

SundayHerald art & culture

IN KERALA

The thread that lingers

Hidden amongst the fine colourful stitches of petit point embroidery are chapters of history, beauty and empowerment, **GOPIKA NATH** writes...



t was a breathtakingly exquisite work of intricate petit point. Looking at the embroidery before me, I gasped and couldn't help but wonder how this stitch, renowned for the 'mille-fleurs' pattern of a thousand flowers of 15th-century France, was being done miles away and centuries later, effortlessly and skilfully, at a convent in the tropical clime and shady coconut groves of Kochi in Kerala, India.

A stitch in time

'Petit point', meaning 'small point' or 'dot' in French, is a form of canvas embroidery like cross-stitch, but even finer because of its minuscule scale. Patronised by the French aristocracy, it was a favourite pastime of noble women who used the finest strands of mulberry silk to embroider intricate *objets d'art* such as pill-boxes, small portraits and elegant handbags. The squares that create the outlines of the embellished forms are barely apparent and the lines appear curved rather than linear and stepped.

In Kerala, women mostly use silken rayon thread, crossing over the intersection of one horizontal and one vertical thread of the polyester net-canvas, forming a diagonal stitch slanted at an angle of 45 degrees, with 1,764 stitches in a square inch. On the

back of the work, the stitches appear vertical. The thread is carried back and forth from stitch to stitch in a uniform manner to ensure that the pull of the thread at the front is consistent.

The women in Our Lady Convent, Thoppumpudy, and at St. Francis Xavier's Convent in Kaloor worked on long, rectangular frames with a fine net stretched across the wooden slats to enable this consistency. But Shelsy, the woman who had taught those in Kaloor, was apparently so adept at maintaining the tension that she didn't need to use a frame.

Four to six women were bent over each frame, studying a pattern kept on their left, on the stretched fabric, while they stitched its painterly likeness on the ultra-fine Chinese net (bought in Mumbai) stretched out on the frame. Each were given a portion of the complete design, which was a scanned colour copy of the pattern already embroidered in petit point, and they followed its colour and scale to perfection without any creative intervention. They were embroi-

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INTRICATE Petit point embroidery in progress. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

dering borders to be sewed onto six-yard saris.

Their clientele was apparently from North India, but they couldn't reveal more. All they knew was that a couple of women came and placed orders, which upon completion, the sister-in-charge would despatch. They were just happy to have work because for them it wasn't about history or tradition, but the means for an independent income.

For the women, by the women

And the nuns were cautious about revealing much more, as the tax authorities had decreed that these units within the premises of the convents, which earlier employed 500 women, came under the ambit of a factory and were taxed accordingly. The nuns couldn't afford to pay these taxes, so the units were shut down and re-established a year or so later as self-help groups employing less than 20 women.

Thomas, who has a shop in Mattancherry in the Jewish area of Fort Kochi, runs a co-operative for fishermen's wives and widows, but everyone I met was cagey about giving exact details of these workshops, the clientele and materials used.

They also knew very little about the history and how it came to Kerala.

Apparently, the work was rather popular a while ago with up to 700 women employed in independent units across Kochi, but with alternate employment avenues opening, fewer are interested in this work, instead opting for higher paid and lesser arduous options. However, the girls working in these convents enjoyed creating a thing of beauty along with the practical considerations of flexible work



hours that enabled tending to their children and household chores with ease.

At the Kaloor Convent, a framed photo of the nun who started this convent, the 'Blessed Mary of the Passion', helped open the history trail. A Franciscan missionary of Mary, of which Our Lady Convent in Thoppumpudy and St. Francis Xavier's Convent in Kaloor are the same order, she is said to have come to Kerala a hundred years ago to empower women through embroidery, such that was originally taught at Our Lady's Convent at Saint-Cyr-l'Ecole, a small village near Versailles, south-west of Paris.

A favourite activity of Madame de Maintenon, consort of King Louis XIV who founded this school for girls from impoverished noble families, needlepoint and petit point were taught as part of the curriculum. The school eventually became 'Our Lady's Convent', and it is likely that the nuns who came to Kerala were of the same lineage.

To think of women in the land of matrilineal needing empowerment is perplexing. However, matriline in Kerala was confined to the Nair women, while the rest faced prejudices similar to women the world over. Yet, it wasn't just the underprivileged women who learned to sew.

