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SWARNIMA KRITI

Email: swarnimakriti92@gmail.com

Co-founder of Chinhari: The Young India

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UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

NEW DELHI-110021

TOWARDS POST-COVID FUTURES: PAINTING HOPE AND DESPAIR IN INDIGENOUS LIFEWORLDS

SWARNIMA KRITI #

Abstract

This paper is an in-depth study of life and livelihoods in five adivasi/indigenous villages (Mardapoti, Dokal and Jhujhrakasa in Nagri block of Dhamtari district, Koliyari in Antagarh block and Khadka in Bhanupratapur block of Kanker district) in Chhattisgarh. It looks at how these villages have dealt with questions of life and livelihoods (not simply understood as income generation) in times of COVID-19, making an effort to understand, and, in the process, provide a roadmap for how rural, forest based, agriculture-based societies—societies and communities that grow their own food (marked by a degree of seed sovereignty) —have managed to find possible livelihoods during the pandemic.

The paper engages with the question of whether there apparent food shortages in (these) indigenous villages. In the process, the paper tries to (a) understand the extant economic reality in these villages, (b) think of possible means to intervene in such economic reality, and (c) conceptualise transformations in such economic reality based on social justice and well-being considerations, i.e. investigate ways and means and consider further possibilities of moving in non-exploitative and non-oppressive directions.

Keywords: alternative livelihood, adivasi/indigenous, Tagore's *punarnirman*, post-COVID futures.

Swarnima Kriti is the co-founder of Chinhari: The Young India (www.chinhari.co.in) which has been working on questions of gender and indigeneity in developmental contexts in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh with a group of largely young indigenous women. Her recent publications are (i) Bastar Dussehra: Rethinking Co-existence Through Folk Cultures, in *Cultural Exchange Through Folklore* edited by S. K. Chaudhuri, S. D. Basu and A. Basu (2022), (ii) Hegel and India. *GCAS Review*. <https://www.gcasreview.com/magazine-1/2022/10/24/hegel-and-india> (2022), and (iii) Chinhari—The Young India: The Praxis of Feminizing Democracy, in *State of Democracy in India: Essays on Life and Politics in Contemporary Times* edited by M. Ray (2021).

Introduction

In the hope of a reconstructive praxis, this research started in a small village called Mardapoti¹ in the Dhamtari district of North Chhattisgarh, India. It was a cold December evening (in 2020) when I met Kavita Yadaw². Kavita struggled with her mask; she adjusted and readjusted it. Her voice, sieved through the cotton cloth mask, reached me with difficulty. But, these were difficult times and we were all managing somehow. Kavita discussed the everyday; I had known her for five years. She shared that the pandemic was a difficult time for people in her village; difficult not merely economically/financially but raising questions about life/existence/modes-of-being among (what could be imperfectly designated as) “forest societies”.

Shivbati Yadaw of the same village shared her understanding of the situation while she sat in a small women’s group meeting. She said, “the pandemic was a way of punishing us for our sins, for the violence we have been perpetuating.” Shivbati was visibly troubled by the new decorum in the world that did not question violence by people over other communities. One may wonder, if she also referred to how humans have unleashed forms of macro and micro-violence on life in the forest, on the soil, air and water; in a word, perhaps she was referring to the violence enacted on all of nature. What then had the ‘Gods’ unleashed upon them, all of a sudden? No one could make sense of Covid-19, but it had become synonymous with the fear of the unknown, and the fear of death largely navigated the sense of the word. Covid-19 was, as if, an enemy that changed its face every time one got to know something about it (scientists called it ‘mutation’). But has Covid-19 been the enemy; an *enemy* at all? Or is it a result of what many communities in India term *karmas* – a rare rage of the Gods like Shivbati would tend to suggest? Do we then need to go through *prayaschit* (atonement) – by rethinking our lives, our mistakes, the violence we have been unleashing upon the planet as also upon others? The community in Mardapoti – largely Gond adivasis, but also constitutive

¹ Mardapoti is located approximately twenty kilometres away from Dhamtari district. The social composition of the community in Mardapoti largely comprises of Gond adivasis (indigenous), but is also constitutive of Tamrakars, Muslims, Devdas and Yadaws giving an insight into ways of living together.

