



ANNUAL ACTIVITY REPORT 2023-24
DARICHA FOUNDATION



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ABOUT DARICHA FOUNDATION

Daricha Foundation is a small Kolkata based NGO that has been working in the field of folk and tribal arts of West Bengal for over ten years. It was established at a time when there was practically no online presence for structured, in-depth information on India's folk and tribal culture.

Founded by Ratnaboli Bose, the society's Secretary, the members of Daricha Foundation's governing body are Goutam Ghose (renowned, award winning Kolkata based film maker) - President; Jaideep Ganguli (management consultant) - Treasurer; Subir Das (chartered accountant & Clean Energy activist); Prattyush Banerjee (Indian classical musician) - Assistant Secretary; Subir Datta (retired professor); Prosenjit Dasgupta (author & folk researcher) and Anandi Ghose (film maker).

Daricha's primary goal was the launch of a website that would deliver authentic and in-depth knowledge on West Bengal, to begin with, and help stem the paucity of knowledge and awareness on both the arts and its practitioners. It would act as a window (which is what "Daricha" means in Urdu) through which such knowledge would instantly flow to the public.

The website, www.daricha.org is a content rich knowledge domain, with a special focus on genres that are vanishing or have received less exposure. Through its continued focus on research, documentation, dissemination and promotion of public consciousness of West Bengal's intangible cultural heritage, the website features over fifty-five folk traditions currently, including many aspects of Santal culture.

In addition to its knowledge portal, Daricha Foundation has also been active in helping create sustainable and dignified means of livelihood for artists through activities that help revive and promote their arts. This includes workshops, training programmes and collaborations with festival organizers. Several workshops have also been conducted within the Santal community in their villages over the past few years, in an attempt to preserve traditional knowledge. In a small way, marketing of some of the products made by Santal women and other folk artists has also been undertaken, primarily through Daricha's Instagram page and a few retail stores.

Taking stock of our achievements since we started out in 2013, we would like to believe that we have made an impact, however small, in the promotion and preservation of some aspects of traditional rural arts. But we have miles to go and promises to keep.

YEAR IN REVIEW

Key Highlights & Achievements

We began the eleventh year of our existence this year. Through ups and downs, with a little help from our friends and family, a few grants, oodles of enthusiasm, coupled with hard work and determination, we have not fared badly. We remain small, and have impacted not large clusters, but many individuals. We shall continue with our research and dissemination-based activities but also concentrate on promoting Santal Sohrai paintings, an initiative that we have recently undertaken.

Collaborations, Support and Upskilling

Our project under the grant from Hyundai Art for Hope 2023 ended with the exhibition in Delhi and Chennai in February - March 2023, but our support for the two interns for the craft of Sherpai under master artisan Bholanath Karmakar continued. With donations and our own resources, we expected to continue stipends till June, but managed to pay daily wages to the interns till December 2023.



In June, we attempted yet another design development exercise with lac doll maker, Brindaban Chanda. Last year we had got him to craft lac doll fridge magnets which were very popular; this year, we got him to craft garden stakes with his lac coated figurines of colourful birds. The beautiful birds fitted on metal rods to be used in gardens or flower pots were very well received.



In July, Tata Steel Foundation requested us to send Santal wall painters for a residency they had planned in preparation for their 10th Samvaad event. Samvaad, since 2014, has emerged as an ecosystem that brings together tribes of India and beyond for constructive



Sraboni, Maiko, Parboti, Rathi and Badani , the expert Sohrai Likhan artists, try their hand on paper and canvas for the first time, at the TSF Residency.

dialogue, enabling key elements of tribal identity to thrive and to be celebrated and to propel tribal youth to drive positive change. We were first invited to screen our documentary on Sohrai wall art, “Sohrai Likhan” at a pre-Samvaad event in 2018, and we have been collaborating with them ever since.

Not ever having painted on any surface other than walls, the women were understandably tentative handling paper and canvas, but soon got over their nervousness and were able to successfully channel their creativity and produce collaborative art with tribal artists from other states which was showcased at the Samvaad festival later in the year.

Constantly on the lookout for marketing opportunities for our folk artists, we visited Mumbai in August to meet with members of the Paramparik Karigar team. We were invited to present some of our natural fibre ornament artists and bamboo artisans at their upcoming exhibition in Mumbai in March 2024.

Bamboo craftspeople in West Bengal are primarily from the Mahali community and we invited Shrinath Tudu, who crafts beautiful bamboo products and whom we have been supporting for several years, to prepare for the exhibition.

For the natural fibre ornament makers, all from the Santal community, we first organized a five-day workshop in October, on improving the finishing of their products, in preparation for Mumbai. Chhabi Besra and her niece Tuhina came from Birbhum and Bardhaman respectively, while Kunami Mandi and Sonamoni Mandi came from Purulia.



