

EDGY EMBROIDERY

The global stitch

GOPIKA NATH sews the story of the humble cross-stitch that has percolated across civilisations and cultures

My earliest memory of doing cross-stitch is when I was about 12 years old. A birthday gift-set of fabric with designs to embroider had me spend my winter holiday learning this. Cross-stitch is not part of the popular repertoire of traditional Indian embroidery. But, just like it's more natural for me to speak the English language than write or converse in Hindi, cross-stitch is also 'native' to my fingers.

The process of embroidering a picture using squares fascinates me. It breaks down the figure, not unlike the pixels of a digital image, and you're never quite sure how it's going to look until you've finished. Counting the threads as you go along is also a great exercise in concentration. Fabrics used for doing cross-stitch are called even-weave, or matte, woven to ensure the same number of threads per inch, vertically and horizontally. The cross-stitch method uses the little squares, demarcated by dots formed between the warp and the weft threads, for easy insertion of the needle. There are many variations of cross-stitch, including a half cross-stitch called 'tent' stitch. And I've devised my own version, of a 'crazy cross-stitch', that does not count the warp and the weft threads, but layers of cross-stitches are used for blending colours to create subtle, shaded effects.

For years I had worked with variations of this stitch without questioning. But as my curiosity grew, I asked around, wanting to know how it had come to India. Many people assumed it was the influence of Christian missionaries.

Having attended an Irish Catholic convent school, I know how the culture they brought with them has percolated into our lives. But, could there be some other link? Research revealed cross-stitch in garments from Hissar, Bihar, Sindh and Baluchistan — folk and tribal dresses from late 19th or early-20th century.

Adopted stitch

Kasuti, which is done in Karnataka, also uses the spaces between warp and weft threads, counting them, to create geometric patterns, but it's not clear how this technique came to the subcontinent, or why it remains on the periphery of the embroidery practices for which India is renowned.

While convents may have imparted this skill to most urban embroiderers, cross-stitch is not confined to the cities. It's a recent addition to the *kantha* repertoire. They call it *tin phor*, for the 3 steps that complete 1 set of crosses.

The Bagh and the Phulkari embroiderers of the Swat Valley have also used this stitch alongside the darning stitch. And, in Daman and Diu, the clothes of the Portuguese and Christian women, which are renowned for their embroidery, use cross-stitch among other embroidery stitches.

Recently, at the Dastkar Basant Bazaar in New Delhi, I found beautiful cross-stitch Jat embroideries, adding greater complexity to its origins. This is done by Garasia Jat women, who stitch geometric patterns in counted work, based on cross-stitch, studded with minute mirrors, to fill yokes of their long gowns called



COLOURED VARIETY (Left) A Garasia Jat tunic embroidered with cross-stitch and mirrors; cross-stitch on 'paj ntua' or flower cloth, used by the Hmong ethnic group of Vietnam. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR



churi. They are Islamic pastoralists who originated outside of Kutch, but their embroidered dresses are unique to Kutch and Sindh.

At the *Kala Raksha* stall, 'tent' stitch or half-cross stitch and other variations of the stitch were embroidered on tunics, cushion covers, purses and other items.

Historically, the earliest example of a cross-stitch-embroidered piece was discovered in a Coptic tomb. Preserved by the dry desert climate, a design of upright crosses on linen from 500 AD was unearthed in Upper Egypt. Few pieces of decorated fabric from ancient civilisations have survived because, unlike metal and ceramic objects excavated from archaeological sites, natural fibres do not survive the rigour of time nearly as well.

Not only is it difficult to ascertain exact details, there is not enough accurate information to trace the specific origin of cross-stitch embroidery. Courtesy the great Silk Route, this embroidery has found a cross-cultural identity like few others, and cross-stitch is done in different countries across the world.

In Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, very fine and detailed cross-stitch is done on *sai goshas*, which are V-shaped strips used to identify and decorate bedding rolls when not in use. The embroidery is also done by ethnic groups in Vietnam and Thailand.