² Kavita is a member of a young women’s organization called Chinhari: The Young india (revisited later) and the first engineer in her village.

of Tamrakars, Devdas and Yadaws, had helped hold a ‘mirror’ to elite excesses and not just merely project all blame on to the virus.

Evidently, there exist processes wherein nature fulfills community needs for food, vegetation, medicines, housing, and the narratives shaped around these histories, where commons were harnessed, processes where collective labouring and collective appropriation of labour took place that were far removed from the exploitative and profit maximising practices. Such processes which are outside the reach of capital in general, or to be more precise, are not integrated into the circuits of global capital became a space of survival during Covid-19. The study suggests that the economic breakdown in urban, modern and industrialised spaces during Covid was not readily evidenced in rural and forest societies.

Would Tagore’s conception of *punarnirmaan* (reconstruction) and the Palli Samaj³ be helpful to arrive at non-exploitative and non-oppressive futures? Could the culture of sharing and processes of being-in-common in adivasi/indigenous worlds offer general grounds for negotiating with COVID-19? This paper engages with the understanding that the economic reality pertaining to the flow of goods and services in rural and forest societies was larger than what could be called ‘capitalism’, or more precisely, the capitalist class process (Chakrabarti and Dhar 2019).

Latour in his book *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis* (2020: 16) states,

If I force myself to keep the regulatory safe distances, breathing with difficulty through this surgical mask, I don’t manage to crawl very far because as soon as I try to fill my trolley, the uneasiness intensifies: this cup of coffee is ruining a patch of the tropics; that tee-shirt is sending a child into poverty in Bangladesh; from the rare steak I was eating with relish emanate puffs of methane that are further accelerating the climate crisis. And so I groan, I tie myself in knots, terrified by this metamorphosis – will I finally wake from this nightmare, go back to what I was before: free, whole, mobile?

Will one go back to being free, whole and mobile? Latour’s argument makes one think if we must arrive at a ‘break’—one with our own techno-scientific past; a break from how we have

³ Tagore’s ‘Palli Samaj’ (Rural Society) was published in 1908; he spelled out his ideas of a comprehensive rural governance structure that aimed for a rural community development programme based on the ideas of the principles of self-help and enlightenment.

been functioning hitherto i.e., ‘the same climatic regime against which we were battling, until now somewhat in vain’ (Latour 2020: 1 as cited in Healy et al. 2020: 159).

These are more complex questions that point to unequal investments of power and responsibility in addressing not only the immediate contexts of the post-pandemic world, but also wider and longer arcs of extraction, exploitation and expropriation, such as those explicated by Nancy Fraser in her ongoing work (2016) on extractive and racialised capital—‘In a nutshell, as I shall explain, the subjection of those whom capital *expropriates* is a hidden condition of possibility for the freedom of those whom it *exploits*’ [emphasis in original]. And further, ‘advantageous even in “normal” times, expropriation becomes especially tempting in periods of crisis, when competition is intense, recent productivity gains are generalized, ecological degradation raises costs, and/or rates of profit fall below what are considered acceptable levels. In those times, which occur periodically and for nonaccidental reasons in the course of capitalist development, expropriation serves as a critical, albeit temporary, fix for restoring profitability and navigating crises.

