

'Gondwana'/'Gondwanaland'¹ as a Homeland of the Gonds: Storytelling in the Paintings of Gond Pilgrims²

Mayuri Patankar, *Delhi University*

प्रकृतिकेसत्त्वको, करुँजुहार – जुहार.
गाथाबरनुँधराकी, शरणसदाओंकार.
बन्दऊँप्रथमधरित्रिमाई. जोमहिमापुरखननेगाई.
वहीबातपुनि–पुनिदोहराऊँ. करहीकृपाधरनीगुणगाऊँ.
गोलपिण्डसमअण्डकार. थलहिंभागपैँजियापुकार.
सजलभागतीसरचौथाई. पेंथलसानामकहलाई.
उथलपुथलकालान्तरभारे. धरनिविखंडितटूकभयारे.
उत्तरखंडलैण्डअंगारा. दक्षिणदिशिगोंडवानासारा.
टेथिससमुंदमध्यलहराये. दोव्दीपमंभेदकराय.
अंगाराजनआर्यकहाये. गोंडवानाजनगोंडकहाये.
चारभागपुनिभयेअंगारा, गोंडवानापंचखंडदोबारा
पंचसमूहगण्डकहलाया, गण्डअंकगोंडवानापाया³

*I weave a story of this land, always at your feet is Onkar.
First I bow to Mother Earth, whose greatness our ancestors
sang of.
That same tale I sing again and again. This land blesses me, so
I sing.
The land is shaped as a sphere. Under the land is Pangea.
Three-fourth of the land is water. It is called Penthalsa.
Over time, there were many upheavals. The land broke into
different pieces.
In the north is the land called Angara, the entire land in the
south is Gondwana.
Tethys Sea is thrown in between. It divides both the lands.
Inhabitants of Angara are called Arya, those of the Gondwana
are Gonds.
Angara got divided into four parts and Gondwana again into
five.
A group of five is called 'गण्ड' (Gand), and from it derives the
name 'Gondwana'.*

Introduction

How does the idea of a Gond homeland find representation in the visual register? Or conversely, how does Gond iconography produce the idea of a homeland? This issue is very tangled in the case of the

visual representations amongst the *adivasi* community of Gonds in the Chhattisgarh-Maharashtra border regions in relation to the idea of 'Gondwana'/'Gondwanaland'. Discourses from natural sciences, colonial anthropology, Hindu nationalism, the concept of indigeneity and *adivasi* life-worlds complexly inform these representations. Although Eduard Suess' 'Gondwanaland' finds a privileged position in this imaginary as the homeland of the Gonds, these assertions also claim to retrieve pre-Vedic antiquity and equate the Harappan script with the Gond script. At the same time, even though the revivalist surge of ethnic consciousness centered on the idea of a distinct Gond religion or *Punem* celebrated through festivals and fairs provides the framework for understanding the homeland, clearly external influences fundamentally over-determine its conception.

This paper will look at the meanings embodied in the idea and visuality of the concept of the Gond homeland 'Gondwana' by using a Gond painter Komal Singh Marai's paintings in the context of considerable local writing related to the *Punem*. I will use this exploration to investigate various kinds of historical pressures that inform these articulations and the ways in which seemingly disparate influences get braided into the conception of a homeland. I will use the writings of Gond pilgrims who visit the festivals and fairs of the *Punem*, most of which are written in the Hindi and Marathi languages, to read the images. By studying the deployment of popular images of 'Gondwana' in the public sphere, this exposition underlines the ways in which ideas of 'Gondwana' are mobilized into existence through place-making discourses in oral, literary and visual media.

The Discourse of 'Gondwana' in Gondi *Punem* and its Literature

Since the 1980s, Eduard Suess' 'Gondwanaland' has appeared endearingly in the material culture, folkloric

narratives, and vernacular literature of the Chhattisgarh-Maharashtra border region inhabited by the Gonds. This invocation of 'Gondwana'/'Gondwanaland' is closely linked with the surge of a revivalist movement in this community that seeks to establish a consolidated *adivasi* religion called Gondi *Punem*/Gondi *Dharma*.⁴ With its origin in cities like Nagpur, Raipur and Bhopal, Gondi *Punem* manifests in a nexus of beliefs and practices: Gond deities are restored, new shrines and pilgrimage centres emerge while older ones are re-invested with signs and symbols from Gond cosmology, language and ritualistic practices shift, and a robust cultural production centred on the issues of *adivasi* language, ethnicity, and sovereignty challenges the mainstream representations of the community. Through community celebrations, festivals, rituals, and pilgrimages these beliefs and practices are consolidated. *Adivasi* deities like Pari Kubar Lingo, Mata Kali Kankali, Mata Jungo Raitad and Ravana are restored in local shrines, both metaphorically and physically. While new centres of worship and pilgrim-ages emerge, the older ones are saturated with new meanings and values. For example, one particular shrine, which is centered on Mahakali, in the city of Chandrapur, is (re)situated in an entangled web of stories. In the contemporary context, the popular religious publications by the Gond community highlight religious associations of the Gond community with the shrine. Similarly, the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra has witnessed a rise in the number of shrines of Ravana and of Ravana *Mahotsavs* (festivals of Ravana) since the year 1992. A shrine of Mata Kali Kankali, located in the Kachargarh caves (of Gondia district in Maharashtra), also known as *utapattisthal* (place of origin) of the Gonds, emerges as one of the most important shrines for *Punem* pilgrimage.⁵ In the 1980s, the cultural leaders of the Gond community, namely K. B. Marskole, Motiravan Kangale, Sheetal Markam, Bharatlal Koram and Sunher Singh Taramji, visited the caves and decided to initiate a pilgrimage there. Soon, the annual gathering turned into a means of educating the *adivasis* about their culture and rights.⁶

