UNIT 7  FOLK PAINTINGS: VISUAL NARRATIVES

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

- undertake a journey from the prehistoric rock art or cave painting to the living tradition of folk painting;
- get a glimpse of the visual narratives and appreciate the factor of continuity;
- get an exposure to the vital expressive, evocative, narrative, and magical dimension of art;
- understand the anthropomorphic imagination of art;
- understand and appreciate the vitality of folk painting; and
- understand art as a parallel reality.

7.1 INTRODUCTION: FOLK PAINTINGS

In this unit, we are to focus on the genre folk paintings, as they subsisted in the past and as they continue to exist in the contemporary times. Cave paintings, which bear testimony to the astounding creative energy, had been a part of the cultural traditions all over the globe. There is certain timelessness as far as the painted images are concerned. As J. S. Swaminathan said, “In art, the past lives with us as other presences, it vanquishes time”. He called it “…the state of the continuous present”.

Let us now focus on what we mean by ‘folk’. There are as many definitions of ‘folk’ as there are folklorists. But perhaps we have a come a long way from the time when the peasants were alone attributed the status of folk. Another attribute, that of oral tradition associated with ‘folk’ can also not be held with rigidity, considering the factor of spread of literacy. The expansion in the understanding of who the folk are ensues when we consider the folk to be bound by common elements and as the repository of common folklore. Each of us in this sense constitutes a ‘folk’, if we interpret folk to be bound by common elements. When we think of the theme of ‘folk paintings’ and visual narratives, we realize that the common element that binds the folk across time and space is the desire, the passion to make images. As John Berger, the novelist and art critique said, “What the past, the present, and the
future share is a substratum, a ground of timelessness”. The images could be on the rock, on the walls of the houses, on canvases and on paper.

We would begin the unit with the rock art or cave paintings in Bhimbetka, in Madhya Pradesh, that were drawn over thousands of years by men and women across time and space.

We will then look at the living tradition of wall painting and subsequently paintings on canvases and sheets using modern mediums, found among the Adivasi communities of the Gonds and the Bhils in Madhya Pradesh.

Once we have clarity about the folk we are concerned here with, we would need to understand the aspect of painting, their bearing in the cultural tradition, as well as their function in granting us an exposure to that realm of art which questions the dominance of the naturalistic representational tradition that had developed in the west.

The Adivasi or tribal painting, the other form which is infused with what Sir Herbert Read defines as “an element of expressionistic vitality” was not granted any significance for a long time. It was Pablo Picasso, the Spanish painter, poet and writer who had made people aware of the importance of cave paintings when he said, “I realized what painting was all about”. As Kapila Vatsyayan says:

In the context of arts that essence of life is the realization of beauty in perfect form, where a perfect concord exists between viewer and the viewed. The artist shares this vision and it is this which gives him a whole view totally different from what is understood as the ‘descriptively representational’. The artist must in some way realize a complete self-identification with the psychical internalization of sense perceptions. Reality assumes a different meaning and the ‘perfect’ form is the model of his inner vision to which he then seeks to give expression through visual or aural forms.

Let us now have a look at the prehistoric cave paintings from all over the world and then focus on the ‘natural art gallery’ in Bhimbetka in today’s Madhya Pradesh and then the living traditions of folk painting in Madhya Pradesh itself: Gond painting and Bhil painting.

**Prehistoric Rock painting**

Prehistoric rock painting of the world covers a span of 35,000 years, and traces the art of the people from the Stone Age to that of prehistoric time. Prehistoric cave paintings are found in Africa, Australia, Europe, North and South America, South East Asia and East Asia. Previously it was believed that the earliest prehistoric cave paintings were from Europe, but the discovery of the Pettakere caves in Indonesia proved otherwise. The image of the pig deer on the wall of Pettakere cave in the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia is 35,400 years old and as of now is the oldest one. But may be in future, more cave paintings will be discovered and take the date further back in time.