Methodology: Learning to Learn from Below

In psychoanalytic study, there exist predominantly two approaches to researching cultural precepts and phenomena: the first is the ‘etic approach’, which ‘assumes that behavioral constructs (i.e., concepts, methods, measures) studied in one culture have significance in all other cultures. Alternatively, an “emic approach” describes the study of cultural norms that are specific to one group of people or within one culture’ (Fraser 2016) Building therefore on an *emic* approach, the methodology this research followed was *immersive*⁴ and *participatory*.⁵ This research was conducted with the community (not conducted *on* the community; where the community is the *object* of study) such that one rethinks the questions

⁴ Building on the distinction between field-work and immersion, the paper tried to reflect on an ‘immersive approach’—the problems and potential therein (Kriti 2019).

⁵ An important element of “participatory research lies not in methods but in the attitudes of [action] researchers, which in turn determine how, by and for whom research is conceptualized and conducted ... The practice of participatory research raises personal, political and professional challenges that go beyond the bounds of the production of information” (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995: 1667–68).

of ‘critical distance’ and attempts to remain ‘non-extractive’ and ‘non-appropriative’ in one’s relationship with the Gond indigenous subjects.⁶

This research has explored the stated questions not only through secondary data but also from a point closer to the ground, through the usage of primary data. The methodology undertaken has refrained from taking a ‘bird’s eye view’ of the impact of COVID-19 on adivasi/indigenous livelihoods, which would amount to certain practices of erasure, as well as privileging unequal binaries between the researcher and the field. It attempted to undertake a grounded view instead, that may carry the possibility of arriving at important insights without attempting to privilege one position over another.

This research has not just studied the living conditions of the ‘subject’ during COVID but has also tried to understand the different facets of their lifeworld; especially focusing on how such lifeworlds and worldviews helped or enabled these subjects to negotiate their way through the pandemic. This movement remains inspired by what Spivak designates as ‘learning to learn from below’ (2002), where the idea points to ‘a suspension of belief that one is indispensable, better or culturally superior; it is refraining from thinking that the Third World is in trouble and that one has the solutions; it is resisting the temptation of projecting oneself or one’s world onto the Other’ (Spivak 2002: 6 cited in Andreotti 2007: 76). Andreotti further points to how it understands and locates the ‘discontinuity between the subalterns and the activists and educators who are trying “to help”, and changing the notion of responsibility as the duty of the “fitter self” towards the other into responsibility to the other...and attempts to go beyond ethnocentrism, essentialism, reversed racism and orientalism.’

In view of the concerns outlined above, the methods undertaken for this research were: (1) one-on-one conversations, (2) focused group discussions, (3) informal group discussions, (4) telephone interviews, and (5) local publications like newsletters on COVID-19, which were

⁶ This work remains inspired by the Feminist Political Ecology Standpoint that “aims to do research with communities in order to understand how local people live, feel and understand the environment and the agency of other-than-human beings, or what Val Plumwood calls ‘Earthothers’ (Plumwood 2002). In undertaking engaged research, FPE scholars aim to do non-extractive research which is based on experiencing and learning from communities’ responses to [politico]environmental change in a participatory co-production of knowledge” (Clement et al. 2019).

aimed at arriving at shared insights and knowledges, rather than adopting an *a priori* epistemological stance.

Engaging with the Unknown: Sharing Grassroot Experiences

There were varied narratives of the experience of the pandemic although most of them juggled three kinds of fear—fear of the disease (the virus), fear of the (police) State and fear of the present and an upcoming monetary crisis. This was articulated through the various meetings and interviews that took place over the research period.

One could say that among the five villages that had been visited for this research, Mardapoti had been the worst affected during COVID-19. This was possibly because of its proximity to the Dhamtari-Nargi highway. For years a common profession for men in Mardapoti has been driving (trucks, lorries, cars, etc.). When the epidemic started these men were out driving in different cities across the country. Stories of a disease had reached them though—a disease that was spreading at an incalculable pace. This was the time when ‘India’s “working class”, the large mass of “performers of surplus labour” in both organized and unorganized sectors, in formal and informal units – [were] either waiting outside locked factory and construction premises, workhouses, shops, and warehouses or [had] already been thrown out of jobs, mercilessly, or [were] taking a long walk - exceeding at times 2,000 kilometers - back to their homes’ (Chakrabarti and Dhar 2020).

