‘Bona fide Tribals’: Religion and Recognition among Denizens of Mumbai’s Forest Frontier

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Abstract

This essay discusses a predicament confronting semi-urban members of the Warli community, a tribal (adivasi) group whose settlements occupy the wooded northern frontier of the city of Mumbai. Much of this area is administered as a nature reserve, the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, with adjacent sections having been opened to development by business interests, prominent among them the Bollywood film industry. When first an environmental NGO and then the film studios sought to drive the Warlis from their land, Warli NGOs responded in court first by enumerating their presence and then by establishing a connection between those abstract numbers and constructions of tribals already circulating in legal discourse and other privileged channels—ideas, images, and narratives that could frame them as a certain kind of community whose relation to a certain kind of space gave them legitimate rights of occupancy. At stake in these conflicts, I argue, was the problem of recognition. Invisibility, which had so long defined the condition of denizens of the Indian wilderness, was no longer a refuge; once the forest zone had been absorbed within the realm of polity, it became incumbent on the Warlis to claim recognition as fellow subjects in whatever terms were practicable or be consigned to abjection.

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To the north, the Mumbai city limits are coterminous with the boundary running between the suburbs and Thane District. Along nearly half its length this line bisects a forest. The government has set aside most of this area, 103 square kilometers, as a nature reserve, the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. Two contiguous tracts adjoin the Park to the south. The Aarey Milk Colony is a sprawling dairy farm complex that suggests what the pastoral trysting grounds of Krishna and Radha might look like if repackaged as a State of Maharashtra undertaking: herdsmen usher their cattle through a landscape oddly punctuated by barrack-like housing units, agricultural research facilities, and, looming over the fringes, corporate industrial parks. Next door is Film City, five hundred photogenic acres placed at the disposal of Mumbai’s flagship industry by the Maharashtra Film, Stage and Cultural Development Corporation. Among the permanent sets housed on the grounds, a promotional pamphlet lists ‘helipad, artificial lake, temple, discotheque, aeroplane, village, town, church and court’.

It may add to the landscape’s uncanny quality to state that Film City is also home to two tribal hamlets, or padas, with another settlement immediately adjacent—a total of 110 households of which all but 29 identify themselves as belonging to the Warli community or other adivasi tribes. The source of my figures is survey data collected in 2003 by the tribal rights advocacy group Sramik Mukti Sanghatan (SMS), whose totals for an area encompassing Film City, the Aarey Milk Colony proper, and peripheral tracts controlled by private interests add up to twenty-six padas comprising 1027 households, 749 of them tribal families. For corresponding figures on the population living within the much larger area of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park I turn to the work of a rival grassroots organization called Jaag, which in 2000 compiled a list of 36 hamlets on the Mumbai side and an additional 20 across the district boundary containing an estimated total of 2500 adivasi families.

1. The Hindi term adivasi, literally ‘original inhabitants’, denotes ‘tribal’ Indians, people historically defined by a condition of marginality in relation to Hindu caste society. One of the problems I consider in this essay is the contemporary reformulation of this marginality in spatial and religious terms.
It will be noted that neither of these sets of numbers constitutes official data. The 1991 Census of India records no human habitation within the forest zone at all, with the exception of the dairy employees housed in the workers’ quarters at the Milk Colony. In fact, as its status as an archival blind spot indicates, the case of these forest *padas* presents an anomaly as far as the official organization of space is concerned. But it is a multifaceted anomaly, affording more than one angle of approach to the forest’s inhabitants—or more properly those who represent them in public—as they seek recognition within the official order.

The problem is not simply that human settlement is conceptually inadmissible in an area that, across most of its compass, has been designated a nature preserve. I would argue that, given the enduring power of the nature–culture opposition as a structuring trope in Indian thought and literature, tribal communities and territory alike have historically become defined as such through a political and epistemic segregation beyond the rule of law and ken of civilization (cf. Damodaran 2006; Feldhaus 1995: Chapter 4). Insofar as forest management policies adopted in the colonial period have come to transform this scenario, what the Government of India’s assumption of the role of steward over natural resources and, by extension, guardian of the children of nature has done is to reframe the wilderness as a kind of annex of the state. Its space neither *public* nor its denizens *citizens*, this is a distinct regime of subjection to be kept in quarantine by the authorities from a host of modern contagions—threats to the integrity of the natural environment—whose vectors of transmission include symbolic formations (Sanskritic Hinduism, popular cinema) as well as material commodities and capital.

The surveys and maps of settlements whose results I present here are thus informal, provisional efforts on which representatives of the most educated cohort within the Mumbai Warli community embarked in response to specific challenges mounted by nontribal interests. The challenge in the case of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park took formal shape in a sequence of lawsuits. In 1995 an effort to expel so-called squatters from the area of the forest reserve reached the Bombay High Court in the form of a writ petition filed by an organization called the Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG). Debate in *BEAG v. Maharashtra* was joined on the question of how human settlement in natural spaces was to be regarded in the eyes of the law. The survey data compiled by Jaag was submitted as evidence in the case that succeeded *BEAG*, Writ Petition 925 of 2000, *Sapte v. Maharashtra*, which reopened the question with particular reference to the tribal population.

