

CONTRIBUTION OF TEXTILE HANDICRAFTS IN INDIAN FASHION- A TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The **Indian craft** is diverse and rich in its history and religions. The craft traditions are as many in India as much there are cultures. For years the **crafts of India** were embedded and limited within its rural communities but now the contemporary designers have revived them and given them a new look to present it to the world.

India has a strong history of crafts and craft traditions. These craft traditions especially in the Indian Textile sector led to India being one of the top most countries when it came to textile exports even before the British Raj, and probably leading to it. Due to modernization and mechanization a lot of crafts were slowly beginning to get lost in history, but the love of craft, design and tradition helped the revival of Indian Craft Industry. It has now become the USP of Indian designers. Surface design is the major contributing factor in value addition when it comes to Indian designers, Ritu Kumar, Rohit Bal, J JVallaya are to name but a few. This has attracted the domestic as well as international designers towards the Indian textile crafts. It moves the designs from mundane to special and has become the backbone of Indian Fashion Industry. Design intervention in terms of latest trends, technical knowhow and contemporary fashion needs have helped the crafts and craftsmen gain a foothold in the Indian Fashion Industry. This paper is a study of the rebirth of these dying crafts as pillars of Indian Haute- Couture.

Index Term: Indian Haute- Couture, permanent dyes, Folk crafts, Kutch, Dharaniya, Brocades, Kashmir Shawls etc.

Introduction:

‘The only thing constant about Fashion is Change’ said Oscar Wilde. As times change, so does fashion in the modern world. To be able to sustain, one has to change with the times. The Ancient civilization of India has constantly changed and adapted itself to the times, and thus is alive and kicking even after so many eons. Indian fashion has been classic for most part of time, Indians are not true believers in FADS, more often than not Indian fashion has been characterized by western influences throughout history or has been influenced due to rulers and foreigners wearing clothes that were different from the traditional. In spite of changing sensibilities of fashion, the Indian textile crafts have always emerged winners.

The Indian Fashion Industry is in its youth. It was conceived in the 1980s, born in the 1990s and faced some teething problems; after successfully completing its primary years in the first decade of the 21st Century, today it is a young and thriving industry waiting to grow and blossom. This industry though is new to an ancient civilization; it has its roots in the rich and vibrant Indian Textile Industry. The availability of raw materials like cotton, silk and wool fibers along with natural dyes and finesse for craft had made India the greatest textile exporter in the 17th and 18th Centuries. It is a well-known fact that the Europeans came to India in search of spices and beautiful textiles, which ultimately resulted in the British Raj, more by accident than by acumen. After gaining independence in 1947 from the reigns of the mighty British, the Indians are discovered themselves as amalgamation of the east and the west. Apart from using silhouettes from the traditional Mughal

and Rajput styles, they borrowed silhouettes from the west unabashedly and felt proud to do so, they felt modern, and yet they wanted to stick to their roots. After more than sixty years of independence, Indians are more comfortable in their own skin and have realized the immense potential and the gold mine that they are sitting on when it comes to Textile crafts.

This love for textile crafts can be seen in daily wear in India, people do not wear merely neutral colors, but they love vibrancy in color and have a great taste for surface ornamentation. Textile crafts are a major source of value addition and Indian Fashion Designers, retailers and even exporters know that Indian Textile Crafts are their biggest USP. Not only Indian Designers but designers across the world even today come to India to source their exclusive handmade textiles.

History of crafts in India

Crafts were an important commodity for world trade and they were a part of the economy in India, since ancient times. Trade links between India and the rest of the world existed from ancient periods. India being the home of cotton had textile trade with the Far East and the Western world. Indian textiles and their **permanent dyes** were accepted throughout the world. Roman trade documents mention that **silk** was exported from India to Europe from the 6th century A.D. The Arab sailors brought silver and gold from their countries and took back shiploads of handicraft objects from India to the Far- East. In the North, caravans carried woven textiles along the Silk route and went right unto Moscow by the Fur- route.

Under the good patronage of the early Mughals, India's handicrafts reached its pinnacle of perfection. Crafts like carpets, textiles and jewellery were developed into fine arts. The famed Mughal Emperors namely Akbar, Shah Jahan and Jehangir invited skilled craftsmen from all over the world and blend their native ideas with our own techniques and skills. Brocading and velvet manufacturing developed rapidly in India than in their native countries. But with the break- up of the Mughal Empire and the growing enmity between the smaller Princely states, local crafts lost their centuries- old local patronage. With the East India Company coming to India, the volume of trade reduced though they managed to strive.

England flooded the Indian market with its cheap machine-made items, which ousted the homemade crafts. A number of craftsmen were turned destitute overnight. Those who continued with their craft had to compete with the machine-made goods, that quality was made to suffer. Gandhiji's **Swadeshi movement** focused on the plight of the Indian craftsmen and on the need for maintaining the ancient craft traditions.