National records reveal approximately 198 migrant workers lost their lives because of road accidents on their way back home,⁷ and 80 more deaths were recorded on the Special Shramik trains, although this was not disclosed publicly.⁸ In the absence of continued record-keeping, these figures could vary dramatically. The migrants of Mardapoti had also packed their bags and planned their return by the end of March 2020. They started for home, a safe space. However, when they returned, they with their families in their houses for up to 14 days by the law enforcement agencies of the state. Mardapoti’s proximity to the highway (and by

⁷<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/198-migrant-workers-killed-in-road-accidents-during-lockdown-report/story-hTWzAWMYn0kyycKw1dyKqL.html>

⁸<https://thewire.in/rights/centre-indian-railways-lockdown-deaths-migrant-workers-shramik-special-rti>

default to modernity and capital) had become a curse for them. It seemed as though the state policing would never end. The men who returned to save their own lives, ended up putting their families in extreme difficulty. This was not because they could be potential carriers of COVID-19, but because after their return all members of the family had to be quarantined (as, until then public quarantine centres in schools and panchayats had not been established). No one in the family could go out for work and no one could earn. 14 days of ‘no work’, especially during the peak season when forest products (like mahua, tendu, behda, etc.) are gathered, was not acceptable to many.

Often the economically-weaker households secretly went to the forests early in the morning and came back late at night. However, those who were caught had to undergo the brutal violence put forth by state’s patrolling officials. The ‘non-compliant’ individuals were beaten up in the streets of the village and left in quarantine with no possibility of medical attention. These were the early days of the lockdown.

In addition to this new form of discipline by the state, the fear of being affected by COVID-19 was equally high; it was all the more worse because death looked to be its only end. The less they/we knew about the disease, the more they/we feared the consequences of being affected by it. It was yet to be discovered if this disease was air-borne, water-borne, or how it was affecting so many people; the pandemic had even brought the understanding of virus into question. Common people had started to wonder if science itself could properly understand this phenomenon. On most days the house was a safe space. But was being at home now really safe? The issue was not just the pandemic but also poverty, unemployment, hunger, mental health issues, etc. One burning question of the hour was the handling of one’s savings: if small amounts of savings were used for everyday living how would one manage instances of emergency, say medical emergencies? From 30 January 2020 to 5 May 2020 approximately 45,755 people died of malaria, 56,390 of diabetes, 92,746 of tuberculosis, 1,28,361 of diarrhoea and 1,37,017 of cancer in the country.⁹

These numbers are much higher than the year 2019. This may be because of three reasons: (1) restricted access to medical services, (2) most medical staff and services being diverted to

⁹<https://scroll.in/article/962147/stronger-health-system-could-have-averted-500000-non-covid-deaths-in-india-in-early-lockdown-period>.

taking care of the COVID-19 situation in the country, and (3) the financial difficulty that may have trivialised minor illnesses. Thus, the fear of being in a financial crisis stood at a clash with orders and forces of the State (especially for the ones who were quarantined). Attempts to control the spread of the disease had started to translate into a coercive ‘control of the population’. The state turned into a ‘panopticon’ (Foucault 1977). The pandemic had become a trope to control, a means to expand and extend the gaze of the State.

The economic situation was worsening in Mardapoti—especially the money economy. The rabi crop suffered in the villages because labouring subjects could not work in the fields. The summer produce had poor sales because middlemen could not reach the villages and the few who reached, quoted arbitrary prices because of poor competition. An important means of earning for most of the rural households in Chhattisgarh has been sale of NTFP products. But these products too could not find their right price because of uncertainty and meagre competition in the market.

