

A DIARY OF AN ART MASTER Amitava Bhattacharya



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A m i t a v a B h a t t a c h a r y a

### ***Amitava Bhattacharya***

Amitava is a practicing artist and scribe. Presently a recipient of senior fellowship in visual art for two years from the Ministry of Culture, Govt of India.

He obtained his bachelor's and master's degree in Fine Arts from Santiniketan. Had a Chinese Govt Scholarship in 1993 and studied language and art in Beijing, awarded Asia Fellowship from ASF Bangkok under Ford Foundation and was associated with Central Academy of Fine Arts as a visiting Fellow in 2003-2004. Later, he was associated with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad inst of Asian Studies and Asiatic Society as a project fellow to research on Sino-Indian artistic contacts. He was a visiting fellow in the University of Shenzhen from March to June 2012.

A regular participant in many group exhibitions, seminars, workshops and conferences in India, China and South East Asia. Had solo exhibition in Beijing, Kunming and ICCR Kolkata. After his study in Santiniketan he taught art in various institutes in Delhi, Kolkata and had a sort term experience as an art teacher in a reputed international school for African kids in Southern Africa and was a guest lecturer in the Govt College of Art & Crafts in Kolkata. Amitava resides in Kolkata

### ***John Clammer***

John Clammer is currently Visiting Professor of Development Sociology at the United Nations University. Previously he taught development sociology, contemporary Asian studies and the sociology of art at Sophia University, Tokyo. He has taught, researched or been a visiting professor at the University of Hull, the National University of Singapore, the Australian National University and the University of Buenos Aires, Kent, Essex, Oxford, Pondichery, Handong (South Korea) and the Bauhaus Universitat Weimar. His academic and practical interests range over development sociology, environmental sociology, urban sociology, the sociology of religion, post-colonialist indigenous social theory, social movements, economic anthropology and alternative and post-capitalist economies, sociology of art and critical social theory, both Western and non-Western. His current research relates to solidarity economics, issues of art and society and the place of culture in development and in particular alternative forms of sustainable development. He is the author of numerous books, including most recently *Diaspora and Belief; Globalisation, Religion and Identity in Postcolonial Asia*.

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*It was a new challenge to execute a month long art workshop in a completely different space, socio cultural context with different people. This new experience inspired me to keep a record like a memoir and to make a small survey of that society I anticipate sensitive response from the readers.*

*It is my pleasure to dedicate this small publication to my all teenager friends in Ma Sarada Kannya Vidyapith primary school in Pondki village, District Anuppur, M P. I am grateful to my friend John for his continuous encouragement to pursue this workshop and his valuable article for this small publication.*

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**Art Master Diary**  
*Indigenous Creativity and the Power of Imagination*

John Clammer

The source of positive social change is not economics or politics in the last analysis – it is creativity and imagination. The possibility of envisaging another world is the root of the future. Decades of “development” in India and throughout much of the world have not brought about the benefits promised. Poverty, deprivation and marginalization continue and in many cases increase. The experience of development for many has been one of violence, not of a peaceful transition to a richer, more secure, healthier and happier world.

This very negative form of development has tragically been the fate of many of the Adivasi communities in India, and not of these alone: many Dalit and other socially marginalized communities have had similar experiences – at the worst loss of land to mining, dams and other mega-projects, at best continuing poverty, lack of access to healthcare and education and very little participation in the “Shining India” promised by the political and economic leadership. But despite this, the experiences recorded in this diary of Amitava Bhattacharya’s fertile attempt to introduce art to the children of remote villages in Madhya Pradesh shows, as we might expect if not blinded by caste-ism, and social and cultural prejudices about the poor and rural life, that behind the deprivation lies a whole continent of humanity: of creativity, close links to nature, of warmth, humour, hope and imagination, simply waiting to be released.

