DOCUMENTING INDIGENOUS PERCEPTIONS through children's drawings

Gauri Bharat
Assistant professor
Faculty of Architecture
CEPT University

gauri.bharat@cept.ac.in

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I focus on documenting indigenous perceptions of built environments through the medium of children's drawings. In the course of my doctoral fieldwork in Adivasi (indigenous) villages in the Singhbhum region in eastern India, I inadvertently started a process of providing sketch books and colours to village children who, in response to my own architectural drawings and research interests, returned with details drawings about things in their environment. I collected nearly eighty-five drawings drawn by children between the ages of six and twelve in the course of one month. The children's drawings revealed two important things – one, some definite insights into elements and relationships that were significant in their everyday lives environment and, second, a fascination with newer developments such as elements of infrastructure. In this paper, I analyse these drawings to argue that the graphic conventions employed (though often taught at school) and narratives (based on bodily movement and experience) produced by children provide some vital clues about indigenous perceptions of the environment. I also discuss how children represent newer elements in their landscape in an almost iconic manner, and thereby, reveal the inevitable modernity of Adivasi everyday lives that often escapes an outsider's notice. In short, I argue that children's drawings can potentially become a medium for documenting some lesser-known aspects of cultures and places as long as the production of visuals is carefully analyzed.

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In this paper, I focus on documenting indigenous perceptions of built environments through the medium of children's drawings. In the course of my doctoral fieldwork in Adivasi (indigenous) villages in the Singhbhum region in eastern India, I inadvertently started a process of providing sketch books and colours to village children who, in response to my own architectural sketches and research interests, returned with details drawings about things in their environment. This began as a way of friendly engagement with the children in the case study villages but seeing the content, structure and details of the drawings, it was quickly apparent that this was an opportunity to see the villages through the eyes of the village children themselves.

Before delving into the details of this method, a brief sketch about my doctoral research is required. Santals are one of the many Adivasi (indigenous) communities in eastern India and are particularly renowned for precision and craftsmanship in their domestic architecture. My project attenpted to construct an architectural history based on the production, use and transformation of Santal built environments. There were two important concerns in the study. First, I examined Santal dwellings and settlements as both sites and processes, i.e., I analysed built forms, everyday life, domestic art practices, and people's perceptions of important aspects of their surroundings in order to understand Santal senses of space and place. Second, I attempt to correlate architectural shifts to wider changes in the Santal and other Adivasi communities and the Singhbhum region in order that the architectural analysis may be brought to bear upon a wider understanding of Adivasi pasts. In short, using architecture as a lens, I aimed to understand Santal senses of being-in-the-world and how these have transformed in the course of the past two centuries.

The fieldwork for this project included architectural documentation, which included measuring and drawing plans and sectional views of physical built form and ethnographies of everyday life in the case study villages. Additionally, I used a number of participatory methods to get some insights into how the villagers saw their environments and how they thought it should be represented. The drawings made by the village children became part of this strain of fieldwork engagements (Figs. 1-3: Children making drawings in case study villages). While this was not a method I proposed before going into the field, as I mentioned earlier, it quickly developed into an interesting prospect when village children followed me around on

most days and got excited at my offer of getting them drawings books and colours. Children gathered around to watch what I was drawing or taking photographs of. I showed them my own sketchbook and explained that I was drawing houses. I casually asked if the children liked to draw and gave them some paper and colours when they replied in the affirmative. The next day, three girls returned the sketchbooks with houses drawn in them (Fig. 4-6: Initial sketches by children).

What was interesting about these drawings was that while the house itself were nearly generic in that they had been drawn as children are taught to draw houses in school, the girls has added their own local details. These included details of the house such as like coloured bands added to the front elevation of the house and objects and observations on things typically found around the house, such as hand pumps, paddy fields and fruit trees. Intrigued by the kinds of details children drew, I offered more paper and colours and encouraged children to make more drawings. When they asked what they else should draw, I suggested that they make more sketches of their dwellings, village and whatever they considered important in their surroundings. This, I explained, would help me understand how they perceived their surroundings and what their point of view was.

