

VARANASI – A TAPESTRY IN BROCADE

Kasturi Gupta Menon

Kashi, Benaras, Varanasi – “older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together”. This, according to the Eicher Guide is how Mark Twain described this holiest of cities.

My own exposure to Varanasi had been limited only to the films of Satyajit Ray, to “Aparajito” and its magnificent black and white images of the ghats, to the boy Apu aimlessly wandering around the old haveli where his widowed mother worked, to “Joy Baba Felunath” – which captured the atmosphere of its winding “gullies”, and of course the river Ganga, whose meandering presence permeated virtually every frame.

“I’d like to visit Varanasi”, I had casually mentioned to Purnima towards the beginning of May, “to check out if a new range of cotton and silk saris can be sourced for “Kamala” Kolkata’s Puja exhibition. I’ll ask Gulshan to give me some names of master weavers and craftsmen.” “If you are travelling alone I can accompany you if you like”, Purnima had responded and that is how the two of us set out on our Varanasi pilgrimage in the last week of May, oblivious of how scorching the summer heat could be.

Gulshan had armed us with a list containing the names of several master weavers whom we should contact. We had called most of them before we had set out, and so were able to meet each of them over the following three days.

Rais Ahmad, of the Diamond Silk Co-operative Society Ltd. was the weaver we visited first. We entered his house in the Natimli Bunkar Colony and were led inside a room which contained his products. A rainbow of colours flashed before our eyes. From shaded silk scarves, to brocade stoles and shawls and clutch bags, – he had them all. The scarves were in three sizes and dyed in a manner so that each colour merged effortlessly into the next. Very popular with NRI visitors and our younger customers, both Purnima and I picked up enough stocks for Kamala’s Diwali and Christmas expositions. What was most interesting however, was his new line of brocade clutch bags. Sleek, long, yet functional, they would be a perfect accessory with any evening ensemble. He also had matching cell-phone holders and card-cases which could be placed inside these clutch purses. One of the oldest suppliers to the “Cottage Industries” chain of retail outlets, he acknowledged that he owed much of his success to Gulshan’s life-long insistence on quality and excellence.



Our first call the next morning was to Badruddin Ansari’s house at Pili Kothi. He handed me his card with a flourish and awaited my reaction. “Badruddin Ansari, B.com (Hons.) L.L.B” it read, followed by a host of other designations! Tucked away in a corner was the phrase – “Winner, National Award, Year of Handloom, 1986.”

“Kasim Silks” as his outfit is named, specialises in brocade. His saris were on silk and tussar, and he had a jamdani range on cotton as well. Each piece was a feast for the eyes. As shimmering bolts of colour unfolded before our eyes, it was hard to make a choice. His brocades were not cheap, nor also his tussars, – but they were unquestionably among the finest, both quality and design-wise. The jamdani weaves in cotton had a beautiful pastel colour-palette, and this is what I picked up in larger numbers for Kamala’s pre-Puja exhibition.

"Kasim Silks' brocades are among the finest available. His motifs, designs and colours still adhere to the traditional gharana, yet are very wearable even today. A former Chairman of the U.P., Handloom Fabrics Marketing Co-operative Federation, and former member of the All India Handloom Board, he is today among the most respected master-weavers of his generation.

Pilikothi was also the area where Maqbool Hasan had his residence. So this is where we went later that morning, after leaving Badruddin Bhai's place. Maqbool specialised in Pashmina stoles and scarves which are his son Niaz showed us in a variety of colours and textures since Maqbool himself was away.

There was a warmth and soft feel in each piece, and I ordered about a dozen in various shades for our November and December exhibitions since Calcutta has a limited winter season.

After a quick lunch at Jnana-Pravaha (which is where we had halted), we set out for MADANPURA in the afternoon to visit Suhail Bhai and his son Ashraf Mujeeb's product range sold under Ashraf's grandfather's name Mohd. Ayoob. Here old-world courtesy greeted us.

Ashraf's father first unfolded an ancient cloth-covered packet. These contained the line drawings of traditional paisleys, butas, and borders. Sheet after sheet of brittle yellow parchment-like papers were lovingly displayed. "These belonged to my father and grandfather", Suhail Bhai explained, "and till today serves as our basic design resource base". He then proceeded to unfold yet another cloth wrapped bundle which contained the zari encrusted wedding outfit of his wife _ Ashraf's mother. Preserved with pieces of camel bone _ "to keep away insects" _ it was tenderly laid out for us to admire.

It was only after this preamble did the display of traditional silk saris begin. Most of the pieces shown were exquisite wedding wear. Many saris had elaborate zari work, while others had less. The collection was varied and of a very high order. Purnima placed some orders for Kamala (Delhi's) Diwali exhibition while I picked up a couple of quieter pieces for Kamala (Kolkata's) Puja display. Suhail Bhai's prices were reasonable, and the quality of saris excellent.

The next morning we left early, to catch Junaid, son of Abdul Mohasin of Haji Munna Haji Noor Mohd. of Madanpura. Situated amidst a surprising clearing in Varanasi's cheek-by-jowl building clutter, Junaid's house was airy and full of light even though several tall leafy trees surrounded it.