Studies elsewhere have shown that in working with excluded communities and individuals – the mentally handicapped, slum dwellers, victims of trauma – art often proves to be a liberating force, not only allowing a non-verbal means of self expression, but revealing

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to those who try it that they too have resources of creativity that they may never have imagined. That discovery is itself empowering, and one very good thing about such “art therapy” is that it is non-competitive: no one is striving to be “better” than others, all that is important is that experience is expressed and given a concrete form that allows both the self and others viewing the art a means to come to terms with the life experiences that it embodies. So it is in the villages that formed the location of Amitava Bhattacharya’s experiment in teaching art, or rather perhaps in providing the opportunity, materials and incentive for children to discover the artist latent in themselves.

Many significant lessons are to be derived from the “Art Master’s Diary”. Anthropologists concerned with development have recently begun to discover what they are calling “Indigenous Knowledge” – usually practices of medicine, agriculture, fishing and survival. But almost always the conception of such indigenous knowledge is highly cognitive – it rarely extends to the perception that the imaginative and creative life of peoples is also a significant part of their total body of knowledge. Yet here in these remote villages we find that this is very far from true – not only is there indeed a local knowledge of such essential things as agricultural techniques, but there is also an alternative aesthetics, arts and crafts rooted in nature and daily experience and utilizing local materials in an organic and sustainable way, but also a strong predilection or stories. Many studies, both in literary scholarship and in the sociology of medicine have shown how important narratives are for any culture and

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individual to make sense of experience, to create a framework for understanding what is happening and to link these current events to tradition. In the paintings produced by these village children, we see immediately how true this is: stories are strength and give the community a means of engaging with the world while retaining the core elements of their own culture.

Bhattacharya notes how the Russian-Jewish painter Marc Chagall drew much of his inspiration from both nature and folk tales, and from the intimate life of the ghetto communities in which many Russian Jews lived at the time. The same of course is true in Indian art – immediately one thinks of Jamini Roy, and of the Indo-Hungarian painter Amrita Sher-Gil and the latter’s settling in and depicting the everyday life of the village of Saraya in the Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh. But these were depictions from without: the work shown in this diary however is from within – from artistically untutored children who given the materials and the occasion, immediately began to produce vivid paintings, glass art and murals, drawing instinctively on their environment, culture and experiences and depicting both the realities of everyday life – the search for water and food, but also its joys and especially dancing and the festivals that punctuate their lives of labour.

But at the same time the diary raises questions of another level. Some of these concern the role of the professional artist in such a situation: is his or her position one of essentially extending personal vision (as perhaps was the case with Sher-Gil), or is it to help

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extend their vision, that of the individuals and communities experiencing these new expressive possibilities? Of course the artist is bound to take away all sorts of new themes and inspiration from such an intense experience, but the much more valuable aspect of the work embodied in this diary is certainly the latter aspect – to promote forms of creativity that while in this case rooted in visual art, might potentially lead to new cultural and civilizational forms that will help these communities transcend feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Other issues concern the dangers of assimilating these newly discovered forms of artistic creativity to the “art world”, as has happened to a great extent with Australian Aboriginal art or even the Pat paintings of Bihar and West Bengal, that have in many cases become commodified and certain “star” artists identified at the expense of the originally communal and democratic forms of art production.

A big issue here then is ultimately what new forms of development are possible? Amartya Sen has famously defined development as freedom, and if this freedom is to be inclusive it must include freedom of the imagination, and of creativity located in a field of social and economic justice. The communities represented here stand as a kind of case study of possibilities: of how indeed to locate these indigenous imaginative and expressive resources in a context that will empower them, and not simply enrich others who would exploit them or turn their art into just another commodity in the art market. It is the responsibility of the larger art world indeed not to exploit, but to nurture such expressions and to see that

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they flow back to the benefit of the creative but desperately needy communities that have produced them. It is evident from the Diary that huge internal resources for change and empowerment, of promoting gender equality and of self expression exist in these villages, seemingly cut off from the mainstream of development and indeed in many respects its victims. Paradoxically this may be their salvation: to pioneer new forms of imaginative futures that makes them part of a wider solidarity economy that will withstand the huge crises that the mainstream economy is going to face as it comes up against declining oil and other resources.