Till Pettakere Caves were discovered, Altamira caves were considered the earliest ones since Marcelino Sanz De Sautuola discovered it in the late 19th century. He was a Spanish jurist and an amateur archaeologist and owned the land where Altamira caves were situated. Unfortunately, he was accused of forgery since there was wide spread disbelief about the astounding creative energy of the prehistoric human. In 1902, the paintings were acknowledged as genuine. The Altamira caves became
It is to prehistoric rock art that we owe our understanding of the humans who lived thousands of years before us. If there were no art on the rocks, in the caves, how would we have known about the people of that time and space? The rock art narrates to us about the people who walked on the earth thousands of years ago, the animals that existed, the weapons and the tools that the people were making for survival, and for gaining control over their surroundings. The rock art also tells us that the people who walked the earth thousands of years ago were also engaged in expressing themselves creatively through painting images. The paintings also tell us about the way they made colors that stood the vagaries of time. For thousands of years, the rocks were painted by different folks, bound by the common element of creative urges, and now, the rock art is a part of our painting ethos. And in the living tradition of painting today, we get a glimpse of it.

7.2 PREHISTORIC CAVE PAINTING OR ROCK ART IN INDIA

Prior to the discovery of Altamira caves in Spain, the rock paintings at Sohagihat, in Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh in India were discovered. It was Archibald Carlleyle, an English archaeologist, who had discovered it in 1867. Though he did not publish about it, he left his notes with Reverend Regionald Gatty and it was subsequently published by V. A.Smith, an Indologist and art historian, in his book Early India, which paints a vivid picture of the era.

Subsequently, many rock paintings were discovered in Kerala, Karnataka, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. We find that more than a thousand rock shelters in nearly 150 sites were discovered. But till now, the richest zone of prehistoric art is Central India. The largest number of prehistoric rock art sites is in Satpura, Vindhya and Kaimur hills. The sandstones that go into forming the hills wither away rapidly leading to the formation of rock shelters and caves.

The two excellent prehistoric painting sites in India are the Bhimbetka caves and Jogimara caves in Madhya Pradesh. Let us know about the prehistoric cave paintings in Bhimbetka.

7.2.1 Bhimbetka

In this unit, we are going to focus on the rock art that was discovered in Bhimbetka as recently as 1957. Prior to that, the ancient Vindhyachal ranges with its dense forests had sheltered the caves in its northern periphery. Perhaps, people who lived close by had often strayed into the caves, but not aware of their relevance, had not spoken about it. It was in 1957 that an archaeologist from Ujjain, Dr. Vishnu Wakankar, who happened to venture into the dense forest, located the caves and was astounded to see the paintings on the walls of the caves. The seven hills in Bhimbetka in the western Vindhchal are dotted with 600 prehistoric rock shelters.

The rock paintings have several layers. Each layer is from a different era, from the upper Paleolithic to Mesolithic to prehistoric to the medieval age. Many a times, new paintings were painted on top of an older painting. The fact that the same ‘canvas’ was used by different people at different times has been authenticated by the superimposition of paintings. There are variations in the thematic and stylistic aspects in the art which also tell us about the chronology of the paintings.
Painted mostly in red and white, with the sporadic use of yellow and green, on matters taken from the everyday events of thousands of years ago, the paintings by and large portray hunting, chasing of animals by humans, animal fights, dancing, elephant and horse riders, humans collecting honey, decoration of bodies, disguises, masks and different type of animals such as bison, tiger, rhinoceros, wild boar, elephants, monkeys, antelopes and peacocks. It also portrays social life. In the upper Paleolithic age, that is 40,000 to 10,000 years ago, we find the paintings of huge animals such as bison, tiger, elephant, rhino, and wild boar in linear representation in dark red and green, along with human figures that are stick like. Geometric patterns fill many of them. Interestingly, the hunters are in red and dances have been portrayed in green. The images on the rock have a narrative streak and we get to know the animals that inhabited during that time, the constant fights for survival, the developing of technology to fight the animals, the community life.

The rock arts that are from the Paleolithic to the Mesolithic times show the significance of hunting in the lives of the people and interestingly, the form of animals projected on the rock grew smaller as the humans acquired a grasp over the technology to make tools to fight them. This is evident in other prehistoric cave painting too. In the Lascaux cave painting in Southern France, which are 17,000 years old, one of the bulls in the great hall of the bulls that are shown along with deers and horses, is 17 feet long. Subsequently, the sizes of the animals decreased with the invention of weapons.

