

VISHNUIAS.COM

Tribal Alchemists of This Maha Village Create Magic With Their Hands!

ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-204



(Welcome To Vishnu IAS online)

(Research and Training Institute for the best civil services preparation in India)

<http://vishnuias.com/>

Tribal Alchemists of This Maha Village Create Magic With Their Hands!

Devrai Art Village was established by Suresh Pungati, a noted Adivasi artisan, and renowned documentary filmmaker, Mandakini Mathur after the monsoon of 2008, with the vision of preserving the timeless heritage of Adivasi metal artistry, lest the craft phases out.

Nestled amidst the forested hills of Panchgani in Maharashtra, there is a little-known art village where the ancient legacy of Adivasi handiwork is quietly being carried forward by a group of skilled tribal artisans for almost a decade now.

Every day, these artisans, both men and women, get together under an old Umbar (*Ficus glomerata*) tree located in the middle of their land to conjure up magical artefacts

fashioned out of metal, with a contemporary touch.

The Devrai Art Village (DAV) was established by Suresh Pungati, a noted Adivasi artisan, and renowned documentary filmmaker, Mandakini Mathur after the monsoon of 2008, with the vision of preserving the timeless heritage of Adivasi metal artistry, lest the craft phases out.

The establishment strives to empower the craftsmen by giving them new design ideas and marketing possibilities, right in the lap of nature, where it is not looked upon as a mere resource but where plants, animals and humans cohabit the same space, and have an interdependent relationship, and where art can reflect the true sacredness of nature.

“If I think of the beginning of inspiration for DAV, the old tree of Umbar that stands in the middle of our land comes to my mind. Its

extended branches that almost touch the ground create a natural cave of green-coloured light. This magical space was an invitation to sit under the tree and soon a platform was created,” says Mandakini to **The Better India**.

The inception of the art village took form when Mandakini met Suresh, who hails from the Naxal-hit village of Gadchiroli and at the time was employed as an art teacher in the local government school.

He shared the dire state of Adivasi artisans, who were often caught in the crossfire between the state and Naxal insurgents in the region and how their craft was suffering in the process, in addition to lessening demands for their painstakingly crafted artefacts.

“The Adivasi youth, in particular, have been at the constant risk of being forcibly picked up by the Naxals if they stayed put in the region or had to leave behind the craft

practised by their family for generations in search of better employment alternatives, which more or less was limited to construction work. We started out with four Adivasi craftsmen under the guidance of Suresh, who belongs to the Madhia tribe and today, we have a community of 35 craftsmen and craftswomen, which includes individuals and families from the region as well as few artisans from Chhattisgarh,” explains Mandakini.

Suresh was brought up in Baba Amte’s ashram in Anandvan, where he had the opportunity of learning various forms of tribal art and craft. In fact, for his relentless and dedicated involvement towards tribal community progress and development in and around Gadchiroli, Suresh was awarded the ‘Adivasi Sevak Puraskar’ by the state government in 2002.

The village was set up on a plot belonging to

Mandakini with no funding or monetary contribution other than what she and Suresh could put together.

Fortunately, the initial sales meant that they were able to sustain their dream and since then, they have witnessed an increase in demand for their artefacts, that, besides their in-house store and a newly-established one in Gadchiroli, are mostly sold through exhibitions and retail stores across the country, including Kala Ghoda. One can also approach DAV for customised articles based on their ideas and concepts.

Besides taking young apprentices under their wing, and giving them a two-year-long intensive training, DAV also organises workshops led by their master craftsmen and craftswomen in various cities and towns across India. The village often finds interns from prominent design schools, including NID, flocking to the premises; they get a first-

hand exposure of how one can reinvent ancient metal artistry that has evolved to meet modern-day aesthetics.

Providing a safe haven for these artisans to carry forward their legacy, DAV also gives them the scope of infusing contemporary ideas into the traditional craft of Dhokra, which the artisans along with Mandakini and Suresh, together conceptualise and brainstorm together at the organisation.

In fact, 'Rock-Dhokra' is their pioneering craft form, which as the name suggests, fuses the age-old craft of Dhokra with rocks as the centrepiece that lends these artefacts a refreshingly new aesthetic dimension.