On completing fieldwork in three Santal villages, I collected nearly eighty-five drawings by children between the ages of six and twelve. Considered as a whole, the set of drawings presented a range of scales i.e. from individual houses to entire villages, levels of detail and types of objects represented. While there were broad similarities and differences between the content and structure of the drawings, the challenge was to develop a framework for examination. This was a challenge primarily because these drawings could not be considered as absolute representations of how the village children perceived their environment but was obviously mediated by other factors. This was clear, for instance, in the graphic convention used for houses. Children nearly always drew houses as they were taught in school, i.e. a square or rectangular lower part with triangular roofs. If the graphic convention was learnt at school, it was likely that ideas and influences may be have come from other sources as well. The framework for examining these drawings needed to draw out the unique features of children's perception of their environment, while recognizing the contingencies of other factor that had necessarily affected visual production in this case.

The framework that I eventually developed was quite basic and explored two things - first, the specific elements and details drawn by children, and second, the relationship between these elements or the organisation of the drawing. Conceptually, this approach draws from the representational theories of Rudolf Arnheim, where he proposed that, in order to pictorially represent the three-dimensional world, children need to 'invent' forms that are 'structurally or dynamically equivalent' to what they are seeing (Golomb 1993, 13). A child's drawing cannot be read as a 'replication' of what they are seeing, but rather, must be

considered as a ‘pictorial equivalent’ made ‘using the tools at his or her disposal’ which ‘transform perceptual concepts into forms that can stand for the object’ (Golomb 1993, 13-14). In other words, when children draw, they are not attempting to faithfully duplicate what they see in front of them. Rather, they use pictorial forms and graphic conventions that ‘stand in’ for the complexity of their experiences. Therefore, as Golomb (1993, 16) argues, the ‘analysis must focus on the intrinsic visual or graphic logic exhibited by a drawing rather than on its supposed defects [or perfect correspondence] in terms of a hypothetical standard of realism’. From this point of view, the focus on details in the children’s drawing was an attempt at delineating the specific objects that children chose to represent as part of their dwelling or village, while the composition of their drawing potentially provided insights into the relationships between the elements as observed or experiences by the children.

Moving on to the analysis of the drawings, as I mentioned earlier, children typically drew houses and their immediate surroundings, views of the village, and in some cases, other things in the village that interested them. These choices were obviously responses to my own architectural documentation and research interest that I had shared with the children. Each of these drawings may be analysed in terms of content/ details and compositional structure as outlined above.

To begin with the drawings of the houses, two things were apparent at first glance. First, the houses were always drawn in a frontal view but have added details such as wall paintings, which is typical among Santals in this region. So the form of the dwelling is generic in the sense of how children are taught to draw houses in schools everywhere, but the village children had added on their own details which are particular to their environment (Fig. 8-9: Generic form of house with varying details around it). Even the most minimally drawn house underscores this idea, where a band is marked midway on the front wall to indicate local wall painting patterns (see Fig. 6). Second, houses are always drawn together with elements such as trees, hand pumps, and *alpana* or floor drawings that are made near the entrance of the house. That nearly all children drew these elements may be attributed again to their school, where the children are taught to draw these elements as part of a typical ‘village scene’. What is interesting however are the minor variations. For instance, many children in one village drew grass and indicated plants around the hand pump (See Fig. 9-10: Drawings with grass and plants indicated around hand pump). This was a reference to the greenery that one finds around the drain that leads water away from the hand pump. It also refers to the fact that villagers, in nearly every house, typically plant creepers where the drainage of the hand pump leads. Given that many children indicated plant growth around the hand pump, one may argue that this was an important relationship between the house and its surrounding areas and is registered by children as such.

The drawings of the village reveal similarly important aspects and relationships within the village. In this case too, children chose to draw houses using generic forms, but added a number of details such as trees, ponds, places of worship and other unusual features in the village. Depending on the scale, i.e., whether the houses were drawn large or small, children distinguished individual dwellings through wall painting designs or through roofing material. These distinctions, however, were minimal when compared to the precision with which trees, hand pumps and water bodies were drawn (Fig. 11: Detailed drawing of water body with lotuses). In many cases, children intended to distinguish different types of trees in their surroundings. This was done by labelling rather than through variation in pictorial convention, i.e., the trees were drawn using a generic cloud-like form as typically taught in schools, but were clearly distinguished from each other as being particular kinds of trees. Similarly, other elements such as water bodies, shrines, and infrastructure elements such as railway tracks and street lights were distinctly located and clearly indentified in children's drawings (Fig. 12: Drawing showing railway tracks and speed breaker in the road). The point to be noted here is that the houses are distinguished to a lesser extent as compared to these other natural features and elements, which, arguably, form an important part of the children's perception of their village.

