



Charmed by a Handloom City

When you travel to Shirdi do not miss the little-known town of Yeola, writes Ilika Ranjan

It was Saturday evening when my friend and I arrived at Manmad station on a train from Mumbai. A restless mind and a fondness for Sai Baba were what triggered our impromptu visit to Shirdi – a town that always brings one a feeling of peace. We boarded our pre-booked taxi, setting off on a pleasant two-hour drive along a smooth and silent road, through sporadic drizzle and a cool breeze. Undulating hills accompanied us throughout. After almost an hour, the sight of a bullock cart loaded with colourful, beautifully embroidered clothes caught our attention. Neatly

packed in transparent plastic covers, they had such finesse that we could not take our eyes off them. We also saw a few women carrying similar packages on their heads.

Stumbled-upon treasures

‘What are they carrying?’ was my obvious question to the taxi driver. He smiled and said, ‘This is Yeola city, the home of Paithani sarees.’

We had inadvertently landed in Yeola, the handloom-weaving centre for Shalu and Paithani silk sarees. Paithani gets its name after Paithan, a town in Maharashtra, where it is hand-woven by local



womenfolk. Made from the finest silk, these sarees employ an art form dating back over 2,000 years, and are considered to be among India's richest varieties of saree. Paithani thrived under the patronage of the Satvahana dynasty of kings, and is based on an ancient tapestry technique in which multiple threads of different colours, including gold and silver, are weaved together to form a fascinating piece of silk. In the distant past, the Romans imported Paithani in exchange for gold of an equal weight. And history has it that after the decline of Mughal influence, the Peshwas of Pune once again took Paithani under their wings by settling weavers in Yeola.

Historical nuggets

Yeola's people fondly remember Sant Raghuji Baba – a reformer who

is also credited with being the city's 'saviour'. He lived in the time of Aurangzeb, who, during his quest to capture Peninsular India, would reputedly destroy any city without a mosque. To save Yeola, the Baba gathered a group of Hindus together to build one. However, the people were still afraid, because Yeola had no Muslim people living there. To fix this, the Baba requested some Muslims who lived in adjoining areas to shift homes. The city was saved, and today, the mosque, which is known as Patel ki Masjid, is to be found near a memorial to Raghuji Baba. Interestingly, Yeola also has one of India's oldest municipal councils, formed in 1857.

A short stop in Yeola

While the town has numerous saree factories, most women prefer

to weave at home – and one can see lanes of houses in which they weave intricate designs on nine-yard-long pieces of cloth. The locals directed us to the Yeola Paithani Tourism Centre. This 20,000 square-foot information-cum-sales facility was set up in 2014 in response to strong demand for Paithani and the locals' reliance on it for their livelihoods. The sales counter has a range of artisanal products. Wandering around the centre, we saw a training facility and an exhibition hall with Paithani clothes and Jardosi work on display.

The journey ahead

It was getting dark, so we proceeded to our final destination, which, thankfully, was only 35 kilometres away. The hustle and bustle of Shirdi, with all the energy



in its air, the divine chanting of prayers, and people's excited faces, told us that we have arrived. Checking in to our hotel, we decided, before heading out to the temple, to return to Yeola the very next day.

While in Shirdi, one must buy raisins and pomegranates – which are both cheap, and of the best possible quality. Also not to be missed is the local Shrikhand; my favourite is the Kesar flavour.

Shani Shingnapur

Next morning, we took a cab to Shani Shingnapur, a much talked-about village 60 kilometres from Shirdi. Shingnapur hosts a temple to the planet Saturn, which is believed to bestow rewards on those who do



good deeds. What is surprising is that the local residents do not fear theft at all, believing that their faith in Lord Saturn will protect them against it. Houses here either do not have doors at all, or if there are doors, they are left unlocked. Until recently, though, women were prohibited from praying to the deity, but in April 2016, the Supreme Court ruled against this, and the temple now allows women to make offerings.

Sugarcane juice: bittersweet

The route to Shani Shignapur is delightfully picturesque, and our cab raced through sugarcane-laden fields. At regular intervals, we saw farmers selling sugarcane juice; many had even set up wooden

swings for tourists to better enjoy the rainy month of 'Saawan'. The juice itself is extracted by a machine attached to a bull or cow with the help of a small log of wood. The animal is encouraged to do circles around the machine, thus turning its gears, but the thought of it being tied up all day like that triggered feelings of pain and disappointment. I tried telling the farmer to release the animal, but to no avail. I did not end up drinking any juice, and my prayer to Shani Dev was to save the poor animal.

Revisiting Yeola

We returned to Shirdi by noon and headed back to Yeola. Reaching the Tourist Centre, we enquired about manufacturers who could

sell us real Pathani sarees. (A word of caution: of late, fake Paithani has made it to the market, and unless one knows where to source the 'real thing', it is best not to buy sarees.) Happily, we were directed to the homes of some true artisans, whose hands adeptly wove stunningly colourful sarees and scarves. Needless to say, we bought and bought!

We also stopped at various factories, where the men and women were deep into weaving, deftly



swaying their fingers to 'Make in India'. It was a sight to behold. ■

Ilika Ranjan is an author and an avid traveller