However, it could not be forgotten that these communities largely grew their own food; hence were cereal sufficient. Some in the village who had the facility of irrigation grew vegetables too. This allowed for the growth of a self-dependent/sustaining village and a locally interdependent economy. As an extension of state-sponsored relief efforts in rural areas, the public distribution system (PDS) and the MGNREGA work continued; at the same time an amount of 500/- was credited for each household to bank accounts of women SHG members. This may have not been enough for a family of five or more but it was an additive. Even though the money economy was under pressure in Mardapoti, the need economy was functioning largely effortlessly.

On a windy afternoon (in February 2021) I sat under a tree with Mr. Ramesh Kodoppi and a few men of village Jhujhrakasa. Jhujhrakasa is a village deep in the forests of the Nagri block of the Dhamtari district. Kodoppi shared that the pandemic was not a very difficult time for their village. However, it did make them anxious because it was an unknown and invisible disease. The anxiety did paralyse their minds for some time, but the village as a collective found its way through this crisis. The men and women of the village blocked the road that enabled entry to their village. Roads had an important meaning for the men and women of Jhujhrakasa. These were not the usual travel routes for them, they instead used paths within

the forest. Roads were the entry point for outsiders, for the rich who had travelled to cities and other countries and could carry the disease back with them. They were sure the COVID-19 virus could only reach them through these roads and not through the forests. One may see an interesting contrast between Mardapoti and Jujhrakasa. Jujhrakasa's distance from the highway and the blocking of the roads enabled them to be saved from both the virus and the everyday surveillance of the State. Similar was the situation in Dokal, Khadka and Koliyari; they could manage to hold on to their autonomy because of their distance from the highway, and thus from the state officials. This was also possible also because Jujhrakasa, Dokal, Khadka and Koliyari did not have many migrants who were returning home.

The community's access to the forest without much state surveillance was a boon for these villages. The forest continued to be their biggest source of food in the form of edible leaves, fruits, tubers, yams, seeds, animals, medicinal herbs, etc. When one could not find edibles in the forest, vegetables produced in a few households were locally shared or exchanged for other valuable goods. Sometimes vegetable cultivators sold their wares in the nearby villages too. The villages also had ponds from where they procured fish. An old sacred pond in village Dokal had been handed over to the women of the village (to the self-help group members). These women collectively took care of the pond, bred fish, shared and sold them. Fish from the pond was a regular source of food and money for the households in Dokal. Another practice that had been undertaken for decades in Dokal was the maintenance of a grain bank; a practice in several villages of Chhattisgarh. The grain bank is collectively maintained by the whole village.¹⁰ Every year, post harvest the village collects paddy from each household. The collected paddy is stored in a community-owned mud house. This paddy becomes a collective resource that can be lent, sold and used in cases of emergency. The idea of a grain bank was born out of instances of drought in the village. Their hope was to fight future conditions of food shortage. During the pandemic the grain bank was an important safety net for the people of Dokal.

A larger part of the relationship these societies share with the forest, land and water bodies focuses on need fulfilment through sharing. There were processes where commons were harnessed, and collective labouring and collective appropriation of surplus took place that is

¹⁰<https://www.adasilivesmatter.com/post/tribals-are-becoming-self-reliant-with-this-unique-charjhaniya-ghar-seedbank-of-chhattisgarh>

far removed from the exploitative and profit maximising perspectives; processes that were *outside* the reach of capital in general, or to be more precise, were not integrated into the circuits of global capital (Dhar & Chakrabarti 2019; Dhar 2020) seemed to have become a space of survival during COVID-19.

However, not all their consumption practices were disengaged from the circuits of global capital. Sattu Bai Netam (a woman in early forties) of Dokal shared, that as a young girl, she would go to the market to merely buy salt and oil. Everything else was locally procured. Salt even today is procured through PDS, but in the last 30 years the list of what one buys from the market has become extensive. It has diversified from oil, spices and vegetables to shampoo and soaps to motorbikes and tractors. Earlier, even soap and shampoo had a local alternative. Concoctions of locally-procured *harra*, *reetha*, mehendi and a specific variety of the soil were used to wash hair and keep it healthy. Vegetables and spices were grown at home.