Junaid showed us exquisite silk by cotton butidar saris in the lightest of shades ranging from off-white to, cream, ivory, and silver. Purnima felt they would be very popular as summer wear, and proposed to work on a project with him for Summer 2012.

From here we went to Rasoolpura, the residence of Ali Hasan _ "the master naqshaband of Banaras brocades." Although Ali Hasan has passed away, his unseen presence lingered everywhere. Naseem Ahmed _ Ali Hasan's great grandson _ is the last of the weavers from Benaras who can weave a "Baluchari" sari. Like his great grandfather Ali Hasan, and his grandfather Jafar Ali, he, too, "is engaged in naqsha making and re-interpreting the pristine ornamental nuances of his great ancestors."

Purnima and I were led into a tiny room where Azizul and Naseem began to speak of the past. Unlike our visit to the premises of the other master weavers, we did not discern any sense of prosperity. Naseem brought out a maroon Baluchari sari he had woven, and another muted grey-green brocade sari with a traditional "meenakari" border. Each one was a classic. But I felt he did not have adequate stocks. Possibly shortage of credit could be one cause.

The Baluchari is a complex sari to weave, and takes time. Not more than 6 to 8 pieces can be woven in a year. The cost of each piece varies between Rs 10 - 12 thousand as the elaborate pallu is woven, as per tradition, on the "jaala". In earlier times, it used to be an integral part of a Bengali girl's trousseau. Today it is only Naseem who is the custodian of this priceless heritage and who is rightfully both angry and sad to see that no steps are being taken to nurture and revive it. Could the Crafts Council of India think of supporting a two-year revival project in 2012-13 with assistance from the office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts)?

Conclusion -

Our visit to Varanasi would not be complete if I failed to mention the affection and care with which we were looked after in Jnana-Pravaha. Located near Samney Ghat on the banks of the Ganga, it was impeccably

laid out and well maintained. The food was excellent home-cooked vegetarian, topped with fresh juicy “langra” mangoes and lichees whose season had just started!

Varanasi was a visit to the past, to a time-warp where legend and the everyday are permanently intermingled. To a city which stands on the quietly flowing Ganga, a mute witness to its life and heritage.

Acknowledgement -

(a) The Master Naqshaband Of Banaras Brocades - Ali Hasan Alias Kalloo Hafiz

A Monograph By Anjan Chakraverty

(sponsored by the Office of the Development Commissioner, Handicrafts)

(b) Varanasi City Guide - Eicher Goodearth Limited, New Delhi.

KNOW YOUR CRAFT

Weaving the Yarn -- Search for a Fine Fabric Reinventing Khadi

Ruby Palchoudhuri

In a small town 85 kilometres from Kolkata, connected by road and the railway, a small community of weavers and spinners of Kalna, Bardhaman district in the state of West Bengal are collaborating in a project to reinvent khadi, a socially unique fabric with political overtones.

The history of the homespun hand woven Khadi has historic and political connotations as the spinning of the yarn and the weaving of the fabric were transformed by Mahatma Gandhi into a symbol of protest against colonial exploitation as well as of pride and prestige.

The quest to revive the almost abandoned technique of producing the finest of homespun yarns is an adventure that the Crafts Council of West Bengal undertook when it persuaded Jyotish Debnath to begin working on producing yarns of 300 to 500 counts from which could be woven the fabled fine fabric embellished with intricate “Jamdani” designs. The Centre at Kalna was revived with support from Ann Johnson.

The Kalna project has reached the first stage of rediscovering the almost lost process of making Jamdani from homespun yarn.

Before mill made yarn almost ruined India’s textile trade, especially the trade in fine fabrics that were coveted by the wealthiest in the rest of the world, the spinners and weavers of India created beautiful cloth that was light, fine, supple and strong in colours which were produced by powdering and mixing a dizzy array of natural materials of botanical and mineral origin.

Though the yarn and the fabric are both called khadi, they are in fact two separate processes. The yarn is produced entirely by women. The fabric is woven essentially by men. Without Ira, who converts lengths of raw cotton into “slivers”, Shukla Nandi who processes the yarn by kneading starch into them and Juthika Debnath, who spins the yarn onto bobbins, Jyotish Debnath would have no yarn to put on the drum and then transfer it on to the loom in order to weave it into khadi fabric with Jamdani technique for the design.

The story of the khadi Jamdani therefore begins with the women. Their skill is taken for granted, since it has been reduced to a pre-production function. The knowledge that is embedded in each length of yarn is not recognised. They possess knowledge and skill as Narayan Nandi, 82 years old, candidly admitted. “Unless the yarn is produced and processed to perfection, we would not be able to weave the fabric. If the yarn is poorly made and processed, we would have to cut the flawed yarn from the loom, because we would not be able to weave it.”

Ira takes lengths of raw cotton and begins twisting it into slivers. The slivers are then joined to become the “roving yarn.” The yarn is spun and processed over and over again to make it finer. Initially four “fibres”

are spun into one; then eight fibres are spun into one yarn; then 16 fibres are spun into one yarn. The final count could be 300, 400 and even 500. Occasionally, if the elements are kind lengths of 600-count fibre may be produced.

