. Manimala Chitrakar, Vill-& Post- Pingla, West Midnapur District, W.B., December, 24, 2007.

deterioration of the man-nature relationship in colonial and post-colonial times. Their nostalgic past was always in their minds. It was again revived during the cultural revivalist movement of the Adivasis. Majhi Ramdas Tudu Reska's painting (Fig.10) expresses the spiritual origin of the Santals (Hembrom, 2007).



Fig. 10: Pilchu Haram, Pilchu Burhi and their Children (Source: Tudu Reska 1951: 29)

### **The reality, 'vibrant power' and contemporaneity in Adivasi art**

In Adivasi art, individuals play an important role and their genius has been recognized and the community recognized their art as the collective heritage of their society (Swaminathan 1987: 36). 'Reality' has a profound meaning for the Adivasi. As there is no use of perspectives in Adivasi art, an Adivasi artist is not interested in showing the reality that he sees with his open eye, instead, he makes a parallel reality of art. Haku Shah writes, 'reality for them incorporates the visual exterior of the painting, its moment of creation and the conscious and sub-conscious influences on the artist's mind' (Shah 1993:34). When an Adivasi woman artist draws any figure (flora, fauna, human figure, etc) on their walls or *cawk* on the floor, it is the totality of the state of mind that she creates. This is a language of its own. Adivasi artists are always at ready command.

They do not require conscious ‘designing’. Thus they work above the level of conscious observation. She never doubts a figure. The Adivasi artist always forms images that are handed down from generation to generation. The art drawn during the festival invokes power for protection from evil *bongās* or evil spirits.

When the author asked the woman artist about the inspiration behind her depiction of a hunting scene, she replied:

“*ing ben hopon lo bir sendrā sen lena. şendrā khan rowār  
hejkāteālek sāmāg re lo bir sendrā reyā kāthāk ādh lejā.  
onā kāthā ka ajām kāte mane jui mid naywā aiko teyar  
enā. onā oiko reyā mid hins ge nowā sendrā reyā chitar  
dā.*”

(My sons participated in the *lo bir sendrā* which they narrated their hunting experience to us. This narration had a great effect on my mind and created enormous energy. I depicted the murals of the hunting scene.)

After returning from there they narrated their experiences to the family members. This reflected their love of participating in hunting. Thus from this narration, she received enormous currents of imagery, events, and energy which combine to realize the resultant form. It reflects the past, which becomes the present. This 'present' gives birth to a new creation of the time dimension (Shah, 1993). The arts of the Adivasi are regenerated through their social festivals. Socio-religious festivals, belief systems, and cosmologies give them inputs in forming their art forms.

In historical studies, linear or developmental understanding of time is the key tool of understanding. In western civilization, historical time is seen as a unilinear progression. It cannot be considered normative (Swaminathan 1987: 29-31). Time is not a neutral concept. Interdisciplinary scholarship advocates for 'Temporalities' where time is considered as an object based on human perception. The Adivasi people's life patterns are directed according to the natural cycle. Their activities, such as planting, manuring, weeding, and harvesting are performed by each season. Present-day assumptions of ecological collapse the notion of the 'arrow of modernity' and belief in future purpose and development has vanished. The life of the Adivasi has always been guided by the natural cycle. The rhythm of nature has always motivated the cosmologies (Pachau and van

Schendel 2022: 8-11). We can see Adivasi art as contemporary art from the context of temporalities. Whatever inspiration behind it, Swaminathan regarded Adivasi art as contemporary art on the infinity matrix. Adivasi art co-exists with other cultures and it is living, changing, and regenerating along with the natural cycle.

### **Conclusion**

The performing art of the Adivasis is based on enjoyment, while the visual art has its meaning. Two distinct features that Franz Boas identifies are also visible in the art of the Adivasis of Jungle Mahals. Their art possessed aesthetic value and it became meaningful on the occasion of their community festivals. Through their decorative rituals, the women artists express their sense of beauty. Adivasi aesthetic tradition is closely connected with their worldview of the spiritual origin of life. It illustrates the intertwined relationship among plants, animals, and human beings. For Adivasis, reality has a different meaning. From the context of temporality, their art is regarded as contemporary art, which is regenerated by natural cycles every year during their harvest festival. Despite the deterioration of the human-nature relationship, they nurture their symbolic relationship of the past.

Thus, their aesthetic tradition was associated with the landscape of their past forests. It is their important source of a powerful memory, which was revived during their cultural revivalism and cultural resistance movements. There was a significant shift occurred in recent times in mural paintings when they used to apply chemical colours purchased from the markets. They are less interested in frescos with mud soil with natural colours but are used to drawing colourful paintings. Therefore, Adivasi communities have an important contribution to the development of India's visual aesthetic tradition, which mainly originated in central India. The aesthetic tradition of the Adivasi people of Jungle Mahals was connected to this zone because of basic similarities between the two.

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