

February 8, 2015

Matters of the haat



Jaya Jaitly with folk artistes at the bazaar. Photo: R. Ragu



Jaya Jaitly

As this year's edition of the Dastkari bazaar takes place in the city, cultural curator Jaya Jaitly talks to DEEPA ALEXANDER about her exciting journey through Indian craft traditions

Someone had to find a way to put the gloss on our crafts. It happened in a cultural hub in New Delhi that celebrates all things India. And over the past 21 years, Dilli Haat has grown to become the national capital of ethnic chic, and Jaya Jaitly, its ambassador.

Nearly 2,000 km to the South, in a Chennai neighbourhood that balances delicately between the past and the future, this India is still being celebrated. In the fading light of a balmy winter afternoon, at the Kalakshetra Foundation, I find Jaya. The founder-president of the Dastkari Haat Samiti is elegantly clad in a block-printed indigo sari from Bagru, and seated behind row upon row of her books that have chronicled and captured the beauty of our cultural heritage.

“This is my latest,” she says, opening *Woven Textiles of Varanasi*, a yet-to-be launched coffee table book. “It’s been two years in the making and I wanted to showcase that beyond the temples, Varanasi has a very strong parallel history of textile weaving. It’s to get people interested in a part of what the city is also about.” Given that she lived the privileged life of a diplomat’s daughter growing up abroad, how did crafts draw her? “I was always artistically inclined. Not to do it myself but to recognise it elsewhere. The more you travel, the more you see of the world outside, the more you treasure what’s at home. I was first sensitised to crafts in Japan, and an interest in social activism spurred this further. Working for the underprivileged through crafts satisfies my natural instincts.”

With workshops on ancient painting styles and talks on textiles by experts as part of the bazaar, Jaya rewinds to the beginnings of the Samiti, the NGO and national association of craftspeople she founded in 1986. “The need was to get those in the changing urban scenario interested in our cultural heritage. Even in politics this is what I worked for — what kind of policy will benefit craftsmen. When we talk of concepts like ‘Make in India’, we need to find ways to sustain existing livelihoods, give access to marketplaces and lend support systems,” says the former national president of the Samata party.

“These booklets,” she says, gesturing to some of her earlier ones, “are a result of the work the Samiti has done with different countries and we’ve realised that craftwork is an excellent instrument for soft power diplomacy. There is no competition here. This is a segment that is not suitable for export because processes go through so many hands that all of them have to make money. So the squeeze comes on the artists’ earnings. Also in the pursuit of standardisation, the little quirks that make a product unique get lost. My role has been to consolidate these many small groups on a common market platform.”

In our mall-centric times, has the buying and wearing of handloom textiles acquired a certain snob value, the prices often placing it beyond the reach and purpose of the ordinary person? “I’m glad there is some value,” she laughs. “Our middle class has acquired good purchasing power and is certainly now able to spend on branded goods. The rural poor, except maybe in Bengal, still largely prefers polyester — it’s more manageable and affordable, but it’s also unsafe considering women spend hours in front of the hearth.”

Jaya, who worked for well over a decade as a designer and resource person with Gurjari, before striking out on her own, says, “I love to do a hundred things at the same time. I took the Haat to Ujjain, Tirupati, Guwahati... where people then had never seen textiles from other places.” On

her crafts maps, she says, “We made these over 14 years, painstakingly weaving together information from across the country on well-known and lesser-known arts.” The *Crafts Atlas of India* went on to win the Choice award for outstanding academic title, while another book, *Akshara: Crafting Indian Scripts* co-authored with Subrata Bhowmick journeys into the realm of texts, letters and calligraphy.

Writing has been a companion charting both her political and craft forays. “I also write to highlight political and human rights issues. I’m not keen on mainstream politics at the moment, though I must admit, politics taught me a lot and I have experienced everything I’ve needed to. Many times, I have been able to achieve more concretely outside of politics. But it has given me a better world view even about my crafts.”

By now, the cultural troupe is striking up the dholak on stage, and our chat is lost amidst the haunting tunes of the desert. “Seeing the ingenuity of our crafts makes me smile. This is not a life of my choice but I have learnt to love it and done only things I really wanted to. I only wish literary fests would also fit in sessions on crafts. Like we celebrate the novelist, it’s also time we celebrate the humble craftsman.”