

Artist Statement – Gopika Nath

The deep-rooted philosophy of Indian textiles, their history and excellence is a factor that has always inspired me. I have this deep yearning to make as beautiful, skilfully structured textiles, as our craftsman did, and still do. But, despite acquiring the relevant skills, I found the environment I live in - life in the metropolises such that I have known, doesn't facilitate that kind of discipline. I need self-expression; I cannot work with skill alone.

Working as a designer, I have been fortunate to work with rural craftsman in different parts of the country. It was their predicament in this frenetic digitized age that took me deeper into the historical practices and traditions where I found myself resonating with the ideas of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. I was intrigued by the idea that crafts in ancient India nourished the man in mind, body and spirit and that too without self-expression which was the norm in Western art practices. He said that in ancient Indian art practices, this was considered more 'pitiable than heroic'. And yet, while working with the craftspeople, I felt intimidated in telling them what to do – there was no element of creativity in their practice, they were reduced to mere skilled labour. But the awe I feel in looking at and holding skilfully worked fabrics, never goes. These contradictions intrigue me. Delving deeper into these ideas, through my work and experience as an artist-craftsperson - embodying the dual role of conceptualizer-producer, akin to what it was in ancient times, I find some measure of understanding the ideas Coomaraswamy spoke of. Through my work as an artist, I discovered the potential of thread, cloth and embroidery to speak a language of feelings – of self-expression that was never a part of the ancient traditions of textile-making, which I so admire.

It was an awkward development. Coming from a culture rich in myriad, skilfully created fabrics, how did my art practice really fit into the inherited framework that I admired? My interest in knowing, took me on a historical journey where reading and researching led me to see that the kind of ideas I was bringing forth, where thread was a metaphor life, was not something that I had invented. This existed more than 2500 years ago, where the ancients used textile-making terminology to speak of life-philosophies, in the Rg Veda. The saint-poets Kabir, Namdev and others have also used cloth with reference to the fabric of being, and more in this vein. Reassured, I continued with the idea. But, instead of embroidering by following a prescribed pattern – working to perfect the stitching technique, I deconstructed traditional stitches and created my own stitch vocabulary. I was making lines and marks that were traditionally inspired, yet treated with irreverence not visible in embroidery practise of yore. Why was I doing this?

The quest continues. Constructing to deconstruct also continues. I am beginning to see that one really does need a very quiet and orderly mind to be able to work in any kind of structured way. In our chaotic world, we function more through the intellect than our feelings, which in turn become suppressed and make their presence felt in destructive ways. Something that our feelings were never meant to do. Creative self-expression, in that sense, seems to serve towards containing this destructive potential. And, even if this was not part of the practices in ancient India, maybe it could help a return to that tradition where, as Coomaraswamy told us: 'an artist was not a special kind of person, but everyman a special kind of artist otherwise less than a man'.

Through this process of discovery and recovery of the power of feelings, the deconstructed threads also lend themselves towards bringing renewed attention and value to the practice of embroidery - one of the many crafts of the ancient world.

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