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Traditional Weaving Culture of Tirunelveli with Special Reference to Pathamadai Paai

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Abstract

The Culture of traditional weaving in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu is a vital aspect to the indigenous handicraft traditions of South India. Within the various weaving traditions of this area the Pathamadai Paai (also known as the Pattamadai mat) is unique in the fineness, durability, and cultural significance of the woven products. Pathamadai Paai is produced mainly from korai grass, harvested from the banks of the River Tamirabarani. This tradition reflects a perfect balance between the community's use of natural resources as well as their way of life.

Weaving Pathamadai Paai is not only a source of income, but also an expression of the culture, customs, and beliefs of the artisans in Pathamadai. This article presents the history of weaving in Tirunelveli.

Keywords: Traditional weaving, Korai grass, Handicrafts, Cottage industry, Artisan communities, Cultural heritage.

Introduction

Tirunelveli district, in the state of Tamil Nadu in the southern part of India, is famous not only for its ancient temples, ever-flowing rivers, and agricultural land, but also for its rich heritage

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of traditional crafts. Among these, grass mat weaving is an important one. The Pathamadaï Paai, made in and around the village of Pathamadaï, is a special example of the sophisticated craft that has been developed over the centuries. This paper will discuss the traditional weaving culture of Tirunelveli, with special reference to the Pathamadaï Paai..

Historical Background of Weaving in Tirunelveli

Historically, Tirunelveli has been a cultural meeting point because of its geographical position on the banks of the Tamirabarani River. The river resources supported not only agriculture but also craft-based subsistence, especially those that rely on natural fibers. Korai grass (*Cyperus corymbosus*/*Cyperus pangorei*) is one of these natural fibers, which is the basic raw material for mat weaving.

The art of weaving mats from korai grass dates back several centuries. The mats were first made as home furnishings in the form of floor coverings and sitting arrangements. Later, the craft developed into a specialized art form that was characterized by its fineness, flexibility, and durability—features that later defined Pathamadaï Paai.

The international recognition of this craft was marked in 1953, when a finely woven Pathamadaï mat was presented as a ceremonial gift to Queen Elizabeth II during her coronation. This event elevated the craft from a regional tradition to an internationally acknowledged cultural artefact.

Technical Aspects of Pathamadaï Paai Weaving

Raw Materials and Preparation

The main raw material utilized in Pathamadaï Paai is korai grass, which flourishes in abundance along the banks of the Tamirabarani River. Following the harvesting, the grass is subjected to a careful preparation process that includes drying, soaking, and splitting. Traditionally, the grass is immersed in water for several days to improve its flexibility and softness. This procedure enables artisans to divide the fibers into very fine strands, which is essential for creating high-quality mats with dense weaving.

Weaving Techniques

The weaving of Pathamadaï Paai is a completely manual process that demands remarkable skill and patience. The warp is generally composed of cotton or silk threads, whereas the weft is made up of meticulously prepared korai grass strands. The highest quality variant, referred to as pattu pai (silk mat), is woven with such tightness that it achieves a smooth, fabric-like

texture. In mats of superior quality, the weaving density can reach as high as 140 strands within a width of nine inches. Decorative borders and patterns are created by incorporating colored strands or employing various weaving techniques. Although natural dyes were historically utilized, there has been a growing trend towards the use of chemical dyes to satisfy modern market preferences for more vibrant colors and diverse designs.

Gender Dimensions of the Craft

While both men and women have been involved in mat weaving in the past, women, especially from the Muslim Labbai and Rowther communities, have come to be recognized as the main weavers in recent years. Women are involved in the weaving process, while men are involved in procurement, marketing, and sales.

Socio-Cultural importance

Ceremonial and Ritual Use

In the Tirunelveli cultural context, the Pathamadai Paai has ritualistic importance in addition to its practical use. Conventionally, mats were made especially for weddings, with the names of the bride and groom and the date of marriage inscribed on them. The mats were a part of the marriage trousseau and represented prosperity, union, and continuity. In addition to their use in weddings, the Pathamadai mats were also exchanged during religious events and community gatherings.

Craft, Identity, and Community

The craft of weaving Pathamadai Paai is essential in forming the identity of the community. This art is passed down through generations via oral teachings and practical training within families. Such a transfer of knowledge across generations enhances community unity, instills pride, and cultivates a profound sense of belonging. Consequently, weaving serves not just as a form of labor but as a cultural heritage that encapsulates regional memory and identity.

Economic Importance

Livelihood and Cottage Industry

Pathamadai Paai weaving is a source of livelihood for several hundred families in and around Pathamadai village. It is largely a cottage industry that is carried out from home. The industry utilizes local raw materials and home-based labor. Over 300 women are believed to be actively involved in mat weaving.

Unlike agricultural work, mat weaving is a year-round source of employment. Nevertheless, despite the labor-intensive and skill-intensive nature of mat weaving, the income generated from it is not very high.

Geographical Indication and Market Value

In 2013, Pathamadai Paai received Geographical Indication (GI) status, acknowledging its distinct regional identity and traditional knowledge foundation. The GI certification has played a crucial role in safeguarding the craft against imitation and has improved its visibility in both national and international markets, leading to a rise in market value.

Export and Global Demand

Even though the production process is still artisanal, Pathamadai Paai has discovered specialized markets overseas, especially among buyers looking for eco-friendly and handcrafted items. Its sustainable and biodegradable characteristics resonate strongly with the worldwide focus on environmental awareness.

Challenges Facing the Tradition

Pathamadai Paai weaving suffers a number of difficulties despite its cultural and economic significance:

- Competition from synthetic and machine-made mats, which are mass-produced and less expensive.
- Younger generations' engagement is declining due to urban migration and other job alternatives.
- Low income and reliance on the market, which frequently involves intermediaries who lower artisan profits.
- Pressures from modernization, where mechanization runs the risk of eroding authenticity and craftsmanship.

Maintaining the craft continues to depend heavily on striking a balance between efficiency and tradition.

Preservation and Future Prospects

Cooperatives, NGOs, and government organizations are working to maintain the craft via skill training, financial assistance, and marketing efforts. Youth involvement, craft tourism integration, and digital platform use will all assist in rekindling youth interest in weaving. By marketing Pathamadai Paai as a sustainable/eco-friendly lifestyle choice product, there is great potential for developing a future in both domestic (India) and international markets.

Conclusion

The traditional weaving culture of Tirunelveli, as seen through Pathamadaai Paai, is an example of living heritage made up of history, culture, and craftsmanship. While the craft faces many financial difficulties and contemporary problems, it still survives because of the artisan community's commitment, and the growth of cultural awareness. If we continue to support and invest in sustaining the craft with creative innovation and thoughtful solutions, we will have a successful craft tradition for several generations.

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