Tying up the loose ends - A case study on Pochampally

Textiles Committee - a statutory body under the Ministry of Textiles, Govt of India, has carried out a comprehensive study of the textile industry to formulate a set of future strategies as a part of their National Campaign for Capacity Building of textile SMEs. Through the Cluster Development Programme, the Textiles Committee aims to make the “Made in Pochampally” labelled products a globally preferred brand by the year 2005. In continuation with Textile Intelligence’s series of focus on domestic textile clusters, this fortnight, Aditi Gangavkar reviews the Pochampally handloom sector known for its tie and dyed handloom silk textiles.

SITUATED in Nalgonda district of Andhra Pradesh, the Pochampally handloom-weaving cluster is a natural cluster of its kind.

Over the past fifty-five years, it has been developed as a center for handloom silk sarees. The “tie and dye” technique is Pochampally’s forte and commands wide markets, both within and outside the country.

The technique involves tying up some portion of the yarn with rubber strips in order to prevent it from coloring.

The end product of this tie and dye process is a beautiful, colorfast patterned yarn. Apart from silk sarees, the cluster is also known for its cotton sarees, dress materials, bed sheets, furnishing fabrics and wall hangings.

Historical Performance of the Pochampally dye cluster

The Pochampally has been famous for its tie and dye art, since the beginning of the last century. During these times, the Pochampally textiles, commonly called the ‘sooseelu’ was woven by the 20s cotton. The tie and dyed rumals, also known as ‘Agra rumals’, ‘soibiyan rumals’, ‘jananilu’, etc were exported to Pakistan, Afghanistan and other West Asian countries.

Under the Nawab’s regime, the traders from Hyderabad, provided finance for the purchase of the raw materials. Moreover, the weavers used to get colors and yarn on ration from Secunderabad on the basis of number of looms, certified by a village officer. The traders managed the marketing activities of Pochampally products. Thus, the Pochampally weavers received adequate demand and trade assistance, during the Nawab’s reign.

However, with the end of the Nawab’s rule in 1949, Pochampally products suffered a heavy blow. The contacts with the Hyderabad business elite were lost and the demand for Pochampally’s products plunged.

The artisans oblivious of their markets, failed to promote their products. With the implementation of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s five-year plan that gave priority to the handloom sector, Pochampally once again journeyed along the path to prosperity. The concerted efforts of some of the Andhra Pradesh leaders during 1950, lead to the establishment of the Co-operative movement and Handloom Co-operative Society for the benefit of the handloom weavers. In addition to this, the ‘Bhoodan’ movement started by Vinoba Bhave in Pochampally in the 1950s, attracted hordes of visitors. These visitors were fascinated by the artisans’ dexterity, which ultimately increased the demand for the Pochampally tie and dye art.

Soon, the “tie and dye” patterned rumals initiated a demand for “tie and dye” sarees. The artisans of Pochampally began their efforts to weave tie and dye sarees using 60s cotton. Consequently, dye cotton sarees came into picture and within no time gained popularity.

The success of the cotton sarees led to the idea of weaving silk sarees using the same technique. Immediately, the All India Handloom Board arranged for a training programme in Benaras and suitable silk weaving machinery for two Pochnamally weavers.

After 96 days of hard work, the weavers learnt the art of silk weaving. However, the techniques and colours used for producing cotton “tie and dye” sarees had their own limitations and failed to give the desirable result, when tried on a silk yarn.

Then, a trader, Sri Kondana Raman of Radha Silk Emporium, Kumbhakonam, took the Pochampally artisans to Kumbhakonam to learn the art of weaving tie and dye silk sarees. It was only after a year’s hard work that the Pochampally artisans were successful in weaving “tie and dye” silk sarees.

The prosperity of Pochampally art was, however, short lived. The traditionally designed big mills and power looms, which within a short time copied these designs. These machine made products were available at cheaper rates in the market, thus posing a threat to the genuine Pochampally art. Despite this, Pochampally has not made a conscious effort to survive this competition.

Present state of Pochampally Handloom Industry:

1) Nature of production activities: There are as many as 800 looms in the co-operative sector of the Pochampally cluster, under the fold of “Pochampally Handloom Weavers Co-operative Society Limited”. Out of the remaining, most work for master weavers. Though production in the co-operative sector was predominant, only 15 to 20\% of the looms are active today.

Thus, the weavers have to depend on job-work. The traders procure orders and organize production through a network of master weavers. There are over 50 master weavers operating in Pochampally. These have an association called “Pochampally Handloom Tie & Dye Manufacturers Association”.

The general practice prevailing in the sector is that the Society or Master weaver supplies silk yarns to the weavers. They carry out the degumming, mercerizing, dyeing and weaving at their homes.

For each design the master weaver provides the materials for eight sarees. The weaver takes minimum 30 to 45 days to complete the job with the help of the other members of his family. For eight sarees the weaver gets on an average Rs.1500/- to Rs.2500/- as conversion charges. The rates, however, vary from design to design.

2) Products: Though tie and dye silk sarees is the specialty of the Pochampally, some efforts have been made to adopt new designs.

Hence, of late, the cluster has diversified to dress materials, home furnishings and wall hangings both in silk and cotton. But, these products have failed to make a mark especially because of the poor marketing strategies and also, to some extent, due to weavers’ resistance to change.

At times, the change in the design makes the product costlier, thus making it difficult for weavers to produce it.

3) Raw Materials: The raw material needed by the Pochampally handloom sector comes from the neighbouring states, as there is no yarn-manufacturing mill in the cluster. The local silk traders have formed an association called “Tie & Dye Manufacturers Association”.

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A common display center, where the weavers’ could exhibit their works, is a need of the hour in Pochampally.

Equally important is the shop floor upgradation and duty exemptions on the handloom garments could be brought down by forming common consortiums to purchase raw materials. Product innovation and diversification could provide a competitive edge to the Pochampally products. Training should be imparted to the cluster’s various SMEs with regards to latest techniques of production and methods of quality control.

Threats:
1) Finance: Even if the SMEs take steps for the development of the Pochampally cluster, it is quite likely that the non-proactive bankers may not support them. In addition, the low margins amongst small entrepreneurs may affect the sustainability of development initiatives.
2) Market: The current market for the Pochampally products is saturated. No new markets have been explored on a systematic basis. Moreover, the SMEs face stiff competition from the mill and the powerloom sector. Likewise, the non-tariff barriers have been adversely affecting Pochampally exports.
3) Production: The outdated methods of production used by the Pochampally artisans are a serious threat to market sustainability. Absence of private and public partnerships to promote R&D along with non-implementation of effective management systems is also cited as one of the reasons for the diminishing Pochampally art.

For years together, the Pochampally weavers have been using geometrical designs, widely known as ikkat in their creations. But with the changing times, the weavers are now experimenting with new patterns and designs. Therefore, the weavers should be provided assistance in the form of design centers, training and work shops to educate them about new designs and changing market trends.

Likewise, financial assistance along with innovative local and global marketing strategies need to be adopted.

Buyers, within and outside the country, need to be sensitized about the precious Pochampally art with a view to capturing new markets for these products.