Having discussed the judgment handed down in *Sapte* in 2003, I will move on to consider some aspects of the outreach conducted by the
other activist group, SMS, among the padas of Aarey Milk Colony and Film City. This area is characterized by conflict between adivasi communities and a number of development interests that, when not effectively blind to their presence on the landscape, actively seek to erase them from it. The scenario is most vividly illustrated by the fate of a Film City hamlet called Devipada, the uneasy neighbor of an expanding construction site. The Whistling Woods Film Academy, the development in question, is the brainchild of the well-known Bollywood impresario Subhash Ghai. Ghai’s crews have erected a stone wall across territory the Warlis claim as part of their pada and on one notorious occasion in 2003—of which more later—called in police support for their bulldozers.

The conflicts animating my two case studies were manifested in different ways: on the one hand, a set of appeals to a symbolic matrix—the law—mediated through professional advocate-surrogates; on the other, the direct usurpation of space by one party from another, a physical process that spilled over into violence. But at stake in both, I would argue, was the problem of recognition. The invisibility that had so long defined the tribal condition was no longer a refuge; once the forest zone had been absorbed within the realm of polity, it became incumbent on resident Warlis to claim recognition as fellow subjects in whatever terms were practicable or be consigned to abjection. The opening move made by both tribal organizations, as I have mentioned, was to enumerate the populations whose homes had been brought under threat. The next step was then to establish connections between those abstract representations and constructions of tribals already circulating in legal discourse and other privileged channels—images, ideas, and narratives that could frame the forest’s inhabitants as a certain kind of community whose relation to a certain kind of space gave them legitimate rights of occupancy.

While it was imperative to come up with numbers on a map, in other words, there also had to be a persuasive validation of those numbers’ presence on that map. In this article I will describe some of the representational options confronting the Warli leaders and move on to an analysis organized around some terms borrowed from the typology of signs formulated by the American philosopher and pioneer of semiotics, Charles S. Peirce. In looking to Peirce, I follow the example set by a number of scholars working in cultural and symbolic anthropology who have sought inspiration in his theories for their own efforts to understand communicative acts within cultural systems, and their generation of meaning (and other effects) at different levels of experience or perception. Specifically, I am interested in a threefold distinction Peirce draws among the ways that signs relate to their objects. This is the famous
trichotomy of *icon*, *index*, and *symbol*. If the sort of signification provided by archival records—as instantiated in the columns of numerals and type that run through census data—is to be assessed primarily at the level of Peirce’s *symbolic* mode, which operates on a strictly conventional connection, the balance of my analysis will rest on the two other props of the Peircean tripod: the *iconic*, which enacts signification through resemblance, and the *indexical*, which relies on a relation of causality or ‘spatiotemporal contiguity’ (Parmentier 1994: 6).

Having considered some of the distortions generated by the system of archival registration, I will move on to emphasize the iconic mode, which I identify as the salient signifying logic in ongoing efforts on the part of some of Mumbai’s Warlis to negotiate a public identity as a community with a distinctively tribal cultural sensibility. I am tempted to gloss the purpose of this activity, which is less a coherent project than a set of ‘poaching’ practices in Michel de Certeau’s (1984) sense, as the dissemination of ‘Brand Tribal’. There is a singularly postmodern tendency at work in these moves to establish the forest’s denizens as ‘bonafide tribals’—as people, that is, who look like what other people think they should look like—through the mimetic citation of images and tropes fabricated and circulated, in large part, by the very film studios that have overrun their homes.

The first bid for self-representation that I will take up, however, relies primarily on an indexical link between the population and its land: that marked by the local gods resident in the landscape. In a development that can seem somewhat paradoxical in light of the concretized and site-specific character of the cultic practices such deities command in India, over the past decades a body of precedent in the adjudication of indigenous-rights cases has accumulated in other countries that share the presence of a historically dispossessed Native minority alongside a heritage in British common law—Australia, Canada, the United States. Cumulatively these rulings have produced, at a transnational level, a reified construction of tribal culture. According to this construction, one

2. Of the sets of relations Peirce maps among signs, their objects, and their interpreters (or ‘meanings’), the trichotomy linking signs to their objects has tended to command the attention of anthropologists and students of visual culture over his other schemes. Much useful work can be done in examining which of the relations comes to the fore in a particular act of signification within a particular cultural field of effects. To give an example germane to my fieldwork, an I.D. photo might be variously considered as an icon, inasmuch as the image reproduces a formal quality of its object; or an index, as the trace of the event enacted at the shutter’s click; or again as a symbol, in its function as a component of a routinized code or ‘language’ of official record.
of the defining marks of such a minority community is adherence to a particular kind of religious observance, one that (again, regardless of geographical or historical provenance) claims space on the basis of recognition of immanent spirits at specific sites.

