



# Indian Horizons

Volume 61 No. 4  
October - December 2014

## Indian Council for Cultural Relations

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) was founded on 9th April 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first Education Minister of independent India.

The objectives of the Council are to participate in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes relating to India's external cultural relations; to foster and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries; to promote cultural exchanges with other countries and people; to establish and develop relations with national and international organizations in the field of culture; and to take such measures as may be required to further these objectives.

The ICCR is about a communion of cultures, a creative dialogue with other nations. To facilitate this interaction with world cultures, the Council strives to articulate and demonstrate the diversity and richness of the cultures of India, both in and with other countries of the world.

The Council prides itself on being a pre-eminent institution engaged in cultural diplomacy and the sponsor of intellectual exchanges between India and partner countries. It is the Council's resolve to continue to symbolize India's great cultural and educational efflorescence in the years to come.

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## Editor

Subhra Mazumdar

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Work on the current issue, themed around the sari, coincided with the time of Diwali and Dussehra when the annual sari buying occasion gets a spurt, in keeping with the season. As in every other year, when I set out on this annual sari purchasing ritual, I was overwhelmed by the range on offer and the varied tastes of shoppers around me, as I grappled for space on the sale counters to pick up smart choices. It struck me that our weavers and designers have really done us proud and surely our issue needed to explore the nitty gritty of sari making and wearing, penned by some of the experts.

My first port of call was a talk with India's leading sari researcher Rta Kapur Chishti, who has painstakingly put together a volume on the Indian sari, citing the more than a hundred ways of wearing the garment, besides the differences in their texture, weave, places of origin, colour choices and so on. Reviewer Vaskar Das, was so intrigued with the idea of a complete volume on the sari that he offered to undertake a review of the book, veering away from his usual beat of poetry, literature and military matters!

As wearing one's first sari is a landmark date in the life of every Indian woman, one needed to take an overview of the garment as something that makes our days, moments and incidents special, from a nation-wide level. Ritu Sethi's article touches upon such landmark occasions as it traces the Indian fidelity towards the garment across all classes and cultures. On the other hand, Laila Tyabji in her essay bats for the sari through her personal experience with the sari and its wear, which in her case dates back to her toddler days. Her essay underlines the boost which the sari provides to the wearer's personality

and the ease of wear that a sari ensures, a realization that many of us tend to forget in our daily dealings with the sari.

The general belief is that saris and their designs are exclusively rooted in Indian soil. Varun Rana's essay, based on a one-to-one conversation with Ashdeen Liloawalla, a restorer and maker of the Parsi Gara variety of sari wear, reveals that this prized garment in a Parsi woman's wardrobe has its tentacles spread as far as China and the Far east. Today these heirloom pieces are being carefully restored, and newer orientations are being made from patterns once stitched by Chinese embroiderers for their erstwhile Indian trader clientele, who had placed orders of exquisitely embroidered saris with traditional Chinese embroiderers.

Our very own Benaras weave and its linkages with Chinese, Mughal, and other sources, forms part of the photo essay segment of the volume. Several of the images are close-ups of the motifs and fabric textures used so one comes to conclude that the Benarasi weave is actually a conglomerate of designs styles and traditions. That the sari also underscored India's textile trade and development is pointed out in the essay input given by Amba Sanyal. Going through the journey of the textile trade one becomes aware of the multi cultural depths of sari making, which like all other textiles of India origin, has been influenced by mythology, folklore, trading considerations, stretching beyond the technicalities of yarn count or design weaves and colour dyes.

Her insightful observation about the pioneering work of craft czarinas such as Pupul Jayakar and Kamaladevi

Chattopadhyay, informs us that these craft promoters encouraged designers to combine and create saris that encompassed styles from other regions of the country. Purnima Rai follows the journey of innovative variations being introduced into sari weaving by our craftpersons today, an aspect few people are aware of. Instead of following the straight and narrow track, enterprising weavers are now adopting the crafts of other regions onto their sari weaves and coming up with stunning novelties that have found ready acceptance among sari wearers everywhere.

