

DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION  
SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION  
CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF TAMIL NADU

LOCAL VISUAL CULTURE SERIES  
VOLUME 2 - 2023

# ART: INSIDE STORIES

EDITOR  
FRANCIS P. BARCLAY



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# WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?

This book is a compilation of fieldwork-based essays assigned to I M. A. Mass Communication students as a part of the course on Local Visual Culture guided by Dr. Francis P. Barclay. Espying the current efforts of the Central University of Tamil Nadu in exploring novel avenues to expand and enhance the scope of knowledge and learning experience, the Department of Media and Communication introduced (in 2021) this standout course of substance to document precious local cultures that are facing the threat of obsolescence. This course made it convenient for the students to conduct intimate inquiries into local cultures—gathering information from relevant sources, rediscovering art and culture through contemporary and enthusiastic perspectives, and showcasing student cultural and artistic talents. Ours is an ethnically and religiously diverse country, replete with regional cultures. Our indigenous wisdom of oral literature and visual culture is rich, and the onus is on us to help it survive in new-fashioned forms. This small book is an exhibit of those aspirations. In this volume of the Local Visual Culture Series, we explore the inside stories of artisans whose gifted hands create art and whose unwavering devotion during challenging times help sustain the culture that their art creates.

Editor  
**Dr. Francis P. Barclay**

This book and the Local Visual Culture course are a part of the Local Community, Communication and Culture Linkages (LCCCI) initiative of the Department of Media and Communication, CUTN

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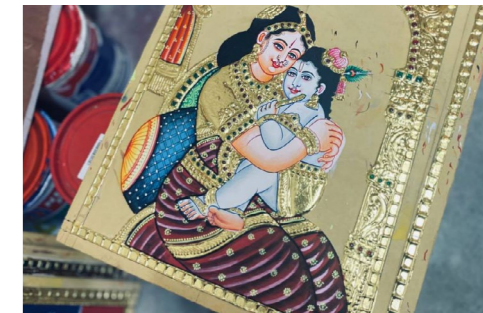
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# Creators of the Creators



By Anusree R, Anujith KD & Aswin VM

**DIVINE TOUCH:**  
Jamna at work

Beyond the resplendent allure of the Gods lies a humble and unassuming family who shape the divine with their skilled hands. Hailing from Rajasthan and now residing in Senthamangalam, Thiruvapur, Tamil Nadu, Jagdheesh and his kin have dedicated their lives to crafting celestial figures from plaster of Paris, infusing colour and vitality into their creations. For fifteen years, this family has continued the legacy passed down by their parents, fashioning Gods and Goddesses that find their place in temples

and sacred rituals.

Driven by the pursuit of livelihood, this migrant community sought opportunities across Tamil Nadu and Kerala, finding solace and purpose in the rich sculptural and cultural heritage of Thiruvapur. Within this temple town, their presence holds special significance, for they breathe life into the deities that inspire unwavering devotion.

Jagdheesh, together with his wife Jamna, their two children, and his brother's family, have transformed the creation





of Gods into a cherished family enterprise. Against limited employment prospects, this creative clan has delicately woven a livelihood by moulding and painting the divine. During festive seasons, their craftsmanship shines brightest, attracting a surge in demand for their divine creations.

“Our Gods become conduits of faith, especially during the festival fervour,” shares Jagdheesh. Their creations, ranging from modestly priced idols starting at Rs100 to intricate and grandiose pieces costing up to Rs15,000, give tangible form to the formless, fostering a spiritual connection for devotees. While their own lives may lack the vibrancy of the Gods they fashion, their occupation sustains them, enabling them to provide their children with education in a local government school. In the hands of this devoted family, the Gods find embodiment, a testament to the profound role they play in preserving religious beliefs. Through their artistry, they infuse divinity into every stroke, enriching the lives of those who seek solace and inspiration in the celestial realm. ■

**HOME OF GODS:**

(Left and right) Statues created by Jagdheesh's family on display at their humble abode





