

THE PAINTED HOUSES OF HAZARIBAGH

**The overview of the Khovar and Sohrai
tribal women's house painting tradition of
Hazaribagh, Jharkhand, India**



Bulu Imam
(2002)

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Sanskriti Publishing,
Hazaribagh

Published by
SANSKRITI PUBLISHING
Sanskriti, Dipugarha
Hazaribagh 825301
Jharkhand

Distributed by
Sanskriti Publishing

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2001

Black and white drawings
By Juliet Imam

Photos from Sanskriti Archives Hazaribagh
Selected by Marcus Leatherdale, New York

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ISBN – 81-88128-01-3

Typeset and designed by
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At Sanskriti Press
Hazaribagh 825301

Dedicated to

Chedi Munda , guard of Isco Rockart, who passed away on 3rd October, 2001, and to the late Khaita Munda, my other guard at Isco who passed away a few years back. They are succeeded by their sons, Rameshray and Saghan.

Introduction

The house represents the Mother as the agricultural period sacred *Chouk* (Square or rectangle). It is covered with black earth representing the Mother (Kali-Mati / Kali the mother goddess, Mati: earth) which is Manganese. The Mother is darkness, the womb, from whence birth comes. The black earth coating is covered with the white earth of Kaolin/Silica called Dudhi (milk) this Dudhi-mati representing the father god (sperm, light). When the white is covered entirely over the black earth and cut with a comb then forms of the mother goddess appear. This is the earliest kind of writing (*Likhna*), and it is believed that even before speech had developed fifty to a hundred thousand years ago, the earliest humans were communicating through signs. Thus forms were, and are, considered sacred. They are in Khovar ritual painting by the tribal women of Hazaribagh sacred offerings to the Mother.

The symbols of Khovar are unavoidably linked to this sacred complex. Forest dwelling tribes have forest forms in their art like the tiger, deer, elephant, peacock, snake, etc. River valley and plains dwelling agricultural tribes have domestic animal forms like the cow, bull, goat, fowl, pigeon, peacock, lotus, etc. Forest dwelling tribes have forms like the bull, elephant, tiger, horse, deer, peacock, cow feeding calf, lotus, X-ray, etc. Sometimes horse with man standing on back is shown.

In the Kurmi Sohrai of the Bhelwara complex of villages to the east of Hazaribagh town, the earth is covered with yellow ochre earth, or *Pila-mati*. *Pila* means a child or a young one and *mati* means earth. Thus, *Pila-mati* means young earth. Yellow earth is the Palaeolithic strata of the earth in which stone tools of that period are found, also in Hazaribagh region, as elsewhere. *Pila* or yellow is also the colour of the growing rice sheaves celebrated during the harvest festival, and these will mature and be cut starting within a fortnight or so after the festival. The houses are painted with large symbolic ritual forms painted in red, black, white. The red represents the blood of the ancestors, the white is painted with the last year's rice ground with milk into a gruel and represents food, black of course represents the Mother goddess, as this is still a strongly matriarchal society.

The Kurmi Sohrai of Bhelwara is painted in triple lines of red, black, and white outlining the forms painted on the yellow walls. In the nearby Potmo complex of villages, between Bhelwara and Jorakath where the Kurmis decorate their houses with comb-cut images, we find a glyptic form of wall painting using large masses of red, black, white. Such glyptic art is found on the floors of the inner rooms in Bhelwara. In places like Jorakath and nearby in the North Karanpura valley the comb-cut Khovar practiced during

the harvest festival is defaced with white stamping made with corn cobs or ladles with red vermilion in the centre. In the Ganju Sohrai the walls are comb cut or painted but the yellow mud of the house walls are first coated with black, then again coated with yellow ochre or white before painting.

The symbols of Sohrai art are comparable with the rock paintings of the chalcolithic period done in the newly found caves in the forests of Hazaribagh. In the rockart of Isco a spotted deer on wheels painted in red haematite and kaolin white has been found which is the original vehicle of the mother goddess. Later the form of Pashupati, Lord of Animals, appears on the back of the bull, elephant, and finally around 600 B.C on the back of the horse (Ghoda) whose cult is celebrated in the harvest art of the Kurmis of Bhelwara so spectacularly. Other symbols of fertility appear like the fish, lotus, ladle, etc. The main symbol is the Ghoda or horse with Pashupati on the back, also bull and elephant with Pashupati, and often the Tree of life appears on the bull's back appear. The tree is identified as Bhelwa (*Seacarpus anacardium*), the marking nut tree, the Tree of Shiva.

The Ganju Sohrai has wild animals of the forest painted, but also sometimes comb-cut, such as deer, boar, rhino, peacock, florican, tiger, elephant, duck, X-Ray, etc. Deepavali the Hindu festival of lights comes one day before Sohrai. Originally the Adivasi Sohrai was called Deewali (Deewal= wall) because it was the festival of the repair and painting the walls. The Adivasis do not celebrate Deepavali the festival of oil lamps, but they celebrate Deewali, the festival of the painting of the walls, linked to repair of the houses, and the harvest festival.

There is a similarity in technique as well as in the philosophy of Chinese painting and its philosophy of art with the Khovar painting in Hazaribagh. As a mountain in Chinese painting stands as a symbol of truth so too does a bird stand for freedom in Khovar. As in Chinese painting spray of plum struggling to blossom despite harsh weather symbolizing courage and endurance, so too the date palm in Khovar expresses fruitfulness. As a pine tree symbolizes age and maturity in China a mangoe tree has the same meaning in Khovar. The lotus is in both cultures the everlasting symbol of beauty rising from the muddiest waters. Grasses, bamboo, flowers, each has its own values and respect. For the Chinese the bamboo signifies resilience of temperament, the ability to swing back to equipoise as soon as unrestrained, its hollowness symbolized the open mind.

The Khovar artist, like the Chinese has a well thought out plan in mind before beginning a painting. Let us see how the Chinese artist paints. He follows a "key" or pattern in laying out the painting. Let us see how he paints a spray of flowers. First he places on the paper the leaves, using a

bold sideways twists of the brush. Then he places in the flowers, each petal a pair of fine curved lines. Then he lays in the stems and stamens of the flowers; the leaves come next. All this is done in a limited number of regular strokes not exceeding six in variety of styles each fulfilling its contribution before the next was employed. This is the discipline of the Chinese artist.

The Khojar women painters of Hazaribagh are not less consistent and economic in their variety of strokes, mostly curving lines which are laid in first in blocks and then joined to complete the particular object, bird flower, animal, etc. There is no such thing as a “running hand” as employed in Western drawing and painting. The exact number of strokes and the variety of stroke is fixed in the artists mind in a calligraphic manner. As the Chinese artist approaches forms as pictographs so too with the Khojar women artists of Hazaribagh. The Khojar painting, like the Chinese, emerges in sets of well conceived and deftly executed forms, displaying deft use of the brush or comb and excellent memory of design. For the transmission of forms in Khojar to simply memorize the forms is insufficient. One has to know the manner in which the form is written (literally, writing, *likhna*) because several independent strokes in a limited variety of styles makes up the form.

Thus, when the experienced Khojar artist approaches a large space which is to be decorated with her art she has already a complete plan of what is to be made on the space, and she simply follows a plan in which she executes the painting with sureness of calligraphic style. The Chinese artist also uses a similar plan and technique of painting and has to have the completed picture before him in his mind before he begins painting. The Chinese artist excelled in pictures conveying a philosophic message... such as a mountain symbolizing truth's faultless majesty. Or a lonely snow-field, rivers and rocks, wild bamboo clumps and mist-veiled heights symbolizing a lonely or pensive state of mind which others of the same disposition will easily identify with irrespective of time or place. Such paintings are valid today as when they were painted several centuries ago in classical times in China (i.e. 10th Cent. Sung, Tang Dynasty, etc). The Chinese script as we know is pictographic and each character is the representation of some thing or idea not a phonetic symbol like the alphabet. So to the pre alphabetic consciousness of Chinese interpretation must be added the preliterate consciousness of the Khojar interpretation.

There are no shadows in Chinese painting and no reflected light, just as in Khojar painting! The line is important in Chinese painting and drawing, as in Khojar. Line occupies itself in these societies as light occupies the Western mind.

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A background note

The Khovar and Sohrai ritual traditions are a complimentary matriarchal pair of art forms linked with the seasonal cycles and so implicit with the feminine symbols, sexuality, fertility, and everything which "Woman's World" is all about. The bringing to light of a vast prehistoric rock art heritage in the jungles of Hazaribagh along with the attendant evidence of a striking palaeolithic culture, in 1991, was followed by our researches into the tribal house painting traditions of this remote, inaccessible, almost exclusively tribal area in the densely forested part of north Jharkhand plateau. Our bringing to light of increasing numbers of rock art caves in this area, and showing their traditional continuance in tribal house murals, drew focus to the imminent threat of destruction of this heritage in more than two hundred villages by rampant, opencast coal mining which earlier on had destroyed the cultural heritage of the entire lower Damodar Valley, one of the birth places of Early Man and river valley civilization. The upper valley of the Damodar in Hazaribagh is almost exclusively the last remaining stronghold of Khovar and Sohrai art. It is also one of the last palaeo-archaeological treasure sites. Today, as the result of on-going mining, both the one dozen rock art sites and mural traditions face imminent destruction.

Khovar is the mural art form practiced by the tribal women artists during the marriage season from January to June. In the Khovar the black Manganese (*Kali Mati*) black earth found near the hill sides at the edges of the fields are dug up and powdered, soaked overnight in water till it becomes soft and clayey, then it is spread over the walls and let dry for a little while. Generally before it is fully dried the second stage of the painting process begins immediately. The white or cream earth which is called *Charak Mati* and *Dudhi Mati* are being soaked in buckets of water, and are now applied directly over the drying black coating; A yellow earth ochre coat called *Pila Mati* is sometimes applied. Then before this upper coat has fully dried the painting, or rather *cutting* of designs with the used pieces of combs begins, the women working like dervishes! Usually early morning or late evening are preferred so that the earth does not dry too quickly. It is a comb-cut sgraffito technique which is comparable to the Grecian as well as Pacific Island decorated pottery (La-pita). *Kho* in the local tribal dialect means a cave, and *var* signifies a bridal couple. A Khovar or Kohbar is the marriage room. This is the name given to caves

containing rock art associated traditionally with marriage throughout India. The term Khovar is a popular name given also to the marriage room art-forms. Thus in Madhubani painting in Mithila we hear also of the Kohbar. The Khovar Art of Hazaribagh's upper Damodar Valley is directly evolved from the 20,000 year old rock art of the plateau scarps overlooking the valley. The date 20,000 is derived from the dates 30,000-20,000 given to the microlithic period by H.D.Sankalia. Microliths are found in abundance in the Khovar caves. It is also very likely the longest continuous artistic and cultural tradition in the world. In places like the Isco Khovar in Hazaribagh we have clear evidence of the continuance of these palaeolithic cultures continuing into the age of pottery and agriculture, iron and bronze. The nomadic Birhor tribals who live in the forests in leaf tents called *kumbas* have a living tradition that the cave art was painted by their forebears. Today the Bihors indulge in sand drawing and wherever they find wall space available they draw in charcoal in an enigmatic palaeolithic art depicting wild animals. They still survive by choice through trapping and food gathering. The local villagers also accept the Bihors have a special knowledge about the art, while the potter tribes like the Prajapatis also claim that their forebears painted the rock art.