“The concept is unique in its cross-pollination of ideas – between the old and the new, urban and the rural, truly Indian in spirit but universal in appeal. Following much experimentation, we realised that not every rock or pebble could be used for these artefacts – only those that were really hard and could withstand high temperatures along with the metallic components. Finally, we found that only river pebbles were the best for this purpose and since then, we’ve been

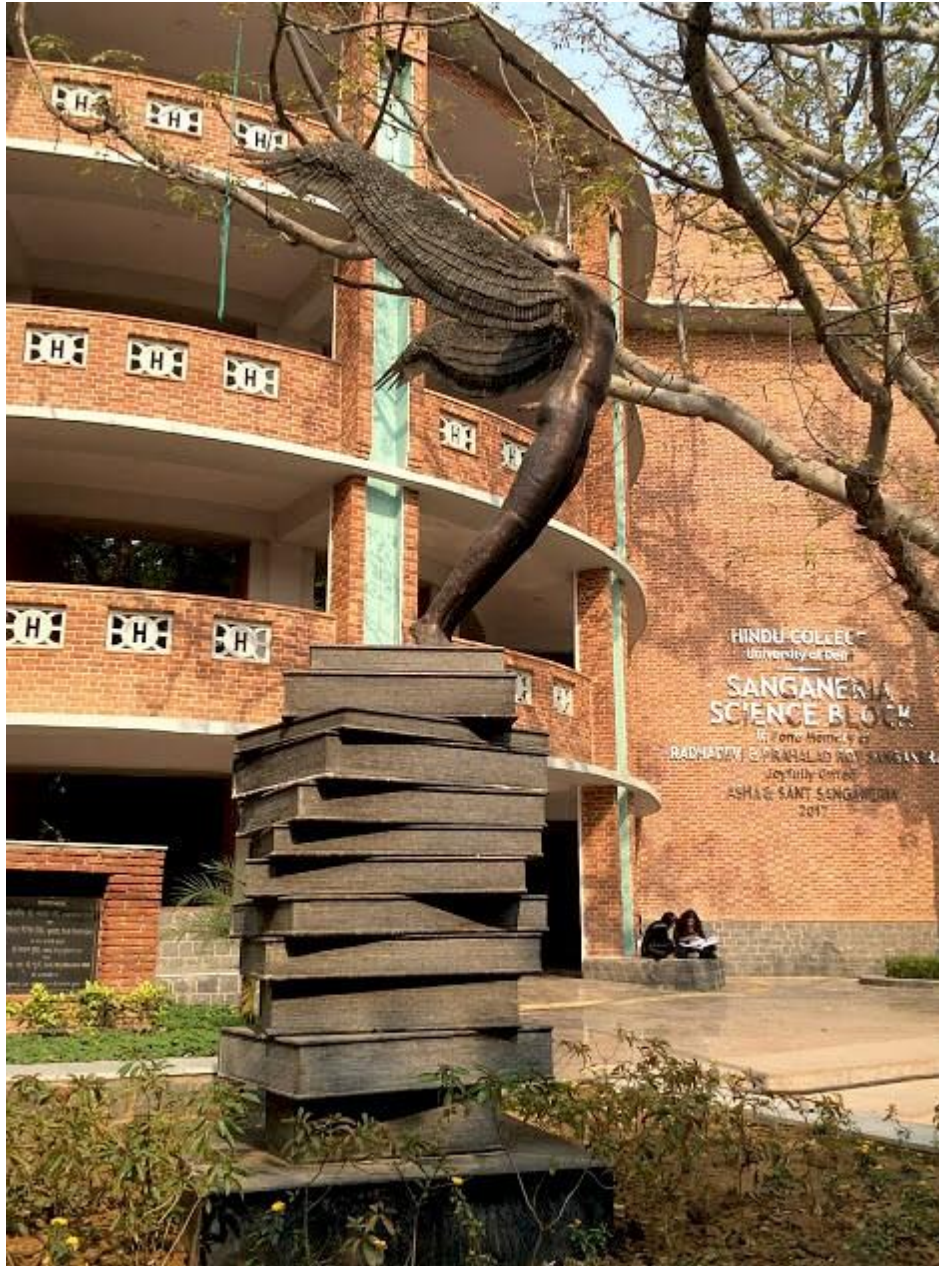
creating this form and even got it patented,” shares Mandakini.

Not just Rock Dhokra, the artisans have also been experimenting with bamboo craft as well as organic casting and have fashioned fusion artefacts using terracotta as well.

“Currently, we are working on ceramic works that have been laced with brass inlay. We are positive that this too shall materialise well soon. Another traditional-contemporary art form that we can proudly mention are our molten metal murals that are finding more and more takers,” she happily adds.

One needs to visit DAV to truly understand and witness what goes on behind the

process of creating these artefacts magically fashioned out of metal in the midst of nature.



Providing a platform for the ancient metal artistry to survive in contemporary times as well as

sustainable livelihoods for Adivasi artisans, Devrai Art Village stands out as a beacon of hope for these marginalised communities by helping them break free from the endless circle of Naxal insurgency and unemployment and we hope that more such organisations come up across the country to conserve the art and crafts legacy of our Adivasi communities.