The literary sphere too engaged actively with the religious changes in the community. Various community groups, cultural leaders and literary activists contributed to the deeper study of the folklore and culture of the region and the publication of the resulting studies. Vyankatesh Atram's 1984 text – *Gondi Sanskrutiche Sandarbh* (A Reference to Gondi Culture) – is one of the first texts focused on the revival. The vision of a contiguous 'Gondwana' state that is in agreement with Gond beliefs and practices is at the core of the revival's agenda. In November 1979, a conference on *adivasi* literature was held in Bhadravati in Maharashtra.⁷ Most of the Gond

pilgrims hail it as the first conference to be organized chiefly for *adivasi* writers of the Marathi language.

The writers among the Gond pilgrims function at different locations and undertake a variety of projects. Writers like Bhujang Meshram, Vinayak Tumram and Govind Gare work from the location of university spaces in cities (of Maharashtra) and attempt to dissociate *adivasi* literature from the Marathi literary sphere. Their works, especially those of Meshram, are heavily influenced by native American and *adivasi* assertions. Then there are revivalist writers like Sunher Singh Taram, Usha Kiran Atram, Motiravan Kangale and Prakash Sallame, etc., whose writings are at the heart of the revival and aimed specifically towards the readers within the community. 'Little magazines', monographs on deities and shrines, and booklets on mythology are the primary modes of communication. All these publications, in some way, are either financially supported or ideologically influenced by community groups like *Akhil Gondwana Gondi Sahitya Parishad* (All-Gondwana Gond Literary Academy). They persistently labour to lend historicity to cultural assertions while heavily drawing on colonial anthropology, both in terms of content and method. In doing so, mythical places are rendered tangible and mapped onto regional geographies. In fact, in an interview, Sunher Singh Taram delightfully narrates how Bishop Eyre Chatterton's text, *Story of Gondwana* (1916), was instrumental in the revival of the Kachargarh fair. Kachi Kubar Lohgad (The Hill Rich in Iron Ore) in Chatterton's text is identified as Kachargarh by the revivalists.⁸ This place serves as a site for the revival of an annual pilgrimage, as pointed out earlier. Over the years, Kachargarh has transformed into a significant site for the dissemination of Gondi *Punem* ideas and customs. Most importantly, the revivalists claim to have found pieces of their lost history in Chatterton's 'Gondwana'. Its textual and visual content finds its way into popular posters and folksongs.

The third cluster of writers is the one associated with local presses in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The primary literary output from this group includes language primers, posters, and booklets of devotional and folk songs in Gondi, Chhattisgarhi and Hindi. This ultra-minor literature is a highly local retelling of revivalist writing. Here colonial anthropology merges with folk memory to open up intimate and transformative spaces. In these writings, pilgrimage centers, deities, the homeland of 'Gondwana', cultural leaders and even the discoverers of the Gondwana – the 'scientists' Eduard Suess and Alfred Wegner – are eulogized with utmost devotion. A couplet on the scientists, which appears in one of the creation myths in which the imagined homeland is placed between the formation of Narmada river and the Amarkantak hills, reads as follows:

वैज्ञानिकवैगनरहुआ, अमेरिकाअल्फ्रेड/महाद्वीपविस्थापन,
दियावास्तविकलेख

A scientist named Wegner and Alfred from America/wrote
scientific essays on the creation of the island.⁹

The folk songs are meant to accompany various rituals and often get adapted in local albums and movies. The ever-floating, shifting tectonic landmass of 'Gondwanaland', which is now fragmented into different continents and scattered around the globe, is reanimated as the ancestral homeland of the Gonds. One of the pilgrims, Barkhade, notes:

दक्षिणखंडधरागोंडवाना. कहुँजिसेइतिहासबखाना. सुन-मुनसोनचिरैयाभोरी.
दानुरवीरधरा, कुयमोरी.

That southern part of the Earth, which is called 'Gondwana' in
history/It is, in fact, Sunmun dwip (island), a golden bird, land
of Dainur warriors, and called Koyamuri dwip (island).¹⁰

'Gondwana' thus emerges as the mythological, historical and political centre of the world. Human life, civilization, language and music begin here. It is also a place where justice and glory prevails. In the recollection of another pilgrim: 'The rights of forests, trees and birds are never seized from them, *nakshatra* (constellation) never attacks anyone/such is the life in Gondwana'.¹¹

The prospect of establishing a contiguous land of 'Gondwana' for the people described as Gond, who may or may not speak the Gondi language, and which is in agreement with Gond beliefs, governs these revivalist writings and other associated articulations. The revivalists claim that the Gonds have a distinct cultural identity and that they are the original inhabitants or *moolnivasi* of 'Gondwana', a belief which makes them the rightful owners of Gondwana and the custodians of its lands, forests, culture and heritage. The concomitant construction of the 'native' versus 'foreigner'/'invader' distinction is central to this imaginary. 'Hindu' religious communities are positioned as 'invaders' and 'outsiders' by the deployment of the 'Aryan invasion theory'.