In terms of compositional structure, the village drawings are particularly revealing both in terms of how the children perceive the structure of the village and the graphic conventions they use to communicate their perception of this structure. Children appear to have organised their drawings in relation to how they themselves typically move through the village. This is clearly seen in cases where houses are drawn on either side of the street, with the lower edge of the house touching the line of the street and, consequently, one set of houses is upside down (Fig. 13: Houses drawn upside down on either side of the street). This became apparent as I watched the children make the drawings. In order to draw things all around the street, they turned the sheet around repeatedly. This gesture may be considered akin to standing in the middle of the street and turning around to see things in every direction. In short, children did not make these drawings from a single vantage point, but notionally moved through the village in the course of making the drawing.

This understanding of the compositional structure of the drawings allows further readings of the perceived structure of the villages themselves. Through the organisation of elements in the drawings, one gets some insights into the structuring of the village as a social space. For instance, when children have drawn the entire village or picked a view that shows more than one house, the central street is the key organising element in the drawing and all the other elements of the drawing are positioned in relation to the street. In one example, the street bends in four places and in each bent segment, the child artist has written the name of one of the *tolas* or neighbourhoods in the village (Fig. 14: Segments of central street with names

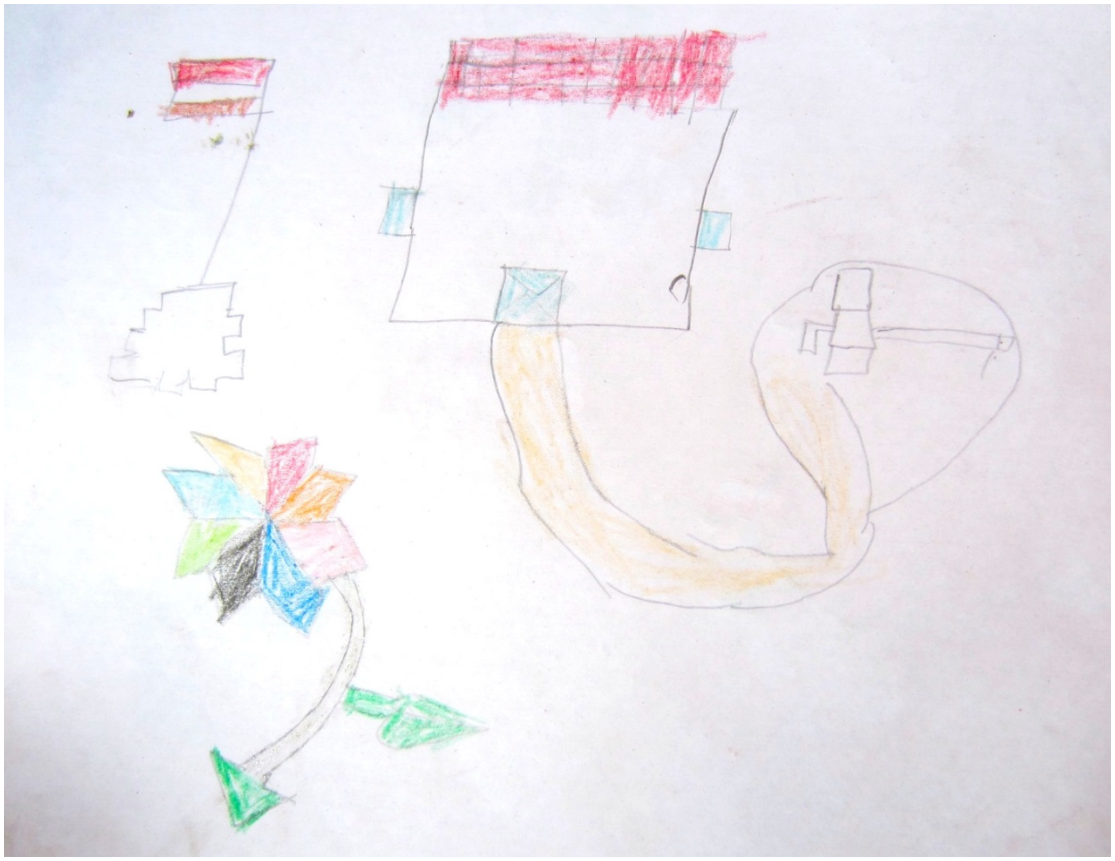
indicating neighbourhoods). Given that children invent 'pictorial equivalents' or 'structurally adequate forms which can stand for a complex object' as discussed earlier, one may argue that in these drawings, the child artist demarcates and labels segments of the street to indicate neighbourhoods. This reading of children's drawings corresponds to the fact that the central street is an organising element in the village and an important generator of a sense of community for the families that live around it.

