

MUMBAI MIRROR | PRINT VIEW

MUMBAI, Monday, August 08, 2005

'Mills have ruined us'

Though Pochampalli saris enjoy GI status (guaranteeing protection to the original 'tie and dye' style of saris from unauthorised duplication and use), nothing has changed for the weavers here

Roli Srivastava

Pochampalli: A striking feature of every hutment in Pochampalli is the lone piece of furniture that sits at the centre of bare houses — a loom — clearly indicating that the lives of those living here revolve around it.

Small wonder then that villagers who have learnt just one profession — weaving — rejoiced when Pochampalli saris were given Geographical Indication (GI) status in February this year. The status "guaranteed" both branding as well as protection to the original 'ikat' (tie and dye) style of Pochampalli saris from unauthorised duplication and use. However, the happiness of weavers was short-lived. Nothing has changed for the weavers - there is still not much work coming their way. "Patenting has not helped", says Mohan Rao, state president of Pochampalli weavers' trade union. He alleges, and so do thousands of other weavers, that mills are still duplicating Pochampalli designs, beating them at both speed of producing saris and the cost.

"People recognise the ikat design which are now being reproduced by mills. Most of the Pochampalli saris in shops are machine-made and come cheaper as compared to the original hand-woven tie and dye Pochampalli sari. Most people confuse it for original Pochampalli ignoring the fabric," says Rao.

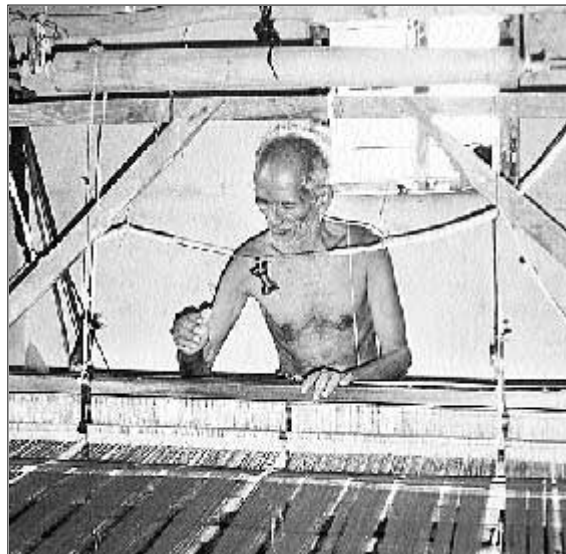
Government officials say the "GI status is not a magic wand" and that it would take some time before things work out for weavers. Until then, weavers say it is beyond their means to drag rich mill owners to the court to prove that they are violating the GI Act.

Until 1995, weavers' cooperative societies used to get a "credit guarantee facility" for purchase of raw material such as silk yarn and zari, wages for their work etc. In case the cooperative societies were unable to repay the amount, the state government repaid it. However, over the last one decade, the credit amount has dropped from Rs 135 crore per annum (for Andhra Pradesh State Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society Ltd.) a decade ago to Rs 50 crore now. In the absence of credit guarantees, of the 1,050 cooperative societies for weavers in the state, just about 150 are functional and provide work to weavers. The rest are dormant.

After 23 starvation deaths in 2003, the government gave Rs 10,000 to each weaver's family. "That has pulled us through the last two years. We are not sure of the future", says Boga Ramulu, a senior weaver. But, strangely, the village hums with activity. Looms creak in all hutments. Family members join weavers in tying and dyeing of yarn in myriad shades. Perhaps, this is what that keeps them going — creating magic on cloth.

What is ailing the weavers?

- * Mills are still duplicating Pochampalli designs, beating the weavers at both speed of producing saris and the cost
- * While buying, most people confuse Mill saris for original Pochampalli, ignoring the fabric
- * In the absence of credit guarantees, of the 1,050 cooperative societies for weavers in the state, just about 150 are functional and provide work



After 23 starvation deaths were reported in 2003, the government intervened and disbursed Rs 10,000 to each weaver's family



A Pochampalli sari weaver