The finest lengths of fibre produced by Ira are then further processed by Shukla who works magic with her fingers. The magic is a combination of physics and chemistry, intuition and learning, experience and skill. The magic is the knowledge and the technique executed to perfection that allows Shukla to produce bundles of yarn that can be smoothly transferred on to bobbins or the drum. She “sizes” the yarn. She cannot do that unless she can procure the special rice variety – Kolma or Dohor Nagra. The rice and the popped version made from the same Kolma or Dohor Nagra rice are essential.

Shukla, a college graduate, learnt from her mother-in-law, Ashoka Nandi the art of converting cooked and popped rice into a starch strong enough to hold through the infinite number of movements that go into weaving the fabric. The to and fro of the shuttle, the tension of the threads strung up on the loom are entirely dependent on the knowledge, technique and skill of Shukla, who kneads the starch into every fibre of the yarn. There are precise measures of how much cooked rice must be added to previously soaked popped rice and mixed together with the starchy water produced by rice as it cooks. The starch water has to be mixed with a precise amount of tamarind pulp and the mix has to stand for a certain number of hours. If the starch turns sour, it will curdle. If it is too fresh it will not hold.

Shukla knows exactly when the starch, cooked and soaked popped rice can be mixed. But she cannot mix it when the ingredients are ready. She must mix it when the moisture in the air and the temperature are just right – at four in the morning. She takes a large stone platter with a high edge. She mixes the cooked and popped rice and the tamarind-rice starch water and then begins kneading the glutinous stuff into the yarn. She kneads it for 25 minutes or so by which time the entire mixture is absorbed by the yarn. Even when she squeezes the yarn there is not a drop of excess moisture. The backs of her fingers are lightly calloused, because she processes yarn frequently. Each skein weighs 2 grams and the length is 1000 metres.

The yarn is then spun into a skein. As Shukla spins, her left hand gently trembles so that the threads when dry and pulled apart reveal a webbed look. The threads cannot be allowed to stick together in a bunch. They would break when spun on to bobbins.

When the sized threads reach Juthika, she puts them on her spinning wheel and from that transfers it on to bobbins. The threads must be perfectly tight, but not so tight that they snap.

Only after that can Jyotish Debnath, Hemanta Nandi or Narayan Nandi, 82 years old and still weaving, begin putting the threads on the loom and weaving fabric from it. Narayan Nandi began weaving when he was 12. His wife Ashoka, now 70 has been sizing the yarn since she was married. At 82, Narayan Nandi continues to weave the threads that make khadi a socially unique fabric. His son Hemanta is also a weaver.

SALUTING OUR NATIONAL TREASURES.....

Shri. Gajam Govardhana



Shri. Gajam Govardhana was born in a poor ikat fabric producing family of Puttapakka, in Samsthan Narayanpur Mandal of Nalgonda District in 1949. He won the National Award in the year 1983 and Shilp Guru Award in the year 2007. Apart from National Award and State Government Awards, he has won UNESCO and other International Awards for excellence in Telia Rumal weaving. National and International institutes have documented his work and published books on his work, as well as the documentation of the process of Telia Rumal production. His ikat is a mélange of brilliant weaves and concepts and a subtle interplay of colours.

CCI warmly felicitates Shri. Gajam Govardhana on being honoured by the Padmashri Award by the Government of India.



Gulshan Nanda

Smt. Gulshan Nanda, crafts scholar and activist, revivalist, documenter of the country's craft traditions and expert par excellence in craft promotion and merchandising, wears many (handcrafted) hats with practiced ease. Including the latest one, the Padmashri award bestowed on her by the Govt. of India. A very brief resume of her distinguished career and numerous achievements in the craft field would include multi-pronged work as manager in the Central Cottage Industries Emporium, New Delhi, in charge of sourcing, purchasing and promoting handicrafts, Consultant, Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Coordinator for Art Council of Great Britain's live demonstrations and exhibition of Contemporary Art, Member of Govt. of India's Trade Promotion Programme delegation to Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Spain and the Netherlands, Consultant Crafts Trust. Above all, there's not a craft pocket she hasn't traveled to, in her efforts to know the problems, pain and strengths of the Indian artisan and his craft.

CCI is proud to felicitate Smt. Gulshan Nanda on being honoured by the title of Padmashri.

.....AND THE KAMALA AWARDEES

Instituted by CCI in memory of Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, the Kamala Awards honour and recognize craft activists and hereditary artisans for their excellence in craft skills and their contribution to the field of craft.

Kamala Samaan

Ms. Judy Frater is the winner of the prestigious Kamala Samaan Award for the year 2011. The award is conferred by The Crafts Council of India to honour a senior person for dedicated work done over a period of years in the craft field which brings about a transformation in the artisans' lives. As Founder and Coordinator of the Kala Raksha Trust in Bhuj, Gujarat, Ms. Frater has successfully taken a large number of tribal embroiderers on the road to self expression, financial security and sustainable development.

Kamala Award for Excellence in Craft

Shri. Gajam Yadagiri has been conferred the Kamala Award for Excellence in crafts for the year 2011 by CCI. Superbly designed and patterned Telia



Rumaal in double ikat, using natural dyes and traditional motifs have placed Shilp Guru Gajam Yadagiri in the forefront of Ikat master weavers. He is also the Cluster Development Executive for the Puttapakka cluster administered by CCAP.