In the Paleolithic time, that is the Old Stone Age, when humans were in the hunting-gathering stage, the stones used for hunting were clipped ones. In the Mesolithic period, the hunting scenes grant us a clear picture of the weapons used during those times: barbed spears, bows and arrows, pointed sticks. Moreover, in this period, communal dances are portrayed and also birds, mother and child, pregnant women, men carrying dead animals, drinking etc, are seen in this rock shelter range. It is so very significant to note that by using simple lines and colors, they had created visionary images and had not gone for mere imitation of nature:

When speaking of learning and imitation of nature, it does not mean photographic imitation of nature; rather it is a nature that artist experiences and offers it in the form of art. (Coomaraswamy, 1994)

In Bhimbetka, one gets connected with the transition from the nomadic ways of the prehistoric human to a settled agricultural life. During Chalcolithic times, the paintings exhibit the association of the cave humans with the agricultural communities of the plains. And during the early historic and medieval era, we find many Brahmanical gods like Ganesh and Nataraja in the rock shelters. But by and large, Bhimbetka is known for the images painted by the prehistoric humans.

The way they made colour is a fascinating narrative. Paints were made by grinding various colored stones. Red and white seem to be their favorite colours. The colour red was obtained from ‘geru’, that is from ‘hematite’, white from limestone, and green from a green coloured rock called ‘chalcedony’. They would also prepare colours by combining manganese, hematite, red stone, and wooden charcoal. And some sticky matter like animal fat or gum or resin from trees may have been used while mixing rock powder with water. All over the world, different substances were used to prepare paint. In Magura cave in Bulgaria, the paintings were made by ‘bat guano’ that is bat excrement. They had to spend time in making these paints and the brushes that were made from plant fibres. And then they would create the astounding images on the cave walls.
We are simply amazed at their execution which stemmed from a creative urge and which some believe is propelled by a basic social need. In fact there are different theories and interpretations about why the prehistoric humans made images on the rocks. Some of them believe that it could be the practice of ‘hunting magic’ which even today prevails among the hunter gatherers and which is meant to increase the number of hunted animals. David Lewis Williams, a South African archaeologist said that it was the Paleolithic Shaman who perhaps would paint the animals in a state of trance so that a great number of animals could be fetched, and that those motifs were used to instill courage and hope in the hunters, a kind of auto suggestion. There are others who do not subscribe to this view and believe that it is creative passions which led them to leave creative imprints in the walls of the caves. It could be either or both that led them leave behind such images which they perhaps never even thought would be viewed by people thousands of years later. Today’s paintings on canvases would not last the vagaries of time but the paintings on the rock still last. And each painting, a visual narrative of that time frame, would continue telling us of their adventures and social life, fears and joys, sorrows and sufferings. We can relate to the emotions depicted in the painted images since in art, time ceases to matter.

Thus Bhimbetka, the ‘natural art gallery’ narrates the story of the humans and other life forms, the way the humans were learning to survive, the way they gave expressions to their creative impulse.

7.2.2 Gond Painting: The Living Tradition

We will now focus on the painting traditions of the communities like the Gonds and the Bhils who live in the same state of Madhya Pradesh and whose images reflect the connection with the images on the rocks.

The Gonds are the largest Adivasi community in India and they are of Dravidian origin. They lived in the deep forests of Vindhya, Satpura and Mandala by the Narmada region of the Amarkantak region for eons. They are known for their rich cultural legacy which finds expression in their narratives, dance forms, music and art.

