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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF MR. RAHMATHULLA, A NATIONAL LEVEL AWARDEE TO
PATTAMADAI MAT.**

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Abstract

Mat weaving is an important and traditional handicraft of Tamil Nadu. The material used in the industry is wild Korai grass found in abundance in the banks of rivers and marshy area in Tamil Nadu. Mat weaving is one of the oldest creation of art done by interlacing leaves of the korai grass, with the minimum of tools. The nice pattu pai [mats weaved of silk] of Pattamadai are the traditional gifts for important functions; they are produced in different shapes, sizes and colours as regular floor mats, designer mats and wall hangings. Pattamadai is famous for its fine quality mats commonly known as "*Pattamadai Pai*". The local reeds are split into nearby hundred pieces and are woven on a loom with cotton warp. The mats are so fine that they can be rolled and placed in a small box. The Lebbai Muslim community weaves these famous mats in this area.

Craft Council of India in the early 1990's had encouraged this cluster to submit well woven mat for the National Awards selections. Some of the weavers of these fine mats also became recipients of awards conferred by the Government of India in recognition of their outstanding performance. It does this through the examination of one of the most coveted of awards within the Indian Craft worlds, the National Awards and Shilp Guru Award for Master crafts persons given by the Government of India every year. Pattamadai, a town panchayat in Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, is famous for its fine varieties of mats. Notable residents of this town are recipients of several awards including the National Award, Shilp Guru Award and Tamil Nadu State Award.

This article focuses on the contribution of national awardees in Pattamadai especially the contribution of Mr. Rahmathulla and his family in the field of mat weaving. Mr. Rahmathulla received the National Award in 2003 for his outstanding master craftsman with extraordinary skill in Korai grass mat weaving. He also received

another Indian highest award called Shilp Guru Award in the year 2011. The Shilp Guru is the highest honour in the Indian handicrafts sector awarded by Development Commissioner, Ministry of Textiles, and Government of India.

Key words: Pattamadai , PattuPai, Koragrass, Rowther Muslims, Labbai Muslims, Korai grass, Craftsmanship, National Awards, Shilp Guru Awards, Living Craft Creature Award , Handicraft, Master Craft Man, Mat Weaving, Rahmathulla, Craft Exhibition.

Introduction

Location of Pattamadai

Pattamadai town is located in Tirunelveli Kattabomman District, one of the southern-most districts of Tamil Nadu state in South India. Pattamadai is famous for the fine varieties of mats. This town is three kilometer from Cheramadevi served by a number of buses in addition to the occasional train service. The town is green and fertile due to the proximity of the Tambraparani River, one of South India's few perennial Rivers.¹ The river Tambraparani flows at a distance of 3.2 km from this town and the wild Korai grass growing on its banks provides the raw material for the weavers of Pattamadai.

Importance of Pattamadai

Pattamadai is a town panchayat in Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu which is well known for many things. But above all, what comes uppermost in one's mind at the mention of the name of the village is its exquisite silk mat known as Pattamadai Pai. Mat weaving has been the traditional occupation of many families in Pattamadai for generations.²The popularity of these mats is due to their finesse and the scrupulous care taken by the workers in cutting the reeds and removing the pith there. They are woven so fine that a few of them can be folded and put into a pocket and carried.³

Mat Weaving and Muslims

Mats of various qualities are manufactured here using korai grasses. This industry has become a familiar one even for the women of the Labbai group. The Rowther families in this place are also engaged in this work only. But they weave ordinary mats. Fine mats are produced only by Labbai Muslims. Members

of the Tamil Muslim Labbai group have specialized in mat weaving at this place. There were only four or five Muslim Labbais engaged in this occupation in 1917. During 1961 there were about 173 persons engaged in the production of these fine mats. They all belonged to Labbai community.⁴ During 1991 there were about 400 families engaged in mat weaving in Pattamadai. ⁵ The strength has decreased to 200 families in the year 2000. In the year 2015 only 40 families engaged in this Industry.⁶ Now only 10 families' particularly family members of those who are recipients of prestigious awards are primarily engaged in this Industry.