To end on a positive note Varsha Rani has provided an exhaustive coverage of the growing demand for the Bhagalpur tussar weaves that are fast becoming a must-have in every Indian wearer's wardrobe. Journeying into the interiors of the district she brings

us personal interactions with the grassroots makers of these glistening gems of sari wear, thereby informing us about the boost the sari is giving to the economy of the region as well as making a style statement in art and cocktail circles.

The Azad Bhavan exhibitions this quarter were colourful, spontaneous and creativity-driven. They managed to make a huge impact on viewer sensibilities. The archival journey into the ICCR of yore yielded nostalgic shots of exhibitions from across the globe as well as important interactions with scholars and artists. Putting together this volume has been a source of great excitement and challenge for the team and we hope you enjoy going through the content as much as we have, in 'draping' its many folds into a stunning issue befitting of its theme, the Indian sari.

Editor



Subhra Mazumdar

# Foreword

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Satish C. Mehta  
Director General, Indian Council for Cultural Relations

The Indian sari has been the most representative cultural statement of the country, not simply as the garment of choice for women but also for its design aesthetics, its ease of wear, myriad colours, weavers, patterns and fabrics and much more. Having a record of hundreds of years of existence, this garment has seen dramatic re-invention over the last century. The current issue of Indian Horizons is an attempt to examine how the sari has been reinventing itself to keep abreast of changing times. In this issue some of the foremost authorities share their views on the improvements and innovations linked to the sari and brought to fruition by designers, embroiderers, wearers and makers of this ever-alluring garment.

The writings reveal that the structure of the sari as an unstitched garment of a required length and width, has remained unchanged. It is the potential of the garment to lend itself to innovative craftsmanship, fashion statements and revivals of its earlier avatars that has come to the fore. Purnima Rai of the Crafts Council of India has updated readers on adaptations of ancient textile techniques and the inclusions of newer materials for sari weaving, through her contribution. A pioneering write-up in this issue has been an exhaustive documentation of the process of making a Bhagalpur tussar sari, penned by Varsha

Rani. The romance of an embroidered gara sari, the trademark wear of the Parsi community, being revived in a karkhana in Delhi is unearthed by Varun Rana.

Besides makers, the voices of its wearers are ably captured through the experiences of one of the sari's greatest advocates Laila Tyabji. In the article by Ritu Sethi, memorable sari moments in the country's history make for re-telling of the sari saga in glowing terms. The history of India's cotton textiles and its impact on the sari, particularly after independence when saris became pan-Indian in terms of assimilation of regional designs and market awareness, are inputs provided by Amba Sanyal

In our regular pages, the book review pertains to a handpicked volume on the sari, justly regarded as the most authentic coverage of the subject, by Rta Kapur Chishti and Martand Singh as general editor. Vaskar Das, as reviewer, has taken a penetrating look at sari production in this representative volume. The photo essay has documented some of the latest weaves from the looms of the Benarasi sari, handpicked from an edition by Jaya Jaitly. Our Archives capture moments with distinguished visitors and celebrities who had graced the ICCR. The arts reviews at the Azad Bhavan complex provides this issue its distinctive 'weave' of colours, concepts and presentations.



