

Warli: A Pedagogical Tool for Primary Classes

Ridhi Sharma*

Abstract

India is known for its rich diversity as it is home to different religions, cultures, languages and art forms. Art plays a very important role in a child's life. It helps a child to develop motor skills (both fine and gross), appreciates numeracy, reduces stress, builds a child's self-esteem, enhances creativity and can also act as a medium for starting a conversation. Integrating various Art forms with school subjects helps to facilitate specific skill development and holistic fun-based learning among students. This is especially true in primary classes where an interdisciplinary approach is followed in order to build a foundation for later classes. This article focuses on how integrating such Indian Art form known as warli can lead to better conceptual clarity among students in different subjects.

INTRODUCTION

With a background of abundant cultures, India is divinely blessed with diverse yet unique folk arts and traditions. We have introduced rich picturesque art forms which are much admired by the world. These range from beautiful Madhubani paintings from Mithila a region of Bihar to Tanjore paintings of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu, in Phad from the state of

Rajasthan to Gond Painting of Madhya Pradesh and so on.

One such naïve and treasured folk art form in India is 'Warli'. Warli painting is a style of tribal art crafted by people of Warli tribe mainly residing in the North Sahyadri range in Maharashtra. This range encompasses cities and town such as Dahanu, Talasari, Jawahar, Palghar, Mokhada and Vikramgad of Palghar district. Though the tribe inhabits

*Independent Consultant, TCS

in proximity to the highly populous city life of Mumbai, the *Warli* tribe has maintained a distance from the contemporary culture of the metropolis.

The existence of *Warli* art can be traced back to more than ten thousand years. The art being a form of non-verbal communication, is vastly influenced by their ingenuous lifestyle practices and customs. While comprehending the harmonious interdependency of nature and human life, their everyday life practices and even the environment-friendly things they use, are seen to be a part of their art culture. Such value-conservation of nature, simplicity of living and celebration of a way of life-need to be re-emphasied in the twenty-first century.

WARLI ART

Since ancient times, *Warli* artists use their huts made of clay as a canvas. The walls of the huts are usually

smearred with the terracotta providing the signature earthen backdrop. Using a sticky paste of rice and water, the illustration are painted with the help of chewed bamboo sticks.

Warli art is purely based on their life and its events. Prominence of mountains, coastline, harvest, animals, plants and trees in their art-portrays their love towards the nature and its importance in their lives. Not only the landscape, even the animals carts, utensils and musical instruments that the people of the *Warli* tribe use in their daily lives, is artistically illustrated. Prominently drawn images of gods and goddesses and worshiping practices also inculcates the idea of their devotion in every celebration. Interestingly, no straight lines are used in this art. The elements consists of circles, triangles, squares, curved lines, running dots instead. As stated earlier, originally *Warli* art consisted of white figures on a mud-brown background. Later,



black became predominant. Recently, the use of Maroon and varying shades of brown on white background can also be seen. These figures, although static, seem full of life and movement.

Though being so captivating in nature, *Warli* as an art came into limelight around early 70s, after it caught the eye of government and native NGOs, who lauded and supported this art form. The story would have been much different, if it wasn't for constant efforts of a local artist, Shri Jivya Soma Mashe, who started to draw in this art form. Jivya was born in 1934 in the Ganjad village near Dahanu in Palghar district of Maharashtra. He lost his mother at the age of eleven, after which he stopped conversing with anyone, rather he kept drawing on sand. He gradually started to observe and learn from the women of the community who were raising him. He assisted them while they drew *Warli* paintings on the outer walls of their house during festivals and other religious celebrations. Though men of the community discouraged the idea of a male helping women in any of the household activities, Mashe's persistent devotion for drawing consequently, made everyone change their outlook. His drawings evolved with his age. In 1970, during an exhibition in Delhi 'Apna-Utsav' festival, *Warli* paintings were exhibited which included Mashe's work. This was the turning point for the *Warli* art and artisans. In sometime his work was recognised around the

world and Mashe received a number of honors and awards. In 1976, he was felicitated by Mrs. Indira Gandhi with a National Award. He had received the title of 'Shilpa Guru' by the Ministry of Textiles in 2002 and was presented with the *Prince Claus Award* in 2009. He was awarded the *Padma Shri* in 2011, becoming the first tribal artist to be honored with this award. Mashe passed away in 2018, but his legacy is being continued by two of his sons and grandchildren.

