

MUMBAI

Helping Warli artists profit from their work



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Mumbai: The unique art of the Warli tribe has steadily gained popularity over the years. But thanks to its simple lines, it is easily replicated and often is, and screen- printers, not the artists, make money out of it. The Raah Foundation, a Mumbai-based NGO, aims to change that, with the first Warli Art Studio, in Jawhar, Palghar district. The studio wants to contemporise the art form and ensure that the commercial value of the work is transferred to tribal artists directly.

The foundation's proposal was accepted under a project called 'Rural Livelihood Creation in the Indian Crafts Sector,' a collaboration between the Tata Trusts and the Harvard University South Asia Institute (SAI). Raah is one of six organisations from different parts of the country selected under the project. "The primary objective of these grants was to encourage social enterprises like Raah Foundation to implement innovations in their crafts enterprises that would benefit rural artisans," said Dr. Shashank Shah, Project Director and Fellow, Harvard SAI.

The studio is a dedicated centre for capacity-building and training of tribal artisans to sustain the Warli art form and provide quality and design inputs for better output, scale and innovation, Dr. Shah says. It is equipped with machines to cut fibreboard into different shapes and polish it. Warli designs are then hand-painted on them to make complete products. The studio was established in six months, says Dr. Shah.

"When we started working on the livelihood issues of Warli tribals, we realised that the art form was eroding," says Dr. Sarika Kulkarni, CEO of Raah. "Due to lack of commercial value to the work they produced, the artists were quitting it, and even taking up jobs at brick mines or sand mines." The foundation brought over 50 Warli artists to Mumbai, where they were trained on modern nuances of the art form using the studio facilities.

"We tried to give them a commercial viewpoint," Dr. Kulkarni says, "and now with studio in place, they design lamp posts, trays, book stand, small tables, paint saris, and many other things." The items created are sold in the foundation's shops or in exhibitions. They have also got orders from a number of companies. "We give the artists' money directly to them."

The artists are also turning entrepreneur, according to Dr. Shah: "Six of them have started micro enterprises where they have been encouraged to make products independently and either sell directly or supply to Raah Impact Ventures, a sister concern of Raah Foundation."