# Looming Gloom and Threads of Resilience

By Anusree R, Anujith KD & Aswin VM

**A**mmaiyappan, a small village in the Thiruvarur district once renowned for its vibrant handloom silk sarees, now grapples with the weight of a fading tradition. Yet, amidst this struggle, a bold woman named Nandhini, in her 40s, stands tall, embodying the triumphs and hardships of her weaving family. Step into her world and witness the tapestry of prosperity woven from silk threads, as well as her unwavering determination to reclaim the glorious past. Originating from Kumbakonam, Nandhini grew up in

a joint family where weaving was not only the primary income source but also a shared passion among both men and women. "As a child, I played among the looms. Weaving was ingrained in our lives and I learned the craft from a tender age, alongside my cousins and siblings," she fondly reminisces about the golden days. Upon her marriage, Nandhini arrived in Ammaiyappan, where her in-laws were also engaged in weaving. However, the decline in demand for hand-woven sarees and a devastating storm that nearly destroyed their



**PRICELESS POSSESSION:** Nandhini at work (above) and she displaying her 25-year-old wedding saree(right)







humble coconut leaf thatched hut brought challenging times to their doorstep. With determination, Nandhini rallied the women of her family, juggling household chores and weaving, while the male members sought additional daily wage jobs for sustenance. The handloom became her refuge, providing solace and support during times of adversity. Within three months, they transformed their shelter into a concrete abode, offering security to her trembling children. Tears well up as she recounts the memories.

Amidst the bittersweet nostalgia, Nandhini unveils a treasured possession—the saree she wore on her wedding day. Skillfully woven 25 years ago, it still radiates timeless allure, a testament to her family's commitment and artistry. Within its folds lie not only cherished memories but also the legacy of a once-thriving tradition.

Yet, the glow in Nandhini's eyes dims as she discusses the present plight of the handloom industry. The mechanical intrusion has cast a shadow over the livelihoods of weavers in her village. As the demand for handwoven sarees wanes, Nandhini's family, like many others, yearns to revive their glorious past. "There are organisations assisting us in selling our products, but they come with limitations," she laments. Crafting a silk saree with utmost perfection takes them about

**LOOM OF BLOOM:**  
A decades-old loom at Nandhini's house.

five days and requires significant investments. However, machine-made alternatives offer convenience and cost-effectiveness, making them preferable to merchants. "Quality is paramount to us. We cannot compromise on the time and expense required to create our sarees," she affirms.

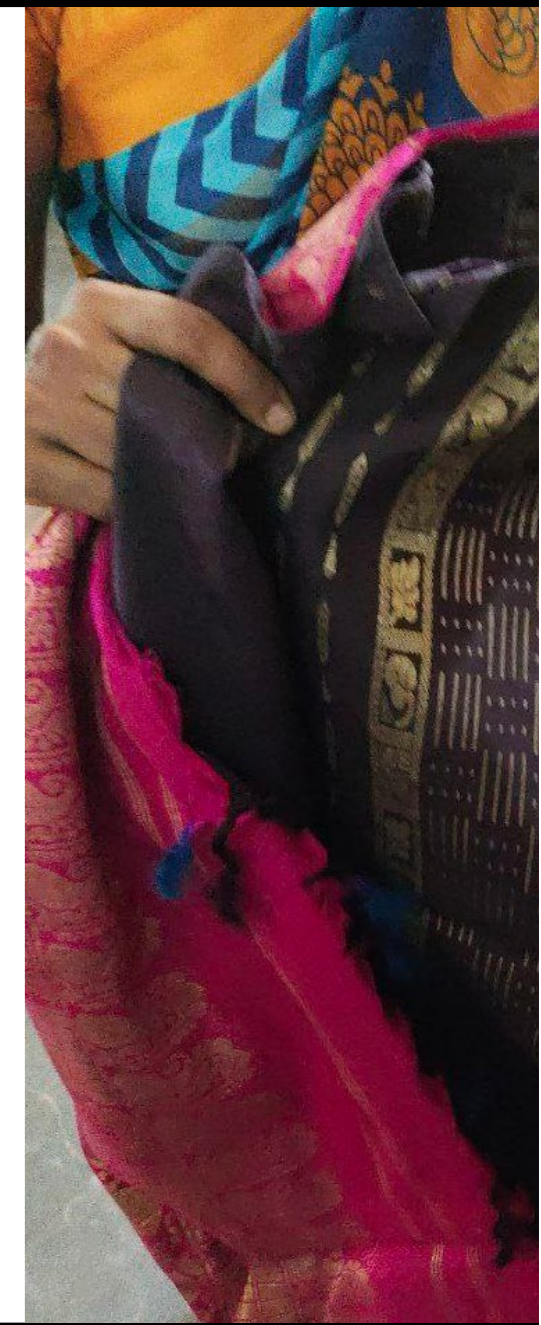
"We now undertake various jobs—plumbing, electrical work, construction, cleaning and more. We earn a living and lead contented lives. Yet, somewhere along the way, it feels like we are losing touch with our identity and ancestral roots," Nandhini's words echo the urgent need to preserve our cultural heritage, lest we witness the irreversible disappearance of an exceptional tradition. Amidst adversity, glimmers of hope emerge. Resilient souls in Ammaiyappan village continue to uphold the craft, seeking innovative

