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Strokes Unfolding Unexplored World: Drawings as an Instrument to Know the World of Adivasi Children in India

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This paper is based on an analysis of the drawings of Adivasi children in Maharashtra, a state in India. It presents the otherwise neglected world of the Adivasi children, namely, the children's perspectives towards their environment and culture as expressed in the drawings. It also discusses the influence of the geographical and cultural environment on the drawing style of Adivasi children, emphasizing special features of the drawings, i.e., their collective creation. It further analyzes the intellectual attributes Adivasi children exhibit through their art work using the theory framework of multiple-intelligence. The drawings exhibit different aspects of visual-spatial intelligence and a strong emotional bond between Adivasi children and nature. The paper offers leads for understanding the visual-spatial intelligence and naturalistic intelligence among these children. It also discusses the possibility that the high ability of coordination and cooperation among Adivasi children acquired through socialization in their communities could be attributed as interpersonal intelligence. The paper comments on the design of the Indian Education System, which is characterized by an insensitive approach towards the specific cultural context and intellectual attributes of tribal children.

Keywords: *World of Adivasi Children; Multiple Intelligence; Spatial Intelligence; Interpersonal Intelligence; Natural Intelligence; Cultural Capital; Indian Education System; Adivasi Education*

The World of Children in India

The world of children is neglected by scholars in India. According to some scholars, reflections on childhood are included in Indian epics like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Manusmruti* (Kaur 2015). Yet, these epics mainly reflect on *sanskara* (the socialization process) and illustrate the training needed in order to become an ideal king in the future. Insights into the psychology of children are few in the Indian literature.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, which was marked by an intensification of the globalization phenomena, the western understanding of childhood continued to be central in the academic view on childhood in India (Kumar 2006; Kakkar 1981). Havovi Wadia (2011) has criticized activists and researchers for limiting the concept of Indian childhood to stereotypical notions that are mostly influenced by the normative child—male, upper-caste, middle class, and urban—as well as by international, western notions. Olga Nieuwenhuys (2009) very aptly argues that childhood in India continues to be discussed mainly in terms of issues that children face and problems that they may create. However, childhood is not just a “natural,” “biological,” or “universal” category, but also a culturally-specific, socio-historical construct that can be understood differently in various locations, contexts, and time periods (Aries 1962).

It is hardly surprising that the world of the Adivasi¹ children in India is totally overlooked. Indian Adivasi children are portrayed as shy and quiet in scholarly documents and literature in India. While working with the Adivasi children of Maharashtra as a Programme Coordinator of the Shikshan-Mitra² Program, I became curious about the world of these children. I wanted to know what their family life was like, what friendship meant to them, how they understood their community life, how they viewed their school and their environment in comparison to the modern urban world, and so on. With this goal in mind, I started the publication of a wall magazine³ to give these children an outlet for expression. The highly rigid, behavioristic framework of India’s education system influenced the creation of the wall magazines. Teachers, the dominant authority in the classroom, dictated almost entirely how the children expressed themselves. As a result, the ultimate product reflected what was perceived as appropriate from the point of view of the teachers and was mostly written in a standard language. It was only after the yearlong intensive process of deconditioning and relearning that the teachers and adult facilitators accepted the child as having, “an independent, competent personality.” The genuine drawings presented in this article are the result of providing a pressure-free space to the children. These drawings present the world as seen by the Adivasi children.

Collective Drawing, Collective Living

One special feature of the children’s drawings is that they are collective drawings, which means that groups of girls and boys drew a single drawing collectively and simultaneously on a single piece of card paper. The children chose to work in groups of four or six and selected the topic collectively. In some groups, one of the members led the process and others played a complementary role. In others, all the members contributed equally. I observed effective coordination among the members of each group while they worked on a single drawing.

The way of life of the Adivasis in India is reflected in the creations made by the children. They live collectively, and most of their activities, such as singing, dancing, and hunting, are collective activities. Individual performances in these arts and spheres of life are usually insignificant. Some of the tribes also have a tradition of collective drawing and painting, which is observed on special occasions and for special purposes. For example, *Rathawa*⁴ Adivasi practice *Pithora*⁵ painting. The purpose of performance among the Adivasi is to celebrate different occasions in life and to express their experiences rather than to achieve excellence at the individual level or gain personal fame. The absence of ambition probably helps the performers to devote themselves to the group’s common goal and to restrict individual urges and drives.