Satish C. Mehta

## From our Archives

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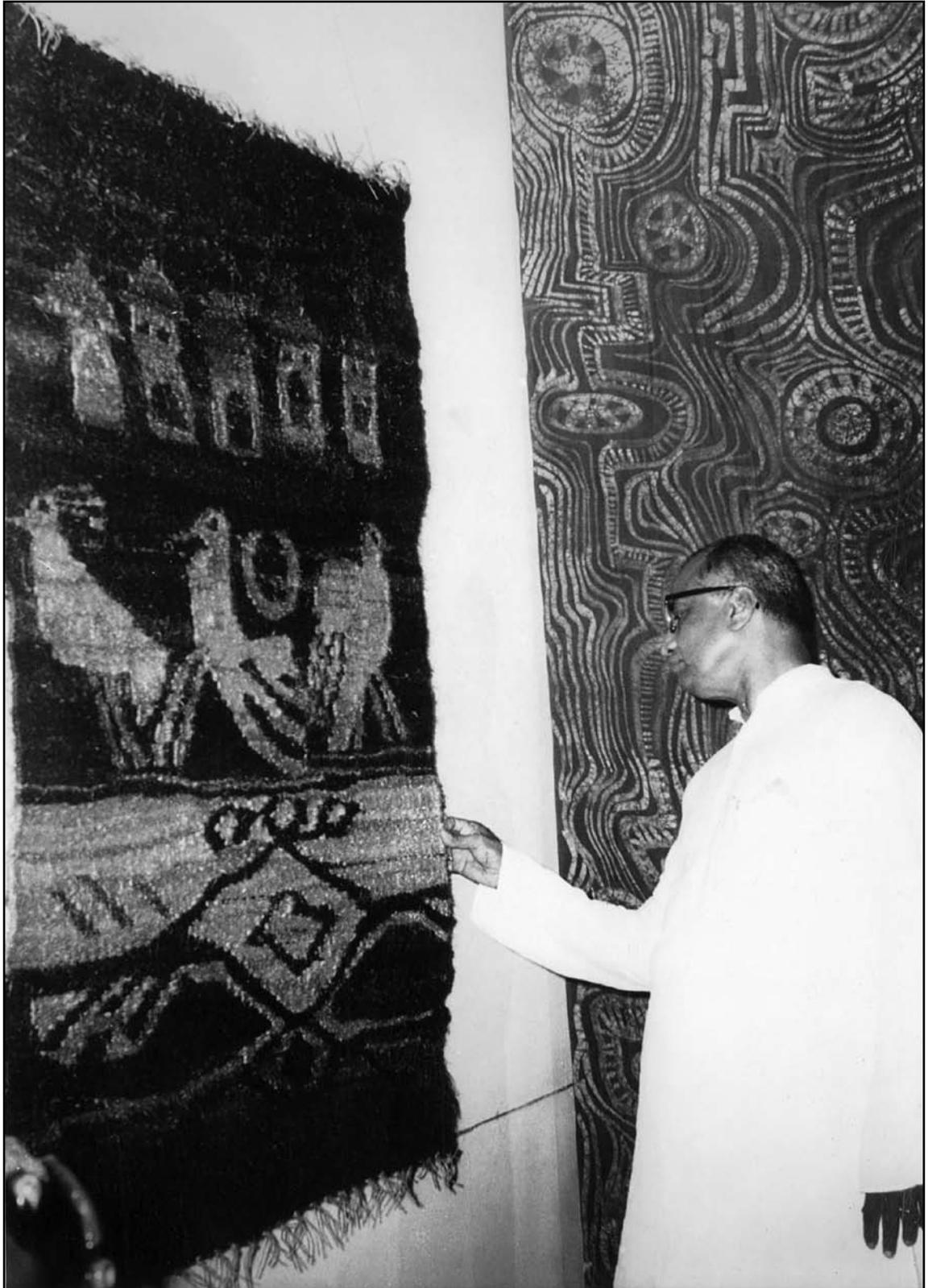
Inauguration of Exhibition of Rumanian Handicrafts in Bombay, May 20-26, 1969



Exhibition of Rumanian Handicrafts in Bombay, May 20-26, 1969



Exhibition of Paintings by M.A.J. Bauer (Netherlands), December 20-28, 1963



Exhibition of Yugoslav Applied Art, August 6-13, 1970



Dr. Zakir Hussain, Vice President of India at dinner in honour of the delegates to All India World Federalists Conference, September 1963



Visit of H.E. Dr. A Ramangasoavina (Madagascar), December, 1963



Performance of Manipuri dancer, August 1972



Inauguration of Seminar on Australian and Indian Literature, January 12-16, 1970

# The Sari Matters

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Ritu Sethi

CEOs and housewives, politicians, poets and writers, newsmakers and newsreaders, in offices, fields, construction sites and across the Indian subcontinent there is one thing women share in common — the sari. This remarkable woven length of unstitched cloth has through the centuries, from eons before Rani Lakshmi Bai and to Aishwariya Rai today, defined and enhanced the position of women in their worlds.