In citing religion to underpin her clients’ bonafides, the strategy of the Warlis’s lawyer in *Sapte v. Maharashtra*, Maharukh Adenwalla, was to tap into this legally established reservoir of respect for the sacred places of Native peoples. Yug, her partner, laid out the essential challenge of the case for me: ‘What is title? If we say, Our gods live in these hills, that’s title. That’s a claim’.

*Sapte v. Maharashtra*

‘In the High Court of Judicature at Bombay’ runs across the top of the official documents filed in the case of *Sapte v. Maharashtra*: writ petition, respondent’s affidavit, written arguments, judgment. The physical space the words designate is a monumental Neo-Gothic structure, a landmark of colonial architecture, and also, to my outsider’s eyes and ears, of colonial manners and locutions. Viewed from the street, the steep Gothic arcades, bustling with lawyers in black gowns and white stocks, look imposing, not to say forbidding. Up close, however, the High Court’s police presence is revealed to be minimal and entry to its precincts surprisingly easy. Perhaps the grandiosity of its shell has been deemed security in itself against intrusion by anyone with no proper business in the building.

My business on 17 July 2003 was the hearing at which Maharukh Adenwalla, counsel for the NGO Jaag, and her opponent, the government pleader, presented oral arguments before the bench. Justices Thakker and Radhakrishnan sat at a massive platform flanked by a bailiff in red livery and Maharashtrian turban. In the gallery a crowd of subaltern-looking spectators had left standing room only. Most if not all of them must have been tribal members of Jaag. Although the language of the proceedings was English, I doubt I understood much more of what was being said than any of my neighbors. No decision would be forthcoming for another two months, and as the judges and the lawyers traded utterances it was difficult to distinguish words of argument from protocol. The draped backs of the lawyers bobbed up and down, the big fans churned the air overhead; eventually I found myself a place to sit down, but most of the folk in the gallery stood through it all with uncomplaining patience.

Maharukh’s predecessor, Colin Gonsalves, had filed Writ Petition 925 of 2000 on 23 March of that year. After identifying the petitioners and
asserting their role as representatives of a community of 2500 families, the document defines their grievance. More affecting as a summary than the lawyer’s words, however, is a letter he annexes at Exhibit B, sent by Jaag to the forest administrators on March 1.

R/Sir,

As per stated in the subject we humbly request that the Bombay High Court Order regarding eviction of slum dwellers from the National Park is not applicable for tribals. There is a fundamental difference between tribal and a slum dweller. The tribals are adiwasis who are the original inhabitants of this soil. Whereas the slum dwellers are migrant people who have come to Bombay for sheer survival… There is no single word stated in the Bombay High Court Order to evict any Tribal or Tribal family from the National Park… Please take serious note of this and [don’t] evict my tribal from the National Park.

The petition’s next step was to establish the tribal position as a question of customary law. In amplifying this point Gonsalves summons conventional tropes both of nature, as a condition that tribals unproblematically inhabit, and culture, as a component of identity that marks apart the community:

The forest is a religious and cultural site for the forest dwelling communities and is the home or the natural environment of such people, just as the city is the home to the urban citizen. Ownership of this home is based on principles very different from the modern, legal notions of property. These principles are governed by customary law (Sapte and Shramik Mukti Andolan 2000: para. 16; emphasis added).

And in cementing the claim he makes an appeal to precedents that have been set transnationally in the adjudication of Native land claims: ‘The emerging principle in the common law tradition from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA and South America is that communal rights in land are not dependent on legislation or administrative orders’ (para. 22 [i]).

The key move from the respondents’ side was the submission of an affidavit to the High Court by the national park’s deputy director, A.R. Bharati, on 14 July. Bharati’s statement relies on two tabulations of population figures whose sources, while not purporting to represent

comprehensive survey work, are nevertheless framed as authoritative. One is a signed and stamped Forest Department memorandum from 1977; the other, annexed to the affidavit as Exhibit A, is a letter from yet another local tribal rights NGO, a group called Adivasi Hakka Samiti that was apparently active within a subset of the forest zone’s padas at the time of the BEAG suit. The letter is the product of a meeting held in August 1998 between forestry officers and representatives of local settlements concerning the court-mandated resettlement scheme.

The Forest Department’s argument was simple: As reliable documents could certify, the total tribal population of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in 1977 had been a mere 46 families; as of 1998 it numbered 216 families. The balance of the 2500 families Jaag had estimated and whom the Sapte petitioners represented were thus—if at all present in the Park—not tribals. Setting aside the 11 settlements legitimated by mention in the Samiti letter, the 56 padas the petitioners listed were not padas but squatter colonies. And a further point to be inferred from Bharati’s evidence—and chalked up in his favor—was the apparent fluctuation in the numbers recorded in 1977 and 1998 of a population the petitioners claimed to have been inhabiting the forest, as its indigenous territory, since time immemorial.

