



Warli Art: A Tribal Heritage in White Lines

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Abstract:

Warli art is one of the oldest forms of tribal expression in India, originating from the Warli tribe of Maharashtra. This research paper explores its origin, cultural significance, stylistic features, symbolic elements, and its transformation from ritualistic wall paintings to a globally recognized art form. By analysing its themes and motifs, this paper emphasizes how Warli art reflects the tribe's worldview and ecological wisdom.

Introduction:

India has the largest number of art forms anywhere in the world, mainly because its cultural heritage is rich, diverse and vibrant. Tribal people live in less accessible parts of the country, not on the open plains or along the great rivers. They are bonded to each other by rituals, their special ways of celebrating ceremonies at the time of birth, marriage, and also the first haircut or the piercing of the earlobes and so on. India's cultural landscape is enriched by diverse tribal communities, each contributing unique traditions of art, music, and storytelling. Among these, Warli art occupies a special place as a symbolic representation of harmony between human life and nature. Practiced by the Warli tribe inhabiting the Sahyadri ranges of Maharashtra and parts of Gujarat, this art form dates back to nearly 2500–3000 BCE. Unlike mainstream art, Warli paintings are not ornamental but deeply ritualistic, symbolic, and community-oriented. In this publication, we have explored tribal and folk paintings in various parts of the

country as part of our living traditions since pre-historic times to now.

Historical Background:

India has the largest concentration of tribes after Africa. 90 million people belong to the indigenous communities known as Adivasis or tribals. There are 573 tribes in India and tribal communities comprise about 8 percent of our population. The term 'tribe' usually denotes a social group bound together by kin and duty and associated with a particular territory. Every tribe is known for its outstanding cultural traits. Tribes such as Bhil's, Gonds, Murias, Sauras, Warli's and Rathwas are known for their paintings. Some of the tribal paintings are Pithora, Warli, Santhal and Saura whereas Picchvai, Mata ni pachedi, Patachitra and Phad are folk paintings. The Warli tribe is among the largest tribes in Maharashtra, concentrated in Thane, Palghar, and Nashik districts. Historically, Warli paintings were created during occasions such as weddings, harvests, and festivals. They were drawn on the walls of mud huts, using

rice paste as pigment and gum or water as a binding agent. The paintings were ephemeral in nature, made afresh with every occasion, reflecting the transient yet cyclical worldview of the tribe.

Origin:

The word 'Warli' is derived from Warla, meaning "piece of land" or "field". Warli paintings are primarily done on the walls of homes with rice paste during marriage rituals or after the harvest season. Warli is the main tribe to be found on the northern outskirts of Mumbai, in Western India and extends up to the Gujarat border. The Warli's inhabit small villages of thatched mud-huts, which are constructed in such a way that they all surround a central cell. The origin of the Warli's is yet unknown and no records of this art are found, but many scholars and folklorists believe that it can be traced to as early as the tenth century C.E. Traditionally, it was women who painted these wonderful paintings and were joined by men later. Warli art became popular in the early seventies. It was the only means of transmitting folklore to a general populace not well versed in the written word.

Themes and Motifs:

Warli paintings are narrative paintings which require performance gestures and movement with little scope for facial expression. Most of the characters are in dialogue with each other. The art form deals with themes that narrate the social lifestyle and activities of the Warli's i.e. hunting, fishing, farming, forest activities and village life. During the harvest season, weddings and births, their houses are adorned with paintings. The Warli's are predominantly farmers whose life is governed by the monsoon cycle. As their life is closely linked to nature, they worship it in different forms—Sun and moon,

God of thunder, lightning, wind, rain and several others. Gods are worshipped according to the seasons. After the first rice cycle, they worship the god of rain and it's called the festival of Naranadeva. This is then followed by the worship of household gods, in the festival of Hirva, Nimai and Jhoting. Next is the festival of Tiger God, and then is Kansari, the goddess of grain. The paintings depict humans and animals amidst a festive atmosphere – a group of men and women dancing around a person playing the harp, dancing peacocks etc. Men and women are depicted engaged in a harvest scene, cultivating land and hunting and many more day-to-day activities. Spiral formations of men and women and concentric circular designs in Warli Paintings are symbolic of the Tarpa dance. For Warli's, life is best represented by a circle which doesn't have a beginning or an end. At all occasions—birth, marriage and death—they draw circles. Death is not an end for them; but a new beginning. This circular and spiral movement gives an everlasting joy. Warli art revolves around the interdependence of humans and nature.

Material and Technics:

The Warli painting is simplistic in character with human figures made of triangles and stick like hands and legs and a variety of flora and fauna in geometrical shapes. Warli paintings are practised generation after generation and there is no formal training given to the artists. Warli art uses a white paste (often rice paste with water) applied with bamboo brushes on a red-ochre background (mud and dung) to depict village life. Alternatively, modern materials like poster or acrylic colours, and fabrics like handmade paper, cloth, or even walls, can be used. Techniques involve first preparing the background, then sketching designs directly on the surface and applying white paste with

brushes or fingers to form basic geometric shapes.

Symbolism in Warli Art:

Warli art, a tribal art form from Maharashtra, India, uses simple geometric shapes as powerful symbols to express deep cultural and spiritual meanings. Circles, triangles, and squares, along with human and animal figures, represent nature, human life, and their interconnectedness. These symbols are not merely decorative; they reflect the Warli people's beliefs, their relationship with nature, and their social customs.

Here's a breakdown of the symbolism:

- **Circles:**

Represent the sun, moon, and the cyclical nature of life, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all things.

- **Triangles:**

Symbolize mountains and trees, representing the natural world and the Warli' connection to the earth.

- **Squares:**

Often depict a sacred enclosure, the "chauk," which can represent a village, a house, or a space for rituals and ceremonies. They can also symbolize the human world and community.

- **Human Figures:**

Typically depicted using two joined triangles, one representing the upper body and the other the lower body, signifying the balance between body and spirit, masculine and feminine, and the harmony within the human form.

- **Tarpa Dance:**

The Tarpa, a trumpet-like instrument, is central to Warli art and culture. The dance performed around the Tarpa player symbolizes community, continuity, and the circle of life.

- **Other Symbols:**

Animals like peacocks and cows, and daily tools like sickles and ploughs, are also depicted, showing reverence for the natural world and the tools that sustain their lives.

Contemporary Relevance:

With modernization, Warli art has moved beyond mud walls to Canvas paintings and murals in urban spaces, Handicrafts, fabrics, pottery, and home décor. Global recognition in exhibitions, fashion, and even corporate branding. Organizations and NGOs are working to preserve Warli art by empowering tribal artists through workshops and international platforms. However, there is also the challenge of commercialization, which risks diluting its ritualistic essence.

Conclusion:

Warli art is not merely decorative it is a visual narrative of tribal life, culture, and philosophy. Its geometric simplicity encodes profound meanings about the relationship between humans, society, and nature. As globalization expands its reach, preserving the authenticity of this art form is essential to maintain its cultural integrity. Warli art has gained international recognition, captivating audiences with its unique style and connection to nature.

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