The 'Aryans' are held responsible for the marginalization of the *moolnivasi*, more specifically the Gonds. The Gond past is buttressed by the evidence of various archaeological excavations, sculptures and places of historical significance in India. Mohenjo Daro is claimed as the seat of Gond civilization, its script as the ancient Gond script, and the Gondi language as an ancient language. Present-day non-tribals are viewed as descendants of the cruel 'Aryans' who invaded 'Gondwana', destroyed *adivasi* places of worship, and forcibly converted the natives to 'Hinduism'. The narrative goes as follows: 'The pre-Aryan *adivasi* culture

was an urban and prosperous civilization. The Aryans arrived from outside and indiscriminately killed the non-Aryan. The cities were looted. They were reduced to penury and compelled to migrate out of their lands'.¹² The entry of 'Aryans' is thus a 'dramatic reference point' in this consciousness. Forced assimilation and deception by the 'Aryans' represents a monumental intervention in *adivasi* history. This event recurs several times in the literature of revival and is linked with the Gonds' experience of marginalization. The experience of being driven into forests is written into Gond subjectivity through such narratives. Forest places then get constructed as sacred places. The themes of marginalization and religious intrusion appear to recall experiences of social inequality and subordination.

There is a peculiar emphasis on the outside origins of the 'Aryans'. The motif of settler colonization is deployed to characterize the 'Aryans'. In Vyankatesh Atram's account, the 'Aryans', after having invaded India forcefully, annihilated the native Gond culture and civilization, thereby compelling them to migrate to the forested regions. The religion of the 'Aryans' remains alien to the natives as 'the ones who tried to emulate/follow the 'Aryan religion' were punished... the yagnya dharma of the Aryans (hence) was limited to the Aryans and Kshatriya sons'.¹³ The repeated attempts of the 'Aryans' to annihilate Gond culture is met with resistance. 'Aryans' remain outsiders in the ancient as well the modern Indian nation.

Language emerges as another significant element in these place-making narratives. Atram asserts that the 'Gondi language is the mother of Marathi',¹⁴ and Kangale reads the Harappan script as Gondi script, as mentioned earlier. Atram further writes: 'The term 'Gondi' symbolizes demographic rather than caste associations. The people living in the region named "Gondwana" and the ones who can speak and understand Gondi language are Gonds'. Kangale's assertion serves two purposes: first, it lends a deep past to Gond culture; second, it establishes the presence of a culture before the Aryan invasion. Kangale's evaluation of the Harappan hieroglyphics is an intense engagement in place-making that laboriously constructs a pre-Vedic antiquity. In the introduction to *Decipherment of Indus Script in Gondi*, Kangale compares various ancient cultures based on their rich hieroglyphic traditions. While doing so, the cultures of 'Harappa, Ancient Sumer, Eastern Islamite Egypt and Southeast Europe'¹⁵ emerge as significant ancient cultures. Like Atram, he goes on to suggest that Gondi is a proto-Dravidian language. By placing the collective history of the community in the ancient time, a more acceptable future for the language and script is envisaged.

These writings claim to be addressing the marginalization and repression of *adivasi* voices. For example, Vyankatesh Atram prefaces his work with a brief note on the 'reference-less language'¹⁶ of his book. This language alone, he feels, can express the 'intimacies of the dialects of the Gonds, Korkus and Kollams who reside in the remote insularity of the forests, details of (their) lives, and mysteries of their distinct identity. It is an answer to (their) silences'.¹⁷ Thus, a consciousness of having been 'repressed', 'silenced' and 'marginalized' guides the poetic tributes to the homeland. This homeland is at first 'discovered' and then flung into existence by an emergent ethnic consciousness. Sallame writes wistfully: 'That which is lost will be found/and the one that is found/I do not want to lose'.¹⁸

'Gondwana' in Paintings by Komal Singh Marai

From the literary writings and in the popular culture of the *Punem*, three forms of visual representations of 'Gondwana' emerge: i) paintings¹⁹ ii) posters and iii) monochromatic maps. All these three forms create different kinds of places, which are allegorical, political, and cartographical respectively. Here I draw from Anishinaabeg Studies, a body of writings invested in the cultural history of indigenous peoples of Canada and North America. Much is to be gained from the recent trends in Anishinaabeg Studies, especially in terms of method, as these writings have argued that 'stories are not only things but *do things*, like provoke action, embody sovereignty, or structure social and political institutions'.²⁰ Borrowing from Anishinaabeg Studies in which stories 'serve as the foundation and framework for the field...providing both a methodological and theoretical approach to our scholarship',²¹ this essay brings together 'storied contexts' rather than just invoking the stories depicted in the two paintings of the Gond painter Komal Singh Marai. In doing so, the way in which these paintings converse with colonial anthropology and the folklore of the region, where they contribute to the aesthetic project of establishing a distinct *adivasi* consciousness, is brought to the fore.

