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'There's renewed interest in handlooms'

By Shritama Bose | August 23, 2016



Ikkat from Andhra Pradesh by G. Goverdhan



Paithani by Pravin Thakur

Interview/Ratna Krishnakumar, associate member, Paramparik Karigar

The standard bearer of traditional arts, crafts and textiles in Mumbai, Paramparik Karigar, completed 20 years recently. It has come a long way since the days when six craftspersons formed the organisation with the backing of legendary revivalist Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Roshan Kalapesi. Associate member Ratna Krishnakumar, who has been with the organisation for 17 years, spoke to The WEEK on the sidelines of its annual exhibition in south Mumbai. Excerpts:

Tell us about how Paramparik Karigar and the craftspersons associated with it have evolved over these 20 years.

The craftspeople were always feeling sidelined by the women who were representing them. They were never at the forefront. All of the original six members were part of the Crafts Council and they met Roshan Kalapesi, who was

working under Kamaladevi (Chattopadhyay) and said, “We need an organisation for ourselves, where we can represent ourselves instead of other people representing us.” Then Roshan convinced Kamala that this is what they want to do and that is how six craftsmen formed this (organisation). It was originally called Vishwakarma and then 20 years ago, it became Paramparik Karigar.



Manipur Pottery by A.S.Tamreipam

The whole idea was that they are the ones who will decide everything. We have AGMs every year. People like us are associate members. We don't have any voting rights. Only the craftsmen have voting rights. Any major change has to be cleared by them. We have to present the finances, auditing—everything—at the AGM. So, it's a totally different organisation from the other NGOs representing craftsmen.

With that background, what we have to do is make sure that only genuine craftsmen come in. We go out into the field and check. Earlier this year, we went to Kashmir and in those glorious

two weeks we got to see pashmina being woven from yarn to the finished product. Then there was embroidery, papier mache, walnut wood craft. We met amazing people there and selected three of them to come [for the exhibition], but, unfortunately, problems started there and only one person could make it. Similarly, last year, we had gone to Andhra Pradesh. We still have to cover a large part of Andhra because it is a large state and there are so many craft there. That is how we select the craftsmen. It has to be a traditional craftsman, not a shopkeeper. The whole idea of Paramparik Karigar is that you sell directly to the public. We don't take any money for the exhibition. At the end of the fourth day, they contribute 10 per cent of their sale proceeds to the corpus.

Earlier, it was very easy to get sponsorship for exhibitions, but subsequently, it became more and more difficult....

When and why did it start to get harder to raise funding?

Funding is done mostly through personal contacts. Nobody believes in a cause and decides to be generous. But, I had thought with this 2 per cent coming in, it will be a cakewalk for people like us. (The Companies Act, 2013, requires companies of a certain size to spend at least 2 per cent of their last three years' average net profit on activities focused on corporate social responsibility.) But there are so many

rules attached to it that it's like a maze. So, it's virtually impossible to get any money from any of the corporates.

I find that this 2 per cent [requirement] is really not working for us. Before news of it came, funds had already started drying up. Then the craftspersons decided that they would contribute 10 per cent and we were able to hold exhibitions with that, which is really good. That was enough to cover the cost of the hall and advertisements, which take up a major chunk of donations. Earlier, they used to contribute eight per cent and later raised it to 10 per cent. This year we were very fortunate as Yes Bank stepped in to sponsor it under their culture institute. But, it is getting difficult to get money for exhibitions.



Phulkari Embroidery by Lajawanti Chabra



Silver Filigree by Pankaj Sahoo

Why do you think Mumbai hasn't developed as a hub for traditional craft in the way Delhi has?

Delhi, being the capital, has all the embassies there, which can showcase the craft. So, the city has always got preferential treatment. In Delhi, there is a certain crowd, a small percentage that likes handlooms and will pay any price for a Patan Patola or a beautiful chikankari.

