

A Visual Cultural Study of Indigenous Art Through the Individual Reflections of Artist Lado Bai

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Abstract:

The art of tribes can be considered an important cultural source of memory and identity because it is a visual representation of this memory, which summarizes Indigenous beliefs, traditions, and socio-spiritual histories. Of them, Bhil art in Madhya Pradesh can be singled out with its deep colouring, detailed design, and religious narration. Traditionally, a group expression with a ritual and agricultural-festival basis, Bhil art has been redefining itself into a recognizable voice in contemporary world practice.

Lado Bai was a radical female artist in the Bhil community, serving as an example of this transformation. The bleeding of the traditional and the contemporary reflected in her work is from her background as a labourer to a nationally known artist because of the tutelage of Jagdish Swaminathan. This paper is a critical reading of her work in terms of visual semiotics and culture, a reduction of her sign use of pattern, symbolism, and narrative.

This qualitative research, which involves semiotic analysis of images, field interviews, and comparative cultural systems, locates Bais' art in the traditions of Bhil people and in the context of Indigenous representation as a whole. The paper adds value to the study of the visual culture of Indigenous artists as the author develops the argument that the Indigenous cultural memory and meaning is actively transformed through individual and communal experience.

Keywords: Bhil Art, Tribal Art, Indigenous Visual Culture, Lado Bai, Visual Semiotics

1. Introduction

The thing is that indigenous visual traditions are a substructural component of the intangible cultural heritage of the world. Planted in the oral histories, ecological consciousness, and religious traditions of the spiritual practices, they are highly communal in nature, representing the collective authorship and the tradition being handed across the generations as the collective knowledge (Assmann, 2011). In the Indian environment, the tribal art, which includes Bhil, Gond, and Warli, is not a simple ornamental or folk art; the art is a complex system of visualization of the cosmology, epistemology, and social structure (Morphy & Banks, 1997; Jain, 2012). In these, knowledge and belief are encoded in a language of abstraction and symbolism, which is distinctive of the cultural milieu.

Among these, the Bhil art, which is largely carried out by the Bhil people in the western region of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, is distinguished by virtue of its vividness of color palette, pointillist style, and semantic vocabulary, which is based on ancestral memory and ecological rhythms. Bhil paintings are oral history archives and offer a rich cornucopia of life-cycle rituals and agricultural rhythms painted by women on mud walls during festival occasions. Based on tattoo designs or patterns in grain patterns, their dot matrices are the symbol of spiritual security, fertility, as well as ritual continuation (Mansingh, 2015; Singh, 2019).

As these tribal forms were swept into institutional spaces as late as the late 20th century (such as the Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal under the curatorial signal of Jagdish Swaminathan), they moved off the ephemeral ritual walls and onto the archival canvases. This trend represented a change in the practice of anonymous collective authorship to individualized visual authorship, especially by the tribal women. Critics have contested this process of migration as an example of cultural translation and

symbolic commodification, raising questions on the idea of agency or modernity and aesthetic independence in native art (Dalmia, 2001; Jain, 2010).

In the course of the evolution, Lado Bai, a Bhil artist who started as an Indian construction worker at Bharat Bhavan, found an unusual voice of native self-expression. She became a trained visual artist, instead of a ritualist, with Swaminathan as mentor, and the dots that she was using as motifs now became a narrative as well as an emotive feature. Her paintings, which are of flowers, animals, fiestas, and memory preservation, also describe the conflict between tradition, individuality, and contemporary life. Bai does not simply create; Bai creates visual ethnography, which bridges between cultural heritage and personal statement, trying to find its way in the middle.

In this paper, I am going to bring a critical analysis of four chosen texts by Lado Bai through the semiotic triad proposed by Roland Barthes. denotation, connotation, and myth (1977), cultural memory theory presented by Jan Assmann (2011), and visual performativity suggested by W.J.T. Mitchell (2005). In this interdisciplinary context, this paper discusses how Bai redefines the tribal semiotics of her works to new audiences, claims the gendered indigenous voice, and enacts the visual memory (as an individual and social act).

