

TIE & DYE, WARP & WEFT

Bindu Gopal Rao studies the ancient techniques that are responsible for the popular Ikat weave which the town of Pochampally is famous for.

A small town located a mere 50 km away from Hyderabad, Pochampally is an ancient weaving centre in India that is known for the famed Ikat weave. This weave is similar to Orrisa and Gujarat's geometric weaves and Pochampally is known for its traditional geometric patterns in the Ikat style of dyeing. These intricate geometric designs manifest in the form of saris, salwar kameezes, dupattas, kurtas and more. This place is a result of the Bhoodan movement by Acharya Vinoba Bhave (1951) wherein land was donated by the erstwhile *zamindars* towards community welfare. It is from here that this town gets the name 'Bhoodan Pochampally'—the first village to be created by this movement.

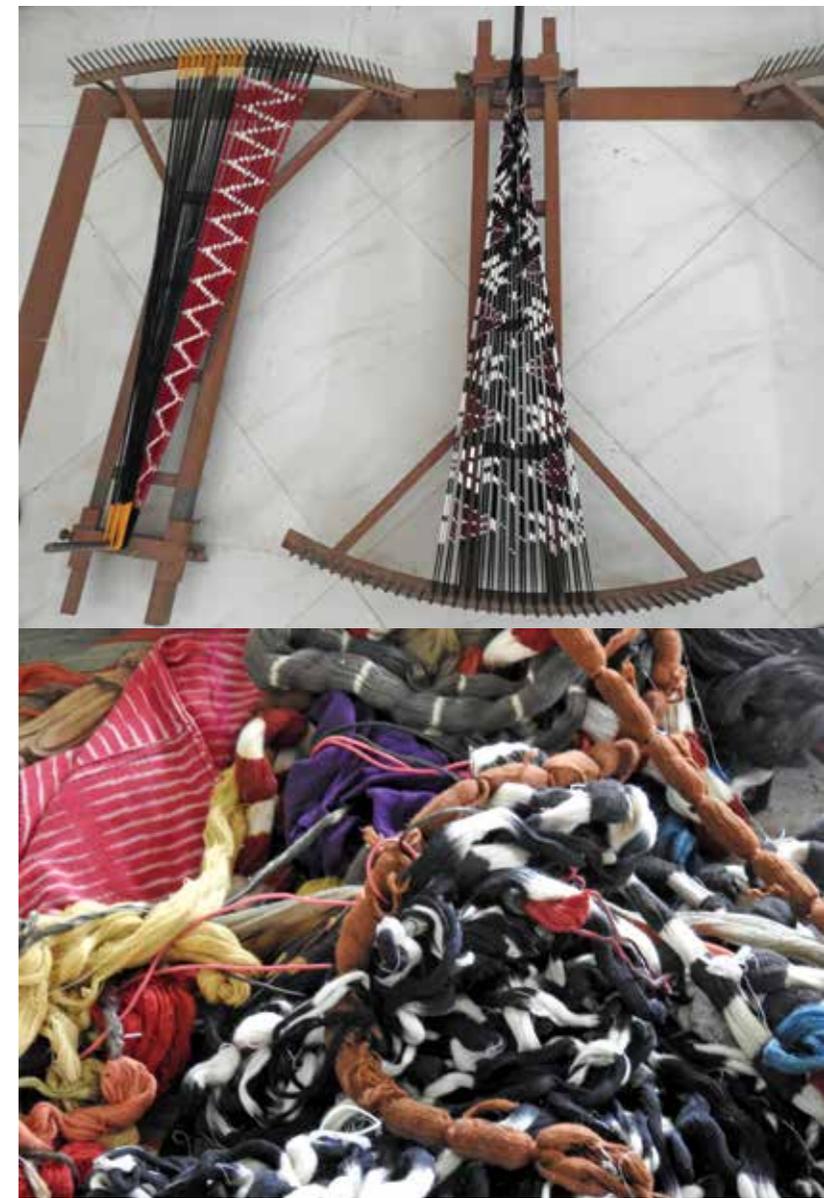


POCHAMPALLY IKAT

Ikat is an ancient way of creating design by tying and dyeing. It is a kind of weaving technique where the warp, the weft or both are tie-dyed before weaving to create designs on the finished fabric. The Pochampally Ikat fabric is popular, since the weavers use modern synthetic colours and create more traditional designs than other weavers. Each weaver works at home with the help of all his family members to produce these fabrics. Locally, Pochampally Ikat is referred to as *Pogudubandhu*, *Chitki* and *Buddabhashi* and has a unique character of design, different from other Ikat weaving areas in India. In the Pochampally village, there are over five thousand looms producing this textile and UNESCO's tentative list of world heritage sites refers to it as a part of the "iconic sari weaving clusters of India". The weaving happens in the villages of Pochampally, Koyalgudam, Chowtuppala, Srirpuram, Bhubangiri, Chuigottala and Galteppala. The uniqueness of the Pochampally Ikat lies in the transfer of intricate designs and colouring onto warp and weft threads first and then weaving them together, that is known as the double ikat textiles. The fabrics used are cotton, silk and silk cotton and a mix of exquisite silk and cotton. The colours are from natural sources and blends. What sets these Ikat designs apart is that instead of dyeing the fabric as a whole, each thread is dyed in a pattern and woven in accordance with the design into the cloth. This makes it a complex and long process. That is why when you look at the finished product, it is identical on both sides of the fabric. The Pochampally sari received Intellectual Property Rights Protection or Geographical Indication (GI) status in 2005 and is the registered property of Pochampally Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society Ltd and the Pochampally Handloom Tie and Dye Silk Saris Manufacturers Association.

