SundayHerald art & culture

Kurt Cobain's stellar imagination
As a kid, the musician believed he was an alien. He convinced himself that his parents adopted him from where a space ship had dropped him off.

NATIVE COMFORT

The sari is born

With indisputable roots in the subcontinent, the sari becomes a powerful cultural signifier. GOPIKA NATH stitches together a yards-long saga of the unstitched cloth

In the recent past, wearing a *sari* has elicited responses that made me question the very notion of the garment. 'Why I don't' and 'what this means for me' resulted in an exploration of the historical and cultural importance of this unique, unstitched costume synonymous with the Indian subcontinent. As a designer of textiles, I cut my professional teeth conceiving patterns for the *sari*. It was once my canvas, where painting them unparalleled everything else I designed. There was a full-length mirror in my studio so that every finished *sari*, removed from the frame, could be draped to evaluate how it looked when worn. When I graduated from designing to making textile art, it was the graciousness of the *sari* in moulding itself to any form and embellishment that led me to painting with the needle — which was the closest I could get to the irreplaceable fluidity of colours, my brush created on those six yards.

Infused influences

The *sari* is probably as ancient as the making of cloth itself. While Gandhara sculptures and friezes, of Hellenistic inspiration, show men and women wearing flowing robes, where the women carry a long length of fabric across the shoulders from the back, pulled down, around the hips, almost like a modern-day *sari palla* would be worn. However, suggestions of Greek influence remain untenable, for the *sari's* lineage can be traced much earlier, to the Indus Valley Civilisation.

With indisputable roots in the subcontinent, the *sari* becomes a powerful cultural signifier "laden with unwritten language: the way you tie it, the length, the fabric, the way the pallu is draped over one's shoulder, the under blouse, the accessories, the posture, is a grand statement, and finessing that is crucial," elaborates Jessica Frazier, a scholar of Hindu studies.

Early Sanskrit Literature carries references to the garment with texts such as *Kadambari* (7th century CE) and the epic poem *Silappadhikaram* (100 to 300 CE), describing women in exquisite drapery. In the *Mahabharata*, during Draupadi's *vastraharan*, emblematic of the violation of *dharma*, disrobing of a woman's self-respect and her faith; her seamless garment became endless with the grace of divine intervention. Similarly, a statue of a *sari*-clad Kannagi, the heroine of *Silappadhikaram*, worshipped as Kannaki Amman in Kerala, was erected in Chennai in 1968, removed and re-instated because of protests stating that she was 'an

COSY A local in North Goa.
PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

epic heroine... symbolising Tamil womanhood and Tamils' zest for justice'.

More recently, the *sari* became a marker of power and politics in a fictional biography, entitled *The Red Sari*. Loosely based on the life of Sonia Gandhi — the Italian-born leader of the Congress party, who is never seen in anything but a *sari* — the book notates her life and rise to power. Her mother-in-law and late prime minister Indira Gandhi also dressed only in *saris*.

No longer worn only by Indian women, attired in one abroad, can carry racist implications. One protesting non-Indian blogger writes: "Every single day in the geopolitical West, brown women are glared at, harassed and even assaulted for daring to wear traditional garb out in public. Whether it's a *sari*, a *kurta*, a hijab or a *salwar kameez*, these items of clothing code us as Other, and for our own protection and self-preservation, many *desi* women opt out of making inadvertent political statements by dressing in their own clothes. In the wake of President Donald Trump's Electoral College win, even a jewelled *bindi* on my forehead has gone from being an accessory I wear proudly to making me feel like a walking target."

The *sari* as we know it today, evolved

FUSION A model in a quasi Maharashtrian-style 'sari'.

from costumes belonging to the *Vedic* and post-*Vedic* period which comprised a three-piece ensemble or *poshak*. Fashioned for men and women alike, these articles of clothing were made of rectangular pieces of beautifully crafted, unsewn textiles. The *antariya*, which was passed through legs, covering them loosely and then flowing into long ankle-length, decorative pleats in front of the legs, evolved into the skirt, or *ghagra*/*lehnga*. The *uttariya*, a mantle, covering the upper part of the body, worn over shoulders or head, also draped across the back, resting on shoulders, to fall freely on the forearms, became the *dupatta*.

Two become one

Sometimes women sported two *uttariyas*, one on the head, and the other across the arms. They didn't cover their breasts, but married women wore a chest-band, known as *stanmasuka* or *stanapatta*, similar to the *mammillare* worn by Roman women, and this developed into the *choli* or *sari* blouse.

