

The Art of Textile Making

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textile

Woman and children in Bastar



art

1.

“The sacrifice that is spread out with threads on all sides, drawn tight with a hundred and one divine acts, is woven by these fathers as they come near: ‘Weave forward, weave backward’, they say as they sit by the loom that is stretched tight.

2.

The man stretches the warp and draws the weft; the man has spread it out upon this dome of the sky. These are the pegs, which are fastened in place; they made the melodies into the shuttles for weaving.

7.

The ritual repetitions harmonised with the chants and with the metres ; the seven sages harmonised with the original models. When the wise men looked back along the path of those who went before, they took up the reins like charioteers”.

Hymn of Creation Rig Veda 1.130

When I embarked upon a career in textile design some 25 years ago, little did I know what was in store for me. I have come to love textiles and they, in turn, have taken me on many a journey of discovery, about myself and also the realm and reach of fabric. Working in India, I have been a part of the thread of continuance of her textile legacy, which has been a privilege and also an eye-opener. This experience has made me re-evaluate the notions and practice of my own work as a design professional, which has revealed enlightening facets, creating an awareness and understanding of larger interests and concerns that are beyond ornament and embellishment, highlighting issues that seek to address the larger ‘fabric’ of our society.

My evolution from designer to fiber artist is a result of this thinking. There is so much that we take for granted in this country, a realisation that was a jolt to my self-satisfied reverie of being a part of this rich and creative legacy when I encountered the harshness of the weavers’ lives in the tribal area of Bastar.

This experience made me face some realities about the prevalent practice of handcrafted textiles and the people who make them. It was Bastar’s stark terrain that highlighted the wide disparity in life-style, which made me sit up and reevaluate my ideas about handcrafting in the contemporary context.

I see handcrafting and its practice in India as an important element in socio-economic terms. However, the value accorded to it is not commensurate with this, nor with the kind of excellence we continue to see in this activity, despite the lack of sufficiently enlightened patronage.



Table Mat and Napkin, designed by Gopika Nath, woven by the weavers in Nagamar, Bastar.

Those with the tendencies and predilections for textile making, quite naturally, seek to emulate the rhythms inherent in this activity. The languorous mood of weaving evoked by the verses from the 'Hymn of Creation in the *Rig Veda*', have been more than partially replaced by the frenetic pace of mechanical and digital technologies. This also signifies the change in the pace of our daily living, our choices, our needs, our values and attitudes. However, in the elemental and fundamental process of designing, the melodies made by the shuttles for weaving are still essentially those that evoke an era of some 3000 years ago. In fact, in India, a country where many centuries seem to co-exist simultaneously, the textile making of old still prevails, posing an immense challenge for any attempt to reconcile the cultural differences.

Straddling the two worlds -of the poetic elements of fabric, colour, thread and texture and that of the prosaic and brusque world of the business of design where these elements and values are hardly relevant, is a Herculean task. Handcrafted textiles have a unique ability to embrace both the poetry and business of design and textile making.

Textiles are a fundamental aspect of man as a social being and such an essential aspect of our existence that it would be difficult to imagine a life without fabric. If you take away textiles, you change the entire outlook of a society, its norms, its facades, its morals and ethics or lack of them...you literally disrobe it! Therefore, the making and designing of fabric should play a pivotal role in any social context or debate.

However, when considering issues central to design today, textiles do not usually figure on the top of the list. Beyond style and comfort, the world of design is driven and determined largely by factors that deliver efficiency and safety in farmlands, on the roads and in the building of

cities. These are indeed relevant issues, but it is still nonetheless curious that textiles, which form such an integral aspect of our daily lives, should be sidelined and considered peripheral rather than intrinsic to social affairs.

Throughout the history of design, the criteria that have governed its practices have been ever changing. What design really means or does in today's environment is actually a rather perplexing issue. In its present context, design is not a concept that is rooted in the Indian ethos. Ancient Indian society did not differentiate, in the way we do today, between art, craft and design. In fact, there is no Sanskrit word for 'Art' in the way it is understood in the modern world. Indian Literature provides us with a list of 18 or more professional arts or 'Shilpas' and 64 avocational arts or 'Kalas' and these include every kind of skilled activity from music, painting, weaving to horsemanship, cookery and the practice of magic, without distinction of rank. Studies of works of art, from pottery to architecture, reveal that the same qualities pervaded all works in any given period, finding equally eloquent expression in the smallest textile fragment or elaborate temple architecture.

