

A STITCH IN TIME

Bindu Gopal Rao profiles the classic *Mangalgiri* fabrics, and tracks how these traditional weaves are now staging a comeback by fusing with modern trends.

A small town in the Guntur District in Andhra Pradesh on the Guntur-Vijayawada Highway, Mangalgiri is home to the Padmashali community, whose traditional occupation is weaving and textiles. Mangalgiri boasts of about 5000 weavers and over 50 outlets selling the famous weaves of the region: *Mangalgiri* fabrics, saris, salwar sets and more. These are available in silk, cotton and cotton-silk. The weavers work from their homes as well as in indigenous sheds about five kilometres away from the town centre in a place called Ratnala Cheruvu. Some of these weavers work for dedicated wholesalers and also supply their wares to multiple outlets.

THE FABRIC

The count of a fabric is a measure of the number of threads woven lengthwise (the warp), and breadth-wise (the weft). *Mangalgiri* fabric is a pure cotton yarn with a count of 80x80 in most cases, with a few fabrics of 60x40 count. What makes this fabric special is that it is woven tightly over pit looms with



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the weavers sitting with their feet firmly on the ground. This gives the fabric its traditional soft texture. Designer Mithi Kalra says, "The uniqueness of the fabric is in its durability. Apart from locally preferred exquisite and bright sari creations, this textile has a global demand too. The fabric, which is white at first, is subsequently dyed. The fine zari work completes the whole look. Since the fabric is extremely fine, the golden thread work which is sewn upon it has to be delicate. In fact, this fabric can also be mixed with silk for a beautiful combination."

A key distinguishing feature of the *Mangalgiri* saris is its famous traditional zari border, also known as Nizam border, which is about two inches thick. The saris have a thick gold border with closely knit patterns that look like small inverted checks. The zari in this border is superimposed by weaving it over the base fabric. The body of the sari is usually plain or with stripes. The simple designs on the *pallu* are inspired by tribal motifs. Moushumi Mitra, founder of Perrian Lifestyle says, "The original style of this type of weaving dates back five centuries.

Mangalgiri saris are woven from combed yarn on pit looms. Upon weaving, the fabrics are dyed in bright colors and embroidered with golden thread in the zari style. Sometimes weavers will embellish the body of the sari with small zari checks, but *Mangalgiri* saris are largely plain, with a striped zari embroidered Nizam border on the *pallu*. The traditional features of the design and weaving patterns of *Mangalgiri* saris are closely tied with the culture of the Mangalgiri town. The town houses the Lord Narasimha Temple, where the saris are also used in prayer and devotion. In this way, the *Mangalgiri* fabric and culture are woven together. Combining the traditional and the modern, Perrian Lifestyle has used the *Mangalgiri* fabric as the basis for a gown, rather than a sari, adding a new twist to the 500 year old cultural staple. As opposed to traditional Nizam embroidery, the neckline of the gown has been embroidered with a reimagined tattoo design, merging the old and new in one item of clothing."

MATERIALLY SPEAKING

The raw material (cotton yarn) is sourced locally from Guntur, the Andhra Pradesh State Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society (APCO), and some districts of Tamil Nadu. The zari is sourced from different cities like Ahmedabad, Surat and Bengaluru. There is a set process that needs to be followed for the fabric to be turned into the final product. Firstly, the yarn is cleaned by boiling it with soap and soda. This helps remove impurities like seeds, oil, wax as well as



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its inherent stickiness, which eases the dyeing process. The warp and weft are dyed separately, and the yarn is washed, dried and starched before being distributed to the weavers. After the yarn has been sun dried, it is ready for the weaving process. The yarn is then loaded on to a charkha, where it is converted to the thread forming the warp and weft. This is a complex process that needs the work of at least 30 people before the yarn is ready for weaving. The yarn is manually wound on the charka and bobbin to create the warp, while the weft is woven on a print. Vat and naphthol dyes are normally used; vegetable dyes are only used if there are specific export orders.

Additionally, working with natural dyes is complex and expensive, which deters most weavers from using them.

WEAVING TECHNIQUES

Mangalgiri fabrics are woven using traditional pit looms which allow the weaver to actually exert more force, giving the fabric its tenacity. The pit is dug into the ground and the pedal of the loom is placed in the pit. The weavers sit on the floor and use their hands and legs to operate the loom. The technique is usually passed on from one generation to the other, making this a special kind of handloom. The fabric is only woven on the pit loom and there are no gaps in the weave towards the edges of the fabric. This is another unique aspect of the *Mangalgiri* fabric which is not seen in other regions. The weavers plant their feet firmly below the ground to apply the right kind of pressure to ensure the tightness of the weave which makes the fabric and zari thick and closely-knit. The amount of yarn woven into the fabric per loom is quite high, ensuring that the fabric is durable and stays intact for long. *Mangalgiri*



fabrics are made using the Jacquard weaving process. Unlike machine-made fabrics that use power looms, this traditional fabric is always made on hand looms and is a labour intensive process, with each sari taking nearly two days to be completed.

FUTURE PERFECT

As a light and airy fabric, *Mangalgiri* cottons are an ideal choice for all seasons: cool for summers yet warm enough for winters. A lot of revival measures have been undertaken to help give a contemporary and modern twist to the *Mangalgiri* textiles. While the sarees and dress materials continue to be popular; the young generation now has a choice of *Mangalgiri* woven cotton kurtas, dupattas and stoles that are quickly becoming popular.



Mangalgiri textiles are witnessing a revival thanks to the cotton handloom products that are extensively exported. This has given a boost to the sector and several weavers are now returning to the craft. Meghana Joshi, Co-Founder, Aadikarlnk Designs, states, "*Mangalgiri* is one of the most versatile fabrics for clothing. Until recently, it had been used primarily as traditional attire, but now it has caught the attention of fabric lovers and designers alike with its bold colors and striking combinations. Skirts crafted from *Mangalgiri* are now a staple fusion wear. Slowly but surely, sensibilities are evolving to incorporate palazzos, trousers, culottes and even dresses created using *Mangalgiri*." The handloom cottons of Andhra Pradesh offer an extremely wide spectrum of textures, which suit a variety of apparel. *Mangalgiri* and *Narayan Peth* are a few examples that have found a niche in the contemporary apparel space. "In most cases, weavers are being trained to develop and experiment with newer patterns, while preserving the traditional techniques of production. These fabrics are then fashioned into fusion wear and apparel with modern sensibilities. This way, the age old techniques of weaving are preserved and made relevant at the same time," adds Joshi.

The *Mangalgiri* saris are, however, gaining much more popularity, primarily due to their superior quality that sets them apart. Weavers and outlets are experiencing a good turnover, and due to the growing demand, they have partnered with vendors to sell the saris online as well. In fact, these vendors procure over 50 saris per week.

There is a growing awareness to ensure that traditional handloom weaves are kept alive. The fact that *Mangalgiri* fabrics are patronised not just by designers, but also by international clients certainly bodes well for the fabric. ■