The word ‘Adivasi’ implies that they are the original inhabitants of the land and the history of Adivasis dates back to the pre-Aryan era. It was during the colonial period that the Adivasis were given the designation of ‘Tribal’ and then in post-independence India, they were classified as scheduled tribes. The problem arises when the ‘tribe’ is not considered a ‘type of society’, and is relegated to a ‘stage of evolution’. This implies that the cultural practices of the community are in danger of extinction. This is precisely what could have happened to the Gond and Bhil communities but for the intervention of people like Verrier Elwin and J. Swaminathan. It is due to them that the folklore and painting tradition of these communities in Madhya Pradesh got a new lease of life. It is due to the spread of art of painting that the Gond cultural tradition is in a thriving state. Let us get a glimpse of how it had happened. Verrier Elwin, expressing his concern, had written in Tribal Art of Middle India:

Tribal India is to be filled with thousands of small schools…there is danger that they will be led to reject the old life and that they will be given in its place little idea of how to have rhythm and vitality, exuberance and delight.

That was 1951. In 1987, J. Swaminathan writes in his book, Perceiving Fingers:

The situation has not changed for the better. The jungle no more belongs to them, they can no more practice their traditional mode of cultivation in the name of
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conservation of forests (which are any way being systematically destroyed for catering to ‘urban and development ‘needs), they cannot seek and hunt game anymore and the inroads of the money economy are seemingly irreversible.

Verrier Elwin had collected thousands and thousands of tales from different communities. And that ensured the documentation and presentation of tradition.

It was in 1984 that J. Swaminathan, the artist who was the director of Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal then, was passionately in search of Adivasi artists in Madhya Pradesh. He was building Roopanker where he wanted to display the works of urban artists and Adivasi artists on the same platform. He had sent his students to different villages in Dindori district where they located many young men and women with great creative talents. One of them was Jangarh Singh Shyam who was an exceptionally brilliant artist, the image on the walls of his house bearing testimony to his creative genius. He was equally enthusiastic about coming to Bhopal to try out the new medium of painting. And once he came to Bhopal and created a space not for only himself but also for many Gond artists, Gond folklore and painting took a firm root in the minds of the next generation, and that ensured the continuity of their folklore and a sound economic base. This is how the journey of the Gond painting began from walls to canvas and now, it is a simultaneous process. Traditional and contemporary paintings coexist.

Before we discuss contemporary Gond paintings, let us first understand the living tradition of Gond painting. It is found on the outer and inner walls and floors of their houses.

Today’s genre of Gond painting has its roots in Nohadora, Digna, and Bhittichitra. Nohadora is painted on the outer walls of the Gond house and it is during the Chedta festival that they bind the house with it. They first dip their three fingers into cow dung and then put dots on the walls, in the shape of a tiger’s front paw imprint. Chedta festival is associated with harvesting and children collecting food grains from each household sit in the open and cook it and eat it together in great joy. It is believed that tigers generally enter the village during this time at night. Therefore the practice was to paint nohadora around the house so that tigers would not come near. It is believed that nohadora protected them from tigers.

Digna is painted on the inner walls and floors during weddings and other festive occasions. It is a geometric pattern, a chowk that is painted on the wall or floor, after plastering them with cow dung. The digna pattern has evolved from nohadora and gradually more complex motifs emerged.

J. Swaminathan writes in Perceiving Fingers:

The commonly found motif in Gond wall painting of the triangle used in inverted juxtaposition in panels as border around the wall symbolizes the male and female principles of creation and the abstract geometric design in yellow, red, and black or indigo lends an auspicious air to the frugality of the Gond hut.

Bhittichitra is the image of animal, plant, or tree that is painted on the walls of the Gond house. During any festive occasion like marriage, Deepavali or Dussera, the walls of Gond houses are plastered with yellow or white clay and cow dung mixture. The Gond women then paint the inner and outer walls of their houses with digna and bhittichitra. Vegetable and mineral dyes are used for colors – flowers, leaves, clay stones, rice, and turmeric. Brushes are handmade, made from a neem or twig and a rag.
The Gond children grow up observing the process of putting *nohadora* on the walls and making *digna* and images on the walls and imbibe respect towards it as well as the penchant to do it with perfection. The dots need to be put with certain aptness. Though it is held by many that the traditional Adivasi art is a collective creation, it has been found out that some of them are considered gifted by the whole community. As J.Swaminathan said, “Among the various Adivasi communities with whom we established contact, we found that certain individuals in the community were generally recognized as gifted in this direction”. (*Perceiving* 89)

**Gond painting: Contemporary**

In the year 1984, it was the initiative of J. Swaminathan that made possible the discovery of Gond artists of extreme talent and ‘inborn genius’.

