

SundayHerald art & culture

It's raining noodles!

Named after Momofuku Ando, who invented the world's first instant noodles in 1958, Momofuku Ando Instant Ramen Museum is an interactive food museum in Japan. Visitors can also create their own packet of instant noodles here!

DEL VING INTO DARNING

Healing the damaged cloth

The age-old craft of darning is struggling to thrive in today's times of 'use & throw' culture and hectic lifestyles, writes GOPIKA NATH

On a hilltop in Shimla, looking down on Annandale and facing icy Himalayan peaks sits a doll's house-like building. It once boarded young girls attending a Loreto Convent School run by Irish nuns. The year is 1970 and a group of 11-year-olds are attending needle-work class, learning how to darn their torn and worn, grey, woollen school socks. Five decades on, I and some of my classmates can still do the odd bit of darning, but this is no longer taught in schools. Thriving on contemporary concepts of use and throw, our disposable culture values time more than it cherishes the material.

Textiles are integral to everyday living: we wrap ourselves in them, sleep and sit on them, often overlooking their significance. Cloth wears out, gets torn and damaged. Darning has been used to prolong the life of a garment out of social and economic necessity and for sentimental reasons. The tradition of recycling old, used fabrics, handing them down from one generation to the next, is how mending skills endured. And, that they exist despite our consumerist tendencies is also because of the investment made in preserving precious textiles, especially in India.

Through the ages

The history of darning is as old as cloth itself, arising through the evolution of the woven fabric. Prior to the invention of the heddle in Neolithic times, early weavers faced problems regarding the insertion of weft into a warp to form the cloth. And, the simplest way of putting the weft was to 'darn' it in, by running the leader end under the first thread, over the second, under the

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third and so on, one thread at a time, back and forth across the warp.

Once integral to the making of cloth, the darning stitch has also been used to embellish fabric with colourful patterns. The *phulkari* of Punjab, *kashidakaari* of Kashmir and *kanthas* of Bengal stand alongside traditional embroideries found in Africa, Japan, Europe, the Middle East, Mexico and Peru, which used pattern-darning, to decorate rather than to mend.

However, over the years, to 'darn' principally meant to mend holes, rips and cuts, using different stitches for each. 'Cashmere darning' was used to mend twill fabrics, 'Swiss darning' to repair knits, and in northern India, *bajaji*, *taar-tor* and



INTRICATE (Clockwise from left) Visible darning; darning in progress; a Kani shawl; a sojnikar embroidering a shawl in Kashmir. PHOTOS COURTESY: DINESH KHANNA & PRIYA MEHRA

patchi were employed in repairing fabric. An anonymous text, on the internet, gives precise instructions on how to 'reinforce', do a 'running darn', 'woven darn', mend a 'broken stitch', 'drop stitch', 'set-in a piece', 'underlaid piece darned in' and 'stotting', as well as on using 'mending tissue', tackling 'triangular tears' and 'patches'.

All of which indicates that it was a specialised craft.

In Dillmont's *Encyclopaedia of Needlework*, published in 1886, the Austrian needle-worker writes that "mending of clothes, underwear and house linen, though wearisome, is nevertheless very necessary and no woman should be ignorant of the best methods of doing it," adding that "tiresome though this is...as much pride can be taken in a neatly mended article as in a newly produced one, and certainly the pleasure of a good conscience is an extra reward for the trouble taken," implying that it was an act of patience and technical competence, and

also considered good housekeeping, but primarily a woman's job.

In India, darning work is done mostly by professional men, many of whom have come from Kashmir. *Arafoogar*, or darning, "is a healer of damaged cloth," says Priya Ravish Mehra, who has spent decades researching and documenting this diminishing art form, likening it to a performance of magic that makes the flaws disappear.

Growing up in the 1960s, her summer vacations were spent at the family ancestral home in Najibabad, in the Bijnor district of Uttar Pradesh, which is also home to many *rafoogars*. Founded in the 1740s by a Rohilla Muslim warrior, Nawab Najib-ud-Daula, this township is a five-hour drive from Delhi, on the old trade route from Kashmir to Bengal. It's therefore possible, that en route from Kashmir, via Punjab, some *rafoogars* settled in Najibabad, making it a repairing-hub for the precious Kani shawl.