After Independence, **The Handicrafts Board** was set up to look into the plight of the dying crafts. Slowly demand grew for these items both at home and also abroad. Recent export figures show that India is lagging behind in many handicraft commodities except in the case of gems and jewellery items.

Despite the growth of handicrafts industry in India, the average earnings of the craftsmen when compared to other fields is very low. Hence the younger generation is moving onto other fields with only the elder craftsmen left over. The average age of many master craftsmen is around 50 years.

Improving educational system and lifestyles of the middle class people contribute a lot for the eroding of the native crafts in India. Cheap plastic items have now flooded the market and people have left out the age-old clay and metal containers. They do not understand the harmfulness of plastic items, which may react with their food . Also they have moved onto wearing synthetic clothes avoiding good, comfortable and cheap cotton woven items, just for their patterns and cost. The need of the hour is assistance for the craftsmen to improve their techniques, availability of good raw materials, direct marketing channels, credit and enough wages and socio-economic benefits

Categories of Indian Textile Handicraft

Crafts are an integral part in the life of an Indian, despite the rapid social and technological changes that are taking place. In the Western world, special artists create craft objects and they are considered as luxury items. But in India like many other developing countries it is the main source of employment for a vast majority of the population, next to agriculture.

Handicrafts can be defined simply as objects made by the skill of the hand and which carry a part of the creator as well as centuries of evolutionary tradition. It can range from the simple clay- lamps to the diamond - studded jewellery items. Handicrafts consists of objects created by skilled people for religious rituals, like wedding and celebrations and for personal use as well as luxurious ones created by specialized craftsmen for specific requirements. Handicrafts bring a great sense of grace to every home be it the poor hut or the opulent star hotel. There is a timeless quality in these craft objects, for they have evolved over centuries and continue to be made even today with the same sentiment.

There are three main classifications of crafts .

- **Folk crafts**
- **Religious crafts**
- **Commercial crafts.**



Bihar Folk Embroidery

People for their personal use, or for a limited client base create **folk crafts**. Folk embroideries done by the village women folk of India are a good example. There are craftsmen who are specialized in creating textiles or jewellery which meet the criteria set up by a particular group of people, usually a particular caste or community. They have their own distinctive designs and styles.



Bronze lamp used for worship

Religious crafts are developed around religious centers and themes. These craft items are connected with religious institutions and relevant ceremonies. Various religious places in India are specialized in particular craft items.

For example, Varanasi and Kanchipuram in Tamilnadu specialize in weaving clothes for religious ceremonies, particularly silk materials. Similarly Puri in Odisha, which is a big pilgrim center, is connected with crafts like patacharita- a wood and stone carvings.

Specialized craftsmen of a particular group who are specialized in a painting on cloth and particular skill and who can completely master the craft do **commercial crafts**. They even have sub groups, which work for particular groups, and their tools and techniques may vary. The Weavers, the Dyers, the Printers, the Goldsmiths and the Carpenters are some of the commercial craftsmen.

Folk Embroidery

In India, folk embroidery is always associated with the women folk. It is a form of their self-expression. They create patterns that are connected with their native culture, their religion, and their desires. In short, the pieces mirror the daily life of the people.

Women embroider clothes for their personal use, for their children, their husbands, the elderly members of the family, etc. The people connected with the pastoral occupation prepare embroidered animal decorations. Decorative covers for the horns, forehead etc, for the bulls, the horses ,etc are prepared. **The Rabaris of Kutch** district in Gujarat do some of the finest embroidered decorations for the camel.

Embroidered pieces are also prepared for use during festivals, marriages and other important social functions. The embroidered or applique work called **Dharaniya** is an important decoration for the homes of Saurashtra and Kutch people. Embroidered Torans are put on the walls during festivals. Long Pattis, running embroidered strips cover the rafters.



Mirror work in cloth

One of the important techniques of Saurashtra is the **heer embroidery** which has bold geometric patterns worked in silk. The Mutwa women of the Banni area of Kutch have a distinct style of embroidery. They create fine embroidery works with stylized motifs and mirrors of the size of pinheads. The Gracia Jats use geometric patterns of embroidery works on the yoke of their long dresses.

Saurashtra also makes embroidered quilts. Kutch prepares quilts with applique works and also makes quilts from small multi- colored cloth pieces. Bikaner has a distinct style of embroidery, which is prepared on woolen ordhnis with woolen thread. They stimulate the Bandhani effect.



