

Woven into Madras

Arundhati Menon

Madras, nalla Madras was one of my favourite songs when I moved to Chennai in 1967. A Bengali raised in Delhi, I arrived in the city with my family harbouring a lot of reservations.

While pursuing Masters in Social Work at Stella Maris, I decided to start an 'earn while you learn' programme, where talented students would craft things and sell them to Shanti Bhavan, a social welfare centre under the college administration that assisted the underprivileged from surrounding areas.

I was interested in crafts and needlework, and stitched my own clothes, thanks to my mother. My Bengal cottons would cause a stir in Madras, and at that time, a good *Dhonekali* or *Tangail* sari cost a mere Rs. 14. They were so much in demand that I would get a suitcase full of saris after every visit to Calcutta. That's how it all began.

I started off in a garage at home and employed talented tailors. My clientele grew from a few to 100 over time and in 1980, *Shilpi*, a boutique on C.P. Ramaswamy Road, was born.

Shilpi initially sold children's clothes and saris and then moved to handloom salwar kurtas and dupattas. We travelled to various parts of the country to bring in unique and varied handloom weaves from different States. It was an exhilarating experience to promote Bengal's



FABRIC OF HER LIFE

— PHOTO: M. KARUNAKARAN

Kantha work and Gujarat's block printing in Chennai. The women here lapped it up.

In the last few months, after I sold my business, I have been creating and designing again at a leisurely pace with individual-craftspersons. Skilled artisans don't get enough recognition in our country. When you showcase the designer, showcase the artisan too.

I will always be a *Madrasi*. My girls call themselves Chennaiites and speak the language fluently.

I think I speak fluent Tamil albeit with mistakes. I managed 125 people at one point and believe communicating with them was most effective in the local language.

Arundhati Menon, sister of producer Siddharth Basu and a reviver of handloom textiles, is the co-founder of *Shilpi*.

(As told to Lata Ganapathy)



VIDEO

<http://thne.ws/madras-arundhati>

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