The contemporary Gond painting has its deep association with Jangarh Singh Shyam and some people call the genre of painting ‘Jangarh kalam’. But many of the Gond artists do not approve of this since they all have their individual style and signature.

Jangarh was an exceptionally gifted artist and as J. Swaminathan says in *Perceiving Fingers*, “Jangarh is no ordinary artist, painting in any traditional manner or style. He is not just an icon maker. Inventive and innovative, he opens up vistas which perhaps have no parallel in Gond art”. J. Swaminathan is wonderstruck by this gifted artist who “taking a leap from the chowk, displays an extraordinary versatility” in giving form to his ideas. Many people would question the very essence of the art and would hesitate to call it an expression of Gond art. But as J. Swaminathan pointed out, that they are indeed expressions of Gond art “precisely because they are drawn from the deep recess of Adivasi memory and it is the individual artist who gives visual, tactile expression to commonly held beliefs”.

When Jangarh began to paint with modern brushes using synthetic colors, he was thrilled to see the effect of the colours on paper and canvas and to be able to bring out the nuances, the subtleties of the themes with the fine bristle of the readymade brushes. Jangarh used colours like greens and red, pink and yellow, and he thus ‘fortifies the vibrating tensions of the lines”. As J. Swaminathan puts it so beautifully, “The lines not only fulfill the function of outlining the figure, they create the form. It is in their flow, their conjunction, their staccato rhythm that the form coheres and acquires life and meaning” (*Perceiving* 66).

Jangarh, who also made wall reliefs and clay models, belonged to the Pardhan community among the Gonds. The Pardhans are the traditional bards of the Gond community and are the repository of folklore. The way Swaminathan had discovered him, Jangarh discovered many more artists mostly among the Gond Pardhans. Among them Narmada Tekam, Anand Singh Shyam, Kala Bai, Durga Bai, Venkat Singh Shyam, Bhajju Shyam, Ram Singh Urveti, Gariba Tekam, Rajendra Singh Shyam, Nan Kusia Shyam, Ramesh Tekam, Suresh Dhruve, Indu Bai, Subhash Vyam and many others have created their own space in the world of painting. Among the second generation of painters, Mayankh Shyam and Japani Shyam are both children of Jangarh Shyam, Nikky Urveti and many others have their own space by dint of their sheer talent. Each of them is extraordinarily talented and they have painted on varied themes, and on different Gond cultural motifs. Each of them is full of Gond folklore and song and apart from flora and fauna, animals and birds, they have also portrayed their deities and granted them forms. The myths and tales have been captured so very vividly and with such abandon that even a child from the Gond community can identify it with great joy, thereby granting them permanence in their unconscious. In the Gond paintings, the cosmos interacts with the natural and
7.2.3 Bhil painting: Traditional

The Bhil community is an ancient people, older than the Dravidians. They were referred to as ‘Nishada’ which did not indicate a particular tribe, rather to all the non Aryan tribes who were not under Aryan control. We find many references to the Bhils in Puranas. It is believed that the word Bhil has come from a Dravidian word ‘villa’ which means ‘bow’ and that was the characteristic weapon of the Bhils. It is believed that Valmiki was a Bhil named ‘Valiya’.

The Bhils were basically a hunting and cattle-rearing community, and the horse has a vital role in Bhil life. Like many Adivasi communities, they also engaged in rudimentary forms of agriculture. Some of them would refuse to use the plough since they did not want to inflict wounds on the body of mother earth.

During festive occasions, the Bhil women create images on the walls of their houses and they called them Bhittichitra. They would plaster the walls with cow dung and then would make images with natural colours. They also use cow dung to make wall reliefs around their huts, which enhance the aesthetic appeal.