The *uttariya* and *antariya* merged to form the single unstitched vestment known as the *sari*. This cloth can be wrapped in myriad ways, of which 80 have been recorded. Most commonly, the *nivi*

CHIC A contemporary designer 'sari' from Baroda. PHOTO COURTESY: MALA SINHA

style is tied around the waist with the loose end of the fabric worn over the shoulder, baring the midriff. *Sari*, the generic term used for the unstitched garment worn across the subcontinent, is also referred to as the *pudvai, lugad, sardhi, xari, kapta, fariya* and more. It varies in length from five-and-a-half yards to nine, and two to four feet in width.

Sculptures display the *antariya* as tied below the navel, emphasising the curves of the female form. In keeping with ancient traditions according to *Natya Shastra*, which considered the umbilicus of the Supreme Being to be the source of life and creativity, the navel was to be left unfettered by clothing. Later texts such as the *Dharmasastras* advocated that women should be dressed so that the bellybutton is never visible. Refashioned from its earlier *avatars* to represent apparel that was discreet and demure — emerging into a restricting stereotype, "a bunch of *sari*-clad women" wasn't a statement of their sensuality nor considered a compliment.

Though worn throughout the subcontinent, including Nepal and Sri Lanka, it was post-Independence, when Pakistan disowned the *sari* for being unpatriotic, that it became unequivocally an 'Indian' dress — a symbol of national unity. This unstitched clothing derives its name from the Sanskrit word '*shati*', meaning 'strip of cloth', and from *shadi* or *sadi* in Pali. Evolving over time, to become the *sari* of contemporary usage; ever-changing, it continues to revision itself.

Vidya Balan, the actor, sees it as being "versatile" and the "sexiest garment ever", with Kajol adding that "everything is covered, yet a peep of an ankle can be a turn on..."

Indicative of its definitive associations, Indra Nooyi, living and working in the US, has said, "I would not flaunt my Indianess by wearing a *sari* to work everyday, because it distracts from the job."

PATACHITRA

The art of the matter

On the banks of River Bhargavi, not too far from Puri, lies a village called Raghurajpur. It is inhabited by some of the greatest artists of *patachitra*, with entire families devoted to the pursuit of the art. Today, the place bears the title of 'Heritage Village', due to its contribution to a special form of art, which is as ancient as history itself. According to some people, *patachitra* is one of the oldest indigenous art forms of Odisha.

Vibrant colours, intricate lines and imaginative figurines are intrinsic to *patachitra*, the word being a combination of two words '*pata*' and '*chitra*'. It is said that *patachitra*, which dates back to the 12th century, reflects the painting style that has been found in the ancient cave paintings of Udaygiri, Khandagiri and Sitabhinji.

The master artists, known as *chitrakars*, mostly belong to the Mahapatra, Maharana, Sahoo or Swain communities, with the skills being passed through generations.

SCROLLS Making this is an exacting process, mastered by the artists of Raghurajpur.

According to our guide, the origin of the art form lies the famous Jagannath Temple of Puri, which was built by Chodaganga Deva, the ruler of Kalinga, in the 12th century. Originally created on a canvas of cloth, *patachitra* has ritualistic importance in the temple. During the *Rath Yatra*, when the idols of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are taken out in the procession, *patachitra* of the idols is placed in the sanctum sanctorum.

The life of the residents of Raghurajpura revolves around *patachitra*. The process is laborious and elaborate. While the women are involved in the preparation of the pigments and the making of canvases, the men folk busy themselves in the process of painting.

Making a canvas is a process in which the cotton cloth is placed in a solution of tamarind seeds and water for about five days. Thereafter, a paste of chalk powder and gum is applied on the cloth, and it is smoothened out before being dried in the sun. This is followed by a series of steps in which the cloth is rubbed with different kinds of stones to give it gloss and smoothness.

Traditionally, five colours, based on the mythological texts, were used in paintings. For instance, Krishna is always painted in blue, while yellow is used for Radha, green for Rama, and white for Balabhadra. The pigments are made from various organic substances. The yellow comes from a stone known as *haritala*, the red from

geru, black from the soot that comes from the burning of coconut shell, blue from indigo, and the white from powdered conch shells. Now, young artists use fabric paints.

Once the canvas and pigments are ready, an outline is drawn. Traditionally, lamp-soot-mixed rice paste, rolled into sticks, was used to draw the outline, but now, many artisans have replaced the method with chalk or pencil. One of the most distinctive features of *patachitra* is the multiplicity of elaborate borders that provide a distinctive frame for the painting. The motifs have largely been derived from the sculptures of the local temples of Odisha. The border is one of the most important and creative aspects of *patachitra*. Vibrant colours and fine designs are used to create the beautiful border, which is drawn with a fine set of mouse-hair brushes. The outer border is broader and made of floral motif, while the narrower inner border consists of a variation of the leaves blended with geometrical motif.

