

Pune Times

OF INDIA

Weaving hope into rural fabric

PUNE couple Neeta and Girish Deshpande are on cloud nine. The duo who have been retailing ethnic handmade fabric through their two Banjara stores in the city, have been featured in the latest issue of *Fiberarts*, USA's specialist magazine for textiles.

A just reward indeed, considering the duo has been championing the cause of the economically backward weavers of the country for close to seven years now.

The duo, who are known to travel to the most remote villages of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, have established a network of rural weavers in these states, from whom they purchase hand-made fabric.

According to the Deshpandes, a majority of the weavers in these states are on the brink of penury and starvation, with reported cases of suicide in states like Andhra Pradesh.

According to Girish, it is the bureaucrats and even the master weavers, who have been known to siphon off funds earmarked for the development of the weavers. This has reduced the weavers to lead a hand-to-mouth existence. There have been cases where some weavers have not been able to even afford hospitalisation expenses in the event of illness and accident. The Deshpandes say that they have spent urgent money

orders in the past to alleviate the suffering of weavers.

All this has had an adverse effect on the growth of the handloom industry. In Bastar for instance, the number of specialist weavers have dropped from 40 to a dismal four in the last few years. At this rate, the Deshpandes fear that the hand-crafted fabric industry could cease to exist.

According to Girish, the government can easily prevent this from happening. Firstly by taking rural weavers for foreign exhibitions where their work could be sold; and secondly by creating an efficient sales and distribution network across the country.

Girish is of the opinion that the central government's bias for khadi over other forms of hand-crafted fabric, has also been spelling doom for weavers of non-khadi fabric.

The Deshpandes themselves have a pet formula to save the weavers from starvation. According to them if every single middle-class citizen in Pune's approximate 10 lakh middle class population were to buy one two metre hand-crafted shirt, they would end buying 20 lakh metres of the fabric, thereby contributing immensely to the lives of the under-privileged weavers.

It is this saga of the Deshpandes that has been documented by Joanna Lewis, the Colorado-based writer in *Fiberarts*.

— **Rahul Chandawarkar**
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INTERNATIONAL: Neeta and
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