The prehistoric rock art of Hazaribagh may be divided into three distinct categories - the earliest perhaps as far back as 20,000 years or more, equivalent to the Aurignacian epoch in Western Europe. It depicts anthropomorphs, zoomorphs, horned and barbed figures which reflect early sorcery and shamanistic perceptions, and have many parallels with the Bushman ancestors' rock art of the Drakensberg Ranges of South Africa and the Troies Frere art in the Central Massif in France. The connection between Khovar, this art, and similar proto-Australoid art traditions of the Aborigines of Australia has been drawn attention to by me in my first book on the subject (*Bridal Caves, INTACH, 1995*). Many of the designs and ritual significances both in the rock paintings and the village art are identical. In Hazaribagh, tertiary level of rock paintings of frogs, snakes, plant and natural forms appear. These are aniconic and pre-brahmanical, and the protozoic form of art in India. It could be from anywhere between 30,000 and 20,000 years ago because Middle Palaeolithic hand axes have been collected in these sites. The most recent rock paintings point to agricultural peoples and contain geometrical designs, mandalas associated with marriage and agriculture, and what seems to be a form of non-linear picture-writing, even perhaps a proto-Harappan script since over 93 characters of the Indus script have been isolated in the Isco caves. It is also common to find script symbols appearing in the art painted by the tribal women, what the late Mrs. Pupul Jayakar once commented to me was perhaps a practice of memory training by the women artists to keep these signs alive. The ephemerization witnessed in the earlier levels of the rock

art appears repeatedly in the marriage art of Khovar as well as in the Sohrai painting and is connected with symbols of sexuality and familial priority, and the dominance and worship of the cult of the mother goddess. One of the oldest stone mother goddess figurines was found in the area and dated by the late Dr.B.K.Thapar to pre 20,000 B.P. All the married women who paint the Khovar and Sohrai art are called Devi, which means goddess. By contrast the men are not called Devas. These women carry an artistic ritual tradition which they brought with them from their mothers and aunts, and points to a matrilineal period of society. These Devis pass on their knowledge of sacred forms to their daughters and nieces who take these forms with them when they get married and go to their husbands homes. Thus the stylistic continuity of the art spreads and mingles with new stylistic modes. Overlapping stylistic modes have been determined in members of the same tribe or caste. Understanding the evolution and dissemination of their sacred art forms is wholly possible for a senior Devi of the tribe. From their art the women know one another, where they come from, who they are.

Historical background

Ever since Vedic times a growing pressure on land for agriculture was felt through India as the landed brahmanas exercised their growing authority in tribal areas and the need to reclaim virgin land for agriculture increased. It was at this early period some three or four thousand years ago that an increasing non tribal ritual system was growing in the tribal areas of the subcontinent. The landed brahmanas and the tribals increasingly interacted with each other. The inculturation of tribal labour grew as an imperative for the landed brahmanas and *agrahara* land grants grew in early mediaeval times in India. A Vakataka charter records endowment of 8000 *nivartanas* of land to a thousand brahmanas and the Tipperah copperplate of Lokanatha records donation of forest land to a community of more than a hundred brahmanas; and the Navalakhi copperplate inscription of Siladitya records the gift of a village to forty-four brahmanas. The Parikud copperplate records the grant of a village to twelve brahmanas. These then were the founding of societies such as we find today in the Khovar and Sohrai villages. The area of land allotted to each brahmana was fairly small, and not being wealthy they tilled the land themselves. According to the *Brihatparasara* the highest religious duty was cultivation, and all profit and happiness was to be derived from agriculture. The *Agnipurana* details the astronomical considerations in connection with agriculture, and the *Brihatsamhita* deals with agricultural matters. Increasingly ritual played a major role in tribal life in the context of agriculture and various *yajnas* were created. The Sohrai ritual grew out of such a background as *asvayuji* and *kartiki* rites performed for the welfare of the cattle. That the brahmanas and tribes intermixed is well established. Scholars have made out a case for the teaching of plough agriculture to the tribes and thereby creating a process of deconstruction of tribal culture, and a reconstruction of the brahmana agricultural culture. However, it is an historical fact according to the archaeological record that the art of plough agriculture was already several thousand years old in South and Southeast Asia at the time of the arrival of the brahmanas. It is clear from Brahmanical sources that the artisan tribes such as Turi (basket maker), Chamar (leather-worker), Ganju and Kurmi (agriculturist), Malhar (metal-caster), Machwa (fisher-man), Teli (oil-extractor), Prajapati and Kumhar (potter), Rana (carpenter) continued to enjoy guild status as tribes. Other tribes like the Birhor were hunter-gatherers, and Santals were hunters and farmers.

It is known that the brahmana ranks include tribes or sudra brahmanas known as nagara brahmanas. According to local traditions lord Rama on his return from Sri Lanka collected thousands of hill tribes and made them brahmanas. Thus may the tribal status of the brahmanas be

established as well as a priestly role such as composition of *Puranas*. The *Matsyapurana* and *Skandapurana* were composed in tribal regions like Narmada valley by tantric brahmanas believed to have taken in transmigration the forms of birds. The Narmada valley during the Harappan period was one of the major migration routes between the Indus valley and northeastern India for speakers of the languages such as the Malto and Kurukh of the North Dravidian Branch spoken by Paharias of Rajmahal and Oraons of Jharkhand.(A.Parpola, 1994). Thus the tribal and brahmana cultures have merged in an interface, leaving us such manifestations as the Khovar and Sohrai traditions in Hazaribagh. The tribal brahmana priestly class (bhagat) remains in evidence and the rise of these ritual art forms are a manifestation whose significance they understand and respect. That Khovar art, though matriarchal, is of a *puranic* tradition cannot be denied, and the drawing of a circle or svastika over which Sara (sal) leaves are arranged before transcription of a *purana*, is a ritual art form still manifested in the wall art, as well as found in the arrangement of these leaves on the low altar of the householder shrines in the village which are made facing to the east as enunciated in the Agnipurana (63.13-15, 17, 20). The Khovar traditions still present among simple tribal societies such as the hill and forest-dwelling Kurmis of Hazaribagh may be one of the last great endowments to be found of the *puranic* period. In these forms and *mandalas* will be found the root ideas which underlie the construction of the *Puranas*. The idea of four leaves in a circle is also the oldest tribal or autochthonous idea of the four directions in the universe evidenced in the oldest levels of rock-art both in Australia and India. The idea of conveying the deepest meaning through symbols is a very ancient idea and Khovar and Sohrai art still continue this as living traditions. In this manner the simple villagers could understand the deeper metaphysical meanings of the sacred texts carried on by the *pujaris* or village priests. Thus symbols were used to convey abstract ideas. So the symbolism inherent in Khovar and Sohrai in Hazaribagh may be seen to augment a bardic tradition rather than be in itself an illustrative narrative in picture form. As such it is the earliest tradition known, far older than story telling in pictures such as Mithila art (Madhubani) or the Thane folk art (Warli), which may be traced to prehistoric aniconic sources in rock paintings such as Raisen.

Khovar Art, and an introduction to Sohrai

The Khovar is, strictly speaking the Bridal Room, and the decorated nuptial room is a tribal tradition found as far away as Spain, and the decoration is done in this room, in the bride's house by the bride's mother and aunts, because in the tribal system bride-price is paid, and the bride-groom spends the nuptial night in his wife's house, which is the influence of the original matriarchal system. Bride price is still paid in the tribal

villages of Hazaribagh. The marriage season runs from January till the onset of the monsoons in June and overlaps the summer months when the great annual spring and summer hunts take place. In the jungle -dwelling tribes like the Ganjus, the Mundas, and the forest dwelling Kurmis, also some isolated hamlets of Oraons, and the animist Saonsar, even in the semi - hinduized Bhagat, we find a hunter's art which is replete with wild animals and birds of the hunt. Such art as that of the Ganjus and forest dwelling Kurmi reveal the highest naturalistic art in the Hazaribagh Khovar and Sohrai palette among our tribes. Also plant forms and Maltese cross appear. The prehistoric roots of sgraffito are in ritual scarification, and the comb is associated with the married woman and parting of the hair for placing vermilion mentioned in both the Upanishads and Rig Veda. The art of the Oraon tribals which I will deal with at greater length later, comprises the series of semi-circular whorls referred to as *basera* which is common both to the Indus and the prehistoric pottery of Iran. The continuing of such a tradition is of great interest for understanding the civilizational status of the living traditions of a people believed to have inhabited the Indus valley, and yet whose cultural and evolutionary roots are directly connected with a much earlier tradition of palaeolithic rock-art ! Interesting cross-cultural parallels appear in the comb Khovar, such as bulls with feeding troughs found in Indus valley seals, and fish sprouting lotus stem and flower from tail found in Easter Island stele of the South Pacific !

The actual technique of comb cutting is as follows. The wall is completely repaired and plastered with mud, after which it is in some instances only, as in the case of Bhuiya art, given a coat of cow dung, and mud mixture, after which it is covered with a coat of black earth (Kali Mati) applied in a circulatory half moon stroke called the *basera* (Bas-bamboo, era - goddess) and recollects the old bamboo matting which would be mud plastered and is civilized man's earliest dwelling form traceable back seven thousand years to the marsh-beds of the Tigris. After the black earth coating has dried (or in some instances when it is still only half dried) the Devi covers it over with a coating of either brilliant white earth (Charak) or subdued cream coloured mud (Dudhi) , or plain yellow earth (Pila). Pila means child, mati means earth. Pila mati contains palaeolithic deposits. It is correctly the child earth, the oldest beds of palaeolithic deposit, found in the North Karanpura Valley. The black earth is named for the goddess and is called the Kali Mati. Before the white or cream or yellow earth has a chance to dry it is immediately "cut" by a sgraffito technique, or modern scraper board style , with a piece of broken comb, for the comb is sacred. The sacredness of the comb is referred to in the sacred texts like the *Upanisad*. The cutting reveals the black ground beneath the over-coat, in a striking design pattern. The Khovar is a highly symbolic art filled with aniconic forms and mandalas which are ritually connected with marriage,

the story of creation, fecundity, fertility, and prolific images of every kind. The protozoic forms both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic are found in this art. The artists who do the comb-cut art of the Khovalar do not paint their designs during the harvest festival. This is a special form highly evolved in the north Hazaribagh plateau by the Kurmis and Ghatwals. The Kurmis of the jungle villages of Jorakath also do not have a painted art and choose to comb-cut forms of the wild birds and animals of the jungle, and a few aniconic forms like *lajja-gouri* the fertility female figure with parted legs, the mother goddess; a double-headed bird *do-muha*; four legged bird *Chibba* ; pipal leaf or *pani-pat* ; the *Shiva Damru*, which is Shiva with drums at his waist ; lotus buds called *puran-paat*, resembling papyrus; the forest of lotuses : *Kamal-ban*; Shiva in the symbolic form of the *Semacarpus anacardium* or Bhelwa tree, *Shiva-Bhelwa* etc. The Ganju paint both with comb-cutting and applying colours , and their themes are wild birds, animals, and snakes, during both the Khovalar and Sohrai festivals. The first great art I encountered was the Ganju comb art of huge birds and animals, which led to my “discovery” of this remote jungle art, which I will describe later on.

The Khovalar in the valleys and plains is almost exclusively cut by comb and this is why the term Khovalar is generally given to the comb cut art. The Khovalar art carries motifs found in the earliest rock art, snakes and scorpions, and even older zoomorphic and anthropomorphic creatures, frogs, water insects and aquatic plants. These are animalistic in content. Such forms have found their way unexpectedly into the "Man's World" in the hands of the tattooist (*Godna - Kari*), and a deep speculation arises how the male could painfully inscribe the sacred forms of the woman's world into the women's skin and would seem to be an act of male chauvinism. However, it is important to note that an ancient tradition of female tattooists still persists in the Hazaribagh region, and these tattooists are the wives of the metal casting Malhars. The Malhars would seem to be carrying the oldest heritage of the chalcolithic age of bronze and copper casting in India as also found among their cousins in Bastar and elsewhere. The forms made by the Malhars are uniquely important since they cover all the rock-art forms, bird and animal forms, including aquatic creatures, and their signature lines at the bottom of the objects are identical with such patterns from Neolithic Sumer, the Danube valley, and Celtic Ireland. It is therefore not surprising that their womenfolk are exponents of a striking artform in their tattooing or *godna* which is a replication of the rock-art forms of Hazaribagh. These women know all the most ancient patterns, which their husbands use in their metal casting, and which have been traced by us to their sources in the pre-historic rock-art of Hazaribagh. The Khovalar tradition of Hazaribagh may justly claim to be the source of almost every design and pattern known to the male art of Godna that features in

Madhubani art so prominently. All may be traced to Hazaribagh's pre-historic rock-art.

