



Annual Activity Report 2024-2025





*Shola Masks of Kali at a Chandi Thaan in Uttar Dinajpur to propitiate the goddess*

## **Contents**

**About Daricha Foundation, Page 3**

**Year in Review: 2024-2025, Page 4**

**Financial Sustainability, Page 18**

**Looking Ahead, Page 19**

## 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. 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.

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; Prattyush Banerjee (Indian classical musician) - Assistant Secretary; Banhi Chakrabarty (retired assistant professor, IIT Kharagpur) Subir Datta (retired professor); Prosenjit Dasgupta (author & folk researcher), Subir Das (chartered accountant & Clean Energy activist); and Anandi Ghose (film maker).

The website, [www.daricha.org](http://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 sixty-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 and exhibition organizers. For the last few years, we have been working actively with traditional Santal wall painters of Purulia as well and have conducted several workshops with them, to preserve traditional knowledge. We have taken some measures to market their stunning artworks. Other folk crafts are promoted not just through our website but also through Daricha's Instagram page and a few retail stores.

## YEAR IN REVIEW

### Key Highlights & Achievements

2024-25 was a particularly busy year: two very successful back-to-back exhibitions, field trips and a mask workshop kept us on our toes. As before, we remain small, but through our hard work and determination, have impacted not large clusters, but many individuals.

### Visit to Pashchim Medinipur

We began the year with a field trip to Pashchim Medinipur, primarily to meet the clay doll makers among the patuas (scroll painters) of the region. These clay dolls known as Jou Putul are made only by the women-folk. Traditionally, while their menfolk would paint scrolls, the women, during their leisure, would make small hand pressed dolls and bake them in their kitchen stoves, both for the pleasure of their children and to be sold at various folk melas in the region. This was their way of adding to the meagre family income.



Painted Jou putul by Phuljan Chitrakar

Ever since women too took to painting patachitras themselves some decades ago, the Jo putul tradition has taken a back seat. There are just a handful of women who continue to practice this craft – among them being Phuljan Chitrakar of Bagagerya, Ayesha Chitrakar of Naya and Serafin Chitrakar of Thekuachak, all villages in Pashchim Medinipur. The younger women in these villages, prefer to paint scrolls, since this is less demanding.



Ayesha Chitrakar's Jou dolls retain their traditional look





We also visited Naya, the most popular of the patua villages in West Bengal and spent time with Seramuddin Chitrakar and his family. We have collaborated with this family for many years. Bahar Chitrakar, who is the head of the family and the oldest patua in the village, continues to be spritely and active. He treated us to a song on Krishna, while showing us the magnificent patachitra made on the subject by his late father-in-law and guru, Pulin Chitrakar.





Our next stop was at Gurupada Mana's home in Jhikuria under Sabang police station. The Sabang region is renowned for its ultra fine *masland* mats. The famed and decorative masland mat is the finest of all the mats woven in West Bengal. *Masland* mats are made with superior quality *madurkathi*. The reeds for these mats are harvested locally and sold at weekly *haats*.



Gurupada and his wife weaving a masland mat



Closeup of the process

The finest of the mats have 72 warp threads for every nine inches of the width. Cotton or jute strings are used for the warp. A greater number of warp threads contribute to a finer, denser, and more durable mat. To make the masland mats, a reed is first moistened and split into numerous strands; the weaver usually does this with his teeth. At least two people are required to weave these mats. One person places the reeds from left to right, alternately laying one thread on top and the next underneath. The second person repeats this from right to left. When they reach the edge, the threads are turned and the process is continued. Depending on its complexity,

it may take several months to complete one mat. Gurupada and his wife demonstrated to us the masland mat weaving process on their simple floor loom.



Masland mat made by Gurupada and his wife awaits finishing

## A Generous Well-wisher

We were greeted with a wonderful surprise in early May. Young Tonoya Biswas, a budding Bharatanatyam dancer and a sensitive soul, decided that she wanted to use the gifts she had received for her arangetram for a meaningful purpose. Her mother had written to us earlier out of the blue and Tonoya's uncle in Kolkata, Mr Pinaki De, decided to help her out and on her behalf, gave us a generous donation, which was of immense help to us, for our workshops with our Santal artists.