Kamala Award for Contribution to Craft Field

Shri. Belagallu Veeranna is the recipient of CCI's Kamala Award for Contribution to the Craft Field for the year 2011. Shri. Veeranna is a master in handcrafting traditional life sized leather puppets. He also produces puppet shows with themes drawn from the Epics, history as well as societal and political themes with contemporary content. Andhra's famed 'Gogallu Gombe Aatta' evolved to heights of perfection under his direction.

Shantha Prasad Award for Excellence in Craft

Smt. Bina Dey is the winner of the Shantha Prasad Award for Excellence in Craft constituted in Memory of Smt. Shantha Prasad, for the year 2011. A passion for perfection and innovation has made Smt. Bina Dey a master kantha embroidery artisan. A deft embroiderer with a feel for kantha's nuanced expressions, Bina Dey has revived many 19th century kantha stitches.

EDUCATION AND CRAFT SUSTAINABILITY: IN SEARCH OF MEANINGFUL AND RELEVANT EDUCATION -

Various educational schemes and incentives such as scholarships, awards etc for children of hereditary artisans have been instituted by the Crafts Council of India and other State councils. How far do these schemes go towards keeping the children in their family craft ? Will this education, beneficial though in the larger context, enthuse the children to take crafts as their vocation ?

Here are a few opinions of the councils involved in this challenging field.

CCI AND THE TRADITIONAL INDIAN ARTISAN

Vidya Sastry

Ever since we started the Educate to Sustain programme for scholarship of children of artisans, we in CCI have been faced by the fact that this support of ours may get us no where.

Yes, it is true that after all our inputs, we can only hope that the children will take up their traditional craft as their livelihood; that their parents would encourage them to do so. And yes, some of them have indeed done so. But still the fact remains that many have not, and do not intend to take up the craft.

We console ourselves saying that we have done our bit by ensuring that they have the skill and that they could return to the craft later in life too.

But have we really done our bit? Is there anything more that we can do? Can we help direct their higher studies also in the line of craft? In May 2011, we had 23 students from our schools programme who were finishing class X and another 25 will be completing class X in 2011.

So here is where our search began for what relevant advanced training is available in the country for the child of an artisan who knows the craft and who has completed class X. What soft skills and computer training would this child need and where is it available? Are there markets and design guidance available to these students and, if so, where?

CCI has in various ways over the past few years explored five options covering some of these needs - the Canara Bank Institute for Artisans; the Indian Institute of Craft Design in Jaipur; the Shilpa Sadan in Vishwabharati University at Shantiniketan, Kala Raksha Vidyalaya in Kutch, one of the schemes under HRD of the DC (Handicrafts), Govt of India. Each of these is doing pioneering work but each has its limitations.

The opportunity to conduct CCI's National Meet of 2011 at NID therefore provided us an opportunity to discuss this issue. The successes of each of the institutions were discussed. This was only the beginning of a dialogue. The canvas was now laid out for future planning. The important facts which emerged were:

- a. Opportunities for encouraging the next generation of artisans must note that the current average age of artisans is near 50 years. This is a critical danger signal for the future of Indian crafts.
- b. There should be an opening of a range of opportunities for young artisans including design, marketing and entrepreneurship.
- c. Capacity-building opportunities must include mainstream educational opportunities for potential artisans, so that craft training is not seen as isolating them from mainstream opportunities.
- d. Training curricula must balance traditional and contemporary knowledge, recognizing that potential future artisans often lack deep knowledge of the traditions represented by their families. Craft training must therefore demonstrate that tradition is the foundation for innovation.
- e. Innovating ways to reduce the risk for artisans investing in training, including financial supports to balance the loss of earning opportunities during training.
- f. There is no one-size-fits-all. CCI will need to create a menu of training options directed to local/regional situations and creating an "umbrella of supports" (M P Ranjan).
- g. Current knowledge of artisan training rest with a range of institutions (including CCI, NID, Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, BCDI in Agartala, IICD Jaipur). To create and share a menu of training options, CCI should consider bringing together these institutions for a brain-storming related to future directions.
- h. Encourage master artisans as key faculty (Judy Frater).
- i. Graduates of existing training activities in these institutions could form a core of trainers for the future.

VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS IN CRAFT POCKETS

Meena Appnender

Gajam Goverdhana one of our most active members and a Master Weaver of Ikkat saris was awarded the The Government Of India has finally 'recognized' our craft tradition as a part of larger framework of education and seeks to teach it in the CBSE schools. They have included it in the CBSE syllabus of the 11th and 12th classes as a 'theoretical social science' with an element of field study and applied creative activity.

The focus of this syllabus adaptation seems to be urban or semi urban children who are losing contact with their craft heritage. They will be educated about our crafts in a theoretical nature.

Crafts Council of Andhra Pradesh, in the past year has been doing something similar. We have visited a few schools and spoken to the principals. They do not want to 'distract' the children in the 10th, 11th and 12th classes with the ethos of our craft tradition!. However, Crafts Council of Andhra Pradesh members who visited a few schools regarding this issue found the classes 6th, 7th and 8th most receptive. It is at this stage that they are connecting history and geography to trade and economics and how misuse of resources leads to ecological disasters.

