

Folding and Unfolding The Process of Textile-making



“For me the joy of weaving is the joy of seeing form and colour gradually unfold to come to life through the movement of your fingers partly through chance and partly through the expressive qualities inherent in the material themselves. To recognize that moment – and to catch it in the play of warp against weft – is the essence of the art”

- Monica Correa

The act of weaving is incredibly profound. Most weavers across the Indian textile landscape would perhaps say much the same if they had this facility of language. The beauty of seeing fabric grow weft by weft and inch by metre on the loom is unparalleled and probably why the ancients also used textile terminology to speak of life philosophies.

*“The Man [Purusa] stretches the warp and draws the weft;
the Man has spread it out upon this dome of the sky.
These are the pegs that are fastened in place;
they [gods] made the melodies into the shuttles for weaving.”*

[Rg Veda/Doniger O' Flaherty 10.9]

As I leaf through the newly arrived copy of 'Unfolding', by Maggie Baxter, I relive much of my own journey through textiles. Indian textiles fascinate. For many designers it has been about reviving traditional techniques and for some it has been about creating a whole new way in which traditional craftsmen and women now engage with their skills. Whether it is Chanda Shroff of The Shrujan Trust in Kutch, who revived and re-invented 'Soof'ⁱⁱ or Sanjay Garg of Raw Mango and his outrageous use of colour, the contemporary trajectory of textiles has been an invigorating one.

Hand-crafting traditions once at the forefront of a thriving trade for millennia continue to enthrall and some designers have also incorporated digital technologies to stunning effect. While much of the inherited visual vocabulary has been elegant in its representation of natural forms, the contemporary is more abstract. And, if the stylised 'Mughalesque' motifs are used, they have been blown-up so large, they become abstract. Divided by folds that drape the body the full motif is not seen in its entirety.

In many other countries, Textile art has evolved beyond the basics of weaving to include site-specific installations and fibre-based performances, but India has seen limited evolution of this genre. Some artists do use fabric in their art practices, but it is the means to an end and not the end in itself. For artists such as Mithu Sen and Jagannath Panda textiles are part of the "theatre of assemblage".ⁱⁱⁱ Fabric is not central to the composition or concept but an accent to Sen's dark comedy or heightening the exploration of contradiction and duality in Panda's sculptures.

Having traversed the design route for two decades before deciding to work as an artist-craftsperson, beyond the form and function of design, I have to say that present times are very exciting for the textile designer, which it was not three to four decades ago. The quantum leap with which the textile vocabulary has grown is incredible. Fabrics no longer have the tired, worn-out look of regurgitated, old designs. The essence of contemporary textiles is more about bright hues and bold use of motifs that may have their imprint in history, but which have been used in novel and interesting ways. The internet also facilitates an easy exchange of ideas bringing a global feel to present-day textiles. Production limitations are no longer the stumbling blocks they once were. I remember when a client stated candidly that he could not translate my paper designs onto fabric, because the subtlety required for such work was beyond the scope of his production capacity. His factory had twenty buckets of colour that would be used for the entire day's screen-printing production. This meant that he could not create three different shades of yellow - with a hint of pink or green or grey. A yellow was a yellow and there were no two shades about it.

Today designers have turned entrepreneurs, taking on the mantle of production to reproduce the effects they visualise, whether it is printing, weaving or embroidery. They are no longer limited by technical limitations –if they want a certain effect they go out of their way to find someone who will do it for them. Or then there are those like Himanshu Dogra of 'Play Clan' who uses the mother of all contemporary tools – the computer, to create irreverent, shocking and unrestrained patterns and colour combinations.

The crafting traditions of our country, especially the textile traditions have been and remain unparalleled. The fact that they co-exist with and have survived industrialization and digital technologies say a lot for the tireless efforts of individuals, government organizations and NGO's that have worked, against all odds, to ensure livelihood for the craftsmen. But even so, they still barely manage to make a decent living out of their crafting lineage and the younger generation of artisans now opt for more lucrative professions such as computer engineering. The Indonesians once prized Indian fabrics such that the makers were called 'Klingas' or gods. Their reverence for this cloth was the basis for the thriving trade in textiles via the spice route. Art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy has told us that there was much more to these fabrics than the surface or

constructed ornamentation which adorned bodies and stone halls of temples and palaces. He led us to see that it was the activity, the process of making, which inspired the creation of such amazing beauty. It was not just a trade, but a spiritual activity which in effect prompted the hand to such exquisite crafting.