By so doing, the paper shall also make contributions to the fields of visual anthropology, decolonial art histories, and indigenous aesthetics, to reaffirm that tribal art is not fixed, but on continuous development: it is in continuous dialogue with the world, but with nothing to be unattached to its earth.

2. Literature Review

The study of Indian tribal art has progressed over time, but what have come to the fore as of late are interdisciplinary and critical studies of its aesthetics, socio-political, and epistemological aspects. Ethnographic writings by Verrier Elwin, *The Tribal Art of Middle India* (1951), also played a dominant role in listing visual customs, and in casting tribal art as primitive or functional in vision, one that conflated ritual with aesthetic primitivism. The same is true of Hermann Goetz (1964), whose approach to tribal art in museums depicts tribal art being mostly classified under formal and ritualistic classifications with little regard to artistic agency and innovation.

On other fronts, there was a point of some paradigmatic shift in the late 20th century with Jagdish Swaminathan, who made the tribal and folk artists appear as the Other Masters (Swaminathan, 1996) through his act as the founding director of the Roopankar Museum at Bharat Bhavan. His curatorial position was an objection to the dichotomous opposition of tribal and modern art, where indigenous art was not an ethnographic example but equally a contemporary manifestation of independent world philosophies. He has promoted the idea that tribal visibility is not naive and derivative, but rather based on refined cosmologies and aesthetics. Furthering this work, Jyotindra Jain himself developed the term the vernacular contemporary, which presupposes that tribal and folk forms do not merely serve as the storehouse of tradition but interact dynamically with modernity and a market economy as well as with the notions of authorship in visual arts (Jain, 2009). He underlined the transformation of ritual practices into the modern forms of storytelling because artists work with new media and new audiences, and new institutions. Jain scholarship also enlightened the way indigenous women artists defy transmitted grammars of symbols to proclaim personal stories and imaged agency within patriarchal frameworks. Yashodhara Dalmia (2001) moved on to specify that indigenous paintings the most, particularly those by women, are correlated with the spatial memory, the ecological intimacy, and the cosmic ritualism. She posited that such visual practices are mnemonic maps of community consciousness as opposed to individual artefacts. Her interest in the semiotic stratification of symbols, motives, and spaces correlates with the modern theory of visual culture.

Gond art, especially with the global acclaim of Jangarh Singh Shyam, has attracted significant intellectual interest vis-à-vis other tribal customs. His art and its legacy have been analyzed under three themes: visual narration, oral storytelling, and eco-symbolism (Mago, 2000; Singh, 2015).

Nonetheless, the Bhil art, particularly works of such female artists as Lado Bai, is relatively unexplored, especially through the prisms of semiotic theory, feminist aesthetics, and visual performativity. What is more, whereas several studies deal with the commodification of tribal art in terms of the adaptation to canvas and its making visible by the art institutions (Gupta, 2010; Kapur, 2008), not much has been said about the underlying semiotic changes that take place in the process of such change within going the art on canvas. These transitions can be decrypted using Barthes' semiotic triad- denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1977), Jan Assmann's cultural memory theory (2011), and the concept of visual performativity (Mitchell, 2005) first described by Mitchell who mainly drew the latter two concepts in the field of study of Indian tribal art.

The article, hence, fills an important gap in that these theories have been used to interpret the iconography, memory, and performance gestures in the paintings done by Lado Bai. It helps grow the line of discussion about the visual authorship of indigenous women, how traditions and rituals are reshaped into modern artistic practice, and how the notions of agency can be restructured in the aesthetics of tribes.

Justification of the Study

In light of the above, the present paper takes into consideration an important gap in research regarding tribal art. Though coded in the cultural economy in India, the probability of reshaping Bhil art by the means of individual artists such as Lado Bai, in particular, using semiotic and feminist perspectives, is less explored. The study is hence meaningful in three related aspects:

Theoretical Contribution: It combines aspects of visual semiotics, memory theory, and performativity to give a reading of tribal art that is not confined to formal or iconographic analyses.

