

Crafting Wisdom

Gopika Nath



Embroidered Kashmiri Shawl (Sozni) [Date unknown] Photo credit: Gopika Nath Fabric courtesy: Heritage, New Delhi.

"If I were asked under which sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has deeply pondered over the greatest problems of life and found solutions for some of them, I should point to India."

- Max Mueller

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nanda K. Coomaraswamy revealed to us that the foundations of Indian civilization lay in the hands of her craftsmen to which Jawaharlal Nehru added that "the history of India may well be written with textiles as its leading motif, for no other craft of India shows such perfection of variety of techniques as the making of fabric. The concept of devotion inherent in the traditional practice of hand-crafting, in ancient India, became synonymous with the creation of the superb excellence in skill and diversity of Indian textiles. Crafts embody the concept of utility with a sense of aesthetics in their making as well as in adornment. The artistic practices of ancient India imbue this with a spiritual dimension where the craftsman is required to become one with the spirit of his being to competently perform the ritual of his craft.

The history of Indian art provides ample evidence of the merit of the philosophies that governed its artistic practices, but time has eroded the relevance of this wisdom. Today we live in an age that defies the dictates of time. We live amongst a generation that demands production and ridicules contemplation, often defying limitations of being

human. Handloom production may not have been as advanced in the quantum of what is produced, because of governmental intervention and subsidies; and the traditional saris of Gujarat and Orissa may well be worn by many more than the village societies of ancient or medieval India could reach, but the creative excellence of its makers has become stunted and distorted by the practices of our time.

Technological advancements have made us, if not virtually incompetent to, then certainly reluctant to work with our hands, if we can help it. This reflects upon our attitude and frames its perception of the culture of hand-crafting that has been an inextricable part of this nation's heritage, exemplified by the fact that craftsmen do not get their due for their contribution in the making of any product. This erosion of values has huge implications for the survival of the practice of hand-crafting as a cohesive living movement. To restore these, a study of past traditions and practices provides a vital key, towards returning to and retaining the code of aesthetics that constituted the essence of the philosophy and practices, which formed foundations of this ancient and wise civilization.

In an era of highly developed machines and technologies that can connect us in seconds across the physical divide of whole continents; in this world of Information technology which

has virtually seduced our minds, we have forgotten a fundamental fact: information is not knowledge. This, needless to say, comes through experience, sifting through its import, assimilating and absorbing its wisdom. Age brings wisdom for no other reason than the experiences she has weathered. India is one of the oldest civilizations of this world. The discoveries of Mohenjodaro and Harappa have informed us of the degree of sophistication that existed in terms of meticulous town planning, underground drainage systems, textile dyeing and printing and more, in these excavated cities that were built some 5000 years ago.

A civilization, with its accrual of vast and deepening experiences, imbues the life of its people with a sense of aesthetics peculiar to them. This becomes their 'style'.

The India of today is far removed from the civilization she was. A young nation of little more than half a century old, she is still too young to have developed a style and therefore in the process of evolving her own sense of aesthetics, emulates that of others. Her focus however is not the 'style' of the India of yore, the ancient civilization that is part of our inherited psyche, but the Western world, whose technological obsession and might have cast a shadow on the wisdom of an ancient society and its 'style'. We are mesmerized by the sleekness of modern design that glorifies the power of consumerism, and of mechanization and digital technologies, without realizing that this is robbing us of a vital aesthetic and spiritual quotient. In making us so accessible to each other, dependent upon 'things'



Jamewar Shawl, Kashmir (approx. 100 years old)

Photo credit: Gopika Nath Fabric courtesy: Heritage, New Delhi.

Bandhini Uanmagar, Gujarat! Same [contemporary]
Photo credit: Gopika Nath Fabric courtesy: Heritage, New Delhi.



and machines for most of our daily living, we are taken away from the essence of ourselves. This distorts the balance in mind, body and spirit, narrowing the scope for any sense of sustainable fulfilment.

India is a land "teeming with Gods and legends" and all aspects of living are intimately linked to religious, literary and mythological traditions. We live with celestial beings, bring

them close to us, by invoking them with affection and devotion like well-loved companions. In ancient Indian society, artists/craftsmen conformed to the inherited myth "that the God Brahma was the creator and all human beings had to emulate his example to become him". In the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (1.4.10) it is said that "*whoever worships a divinity as other than the self, thinking 'He is one and I another', knows not*". In this philosophy, which implies deep under

standing of the psychology of aesthetic intuition, the imager or artist I craftsman, was required to real-ize complete self-identification with the form. In fact, the whole process belongs to an established order of personal devotions, in which worship is paid to an image mentally conceived. This pertained to the principle which delineated that "true knowledge was not obtained merely by empirical observation or reflex registration, but only when knower and known, seer and seen, melt into an art transcending distinction."

This thinking was not alien to the Western world. Dante's philosophy of "who paints a figure, if he cannot be it cannot draw it" was in fact drawn from the ideas of Aristotle, but artists like Leonardo da Vinci contradicted this by saying that "the painter paints himself" where he identified not with the painter's essence but the 'accidents' of his being, his physiognomy, etc. This idea was adopted and formed the practice of art in Europe and America but from the ancient Indian point of view, any such reflection of the person, of the artist in his work was regarded as a defect.