Phulkari work

The **Bagh and Phulkari embroidery** of Punjab is a labor of love. The Phulkari does not have embroidery all over the surface, but it has motifs distributed over the surface revealing parts of the background material. The

phulkaris are of three types: one carries stylized motifs of flowers, fruits and birds, the other carries folk motifs and the third one sports stylized Haveli gateways.

The hill areas of Himachal Pradesh produce a double-sided embroidery known as **Chamba Rumal**. This may be of the simple folk type or the classical form, which has simplified versions of miniature paintings of Pahari.

Bihar has a rich variety of embroidery works. The **Akshida** is famous here and it has embroidery work throughout the whole surface like the Bagh. Applique work of Odisha is prepared in Pipli, near Puri known for the Jagannath Temple. Here special canopies, fans, umbrellas, etc used in the famous Rath Yatra Festival are made.

The **Kasuti embroidery** of Karnataka is a stylized form with stitches based on the texture of the fabric. Negi, Gavanti and the Menthi are the three different types of stitches used **Bead Works**

Transparent and semi-transparent beads are used to produce a remarkable line of embroidery. This craft developed in India in the 19th century because of the influence of the European traders. They bought beads as articles of trade. Unlike other places where the beads are stitched on cloth to form a pattern, here they are used with no backing material at all. A large number of different beads and a needle and thread are the only materials with which the craftsmen create chaklas, door hangings, belts, bags, pot covers and a variety of other things.

The design is woven with thread and needle. The work is done row by row on a tri-bead system, three beads being taken up at each stitch. On the return row, the stitching of the beads moves one position forward, so that a tight network is created. Usually the background is white with the pattern in different colors. The beadwork of Saurashtra and Kutch is very special. This work is not found in any other part of India.

“Indian textiles were extremely popular in the ancient world of trade. Inscriptions from the Middle East - for example that of King Sharrukin of Akkad - suggest the trade of textiles of the Indus valley civilizations form as early as 2350 B.C. They were exported to many ancient civilizations, mainly through the port of Guzarat. The records of the Greek geographer Strabomention the Guzarat port as exporting various Indian textiles. Greeks and Babylonians called Indian cotton as Sind and Sindon. Indian silk was popular in Rome during the early Christianera, and Egyptian tombs from the 5th century exhibit hoards of fragments of cotton material originating from Gujarat.”

The Indian Textile crafts can be divided in to broad categories of Structure and Surface. By structure I mean the crafts in which the design is incorporated in a textile product while being constructed. The examples of these are the various woven shawls, sarees and other brocaded textiles like Banaras Brocades, Kashmir Shawls, Naga, Kullu and Manipuri Shawls, Jamdanis, Balucharis, Venkatgiri, and Ikats like pochampalli, Telia Rumal, sambalpuri saris, patola and the like. Apart from these beautifully woven textiles India has a range of handpainted / printed hand embroidered as well as resist dyed textiles, which range from embroidered shawls of Kashmir and Punjab to fine chikankari of Lucknow, from simple Kantha to complicated Zardozis and sindhi kadhais to kalamkaris, ajrakh, bagh and bagru prints to bandhanis and leheriyas. Indian traditional textile crafts are probably more versatile than anyone could ever imagine.

Globalization of businesses and markets has driven consumerism to unprecedented heights. Under such economic conditions, contributions made and issues faced by the individuals working in unorganized sectors (like craft clusters) of emerging economies like India and China have not been given any attention by both practitioners and academicians. Economists reflect upon the employment that this sector provides and their economic reforms, whereas, literature on politics discusses the issues faced by labor market of this sector from the perspective of social transformation. Business literature introduces readers to the concepts such as economies of scale and use of technology to address some of the problems of this sector . Although there is still poverty to a great extent and this sector at times faces threat of extinction, but the individuals and institutes along with the Indian Government are playing their part in its up liftment. The Indian Government has helped this sector by providing design intervention, such as in the case of craft cluster initiatives, Various Craft Clusters have been identified which have been then helped in terms of design intervention and improved marketability thereby increasing the visibility of these crafts.

Analysis And Conclusion

Fashion is the latest entity in one of the oldest histories in the world. The age old India has been brought alive and turned young again with the realization of Fashion. The country that took fashion to be frivolous has now started taking it seriously. The change came about in the late 80s and early 90s. New institutes were set up to impart fashion education and the Indian government began to create opportunities for fashion. Lakme India Fashion Week and the Fashion Design Council of India have brought a Fashion Revolution in India. These Fashion forerunners for the domestic as well as international market have a huge contribution from Indian Traditional Textile crafts as raw material for fashion. Major players in Indian fashion are Indian Designers, Indian retailers or ready to wear market suppliers as well as small Indian boutiques and fabric shops. Indian designers cater to the high end buyers as custom clients or high-end ready to wear market. The next major player is the ready-to wear sector in the Indian market.

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