Crafts by Women
Category : January 1996
Published by Anonymous on Jan. 01, 1996

Crafts by Women

Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

Last week I went to a phenomenal museum, a women's museum. I had never heard of a women's museum--and probably will never hear of, or see, a men'smuseum. (That's a whole other discussion.) But Shashwati museum, in Bangalore, is unapologetically feminine in focus, and arguably the only one of its kind in India. It is a thrilling treasure chest of women's handicrafts as well as antiques and precious family heirlooms. I confess a special affection for this place. It is housed in the the college where I went to school, NMKRV, and it was born the same year I started. The founder, Dr. C.N. Mangala, was my teacher and principal of the college, and the walls are lined with beautiful embroidery works that once lined my own ancestral home.

The 4,000 pieces include Mysore paintings of mythological scenes and figures, brilliant embroidery, fine jewelry, metal-etched cooking pots, hand-carved nutcrackers and teakwood baby cradles. There is even a plate made of rice paddy over 50 years old. Even the husk is intact.

Shashwati's own birth was hardly out of old tradition. It came "out of the blue." Dr. Mangala had just "rediscovered" the legendary, still living, authoress Thirumalamba [see side-bar right]. Impressed with her and her writings, she said, "I

decided right there to make her works eternal. I asked her for her books, which she pulled out from an old trunk. As an afterthought I asked her for some of her old belongings. She gave me an old pair of spectacles and her old trunk. That was all she had. My idea was to create a museum along the lines of a Shakespeare museum or Dickens' museum, which recreates the atmosphere of an older time." But the idea soon mushroomed to include and exhibit the works of many women in all artistic spheres, not just literature. She and students set out door-to-door to collect art pieces, and were totally amazed at what women were willing to tearfully part with once they could clearly see how much Shashwati could and would culturally uplift young girls today. Now an adultish 21-year-old Shashwati has grown up and built a sophisticated centre for women's studies that gives out several awards each year, recognizing distinguished women in many fields of art and social service. It also offers a popular graduate course in women's studies, the first of its kind in Karnataka. Over a dozen girls enroll each year.

The name Shashwatiwas carefully chosen. "Shashwati was a brahmavadini[an unmarried, learned, religious teacher] of Vedictimes," Dr. Mangala said. "We wanted a name that had antiquity and heritage, but one that was also progressive. I want this museum to be a livingmuseum. Hinduism is a living, inclusive religion and through this museum we are conveying the Vedicmessage of zestful, vibrant life. Life's principle of creativity, dynamism and humanity will be brought to the forefront of the present restless and disintegrating generation."

Once home, surrounded by my time-saving modern gadgets--gas stove, electric grinder, pressure cooker, etc. I was wondering how our grandmothers, who ran huge bustling joint-family households, found time to make such intricate

works of art. I reflected how joyful an era that must be have been, filled with all those, "I made this with my own hands just for you!" Such soulful craftsmanship is now very rare. *

Choodie Shivaram is a free-lance journalist and holds a degree in law and English.

Sidebar:
Thirumalamba, A Literary Legacy Lives On

This is the story of the extraordinary soul, Thirumalamba, the woman who inspired Dr. Mangala to found Shashwati. Born in 1887 to orthodox Iyengar parents, Thirumalamba lost her mother when she was barely five years old. Her father was a lawyer and wished his daughter to be educated too. But educating girls, though legal, was considered sinful by most people. Ignoring public condemnation, he nevertheless enrolled Thirmalamba in school. Eventually the villagers so harangued him, he removed her from school and married her off at age 10. Four years later, her husband caught the plague, and villagers banished him, fearing they would contract the disease. Alone, untended and sickly, he soon died. The only time Thirumalamba ever saw him was at their wedding.

Widowed at age 14, the crushing restrictions of widowhood clutched the little girl. She was forbidden to step beyond the threshold of her house. If she did, she and her father would be ostracized by the community. Crestfallen at her fate, her father resolved to bring at least a little joy back into her life by educating her himself. Every night, by the dim light of an oil lamp, he read her the Ramayana, Mahabharataand other classics. Soon she was reading on her own. Little did he know he was nurturing Karnataka's first and foremost woman writer of the modern period.

Arising daily pre-dawn, the young girl took her bath, performed

puja, japa, meditation and did Surya namaskarfacing the eastern horizon. Afterward, she dove into the enchanting world of words. By age 21, she was writing dramas, novels and traditional wedding songs. She bought a little printing press and set it up inside her house. With the eager help of cousins, she printed cards and labels. She struggled to get someone to publish her writings, but every publisher rejected her. Women cannot be writers, they scoffed! So she started her own publishing house, Sati Hitaishini. Over the years, it published 40 of her books and two magazines, Karnataka Nandiniand Sanmargadarshini.In these, she exposed in grim detail the dead-while-living agonies that widows must endure. She argued for saner, kinder attitudes that help rather than punish and imprison widows. She opposed child marriage and railed against the infatuation with English and its Anglicizing undertow. She urged a renaissance of Kannada and other Indian languages.

Finally, a little recognition flowed her way and the Madras and Mysore governments honored several of her books with awards. A few were even used as school texts. With her last novel, Manimala,published in 1939, Thirumalamba suddenly faded out of sight. No one knew why until 25 years later.

In the 1960s educationist Smt. C.N. Mangala was writing an article about women writers of Karnataka and included a section on Thirumalamba, referring to her in the past tense, i.e., dead. Someone informed Dr. Mangala that the aged writer was alive, living reclusively in Madras. Dr. Mangala rushed to Madras and prostrated before the 80-year-old figure and apologized profusely for the error. "No need to apologize," Thirumalamba said. "What you said was correct--that Thirumalamba does not exist any longer. Today's people don't like what we write. So life for me now is my home, my pujas and my japa." Dr. Mangala told her that her writings were of

immeasurable inspiration for others, including herself. "I told her that her works had eternal value" and honored her by putting a shawl over her shoulders, offering a plate of full of fruits--and then by founding Shashwati, an inspirational tribute to an unbreakable literary spirit.