After the monsoon rains the village houses again require repair while the paddy has to be harvested, and Sohrai is the festival celebrating plough agriculture done by cattle as well as the domestication of the cow. The art on the walls painted by the Devis marks a distinct change from Khovar in that it celebrates a male god, Pashupati the Lord of Animals. It is celebrated the day after Divali and is connected with the return of Lord Ram. In the murals in the village Prajapati is shown standing on the back of the Bull, very Sumerian in design and conjectures the link with West Asia and the Sohrai art of the Nile Valley as well as the Warli art. This is a Hinduized iconic art. The body of Prajapati is in shape akin to Shiva's drum (Damru) and around him is a wheel of six lotuses representing the Six senses, and we are reminded of the enigmatic yogi An from the Mohanjodaro seal, who was the chief deity of the Indus Valley. Shiva the forest god is shown in the form of a tree called Bhelwa (*Semecarpus anacardium*), and a similar form is the "Flowery Trident", as I call the vertical lotus headed form sprouting five or six triangular horned triangles like the Animal Wheel. He is also called Shiva and associated with the Bhelwa tree. The rock art of Isco in Hazaribagh in a panel dated to the meso-chalcolithic has two Ghodas or spotted and wheeled animals, identical to the Sohrai *ghodas* of the Kurmis of Bhelwara, and the cult would have to find its source in Hazaribagh's rock art in this upper level which could be over seven thousand years old. As well as mandalas, geometric motifs and compound hieroglyphic compositions are found also in the simple art of the river valley peoples. The compound element is a great pre-historic discovery, in fact, the beginning of all scientific thinking. It occurred about the time early compound stone tools such as the microlithic sickle and hafted axe appeared. In the typical Kurmi Sohrai of Bhelwara in Hazaribagh huge ghodas with Prajapati atop, wheel of Life, Tree of Life, Flowery Trident and almost all the sacred Buddhist symbols are present. The name Bhelwa-ra refers to Shiva as the village deity. The tree as an anthropomorph of this supreme deity regularly appears in house after house, a vertical line with a triangular head with horns on either side. This the Devis will shyly tell you are the forms of Shiva, reserved for the inner rooms, for he is worshipped by the women as the bestower of progeny. Shiva is portrayed wearing the double drums (*damru*) at his waist. At some period during the Buddhist period, he Mahadeva, the forest god became associated with the Buddha. Thus did the gentle Sujata the tribal maiden, seeking his blessing, take a bowl of rice-curd for the Wood-Good sitting under the *Saal* tree and find instead of the Lord of Compassion, he who was soon to become the Buddha ! Times have little changed since when Sujata and her handmaiden Radha went into that holy wood seeking the Wood-

God's blessing. The paintings are made by first drawing the entire compositions in their huge scale across the mud walls using a nail or twig to scratch a line. Then the nail line is outlined with a double black line, outlined with a double red line, in turn outlined with a double white line on the day of Sohrai. These forms interchange too.

The Kurmi Sohrai in the hill forests of Hazaribagh plateau could not be more different in their sources of inspiration and stylistic expression to that outside the jungle! In addition these hill Kurmi villagers are close to the rock art sites. These tribals comb cut their designs of wild animals and birds found in these forests, and tigers and elephants are common motifs along with peafowl and the legendary man-like bird *Chibba* which runs on four legs and stands upright, and has arms with hands. X-ray is also common as in the rock art paintings. The force of the animal art of the Hill Kurmis of Jorakath in the Hazaribagh jungle overlooking Isco rock art, is without parallel. Here too we find the Ganju Sohrai. Again the force of pure line and vivid and naturalistic portrayal is profoundly real. However the Ganju Sohrai is painted as well as comb cut. Birds and animals no longer found in these forests appear like the extinct one horned rhinoceros and the Bengal Florican, no more seen in these parts.

The Ganju village of Saheda overlooking the Isco rock-shelter with its great painted pre-historic art is a few kilometers to the south of Jorakath and chapri where we have experienced a fantastic portrayal of jungle creatures from peacock to elephant. The legendary double headed snake *domuha* appears, as also "fighting" snakes. This aspect of the so-called Contest Motif peculiar to Mesopotamia may require drawing attention to. The motif shows two identical animals facing each other, apparently fighting, as in the two dogs fighting, etc. The motif as in the ancient knife handle of Jebel-El-Arak is found in Ganju art ! Also, in the Ghadwa bronzes of Bastar we find combs with the "fighting" peacocks and elephant, a common Kurmi Khovar motif and wonder if the Murias, Ghadwas, and Kurmis were once closely connected ! Also appear those deer and animal forms which we find in the rock-art of the nearby Satpahars and Isco. Time stands frozen in the march of progress.

The tribal women artists of Hazaribagh are also mothers and grandmothers who use their little available spare time for making beautiful and practical craft objects of the "Woman's world". The unique and distinctive toffee paper-toys of Khovar belong to this peculiar *genre*. Folding the shiny coloured papers into neat triangular shapes which audaciously mimic the sharp edges of the sgraffito comb, these women (and their daughters and nieces) deftly stitch them on to forms made of old saris stuffed with rice husk and made to stand on small tooth powder tins. Waste

materials are used to complete the striking effect audio tape waste goes into fashioning breezy tails, red school ribbons thrown away are fashioned into cockscombs, bright sequins from a torn dress become the bird's eye !

In the same woman's world the quilts of old saris (*ledras*) follow an ancient time honoured native Indian tradition which time could not change nor modernism alter. The same motifs which have been solemnly comb-cut or painted with cloth rags on house walls are now once again resurrected on waste materials to provide insulated warmth in winter for new born babies and aged bones hardly adequately inured to the forest cold. These are the timeless *Ledras*. Typically *ledra* means "waste clothes". A quiet show of great economy and impeccable artistry creates another work of art from thrown- aways in the "Woman's World". Technical proficiency and artistic sense never displayed itself better in simple, untutored hands. Six or seven layers of frayed cotton cloth lovingly quilted with locally spun thread using timeless designs create works of unparalleled artistry and inspiration. I would like to quote my friend John Kirkman's observation about these memory quilts.

"The delicate art of the *ledra* is a source of tribal inspiration maternal strength and spirituality. Yet it also draws attention to the cultural, economic, and environmental crisis wrought on tribal communities by technological development ... By 1996 the making of the sacred *ledra* had almost been forgotten as open cast mining continued to displace tribal communities and irrevocably destroyed sacred sites, mythology and cultural heritage ... through the work of the Tribal Women Artists Cooperative project and resultant exhibitions the tradition of *ledra* making is undergoing a renaissance ... the *ledra* remains a powerful and dynamic symbol of survival for those who make and use them for the comforting warmth of inspiration and guidance".

I recall that when the North American Plains Indian had lost almost every right to their once vast pasture lands and hunting grounds as the result of being outmaneuvered on their own ground by the European colonists, one of the old chiefs advised his tribe to reaffirm their culture by stomping, which was simply jumping up and down that was the resurrection of the principle of the ownership of a space whether on the ground or in the spirit, which could not be colonised, forcibly acquired by anyone else, and in which the spirit of the people could continue to endure. The *Ledra* is one such space. And by inference, so too is Khovar and Sohrai art. Today *ledras* by Philomina and Elizabeth hang in the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, and Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. A major exhibition of quilts was held in Casula Arts Centre in 1999. Several exhibitions of quilts in Australia have been held.

Sohrai is the harvest art, the name itself coming from an ancient palaeolithic word, “soro”, meaning literally to drive with a stick. It is the festival of the early winter months when the paddy has ripened and is about to be harvested. Thus it is connected with the origin of agriculture. As we have seen the earliest pictograph of the wheeled deer as a votive deity comes from the Mesolithic rock-art of Isco which is over six thousand years old. These perennial images continue in the Sohrai painting of Bhelwara today among the Kurmi tribals. The cattle have been taken out to the jungles very early in the morning, and washed after grazing in the forest ponds. Then they are brought back ceremonially to the village where they are welcomed with special painted carpets called “aripan”. The welcome of the cattle on Sohrai day is the mark of domestication of wild cattle, and the origin of this event is attributed to Ram the great ancient king of the tribes, probably a pre-Aryan tribal king who has been seen in the Ramayana, as Parshu-Rama of the Indus king lists, and sometimes also associated by these simple people with the creator and lord of the animals, Pashupati. The figure seen on the backs of the cattle painted in the Sohrai murals are the form of Pashupati. The name Pashu means animals, Pati- the father of animals, or image maker of animals, creator of animals, Etc. The male deity is represented by a vertical figure, often associated with the Bhelwa tree and Shiva as I have earlier observed. The day after the Sohrai is a mock bull-fight in which sacred cattle, both bulls and buffaloes, gaily anointed with coloured spots and oiled horns are taken to posts in the crossroads of the village where the three wise men sing to them. They are tied to a stake or *Khuta* so the festival is called, simply, *Khuta-bandhan*. *Bandhan* means to tie. The women anoint and colour the animals before they are brought to the sacred post.

Pashupati

*When the oil lamps of Divali are over
Then the lord of the animals, Pashupati,
Comes with the animals from the forest.*

The song of the three wise men is like this,

Song of the Three Wise Men

*Where have I seen such a beautiful horse ?
Where have I seen such a beautiful cow ?
Where have I seen such a beautiful family ?*

*You are the beautiful sacrificial cow,
Such a beautiful horse, such a beautiful cow !
Such a beautiful family, such a beautiful cow,
Such a beautiful horse, such a beautiful cow,
Such a beautiful family cow.*

The inference of these songs and these paintings, here on the southern hand of the Asian Highway, the great Grand Trunk Road, which cuts right across the Chotanagpur plateau in Hazaribagh, the thoroughfare of ancient trading caravans, a region that saw the earliest thrust of cavalry and horses from northwestern India with the Aryans, shows that the cow is being confused with the horse. This is natural in an artform which has steadily been evolving in the context of cultural contacts on this sensitive high road between northwest and southeast Asia. The women's role in the festival as we have seen, is crucial, and points back to an ancient matriarchal society. Even today we find the nomadic graziers or herders the Van Gujjars of Rajauri who wander in the summer months over the Pir Panjals and across the Rohtang Pass into the Sarchu plain. These people's art in the villages along the Siwaliks and in the Jhelum valley is a very early form of the same Sohrai art which we witness in Hazaribagh. When the Santal and the Munda, the Kurukh tribes and the Kol, the dark proto-australoid and the Dravidian, wanderer were pressed under the force of advancing Aryanism into the gentle sheltered valleys of the east, they left behind, and some carried along with them traditions which they had taken to the northwest millennia before. As the emperor Asoka had said, to maintain the line of control in Indian soil you have to protect the frontiers of Bactria --- so too with our ancient cultures, they had wandered farthest from the forests where they were born in Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh, spreading to the soil of Persia. An Oraon song goes like this,

Jharkhand

*Our land is adorned with gold and silver,
Suvarnrekha's water is shining gold,
The water of heaven comes down in drops
And the blue shadows of the hills are still;*

We are happy with that stillness

*For the place we have been born is very good.
This is the oldest place on earth,
And here we will dance with happiness.*

The *mandalas* to welcome the cattle back from the jungle are made from rice flour and milk in a kind of gruel which when dried on the sparse brown earth is brilliant white. The *mandalas* are in the form of hoof-prints, and sacred dots of vermillion (*bindu*) are put at line junctions. Such lines of circular motifs with lines running through them are also found in the rock paintings ! The head of the long column which is called the “aripan” is a triangular shape, denoting the mother goddess (*yonis*), in whose middle is placed the small tuft of *Latlatiya-ghas*, a grass held very sacred by the women on this occasion. It may be noted this tuft is the ponytail, the sign of the goddess, found six thousand years back in the reed beds of the Tigris amongst the earliest grain collecting societies of marsh Arabs. The symbols painted by the women include signs found as far away as Sumeria and the Indus and points to ancient culture contacts. The forest of lotuses or *Kamalan* is a very common motif. It is surrounded by five or six arms, showing horned animal heads, and may be compared with the Animal Wheel of Mohenjodaro which I have referred to as the flowery trident. Dozens of sacred emblems also taken in the Buddhist rituals are found, and this points to a contact with Buddhism in the past, which is quite natural, since the region is in the earliest land of Buddhist influence. The house sparrow is believed to have come with the cattle from the forest and is called *goraya* or the one which comes bringing the cattle ! Thus in the painted houses of Hazaribagh we are looking at a variety of ancient influences which are still continuing on.