Men gradually drifted from mat weaving to other sources of income owing to its low wages, whereas the women find working from home to be an advantage. A majority of the youngsters of Pattamadai have sought employment in Arab Countries and due to the rapid growth of foreign opportunities once prosperous mat weaving industry lost its priority. Apart from these, the consistent hike in the price of raw materials involved in making the mat is also very high which has forced people to shift jobs owing to their livelihood.⁷

National Awards Received by Rahmathulla

From Pattamadai some of the weavers of these fine mats also became recipients of awards conferred by the Government of India in recognition of their outstanding performance.⁸ The first national award made to a weaver from Pattamadai was won by Ibrahim Beevi in 1993. She is the daughter of Peer Mohammed, the most prominent trader of mats in Pattamadai. A second national award for mat weaving was won by a superfine mat weaver, Kader in 1996 for a mat he submitted to the awards competition.⁹ This award came in part because of Craft Enterpriser's work in Pattamadai. The third national award received by Mr.

Rahmathulla from Pattamadai in 2003 and Shilp Guru Award in 2011 for his contribution to the field fine mat weaving and for his skill as a weaver.

Mr. Rahmathulla was born on 09.08.1941 to Khalifa Lebbai is one of the best craftsman for wearing mats. He had acquired the art of weaving mats from his forefathers, especially Mr. A Syed Khader Meeran specialization in weaving mats for weddings and making mats art of silk.¹⁰ Mr. Rahmathulla has three daughters and two sons. Three daughter are Zeenath Beevi, Mohamed Regina and Noorul Abitha, who are also engaged in the field of Mat Weaving, to promote the business his daughter Zeenath Beevi held out his visiting card, which had a stern photograph of him, with 'National Award 2003' and 'Shilpa Guru Award 2011' printed above his name. He also used to be a medicine man and the Muezzin, calling his village men to pray at the Palli Vaasal; (Mosque).⁹

Rahmathulla is an award –winning mat weaver. He received the National Award by the then President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in 2003.¹⁰ The National Award given to Rahmathulla for his fine mat of 140 counts that displays Thiruvalluvar image and the first Thirukural couplet, "*AgaraMuthalaEzhuthellamAathiPagavvanMuthatraUlagu*". (in a single line) using natural dye.¹¹To be noted, his wife late Katheeja Beevi was also a legendary weaver who won state level awards. He is an outstanding master craftsman with extraordinary skill in Korai grass mat weaving. He has developed new patterns with various colour combinations. His product range with exquisite finish includes floor mats, prayer mats, dining table mats, wall hanging, bag, purses, baskets, hand fans, etc. He has trained ten artisans under Guru Shishya Parampara Scheme of the office of the DC (Handicrafts) and has participated in various events and exhibitions organised by the office DC ((Handicrafts).

The President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam presenting in New Delhi the National Award for craftsmanship and contribution to the development of Korai Grass Mat Weaving to K. Rahmathulla from Pattamadai, Tamil Nadu.

Shilp Guru Award

When a skill is pursued with the both inspiration and dedication it creates an enviable tradition. When the human spirit engages, body mind and heart to innovate and perfect with quite and effective zeal, it creates living legend. To us, such a living legend is Shilp Guru.

On 15th November 2002, to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the resurgence of Handicrafts in India, the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) launched the Shilp Guru Award. At a ceremony held at Vigyan Bhawan, the then president of India Dr. A.P.J, Abdul Kalam honoured 10 masters of living traditions who are, responsible for the maintenance of the living cultural heritage of India. It was also decided that the awards should be given a countrywide coverage through the audio-visual media to make people aware of the importance of recognition of



Heritage Masters for outstanding contribution in the field

Selection of Shilp Guru Award

The selection of Shilp Guru should be made from amongst those who are hereditary masters, who received the National Award at the very inception of the scheme and who are alive or whose children are carrying on with the tradition and have made a valuable contribution in the development, creativity and expansion of knowledge in their craft. Selection of Shilp Guru has to be made from among some extraordinary skilled masters whose work has not been recognized and they deserve the title of Shilp Guru because of their contribution in keeping alive the craft skill, reviving a dying craft, setting up of institutions for training of Master Crafts persons.