Komal Singh Marai's book *Gondwana Bhukhandki Prasangik Kathavastu* (The Relevant Folklore of Gondwana) published in the year 2002, presents five paintings to accompany his poetic narration of the evolution of 'Gondwana'. I have selected two paintings for discussion from it. The two selected images in particular bring multiple genealogies together: geological artefacts, British colonial and concomitant pedagogical practices, Hindu reform movements to which the Gonds were earlier subjected, questions of political sovereignty, recent discourses on indigeneity as it arrives in India

from global bodies like the UNESCO, and contemporary cultural assertions related to religious and ethnic identities of the Gonds. Suess' discovery is an object of utmost appreciation and devotion here. Collected together in a tight frame, various symbols and icons interact and clash with each other in a complex way. Though both the paintings I focus on borrow heavily from the posters in circulation in the community and the *Punem*, Marai's deployment of oil, acrylic and 'storied landscape' lends them a character all of their own. The following paragraphs attempt to understand the contexts of various stories invoked in this painting as they open up creative spaces for negotiation.

Figure 1 is a painting, one of the five that use mythological stories as their ground of articulation, on a book cover with a slight gloss. Two inventive globes are firmly placed at the diagonally opposite corners of the frame as if they are dictatorially hovering around and en-framing other elements in the painting, forcefully echoing their significance in the visual. A yellow band divides the cover into two sections. While the upper section contains icons in circulation in the posters, the elements in the lower sections are more imaginative. The name of the homeland, 'Gondwana', written elegantly across the page in bold, white letters, in Devanagari script, guides the viewers' perspective in 'seeing' the image.

The main elements, the two globes, guide the discussion. Between them are firmly etched a Gondwana *sapatrangi dhvajha* or the Gond *Punem dhvajha* (seven-coloured Gondwana flag) and the *sodum*, a tiger mounted on an elephant, which was once the state symbol of the Gond kingdom of Chandrapur. Below the subtitle are a reverse swastika, a dove with an olive branch in its beak and a trident emerging from the logo of the *Akhil Gondwana Gondi Sahitya Parishad*, the literary body that funded the publication of this book. Towards the centre of the painting is an open book attached to which is a small reading lamp.

At first, the fundamental referents in the image appear very simple. The globes at the border of the paintings refer to 'Gondwanaland', a geological entity that finds mention in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century geologist Eduard Suess' four volume treatise *Das Antilitx der Erde (1883-1909)*. Suess' propositions on the evolution of the Earth²² gained currency in the late 20th century and hold a dominant place in school curricula in India. By rendering the images of 'Gondwanaland' in oil and placing them along the political and mythological symbols from Gond religion, Marai lends an imaginative aspect to the 'scientific' representation of the landmass called 'Gondwanaland'. The Gondwana flag is representative of the belief and kinship structure of the Gond community. 750 is the number of the ancestral gods

and the seven colours refer to their patterns of grouping. One of the pilgrims notes that 'this flag is representative of the *gandjeevs* (the inhabitants of 'Gondwana') and Gond *Punem* values'.²³

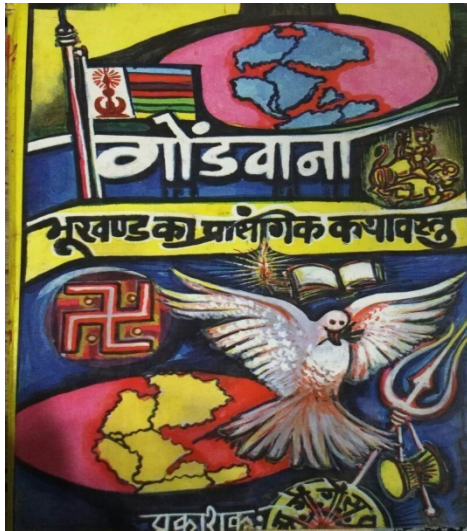


Figure 1: *Untitled*. Painting by Komal Singh Marai²⁴

Another icon, a tiger mounted on an elephant, locally called *sodum*, is painted with a tinge of gold and was the official crest or *raj-chinha* of the erstwhile Gond kingdom of Chanda. The trident in the left is representative of the deity Budha Dev and sometimes signifies the *Trishul Marga*, an emphasis on 'mind, body, and knowledge'²⁵ in the *Punem*. However, the trident is a dense symbol which invokes multiple subtexts. It also represents the deity Shiva, who is locally referred to as 'Shambhu' or 'Mahadeva'. In the writings of Kangale, the Pashupati seal from Harappa – which is sometimes read as a pre-Vedic representation of Shiva, is presented as an older depiction of the Gond deity Lingo.