The engagement of these societies with circuits of global capital has been strengthening over the years which has led to, one may say, complete dependence on the market for oil, clothes, footwear, stationery, etc. A small market mapping, conducted at Keregaon village that hosts the local *haat* or market on every Saturday, showed that most local large-scale producers of vegetables and pulses sold their produce in the nearby city, i.e. Dhamtari (approximately 30 kms away from the local market). Vendors from around the villages would then go to Dhamtari and buy vegetables to sell at the weekly local *haat*. Approximately 70 per cent of the shops bought products from Dhamtari and sold it in the *haat*. It thus cannot be ignored that the villagers are well connected to and dependent on circuits of global capital, however, it would also be too soon to say processes that strengthen the local economy are non-existent.

Loss and Recovery of Self¹¹

This paper is not simply a repository of the experiences of adivasi/indigenous spaces during COVID-19. It also looks for moments of possible intervention for reconstructive efforts. Soni

¹¹ The title is inspired from Nandy's book *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* written in 1983.

Bai (an old woman) of village Koliyari in the Antagarh block shared her experience of the pandemic in Gondi.¹² She said that the village had difficulties buying edible oil (i.e., sunflower or peanut oil sold by multinational companies) and some spices. The local *haats* were closed and they barely had any money for their household expenses. This was perhaps an important moment when a return to a self-dependent past was initiated. Few in the village realised that the pandemic seemed to have no ‘expiry date’. They perhaps needed to choose other ways to engage with the pandemic than simply wait for it to end (taking us back to Latour). Few families—as a risk management strategy—started collecting seeds of *sarai*, *mahua*, *kusum*, *karanj*, etc. such that they could extract oil from them. *Sarai and mahua* remain most important here, because their oil could be used for cooking. Many families also started using recipes that did not require any usage of oil. They started using water as the medium of cooking.

Thus, techniques as well as tools (utensils) of cooking had started to take a (re)turn to a more in(ter)dependent past. Basic spices like turmeric, chilli and coriander were easy to produce locally. The bleak memory of local techniques of oil extraction helped Koliyari find a balance. Koliyari was only one among the five villages that not only remembered the road to a self-dependent past but also agreed to tread such a path. The others seemed to have found certain comfort in waiting for the pandemic to end, of restricting themselves to their dependence on the outside world.

The story of locally-produced *sarai* or *tori* (mahua) oil, used for cooking, remains relevant because they help us walk out of the TINA (there is no alternative) syndrome. It helps us register that there are alternatives and alternative ways of living. It exemplifies that the economic breakdown in urban, modern and industrialised spaces during COVID-19 is not apparent in rural and forest societies. The forest societies have mechanisms to sustain themselves largely because they can value gifts of nature. These instances could be a window of hope, from where exploitative practices within the circuits of capitalist economy could be questioned and search for a pluriverse of survival practices be initiated. The hegemony of capitalism leaves these stories quilted and thus, the windows of hope remain sealed (see

¹² Gondi (*Gōṇḍī*) is a south-central Dravidian language, spoken by about three million Gonds, chiefly in the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and by small minorities in neighbouring states. Although it is the language of the Gond people, it is highly endangered, with only one-fifth of Gonds speaking the language.

Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg 2012 for a discussion on ‘capitalism’ as a ‘hegemonic formation’).

It may be extremely difficult to then conclude if the adivasi world faced a situation of food crisis during COVID-19. The answer is complex. A peek at life from ‘subject position’ tied to circuits of global capital will perhaps agree to a condition of food crisis. The village in turn could hardly get access to lentils, vegetables (like cauliflower, tomatoes, cabbage, etc.), or edible oil (made from sunflower or rice bran sold in packets by multinational companies). But a disaggregated view of the village economy that includes practices of gathering (different kinds of tubers, edible leaves, fruits, roots, mushrooms, etc.) from the forest, sharing one’s produce, gifting the excess, extracting oil for self-consumption, etc. will make one think if there was in turn a food crisis in these five villages. In that sense, the apparent food crisis could be narrowed down to areas or zones (not geographical) that were closely tied to the circuits of global capital in each village. The capitalocentric view veils these self-dependent processes and makes subjects believe they are lacking, even if they are not.