## Exhibitions & Performances

Our efforts at promoting the endeavours of our Santal artists paid off with two nearly back-to-back exhibitions in late August and early October. Paramparik Karigar of Mumbai whose exhibition we had been invited to in March 2024 invited us to participate at their grand exhibition at the World Trade Center, Mumbai, held between August 22<sup>nd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. We also persuaded them to invite Seramuddin Chitrakar and Gurupada Mana to participate. This was the first time these artists had been invited to Mumbai. This was followed by a 5-day exhibition, The Festival of Handmade organised by A Hundred Hands at the Jaymahal Palace, Bangalore between October 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>.





The ladies proudly display their efforts during the workshop

Naturally, a lot of preparation had to be done and the nine Santal artists - six ornament makers and three Sohrai painters - got into a flurry of activity. Between June and August, over a hundred paintings were made for the two exhibitions.

Both the Santal paintings and the leaf ornaments met with great success in both cities. The Sohrai paintings, in particular, were being viewed by the public for the first time and were much admired. For the Sohrai artist, Sraboni Baskey, it was a specially thrilling experience, since this was the first time she had left her village to visit these cities.



Our Sohrai artist, Sraboni Baskey at our stall at the Paramparik Karigar exhibition in Mumbai





Our Santal artists, Sraboni, Poulina and Chhobi at The Festival of Handmade exhibition in Bengaluru, organised by A Hundred Hands

We were also invited by the organizers of Lok Sanskriti Utsab 2024 at Dakshin Delhi Kalibari to send folk performers from various districts. The festival took place on September 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. Other than a group of Gomira masked dancers from Dinajpur, Santal Chadar Badani puppeteers from Birbhum, we also sent a group of male Santal dancers. This was the first time that the audience had witnessed all male Santal dances, used as they are to performances only by Santal women.

### Field Trip to Purulia

Winter always finds us in Purulia, continuing our decade long documentation of Sohrai wall paintings and other aspects of Santal culture. We did three field trips between November 2024 and January 2025, covering villages across Raghunathpur sub-division.

Our hunt for traditional Sohrai painters took us to several new villages. Some were successes, some not – since quite a few of the traditional artists had been persuaded by the younger members of the household to adapt to the newer trends in Sohrai wall painting. We also trained a few more traditional artists to paint on paper, an ongoing exercise that we have been conducting since 2023.

Another aspect of Santal culture that is waning is the tattoos (*khoda*) that the women have on their arms, wrists, and chest. Young Santal girls have traditionally been marked with these tattoos, in the belief that these marks will keep them safe in the afterlife. However, the tradition is swiftly dying and the tattoo artists, who once made a brisk business of this in the winter months (when the pain was easier to bear), are few and far between and have resorted

to other ways of earning an income. These tattooists (always women) do not belong to the Santal community. We met Joitun Bibi, a traditional tattoo artist who learnt the skills from her mother and has been tattooing Santal girls for over 45 years. Now she sells bangles. We will



conduct a more detailed study of this tradition in the near future.













Earlier in the year, during a meeting with Mr P Sainath, the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts awardee (2007), who founded the Peoples Archive of Rural India (PARI), we were requested to help them with collecting adivasi children's paintings from Purulia - a project we gladly accepted.



Students getting ready to paint at Sheekar Kuhu Adibasi Primary School, Jibanpur



Students from various ethnic communities busy painting at Dhagora Adibasi High School



Nandita Murmu of Sonaijuri Junior High school with her painting

Our project took us to various Santal medium schools in the Raghunathpur subdivision, and one Bengali medium school with children from different communities. We requested children from the ages of 10-17 to paint on any subject that had to do with their daily lives. We also took videos of the children who were asked to explain why they had chosen to paint what they had.

We were shocked to find that in at least one of the schools, Kesharpur Kushal Baskey Adarsha High School, several of the teachers did not receive a salary but selflessly travelled upto 50 km each school day to teach the children!

The school teachers were unsure how their students would perform, since drawing or painting was not taught. We asked them not to worry and gave the children the freedom to choose their paint materials. Some absolutely delightful pieces of art emerged on a variety of subjects that were of concern to the children. It was a great learning experience for us. The artworks and videos will be displayed on the PARI website soon.