I say that the petitioner’s contention that the Tribal families have been the residents of the National Park for generations, cannot be accepted in view of the Revenue and Forest record, as stated hereinabove. I say that if the petitioner’s contention is to be accepted, the status of the said Tribals would have been amply recorded to show that there are 2500 families who have been residing there for centuries and who have special customary rights over the said forest… (affidavit, para. 5; emphasis added).

Although I cannot concur with Bharati’s apparent implication that the Forest Department’s failure of governmentality was somehow the adivasi community’s fault, neither can I deny that it had certainly ended up being their problem. It should be noted that such tribal population figures as he is able to muster in this affidavit were collected in the context of state-directed projects to reduce that number to zero—a first time in the 1970s, a second in the late 1990s aftermath of the BEAG decision—and it seems likely that at both junctures survey work had only been undertaken once the authorities had already settled on eviction as their course of action.

In comparing Bharati’s letter with the petitioners’ Exhibit A, the list of 56 padas compiled by their own tribal rights NGO, I reach for my Peirceian toolbox. First, to put things in accord with my earlier propositions about governmentality and archival paperwork, I note that the signifying work both lawyers stressed with their deployment of the two
documents takes place at the symbolic level—the authoritative conversion of tribal subjects into numerals and typescript (Fig. 1).

However, the indexical and iconic operations of the Sapte exhibits seem also to have been significant, so to speak. In neither case is the causal provenance of the artifact to be found in an official organ of archival data collection. No census taker or policeman compiled either set of figures; rather, at the indexical level, the claim of each to serve as a representation...
of local conditions rests on its validity as a statement by local people in the know—that is to say, by *adivasis*. But whereas the petitioners’ exhibit is an unadorned list, presumably transcribed from NGO records by the lawyer’s typist, the respondents’ letter (Fig. 2) bears the indexical traces of acts of witness: signatures and (perhaps more impressive as marks of both legality and tribality) thumbprints.

![Figure 2](image-url)
And there is also an iconic dimension to the letter’s superior force as a citation of both legal authority and tribal authenticity. Not only does it bear the impress of the rubber stamps of its recipients as well as of the inked digits of its subaltern coauthors, it has been presented on the NGO’s letterhead, which features a logo designed in the distinctive style of Warli graphic art. In the end I suspect that, among the interested parties in the case, I was not alone in finding Bharati’s evidence simply to look more like evidence.

In their decision of 15 September 2003, Justices Thakker and Radhakrishnan assented to Maharukh’s point that tribals were indeed a constituency to be distinguished from encroachers. Adivasis were a group whose special interests had been duly recognized in the Indian courts as requiring special protection by the state, and in principle rulings in Maharashtra and elsewhere in the country had indeed set precedents for mandating ‘regularization’ within national park territory as one such protective measure. Nevertheless, the justices stopped short of ordering regularization for the Sapte petitioners.

What they contested was the standing as ‘bonafide tribals’ of the estimated 2500 families. Bharati’s affidavit and the letter attached to it had succeeded in their purpose, as I read it, to be taken just seriously enough that, if their erratic numbers did not actually secure official credence, they would nevertheless discredit the opposition’s figures by implicating them in what was being constructed as an intrinsically dubious project—that of an objective head count in the wilderness. The judgment cites the Forest Department’s data approvingly and concludes with the following words:

16. In view of the above facts and figures, in our opinion, a tall claim put forward by the petitioners cannot be upheld. There is no evidence, even of a prima facie nature, that the assertion made by the petitioners has substance. In the circumstances, in our opinion, the plea put forward by the learned counsel for the petitioners cannot be upheld.

The judges accordingly dismissed the petition, with the addition, however, of the following proviso:

17. …It is however open to the State Government to consider the case of the petitioners and if it is found that they or any of them are tribals/adivasis, the respondent authorities will take appropriate proceedings in accordance with law for their settlement…

Eviction procedures were scheduled to begin six months from the ruling.

Seizing on the opening the ruling left for a fact-finding commission that could pronounce with authority on the recognition of her clients as tribals, Maharukh shifted her attentions to a number of institutional
bodies that might sponsor such an agency, including a parliamentary standing committee in Delhi, a Mumbai-based research institute, and the State of Maharashtra’s own Tribal Department, which in proper governmental style had a set of procedures in place for the assignment and verification of paper tribal certificates to applicants who could satisfy official inquiry into their bona fides. With these moves, the challenge Mumbai-area Warlis faced in the aftermath of Sapte had thus become: *What does a bonafide tribal look like?*

Twenty-first-century Warlis and their neighbors from other tribal groups who live in Mumbai’s forest zone identify themselves by generically Maratha-sounding names. They speak colloquial Marathi and Bombay Hindi. All but the oldest women wear full-length saris of mill cloth and the men wear shirts, pants, and lungis like everyone else. Nobody in bourgeois society would seriously expect them to do otherwise, I think, but in the context of the legal challenge to their right to inhabit the Sanjay Gandhi National Park and economic and other pressures on their presence in adjacent parts of the forest, I cannot help but think it has been disadvantageous to the tribals’ case that their dwellings do not look more like the painted cabins government anthropologists have put on exhibit in such venues as the Maharashtra Tribal Department museum. Or, alternatively, like the backdrops to the tribal dance numbers that have long featured as part of the characteristic palette of Bollywood, and which some film scholars number among the subset of formulaic *mises en scène* to be characterized as cinematic ‘arcadias’ (Inden 1999).