Kunami Mandi models her creation

We brought on board, artist and jewellery designer, Shohini Gupta, to guide them. Our member, Mrinalini Mukherjee, too contributed with her designs. The young women were quick to learn the requisite finishing skills and were provided all the necessary components required for a more “urban friendly” and aesthetically pleasing finish. In mastering new designs, they also learnt how to embellish their work with jute and cotton yarn and the end result was very satisfying indeed. The girls happily modelled their own works of art.



Sonamoni Mandi models her creation



Tuhina Mandi models her creation



Chhabi Besra's creation



The Natural Fibre Ornaments workshop in progress

Meanwhile, we applied for a grant from the Hyundai Art for Hope 2024, hoping to bring to fruition a long-awaited dream – that of converting the traditional Sohrai Wall Art of the Santals to paper.



Walls painted by Sraboni Baskey

Our goal was to at least help preserve the compositions of this dying tradition and at the same time, offer better livelihood opportunities to a diminishing group of tribal women, the last practitioners of this vanishing form. Considering we were the outsiders, the “Diku”, we could only suggest and enable them as best as we could. That the art was getting modernized in most Santal homes was a conscious choice made by members of the community, and we hoped that the traditional artists would not give up their art, if properly incentivized.

Irrespective of whether we would win the grant or not, we jump-started the process and conducted a five-day workshop with the women in November. Choosing previously identified expert practitioners of traditional Sohrai Likhan (Wall Art), we set to work, familiarizing the women with the new medium of paper and working on sizes that were about one-tenth of their massive walls. We bought hand-made paper and brushes and invited folk artist, Seramuddin Chitrakar to teach the women how to extract and use plant-based gum as a fixative for the diluted clays and minerals that they would use on paper.



Seramuddin Chitrakar was kind enough to teach the women how to extract glue from tamarinds and the bael fruit

The women successfully experimented with mixing the clay with the gum in the correct proportions but struggled with using a brush to reproduce their work on small sheets of paper. They were skilled at coating mud walls with sweeping movements of their arms and then quickly etching intricate motifs on the damp clay with swift, expert flicks of their wrists, but wielding a paint brush on small sheets of paper took them some practice. Satisfied with their initial efforts, we kept our fingers crossed that Hyundai Motors would get back to us.

November also saw us at Jamshedpur at the Samvaad 2023, the annual tribal conclave enabled by Tata Steel Foundation. The five days of Samvaad 2023 held each year between November 15 and 19, celebrated the skills, culture and diversity of India's tribal communities on a massive scale over the course of five days. November 15 is the birth date of the great tribal leader, Birsa Munda. Representing their communities at the event were youth leaders, indigenous healers, artists and artisans from more than 120 tribes.

We sent our Mahali and Santal artists working with bamboo and natural fibre respectively to participate. The group comprised bamboo artisans, Shrinath Tudu and his son Prabir; and ornament makers Chhabi Besra, Tuhina Mandi and Kunami Mandi. They attended workshops specially designed for tribal artists and artisans during the day and in the evenings, sold their products at our stall.



Brisk sales at the Daricha stall

Documenting Joynagar-Majilpur dolls

West Bengal is famous for its variety of clay dolls and figurines. Once popular as a source of entertainment for children and as votive figurines, the demand has drastically reduced over time. Yet these clay doll artists continue to uphold their art and struggle to sustain themselves. The unique dolls of Joynagar-Majilpur have been in existence for at least 250 years and were traditionally sold at fairs and festivals like the local Rath mela. These are moulded toys. We visited Shambhu Nath Das who belongs to the eight generation of a such doll makers at his home-cum-workshop at the beginning of winter. Shambhu, while demonstrating his craft, told us that a recent spurt in demand from craft shops and online

stores have helped him stay afloat.



Lac Dolls for a Christmas Bazar

Baromarket of Mumbai had requested us to send us lac dolls suitable for their Christmas Bazar. We requested Brindaban Chanda, the last traditional lac doll maker, to craft suitable designs and he came up with beautiful figures of colourful birds and stars.



In Search of Songs of the Fields



The women of Tilgora village getting ready to sing Tainr geet

Research and documentation being our primary goal, we balance it with our efforts to directly empower the artists we engage with. Many ethnic communities have a huge repertoire of agricultural songs which were once sung as they worked on the fields. Many of these songs relate to particular activities on the field. But the tradition has faded and there are not very many people who remember these songs. We have been reaching out to members of Kurmi Mahato and Santal communities for some years.

We visited a Kurmi-Mahato community in Tilgora, Purulia in January to document some Jhumur songs. The Jhumur is particular to certain communities of the regions of Purulia, Medinipur and Bankura. The original four-line Jhumur songs were songs of the field which certain communities would sing as they cultivated their land. These were the early days of Jhumur. Songs of the field were known as Taainr Jhumur – taainr (taanr) meaning fields. The women would often sing aloud the songs, hoping to get a response from some unseen person - and this was referred to as Jhumur Haanka, Haanka literally means calling out to someone not in the immediate vicinity. Cultivators would compose couplets and songs right on the fields while doing their work. These songs, with their lilting rhythm, simple tunes and easily understood lyrics, were songs about love, sorrow, joy and everyday concerns which affected the lives of these ordinary people. The songs were not spiritual or profound in form or content, and were sung in the local vernacular. The field trip was more of a recce and while we found a few women who remembered the songs, our search has only just begun. We were however lucky to meet Bhakti Banwar who had a huge repertoire of such songs.



