

Art as Education: The Revaluation of Adivasi Art in Higher Education Examples from the Indira Gandhi National Tribal University

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Abstract

This article exemplifies contemporary cultural revaluation processes of Adivasi cultures in India through the integration of tribal Adivasi art into Higher education in India. The Indira Gandhi National Tribal University (IGNTU) in Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh, is India's first tribal university established by an Act of the Parliament of India in 2007 and operational since 2008. It is "fully funded by the Central Government through the University Grant Commission", and in its mission statement it "caters to the tribals' long cherished dream of higher education" (<http://www.igntu.ac.in/theuniversity.aspx>).

Key words: Adivasi in Higher education, integration, revaluation

Integration and revaluation of Adivasi cultures at Indira Gandhi National Tribal University (IGNTU)

Even though the university is open to all for higher education, the inclusion of tribal population is lying in its core mission. In its mission statements IGNTU acknowledges as well as the great rich cultural heritage and sophisticated artistic and handicraft

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traditions of Indian tribal societies as well as it recognises the systemic marginalization of tribal cultures in society and in education in particular. Despite the fact that the educational ethos of IGNTU does not question an evolutionary model of “development” or “advancement” of tribal communities into a technologically more advanced Indian society, tribal communities are in IGNTU respected as “*the custodians of Indian culture in real sense.*” In this sense, the IGNTU educational project has thus overall social and cultural empowerment, emancipation and improvement goals for the socially and culturally marginalised Indian tribal students:

“Now in the present age of globalization the world has shrunk into a village as the society has advanced in technology. But the tribes, who are the custodians of Indian culture in real sense, are far behind in this race of advancement. In order to rescue them from the present plight, the university has put before itself the following aims and objectives:

- To provide avenues of education, especially higher education and research facilities primarily for the tribal population of India.

- To disseminate and advance knowledge by providing instructional and research facilities in tribal art, tradition, culture, language, medicinal systems, customs, forest based economic activities, flora, fauna and advancement in technologies relating to the natural resources of the tribal areas.

- To collaborate with national and international universities and organizations, especially for undertaking cultural studies and research on tribal communities.

- To formulate tribal centric development models, publish reports and monographs and to organize conferences and seminars on issues relating to tribes and to provide inputs to policy matters in different spheres.

- To take appropriate measures for promoting the members of tribal communities capable of managing, administering and looking after their own needs by access to higher education through a university of their own.

- To disseminate and advance knowledge by providing instructional and research facilities in such other branches of learning as it may deem fit.

- To take appropriate measures for promoting innovations in teaching learning process in inter-disciplinary studies and researches and to pay special attention to the improvement of social, educational and economic conditions and welfare of the scheduled tribes within the Union of India.

(See <http://www.igntu.ac.in/theuniversity.aspx>, retrieved 11/08/2020)

The educational memorandum of Indira Gandhi Tribal University can be seen as an example of participatory and inclusive education of marginalised tribal cultures. Since decades, IGNTU fosters the social, cultural and educational integration of tribal voices into Higher education.

One successful way can be seen in the inclusion of local Pradhan Gond tribal artists from the Amarkantak/Madhya Pradesh region as creators of the University’s public space in form of the University’s open-air Adivasi Art galleries and large beautification projects of university buildings through Adivasi paintings. The inclusion of the tribal ritual art tradition into modern architecture and design is an innovative way of inclusion and transformation of tribal art into Higher education. With common Adivasi motifs, expressed in various open-air paintings, tribal students are surrounded by their common symbolic and aesthetic imaginary. Adivasi students perceive their cultural imagination

and sensitivity as central for higher education and its knowledge transmission. Their learning experience creates eventually a long-lasting feeling of cultural respect and empowerment with a powerful and empowering impact of indigenous knowledge for higher education in India.

As such, the IGNTU artistic and aesthetic innovations also represent and continue the ancient pan-Indian tradition of art as education, mirrored in the classical Indian aesthetics and *rasa* theory of aesthetics as education and experience (see Wilke 2018, 47-90).

Tribal art project at IGNTU

The Tribal Art project at IGNTU started in 2011, instigated and inspired by anthropologist and Head of Sociology and Anthropology Departments Professor Dr Ranju Hasini Sahoo. Sahoo's idea was to display tribal painting on the walls of the University campus and buildings, painted by local and regional tribal painters. As such, tribal imaginary and knowledge would be respected and recognized (personal communication with Prof Ranju Hasini Sahoo).