Self-esteem is the basis of change: what the Diary show so clearly is how that can be achieved, not through traditional competitive education, but by liberating the springs of creativity. Aravind Adiga, the author of the prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* suggests in that book that artistic creativity lies at the basis of a social revolution, or as he puts it in his more earthy language “ Iqbal, that great poet, was so right. The moment you recognize what is beautiful in this world, you stop being a slave. To hell with the Naxals and their guns shipped from China. If you taught every poor boy how to paint, that would be the end of the rich in India”. As Bhattacharya’s initiative shows, all that has stopped the children in the villages where he worked was an invitation to creativity. None of them had been encouraged to express their artistic sensibilities and none had ever worked with these media – water colours, paper, glass, before. But once given the “permission” to do so, their autonomy as

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immediately shone through. Here indeed is the basis of a cultural revolution: the liberation of the imagination.

Perhaps we can close with the words of the great philosopher John Dewey, who amongst the many subjects, philosophical and political, that engaged his attention, was that of art. In his work *Art as Experience* he said the following: "Imagination is the chief instrument of the good...art is more moral than moralities. For the latter are, or tend to become, consecrations of the status quo, reflections of customs, reinforcements of the established order. The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets even though they spoke in free verse or by parable...Art has been the means of keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun the evidence and of meanings that transcend indurated habit". In the isolated villages of Chattisgarh district we see the truth of this: the seeds of transformation, self-respect and empowerment growing from the simple act of allowing children to see anew and to express that seeing in colour and image.





*Shon, Johila and Narmada*

Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain  
an artist once he grows up.

*-Pablo Picasso*

I am reminded of the famous quote of Picasso, while in the midst of tribal kids in a remote village in MP. It is my foremost experience to come across the creative mind of the poorest tribal children in India. However, this to me is a different experience in art teaching, compared to my earlier experience as an art teacher in a cultured urban elite school in Calcutta.

A huge wide world opened before my eyes, during my recent forays into the tribal hamlets of Chattisgarh. I came across humane personalities, who made to rethink the links between modernity and civilization. I felt the need to explore aesthetics and culture from a paradigm untainted by discourses of enlightenment.

I was made to wonder whether it would be pragmatic for me to dwell into the issues of primordialism and indigeneity. I was amazed to find myself engrossed in the midst of little





*Chandradevi*

artists from the dusty soil, who had possibly little understanding of the fast changing world outside their own locale. One of them was Chandradevi from far Paora village- a permanent member of the world of abject poverty, exploitation and gloom in the post independent India. Chandra's skin is coated with sad dark brown complexion but her smile is remarkably bright. Her parents sent her to this small school simply to secure her food through the state sponsored mid day meal scheme. But Chandra loves to paint flowers and sun. She never had seen water colours and pastel before. She told me a story on how wild boars destroyed their little field. She knows how to find wild, non poisonous mushrooms and to clean it. So it is not at all a question of how to be an artist but Chandra's innocence also stands in her way to find the options out of the atmosphere reveling in hierarchies, gender inequalities, intrusion of monetized, corporatized economies and a nation state, which seems to take all that makes her little world, be it her hearth, the forest, the village stream or her happy family, where members smile, despite their starvation.

My four students, Chandra, Pushpa, Reshma and Deepa were very shy, initially when I came to this school, but they are now more free and finally have accepted me as a friend and Dadaji{elder brother}.

