CHAPTER 1

1.1 GEOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF WARLIS
There was time when the Indian subcontinent was blessed with an amazing variety of natural life, made possible by diverse geographical features and climatic conditions. Innumerable early communities, which we now refer to as Tribes and Adivasis, lived as an integral part of nature harvesting its bounties. Even though each tribe has its own lifestyle, specific habitat, food habits, customs and rituals, it shared a common divinity with the others. Nature was their God, their Guide, their very reason for being. One of the communities living in Maharashtra is the Warlis.

![Serenity of Warli](image)
The Warlis are one of the major tribes of Maharashtra. The Warlis are largely concentrated in the Dahanu and the Talaseri Taluka of Thane district of Maharashtra. The region lies in the Sahyadri Hills north of Western Ghats (Prakash, 2004). Warli or Vari tribe is an Ancient East Indian Tribe of India. They are cultivators and gatherers, growing a single crop, usually paddy, for subsistence or gathering forest produce and dominating livestock. Their lives are undoubtedly dependent on nature. There is a belief among historians and scholars that the tradition of Warli may be traced as early as the 10th century A.D. The art was first discovered in the early seventies.

The Warlis have a deep reverence for their spirit and deities. Warli religion is based on awe and fear. They worship gods chiefly to avoid their wrath (Sabavala, 1983).

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They are well known to have a faith in Tiger God (Vaghai). They consider the Tiger a symbol of life and regeneration. As such they do not have well built temples, but have carved wooden statues of tigers with or without other components of nature (warlis culture)³. When a Warli heard a roar of a tiger, he would say Paona Aala meaning the guest has come. The footprints of this visiting God in a field was celebrated by breaking coconut and smearing the space with gulal. The presence of this footprint was welcomed as a sign of good harvest⁴.

Minute changes in sunrise and sunset and the cry of a particular bird, herald the onset of the rainy season- ushering in a period of plenty and cause for joy. Since Warli tribals are agriculturists, Hariali Deva, the god of plants, also occupies a prominent place in the Warli pictograph. The holistic view of life is expressed through a number of

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many small daily practices. Warlis previously did not plough the land, as this would hurt Dharitri or mother Earth. The life support system of Warli is linked with that of the forest. The Warli is dependent on his forest for Anna, Arogya and Aasra (food, wellbeing and security) (Taneja, 2010).

The art of Warlis at any rate seems to belong to the phase classified as Neolithic in the rock painting of Central India. In recent years their art has become a celebrated form of folk art and has gained popularity for wise.

Figure 4 Warli Home (inside)

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The language of Warlis contains many Sanskrit, Gujrati, Marathi and Hindi Words. Among the Sanskrit words Dharti or Dharitri (earth), Gayatri (Cow), Sura (liquor), Maniya (Man) and Pavana (wind). Warli also have their own archaic tongue which can still be distinguished by words like Vahuk (cucumber), Vepar (to cook), Lisan (ladder), Bahara (broom), and Lothi (young girl).7

![Warli Home](image)

Figure 5 Warli Home

Warli abodes food habits and clothing point to an inherent austerity. Their homes are windowless spacious simple structures of wood, bamboo, karvi reeds, earth and cow dung with roofs of straw and dried leaves. Inside the rooms are dark and empty except for a handful of possessions. Although they share their living

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spaces with their domestic animals like dogs, goats, hens and even cows, cleanliness is overtly apparent. Surprisingly there is no furniture and no storage containers like boxes, cupboards or trunks. The only food storage is the rice in the Kaanjiis.