Woven magic

Seated on the floors of verandahs or in open court yards, spreading the shawls out on the floor to inspect the damage, these woven masterpieces pass through several hands, are held over their raised knees, restored with a fine needle and eye, before being returned to the owners or sold anew. These deft

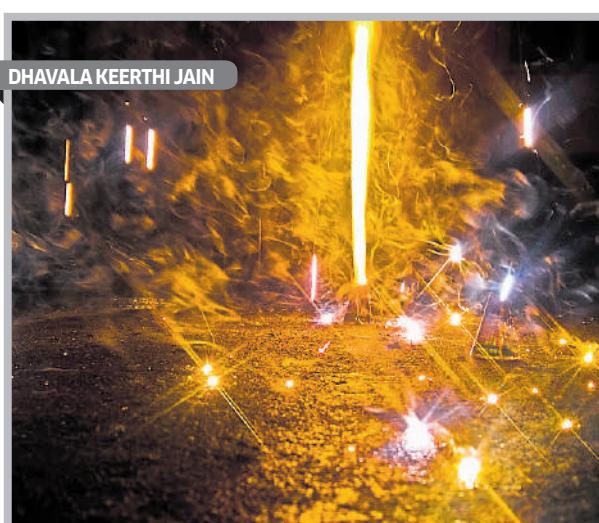
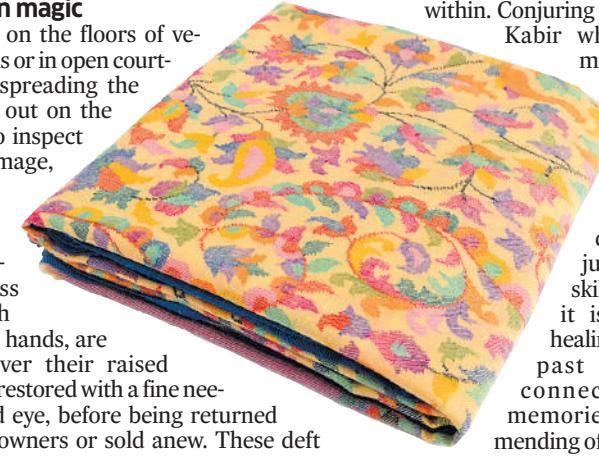
needle-men are themselves descendants of migrants to the Kashmir valley, from Samarkand and Iran, and progeny of the early *sojnikars* of Kashmir, who once embroidered the *amli* and *dorukha jaamwars* favoured by Emperor Akbar.

Traditionally, a darning is advised that "particular care should be taken to make the work as inconspicuous as possible. A thread or ravelling of the material will do better than one of sewing silk, as the latter, no matter how well matched in colour, will be sure to have a lustre that will bring the stitches into prominence." In *bajaji* and *taar-tor* work too, threads are pulled out, likewise, to recreate the warp with a needle, then weaving in the weft threads, also with a needle, to simulate a plain-weave effect.

No one wants to wear or own a damaged fabric, so the aim of the darning or *rafoogar*, is invisibility. He strives to hide the damage. The needlework must be so perfect as to merge with the cloth—damage unseen. Traditionally, the yarn used for repairing Kani shawls is pulled out from old *pashmina* pieces, collected just for this purpose. Mostly, a matching thread is found, but the old fabrics are also dyed to match colours required for the restoration work. Ironically, the imperceptible character of *rafoogari* along with the shame in owning damaged fabrics has relegated this craft to the shadow-lines, rendering the *rafoogar* himself invisible.

But, the very act of darning, however undetectable, does transform the personality of the cloth. Whether the darning threads are unravelled from the mended fabric or of distinctive character, when interwoven into the fabric, they distort and reshape the surface. Even the mended darn can become an embellishment, altering the original. This facet of making the invisible visible has augmented Priya's art-practice. Evolving it as a metaphor for self-knowledge, critical in restoring self-esteem, she has sought to 'darn' the fabric of her own life.

Concurrent with her research in *rafoogari*, Priya was diagnosed with cancer and creatively uses the act of visible repairing in her thread-work, to speak of her own inner transformations that stem the disease within. Conjuring the saint-poet Kabir who poetically meshed the tangible with the transcendental, she says that, "to revive darning is not just a revival of skill and craft.... it is also about healing suppressed past emotions connected with memories and the mending of cloth."