Inclusive Outlook Expressed through Minute Details

*My Village*

The drawings of the Adivasi children reveal minute details that say a lot about their observation skills. This particular drawing, *My Village*, depicts an Adivasi village and its surroundings. In the *Satpuda*⁶ region, habitations are usually scattered. Thus, in the drawing, one can see scattered houses on both sides of the road. The colorful school building—decorated with a wall painting of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*⁷ and surrounded by neat vegetable and flower plots—is prominent in the drawing, underlining its importance in the minds of the children. The bridge over the river with cars running on it and windmills on the mountains show that the children have correctly gauged the signs of the modern world that is gradually entering their own world.

Also pictured in the drawing are common village sights, such as women fetching water from the well and the hand-pumps; farmers grazing their cattle, working in the field, and fishing in the river; villagers chatting on the *par*⁸ under a tree; and stray animals. The level of detail in this drawing is extraordinary. For example, if one looks at the tree closely, a bird can be seen with its nest on the lowest branch. The children's acute observation of details, like the fish in the river, the sign board showing the way to the bus stand, the cranes flying in the sky, and the aquatic vegetation, make the drawing very realistic. The drawing, *Gaw Diwali* pictured below, also includes intricate details.



Gaw Diwali

*Gaw Diwali*⁹ is celebrated among Adivasi communities in the *Nandurbar* district during winter. This drawing portrays *Songadya Party*, a musical drama performed during the night that is the greatest attraction of this festival. The colors used in the drawing indicate that it is a depiction of a night-time event. The background, made up of serene mountains and houses, highlights the activity on the stage. The humans are rejoicing at night, while the stray animals are asleep following their natural course, and therefore can't be spotted in the drawing. Interestingly, not a single person in the audience, which is seen from behind, resembles another. This particular aspect of the drawing says a lot about the pictorial imagination and expressiveness of these children. The performance venue is surrounded by various vendors who are busy selling their goods, even at night. Children are lingering near the vendors. Just in front of the balloon seller, there is a small group of people sitting around a rectangular board and enjoying gambling with cards. Children take in all the things happening around them, irrespective of the moral value attached to them, and these things then become a part of their world.



Village Market

This drawing, depicting a scene from the village market of Dhadgaon, provides a vivid view of everything that is found in and around the market. It shows different parallel and crossing lanes in the market, along with specific details of the products in the shops on each lane. Starting from the right-hand corner of the upper lane, one can make out a cloth shop, followed by a sweet shop, a vegetable and fruit shop, a *gutkha*¹⁰ shop, and, lastly, a toy shop. In the lower lane, one can see a jewelry shop in the right corner. Though the sale of *gutkha* is prohibited by law, it is sold illegally in the open markets in villages. This sad reality is reflected in the drawing.

The drawing also depicts the area surrounding the market with impressive detail. People waiting at a bus stand can be seen in upper right corner. In the upper left corner, there is a temple of a village deity decorated with flowers. A great rush of different vehicles and pedestrians can be seen because it is a market day and also a *taluka*¹¹ place. Other tiny details, like girls fetching water from the hand-pump and children planting saplings alongside the river, give the backdrop of the village. The depiction of fish and snakes on the river surface may represent an effort to emphasize their presence in the river. An extraordinarily large span of the village market is covered in this drawing.

The above drawings include some special features. First, all the drawings present a bird's eye view of the depicted objects. Most of the children who created these drawings dwell in the mountain ranges of *Satpuda*. It's most likely that very often they see the world around them from an elevated position. They

presented this view from the top very effectively in their drawings. Second, the objects are seen from a long distance, a clear indicator of the span of the children's observation. The drawings also speak about a wider and more inclusive outlook on their surroundings. The mountains, river, trees, and various other non-human inhabitants are also an inevitable part of the scenes. Human life and nature coexist.

Critical Perception of the Phenomena / Environment

There are a few other drawings which go beyond just the factual depiction of the environment and provide a critical comment. These drawings reveal the higher qualities of intellect, like critical comparative observation.