This new syllabus has 30 marks for applied craft, the time allotted would just be adequate for the child to get his or her hands on the material and tools. Is a few hours a week in two years enough for one to learn a craft? If not, what is the purpose of this activity?

Crafts Council of Andhra Pradesh feels we should represent to the government that in vibrant craft pockets we should have specially designed vocational schools for artisan's children who want to continue their parent's livelihood schools, whose syllabus is adapted to the needs of the craftsmen's children.



Sungudi programme Inauguration



Kamala Samaan to Judy Frater





DCC's Rajat Jayanti Celebrations



Abhushan - Curated Exhibition



Chaya katha

At no point should these schools be the only ones available to the children. A vocational school would allow the children to continue learning from their parents, and would focus on new design and development in the craft and also keep their education very broad based so that they can enter the mainstream in case they choose to do so.

Crafts Council of Andhra Pradesh is faced with a thought provoking situation in the Puttapaka cluster and in Nagaldinne, where Gadwal sarees are woven. In Puttapaka most weavers have moved to Hyderabad for better jobs and for their children's education. In Nagaldinne some youngsters were very angry when we told them it was very important that they continue weaving Gadwal sarees. Their retort was "is this all that is destined for us". Good vocational schools would have prevented this situation. Most skilled labour migrate to the cities because of the schools. In the process they forsake their work to provide their children greater opportunities.

When we allow our children such a wide choice of professions, could we possibly deny others the same choice?

Representing to the government the importance of craft specific vocational schools seems to me a very relevant part of the Craft Council's agenda.

DCC'S KAMALA DEVI PURASKAR

Purnima Rai

At the Rajat-Jayanti celebrations of the Kamaladevi Puraskar, we had several interactive sessions, where we had a chance to hear the young craftsmen speak about their lives, and how this award had affected them. Several years ago when we had sent them a feedback questionnaire, we had got similar replies. The Kamaladevi Puraskar awards have been instituted by the Delhi Craft Council for children of hereditary craftspeople as an incentive to continue in their craft within the larger framework of providing them mainstream education.

All the awardees felt that it had raised their status in their village and community. It had instilled fresh pride in their art, and gave them an impetus to work harder. They were very grateful to the DCC for broadening their horizons, and opening their eyes to new experiences. When we recalled their earlier appearance, it was heartening to see the confidence in many of them and the increasing sophistication in their work. Three of the child awardees have gone on to become national awardees. Bhagban Subudhi the stone craftsman from Orissa, our very first awardee, who received the award from Kamala Devi herself is one of them.



The problem areas are predictably, lack of marketing opportunities, and in the case of really poor craftsmen, not having the wherewithal to buy raw materials or having difficulty in procuring it.

Though the stipend is only for one year, and it is only Rs.500, the whole experience of receiving it, making a trip to Delhi, seeing a new world, has had a tremendous impact on the lives of most of the awardees.

WORLD CRAFTS COUNCIL: CRAFT EDUCATION PROGRAMME FOR SCHOOLS

The School Children's Hurrah for Learning Crafts: "We love it!"

Pushpa Chari

Menaka, Sandhya, Sharanya, Dhairavi, Badrunissa, Ramya from Children's Garden School. Neena Aditya, Valli Narayan, Harish, Sahitya, Joshini, Anita from Hari Shree Vidyalaya School were unanimously and



hugely enthusiastic about the introduction of craft education in their schools introduced under the aegis of WCC, the programme holds once a week classes by master artisans teaching the processes and philosophy of handicrafts to children. The aim is to sensitize artisans and urban children to each others sensibilities, to create different perspectives for the children, to literally put heritage creation in their hands alongwith a possible vocation. Hear their voices raised happily, chirpily

Ramya and Sharanya “We loved to work with shells, to create lovely peacocks, birds, tiny flowers for greeting cards. And our teachers were so patient.....”. Sandhya and Badrunnissa”. We were so happy learning shell craft. When we are more proficient we can make products, retail and sell.... May be we can do it as a hobby while we work as doctors and teachers”.

At Hari Shree the children not only loved the feel and smell of palmyra but enjoyed weaving it into boxes, trays, etc. Joshini, Sahitya and Valli loved the eco-friendly natural colours and reveled in studying the whole process from seeing a palmyra tree to actually experiencing how the leaves are dried, cut and woven.... For Harsh it was about a more eco-friendly environment and “the trip to Pulicat was fun. We loved the rural landscape and the leisurely peaceful and eco-sensitive way of life which is what handicrafts is all about”.... And all said in unison “We’d love to learn more crafts ! ”

Amidst future doctors, engineers, architects, scientists and astronauts do we also see studio craftspersons, artists, creative artisans and craft entrepreneurs ?

REVIVAL AND HERITAGE

SUNGUDI: REVIVING A VANISHING TRADITION

Sudha Ravi

On a visit to the temple city of Madurai with a friend, we were urged by a shop assistant at the brand new Airport Handicrafts Store to take a look at the marvelous Sungudi saris once favoured by the royalty of South India. On close examination, we found them to be not the original Sungudi, the tie-dye textile craft made famous by the Saurashtrian weavers or “pattunulkarars” who had migrated to the city four centuries ago, but modern day wax and screen printed versions. It was distressing that even while the original tie-dyed Sungudi had obtained the Geographical Indication (GI) tag associating it with Madurai, stores in its traditional home no longer stocked the original tie-dyed Sungudi but only a poor modern imitation.

