

Warp & Woof of Hill Folk From research & teaching, Alams launch revival of weaving skills

By SHANTI THAPA

City dwellers know the Bhotias for their skills at animal husbandry. Or for the special breed of dogs that accompany them on their perennial treks, keeping (sometimes) even leopards at bay. But some Bhotia communities are now being gently nudged back to another skill they have been traditionally good at... a craft that was near forgotten and is now being revived....the art of weaving and dyeing.

Ghayur Alam and Patricia Alam have made Masrana (a few kilometres from Mussoorie on the Dhanaulti Road) their home and are behind the lighter, softer hand-dyed woollen scarves, stoles and pashminas coming into the market. Their aim is to re-ignite and promote the traditional crafts and skills of people living in the mountains, thereby helping these communities. Another aim is to minimise the use of chemical dyes. The Alams say they have literally had their hands full of combinations and permutations of vegetable dyes...all the dyes they use have been personally developed (with a lot of help from traditional sources).

The Alams work with Bhotias in the villages of Dunda and Harsil. Their venture is called Himalayan Weavers. The couple uses pure pashmina, which is

procured from the Changthang region of Ladakh (4500 mts), and Tibet. The raw pashmina is spun and woven into fine shawls, stoles and scarves.

By providing fair trade opportunities and greater market access, they encourage craft people to sustain the creation of their beautiful woven fabrics. A part of the profits are devoted to the educational and health needs of villagers.

The Bhotias live along a wide stretch of the Himalayas. They are legendary traders, shepherds, spinners and weavers. For generations they nurtured partnerships with nomadic Tibetans, enriching their craft by learning of new dyes and adapting Tibetan designs. Their skills were falling into disuse, as their access to markets became limited and largely confined to pilgrims along the routes to the Badrinath and Kedarnath shrines in Garhwal.

In a talk held with the couple, recently, important aspects of the effort and their motivation came to light. Some excerpts:

You worked as researcher and teacher in Delhi....what made you settle in Masrana and start this cottage industry?

Alam: We wanted to move to the mountains and were lucky to find this place by chance. It was



From left to right Gauri, Neelam, Pat and Alam.

more than 20 years ago when I saw this place from a bus and thought, 'This is it!'

We started the weaving and dyeing business just two years ago. But we have been coming to these areas for more than 20 years.

What made you get into the weaving business?

Pat: The easy availability of chemical dyes has meant a decline in the traditional use of natural ones. One of our chief objectives is to reverse this trend, and all our products are coloured with natural dyes.

The colours obtained from roots, bark and flowers are very beautiful and are also environmentally friendly. We use Harad, Amla, Henna, Indigo, Lac, Madder, Ratan Jyot, Safflower, Tesu and Walnut. All the dyeing is done in Masrana village.

Are you confined to Masrana alone?

Alam: Two places are

involved in the success of Himalayan weavers. Masrana and Dunda near Uttarkashi.

Dyeing with vegetable dyes take place in Masrana. In Dunda, the wool is spun by the Bhotia Community. We use only very fine Marino wool of 19 microns. Raw Pashmina is procured from "Changthang" region of Laddakh and is spun in Uttarakhand.

Have you made a difference?

Pat: We have...and we do hope that greater market access and fair prices will increase the earnings for this craft... that through working with them we can help to recover some of the dyes and designs that have been lost.

How many families are regularly employed?

Pat: Currently about 20 families are working with us. Many more families are getting involved slowly...there is a spillover effect of this cottage industry.

Are you only working with the Bhotias? What about other communities?

Alam: We are also working with the people from the Jaunpur area of Tehri. They also have a long tradition of spinning and weaving wool. Greater access to mill products has led to a decline in traditional wool craftsmanship. We are working to revive this tradition by supporting spinners and weavers in villages of Jaunpur.

What is your goal in short?

Pat: We hope that greater market access and fair prices will increase the earnings of craft people and that through working with them we can help popularise the use of natural dyes and designs that have been lost.

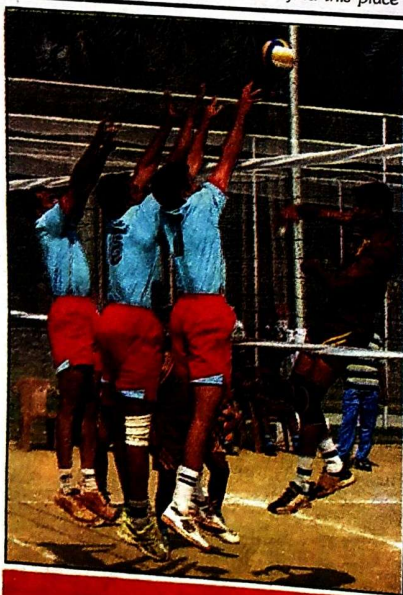
What do you do with the revenue?

Alam: Wait till we generate surplus enough to talk about it! We still have to recover what we have invested in experimenting with natural dyes, exploring markets and experimenting with lighter weaves. Now that we have done that, we find everyone else copying! To come back to your question, we intend ploughing back 25% of the profit for the educational and health needs of the villagers.

Why are you getting into weaving when weavers elsewhere are committing suicide?

Alam: In Uttarakhand, most weavers have some land, which provides them some security. Many of them also do a bit of trade. In Andhra, perhaps, weavers don't have land and are totally dependent on weaving. Given the vagaries of the market and lack of government support, weaving becomes a precarious occupation.

For more:
www.himalayanweavers.org



23rd All India Postal Volleyball Tournament Karnataka, AP, UP, Gujarat sail into semi-finals

BY OUR STAFF REPORTER

DEHRADUN, 1 Mar: Defending Champion Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat sailed into the semi-finals of the 23rd All India Postal Volleyball Championship here today.

In the first quarter-final match, Karnataka defeated Tamil Nadu 3-0. In a closely fought second quarter-final match between Uttar Pradesh and Kerala, the former managed to overcome the latter 3-2. The third quarter-final was won by Gujarat 3-0 against Uttarakhand.

In the last quarter-final of the day, Andhra Pradesh excelled over West Bengal 3-0. Inconsistency in the team led the Bengal team to defeat. After losing the first set 15-25, the Bengal players gave tough competition to the

rivals till half way, equalling the score 15-15. After this they started losing points and made too many errors. It gave away 9 consecutive points to the rival and lost the set 16-25. Making a comeback in the third set, they maintained their tempo and fought tooth and nail to win the set to remain in the game. In the dying moment of the last set, the West Bengal spikers managed to take the score to 21-22 and maintaining the gap took it further to 23-24. However, under the pressure to win the set, they ultimately wilted and gave it away 23-25 and crashed out of the Championship.

Karnataka will face Gujarat in the first semi-final and Andhra Pradesh will meet Uttar Pradesh in the second semi-final scheduled to be played on 2 March. The final will be played at 2 p.m. the same day.

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