

DYEING THREADS



Imagine a time long, long ago, when men celebrated life through the fabric they wove and wore. Behold the genius of a people that devised the means to decorate fabric by tying and dyeing delicate strands of unwoven thread. Applaud the skill that perfected this art as well as the social conditions that supported such artistic development, of a time-intensive process of dyeing and weaving, rather than performing the more routine domestic chores of daily living. And then, let's celebrate the textile making process that creates the veritable treasure of Ikat fabrics inherited by us in this contemporary age.

Meticulously tied and dyed, in accordance with a conceived plan, thread by thread, inch by inch, the pattern is formed. Woven, it then unfolds to enrich our lives. Silk or cotton yarns tied with fine cotton thread, pineapple fibre or even rubber strips cut from discarded cycle tyre tubes, this unique method of resist dyeing called Ikat, holds a very special place of reverence in my life. A source of great inspiration, it has provided me with many challenging moments as a designer and fascinated me from my student days. Just once, many years ago, I tried my hand at creating some fabric using this technique. Needless to say I made an absolute mess, but the chaos of that moment, defined a turning point in my life, generating respect and awe for a fabric I only then, truly began to discover the value of.

The frescoes of the Ajanta caves lend testimony to the fact that Ikat is an ancient art which is centuries old. However Ikat making is not specific to the Indian subcontinent alone. The very name Ikat is derived from the Malay word *Mengikat*, which means to tie, knot or wind around. Ikat fabrics are found in India, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, South America, Africa, Central Asia and Japan.

By its nature fabric is fragile and does not exist for more than a few centuries at a time. This makes it extremely difficult to determine exactly where a particular technique may

have conclusively originated. There are known links between Ikat production in India and South-East Asia, where *Patola* (double Ikat) from Gujarat was exported to Indonesia for use by the royal families. Ancient trading routes have also linked India with Central Asia and Ikat is known to have been produced in several pre-Columbian Central and South American cultures, which have no evident link to the other fabrics of this kind. Therefore the general consensus is that the art of Ikat dyeing and weaving, probably developed in several different locations independently, although Indonesia and Malaysia were known to be directly influenced and inspired by the Gujarati *Patola* that found its way to their shores by virtue of the spice route.

The patterns, rituals, symbolism and culture of the craft of Ikat vary in each of the countries it is practised in, which become their distinguishing features. Ikat is practiced with surprising variety in different parts of India. In Andhra Pradesh, famous for its *Telia Rumal* (name derived from use of *tel* or oil in the dyeing process) and *Pochampally* sarees, the making of Ikat is not more than two generations old and this lends itself well for developing contemporary designs. Chirala, Pochampally, Puttapaka and Koyyalguddem are the main Ikat weaving centres in Andhra Pradesh.

Gujarat is perhaps the oldest centre for Ikat fabrics in India, best known for the famed *Patola* sarees which have many myths associated with them. Brides from affluent homes are said to wear a *Patola* saree for their wedding ceremony because this highly prized textile is deemed to be auspicious. Medicinal and magical properties have also been accorded to the *Patola* for it is believed to be capable of dispelling disease. Mothers of certain communities in Gujarat were, at one time, required to wear this during certain stages of their pregnancy. Orissa is another major centre for Ikat weaving whose character is quite distinct from that of Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. Each area has certain distinguishing features which reflect the ethnic culture of the region.

This is also true of Ikat everywhere else in the world. Central Asian people lay emphasis on ornamentation and colourful garments and accessories to brighten up their relatively barren desert environment, which is aptly reflected in the large and vibrant Ikat motifs they weave. Japan on the other hand, with its penchant for minimalism, is represented with simpler and smaller motifs and minimal use of colour. In Japan Ikat is referred to as *Kasuri*.

Ikat is classified as single, double or combination Ikat. Single Ikat denotes a fabric where the warp has been tied and dyed while the weft is a single colour and plain dyed. This is the simplest process. Single Ikat can also be weft based and we usually come across this in the pallavs of sarees from Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. Double Ikat is exceedingly complex for it involves the tying and dyeing of both the warp and weft threads to form a singular pattern, which when woven is enmeshed such that the dyed patterns and colours align almost perfectly. The *Patola* of Gujarat is perhaps the finest example of this type of Ikat. This Ikat style is usually accompanied by a kind of hazy shadow or fuzziness (usually white), around the motif, where the dyed colour may have over-run its defined/tied boundary. In some regions it is even considered desirable. The Ikat of Central Asia is called '*Abra*', meaning cloud, simply because of this effect. Needless to

say, the greater the skill there is, the less this fuzziness is evident in the woven fabric. Combination Ikat usually combines some other weaving technique along with Ikat, such as the *Bandhas* of Orissa and the traditional fish and conch shell motifs you find along saree borders.

Ikat fabrics have the distinction of being among the most highly prized textiles of the world. Revered by generations of nobility, treasured in the finest museums across the globe, their beauty lies enmeshed in their rich visual texture of detailed, intricate patterns and in a precision bound technique. For many, Ikat is just another fabric, to some it's a way of living while to others the process is like meditation. Although it is not a dying art, it is still a relative miracle that Ikat is produced in this age of supersonic speed and instant communication. The weavers live quite miraculously in this maddening world of speed, yet beyond its cacophonic strains, continuing to bind the threads of a precious legacy.

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