Likewise other art forms, *Warli* art has made a long journey since its recognition. Use of skillfully drawn figures printed on bright or contrasting backgrounds of fabric can be seen on sarees, bags, wallets, even mugs, earthen pots, decorative items for homes, canvased walls of the metro station, airports, almost everywhere. In 2018, in Mangaluru, Karnataka, a government school decided to beautify the school premises to celebrate twenty successful years of the establishment. They wanted to do something unique. With consensus, a renowned *Warli* artist was approached who outlined *Warli* art on the walls, while the parents of students of the school volunteered to fill colours in the outlines.

WARLI AS PEDAGOGY

This art form fascinating makes *Warli* art amenable to pedagogical use. Since *Warli* consists of simple geometrical figurines, it can be used in varied contexts. It can easily depict traditional

lifestyles as well as contemporary social issues. Indeed, the Warli art form too, had undergone a sea change, thanks to greater exposure, and its own inherent adaptability. Further, the artists seem open to the idea of experimenting and evolving.



The image above is an inspired version of an airplane in Warli art form. Such inclusions in folk art are crucial, as the general population can relate more to stories or depictions which include elements of an urban

lifestyle. Though it is important to keep the fundamentals like agriculture and other farming activities alive in the art form, as they are the crux of *Warli* art, regrettably are under-appreciated by the urban communities as these activities aren't practiced on regular basis in an urban-setting. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of an educator to introduce the learners at an early age with such art forms and with as many relatable elements as possible.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Children use language for a variety of purposes to recall the past (event, person or object in the past), to express their fears or plans, to explain things, to describe, and to respond to situations. *Warli* art can be used by the teacher 'to create an environment which permits children to make continuous attempts to link the use of language with life experiences and objects' (Kumar, 2004).

GENDER SENSITIVITY

The above (self-created) image is an attempt to portray birth of a girl child



to a couple. While the proud parents are holding their beloved new born daughter, walking towards the sacred place, the people around are playing musical instruments and dancing to the tunes in its celebration. Such pictures are a great resource for creative and analytical talk. Children need to be taught about gender equality and sensitivity. Since decades, India has been a slave to the idea of preferring a male child over a female child. Through education, governmental policies, and awareness programmes, this attitude towards the preference is gradually changing, however it still remains as one of the major social issues in our country. The above picture is an effort to sensitise the viewer towards the concern of gender equality and equity.

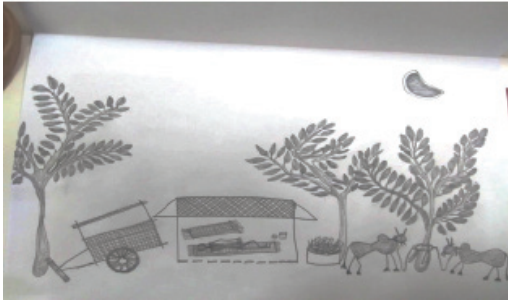
INCLUSION

We live in an inter-dependent world: human-nature, animate-inanimate. None of us can meet all our needs on our own. The above (self-created) picture brings out the reality of inter-dependence, it also accepts and celebrates diversity.

A sense of belongingness for every being and opportunities to cherish life with uniform prospects, is strived to be portrayed in the image above. As a society, we must all try to live in harmony with each other, respecting one another and helping one another. There are things in life which can be learnt and experienced well, if we broaden the horizon of our mind and appreciate while accepting love and compassion the ones who have been excluded.