So when Mrs Usha Krishna, President, World Crafts Council (WCC), suggested to the Office of the DCH, Ministry of Textiles, Gol, that WCC along with the Crafts Council of India take up the revival of this ancient textile tradition, the idea was greeted with great enthusiasm. And so began Project Sungudi in March this year.

The project comprises three phases. In Phase One, we carried out a survey to collect baseline data and our worst fears came true. The survey revealed that there were only a handful of practitioners of the traditional Sungudi and also that most of those are in their sixties, underlining the urgent requirement to make efforts to enthuse, motivate and train a set of younger people.

In Phase Two we carried out the actual training of 39 women for a period of 15 days. This programme was enthusiastically received as not only were they trained in Sungudi but there were other sessions of music, craft, motivational talks, yoga, art and history to provide holistic training and make the entire learning process interesting. The emphasis throughout the programme was on improving the quality of the tie by making it smaller. The participants were taught dyeing techniques and the hazards of using azo dyes by the Weavers Service Centre, Chennai.

We are currently in Phase Three where we are developing prototypes and products for an exhibition to be held in Chennai. During this phase, we will experiment with other closely related fabrics (the original Sungudi was usually on fine cotton of 80s count) to try out the tie and dye, revive older designs which we have meticulously collected during the survey and also branch out into product development like producing yardage, stoles, dupattas, table cloths, place mats, napkins, bags and so on. The ultimate goal is to empower these women by setting up self help groups, link them directly to the market and free them from the clutches of the middlemen.



This entire project is spearheaded by CCI committee member Ms. Dally Verghese and assisted by Ms Lisa Mathew, an NID trained designer. They carried out the survey initially, drew up the report, and conducted the training programme when they spent time with each and every trainee, identified their strengths and weaknesses, experimented with fabrics and with colours, and even tried introducing an artificial nail to assist in making the tie smaller.

In the current phase the saris are all being designed by Ms Verghese and the products by Ms Mathew.

Heres hoping that the dotted, meticulously crafted Sungudi will once again attain its pre eminent position in the world of craft!

THE SARI: INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Gita Ram

Graceful, flowing, timeless. The sari is the civilizational drape which has sculpted the form of Indian women through the millennia. Symbolic of cultural unity but carrying within its folds weaves, textures, colours and motifs which celebrate the fantastic unity in diversity of our textiles and of our country's heritage.

A generation ago the sari led the handloom movement post Independence, in the greatest design story of our time.

It is absolutely imperative that the sari finds a place in UNESCO's list of India's Intangible Cultural Heritage. Academicians, practitioners, sari wearers and scholars are all vehement that this be done.

The recognition of the sari as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO will not only validate this unique historic garment but also be a source of great encouragement and support to the creators of the sari which includes the community of weavers, cultivators, cleaners, carders, spinners, dyers, seizers, polishers. Their skills are unparalleled, comprising a gene pool of creativity.

In the early 21st century it is fortunate that there are still pockets of weavers and related hand skills that could be India's greatest and most unique resource for future development.

These skills are being transmitted from generation to generation and are constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment and their history.

This provides the groups involved with a sense of identity and continuity with nature and their history.

They need encouragement and support and the faith that their livelihood is not threatened. The challenge the sari weaver faces is to be able to combine the advantages of modern education (and the exposure it brings with it) which they know is important for their children with the inheritance of skills that has evolved over hundreds of years of experience. The average age of the weaver is 45 years, with most of their children having left in search of 'better' jobs.

The procedure for the sari to be listed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is a little elaborate. It requires the weaving communities of about 14 States in India to agree that the sari is listed.

CCI will undertake this task and then go on to showcase to the world a collection of the best of our sari heritage.

CHAYA KATHA

Supriya Sundararaman

It was an enchanted setting. A fragrant Nagalingam tree dropped the occasional pink blossom on the audience as we watched a shadow puppet show unfold, full of colour and charm, drama and fire. The thematic performance of the Ramayana, which was presented by six different puppet groups from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bali, Thailand and Indonesia was part of CCI's special collaborative workshop for leather puppeteers. The aim of the workshop was to look at the similarities or differences in the making of puppets in various parts of the world and the variation in the style of the performances.

Shadow puppetry is widely prevalent in south India where different styles of leather puppets are handcrafted in different regions in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. There are puppeteers whose genealogy goes back to ten to eleven generations with references to the islands of Java, under the control of Pallava and Kakatia kings in the sixth century. This art form from south India seems to have travelled to Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Japan and China.

In spite of the rich and glorious tradition of shadow puppetry, Indian puppeteers today are unable to compete with modern methods of making leather puppets and performance as they have been unable to improvise, innovate and diversify. A glimpse of the level, quality and impact of both performance and puppet making among puppeteers of South East Asia led members of CCI to conceive a programme that would enable the Indian puppeteer to be exposed to learning and improvisation, based on skills and styles of their counterparts from Bali and Thailand.