Design and art disciplines are segregated in this country and there has been little scope for interaction and exchange of ideas at the learning stage. I personally, have found the journey from designing to making art to be a long one. The irreverence and playfulness of Raw Mango, Play Clan and even Good Earth, enchanting as it all is, employs creativity that barely scratches the surface of creativity involved in expressive fine art. Taking a motif and enlarging it to gargantuan scales is a bold step in a county where the delicacy of traditional motifs has been hallowed ground. Printing images of Rabari women and film posters onto cushions is also another step that has no precedence in the textile traditions we inherited. The contemporary vocabulary of design has stretched itself admirably to bring in a whole new voice. The designer is the new 'Klinga', who ironically rarely works with his or her own hands. The craftsmen who inherited the skills passed down through generations of families are now mostly skilled producers, where few have come into their own as artist-producers.

My evolution from designer to artist-craftsperson didn't emerge from exchange with fine-artists. It arose from my experience of working as a designer where I became intensely aware of how little value was accorded to the craftsperson. Whether urban or rural, educated or illiterate – the maker/fabricator or producer held far less value than the conceptualizer. As a textile designer, I painted sarees using commercial dyeing processes and was often chided for my pricing, citing that the time taken to paint didn't merit the asking price, when in effect the efficiency of time was the result of valuable experience. Noting that my crafting skill was not valued in the way art was, was distressing. This was also something I observed in the communities of hand-crafting. Even today, the price commanded by a designer garment is far above that which craftsmen can ask for – and the attention grabber is the bold, eye-catching colour combination and uncommon visual effect. Very little is said about the makers and the process employed to produce the final textile.

As a textile practitioner what has interested me the most, in my four decade-long journey, is the process. Whether weaving, painting or embroidery, the process of making has intrigued precisely because of the exquisite designs and diversity of skill in decorating cloth that I have seen across this country. In college, I once decided to make *ikat* fabric using the guidance of a book. Along the way, I discovered how skilled an art it was, requiring phenomenal level of concentration and methodology to keep track of which thread formed which part of the design and which bobbin had to be inserted where. Needless to say I failed miserably in this project but, I learned not just the value of skill but just how much skill our craftsmen had in their hands that I could not aspire to learn in this life-time. Added to this was the growing awareness of the diminishing value of this skill in making, in favour of the visual shocks of contemporary design.

The recent 'Fabric of India' exhibition at Victoria and Albert Museum in London has generated considerable controversy over an "Ajrah inspired" jacket by fashion designer Rajesh Pratap Singh. The *Ajrah* craftsmen in Kutch were approached by Pratap to carve the block for printing a skull image which they refused as Islam constrains usage of figurative representation. The designer went ahead using digital printing to get the desired effect, adding motifs found in *Ajrah* block printed fabrics. The controversy is that the jacket has been labelled "Ajrah inspired" when in effect '*Ajrah*' or *aaj rakh* is a laborious process where the dye needs time to be rested and matured. Therefore, taking a motif from traditional blocks used by '*Ajrah*' craftsman doesn't make it "Ajrah inspired" because '*Ajrah*' is not a visual effect, it is a process. And this is true for most of India's hand-crafted traditions – the process makes them what they are.

As I embroider, I find the procedure stills the mind. It allows for thoughts to float in and out of the mind and ideas emerge that otherwise were buried in the busy-ness of doing. I find grace in this stilling of time and physical rooting whilst engaged with the hands. In fact, it is the repetitive motion of needle leading thread through fabric, in and out and in and out and in and out, in rhythmically measured intervals, meditatively distilling the mind, that connects effortlessly with the higher consciousness of being; inspiring my continued efforts with embroidery. While I love the vibrancy and diversity of the contemporary design vocabulary from the subtle felted shawls by Tushar Kumar, the near-sculpted, woven garments by Gaurav Jai Gupta and the larger-than-life *Jamdani* reinvention by Bai lou, the shift in focus, away from the process of making is a disconcerting one. The makers and the hand-crafting process must also be given their due, because hand-crafting cannot revive its past glory or sustain itself by shock and awe alone.

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ⁱ Published by Niyogi Books, 2015

ⁱⁱ Surface satin stitch worked from the back

ⁱⁱⁱ Maggie Baxter, Unfolding