The ritual wall painting of the Bhils is very crucial in understanding the ethos of the community and their painting tradition. It needs to be elaborated upon. Though some of the scholars think that the Pithora painting is purely a ritual painting, that there is no aesthetic contemplation, but as J. Swaminathan rightly said, “…it should not be forgotten that the myth is being depicted in a pictorial language and therefore the aesthetic aspect cannot be ignored….It has to be borne in mind that whole areas of Adivasi art are tied up with myths, rituals, magical and religious practices.”

(Perceiving 53)

The Bhils in Madhya Pradesh paint the ‘Pithora’ which is a ritual wall painting. This ritual painting is done to invoke Pithoro, the deity of fertility and prosperity. It is the most intriguing ritual wall painting which contains in itself the whole cosmos, all life forms, many deities, and mythical characters. Pithora, the painted myth of creation, is a very expensive ritual and therefore, every member of the community cannot afford it. But the whole village gathers during the ritual. It is held for the fulfillment of a wish: for good harvests, fertility, and prosperity. It is painted by Lekhindra, the special pithora painters. As he begins to paint, there is an elaborate ritual. The priest, the Badwa (the witch doctor), the Ghardani (the person in whose house Pithora is being painted), they all have prescribed roles and the people of the community are all engaged in drumming, dancing, feasting, a part of the ritual.

Let us first know who Pithora was and why this ritual wall painting is so crucial for the Bhil consciousness. The gist of the story narrated by Pema Fatya, who is a Lekhindra (Pithora painter) of exceptional artistic talents, goes thus: Pithoro was the son of Indiraja (some of the scholars think he is Vedic God Indra while others do not subscribe to this view). Once it so happened that Pithoro committed an impropriety. When betels were being offered to the guests, Pithoro took the offering though none of his brothers committed this indecency. And so Pithoro was punished for this. He was asked to go to the Himalaya mountains riding his horse and bring Himalaya Behn from there. He was very worried to go to the far off land and felt he may not come back. But Indiraja’s daughter told him not to be afraid since Himalaya Behn was also Indiraja’s daughter. When Pithoro reached the abode of the Himalayas, he was recognized by Himalaya Behn by his ring and he was treated like royally. As
there was only one bed to be shared by them, Pithoro placed his sword between them, saying if they turned to each other, they will die. And he brought Himalaya Behn back to Indiraja who called him a blessed person to have come back alive. And since then, it was decided by Indiraja and Desi Bhabar (village deity) that Pithoro would have a permanent place on the wall of the house and will be the one who will be given the new grain first. And others would stay in the jungle and would eat only after feasting him. The story tells the people about the whole cosmos, different life forms, and mythical characters while they are being painted on the wall. There are many layers in the narrative and it goes on for hours together as the Lekhindra paints the creation myth on the wall.

Pithora painting: The Lekhindra paints a rectangular area with an opening in the center of the bottom of the border. And then he fills up the area with characters. Baba Gane is the first figure, who is painted in black and sits at the left hand bottom corner, smoking a hukka. In the upper left hand corner, the Kathiya ghoda is painted in black. Kathiya ghoda is a horse with a rider, who is called kathiya kunwar, and they are the ones who are engaged in inviting all the deities and the people for the pithora ceremony. At the bottom right near the gate opening are painted the chandababa, surajbaba and tare (moon, sun and stars). And then with some irregular lines, sarag, that is the sky, is painted near the sun and the moon. Near the moon and the sun is also painted a rectangle divided into scores representing the earth, Jami mata. The Desi Bhabar, the village deity is represented by two horses held by a groom. And just above the Desi Bhabar, Pithora Bapji I is represented by two facing horses held by a groom. Then all other characters are also represented by horses or mares. For instance, Rani Kajal, the sister of Indi Raja is symbolized by a mare with a foal. Meghani Ghodi is the two headed mare symbolizing the lord of the rain cloud. A black horse stands for Hagharja Kunwar that is the lord of the jungle. Everything connected with Bhil life is painted: tigers, elephants, goats, camels, monkey, parrots, banyan tree, toddy tree, shrubs, insects, snakes, scorpions, chameleons, beehives, deities and mythological figures, wells, women water carriers, farmer ploughing the land, women churning butter, hunters carrying the games. The horse as a symbol of fertility and power has great significance in Bhil life.