The technique and designs of cross-stitch also spread throughout Europe. Historical evidence suggests it first originated in China, where the stitch was widely used during the Tang Dynasty (between 618 AD and 906 AD). The designs may have spread from China via the Silk Route to Greece and Rome, the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East; and through

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the Crusaders, onto Europe.

Paradoxically, it has also been suggested that this embroidery practice may have travelled in the opposite direction, citing the first important migration of foreigners into China that occurred during the Tang Dynasty. Persians, Arabs and travellers from Greece and India also travelled via the Silk Route to China. The caravans carried articles for sale as well as itinerant craftsmen who practised their skills wherever they settled. Their influence on the designs of Chinese textiles is evinced in patterns that bear similarity to Persian fabrics.

Status message

The spread of cross-stitch designs to so many locations makes it difficult to pinpoint its exact origin. But, one of the more important and widespread functions of cross-stitch has been to embellish peasant garments and household linens. In Palestine, once a traditional craft practised by village women, it was an important symbol of Palestinian culture, often as a way of indicating family wealth and status in the community.

The Samplers that were popular in Europe were generally stitched by young girls learning how to sew, recording alphabet and other patterns to be later used in their household sewing. The earliest surviving, dated Sampler was stitched in 1598 by an English girl, Jane Bostocke, almost 400 years ago. The unfolding of this ancient and fascinating lineage, linking a contemporary art practice to ancient civilisations, not only cites globalisation as an age-old concept, but reveals how a humble stitch can transcend the boundaries of religion and nations to forge a universal language.

Models of nature

For the art installation 'Ash dome', British artist David Nash planted 22 ash trees in a vortex-like shape near Wales, in 1977! The exact location of this growing artwork in nature remains a guarded secret.

TRIBAL DANCE

Moves for festivities

Tribal dances are fun to watch as the costumes, the music and the exuberance make for a jaw-dropping experience. A trip to Chhattisgarh proved this.

While in Bastar, an opportunity to watch the Muria tribals perform their native dance excited me. Almost all Murias undergo training in community dances at *ghotul*, a tribal hut which is their cultural centre. There is a touch of reverence to these dances, too. For, they begin the dance with an invocation to Lingo Pen, the phallic deity of the tribe and the founder of *ghotul*; and by worshipping their drums.

According to their belief, Lingo Pen was the first musician to teach Muria boys the art of drumming. When the dancers congregate at a festive occasion, they beat the drums to signal the commencement of dance.

The happy dance

The dance I watched, *har endanna*, is performed to celebrate marriages. It begins with a group of boys accompanying the groom to the ceremonial place, carrying ritualistic offerings and gifts. The girls and the drummers soon join the merry-makers. What follows is a happy dance involving a variety of movements — from running to kneeling to bending and jumping. It's more entertaining to watch the drummers dance.

The dance form *sua*, or *sugga* dance, performed by the women who hail from Maikal Hills, defines the elegance and grace of tribal women in general. Performed a month before *Deepavali*, it derives its name from parrot (*sua* or *sugga*), and features movements that mimic a parrot's walk. The dancers clap their hands and move their heads like a parrot, and enjoy every bit of it.

In fact, groups of girls move from one village to another to perform this. The most fascinating bit of this dance is that it uses a single prop, a wooden clapper called *thiski*. The only other music heard is the rhythmic clapping of hands.

The group dance has one dancer in the middle who holds an earthen pot on her head. The pot, covered with paddy shoots, also has a wooden parrot in it. This particular dancer turns toward the row that is performing, and hence is always on the move.

This dance reminded me of the *kaksar* dance performed by the people who inhabit the hilly forest region of Abujmarh, in which the dancers carry dummy horses on their shoulders and move slowly in a wide circle. This is to invoke the blessings of the almighty for good harvests. The costume for boys is white long robes, while for girls, it's finery.

Colourful, melodic and eye-catching — tribal dances in short.

VATHSALA V P



NOTES FROM NATURE 'Sua' dance, performed by women hailing from Maikal Hill, Chhattisgarh, mimics the movement of parrots.

What's not to love?

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They even laughed at my jokes. And then I get a couple of emails from people settled abroad — "Are you sure the doctors in India are good? I really wouldn't trust the medical system out there."

