



World Creativity Summit 2008 Taipei Report

Michael Day, InSEA Secretary

Leaders of InSEA and two other international arts education organizations met together at the 2006 Lisbon UNESCO World Congress and created an alliance designed to combine their voices and expand their influence. InSEA President Doug Boughton (2004-2006) and members of the InSEA World Council established a working party to explore ways to respond to recent UNESCO arts policy. Leaders of the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA) and the International Society for Music Education (ISME) were invited to contribute to this discussion and one of the most important outcomes of the meeting was the creation of the World Alliance for Arts Education (WAAE). The first result of the international multi-disciplinary alliance was the Joint Declaration on Arts Education for the UNESCO World Congress of Arts in Education held in Lisbon, Portugal, in March 2006. This document established a fundamental position that arts education groups around the world can cite for direction and support (see the InSEA website).

Moving quickly, the Alliance organized an international multi-disciplinary conference in 2007, titled the World Creativity Summit (WCS). InSEA President Ann Kuo (2006-2008) worked with the World Alliance presidential council, Dan Baron Cohen (IDEA) and Liane Hentschke (ISME) to plan the first World Creativity Summit in Hong Kong, July 23-25, 2007. This landmark event was supported by civic, cultural, and private funding. The focus of the three-day Summit, attended by 110 participants, was to encourage initiatives and collaborations through the Alliance to further the cause of international arts education.

Maintaining this organizational momentum, InSEA hosted the World Creativity Summit 2008 held in Taipei, Taiwan, June 5-9, 2008. President Ann Kuo obtained funding and directed the Summit in collaboration with Cohen and Hentschke, and invited participation by the World Dance Alliance. The purpose

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Welcome to the Inaugural Edition of the InSEA Newsletter!

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The Traditional Art Practice of Chittara and the Challenge of Reviving this Practice of Deeveru Community in Southern India

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The traditional art practice of Chittara is a cultural phenomenon of the Deeveru community, in Southern India. Community members reside in and around the village of Sirevanthe, Sagar, approximately 360 kilometres from Bangalore in the state of Karnataka. Amidst beautiful vales of the Western Ghats, this village is situated close to the nationally famous Jog Falls and other monuments of tourist interest. The Deeveru community is remotely connected to the outside world by local newspapers, a postal service, a local satellite TV, and a moderate transport system. It has limited telecommunication and power infrastructure. There is a small scale ICT awareness burgeoning in the village with a handful of computers available in schools, but this effort is rendered ineffective due to scant electrical supply.

The Deeveru community

The Deeveru are originally island settlers, they are an agrarian community of nature worshipers who hold the element of water in high esteem. As observed from their socio-cultural practices, they use water for all customary practices of childbirth, marriage and death (Chandragutti, 2005b). They are primarily cultivators of rice, sugarcane, and areca nut and also weave mats and baskets. They are mostly farmland tenants with limited financial means, and a few are economically advantaged landowners.

Deeveru are a matriarchal society and women command a high status, with the mother playing an important role in all family and community practices. They have an exceptional practice of widows adorning 'red' bangles and participating in all rituals. This practice enables integration of widows into mainstream society,



A Deeveru woman who is a traditional artist .

as opposed to other communities where widows are frequently marginalized and forbidden from adorning themselves with symbols of fertility. Deeveru women folk are extremely hard working. They spend the mornings and evenings doing household chores. During the day they till the farm, weave mats or gather resources from the forest. In many families, the women, rather than men, manage the finances of the household. The power relationship between men and women also manifests in social practices such as marriage ceremonies



complete. The paintings are made with eco-friendly natural resources such as ground rice for white colour, roasted rice for black colour, yellow seeds (*guringe*), and red earth; areca nut fibres (*Pundi Naaru*) are used for constructing brushes. The paintings make extensive use of straight lines, which women use threads to create; at least two people collaborate to make the lines (sometimes men help them in drawing these lines but are not allowed to contribute any further). Crooked lines are not acceptable and erasing lines during paintings is considered inauspicious. During the creation of these paintings, women collectively sing folk songs and immerse themselves in the practice as a celebra-