Bhil Painting: Contemporary

J. Swaminathan points out that “There is a great austerity and economy of expression in the Pithora of the Bhils of Jhabua. They have the primeval strength of prehistorical rock shelter drawings. In the Bhil Pithora, the horse is rendered by the simple device of two triangles horizontally joined at the apex and the human figures conceived in the same manner vertically” (Perceiving 39). In 1984, Bhuri Bai, a construction labourer, was asked by J. Swaminathan to paint on paper, using a brush and acrylic colour. Bhuri Bai had painted the Pithora horse, ‘rendered by the simple device of two triangles horizontally joined at the apex.’

This is how Bhuri Bai’s journey in the contemporary world of painting had begun. She was five years old when she had started to paint bhittichitra on the walls of their houses during a festive occasion and was soon recognized by the community as a gifted child. While other children would do the paintings for a short while, Bhuri would do it for hours together. She loved the whole process of making colours and then making images on the walls. Gradually her neighbour and others began to invite her to make bhittichitra on their walls during weddings or other occasions.

Bhuri Bai and Jangarh Singh Shyam had begun to paint on paper and then on canvas at the same time. They both were thrilled to see the effect of acrylic colours and brush with fine bristles. In 1984, none of them knew how revolutionary the step
would prove to be, that within a decade or two, they would be considered as the *avante-garde* among the contemporary Adivasi artists.

Bhuri Bai loves to paint the forest as she says, “I feel I am a part of the forest. Since I no longer live in the forest, I feel an urge to create forest on my canvas.” (Quoted by T.B. Naik)

Bhuri Bai has painted every life form that she came across while collecting dry leaves or animal bones in the deep forest as a child. One of her favorite life forms is ‘khobla’, the reddish brown insect that subsists on clay. *Satkood* is another favorite snake which is lethargic by nature and survives on the chance rat or other life forms which come close by. She has painted on every cultural practice of her community, and deities they offer prayers to. And Bhuri Bai never tires of painting mythologies and folktales. The Pithoro is an integral part of her unconscious.

Gradually other artists also emerged from the Bhil community. Another artist, Gangu Bai – also known as ‘badi Bhuri Bai’ – and many others have also established themselves as contemporary Bhil artists and some of their children have also become artists. To understand Adivasi art, it is significant to understand what J. Swaminathan says:

> It is important to understand the difference between sight and vision. The human eye of course projects an image but at the receiving end there is not a blank screen but the human mind. The human mind is not only served by senses other than that of the eye but also genetic perceptions or perhaps what Jung calls the ‘collective unconscious’. The capacity of sight becoming vision lies not in the lenses but in the mind….Art does not mirror nature. It is on the other hand a parallel reality.

The mythology, the folklore and this function of imagination create this ‘parallel reality’ which turns the ‘sight’ into ‘vision’, and that is how we move forward, from being one dimensional to multidimensional beings.

### 7.3 LET US SUM UP

The painting journey had begun thousands of years ago and it continues depicting the narratives to people who are from a different era and space. This journey will continue and since the distant future is not known to us, we do not know how it would be then. Whatever it may be, humans would continue narrating their tales through paintings, and the images would grant us a vista to explore further into human mindscape and understand it in its multiple contexts and levels.

### 7.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


Identity and Hybridity: Kshetra and Desha


### 7.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Note:** Your answers should be in about 300 words.

1) What do you understand by the term ‘folk’?

2) Why are cave paintings important? What is their relevance?

3) Which are the oldest cave paintings in the world?

4) What are the ways in which colours are prepared for cave paintings?

5) What narratives are being told by the images in the cave in Bhimbetka?
6) How would you portray the humans of that time and space, based on the cave paintings?

7) What role did the mythic character of Pithoro play in the collective consciousness of the Bhil community?

8) Who was Jangarh Singh Shyam?

9) What role did Verrier Elwin perform in ensuring the continuity of Gond folklore?

10) What role did J. Swaminathan play in the area of contemporary Gond painting?