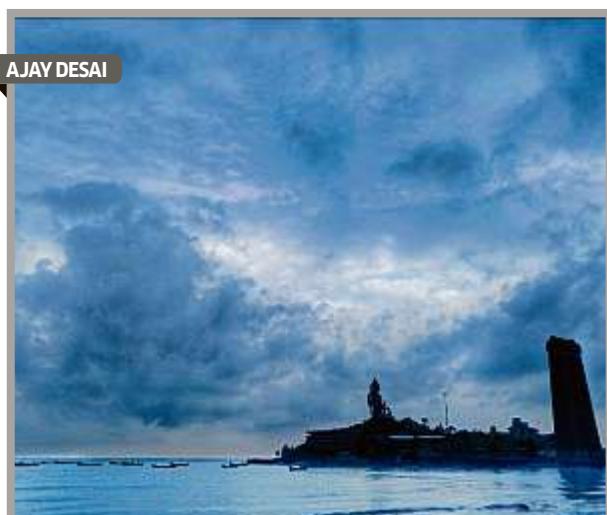
Writing about the Kupaka princesses from the House of Travancore, Manu Pillai tells us that alongside English, Sanskrit and Malayalam lessons, "The Ranis were taken for music concerts, drives or perhaps a game of tennis or croquet, always a curious sight in their traditional costumes... and in the evenings, they read and embroidered, in a silly imitation of what the young ladies in Europe were instructed to do."

What embroidery these young princesses were doing in early 20th century Kerala is not identified, but taking their cue from European aristocracy, it's possible they were taught petit point. There is, however, no word in Malayalam for embroidery and 'petit point' is still referred by its French name, albeit pronounced with phonetic emphasis that doesn't soften the 't'.

The rendering of motifs uses up to nine shades in a single flower and these painterly embroidered patterns reminiscent of 16th-century Dutch and Flemish still-life paintings, add to the mystique of its yet unravelled history and origins in Kerala. The Portuguese, Dutch and British came and left their imprint on the architecture and trade practices of Kochi. Along with these and other colonial preferences, the thread of 'petit point' lingers, even years after India's independence.



SHARATHCHANDRA JOIS
In the countryside
Shivamogga



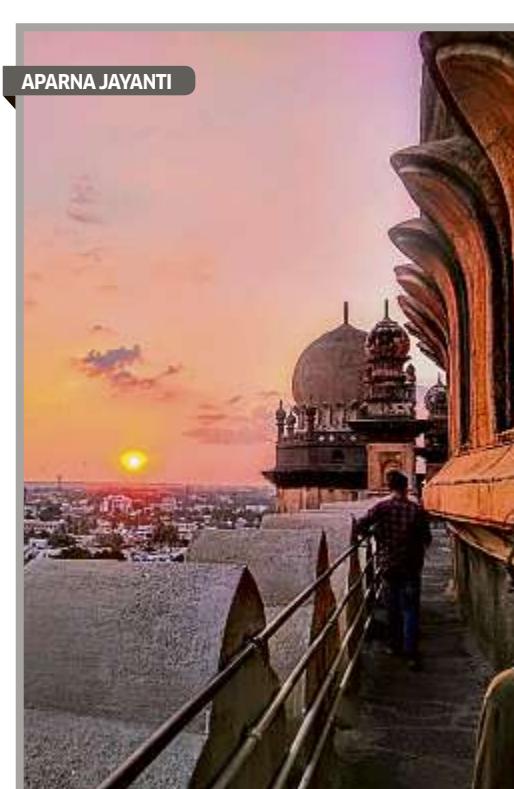
AJAY DESAI
Divinity by the sea
Murudeshwar



THE BEAUTY OF KARNATAKA

The theme for the next photo feature is '**WINTER WONDERLAND**'. Submit your entry (one per person) with your name, a caption, & information about where you have taken the photo, to sundaydh@gmail.com latest by December 4, 2017.

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



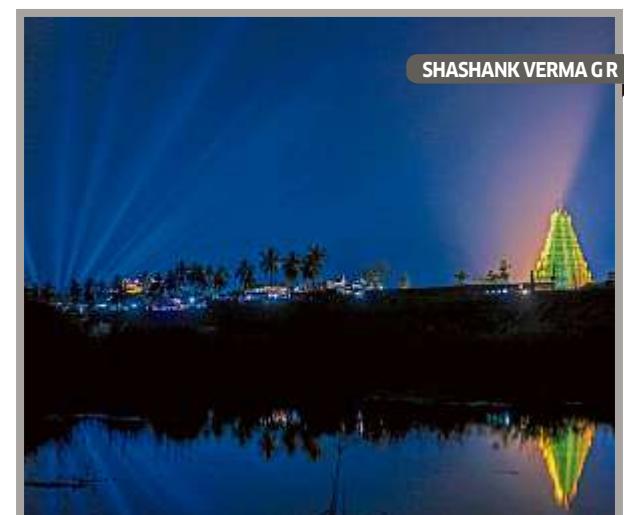
APARNA JAYANTI



SHUBHANGA RAO



SATHEESH NARAYANASWAMY
Together they go down
Shivanasamudra



SHASHANK VERMA G R

When history shines
Hampi

DIVYA KUMARI
The golden hour
Vijayapur

THE MONSOON PALACE
Madikeri



Celebrating a Japanese goblin

Shimokita Tengu Matsuri, also known as the Long Red-Nosed Goblins Festival, celebrates the mythological 'Tengu', a bird-like anthropomorphised creature in Japanese folklore. It is held in Tokyo every year.