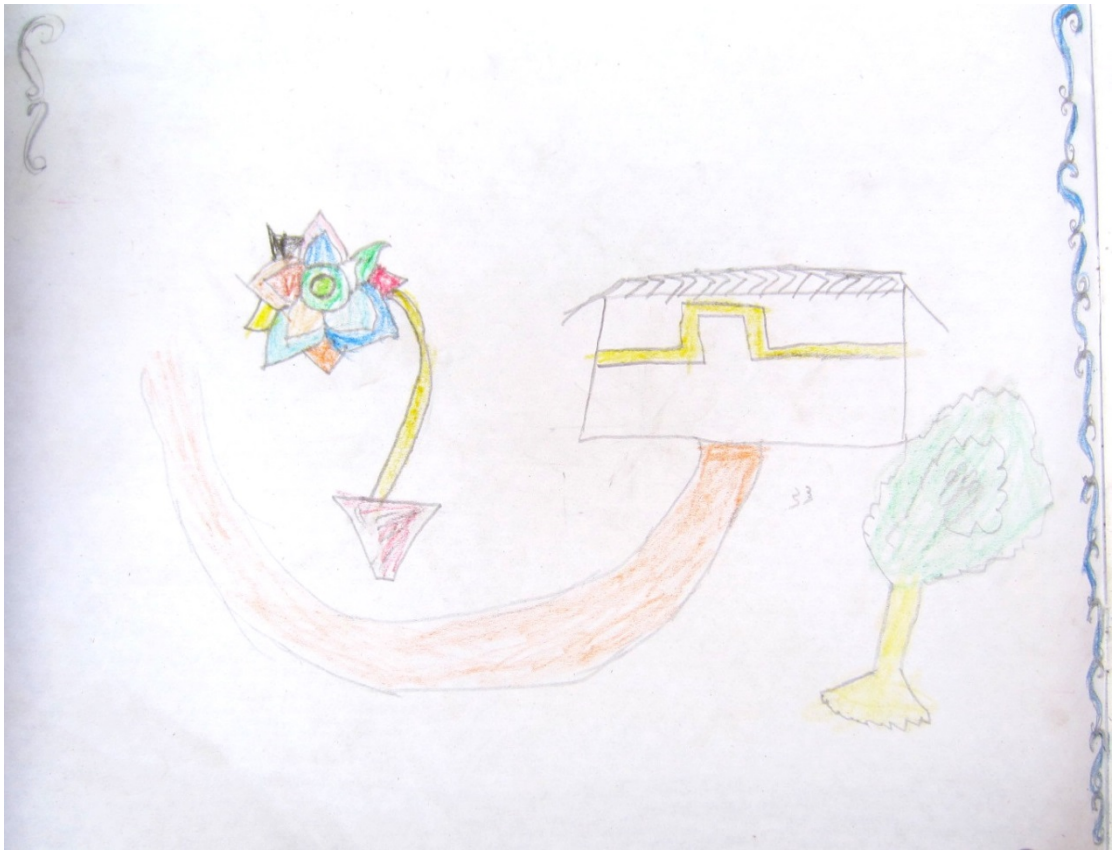
The occurrence of elements of infrastructure in the children's drawing was an unexpected find and requires further elaboration. What the children were attempting to illustrate in their homes, village, and things that they considered important in their environment. They drew solar streetlights, hand pumps, electricity poles, railway lines and even a transformer in one case, while I had not paid any attention to these things in my own documentation efforts. By including such things, children clearly flag up the important role played these elements in their experiences (Fig. 15-16: Elements of infrastructure drawn by children). What is paradoxical, however, is that these elements did not functionally contribute everyday life in the villages. For instance, the tube wells provided barely enough water for the subsistence of most families, while the solar streetlights drawn in considerably detail by children in one village, had ceased to function a few years earlier. One may argue then that for the children – and possibly for other villagers as well - these elements were iconic and symbols of development even though they did not function as such.

