



**WOMEN POWER** A billboard painting conceptualised by Don Fels

# A tribute to our women labourers

**ART** Migrant women labourers become the subject of an American artist's recent works

**F**or Mallika, a migrant woman labourer from Erode, a small village in Tamil Nadu, a compliment is the farthest thing on her mind. And a pictorial tribute to her lot is quite unthinkable. As she drops to sleep under a shabbily, canopied starry sky she is oblivious even to the wail of her child, tucked in the cloth cradle near her.

But she has been an inspiration to American artist Don Fels who is presently doing a series of works that acknowledge them. "They are strong, beautiful and striking. They are handsome women. Even amidst the dust and grime of coal tar and metal they stand out. They even have flowers in their hair," says Fels suitably charmed by the ladies.

And coupling their beauty he deals with another contemporary issue that's racking his country of late: outsourcing jobs to India. "Here too the road construction work is outsourced to these migrant workers, just like many jobs in America are outsourced. If the poor are ready to do work that you are not ready to do, jobs will go to them. If labour is cheaper elsewhere, the jobs will be outsourced. That's a phenomenon happening all over the world. I saw in these Tamil migrant labourers the theme

of outsourcing," explains Fels who interprets the fallout of trade and world economics through art.

So in his characteristic style of painting on huge billboards Fels has got together local artists to express his aesthetic thought. Surya Noufal, Jiju, Raju, Sunil and Jagadish make the group of local artists, from Mattancherry, who are putting together this travelling show. Fels wishes to donate the proceeds of this show to the cause of these hard-working women. "They are dark and very strong. They do a man's work but are extremely feminine. They don a shirt, tie up their boots with cloth to keep the hot tar off and still wear nose pins and bangles. What is difficult for me to understand is how do they keep their beauty intact, despite doing such back breaking work and living in such hard conditions?"

And it is this human condition that stirs the artist to comment on the plight of the ladies and on the controversial political issue of outsourcing. The exhibits done on aluminium sheets, in enamel and in billboard proportions are in the process of completion at a godown in Mattancherry, which serves as Fels' studio.

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