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A riot of colours

TRADITION Untie the knots and out spill hues of red, yellow, purple, green... Welcome to the gorgeous world of Sungudi.

KAUSALYA SANTHANAM

Her fingers fly over the fabric with lightning speed. She pinches a tiny portion, deftly ties the thread around it and knots it tightly. Soon the spread of cotton is filled with innumerable knots. Once the fabric is dyed, and the knots untied, the tiny space will transform into a dot. Thousands of such dots then illuminate the expanse of the cloth.

Sixty-five-year-old Saroja is a hereditary practitioner of the tie and dye technique of Sungudi. It is a traditional craft that has put the temple city of Madurai on the textile map. Sungudi has won a special place for the Pattunool community that originally came from Saurashtra in Gujarat and which specialises in this skill. But printing began to replace the art of tying the knots by hand impacting the authenticity and the value of the craft.

The World Crafts Council along with the Crafts Council of India and the Office of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, recently have been engaged in the task of reviving Sungudi.

Nearly 40 participants were selected in Madurai and

trained there at a 15-day workshop.

Saroja, whose deftness owes to four decades of experience, is passing on her skill to a group of students of the Department of Fine Arts, Stella Maris College at the college premises. Along with her is Narmada who learnt the craft from Saroja at the workshop in Madurai.

"The idea is to sensitise younger people as it will help revive the craft. We also want the student community to respect craftspersons - to appreciate the amount of labour involved and the beauty of our craft traditions," says Usha Krishna, president of World Crafts Council. "Later, we are going to ask the students of this college to demonstrate to school students so that there is a ripple effect and they become aware."

"Dr. Sr. Jasintha Quadras, Principal, Stella Maris College, was very supportive and so we are conducting this two-day workshop at the college," adds Sudha Ravi, member of the World Crafts Council, who is Project Coordinator for the revival of Sungudi. "Leela Samson, Director of Kalakshetra, was also very supportive. She sent participants from the Kalakshetra Crafts wing to take part in it," she says.

"At some stage we want to

involve the students of Madurai as well," say WCC members.

The training of the students has been financed by WCC.

Self-help groups

"We have helped organise around 20 women who participated in the Madurai workshop into two self-help groups, 'Madurai Meenakshi' and 'Madurai Malli,' so that they can become self-reliant and reap the benefits of learning the craft," adds Sudha.

Saroja and Narmada say that previously they were receiving meagre wages but thanks to WCC the rates have been revised.

Dally Verghese, member of CCI, the designer of the workshop has successfully explored a beautiful palette of colours and a range of designs. "There are 14 students from Stella Maris and 11 from the Kalakshetra participating in the workshop," says Dally as she guides the students to mark grids for the designs by applying dye on the cloth. Dally shows how the pattern can be transferred. "It is a secret generally guarded by craftsmen and which prevents the continuation of the legacy. I want to revive the traditional combinations of colours such as black and red, purple and green, yellow and red," she says.

Mallika Madhavan, Faculty Member of Fine Arts Department in the college says, "Indian textiles form part of the curriculum and Sungudi has been introduced for the practical course. Our principal encourages us to reach out and to



VIBRANT: Sungudi saris and (below) at the campus workshop. PHOTOS: V. GANESAN AND M. KARUNAKARAN



tie up with the community."

The participants, all post graduate students, are enthusiastic about learning the craft. According to Supriya, "It is difficult to get the hang of it but since I can thread jasmine, I am able to get it. This will prove a very useful skill as I can teach the students of the school run by my parents."

Her friend Susha loves the fact that the colours are typical of the South. She also feels one can combine Sungudi with prints to make it creative. "You

can play around with it," she says, while Nadia and Sandra add that Sungudi can be adapted for use on letter paper pads, pouches and stoles, "even as strips to decorate footwear."

"Since Kalakshetra has the facility of vegetable dyeing it will be wonderful if we can do Sungudi using vegetable dyes," says Dally. "We would like to move on to Azo free dyes as well," adds Sudha. For a craft to survive, one has to reinvent and innovate constantly, feel the students.

Platform for craftspersons

The exhibition and sale of the revived Sungudi saris, organised by the World Crafts Council and Crafts Council of India, will be held on October 1, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. at Apparao Galleries, 7, Wallace Garden, Third Street, Chennai-600 006.

The saris spill over from the boxes in a riot of colours. Bright reds and greens, blacks and blues, purples and yellows are lit by finely executed dots.

The saris show how when a craft is presented in its authentic form, the mellow beauty is uncovered and it becomes a prized possession. There are saris with zari borders as well as plain ones covered with the typical Sungudi dots. They have been executed on Khadi, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu cottons.

"At the sale, we want to expose retailers also to the Sungudi saris. We want to be facilitators, to hold the hand of the craftspersons till proper channelling is arranged," say the WCC members. Around 150 saris will be on sale ranging from Rs. 1,800 to Rs. 4,000. Yardage and dupattas will also be on sale.

"To the non-discerning eye, these textiles may seem like any you get in a retail store; but it is a question of *pehchan* - recognition of the labour involved, of the time-consuming process and fair wages to the craftsmen," add WCC members.

K. S.