LOOMS

The different kinds of weaves include the Single Ikat *Akshara* design (a close knit detailed design), Single Ikat *Mungi* design (a plain design), Double Ikat *Onku* design, Combination Ikat *Chepa* design (a fish pattern) and Silk *Teliya Rumal*. The types of looms used in Pochampally include pit and frame looms. The pit looms where the weaver sits with his or her legs in a pit where there are two pedals that open the warp threads allowing the weft to shuttle used for shuffling the thread to pass through freely. Pit looms are more popular than other looms, as less wood is required to build them. On a pit loom, the weavers' hands are free to pass the weft shuttle from side to side and to compress the weaving as they go. The speed of



a pit loom is relatively more compared to weaving on a frame loom. Frame looms on the other hand are made of rod and panels fastened at right angles to construct a form similar to a box to make it more handy and manageable. This type of loom is now popular now due to its portability.

GOVERNMENT IMPETUS

The Pochampally Handloom Weavers' Co-operative Society Ltd was established in 1955 and helps market the saris and other garments made by the weavers all over India. The fabric is marketed through the cooperative society and APCO—the Andhra Pradesh Cooperative Organisation. The condition of the workers is comparatively better in the nearby Handloom



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Park. This park was set up by the Union Ministry of Textiles and employs about 400 weavers to make a host of products including bed spreads, table covers, quilt covers and bags, apart from saris. While designs on the saris woven in homes are mostly traditional, those in the Handloom Park have modern designs as well, done by a team of dedicated designers.

The best part of Pochampally is that the village itself has many homes where you can see the weavers at work. In fact the best way to learn more about the weavers and their weaves is by actually going into the village (which is impeccably clean) and interacting with the people who are more than willing to explain the process. There are also numerous stores that dot the main road where you can actually buy the finished product, as well.

HANDLOOM MATTERS

The Government has initiated the Integrated Handloom Cluster Development Programme, sponsored by the Ministry of Textiles. Puttapaka, a village in Nalagonda where the art still thrives, was chosen under this scheme. Thanks to the initiative, *Telia Ruma* saris that were hitherto mere relics from the past hope to find a place in the markets soon. The three-year Cluster Development programme implemented through the Crafts Council of Andhra Pradesh has succeeded in providing marketing facilities. Another initiative is the creation of a Pochampally

handloom park that will be an integrated handloom textile designing, dyeing and weaving facility spread over 24 acres and is meant to promote Ikat designing, in both national and international platforms. Chenetha Colour Weaves (CCW), a weaver-owned social enterprise and its brand Karghaa was initiated by Oxfam GB in 2007 as a response and viable solution to the handloom crisis. Through this model, the role of intermediaries and middle men has been minimised in order to maximise the gains to the handloom weavers. By working towards organising and building the capacity of the small handloom weavers in the 17 villages of the Nalagonda district in the state of Telangana and market reach through its brand Karghaa, CCW has brought about a remarkable change on the lives of 132 Ikat handloom weavers in terms of earnings, design, development, quality control and market exposure.

THE POCHAMPALLY SARI WEAVERS ALSO FACE FIERCE COMPETITION FROM POWER LOOMS WHICH COPY THEIR DESIGNS AND SELL PRODUCTS AT LOWER PRICES.



CHALLENGES GALORE

The weavers of the Pochampally sari, however, are facing several challenges in continuing with this craft. In spite of the fact that this is a honed skill, the wages are low and there is a steady dwindling in the numbers amongst the weavers, here. A simple Ikat sari takes four days to be completed, including the pre-loom process. The silk yarn is light and easier to dye and weave— apart from the fact that it earns a higher margin. However, the cotton yarns are heavier and take more time to be dyed and woven. The dyeing is especially more tedious as it requires chemicals like sulphates and even after all the effort earn lower margins.

Adding to these challenges, the Pochampally sari weavers also face fierce competition from power looms which copy their designs and sell the products at lower prices. The silk used in the Pochampally sari is sourced from Bengaluru and the cotton from Coimbatore. The China silk which is used by power looms has more shine which is causing a dent in the market. The traditional hand woven intricate Ikat saris are exquisite but still do not bring much wealth into the homes of these proficient weavers, making this weaving community a shrinking lot. The average income of a weaver of cotton saris is ₹8,500 per month while a weaver of silk saris makes ₹12,500 per month. This is why the current generation is not very keen to pass it to their children—their earnings are not commensurate with the work they put in. The weavers feel that the effort is so much, that they do not want the next generation to work so hard and not be compensated enough. This is the reason why this community needs our support and patronage to keep this beautiful art alive. ■