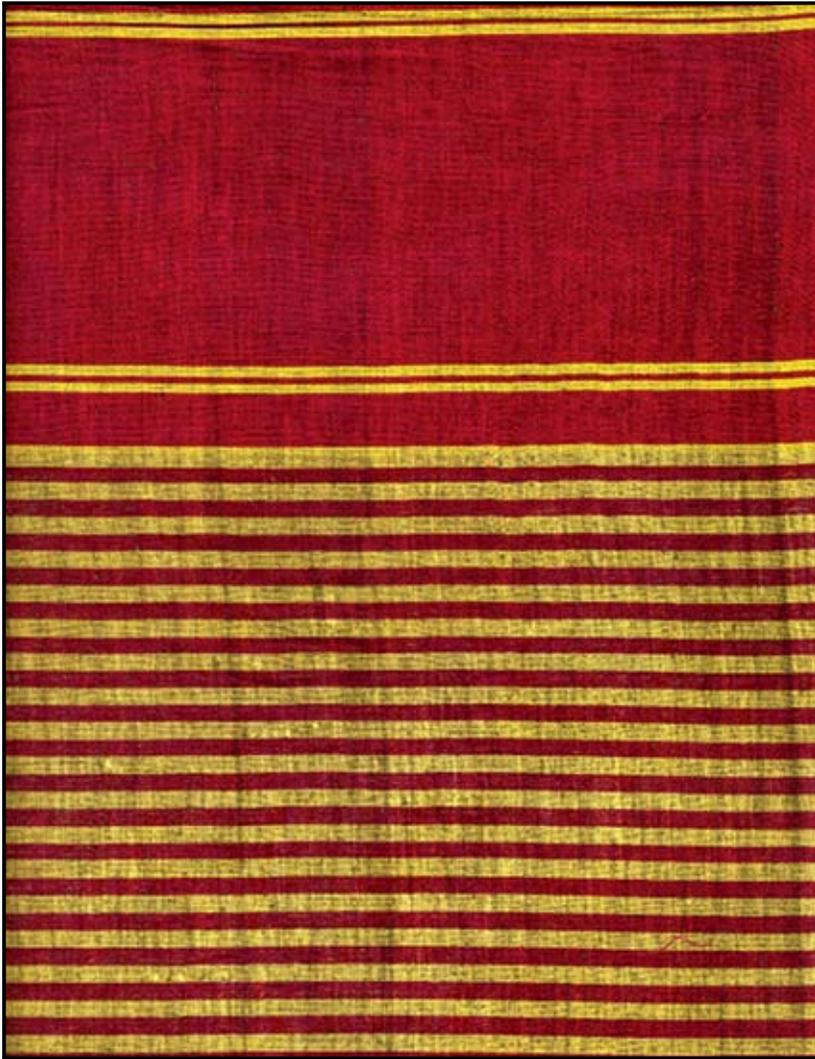
Part of the unstitched woven garment lineage of India that includes dhotis, lunghis, dupattas, angochas,

turbans, shawls, the meghla-chador and sarong the sari continues to hold a special place.

The sari is not one kind of garment as its drape, length, material, weave, style, accoutrements are individualized by the several million of women who wear it. In the multiplicity of women's lives and identities the draping of the sari whether it be for comfort and convenience, for practical and no-nonsense work in the fields, at home or in office, as an ultra-feminine style for the red carpet at Cannes



Sari material from Gujarat



Sari specimen in the Knoxville Museum of Art

and the Oscars, or worn by women in public life – law makers, artists, bureaucrats, doctors, lawyers, educationists and others in the public eye exuding authority dressed in a sari, leading modern lives. This unstitched cloth, a uniquely Indian phenomenon, defines our cultural identity and is our visual marker.