Along with their lawyers, the activist-leaders of the Mumbai Warli community found themselves confronting a certain vexing lack of definition their *padas* displayed by the standards of the hegemonically prevailing codes of representing space. The challenge may be defined more precisely in Perceian terms as a lack of iconic clarity. Put simply, the tribal hamlets and the squatter colonies looked a bit too similar for comfort. Jaag’s leader, Vithal Lad, recounted to me how he had struggled to encourage the tribal residents of Aarey Milk Colony to refer to their homes by the authentic-sounding *pada* names instead of citing the plot numbers that had been assigned by the dairy administration, as they had been accustomed to do for some time. When asked, ‘What is your village?’ it was a matter of self-respect, Lad argued, to reply in Marathi, for example, ‘Keltipada [Monkey Hamlet]’, instead of ‘Eighteen Number’ in English—it was a question of the iconic signification, delivered phonically, of a ‘proper’ native village. Lad is also recorded as having ‘deposed before [a human rights group’s] tribunal that every tribal family has a house of its own made of mud and thatch with Mangalore tiles for
the roof’ (Sebastian 2000: 38), but the only structures I saw in Mumbai-area padas whose roofs were attractively free of such components of postindustrial bricolage as plastic sheeting and tire rubber were those refurbished for use as local outposts by his own organization. And, saving one highly anomalous site that I will introduce at the end of this article, Jaag’s buildings were also the only structures I saw in the forest zone that sported Warli graphic patterns on their outer walls.

Back in 1995, the Bombay Environmental Action Group had presented photographs along with the writ petition that had started all the trouble, stating, ‘Large areas of the park look like slum colonies as is evidenced from the photographs at Ex. “A” hereto’. Of the same images, Maharukh asserted years later, ‘Photographs annexed at Exhibit “A” of the [1995] petition are photographs of slum colonies’; the passage, to which I have added the implied italics, appears in the written arguments (Sapte and Shramik Mukti Andolan 2000: section B [b]) she submitted before the High Court in support of her own contention that her clients in Sapte were not encroachers but tribal villagers. She stopped short, however, of attaching the photographs she had of the petitioners’ own dwellings as counterevidence. My own inability to tell the difference when her partner showed them to me might have had something to do with it. ‘It’s a village’, Yug had had to cue me, as if prepping a dull witness.

**Gaondevi Puja**

I will round out my discussion with some observations about a visibility-acquiring project undertaken not by Jaag but by its Film City and Aarey–based rival, SMS. More modest in its scope and stressing a grassroots approach, SMS had split from the other organization in 1991 or 1992. In collaboration with allied NGOs from Mumbai and the neighboring district of Thane, SMS had planned a ‘consciousness-raising exercise’ to be held on Gaondevi Puja, the central event of the Warli ritual calendar. The festival, which falls within a few days of Diwali, brings together the fellow residents of a tribal village from its component hamlets—the padas dispersed in the woods—to worship at the central station of the gaondevi, the local goddess who personifies the space they share as a social unit. The occasion is customarily celebrated before her sacred stone with animal sacrifice, drinking, and possession activity. It was as a supplement to, if not a substitute for, this religious observance that the leftist SMS had collected local children on leave from school for the Diwali holiday at a building normally in use as a music school, which had been rented that day for a series of workshops.
The overall theme of this program was the invocation of a sense of community solidarity that went well beyond the borders of discrete villages. Forty-two children had gathered, most of them of grade-school age, well scrubbed and extremely cheerful. Across the room somebody had hung a banner displaying the words ‘All-Bombay Adivasi Samaj’, the coalition in whose name the event’s various sponsors had come together. The English translation of samaj is ‘society’, which preserves the dual sense of formal association and community, although the Hindi term is also frequently used in an India-specific intermediate sense as a synonym for caste or community. The coalition’s name can thus be read in two ways: as designating a select collective of Mumbai-area residents coming together in the name of adivasi interests, or as marking the Mumbai subset of the entire collectivity of India’s diverse tribal groups.

The day’s agenda was to unfold in four parts: a lesson in Warli art; a consciousness development workshop; a training session in cultivating a scientific perspective; and a magic demonstration. The latter two sessions, although eloquent and effective in context, are not difficult to explain. They were two sides of the same rationalist coin. The scientific training session was directed at debunking superstitious or otherwise obscurantist practices and ideas that were said historically to have kept tribal people in a backward condition, and the magic demonstration was an entertaining way of exposing the trickery behind the stunts displayed by diviners and other charlatans who exploited superstition. Spirit possession, blood sacrifice, alcohol—properly scientific-minded young citizens were to hold none of that in esteem. Indeed, had I arrived too late to catch the first half of the program, I would have come away with the impression that the All-Bombay Adivasi Samaj had as its aim the erasure of much of what marked the tribal practice of religion in Maharashtra apart from metropolitan Hinduism.

