



An Inspirational Journey

Editor's Note:

I received the following as an e-mail from Surendar Valasai, the husband of Naina, a Ralli quilter who was chosen to represent her cooperative at the International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe last summer. Though Surendar speaks and writes English, Naina does not, so he served as her translator. If they attend the market next year, we will certainly invite them to meet our group next summer. Their visit to our Folk Art Extravaganza seminar was life-changing!

Surendar Valasai

Of the world's population of seven billion, a majority of those living in rural areas are folk artisans who carry forward their folk arts through their hands, hearts, and souls to the next generation.

A Definition of Folk Art

I found the most accurate, best, and beautiful definition of folk art on the website of the International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe, New Mexico (www.folkartmarket.org):

- Folk art is rooted in traditions that



come from community and culture—expressing cultural identity by conveying shared community values and aesthetics.

- Folk art encompasses a range of utilitarian and decorative media, including cloth, wood, paper, clay, metal, and more.
- Folk art is made by individuals whose creative skills convey their community's authentic cultural identity, rather than an individual or idiosyncratic artistic identity.
- Folk artists traditionally learn skills and techniques through apprenticeships in informal community settings, though they may also be formally educated.

A History of Change

Born in a folk artisan family of Meghwar caste (who are treated as untouchables by the followers of Manusmriti, a religious script of Hinduism), I saw the best folk artisans around me living their lives in stark poverty. The beautiful things they created with their hands, heart, and soul could not fill their stomachs. Their lives were full of misery in different forms—untouchability, caste discrimination, and human inequality were routine in their lives.

Watching and experiencing these social evils, I imagined solutions during my childhood. These imaginings accompanied me to adulthood, and I launched the first Internet petition for

the rights of Dalits (untouchables) in Pakistan (www.petitiononline.com/scfp2003/petition.html). This formed the foundation for the human rights struggle of Dalits in Pakistan.

Most of the children who played with me as a child remained uneducated and now work as laborers in brick kilns or adopted masonry as their profession. However, the women in our clan are considered the best artisans in our communities. They make beautiful Ralli quilts and other hand embroideries and textiles. These creations are the most important part of a dowry.

Landlords and well-to-do people of other communities used to hire these women to produce Ralli quilts, embroi-

dered shirts, and jhules (used as a decorative cover on the back of a camel), for dowries and personal use. My grandmother Dadi Ganga was considered as the Ralli quilt and embroidery artisan in our area. Several of her textile creations are still the most prized possessions of some local landlords.

From an early age, looking into the poor conditions of so many brilliant artisans, I wanted to work for their benefit and launch something that would contribute to economic development in our area. Being a member of the Karachi Press Club, I was fortunate to have access to the Internet, which provided a ray of hope for me. For many years, I searched the Web for potential clients for our folk art products, but there was no positive response.

In 2004, I found www.ralliquilt.com and contacted the site's owner, Patricia Stoddard, about these products that were made by my family, including my grandmother, mother, and other women of my clan. We have worked under Patricia's guidance since then, and she has taken our Ralli quilts to the Santa Fe Interna-

The women in our clan are considered the best artisans in our communities.

tional Folk Art Market each year. A small drop of rain for a few thirsty folk artisans!

In July of 2011, Naina, a Ralli quilter, and I were invited by the International Folk Art Market and the Museum of International Folk Art to represent our cooperative, Lila Handicrafts (www.ralliquilt.com.pk) at the International Folk Art Market.

The Gallery of Conscience

In conjunction with the market, the Museum of International Folk Art featured in their Gallery of Conscience, *The Arts of Survival: Folk Expression in the Face of Natural Disaster*. The exhibit explored how folk artisans have helped themselves and their communities recover during four major natural disasters in 2010: an earthquake in Haiti,

Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, a volcano eruption in Indonesia, and floods in Pakistan.

The exhibit provided a chance for museum visitors from across the United States to view how affected communities have been aided by folk artisans to survive the disasters and

mitigate their sufferings through their folk arts. I shared my experience of watching the Ralli quilt artisans in the flood relief camps in Hyderabad Sabzi Mandi, where women made Ralli quilts and other textiles and sold them to earn money for food for themselves and their children, rather than relying on aid alone.

Folk Art Extravaganza

Another inspirational program in conjunction with the market, the *SchoolArts/CRIZMAC Folk Art Extravaganza*, was held in Santa Fe for art teachers from around the United States. Here we saw so many art teachers busy making their own small appliqué pieces. The way they received Naina and shared their views was wonderful, and their interest in Ralli quilts was awesome. Many of them also visited our booth in the market.

Naina was surprised that highly educated ladies, in Western costumes, too, do the quilting, which in our part of world is considered the job of only uneducated women. She made many friends there and has placed the small and beautiful gifts given to her by the art teachers among her most prized possessions.

Indeed, it was an inspiring journey for Naina and I to be a part of the Folk Art market! ☺

Surendar Valasai is a journalist and media coordinator for Ralli Quilts, Pakistan.