ways to preserve its essence.

Initiatives that blend tradition with modernity and strive to revive the lost glory of handloom are gaining momentum. Nandhini, too, dreams of a resurgence, where her children can inherit a thriving weaving legacy.

The story of Nandhini and the handloom workers of Ammaiyappan village reflects the broader struggle between tradition and mechanisation. In our pursuit of progress, let us not forget the invaluable cultural heritage intricately woven into every silk thread. As the sun sets over the village, Nandhini's unwavering determination to revive the past shines brightly. The legacy of Ammaiyappan, interwoven with love, dedication and artistry, deserves to be cherished and preserved for generations to come. ■

**A CLOSER LOOK:**  
Nandhini holding her wedding saree.





# Breathing life into stone

By Sherin S, Prasanth PP, Rishikesh MI & Kavya Suresh

In the realm of sculptural mastery, the ordinary—piece of rock—becomes the extraordinary—sculpture—and the extraordinary merges with the ethereal—to become an idol of worship. Sculpturing stands as a sublime form of expression and an incredible form of art, wielding profound and transformative power with divine effects. Within the hallowed grounds of Sri Arunachaleshwara Shilpa Kalaikudam, nestled near Kangalancherry in Thiruvavur, Tamil Nadu, a collective of remarkable artisans harnesses

this transcendent artistry. Their creations reach beyond the realm of mere statues, breathing life into inert rocks and evoking reverence in the hearts of beholders. Embark on a captivating journey as we delve into the profound depths of their minds, seeking to unravel the secrets behind their divine sculptures.

Mani, who has been running the sculpting workshop for the past 17 years, he would say the aim of sculpting is to represent not the outward appearance of things but their



## **ALMIGHTY IN STONE:**

(Above) The sculpture of Goddess Ammal. (Right) Stone carving of Goddess Mahalakshmi







inward significance too. “A good artist doesn’t need a picture of the things that he is going to create. All they need is the prompt that makes them. Creating artifacts for livelihood is different from that for pleasure or satisfaction. It’s never been easy, ever. The work is toilsome, to bring the stone into any sculpture, the process is carefully administered and executed.”

Sculptures, with an extra dimension, are more real and alluring than most other art forms. “Sculpture-making has an important role in the art world. Sculptures aren’t just stone shapes or historical monuments, but they are the medium of conveying the inner stories of humankind. The ideas conveyed by each sculpture would be entirely different from one another,” Mani delves into his mission. We could find many sculptures that tell stories at the Kalakuudam. Mostly, they are sculptures of gods and goddesses made of black rock. The rock is from Raashipuram and it would take at least seven days to finish one sculpture. There would be poojas in the beginning and at the end of sculpture-making. Ayyanar, Amman and Varaaham are the most common sculptures they make here.