The readings of this visual material proved instructive in three ways. First, and more obviously, it provided insights in some objects, places and relationships that children considered important within their everyday lives and environments. These insights served to nuance and underscore various other architectural and ethnographic findings in my study. Second, and more significantly, the children's drawings highlighted the subjectivity of my own architectural and anthropological engagements with the field. The limited emphasis on dwellings and the representations of the village in relation to bodily experience were in complete to my own architectural gaze, which typically focused on built forms and morphological relationships. Chakrabarty (2008, 239) highlights the epistemological difference between the researcher's and inhabitants' points of view when he says that 'if historical or anthropological consciousness is seen as the work of a rational outlook, it can only "objectify" – and thus deny – the *lived* relations the observing subject already has with that with which he or she identifies as belonging to a historical or ethnographic time and space separate from the ones he or she occupies as the analyst' (emphasis in original). In other words, I was interested largely in explicating Santal relationships with their environment by observing structures and patterns in everyday life, while the children's drawings revealed that perceptions of the environment were rooted in lived experience, were temporally fluid, and variously informed by the social, natural and historical worlds they are

part of. Third, what also emerged from these drawings is a glimpse of the inevitable modernity of Adivasi everyday lives that often escapes an outsider's notice. That the children consider streetlights, tress and houses as equally important elements of their environment while I had not given them any thought during my own documentation efforts drove home the preconceptions with which even the most liberal researchers engage with indigenous communities and consequently, end up ignoring vital aspects of their lives and their conceptions of themselves.

To conclude, children's drawings developed as an unexpected but revealing method for engaging with people's perceptions of their environment. Its potential for more widespread use in different contexts and disciplines became apparent during a chance remark by a woman observing a display of these drawings in the UK. Commenting on the fact that children had drawn hand pump, the woman wondered if her own children would draw taps or a water tank as an important part of their environment. She surmised that her children would probably made drawings of a computer or a tablet instead! While the method is full of potential, what needs care is the analysis of this material, where the contingencies affecting the production of these visuals must be taken into account as much as possible.





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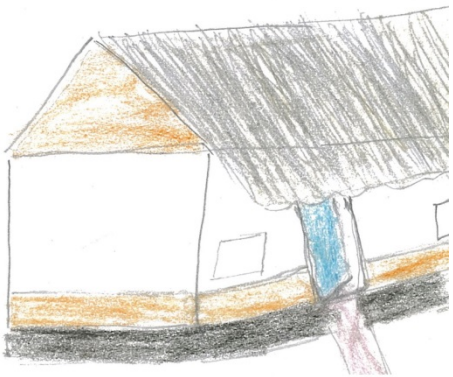