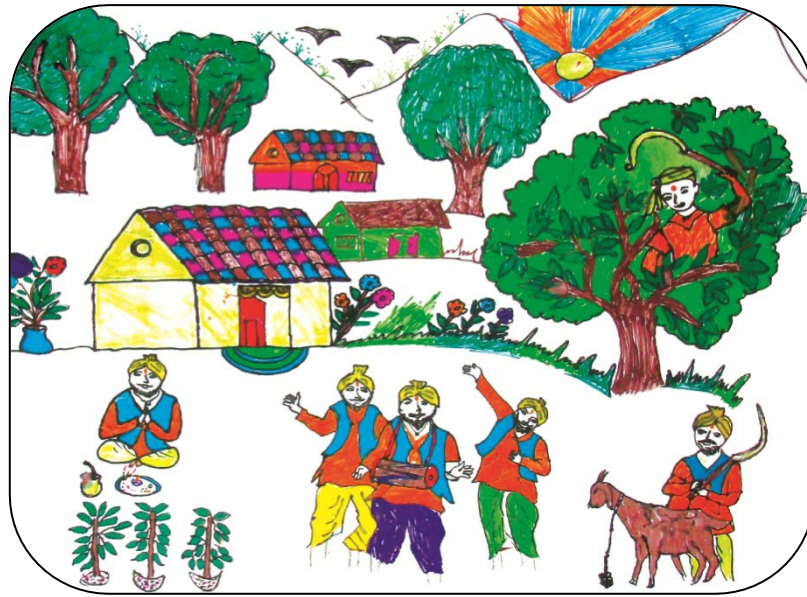


Market in City and Village

This drawing pictured above presents a comparative picture of market places in the city and the village. The asphalt road with zebra crossing, the mall exhibiting fashionable clothes behind the glass wall, the big storage room, the high-rise buildings, and the family dressed in the latest attire are all typical features of a city. Against this background, the people sitting on the mud floor selling their goods, mostly grocery items of daily use in cane baskets, indicate a simple market place in a village. All the goods in village markets are necessary for daily life and are not sold in excessive quantity. The dress patterns of the villagers, which are different than those of city people, further emphasize the differences between the cultures of both places. Just a few strokes of lines explain something that is quite extensive and wide-ranging. The children might not have consciously critiqued this cultural difference, but it is interesting to note that their apt observations have captured it, either knowingly or unknowingly.

Value of Cultural Archives

The drawings of the children proved to be an effective means of sharing unique features of the Adivasi culture. The following drawing presents a performance of a ritual called *Indal*, which is practiced among the *Pawara* Adivasi in northern Maharashtra. It is performed to express gratitude after a wish uttered in front of God is fulfilled (*Manata*). The drawing explains the three main rituals of *Indal*.



Indal

One can see a boy cutting a branch of a tree in the background. This task is supposed to be performed by a young boy and not an adult. The figure of the boy is drawn on an unusually large scale. The tree being cut is called *kamba* or *kumban*. The branches are being worshiped ritualistically by the person sitting on the ground. Three other men are playing musical instruments and singing. People dance and sing all through the night and the branches of the *kumban* are released into the river in the morning. A man standing behind a goat with a long sickle in his hand indicates another part of *Indal*, the sacrifice of a goat.

All the men in the drawing have beards. This fact explains a custom related to this ritual. The men performing *Indal Pooja*¹², who are called *valava*, *balava*, and *fuvanya*, have to observe a code of conduct for a week before performing Pooja. They are not allowed to sleep on a bed, eat food (including non-vegetarian food) cooked at home, consume liquor, use footwear, or shave. Another drawing documents a marriage ritual that is typically observed among the Adivasi communities titled *Ritual of Adivasi Marriage*.