Apart from chisels and other traditional tools, they now use electric machines for sculpting. But still, there are customers who demand the traditional way of sculpture

**EVOLUTION:**  
A stone that will become Lord Vinayaka.

making. There are five types of rocks in sculpture-making and the black stone used for temple sculptures is known as “penn kallu”. The same God’s shape, body language and facial expressions will change according to temples. The eye is the most important part of a sculpture and is done only at the end. Usually, the eyes of the sculpture are not chiselled. And it is done only just before the delivery. There would be prayers during the delivery time. The shop is about 8 km from the Thiruvarur railway station and about 100 metres off the Kangalancherry bus stand. ■



**GUARDIAN ANGEL:**  
Sculpture of Ayyanar.



# Son of the Soil

By Shabeena TA, Ansil Ali, Roma Suhas, NTV Sainath & Yedida Harikiran

In a world where modernism prevails, upholding traditional values becomes a challenging task. Karuppaian, now 67 years old, stands as an unusual individual who chose to dabble his hands in clay and dedicate his life to eco-friendly pottery at the age of 15. He belongs to one of the few families engaged in traditional pottery along Nagapattinam Road in Thiruvavur.

Thiruvavur district, renowned for its temples and chariots, holds a special place in the realm of pottery, with its

remarkable mastery of crafting terracotta idols and pottery items. From cooking vessels to storage containers and water pots, pottery in Thiruvavur encompasses a wide range of essential items. Pottery has been an integral part of the local lifestyle, deeply woven into the fabric of their existence.

Nevertheless, the communities engaged in pottery remain small and unnoticed, lacking recognition. In the era of plastic, the handmade pottery that was once a common sight has dwindled. Modern technologies and alternative options