Of India and her wisdom, it has been said, that "more than five thousand years ago, while the forefathers of Britain and Gaul, Greek and Latin, were roaming the vast forests of Europe in search of food, true barbarians; the Hindu was already engaged in pondering the mystery of life and death, which we now know to be one." Much of India's spiri-

tual teachings, which have been arrived at through deep study that has penetrated the veil of existence, are devoted to sublimating the ego as opposed to exalting it through individual identity and this forms an integral aspect of the way her artists/craftsmen have also worked. However, much of this has changed with the adoption of Western art practices which have resulted in changing the artistic and spiritual equation, where the spiritual quotient is greatly diminished.

This change has also imposed a hitherto unknown distinction between the arts, where painting and sculpture are ranked above pottery and weaving and the self-indulgent expression of an artist, which had no purpose beyond its expression and was considered pitiable rather than heroic, is now lauded above the dimensions of function and utility which defined the notions of art in earlier times. In a world that applauds the individual identity and exalts the ego, the norms, practices and discipline of ancient India are virtually redundant. Hand-crafting was part of the arts of ancient India, where there was no distinction made between the fine and decorative arts. The 64 kalas or evocational arts included every kind of skilled activity from music, painting, weaving to cook-

ing and kissing without any distinction, "all being equally of angelic origin". India is today widely acknowledged for her spiritual wisdom and alternate methods of healing. Ayurveda, Dhyana and Yoga are practised throughout the world and these Sanskrit words form part of the lexicon of many world languages. The Kumbh Melas are attended by American celebrities and

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, two great sanskrit epics of India, have impacted the thinking and culture of the world right from South East Asia to Europe and America. The Mahabharata has been made into an internationally acclaimed film by the renowned British director Peter Brooks and local asian groups in North America are known to produce dramatised adaptation of the Ramayana, directed by

Weaver at his loom, Village of Bade Morenga, Bastar, Chhattisgarh 1998. The light from behind the weaver is the only available light. Photo credit: Gopika Nath



non-Asians. This great epic of ancient India is said to have "particular resonance for Americans, mired as the country is with moral, social and political issues not unlike those raised in this great epic of ancient India". The Ramayana is also an intrinsic part of the myths and legends of Thailand and Indonesia as well. This worldwide acceptance of an Indian legend implies a universality of its ideas which are rooted in the universality of being human and the truth of its tendencies that form an integral aspect of a human existence. These were not mere philosophies, but ideals that were incorporated into the culture and lifestyle of people. The history of India provides

ample evidence of this through a study of her artistic practices.

Great Indian philosophers have taught that the earth is a place where we must struggle to achieve bliss. In heaven only happiness prevails, but here on earth, it is the sharp and deep contrast between joy and sorrow which impels man to realize a third state, elevating us beyond the traumatic interplay between pleasure and pain, to a state of bliss. Many great masters have striven to find the true path of Nirvana arriving at the conclusion that humans could evolve to a very high sphere of existence through supreme faith. This is in evidence in the work of the craftsmen of ancient India,

who were required to adhere to a multitude of iconographic rules which minutely defined each attitude, expression and gesture of their expression in any creative endeavour. By their practice of devotion, adopting the concept of sublimating as opposed to exalting their individual identity, they expressed themselves through subtle suggestion and implication culminating in a body of work over the centuries, which display exuberance, abundance, variety and vitality that demands admiration.

The celebrated textiles created by the craftsmen, which emerge from this school of thought and practice, are said to flow "from the intuitive pleasures of



Detail of embroidered crewel wool rug, Kashmir Designed by GopikaNath Photo credit: GopikaNath

sight, of touch, of the nostalgia for indolence in the more leisurely activities, when man was nearer nature". This is symptomatic of an age where it was believed that "man shall have joy in his labour" and biological survival depended upon the correlation of the hand, heart and eye. It has been noted that before the introduction of machines in our country, there was a tendency towards perfection of handiwork in the making of things whether they were of clay, stone or fabric. It is evident that the early emphasis on the artist as inspired by God and through the ritual of crafting in attempting to emulate Brahma; the God of creation, imbued the act of making with a sanctity that inspired craftsmen towards such a level of excellence in creativity and skill that is not seen in these modern times.

Hand-crafting in ancient India, was not a profession or an activity divorced from other spheres of living. It was a way of life that nourished the man "corpus anima et spiritus". This ideal has been challenged with the advent of machines. The practice of hand-crafting is languishing in the face of the fast pace of life dictated by a supersonic speed of communication, which is the mantra of this digital age. Working with the hands is deeply linked to the formulation of ideas. There is

contemplation in a physical dimension, where "the culture of thinking requires a culture of hand as a subtle, sensitive organ. If the hand can open up, if it doesn't just work, but plays as well, if it perceives, then the mind will open up more freely as well. The hand's plasticity is the plasticity of thought; the concept is what is conceived." This affirms the wisdom of artistic practices of ancient times, clarifying the concept of human devotion towards and for the ultimate power of being, where the physical dimension augments and complements the process of mental contemplation.

