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ICFC organizes Saree Conversations

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PHOTO CAPTION: Rupa Menon (left), Harriet Vidyasagar, Pavithra Muddaya and Manju Anand Photo: Tom Dawson

by Harriet Vidyasagar and Manju Anand

The India Canada Friendship Circle is celebrating its 10th birthday this year. After a very successful screening of the film Tied in a Knot on March 9th, India Canadian Friendship Circle (ICFC) together with the Indo-Canadian Community Centre (ICCC) Ottawa organized a fascinating program for members and their guests at the Rockcliffe Park Community Hall on Sunday, April 27, where participants were treated to an exciting presentation, "Sarees tell a story of women's personal economic empowerment."

"Saree Conversations" is a unique international community initiative, designed by Harriet Vidyasagar, Founder of Women of India (WOI) to reach out to NRI women across the world. The program creates opportunities for women to showcase their heritage saree collections, some almost a century old, and provide a forum for sharing memories.

"Through these inter-generational conversations we hope to engage with women of India around the world to help younger generations appreciate our fast vanishing handloom textile weaving traditions, techniques and designs and inspire them to help support artisans and weavers back home," said Vidyasagar.

With a dazzling display of handloom silk and cotton sarees as the backdrop for the event, Rupa Menon, coordinator of the project in Canada, also introduced Pavithra Muddaya, revivalist designer and trustee of Vimor Handloom Foundation India.

Muddaya had the audience enthralled for over an hour with her in-depth knowledge of intricately designed handloom textiles that weave traditions, motifs, meanings and accompanying myths and stories.

ICFC's mission to promote inter-cultural relationship between India and Canada found resonance in Saree Conversations, along with the goal of preservation and revival through reproductions of family heirloom heritage designs, to create not just sarees in a range of fibres, but also new contemporary products like stoles, sarongs, and wall hangings.

Members had several excellent questions, and by the end of the evening it was evident that everyone present would henceforth be looking at a handloom saree border and pallu with its intricate designs in a whole new light.

The fact that weavers today struggle to eke out a living as vegetable vendors, tea stall operators or rickshaw drivers with the influx of cheap Chinese-made copies of Benares silks sarees, came as a big surprise to many. Younger generations of weavers are abandoning their craft for other lucrative employment opportunities. Urbanization and globalization pose a real threat to the continuation of India's textile tradition, a national treasure that has for centuries been greatly appreciated the world over.

Communication between members of the Indian diaspora, who are interested in reproductions of heirloom designs, and the crafts people who make them will go a long way in helping to preserve the skill sets of artisans and handloom weavers in India. It will encourage and support them to consider a path to a sustainable economic livelihood and leverage a myriad other possibilities.

ICFC announces its next lecture and tasting event on Sunday, June 8th from 3 to 5 p.m. at the Rockcliffe Park Community Hall, 380 Springfield Road, Ottawa.

Chef and Restaurateur, Mr. Coconut Lagoon, a.k.a Joe Thottungal will talk about the "Tantatizing & Tasty: Cuisine of Kerala — God's Own Country"

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