

THE WHIRLING WORLD OF THE WARLIS



In recent years their art has become a celebrated form of folk art & has gained popularity far & wide, yet another than this Neolithic Art form & their extreme poverty, little is known about these shy & self effacing people.

There was a time when the Indian sub-continent was blessed with an amazing variety of natural life, made possible by diverse geographical features & climatic conditions. Innumerable early communities, which we now refer to as Tribes or Adivasis, lived as an integral part of nature, harvesting its bounties. Even though each tribe had its own lifestyle, specific habitat, food habits, customs & rituals, it shared a common divinity with the others. Nature was their God, their Guide, their very reason for being.

In the state of Maharashtra alone there are communities belonging to 47 different Tribes living along the western coast of India. This accounts for 9% of the total population in the country. One of the communities living here are the Warlis. Although in recent years their decorative art has been celebrated & has gained wide acceptance, little is known about these people.



Images of Warli Life

The Warlis are an indigenous Tribe of people who have lived in the Thane District of Maharashtra for centuries. They were originally hunters but with deforestation & access denied to the existing forests, paddy farming is now the main stay of their existence. Even today, their entire life revolves around nature. Seasons dominate every aspect of their life with the year getting divided into various periods of rice growing. All the work is done manually with no help whatsoever of machines. The entire family, including women & young children, get engrossed in work throughout the year, leaving old women at home to look after the babies.

The community has developed an astonishing set of eco-indicators with the help of which they can predict the coming of the monsoon. Minute changes in sunrise & sunset and the cry of a particular bird, herald the onset of the rainy season – ushering in a period of plenty & cause for joy. The first rain in June announces the birth of a new cycle of life. The seeds are sown & the first seedling that sprouts is celebrated as a gift from Dharitri [Mother Earth] with a rite known as Kaavali Khaane. The seedling is cooked into a curry & shared by all the family members. Transplanting of seedlings takes place after this rite has been performed.



Warli Folk preparing for Harvest Season



These Footprints signify a good harvest season

From June to September, the Warlis are busy in their fields, managing water, weeding, tightening plants that have become loose, chasing away rodents & cutting the abundance of grass & storing them for their cattle. Nature responds & by September the crops are standing tall in the fields. The Warlis then harvest the crops, but only after Saavari the field Goddess is thanked for her generosity.

After harvesting, its time to celebrate Diwali. Entire clans come together under the same roof & prepare to eat the newly harvested grain for the first time. This is accompanied by joyous dancing, singing, drinking & merry-making. More celebrations follow with the propitiation of Vaghadeva [the Tiger God], Kaansaari [the Corn Goddess] & a host of other Gods & Goddesses. The Harvest is threshed & the new grain is brought home & stored in a Kaangii which is a circular rice bin.

By January, preparations are afoot for marriages in the family. All Warli marriages take place in winter & involve at least three days of feasting & rituals. The whole village helps out in the preparations. Women contribute each day by helping in the collection of the fuel wood, water storage & cooking.

As summer sets in, the marriage season comes to an end & Holi is celebrated. This festival marks the death of one cycle of life & the Warlis start preparing the earth for the birth of the next cycle, with the collection of dry leaves for the preparation of Rab, the organic fertilizer to be spread over the land.

Warli abodes, food habits & clothing point to an inherent austerity. Their homes are windowless spacious simple structures of wood, bamboo, karvi reeds, earth & cow dung with roofs of straw & dried leaves. Inside, the rooms are dark, empty & bare, except for a handful of possessions. Although they share their living spaces with their domestic animals like Dogs, Goats, Hens & even Cows cleanliness is overtly apparent. Surprisingly, there is no furniture & no storage containers like boxes, cupboards or trunks. The only food stored is the rice in the Kaangiis. All the clothes that they possess hang on a rope tied across the room.



Dried Gourd Shells



The Musical Instrument Tarpa

Their food is simple, varied & nutritious & consists of rice along with pulses like Vari, Udid, Tur & Chavli. This is accompanied by fresh & dried fish. It is only on festive days that they include the meat of a fowl, goat or pig. Their clothing is also scanty & minimal, yet practical – allowing for free movement. Men wear a lion cloth & sometimes a thin Kurta & a Turban. Women wear a nine yard sari which is tightly wound around their waist & thighs. The upper part of the body is covered by a choli & a piece of cloth called the Padar. Little girls wear skirts & cholis while little boys wear shorts. The women's cloths are brightly coloured & on festive days they look gorgeous with their hair well oiled & decorated with flowers, intricate pins & coloured ribbons. Apart from the cloths that they wear, the Warlis seem to have no material possessions. Except for a single gold bead threaded in black beads given at the time of marriage, the women have no gold or silver jewelry. Young children now go to government schools in the nearby villages, but very few of them, if any, pursue higher education. Even though there is no doctor in the village these people are relatively healthy. This is because traditional knowledge about medicinal plant is passed on down generations & is still practiced.