The mother goddess of the Eiyar hunter tribes in south India is depicted as riding on the back of a stag when she is called *Durga*, her accoutrements being the same as Shiva’s wearing hair piled in a *Jatha*, encircled by a small snake, a crescent moon of boar-tush on one side, a necklace of tiger teeth, girdled with a tiger skin, holding a bow; The same deity appears in the later manifestation as the tree form of the goddess on the back of the buffalo in Harappa. The same motif, including spotting of cattle and spotted cattle forms in the mural paintings of Sohrai in Bhelwara in Hazaribagh is found. Sometimes the animals are shown on wheels. An identical spotted animal on wheels has been found in the rock art of Isco in Hazaribagh dated at 6000 B.C.

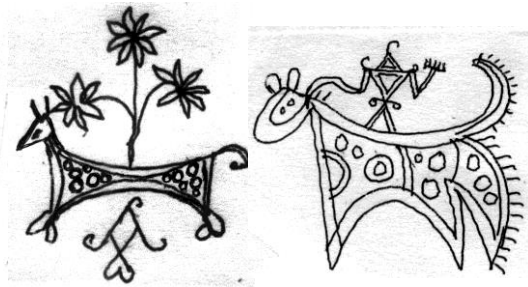
The same motif is found in the Sohrai Khutan of the Kurmis in Bhelwara which is of interest since the Kurmis and the Santals are believed to be related. What has to be understood above everything else is the clear possibility of a commensurate level of culture in Hazaribagh as that of Harappa. Since the Harappan evidence is found to coincide with contemporary Hazaribagh culture it is clear the two are related. This does not necessarily mean that Hazaribagh is a later period culture, since we have evidence of a similar Chalcolithic culture to Harappa and Ahar in

Hazaribagh. The Ahar culture in the eastern Aravallis in Rajasthan (near Udaipur) has evidenced *Khovar* (reversed slip) sgraffito designs on pottery similar to Hazaribagh dated to before the third millennium BC.

Recently archaeology has brought to light the decorated pottery of the Ahars dated 4000 BC in Balathal –Bhilwara on the Banas river, near modern Udaipur in the eastern Aravallis in Rajasthan, which is of the *Khovar* “sgraffito” technique ! This technique, referred to as “reversed slip” by experts, was seen in only a few shards of the Harappan site of Mohenjodaro and Surkotada dated around 2400 BC and seems to be more ancient and the Harappan prototype. This technique, similar to *Khovar* is a potter’s art-form, and consists of putting a second slip over the lower one and cutting design in bands to reveal the decorative motifs in wavy and straight lines, criss-cross patterns, and a twin colour similar to our *Khovar* art in Hazaribagh. Since the motifs of *Khovar* “reversed slip” may be traced to six and more thousand years old rock paintings in Hazaribagh it is certain that it precedes the Balathal art. This suggests a westward migration of the art form from Hazaribagh !



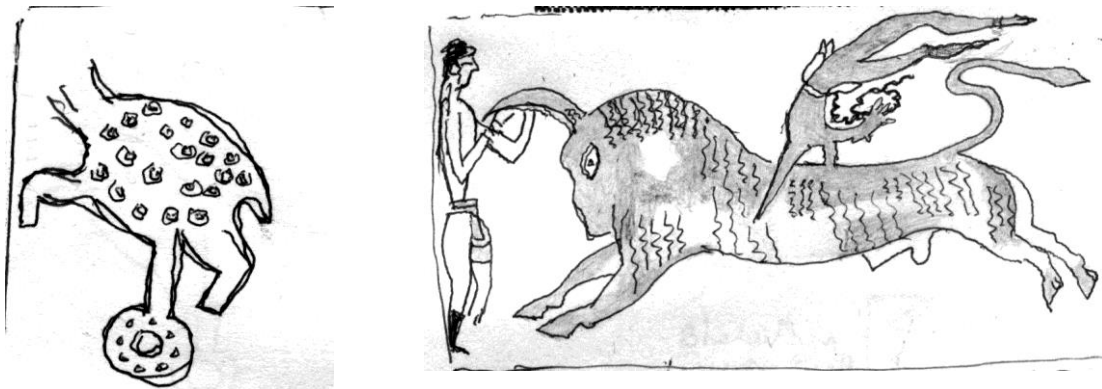
*Sohrae Khuntan, Harappa, c.2000 BC
Hazaribagh, (Contemporary)*



Sohrai Khuntan, Bhelwara,

The Harappan seal illustrated depicts what sandals call “Irritation of the Bull” in the Sohrai Khuntan. This is shown by a man leaping over the back of the bull similar to the bull leaping of the Cretans in the bull cult of Minos in Crete, as well as the mock bull fights in village streets during the Spanish cattle festival, and the South Indian Cattle festival of Pongal which takes place in the middle of January. A similar mock bull fight is staged during the Sohrai Khuntan among the Kurmis of Bhelwara in Hazaribagh during the harvest festival of Sohrai in October-November. The Santals of Hazaribagh (Manjhi) who live close by do not celebrate this Sohrae festival of the Kurmis, which is of note. The Santals celebrate the Gora Parob similar to the South Indian Pongal in January, which is strictly a cattle festival. However, in the Godda and Dumka region of Santal Parganas, the more developed Santals celebrate the Sohrae Khuntan in October-November. The *Manjhis* of Hazaribagh live in

jungles, and are not Hinduized. This cattle festival takes place in mid January and is very similar to the Khond festival of Porho Jatra. However, the Porho Jatra of the Khonds is a bloody festival, probably a carry-over of the human sacrifice (*Meriah*) in which the bull is fought and killed and the flesh divided among the villages assembled. I have personally witnessed and written about it in the Phulbani-Baliguda area of Orissa in 1979. The significance of cattle links it to the Pongal cattle festival of South India in which the horns of the cattle are decorated with turmeric and vermilion and bells tied around the neck and the animals paraded along the streets when young men try to catch the horns, as witnessed also in Crete where bull leaping was a rituals sport of the Minoan bull cult. There is reason to believe the myth of the unicorn in the Indus seals arises from a mis-representation of the side view representation of the “toreador” event. The Khond Porho Jatra is also in my opinion a continuance of the human sacrifice (*Meriah*). In Spain also during the harvest festival young bulls are still paraded in the streets and the young men try and touch the horns. All this seems to lead upto the famous Spanish bull fight.



Wheeled Animal, Isco rock-art, “The Toreador Fresco”, Cretan, 1500 B.C
Hazaribagh, C. 5,000 B.C

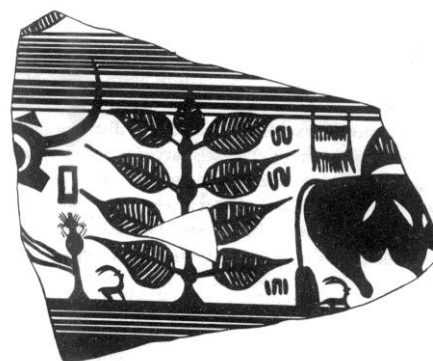
The early Harappan period closes with the transitional phase in Nausharo ID, Amri III A, C.2,600 to 2,550 BC. leading to the Mature Harappan phase. There is a great deal of locally produced Kot Dijian pottery decorated with the “fish-scale” and “Concentric circle” motifs that are the hallmark of the Mature Harappan period, in which large dishes and other vessels are decorated with Sohrae Khuntan motifs, and which are prototypes of the later Kulli Ware of southern Baluchistan which would also be an area which show Oraon transference between Harappa and Hazaribagh (A.Parpola, Deciphering the Indus Script, 1994 p.160-165). In the Nausharo and Kulli motifs illustrated the tree to which the sacrificial bull is tethered itself stands upon a small triangular stand (seen in Assyrian motifs sometimes as a vase), (Nausharo) and to a stake (Kulli) reminiscent of the stake to which victims were tied during Vedic and

Hindu rituals (Parpola, p.21). The three Zebu bulls in the Nausharo illustration is very pertinent. Uptil now the three or more types of trees represent the deity in the Khovar of Hazaribagh. Assigned the role of Siva by some, they infact represent the subdued mother goddess as a result of patriarchalism. The bull was also a cult object in Harappa as shown in the Sohrai Khuntan seal which is illustrated along side a traditional mural of Sohrai from Bhelwara in Hazaribagh, with identical Spotting and curled fish-head depicting An (Parpola, p.185) also found on the horned head of Pashupati in Sohrai, with two asterisks between the horns that are an ancient Babylonian sign of God. In the Sohrai art of Bhelwara a human figure on the back of the bull is very common. This figure is called Shiva or Pashupati. Since the tradition of deities as riders of horses is common in Bastar also and it may be connected as rider standing on horse (Ghoda) holding the rein is a very common Sohrai motif.

To sum up the various points which we have here looked at in the seal of the “Irritation of the Bull”, the Harappan seal presents us with five outstanding messages. First, (a) the tree on the back of the buffalo on the left is a *ficus*, representing the mother goddess in Harappa, and which tradition we can see is still carried on by the Kurmi tribals of Bhelwara in Hazaribagh. (b) the buffalo is spotted similar to what is still done on live animals and murals in Bhelwara and which was also found on the wheeled spotted votive animal from the meso-Chalcolithic rock-art of Isco in the North Karanpura Valley. (c) the human figure on the back of the bull on the right in the Harappan seal possesses three supernatural attributes – tail, wing, horn, and bull-leaping significance. (d) between the horns of the buffalo on the left is the Mesopotamian sign for father god, and asterisks * . (e) on the crown of the buffalo is the plume symbolizing the mother Goddess among the first marsh dwelling agricultural societies in lower Tigris-Euphrates delta in Mesopotamia in 4000 BC.



*Three Zebu bulls tethered to the Ficus,
Painted pottery , Early Harappan,
Nausharo ID, 2600 B.C*



*Bull tied to stake,
Painted Pottery, Early
Harappan, Kulli, 2600 B.C*

There are other tribes alongside the Kurmis who observe in their own way these sacred influences. For example, not very far from Bhelwara in the watershed of the beautiful Konar river we find the Ghatwals. Their art has also been illustrated in this book. It is a cubistic artform, so modern and yet so primitive. The Ghatwals were the tribals who guarded the passes of the Hazaribagh plateau for the Rajas. Their art has a tendency to be glyptic, with black and red overtones, highly stylized and yet expressing a lyrical quality as light as Oraon floral motifs. On the other hand the cattle keeping Oraons have a strong geometrical design of horizontal and vertical bands which have a deep significance in continuing the memory of the ancestors or totem pole *Khuta*. The Oraons also use a series of *Basera* motifs which are cloud formations, arc upon overlapping arc, found in the mountain symbol from Mesopotamia, used by Asoka on his coins. This art is alive even now. It is also the Ganesh sign of Brahmi script. The same motif is used by the Bhuiya tribe in a motif called *Basera* which refers to *basa-era*, the goddess of the bamboo grove (basa= bamboo; era=goddess). It is the old Babylonian cuneiform signifying a house. Dozens of ancient Celtic and Babylonian motifs are found on the painted walls. My belief is that the Khojar is the protozoic form, still alive today, and also found in the rock paintings.

The Oraons have three distinctive artistic styles. One is very similar to the Khojar of the agrarian Hinduized Kurmi tribes and may be seen in a way an ancient progenitor of the style now in danger of being lost among the Oraon themselves. They only paint these anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms indoor. The second great Oraon art form are totem poles or *Khuta* of the ancestors. Ancestor poles are erected still by all Hinduized agricultural communities in the shadow of their villages but the only painted form is found among the Oraons, especially those who are cattle owning (Gorait). The third is a delicate realistic flowery style with a freshness of insect, bird, and animal life not found elsewhere in Sohrai art. All forms of this expression of their indigenous artistic genies is being suppressed by Christian missionary influence in the tribe. The same is the case with the Mundas whose art survives only among the *saonsar* animists in the jungle villages like Isco.

Nearby to the villages of the Kurmis painting their harvest art are the Santals, who celebrate the cattle in the spring month with simple floral and bird designs. During marriages Santal bridegrooms paint their courtyard with these designs. Down in the valley of the Damodar we have the delicate floral art of the Prajapatis who are potters, and the dark, heavy forms of the Ranas who are carpenters, both comb-cut. Another heavy style is that of the oil extracting Telis. The basket-making Turis have a light painted art.