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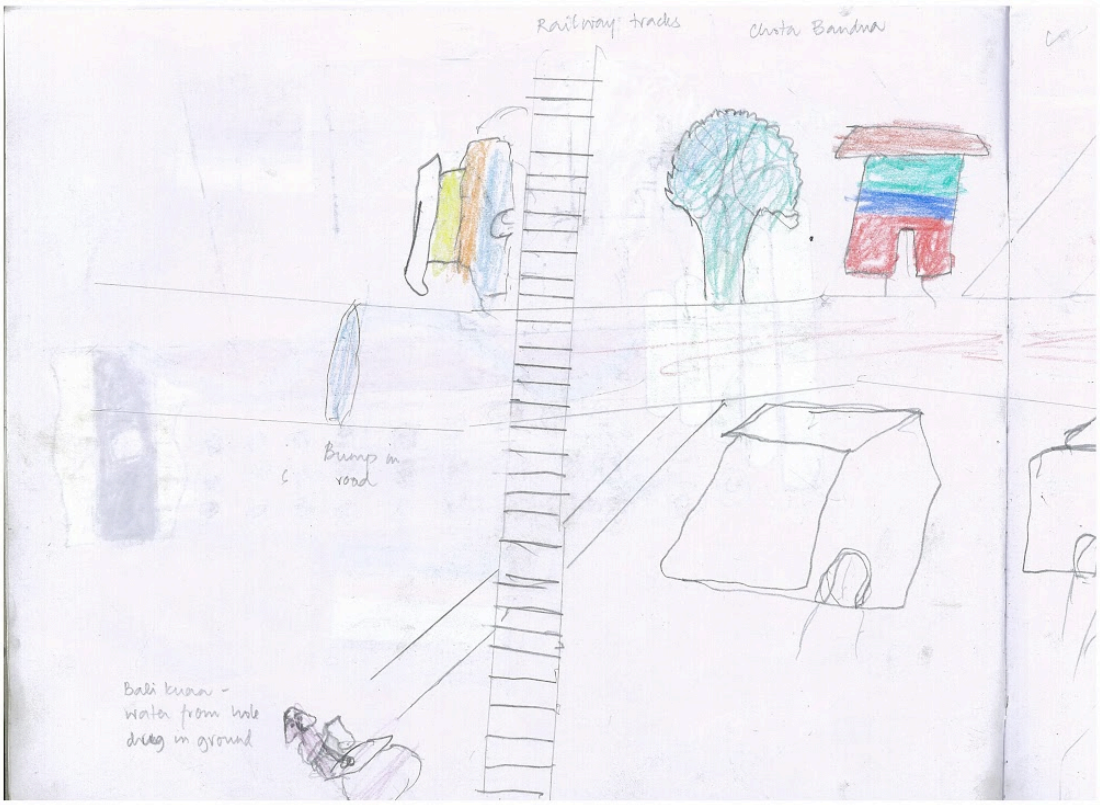
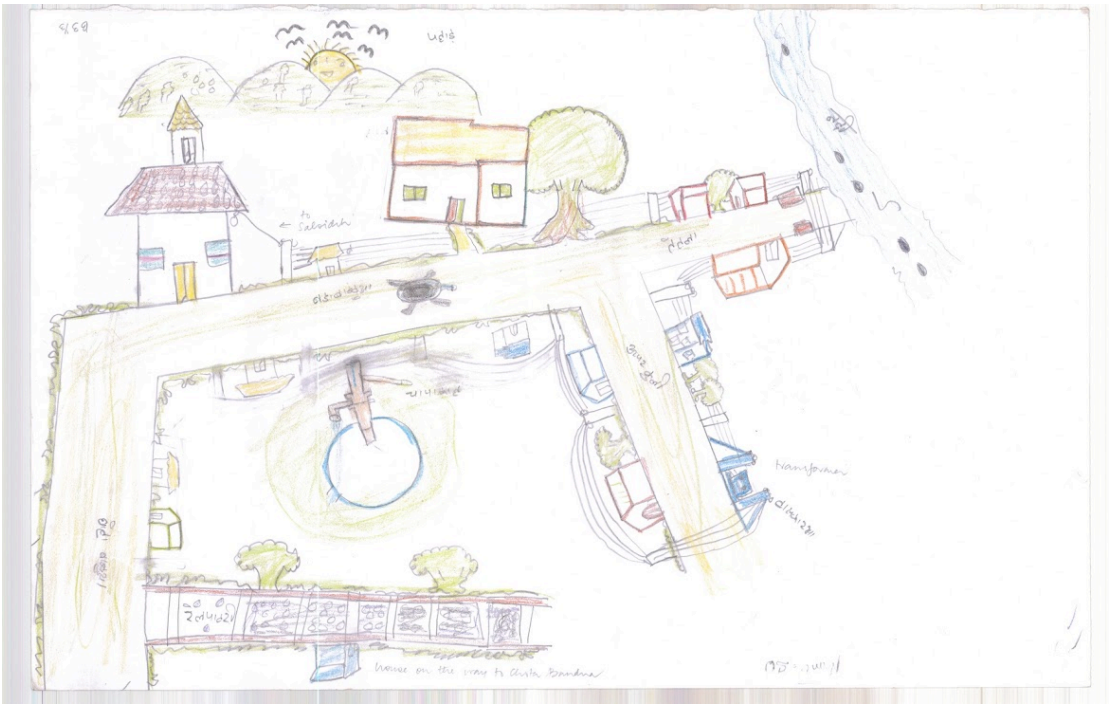