The Sohrai Likhan workshop we conducted for students of the Santali medium school at Sonaijuri

We also met the principal of Sonaijuri Tilka Murmu Junior High School, Mr Satrugan Murmu and offered to hold a Sohrai wall painting workshop with the students, which he gladly accepted. Since Santal medium schools also instruct students on Santali culture as part of their extra-curricular activities, we suggested that they should also include Sohrai Likhan as



part of their syllabus. They appreciated the idea and promised to take this up with the higher authorities.

Purulia is also the land of Jhumur. We have been documenting rural Jhumur singers for many years and in January, we visited Kiriti Mahato, a Jhumur singer, archivist and author. He also teaches Jhumur at Sidho Kanho-Birsha university in Purulia. We will certainly be revisiting him.



## Hyundai Art for Hope 2025

For the third year running, we received a grant from Hyundai Motor India Foundation, under their Art for Hope scheme. This time, the objective of our project was to resuscitate the craft of ritual Gomira masks in Uttar Dinajpur, by conducting a workshop for untrained artisans led by two masters. The background to this project was that most carpenters or mask makers in Uttar Dinajpur had either not had the opportunity to train in the craft, or had given up on mask making and reverted to carpentry.

An eight-day workshop took place between January 16 and 23, 2025 at Chandol Haat village in Kaliyaganj block in Uttar Dinajpur. Our selected master artisans were the renowned Sachindranath Sarkar and Krishna Deb Sharma, who taught nine artisans how to craft Gomira masks in the traditional manner. None of the trainees had ever attended a workshop before; nor had any of them sold wooden masks commercially or ever been invited to participate in local fairs

Since the trainees were all adept with carving, the training was aimed at getting the forms of the traditional masks correctly. For this, we had collected photographs of old masks from collectors and museums and provided this as reference. The masks to be made were of the various local forms of Kali and several of the malevolent spirits associated with her – all of

whom are worshipped during the Gomira ritual. These were Smashan Kali, Mashan Kali, Chamar Kali, Shiknidhal, Mashan, Dakini, Bagh Mashan, Burha and Burhi. The sizes of the masks varied from 14 to 30 inches and were made so that they could be used at a ritual, fitting the human face.



The traditional Gomira mask workshop in progress



The end products of the workshop - ten traditional Gomira masks



Instead of the synthetic paints used by Gomira mask makers today, the dyes used were sindoor, haldi based yellow, lampsoot, white clay, indigo and a deep black-brown powder extracted from a locally available (inedible) fruit called *boshotboir*. The trainees had no experience in these colours and watched carefully as the masters prepared the dyes and guided them with the painting.



Final day of the Gomira mask making workshop at Chandol Haat, Uttar Dinajpur



The grand finale – Art for Hope 2025 exhibition at the Travancore Palace, New Delhi



The grand finale at the Art for Hope exhibition at Travancore Palace, Delhi between February 28<sup>th</sup> to March 2<sup>nd</sup> brought the authentic Gomira mask to the notice of a wide urban audience. Since it was not possible to carry all ten masks for the exhibition, two medium sized masks were chosen for the final display – Smashan Kali and Chamar Kali. We also screened a video on the making of these masks. Each year, Art for Hope ensures that their exhibition is inclusive, with a tactile replica of each grantee's exhibit – which is always labelled "Please Touch".

Meanwhile, the trainees look forward to honing their skills further and perhaps one day, achieve the respect and recognition that the two masters possess. More importantly, by dint of their recent training, they would now be emboldened to participate in local government competitions – this would pave the way for their progress, commercially.

## FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Donations from members and well-wishers and small grants continue to be our chief source of sustenance. In comparison to the previous year, income, expenses and surplus have all shown a very significant upward trend, thanks to a significantly higher level of activity vis-à-vis several exhibitions and the Hyundai Motor Foundation grant received during the year. Donations and Members' Subscriptions have also recorded a healthy growth. We need to strategize to maintain the same level of activity going forward.

We need to attract more grants for the preservation of cultural traditions, the continuation of our field documentation and to provide improved market access for the artisans that we work with. Thus, we continue to reach out to both government and private organizations.

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, 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, perhaps in collaboration with interested organizations working in the same field.
- 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, e-commerce platforms and domestic craft stores.







A traditional Khojagori performance, popular in the region, at Chandol Haat, Uttar Dinajpur