Hyundai Art for Hope 2024



In January, we received the good news from Hyundai Motor India Foundation. Our Santal girls had been awarded the grant for our project “From Mud Walls to Urban Spaces: Preserving Traditional Sohrai Wall Art of Santal Women in Purulia” and we soon set to work.



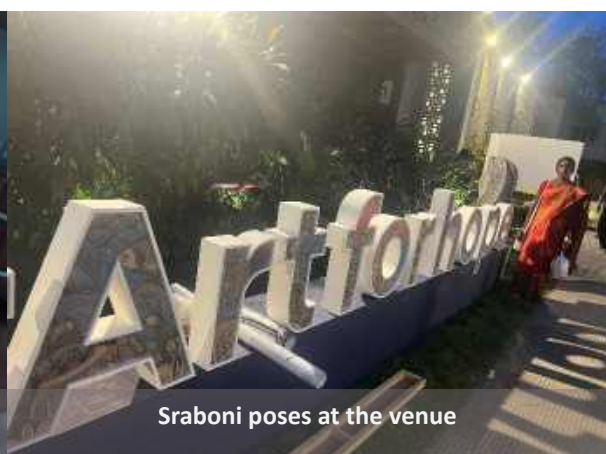
Our objective for this project was to workshop with three women, Sraboni Baskey, Badani Murmu and Parboti Murmu, experts in traditional wall art and have them produce, by the end of two months, at least forty paintings which would be exhibited at the Hyundai Art for Hope 2024 event in Delhi in end March. Ratnaboli Bose, Secretary, was to be part of the team, in charge of facilitation and documentation.



Over the next few days, the women wished to add colour to their palette and began extracting natural hues from stones, indigo and leaves and mixing these with their clay, dung and soot based colours, achieved some wondrous shades of beige, green, teal, brown and terracotta.



By the first week of March, we had over fifty gorgeous paintings ready and had a hard time deciding what to short list. But our best take-away from this workshop was the look of wonder on the faces of Sraboni, Parboti and Badani as they completed each painting.



The venue for the Hyundai Art for Hope 2024 exhibition was the Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi. The trip to the capital was a huge adventure for Srabani and Badani - they were very excited and full of wonder all through the journey; this was the first time that they were going on a long-distance journey in an airconditioned train. Unfortunately, Parboti had to stay back.

Over five days between March 27 and 31st, the works of 40 grantees were on display. The women were thrilled with the appreciation they received. They also demonstrated their traditional technique on a mock wall for the dignitaries present on the inaugural day. This was the first time traditional Santal wall art was being viewed outside of their villages.



Our Tribal Artisans in Mumbai

March was a busy month for us, with back-to-back events in two cities. Prior to the Hyundai Delhi event, Paramparik Karigar had its Art & Craft Exhibition at a venue in Shivaji Park, Dadar in mid-March and Daricha Foundation was invited to participate for the first time. Shrinath Tudu's beautiful bamboo boxes and lamps and Chhabi Besra and her team's ornaments, so skilfully and lovingly woven, drew a lot of interest, being distinctly different from what visitors were used to seeing. The footfall was not as much as we had hoped for, but participating at a Mumbai event was a great learning experience for the artists.



FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Donations from members and well-wishers and small grants continue to be our chief source of sustenance. The Hyundai Motor Foundation grant that was given directly to the artists but was managed by us was of immense help to start off our Sohrai painting preservation project.

We hope to be able to take attract more grants for the preservation of cultural traditions and continue our field documentation, though this is increasingly becoming a daunting task. However, we continue to reach out to both government and private agencies with a view to promote folk and tribal arts and

provide improved market access for the artisans that we work with. With our Section 12AA Registration under the Income Tax Act, 1961 and approval to receive donations eligible for Section 80G deductions under the Income Tax Act, 1961, we also hope to receive enough donations to help us continue our work in the following year.

LOOKING AHEAD

What we would like to achieve over the coming years continues to be:

- Facilitate workshops by master artists/artisans at the grassroot level, within folk and tribal communities, to help preserve the legacy of traditional knowledge. In particular, we will continue our efforts to bring the Sohrai wall art of the Santals, newly recreated on paper, to the limelight.
- Conduct field trips, particularly to villages of lesser-known ethnic communities who are gradually losing their identity.
- Document endangered agricultural songs of ethnic communities in Purulia.
- Collaborate with organizers of fairs and festivals so that craftspeople/performing artists find newer opportunities
- Direct marketing of folk and tribal crafts either through our Instagram page, existing e-commerce platforms and domestic craft stores.

