

Prabha Dulari Ekka

It is said that necessity is the mother of survival. And this need to sustain herself and her family made Prabha Dulari Ekka from Jharkhand make Soharai paintings in 2005. Today Prabha is training other women of her tribe to make them self-sufficient. And is also involved in the preservation of this ancient tribal art form.

Soharai and Khovali paintings are made on mud walls by tribes of Hazaribagh, Jharkhand. Khovali is made during marriages while Soharai is associated with the harvest season. They are made with natural earth colors – white (kaolin), yellow ochre, black (manganese), and red ochre. Soharai has also received geotag from the Indian government last year.

Prabha belongs to the Oraon tribe and learned this art from her mother. As a kid would make elaborate designs outside their hut verandah. “As cement homes replaced mud walls, it became difficult to make these murals. So, I started making them on paper after marriage,” says Prabha.

At the age of 22, she made a beautiful Soharai painting on paper for the first time. After her husband Maryan Rajan Ekka’s untimely death in 2005, she took up this art professionally. “I wondered if I could make money by selling these paintings and took it up full time,” she says. She would sell her paintings to visitors in the village. The income helped her take care of her two sons who are married now.

Today Prabha is a well-known artist in her village and shares her art generously with other women. She is one of the 1000 women selected by the Ministry of tribal affairs (MOTA) to undergo a women entrepreneurship program. The 21-day program is conducted by SEEDS India (sustainable environment and ecological development society), Delhi. It aims to financially empower tribal women who will help their fellow sisters become financially independent.

Speaking about the program Prabha says, “I never thought I’ll be teaching others. It is so satisfying to see the women of my tribe make these beautiful paintings on paper,” she says. “They have only painted murals and never held a paintbrush in life. After a practice of two to three days, they are now painting well on paper,” she says.

She hopes that this training helps these women become financially independent. She also prays that her effort also helps in the preservation of this ancient art. “Our ancestors were deeply connected to hills, forests, animals. But today’s generation hardly knows about this. Through our paintings we want them to feel connected to our roots and preserve our art,” she concludes.