



WOMAN POWER IN CRAFT

BY PUSHPA CHARI

When one holds a piece of Indian craft in one's hands, one all too often forgets to celebrate the woman artisan whose hands have played such a crucial role in the creation of the craft. Relegated by tradition to the “ancillary and preparatory” backroom role, she is the woman who diligently prepares by hand the yarn, often of exquisitely minute thinness, which the male members of the weaver family weave into fabric of ethereal delicacy. She mixes the colours in which the cloth or sari is dyed by her male family members or workers, block-printed on fabric, grass-mat, metal or paper, colours which make the traditional toys, dolls, decorative and utilitarian craft objects into unique colour-drenched statements. And it is the women helpers who, unnoticed, help prepare the clay which the male potter throws into the potter’s wheel to create fabled pots of exquisite proportions following a tradition going back 8,000 years...

Traditional Vishwakarma 'jaati' rules excluded women from the conceptualization and creation of the complete craft product, of being regarded as its ‘creator’. Embroidery, stitching, knitting, and in some rare cases, painting, were deemed ‘suitable’ crafts for women. However, women belonging to tribal communities, particularly of the North-East, could traditionally weave saris, fabric, shawls etc, and also create pottery for domestic use. They were given their place in the community as artisans in their own right.

In the past many decades, changing social perceptions, women’s education, growing emphasis on women’s empowerment, and being seen today as partners in the economic growth of society, are factors which have seen a shift in women artisans being seen as craft creators in themselves. Entrepreneurs, craft and social activists, NGOs, individuals and artisans themselves have played a role in bringing women artisans centre stage. In some cases, talented women artisans have breached traditional taboos to become, for example, Kalamkari artists or potters, both once exclusive male preserves. Today many women are going into craft training programmes to become artisans. Among many such groups in the country are Ratna Kumari’s ‘Natural Dyeing Women Only’ outfit, Padhmini Govind’s ‘Wood block printing’ craft group comprising only women, Pattamadai women’s mat weaving group, Ambika Devi’s Madhubani training clusters, and training for many women in Assam’s unique Mishing tribal weaves by National Award winner Anuradha Kuli, to name just a few. In addition, government support to women artisans in the form of subsidies, interest and infrastructural support, PM Vishwakarma Scheme with 75 per cent women’s enrolment and many other schemes help women artisans in their craft journey.



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The Craft Council of India (CCI) and its affiliated State Councils have played an important role in training and empowering women artisans drawn from both traditional and non-traditional craft backgrounds.

CCI's skilling programme for 40 women Pattamadai mat weavers with focus on the introduction of new designs, better dyeing methods and financial and digital literacy has led the women weavers to form 4 self-help groups and using WhatsApp to do business. Delhi Craft Council's interventions in the languishing craft of Chamba Rumal in the areas of quality and design, and the opening of the CHAARU training centre for women embroiderers, is a remarkable story of revival and the creation of exquisite, much acclaimed Chamba Rumals. The Craft Council of West Bengal's (CCWB) 'Kantha Centre' in Kolkata for women Kantha artisans has become a centre for the creation of priceless Kantha products, transforming it from a home decor and apparel craft to an internationally acclaimed embroidery art. The Craft Council of Andhra Pradesh's sustained training scheme for Banjara women of Yellamma Thanda village in the area of traditional embroidery skills, design inputs, quality control and diversification of product range is yet another State Council initiative for women artisans. Read more about 'CCI's work in training and empowering Indian women artisans in 'CCI is 60'.

As always, the last word comes from women artisans themselves. Says Pritikana, kantha embroiderer par excellence who was trained in Nakshi kantha at CCW's Kantha Centre in Kolkata "I want to take Nakshi kantha forward by training more women artisans". And Syed Ahmad Fathima: "I'm from Pattamadai. I run a Self-Help Group and give training in mat weaving to 40 women. At CCI organized digital skill training workshop we learnt to cost our products, and place orders through photographs on WhatsApp as well as received payments". In this issue of the CCI Newsletter features Conversations with a few successful women artisans, who hopefully, will become a beacon light to young aspiring women artisans. May their tribe increase.

VOICES OF WOMEN ARTISANS

At the CCI National Meet held in Kolkata on 3rd and 4th October 2024, 3 women artisans, one each from West Bengal, Meghalaya and Assam, shared their experiences of “roads less travelled” exposing them to challenges and triumphs which they faced with their immense talent, grit and resilience to reach positions of eminence in their respective crafts.

Listen to their stories...

