The Recrafting Of India's Ancient Crafts
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The Recrafting Of India's Ancient Crafts

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Crafts and religion have been deeply entwined in India. No festival, no ritual would be complete without the creations of these craftspeople: clay icons, lamps and fireworks at Diwali; gold thread bracelets at Rakshabandhan; kite at the festival of Makarsankranti. No puja would be complete without the clay images of Lakshmi and Ganapati. Yet under British domination, and the industrialization after independence, India's talented craftspeople, rich in their knowledge of ancient arts seemed to be an endangered species. As India in *** synthetics seduced consumers with their durability, easy care and affordable prices.

Meet A. Shekhar, the master potter who out of common clay molds the most wondrous Siva lingams, temple bells and auspicious Ganeshas; Meghaben Shah, the embroideries from Kutch whose skillful fingers transform plain fabric into a jungle of multi-colored parrots, flowers and birds; M.V. Prasad Rao, the toy maker of Kondapalli who is renowned for his ten incarnations of Vishnu; Bhramarbar Nayak, the pattachitra artist who creates intricate stories from the Mahabharata and Ramayana on fabric panels; and Govind Hazari Bhat, the Kathputhli puppeteer who has been delighting young and old with tales of gods, kings and demons in towns and villages. These five craftspersons, symbols of all that is unique about India, were recently in New York sponsored by the Association of Indians in America (AIA). Their visit was organized and financed by the AIA, which also received a small gram from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington D.C. The craftspeople conducted workshops in museums, schools and fairs, demonstrating their centuries-old crafts to an America of around-the-clock television programming, rock music and fast foods.

Is there a place for these ancient crafts in a high-tech world? Today, computers mimic the human brain, and substitute for human beings in many jobs and assembly lines produce everything from plastic money to plastic hearts. Yet, as our

world gets more and more depersonalized, the yearning increases ever more for one-of-a-kind objects, objects touched by the human spirit, made by human hands. And that may be good news for India's villages and its craftspeople.

For centuries in dusty villages, small towns and crowded metropolises, generations of families have pilled their craft, passing their skill from father to son. Yet as the lure of cities and factory jobs have beckoned the young, these trades seemed to be in danger of dying out.

The Eighties, however, saw a wonderful rejuvenation of crafts. Young Indians seemed to awake to their cultural roots. They seemed to realize that not everything Western was good, and not everything Indian was bad. There seemed to be a new pride in their crafts and their culture, and consumers made ancient arts and crafts a part of their everyday life. Indian women were delighting in the variety of their ethnic garments, creating a new demand for the work of craftspeople. Fashionable homes brought humble clay artifacts into the living room, and there was a resurgence in traditional Indian furnishings. From being artifacts sold mainly to tourists in government emporia, crafts - long a part of village life - have now been incorporated back into the mainstream of life in towns and cities alike.

It is interesting to note that many of these Indian crafts started in the temple with religious underpinnings. These artisans bring a devotion to their craft. Hinduism is never far away from daily life in India. The same earth is molded by artistic hands into icons for the temple, and toys for the children; the craftsperson who carves wooden birds for living room showpieces, also carves the pedestals of gods and goddesses.

HINDUISM TODAY met with the five visiting craftspersons, all of whom have been honored by the Indian Government, to find their views of the state of the crafts. A. Shekhar, who lives in Pondicherry, is the sixth generation of potters whose origins are in Kosapet, Madras. His grandfather created Panruti toys which are still sought out by collectors. Shekhar's talents are much in demand, especially during religious festivals, be it Pongal, Diwali, Dusshera or Ganesha Chaturthi. Indeed, in the villages people have been worshipping clay icons for centuries, and offering terra cotta figurines in temples in thanks for wish fulfillment: the childless couple whose prayers for a child are answered offer a clay cradle and child. Passing through Indian villages, there are clusters of village deities: Ayyanar guards the fields while Karuppannasamy and Muniandi look after the uninhabited parts of the village,

protecting the inhabitants from epidemics and nature's wrath. Often one sees a terra cotta horse or elephant next to the deities, for the deities will need a mount in their surveillance of the village.

Shekhar's entire family including wife, children and brothers work with him in creating clay icons and toys. Earlier, the pottery had been only for temples and home. However, as metal kitchenware has become affordable by all, the potters have diversified, introducing new items and varieties of toys. People generally use brass temple bells and lamps, but often the poor cannot afford these items. So the potters have perfected new techniques by which they make clay bells which actually resound like metal bells. Shekhar says they constantly adapt to the changing market, even creating paper mache masks, and icons of Christ, trees and Christmas lamps for the Christians of Pondicherry. Yet the biggest demand is for Hindu icons for temple processions, and 18-foot-tall Ganeshas for the Ganesha Festival in Pondicherry. Says Shekhar, "We are constantly in production. During Pongal we make clay 'chullahs' or stoves for the village folk. Different people have different needs. It is very hard work. One item can take seven days to make because it is a very laborious procedure."

Meghaben Shah is one of about 2000 women in the Kutch district of Gujarat who create the dazzling embroidery interwoven with glittering circles of glass on garments, bedspreads and wall hangings. She says, "Right from the time a girl is six years old she is taught to work with the needle, and from then starts preparing for her marriage. All items for the wedding have to be made and sometimes it takes six months to one year to complete one item." Most of the women do this work commercially too. In the villages girls are kept home to do this work, while boys attend school. But as Meghaben points out, there is reform in the bigger towns. She herself lives in Bhujj where her husband is an advocate, and although her daughter is six years old, she had not taught her embroidery yet, preferring to send her to school instead.

