

Archives

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From Wall to Walls - the Warli paintings

Dahanu tensil is a small settlement, nestling at the foot of the Sahyadri hills. It is located in the northern part of the Western Ghats. In more urban geographical terms, it is in Thane district in Maharashtra. With has brought this tehsil into limelight is the living cultural heritage of the community of Warli. And the repositories of this heritage Warli painting are mostly tribals, living on forest produce.

The world famous Warli paintings (see inside covers) are the expressions of the Warli women, who decorate the interior of their homes with drawings. These have now transcended medium and time and are being reproduced in paper and cloth.

The general theme of all Warli paintings are Nature-related. For, their daily lives not just revolve around but depend on it. They plead with and please the gods who give them rains and sun shine, good crops and healthy animals. In each season, the god to be worshipped is specific. The god of rains is '*Naranadeva*' who is worshipped during festivities in May. Dance, music and feast form part of all Warli festivals.

The god grants the rains and the land is prepared along with the first rains. The first paddy seeds are sown in mid-August-September. When the grain is ready for harvest, the Warlis worship '*Hirva*', '*Himai*', '*Jhoting*' and '*Naranadeva*.' The field goddess, '*Savari*' is also paid due respects. During the harvest, '*Cheda*' and tiger-god '*Vaghadevta*' are propitiated to protect the yields from plunder and theft. The auspicious months for marriage begin after the harvest is done and the yield is threshed and stored.

The village priest is the most important person in the lives of the Warlis. He protects them from evil spirits witches, and conducts the rituals and leads the festivities. The Warlis do not undertake any task without first consulting the priest.

The famous Warli paintings are done by '*suvasins*' (married women, not widowed) while *Dhavalis* (the married female priests) sing traditional songs. The walls are first given a thorough wash with wet cow dung. On this is smeared red mud. This gives the walls a brownish finish. Women use bamboo twigs and thin rice paste to draw designs. It could be a scene from their daily lives, or some folk tale or any nature-related theme. These paintings are perishable and they do get rubbed off over a period. Fresh layer of background is prepared on each occasion. Some of the most common features found in the Warli paintings are trees, peacocks, other birds and animals.

IGNCA has in its archives, a collection of 62 Warli paintings, made on paper and cloth. The largest of them is a 2 X 3 ft painting on paper, depicting the daily life of the Warlis. There are some interesting paintings that tell a folk tale. For example, the painting 'Old man and seven daughters' has a story depicted.

An old man had seven daughters, who were thoroughly spoilt. He did all the work as they wiled their time away. One day, the man was unable to lift the bundle of chopped wood in the forest and called out for help. A crab offered him help. On reaching home, seeing the youngest daughter, the crab expressed a wish to marry the girl. She too agreed but the other sisters teased her. However, upon entering the house of the crab, she found that she had actually married a handsome young man. The entire story is

relayed in the painting.

There are paintings on the festivals like 'Diwali' and hunting scenes, showing various moments - animals being chased, men with killed animals etc. Now, the Warli paintings are being done on thick paper or cloth. A mixture of cow dung and red mud is applied on the canvas to give it the original monotonous background. The man who reached Warli to the outside world hails from the community. Jiva Soma Mahse is the man who first brought the paintings from the confines of the interior of Warli homes.

- Mangalam Swaminathan