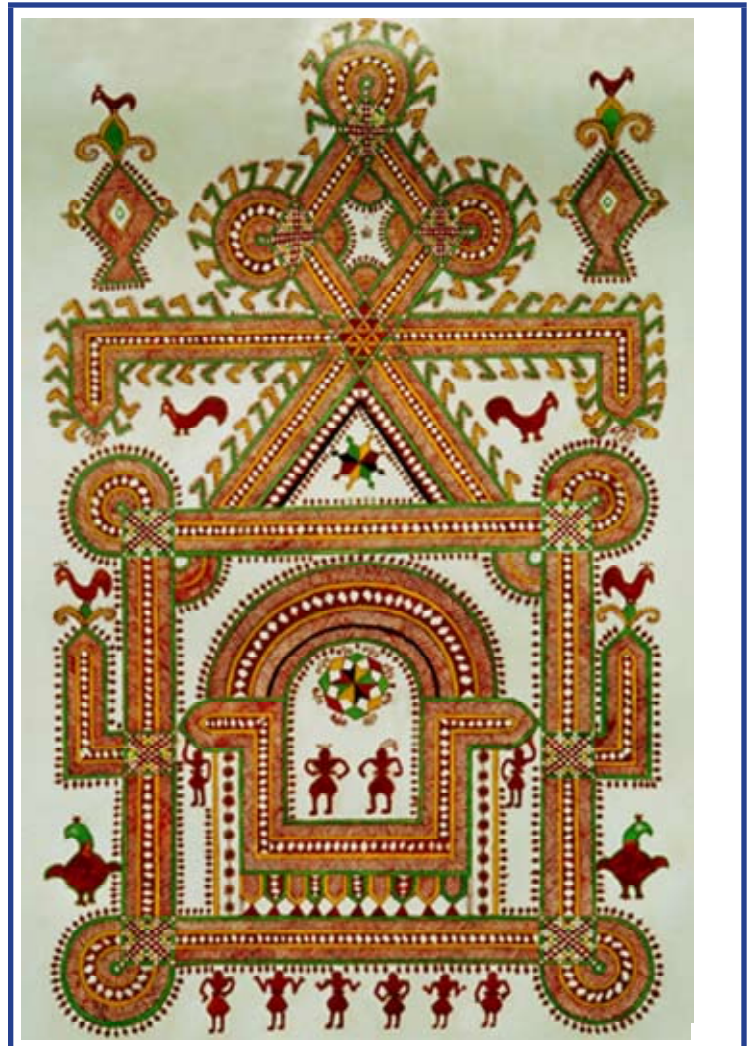
where the bride's family commands high respect.

As a community, the Deevaru are closely knit, with no social rivalry amongst them, and they are proud of their cultural and traditional practices. These practices not only bind them together but also reflect their profound relationship with the physical environment. One ritualistic practice is *Bhoomi hunnime*, in which they pay reverence to Mother Earth at the auspicious occasion of harvest time (*Bhoomi* meaning earth and *hunnime* meaning full moon). This replicates the ritual of *bale shastra*, in which they pay reverence to a woman expecting a child, (*bale* meaning bangle and *shastra* meaning custom) (Chandragutti, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a). All these customary rituals, however, are incomplete without the creation of artworks that basically constitute a traditional art practice of *Chittara*.

The Traditional Art Practice of Chittara

Chittara is an ancient art practice that has been passed down for generations and is engaged by the women folk of Deevaru community. Chittara paintings are done on the walls and floors of houses. They are primarily created during marriage ceremonies and festivals such as *Bhoomi hunnime*, have symbiotic relationship with all ritualistic practices, and are created through a collaborative process.

Generally, three to four women get together after finishing their household chores and paint for two to four hours past midnight. They usually make paintings by the light from oil lamps, as electrical supply is scant. Each painting takes about four to five days to



Terina Chittara

tion of their creativity and talent (Chandragutti 2004a; 2004b). The paintings not only require skill, effort, and patience but are also a matter of pride that reflects their identity. In a personal interview with theorist Mohan Chandragutti, he mentioned that one could look at a painting and recognise the artist; men folk in general are highly appreciative and take pride in the paintings of their women relatives (M. Chandragutti, personal communication, February 14, 2006).

The Social Narratives in Chittara Paintings

The ornate and intricate patterns of Chittara are social narratives that reflect the general iconography of

ers. The visual manifestation epitomizes the Deeveru's conquest of their past deprivations (Chandragutti 2004a, 2005a).