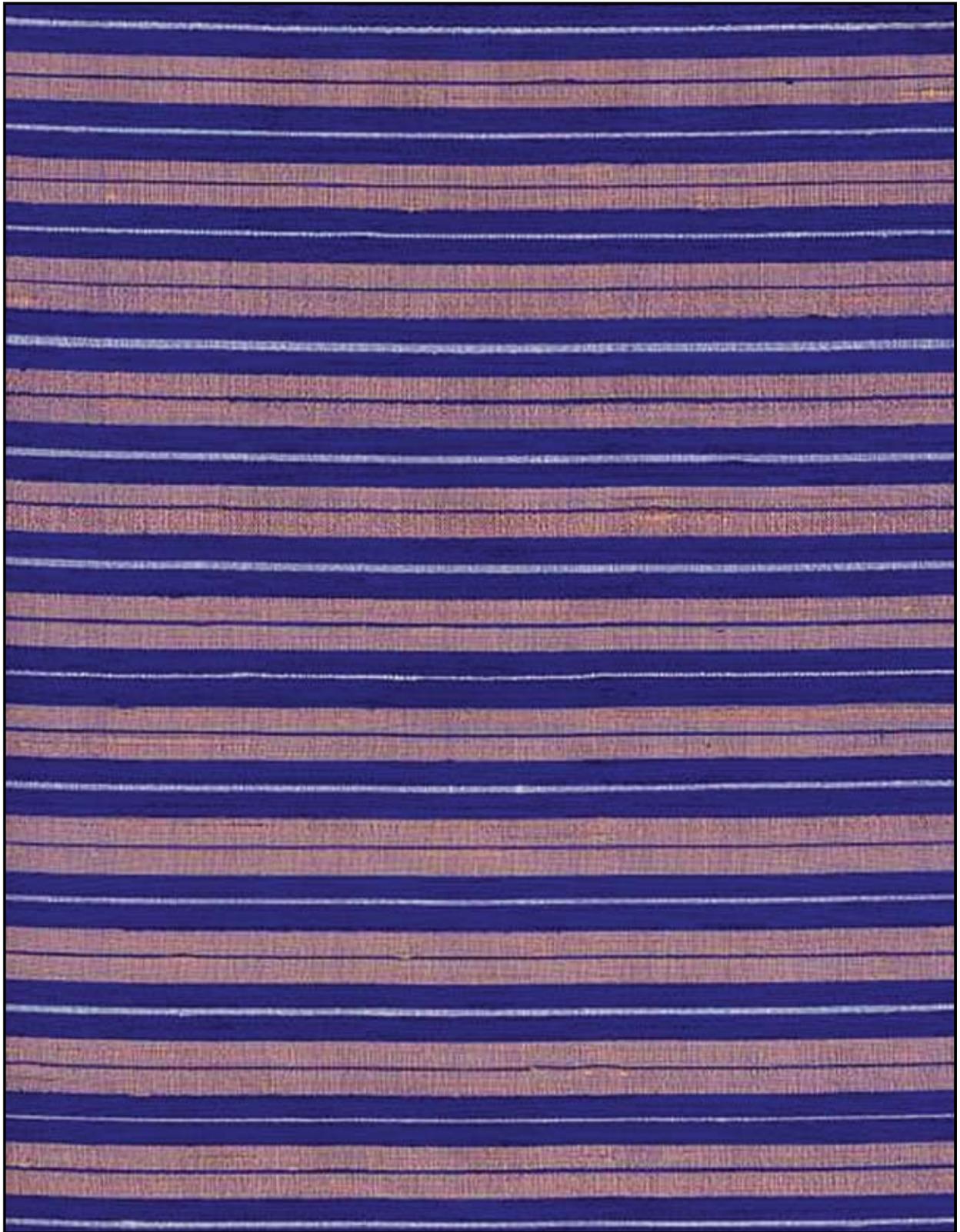
While the draping style continues to vary across the geography of India, the urban style of wearing the sari can be traced to Gyanadanandini Devi, the wife of Satyendranath Tagore. The story goes that as Satyendranath Tagore had to leave for Bombay (now Mumbai) for his posting as the first Indian selected for the elite Indian Civil Service he wished to take his wife

with him, but the problem of what she would wear while stepping out of the home's inner quarters to face the onerous duties of an ICS officer's wife, arose. Gyanadanandini Devi, herself a remarkably accomplished woman appreciated the style the Parsi women adopted while wearing the sari. She emulated and adapted the style thus founding the contemporary sari wearing mode as we know it today.