Somehow, in Mumbai, that percentage is really small. Also, the government has not stepped in at all, whereas in Delhi, a lot of government help is there. We don't have land in Mumbai. We have one place in Borivali, which is being transformed

into a craft village. The craftspeople can live there for a couple of weeks and sell their crafts. That's in the offing and should come up soon. But then, that's very small. It doesn't have the scale of Dilli Haat or the Pragati Maidan fairs.

Have you ever considered taking the craftspersons to an online platform?

[Apart from the exhibitions] for the rest of the year, they are on their own. Some of them are already online, but as an organisation, we don't have a sales tax number. We are 10 or 12 ladies here. We have neither the manpower nor the resources or infrastructure to do it ourselves. In fact, one of the portal people were here trying to get them to join. But that's an individual choice. We can't force them to do that.



Tarkashi by Ramsingh Kumawat

Over all these years, tastes have changed even among the crowd that buys specifically handlooms. Do you think most craftspersons in India have adapted to that? Are they open to change?

Some of them have. The problem is that they are set in their ways and to overcome it, we are holding workshops for the craftsmen. We have an initiative from one of our sponsors where we select 10 craftsmen who will interact with designers at NIFT and learn the nuances of contemporary design and how to use them in their craft without meddling with the intrinsic

methods of the craft. Some of the craftsmen are very receptive, some of them think, "We have been doing this for the last five generations. What will these people teach us?" So, it's an experiment. Let's see how it goes.

Are most of these craftspersons happy with what their state governments have done for them?

We have the largest number of craftsmen from Rajasthan, partly because they have a lot of craft. Andhra also has the state government doing quite a bit. But state governments have to do a lot more.

The GST is a great boon for these people because every time they go to a different state, they have to stop at the checkpoints for octroi and their parcels are held up. I hope by next year when the GST is enforced, it will make things easier for them.

After all these years of independence, we have only one full-fledged mainstream retailer in Fabindia, which exclusively stocks handcrafted goods. Why do you think that has happened?

I think that's because nobody has really taken the trouble to invest in craftsmen. Why do you think when an exhibition like this happens, so many people come? They know it's genuine stuff and they are buying for the right price. Yesterday, at the inauguration, the guest of honour couldn't get over the prices. I said, "Yeah, because you are buying directly from the craftsman. The middleman is not there."

We are seeing a renewed interest in handloom. Thank God for that.

You have sari pacts online. Do you think it's really helping to increase the size of the market?

Apart from when you are going out, you rarely wear saris, especially working women. It's only in the evening when you go out for a formal



West Bengal Tangail Jamdani Saris by Ramanand Basak

occasion that you wear a sari. Of course it's convenient [to skip the sari] and if it's a cotton sari, you have to starch it and so on. But, I would any day choose a sari over any other outfit. To expect a girl to drape a sari every day and go to office, it's a little far-fetched. You have to be practical. And then, if you force them, they will all turn to synthetics and the whole point will be lost. But, maybe, offices can have something like a 'sari day' once a week.

We have a new minister for textiles now...

I am hoping that things will change a lot now.

Being a woman, she knows the problems and I hope she has more interactions with the weavers directly and things change for the better. Many of the weavers have a really sad existence.

When you make a sari, you have to buy the yarn. You have to colour it. Then you have to design. If it's a jacquard loom, you have to do the card-cutting. All of this is expensive. Card-cutting is the most costly part of the process. You can make a lot of saris with one set of cards, but the thing is, how many people will buy it after some time? So, you will have to use a new design and the expense is very high. Then the middleman comes in and he delays the payment of proceeds from sales. So, the weaver is stuck with the moneylender. To buy the next bit of yarn, he needs money. For that, he will have to stick with the middleman and it's a vicious circle. If there is centralised purchasing where yarn could be distributed at the correct rate, if they could insist on asso-free dyes or natural dyes and have an effluent treatment plant straight away, these steps will make a major difference. There could be a regulatory body to ensure that the right kind of yarn is going to the right person and these people are freed from the clutches of the moneylender. They will then be able to weave without any worries.

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