

How to fabricate a micro-economy

Designers are keeping village textile skills alive, writes **Jenny Brown**.

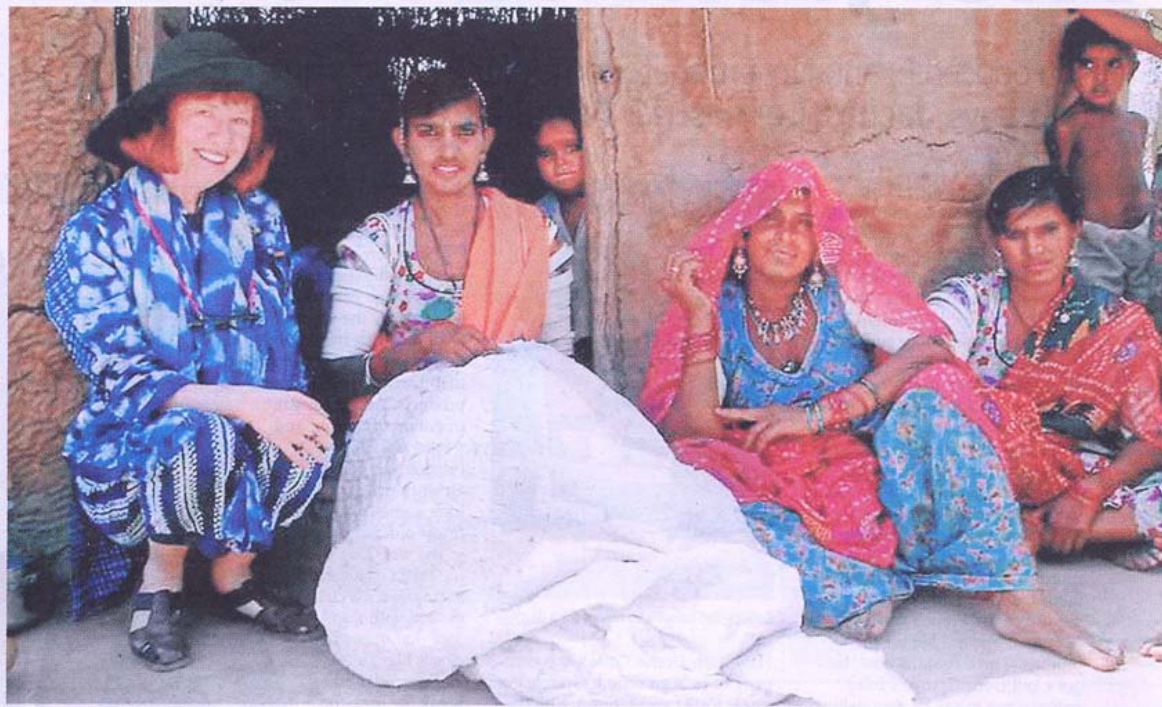
WHILE its neighbour China is flooding the world's markets with garments and textiles that come off production lines with such rapidity that they can be marketed extremely cheaply, there are remote villages in India and Bangladesh where the threading of a single loom for the creation of a specific piece of fabric can still take up to a month.

There are villages that continue to specialise in carving wood blocks for fabric printing, villages renowned for applique work, and areas where ikat, or fabrics made from thread that is dyed with vegetable dyes before being hand woven, are the traditional skills and the prized trade commodities.

These are the "endangered" communities where Sydney-based costume and set designer Sally Campbell spends several months a year collaborating on the production of handmade

quilts, tablecloths, cushion covers and appliqued organza curtains for her new range of home textiles.

Ms Campbell, who had worked on commercial, film and documentary production for 25 years,



Since Sally Campbell and other designers started collaborating with villagers, loom production has risen from one to almost 100 looms.

quilted cushions (below); and sari patchwork quilts (right).
gaining credits for the 1997 film *Oscar and Lucinda* and, in 1988, an AFI award for *The Navigator*, had discovered these isolated and often tribal-based craft centres during her career.

When, a couple of years ago, she became ill and was advised to pursue a more low-key career, these are the villages to which she returned to begin a new industry that gives old crafts a new "designer" spin. "It's the new me," she says.

For someone with such an informed love of textiles, the collaboration is therapeutic and mutually beneficial.

"I love it," she says. For the villagers, it is providing a new stimulus to age-old skills. "It is putting money back into these villages and keeping the crafts going, which is so important.

"Four years ago, one of the villages was down to operating with just one loom," she says. "Now, with four other foreign textile designers also wanting

their fabrics, that village now has 100 looms in operation."

Preserving the skills of handmade fabrics is vital for the local economies but also essential to create the beauty and unique qualities of trad-

thread being dyed in open pits in the desert using the products of the indigo plant. "I love the intensity and earthy quality that you get from natural dyes," she says.

"I love watching fabric go into a pit from which it emerges as a deep green cloth. Within five minutes, it completely changes colour to a deep indigo blue."

In the first 18 months of her new business, Ms Campbell has concentrated on homewares that include organza curtains hand-appliqued with gum-leaf and gum-nut motifs.

"I'm adding a different vision to traditional craft."

She has also been collecting vintage quilts and gathering saris to remake into patchworked,

hand-stitched quilts. In future, she plans to add "East meets West" clothing to her range to include, for a start, pinafores and jodhpurs.

India was the place where so many of these traditional fabric technologies evolved, she says, "and it is vitally important to keep them going against the nightmare of manufactured goods".

"It is important to value this beautiful work when everything everywhere else is becoming so cheap."



ditional crafts. "People from all over the world are really starting to value such beautiful work," she says.

Handmade and hand-dyed fabric is different. "I love its primitive, naive quality."

Ms Campbell has watched

Contacts

Sally Campbell's Home Textiles will be exhibited for the first time in Melbourne at Kazari Decorator, 290 Malvern Road, Prahran, from November 17 to December 1. For more information, contact **Kazari** on 9521 1107 or log on to kazari.com.au or sallycampbell.com.au.



Reversible quilts (above); vintage cushions (below); and sari patchwork quilts (right).