In the 1950's Mahatma Gandhi's powerful call of Swadeshi and Swaraj to his fellow Indians not only created the radical shift that led to the crumbling of imperialism in India, the call was equally a beacon to the spinners and weavers, the makers by hand, spread across rural India. The powerful iconic image of the Mahatma spinning on the charkha, his vision for a self-reliant, free India closely linked to its resurgent village industries and its village roots, laid the foundation stone of the development and revitalization of

handloom weaving setting the bedrock, inspiring others to follow. The many millions of weavers in India continue to spin the warp and weft of this unstitched cloth.

The sari has been part of India's journey highlighting key moments of political and social change, with images relayed on newsreels, television and in the press of women holding their own – dressed in saris, conveying authority. A pan-Indian look, both distinct, original and power dressing at its best. Images of the Dandi March with women walking in step towards claiming freedom from oppression, Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali and others addressing huge public gatherings, Mother Teresa in her simple white sari



A museum display from Tamil Nadu

bordered in blue, women at the frontiers of change formidable in the power that they invoke, dressed in saris that do not distract from their achievements but are part of their whole persona, communicating their own strategic message of tradition with contemporaneity.

The highly influential world of cinema and TV soap operas also makes its contribution with the diva Rekha, magnificently draped in sumptuous, glamorous Kanjeevaram silks, Shabana Azmi, Aparna Sen, Vidya Balan, Sri Devi, the mega stars of South Indian cinema and others, seen onscreen and off in cotton and silk saris, in settings that show the best of Indian crafts.

In a dip stick survey of contemporary women about how the sari fit into their working life the response was pertinent 'it got them to the head of the queue' as the sari made them stand out from the crowd, making people notice and getting their voices heard, defining them and their position without distracting from their message.

The strength of the sari lies equally in its unchanging adaptability that has weathered societal shifts and has remained largely unaffected by seasonality and trends.

Which then begs the question of which other form of dress can be handed down and worn with as much aplomb by grandmothers and great granddaughters?

Textile weaving skills through India continue to be deeply embedded in the cultural roots of weavers and their clients. The directories of design, motifs, colours, combinations and technique that have been nurtured and kept alive constitute a living repository of communities historic legacy. Distinctive textile traditions are distinguished each with their own unique history and regional influences, playing critical roles in local ceremonial and ritual life, signifying community identity, and on occasion, also representing the transmission of influences from other regions and cultures.

The extraordinary skill of the textile weaver and craftspersons is visible not only in everyday life and

wear in India but in museums and collections all over the world. Saris exemplify the vast repertoire of Indian craftsmanship of creating and embellishing textiles through spinning, dyeing, weaving, tying, embroidering, painting, appliqué and block-printing.

Using material as varied as mulberry to the wild silks of tassar, eri, muga; cotton – hand or mill spun, metallic yarns of silk and gold, wool and pashm, the sari weaving tradition represents everything that is great about Indian craftsmanship — originality, versatility, design and technical virtuosity and adaptability to contemporary modes.

The weaving pedigree stretches back over five millennia. Excavations at ancient sites of the Indus Valley have unearthed needles, spinning implements and a fragment of madder dyed cotton, revealing evidence of an already highly developed textile tradition. Further evidence through literary references, paintings, sculpture, all reveal a vibrant and evolving textile culture, while Vedic sources of the Samhitas, Brahmanas, the great epics of the Ramayan and Mahabharat, the Buddhist Jataka legends reveal details on dress and clothing and their making. Further on in time the murals painted in the Ajanta caves, dated to the 5th century A.D., depict a culture evolved in every aspect, including textiles.