Govind Hazari Bhat, who makes puppets, cloth dolls and toys, belongs to India's tribe of Kathputhli puppeteers. He travels from village to village, manipulating his wired puppets and in changing tones retells mythological and folk tales. Holding a fierce mustachioed dacoit (bandit) aloft, he grins and says this is the "Khandani dhanda' (family business) of his 'baapdada' (forefathers). And it is destined to continue: he points out there is good support from the government, and there is demand for handicrafts. Even his youngest grandchild gives a hand, doing simple tasks like making tassels.

Bhramarbar Nayak is an artist who creates pattachitra or icon paintings on fabric in a painstaking procedure with natural dyes and colors. They occupy an important status among the many arts centered around the temple of Puri in Orissa. Highly stylized paintings of the Puri temple and scenes from Ramayana and Mahabharata are features along with paintings of Lord Jagannath, his older brother Balarama and sister Subhadra. Both Nayak and his wife are pattachitra artists. As Nayak works on an elaborate painting of Krishna Leela with episodes from the child Krishna's life, he admits that the money is not too good, but this work satisfies his passion for art and gives him great happiness. The themes are always religious and as he says, to create these beautiful visual stories, "you have to have faith. In our family we all pray."

M.V. Prasada Rao learned to carve folk toys at the age of 15 from his grandfather. He lives and works in the village after which his unique style of toys is named, Kondapalli in Andhra Pradesh. Only a few families in the village now practice this ancient craft, carving delicate toys out of a light whitish wood. He carves chariots, temples, scenes depicting religious legends as well as items from daily life. He says there is a great demand for these folk toys which teach children so much about life and religion, while entertaining them. Rao, who is not married, lives with his sister who also does the same work.

What was particularly interesting about this visit of the craftspeople is that they were joined by three Indian-Americans who, while living in hectic New York, still manage to nurture and propagate such ancient Indian arts as temple floral arrangements, rangoli and kathakali makeup, thus strengthening their Hindu faith and culture. Vengamma Chimmeri learned the art of floral ornamentation, essential for the proper education of the traditional Hindu woman, from her mother and older female family members in Nellore, near Madras. Chimmeri, who is a New York housewife, recalls that they would gather jasmine, roses, marigolds and chrysanthemums and weave them into intricate garlands for the rituals at home and the temple. She still practices this craft on festival days.

Hansa Ashar learnt the dynamics of rangoli or floor paintings from her family in India. She now lives in Connecticut but keeps this tradition alive by conducting workshops at museums and decorating the home on festival days. The floor is the canvas, the hand the paintbrush and rice paste, wheat flour and vegetable dyes are used for colors. Elaborate designs are prepared for ceremonial occasions, explains Ashar: During Diwali, the chowki (seat) of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, has two interlaced triangles signifying also the Goddess of Learning, Saraswati. Encircling this is a 24-petal lotus flower border, the outer circle being decorated

with Lakshmi's footprints which are repeated in the four corners. Durga, the goddess of strength, has a central design, intricately drawn with swastikas, the outline done by putting nine dots horizontally and nine vertically to invoke the deity's nine names under which she is worshiped for nine days at the time of the Dusshera festival.

Anujan Ezhikode is a graduate of Kerala Kalamandalam (Kerala Academy of Arts) where he studied and later taught makeup and costume design. He has toured with kathakali troupes all over Europe and the US, and now is a working artist in New York. Kathakali is a form of mine dance drama based on the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and started as a temple dance form. Many are the hours he has spent using the basic kathakali colors of green, red and yellow to change ordinary mortals into superhuman monkeys like Hanuman, kings and heroes like India, arrogant kings like Ravana and Sisupala. Asked about the future of crafts in India, Ezhikode says, "Our crafts are so rich, I don't think they'll ever die out. They are like Hinduism - it will always be there, part of our culture."

Indeed, new public awareness and appreciation of these ancient arts, as well as government programs and awards seem to have given crafts a vital shot in the arm. In such a nourishing environment, future generations of craftspeople may well keep their arts alive. Arun Aguiar, Chairperson of the Arts and Crafts Committee of AIA, however, adds a word of caution, "Though the whole force of modern economic organization is against it, the crafts tradition still lives on in India. But under the impact of far-reaching structural changes in the social pattern, certain types are in decline. Hopefully, this tour will make people more aware of the value of these ancient crafts. We pray that such tours will stimulate interest among preservationists to document and preserve these traditions."

This year the five visiting craftspeople displayed their skills in demonstrations in museums, schools and workshops in the New York area, at the Deepavali Festival in New York's South Street Seaport, and at a Diwali Mela at the Morikami Museum in Florida. Next Diwali, a different group of craftspeople will be touring America. HINDUISM TODAY readers in the US who would like to arrange demonstrations in the museums, schools or organizations in their town or city can contact Arun Aguiar at (212) 825-0385. Introduce your fellow Americans as well as young Indian-Americans to the rich cultural traditions of India, and through those, to Hinduism.

After all, crafts are the common link which bind people together in religion, be they rural folk or city dwellers. The clay icon of Siva, the puja lamp of brass, the pattachitra extolling the virtues of Rama, they are just as relevant in a small village alar as in a marble puja room in the home of urbanites. And when earthen lamps are lit in the temple or myriads of clay Ganeshas are immersed in the ocean by devout masses, crafts once again become a living part of Hinduism.

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