

Embroidering Life

Tulsi Badrinath

Recently I came upon a small square of white cloth, now yellowed with age, preserved over thirty years ago in a dented sweet box. Nine lines, carefully drawn with a ruler, marked the tightrope over which my fingers had wobbled, trying to sew neat, even stitches. Nine different stitches for each of those lines and I called out their names, remembering Mrs Sampath's embroidery class: blanket stitch, back stitch, stem, chain, running stitches...In the space below, lacking a guideline, cheerful daisies grew haphazardly.

In the convent school where I studied, there came a year when we had embroidery added to our list of classes. This was in the fifth standard and I was about ten years old. We were asked to bring a handkerchief-sized bit of white cotton cloth, skeins of thread and needles. Good natured Mrs Sampath came once a week to teach us sewing. With great excitement, we first learnt to tack the cloth folded on itself and just as easily free it of the tacks so that we could practice again.

This led to attempting the basic stitch of all, resembling tacks placed close together, the running stitch. And with each successive class, the lines on the square of cloth grew until the sampler was declared done and the edges hemmed. Now as I run my finger over the hemming I can see how clumsy I was and how the stitches, spaced unevenly, lie aslant from each other.

The term over, embroidery was forgotten and we were never offered such a class again. I don't know what the purpose of this embroidery class was, teaching us as it did rudimentary craft. All I know is that the small act of piercing cloth with a needle, pulling through a thread and sealing shut a pattern delighted me. I was proud of the sampler, though now I can see I had no reason to be!

A few years later, I attended a tailoring class in another school and results were disastrous. A corduroy skirt with the cords pointing in two different directions at the seam, a nightgown that had to be cut open at the chest if it was to be wearable at all, and a sweater that was just one long piece of knitting. Clearly I did not have the magical fingers required to transform fabric into well fitting garments.

Yet, I never forgot the basic skill that Mrs Sampath taught us. In time I was to discover what a therapeutic way it was to cope with life's

emergencies. I could repair minute tears, camouflage holes, seal unravelling hems, apart from replacing buttons, refastening hooks and gifting new eyes to sari-blouses. It did not limit itself to clothes alone. I've covered parcels in white cotton, stitched jewels into my hair as part of my dance attire, and done emergency suturing on dance costumes backstage, mid-performance. While I could not mend some of the jagged edges in my life with the same deftness, the very act of dealing with these miniature crises gives me a quiet sense of triumph. With only a needle and a thread, dipping in and out, in and out, I have imposed some order on a square inch of cloth, on the rough material of life.