All the clothes that they possess hang on a rope tied across the room. Their food is simple, varied and nutritious and consists of rice along with pulses like Vari, Udad, Tur and Chavli. This accompanied by fresh and dried fish. It is only in festive days that they include a meat of a fowl, goat or a pig. Their clothing is also scanty and minimal yet practical- allowing for free movement. Men wear a loin cloth and sometimes a thin kurta and a turban. Women wear a nine yard sari, which is tightly wound around their waist and thighs. The upper part of the body is covered by a choli and a piece of cloth called Padar. Little girls wear skirts and cholis while little boys wear shorts.
The women’s clothes are brightly colored and on festive days they look gorgeous with their hair well oiled and decorated with flowers, intricate pins and colored ribbons. Apart from the clothes they wear, the Warlis seem to have no material possessions. Except for a single gold beaded thread in black beads given at the time of marriage, the women have no gold or silver jewelry (Dalmia, 1988)\textsuperscript{8}

CHAPTER 1

1.2 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF WARLI PAINTINGS
The art of Warlis at any rate seems to belong to the phase classified as Neolithic in the rock paintings of Central India. This period is categorized by paintings done in white outline, triangular humans and animals with geometrical designs on the walls of the caves.

Since pre-historic times there have been the artistic aspirations of early man revealed through excavations at several sites in India dating back to the Neolithic period (Bhavnani, 1978).

Warli art was first discovered in the early seventies. This old tribal art is two dimensional, with the perspective or proportion. There are no records of the

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exact origin of this art. Mr. K.J. Save in his book, “The Warlis” corroborates this, “Many Warlis claim that their original home was in Namnagar or Nagarhaveli in the Daman Territory. Almost invariably they say that they have come from the north, either from Dharampur or Daman Territory”.

This art form is similar to the pre-historic cave paintings in its execution. In her book Painted World of Warlis; Yashodhara Dalmiya claimed that the Warlis carry on a tradition sketching back to 2500 or 3000 BCE. Their mural paintings are similar to those done between 500 and 10,000 BCE in the rock shelters of Bhimbetka, in Madhya Pradesh. Warli paintings have various subjects or
themes, which presents a picture of their daily life. This old tribal art is two dimensional with no perspective or proportion. Each painting has various elements giving a huge outlook. These paintings are different from any other folk paintings because there is no depiction of mythological figures and religious icons.\textsuperscript{11} It obtains its motivation from the rituals and festivities of the tribe, with the main focus on the occasions like birth, death, and marriage. Their life is closely linked with nature so one of their themes also depicts the forms of nature i.e. sun and moon, rain, wind, lightening, and god of thunder. At all occasions they draw circles, which have neither an end nor a beginning. They believe that death is not the end but just another beginning and also that the circular patterns give never ending joy.

These extremely rudimentary paintings use a very basic graphic vocabulary: a circle, a triangle and a square. The circle and a triangle come from their observation of nature; the circle

\textsuperscript{11} Indian Folklife, Arts, Crafts, Folklife, A quarterly newsletter from National Folklore Support Centre, Volume 1, Issue 6, January 2001.
representing the sun and the moon, the triangle derived from mountains and pointed trees.

Only the square seems to obey a different logic and seems to be a human invention, indicating a sacred enclosure or a piece of land. So the central motif in each ritual painting is the square, the Cauk or Caukat, inside, there is a Palaghat, the Mother Goddess, symbolizing fertility. Significantly male gods are unusual among the Warli and are frequently related to spirits which have taken human shape. The central motif in these ritual paintings is surrounded by scenes portraying hunttings, fishing and farming, festivals and dances, trees and animals. Human and animal bodies are represented by two triangles joined at the tip.

The Warlis are simple in nature, they include life around them in their drawings like what they feel, see and believe in life. Warlis never do anything without significance. For example, they will not speak unless absolutely necessary because they believe that words can make things alive. Visually this is demonstrated in a striking contrast that the dark hut provides to the resplendent wedding painting (Mahse).

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13 Mahse, J. S. The Warlis Tribal Paintings and Legends. Bombay: Chemould publications and Arts. p. 6
The world view of the Warlis is best represented by the circle which has neither an end nor a beginning. It is an expanding, encapsulating view of reality, a kin to the womb which is capable of endless births. Little wonder then, that they draw the circle at the time of birth, during marriage and while performing the death rites, for it denotes to the very core of their existence. The whole wonder of life, marriage and death is symbolized by the cult of the mother and is given concrete expression in the form of rituals.