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Tale of Pochampalli weavers

Number of weavers at Pochampalli, the Mecca of ikat (tie and dye) style of saris, has dropped by 50 per cent and villagers blame liberalisation policies for it

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Pochampally: An annual ritual in this leafy village has come to an abrupt end. Every year on the Ramnavami day, Pochampalli's finest weaver Ch Ramalingam would load a miniature loom on his bullock cart and weave a sari on his way to the temple from his hutment.

This sari would then be draped around the deity amidst cheering and festivities. Ramalingam passed away in 2003. And the tradition of draping the goddess in a freshly woven Pochampalli sari also ended with his life.

The end of the tradition, say village elders, reflects the all-time low hit by the weaver community here.

Pochampalli mandal that once teemed with skilled weavers has about 10 left in the 'highly skilled' category but none of them can weave a sari as deftly as Ramalingam.

The number of weavers at Pochampalli has dropped nearly by 50 per cent. "There are about 2,000 looms in Pochampalli mandal. A decade ago, there were twice as many.

While some weavers took up jobs as extras for film shoots in Ramoji Rao Film City (about 15 km from Pochampalli) many others, who owned handlooms took up work as daily wage workers in power looms for lack of work here," says Boga Ramulu, a senior weaver. However, the weavers who migrated to Mumbai, Bhiwandi and Solapur in search of work in power looms were hit yet again - the power looms too shut down leaving them jobless.

Ramulu says that the seeds of the downfall were sown by the new textile policy of 1985 that favoured liberalisation ignoring the livelihood issues of handloom and power loom weavers.

For years now, mills and power looms are churning out the ikat (tie and dye) style of Pochampalli saris taking away from the weavers not only their designs but also their livelihoods. Lalita and Ramesh, a young couple, say they just want an additional Rs 1,000 to make ends meet for their family of five.

The couple works on the looms for eight hours a day and make just about Rs 2,000 a month. But, this is just not enough as the cost of raw material such as silk yarn and colours for tie and dye has doubled over the years.

The traders of saris here, once inundated by orders, are now travelling themselves to market them. Shopkeepers find them too expensive for consumer taste and prefer to sell the saris produced at mills.

"We have started giving three to four saris for free to showrooms. We tell them to pay us if they are able to sell them", a trader says.

Predictably, none of the weavers want their children to make a career in weaving. "They should study and get a job in the city," says Madhavi, who sends both her daughters to school.

While the old weavers stick to their looms, their sons admit that they are not experts like their parents. "I cannot weave but I can make designs for saris. My children don't even know that," says K V Balasubramanyam, who is known as a 'master weaver' - a term used for sari traders who employ weavers.

Pochampalli saris: magic unfolded

There are at least 40 village's within a 70 km radius of Hyderabad, including Pochampalli, Koyalagudam, Puttapakka, Elanki and Chautupal where ikat textiles are woven.



A model wearing a Pochampalli sari



A weaver showing a sari at Pochampalli village. There are about 2,000 looms in Pochampalli mandal while a decade ago, there were twice as many

The term ikat is taken from the Indonesian word 'Mangikat', which means to bind, knot or wind around. Ikat involves the sequence of tying (or wrapping) and dyeing sections of bundled yarn to a predetermined colour scheme prior to weaving.

In the 60's the All India Handicrafts Board assisted the weavers of Pochampalli to start weaving sarees.

Pochampalli slowly captured the market for ikat sarees and today the whole of Nalgonda district works on ikat weavers which can compare with the very best in single ikat-wrap weaving.

In Pochampalli, most of the weavers work for the Pochampalli co-operative society and the materials are provided to them through the society itself

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