Under exceptional circumstances, the selection of Shilp Guru could be made of a person, who may not be a hereditary craftsman, but who has mastered the technique and has been responsible for the revival of tradition, training of masters, contributing to the development of technology. The individuals who have not trained masters to carry on the tradition shall not be considered for awarding the title of Shilp Guru. One important criterion of selection is the contribution of the Shilp Guru to the welfare and development of craft community and craft sector as a whole.

Shilp Guru Award to Rahmathulla.

The highest Indian Award presented by the central government is the Shilp Guru Award. Shilp Guru (Kalai Aazan) is an award conferred by Government of India every year to the Master Craftsman in innovating different styles and designs of the traditional craftsmanship, to continue with the highest level aesthetic character, quality and skill in the traditional Indian Handicrafts. On 15th November 2002, to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the resurgence of Handicrafts in India, the Development Commissioner [Handicrafts] launched the Shilp Guru Award. At the ceremony held at VigyanBhavan, the then President of India Dr.APJ Abdul Kalam honored 10 masters of living traditions who are responsible for

the maintenance of the living cultural heritage of India. From the year of its inception, the Shilp Guru Award selection process has undergone some changes and in 2005, the following criteria have been used for selection.

Rahmathulla received the Shilp Guru Award from President Pranab Mukherjee on 01st July 2014 at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi, for his valuable contribution and excellence in Korai grass mat craft with a cash prize of 6 lakhs rupees with 20 gram of gold was presented to the recipient.¹³ Rahmathull was also recognized as **“Living Craft Creature Award”** (Vazhum Kaivinai Pokkisham) of Tamil Nadu for the 2013 to 2014.¹⁴ Rahmathulla presented special mats to former Prime Ministers directly to Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi and to former president of Sri Lanka Srimavo Pandaranayaka, Russian President Gorbachev among others through different government channels.¹⁵



Presentation of Shilp Guru Award for 2011 to Master craftsman to K. Rahmathulla from Pattamadai,

Tamil Nadu by Shri Pranab Mukherjee, President of India at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi.



Shilp Guru Award-Gold Coin.

The daughters and granddaughters of Mr. Rahmatullah continue to carry his legacy in the field of mat weaving and the awards and recognition of their handwork. His daughter Mrs. M. Noorul Abidha was awarded the best craftsman award for mat weaving for the year 2013-2014.¹⁶ She also received District Poompuhar Best Craftsman Award for mat weaving for the year 2014-2015.¹⁷ Mrs. S. Zeenath Beevi who is also his daughter was awarded the District Poompuhar Best Craftsman Award for mat weaving for the year 2016-2017.¹⁸, along with the State Poompuhar Best Craftsman Award for mat weaving for the year 2017-2018.¹⁹ His granddaughter Mrs. M. N. Kyrunnisha was awarded the District Poompuhar Best Craftsman Award for mat weaving for the year 2017-2018.²⁰ Also been lauded with the "**Poompuhar State Award**" for the year 2019-2020 for her excellence in Mat Weaving Craftsmanship.²¹

Conclusion

Fine mats of Pattamadai, which enjoyed a lot of prominence, have now started to lose their significance. This occupation is badly affected in this

area due to the profitable beedi rolling business. A number of Muslim women have switched over to beedi making. Another reason for the decline of mat weaving is the mat industry of Pattamadai is declining day by day due to flooding of the market with machine made mats. Governmental intervention by way of financial assistance through socially accountable nationalized banks may perhaps help those who combine aesthetic and innovative methods in the production of mats in this place.

Although Rahmatullah have received many laurels and acclaimed fame his state of living continues to be the same. Despite being awarded by the Central and State Governments, he continues to live in rented house and is struggling to develop his business. These small scale industries though continue to receive their due recognition through awards, in terms of livelihood, they are still a little setback.

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