Design provides a sense of aesthetics in everyday living. What's different today is that the practitioners are disconnected from this in a way that was not so in ancient India. The craftsman, be it a weaver or a potter, was an important and highly respected person in the village community because he provided fundamental necessities. In a world where machines have taken over, people cannot be thus valued.

Today, with the advent of the computer, where it is so simple to recall images from any era or area of the globe, all you really need, to be a competent yet successful textile designer, are some good computer skills, training and a little imagination. There is very little involvement and

engagement in terms of creativity in this process. And what one sees in relation to textiles in India, is basically good adaptations of designs or just some good marketing of vintage ideas.

We know that textile making is an ancient activity. In India, generations have taken pride in the achievements of the craftsmen who made fabrics that brought dignity and self respect to the wearer, which in turn inspired the skill of millions of weavers, dyers and printers towards a creation of some stupendous fabrics. This would not have been possible if commercial prudence alone governed the making of the material.

As a designer of textiles, I have been greatly inspired by the Indian tradition of handcrafting. In addition to this, what drives me to peruse the idea of textiles/fiber as art arises from the fact that digital technologies do not, in themselves, cultivate an excellence in creativity. And nor does the business of design, in a world that is driven by a pace which defies basic human tendencies. Also, I do not believe that commerce per se allows us to explore the greater creative potential of any medium. In this sense, fiber art for me, became a natural corollary to textile design, evolving through its process, rather than extraneous to it.

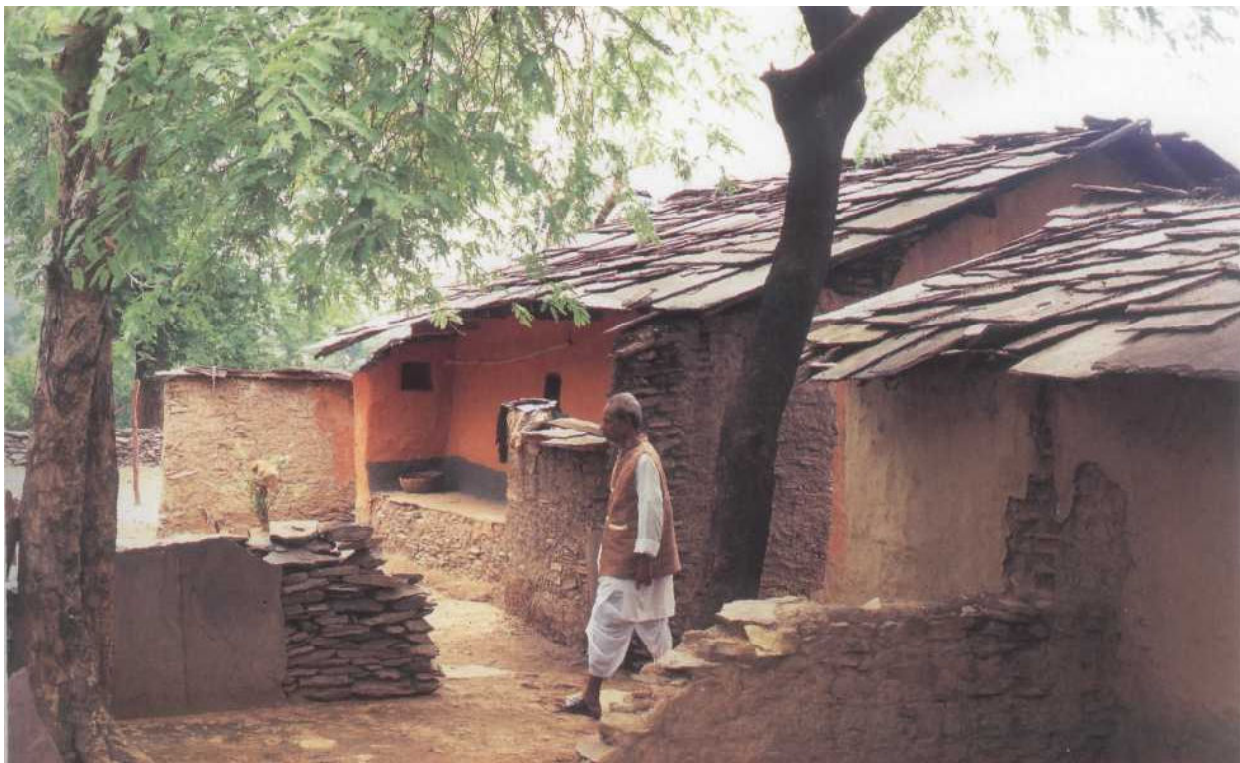
To enable creative people to define a sense of aesthetics that is truly in their own voice, it needs to be nurtured.