Feminist and Decolonial: Through the lens of Lado Bai, the paper prioritises that of indigenous women's authorship, as a challenge to the patriarchal and ethnographic approach to tribal creativities.

Cultural Relevance: The research is of contemporary interest to the issues of authenticity, agency, and commodification of tribal art in postcolonialism and in a globalized world.

Using this interdisciplinary and critical perspective, the paper not only adds to the knowledge on Bhil visual language but also redefines the meaning and appearance of contemporary indigenous expression in India.

3. Methodology

The study is qualitative and interpretive in nature and is based on the study of visual culture, semiotics, and indigenous aesthetics. It aims at critically analyzing some pieces of art by Lado Bai and exploring how Bhil visual language can change with unique authorship in modern cultural contexts. Since in the given case the works of art were symbolic and can be described as image-based, the study focuses on visual analysis rather than quantitative or even empirical work.

The primary data will be four paintings by Lado Bai will including *Peeples ka Pad* (1980), *Pithora Chitra* (1990), *Jungle* (2017), and *Utsav* (1990), and will be made by using personal visits to Bharat Bhavan (Bhopal) and Ojas Art Gallery (New Delhi). The given visits allowed one to observe the artworks with the benefit of a first-hand effect, both in curated and archival contexts, to add to a contextual interpretation and visual description. The works of art were interpreted through an interdisciplinarity of studying a tripartite semiotics (Roland Barthes), a theory of cultural memory (Jan Assmann), and visual performativity (W.J.T. Mitchell). This three-fold optic enables a multi-levelled exposition of the role of imagery, motif, and pattern, not simply as a mere aesthetic resource, but in becoming vernacular of memory and ecology, and identity. The analysis is complemented by secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed literature, exhibition catalogues, and curatorial writing, giving the history and context of the Bhil art traditions, modernity of the tribes, and the visual practice of Lado Bai. The methodology lives up, therefore, to the holistic and critically involved reading of Bhil art as an active place of both tradition and innovation.

4. Bhil Art: Tradition and Symbolism

The art of the Bihls, which is represented by one of the largest Indigenous peoples of India, takes an impressive place in the history of visual tribal culture by the beauty of the visual language, spiritual symbolism, and generational extension. Historically, Rhil paintings were performed ritually and on the walls of the mud houses by means of natural pigments (Jain, 2010; Goetz, 2007). As wall art has become more permanent, fixed on canvas (this change more emphatic after the 1980s), Bhil art has at the same time maintained its repertoire of symbols (alongside changing to new forms of expression), to enter the circulation and language of modern exhibitions.

The use of repetitive dot patterns is one of the most noticeable elements of Bhil art and the visual trace of historic godna (tattoo) dressing style and mandana floor design (Sharma, 2016; Dalmia, 2001). These dots, however, are not only decorative elements, but also mnemonic and symbolic elements, which mean continuity, fertility, unity, and the rhythm of the cosmos. To wit, according to Jyotindra Jain (2010), the dot in Bhil art is a generative mark, a mark that not only organizes the image itself, but the cultural ontology of the image, a worldview based on the ideas of ecology, repetition, and spirituality.

Bhil painting motifs are based on both the natural and social worlds of the community. Trees, especially a peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), become metaphors of lineage, of holiness, and of generational cycles. Birds, spirits, or ancestors sitting on their branches are often painted in them, which means that they symbolize the vertical axis of memory and continuity (Assmann, 1995; Jain, 2010). Wild animals, including tigers, deer, and peacocks, symbolize natural harmony and the presence of the divine, since the forest is not only a habitat; the Bhil cosmology views it as a spiritual space (Goetz, 2007; Singh, 2018).