If we enter the realm of the practice of hand-crafting and tabulate the process in our own minds, our attitude towards hand-crafting will change. We will then be able to see working with the hands differently. It will no longer be a 'cause' to espouse for the development of the underprivileged bearers of our precious and ancient heritage, but something that we begin to value, in the performing of this 'ritual', as an extension of ourselves, denoted through a similar process and activity. In my own personal experience of working with the hands, as an artist/craftswoman, I have noted, that beyond providing the opportunity for excellence in creativity and production, the pro-

cess also allows the time, space and dignity of pace to come to terms with being human and all that it entails, which includes the capacity to retain some measure of emotional balance in an otherwise frenetically paced world.

This has led to the understanding, that it is the notion of aesthetics that needs to be re-defined and re-evaluated. It is the concept which marries action with contemplation that takes one back to ancient times, for then, aesthetics was much more than just pertaining to the creating and/or presenting an object with a visual sense of appeal. It was intrinsic to the very act of creativity and by extension, to living itself. In defining Saundarya as perceived by traditional Indian society, scholars not only include the 'repulsive' and the 'sublime', but state that beauty was an integral aspect of ritual, including the ritual of crafting.

Hand-crafted work is painstaking. It is slow and in this itself, defies the tide of time today. Much of the hand-crafted populace of contemporary India is uneducated, or marginally so. Their products have to compete price-wise with machine-made goods and these are crafted for a world they have neither experience nor understanding of. It is a culture completely alien to theirs. This has required the introduction of the de-



A Kashmiri embroidery craftsman at work, Srinagar, 2004 Photo credit:Gopika Nath

sign interface provided by the urban-educated, English speaking, professionally trained designer, which has made the process of hand-crafting a fragmented activity. The traditional dual role of designer-craftsman has been replaced by the urban design interface and the craftsmen merely provide skilled labour to execute concepts devised by professionally trained designers. These designers have little if any skill or knowledge of the craft areas they provide the design concepts for. The craftsmen cannot sustain themselves in this manner "corpus anima et spiritus", fulfilling this ideal of the concept of traditional practices of hand-crafting.

If the practitioners cannot sustain themselves in mind body and spirit and live by the ideals which defined the kind of excellence their ancestors created, then how do we realistically expect this activity to sustain itself? The populace of hand-crafting artisans in India today, count for almost one fourth of the entire world's population. This becomes an important criterion for their survival for which governmental policies have ensured that handloom production has been sustained despite the odds they have faced with regards to mechanization, but working for bread alone cannot provide the requisite sensibilities that generate qualities of creative excellence and neither can mere skill.

The Arts and Crafts movement of Great Britain faced similar issues with regard to cultivating design excellence at the dawn of industrialisation. Their endeavours to encourage excellence in designing through the ideology of hand-crafting, eventually led to the emergence of a genre of studio potters, weavers and fiber / textile artists, signifying the continuum as an individual activity rather than a collective movement of hand-crafting. This idea could be viewed in a narrow context, as one that would sound the death knell for crafting in the Indian context. However, the changes that have eroded the ideals and practices that sustained and nourished the concept of hand-crafting and its prac-

tioners, have been arrived at through the passage of centuries in time. To reverse this process requires perhaps as much time and also necessitates changing the outlook of an entire nation, if not that of the world at large. This cannot be achieved overnight and therefore the concept of the urban-educated designer / artist-craftsperson should be seen as a phase of transition towards returning to the dual role of the traditional craftsman.

This practice could augment and enhance the present-day value of work which employs traditional practices of hand-crafting, where the urban-educated designer/artist is the craftsman. Their work when displayed in art galleries, presenting hand-crafting beyond utility, beyond design; as Art, suggests a change which re-defines

the existing code of aesthetics. This signifies the potential for a return to the artistic practices of ancient India, which nourished not just the body but also its soul. A return to the dual role of craftsman-designer is a must, however it is achieved. In addition, a return to devotion at work is also imperative; to be able to imbue life and the work we do with a sense of aesthetics that radiates beyond the creation of art, to encompass the very process of living. Given that man essentially expresses what he 'feels', the concept of beauty in art, should extend to imbue human behaviour with the same code of aesthetics, where beyond the plastic and performing arts, living becomes the Ultimate Art, and "the artist is not

A special kind of person but everyman a special kind of artist otherwise less than a man".

Imagine living in a world where we savour time, nature, ourselves and our relationships with and to each other, where these aspects of living are as aesthetic as the artefacts that adorned the functional dimensions of life, living spaces and the clothes that draped the human body; where the wisdom that fashioned the culture of crafting, that created the marvels we cherish and encase in our museums, is once again part of our everyday living. Imagine then the wisdom that lies in a tradition of crafting, waiting to be incorporated or re-invented, towards laying the foundations of another great civilization, such that India once was.

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