Modernization and the Next Generation of Chittara

Modernization has not only changed the dynamics of the practice of Chittara painting but also threatened its very existence. This art practice is now survived by a meagre populace of about 1-2% of artists among community members, as opposed to 40-50% in past decades. The lamentable changes are not just in the art practice, but also in the social lifestyle of this community. Bullock carts are being replaced by trucks



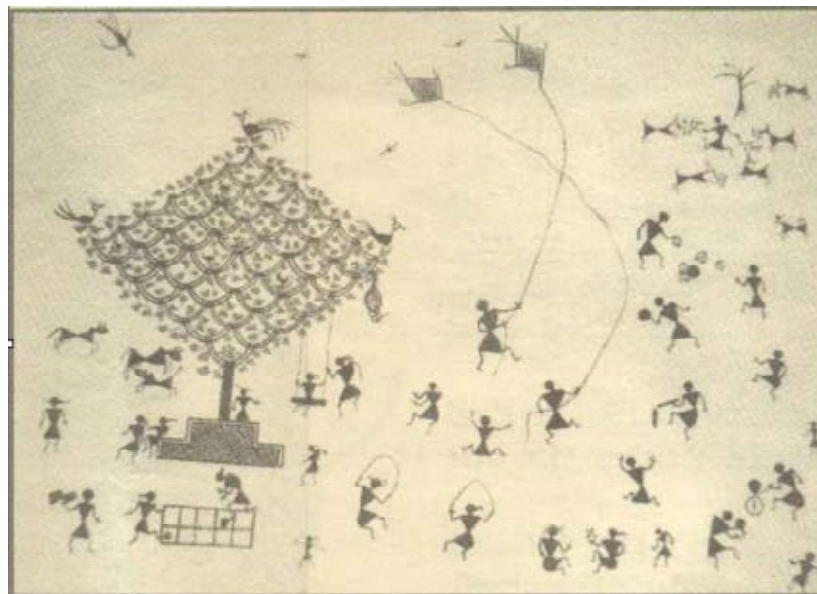
Symbols used in Chittara Painting

the community. The paintings are usually two or three feet in size, aesthetically homologous, and replete with symbols representing the local environment, which includes birds and insects, paddy fields, and agricultural equipments such as sickles, ladders, and musical instruments. Most significantly, these patterns represent the intrinsic socio-cultural constructs of their historical existence.

The polygons and straight lines represent the set societal and moral rules that pervade their lives (Chandragutti 2004a, 2005a; DeSouza, 2002). These enclose a fairly large empty space with a *palanquin* (a covered seat carried on poles by two to four persons) in the centre, which is of immense significance. The visual representation of the *palanquin* embodies the opulence and grandeur that once was attributed to ownership of *palanquins*. Historically, Deeveru were a socially deprived community and were made to walk, as opposed to members of the *Vokkalingas* (their contemporary superior clan), who sat in *palanquins* while the Deeveru served as torchbear-

and buses; traditional-hand made intricate embroideries are being replaced by cheap machine made embroidery; handcrafted baskets are being replaced by plastic baskets; traditional delicacies made during festive occasions are being replaced by fast and easily made ones. Chittara paintings on walls made during marriages are now are being replaced by pictures of *Goddess Lakshmi* and *Lord Ganesb*. The exuberance and celebration that exemplifies the collaborative practice of Chittara is now replaced by disinterest and lethargy in the society. With the decay in practice comes decay in the value systems of community members who were once deeply rooted within the polygons and social narratives of Chittara.

The winds of modernization have also transformed this art in another direction, a vector that moves from a traditional customary practice to commercialization. From walls, floors and fields of the Deeveru community, the ethos of Chittara has now been displaced. Instead, they are now seen in posh galleries, on hotel walls, and treated as saleable products. During a personal interview with Chandragutti, who has been observing the changes during 1980-1990, he stated that a handful of *male artists*, including a national award winner, are responsible for this tangential change from a collaborative cultural practice to a commercial proposition. "Now there is another risk," continues Chandragutti, "diluting Chittara into modern modern art" (M. Chandragutti, personal communication, February 14, 2006). With change in context comes transmuted forms of Chittara with crooked lines, or just a snake or a bird or a hut 'as Chittara' as opposed to the ethos of the patterns in their entirety.



