

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

### Warli Village Solar Trust, Rice Paste on Parchment, 2016

Kathryn Milun, MA, PhD, on behalf of the Warli Art Cooperative

#### Abstract

Artist's Statement for the cover art of IJPS volume 8, issue 2: Warli Village Solar Trust, rice paste on parchment

Keywords: Warli Art Cooperative; Solar Power; Solar Commons Model; India; Climate Change; Ecosystems; Social-ecological Interface

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**Warli Village Solar Trust** is a painting created by the Warli Art Cooperative in Maharashtra, India (2016) for the Solar Commons Project (Creative Commons License 3.0 Solar Commons).

The Warli are one of India's most ancient and earliest agricultural peoples. "Warla" means "piece of land" and Warli art is made using the sustaining elements of their rural lifeworld: white rice paste against the red soil fertility of earth. The stick figure art form, still visible on 10,000-year-old petroglyphs in central India, depicts sacred relationships among Warli and the natural world as well as scenes of everyday life. Warli painting was traditionally done by women on inner walls of village huts for important rituals like marriage and harvest festivals. In the 1970s village men applied the form to

canvas so it could be sold in art markets and bring income to forest communities experiencing the encroaching impacts of India's industrialization. Like many Indigenous peoples in South Asia, the Warli live in remote, mountainous forest areas and are among the 300 million Indians – one third of India's population – who do not yet have electricity.

This painting was commissioned by the Solar Commons Project in the summer of 2016 from a Warli Art Cooperative of men living in Maharashtra villages recently electrified by solar microgrids. I had heard that the Warli were using a strategic community solar ownership model aimed, like the Solar Commons Model (which I am developing with colleagues in Arizona and Minnesota), to link solar electricity to social equality. The Warli are experimenting with owning their solar array as a community trust requiring half the Board of Trustees to be women and thus empowering women's role in village governance. Knowing this, I asked my Indian collaborator, Prof. Aparna Katre, who was visiting the Warli's remote villages in 2016, to ask the local artists if they could show us how the new force of electricity is impacting village life.

This painting is their response. Before and after scenes show women who used to walk up and down the mountainous terrain for hours every day fetching water for their families and crops; the women now fill their water jugs at a central village pump. Children can be seen reading and watching internet and TV screens at home. Villagers socialize outside at night beneath a lamp without fear of unseen forest predators. The artists help us see the energy infrastructure, where the electricity comes from as well as the work, lifeways, social change, and social equality it enables—all of it embedded in a world filled with the diverse animals and plants that the Warli revere. In the center of the painting, the sacred rice plant stands taller than the solar array.

India is in the process of bringing electricity to all its 1.3 billion people and as it does, it will use the resources it has at hand. Solar is a good and clean source of electric power for remote villages, but coal is abundant in India and will play a big role in powering India's expanding electric grid just as it has in Europe and the US. New coal-

burning power plants now send electricity through India's transmission grid expanding across the countryside to run industrial cities, bring light to towns, pump water from distant wells, cook food without dangerous fumes, and connect hamlets to the global internet. Coal often lies beneath the forested hills of indigenous peoples' villages. Just as we have seen in the US with the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Line 3 pipeline moving Tars Sands Oil from Canada through treaty lands of northern Minnesota, gaining access to new fossil fuel sources often makes electricity producers part of an extractive industry reaching further into parts of the earth where Indigenous peoples and their worldviews hold a tenuous but fierce and righteous sovereignty.

Seeing electricity in the world around us means seeing the coal mines, oil and gas pipelines, and overhead wires as well as the places, peoples, lifeways, worldviews, ownership structures, and social justice issues that give form to our modern electrified planet. In the mountains and hills of both Maharashtra and Appalachia, taking coal out of the ground brings pollution and health problems along with jobs for local people. Burning coal for electricity is also the single greatest threat to the earth's climate system: emissions from coal-powered plants fill the earth's atmosphere and fuel global warming; methane (from coal mining and natural gas extraction) is one of the most potent greenhouse gases.

There is only so much carbon space left in the earth's atmosphere if we want to hold on to the stable climate that has supported human agriculture and societies for tens of thousands of years. As India electrifies, the US will be sharing the earth's carbon space with millions more earth citizens. Americans, the second largest consumers of electricity after China, currently use 1843 watts of electricity per person, compared to China which uses 474 watts and India which uses a mere 152 watts per person. In the US, our high-energy lifestyle uses climate-changing fossil fuels to produce most of our electricity. In 2016, coal, the most harmful fuel, was powering 33 percent of the US electric load.

The earth's fragile atmospheric zone and its carbon-carrying space, the sun's radiant power—these are two domains that would qualify as “commons” according to the economist Elinor Ostrom who won the Nobel Prize in the field of economics in 2009. Ostrom studied “commons,” how people shared resources at all scales around the world. She published on the resource management systems and legal institutions that governed global commons like the atmosphere. She also visited and wrote about the peer governance rules used by Nepalese to manage their village wells. I know how intrigued Ostrom was with the Solar Commons Project as I had the good fortune to present the concept to her before she died in 2012. I can well imagine how much she would have loved this painting by the Warli Art Collaborative. Americans have much to learn from how newly electrified village scale societies around the world are managing their shared solar technologies. These villages can teach us about solar as a socio-cultural technology. Through the Warli art, we can see and compare how solar energy is embedded in local value systems and how it is managed to generate common wealth to serve a common good.

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Information on American electricity use is from the US Energy Information Administration ([https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/index.php?page=electricity\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/index.php?page=electricity_in_the_United_States)).

World figures on electricity use are from the CIA World Factbook website (<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/> ).

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