The Ganjus are a farming tribe who depend on the jungles for subsistence. Their densely forested environment in the southern part of the Hazaribagh plateau has given them a close observation of the wild flora and fauna. This is inevitably reflected in their paintings,. Their art is most vividly depicted in painted murals done during the Khovar marriage season from February to April. Notable in Ganju murals is the “Contest motif” and *Anubis* or sacred jackal comparable to the artistic images of the copts of the upper Nile who decorated the tombs of the Pharaohs. The Mundas are an old proto-australoid tribe of India with several racial and cultural affinities with the Aboriginal of Australia. Their art shows these ancient cultural links, and the rainbow snake Borlung of the Aboriginal that drives away the clouds, is represented in Munda finger painting as the rainbow snake Lorbung which drives away the clouds with its fiery breath, gurgling rain. The Mundas also speak a language which has close affinities with Australian native languages. Similarly, in the delicate tracery of Prajapati comb art we find connections with Papuan and Polynesian pottery (La-pita), and on the other hand we find connections with Sumerian designs which have been found as far away as the neolithic potsherds of the Danube valley in Europe ! The neolithic cliff paintings of the Iberian peninsular are identical to forms found on the painted pebbles of southern France which appear in the artforms of Hazaribagh. These should not be surprising coincidences, since there have been ancient culture contacts, and the evolution of humans has been closely linked. The Kurmis of Chapri and Jorakath paint the elephant and feeding trough so exactly similar they could have been copied from the steatite seals of the Indus valley ! The really fascinating thing about this art is not that it shows merely ancient contacts between civilizations in the old world, but that these continuities are existing even today. The beliefs that keep alive such ancient traditions are a continuing culture. For example the belief in the four-legged bird Chibba found in the jungles of Jorakath is painted by many women artists in Jorakath. These four legged birds are unique, but so too is the fish which sprouts a lotus from its tail , and the double-headed bird which are icons of the Easter Island stelae ! The jungles of Jorakath, in the southern part of our Hazaribagh plateau is also a site of Early Man. In the gullies and upper cataracts of the Dudhi river below Chapri we find flint and fine blade stone tools dating back to the rise of man. A few kilometers away heavy hand axes and palaeolithic pebble choppers are found on the verges of the Hazaribagh plateau below which is the now-famous middle palaeolithic cave of Marwateri , and closeby the legendary painted grotto of Isco overlooking the sweep of the upper Damodar Valley which takes one’s breath away – and to think that all this will be mined quite soon, leaving an inferno of waste for history to bear witness to ! The Birhors still live in parts of this lonely valley, Palandu for instance, and some have been weaned to agriculture.

In this circumstance it should not be too surprising that Hazaribagh still has a tribe more primitive than the Juang, and this is the nomadic Birhor who still live in leaf houses called *kumbas*, moving about from place to place with their hunting nets and traps. These simple people have a tradition that their ancestors painted the rock-art. The Mesolithic rock paintings of Hazaribagh would seem to belong to more recent date, but the earliest rock-art, discovered on the upper scarps of the Satpahar range in the valley are definitely of a pre-mesolithic antiquity. Here we find anthropomorphism in its first expression and the earliest expression of a horned deity on the subcontinent. Could this be the work of the Bihors? How did it come from there to the anthropomorphism which pervades the Kurmi art of Jorakath, and largely influences the iconography of plant forms in the Prajapati and Teli art of the valley. The village people do say that only the Bihors understand the meaning of the rock paintings. Is this a very old racial memory ? Certainly, the Bihors are painting with a palaeolithic vision even today, or picking glypts that have no connection to the present world. But how and when did their palaeolithic art transmit itself into the Prajapati and Teli art ? These are questions that will haunt us for some time to come.



Note on the Ledra

The ledras or sacred quilts of Hazaribagh have an ancient matriarchal prehistoric tradition, since they are related to the designs combcut and painted during the ritual seasons of Khovar (marriage) and Sohrai (harvest). These sacred designs are found in the thirteen Mesolithic- Palaeolithic rockart of the rock caves discovered in the region. Both the discovery of the rockart as well as the development of the ledra, a dying tradition, and the bringing of house-wall murals to paper are the work of our family team, largely consisting of my own family members, under the auspices of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) developing a simple voluntary organization of the tribal women now well known as the Tribal Women Artist's Cooperative. The area in which this tradition exists consists in portion of the Hazaribagh plateau and the upper valley of the Damodar where over two hundred of these villages are currently threatened by Open pit coal mining projects. The project was envisaged to highlight the displacement, protect and promote a dying matriarchal artform, and bring both income and empowerment to a much neglected area of our society, the Women's World. Over the past seven years much has been achieved in the development of the art including major exhibition in Australia, India, and England where it has been much appreciated and commercially proved successful.

The ledra or sacred quilt is a ritual object made during the cold winter months after the harvest is over and a period of leisure has arisen. It is also a time of expectancy for the young brides of the past marriage season as well as a source of excited expectancy on the part of grandmothers and aunts who make these ledras as crib quilts for the babies that will arrive in the spring. The Ledra is usually about five feet in length and three & a half feet in width, but longer quilts are made which the older people use as a covering in their small string cots on which old ones are spread to form quilts in the almost hammocky shape which old string cots assume in the villages wherein people sleep on their side in a natal manner with legs bent. This is a natural position in which villagers sleep in their string cots called *khatias* and also a natural position for prehistoric burials noted by archaeologists.

Ledras are made by folding old saris or the five metre cloth garment used by the Indian woman traditionally and which, apart from the dhoti/ lungi the men wear is perhaps the most famous unstitched garment in the world. The cloth is laid out on the floor and folded in layers. An ordinary ledra uses four saris but lighter or heavier ones are made depending upon availability of old saris. The refolding and tacking together with thread and needle is followed by the basic design of the pattern outlined with liquid

turmeric (haldi) or vermilion (sendur), and some times with charcoal, after which these designs are stitched with a running stitch in contrasting colour thread with the material. Slowly, as the work develops, small stitches are made in their surrounds which create highly varied hues of thread squares which form thermal pockets giving the ledra its unique insulation quality. The designs embroidered by the tribal women are delicate and bold at the same time, bird and animal forms, tree and plant forms, flowers and fishes, sacred icons and mandalas primarily devoted to the mother goddess. Beautiful wild animal forms such as the tiger, elephant, deer, and exotic birds like the peacock and jungle-cock is a favourite theme. Two common mandalas are the rectangle or square with crossed diagonals representing the marriage Mandala or Shadi Chowk, which is also found in the prehistoric rockart of the region. All the artforms of the ledra art are also found in the rockart, and its continuance with the sacred tradition of painting houses during the marriage season called Khovar, and during the harvest season called Sohrai. The other common design related with marriage is the double diamond, one over another, representing the two pitchers. Traditionally during the engagement ceremony there is an exchange of pitchers, one containing sugar water called Pana, the other containing ordinary water, Pani. This seems to be a design feature common with traditional societies as far away as the Amish quilts. The Mandala is called the pitcher Mandala, or Ghagra Chouk In Australia this pattern represents the Billabongs or pools of collected water along rivers. Also common in the designs found are the rectangles within rectangles representing the pond of the village and is a powerful icon of tribal expression of its geography.

Designs are made through running stitch, although we may sometimes find cross stitch or chain stitch also, and the colours in use are fast and easily procured in village bazaars. Colours are chiefly primary, i.e. red, yellow, blue, orange, green, and black. White is generally used as ground. The base colour is whitish which is the commonest shade used in the village, and almost always cotton cloth. Sometimes brighter saris are laid on top to take the pattern, and plainness is not necessarily a sign of the remoteness or isolation of a particular village's ledra. Widows in India wear white traditionally so often the older women's work may be said to be on white cloth. Deft stitching with flawless combinations of hues emerge over a stitching period of six to eight weeks on a single ledra. The very length of the time taken in the creation of the ledra as an artwork evokes a magical aura since it has seen so many moments of change in the creative action of its maker. Overall we are seeing in the ledra now a form of high artistic expression emerging which carries not only the traditional patterns but much of the individual artistic creativeness of expression by non literate women (many are, however highly literate), who are responsible for the

making from the stage of wearing the cloth to laying it out and designing and embroidering it, when it will become a crib quilt for babies. The final stage is a light rinse at the well and hanging up in the sun to dry. A good ledra should not be lumpy and must be equally stitched. Deeply rooted in the marriage tradition of Khovar, some of the images relate to marriage, such as a palanquin or temple, other images are evocative of the harvest festival of Sohrai when the form of the Lord of Animals on the back of a bull or horse is made. Other Sohrai icons are the Tree of Life, a Flowery Trident, Etc. Many of the animal forms of the Sohrai art, both on the walls and on the ledras carry the comb figures of Sumer and designs similar to Indus Valley painted pottery. These designs must be seen in the context of an earlier civilizational base in the Hazaribagh region which is part of a Palaeolithic complex in eastern India that has a steady evolution witnessed upto the Neolithic, and it is hence very likely the traditions may be traced to the ancient rockart of the region. Thirteen Mesolithic rockart sites in Hazaribagh bear images which correspond directly with the village art. The Madhubani painting of North Bihar and the Kantha and Pat traditions of Bengal may also be traced to the art of the Hazaribagh caves and villages. These include pictographs and elementary script also alongwith zoomorphs and anthropomorphs. The anthropomorphic and zoomorphic character of Khovar and Sohrai art is well established curatorially. The villages call their artworks Likhna which means writing, and a famous rockart site is Likhanya in the Mirzapur district to the west, which literally means What Is Written. The art is therefore at the earliest levels of non literate expression as a visual medium. The rockart designs also form the basis of the enigmatic sacred tattoo designs which the tribal women have tattooed on their arms, legs, necks, backs, and chest. In fact the Hazaribagh tribal woman carries much of the rock painting symbols on her body which she in turn embroiders on the ledra.

When I picked up the ledra in 1994 as a subject of study it was a nearly dead form. There were hardly any designs. The ledra was becoming simply a mass produced village utilitarian object and losing its ancient tradition, which only some of the older women carried on, and in my book on the Khovar and Sohrai art in 1995 I gave an example of a beautifully embroidered ledra made by the late mother of Sugya Devi of Kharati (Bridal Caves, p.xxv & p.139). The ledra tradition was rediscovered and from that moment upto now I have worked with the support of my family and a growing number of tribal women artists in Hazaribagh to rejuvenate the ledra tradition in dozens of villages and different tribal communities, and I am happy the work has drawn significant curatorial attention abroad. The first major hanging of Ledras was organized by John Kirkman at the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in Australia in July and August 1997 and it subsequently was shown under Mr.Kirkman's curatorial directive in several

places in Australia at leading galleries. The ledra had arrived. Recently a major exhibition of ledras was organized by Mary Edwards at Craft Victoria in Melbourne !

Since the tribal woman is revered as Devi, the mother goddess, the woman is a very special person. Upon marriage she becomes Devi and anything made by her hands is considered the gift of the mother goddess. The Devi is the sole person allowed to draw or embroider ritual sacred icons relating to marriage and harvest seasons, and it is an ancient tradition. The Devis officiate during the marriage ceremony, they it is who perform the anointing of cattle in the harvest. The men merely offer sacrifices. The household shrine and not the temple is in use in these villages. Only the Hindu festivals are celebrated in the temple. The harvest brings a time of leisure to village society and the tribal women sit in the sun embroidering the ledras, or crib quilts, and the larger the better so they may be used by old people also. The babies due in the Spring from the marriages of the previous year will all have ledras made for them by some anxious grandmother. The designs on the house walls painted during marriage and harvest time, and the designs embroidered on the ledras have to be seen as magical in warding off the Evil Eye. The different tribes have their own particular styles and characteristics which through experience one can easily differentiate. A cluster of several villages may have its own definitive style, while within these clusters different ethnic groups might display their own styles. Some work is brilliant, others slipshod, but in each the flair of the artist speaks with no uncertainty. So there is within a well defined tradition space for artistic expression and creativity also. The aura of these ledras has been a major source of inspiration in a spirit world of the tribes where ignorance breeds fears of the supernatural evil spirits, and these designs have for countless generations inspired strength, courage, and maternal blessing to the villagers. Deep spirituality and the living presence of the human spirit lingers with each ledra into the future with the memory of the mother or grandmother who made it. It becomes an ancestor token. This is where the tribals worship the spirits of the ancestors or Manita Bhuts. Just as this form of worship was about to be lost we managed to catch it and bring it back.

