



*Deborah*  
*Thiagarajan*  
— Art & Culture



Art, craft, architecture, lifestyle - living heritage such as songs, dance, theatre and cuisine are the identity of a country; they provide an insight into the history of the country. It is also possible to trace the country's growth through these parameters. UNESCO also states that the preservation of these provides a guarantee for continuing creativity and gives direction for human development in the future. This is the very idea behind the creation of DakshinaChitra, whose Chairman Founder believes that, one has not seen India unless one has visited her villages and experienced the throbbing culture that they uphold. Located conveniently off the East Coast Road, Chennai and with nearly 1.75 lakh visitors last year, DakshinaChitra is a popular destination for school excursions and a one-stop cultural experience of South India for foreign visitors to the city. It also has a loyal fan base among the locals who go in for the art and craft workshops, interactive sessions with artisans and family fun-days with folk art groups from all over India.

It all began at the behest of Mrs. Deborah Thiagarajan, Chairman of Madras Craft Foundation. A lover of art and especially textiles, she was a student of Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh where she met Raj Thiagarajan, scion of a Chettiar family, whom she would marry. The new bride dreamt of indigo, silks and splendourous Madras checks as she arrived at Madras in 1970, but instead found herself working with the Institute of Development Studies. The then government's Nutrition Project took her to villages all over Tamil Nadu; she witnessed first-hand the rich folk arts, culture and traditions of Tamil Nadu. Citing the example of the villupattu tradition, she described it as an art which was at once wisdom-sharing and entertaining. "After the day's work, the villagers would gather under the mellow starlit skies and there would be impromptu singing and story-telling accompanied by local musical instruments. But now even in the villages, it is seen only on rare occasions - at temple festivals and the like. Each village had a speciality that added to the cultural canvas. Truly, though the rural people were poor in means, they were rich in culture", says she. Deborah felt that the arts that gave

the people their identity needed to be preserved and thus came about the idea of a heritage museum.

Back in the city, Deborah pursued her Ph.D. in Ancient Indian Culture and History at the University of Madras. She was also busy raising her family. She recalls one occasion where, her then school-going daughter had returned, disappointed, from a visit to a local museum to study the Indus Valley Civilization. The poorly maintained museum had dulled the child's instinct to reach out to her country's history- there were rich stories to be told, but the exhibits lacked the ability to excite. This proved to be another cue for Deborah - in order to develop a healthy attitude towards one's roots, the sensitization had to be provided

in childhood through education and through rich and colourful exhibits- collecting objects and artefacts from heritage homes would become an important part of her dream project. With this in mind and with the help of a small group of likeminded women, Deborah formed the Madras Craft Foundation in 1984. "My primary objective was to bring alive the lives and ways of Indians in the pre and post-colonial era, and this heritage museum had to be an exercise in collaboration, not a single person's effort", says Deborah in all humility.

The key group began with working on government approvals, financial support, documentation and collecting objects. A piece of land on the outskirts of the city was taken

on lease from the state government and by December 1996, the first building had been built. Among those who pitched in with valuable support were Laurie Baker, who was the architect, P T Krishnan the structural engineer and Benny Kuriakose who was the builder. With the main building and the layout in place, the group began identifying the primary exhibits - heritage homes from the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Each exhibit and setting took at least three years to recreate on location at DakshinaChitra.

Deborah and her group are proud of the exhibits that convey the 18th-19th century settings with the paraphernalia used during the period. The most ideal homes were bought,







dismantled carefully, transported and rebuilt at Dakshinachitra- craftsmen who were familiar with construction practices of that state too were brought in for this specific purpose. Except for some basic protective treatment the houses were authentically recreated. She explains that what was striking in these homes, was the use and upkeep of specific objects, relevant only for their functional value- granaries, potter's wheel, weaving and dyeing equipment etcetera spoke of the traditional occupation of those particular homes - the exhibits too wear a simple and spartan, yet elegant look.

The Chikmagalur Muslim house is the most recent acquisition. It holds an exquisite exhibition of articles acquired from the original location and some donated for display by donors and patrons of DakshinaChitra. The preparation for this exhibit had involved exhaustive study into Islam and the lives of South Indian Muslims, numerous trips to the native location with photo shoots, identifying and documenting articles and last but not the least, fundraising to finance the exhibit. The exhibit was curated by Gigi Scaria

a famous Italian art curator and connoisseur. Every heritage home was the result of equally meticulous research. There are similar heritage museums, both National and privately-owned all over India- for instance, the Tribal art museum in Bhopal and a museum of boutique homes in Manipal- these come close to DakshinaChitra in intent, but Deborah chooses to describe DakshinaChitra as an inclusive museum which showcases all ethnic communities of South India.

Deborah explained how many rural arts had disappeared in the last few decades as a result of lack of patronage; artisans were discouraging their children from taking up traditional arts and favouring other livelihoods. With the intent of infusing life to such dying art forms, artisans with specific skills are identified and brought to DakshinaChitra each season. They are provided a platform where they can sell their creations, teach at workshops and interact with people of similar backgrounds in order to learn from one another. These are non-profitable to DakshinaChitra in that, the artisans take home all their earnings. Similarly, dancers

and musicians from both classical and folk background are invited to perform and participate in seminars and conduct workshops. Transport, housing and hospitality expenses for outstation artists are borne entirely by DakshinaChitra.

Art workshops are featured round the year and differ, in duration from two to week long ones, and paid and non-payable ones. The most popular and repeatedly sought after amongst these are ceramic arts, palm leaf and block printing, kalamkari and madhubani art workshops as they feature experts from the field. There is an art lab for children from local communities which is open throughout the day where the children are free to express themselves through art. Residential workshops for children from marginalized sections are conducted in tandem with NGOs like Nalandaway. Education through the medium of art and heritage is a subject that Deborah has always been passionate about. She runs an exclusive program which has become very popular among government school teachers. DakshinaChitra has in the past been funded by private organizations, donations and sponsors. Government grants have helped set up projects and pay wages. Often, large events and exhibits have been funded by foreign organizations like the Ford Foundation and more recently, the U S Council (that funded the Chikmagalur exhibit.) In the last few years the organization has become self-sustaining; proceeds from membership, paid workshops, private events, exclusive art exhibitions and the well-stocked craft-shop have provided towards in-house expenditures. The venue is a popular stopover for semester-at-sea programs and attracts foreign art students who wish to study Indian Art forms.

Despite her western moorings and upbringing, Deborah found a powerful resonance with Indian culture. The anthropologist in her, found the need to foster and cherish the wilting culture of her adopted country, and gave direction to the creation of DakshinaChitra - a most unique experience. In the current era where digital art is increasingly taking centre-stage and live art is being relegated to the wings, Deborah has managed to ignite a passion for rustic and rural art forms- her



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team of young designers and planners is proof of this. The organization now also offers a fairly popular course in Arts management- she declares that if she manages to transform even a small section of children of the “tech generation” to take up study and sustenance of culture and arts, she would have accomplished what she set out to do. Through DakshinaChitra she has given back to Chennai and India a flavour of their own marginalized past. Deborah Thiagarajan is a true Champion of Chennai!