Burning the darkness
Nellikar, Karkala



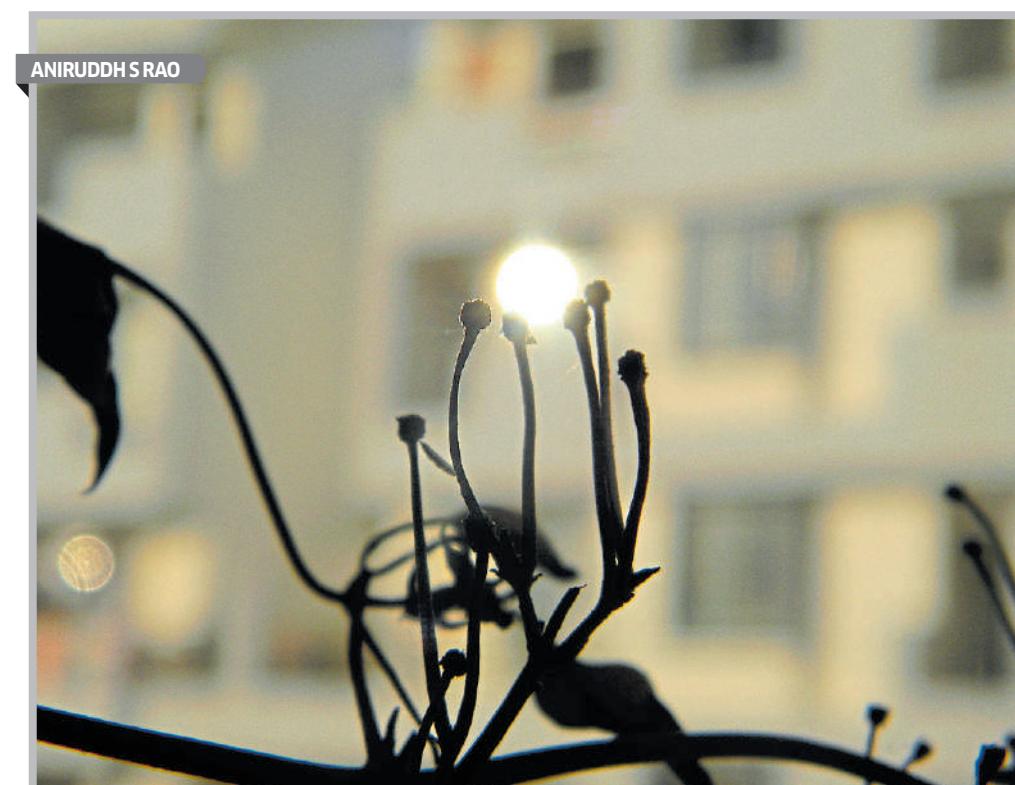
Diagonal radiance
Coorg



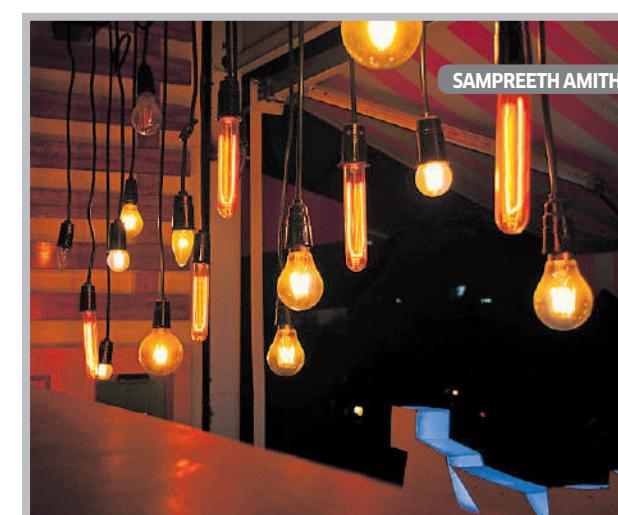
THE WONDER CALLED LIGHT

The theme for the next photo feature is '**WHEN THE WATER FALLS**'. Submit your entry (one per person) with your name, a caption, & information about where you have taken the photo, to sundayh@gmail.com latest by October 23, 2017.

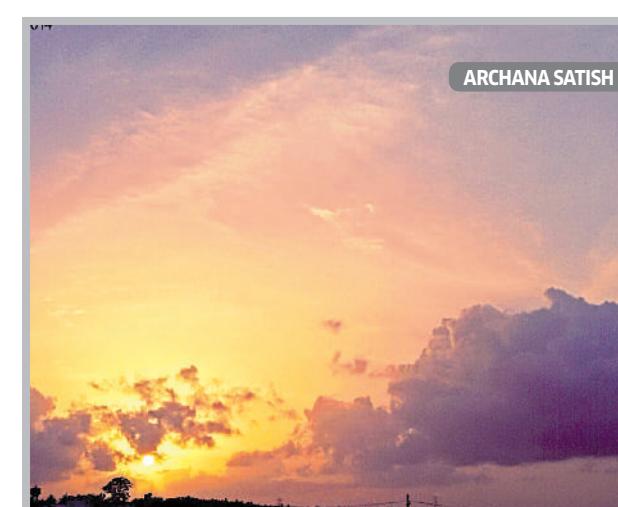
File size should be 500 KB. The subject line for the mail is 'My Take'.



Light at its reflected best
Bengaluru



Brighter together
Mysuru



Illuminated hues
Belagavi