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## Thread of Hope

By Shoba Narayan | Thumbod

Never mind applying creams and lotions—if you could relieve a skin ailment simply by the kind of clothes you wear, or the bed linen you use, wouldn't you? The Handloom Weavers Development Society in Kerala, India, hopes so. The nonprofit organization—based in Thumbod, a tiny village of swaying palms an hour outside the state capital of Trivandrum—has infused yarn with organic herbs and plant extracts, and claims that regular contact with cloth made from this material will relieve itches, rashes and other skin disorders.

With a sharp eye for the contemporary obsession with Eastern homeopathy, the weavers have dubbed their cloth "ayurveda"—referring to the ayurvedic principles on which production is based. After cleaning, the raw yarn is coated with a natural gum, and it's then soaked in medicinal dyes prepared with pomegranate, turmeric and indigo, among others. "The idea is that immunity levels are raised when using these medicinal textiles and the body reaches a certain mental and physical equilibrium," explains Rajan, a weaver sporting one of the society's simple, hand-woven tunics.

Before you rush off to order bolts of ayurveda, do remember that it's still early days and more research needs to be done. But the cloth does seem to show some promise. A trial conducted by Kerala's Government Ayurveda College concluded that after using bedding, rugs and towels made from ayurveda for one month, patients suffering from eczema, psoriasis and (curiously, because it is not a skin complaint) rheumatism showed a "marked improvement." This was sufficient to persuade the state government to give the weavers a grant of \$250,000, which they're spending on a new medicinal-dye works.



The success of ayurveda would not only mean more income for Thumbod. It would also be a boon for nearby hill tribes, who could grow the plants required. India's coir industry—which produces matting and mattresses from coconut fiber—may also find a new market if weavers can be persuaded to work with coir as well as yarn. But for now, the weavers must be patient, and hope that the present trickle of buyers can be converted into steady orders. "[Ayurveda] seems like the next logical step for us," says Satish, a weaver who has researched ayurvedic formulas. Let's hope that it really can make its wearers feel as good as they look.

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