**AT WORK:**  
(Above) Karuppaian making sand ovens.  
(Right) Wet pots left for drying





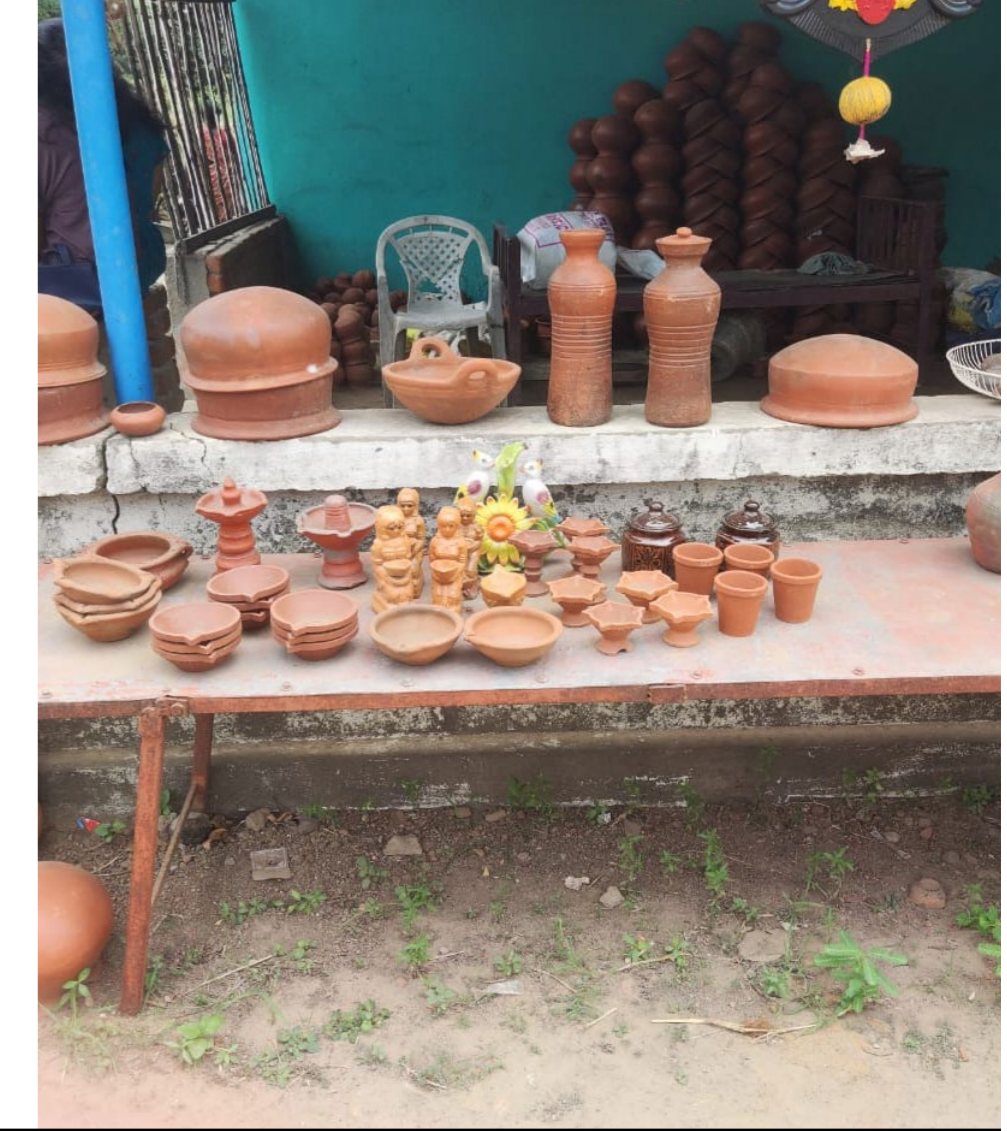


have diminished the demand for eco-friendly pots, which were once a vital resource in every household. Despite facing challenges, these artisans have faithfully carried on the craft passed down through generations from their forefathers. Also, the practice of shaping clay by hand and using earthen pots for cooking holds immense value. Scientists emphasise the health benefits of cooking in earth-

enware, as it not only enhances the taste of food but also promotes conservation. The younger generation, seeking alternative livelihoods, has abandoned the pottery field, leaving the elderly as the sole torchbearers of this dying tradition. While Karuppaian and a few other families continue to engage in pottery, selling their creations in humble settlements of huts, all three of Karuppaian's children have



e, is situated in Thiruvarur. This temple is a rare ancient shrine in India where we can witness the culmination of di







chosen alternative professions. The art of pottery is now in its most vulnerable and challenging phase. The community yearns for support, as globalisation has pushed them to the economic margin.

Despite campaigns for the development of pottery, their impact remains limited, often failing to reach rural areas where the craft is still cherished. As a result, the livelihoods of these artisans have become increasingly difficult, and the age-old craft of pottery in the Thiruvarur district now stands at a crossroads, in desperate need of support and recognition to preserve its invaluable cultural heritage. In an age where modernity prevails, it is crucial to safeguard these traditional arts that hold deep significance and contribute to a sustainable and eco-friendly way of life.

Karuppaian and his fellow artisans serve as guardians of Thiruvarur's eco-friendly pottery tradition, and their efforts deserve acknowledgement and support to ensure the survival of this ancient craft for future generations. ■

**FROM RAW TO REFINED:**  
Finished pots and mudstove for sale.

# The Enduring Legacy of Metal Sculptures

By Megha Anna Martin, Anamika GR, Muhammed Shibili A

In a world where hypermarkets overflow with plastic sculptures and spray-painted moulds that fly off the shelves during gifting seasons, the allure of metal sculptures remains untarnished. Yet, beneath their shining semblance lies a lamentable truth. These metal sculptures, often simplistic and mass-produced, revolve around typical deities or popular themes like lamps and laughing Buddhas. While they may boast durability, the traditional and local art of authentic and creatively-fashioned metal sculpting

is teetering on the edge of extinction, sustained only by a handful of dedicated artists.