An example of a modern variation of Chittara

With this dilution and commercialization, one can question the participation of male artists, who have endeavoured to revive the practice. However, one could argue: so what if they are male artists practicing an art that is primarily practiced by the women folk of the community; so what if they are using a cultural practice to earn a few more pennies; so what if they are exercising their creativity and adding personalized symbols and transforming the context? These issues, however, are not simplistic. Transformation of this practice as an artistic pursuit, co-existing as a commercial entity, is fraught with conflicting ideologies. Scrutiny of these issues is not only pertinent for the revival of this practice but also in comprehending what the long-term consequences, such co-existence, will have in the social framework of their community and the cultural ecology of this practice.

Centre for Revival of Indigenous Art

The Centre for Revival of Indigenous Art is a non-profit organization, run by a handful of voluntary workers who are committed to building awareness and preserving indigenous art practices through research and development. Most importantly, the Centre is concerned with the upliftment of artisans whilst safeguarding the socio-cultural and ecological aspects of their artistic practices that mutually benefit them and the environment that surrounds them. With regard to Chittara, extensive interviews, focus groups and discussions were conducted with the motivation of getting a deeper understanding of Chittara practices, and formulating developmental frameworks to revive the art practices for the benefit of local artists and the community. From the research findings and discussions from

theorists, observations that emerged provide an insight into the pros and cons of the practice as it stands today, and its possibilities for the future.

Co-existence as an Artistic Pursuit and a Commercial Entity

Although this co-existence has provided new opportunities for the art practice and artists of Chittara, underneath the stratum of these meagre advantages are several inconspicuous, complex and ambiguous socio-cultural shifts that are worthy of wider evaluation.

First is to consider the impact of this decaying practice as an artistic pursuit on the socio-cultural fabric of the Deevuru community. Although traditional and ritualistic ceremonies are still prevalent, with diminishing practice of this artform, there are reduced interactions and collaborations, which threaten social bonding and cultural integration. Also affected is the practice of folk singing, which is specifically done during the creation of Chittara painting. Further, lack of engagement with painting and hence its ethos introduces a sense of detachment from the physical environment.

Second is to consider opportunities and threats due to commercialization of this practice. Increasing commercialization has only benefited a handful of artists, all of whom are men. A commercially successful male artist may wear Lee Jeans while an unknown female artist from the community may wear a knee length sari. (It is not customary for women to wear knee length sari. This is a mark of poverty; women wear sari this way to make them last longer). A male artist may be commissioned to create an artwork somewhere in the city; a woman artist may be exploited. Once a senior woman artist in the community was promised her painting would be exhibited in Bangalore and then returned; later, she was told that the painting was stolen. Such an experience not only caused pain, but also left fear of interaction with people from the city and the fear of exploitation.

Male artists often are recognized publically and are financially successful; female artists from the community do not realize such rewards. The advantages of recognition and finances for a handful of male artists have created crevices in a once socially cohesive community, with the result being growing feelings of rivalry, competition, and selfishness. Such crevices have crept not only within the community but also within families. A national award winner for this art laments that, although he has received recognition and commissions, he has lost his close relationship with his own sister.

Third is to consider monopoly of knowledge about current Chittara practices. Chandragutti explains

that protecting ownership of knowledge and monopoly that further threatens social bonding as a cohesive community (M. Chandragutti, personal correspondence, February 14, 2006). Monopolization of knowledge is a grave impediment for the revival of this practice.

Fourth is to consider the issue of power and control with the subversion of gender relationships. Traditionally, Chittara was practiced by the women as a socio-collaborative artistic pursuit; today, of the handful of artists engaged in this art both as a commercial entity and an artistic pursuit, a majority are men. Most women artists are either illiterate or semi-literate. In most commercial ventures or support initiatives men play leading roles in terms of transacting money and mediating with the outside world; this transforms the power relationships within this society with the art practice forming the locus of change. Most artists who have achieved recognition for their contributions and commercialized participation are men, who have visiting cards and mobile phones, which increase their accessibility while the women have no communication modes or devices. When artworks are commissioned, men play a leading role and women accompany them as 'subordinates and assistants.' (The Hindu, 2007) This has introduced an aspect of hierarchy within the art practice, as opposed to the provisos of being the celebrative and collaborative art practice that it was originally. The higher status and power relationship of women now remains only an ethos that does not percolate down to the reality of practice.