This cannot be done at the speed of the *Shinkansen Express* (Bullet Train). Ideas need time, encouragement and indulgence in order to grow. I am not satisfied with merely good adaptations of designs. It is a passion for greater excellence in the realm of textile making that motivates me to explore textile designing beyond the parameters of form, function or style.

Fiber art is not without its historical context in other parts of the world, nor does it presently have any real bearing on the practice of textile design. In fact, it is to be noted that fiber artists, more often than not, have a background of training in textile designing and making processes, but often choose to explore this as art rather than design.

The notion of textiles as art is not something that this century (or even the previous one) has invented. This idea was merely given a new lease of life with the Arts and Crafts movement in England in the latter half of the nineteenth century, ironically, because of the inferior products of mechanisation in its early stages. Fiber art was a fall-out of William Morris' ideology to provide a continuance of excellence in creativity that handcrafted produce boasted of, which machines couldn't replicate as they do today. This movement spearheaded a legacy of studio weavers and potters that led to a revised genre of fabric making - fiber art as we know it today.

The village of Tokapal, Bastar. A master weaver is seen in the frame.



Fiber artists the world over are highly educated individuals with a bachelor or masters degree in Fiber/Textiles. Today, they represent the 'craftsmen' in a western world that is totally mechanised in its textile production facilities. In India, we still have a vast body of people who are employed in the making of handcrafted textiles, right across the country. However, most are not well-educated and the activity is not a largely profitable one, all the more impoverished because of the pace and expense of business that has evolved. Today, the craftsmen are virtually relegated to the rank of skilled labour, as opposed to the bygone eras when they were cherished for the fabrics they made. This role is now being donned by the fashion designer, who in turn contributes to the livelihood of the craftsmen they employ, but the involvement with the fabric they are weaving or embroidering is no longer a part of their self expression, nor can they relate to the sense of aesthetics they are giving shape to.

India today, is a complex society. The disparities in lifestyle are obscene, yet ignored for the most part in a bid to compete with our counterparts in the rest of the world. There is a growing insensitivity to social concerns among the middle class, which is urban and influenced by the west in its education and aspirations. Ironically, much of what is designed and produced to provide for this market or even to be exported to the rest of the world, is crafted/ produced by a section of this country's populace that can

barely eke out a decent living.

Designing to provide for the aspirations of the educated urban elite, without considering the plight of those who are a part of this process of production, can only increase the disparities between the haves and the have-nots. This does not provide for any kind of balance in socio-economic terms and therefore, neither does it augur well for providing a basic sense of aesthetics in everyday living, which is an essential premise of design.

Can design and designers alone address this issue? Perhaps not, but more to the point, can they afford to ignore it? In the past of some 3,000 years ago, Indian society excelled in design and design practices without detracting from the elements of a social existence that created a balanced life. Societies, like tradition, evolve through an absorption and adaptation of cross-cultural influences and therefore, it is not misplaced to consider the relevance of modern-day crafting practices of the western world as something that could augment our own current practice in this regard.

The craftsman-designer of ancient times was an integral part of village life, living in a society organised on the basis of personal relations and duties rather than a society funded on contract and competition. Being an integral part of the society he created for, his understanding of the need he catered to was as fundamental as his being a part of that

Unwoven weft threads, masterfully tied-and-dyed. Sonepur, Sambhalpur Region, Orissa.



community. Today, the whole world is his community and the market he is expected to design for is global. In addition, design today is neither an art nor a craft, it is a profession.