Raja Stpadhi, a 45-year-old master sculptor from Thiruvarur, stands as a living testament to the vanishing art of traditional metal sculpture-making. With over 25 years of experience, Raja Stpadhi has garnered renown for his unparalleled skill in crafting robust and distinctive sculptures that are increasingly rare in the modern world. Having undergone a rigorous three-year apprenticeship in the art of



**GOLD MOULD:**  
Stpadhi's metal mould of Sri Ganesha





sculpture-making, he has emerged as a pioneer and expert in utilising diverse materials to fashion his breathtaking masterpieces. However, the number of stapadhis—sculptors—shrinks with each passing day, leaving few successors to carry this cherished craft into the uncharted realms of the future. The contemporary approach to sculpting, often reliant on mechanised mass production, has overshadowed the authentic and artistic methods employed by artisans like Raja Stapadhi.

Nestled amidst the serene ambience of the Thiruarur temple lake, Raja Stapadhi's humble workshop occupies a small space that once served as a guest house for the palace. While commissions were once plentiful, the landscape has shifted as more individuals lean toward readily available

**METAL MAN:**

Raja Stapadhi (above) and his sculptures (left and right)







**TOP NOTCH:**  
Traditional shield that is used for ceilings

sculptures. Today, only a select few seek Raja Stpadhi's expertise for customisations or specific requirements. Nonetheless, his creations grace numerous temples in and around Thiruvapur, as well as other neighbouring states, including a temple in Kerala—a source of immense pride for the sculptor.

In the modern era, sculptures predominantly emerge from mass production lines, often moulded from plastic, de-

void of the life and distinctiveness found in their counterparts. Metal sculptures, treasured across centuries, offer an avenue for crafting beautiful works of art in a myriad of styles and sizes, transcending both abstract and figurative forms. The authenticity and artistry lie in the creation of one-of-a-kind pieces that defy mass production. The sculpting process, a labour of love demanding months or even years,

calls for immense skill and unwavering patience. While Raja Stpadhi's seasoned hands may make it appear effortless, the truth lies in the substantial effort and time invested in each and every piece.

The sculptures birthed by Raja Stpadhi and his fellow artisans are forged from an amalgamation of metals: silver, copper, bronze and gold. The process commences with meticulous mould creation using wax and sand. Once the molten metal fills the mould, the intricate work of polishing and refining ensues, breathing life into the sculpture.

Copper takes centerstage in the composition of the sculptures. The aid of machinery and tools facilitates the intricate processes of heating and designing. In bygone eras, there was a high demand for temple works and sculptures of deities, often featuring a high gold composition. However, gold now predominantly finds its place in embellishing the eyes of these sculptures. The decline of the stapadhi artisans and their sculpting techniques is an undeniable reality. The future of authentic and artistic sculptor-making appears distant, overshadowed by the prevalence of machine-made sculptures readily available in the market.

Yet, amidst this tumultuous landscape, the demand for genuine and artistic craftsmanship shall forever persist. While ready-made sculptures find their purpose in art installations, they invariably lack the essence of individuality. Thus, we hold firm in our belief that the stapadhi artisans, like their statues, shall endure, albeit in modest numbers, safeguarding the torch of tradition and artistry for generations to come. ■



**IN THE MAKING:**  
A horse sculpture



# Tanjore Treasures in a Hidden Cottage

By Durga S Kumar, Blessy Reji, Fathima Riswana & M Vishnu Gangadharan

In the realm of my childhood memories, there existed a captivating painting that enchanted my gaze. Even when I first met it, its brilliance spoke to me: the eyes held a captivating human essence, while the colours emanated both vibrancy and tranquillity. "Behold, a painting made of gold!" my friend would proudly proclaim. Scepticism danced within me, suspecting some ruse, but destiny had a grand unveiling in store.

As the chapter of our post-graduation unfolded and As

the chapter of our post-graduation unfolded and when we were handed an assignment for an art expedition, my companions and I embarked on a quest to discover the birthplace of the enigmatic "Tanjore paintings," unbeknownst to us at the time. To our astonishment, paintings just like the very masterpiece of my childhood dreams materialised before our eyes—the lifelike eyes, the resplendent hues and the golden embossing. My friend's words were not a tale spun from fiction; they were a testament to the truth—these paintings



## FINAL STROKES:

(Above)

Shanmughavelu working on a painting. (Right) One of his Tanjore paintings











**UNFINISHED MASTERPIECE:**  
Painting of mother Yashodha and  
lord Krishna in process.

were indeed adorned with gold!

