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A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

A textile expert and PhD-holder, Dr Hemalatha Jain is involved in the revival of traditional weaves, especially from the North Karnataka belt. **Bindu Gopal Rao** speaks with her to gain further insights into the initiative.



Dr Hemalatha Jain, a designer, professor, and textile revivalist, works closely with weavers through her trust Punarjeevana, which means 'rebirth' in Kannada. She unravels more about her various revival efforts in this exclusive conversation.

TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR EARLY YEARS AND WHAT GOT YOU INTERESTED IN TEXTILE CONSERVATION.

I had always had an interest in handmade products and crafts as I loved their uniqueness. Studying textiles in my bachelor's and master's courses increased my inclination towards this craft. Further on, I began working as a designer with the handloom board of Maharashtra and Karnataka Handloom Development Corporation (KHDC), which had me working closely with artisans and understanding the minute details of their work culture and difficulties. Having been well aware of



their financial constraints and not being able to do anything about it, I felt helpless. I wanted to carry out real work and provide them with substantial opportunities but was unsure of how to. I went to the United States (US) to work with a professor on natural dyes so I could bring the knowledge back home and help the artisans out. Whilst working with the professor, I developed various natural dyes with different types of colour fastness, and also worked with some artisans weaving quilts, which led me to understand their marketing process, and how they project themselves and their products.

After the completion of the project, I was motivated to undertake a PhD on the crafts of Karnataka, which would help in the sustenance of not just these crafts but also the artisans. In Bengaluru, I worked extensively with KHDC and travelled to villages across Karnataka for a year, collaborating with numerous artisans. During this time, I came across many weaves that people spoke fondly of but did not have a sample or even a photograph of the same. That was when I realised it to be a serious issue. To ensure a constant flow of work, KHDC had converted many skilled artisans into makers of plain materials; their creativity was killed under bureaucracy and corruption. Later, I met Sangaya, a former freedom fighter and also a 90-year-old weaver who narrated a beautiful tale of *patteda anchu*, an ancient weave from North Karnataka. My heart broke upon knowing that there were no samples as they had stopped weaving it long ago. This is where my journey of reviving and conserving traditional crafts began.

IN THE PROCESS OF UNRAVELLING THE HISTORICAL DETAILS AND SAMPLES OF PATTEDA ANCHU, I STUMBLED UPON SAMPLES OF GOMI TENI, LAKKUNDI, HUBLI SARIS, AND MANY MORE.

CAN YOU RECOLLECT YOUR INITIAL DAYS IN THE FIELD OF TEXTILE CONSERVATION?

In the process of unravelling the historical details and samples of *patteda anchu*, I stumbled upon samples of *Gomi teni*, Lakkundi, Hubli saris, and many more. But since my heart was set on *patteda anchu*, I continued with my ethnographic study in ten villages and met people who would have some knowledge of the fabric. Sangaya had mentioned a certain Yellamma temple; he had spoken about a devadasi who may have some clue about the fabric so I headed there to speak to people in and around the temple. From the temple priest, I acquired some more information but it was only after another six months that I met the former devadasi, who had a 150-year-old *patted anchu*, which she had received from her grandmother. This helped me to recreate the traditional colour palette, signature chequered pattern, and other details of the sari.

UNIQUE INITIATIVE

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HOW DID YOU ZERO IN ON THE GOMI TENI, HUBLI, AND LAKKUNDI SARIS?

I had got samples of *Gomi teni*, Hubli, and Lakkundi saris when I was conducting a research on *patteda anchu*. When *patteda anchu* was launched, it received a good response and our team of artisans grew from one to 12. More artisans wanted to join us but we could not accommodate them all as this was a self-funded project; and we could not increase the production due to financial constraints. Moreover, *patteda anchu* replicas, too, had started flooding the market by then. I then slowly and steadily started the production of *Gomi teni*, to which the market reciprocated well. And considering how more and more artisans wanted to join us, I also launched the lost weaves of Hubli and Lakkundi. Today, we work with 45 weavers.



HOW CHALLENGING HAS IT BEEN TO REVIVE EACH OF THESE FABRICS?

The challenges were many as I was perceived as an outsider whom the artisans found difficult to trust initially. So I established the Punarjeevana Trust and self-help group to fuel the work of these artisans. Also, sourcing raw material was an issue as I did not have enough capital to procure large amounts of cotton. Eventually, I found ways and means of self-sustenance and expanded my network, which led to the National Handloom Development Corporation providing us with raw material. Locals working with power looms started seeing me as a threat to their products, which made it difficult to procure material on the basis of credit, so I worked two jobs to fund the whole exercise. Colour intervention was another challenge as the locals were not open to the idea of using black. They found it to be inauspicious and against their culture. It took some amount of persuasion to change this mindset.

HOW DID YOU BRING WEAVERS BACK TO THE HANDLOOM?

Getting weavers to work full-time on the loom was a huge challenge because it was not fetching them enough money. I promised to take care of all the expenses for two weavers on a day-to-day basis, which is when they decided to work on it extensively, giving up other jobs. Soon, we started getting enough orders, and they even enrolled their relatives to work—this is how the number of artisans started to increase. At Punarjeevana, all are involved in decision-making and the finances, too, are taken care of jointly.





CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HUBLI SARI?

During the historical research data collection for *patteda anchu*, I had received a sample that had a border adorned with a parallel chain of flowers. Not knowing what the name of the weave was, I inquired about it. I then found 85-year-old Hussain Saab, who told me that it was a Hubli sari, which he used to weave when he was a 16-year-old. Those days, Hubli saris were extensively woven in Gajendragad and Gadag. The sample received during the investigation was passed through a scientific test to gauge its age; it was found to be close to 103 years old. The Hubli sari was majorly worn by married countrywomen, and the flowers in the border resembled beauty and elegance. This is how our cluster commenced the revival project of the Hubli weave and slowly, it turned into a sustenance model for the craft and the artisans as well.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU VISIT THE WEAVERS?

Almost every weekend, I visit their village and look into every detail of the process—from procuring materials to marketing—involving various people

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at each point to help them to sustain themselves. We have started an evening school for the artisans in order to teach them reading, writing, and speaking in English and Hindi. We also take computer literacy quite seriously.

WHO OR WHAT INSPIRES YOU?

All the people I have met during my journey in the last 15 years have inspired me in many ways, be they weavers or old women from the villages talking of folklore. They keep me going; they motivate and inspire me to keep moving ahead.

WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS?

We are working towards bringing bamboo and hemp into our manufacturing fold. I want to train the younger generation of artisans to keep these crafts alive. We need to lend our revival efforts a newer dimension, and empower our artisans in a way that they no longer have to battle with power looms. ■