



Artisan's Voices: Linking past, present and future

By Pushpa Chari

In tune with today's trend of crafting "Subaltern Histories" through "Peoples Voices", this edition of CCI Newsletter brings once again, the voices of artisans whose talent and dedication have brought them to the pinnacle of recognition and success. The craft journeys of Pritikana Goswami, Puttapakka Gajam Govardhan and Vankar Shyamji span a wide arc – of humble beginnings, a relentless struggle and pursuit of perfection and innovation in their craft, followed by the winning of coveted national honors and international acclaim. As the 3 artisans' inspirational narratives unfolded in interviews held at The Crafts Council of India's (CCI) National Meet held in Hyderabad on 24th and 25th of July 2023, one could perceive not just the immense inspiration, support and help given to them by CCI and State Councils, but their own love and passion for their family's craft heritage. As Gajam Govardhan put it so memorably "We are not selling fabric, but the warp and weft of our desires, thoughts and feelings".

And now for the voice of future hope and enthusiasm raised by the children of CCI's "Educate to Sustain" (EtoS) program. This unique initiative offers financial support to children from hereditary craft families to finish their schooling. In this period the selected children for the EtoS initiative have to continue to learn and practise their familial craft.

With regular financial assistance for school fees, books etc, accompanied by regular monitoring by CCI of the academic and craft learning progress of each child, the "Educate to Sustain" initiative is a way forward for the growth of both craft and its future makers.

In this issue of the Newsletter EtoS beneficiaries Sujan Kumbhakar from Panchamura, West Bengal and Alfon Tudu, also from West Bengal, tell their own stories.....



VANKAR SHYAMJI, PRITIKA GOSWAMI AND GAJAM GOVARDHAN “IN CONVERSATION” AT CCI’S NATIONAL MEET HYDERABAD, ON 24TH AND 25TH JULY 2023

VANKAR SHYAMJI



Master craftsman Vankar Shyamji has taken his ancestral craft of weaving and dyeing to heights of excellence and international acclaim, taking his handwoven blankets and shawls, traditionally worn by Rabari sheperds, to his much acclaimed Bhujodi saris gracing national and international fashion ramps. Recipient of the National Award (2005), UNESCO Seal of Excellence Award and many more honours, he is today a resource person, lecturer, advisor to many design institutes and training centres. He has exhibited widely in India and abroad. Vankar Shyamji runs a multigenerational business started by his ancestors.

In the beginning

“I started weaving at the age of 6 or 7 and was working on the loom by 1990. At the age of 12, while in school I started collecting old weaves crafted by my ancestors. My ancestors only wove blankets but switched to weaving shawls by 2000. Our first lightweight shawl was woven in 1974. After finishing my graduation I began to study natural dyes on our shawls and subsequently brought back natural dyed shawls”.

Other Innovations initiated by Vankar Shyamji

“We began experimenting with yarns and threads like mulberry, eri and muga and worked with Khamir to develop kala cotton. We also rewind handspun cotton. Today 650 women work with us and with Khamir doing handspun weaving. We have worked with many foreign designers, with 50 percent of design concepts being our own”.





Vankar Shyamji, How do you see the future of your mesmerizing Bhujodi Weaves?

Since 2021 we have started a programme where every Sunday 6-7 children assemble at our house. We make them work at the loom and to operate the Charkha. We plan to teach warp and weft patterning to 5th and 6th class students. We are lobbying with the Gujarat Education Board to introduce these subjects in the school curriculum.

“ We are merely caretakers of our tradition and skills passed on to us by our forefathers. We need to pass it on ”



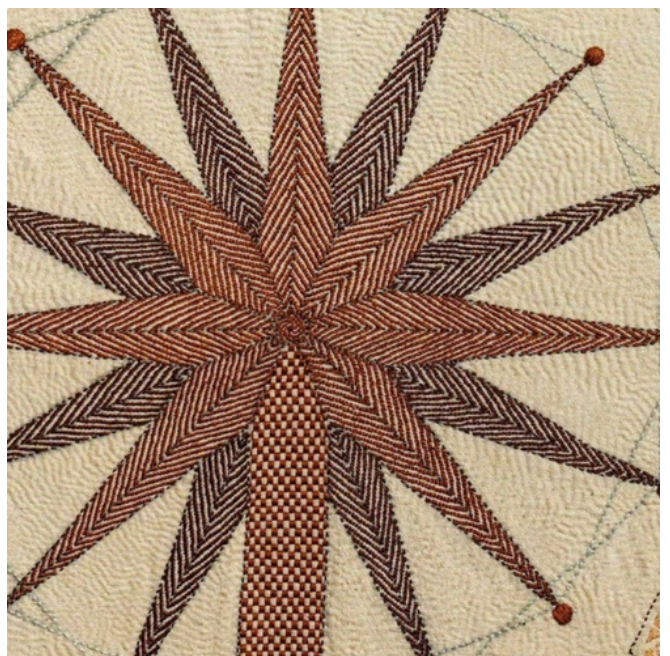
From being born into an economically marginalized family of West Bengal to becoming a Padma Shri awardee in 2013, Pritakana Goswami's life is a story of great talent, creative brilliance and fortitude. Her natural talent for sewing and a serendipitous encounter with the then President of Crafts Council of West Bengal (CCWB) Smt. Ruby Pal Choudhury, led her to join the Kantha Centre in Kolkata which was begun as a centre of Nakshikantha revival by CCWB. Pritakana excelled in Nakshikantha embroidery in no time, her technical and conceptual brilliance reflected in the many masterpieces she created – and continues to craft till today.