The faces in the paintings have exaggerated eyes, pronounced chins and long beak-like noses. The characters are individualised by the use of diverse facial features, hairstyles and clothing. A combination of utmost skill, patience and diligence is necessary for painting a *patachitra*. At the end of the laborious work emerges the iconic paintings, each one of them telling a story.

TANUSHREE PODDER

GROOVE TO CARNATIC

Tech-sonic blends

He looks like your next-door IT chap who gets out of his house at unearthly hours to escape the infamous Hosur Road traffic and returns home by midnight after having slogged the whole day. But looks, as they say, are deceptive. Mahesh Raghvan does not lead a humdrum life. Anything but. A Carnatic fusion artiste, Mahesh has been gaining enormous popularity, especially among the millennials, for his hip, foot-tapping Carnatic versions of popular songs — some of which are arguably better than the original compositions.

Adele or Adeleshwari?

You may not have heard of his name but you would certainly have come across the popular sitcom *F.R.I.E.N.D.S* theme song's Carnatic version created by him. Or the wonderfully addictive classical version of Adele's '*Hello*', which has already garnered over two million views on YouTube. His other creations such as the theme songs of *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones* and *Sherlock* as well as fusion versions of *Cheap Thrills* and Rembrandts's '*I'll Be There For You*' are all bona fide hits on YouTube. The videos are fun, too — with Adele taking the form of 'Adeleshwari' and Harry Potter looking pretty comfortable in an *angavastram*! Mahesh was in Bengaluru recently for a concert he performed along with violinist Shravan Sridhar as part of his ambitious Carnatic 2.0 project. In this project, Mahesh employs technology to present Carnatic compositions in a modern style incorporating a fusion of *ragas* with Western elements. The result is, say, a '*MahaGanapathim*' that you feel like grooving to.

For Mahesh, it all started quite innocuously. Like many South Indians, the young lad too began learning Carnatic music informally under his aunt, who was a musician herself. "I did not belong to any musical family — my parents were supportive and encouraging," he recalls.

What he remembers is being keenly interested in every aspect of music — probably why he learnt to play the guitar and the keyboard all by himself. Soon, his talent began to get noticed and he took up the Trinity College Music exams. He went on to complete his Masters in Digital Composition and Performance from the University of Edinburgh.

"For me, the thrill lies in exploring how music and technology can be effortlessly brought together," he says. Mahesh uses iPad apps such as Geo Synth, Finger Fiddle and others to create genuine sounds of traditional Carnatic instruments such as the *nadaswaram* and the *tanpura*. His passion for sound design is palpable, as is his purpose. "My goal is to present Carnatic music in a form that youngsters can easily relate to. I have known several instances

TIME-TUNED Mahesh Raghvan

when young students quit learning because they feel the pure form is boring. Many do not attend classical concerts for the same reason. I want to change that," he says.

Mahesh is the creative director at IndianRaga, a sort of 'finishing school' for performance artistes with similar goals of making Carnatic music 21st-century friendly. Through its RagaLabs, under the tutelage of Mahesh and others, IndianRaga gets performers to work with musicians of various genres and creates slick videos to be disseminated online.

Brickbats or bouquets?

With Carnatic music itself going through a churn and artistes like T M Krishna trying to revamp the traditional *kutcheri* mould, has Mahesh ever faced the wrath of purists? "Thankfully no. At least, not yet. I have been lucky enough to be appreciated by traditional artistes as well," says Mahesh, who is also collaborating with Bindu and Ambi Subramaniam, children of celebrated violinist L Subramaniam, for a series of fusion concerts. Mahesh believes it is much easier for youngsters today to make a career out of music if they have the passion for it.

But he has a piece of advice for those who want to. "Their fundamentals in music as well as technology must be strong; they must have a good sense of not just the *ragas* but also sound design and structure," he opines. It is this strong foundation, he feels, that has helped him seamlessly merge different genres from electronic dance music to jazz to modern pop with traditional *ragas*.

"We cannot escape technology in this age, more so in music. It is better to adapt and recreate than struggle in ignorance," he says.

In fact, one of the young musician's big dreams is to have an "orchestra kind of concert" where everyone is on, you guessed it, iPads! Not a preposterous dream in these times, is it?

RASHMI VASUDEVA

BLONDIE