Railway tracks
Chota Bandra
Bumps in road
Bali kuan - water from hole dug in ground

प्राथमिक विद्यालय बड़ा भदुआ
नाम - प्रदीप - गौप
वर्ग - पाँच
रोल नं - 3
आमका पेड़
घर झोपड़ी घर है।
Chota Bandra
Railway line


to Salvidah
Transformer
house on the way to Chita Bandhna

उत्क्रमित मध्य विद्यालय चौड़ा
नाम- दुर्गा हाँसदा
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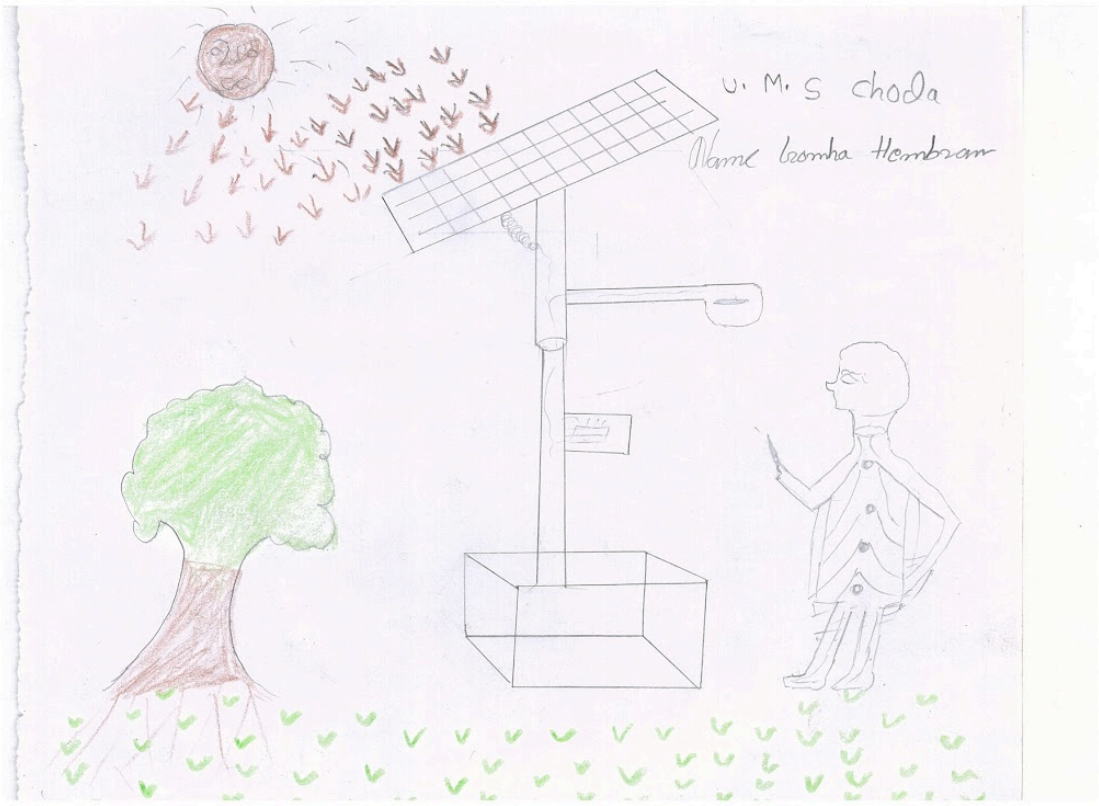
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