Nestled amidst the verdant embrace of Maravathoor's secluded forest, a humble cottage stood as the sanctuary and sire for these magnificent creations. As we crossed its threshold, we were greeted by the brothers and co-owners of this realm, Shanmughavelu and Karthikeyan. Around us, the bustling artisans pursued their craft with a sense of familiar rou-

tine. Granting us permission to wander amidst the mesmerising half-finished paintings that had instantly captivated our souls, Shanmughavelu embarked on a journey through time, recounting their cherished heritage.

"Our calling extends beyond mere occupation; it is a sacred legacy passed down through generations," shared Shanmughavelu, the elder brother, his voice imbued with

ancestral wisdom. "My brother and I inherited this artistry from our parents, who, in turn, gleaned its secrets from their predecessors. Our independent venture began a quarter-century ago, when our enterprise was but a seedling. Now, it has flourished, and we have nurtured a talented team of ten individuals, honing their skills to achieve unparalleled mastery."

With a deft touch, Shanmughavelu proceeded to illuminate the meticulous process behind these creations. "Our chosen canvas is often polished plywood, its dimensions tailored to meet the demands of our patrons. Using a humble pencil, we delicately sketch the outline of our subjects—primarily Hindu deities, though secular designs grace our atelier from time to time. Gem embellishments follow suit, with replicas of rubies and emeralds adorning the compositions." Yet, it was the art of embossing that Shanmughavelu regarded as the pinnacle of their craftsmanship, bestowing a three-dimensional allure upon the paintings. "A paste of chalk powder and a specialised adhesive is our medium, preserving the embossing's integrity and preventing it from succumbing to the passage of time. The chalk paste requires two to three days to dry. For bolder and more expansive embossing, we employ plaster of Paris."

Thereafter, the most opulent chapter unfolded—the application of gold foil. "We employ 22-carat gold, delicately enveloped within sheets of radiant foil. This stage demands the utmost care and precision. Tenderly, we affix the foil onto the adhesive, allowing a day for it to settle and solidify. Such is our reverence for this precious material that we strive to eliminate waste entirely, mindful of its exalted value."

Only upon the completion of these meticulous stages

does the painting commence. "Watercolours, infused with vibrancy, grace our creations, breathing life into every stroke and intricate detail," Shanmughavelu revealed, his eyes gleaming with pride. The resulting tapestries exhibit a symphony of hues, an embodiment of the art's essence.

With a triumphant flourish, Shanmughavelu brought his narrative to a close, unveiling a recently completed masterpiece to our awestruck audience. It was in that moment that we basked in the presence of the finished paintings—each stroke, each hue, an exquisite testament to beauty. "Our clientele hails primarily from Chennai, Thanjavur, Bangalore and Hyderabad, particularly during the lively season of Deepavali. Collaborating closely with trusted salespeople in these regions, we forge lasting partnerships to offer our cherished creations," Shanmughavelu shared when queried about their business ventures.

Upon inquiring about the state of their enterprise, their reply resounded with contentment. "Our humblest paintings fetch a price of Rs3000. The demand for our products is robust, ensuring satisfactory profits. Thus, we find solace and fulfilment in our modest enterprise, for it is the only vocation we have ever known."

Their heartfelt declaration kindled a glimmer of joy within us, for in an era dominated by mass production, the plight of traditional handicrafts and small businesses often teeters on the precipice of extinction. Departing from the cottage, we carried with us the cherished memories of smiling deities and goddesses, a profound sense of fulfilment having graced our afternoon with the wondrous discovery of new realms of beauty. ■

**WORK IN MOTION:**  
Paintings of Gods and Goddesses carved in gold foil.

