

Embroidery: The Universal Thread

Sabita Radhakrishna is a freelance writer, broadcaster and Vice Chairperson of Crafts Council of India based in Chennai. E-mail: sabita@vsnl.com

The pastoral tribes of India and many parts of South and South East Asia have for long been rich storehouses of art and craft. Many of these tribes are famed for their needlework, especially embroidery. Passed on from mother to daughter, embroidery is an important part of the repertoire of the tribe's skills. But sadly, this is a legacy that is showing signs of decay in the present day, mainly because of lack of awareness among the general public.

To raise awareness about the art of embroidery practised by several tribes, the Crafts Council of India in collaboration with the Crafts Council of Andhra Pradesh and the Asian Secretariat of the World Craft Council organised an international embroidery seminar in Andhra Pradesh. Held at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Madhapur, Hyderabad, in early 2001, the seminar was planned to create awareness of the kind of embroidery that was existent in India and the 13 participating countries.

It was also intended to give young designers an added dimension to their work and study of textiles and design. Most of the speakers were designers from NGOs who worked with the tribes and helped them with their work. Spectacular examples of this work were presented on colour slides that served to illustrate many of the lectures. More important, the spirited discussions between speakers brought into focus the numerous problems faced by the needle-craftspeople and attempted some solutions.

The weeklong seminar was spread over eight sessions, covering historical perspectives, regional expressions, pastoral and nomadic traditions, South East Asian embroideries—tradition and change, and the influence of market places. There were joint sessions with the embroidery workshop, as well as a *bazaar* that displayed and sold embroidered saris, shawls, pouch bags and table linen. The craftspeople, most of them women, also had a session where they interacted with each other and discussed their strengths and weaknesses with the help of moderators who spoke their language.

Among the papers presented was one by Judy Frater, who discussed Rabari embroidery as a reflection of the tribe's adaptation to the environment. The paper, *Rabari Embroidery: Chronicle of Tradition and Identity in a Changing World*, described how Kala Raksha, an organisation set up by Frater, guided the craftspeople to view embroidery through contemporary idiom. During the devastating earthquake of January 2001, Frater geared up her organisation and arranged for many exhibitions and sales which took the tribe through a dark period. The seminar also discussed the applique and mirror work of the Banjaras, a pastoral tribe of Andhra Pradesh. The

state Crafts Council had identified this needlework as a project that could help alleviate the poor socio-economic condition of the Banjaras. Yellama Thanda, a Banjara village near Hyderabad, was chosen as the model village, and the women of this village were trained by the crafts council to hone their skills for a demanding market.

Viji Srinivasan, the woman behind Aditi, encouraged women to describe their thoughts and fantasies through quilts which they embroider beautifully and it is the inventiveness of these sujni quilts that make them outstanding. Dinh Thu Huong, a textile designer from Hong Kong, described her group Craft Link as a centre that helped craftspeople to adapt designs to suit the contemporary market, if only to prolong the life of the craft.

Eric Ong, president of the Artelier Sarawak society, spoke of the beadwork that played an important role in the cultural history of the peoples of Sarawak in Borneo. Beads were worn not only for ornamentation, but also as talismans and status symbols. Apart from glass beads, cowrie shells, bear claws, leopard teeth, shell discs, mirrors and brass bells are used. Today, moving with 11 the times, these beads have become part of evening wear accessories!

Indrasen Vencatachellum, Chief of Craft and Design at UNESCO, chairing the wrap-up session, said crafts should be considered a part of the national cultural heritage and that due honour should be accorded to the makers of the crafts.

The UNESCO Craft Awards for 2001 were also presented during this seminar. There were 51 entries from 12 countries, and the entries were judged on the basis of technical proficiency and creativity in the context of tradition and design innovation. The first prize of \$2,500 went to Basheer Ahmed Jaan of India for his embroidered shawl and Kaim Tae Ja of Korea for her embroidered panel screen. The second prize of \$1,500 went to Jasiben Meriya of India (Kutchi wall panel) and a group of eight Banjara craftspeople (Banjara wall panel).