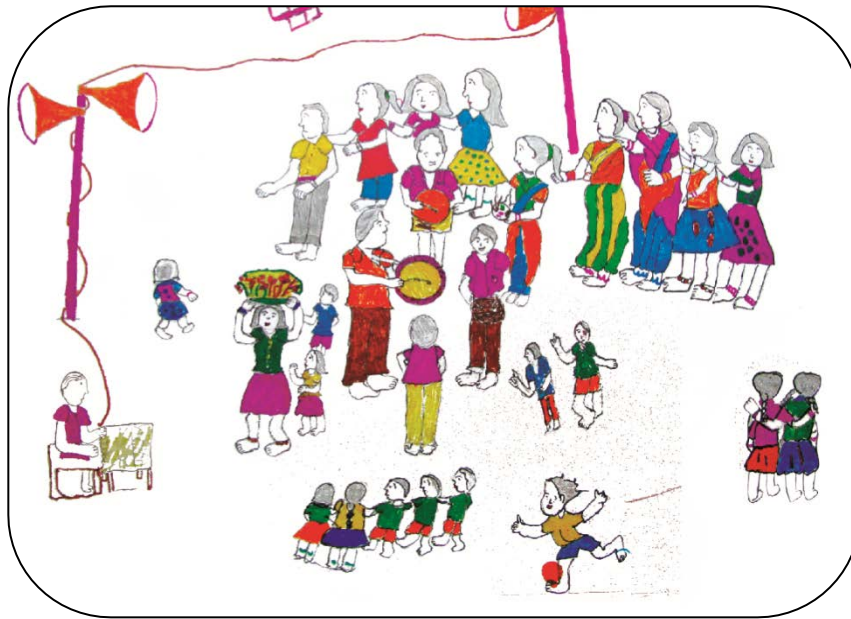


Ritual of Adivasi Marriage

The older couple in the left catches one's eye when seen in comparison with the young couple in the center. The newly married couple on the left is actually supposed to appear aged. Among the Adivasi, if a boy and girl abscond, start living together, and bear children without marrying, they must marry a day before the marriage of their children. Only then will the marriage of their children be accepted socially. The *Indal* and *Adivasi Wedding* drawings have great cultural value and can definitely prove to be an important source for researchers interested in understanding the ways of life of the Adivasi communities.

The Influence of the Modern World

The Adivasi communities and their culture, which is in harmony with nature, are being influenced by urban trends which have resulted in an intermingling of both cultures. Singing and dancing on different occasions are an integral part of the tribal culture. However, the use of modern, urban technology—like loudspeakers and the electric banjo¹³—is the influence of non-tribal culture, which is now accommodated in traditional ways of celebration.



Adivasi Wedding Dance, Modern Influence

The drawing depicts young girls and boys in modern attire and with modern hairstyles dancing in a traditional way on the occasion of a marriage. The girl wearing a skirt-blouse is carrying on her head a traditional *shibli*, a decorated cane basket that has cultural importance during the marriage ceremony. Music is being played on the electric banjo along with the traditional *tasha*¹⁴. The loud speakers spreading the sounds of music have become indispensable in the celebration of the Adivasis.



Influence of Modern Technology

The prominent loud speakers in the drawing *Influence of Modern Technology* show the increasing space occupied by this modern, notorious technology—even in the life of rural-tribal people—and the replacement of the variety of traditional musical instruments with single modern instruments, thus extinguishing diversity. These drawings have also proved to be a means of visual documentation of the tribal culture, which is facing the threat of extinction due to the pressures of urbanization and so-called modernization.

Means to Understanding Intellectual Qualities

Apart from depicting the world of the Adivasi children, these drawings also have the potential to serve as the means to understand the intellectual qualities of these children. The script of any particular language is a symbolic expression which carries the defined meaning for each symbol commonly understood and shared by a particular cultural group. Drawings are also a basic form of symbolic expression of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. It has been observed that Adivasi children feel more comfortable expressing their feelings and thoughts through artistic forms as compared to non-tribal societies, which are more text oriented. Howard Gardner (1983) articulated eight criteria for a behavior to be considered an intelligence, one of which is spatial intelligence. Spatial intelligence refers to the ability to interpret and create visual images, pictorial imagination and expression, understanding relationships between images and meanings, and understanding relationships between space and effect. All the drawings exhibit different aspects of visual-spatial intelligence, such as spatial judgement and the ability to visualize. The drawings open avenues to study whether this indicates visual-spatial intelligence among the children who participated in the project.

