

THE HINDU

FRIDAY REVIEW

Story telling on canvas

Vaikuntam Nakash and his sons are perhaps the only surviving practitioners of Cheriyal scroll painting, writes **Chitra Mahesh**.

Cheriyal, a small village, 85 km from Warangal and 100 km from Hyderabad, is home to one of the most beautiful artistic traditions that still exists. Delightful as the name of the village sounds, this is also the birthplace of work that can stunningly transform a wall in any home or living space.

With earthy colours, fine detailing of brushwork and magnificent stories from the Epics, the Puranas and other mythological tales, the paintings are in line with the oral tradition of storytelling in those parts of the country. They come alive on the khadi canvas carefully prepared over weeks of prepping for the right texture.

The visuals are not just about gods and goddesses. Deviating from the favourites, there are the humble farmer, women working in rice fields, banana sellers, vegetable vendors, boys and girls, babies and dogs and all general things of everyday life.

The beautiful range of Cheriyal scroll paintings on display at the Vennirul Art Gallery, C.P. Art Centre, speaks of an endangered craftwork which has its origin in the 15th century. Despite having withstood the onslaught of time, it is a fading tradition due to the lack of enough creative souls who can carry this forward into an increasingly digital future.

These paintings from the Telangana region are the handiwork of artists called Nakashs, who have been doing this for long. "Mere dada, pardada aur unke phele yeh karte the (My grandfather, great grandfather and even before them, were doing this work)." Today, there is only one family - mine - which is



▲ D. Vinay Kumar and Vaikuntam Nakash at work. PHOTOS: V. GANESAN

engaged in this art," says D. Vaikuntam Nakash, master craftsman and National Awardee, not without a touch of sadness. The scroll paintings bear resemblance to Madhubani of Madhya Pradesh, but without the monotonous - also like the paintings of Rajasthan, but without the strong - minaturisation. These have intense local flavour that follows the course of oral story telling.

D. Vinay Kumar, Vaikuntam's son, also practises this art and has been painting stories since he was eight. He says, "The scrolls formed a colourful backdrop to the engaging oral traditions of the people - the village barber, toddy tapper, the dhobi, the leather worker, fisherman, weaver and farmer. And we painted

their tales and stories. It is only later that the work transcended these categories and became more universal."

Father and son are eager to show how the paints are made and mixed. Everything is organic and made from natural substances. For instance, colours are made from easily available substances such as indigo, black from lamp soot mixed with thirumany tree gum, white from crushed, ground sea shells, lemon yellow from a particular yellowish stone, red from tamarind seeds, brown from geru, and so on. The major colours are first made and from these, the others are obtained by blending and mixing. These are then used to paint minute detailed images on a roll of cloth - about 3 ft. in width and up to 40 to 60 ft in length,

depending on the story.

Traditional scrolls are usually vertical -- depicting stories in a series of horizontal panels. Like comic strips, each panel depicts one part of the story and it is possible that one scroll can have even up to 50 panels. As the bard narrates the story, the panel depicting a particular part of the story is displayed. The choice of episodes and the imaging of each deity are decided keeping in mind the caste for which the scroll is made.

"The making of the canvas is a detailed process," says Vaikuntam. Khadi cotton cloth is treated with a mixture of starch (from rice), shuddh matti (white mud), a paste of boiled tamarind seeds and gum water. Every coating is completely dried before the next is applied.

Once ready, the artists sketch the outline directly on to the canvas using a brush. The outlines are well defined and sharp, reflecting the depth of experience of the craftsman.

"In addition to these scrolls, we also make dolls and masks with coconut shells coated with wood powder, tamarind paste and gum."

Several masks and dolls are hung skirting the scrolls at the gallery and as he points out to them, the sweep of his hand is symbolic of the rich legacy of his inheritance.

"Now detailed stories from folklore are no longer in demand," he says. "It is difficult to get clients who want the long scrolls. General themes that have a universal appeal are often adapted. So now we paint smaller versions, depicting general scenes of life.

However, the State Government has been helpful in promoting this traditional art, he notes. "Especially since 1978. The Crafts Council of India, the World Telugu Federation and Jagdish Mittal (who has written a book on this art), have all worked towards preserving Cheriyal scroll work."

Even with all this encouragement, many Nakashs are switching to other professions. Vaikuntam is perhaps the last in this glorious line with only his sons Rakesh and Vinay to carry the tradition forward.

The exhibition is on till July 11, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. On July 11, 10.30 a.m., Dr. Nanditha Krishna, president, C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, will speak on Cheriyal paintings.