

SOCIETY

Covid-19: Chennai's quilters now make protective masks



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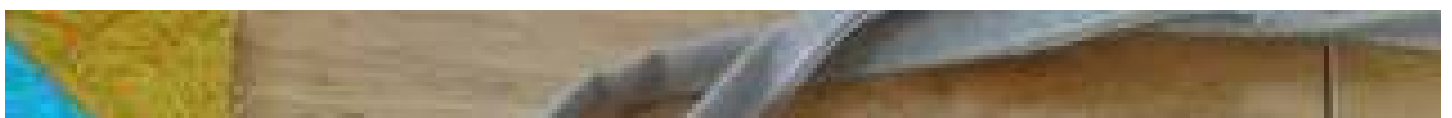
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The inchworms have swung into action. These members of The Square Inch (India's first quilting studio, where they meet to exchange quilting designs and techniques and organise and execute community serving projects) are a community of 150 or so quilters in Chennai, explains Varsha Sundararajan. Now, in response to Covid-19, instead of quilts, they are making masks.

"We have a Facebook group of quilters of Indian origin across the world. One member is Jaya Parker, an ER surgeon in the US. Tina Katwal, the founder of the Square Inch, asked her what she thought of the idea of making masks in these times, and she said it was a good idea. Another quilter Elvira, from Guwahati, shared pictures of the masks she had already started making. We spoke to more doctors in the city and they were encouraging too," says Varsha, who is particular to point out that these are not Covid-19-specific masks. "Masks are needed for other patients too. Those visiting hospitals for dialysis, pregnant women and others who are vulnerable to any infection."

She says that Madras Medical Mission (MMM) approached them and the nephrologists suggested modifications, such as making a provision to insert a filter that would keep patients safe. The inchworms got to work and supplied them with 250 masks in three days. Dr Rajeevalochana P of MMM is happy with them but reiterates that the masks are not for those affected by Covid-19 or for health workers. "These are for patients vulnerable to infections, especially those who come twice or thrice a week for their dialysis. They have to wear masks when they are here. We will sterilise these masks and distribute it to them. These masks can be washed and reused and therefore are most useful," she says. The quilters have also supplied masks to a maternity hospital.





Apart from hospitals, the inchworms are also focussing on making and distributing masks in their respective localities, gated communities and apartments. “There are so many senior citizens and their caregivers where I live. I made masks for them too. And for the milkman, the paper delivery person and the sanitation workers who turn up every day to clean the streets,” says Varsha. Once the needs of each quilter’s community is met, surplus masks are collected at five or six points in the city to be distributed elsewhere. One of the quilters made a mask for her watchman and a policeman who saw him asked where he had got the mask from. She gave him one too! Each mask they give out is accompanied with instructions on how it is to be used. The instructions come in Tamil, English and Hindi.

Tailoring the mask is simple, assures Varsha. “There are just a few points we have to keep in mind and we are good to go.” The masks are made of 100% cotton fabric. Where is all the fabric coming from? Varsha laughs. “All quilters worth their quilts squirrel away fabric. We call it our stash. I never thought I would run out of my stash ever, but I am!”

The inchworms have shared what they do on social media and with friends and family. “We may not be able to cater to demands for masks from elsewhere. But we will be more than happy to share how the masks are made,” says Varsha. She says she has had enquiries from as far as Nepal and, closer home, from Coimbatore. “I ask them to identify two or three tailors with sewing machines and we can tell them how to make the masks over Skype or WhatsApp.” Varsha adds that the quilters have also taught the teachers of V-Excel Educational Trust, and they, in turn, will be teaching others through video.

Admittedly, the inchworms and their masks have come in for considerable flak from “a legion of naysayers.” “But we have stood our ground. Doctors have approved it, hospitals are using it and our sanitation workers and those who are providing essential services are grateful for them. Fabric masks do have their uses. It is a barrier of sorts and the first line of defence. They are easy to make, are not patented and we are happy to show you how to make them.”

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