Although the Warlis celebrate Hindu Festival too, there is a conspicuous absence of a prayer corner in homes & a temple in the village – a feature that one assumes would be present in other Indian Villages. Of course, they visit temples & shrines but they are located deep in the forest, nearly half a day's walk from the village. Such visits are restricted to special occasions once or twice a year.

The Warlis are well known today amongst elite circles for their unique form of decorative art. They paint life with an intricacy of detail & an amazingly beautiful way of depicting every aspect that surround their daily routine. Traditionally, they painted on walls during the time of celebrations or for auspicious occasions, but gradually over the years the images & themes were also transferred to small curios made of bamboo, cloth, pots of mud & dried bottle gourd. One of the main themes that occur in their paintings is that of people dancing in spirals & open-ended circles. For the Warlis, time is akin to a circle – with cycles within cycles repeating themselves endlessly. They see themselves as joyous dancers in this time frame. This cyclic nature of time is played out in all spheres of their life and can be best seen in their annual cycle of work, thanksgiving, enjoyment & work again. Their art also expresses an interesting aspect of their inherent philosophy, that of austerity. All their stories, with its various moods & nuances are expressed with just two basic colours – the brown of the earth & the white of the rice paste.



Women creating Warli Paintings on the House Wall

Their paintings prominently depict Tigers, Corn Fields, Rates, Cockroaches, Horses, Snakes, Peacocks & other manifestations of nature. This reflects the unique relationship that they share with nature. Personified as Hirva, nature is seen as the provider of all their requirements & Warlis identify themselves with Pardhi, the hunter companion of Hirva & see themselves as Protectors of Nature.

This holistic view of life is expressed through many small daily practices. Warlis previously did not plough the land, as this would hurt Dharitri or Mother earth. Till very recently, they refused to use synthetic fertilizers, even though it was highly subsidized & at times distributed free. The Warlis knew with their inherent wisdom, that this would dry up the earth. While cooking, Bhakris are only slightly roasted, as over roasting & over cooking would result in the Grain Goddess Kansaari's back getting burnt.

A story by Chandrakant, a Warli, brings out the relationship between his tribe & the rest of Nature. The story is that of a Farmer who settled on a handsome price for his bull with a neighbouring farmer. After the deal was fixed, the seller offered a bidi to the prospective buyer. The buyer refused saying that he did not smoke. The first farmer then refused to sell his cow to the non smoker & set out to find another buyer. The story kept repeating itself & the tired farmer kept on negotiating with buyers till he found a bidi smoker to whom he sold his bull. When asked about this strange behaviour the farmer reasoned that if a person did not stop for a smoke, the bull would never get any time to rest either. So though the price was good, he would not sell his animal to such a person.

A story told by Jivya Mashe shows their strong belief that nature will always care for them. The crops had failed one year and some Warlis asked a rich farmer to give them food. The rich farmer was apologetic, saying that he had just enough for his own family & he would not be able to help them. He was surprised when the Warlis cheerfully told him not to worry as they had bearded friends in the forest, who would give them enough food. The farmer was curious to know who these bearded benefactors were. He followed the Warlis as they moved expertly into the jungle, pulling up long hairy tubers of yam & suran from the ground. These were their bearded friends. The forest is full of friends & the Warli will only take as much as is essential for survival.

Between 1800 & 1947 AD; Thane was under British rule. The Warli was marginalized & impoverished on many fronts. One of the most important policy decisions that affected them was that their community land was converted into ownership land, to facilitate tax collection. Business communities from Gujarat & Rajasthan quickly moved in & claimed ownership of land & the Warlis were reduced from being the rightful owners to lowly paid labourers on their own land.

In 1807 AD; the East India Company passed a proclamation that transferred the rights over all community forests in the country to the East India Company while in 1878 AD; the British passed an Act that made the Warli an illegal trespasser in his own forest. These policies changed the status of this tribal group, from a self sufficient & independent tribe, with adequate resources & unlimited wisdom, to a tribe of serfs & bonded labourers. Even today, the Warlis continue to fight to regain access to a tiny fraction of the land that was theirs, and access to the forest that they have lived off & protected for ages.

The life-support system of the Warli is linked with that of the forest. The Warli is dependent on his forest for Anna, Arogya & Aasra [Food, Wellbeing & Security]. The current paradigm of development & non-inclusive forest policy has put the Warlis through pain & alienation. The impact of continually being marginalized is best illustrated through relationship of the Warli with the tiger is one of respect. When a Warli heard the roar of a tiger, he would say 'Paaona Aala' meaning 'the Guest has come'. The footprints of this visiting God in a field was celebrated by breaking a coconut & smearing the space with Gulal. The presence of this footprint was welcomed as a sign of good harvest. Today, the Warlis are being denied their rights to forest & land in the name of providing protection to the tiger & the forest. It is time that these gentle people are given back their rightful place in the forest, as 'Jungle Cha Raja' or King of the Jungle. It is time Pardhi [Hunter] was reunited with Hirva [Nature].

