

Photographs by Ankur Sultania
Styling by Rajiv Goyal

LABOUR OF LOVE

Expert Gopika Nath, who has worked with the Ikat weavers of Koyalguddem and Pochampally, writes on the complexities that emerge in such weaver-designer artistic interactions

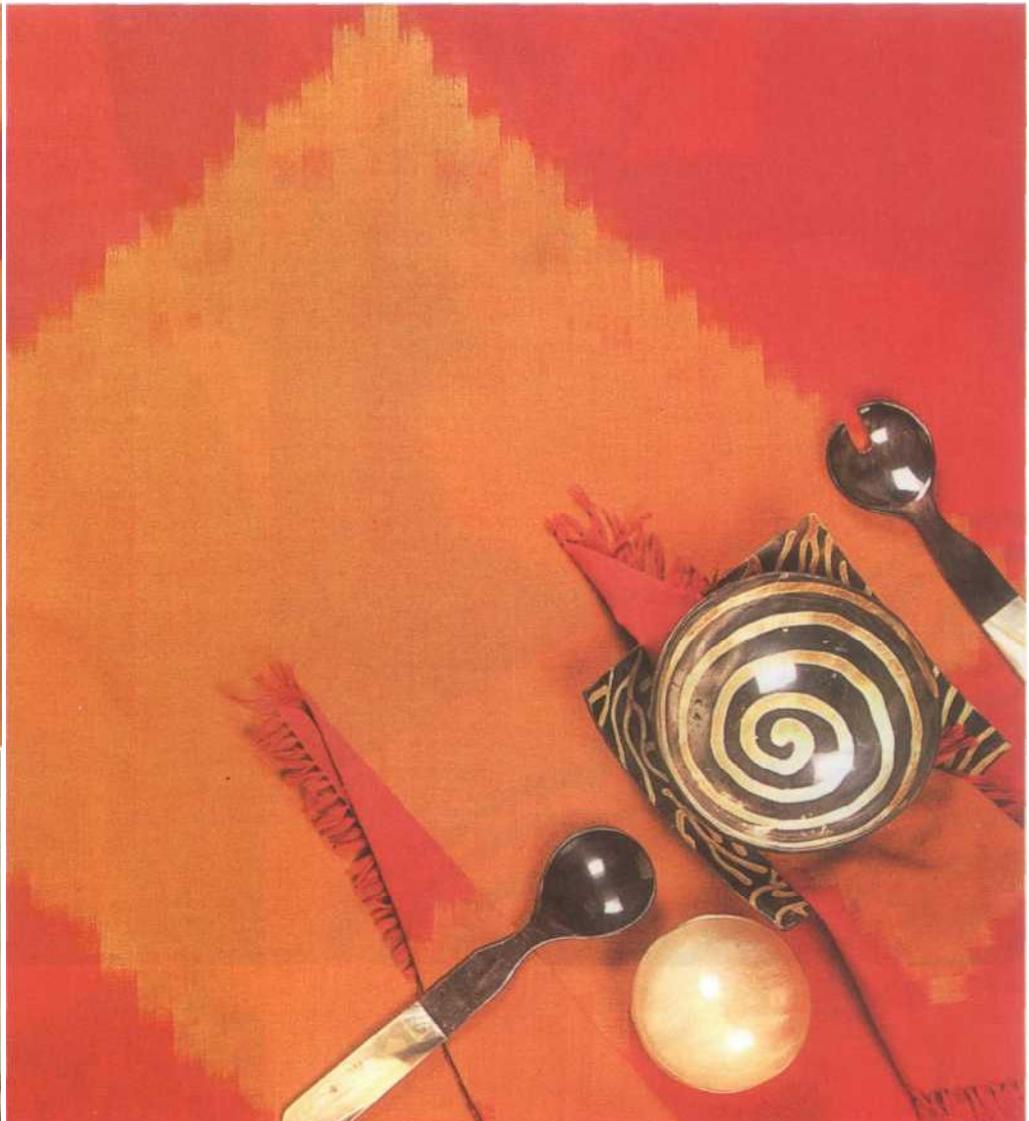


Clockwise from above:
A Gopika Nath creation
in Ikat, worked in Andhra
Pradesh; a Rothko
painting, Gopika's
inspiration; Ikat table
linen; Gopika Nath

IKAT IS AMONG the most prized textiles of the world. Woven in the complex yarn resist techniques of single, combine or double count, this form is of exceptional beauty and technical excellence. And the textile villages of Andhra Pradesh are famous for producing some of the finest Ikat in the world.

I have been involved with Ikat from the very beginning of my career as a textile designer. For my final year degree show in London, I undertook the grand

task of weaving some weft Ikat myself, by studying a book on *Kasuri-e* (Japanese Ikat). Very soon, I realised that mere concepts and the will to do was not enough. I did manage some good designs but I cheated all the way. The threads got into such confused order that I had to improvise with every shuttle I threw in the weft. The experience though got me hooked and augmented my appreciation of the kind of excellence that I have seen in the Ikat fabrics that



are woven all over the country, unparalleled in the world.

The designs that I have worked upon with the weavers of Pochampally and Koyalguddem are primarily done in the complex double Ikat technique and are inspired by ideas that have a foothold in both the Indian and the western artistic and visual vocabulary. Using elements from the native Teliya Rumal and the sectional paintings of the famed North American painter, Marth Rothko, I have

challenged the weavers to present ideas that are simple yet technically complex. The journey that has brought me and the weavers to this point has been rewarding but the wide disparity in education, social culture and attitudes have done their fair share to make it a very difficult task as well.