Human figures are usually represented in stylised profiles and are grouped performing what were seen to be communal rituals, farm practice, musical concerts, and festivals. These characters are hardly made one-on-one; instead, they represent both the social belonging and group identity, which emphasizes the collective authorship that was historically a characteristic of Bhil visual culture (Bhowmik, 2015). The painting by Bhil is usually made on the occasions of the festivities of Holi, Diwali, Bhagoria, and seasonal rites; every painting has become a manifestation of ritual times and spiritual continuity. Bhil paintings are also cyclical and simultaneous in a way that is quite different to the linear narrative structures of Western art. And these images, as Mitchell (2005) indicates, do not show the time they do it. The visual field derived in the game of Bhil art is that of a stratified chronotope, in which ancestral memory, ecological cycles, and daily existence merge.

The dot, in this manner, ceases being a unit of ornament and becomes an operation of metaphysical signification, a perennial breath of cultural memory, and the lived laughter of lived experience. The meaning of dots is decorative on the one hand (as Barthes 1977 might describe it), but rhythmic, ceremonial, and commemorative in its connotation, which means that the myth brings ritualized cyclicity of the world of the tribe to the natural plane.

5.5 Lado Bai: From Collective Ritual to Individual Authorship

An illustration of this shift of indigenous art is by Lado Bai, who is among the most prominent women artists of the Bhil group. She was born in Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh in the 1960s but had no formal training in art, learning the Bhil visual vocabulary through lived experiences, oral traditions, and ceremonial practices. However, exposure to dot motifs, which are widespread in Bhil mandana wall paintings and the traditional tattoos, was the central aesthetic element of her later works on canvas (Shah, 2013; IGNCA, 2020).

Her turning point was in the 1980s as a daily-wage worker at Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal, where she was mentored by Jagdish Swaminathan, the revolutionary artist-curator and director of the Roopankar Art Museum. The Swaminathan school of thought of so-called other-masters who advocated tribal

and folk artists as immediate practitioners also placed well-placed tribal and folk artists such as Bai, to shift to gallery works on paper and canvas (Swaminathan, 1996; Kapur, 2008). This institutional move transformed Bhil art, a ritual, communitarian act, into an individual-authored object to be located within the discourse of contemporary art in the global arena.

In comparison to previous paintings of the Bhil, which were collaged by a group of women within a domestic or a ritual location, the works created by Bai include a more personalised system of iconography that encompasses ancestral memory, symbolic fauna and flora, and subjective interpretation along with re fantasies of Bhil cosmology. According to curator and scholar Jyotindra Jain, her paintings are an intuitive, but conscious negotiation between collective cultural memory and individual expression that expands the space of tribal artistic practice into an arena of introspection and authorship (Jain, 2009).

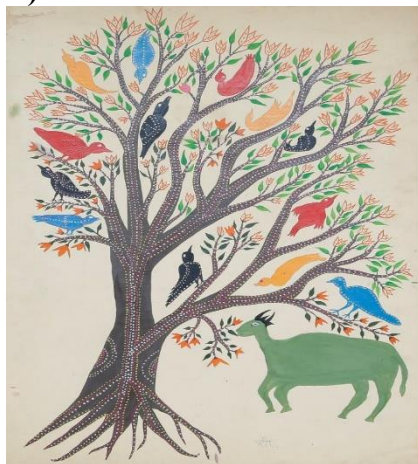
Her compositions show more complicated spatial combinations and narrative levels, although she still used the stylistic devices of the dotted matrix to evoke rhythm, continuity, and above all, fertility. Take, for instance, the peepal tree at the center of most of her works; it is not a simple form of nature but a memory repository, a document of community beliefs and parapsychic presence of the ancestors (Sharma, 2016; IGNCA, 2020).

The awareness of Bai has been spread all over the country, as well as the globe. Her art collections have been displayed in leading centres such as the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) as well as in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, making Bhil art more visible in the vernacular modern worldwide. Here, her visual grammar, which is grounded in Bhil ritual codes but free-flowingly autobiographical, renders what Mitchell (2005) theorizes as a visual performativity, in which the image not merely represents Rebuilding Bhil art into an uninterrupted shifting process, having found a voice, Lado Bai eradicates the established medialities of binary oppositions between tribal and modern, collective and individual, oral and visual.

