

Navjot Altaf in conversation with Grant Kester - 2005

Dialogue has been continuously organizing workshops at all the three *Pilla Gudis*, but these are not classes or craft training programs as such. Performance, painting, hands on activities to make operatable objects from recyclable materials are regular activities on the weekends.

To generate interest in reading storybooks to each other from all over India in Hindi (Hindi language is their medium of instruction in most of the government schools in Kondagaon), the oral tradition of story telling from their own cultures is employed through performance. We have observed that children find performance and hands on activities most engaging, playful and stimulating. Walking with them to the riverside and in the forest to explore nature are some of the other activities that *Pilla Gudis* have been encouraging.

12 + 1 is 13 – hence it is not a circle it is the title of the *Pilla Gudi* at Shilpi Gram. This is one of our first structures built in 2000.

The idea of the offset seat is – whoever takes the seat or sits on it, takes the workshop or thinks of the activity on that particular day. Since the structure is circular everyone can see each other. In one of the workshops a young girl who took the workshop, wanted other children to imagine and feel or sense a cyclone (Kondagaon had a bad cyclone) day and enact it.

Aage Peeche Ooper Neeche is the mirrored ceiling *Pilla Gudi* in Kusma built in 2001. The design is based on Matnar Temple where the sculpted images of gods and goddesses are installed on the ceiling whereas here children get amused to see and explore themselves, including their actions and approach towards each other. Whatever is done below the ceiling can be seen by all present inside the *Gudi*.

A Slide the third *Pilla Gudi* built in 2005 is based on a drawing by a 9-year-old child Somnath. Children from the Kopaweda neighbourhood were invited to design this *Pilla Gudi* and they finally selected Somnath's drawing and titled it as well.

Grant Kester: I'd like to focus first on your working process, and specifically, on the negotiations involved in your work with the villages. Feel free to answer the questions that are most interesting and relevant to you, or to suggest other questions or topics that make more sense...

First, can you describe the situation of the *Adivasi* artists with whom you work?

Navjot Altaf: *Adivasi* artists Rajkumar, Shantibai, Gessuram from different villages in Bastar dist. (situated in central India) with whom I work are not from families of artisans, because of their interest in art, all three of them began learning from a local master crafts persons in the 80's and 90's and later met at *Shilpi Gram*, an institution conceived and built by Jaidev Baghel, an

internationally known *adivasi* bell metal sculptor and his associates in the 80's with the belief that such a place could play an important role to create an interactive spirit amongst artists from different disciplines and cultural backgrounds from the region, or any other part of India and the world.

Since the institute offered workshop facilities and the environment, Rajkumar, Shantibai, Raituram, Gessu and Kabiram and a few others worked in the studios right from the time *Shilpi Gram* was built. They had been participating in various exhibitions organized by the state and the center for different crafts. (I knew Jaidev since 1973 and on his invitation I had gone to visit *Shilpi Gram* where I met the above mentioned artists, who are now my colleagues).

During discussions they wished to take time off from their stereotypical mass production for the home and urban market. According to them their practice denied them scope for experimentation inspired by their contemporary situation or inherited vision. Shantibai wanted to work independently as she had been an assistant to her husband Raituram (master crafts person) for many years, a common practice with most women in that area. Also they were interested in interacting with artists from the cities who would go to their area rather than them traveling to the cities which they did in any case during crafts exhibitions. Except for artists like Jaidev most artists interacted or interact only with the middlemen from the cities interested in buying and selling.

They were also interested in locating themselves within the contemporary urban mainstream art scene.

At that point I was interested to spend some time in Bastar to work side by side with *adivasi* artists and the institute *Shilpi Gram* made it possible.

In my case my interest was not to look at *adivasi* art merely for formal significance, unconcerned about the cultural/historical context in which art is produced. My intention was to engage with the visual field from a premise that is informed by a progressive political perspective as one looks at other contemporary art practice. This also increased my interest in re-reading earlier artists interventions.

GK: Are some villages only populated by *Adivasi's*?

NA: Villages in the interiors are largely populated by the *adivasi* communities living on agricultural and forest produce but in villages closer to towns, apart from agriculture they work as construction laborers (daily wage earners) employed by the govt. agents / individual contractors and builders who build schools, bridges, army /police shelters or *Panchayat Bhavans* (local govt. offices). (Since there is no developed irrigation system at this point, when monsoons fail, daily wage earning is one source of income). But non-*adivasi* communities in the villages' co-exist and one can see that there is interdependence.

GK: Is it unusual for a metropolitan artist like you to work with them, in this manner?

