

Rooted in Rawness

Dhaan Murti, or the art of making idols with paddy, is an indigenous craft of Odisha that is seeing a revival of sorts

By BINDU GOPAL RAO

Hari Krishna Nayak from Koraput sits in a corner of his house, his fingers busy stringing together rice grains on bamboo slivers. He holds the structure in place with the help of naturally dyed coloured yarn. Associated with prosperity, spirituality and wellbeing, paddy is revered in rural India. It can often be seen in the form of *torans* (door hanging), decorating entrances to the homes in South Canara district in Karnataka. Moving to the East of the country, the grain takes on a more divine form—Dhaan Murti. The craft has its origins in tribal communities of Odisha, especially in Balasore, Kalahandi, Koraput and Bolangir districts.

Typically, colours such as yellow, red and green are used. The bamboo slivers and rice grains are soaked in turmeric water and sun-dried to help retain the yellow hue of the turmeric. These strings are then shaped into idols or in any other way required. "I have been doing this since I was a child," says Hari, adding that when he began working on the craft, there was no one in his community who was doing it. "I was taught by someone from another community," he says. Today, besides his own family, only one more from the community practices the artform. It is beauty in its rawest form. Light-weight and brightly coloured, the idols have an aura of culture, richness and rootedness to them.

Using unhusked rice grains, idols of Goddess



Using paddy grains, idols of Goddess Saraswati, Lakshmi and Lord Ganesha are made during Diwali

Saraswati, Lakshmi and Lord Ganesha are made during Diwali. It helps supplement their income from farming, Hari admits. But he knows that this work may not find takers with the new generation. "It is boring



(Top) Artist couple Asha and Hari Krishna Nayak; idols of (clockwise from above) Krishna, the Mahatma and Saraswati



work and the art needs a lot of patience. Working with something as small as a paddy grain is not easy. I have three children. I hope one of them would take it

forward," he says. His wife Asha picked up the art after she got married and has been doing it for 20 years now. "Now I enjoy doing it," she says. Though the younger generation is yet to show any interest, the couple is hopeful of the craft's revival. Before the lockdown, they had showcased at the Dastkar Samelan Committee in Bengaluru. This has rekindled their hopes of many such opportunities in the future.

Today, apart from idols, the craftsmen also make traditional combs and jewellery. In an effort to reach a larger audience, the figures are also stitched on to clothes and at times new styles are

crafted based on individual orders. The Nayaks primarily display their creations at local exhibitions. Have they thought of teaching others the craft? "I am ready to teach anyone. I hope others also learn. I am ready to train people as it is important that the tradition continues," says Hari. Holding on to what is indigenous is more imperative today than ever before. A craft technique untapped can say a lot about a culture unrevealed thus far.

