

The dyers of Kotpad

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"I wonder if the wearers of Kotpad textiles know how hard we work to create these colours," says Jema Panika, who won a National Award in 2009. She says youngsters have lost interest in learning this painstaking craft, and cheaper chemical dyes have taken over the market. "When we go to cities for exhibitions, buyers tell us, teach your children your skills. But the world is changing and our work is impacted." Photographs by Chitrangada Choudhury

On a clear January morning, the Koraput district bus dropped me off on a southern Odisha state highway at Kotpad. It's a town that felt a bit like a busy village, with its gaggle of shops, street hawkers and bustling traffic.

There was little that looked unusual—until I wandered deeper into the by-lanes. Here, the town's unique contribution to Indian textile heritage, now endangered despite a Geographical Indication (GI) tag, sprang into view.



Gobardhana Panika works on his pit loom. "If others do not learn, we will end up as the last generation of Kotpad weavers," he says.

Batches of bark of the aal (madder) tree, which Kotpad's talented dyers—all women—use to derive exquisite hues—had been laid out to dry outside mud-tiled homes in the mirigan sai (weavers' section) of the town. In informal clearings, women tended to vats of aal powder solution bubbling over firewood. Bundles of yarn, which they had treated with dung and castor oil, were being lowered into the steaming dark concoction.



Kotpad dyeing is a manually intensive process, spread over stages, including women kneading the dye into the yarn with their feet.

Here and there, rows of cream and maroon yarn in various stages of the treatment and dyeing process hung from bamboo frames, with women checking on their readiness for the next stage of work.

At the village pond, women were washing the treated and dyed yarn, slapping it on rocks, kneading it over and over with their hands and feet.



'Aal' bark is harvested by Adivasis in the forests of the neighbouring district of Nabarangpur. Traders sell these to weavers for up to Rs2,000 for a 10kg sack. The bark is dried and ground to a fine powder to create a dye.

Close to a month of labour results in the threads' metamorphosis from the original cream shade to dramatic reds, maroons, rusty pinks, coffee browns and deep blacks. The dyed threads are then handed over to Kotpad's famed male weavers. Working on pit looms, they turn these into elegant saris, which were originally sold in the Adivasi *haats* of Koraput and Jagdalpur districts and now get snapped up in urban markets and exhibitions and on e-commerce sites. Sari prices start from Rs3,500, depending on the quality of the yarn used and the intricacy of the woven design.



Iron sulphate pieces (top, left) are ground and added to 'aal' dye baths to impart darker hues to the yarn.

Kotpad dyeing is an entirely organic, manual, labour-intensive and long-drawn-out process, which may explain why the work rests solely on the shoulders of women. Yet the women dyers who give the Kotpad weaves their distinctive look stand on the lowest rung of the creation chain and rarely get any recognition. Their work is not even seen as craft because the focus is limited to the finished product, not the dyeing of the yarn.



Hasita Panika drying a batch of 'aal' bark. "The drier the root, the finer the powder we can grind, resulting in a stronger colour," she says.

"The women's labour and skills are highly under-valued," says Prahollada Mahanto, president of the Kotpad Weavers Cooperative Society, which was set up in 1956 to represent the dyers and weavers. He says most women dyers make around Rs4,000-5,000 a month. During the monsoon, when the dyeing work comes to a stop in the absence of continued sunshine, several women work as casual labour to supplement income.



Yarn dyed by the women gets woven into striking saris by male weavers.

Today, Kotpad has a mere 30-40 women dyers, and 15-20 households involved in weaving, compared to over 100 households around two-three decades ago, according to Mahanto. "Unless the government urgently intervenes to support them and help train young women, this art will vanish," he says.



An 'aal' tree in the compound of the Weavers' Service Centre. The bark of the tree gives the Kotpad textiles their distinctive colour.

Pankaja Sethi, a Bhubaneswar-based textile designer and researcher, describes the Kotpad brick reds as among the most beautiful organically dyed reds in Indian handlooms, and the larger dyeing process practised by the women as among the best in the country. "But there is very little recognition for the women who have retained the integrity of this traditional skill for over a century, and who continue to create these exquisite colours," she



says.

Duttika Seera heats up vats of 'aal' dye. She immerses the threads in the dye bath to create shades of red or brown—the process lasts for days.

Sethi says the dyers should be recognized through state and national awards, and officially sponsored to hold demonstration workshops in Odisha and other states.



Anuradha and Bidyadhar Mahanto are one of the dyer-weaver couples in Kotpad. Bidyadhar has been named for multiple awards, typifying how weavers get sole credit for Kotpad pieces.

Few from the younger generation are learning this sophisticated skill, and the weavers and their century-old pit looms too are down to few households. We might well be witnessing the last generation of Kotpad's famed women dyers.

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