NA: Well, during the freedom movement compared to other art schools set up by the British in India, universities like Shantiniketan in Bengal, run by Rabindranath Tagore had number of indigenous artists on the teaching staff and students were encouraged to observe and learn from diverse art making processes. Ram Kinker Bajj, an artist / teacher at Shantiniketan lived and worked with *adivasis* in that area

Artists like Meera Mukherji, K.G. Subramaniyan and some others in the 60/70s had been engaged with crafts persons to learn the techniques of their craft and to involve them to carry out their own art production. The 80's saw the establishment of a significant museum such as Bharat Bhavan that placed *adivasi* art from Bastar and other parts of central India adjacent to contemporary urban art, where *adivasis* are represented by the curator (Swami Nathan - a practicing artist and the director of the museum) as contemporaries and their art practices as parallel but their expressions are read as universal, timeless and mystical. His approach overlooked the social and cultural meanings or the politico-social conditions of cultural production, and local reception. Contemporary artists employed by the Government run Weavers Centers all over India worked with crafts persons to incorporate artists' designs in the products.

Yes, it is unusual for a metropolitan artist to work with *adivasi* artists (in a sustained manner) for this long and in collaboration doing site-specific works, which includes community members as well. But some of the questions, which keep surfacing from time to time within an art discourse are-

- Whether the urban artist's privileged position continues to get reinforced.
- Whether the position of *adivasi* artists, in any way distance them from the communities they belong to because of their long affiliation with the urban artist and institutions like I.F.A. funding these collaborative projects under arts collaboration program.
- Do my colleagues see themselves as - 'interventionists in their own environment.'
- The question of coherence. (Whether we recognize difference or are looking for coherence)
- Since collaborative practices operate on multiple registers, the question often asked is - whether we see our site-specific works as collaboration between the artists, i.e. *adivasi* and urban, or collaboration between the community people and the artists.
- Is the process reasserting the hierarchy of the artists' concepts even when it is inclusive of community members' participation.

GK: How did the villages perceive you?

NA: Since social scientists, historians, anthropologists, filmmakers, writers from all over have been visiting or researching in this area, initially I too was seen like one of them. In the first year as I lived and made sculptures along side my colleagues at *Shilpi Gram* and had a joint exhibition ('Modes of Parallel Practice; Ways of Art Making') which were shown in Bombay

Gallery, some people in Kondagaon saw me as a mediator. (As there are number of middlemen who come to buy in bulk or designers from design schools working with *adivasi* artists with the intention of improving the *adivasi* sense of product design for it to get a better market).

From 2000 onwards, since we have been engaged with site-specific works accessible to all and the process that encouraged interaction with people from all walks of life and because of our belief and practice of open communication, I am perceived differently. Which means - a woman artist interested in progressive politics in which empathy is central. Who believes in attentiveness, self-awareness and an awareness of how each one frames the world. Who's not judgmental etc. My colleagues are appreciative of the fact that the process of interaction has made them conscious about 'appreciation of the qualitative aspects of life' and self-awareness.

On the other hand the internationally known, widely traveled artist and my friend Jaidev Baghel initially did not want to consider our site specific art making processes as a creative enough art practice and believed that *Shilpi Gram* institute should be used only by those who make (traditional) art objects. Hence we could not live and work from there. Since we had to leave we planned and built a small center, a meeting and working space called *DIAA*-Dialogue Interactive Artists Association in a predominantly *adivasi* area - Kopaweda. Though Jaidev recognizes *Nalpar* structures, as art works but not the process. Since he is not engaged with process oriented art practice he looks at only the outcome. Despite our very transparent approach villagers in general are always inquisitive about the source of funding.

GK: Can you give some examples of the specific ways in which you learned about the local cultures of the villages you work in?

NA: By periodically traveling, living and interacting with my colleagues, their families and people I met in the interiors and in Kondagaon, (where we are located) at different times of the year, at different levels and on different occasions I experienced the peculiarities, differences and similarities in *adivasi* communities and non *adivasi* population from a broader perspective. But to sense or understand the complexity or the nuances of the culture one needed to be patient. What has engaged me with is the contradictions, identity crisis that *adivasi's* go through - identity is multiple as we know, hybridism of the cultures etc. Since the area in and around Kondagaon is no longer isolated and cut off from outside influences, *adivasis* deal and combat the politics of culture and religion propagated by different non-*adivasi* religious and political groups. And the way they deal with these contemporary situations.

GK: What did you learn from the villagers, and what did you have to "unlearn" (in terms of your own preconceptions) in order to work with them effectively?

NA: Even though in present times a number of *adivasi* families who have migrated to towns like Kondagaon and have been working as daily wages earners through manual labour of one kind or

the other - I learnt and understood that how the basic living pattern of the *adivasis* revolves around the time pattern of agricultural /forest produce and life's relationship with the cyclical processes of nature. Hence no matter what work they do, on occasions like birth, marriage, death, harvest, ripening of certain fruits, four seasons, annual *mandais* (fairs during which each, family /community / village is represented by a family deity and then they also move from one village to another between harvest and beginning of summer). They take time off to get together to celebrate these occasions within the family and the communities. Through one of their ritualistic performance *Kokerenge*, which is to pay tribute to the entire earth, I could sense how oral cultures encourage the participatory life of the senses and are linked to the concept of relationships with the human and nonhuman world and its potential to create experience at several conscious and subconscious levels.