On closer reading, deeper meanings can be found embedded. Once a symbol of conquest, the object called the terrestrial globe has 'always served as a pedagogic proxy for our planet, placing the unfathomable in our grasp'.²⁶ However, this colonial import also served as a 'means for producing "enlightened but colonized" natives who learned to recognize themselves as inhabitants of not just Mother Earth but also as subjects of the vast empire since the late eighteenth century'.²⁷ Gond pilgrim Komal Singh Marai, who introduces himself in his book as 'illiterate, but born artist, painter, and sculptor', works into this colonizing object of the globe intimate histories that resist and defy the conquest. It is a worlding from the perspective of a Gond artist from the twenty-first century whose life-world remains affected by the devastating legacies of colonialism and its epistemic practices that have far outlived their progenitors.

In India, the colonial disciplines of Anthropology and Geology developed coevally. Pratik Chakrabarti, through his detailed analysis of the persistence of the trope of 'Gondwana' in geology, history and ethnography in nineteenth century India, highlights the simultaneous processes of archaeological excavations and ethnological studies that led to the creation of a primitive, pre-Vedic 'Gondwana' in the imperial consciousness.²⁸ The landscape of central India is worked into the creation of the colonial category of 'aborigines' that was reiterated in the anthropological studies of the time. The persistent investment of colonial knowledge in the creation of the trope of 'Gondwana', Chakrabarti asserts, was dictated by the search for an aboriginal populace. The concept of primitivism, which was essential to the sustenance of the category of the 'aborigines', a majority of which population happened to be the Gonds in the case of central India, found affirmation in the geological theories of Gondwanaland. The ancient 'Gondwanaland' in geology, the historical kingdom of 'Gondwana' and the people called Gonds were linked together by colonial disciplines. In the contemporary context, some of the pilgrims' assertions through popular visuals in the public sphere represent conversations with a diverse set of concepts like 'primitivism', 'tradition', and 'tribe'. These visuals show how the knowledge systems created during the colonial times have deeply seeped into the cultural memory of the Gond community. This knowledge however, after interaction with folk memory, creates ideas and agency for the community to articulate claims of indigeneity, ethnicity and a consolidated religious identity. 'Gondwana', thus mythologized in resplendence by Gond pilgrims, amidst their deities and histories, speaks scathingly to the conceit of the British Empire, particularly as it was represented in an early twentieth century ethnological text, Chatterton's *Story of Gondwana*, published in the year 1916:

*Not that Gondwana made history in the brilliant fashion which Rajasthan, and many other regions of India, did. Its earlier history is more that of the child races of the world. The fact, however, that it has got its own stories of romance and pathos, and that for well-nigh four centuries it had its four kingdoms, ruled over by its own Gond rulers, makes all that we possess of its history worthy of being more widely known than it is at present.*²⁹

Chatterton constructs his 'story' based on the writings of Sir James Malcolm, Colonel Todd and Captain Forsyth's 'old-world book *The Highlands of Central India*, and detached pieces of history to be found in Government District Gazetteers'.³⁰ A review of the book, dated September 30, 1916, in *Illustrated London News*, lauds Chatterton for confirming through his work that the 'country (India) has given splendid proof that its hopes

and fortunes are bound up with those of the Empire'.³¹

Drawing on Gond cosmology, Marai locates the origins of Gondwana's culture in its water bodies. In a highly charged, dramatic and onomatopoeic passage, waterfalls, rivers and canals swiftly emerge out of the peaks of Amarkantak with tremendous intensity as they rush to merge into the oceans of humanity. This he terms 'the culture of Gondwana'³² An imagery of a seascape, which appears in the myths surrounding the beginnings of life on Singar *dwip* and Koyamuri *dwip*, are drawn into the painting. In Kangale's version of the Singar *dwip* story, life on Earth begins from a flood myth. In this myth, water emerges as an ancestor of humankind. First there was a deluge because of which Singar *dwip* was drowned in water. 'Only a peak from the Amarkantak Mountain remained above water'.³³ A human couple, Salla-Gangra, along with a turtle and crow, survived the flood. Over the years, the couple gave birth to two children, a boy named Andiraven Periyar and a girl called Sukma Peri. It was the turtle and crow who found land but were unable to take the children to it. The anguished children then prayed to the sea to take them to land. On hearing the children pray, there was an intense movement in the womb of the Earth and gradually, the mountain of Amarkantak emerged out of water. The water that surrounded it then flowed away from its peak. Due to this movement of water away from the peak, rivers were formed. The parents who were lost during the creation of these rivers were perceived to be present in the form of rivers. Water is an ancestor. It provides life to its devotees. Despite the logical inconsistencies in the story, the imagery of water in this myth connotes the beginning, creation and continuity of life. The objects representative of the glory of 'Gondwana' float in the waterscape on the page. The water-bodies represent birth and fluidity in which Gondi Koyamuri *dwip*/Singar *dwip* are juxtaposed with the objects of cultural significance, and figures like Lingo, heavily documented in colonial archives.

