

Interview

GOING BEYOND PAPER FROM ELEPHANT DUNG...

During the recent Dilli Haat Nature Bazaar at Delhi, where the products made from elephant dung paper and camel dung paper were available for sale, *Ms. Mahima Mehra of Haathi Chaap* spoke to *Namitha Dipak* about her work and the collaboration with the *Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS)* to produce the camel dung paper. Here is the no-holds barred conversation full of words like dung, poo, poop, and we are actually excited about it...or at least the products made from it! Needless to say, a lot of the wisecracks emanating during this discussion couldn't make it to the final version.

Tell us about the “elephant poo paper” made by Haathi Chaap.

We've been making the elephant dung paper for the last five years now. It had been done before but not in India. Elephant dung paper was being made in countries like Sri Lanka where they use a different process. The dung is made into small balls dried and weighed and proportionately mixed with the rest of the material, and in this way, they know that paper of a certain quality is produced. However, what we do is make it the way paper was made years ago. We boil the dung and then process it. Very often people use bleach, but we don't want to use bleach, because the whole idea is to make it as natural as possible.

Can you tell us about the historical association of the state of Rajasthan with paper making?

Sanganer (near Jaipur) is associated with handmade paper-making. The *kagzis* (traditional hand-made paper makers) go back to the Mughal era, but the tradition died out because of the appearance of regular mill-made paper. And then some time in the pre-Independence era, maybe about twenty years before that, paper-making underwent a revival and became a part of the Khadi and Village Industries. It is now part of the small scale sector.

Do some people with a kagzi background work with you?

There are probably only four big *kagzis* left in Sanganer now, but they do have these small houses where paper-making goes on. But they have trained so many people, and transferred the technology to them.

Are most of Haathi Chaap products sold abroad?

We have been dealing locally also for over one and half years now, but earlier our products were only exported to countries like Germany.

What was your reaction when LPPS got in touch with you with the request to make paper from camel dung?

Just excitement...

Did you ever think of using camel dung to make paper?

Yes, we weren't stopping at elephant poo. It was very much part of what we wanted to do but strangely enough, we did not find that many camels in one place, unlike the 125 odd elephants at Amber Fort in Jaipur. So the collaboration with LPPS made it possible.

Getting to the basics, are there any differences in the properties of the dung and the paper from these two animal species?

Elephant poo is actually the easiest to work with. It has the maximum fibre so we don't even have to mix fibre. Camel poo is drier, and there's not enough fibre, so it needs to be added. We also have to beat it more. Of course the minute you mix some cotton in it, the paper becomes more uniform, so the products that can be made from the two varieties of paper are similar.

Is there some kind of seasonality in the production?

Well, all the elephants are indoors, so it does not affect the raw material. In general during the monsoon, the production of all kinds of paper is reduced. But we work with small producers so of course production is dependant on their capacity.

Has camel dung paper ever been made in India before?

I don't think so. If it was done, it would have been done in Rajasthan.

So the paper from camel dung is a novelty?

Yes, certainly. ■

For more information about Haathi Chaap products, visit their website at www.elephantpoo.com

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