I realized that this pattern is a way of life - and arts very much a part of it. During these moments I got to see how they relate to their immediate environment. I got to know about various forms of narratives, songs, mystical beliefs, disposable art objects / temporary installations made for ritualistic purposes as well as art objects made for the local market, process of hand woven fabrics, drinks/liqueurs, fruits, flowers, herbs, local medicine practitioners, modes of transportations, usable things made of natural materials and yet how villagers consume mass produced plastic, aluminum, synthetic fabric, and popular images of Hindu and Christian gods and goddesses in large quantity.

As an artist I was able to get some sense of their aesthetics and artistic expressions. These occasions also exposed me to their logic, the myths and realities of *adivasi* systems of reciprocity, gender hierarchies within the communities and vulnerabilities of certain communities (as cast is an issue in India) and their relationship with economically privileged non *adivasi* business class, government and forest officials, police and professionals like doctors, health visitors and school teachers etc.

I must tell you that initially I used to get very anxious of the time gone by and the time left to do things, especially when we began doing site-specific works. People, including my colleague's approach to time made me uncomfortable and vulnerable. I had to gradually learn to free myself from my own conditioning regarding time and the way of working through the process of self-transformation, transforming myself into a participant not only in the art projects but otherwise as well. This to an extent helped me, as I began to understand their perceptions of life and time. Times they are living in and the sense of their own histories. Like Levi Strauss says "*they have their past that plays its part in shaping their present state.*"

This approach eased some tensions amongst us and I observed that my colleagues too started making conscious efforts to understand from where I was coming.

In short - It is taking into account - to recognize and to acknowledge other perspectives.

GK: From my perspective the aesthetic value of your village projects is evident not only in the pump site designs, but in the entire process of working in a consultative and participatory manner.

NA: Yes, the process of consultation, sharing, participation, inclusion itself is aesthetic in my view.

GK: Do you view the process of interacting with, and learning from, the village communities, to be part of the "art" in these projects?

NA: Taking up collective responsibilities has been very much part of the ethics or the philosophy, these communities believe in and practice till date. I think creative and inclusive ways draw the participants into an opening.

Learning from them about the significance of the signs, symbols which for centuries have continued to be part of their life as well as objects, material, instruments, sounds they use during rituals and social functions has been extremely meaningful and we do view the entire process as part of art making in these projects. Designs for pump sites are worked out collectively.

In order to deepen our understanding of village communities, we, participate in many of their events. The process builds trust, generates communication with them at different levels.

GK: How did the collaborative process transform the consciousness of the various participants?

NA: First of all, within the group, we tried developing an approach to be sensitive towards each individual's perception of art and collaboration, to prepare grounds to create possibility for our egos to take a back seat. There were uncertainties...

We are inquisitive and interested in Art that draws attention to the uncertainties and risks but by incorporating the ideas of the community members (interested) in the groundwork of the projects perhaps I can say that they, instead of remaining indifferent, spectators or critics, find themselves transforming into participants. This makes them conscious of their own positions as individuals in the community. (As mentioned earlier not all the community members are interested in communication outside their immediate environment) But you know their experiences with us or the transformation of their consciousness is difficult to describe as such.

While interacting with the community members about the proposed collaboration we consciously remember how development schemes, beneficial or not beneficial for them most of the times occur without their knowledge or consent, hence their participation in the decision-making processes remains marginal. So for us their participation is of great significance.

These collective experiences of interaction are difficult to describe, as it is not a systematic pre planned process.

Grant, I believe that beginning to listen is the beginning of the process of communication.

Within the group we have been trying to be conscious about who can speak, how to speak together, or it is something ---to speak with or alongside others in the sense of forming alliances. All this could be impossible but we are of the opinion that those who are interested in restructuring power in more egalitarian ways, consciously like to work towards these values...

GK: Can you give examples of the "cross cultural" communication that was catalyzed by the workshops?

NA: One of the examples... we observed that whilst at a general level everyone acknowledges co-existence of diverse cultures and their interdependence, but when it comes to practice one finds oneself deeply conditioned, so the workshops tried creating a kind of environment to consciously work towards developing a vision to free ourselves from our presumptions enabling us to apply critical thinking to be able to sense the nuances of other knowledge systems and lived experiences of the communities we are interacting and working with.

GK: Why is this kind of exchange important in India today?

NA: India has been a huge multi-cultural nation. But the rise of the Right Wing fundamentalism has been gradually affecting the dynamics of diverse cultures in the country by further marginalizing the culturally rich minorities. Whereas the need of our time is to recognize and acknowledge the cultural difference and various knowledge systems rather than the neutralization of the diversity.

From the perspective of art, art formulates questions and reveals the concealed and I believe that interactive and collaborative processes could enhance levels of sensibility to processes that connect, make communication between people from diverse disciplines and cultures possible.

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