JAMINI PAYENG



Jamini Payeng is a weaver from the Mishing tribe of Assam and lives on the lush green river island of Majuli. The island is totally cut off during the monsoon season and the not-too-occasional flooding of the Brahmaputra river. It is her immense talent and passion for the unique weaving craft of the region, along with grit and hard work, that has taken her to the pinnacle of success as a weaver extraordinaire of the Mishing tribe's weaving heritage. While her mesmerising saris, mekhala chadors with typical Assamese motifs are unfolded to an audience of textile lovers, Jamini talks about her life and craft to Nandini Pal Chaudhury...

Qn: How many generations in your family have practised weaving?

JP: Many, many generations. It has been a tradition in Assam for women to weave for themselves and their families. Most of the clothes we wear are woven by us. In fact, in Assam small hand-made looms are made for the young before they graduate to bigger looms.

Qn: Who were your first teachers in the craft of weaving?

JP: I learnt weaving at the age of 13/14 from my grandmother and mother. We would begin by helping in reeling the yarn and other activities before the yarn goes into the loom.

Qn: Tell us about the difficulties you faced when you first started weaving and how you overcame the tough times?

JP: We faced a lot of difficulties. Manjuli being a river island in the middle of Brahmaputra river, we faced difficulties in communiting to procure yarn. Catching and booking tickets in time, especially during the flooding itself a challenge. When the river is in spate we have to relocate to Jorhat. Procuring yarn, selling our products are major challenges which we face with courage, patience and resilience.





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Qn: How do you source your yarn?

JP: Sourcing good local yarn especially cotton, is both difficult and expensive, as cotton doesn't grow in Assam. Those who can afford silk, eri, noori and suga silk do so but they too are expensive, and I have to face these issues also.

Qn: How many looms are there in Majuli?

JP: Every house has a loom. As in other parts of Assam, weaving is done by women in their backyard or in the courtyard.

Qn: Who helps in marketing your products?

JP: We sell our products through traders who place orders and often at exhibitions and weddings in nearby towns. We sell products on orders from CCI, at private clubs, residences etc., and when government invites us for exhibitions, paying for travel and daily allowance.

Qn: Have you introduced any designs in your design repertoire apart from traditional ones?

JP: We revived natural dyes and old designs worn by our grandmothers. We have revived traditional Mishing tribe weaves as well as revisited old techniques of weaving.

Qn: What are your future plans?

JP: To carry on weaving. We have started 'Collective Looms' of 9-10 looms and are working together to help weavers improve their products, guide and help them with natural dyes and follow up orders more efficiently and on time. And, above all, carry the traditions forward for those who are keen to learn from us-one lives in hope...

DOLAN KUNDU MONDAL



Shilp Guru and National award winner for her stunning and lyrical clay art creations, Dolan Kundu Mondal was born and brought up in economically marginalized non-traditional family. Her first encounter with clay was the river flowing near the hut where she lived. She speaks of her passion for clay art and her story of struggles and successes, trials and tribulations, to Nandita Pal Choudhury.

Qn: What made you take to clay as your profession?

DKM: As a 3-year-old child, from a poor fatherless family, slept on a mud floor and dreamt of working with mud. I did my studies alongside playing with clay got from the river which flowed closeby. Slowly with the need to earn I began making simple toys and jewellery to sell in the neighbourhood.

Qn: Tell us about your creative way forward with clay.

DKM: I began by making small toys and animals, and kept experimenting and trying new forms. Gradually my own style emerged. I always experimented with colour and texture, not by adding dyes but using the fire to give the manipulation in the firing process.

Qn: From clay toys to clay art is a big creative leap. Who supported you in the beginning of your art journey?

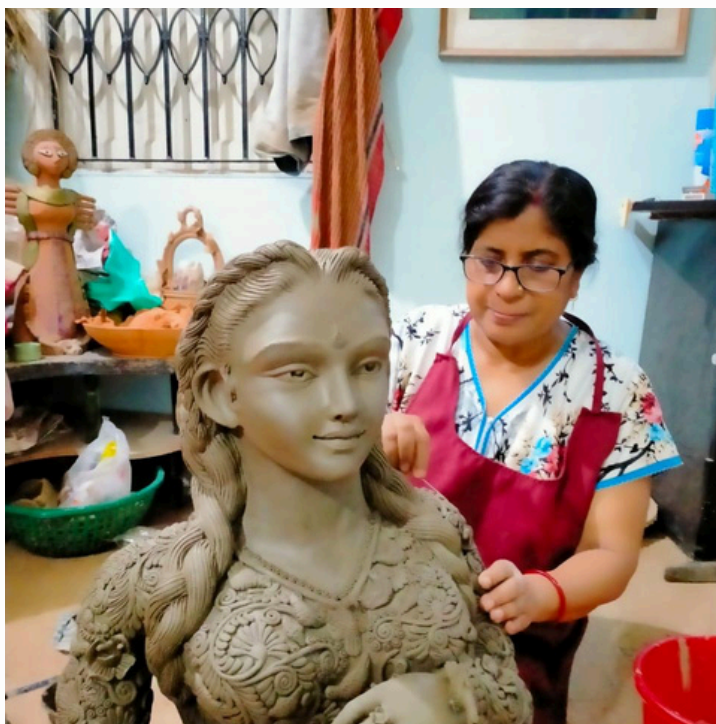
DKM: My mother made a great contribution to my beginnings as a clay artist. She wanted me to follow clay and although unlike toys and jewellery etc., it cannot be monetised, her standing by me was very strong support system in itself. My husband was also greatly supportive of my great inclination for clay art.