The program’s first two sessions are more complex and rich to consider because their purpose was to advance positive steps within the coalition’s project of formulating a modern, translocal image of cultural particularity. The key component of the consciousness-raising session, in this regard, was an inauguratory ceremony that combined ritual with a didactic lecture.

The lecturer’s message went something like this. All of India’s adivasis were one people. From here in Maharashtra to the tribal strongholds of the Northeast, the children of the soil were united in the shared experience of injustice suffered at the hands of ‘casteist’, ‘Brahminist’ society and animated by a common cultural genius, which expressed itself through those talents even ranking members of the caste hierarchy conceded to be natural tribal aptitudes—art and music. Tomorrow’s tribals
were not to consider themselves variously Warlis, Bhils, Mundas, or Santals. They were alike members of the national community of *adivasis*—of Original Inhabitants. And however marginalized they had been historically by their fellow Indians, they had won themselves a proud place in the national epic, the freedom struggle against Britain’s imperial domination (whose rhetorical utility as an allegory for examples of oppression closer to home, across a generous range of contexts, has become well established in modern Indian political discourse).

The exemplary *adivasi* who had sacrificed himself in the name of emancipation was named Birsa. In the late nineteenth century, he had led militant segments of the Munda community in an uprising against Christian missionaries and colonial authorities far to the east of Mumbai, in wooded parts of what is now the state of Jharkhand. Captured in 1895, he died in prison in Ranchi five years later. In 2000, in commemoration of the centenary of his death, a Jharkhand political organization ran off a poster based on a photograph of the freedom fighter that, having been introduced into circulation, has become adopted by a range of other groups with their own agendas (Rycroft 2004: 63). A snowballing effect appears to have taken over the image, such that its reproduction and valorized exhibition as a signifier of generically tribal resistance and pride may turn out to be the Munda rebel’s lasting legacy.

A description of what the All-Bombay Adivasis did with Birsa’s portrait will expand this point. First, a framed chromolithograph of the image was ceremoniously garlanded and presented before the assembly for a collective gesture of veneration. It was a ritual moment familiar to everyone present, a prop of what might be called modern Indian civil religion which cites *darshan*, the visual exchange with the deity central to Hindu devotional practice, and is prescribed in a wide range of contexts in which people convene under the auspices of an organization—a political party, a school, a business—that can be represented by the image of an ancestor, guru, or hero figure. A comparison with Gaondevi Puja may yield useful insights; the one I want to develop has to do with the question of iterability as it pertains to the rather different objects of cultic attention in these two cases.

I would describe the local Warlis’s *gaondevi* as an example of a cultic object in which the presence of divinity is primarily being instantiated *indexically*, to take after Peirce. The Sanskrit term that glosses the principle in Hindu thought is *swayambhu*, or ‘self-manifested’: a *swayambhu* form is typically a natural or naturalized mark on the landscape that an agent who is endowed with the eyes to see—an authoritatively pious person, or not infrequently a cow (see Sontheimer 1989)—recognizes and frames as the index at a discrete location of an immanent
presence. Even if modified by the hands of its worshippers and given
eyes and other features that iconically cite a female form, this tribal
goddess stone derives most of its power from its occupation of a
concrete spot and from its materiality—from the fact of its rockness, one
could say.

By contrast the hero image is not only copyable—it is already a copy.
For those who honor it, to be sure, its power may not necessarily be a
question of representation—the individual artifact marked with it may
be considered the material embodiment or vessel of a presence, even as
the goddess stone is—but as a reproducible image that can circulate
outside of its cult constituency it also operates as a legible signifier. It is
recognizable in public, and even if the formal object of its signification is
a nineteenth-century figure from the far side of the subcontinent whose
biographical narrative is (as yet) obscure to most, the conventional
association of the image with its partisans, the likes of the All-Bombay
Adivasi Samaj, can become imprinted in public through repeated itera-
tions. Again, along with the historical individual, Birsa Munda, some-
thing else the image iconically cites—and no less importantly—is the
formally similar images of everyone else’s god or guru. Indeed, given
enough reiteration, I can speculate that the day may well come when
Birsa finds his place as the emblem of a newly visible adivasi constitu-
cency alongside, for example, the icons of gods and saints that signify the
patronage of diverse Hindu cult communities—as a graphic metonym of
collective identity that circulates in public spaces such as street fronts
and television screens, or in other words a religious brand.

