

BINDING TRADITIONS *BANDHINI*



Textile traditions have bound the world with the similarity in their threads of thought in a fascinating way. We do not yet know exactly who influenced who, what went where and who copied what and when; but similar techniques have developed across the globe that correspond with the idea that the first man on earth ever to compose music or sing, or for that matter, perform any human activity that we take for granted today, did not have any cognizable precedence to follow; just his instinct.

Creating pattern on cloth by tie-dyeing, is one of the most basic of textile arts, found in some form in almost all parts of the world. It is not possible to say when these '*Bandhini*' cloths were first made, in India or any other part of the world but as the relatively complex process of mordant dyeing was known in the ancient city of Mohenjo-daro in 2000 BC, it is scholastically assumed that resist dyeing must also have been practiced there. Earliest evidence of *Bandhini* in India is obtained from the paintings of the Ajanta caves (6th - 7th centuries AD) that show women wearing bodices in single dotted tie-dyed patterns.

Tie-dyeing of textiles is and has been practiced in many countries. In Indonesia it is called Plangi, which is a Malay-Indonesian term for this process. Tie-dyed fabrics are also found in many parts of Africa. There is no written record of its origin, but the technique has been passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. The Yoruba people of Nigeria are perhaps the best known, in this part of the world, for their tie-dyed, 'Adire' fabrics. Early tie-dyed textiles have been found in Peru (1st-2nd century AD) and were also excavated from a tomb in Astana in Chinese Turkestan dating 4th century AD. This technique is assumed to have reached the Far East from India. In Japan, the technique is said to have been known in pre-historic times, while some references infer that it was probably imported from China. However, the art of tie-dye in Japan,

called Shibori reached great heights of technical virtuosity and creative expression. The term Shibori comes from the verb shiboru which means to wring, squeeze or press. In the western world today, tie-dye is often referred to as Shibori and many contemporary textile artists world-wide, have become exponents of this.

Tie-dye or *Bandhini* as it is known in India, essentially involves a process of resist which is achieved by binding individual areas of cloth. In Gujarat, the pattern is marked onto the cloth either by drawing or by printing with a fugitive dye by block. It is then pinched along the delineated lines with the use of a specially cultivated, elongated finger nail, or metal substitute and the area is then tightly bound by a fine thread. Sometimes paste is dabbed onto the bound knots to ensure greater resistance to the dye stuff. Today there are many villages in Kutch that are involved in the making of tie-dyed fabrics, but Jamnagar is perhaps the most renowned dye centre. The main protagonists of the *Bandhini* industry here are the Khatri community. In addition to binding with cotton thread, pineapple threads (*Indonesia*) and raffia palm fibre (*Africa*) are also used.

The villages of western Rajasthan around Barmer and Jaisalmer, and the Sind areas of Pakistan, traditionally produce some of the simplest tie-dyed designs, while the same technique of making patterns from a series of dots or squares has been used for spectacular effect in the urban centres of east Rajasthan, such as Jaipur, Kota, Ajmer and Alwar. Coloured and patterned turbans have always played an important role in *Rajasthani* costumes and Jaipur today is probably the best known as a reputed centre for both the *chunari (odhani)* and *lahariya* cloths. The *lahariya* can be simple or extremely complex masterpieces of dyeing. The wrap-resist dyed on two diagonals, called *mothara* is particularly fascinating for the complexity of technique. Some of these fabrics are part of the extensive collection of Indian fabrics at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Textiles from India have reached all corners of the globe and were much sought after as currency for trade in exotic spices in Indonesia and thereby the rest of the world. Interestingly, trade in Indian *Bandhini* fabrics is not as renowned as is that of the *Patola/Ikat* or block printed and painted resist-mordant-dyed fabrics from the East and West coasts of India. From coarse cotton for *Odhanis* in Rajasthan to fine silk sarees and veils in Gujarat, as well as the widely exported, spotted handkerchiefs (Bandannas) of Bengal; tie-dyeing has been used throughout the Indian subcontinent, in many variations like stitch-resist (tritik), tying, and folding; except for the gathering (Plangi) and clamping technique used in Indonesia, Western Africa and Japan. *Bandhini* work is also done in Pakistan where the present-day work is closely related to that of Western Rajasthan and Kutch. Tie-dyed textiles from Kutch are imported into Sind and Punjab and Muslim dyers who immigrated to Pakistan at the time of partition; also make *Gujarati-style Bandhini*. In a limited way, tie-dye has been practised in parts of South India too.

When you see tiny dots, scattered all over yards and yards of fabric in myriad colours; all meticulously bound and dyed to configure all possible forms known to the human eye, it is inevitable to question: Is it fabric that inspires man or is man essentially inspired just to decorate for the sake of embellishment alone? Is it vanity or is it celebration? Exotic elephants, paisleys, human figures, flowers, trees and more, all find their way onto *Bandhini* fabrics. What never ceases to amaze is the human capacity and propensity to decorate cloth with this kind of meticulous detail and abundance in form and colour. It seems that men find impetus in the life around them, celebrating form through exulting in the spirit of creativity with a desire to emulate. Fabric has lent itself well to this because of its capacity to absorb, to construct, to mould and above all, endure the rigours of the creative process. It is not without substance that the term fabric is often used metaphorically to denote the main body, structure or texture of society or life itself; for in essence it is through the creative endeavour of its threads that we bind and dye, that gives us another lease of life through the textiles that adorn our many facets of being.

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