This 10 day workshop covered the different facets of puppet making, scripting, choreography and overall coordination. The four resource people from India who facilitated this workshop were Dr. Bhanumathi of Paavai Trust, Mr. Upendra, Mr. Gourang Dash and J Surya Narayana Murthy. Mr. Chinnaphatana from Thailand was the resource person from outside India. There were a total of 30 participants in this workshop sponsored by the Development Commissioner, Handicrafts, Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. Interactive sessions during these 10 days gave a chance to all the participants to talk, discuss, debate and understand the nuances of their respective styles and paved the way for exchange of forms and ideas. Language ceased to be a barrier as the language of puppetry took over.....



ACTIVITIES

THE CRAFTS COUNCIL OF INDIA

- ❑ Textile & Jewellery Show (3 - 4 March 2011): Featuring the best in the traditional sari genre, the Textile and Jewellery Show showcased a fantastic range of Benarasis, Uppadas, Khadi, Leheriyas in silk, kanthas, Fulias, Ikats, Jamdaanis, Dhakais, etc
- ❑ Abhushan (3- 6 February 2011): Held under the aegis of the World Crafts Council and the Crafts Council of India. Abhushan was an International Jewellery Summit which celebrated jewellery creativity in fibre, glass, thread, leaves, roots, pin clips and paper and every kind of recyclable material. A dazzling array of traditional jewellery forms from India was also on show.

- ❑ Santa Fe Folk Art Market: Two craftspersons from India participated in the Santa Fe Folk Art Market, the biggest Folk Art Show in the world.
- ❑ Luxembourg Fair: CCI was invited by the Consul General of Luxembourg to participate in the Indian Fair organized there. CCI took selected artifacts for display and sale.

CRAFTS COUNCIL OF ANDHRA PRADESH

- ❑ Crafts Council of Andhra Pradesh conducted 'Kausalyam' a craft exhibition with 50 participating craftsmen from other parts of the state.
- ❑ CCAP committee member Shri Gajam Govardhana who was awarded the Padma Shri in recognition of his yeoman services to the weaving community of Andhra Pradesh was felicitated by Crafts Council of Andhra Pradesh at a function. Smt Kasturi Gupta Menon presented Shri Govardhana with a shawl on behalf of CCI.
- ❑ Crafts Council of Andhra Pradesh has presented the weavers of Nagaldinne with the first batch of 100 looms. The final batch of 120 looms will be given in the second week of July.
- ❑ The Confederation of Indian Industry (CSR chapter) has decided to build two sheds in Nagaldinne, on land allotted by the government. They will enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with Crafts Council of Andhra Pradesh to ensure that the right people are allotted the space in these sheds.

DELHI CRAFTS COUNCIL

- ❑ Kairi 2011: The yearly summer textiles Exhibition was organized by Delhi Crafts Council this year at a new venue, Shilp haat, which had been newly opened at Rajiv Gandhi Handicrafts Bhawan. The three day event was successful and provided good sales to many artisans who had participated. Available were tribal, Benaras, Maheshwari, Orissa, Mangalgiri and Chanderi weaves along with traditional prints like bagru, Ajrak as well as Ikat.
- ❑ "Seed to Silver" Abhushan: Besides the overall planning and coordination of the event 'Abhushan', DCC organized "Seed to Silver", a collection of jewellery from North America, Europe, Asia Pacific, Africa, Latin America and India. The exhibition showed the transformation of ordinary materials like wood, paper and plastic into innovative pieces of jewellery. The Indian section which showed traditional jewellery used for different parts of the human body was curated entirely by members of the Delhi Crafts Council.
- ❑ Kamala Devi Puraskar Awards: The 25th anniversary of Kamala Devi Puraskar awards was celebrated by DCC with a 3 day programme of an interactive session with the awardees regarding the problems faced by them vis-à-vis the various facets of their craft and its marketing the filming of Shyam Benegal's film "Sushman" dealing with the travails of a weaver, Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music etc. The awardees for the year 2011 were: Surgyan Devi, (17) for Leather work, Seema Kanwar, (16) for Applique, Jyothi Bai, (15) for Lambani hand embroidery, Somya Kumari, (17) for Sujni work, Akash Chhipa, (19) for Hand Block printing, Saabra, (13) for Basket weaving, Mukta Karmakar, (17) for Dhokra, Racha Shivaji Ganesh, (20) for Ikat weaving and Azhar Abbass, (15) for Zardozi

CRAFTS COUNCIL OF TAMIL NADU

- ❑ Coimbatore Vizha - January 2011: CCTN participated in the week long celebration of Coimbatore Vizha. It included a one day programme of a puppet show from Andhra Pradesh performed by artist Khande Ramdas and his family with Sundara Kanda from the Epic Ramayana as the theme. The focus was on school children and the show was held at the Bharath Vidya Bhavan school auditorium with seven schools in attendance.

- ❑ Distribution Of Id Cards To Craftspersons. March - 2011:

After a long wait of nearly a year and a half, due to some problems within the DC's office at Salem. CCTN were able to get and distribute the ID cards to 25 of our craftspersons successfully.

- ❑ Marketing Activities: In February 2011, CCTN's sheet metal craftspersons made 200 sets of 16 mango leaf ' thorans ' in copper and brass per set for a wedding in Andhra Pradesh.
- ❑ For the International Jewellery Summit presented by the World Crafts Council's "Abhushan" and organised by CCI, CCTN craftspersons did the entire decoration of the halls with olai craft flowers and leaf parrots.
- ❑ CCTN exhibited Olai craft at the Indo-African Summit held at Addis Ababa in Ethiopia.