To press the comparison further, let me project a hypothetical scenario
in which one ambitious faction of Maharashtrian adivasis takes it upon
itself to enter gaondevi worship into the running alongside other religious
brands by adopting technologies of mass reproduction. Setting aside the
conceptual and factional conflicts likely to arise from the elevation of a
specifically local deity to a position of translocal authority, the project of
disseminating reproducible images of a tribal goddess encounters two
problems at a formal level. One option would be to follow the example
set by the popularity among Hindu constituencies of pictorial repre-
sentations of the temple murtis installed at specific pilgrimage places,
such as Tirupati and Nathdwara—to select one representative goddess
stone to stand in for the collectivity of all village goddesses instantiated
in diverse stones—and to print an icon of that. But the prevailing typo-
logical codes that govern the composition of such modern visual-cultural
artifacts do not favor the reproduction of such an image, and its rustic,
il-defined contours would poorly suit its ability to be recognized as (a)
a representative figuration of a whole class of sacred stones and (b) a
prestigious, modern emblem of any sort. On the other hand, choosing to signify the personage embodied in the rock as opposed to the rock itself, in conformity with the codes that do inscribe prestige and modernity, runs the risk of producing an anodyne anthropomorphic form distinguishable only in select iconographic details from the host of Hindu goddesses already in circulation. A move along those lines might suit the aspirations of those tribals whose ideas of social advancement involve integration within the Hindu majority. But as I expect I have made clear, any such consequence would be antithetical to the Adivasi Samaj’s purpose.

Birsa Munda was fêted in song, with stirring lyrics set to melodies that had come the organizers’ way not from the context of pada life among the Warlis or any other tribal constituency, but rather out of the modern tradition of Indian leftist protest music. Then it was time for the art lesson. A presenter, who turned out to be an art teacher from Thane, sketched on the board, demonstrating the proud status of the Warli graphic idiom as the inheritor of an aesthetic sensibility that originated in the Indus Valley. Art was thus evidence: what documented continuity between India’s prehistoric civilization and India’s extrahistorical population in this narrative was the Warli genius for line.

Here, if I had the space, I would insert a sketch of the crucial last chapter of the history of Warli painting. Briefly, the narrative I want to gesture at involves the form’s transformation in the 1970s and 1980s from the ephemeral traces of a woman’s wedding ritual to commoditized art products that circulate in national and transnational markets. The pivotal event in this history was the recognition by bourgeois patrons in the mid-1970s of two men, Jivya Soma Mashe and his son Balu Mashe, as individual artist figures. Spearheaded by the art of the Mashes, compositions that worked with the motifs, formal principles, and even some of the media—rice flour and cowdung—that had till then been the preserve of pada women decorating nuptial cabins attained an international vogue in the 1980s. (Madhubani painting from northern Bihar is just one well-known example of another folk form that has followed a parallel trajectory, thanks largely to patronage by state government–based agencies called Handicrafts Boards.)

The Mashes’ art was even featured in the Les Magiciens de la Terre exposition of global styles held at Paris’s Pompidou Center in 1989. Warli painting’s fortunes in the art market peaked shortly thereafter, and by 2003 it was the opinion of many Mumbai patrons that the work had passed into kitsch. But the point remains that circulation had established the form as a recognizable quantity within Indian public culture, and the artifacts it marked had come to be regarded as indices of a not merely
Warli, but generically tribal authenticity. Furthermore, with a generation of practitioners having expanded its iconic capacity beyond the conventional ritual domain of pada weddings to signify a wide range of images and narratives, Warli art had potentially arrived as a reproducible idiom of distinctively tribal expression.

Characteristic of the Warli style is the depiction of minimally differentiated human figures in kinetic group activities, such as parading or dancing, a compositional feature that reminds my eye of the work of the East Village artist Keith Haring, whose star also rose in the 1980s. I do not think there is anything more than coincidence to the timing, but the comparison may help illustrate Warli painting’s potential as a medium of political expression. Haring was known for his involvement in public art projects and put his work at the service of various NGO-sponsored informational programs, including most notably an AIDS awareness campaign. Adivasi rights advocacy pressed along analogous lines may never attain the salience of SILENCE = DEATH, although it seems to me that one could do worse for an opener than INVISIBILITY = DISPLACEMENT. But once the lecture portion of the art lesson was concluded, a display of the artistic efforts of Warli children showed that in 2003 in suburban Mumbai, at least, baby steps were indeed being taken in a leftward direction.

One image that serves as an example depicted the hamlet of Devipada in Film City. It had been just the year before that the expansion of the filmmaker Subhash Ghai’s Whistling Woods Film Academy project onto a plot inhabited by Warli families had led to their forcible removal by the Maharashtra Police. The painting presented a particularly sensational aspect of the incident (Fig. 3): the beating of helpless tribal women by female officers wielding lathi batons. The young artist had successfully reduced the paddy wagon and the demolition crew’s bulldozer to the spare graphic motifs of the Warli idiom. A Marathi caption runs across part of the picture: ‘Film City: Where pregnant women are beaten with lathis’.

4. Ajay Skaria comments, ‘Consider one of the staples of radical chic in India: Varli painting. These paintings have come to be synonymous with adivasi art, and reproductions adorn many living rooms. Surely their ubiquity has something to do with the nature of Varli art, which...with their many stick drawings slip neatly into our preconceptions of what primitive art is supposed to be like’ (1997: 742). Essential sources on Warli art include Dalmia 1988; Jain 1998; and Mashe, Mashe, and Lal 1982.