6. Visual Semiotic and Cultural Analysis of Selected Works by Lado Bai

This part will take the selected works of Lado Bai, *Peepal ka Pad* (1980), *Pithora Chitra* (1990), *Jungle* (2017), and *Utsav* (1990), and offer its semiotic and cultural reading, in the interpretive concepts of Barthes (1977) three levels of semiotics (denotation, connotation, and myth), Assmann (1995) cultural memory, and Mitchell (2005) theory of visual performativity. All the paintings are not only a reflection of the Bhil tribal cosmology, but it is also a practice of culture, memory, and identity within the modern visual domains.

6.1 Figure 1: Peepal ka Pad (1980)



Denotation: In the center, we have different colored birds on a large sacred tree and a green goat. The schematized lines are typical of Bhil aesthetic language.

Connotation: Peepal tree refers to ancestral memory and continuity on the spiritual level in tribal cosmology. The fowls depict different spirits or tribe symbols, encompassing intimacy with nature. The goat is a representative of everyday countryside domestic who gives a homelike echo to the mythic ecology.

Myth: The myth of vanaspati (sacred tree) is recreated in the painting as a representation of life created force, which pays more attention to the balance among flora, fauna, and humans.

Cultural Memory: The peepal turns into a living archive, a place of meeting of multi-generational wisdom and ritual. In this case, the picture of the framework put forward by Assmann is clear: the artwork preserves ecological piety and oral tradition.

Visual Performativity: The visual transforms into a performative act, looking into a ritual place and strengthening not only cultural roles, environmental responsibility.

6.2 Figure 2: Pithora Chitra (1990)

Denotation: The painting portrays the relations between humans and animals with ritual accuracy. There is a dynamic tension of horses, god, and archers.



Connotation: Pithora murals are usually commissioned after the harvest or to cleanse spirits. This repetition of dotted forms and colored images of figures demonstrates a call by a community to a balancing and a birth. Myth: It is a form of reanimation of the Pithora deity mythos- a cultural narrative regarding the creation of fertility, rain, and abundance.

Cultural memory: Since Pithora paintings tend to be communal and ephemeral, Lado Bai adopts the medium of canvas as a way of preserving the ephemeral ceremony, turning a memory into a visual fixative. Performativity of the image: the notion of visual performativity is demonstrated in the ideas of Mitchell about what the image is; this canvas does not lose its ritual power, and viewers are confronted with the performative aesthetics that does not lose tribal rhythm.

6.3 Figure 3: Jungle (2017)



Denotation: The Jungle is redesigned in two forms of heavenly beings and figures, mythical creatures, and warriors. The music is by instinct and not representational, symbolic.

Connotation: The intense color scheme and childish impulsiveness imply oral forms of telling induced story. This is not a geographic jungle, but a mythopoetic one, a mindscape.

Myth: The characters refer to the heroes and spirits of the tribe fighting and in harmony with nature, representing symbols of the strength of Bhils against the interference of modernity.

Cultural Memory: This art piece functions as a memory item, visually displaying the mythic landscape and valor system of the tribe to future generations.

Visual Performativity: It not only portrays the jungle, but it carries out its telling in a manner that borders on visual art to oral storytelling.

6.4 Figure 4: Utsav (1990)



Denotation: An expressive picture of dancing and beating of drums in red and green colors with Bhil dots on their bodies.

Connotation: This represents Bhagoria or Holi celebrations, and it is when the community is expressed in the most visual and loud manner. Hue turns into passion, a beat takes shape.

Myth: The art represents a tribal mythology of exultation against oppression, jubilation as the means of staying alive. The image of dancing bodies is metaphorical, representing ancestral rhythm transmitted by dancing.

Cultural Memory: The festivals are the cultural memory at work. In this case, the art maintains performative processes of celebration, such as songs, dance, and costumes, transferring the transitional event to a visual culture of the archive.

