Create awareness, promote learning and provide livelihood opportunities for the last remaining artists of the dying primitive tribal art form of Kurumbas paintings.
The Kurumbas of Nilgiris

Inhabitants of the steep slopes of the blue mountains of India, the Kurumbas tribe are descendants of the royal family of the Pallavas, the kings who ruled southern India in the 7th century. The tribe still inculcates their morals, practices and rituals such as death and marriage ceremonies, etc. An intriguing study about the Kurumbas and their knowledge indicates that they played the roles of both priests and sorcerers for tribes other than their own. So able were their powers that the Kurumbas were respected and often punished for deaths and illnesses in other tribes, who believed that it was the spell of the Kurumbas which was at work. Expectedly they have their very own language which is spoken only among the various sub-groups of the tribe.

The five main sub-groups of the Kurumbas are the Jen, Mullu, Urali, Beta and Alu or Palu; the most populous of them being the Alu tribe. They live in the south and southeastern slopes of Coonoor, Kotagiri and Kundah taluk of the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu. The Kurumbas are not to be confused with the Kurumba, Kuruman or Kuruban. Govt. of India guidelines clearly state that only those group of people who reside in the Nilgiris will be called Kurumbas and classified as one of the Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG's) within the broad classification of Scheduled Tribes of India.

The Kurumbas style of painting

The most important tradition the tribe once had and flourished in was art. In the traditional art form, the artist draws inspiration from his life. He also portrays the milestones in the tribal life and draws figures representing God. The figures are made up of lines and are minimal in style. Lines, independent and concentric, dot and simple geometric figures are the basic elements. Close to some of the Kurumbas villages, rock paintings have also been found and it is believed that this art form has been a part of this tribe for at least over 6000 years.

The rituals, ceremonies and beliefs of the tribe are depicted in their art. The colours for the paintings were all obtained from trees and plants. The ‘Vengai Maram’ tree lets out a resin from under its bark and that is used for making a paste to prepare black, brown and yellow colours. The tree is not found in abundance and at times the artist would need to go deep into forests in search of it. The green colour is obtained from the leaves of ‘Katai Geda’ plant which is found on the steep slopes of the Nilgiris (3000 ft to 4500 ft above MSL). ‘Semun’, ‘Khaimun’ and ‘Bhodimun’ are soils used for the preparation of brown, yellow and white respectively.

The need for revival

However, with the modern way of life spreading rapidly across India after independence, there was a decline in the number of practicing artists. There were no livelihood opportunities and most artists left their villages in search of work in nearby metros. One Earth Foundation, a NGO working in the Nilgiris to conserve and preserve the natural and cultural wealth of the region, conducted a search for practicing artists across the various recorded settlements and found that only 1 artist was practicing and 2 of his trainees were helping him on occasions where there was some work on hand. These artists had no steady income and at times had to go looking for work in the nearby plantations. There was an urgent need to create and enhance awareness about this unique form of painting and also to ensure that the remaining artists were immediately provided with some livelihood.
KARI (Kurumbas Art Revival Initiative) by One Earth Foundation strives to:

- Engage remaining artists to teach & train young Kurumbas children to ensure that this tradition lives on
- Conduct art workshops in the rural panchayat schools and other institutions of Nilgiris to create awareness amongst the indigenous communities, and
- To provide a platform for the artists to generate livelihood by practicing their art and selling their works.

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