

# A tapestry of tradition, creativity and learning: the enchantment of the Endangered Craft Mela

In the heart of Auroville's The Learning Community's (TLC) base camp, where the gentle whispers of the wind were rustling along with the vibrant hum of creativity, a humble spectacle unfolded during the sacred week of Auroville's Birthday. From the 21st to the 27th of February, the fifth edition of the Endangered Craft Mela (ECM) unfolded with its kaleidoscope of patterns, materials, colours and sounds. The theme for this year's ECM was insects, or 'poochis', as they are locally called.



Wood carving

At its core, the craft week served as an annual gathering—a fun-filled journey into the heart of tradition, innovation, and boundless imagination. It was a journey guided by the gentle hands of artisans and craftsmen, who shared not just their skills, but their stories, their heritage, and their passion for preserving the crafts and arts that have shaped their lives. The craft week is an immersive experiential learning week for young children from Auroville and the bioregion schools.

The air at TLC crackled with anticipation as children with their bright eyes filled with excitement arrived in school buses or by cycles. They greet each other to gather around the myriad workshops that dotted the base camp, eager to immerse themselves in the world of craftsmanship that awaited them. The crafts range from traditional practices that have been passed down from their ancestors, like three generations of

stone carving, coconut fibre rope making, leather work, metal casting, basket weaving with natural materials like banana fibre, palmyra, bamboo etc, wood carving, soapstone carving, cotton rope making, clay creations, blacksmithing, lathe work, sewing, and carpentry, along with local handmade crafts like making candles, paper, puppets, crochet, beadwork, murals, making peanut butter while cycling, upcycling, and fun activities like T-shirt printing.

TLC was abuzz the whole week, with craftspeople in their element teaching to close to 200 children in small batches, very patiently, with curiosity, inquiry, many a smile and multiple little conversations laced into what the little hands were creating. "It is amazing to see the focus, curiosity and fun the kids are having. No child has complained that they were bored or wanted to play", said one of the facilitators.

While playing a small yet significant part in sharing knowledge and opening doors to creative explorations, the core group has been working towards supporting the crafts and arts in its own way, by creating possibilities to be



Candle making

inspired by each other's crafts and to integrate them even further. One such advance that unfolded this year at the ECM was making floor mats from the coconut fibre ropes that were made using knots and patterns.

ECM draws its inspiration from the Craft Week at Marudam Farm School in Tiruvannamalai and has added flavours of its own over the last five editions.

One could feel a constant sense of deep holding by the adults present on campus, be it the core team, the craftspeople, or the many volunteers who worked tirelessly to set up the space, draw signs by hand, and figure the many logistics required when over thirty crafts are to be taught to close to two hundred children from various backgrounds.

As the sun began to set, the participants and craftspeople were invited to join an evening programme. Featuring traditional performing arts, including theatre, music, and martial arts, captivating the audience and immersing them in the rich tapestry of



Soap stone carving



Showing a basket

culture of Tamil Nadu and India, it was called "Kalairangam" (stage for arts). The first evening showcased Therukkoothu, an ancient and indigenous form of storytelling that has been performed for many generations in this part of Tamil Nadu.

The next night, it was Thorpaavaikoothuand. Selvaraj and his family, among the last artists in the world to practice and perform this Thanjavur-based shadow puppet theatre style, had the whole audience glued to the shadow images that danced, fought, teased and laughed. It was a feast for the eyes and soul.

Yatra Kalaikkuzhu from Kuilapalayam, presented street play called Paadam ('Lesson'), written and directed by Yatra Srinivasan and presented by the Yatra Theatre team. This humorous play, set in a classroom which looked and felt chaotic, had a beautiful message about conservation and waste management. The drama that unfolded between the students and teacher in the play made everyone laugh, for language was not a barrier. On the 24th of February, MaiyaKalaikkuzha, a team of folk artists from Chennai brought ancient Tamizh forms of



T-shirt printing

percussion and drumming to focus on social issues such as gender and caste. It was hard not to move or be moved by this traditional performance of rhythmic movement and percussion.

For the final evening of Kalairangam, Chennai Kalaikkuzhu, an amateur theatre group with a prolific record of serious political theatre activity in Tamil Nadu, presented two plays: Pattangil Ullapadi and NalVazhi. The focus was on the violence and atrocities faced by indigenous



Basket making

and scheduled communities who are excluded from participation in social spaces and activities. This touched upon deeply engrained social undercurrents.

The final day of the ECM was the "Mela / Fair Day" for children to display everything they had created. It was also a day when the craftspeople had stalls and the community could get their hands on precious local handmade goodies directly from the artisans. The day was filled with mixed emotions: the joy of sharing and the knowledge that tomorrow would be different. "This is one of my favourite weeks. I look forward to coming here every year and spending time with children", said one of the artisans as we shared a goodbye hug.



Mela Fair Day

As all of us process the buzz of the ECM week, one can't help but realise how learning spaces such as this may be a pathway for more such initiatives and explorations of the different ways we learn.

Deepthi Indikuri



A Therukkoothu actor



A Silambam practitioner from Mamallan Silambatta Kalaikkuzhu, Puducherry



Members of the Parayattu group performing