

This khadi collective in a Karnataka village has clients around the world

Author - T R Vivek, Published on - 5.8.2019



Coloured cotton threads hung out to dry at Shramajeevi Ashram in Heggodu; and (below) Prasanna takes a look at the yarn | Photo Credit: VAIDYA

25 years ago Prasanna quit theatre, and inspired by Gandhian teachings, founded Charaka

Legendary theatre actor and director Prasanna insists he is a 'city-dweller' though he has spent the last 25 years in a tiny village called Heggodu in Karnataka's Shivamogga district. The former IITian hopes that one day every machine in the world will be dismantled. When I meet him in [Shramajeevi Ashram](#) in Heggodu, the 71-year-old is dressed in a long kurta and off-white veshti, and his unkempt, flowing white beard still has traces of his breakfast of avalakki and upma.

In the Malnad region, he is revered like a sage by the theatre community. He trained at National School of Drama, his book *Indian Method in Acting* is a veritable textbook to many. But 25 years ago Prasanna quit theatre, and inspired by Gandhian teachings, founded the Shramajeevi Ashram, and *Charaka*, a dynamic rural khadi co-operative, managed entirely by local women. The ashram and weavers have the distinction of having revived traditional dyeing techniques and textiles such as the Udupi handloom saree that was teetering on the brink of extinction.

And Prasanna is proud that the 30,000 metres of khadi produced in the ashram has used no machines.

Annual revenue

The Charaka co-operative employs some 200 women from surrounding villages and 500 more in other parts of **Karnataka** and turns over a revenue of **₹6 crore** annually. Weavers from neighbouring districts, for instance, buy handspun yarn from Charaka and sell handwoven fabric back to the co-operative. The entirely handmade and naturally dyed fabric is much in demand among niche apparel manufacturers and exporters in the southern States. It sells readymade garments under the Desi brand. "With Charaka, we are assured a year-round supply of yarn. And so it means 365 days of assured work for us," says Dharmaraya, a weaver from Gajendragarh in Karnataka's Gadag district.

"When I came here, agriculture was the only means of livelihood. Areca farms and overgrazing were eating into the hills and forests. Farm workers from marginalised castes were at the mercy of the landlords. I wanted Charaka to draw the poor out of agriculture," says Prasanna. The experiment involved creating a diversified Gandhian village economy. The attempt was to train Dalit women and women from other marginalised castes in new remunerative skills. But this was a region without any weaving tradition. Enraged by Prassana's experiments that deprived them of cheap plantation hands, members of dominant castes even vandalised Charaka's office.

Charaka's mascot Gowramma, a Dalit woman now in her 50s, was one of the earliest members of the ashram. Today, she is not only the president of Charaka but also the ashram's administrative head. As Gowramma works the spinning wheel, sitting at the ashram's entrance, she keeps an eagle eye on who comes in and what goes out. When Prasanna introduces her as the beating heart of Charaka, it's hard not to be intimidated by her stern demeanour. Sensing that I am clearly a little overwhelmed, Prasanna says: "That's why she's become the mascot of Charaka." Later that evening, at an event to felicitate Charaka's best employees, many of them very young, Gowramma gives away the awards. It carries a small cash incentive, a certificate, and a tight hug and kiss from her. The awardees, irrespective of age, seemed to swell up with pride. One of this year's winners is Sharada, a weaver in her 40s. Before she came to Charaka, she was a landless labourer in an areca plantation earning **₹70** a day during the harvest season. When she visited the Shramajeevi ashram, she became transfixed by the loom from which fascinating patterns emerged. "Weaving seemed like magic. Instantly, I decided that's what I wanted to do," says Sharada. Until a few years ago she had not been to a bank. Now, her salary of around **₹10,000** is credited to her account and she proudly claims that all her financial transactions happen through her cheque book. Bengaluru-based fashion guru Prasad Bidappa is always moved when he feels the texture of cloth made by Charaka's weavers. "This is so fabulous and comforting. Every inch of handwoven fabric carries a piece of the weaver's spirit. But we are somehow happy buying Chinese acrylic blankets from retail chains. We've reduced our wonderful khadi into a cheap fabric whose chief attraction is the discounted price it is sold at," he says. He is excited enough to even offer his services as brand ambassador and sales agent for Charaka's weavers. Free of chemicals Charaka is different from other handloom co-operatives in that its clothes are completely free of chemical colours. It has perfected the use of dyes and colour fixing through natural products available locally. The areca shells produce a vibrant range of yellows and browns; the ayurvedic herb manjistha, pale reds and pinks; cow dung for blacks and deep browns; black myrobalan, or the ayurvedic herb haritaki, as a mordant. The only non-local ingredient Charaka uses is indigo for shades of blue. Bindu Kasinadhuni, a Chennai-based apparel designer and entrepreneur, is a long-time bulk buyer of Charaka's fabrics.

Kasinadhuni's Chakra Design Studio specialises in high-end kidswear. "I export to consumers in the U.S. who are conscious about fair sourcing and chemical-free textiles. The glitch sometimes is when buyers find slight variations in the colour of the fabric and the print patterns they find in the final product compared to the pictures in the catalogue. I try to explain to them that these are handcrafted products, using natural processes that cannot be standardised like mass-produced factory fabric. The customer feedback is overwhelmingly positive for the material we source from Charaka," she says. Says Prasanna: "I hope Charaka can be a viable template for creating a Gandhian society across India." The voice in my head says he's fighting a losing battle in defence of utopia. But I hope I'm wrong. First published by [The Hindu](#) on 16 Mar. 2019