Interpersonal intelligence is another quality articulated by Howard Gardner. Often interpersonal intelligence is mistaken for extroversion. In a true sense, interpersonal intelligence means the ability to cooperate in order to work as part of a group. These drawings are unique because they are the result of a collective effort. Given the opportunity, children choose to work in a group and are able to work in harmony without any external control or monitoring. Harmonious group work was observed in other activities as well. For example, children worked efficiently in different committees to execute agriculture and health projects. This is also expressed as a collective intelligence, which is defined as shared or group intelligence that emerges from the collaboration and collective efforts of many individuals and appears in consensus decision-making. Less complex societies, like that of the Adivasis, have a greater shared understanding of the world as compared to more complex societies, which is reflected in their ability to work collectively and effectively as a group. It would be interesting to study the quality of interpersonal intelligence among the Adivasi children and whether or not they are more likely to acquire this ability through their socialization process, which emphasizes living as part of a community.

Finally, nature is an integral part of their lives, which can be seen depicted in the drawings. The children are keenly aware of their surroundings and the changes in their environment, even if these shifts are minute. Further analysis of the drawings may throw light on how the children perceive and interpret the existence of natural phenomena in human life. Such a study would offer some leads for understanding naturalistic intelligence among these children.

Pedagogy Design and Cultural Capital of the Adivasi Children

Children enter school with a specific cultural capital, which consists of their language, patterns of communication or behavior, likes and dislikes, food habits, literature in oral or written form, skill sets, traditional knowledge systems, and perspective. However, the schools apply preferential treatment to the cultural capital of children based on the social strata they belong to. In the case of children from the higher strata of society, a continuity or similarity is observed between the culture of their family and the culture at school (Bourdieu 1986).

The schools that are meant for the Adivasi children are influenced by the norms of higher strata of society in their architecture, design, operation, content, pedagogy, and medium of instruction. The distinct skill set of the Adivasi children becomes redundant in this hierarchical, rote-based model of learning (Darak, 2016).

Vygotsky (1934) has acknowledged the role of culture in the intellectual development of a child. By denying the socio-cultural context of the Adivasi children, the schools deny them the opportunity to participate in the education process as constructors of knowledge. This makes the children feel alienated from the school environment and the educational process. Furthermore, it leads to low achievement levels as well as high dropout rates¹⁵ (Census of India, 2011). This, in turn, re-affirms the biased opinion of teachers and the non-tribal community that tribal children are slow learners with low intellectual capabilities and a lack of interest in learning. Educational failure then leads to economic failure. Thus, in a society based on inequality, education reproduces inequality.

Apathy and the neglect of the specific context of the Adivasis are reflected in the policy at the national and state level, too. Though some important laws¹⁶ acknowledging the distinct culture and lifestyle of Adivasi communities have been passed, they are only recent. While these laws recognize the Adivasi communities' rights over natural resources, Adivasi education occupies a very insignificant position in the policy on education and there is also a lack of integrated approaches. In fact, the main objective of the Tribal Ashram schools is to offer the Adivasi children a way out of their family background characterized by poverty, ignorance, superstitions, and addiction, and to create an environment of education, discipline, personal health, and hygiene (Tribal Development Department, 2006). This indicates that policy makers and planners are totally unaware of the positive aspects of the Adivasi culture.

Conclusion

Considering the total detachment of the education system from the distinct cultural context of the Adivasis, the drawings of the Adivasi children have the potential to provide input at the policy level. These drawings should be perceived as an important source for understanding the cultural capital these children bring to their schools, which is the basis on which they construct their own schemas of knowledge. Documents like these drawings should be treated as an insight into the intellectual abilities of the students, which could help the teachers and educators design a pedagogy that better suits the needs of these children. This would provide an opportunity to the Adivasi children to build on their own strengths and explore their niche in this changing world while keeping their cultural identity intact.