I told them to make a kahani{story}on the day and night of their village with brush. But they

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development policy under the Eighth Plan (1992-97) and the approach paper for the Ninth Five Year Plan stress people's initiative and participation as key elements in the development process and in protecting the interests of the tribals. High priority has been accorded to elimination of their exploitation and removal of all forms of oppression. Today, the tribal majority areas, which overlap with the country's major forest areas, are also areas with the highest concentrations of poverty in India". 1,{ref} OVERVIEW OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE TRIBAL COMMUNITIES AND LIVELIHOODS IN MADHYA PRADESH AND BIHAR.'1,{ref} OVERVIEW OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE TRIBAL COMMUNITIES AND LIVELIHOODS IN MADHYA PRADESH AND BIHAR.



*fairy tales of Baiga village by Pushpa and others*



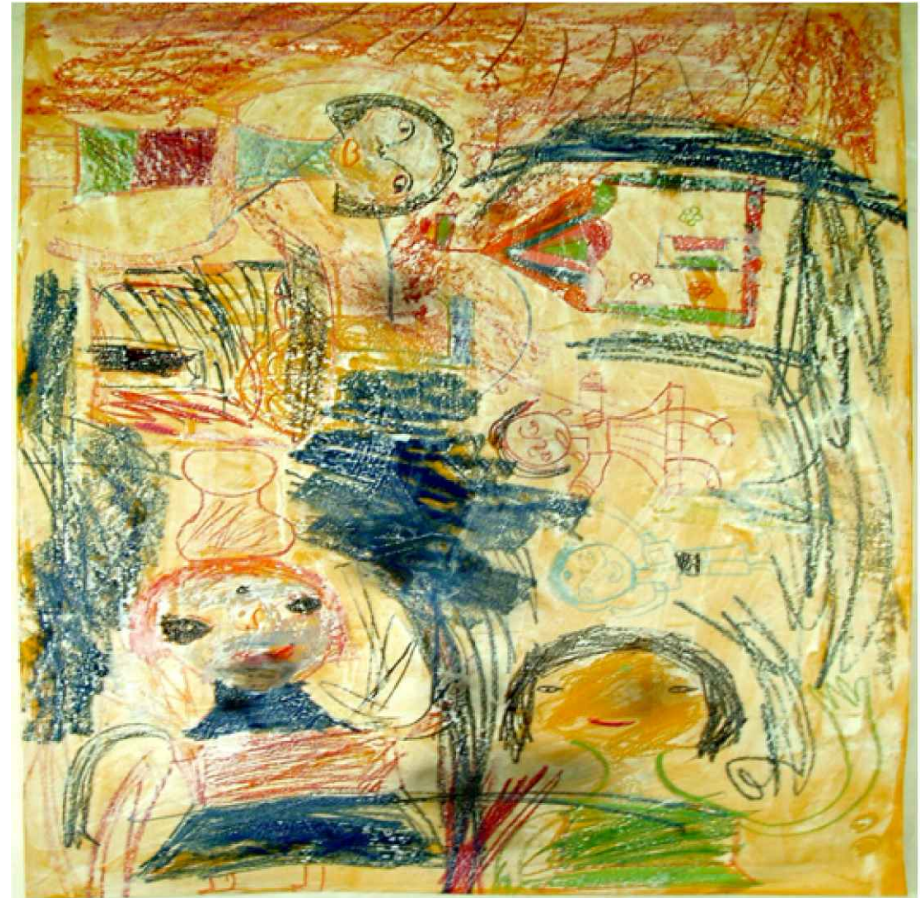
*Day Light in the village*

made fairy tales. Deepa placed a witch in the central position of pictorial space. And strangely that witch wears a yellow gown. They did this painting (5ft/4ft) which somehow reminds Marc Chagall. Chagall used to evoke his Russian rural tales in painting. Deepa and others are nostalgic about their village. They create a different chromatic sensitivity than Chagall who said 'Great art picks up where nature ends'. "A village near my area called Farasimar—a remote village in the jungle, a man is walking alone to find water" says Deepa. "The sun over the mountain called Suryadeva is responsible to evaporate water"— says Deepa in her





School



Villagers searching drinking water, by Rajni, Madhu, Iaxmi