

Little boxes, little boxes, of tradition, not tacky tacky

Even the poet wants to swaddle his soul with it, but urban India won't embrace the *gamchha*. Prasun Chaudhuri on a singular counter effort

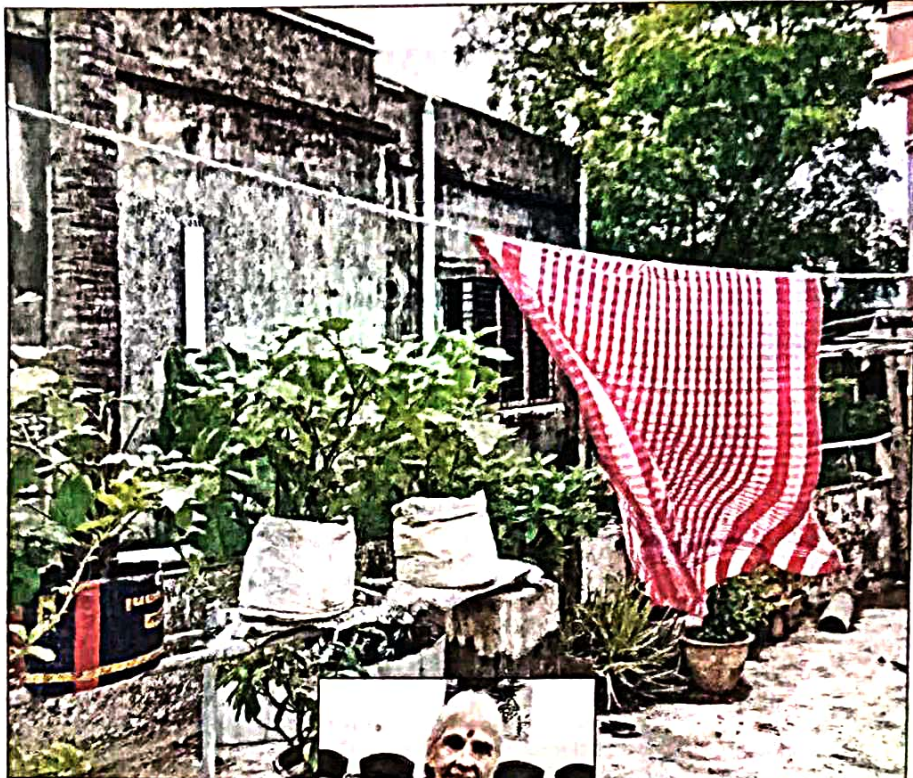
Jaya Jaitly has been collecting *gamchhas* for years now. Her personal collection is a little more than 400. "My tryst with this fabric began when I used to travel across India with George Fernandes and mingle with the trade union people," she tells the Telegraph. "I noticed a variety of interesting patterns, designs and motifs on *gamchhas*, and discovered that it serves about 25 different purposes for the poor Indian," she adds.

Last year, along with some designers, Jaitly curated a multimedia exhibition titled *Gamchha: From the ordinary to the Extraordinary* at the National Crafts Museum & Hastkala Academy in Delhi. It is yet to travel to Calcutta.

The effort was meant to be an intervention. "We need to keep up the tradition of hand weaving. But then, the fabric shouldn't turn into a fashion statement of the elite and become unaffordable for the labourers," says Jaitly.

To revive the lot of craftspeople, Jaitly, as the founder and president of Dastkari Haat Samiti, a non-profit organisation, commissioned women weavers in Bengal's Phulia to stretch their weaves of *gamchha* into saris. That was in 2015. "The idea is to link the urban buyer to the rural weaver," says Jaitly. The jump in income improves the lot of the women weavers — some increased purchasing power, a little more money to buy food for children, educate them, and gain some respect in the immediate family.

Born in Simla in British India in 1942, Jaitly spent her childhood in Japan, Burma, Belgium and England, courtesy her father who was in



CHECK MATE: Jaya Jaitly at an exhibition held in Calcutta in 2025.

Photo: Prasun Chaudhuri

the Indian Foreign Services. She credits a lot of her interest in art, craft and textiles — as well as what she calls a "social conscience" — to this exposure. She says, "Later, when I found our talented craftspeople living and working in miserable conditions, and being exploited by middlemen and big businesses, I wanted to help them socially and economically."

In this context, Jaitly brings up Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay whom she hails as an evangelist of indigenous crafts. Chattopadhyay had established the All India Handicrafts Board, Crafts Council of India, Central Cottage Industries Emporia and more. Says Jaitly, "She was a guiding

light who showed creative work in the world of art and culture could be integrated with electoral politics, writing and other forms of social activism."

In the early 1980s, Jaitly founded Gurjari, the Gujarat government emporium. In 1981, she helped start the

or stone carving to bring their languages and dialect into their craft. Accordingly, some created shawls, stoles and saris with stylised letters adapted as design motifs, while others redesigned objects as familiar as a household lamp but slipped a layer of words and by default a new meaning into the regular work.

Back to the *gamchha*. She asks, "Do you know why this unique piece of fabric has remained relatively obscure to the members of elite society?" Without waiting for a reply she says, "Because we don't notice the user, a poor farmer, a construction worker, or a coolie."

In many weavers' clusters, especially in eastern India, women use the afternoons to weave *gamchhas*, after their domestic chores.

Jaitly stresses that such skills are not valued much by the mahajans — the upper-class contractors — who often try to pay them poorly, say ₹20-30 for a *gamchha*, which is often sold in urban shops at ₹120-150.

Such exploitation is steeped in caste distinction, she believes. She says, "Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Tribes constitute 97 per cent of the artisan community."

She calls them skilled "eco-warriors", as they use minimum industrial chemicals. And shares an experience. She says, "When I take along a craftsman to any important institute of fashion or textile, students don't pay much heed to him in the beginning. But after the class, when they are exposed to his skills, they call him Masterji and look at him with reverence."

Dastkar Society for Crafts & Craftspeople. In 1986, she founded Dastkari Haat Samiti to promote rural artisans and traditional practices and later the famed Dilli Haat.

Jaitly has also written several books on the craft traditions of India, and she has documented the arts, crafts and textiles of India through 24 highly artistic and unique maps of the states known as the *Crafts Atlas of India*. Her *Crafting Indian Scripts* is based on a major project called Akshara, combining literacy, craft and calligraphy. She says, "The project was inspired by craftspeople who told me 'hum anpadh hain, we neither know English nor computer'."

She asked those who did embroidery, weaving, wood

Photo: Debabratee Dhar