The entire territory in which these Khovar and Sohrai villages area is being threatened by huge opencast coal mines in one of the largest coal reserves in the world estimated to contain thirteen billion tonnes of coal. Vast jungles which contain corridors and habitats of such endangered species as tigers and elephants (found in the rockart and village art) are equally threatened with imminent extinction. Ever since 1987 I have with my family been working to protect this area. The present status of the mining and cultural heritage under threat may be seen on our website in

honour of Hazaribagh, which literally means, Thousand Tigers, and may be visited at www.web.net/~pcarter/Hazaribagh.

A strong case has been made for a civilizational treasure in the upper valley of the river Damodar, in the heart of its catchment in the North Karanpura Valley in Hazaribagh, and we are using this art of ours to highlight the treasure of our indigenous art. Along with this we are using the palaeolithic evidence we have uncovered at dozens of sites, and our thirteen rockart sites with their evidence of microliths and Neolithic stone tools to build a case for the indigenous status of our peoples that is being denied by our government. We have repeatedly been taking our case before the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples in Geneva this year our representatives, tribal women artists, will attend the July meeting. In July 1999 an exhibition of our art and the mining scenario was presented by SARINI at the UNWGIP in Geneva. Recently FIAN Germany has brought out a dossier fully cataloguing the destruction and threat to the art (Stripping the Earth). This may be looked up at the website, www.fian.org. We have recently, at the invitation of Dr. Michael Petzet, President of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) presented a comprehensive statement on heritage at risk in the North Karanpura Valley through mining, which will be on the list for 2001-2003 on their website heritage@risk / www.international.icomos.org/risk/india_2000.htm . The lower valley of river Damodar has been completely mined, its forests and tribals have gone for ever. We are attempting to save the upper watershed in the North Karanpura Valley. The Tribal Women's Artists Cooperative is the result of a project sponsored by the Australian High Commission in 1993-94, and a subsequent one in 1994-95, under a Direct Aid Project. It was released and supported by Dr. Mark Thomson, a Gandhian scholar and diplomat at the High Commission to who TWAC is grateful. I have to thank Mr. John Kirkman for first curatorially realizing and bringing to light the significance of the ledra as a work of art. The funds of the exhibition will go toward 1. The TWAC Welfare fund of tribal women 2. The TWAC employment fund for tribal women 3. The TWAC maintenance fund. Our work has been honoured by inclusion in the collections of the Casula Arts Centre, Powerhouse Museum, Australian Museum, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Queensland Art Gallery, and other major venues in Australia. We hope you like our ledras and will enjoy them for years to come.

The Discovery

In 1991 after a *tip-off* from Australian Jesuit missionary Tony Herbert, I discovered in southern Bihar the ancient rock-art site of Isco – now considered among the premier rock-art sites of India. It was to be this and another chance discovery at Isco that led to my involvement with the Khovar and Sohrai art traditions of Bihar and the setting up of the Tribal Women Artist's Co-operative. In the summer of 1992, I was driving with my daughters Juliet and Cherry up the edge of a steep forested hill on the plateau above Isco and I could not find my way in the heavy jungle. Getting out of my four wheel-drive vehicle to find a way to a road, I suddenly saw what looked to me, through the trees, to be a line of running animals and huge birds. Thoroughly dumbstruck I stood for a moment completely taken aback. I was confronting for the first time the very powerful comb-cut visual images of the Ganju Khovar art in its natural setting. Depicted were the animals and birds of the local environment including the rhinoceros and Bengal florican no longer found in the region. We watched a small lithe young artist named Putli Ganju creating these wonder filled comb-cut paintings on the walls of her home in celebration of her forthcoming marriage. I called my daughter Juliet excitedly and together we went and met Putli who had painted her inner rooms and courtyard of her home with huge fishes and snakes and the inimitable Putli cow. She had not left an inch un-adorned. (Today, a mural by Putli, painted during a month-long residency with the Australian Museum's Djamu Gallery, in Sydney during April 2000, hangs in the Art Gallery of New South Wales).

It was from this chance discovery that we explored further afield finding village after resplendent village each boasting virtuoso artists working in timeless ancestral Khovar and Sohrai artistic traditions. The work of many of these artists, including Putli Ganju have been exhibited widely abroad and in India. Khovar, meaning bridal chamber, is associated with the annual marriage season from January to May. Sohrai marks the annual harvest cycle and celebrations from October to November. Both styles are painted in natural earth ochres and iron oxides. It was apparent that the Khovar and Sohrai mural paintings and rock-art sites, including Isco, were inextricably linked. Over a dozen sites were subsequently brought to light by us in the upper basin of the river Damodar in the North Karanpura valley. Unquestionably, these Tribal communities and their ritual village art as well as the archaeologically significant rock-art sites, including Isco, came from a prehistoric tradition, and these Tribal communities and the rock-art sites, including Isco, required protection from open-cast coal mining proposed by the North Karanpura Coalfields Mining Project. Such destructive development would ensure the displacement of two hundred and three villages. Open-cast coal mining brings no economic

benefit to Tribal communities but merely ensures destruction of the cultural and environmental heritage and eco-systems, including over two thousand square kilometers of finest agricultural lands and forests containing tigers, elephants, deer and other wildlife. In 1993 we brought the mural art to paper and requested a two-year development grant from the Australian Government to document the Khovar and Sohrai mural traditions of the North Karanpura Valley. The significant arrival of Australian curators Ace Bourke and Claudia Hyles in early 1995, led to the first exhibition of works at the Hogarth Galleries in Sydney. Very soon afterward the Gallery Chemould exhibited the work in Bombay.

Another major development was the initiative of the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney. Following several visits by its director John Kirkman to our villages and artists, the groundwork was laid for the string of major exhibitions across Australia that took place throughout 1996 and 1997. These exhibitions, and advice from Mrs Khorshed Gandhi director of Gallery Chemould, led to the establishment of the Tribal Women Artists Cooperative. Our co-operative is self-funded through the sale of artworks and provides regular subsistence employment to over thirty tribal women artists in the villages of Hazaribagh, some in remote jungle areas. A permanent welfare fund also assists the artists and their families particularly with medical and legal aid. The fund also supports Sanskriti -- our permanent office, art gallery and museum, research centre and artist residency-studio in the outskirts of Hazaribagh town. The Tribal Women Artists Co-operative is committed to preserving and continuing the development of the Tribal art and culture of our region as well as establishing the rights of communities who are without protection. Currently our project supports over fifty-five artists and their families. Over fourteen international exhibitions and seven exhibitions in India have been held. Exhibitions are currently underway in Melbourne, Montreal, Berlin, London and Bombay, and an exhibition in New York is under planning. Today I look back with satisfaction at the achievements of our little idea and the rich fruit of international interaction and interest in the discoveries at Isco so copiously generated. In March 2000 an artists-in-residency mural painting project was sponsored in Sydney by the Australian Museum at its Djamu Gallery. The mural-painting residency was the brainchild of John Kirkman, director of the Djamu Gallery, a part of the Australian Museum, at Custom House Circular Quay, Sydney. Four of our women artists Putli Ganju, Chamni Ganju, Rukmani Prajapati, and my wife Pilomina Tirkey created fourteen outstanding murals on specially prepared boards six by twelve feet in size. My son Jason, an accomplished sculptor in the Sohrai style prepared the boards, and created sculpture in wood alongside the Indian, Australian Aboriginal, Fijian and New Zealand artists. My six year old daughter June-Yvonne was also painting ! This resulted in

the murals being acquired by major institutions like the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Casula Art Centre, Sydney, and the Australian Museum. Two quilts were acquired by the Power House Museum, Sydney. Wide television coverage was given to the event all over Australia and we had finally “arrived” on the international scene.

Tribal Art Project

In 1992 Dr. Erwin Neumayer and myself were returning from the North Karanpura valley by train. We were accompanied by my sons Justin and Jason. We were all eating *chinabadam*, the ubiquitous groundnut, also known to the intelligentsia of India as *time-pass*, because it helps to pass the time – a national pastime. Erwin and I were in deep discussion about a serious possibility – bringing the village art to paper. A year later his formula, suggested at the University of Vienna, came in the post. One morning, in the middle of a shave, I was summoned by Justin and Jason to a mud-lathered scraperboard, given a comb in place of the safety razor which I had just laid down, and told to, well... shave mud. Some several thousand paintings later, I'm still doing it. Only, the shaving's not mine, but the work of the talented tribal women of Hazaribagh.

As noted earlier manganese black is dissolved overnight in office glue and tap water (or well water, or stream water, polluted or unpolluted). It is thereafter spread by hand, cloth, or brush, over a surface, which is generally handmade high rag content watercolour art paper, and then allowed to dry in a cool place. After this a similar mixture of kaolin white or yellow ochre is applied over it in the same process, and then with a broken comb (or a finely tooled, special, quarter-inch bit of bamboo comb), a design is cut, quickly, sharply, taking in the ends swiftly, as in the case of a bird's beak, or a feather tip end. Sharp snouted snake headed plant limbs, arching trellises with curved lotus petals, and equally curved fishes, float up in *sgraffito* from the dark undercoat, bringing to light a new monotone. Yellow ochre of various shades is used depending upon the locality where the art occurs. In Isco a beautiful lavender earth colour is found, in Kharati a brilliant white, in Jorakath a beautiful natural earth colour. It has the two-dimensional folk magic with the primitive simplicity which has been lost by overworking such artforms as Warli, Madhubani, Kalighat-patas and the pata paintings of coastal Orissa, though I do not doubt excellent naive examples will still be found of these great artforms in isolated pockets where they can spring again unadorned by the modern schooling of traditional village artists which is the great danger of all traditional or great folk and tribal art forms.

The Sohrai art of Hazaribagh for me is the grand painted *ghodas* and animal wheels, the intertwining anthropomorphic floral Shivas, the almost unbelievable creative originality of leafy forms, painted in Bhelwara during the Sohrai festival. The *ghodas* or painted horses of Sohrai art evoke Central Asian rockart influence from the Bronze Age petroglyphs of Kazakhstan (i.e. Tamgaly-III). Yet we find its similarity with the wheeled spotted animal of the Isco rockart which is older. It is as creative as the

Khovar art and evokes a highly individual charm different in many ways to the marriage art with its fertility symbols taken by Buddhism as auspicious ritual symbols. Fresh and highly spontaneous in its original outline made with a nail, (which the Ganju artists sometimes use in making the first line of a stupendous animal form). This is a long trailing line later gone over with in a more studied if not less whimsical line. In the Kurmi art of Sohrai in Bhelwara village a running red line, is later outlined with a running white line; or sometimes a black line is outlined with a red and then a white line. Vast whimsy at its natural best is the irrepressible quality of Sohrai art. The huge glyptic spaces made with black and red ochre on the floors is sometimes echoed in red and white glyptic geometrical designs on the walls.

The project to create comb-cut works of art on paper using natural earth ochres was sponsored in 1993-94 to the INTACH, Hazaribagh Chapter, by the Australian High Commission, New Delhi in a direct aid project (DAP) grant made by Dr. Mark Thomson, then First Secretary. He gave a second grant for the setting up of the Sohrai art project in 1994-95. After a visit by Anthony Bourke the famous Australian curator of Aboriginal art in 1995, the first exhibition of the art was Putli Ganju's Sohrai paintings, arranged in 1995 at the Hogarth Gallery, Paddington, Sydney. The first Indian exhibition was in the Gallery Chemould, Bombay, in 1995. Thereafter a series of exhibitions were held, in Australia, in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, etc. several shows have been held in India. Exhibitions have reached other parts of the world. A cyber gallery is being developed by Michel Sabatier in Paris. In May-June 2000 the Rebecca Hossack Gallery showed both paintings and ledras in London and Cymroza Gallery in Bombay also held a major exhibition the same year. In April 2001 the Victoria Crafts Council, Melbourne organized a showing of quilts curated by Mary Edwards. In June the Therese Dion Gallery of Contemporary Art is holding an exhibition of framed Khovar and Sohrai paintings in Montreal. An exhibition of paintings is being planned in the Bellevue Gallery in Berlin in August. Already confirmed are exhibitions again next year in Cymroza Gallery (Bombay) in March 2002, and Rebecca Hossack Gallery (London) in May 2002. Several television documentary films have been made of the Khovar and Sohrai art under the auspices of Sanskriti in Hazaribagh. Cinema Vision India, Surabhi, Turning Point, and others have made short documentary films. In 1999 Films Division made a major one-hour documentary in 35mm Kodacolor which is presently being shown in cinema halls across Jharkhand. In November 2001 Susanne Gupta of Berlin will be making a film on the Sohrai art of Bhelwara. During the Australian mural painting residency in Sydney in March 2001 the main media visuals were made of the art being painted in its mural scale. I look back in satisfaction at a task successfully accomplished so far, but an

uncontrollable sadness arises when I think of the destruction of the village culture throughout the Damodar Valley in the name of development. In July 2001 my wife Philomina and my daughter Juliet both accomplished Sohrai artist will be representing our tribal artists at the 19th session of then United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Population (23rd to 27th July 2001) at the Palais des Nations, Geneva to speak about the connection tribals have with their art and land presently under threat by destructive development.