The funding for the tribal painting was provided by IGNTU itself taking the example of the successful integration of marginalised communities into educational institutions, such as exemplified first by the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) or Museum of Mankind, in Bhopal. The Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, the largest anthropological museum in Asia, is an outstanding example of Indian new museology and of alternative museum concepts in India (Guzy 2016: 118), which successfully integrates and reevaluates indigenous knowledge systems through tribal art and aesthetic. Since the 1980's Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) has become a world leading cultural and educational institution pioneering in the revaluation and inclusion of traditions of rural and tribal India and recognizing the full variety of its local knowledge resources (see Chakravarty 2005: 25-30; Chakravarty 2010: 137-150; Bhatt 2010:157-160, Guzy 2009: 78-139).

With the tribal art motif, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University (IGNTU) takes up not only the innovative new museology approach of art as indigenous knowledge but it continues also a famous thread of anthropological research in the Amarkantak region (Mandla district of Madhya Pradesh) where legendary anthropologist Verrier Elwin lived with his second Pradhan Gond wife for a while.

The publication of Elwin's 1951 book *The Tribal Art of Middle India*, created a trend in India to focus on indigenous material and immaterial cultural expressions as vernacular artistic forms which has since then lasted until today (for Verrier Elwin's role in the creation of Adivasi Art see Rousseleau in this volume). Elwin's work fostered an Indian wide understanding that artefacts and material culture were a form of art, leading to the emergence of the category of 'Tribal Art', taken up later by museums and further educational institutions such as the IGNTU.

Verrier Elwin's legacy thus can be seen as thriving until today at contemporary educational centers and the Indira Gandhi Tribal University in Amarkantak.

Shamanic artistic imaginary of eco-cosmological knowledge systems

As visible in the below presented motives, the tribal paintings (photos 1-6) illustrate a natural context of a playful interaction between trees, birds, humans and trans-humans

with wings. The motif of birds in the trees is a common motif of indigenous knowledge related to shamanic knowledge and eco-cosmology.

Eco-cosmologies are shamanic worldviews and life worlds. In shamanic worldviews and life worlds (Guzy/Kapalo 2017: 3-5) the transformative experiences of animal-human and ecological encounters and therianthrope transformations are transmitted in a rich culture of orality expressed in rituals, songs, performances and dances. In this knowledge transmission, visions and dreams are the most important expressions of shamanic imaginaries (Noll et al 1985), realities, epistemologies and ontologies revealing imagined, dreamt and lived experiences of local shamanic societies. In this way, the visual mental imagery experiences construe the inner and outer knowledge of life worlds and worldviews.

Eco-cosmological knowledge systems thus relate the human with the non-human, the cosmos and the other-than-human sphere such as trees, animals, rivers, mountains and spirits. An important element in eco-cosmologies is the absence of the dualistic separation between the human and the surrounding geography and landscape, such as mountain, earth, river or a tree. "Identity" is not ego/body/gender centred but spread and integrated with the surrounding ecology, geography and territory. In this sense, trees and birds represent deceased family members and ancestors, mountains and/or rivers manifest clan deities directly intertwined with local cosmologies and kinship structures, and the shamanic dream (Guzy 2021 in print) of the ritual specialist openly interconnects the world of the non-humans and other humans with the ritual, cosmological and ecological calendar and work rhythms of the local community. The shaman in this eco-cosmological setting is the local intellectual and spiritual leader of the community with the capacity to transcend different dimensions of existence through the shamanic dream and its ritual communication and transformation (see photograph 5).

In shamanic worldviews and life worlds (Guzy/Kapalo 2017: 3-5) the transformative experiences of animal-human and ecological encounters and therianthrope transformations are transmitted in a rich culture of orality expressed in rituals, songs, performances and dances. In this knowledge transmission, visions and dreams are the most important expressions of shamanic imaginaries (Noll et al 1985), realities, epistemologies and ontologies revealing imagined, dreamt and lived experiences of local shamanic societies. In this way, the visual mental imagery experiences construe the inner and outer knowledge of life worlds and worldviews.