In Figure 2, multiple histories collide as an epitome of Western sciences, the globe, is pierced by the belief-worlds of the *adivasis*. Figuratively, an object of 'scientific' knowledge and means of 'discovery', the globe, appears as one of the elements in the waterscape, thereby getting diminished in the order of things. The sea is not a part of the globe anymore, but vice-versa! Liberated out of its context, the globe is invested with the poetics of veneration. The globe here is threatened by the sea as it merges with the cosmological beliefs of the Gonds. In these mythologies, homeland speaks to the legacies of colonization. With the globe placed precariously on it, the trident from the previous image recurs here. In the god posters, Lingo is often portrayed as a human wearing white dhoti and a piece of yellow cloth around

his chest. Marai's portrayal of Lingo, however, forges iconic relationships with the Pashupati seal as the former borrows its colours and contours from the latter. This mosaic ushers the viewer into the poetic offerings to the homeland. Placed alongside the emblems of religious revivalism and erstwhile kingdoms of 'Gondwana', the figure of the homeland draws attention to itself.



Figure 2: *Untitled*. Painting by Komal Singh Marai³⁴

About Figure 2, Marai writes:

*In the archaeological depictions of unbroken Gondwana giant, vibrant and pictorially rich glimpses emerge distinctly. In these, we view scattered fragments of the philosophic, literary and artistic grandeur of its native groups of peoples.*³⁵

Against this is the optimism implied by the images of Lingo, and Persapen, a clan deity amongst the Gonds. A complex religious symbol is used to represent the deity. The representation is called *Salla-Gangra*, and even Persapen sometimes, and is perceived to be an amalgamation of the feminine and masculine forces of nature, the sun and the moon. The visual is a reflection on the deities that survive and continue to flourish despite being subjected to imperial domination in the past. In the context of the Gondi *Punem*, the Persapen image is referred to as *Gondi Dharma Chinha* (Symbol of Gond Religion), and it appears on political and religious posters, and household shrines, and is also constructed in public spaces in cement. In one of the multilingual language primers,³⁶ the Persapen image comes to symbolize *gyan* (knowledge), a philosophical concept. Through the image of Persapen, a distinct cultural archive is inserted into pedagogic materials that flourish independent of state patronage.



Figure 3: From *Gondi Bhasha Pahada*³⁷

These various elements of the painting, each of which is located in a body of knowledge, are collected together by Marai within a narrativized landscape. In fact, in Figure 2, icons and symbols emerge out of water. The *Kaldubgatha*, that narrativizes the beginning of life on Singar *dwip* and Koyamuri *dwip*, runs as a subtext in this image. Traditional deities and objects from Gond cosmology, rising out of water, are brought into focus, while the globes are pushed to the margins of the frame. The objects, each with its own mythological relevance, retrieved carefully from their watery abode, sit proudly on the landmass of 'Gondwana'. While Image 1 draws from 'transcultural' genealogies that have flown in to create a vision of 'Gondwana' for posterity, Figure 2 in contrast illustrates local history as it emerges out of water.

Figure 2 in particular enriches the archaeological 'Gondwana' by deploying elements from its sacred sphere. A distinct visual language of waterscapes, which is borrowed from Gond mythology, produces the claim of cultural sovereignty. As opposed to Figure 1, which serves as the meeting point of various global and local histories across time, Figure 2 explicitly situates itself in the beginning of mythical time. In the worldview of Gond pilgrims, the globe is localized as a homeland, which might at first seem as an aberration. The vibrant colours and themes used suggest that we are looking at a mythical rendition or a dreamscape. It is crowded with elements from Gond life-worlds and material culture – a white bison (horns of which serve ritualistic purposes), tridents which are representative of the deity Budha Dev and also the *Trishul Marga* in the *Punem*, Persapen, and the supreme Lingo who liberates 33 Gond ancestors from their confinement in the Kachargarh caves. In the lower left corner is a man wearing the traditional bison-horn head-dress, staring out of the picture. A slender paint brush cuts across the shoulder of this man and beside it is a name signed in Devanagari script. The topographic archive from the repository of myths is pulled into the painting. The act of seeing this image implicates the viewer in the process of story-telling. Forms of verbal expressions are conjured up. They demand an immersive experience

of viewing. When juxtaposed with the myths from the *Punem*, new imaginative spaces open. By highlighting the legacies of imperial histories in this highly local genre of artistic communication, multiple conversations are initiated.

Then there is *sodum* (a lion mounted on an elephant), in Figure 1, which was the crest of the Gond kingdom of Chanda. All the four historical Gond kingdoms had different crests. Among the Gond pilgrims, *sodum* has the strongest currency. One of the pilgrims explains its meaning as follows: 'The elephant represents Gondwanaland and tiger is a king'.³⁸ The conquest of the elephant by a lion/tiger represents the control of the Gond kings over Gondwana's lands. Further on, the narrative invokes a dream that a mythical king named Jodh Singh once had. In this dream: 'Jodhsingh, the son of Yaduraay, went for a hunt during which he saw a tiger sitting on an elephant. That night, Budha Dev appeared in the king's dream and revealed the significance of what he saw – "This is not a mere revelation, but a blessing! It is an omen asking you to be made the king"'.³⁹ The deity then advised the king: 'Pay attention to the *rajchinha*. You have to think what its presence suggests and base your decisions on these observations'.⁴⁰

