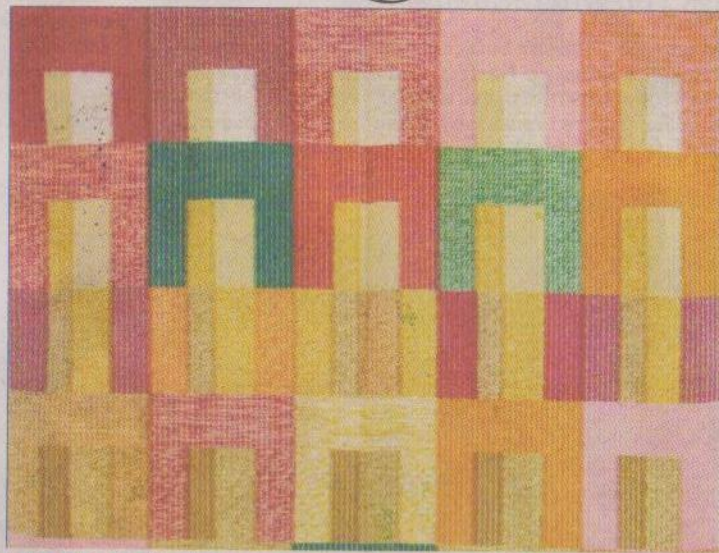


Illuminating the loom

ART An ongoing exhibition presents Sri Lanka's evolving traditional practices, says **SHAILAJA TRIPATHI**

Sri Lankan artist Tilak Samarawickrema's art holds out promise of new frontiers to Dumbara, the ancient weaving technique of his land. While the old Dumbara craft technique used in his wall hangings reminds the viewer of the ancient traditions still in practice in the island nation, the works are equally specimens of contemporary art, drawing imagery from the artist's immediate environment, including mural paintings, temples and mandalas, and other facets of his life as an architect — facades of buildings and windows fill up the wall hangings. They are on display at New Delhi's Art Motif gallery.

The spirited artist, designer and architect rescued the waning weave of Thalagune Udu-Dumbara,



A YARN STORY Detail of a wall-hanging designed by Tilak and woven by the traditional Sri Lankan weavers

the oldest weaving village in Kandy in Sri Lanka by inducing freshness to it. He chanced upon Dumbara mat weaving in the '90s, when he was invited to set up a design unit, Rapid Crafts Development Programme — whose two-

fold purpose was reviving the vanishing crafts and improving the technical skills of the craftspeople and designs. Before that textiles took him on a UNICEF consultancy to Guatemala where he worked with Mayan Indian weavers to de-

sign products to be marketed in UNICEF stores worldwide.

But the long-term engagement with Dumbara began only after Tilak returned to his land for good after spending 12 years in Italy. After finally locating the village Thalagune Udu-Dumbara, the versatile artist embarked on a collaboration with a weaver family in the village. Tilak gave them designs drawn on a grid sheet, and the weaver family transposed them on household products apt for any modern living room.

These wall-hangings have also resulted from the joint effort. While the traditional patterns laid emphasis on floral motifs, Tilak borrowed from his area of interest, mainly architecture. Strong lines, triangles, windows, repetitive geometrical shapes in warm, bright yellows, reds and oranges have depth. "The work in the exhibition spans from 1990 and it has really evolved since then. It has become minimalistic and more structured," says Tilak.

Shedding light on the technique, he says each piece has used 220 cotton threads. "What makes this

technique special is that it is embroidered directly on the loom. And earlier to keep the thread moist, they would dig a pit and weave it there. Ananda Coomaraswamy too took note of the mat weaving and wrote about it in 'Medieval Sinhalese Art' published in 1908," he adds.

Tilak, besides providing designs on a computerised grid sheet, also supplies the master weaver Sirisena and his family the yarn and dye.

The long raging war that affected the tourism of the country had an adverse impact on such craft traditions whose demand dipped during these years. Gradually, due to efforts undertaken by Tilak and other craft enthusiasts and agencies, vibrancy is being restored to the heritage weave. The tapestries and other weave inspired household products created by Tilak and his team are not only sold in high-end stores in the island nation but were sold at the swish MOMA design store in New York for eight years.

(The exhibition 'Contemporary Woven Art' is on at Gallery Art Motif, F-213C, Lado Sarai, till April 17)