These kind of messages really got me mad. I never responded to them because I am too dignified, and more so, because chemotherapy has damaged my short-term memory and I forgot to reply. But, I would be so upset. Indian medical care and our doctors are amongst the best in the world. In my hospital, I'd see patients from different countries flocking here for treatment: if I had chemo any longer, I would have definitely learnt some Swahili.

Then there are these people who want to send their children to study abroad.

"We wouldn't really bank on the colleges here. It's better the child gets the 'best of education'."

I just find that laughable. I have nothing against colleges in other countries. I am sure they are good, too. But, we don't have any less. Plus, the challenging ecosystem with its several dimensions and rigour promises to build characters of tungsten.

I tell my children to study right here and start their own ventures post that — I tell them that their goal should be to provide jobs to those children who'll be coming back to India in search of jobs after completing their studies abroad! Yes, that's what nationalism means to me.

CLASSICAL MUSICIAN

In fine tune with 100 strings

One of the celebrated torchbearers of Indian classical music, Pandit Tarun Bhattacharya has brought a new dimension to the playing style of *santoor* by creating musical patterns that are unprecedented. He is also the inventor of *mankas*, the fine-tuners that help tune the 100-stringed instrument to a high degree of accuracy. Excerpts from an interview with the maestro...

How did you come by *santoor*? Why do you prefer to call it *shata-tantri veena*?

I grew up playing the organ, *sitar*, guitar, *tabla* and the piano as my father, Rabi Bhattacharya — he also played the *sitar* — ran a music school in our Howrah residence. I wasn't serious about music at all. He pushed me to pursue it. It was 15 years before I decided to learn the *santoor*, under the guidance of Dulal Roy.

The word '*santoor*' is of Middle-

Eastern origin, whereas the word *shata-tantri veena* can be found in the *Vedas*. So why not use the original name?

Is it true that you were the only approved disciple of Pandit Ravi Shankar who played the *santoor*? Please share the experience.

Indeed. It was a lovely experience. Raviiji was my *guru* and will continue to be so. There is a difference between a teacher and a *guru*. A *guru* is someone who also moulds your character apart from teaching music. I've learnt so much from Raviiji. I used to stay with him in Varanasi. I also visited him in Mumbai and the US. It's important to maintain the *guru-shishya* bond. Only then can one learn music.

Do you think Bollywood music eclipses classical music?

Yes, partly. Well, I am a positive musician, and I strongly believe in the art of presentation. I think we should be a bit more

careful presenting ourselves in front of an audience. When I play at college fests, I modify my style. When I perform a Bollywood tune, I play some *ragas* related to that tune. And I have seen it work. It's about making the style of music a bit more appealing to youngsters. When I play to a much older audience, my performance becomes more *raga*-oriented, more grammatical.

How important is music for growth?

This is what I tell everyone: be musical, if you cannot be a musician. Music helps everyone overcome stress. You can meditate using music. My music is used in German mental asylums to treat people. Try listening to Pandit Ravi Shankar after a good night's sleep and go to bed listening to Ustaad Bismillah Khan.

You have performed at many lovely venues across the world. Please share



SANTOOR MAESTRO
Pandit Tarun Bhattacharya
PHOTO BY SUBHODEEP SARDAR

a few memorable experiences.

On my first ever tour, in Canada, 3 of us played a small piece as instructed by Raviiji. When it ended, the 2,000-odd viewers stood up, as if to leave.

As newcomers, we thought they were unimpressed. So we packed our instruments and left! Later, the manager said that we had performed extremely well and the audience stand-

ing up was a standing ovation! Back home, after I performed in Santiniketan, the audience applauded by chanting '*Sadhu, sadhu*.' At the end of a performance in Varanasi, the 2,500-odd people began chanting '*Har Har Mahadev*' in unison; it was a spine-chilling response.

Why aren't you scoring for films? I have done background scores for many Bengali films. But the reason I'm not scoring for any Hindi movies is the lack of good projects.

Looking at the number of awards you have received from the government, do you think you have been overlooked? Yes. And I'm disappointed. But I'll continue to play and learn music till my last breath.

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