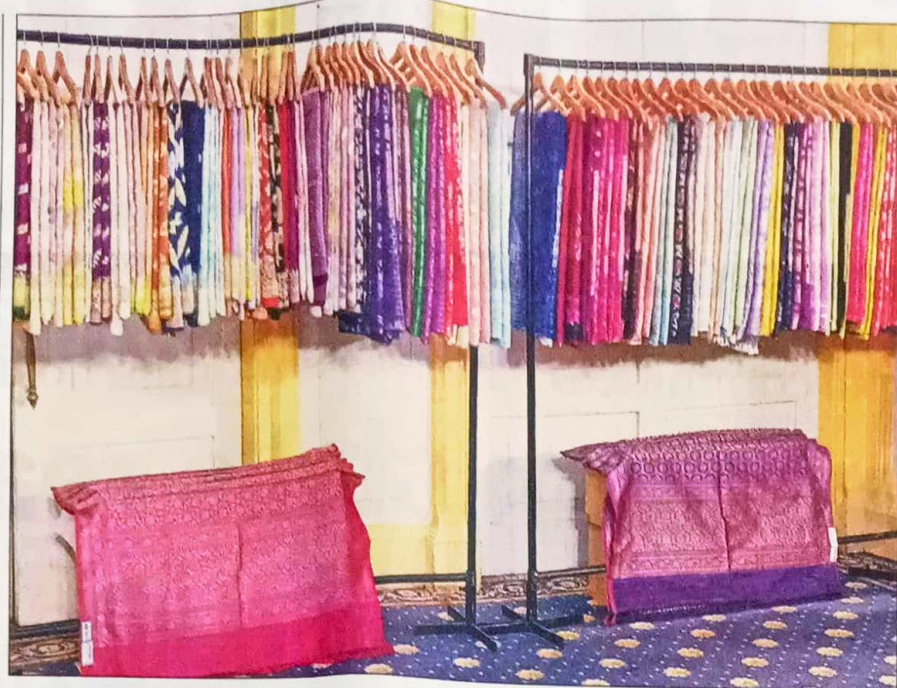
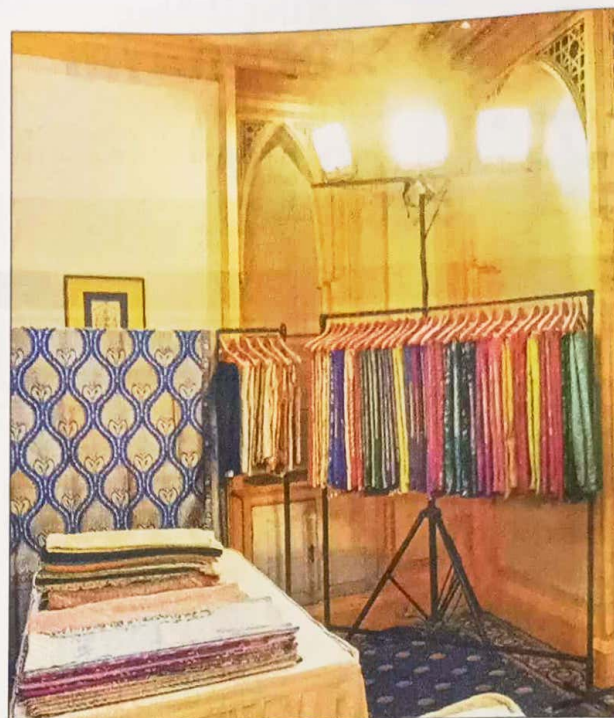




Saris at the exhibition by Nilambari from Benaras at a city hotel on Monday.
Pictures by Sanat Kr Sinha



A Nilambari sari (draped, left) among other exhibits

Weaving heritage against fast fashion

JHINUK MAZUMDAR

Calcutta: A sari is not fast fashion; it is a piece of hand-crafted heritage, an emotion handed down from mothers to daughters, with a story in every fold.

Nilambari from Benaras does not just sell saris. It sells pieces of art that can take anywhere between 10 days and several months to weave.

But the popularity of the sari is waning, especially among young people, who are willing to trade the intricate six-yard drape for easy-to-wear clothing, sari makers from Benaras said.

"We don't sell saris; we sell handlooms and handicrafts. What we weave is not fast fashion. We create heritage, handloom, and heirloom pieces," said Parth Selot, a third-generation member of Nilambari Saris.

On Monday, Nilambari was in Calcutta for the FICCI FLO exhibition, organised by the women's wing of FICCI, at Taj Bengal, showcasing some of its creations.

Nilambari was started in 1982 by Girija Shankar Selot after he was commissioned to revive the Benarasi jamdani



Richa Agarwal, chairperson of the Kolkata Centre for Creativity, drapes a Nilambari sari at the exhibition. Niraj Selot (centre) and Parth Selot of Nilambari look on

weave, which was known as Nilambari. The Selot family, emotionally attached to the name, later named their brand Nilambari, registering it in 1992.

The family has been in the sari business since 1972.

"After Independence, there was a period between the 1960s and 1980s when much of the country's craftsmanship

had declined — from textiles to wooden toys and other crafts. The government had launched a project to revive jamdani handloom on muslin, and we got that project," said Niraj Selot, owner of Nilambari.

Nilambari primarily works with four kinds of weaves: cut-work, kadawa, jamdani and brocade.

The challenge lies in creating the right product — from its design and colour to its weave and cost. "If you like the sari, I don't have to convince you to buy it. If you like it, you will get it," said Parth.

Niraj arrived at the venue well before the exhibition began and ensured that every drape was neatly and carefully arranged.

But the family rues the "diminishing market for saris". Earlier, everyone wore saris, but that is no longer the case, Parth said.

Draping a sari with style requires practice and time.

"Now, it is difficult to convince a woman to wear a sari for an occasion. It is a diminishing market. Many of those who wear saris are not necessarily buying handloom saris," said Parth.

Looking around the hall, which could easily pass off as an art gallery, Parth said: "As a production house, we spend most of our time producing saris rather than selling them. Everything we are selling in this room is handcrafted."

"Every piece is woven by hand using the designs, colours, and concepts we provide. We do not curate from weav-

ers; we give them work."

The popularity of saris is declining among the youth, said Niraj.

"After 2010, there has been a decline in the sari market in Calcutta, and our supply to outlets here has become limited. But there are also people who keep the tradition alive," he said.

On average, only 50% of the saris produced in a year are sold, while the rest remain with retailers, wholesalers, or weavers, the Selots said.

Buying or owning a sari is not enough. One has to wear it to become a true consumer of the sari, said Parth. "Being in this business for so long, I know women who keep buying saris but do not even open one," he said.

Headquartered in Benaras, Nilambari has two outlets in Delhi and Hyderabad.

When Metro asked the younger Selot about opening a store in the city, there was no commitment, but there was "interest".

"We have always wanted to expand into Calcutta... But we are a family business and are still waiting for that one family member who can come here," Parth said.