In the context of Gond revivalism, only the crest of the Gond kingdom of Chanda gets worked into popular visual and folkloric representations. There could be two possible explanations for this selective revisiting of Gond history. Firstly, the revivalist assertions have been the strongest in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, of which Chanda kingdom was a part. Literary events about *adivasi* literature, and religious and community festivals related to the *Punem*, were initiated first in this region. The kingdom of Chanda remained in power till the early nineteenth century. The position of Chandrapur at the border regions of states, its tangible culture, historical and religious associations, fuel a sense of marginalization of intimate history that is essential for the invocation of a sense of loss. One of the Gond pilgrims, Prakash Sallame, gives expression in his poems to the metaphorical journey in which he discovered his roots. He begins by paying obeisance at the Mahakali shrine of Chandrapur that is located inside the fort of Chanda and has strong Hindu and Dalit associations in the region. At first, Sallame is surprised at the discovery of the Gond origins of Mahakali: 'First I visited Kali Kankali's court and tried to find out her history, she turned out to be the mother of *Koyavanshis*' (i.e. the one born of the womb).⁴¹ Following an intimate conversation with *Mata* (Mother) Kali Kankali, Sallame further stumbles upon the remnants of the historical 'Chandagarh district (in) Gondwana Pradesh', whose relative obscurity in contemporary times moves him to tears. Sallame, then determined to reinstate the

glory of the deity and the kingdom, embarks on a journey through which he would repay the debts of Kali Kankali.

Secondly, the motif of 'lions and elephants in combat' has been widely represented in the architecture and sculpture of South Asia for more than a millennium.⁴² The presence of this motif across the Indian Subcontinent allows Gond pilgrims to claim all these areas as a part of the kingdoms of the Gond kings. For example, in Sallame's *Gondi Kot Darshan* (A Description of Gond Forts) and Kangale's *Gondwanaka Sanskrutik Itihaas* (The Cultural History of Gondwana), a historical Gondwana is created using the lion-elephant motif. A line drawing of the motif appears in Chatterton's *Gondwana*, through which it finds a way into Kangale's texts. Based on the origins and dissemination of the *sodum* motif in the Indian Subcontinent and beyond, in the Gond pilgrims' imaginary, Chandrapur emerges as the centre of their political power. The invocation of *sodum* thus engenders new perspectives on the historical past of the Gond people.

The juxtapositions and compositions of the objects in the paintings create new narratives and infuse them with markers from the repository of cosmological stories of origin. In the depiction of 'Gondwana' as a homeland for the Gonds, its embedding in mythologies and its sustenance by an intense poetics of loss, the paintings enact the experience of marginalization in everyday life. In this exchange of personal and communal histories, new grounds for negotiations open up.

The writings of Gond revivalists are about a place that once was a huge landmass constitutive of five present day continents. Gondwana is now fragmented and scattered across the globe, reduced in size and further marginalized in the post-colonial nation. It is a place whose existence is evidenced by the sciences of modernity. Some of these very sciences flourished due to the creation of the category of 'aboriginals', of which the Gonds made up a significant population. It is a place that was once glorious, but is now dominated by destructive, alien forces. A recovered place, nonetheless, which is within the grasp of its native peoples.

For the Gond pilgrims, finding a homeland on the spherical globe conjures up simultaneous possibilities of at once shifting the origin of the world to central India while forging solidarity with the 'tribal' peoples around the world. By claiming Eduard Suess' 'Gondwanaland' as a homeland, the Gond subjects attempt to liberate themselves of the map of post-colonial India and deploy affective associations at a global level. An intense sense of cultural belonging exists in the name of 'Gondwana' even though the 'Gondwana' of central India was never a territorially bound, one, contiguous state either in pre-colonial or post-colonial India. What purpose would

this recovered, once expansive, homeland serve in the modern world in which physical distances and time are constantly shrinking?

This quest for homeland is a quest for origins, a sense of belonging and nostalgia for a lost history. It allows humans to imagine for themselves a past – a prehistoric one, in this case – in which their languages and cultures flourished, and peace and justice prevailed. As utopias in the past, homelands offer multiple possibilities in the present that could have manifested but have not. To be at home is to be at ease with the surroundings. The invocation of homeland also brings into existence spaces in which hopes and aspirations take shape and drive movement into futures. Homelands thus serve as exemplars of the potentials that its peoples hold in the present.