Can this study help us search for a pluriverse of survival practices? Can post-Covid futures be rethought, reimagined and reconstructed? The paper also attends to the example of reconstructive processes initiated by a young women’s collective working in two of the researched villages (Mardapoti and Dokal) to highlight possibility of a return towards sustainable futures *within* adivasi/indigenous spaces.

Painting a Reconstructive Initiative

Chinhari: The Young India¹³ was born out of an ongoing action research work in Chhattisgarh, India *with* a group of young Gond adivasi women (between 9–29 years of age). Since 2016, the collective has been thinking through and engaging with the experiences and the life-worlds of young Gond women in contexts of ‘developmentalism’¹⁴ and especially to

¹³ The website is: www.chinhari.co.in. “Young India” was a weekly paper or journal in English published by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi from 1919 to 1931.

¹⁴ Chakrabarti and Dhar (2009) see ‘development’ as a *masquerade* for the expansion of the ‘circuits of global capital’ in indigenous spaces.

ask if indigenous societies, then, offer a window of hope from where exploitative practices within the circuits of capitalist economy can be questioned.

This work started with women's self-help groups (SHGs) in Mardapoti, looking at the problems related to water access in the village and understanding it further as the problem of acquiring the water – the village spoke only of a 'pani ke samasya' (the problem of water scarcity in the village) at the beginning. This displaced a fundamental gender issue, the sexual division of labour, into an infrastructural problem. The young women (and men) of Chinhari, on the other hand, managed to arrive at and work through the problem of 'paani laane ke samasya' and worked towards transforming everyday practices of young men such that they could share household labour (largely performed by women).

From 2020 the collective has been working in Mardapoti and Dokal (two villages taken up for research for this paper), and has made efforts to revive the indigenous way of food cultivation with indigenous seeds. Chinhari's turn to vegetable cultivation and indigenous seeds is one example among many of cooperative local production among families during the pandemic. The produce was equally shared among the ones who performed labour, and was also gifted to few in the village. Returning to older practices of growing food is a way out of expropriative capital, towards self-sustaining practices that rely on indigenous knowledges and cooperative praxis. The collective also engaged in revival of practices of indigenous 'lac' rearing that helped in maintaining a complex multi-trophic web of flora and fauna in the forests. The lac rearing practices helped five villages in the Nagri block to find alternative livelihoods during Covid-19. These place-based (Gibson-Graham, 2006) practices gave the village's (money) economy a route to find its way back to stability.

During the early days of the pandemic, the members of the village struggled to come together, to meet, to listen to each other's anxieties, to hold each other. It was at this moment that they decided to find a continuum in isolation, and the young women began painting, not only as a creative outlet, but also as a way back to traditional indigenous art forms that are being lost. It proved to be transformative, in the ways of engendering community, as well as self-actualisation, especially against the emotional affect of the pandemic, and its larger traumatic consequences. Painting became their mode of communication in times of

distancing, and the canvas became a repository of their emotions and experiences. Was

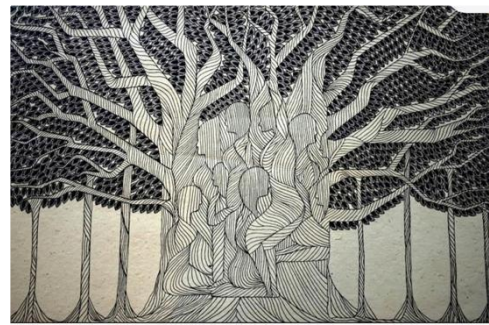


Art by Lalita Suryawanshi
(Member of Chinhari: The Young India)

painting, a turn to creativity, to freedom, to one's inner-self integral for post-covid futures? Could we call this turn an initiation of post-capitalist post covid futures – that is 1) sensitive to affective networks within and outside as also 2) breaks the human/non-human divide.