In the context of acculturation there is a tendency for persuading a weaker society to adopt alien modes of production of a dominant group or at least be a party to such an enterprise. Gandhi had countered this with the idea of *swadeshi*, or indigenous support systems. Today, in an age of globalization, it is ever more important for India to remember this idea of keeping alive our indigenous modes of production and giving them *enhanced value* for the artisan guilds. The Khovar and Sohrai art project as worked on giving enhanced value to the art made by tribal women with an eye to international market, not just by creating artisan goods which may match the technical proficiency of the west, but highly creative and gifted creations that are the expression of a culture which is very mature and in a way having an art based on much more than western nations of “aesthetics”. These considerations will go a long way in understanding the futuristic contributions which Khovar and Sohrai tribal paintings may offer to the west, as well as the highly creative energies which they present modern Indian art which is starved of original indigenous creativity and power of expression today. At this moment it is ever more important than before to understand what tribal art can offer to the contemporary art movement in India. A great transfusion of creative genius stands before us and we must understand and appreciate its importance before it is drowned in big dams or mined through big mines or otherwise destroyed in the purely mercantile process of “development”.

Conclusion

The developments in the Hazaribagh art are four - the Birhor art has been brought to paper and it is planned to exhibit the first paintings both in India and abroad. It is Hazaribagh's most primitive art and closest to the rock painting. The second major development is that Jason, whose mother is an Oraon tribal, has managed successfully to bring the Khovar and Sohrai mural tradition to the three dimensional round in wood and bronze sculpture. He has already widely exhibited his works abroad as well as in India. Third, the development of Khovar into collage using mud treated papers has been accomplished by Juliet, whose mother is also an Oraon. The fourth major development is that a village boy named Manu, is painting realistic village scenes in mud creating a unique *genre*. These paintings are now being exhibited. They extend the range and creativity of Khovar and Sohrai art in a contemporary context.

Threats to the art forms we have been reading about come from the largescale open face mining which has been slowly eating up the entire valley of the Damodar river destroying countless villages, agriculture and slowly moving up to its source in the forested watershed in southern Hazaribagh, where the last of the villages practicing Khovar and Sohrai art are. Over two hundred of these tribal villages will be destroyed and their agricultural and forest environments mined during the forthcoming decades and over 70 mines will destroy 2000sq km of lands and forests, creating the largest mine pit in Asia, where today we find the peaceful hamlets and cultural and artistic heritage shown in this book. The immense value of the dozens of palaeo-archaeological, megalithic, and archaeological sites, from early man to Buddhist sites are also threatened.

In 1993, UNESCO was formally petitioned by INTACH to declare the North Karanpura Valley an Endangered World Heritage site, but nothing has come out of this. As noted, we have submitted our Report to ICOMOS, for [heritage@risk](#) 2002 . Meanwhile, three huge opencast mines have displaced several villages in the western part of the valley, causing untold humiliation and abuse of humans, destruction of housing, and abuse of indigenous and human rights and suffering of indigenous peoples. Thousands of food bearing trees and several hundred square kilometers of old growth forests have been destroyed by new mining and railway line construction. Several tribal villages and sacred groves and burial grounds have already been obliterated for ever. The destruction of rock-art sites is imminent in the blasting for the new railway line to haul out coal. The wildlife corridors have been for ever severed in several places. The attack is on to choke the ancient way of life and whatever resistance it may offer. In this scene of devastation can so fragile a thing as art survive? Can the hopes

and dreams of threatened cultures survive? How long will the art which we have witnessed on these pages in all their colour and glory, remain with us?

At this juncture the novelty and naivete of Tribal art is surpassed by a wider reality – where the curiosities and thin wedges of excitement from encountering something new are overcome by a greater reality. In countries like Australia museums are fighting to preserve culture *in situ* rather than museumize them. The actual nature of indigenous art is a far remove from an artform that has become mercantile and already in some way been shaped by the effects of art aesthetics and merchandise. The original images left on the walls for a few short months before they are worn away by sun or rain, are the real strengths of Khovar and Sohrai mural painting in the villages of Hazaribagh. In the traditional house paintings of the painted houses of Hazaribagh we may mark small slight changes by the younger women but the web of tradition is so thorough in rural India that the ancient forms continue with majestic continuity. The art on the village houses is not to be compared with what passes as Tribal art in the shops of Delhi or Bombay with but few exceptions.

The most important visual evidence and statement on the effects of the passage of time on India is the two forms of expression, iconic and an-iconic. The iconic represents Hindu deities, the an-iconic the *mandalas* and symbols appropriated by the Hindus in their natural Tribal setting, backed by the cave Khovars in which their prehistoric forms appear in all their pristine glory. The natural animal and plant forms just like the sacred symbols and designs very similar to Aboriginal sacred iconography are also an-iconic, since they relate to no particular deity. This is a remarkable anthropomorphic and zoomorphic state of artistic purity. When we speak of the “privileged access to meaning” in the context of Aboriginal art in Australia we must remember that just because there are not so many tales attached to the Khovar and Sohrai art we must not think that these forms are not as expressive of past life situations in the sacred world of our Tribals. The an-iconic nature of Tribal art in its original poetry is unique. Aboriginal art is a kind of short-hand of icons, whereas Khovar and Sohrai are fully-blown, luscious portrayals of the India of Valmiki and Tulsidas, of Krishna and the Kurus, of the unseen within the obvious, the unspoken within the well-known and well-loved all achieved without long, boring tales told in paint. The insistence on finding meanings in Aboriginal art in Australia was an European idea, infused with the ghosts of Linnean classification, which fortunately bypassed Khovar and Sohrai village painting in Hazaribagh !

Meaning is the least important aspect of a picture, and yet paradoxically it is the most important. This is an eternal value transcending

mythology and art aesthetics. The painted houses of Hazaribagh carry meanings for the tribals of fertility and fecundity, of abundance and prosperity, from familiar forms less than a few dozen in number. Unavoidably, Hindu icons have entered here and there, but very few. Popular motifs are plants, fishes, birds and animals as we have seen, and some familiar icons of the mother goddess. The need to tell a story, as in the sense the Aboriginal art of Australia has been portrayed in recent times, is alien to our most original Tribal art. The Western viewer, ever keen to read strange tales from foreign lands will be disappointed in our art! When Australian art critic Adam Geczy wrote about our Khovar and Sohrai art that he hoped that “the murals in Bihar be only effaced by the monsoons”, I think he hit a vital chord: for the natural death of all the village art as a result of the seasons (i.e. monsoons) does not mean the end of the art in the fatal manner of destructive development which is destroying Tribal homelands and ecosystems in India, and literate education in non-Tribal literate traditions bringing with it new cultural histories, religious and social significances, new value systems is destroying oral education. The Tribal tradition continues strictly upon and according to its own foundations. Similarly, when our Tribals cut trees from the forest for building their homes, or for firewood, the forest does not die, it replenishes itself. The threat is from modern development with its nasty need to remodel everything according to exclusive needs; which speaks of conservation while clear-felling forests, and which speaks of saving and museumizing culture while it destroys the roots of culture from one valley to another through big dams or mines or senseless industrialization. This has been the price which Tribal India has had to pay in the past five decades for the cost of development in rural India. Vast areas of archaeological and historical remains have gone too. These things can hardly ever be fully documented any more let alone saved. Gone are the hoary living histories of India’s lost culture. What is most painful is the merciless greed and heartless way in which the remaining cultural heritage of the country is being destroyed under the mask of development. India never created Reservations for the Tribes as was done for the North American Indian and the Australian Aboriginal. As a consequence the threat to our living culture has been unbridled and immense and this is a daily fact of our contemporary traditions under imminent threat of destruction.

The ancient rock paintings discovered in and around the North Karanpura Valley represent a prehistoric tradition of painting that belongs to the Mesolithic age, and perhaps much earlier since the earliest levels seem to have faded out due to exposure and the harsh weather conditions. But the presence of Upper Palaeolithic and Middle Palaeolithic habitation sites close to the rock-art caves has given credence to the claim for a connection, and maybe the strongest claim for a continuous evolution of

indigenous societies anywhere. The nomadic hunter-gatherer Birhor's claim that their ancestors painted the rock-art, (and indeed village traditions in the present Munda village of Isco associate Birhors with the rock-art caves) is not to be taken lightly. The Prajapatis also say the ancestors of the Birhor painted the art. The rock-art has since time immemorial been considered sacred and therefore not spoken about and for the Tribals of the Valley these paintings signify their origin as a people and their notion of personhood, as well as reflecting their deep connection with their ancestral landscape. These rock paintings and continuing traditions of village paintings signify their spiritual symbiosis with their ancestors and hence their past. Everything these people hold sacred has been attacked and attacked by a series of hungry governments. As in the past five decades of industrial development in the tribal river valleys of India, so too in the Damodar Valley the government has attacked the fundamentals, and roots, of Tribal India. In an attempt to displace and emasculate the tribes and extinct them for ever the government has devised ingenuous plans for their development after displacement. These rehabilitation programmes are inevitably linked to organizations of social development and missionary activity which can finally sever the umbilical chords of Tribals with their native culture. After the extinction of the Tribals the land will belong to the non-Tribals. This has been termed cultural genocide. The paintings which represent the identity and indigeneity of the tribals are seen as a threat to government and missionaries programmes since they are inherently associated symbolically with their rights over their lands which is constantly in danger of being alienated. These indigenous communities have been living in this area peacefully for thousands of years and carrying on one of the oldest and longest artistic and cultural traditions in the world. Yet, indigenous peoples in India have continually been uprooted from their original dwelling-places by outside forces leading to the alienation of their sacred paintings.

In the hallowed precincts Of the United Nations the tribals of India have repeatedly been held by our government to be not indigenous. The discovery of a continuous tradition of tribal village art in Hazaribagh which may be unquestionably linked to the pre-historic rock paintings over ten thousand years old has given a tremendous boost to the Tribals in their quest to prove their indignity and also discover their roots. This has also been part of my mission as a non-tribal to research and discover these roots of tribal culture in my region in Jharkhand which may help the Tribals in proving their indigenous identity and supporting their project for recognition of their indignity and the rights which it does bring to them in the gaze of the international community and under the instruments of the United Nations.

Cement and concrete housing has been forced on leaf-dwelling nomadic communities like the Birhor. As a result these dwellings are plastered with primitive graffiti and rough pecked glypts which bespeak an ancient palaeolithic mind-set. The dwellers of these houses are considered un-cultured and rude and constantly their development is an excuse for more and more government projects in the hands of non Tribals destroying ever more Tribal regions . The disaster and calamity that have thus crossed the threshold of Tribal South Asia during the past fifty years is perhaps without parallel. The Tribals have, however, sometimes been able to retain the knowledge of their ancient traditions and somehow managed to keep them alive in new forms, as a statement of their new-found identity and establishment of their rights over a new place, for to the Tribals territory has to be maintained.

Thus it is the Painted Houses of Hazaribagh may appear as a pro-Tribal document in a new light in contemporary India. In Bastar for example, the traditional stone memorial epitaphs are being painted with crude human figures, by so called modern Tribal artists for fancy prices, while the best of their an-iconic art languishes at paltry prices in the village *bazaars*. In Madhubani a similar fate has overtaken their art. Warli art has become stylized. The Kantha in Bengal, Pata in Orissa, are valued in terms of labour. Khovar and Sohrai have made a remarkable tribute to artistic freshness by continuing their tradition into new spaces. But the threat to the art comes mostly from within in the changing scene --- the facades of many a modern Tribal home bears ancient images cut from concrete by masons !