Notes

1. The terms used to describe the Gond homeland and can be used interchangeably. 'Gondwana' as a discourse emerges at different moments in the past variously as a supercontinent from the deep past, a territorially bound state in independent India, a mythological space of the Gonds which is ruled by *Shambhu Gaura*, circumvented by the mythical Lingo and revered by its pilgrims, and also as a geographically bounded homeland that is forever lost to the Gonds, firstly due to the breaking of the continents into five parts, and secondly due to the 'Aryan invasion'.
2. I use this term to refer to the people who participate in the revivalist religious festivals and fairs of *Punem*. The *Gondi Punem*, also known as *Gondi Dharma*, brings to the fore Gond articulations of their experiences and worldview. 'Gondi' means 'of the Gonds'.
3. S. R. Barkhade and Onkar Singh Marai, *Gondian Gaurav Gatha: Gondwana Sanskruti Ke Riti-Riwaaj* (Jabalpur: Jai Seva Prakashan, 2013), 13-14.
4. Akash K. Prasad, 'Gondwana Movement in Post-Colonial India: Exploring Paradigms of Assertion, Self-Determination and Statehood', *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India*, 4th ser., 3, No. 1 (September 21, 2017): 37-45.
5. Aparna Pallavi, 'Gonds Nourish Aspirations at Annual Fair', *India Together*. 28 Feb. 2006, n. p. Web 12. Jan. 2016.
6. *Sahapedia online*, 'Sunher Singh Taram on Kachchergadh Jatra and "Gondwana Darshan"', Interview, YouTube. April 09, 2018. Accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooR1izkZWvA&t=948s>.
7. Eknath Sarve, 'Adivasi Sahitya Ani Samkalin Vastavya', in *Adivasi Marathi Sahitya: Swaroop Ani Samasya*, ed. Pramod Mungthate (Pune: Pratima Prakashan, 2007), 91-96.
8. *Sahapedia online*, 'Sunher Singh Taram'.
9. Barkhade and Marai. *Gondian Gaurav Gatha*, 10.
10. *Ibid.*, 15.
11. Sunher Singh Taram, 'Sampadakiya', *Gondwana Darshan*, 1989.

12. Vyankatesh Atram, *Gondi Sanskrutiche Sandarbha* (Wardha: Sudhir Prakashan, 1989), 219.
13. *Ibid.*, 219.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Motiravan Kangale, *Saundhawi Lipika Gondi Mein Udwachan* (Nagpur: Tirumaay Chandralekha Kangali Publication, 2002), 206.
16. Atram, *Gondi Sanskrutiche Sandarbha*, ix.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Prakash Sallam, 'Harivile, Sapdale', in *Koyaphool: Kavita Sangrah* (Nagpur: Akhil Gondwana Gondi Sahitya Parishad, 2001), 23.
19. This classification excludes assessment of Pradhan Gond Paintings, popularly known as the primary Gond paintings, since they are closely linked with state patronage and embedded in a market economy governed by state institutions. Although it is worth mentioning that a retelling of the Kali Kankali myth, an important part of the *Punem*, finds mention in the Venkat Raman Shyam Singh's 'Finding my Way'.
20. Heid E. Erdrich, 'Name: Literary Ancestry as Presence', in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World through Stories*, eds. Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair and Heidi Kiiwetinpinesik Stark (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 20.
21. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Edna Manitowabi, 'Theorizing Resurgence from within Nishnaabeg Thought', in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, 280.
22. Eduard Suess, tr. Hertha B. Sollas, *The Face of the Earth: Vol. 1-4*, translated by (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1906).
23. Motiravan Kangale, 'Gondi Punem Dhvaj Darshan', in *Pari Kupa Lingo: Gondi Punem Darshan* (Nagpur: Tirumaay Chandralekha Kangali Publication, 2011), 260.
24. Bookcover in Komal Singh Marai, ed. Ushakiran Atram, *Gondwana Bhukhandka Prasangik Kathavastu* (Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh: Akhil Gondwana Gondi Sahitya Parishad, 2002). These images have been reproduced here with the permission of the artist.
25. Motiravan Kangale, 'Pari Kupa Lingo ka Gondi Punem Darshan', in *Pari Kupa Lingo*, 132.
26. Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Terrestrial Lessons the Conquest of the World as Globe* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2018), 13.
27. *Ibid.*, 34.
28. Pratik Chakrabarti, 'Gondwana and the Politics of Deep Past' (Unpublished).
29. Eyre Chatterton, *India through a Bishop's Diary: Or, Memories of an Indian Diocese by Its First Bishop*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Northumberland Avenue, WC 2, 1935), vii.
30. Eyre Chatterton, *The Story of Gondwana*, ed. Richard Temple, (London: Sir I. Pitman & Sons, 1916), 4
31. *Author unknown*, 'Story of Gondwana', review of *The Story*, by Chatterton, *Illustrated London News*, September 30, 1916, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001578/19160930/076/0018>.
32. Marai, *Gondwana Bhukhandka Prasangik Kathavastu*, 14
33. Kangale, *Pari Kupa Lingo*, 63.
34. Marai, *Gondwana Bhukhandka Prasangik Kathavastu*, 145.
35. *Ibid.*, 14.
36. Chandrabhan Singh Bhagdiya, *Gondi Bhasha Pahada*, (Ghansour, in Madhya Pradesh: Rani Durgavati Offset Prints, 2017).
37. *Ibid.*, 10
38. Barelal Barkhade, 'Gondwana Rajya Chinha', in *Gondian Punem Satya Saar*, (Jabalpur: Gondi Dharm Sahitya Prakashan, 2016), 45-46.
39. Barkhade, 'Gondwana Rajya Chinha', 45.
40. Barkhade, 'Gondwana Rajya Chinha', 46.
41. Prakash Sallam, 'Mutki Marg', in *Koyaphool*, 9. In local parlance, the term *koyavanshi* refers to various *adivasi* groups of India, mostly to the Gond.
42. Pushkar Sohoni, 'Old Fights, New Meanings: Lions and Elephants in Combat', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 67-68 (2017): 225-34. doi:10.1086/691602.

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