



FADING MEMORIES OF VIBRANCY

Having elevated Pipili's appliqué art to the status of Odisha's cultural identity, its originators today grope in the dark

gal to terracotta modelling. Very little record, however, remains regarding the origin of the craft. Its history can be traced to the 17th century, when it started blooming due to the famous Rath Yatra festival held every year at the Jagannath temple in Puri. The unique works of appliqué are evident in the intricate and colourful tapestry used as a canopy or *shamiyana* on the chariots, and the umbrellas shading deities from the sun. They are ornate with decorative metal and mirror-works.

Since then, around 15 artisan families were patronised by the king for producing such needle-art during the festival. Till today, descendants of those families continue to make sprawling covers of needlework during the Rath Yatra. With time, however, the art was no longer confined to the temple and chariots. Beyond serving its purpose as religious décor, it entered and adorned local residences and all kinds of knickknacks too.

Today, the craft of Pipili can be seen in handbags, garden umbrellas, show pieces, pillow covers, wall hangings and lamp shades, among other objects. It has also become a fashion statement in *kurtas*, skirts and blouses among other dress materials. Even stationery items like files, folders, envelopes and bookmarks come with the artistic touch of Pipili appliqué. The colourful appliqué lampshades of Pipili light up public places like the airport lounge, film festival arenas and Durga puja pandals.

The dominant themes of Pipili's needle-art are floral designs and Hindu

motifs. Apart from that, animals, birds, and characters from Hindu mythology are weaved in as well. Of them, the peacock, Lord Jagannath, and the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha, are the most common motifs.

The community traditionally involved in Pipili art is called "doraji", meaning tailor in Odia. Today, however, people from other communities are also mastering it. A good part of such artefacts is also made in another heritage village of Odisha, called Raghurajpur. Surprisingly, Delhi has become a major destination, where local people are learning the skill of needle and creating Pipili-like appliqués.

The mind-blowing crafts of Raghurajpur, just 26 km from Pipili, are painted on Tussar silk and *tal patra*, or palm leaf. Originally, it was a form of miniature painting done with natural colours, although nowadays, artists use chemicals too. Its dominant subjects are human figures, followed by floral patterns and references from the mythological stories of Radha-Krishna, Hanuman and the Ramayana.

Despite its significance and recognition, the appliqué art of Pipili is currently undergoing a crisis due to a development project. The National Highway 316 diverts vehicles from the town, which was earlier accessible *en route* to Puri. It has adversely impacted artisans in the village as their shops have reduced to 54 from 72. Those remaining are also considering shutting down due to a sharp fall in demand and rise in cost of production. The *karigars* who lost their shops became contract

labourers or took odd jobs.

After working as a hired *karigar* for many years, Ajay Kumar Mahapatra opened a small shop in 2007 with the help of a loan from the government. Before the new expressway was operational, the village drew a massive foot-fall of tourists and pilgrims, and his business thrived. Today, he hardly gets a customer even during the festive season.

Standing at his colourful shop of handicrafts that grey afternoon, I saw the gloom in Kumar Mahapatra's face surpass that of the weather as he said, "I haven't earned even Rs 50 in the last six hours, though I have to pay the daily wage to four employees, apart from supporting a family." After graduating in law, he started working as an artisan 12 years ago. Those were good times as even an income of Rs 30,000 a day was not unusual, especially during winters and Rath Yatra.

Apart from not getting many customers or tourists, another reason for bad business is that now Pipili appliqués are easily found all over India, following its production in Delhi.

Raj Kishore Mahapatra is a second-generation trader of Pipili art. Boasting the grandest stock in both Pipili and Raghurajpur artefacts, the shop which he now owns was founded by his father 45 years ago. He, too, was in low spirits as it takes a lot of effort to find a customer and strike a fair deal these days.

Utkalika, the state-run art chain which sources stock from Pipili and Raghurajpur, however, remains a silver lining for artisans. "We are no longer dependent on tourists. Rather we look forward to government orders, and demand during Rath Yatra and Durga puja," said Kishore Mahapatra.

While development projects may prove to be a boon for some, it can be a bane for many, the artisans of Pipili in this case. It is sad how after elevating it from mere temple art to the status of a cultural identity, the originators of Pipili's appliqué craft grope in the dark today.

"Swatantrata Ka Amrit Mahotsav Ka Vigyaan Filmstov" — a science film festival to highlight the role of Indian scientists, science communicators and teachers in the Indian Independence movement will be held between 13-15 August to mark India's 75th year of Independence.

This film festival will be organised by Vigyan Prasar, an autonomous organisation of the Union ministry of science and technology that is dedicated to science communication popularisation for more than three decades. Vigyan Prasar is jointly organising this festival with Vijnana Bharati, a non-governmental organisation, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research- National Institute of Science Communication and Policy Research and Films Division, Union ministry of information and broadcasting.

Documentaries, docu-dramas, animations, short videos (up to 60 minutes) made in the last five years will be showcased. The themes are — role of scientists in India's freedom movement, and science and technology in India during 1947 or pre-Independence.

"Keeping in mind the pandemic situation, the festival would be held virtually and be available for viewers on Vigyan Prasar's social media platforms such as Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/vigyanprasar>), YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/user/VigyanPrasar1/>) and even Vigyan Prasar's website (<https://vigyanprasar.gov.in/>), apart from the special portal created for the year-long festivities (<https://swavigyan75.in>) and that of Films Division (<https://filmsdivision.org/>)," said Nimish Kapoor, senior scientist with Vigyan Prasar and coordinator for the film festival.

The films will also receive awards and dates for the 11th National Science Film Festival of India will also be announced.

SOMEN SENGUPTA

An inescapable riot of colours calls for a quick stop at Pipili, a town in Odisha. Only 45 kilometres from Bhubaneswar, on the way to Puri, an array of shops selling vibrant embroideries is bound to attract one's attention. Popularly known as *chandua bazaar*, the market is rich in original appliqué crafts. With their unique

stitches based on a variety of themes, every household there looks like an art studio. Recognised by a geographical indication tag and the Limca Book of Indian Records crediting it with producing "the world's largest thematic appliqué work", almost every resident of Pipili is involved in creating magic with threads and cloth.

Odisha owes its heritage status to the appliqué art of Pipili, just like Bihar does to Madhubani painting and Ben-

