

National Award for Mat Weavers in Pattamadai

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Abstract

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 article focuses on the ways in which craft in India is not just about production but equally about performance. It does this through the examination of one of the most coveted of awards within the Indian Craft worlds, the national awards for master crafts persons given by the Government of India every year. Notable residents of this town are recipients of several awards including the National Award, Shilp Guru Award and Tamil Nadu State Award. Ibrahim Beevi was the first recipient of national award in the year 1992 followed by Mr.S. Abdul Kader, who received the National Award in the year 1995 for his craftsmanship and contribution to the development of Cane and Bamboo Mat Weaving Craft. Mr. Rahmathulla received the National Award in 2003 for his outstanding master craftsperson with extraordinary skill in Korai grass mat weaving. Mr. Rahmathulla also received another Indian highest award called Shilp Guru Award in the year 2011. Although these people have received many laurels and acclaimed fame their status of living continues to be the same. A few awardees themselves continue to live in rented houses.

Key Words: Pattamadai –PattuPai - Rauther Muslims- Labbai Muslims-Koraigrass – Craftsmanship - National Awards-Shilp Guru Awards- Living Craft Creature Award - Handicraft – Master Craft Man –Mat Weaving – Ibrahim Beevi – Rahmathulla – Shankar Dayal Sharma - Craft exhibition.

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Introduction

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. This article focuses on the ways in which craft in India is not just about production but equally about performance. It does this through the examination of one of the most coveted of awards within the Indian Craft worlds, the national awards for master crafts persons given by the Government of India every year. Out of approximately 1,500 entries every year around 40 are chosen for national awards and merit certificates. These carry cash prizes, which are important, but far more important, are the recognition and the opportunities that accompany an award. 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.

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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. It is encompassed in the East by Melachaval, West by Cheranmahadevi, and North by Thamirabarani River and South by Western Ghats. The town is green and fertile due to the proximity of the Thamirabarani River, one of South India's few perennial Rivers.¹

Population of Pattamadai

In 1991 its total population was 12, 993 with 6,275 males and 6,718 females.² Its population rose to 14,965 in 2001 according to a census report. Among them, males and females were 7,314 and 7,651 respectively.³ Although described as a 'sleepy hamlet' in some descriptions at craft sales and in newspaper articles, it is classified as a town. In 1995 agriculture was the main occupation in the town. Other occupations include cow, herding, carpentry, petty trade and services and mat weaving.⁴ Around 40 percent of Pattamadai's population is Muslims. Of these, the Rauther Muslims group is larger, representing around 35 per cent of the total population. The Labbai group numbers around 650 persons. It is primarily Labbais who weave the famous fine and superfine mats of Pattamadai, though some Rauthers are also engaged in this work. Mat weaving has been the traditional occupation of many families in Pattamadai for generations.

Importance of Pattamadai

Pattamadai is a lovely village in Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu which is well known for many things. In the first place, it is the birthplace of H.H. Sri Swamy Sivananda Saraswathi Maharaj, the revered spiritual guru and founder of the International Divine Life Society.⁵ Both Sivananda Ashram and the Sivananda Hospital have put the village on the spiritual map of India. Secondly, Ramaseshwar Higher Secondary School in Pattamadai has produced a number of outstanding alumnae.. 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.⁶ Mats of various qualities are manufactured here by the Muslims using korai grasses. These mats are quite famous in inland and large quantities of these mats are exported to foreign countries. The 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.⁷

National Awardees of Pattamadai

The Pattamadai town is famous for National Awards particularly in the field of Mats. 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. The first national award made to a mat weaver from Pattamadai was won by Ibrahim Beevi, who is the daughter of Peer Mohammad the most prominent trader of mats in Pattamadai. An active member of the Craft Council of India (CCI) and Madras Craft Foundation (MCF) who was responsible for sending the award-winning mat to the national awards competitions Ibrahim Bibi, won the National Award for Master Craftsman in 1992 for her contribution to the field of fine mat weaving and for her skills as a weaver. The former President of India Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma presented an award at New Delhi in 1994.⁸

Ibrahim Bibi was born in a traditional family of mat weavers in 1967. Her father initiated her into the craft at the young age of ten. Later she received training in mat weaving under the apprenticeship-training scheme of the office of the Development Commissioner for handicraft during 1978. However, she evolved many intricate designs based on the traditional pattern. Her works were displayed at an exhibition organized by the Craft Council of India.

She displayed her products in many exhibitions especially in south India. Right from her childhood, she helped her parents in their Korai grass mat cottage Industry which is located at Pattamadai.⁹

Thus she acquired fine mat weaving skills. Mat weaving of fine quality involves several days of labour sometimes. It can be known from what Ibrahim Bibi said in an interview that it took 22 days to weave a mat (Chatai), which is made of Silk thread and grass.¹⁰ She also won the Poompuhar Award in 1995 for her excellence in fine mat weaving.¹¹ She also received Tamil Nadu State award from Nagoor Meeran, the then Minister of Tourism and Wakf Board in 1995.¹²

A second national award for mat weaving was won by a superfine mat weaver, Abdul Khader., for a mat submitted to the award competition. This award came in part because of Craft Enterprise's work in Pattamadai. Mr. S Abdul Khader now resides in Pattamadai, Tirunelveli District. He is a Master Craftsman in Fine Korai Grass mat weaving who has won a National Award in his name for excellence in mat weaving craft for the year 1995, The former President of India Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma presented the award at New Delhi in 1996.¹³