Visual Performativity: The moving dancers appear to be located in the canvas, and the picture is, therefore, a participative performance but not a capturing one.

7. Discussion

The oeuvre of Lado Bai is also founded on the Bhil art traditions, which is an epistemic break to the mainstream art histories within an interstitial situation between an expression and the visibility of the contemporary identity. Her literature is not only symbolic works; it works as an epistemological act; it creates a meaning, it transfers memory, and creates identity.

Applying a semiotic triad by Barthes to Peeple ka pad, we can observe how the denotation of a tree grows into a connotation of sacral ecology to finally reach a myth of a cosmic axis (axis mundi) in Bhil cosmology. The same verticality of meaning is reflected in the map of Assmann's cultural memory, where the tree fits as a mnemonic peg to hang on to generational remembrance, in particular, oral cultures. In addition, the visual performativity of Mitchell is triggered as a result of the viewer's participation and makes the process of viewing a repetition of mass faith.

In Pithora Chitra, ritual breaks the time. The existence of these mythic horse-like beings and chimeras represents a dualism- both of the world and god. It is aesthetic to shift it to canvas, but politically,

this shift corresponds to the walls of tribal houses, where it used to be traditionally painted on mud. It implies the maintenance of ritual knowledge after performative temporality. This crisis, however, does not weaken meaning; rather, it enables new consumers to become a part of what Assmann terms the cultural text, increasing the number of people who can be lured to become an audience even as they are merely viewers.

Amongst the four canvases, the Jungle is probably the most abstracted and imaginative one of Lado Bai. The disciplinary ordering, which seems not serious at first sight, is that of reconfiguring memory as a work of resistance. The forest is turned into a mental map of the ancestral remembrance. In the Barthesian analysis, one can understand that the myth of forest spirits, hybrid beasts, and the beings of the sky are indications of a historical trauma and strength. Jungle also points to the eco-critical field: an ecological awareness, a feeling of integral ecology that man is no longer at the climax but a participant in a complex harmony.

Utsav integrates masculinity, flesh, and color in a very unusual manner that is beyond representation. The focus of Bhil ritual life around dance and music is abstracted as kinetic bodies of dotted rhythm. In such a case, the thought of Mitchell about the images that want something come into play; the figures require involvement, celebration, and incarnation. They should feel rather than be observed. This is performativity in its essence: the picture performs what it pictures. These colors are by no means decorative but are pure chromatic pitches of the emotion, things green fertility, red vitality, and white sacredness.

In all four works, Lado Bai makes the dot, which in some ways appears just an insignificant sign, into an effective semiotic code. It also associates her work with the Bhil tattooing customs, cartographic charting of the ancestral territory, and the oral dot-wise format of narrative retelling. The dot in this case becomes the basic element of a visual language mark and metaphor.

8. Conclusion

Colored by the three different fields of semiotics, cultural memory, and visual performativity, Lado Bai's paintings seem to be more than mere tribal art; in an actual sense, the paintings are living archives, ritual performances, and cultural scripts written in pigment. It is not the loss of ritual but the re-inscription of it into the global contemporary discourse on the part of her move from ephemeral wall art to portable canvas.

Her art is something that counters the bipolarity of folk and modern or tribal and elite. Rather, it shows how native visual languages can develop, migrate, and yet possess an ontological dimension. Such paintings are opposed to the extracting gaze of the other; they present rather a dialogic realm in which viewers are forced to unlearn their visual literacy and re-learn it using the Bhil cosmopoetics. Lado Bai, in this sense, does not just have an art that can be and must be analyzed; the art itself has to be experienced, remembered, and performed. Cultural memory, according to the argument by Jan Assmann, is not simply about the past; it is about making sure that the past should not be a dead force anymore, but as something that is productive in the present. And since Roland Barthes herself would make the point, these images do not merely form a sign, but at one time or another are myths on the move, in perpetual progression. They are the mouthpiece of the people in color, shape, and silence, and through that, they remind us that the visual culture is as much about looking as listening.

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