Appendix-I

The Munda comb painting is often done with the fingers instead of with the comb, and the Bhuiya comb painting is also often done with the fingers only, a style also practiced by some Oraons. The Prajapatis or potters like the Kumhars also use their fingers instead of combs sometimes, but generally Prajapati art is always comb cut and small fine bamboo combs are made by the women specifically for the purpose. The Oraons sometimes use the curving Basera motif similar to the Bhuiya. This design is a series of semi-circles, and has a sacred significance as a mountain (Mesopotamia) and bamboo (India) and is always drawn along the top of walls on which the Khovar art is painted. It is stylistically similar to the archaic Sumerian and Babylonian motifs representing a house when it appears in a squared form. Basera translated mean goddess of the bamboo grove. (Bas = bamboo; Era= goddess)

STYLISTIC MODES OF KHOVAR AND SOHRAI ART

<i>Stylistic Mode</i>	<i>Motifs</i>	<i>Paint Khovar</i>	<i>Comb Khovar</i>	<i>S.C. or Scheduled Tribe</i>	<i>Paint Sohrai</i>	<i>Comb Sohrai</i>	<i>Village</i>
Filigree	Mother Goddess Shiva, Floral, Anthrop omorphs	*	*	Prajapati (Potter)		*	Kharati, Bhaduli Pipradih, Napo
Heavy	Floral, Animal	*		Rana (Carpenter)		*	Kharati, Punkuri Barwadih
Heavy	Floral		*	Teli (Oil Extractor)		*	Barhmaniya
Sgraffito	Snake, Anthrop omorph		*	Munda		*	Isco
Strong, Delicate	Floral	*		Oraon	*		Dato
Heavy, Geometric	Pashupati on Bull/Ghoda, Anthrop omorph			Ghatwal	*		Potmo
Powerful Realism	Birds, Animals		*	Kurmi		*	Jorakath, Chapri
Anthropo morph	Pashupati on Bull/Gho			Kurmi	*		Bhelwara

	da, Birds, Animals, Anthrop omorph						
Delicate	Floral			Turi (Basket- Maker)	*		Kuju
Simple	Circular, Squared		*	Bhuiya		*	Dato, Khapariwa
Electric	Birds, Animals, Humans		*	Ganju	*	*	Saheda

Appendix-II

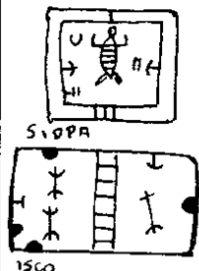
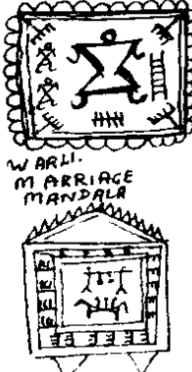



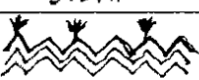
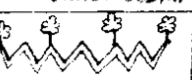
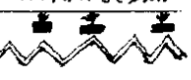
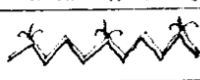

















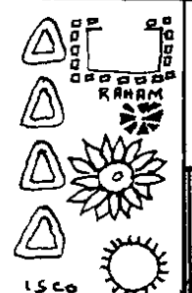
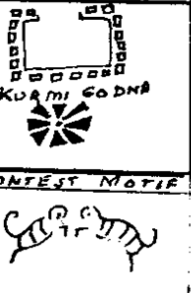


International exhibitions

Hogarth Gallery,	Paddington,Sydney,	1995
National Gallery Of Australia Vision of Kings(shoppe)	Canberra ,Jan.	1996
Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre	Casula, Sydney , May-June,	1996
Footscray Community Centre	Melbourne, Novem-Decem.	1996
Morree Plains Gallery	Morree, NSW , February	1997
Freemantle Arts Centre	Perth, March	1997
Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre	Casula, Sydney,July-Aug,	1997
Bathurst Art Gallery	Bathurst, NSW, Mar-May,	1998
Tamworth Art Centre	Tamworth, NSW, Dec-Feb	1998
Gallery 482	Brisbane, Qld., Feb-April	1998
Nexus Gallery	Adelaida, SA, Jun-July,	1998
Hogarth Gallery	Paddington, Sydney Aug-Sept.	1998
Djamu Gallery, Customs House (Australian Museum)	Circular Quay, March-June,	2000
Rebecca Hossack Gallery	London, May-June,	2000
Victoria Crafts Council	Melbourne, April-May,	2001
Bellevue Gallery	Berlin, August	2001
Therese Dion Gallery of Contemp. Art	Montreal, September	2001
Rebecca Hossack Gallery	London, May-June,	2002











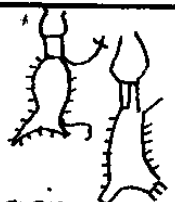









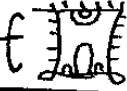
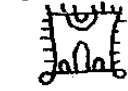
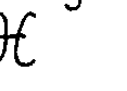

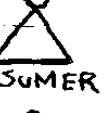







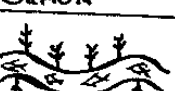



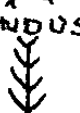

National Exhibitions

Gallery Chemould	Bombay, July	1995
Sakshi Gallery	Bangalore, Sept-Oct,	1996
India International Centre	New Delhi, Aug.	1998
Gallery Chemould	Calcutta, April,	1999
Gallery Chemould	Bombay, July-Aug,	1999
Paramparik Karigar (National Gallery ofModern Art)	Bombay, Decembember	1999
Cymroza Gallery	Bombay, March,	2000
Cymroza Gallery	Bombay, March,	
2002		

Appendix-III

Rock Art	WARLI	SOHRAI	TATOO	OTHER
 <p>SIDPA ISCO</p>	 <p>WARLI. MARRIAGE MANDALA</p>	 <p>BHELWARA. KURMI SOHRAI</p>	 <p>KURMI GODNA. ARCHAK SUMER: HOUSE</p>	 <p>BYEORUSSIAN CHICKEN-FOOT WITCH'S HOUSE</p>
SIDPA	ORAHN GODNA	KURMI GODNA	SOHRAI - KOHVAR	BAIGA GODNA
 <p>ISCO</p>	 <p>SOHRAI</p>	 <p>MOHENJODARO</p>	 <p>KAZAKHASTAN</p>	 <p>ROCK ART ANIMALS</p>
 <p>ISCO</p>	 <p>BHELWARA KURMI SOHRAI</p>	 <p>SOHRAI</p>	 <p>TAMGALY- ROCKART.</p>	
 <p>SOHRAI</p>	 <p>SOHRAI</p>	 <p>SOHRAI</p>	 <p>SOHRAI</p>	
SARAIYA	MOHENJODARO	TROE FRERES. C. FRANCE. 20,000BP	DRAKENSBERG RANGE. S. AFRICA. 9000BP	KHOVAR
		 <p>"Sorcerer"</p>	 <p>"Musician"</p>	
COMMON TO KOHVAR AND SOHRAI		GODNA	KHOVAR.	MOHENJODARO
 <p>ISCO</p>	 <p>RAHAM</p>	 <p>KURMI GODNA</p> <p>CONTEST MOTIF</p>		
16.12.2000				Bulu Imam

Appendix-IV

Rock Art	Ivan	Indus	Oraon	Mauryan-Sumerian
 Thehanggi	 Khusu	 Harappa	 ORAON	 MAURYAN
 Raham	 KHOVAR	 SUMERIAN	 BHUIYA	 BRAHMI
 SARAIYA	 M'DARO	 SARAIYA ROCK-ART	 BHUYA	 BABYLON
 ISCO	 TATTOO	 KHOVAR	 SOHRAI	 IRAN-INDUS
 ISCO	 ISCO	 ISCO	 ISCO	 SUMER
 KHANDAHAR	 BIRHOR-BAPUA	 BANA SANA	 KURMI SOHRAI	 IRAN-INDUS
 SIDPA	 ORAON	 INDUS	 GANJU SOHRAI	
 SARAIYA	 SOHRAI	 SOHRAI	 MUNDA SOHRAI	

Illustrations



1. Rana House with Khovar Painting in Barkagaon, North Karnpura Valley, Jharkhand



2. Kurmi House with Sohrai Painting in Bhelwara, Eastern Hazaribagh



3. Puran - pat aquatic life in Kharati Village - Hazaribagh .Artist - Sugiya Devi



4. Ghatwal Sohrai in Churchu area eastern Hazaribagh



5. Prajapati children with painted alcove in Bhadoli Pipradih, North Karnpura Valley



6. Jasodha Devi of Kharati with her mother in-law and daughter Anita. Three generation of women painters.



7. Gangwa Devi of Bhadoli , Pipradih, North Karnpura Valley, Jharkhand



8. Children of Sugiya Devi's house in Kharati, Hazaribagh, with Papyrus paintings



9. Sugiya Devi of Jorakath with a wall of birds



10. A woman with painted wall in North Karnpura Valley, Jharkhand



11. Mainwa Devi, a Kurmi artist of Jorakath, Hazaribagh



12. A painted Marriage Khovar of Sugiya Devi's house in Kharati, Hazaribagh



13. The Late Birsi Devi of Bhelwara, Eastern Hazaribagh, to whom this book is dedicated



14. The painted marriage Khovar by Rudhan Devi of Jorakath, South Hazaribagh



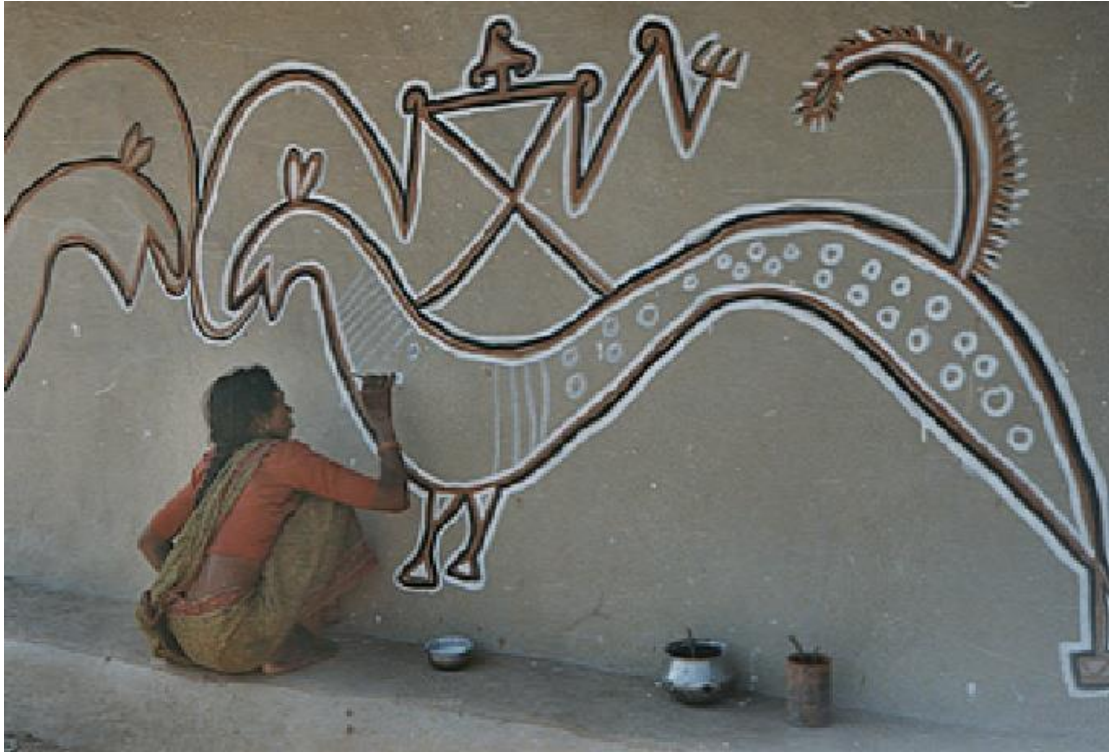
15. The glyptic Sohrai of Churchu, Eastern Hazaribagh



16. *The Flowery trident on the Bull's back, Bhelwara , Eastern Hazaribagh*



17. *A painted frame for the mother goddess of Sohrai in Plant Form*
 18. *The circular motif of the six senses in the Animal , Wheel of life, Bhelwara*



19. Parvati Devi of Bhelwara painting Ghodha or Sohrai Horse (found in Isco rock art also)



20. A house in Bhelwara showing the Flowery Trident and animal senses in wheel of life