Qn: Who were the important influences in your career?

DKM: Nandita Pal Choudhury. She spotted me at a Craft Council Mela and saw my potential. She asked me to concentrate on honing my skills. She has been on my side ever since.

Qn: Recently, you did a long collaborative work with 2 contemporary artists from U.K. and Delhi. The collaboration made clay art publicly known. Within their different techniques and concepts, how did you get the confidence to handle the whole experience?

DKM: I have always been a very confident person, with an inner strength. Cultural differences, language did not deter me. I have an inner voice that tells me I can overcome any hurdle. It made me very proud to work with renowned UK sculptors. I really enjoyed that process of working internationally.



Qn: You are a fantastic artist. How have you become good at the business of selling? How have you set up a viable business enterprise?

DKM: Initially Nanditadi guided me with product designs and contacts, I've always had a good domestic clientele that sustained me through exhibitions sales, and at a small store I set up in my house. Later I became a part of the annually held Bengal Show in Mumbai curated by Nandita Pal Chaudhury. Eventually, she weaned me of all support so that today I handle all my packaging, inventory, sales etc, independent of anybody's help.

RIBIS MALLAI



Coming from Umpegh, a small village in the beautiful state of Meghalaya where weaving is a household craft, Ribis Mallai grew up with the sound of loom music. She lost her parents at a young age, left school at 15, and got married soon after. In the following years she became a mother of 7 children, and to support her economically marginalized family, she took to doing small jobs in the village. Weaving seemed to be her calling, and she approached an old woman weaver in the village to teach her the intricacies of the unique styles of regional weaving. Soon weaving became a passion as well as means of livelihood for Ribis. Today Ribis Mallai weaves textiles with typical motifs and in the most lyrical colours. In our interview, against the background of her beautiful woven textiles, Ribis demonstrates her region's unique technique of yarn making as she tells her craft story...

Qn: When did you start weaving, and who was the inspiration behind your becoming an eminent natural dye expert?

RM: I got to learn the techniques of our region's weaving from an old woman weaver of our village at an early age. My eldest sister, my "choti ma" was and continues to be my inspiration. She taught me about tree colours, how to extract black from iron, pink from lac, yellow from turmeric, and colours from the bark of trees, and how to fix colours through a particular leaf. All materials we use to craft our textiles are sourced locally from the village. I've also attended a programme about creating colours.



Qn: Have you created colours out of natural ingredients on your own?

RM: I have created and used 20 colours through my own experiments. I have a passion for exploring colours and creating new hues.

Qn: Do you have a unit of your own where you experiment and train others in the village?

RM: Yes. I have a registered unit. I have trained many young people in my village and the villages around. They say that I am a 'fun' teacher who makes the trainees enjoy the learning process!

Qn: At a deeper level, what does passing on your knowledge of colours and weaving and creating beautiful fabric mean to you?

RM: I understand that whatever skill I have should be passed on as livelihood income for other women. I see a high hope that the youth of the area will carry on the tradition. I see their passion.

OBITUARY

SMT VIMALA RANGACHAR



The Crafts Council of India (CCI) mourns the passing away of Smt Vimala Rangachar on 25th February 2025 at Bengaluru. An iconic and passionate craft activist, with focus on Karnataka's rich craft legacy, Smt Rangachar's multi-layered personality left footprints on every cultural and socio-economic field she worked in, from craft and art to women and child issues, education, theatre and social work. As a chairperson of Crafts Council of Karnataka (CCK) Smt Vimala Rangachar spearheaded many significant craft events such as marketing exercises, craft exhibitions with focus on quality, and outstanding documentation exercises such as erudite books on Karnataka's 'Temple Rituals Vessels', 'Temple Jewellery', 'Temple Chariots' and 'Metal Craft of Karnataka'. She was also one of the Vice presidents of CCI for some years and actively participated in many CCI programmes.

CCI extends heartfelt condolences to Smt Vimala Rangachar's family, friends and craft associates.



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