The IGNTU tribal art galleries display how artists become the modern shamanic mediators between the world of Indian Higher Education and local visions, worldviews and life worlds. With their shamanic dreams as artistic imaginations and creative visual innovations the tribal artists display their cultural metaphors for a human and non-human/other-than human communication with the otherworld and the world of today. With their visual representation of therianthrope transformation the artist pursues the trance state of a shaman through his or her artistic creations and visual dreams. Shamanic dreams, imagination and knowledge systems are explicitly non-anthropomorphic. The shamanic worldviews do not dualistically separate the human from the non-human or other-than human but rather intrinsically interconnects the human with the surrounding ecology, geography and territory. The shamanic worldview is thus rooted in the eco-cosmologies that indigenous peoples believe in, whereby humans deeply interrelate and blur not only with the non-human sphere (including other

animals) but also with a spirit world. With its therianthrope characteristics, the shamanic and artistic imaginary is a powerful cultural and educational metaphor of transformation.

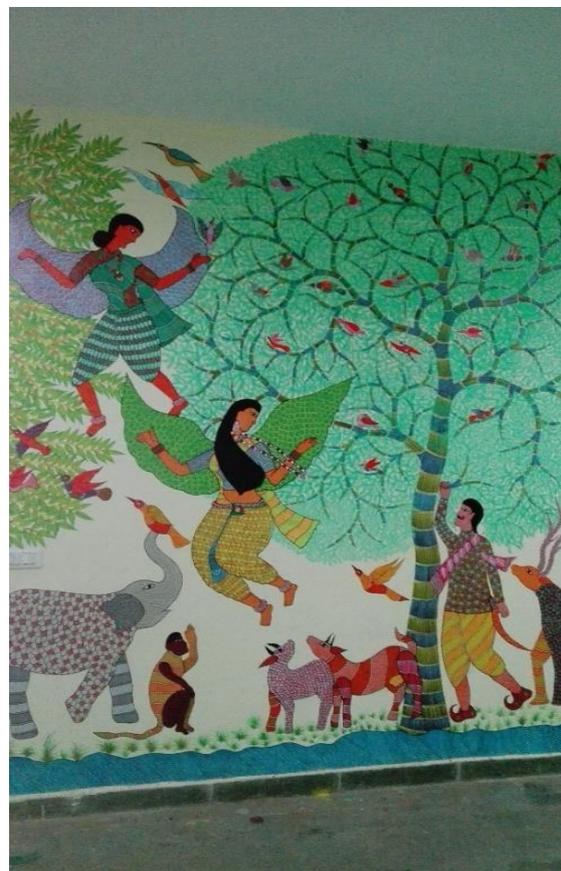
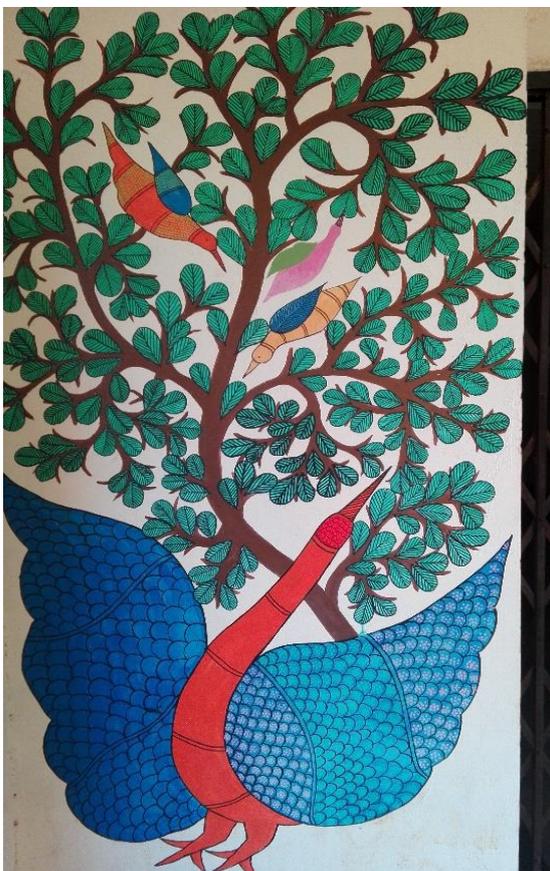
IGNTU as alternative to assimilative education – A conclusion

The tribal art galleries at IGNTU indicate a new tendency in Indian Higher Education where generally indigenous and tribal knowledge is marginalised or excluded by the broader Indian context as criticised by Virginius Xaxa and the Xaxa Commission (2013/2014) and analysed by Marine Carrin within the Adivasi primary school situation (Carrin 2021 in print).