Being a professional has come to mean the putting aside of one's personal views and reactions, regardless of the situation, and carrying on. This ideal of the professional distances us from ethical, political and moral values. This has not been possible in my experience and interactions as a textile designer. The kind of situations I have encountered have compelled me to respond as a whole person, as a designer, a citizen of this country, and also a human being, attempting to devise creative solutions in a complex circumstance.

Handloom and handcrafted fabrics were once a part of every villager's wardrobe. Today, they are the privilege of the rich and the sophisticated and those with a refined sensibility. At a time when speed, precision and replicability are the hallmarks of production technology, hand-woven and hand-patterned cloth epitomises a product of ultimate uniqueness and luxury. This has also meant the introduction of the design

interface, whereby the urban, educated, well-travelled designer provides the craftsmen with ideas that could be suitable for a global market, which is yet beyond their grasp. This, to my mind, has diminished their creative skills and also their self-esteem. In imposing ideas out of commercial necessity, dictated by the times we live in and therefore creating a means to somehow keep alive the whole notion of handcrafting, we have taken away the 'wholeness' of the art of crafting and all the processes that provided fulfilment and enrichment to its practitioners, merely turning it into a business. Can descendants of generations of weavers, embroiderers and printers, who created textiles that are representative of India's rich heritage, her invaluable inheritance, truly be content with merely providing the skill to produce handcrafted cloth?

The textile industry of India, after agriculture, is the largest direct employer. It is estimated to provide employment to approximately 35 million people. Handloom production has increased from 500 million square metres in the early 1950s to 7,506 million square metres in 2000-2001. Therefore, the notion of handcrafting survives, but in my perception, unless the craftsman is also

Contemporary Fiber Art. Tom Lundberg, USA. 'High Tide', 5x4 3/8 inches, cotton and silk embroidery.





Contemporary Fiber Art. Renie Breskin A dams, USA. 'Good-bye Sylvia'. 29 5/8 x 22 7/8 inches.

the designer, its survival does not seem to promise a continuity of the kind of excellence one has appreciated and learned to expect from this activity.

When you remove creativity and self-expression from a painstaking activity, by imposing this through an external design interface, it can only represent tedium for its practitioners, who are then attracted to this work only to earn their bread. This kills the possibilities of exploration in the specific medium, in the context of material, skill, cultural ethos and utility, which more or less signifies death of a particular genre, leaving the production of such fabric almost lifeless without its identity. This identity evolves through the heart and soul the practitioner imbues it with, apparent in the visual and tactile quality it acquires. In ancient India, in the practice of handcrafting, earning one's bread was not separate from one's spiritual practice and evolution. This activity "nourished the whole man, *corpus anima, et spiritus* - in a truly sacramental way".

The present demarcations in terms of art, craft, design and business have divorced the spiritual from the rest of our lives. This is responsible, to a great extent, for creating the present imbalance in our social outlook. My own experiential explorations of working with weaving and embroidery as a fiber artist, have created awareness about the meditative qualities of the whole process of textile making and provided much relief from the stresses of an otherwise frenetically paced life.

In fiber art, one sees a diminishing of the boundaries that have hitherto defined art from craft and design. Here, the artist is also a craftsman and designer, with the fabric also encompassing a utilitarian dimension. This factor, because of the nature of its activity, which inevitably includes lifestyle choices, could go a long way in diminishing the greater divide in social and material disparities between the artist, the designer and the craftsman, and between a rural practitioner or an urban one.

Fiber art and its practices in India are nascent, but as a natural adjunct to textile designing, it should find a place of value in a country that has excelled for centuries in the making and designing of handcrafted textiles that have remained unparalleled in the world. In turn, I believe that the slower, painstaking process of its practices will provide for a more spiritual approach to living. It would also help preserve a cultural inheritance by redefining and re-evaluating the notion and produce of handcrafting,

without the prevailing delineation that defines art from craft and design, towards a return to the concept of design as the ultimate art, in its truest sense.

Gopika Nath is a textile designer and fiber artist, who works with embroidery. A Fulbright scholar, she graduated with a B.A. (Hons.) in Design from the Central School of Art and Design, London, U.K. She is presently involved in various art and design related activities, which include teaching, and writing on issues pertaining to art, craft, design and textiles.