The collective's
turn to
vegetable

cultivation and lac rearing, both carried reconstructive frameworks; both tried to bridge gaps within the adivasi/indigenous life, to recover a withering self that *was*. These were also class processes (CC and AC class processes [Chakrabarti



Art by Swarnima Kriti
Member of Chinhari: The Young India

and Dhar 2012]) that stood outside the circuits of global capital and became a cause of survival during the pandemic. On the one hand, village Koliyari in Antagarh offered a window of hope, from where exploitative practices within the circuits of capitalist economy could be questioned; on the other hand, Chinhari showed that this hopeful return for a sustainable future was in turn possible, even if through small victories. The latter was a small effort towards building post-capitalist post-COVID futures. Both hint towards what Tagore called *punarnirmaan*, towards making of a Palli Samaj. For Tagore,

the community co-operatives [palli samaj] were to take charge of literacy for all; development of local industries; community health care and recreation; safe drinking water; model farming; collective paddy stores; domestic industry-based work for women; campaigns against drinking of liquor; developing fellow-feeling and solidarity among the villagers; and the collection of demographic, economic and social statistics for every village' (Rahman 2006).¹⁵

¹⁵ It is to also remember (and learn from) Gandhi's notion of swaraj (especially in context to village and the village life). Gandhi believed, "India lives in villages. Naturally the development of the country depends on the development of villages. All the goods and services necessary for the village members should be grown within the village. In a word, every village should be a self-contained republic" (Bhuimali 2004).

For Tagore (and Gandhi), reconstructive work in the villages was not simply infrastructural, but also about working through the inner strength of the community. This path, however, is thus not easy, and yet necessary (see Dhar and Chakrabarti 2021).

The paper (through experiences in the villages and in Chinhari) gives us a peek into the ‘outsiderness’ that indigenous know-how offers. More importantly, it attempts to explore alternative ways of life that are detached from circuits of global capital which could provide the ground for a pluriverse of habitable futures. An uncovering of stories from the adivasi/indigenous worlds could become possible ground for a recovery of the post-COVID economy; such a path of recovery puts to question the extant break of our lifeworlds with the past. A more decentralised exchange system honouring need-based processes over exploitative appropriation could open up paths to such a recovery.

Thinking of Possible Means to Intervene in Such An Economic Reality

The study of these villages and of Chinhari gave the research a curious turn. Their engagement with the pandemic highlighted that the forest-based villages—even to this day—carry the ability to be self-dependent as also be locally inter-dependent; such villages enjoy relative ‘immunity’ to at least the nutritional vagaries that pandemics such as COVID-19 precipitate. They have, over the years, found context-driven ways to keep themselves safe and less affected by deadly innovations in the outside world; they also enjoy a degree of food sufficiency. A post-COVID recovery route is perhaps in the strengthening of the existing and the extant self-dependence of these villages.

These villages entail a complex conglomeration of approaches to processes of livelihoods. Where some may be exploitative others are not; where some may be tied to circuits of global capital others are not. This study also questions the difference between two kinds of local, for example, Mardapoti and Jhujhrakasa. It has been mentioned earlier that Mardapoti had to face greater difficulty most likely because of its proximity to the national highway (thus to the city and the city life).

The study also brings to critical view an unthought acceptance or rejection of the ‘local’. The local too is a disaggregated set; parts of this set may be accepted whereas others may become

fecund spaces for transformative work; for instance, the local's relationship with circuits of global capital that Chinhari has tried to transform in its ongoing work with the communities, while at the same time learning new pathways to shared planetary processes.

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