He also received another award called "*Living Craft Creature Award*" (Vazhum Kaivinai Pokkisham) for the year 2018 -2019 from the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Thiru Edappadi Palani Samy on 19-02 2019. He received one Lakh Instant Cash Prize, Eight Gram Gold and Tamara Patra.¹⁴ Abdul Khader displayed his products in various craft exhibition all over the city in India namely Saidapet, Chennai, Madapuri, Hyderabad, Dilli Hat, Delhi, and Udupi Karnataka.¹⁵ Such exposure not only brought fame to Pattamadai Mats but also contributed to the design and product development of the mat weaving industry in this place. Despite being awarded by the Central and State government, he continues to live in a rented house and he is struggling to develop his business. Although the representation given to the Tirunelveli Collector by Assistant Director of Handicrafts to provide permission to construct the piece of land of Mr. Abdul Khader, award winning mat weaver of Pattamadai still he is without a shelter of his own.¹⁶

The third National Award made to a mat weaver from Pattamadai was won by Rahmathulla in 2003. Mr. K. Rahmathulla S/O Khalifa Labbai was born on 8th September 1941 at Pattamadai (Tamil Nadu). He belongs to a traditional family of artisans. He learnt the craft from his father. Rahmathulla is an award –winning mat weaver. He received a National Award by the then President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in 2003.¹⁷ The National Award given to Rahmathulla for his fine mat of 140 counts that displays Thiruvalluvar image and the first Thirukural couplet, "*Agara Muthala Ezhuthellam Aathi Pagavvan Muthatra Ulagu*". (in a single line) using natural dye. To be noted, his wife late Katheeja Beevi was also a legendary weaver who won state level awards. He is an outstanding master craftsperson 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). 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).¹⁸

Shilp Guru Awardee of Pattamadai

Another 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 Craftsperson 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:

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 craftsperson, 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.

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 is presented to the recipient.¹⁹ Rahmathull was also recognized as *“Living Craft Creature Award”* (Vazhum Kaivinai Pokkisham) of Tamil Nadu for the 2013 to 2014.²⁰ Rahmathulla presented special mats to former Prime Ministers directly to Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi and to former president of Sri Lanka SrimavoPandaranayaka, Russian President Gorbachev among others through different government channels.²¹

Conclusion

Although these people have received many laurels and acclaimed fame their state of living continues to be the same. A few awardees themselves continue to live in rented houses. These small scale industries though continue to receive their due recognition through awards, in terms of livelihood, they are still a little setback.

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 that machines purchased from Coimbatore in India and Japan, abroad, have become costlier and due to the cost they could not be passed on to

the poor buyers. 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.

End Notes

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- ² Soumhya Venkatesan, *Craft Matters*, (Artisans, Development and the Indian Nation), (New Delhi, 2009), 46
- ³ *Census of India 2001*, Series-34, Provisional Population Totals, paper-2 of 2001, Rural Urban Distribution, Tamil Nadu, p.183.
- ⁴ Soumhya Venkatesan, *Craft Matters*, (Artisans, Development and the Indian Nation), *op.cit.*, p.46.
- ⁵ K.S.K. Velmani, (Ed), *Gazetteers of India Tirunelveli District*, Vol.II, (Chennai. 2002), p. 1399.
- ⁶ *Pamphlet*, A.S. Peer Mohammed, Silk Mats of Pattamadai, Tirunelveli District.
- ⁷ *The Economic Times*, Bangalore, dated, 16-01-2000.
- ⁸ *The Hindu*, New Delhi, dated 06-03-1994.
- ⁹ *National Award for Master Craftsperson and weavers, Office of the Development commissioner(Handicraft) and Office of the Development Commissioner (Handloom) Ministry of Textile, Government of India, 1992, p.73.*
- ¹⁰ *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, dated, 04-03-1994.
- ¹¹ *National Award for Master Craftsperson and weavers, Office of the Development of Commissioner (Handicraft) & Office of the Development of Commissioner (Handlooms) Ministry of Textile, Government of India, dated, 06-07-1999.*
- ¹² *Dinakaran*, dated, 03-05-1995,
- ¹³ *National Award Certificate 1995* Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 24-12-1996.
- ¹⁴ *Certificate* issued by the Tamil Nadu Handicrafts Development Corporation, dated, 19-02-2019.
- ¹⁵ *Certificate* issued by the office of the Development Commissioner (Handicraft), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, dated, 29.07.1997.
- ¹⁶ *Letter* from G.R. Thampi, Assistant Director of Handicrafts to Shri. K. Dhanavel, District Collector of Tirunelveli, dated on 24-06-1999.
- ¹⁷ *Dina Thanthi*, Muthucharam, Tirunelveli Edition, dated, 19.07.2014.
- ¹⁸ Aparna Karthikeyan, *Nine Rupees an Hour*, Disappearing Livelihoods of Tamil Nadu,(Chennai, 2019), p.195.
- ¹⁹ *Shilp Guru Award&SantKabirAward*, Office of the Development of Commissioner (Handicraft) Ministry of Textile, Government of India, 2011, p.24.
- ²⁰ *Certificate* issued by the Poompuhar, Tamil Nadu Handicrafts Development Corporation.
- ²¹ *The New Indian Express*, Madurai, dated, 20-08-2014.