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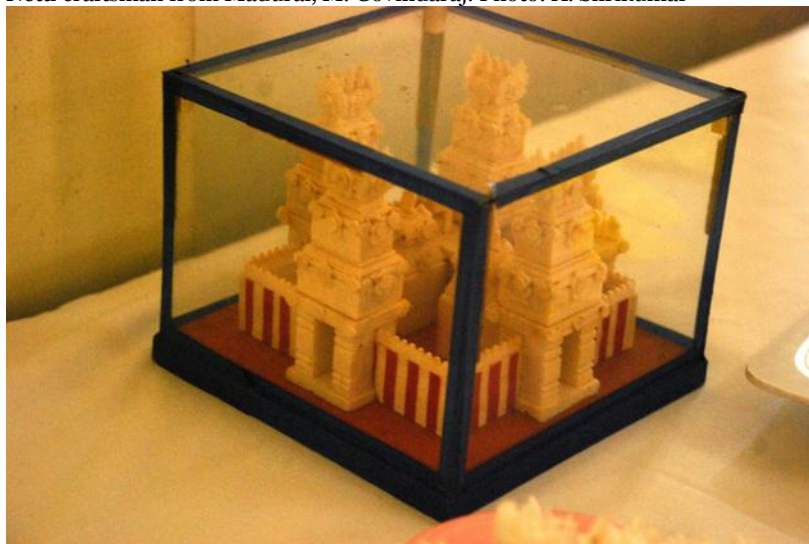
Published: April 8, 2016 16:39 IST | Updated: April 8, 2016 16:39 IST MADURAI, April 8, 2016

Art that stems from nature

- [A. Shrikumar](#)



Netti craftsman from Madurai, M. Govindaraj. Photo: A. Shrikumar



A RICH TRADITION: A temple model made with sholapith. Photo: A. Shrikumar



A RICH TRADITION: Models made with sholapith. Photo: A. Shrikumar

Once a popular handicraft patronised by the kings of Thanjavur, Netti has now slipped into oblivion. INTACH Madurai Chapter is trying to revive and conserve the vanishing craft.

M. Govindaraj pulls out what looks like a long thick stem of a plant, peels off the brown skin of the stick revealing a cream-white inner sheath and deftly shapes it into a smooth cylindrical rod and then slices it into thin sheets. Soon, the long stem is reduced to a small heap of translucent paper-like pieces. He picks a thin slice, dips it in water and skilfully moulds it between his fingers and an amazingly beautiful malli-poo is made. It's not magic. It's an ancient handicraft called 'Netti'. Once, a famous craft patronised by the Maratha Kings of Thanjavur, today Netti is unfortunately a dying art form. Govindaraj and his family are the lone practitioners of Netti in Madurai and probably in the entire region.

Netti is a water reed that grows in the marshy wetlands, the stem of which is light, flexible yet solid, perfect for making models, jewellery and decorative art pieces. In Tamil, the plant is called 'Valarmathi', usually found in the Kanmois and tanks. Elsewhere in West Bengal, Assam, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, where it's widely practised, Netti is referred to as Sholapith. "Netti is a beautiful art form that comes from nature," says Govindaraj, who learnt it from his father since childhood. "We are a family of traditional Netti makers. Our forefathers who came from the Batlagundu region learnt it from the Thanjavur craftsmen."

Traditionally used in making the dindaram (models of jasmine strands worn by Bharatnatyam dancers), the decorations of parrots and flowers which are used to beautify the Karagam in Karagattam and various other art pieces, Netti needs lots of patience and expertise. "It's a laborious process, as it involves a series of methods. First, the stems are dried and shaved into thin sheets, which are later moulded, shaped, cut or pasted to make different forms," says Govindaraj. "Even the model of the Meenakshi Temple we see at the Temple Museum is made of Netti. But most people think it is lotus stem."

Vanishing water bodies, lack of patronage and awareness for the craft and difficulty in getting the raw material has led to the slow death of Netti. "Earlier, we used to harvest the stem from the kanmois around Madurai. Now I buy it occasionally from sellers at Sholavandan, but most of my stock comes from Andhra Pradesh. A bunch of Netti stems costs Rs.1000. Many craftsmen have moved to other professions and there are hardly 10 families left in the entire state." "The dindarams is the most sought-after Netti product. They get parcelled to North India, Kerala and places where the real Malli poo is difficult to find. In a month, I make around 400 to 500 pieces and sell a piece for about Rs.70. Other than that, I also make models, gift articles and art pieces on order. But since most people are unaware of the craft, orders have plummeted over the years."

Recognising Govindaraj with a certificate from INTACH Madurai Chapter, its Convener Dr. Uma Kannan, says, "Since Netti is made from an entirely natural and eco-friendly material, it can be popularised among students and children who often use thermocol, plastic, paper and cardboards for making models. We plan to introduce Netti to the students of architecture at Thiagarajar College of Engineering, as they make 3D models as part of the curriculum." Mrs. Valli Annamalai, an Executive Committee Member of INTACH says, "If revived, Netti can be a wonderful opportunity for entrepreneurs. One major reason, we are losing our traditional art forms is the lack of proper marketing." M.D.Vel, another Executive Committee Member, says, "The Netti craft can open up a number of creative possibilities. For instance, we can design and develop Netti-made souvenirs which will find customers in travellers and foreign tourists." Rajesh Kanna, Co-Convener of INTACH Madurai, says, "It's important to save ancient craft forms from extinction. They are very much a part of our heritage."

The INTACH Workshop was attended by students and teachers of Thiagarajar College, Teppakulam and housewives from surrounding areas. For contacting Govindaraj, call 9943787991

Printable version | Apr 18, 2016 4:47:03 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/society/art-that-stems-from-nature/article8451641.ece>

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