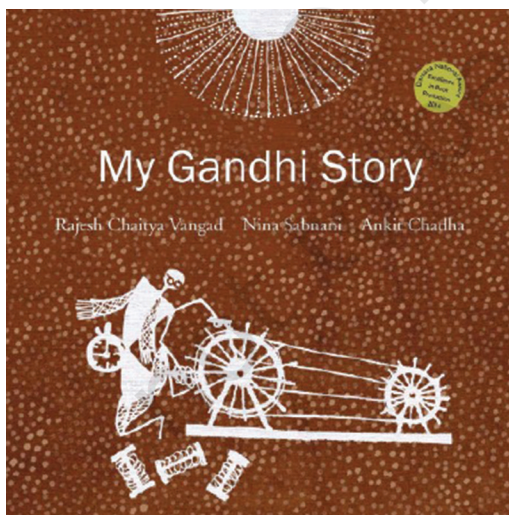
DIGNITY OF LABOUR



The above image showcases a man resting under a roof after concluding his tiring day of working in the field while the two 'cows' seem to be enjoying a chat about their day, under the moon lit sky. Labour and rest are universal. The picture can trigger discussion on various kinds of labour, visible and invisible.

School Projects

Young minds can be encouraged to draw or even develop a book of their



own; perhaps the whole class can come out with a journal, which can be illustrated in the Warli art form. The possibilities are boundless. Teachers may tell learners that such books do exist, as in the following:

Authors: Nina Sabnani, Ankit Chadha
Illustrator: Rajesh Chaitya Vangad

The content and illustrations in this book show Gandhiji's ouster from the train in Africa, and his determination to win justice through non-violence. This book is the result of three minds: an artist of the *Warli* tradition, an animation filmmaker and a storyteller come together in a unique collaboration to create a very visual Gandhi story. In an interview, the authors recall that during the book launch, many children initially mistook the charkha to be an old kind of bicycle! The artwork is breathtaking. Photos of the great personality fill the pages alongside the *Warli* illustrations that depict Gandhiji's lifelong journey and struggle. The illustrations greatly enhance the narrative; in fact, they may be studied as paintings on their own merit.

CONCLUSION

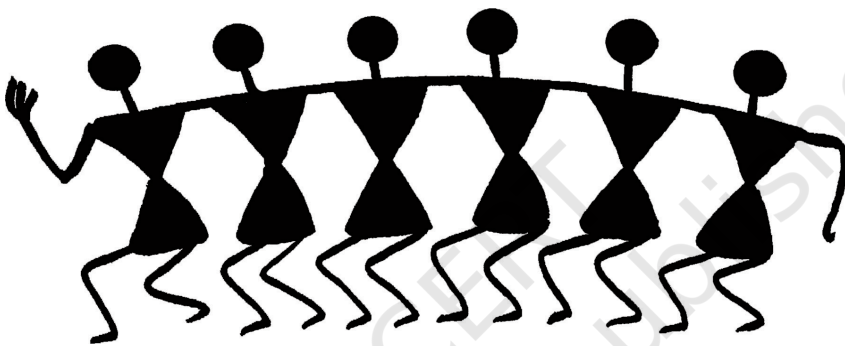
The beauty of our everyday life can be easily displayed through the symphony of silent patterns. *Warli* on the other hand, aspires the art of storytelling with a message to live in harmony with nature and other beings. Novice teachers, particularly those who are to teach the primary grades, are sometimes at a loss when it comes to drawing.

They can, however, easily use *Warli* without much differently. If still different, they may download and photocopy a few *Warli* illustrations.

Interacting about a picture can be very fruitful from the point of view of developing children's language and concepts. As the children develop interest, different dimensions of response can be elicited: finding, relating, reasoning and predicting.

The first 6 years eight month of a child's life, known as the early childhood stage, are globally acknowledged to be the most critical years for cognitive development. (NCERT, 2004)

Investing in these years, through language, art, and values is of crucial importance to ensure an enabling environment for every child.



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