5. I am indebted to Christian Novetzke for deciphering the junior-grade Marathi of the original. The caption tempts comparison with the tagline printed on the cover of the promotional brochure I received when I visited the studio management: ‘FilmCity: Where we shape your dreams’.

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I close by outlining what seems to me to be a predicament that confronts the tribal leaders who are seeking to establish their local constituencies’ bonafides by raising their visible profiles, so to speak—by citing visual forms, such as poster portraiture and marketized art, that circulate in public culture as metonyms of cultural authenticity. The colloquial Hindi terms used to designate discrete ‘communities’ among the Warlis and their neighbors—*samaj* (glossed above) and *zaat* (after the more technical- and specifically Hindu-sounding *jati*, ‘caste’)—collapse together rubrics of collective affiliation that have generally been considered in academic and official discourses on Indian society to define distinct categories of social organization—geographical ‘place of origin’, caste, and religion. Singling out religion specifically sheds light on some interesting disjunctures. Throughout the period of my fieldwork it was a matter of bemusement to me, and I think frustration for Jaag’s lawyers, that the move grounded in the precedents established by Native land claims cases in North America and Oceania—that of emphasizing the immanent presence of local spirit-personalities peculiar to the indigenous community—proved to be a non-starter. *Religion*, in short, was not the sign under which the Warlis themselves were prepared to stake their claim to alterity.
Yet, above and beyond the ideological reluctance of my interlocutors in the tribal NGOs to pursue this strategy—and I concede that the dismissal of religion in general and Warli cultic forms in particular as ‘backward’, and the political aspiration of attaining translocal solidarity at an all-India level, both stack the deck against such a studied valorization of local deities—I have come to the conclusion that there is also a challenge to be identified in the prevailing state of Indian visual culture. I would argue that the codes and conventions that frame and mark an image as sacred have come to be so tightly identified with hegemonic Hinduism that the cultic artifacts of other traditions whose representations enter public circulation run the risk of Hinduization. To relate this proposition to the specifically Warli case, I propose that the project of rendering such objects of devotion as sacred rocks and trees legible in the eyes of non-adivasis is to enact a transference of power from an indexical to an iconic level. By way of illustrating this point, I can cite a no more eloquent example than the one site I visited in the forest zone that looked, to my eye, like what a typical Warli hamlet should look like.

Located just the other side of the road from the besieged settlement of Devipada, it consisted of six dwellings and two wells clustered around a temple to the Warli guardian of village boundaries, Waghoba, the tiger god. All the cabins were painted with graphic decorations in the Warli style. This iconic rusticity to the contrary, however, the techniques and materials used in the structures’ fabrication betrayed them as components of a movie set. The director who had had it built, Nitin Desai, had made his name in the industry as a production designer, and the skill of the set’s execution reflected his professional expertise. Unlike the actual settlements of Film City residents, it had been made entirely out of materials that did not look like plastic. It covered more ground than the paddas it bordered.

The film for which it had been erected, Desh Devi Maa Ashapura (2002), was a mythological production, a votive gesture made in honor of the country goddess—desh devi; compare gaondevi—who had overseen the success of the famously devout Desai, a Gujarati country boy who had made good in the big city. Once shooting on the feature had wrapped, the facsimile pada went on to new fame on television as the ashram of a community of forest-dwelling ascetics. The series in question, Gayatri Mahima, aired in 2003 in the ten o’clock slot on Sunday mornings that the Indian government channel has set aside for programs of a devotional character ever since the celebrated success of the 1987–88 season’s Ramayana. Every week the pious viewers who tuned in were granted darshan of Desai’s tribal confection recast as a forest hermitage—and,
peopled by actors embodying Hindu gods and saints, projected as the locus of a natural, unworldly spirituality.

For me, as a sometime member of this audience, first-hand knowledge of what the set looked like before mediation by the camera threw the program’s elaborately artificial aesthetic into sharp relief. Or rather it did the reverse, for what the show’s producers were at pains to project was the two-dimensional effect of modern Hindu ‘god poster’ art, stylized images whose flat surfaces are accented by a glossy sheen and tinselly highlights (see Jain 2007; Pinney 2004). In the process of being framed, transmitted, and re-presented to offer frontal address from a screen, the icon had acquired a sacrality that the site it represented wholly lacked as a material space.

Not only did this Desh Devi pada look far more like a ‘real’ Warli hamlet than any real Warli hamlet I saw, its structures also seemed to afford better shelter. Yet none of the residents of the neighboring settlements, beleaguered though they may have been by Subhash Ghai’s expansionist project, had considered seeking refuge in it. Those whom I asked found my question absurd. No doubt the producers of Gayatri Mahima had their own henchmen to guard against such an eventuality. But I also suspect that a certain uncanniness projected by this elaborate simulacrum may have had something to do with it. Just because a site might iconically resemble the abode of gods does not mean that the local ones inhabit it.

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