Fifth is to consider the perception of this art practice in the wider society of the outside world, as most information and literature on Chittara is accessed from art and craft based websites. These sites, whilst acknowledging that women predominantly practice Chittara, have made a national award winner, a male artist, synonymous with Chittara. He is bestowed with the honour of 'resurrecting Chittara single-handedly' (Crafts Revival Trust, 1999). Although the male artist states that he learned Chittara as a child growing up in a family of practitioners, which included his sister and other women relatives, the perception of a *male* as resurrector of Chittara not only reflects ambiguity about Chittara origins but also marginalizes the contributions of women involved in the practice and the larger socio-cultural context of the practice. While such perceptions have generated awareness about Chittara, they also have made this male artist the source for the entire practice, enabling his successful commercialization, while women Chittara artists in the community go unnoticed. Lack of

acknowledgement towards women has led to a sense of disinterest and disengagement with this artistic practice as a commercially non-viable activity and a waste of women's time.

There is a challenge to revive Chittara with next generation of the Deevuru community. The decline of the art practice is primarily attributed to reasons such as lack of artists, lack of appreciation and patronage, lack of funds, lack of time, negligence, and ignorance about the value of the practice. Women artists of the older generation feel that, because the younger generation of women and girls have access to education and other past times, like watching TV, they are not interested in practicing the art of Chittara. In personal interviews with senior artists Gowriamma Huchhapaa, Lakshmakka and Gowri Chandrasekhar, they mentioned that amongst the younger generation, Chittara now is viewed as a 'waste of time' accompanied by a negative image of it being 'grandma's art' (February 14, 2006).



A class of girls in the village school eager to learn about Chittara

A class of forty girls aged 16 to 20 years, in the village school were asked about their understanding of Deevuru culture in relation to the outside world that they see on television. The general perception was that 'we eat *idli* and *sambar* and in the outside world they eat other kinds of food; we wear *salwar kameez* and they wear shirts and pants; we go to temples and they go to clubs.' The girls were ignorant about the value of this artistic practice as a distinctive part of their Deevuru culture. Most of them acknowledged that they were either aware of the art form of Chittara or have participated in creating paintings; however, none of them were aware of the types, meanings, and philosophy behind the art. When shown a traditional *bangle kadaga*, and asked if

they knew what it was, they said, “our grandmas wear it.”

Based on research evaluations and discussions with Chandragutti, senior artists, and the next generation of the Deeveru community, various suggestions were proposed about revival of this art. The following suggestions aim to maintain the microcosm of the socio-cultural dynamic and cultural ecology that safeguard the indigenusness of this artistic practice.

- The indigenous community should be educated and made aware of the worth of this traditional practice and its socio-cultural contributions, and contemplate the potential that lies in its practice for the outside world.
- A knowledge base and archiving facility might be created for Chittara and other auxiliary practices like folk singing, allowing knowledge of these forms to be sustained and made accessible to all members of the community. With the elder generation growing older, the transference of knowledge from one generation to the next has been greatly affected.
- An art school dedicated to education of Chittara should be established in order to impart the aesthetics and practices of this art in its traditional form, and new sustainable techniques be developed that impart the socio-cultural essence and philosophy behind this practice.
- Focus should be placed on changing the negative imagery of the art practice amongst the next generation of the Deeveru community. Initiatives to restore the positive imagery of the practice include enhancing its socio-cultural aspects and historical significance. The role of women in relation to the art practice needs to be emphasised and propagated both within the community and to the outside world.
- There needs to be an emphasis on establishing a balance of power through reconsidering gender relationships.

At the village school, the girls were asked if they would like cash prizes or appreciation letters and certificates for their participation in Chittara; all the girls opted for appreciation letters and certificates. Prob-

ably the challenge for reviving this art is about making technology, like mobile phones, accessible to them so they can be connected to the outside world. It is about teaching these women how not to be exploited; it is about establishing their identities as women artists and not just assistants within the community or the outside world. It also is about enhancing their self-confidence in their participation and creating sustainable platforms for continued engagement. Overcoming these challenges to establish a balance of power is imperative for the longevity of the indigenous art practice of Chittara.

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