

SHATRANJ, a variety of handloom carpet which is the heritage of Rangpur and the country, has had a chequered history. Once exported from Bangladesh to India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka it had earned acclaim for its extraordinary aesthetic appeal. Though Shatranji was produced profusely in the village of Nishbetganj (earlier named Parbotipur), technological advancement and colonial aggression led the craft to the verge of extinction. In a precarious situation, the weavers began to look for alternative sources of income.

At luck would have it, there were promoters for Shatranji. Among them was Mr Nishbet, (after whom the village was named), thana collector of Rangpur. He came forward with a plan to extend financial support on behalf of the government for the weavers of the area and thereby revive the lost heritage of Rangpur as well as the country.

However, Nishbet's dream of transforming the legacy of Shatranji did not materialise. Among the reasons was political unrest, inadequate infrastructure and new marketing policies.

Going back in time, the history of Rangpur has it that Shatranji of Nishbetganj was greatly popular in the Mughal period. In fact, it is believed that emperor Akbar used this Shatranji to adorn his palace in Delhi.

Over the course of years, the cottage industries of Shatranji have been set up in Pakistan, Iran and India, using the techniques of the Nishbetganj. These countries have kept their industries running profitably and have also ventured into the export market.

Another promoter of the craft is a Swedish organisation, which came to Nishbetganj with funds to revive the cottage industry. The organisation provided the weavers with money and purchased Shatranji in return to send to Sweden. However, a while later the organisation withdrew its support, leaving the weavers high and dry and spelling the end of the project.

Fortunately, help was at hand. An entrepreneur Shafiqul Alam Selim came



NISHBETGANJ, RANGPUR

Shatranji: An old heritage gets a new lease of life



forward with a creative plan to re-establish the cottage industries of Shatranji at Nishbetganj. Of the view that Shatranji might be a profitable concern, he set up a showroom under the name of Karupannya in Rangpur town. Later he engaged only five weavers to weave Shatranji for sale at Karupannya. Pulling out all the stops, he sought to once again popularise the craft in Rangpur as well as the rest of the country.

Gradually, Shatranji earned renown with new designs and weaving techniques. Today there are over 300 Shatranji weavers. Shafiqul is highly optimistic about the future of this cottage industry. "I am an optimist and believe that talent and sincerity can lead to success. Despite many ups and downs, I was able to popularise Shatranji in the country. When I engaged five weavers, Shatranji had no market. However, today

there is greater awareness about this old craft," he says.

It is a measure of success that Shatranji has crossed the country border and is being exported to foreign countries albeit on a small scale.

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