

## Doll Making

Season of dolls: An artisan gives finishing touches to a doll kept ready for sale at Vilacheri in Madurai; **Dasavatharam** set remains to be the most popular among customers and in demand too.

Artisans in Vilacheri are hurriedly giving finishing touches to dolls they have been making for over a month for Navaratri kolu. "Many customers will come today for last minute purchases and we expect to make a lot of sales," an artisan said.

A part of Vilacheri completely houses artisans and craftsmen who make dolls for various festivals, ranging from Lord Ganesa for Vinayaka Chathurthi to figurines for nativity sets during Christmas.

But Navaratri is the busiest time of the year for them as they make individual dolls and sets depicting 'Dasavatharam,' 'Ashtalakshmi' and 'Sorgavasa' for kolu arrangements across households and institutions.

"We do not use Plaster of Paris at all and make dolls only using mud or papier mache. Plaster of Paris is the cheaper alternative since a number of dolls can be made at one go using a single mould, but we are aware of the hazards it causes," explained N. Pitchai, an artisan, who has been exclusively making only 'Dasavatharam' sets this year, which, he said, remained the most popular among customers.

"Tradition demands that only mud dolls be kept in 'kolu.' So, even if the cost of dolls made with Plaster of Paris is cheaper, customers prefer mud dolls," he said.

Dolls made of papier mache is an alternative which most customers from abroad or other States prefer as it is easy to transport them.

Speaking about dolls made of chalk, which is also a relatively safer alternative to PoP, M. Malaisamy said that they were much lighter than the dolls made of mud and were in demand as well.

"Huge dolls of deities such as Krishna, Siva and Parvathi and Murugan are made using chalk and painted later. The finish is smooth and the lightweight dolls are easy to transport," he said.

Despite rising raw material costs, the artisans said that there were still customers who visited Vilacheri to buy dolls.

"We supply to traders from Tirunelveli, Virudhunagar, Nagercoil as well as Kerala. Other than that, people from Madurai who have settled in other places and visit their

hometown during the summer holidays come here and buy dolls in advance for the doll arrangements in their houses,” said Karthik, an artisan.

This sleepy village on the southern fringes of the city is home to around 200 families that have been making clay and papier-mâché dolls for the past 30 years.

“Our forefathers used to make clay pots alone. We diversified into making dolls a few decades back.

“We mainly make dolls for ‘Navarathri’ ‘kolu’ arrangements, idols during Vinayaga Chathurti and nativity sets during Christmas,” one of the artisans says.

## **Clay dolls**

Artisan M. Ramalingam says though papier-mâché dolls are preferred for their lightweight, many customers still opt for clay dolls since they are of the belief that they are symbols of auspiciousness and tradition.

“We get clay from the Vilachery tank to make the dolls. All the artisans here still make dolls by using moulds and paint them by hand,” he says. “While we supply dolls to government and private showrooms in the city, customers also come and procure dolls directly from us since many are interested in seeing how they are made,” Mr. Ramalingam says.

## **Custom-made for NRIs**

Non-resident Indians (NRI) have started frequenting the area to place orders for custom-made dolls. “They ask for papier-mâché dolls not more than five inches high so that they can be transported to their countries easily. “They give the design or photograph for the doll of their choice,” says artisan M. Muthuganesan.

In the past customers preferred dolls based on scenes from the famous ‘Ramayana’ TV serial. “Nowadays people want innovative sets of dolls for theme-based ‘Kolu’ arrangements during Navarathri,” says M. Meena. Women in the area have formed self-help groups and run their own production units.

## Story of Papier-Mache

“Do you know how papier-mâché came to India?” It seems though Timur Ali was a tyrant ruler, he had a heart for art and architecture. And he often sent people from here to Samarkhand, a place known for different art forms. Indians picked up various arts from there including papier-mâché. We walk through few more lanes of Vilacheri and stories on cows, the thinnai, the mandhai and a tale on the ‘drishti bommai’ follow. “The thinnai is the hotspot for latest gossip in villages. The mandhai is where people congregate during festivals and rituals.”