With the tribal art galleries at IGNTU an artistic alternative to an assimilative nature of Indian education is displayed and celebrated. IGNTU presents an innovative model of higher education where tribal/Adivasi imaginary and knowledge systems are included in a transformative way to “indigenize” Indian higher education, allowing a diversity of knowledge systems and imaginaries to co-exist and to flourish. The indigenous local and national example of IGNTU shows how alternative citizenship (Carrin 2013: 106–120) can be fostered through the inclusion of tribal art as higher education.

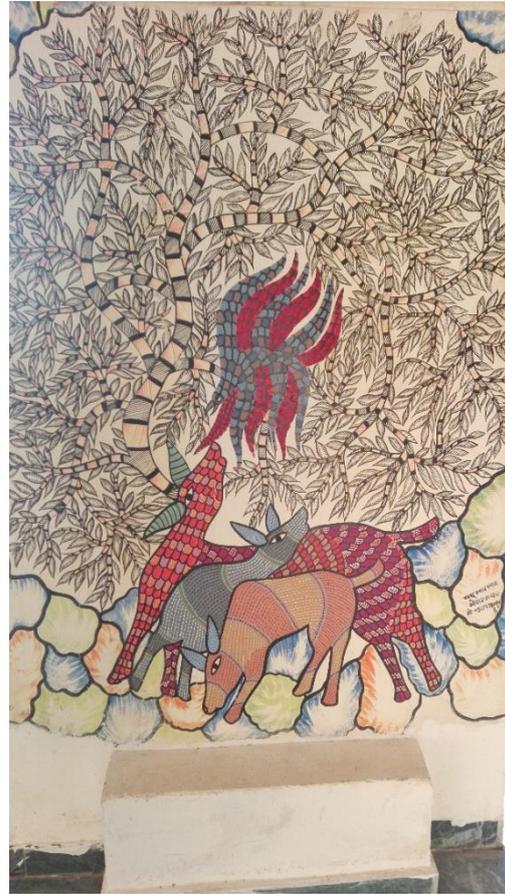
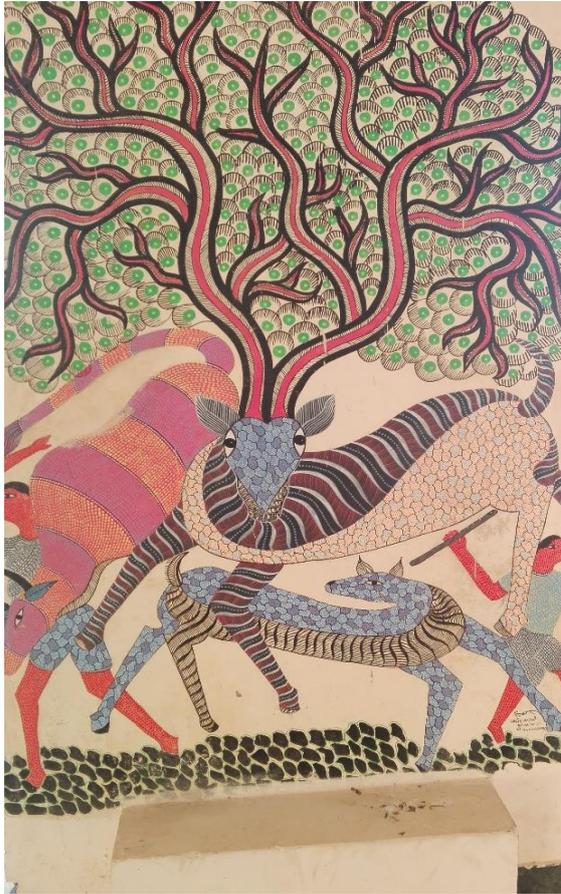
The inclusion of an eco-cosmological shamanic/artistic visionary aesthetic may transform and heal not only anthropocentric patterns of communication and knowledge transmission, but it may broaden and transform the assimilative nature of Indian higher education into a local and global hub of indigenous citizenship, empowerment and education.

Photo 1 & 2: Indoor tribal art gallery at IGNTU, 8 Jan IGNTU, photographer Nick Papandreou



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Photo 3 & 4 & 5 Indoor tribal art galleries at IGNTU, 8 Jan 2020, photographed by Nikolaos Papandreou



Photos 6 & 7: Indoor tribal art galleries at IGNTU, 8 Jan 2020, photographed by Nikolaos Papandreou



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