The villages of Koyalguddem and Pochampally are about 70 kilometres from Hyderabad. Mud huts, unpaved roads, the quiet rhythm of the looms,



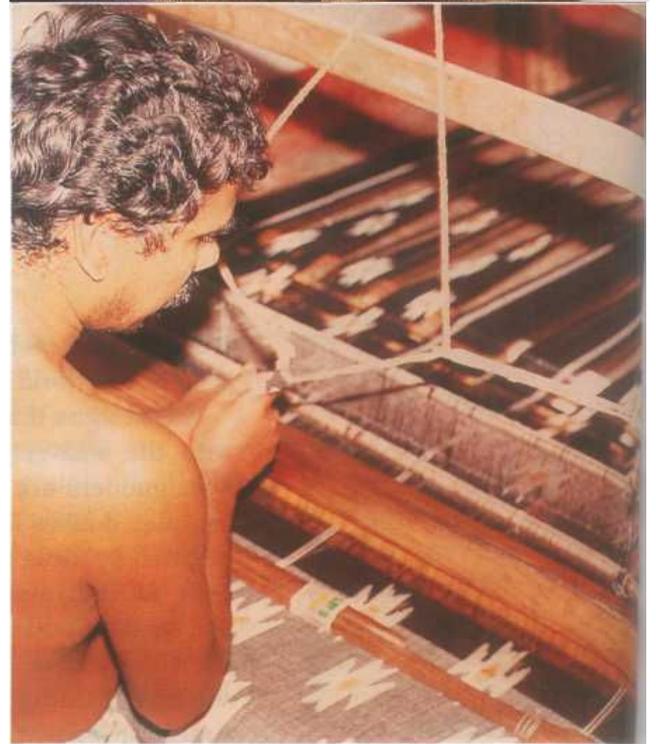
with the occasional auto-rickshaw parked in a corner, welcome you after a two-hour ride through a stark and uninviting landscape that is only occasionally marked with minarets. I have often wondered that 'textile country' Andhra Pradesh is so because the native dwellers were driven to create something out of their hands for what the gods of nature sought fit to leave out. They thence wove their dreams with dexterity, patience and passion.

One of the memories that I always carry with me, for it epitomises the simplicity and the economy of their lives, is that of the post office at Koyalguddem. A post box hangs form a pillar that frames

Above: An Ikat story in indigo hues

Above right: A close up of the geometrical Ikat design

Right: An Andhra Ikat weaver works on his loom





Ikat matching
Coordinates, the result
of Gopika's
interaction with the
Andhra weavers

the verandah of a mud hut. The villagers call this 'the post office'. Of course, there is someone inside the hut alongside, which is at first 'a home', to dispense stamps etc., but the entire concept is denoted by that little post box that would easily be missed in Delhi or Hyderabad.

It is things like these that actually compound the whole nature of the designing process because you are not working in an organized, hi-tech factory. Here one is dealing with incredibly talented human beings who live in an altogether different world. Like many of us, who train in colleges for a vocation, they have their training by virtue of a hereditary process. In today's age, it is not always easy to take this kind of

inheritance forward. They too aspire for the things that the rest of us do, but perhaps as yet, this is what they find comfort in.

IN AN IDEAL WORLD, the weaver and the designer should be one and the same person. One of the dilemmas that has plagued me on my assignments in the rural areas, is that in being the conceptualiser, I do in a sense, impose upon the weaver, ideas that are perhaps entirely alien to him and his sensibility. However, because of the pressure for them to create products that cater to the market that is beyond their reach and understanding, this has become a neces-



Ikat checks on cushions and flowing fabric length

sity. The design interface has become an integral aspect of the handloom industry but the underlying problem in the actual implementation of this idea is a very complex one. Being objective by virtue of being removed from the tedium and complexity of the process allows one to create that really does challenge the traditional visual and technical vocabulary, but this has its pitfalls too.

The weaver is doubtful of its success because it does not fit in with ideas he is familiar with. This doubt, coupled with the kind of effort he is being called upon to undertake, brings into play a certain resentment towards the designer who is not technically one of them, nor really an expert craftsman.

Ikat or yarn resist dyeing involves the sequence of tying and dyeing sections of yarn to a pre-determined colour scheme

or pattern, prior to weaving. The dye penetrates into the exposed sections, while the tied areas remain un-dyed. The kind of complex patterns that the weavers are able to create often involves the use of three or more colours and the basic process is repeated until the full pattern emerges. The process can also involve multiple patterns in a single fabric or a cushion cover or a table cloth which further compounds the tying process. The patterns achieved by the tying process on the yarn are then woven into the fabric.

Someone did ask me once why these designs were not made using applique instead of this painstaking process and the point is not about innovation in a visual dimension alone. Designing explores technology as well as creative inventiveness and in the context of Ikat, this idea has a value that it can never have with applique, which can be done anywhere in the world by anyone with some fabric and a sewing machine.

Handloom today must represent the excellence that can be produced by the hand, with a sensibility that reflects the meditative quality of this process. It cannot hope to compete in pace with machines and therefore, it cannot be produced in bulk. Hand work is very precious. We in India do not value this enough because there is an abundance of such fabrics at our doorstep. ❏