“Pritakana Goswami has trained many young women Kantha embroiderers in Nakshikantha. One such trainee is her daughter who has taken Kantha embroidery to many world museums”

The beginnings of Pritakana Goswami's craft journey.

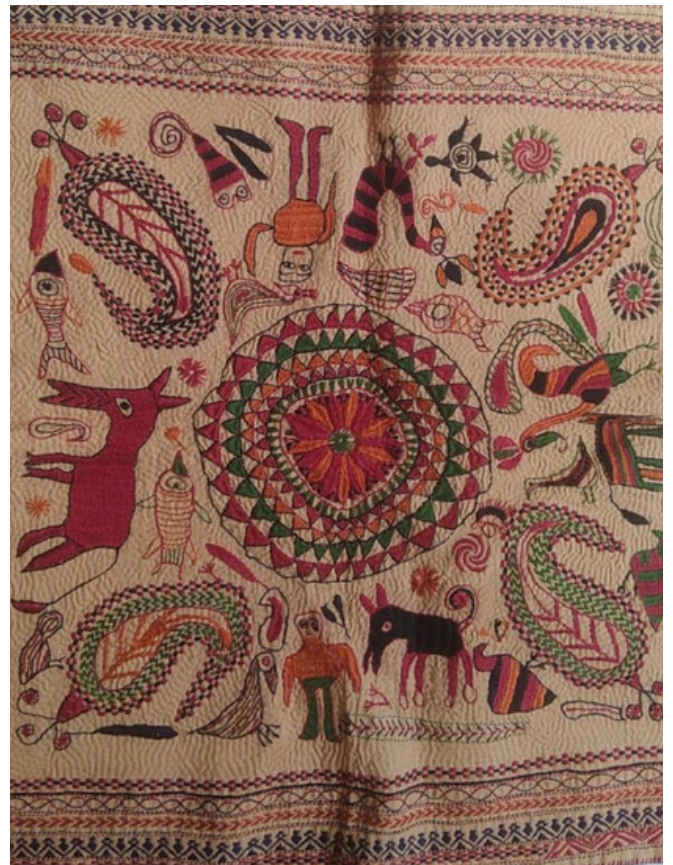
“I am originally from Bangladesh. I lost my father at the age of 10. Six years later in order to supplement the family income, I worked at an embroidery shop and learnt many embroidery stitches. Even after marriage, poverty continued to stalk my life. In 1990 I joined CCWB's Kantha Centre and mastered Nakshikantha in no time under the able guidance of Smt. Ruby Pal Choudhury”.



Her evolution as internationally acclaimed Kantha artist “who creates magic”

“In 2002 a Japanese businesswoman placed orders of Kantha done on chiffons and georgettes in different colours. It was not traditional Kantha as there was no layering and quilting. However traditional stitches were used and I trained many women”.

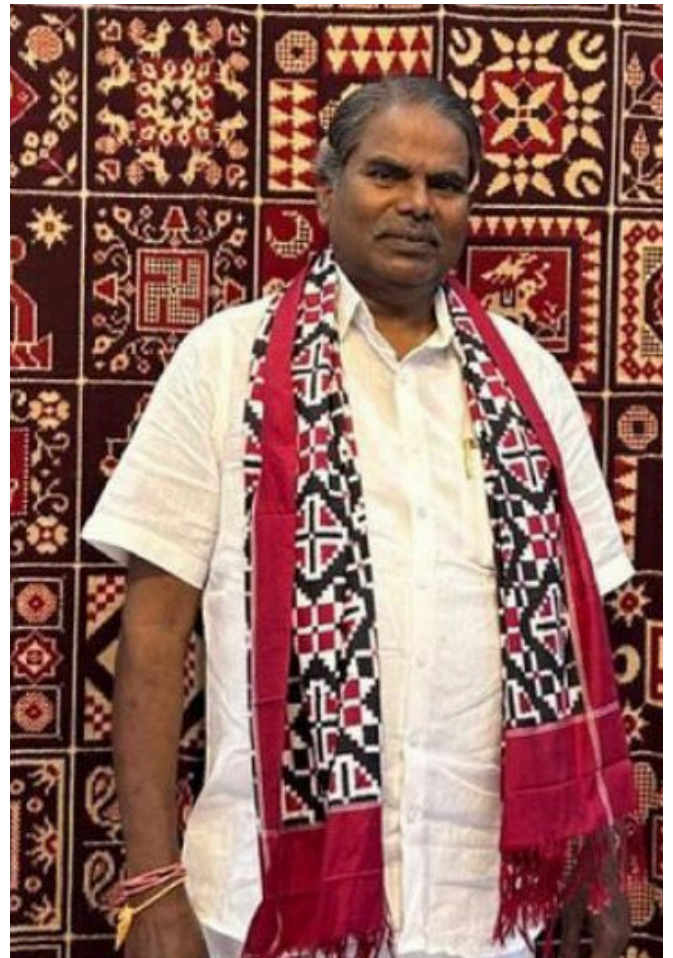
There is a great demand for quality Kantha products. Pritakana has produced wonderful Kantha work, on saris, scarves, dupattas.