Sufia Begum of Bangladesh (kantha bedcover) and Hatice Muskaya of Turkey (hand towel) shared the honours for the third prize of \$1,000. All six entries were sent to Unesco in Paris to be part of a permanent exhibition. This was not only a pat on the back for CCI, it should help keep the tradition of embroidery alive.

**NFSC FOLK FESTIVAL, MARCH 2002: ORAL NARRATIVES, FOLK PAINTINGS, MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND PUPPETRY OF INDIA -
CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

Time: All performances starts daily at 6.00 pm **Venue:** Government Museum premises, Egmore

Date	Event / Art form	Story of	Venue	From	Genre	Guest of honour
March 4	Phad	Pabuji	CEH	Rajasthan	SPN	Jayakanthan
March 4	Therukkoothu	Kandavavana Thakanam	OAT	Tamil Nadu	FT	Na. Muthuswamy
March 4	Khamba Thoibi	Khamba and Thoibi	MT	Manipur	ESD	S. Vaitheeswaran
March 5	Phad	Pabuji	CEH	Rajasthan	SPN	La. Sa. Ramamirtham
March 5	Therukkoothu	Bageeratha Prayathanam	OAT	Tamil Nadu	FT	Prabanjan
March 5	Khamba Thoibi	Khamba and Thoibi	MT	Manipur	ESD	Asokamitrn
March 6	Chitrakathi	Aranya Kand	CEH	Maharashtra	SPN	S. Ramakrishnan
March 6	Tamasha	Marathi Tales	OAT	Maharashtra	FT	S. Dharman
March 6	Phad	Pabuji	MT	Rajasthan	SPN	Thilakavathi
March 7	Chitrakathi	Aranya Kand	CEH	Maharashtra	SPN	Vannanilavan
March 7	Tamasha	Marathi Tales	OAT	Maharashtra	FT	Poomani
March 7	Child Artists - Langas and Manganiars	Folk Songs	MT	Rajasthan	ESD	Anand
March 8	Pata	Sabitri and Satyaban, Chandi Mangal	CEH	West Bengal	SPN	Dilip Kumar
March 8	Yakshagana	Lava - Kusha	OAT	Karnataka	FT	Konangi
March 8	Ponung	Abangs	MT	Arunachal Pradesh	ESD	Gnanakoothan
March 9	Pata	Manasa Mangal	CEH	West Bengal	SPN	Gopikrishnan
March 9	Yakshagana	Pandavaswamedha	OAT	Karnataka	FT	Gnana Rajasekaran
March 9	Ponung	Abangs	MT	Arunachal Pradesh	ESD	Bama
March 10	Padam Katha	Rupavathi Kalyanam	CEH	Andhra Pradesh	SPN	Yooma Vasuki
March 10	Mayurbhanj Chhau	Chakrabiyyuha	OAT	Orissa	FT	Charu Nivedita
March 10	Villuppattu	Muthupattan Kathai	MT	Tamil Nadu	ESD	Pa. Jayaprakasam
March 11	Padam Katha	Rupavathi Kalyanam	CEH	Andhra Pradesh	SPN	Indira Parthasarathy
March 11	Mayurbhanj Chhau	Tamudia Krishna	OAT	Orissa	FT	Jeyamohan
March 11	Villuppattu	Pulithevan Kathai	MT	Tamil Nadu	ESD	Imayam
March 12	Chavittunatakam	Karlman Natakam	OAT	Kerala	FT	Jayanthan
March 12	Chindu Yakshagana	Keechaka Vadham	CEH	Andhra Pradesh	FT	A. Rajamarthandan
March 12	Chandaini	Chandaini	MT	Chattisgarh	ESD	S. Albert
March 13	Chindu Yakshagana	Keechaka Vadham	CEH	Andhar Pradesh	FT	Sa. Kandasamy
March 13	Chavittunatakam	Karlman Natakam	OAT	Kerala	FT	Inqulab
March 13	Chandaini	Chandaini	MT	Chattisgarh	ESD	Vallikkannan

Keys used (Genre) : SPN = Scroll Painting and Narrative;

FT = Folk Theatre;

ESD = Epic Singing and Dancing

Keys used (Venues) : CEH = Centenary Exhibition Hall;

MT = Museum Theatre;

OAT = Open Air Theatre