CRAFTS COUNCIL OF WEST BENGAL

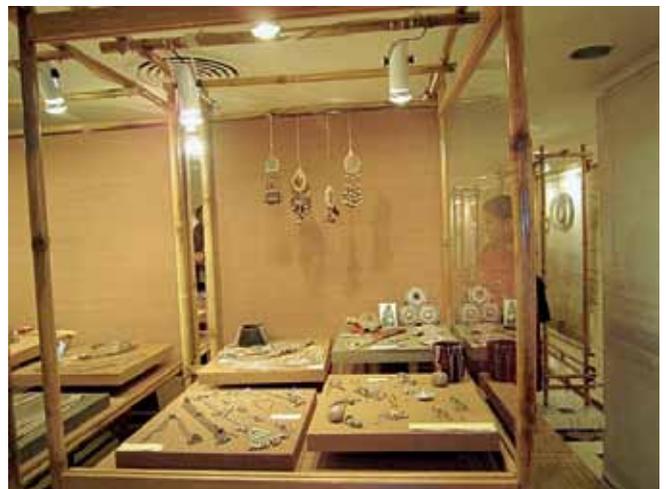
- ❑ Weavers from various parts of the country had brought their collections at Artisana for Bengali New year. CCWB also displayed textile based craft items like lampshades with contemporary batik design, contemporary silver jewellery, etc.

DESIGN FOR CRAFTS: A perspective for the 12th Plan period

Ashoke Chatterjee

India's craft history and the contribution of this heritage to contemporary needs represent a unique contribution to world design. India's design history is unique in that it is an unbroken record of creativity and innovation going back thousands of years, perhaps the only design experience of its kind. Design in India has always been integrated within a larger concept of kala, a concept which ranges from engineering and architecture to the fine arts. While other societies struggle towards this integrated understanding of quality, in India it is a natural component of the wisdom artisans bring to their craft and to their status as India's strongest design resource.

The contemporary understanding of design as a problem-solving process linked to enhancing the quality of the human-made environment underlines the importance of design --- and the design process of problem-solving ---- in serving artisans and crafts in



the transition from tradition to modernity. Design can help ensure that this passage is a continuum in which tradition is recognized not as a static concept or product but as an attitude of creativity and innovation. It is this process that was the foundation of the Swadeshi movement which Gandhiji used to lead the Freedom movement, although he may never have consciously used the term 'design'. It is this process that was introduced into the early efforts by pioneering handicraft institutions as well as into design education when this profession entered India five decades ago through the National Institute of Design. Since that time, the interaction between designers and artisans (including those who have emerged through design institutions as well as through Government's regional Design Centres) has been a major expression of craft development in India. The contribution this partnership has made to building export and domestic markets is self-evident. So too are the challenges in ensuring that design respects heritage and tradition while acknowledging new needs and new, distant markets and users.

In this context it is critically important to recognize that the design process is part of a larger marketing process. Not only does design need more accurate understanding as a process of problem-solving, so too

does marketing require serious understanding. Far too often, the term 'marketing' is confined to selling and retailing. While marketing embraces these activities, it must be understood as the process of identifying needs and satisfying such needs at a profit. In the craft sector, this means identifying (and creating) user needs that hand-skills can satisfy in a way that machine production cannot, and satisfying these needs at a profit which enables a sustainable livelihood to the artisans and ensures that the marketing cycle is a continuous one. For the artisan, design must be a process of genuine empowerment through an ability to negotiate with and influence the market and acquire basic management skills that are indispensable in an environment so fiercely competitive.

In the context of the 12th Plan, the need is to ensure that design is recognized and supported in several ways. These include (1) understanding design as indispensable to the marketing process (2) building design as a professional skill and attitude imparted through training and other capacity-building opportunities for artisans (most particularly the younger generation) (3) strengthening design as professional education within current and new institutions of design learning (4) building foundations of knowledge built through serious investments in craft research and documentation/publication and (5) advocating as an essential attitude and capacity within every stakeholder group in the craft industry.

A step in this direction during a new Plan could be for a serious review of the experience of craft design education and training experience in India over the past five decades, bringing together the experience of artisans and designers who have worked in the craft sector, understanding and drawing up on the collective experience of craft design worldwide, and assessing as well as recommending the investments needed in design for crafts during the next decade.



OBITUARY

Peer Mohammad

The Crafts Council of India mourns the passing away of Peer Mohammad, mat weaving artisan from Pattamadai and a man of many parts. His liberal outlook coupled with love for craft made him the community leader of mat weavers in the area. A mat weaving training school begun by him in Pattamadai under a DCH programme helped train many young people, including girls from other communities. He was a revivalist in that it was his incessant efforts which brought the wonder mat of Pattamadai into national consciousness. Spirituality, wisdom and dialogue were his forte expressed in his dictum that it is the craft trader and weaver who are the ultimate decision makers in their respective fields, based on their own wisdom and experience. Peer Mohammad leaves behind a family totally immersed in crafting beautiful Pattamadai mats around which his own life revolved.

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