Gajam Govardhan's life journey from his birth in a poor weaving family of Putapakka, to being honoured with the Padma Shri and Shilp Guru awards by the President of India is the heady stuff that legends are made of. He left school in the 9th grade to begin learning his familial craft of ikat weaving from his father, soon becoming proficient at the skill. He soon left for Chirala to learn the unique technologies of Telia Rumal weaving, rapidly becoming a Master Weaver of Telia Rumal.

Innovation by Gajam Govardhan

His path breaking innovation was the creation of saris, dupattas and fabric in Telia Rumal, which till now had been only woven as rumals or head scarves. Very soon he was weaving iconic 'Telia Rumal' creations in a brilliant mélange of weaves, concepts and subtle interplay of colours. His 'Telia Rumal' saris, fabric and made ups have not only walked international and national ramps, but are celebrated as textile exhibits in museums in New York, Netherlands etc.



He has set up the, 'Gajam Govardhan Telia Rumal Museum' in Hyderabad which has rare 100 years old 'Telia Rumal' textiles and his own outstanding 50 year old creations.





“Today my village of Putapakka has 28 National Awardees in Telia Rumal, 2 Padma Shri Awardees, Sant Kabir Awardees – with hopefully many more to come”

What are the highlights of your Craft Journey?

“I began by a 3 month training programme of oiling, tie and dye at 8-10 Weaving Centres in my village, with trainees drawn from 20 families. The movement has spread since then.

And what of the future?

“Most of our weavers’ children are in USA, infact children of all 24 households in our village are in the US. But I am optimistic. Art will never die. Many may have left, the younger generation who are pursuing the craft out of their own will are doing great work”.



EDUCATE TO SUSTAIN

Through many millennia, the country's craft tradition and skills have endured and flourished, honed by millions of its paramparic craft artisans.

CCI's EtoS initiative reaches out to today's gen next of young artisans to focus both on school education and learning familial craft traditions from their elders. Sujan Kumbhakar and Alfon Tudu's work resonate with hope both in their future educational careers and excelling as craft artisans.

The purpose of CCI Scholarships under the Educate to Sustain program is to create opportunities for artisans and their children to build capacities relevant to their needs and those of a changing market through education, training and exposure.

While clearly CCI seeks to encourage GenNext to prosper within the traditions of its forbears, the Council also works to provide the children of artisans with the same options of growth and opportunity which are, or should be, the right of all children.



Alfon Tudu

Alfon Tudu was one of the earliest beneficiaries of CCI's EtoS Programme.

At one of the first meetings with students at Kolkata, Alfon was seen being pre occupied with something while the others were talking. By the end of the meeting he had produced a small basket.

Alfon's proficiency in Bamboo craft was learnt from his father Bidan Tudu who is a fine bamboo artisan.

Alfon continued to be in the EtoS program till he passed out of school. We met up with him recently in Kolkata.

"I have finished the Teachers Training course and hope to go back to my own school to teach".



Sujan Kumbhakar

“I am Sujan Kumbhakar . I live in a village, named Panchmura in Bankura, a district of West Bengal. My family is involved in Terracotta art. I am interested in this famous art. One day The Craft Council of India team came to my village they have given me a scholarship From 7 class 12th class they give me this scholarship continuously. With their support I passed Board examination that is madhyamikin 2017. I passed it with 73.2% marks. I also passed higher secondary exam with 91.2% marks in 2019. Then to fulfill my desire I admitted in primary teacher training institute to completed d.el.ed degree(2019-2021)and I also Qualify Teacher Eligibility Test in 2022. Now I study in Geography Honours in panchmura Mahavidhyalaya. It is my last semester / last year (sem-6). My struggling is on the way to achieve in my goal”.