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Illustration Credits

Fig. 1. *My Village* by Devsing, Vishal, Mahesh, Ranjit, Mahendra, and Sanjay (Primary & Secondary Ashram School, Joganipada, Nandurbar)

Fig. 2. *Gaw Diwali* by Anudanit Ashram School, Chikhali, Block: Shahada, District: Nandurbar

Fig. 3. *Dhadgaon Market* by Vasanti, Shital, and Kavita (7th std.) (Government Secondary Ashram School, Chulwad, Block: Dhadgaon, District: Nandurbar)

Fig. 4. *City and Village Market* by Bijlal, Sunil, Mahendra, Samuwel, Vijay, and Nitin (Primary & Secondary Ashram School, Joganipada, Nandurbar)

Fig. 5. *Indal* by Dinesh, Dashrath, Indra, Lata, Mamata, Meena, Prakash, Ranjana, and Salim (Government Secondary Ashram School, Chulwad, Block – Dhadgaon, District – Nandurbar)

Fig. 6. *Ritual of Adivasi Marriage* by Government Ashram School, Moramba, Block: Akkalkua, District: Nandurbar

Fig. 7. *Adivasi Dance at Wedding* by Archana, Hina, Sharmila, Shubhangi, and Yotita (Government Secondary Ashram School, Kochara, Block: Shahada, District: Nandurbar)

Fig. 8. *Influence of Technology* by Bharat, Kesarsing, Vasant, Chatulal, Aapsing, Vinod, Ramesh, Ashok, and Jagdish (Private Aided Ashram School, Chikhali, Block: Shahada, District: Nandurbar)

Endnotes

¹ The Adivasis people are tribal groups named “original inhabitants” in South Asia; in English, they would be called “indigenous people.” *Adivāsi* carries the specific meaning of being the original and autochthonous inhabitants of a given region. It was specifically coined for that purpose in the 1930s. Over time, unlike the terms “aborigines” or “tribes,” the word “Adivasi” has developed a connotation of past autonomy disrupted during the British colonial period in India and not yet having been restored. Adivasi make up 8.6 percent of India's population or 104 million, according to the 2011 census. Adivasis are found throughout India, but are primarily based in the mountain and hill areas, away from the fertile plains. The greatest concentration is in the central states of India, notably Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, southern Bihar, the western *ghats* (hills) of Gujarat and Maharashtra and northern Andhra Pradesh; where over 85 percent of the Tribal population is to be found. Officially they are termed “Scheduled Tribes” and a total of 645 tribes are recognized by the Constitution of the Indian Republic. While in Maharashtra there are 47 scheduled tribes (the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order [Amendment] Act, 1976).

² A literary phrase, which means “friend in education.” The first phase of the project, called Shikshan-Mitra, was implemented by BAIF Development Research Foundation in forty-eight Tribal Residential Schools in Nandurbar, a northern district of Maharashtra, a state in western India. The project aimed to make the education system more relevant to the life of Adivasi students by incorporating the relevant knowledge and skills of the Adivasi communities and interlinking the state syllabus with the life relevant program content. Textbook content was integrated with regular activities of the children such as agricultural, health science, and civics activities.

³ A piece of card paper that includes drawings and different genres of writing on a chosen theme and which is displayed on a wall for reading.

⁴ Adivasi community in the southwest area of the Gujarat State in India.

⁵ A particular type of drawing that is drawn collectively by men from Rathwa community on special occasions.

⁶ A range of mountains on the northern border of Maharashtra. The literal meaning of Satpuda is “seven ranges of mountain.”

⁷ A government program; its name means “education for all.”

⁸ A round platform around a tree. It is commonly used in villages in Maharashtra for meeting and chatting.

⁹ A festival that is celebrated collectively by the entire village.

¹⁰ A sweet or savory preparation which is consumed by chewing or sucking and which normally causes mild intoxication

¹¹ A block is a geographical unit under a district

¹² A ritual of worship

¹³ A musical instrument

¹⁴ A traditional percussion instrument used for producing a rhythmic sound.

¹⁵ The dropout rate at the primary level is 35.6 percent for tribal students and 27 percent overall. The upper primary dropout rate is 55 percent for tribal students and 40.6 percent overall. At the secondary level the dropout rate is 71 percent for tribal students and 49 percent overall (Census of India 2011).

¹⁶ Specifically, the *Panchayat* Extension to Scheduled Area (PESA) Act (1996) and the Forest Rights Act (2006)