



Men and women were equally adept at the Gunta Maggam and slowly the power loom has become a male prerogative. But poverty beckons both the genders on the heritage loom



Heritage of the streetscapes is rapidly disappearing where grandmothers to granddaughters passed on the traditions



Stand looms provide the buffer and soften the realities of the power loom in the short term



Women are the most disadvantaged if Andhra loses our craft traditions

# EYE OF THE STORM: ENDANGERED WEAVING HERITAGE

**M**y father comes from Machilipatnam. My mother from Tenali. Until I was 20 years old, I spent school holidays in Chirala and several other places famous for weaving. Early school days in Guntur included craft classes focused on weaving. My deep interest in weaving continued. Much of my early knowledge was informed by the frequent showcasing of sarees and other textiles for various occasions in my grandmother's extended family house in Tenali. In those days, weavers came with bundles from various places, including Mangalagiri to my grandmother's pan-tiled Manduwa house and its large hall. Every marriage or rite of passage in the family brought us all together, over 40 of us. Woven cloth became part of the warp and weft of our lives.

During my PhD field work in the late 1970s, I was on one occasion accompanied for three weeks by my primary supervisor late Prof AL Basham, the famous author of the classic 'The Wonder That was India'. It was the only book on ancient India to see print run of over a million copies in 36 languages. It still is one of the most lucid and readable volumes written on early India. Both of us shared the passion for the history of textiles. We travelled across Andhra in old tank called the Ambassador car, the strongest and safest and most reliable vehicle that ever traversed the rugged roads and terrain of the then Andhra.

The Greco Roman sources such as the Periplus Maris Erythraei refer to the lower River Krishna valley as producing the finest cottons in the then known world. In the various texts more than 2000 years ago, the region was called Masalia or Maisolia. Significant places identified from archaeological, inscriptional and textual material include Ghantasala, Dhanyakataka, present day Dharanikota/Amaravathi, Bhattiprolu and a host of other heritage places. The region was famous for muslin and that the residual of the name is still found in the name of Masulipatnam that attracted weavers and textile artists from the late medieval times onwards. The Dutch appreciate the incredible depth of the weaving heritage of the place more than anyone else.

In 2015 when I returned home to Andhra, I was devastated that the Salpeter in Amaravathi heritage town had just one Padmasali Veerasami Neta Master living there. Only one old pan-tiled house. No looms in the streets. The headmaster of the SRR High School is a Padmasali Kollu Lakshmi Narayana, but weaving as craft is no longer taught in his school. There is no funding to employ craft or art teachers in schools in the Amaravathi mandal. About 30 years ago, there were 500 looms. Over 200 looms were actively used by about 300 weavers. There was a society through which their weaving was sold beyond the town. For lack of livelihood, they moved with the help of relatives to Mangalagiri, Ponnur, Tenali, Sattenapalli and other places. The once famous weaving heritage of Amaravathi, the heart of Maisolia died out in the past 30 years. Bhattiprolu is another place with a major Buddhist Stupa. There are many associated archaeological remains that are yet to be mapped and studied. Most importantly, the highly endangered intangible heritage is that of the weavers who would have been there for as long as the place existed. Since there is no concept of historical archaeology in AP, we will not know the exact details. Pit looms produce the finest cottons and once produced muslin are soon on their way out. There is no next generation as there is not adequate support to sustain this heritage. Stand looms are still in

use. Only power looms or electric looms get subsidies. Handlooms do not get subsidies. Bhattiprolu Weavers' Cooperative Society is still active. There are about 200 members and out of them only about 25 are working as the last of the pit loom weavers. From about a 1,000 master weavers 20 years ago, we now have about 150 looms, about 125 families that are struggling. Workers on the looms are reduced to 150. The story is the same across Macherla, Repalle, Mylavaram and so on. People are diversifying. They are moving out to work with goldsmiths in Tenali and sending their children to study other professions. Now, all this might sound gloomy. But good days are ahead and soon. Thanks to the foresight, concern and commitment of the Chief Minister, the State has made a strong resolve to map the Memory of Andhra People through its entire fabric of culture on war footing. Safeguarding will be through strategic projects informed by collective memory and knowledge. The AP Creativity and Culture Commission is launching a project to map the diverse elements of the Memory of Andhra People that could



PROF. DR. AMARESWAR GALLA

director@inclusivemuseum.org

Professor Dr. Amareswar Galla, an unhyphenated Indo Danish Australian, worked on the UNESCO Gender Policy, Intangible Heritage and World Heritage. He lives in the ancient Amaravathi Heritage Town.

The visual and monumental Stupa gets the attention. Even there unless the historic landscape values are safeguarded one can not dream of a future World Heritage in a serial nomination across the Lower River Krishna Valley



**Prof AL Basham famously said that both Buddhism and textiles are the common heritage of ancient Andhra, one taken note of and the other neglected as the poorer cousin**

**The AP Creativity and Culture Commission is launching a project to map the diverse elements of the Memory of Andhra People**

be sourced through tangible objects, artworks, documentary heritage, audio-visual archives, sites, sculptures, landscapes, intangible traditions, folklife, language, oral history, weaving and creative expressions across art forms, including dance, theatre, literature, visual arts, digital art and so on. Textile and weaving arts heritage will be a priority.

The commission will be in the next month conducting a national workshop with experts to develop the best methodology for conducting such a mapping exercise and plans benchmarked to the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Heritage.

In the following three to four months, a pilot project using the methodology on a select area will be completed in the Lower River Krishna Valley around

Amaravathi Heritage Town and the surrounding villages in Guntur district. After the evaluation of the pilot project, the commission will initiate a State-wide project for memory mapping in all the 13 districts. The current programs will then be dovetailed into a systematic approach to establishing regional programming State-wide with an emphasis to safeguarding the diversity of our intangible living heritage and establish better public-private partnerships.