These legendary textiles were exported to the known world, both East and West as is revealed from the accounts of travellers from Megasthenese, the Greek Ambassador at the Mauryan court to Pliny writing in Egypt. From the latter half of the first century A.D. we have an unknown Greek trader's log book the *Peripilus of Erythrea* listing textile exports from India and their ports of exit. Better documented are of course the developments as recorded in the Mughal period, when luxurious and extravagant textiles for the courts of the great Moguls received an enormous boost, followed by the Dutch, the British East India Company and French and Portuguese interest and trade in Indian textiles.

This technology, the skill and the equipment present today is sustained, kept alive and vibrant by the



Specimen of a sari as a museum exhibit

guru-shishya parampara tradition of the passing of inter-generational knowledge transmitted from one generation to the next, orally and through daily diligent practice. The art of the sari – the weaving and embellishment continues to be practised across the whole of India, distinguished by its directory of motifs, its vocabulary of form, the immense regional

differences, based on customs and practices of textile usage that continue to be influenced by geographic factors and predisposed by historic influences and cultural and ritual underpinning.

No travel in India can be complete without a visit to a textile centre to watch in the craftsperson, the weaver, the embroiderer in the making of these saris; and no possession is more special than that which is direct of the loom and bought from the maker. With the largest extant number of handlooms in the world that is supported by a technically skilled pool of craftspersons and weavers, India continues its fabled textile journey. Creating complex lengths of saris on indigenously designed and maintained looms from the ergonomic back-strap, loin loom used by women across the North-Eastern States to weave once all daily chores are completed to the complex Gathua looms

used in Varanasi that are replicating the Kinkhab brocades of the courts of Mughal India. From the tribal belt of Korapur in Orissa where heavy cotton saris with auspicious motifs in colours obtained from the roots of the al tree are woven, to the light as air muslins saris of Bengal, the gold and silver brocades of Banaras, a must have in every North Indian wedding, to the brocaded-jewel like colours of the Paithani of

Maharashtra enamelled in luminescent colours that continue to be woven since the Peshwa times. The pristine white cotton bordered with elegant gold Kasava saris of Kerala unique among textiles to the indigenous raw tussar silk weavers of Bhagalpur in Bihar. The multitude of traditions in Bengal extend from the Baluchari figured silk saris to the finest Dacca cottons of Phulia. The Mangalgiri, Narayanpet, Upadda weaves of Andhra to Kanchipuram the place for silk temple saris with contrasting borders, the thick Chettinad cotton saris with earthy colours, Mysore silks and Balrampuram saris of the South.

Similar yet different from the Chanderi sari the cotton and silk warp and weft Maheshwar in luminescent colours was designed by Rani Ahilyabai Holkar in the 18th century and is suitable for royal wear with its loose weave making it perfect for the hot dry climate of the area. The Kotah Doria weave of Rajasthan is also designed for wear in a hot and arid climate.

The Ikat technique wherein the cotton or silk yarn for the warp or weft or both are tied and dyed in such a mathematically precise manner that when woven the pattern emerges almost magically in the woven



The weave and the warp of the sari fabric

textile, is a technique perfected in different centres of excellence across India. This technique in its most complicated form is practised in Patan, Gujarat by a single family of weavers who weave the double ikat famed Patola in Gujarat. Woven exclusively by the Salvi family the red, black, yellow, white geometric and floral patterns are still woven with a waiting list for saris extending up to three years. The technique also includes the double and single Bandha of Orissa with its elegant and sophisticated feathery finished patterned motifs that emerge in the tying and dying. The Telia Rumal, so named as woven squares were earlier exported to the African and Arab coast for use as lungis and head and shoulder cloth with the use of oil in the preparatory process reflected in the naming. Over the last few decades the weaving of the Telia has been extended to cotton and silk saris, textile lengths for clothes and a flourishing home furnishing market that is supplied by weavers working in Hyderabad, Pochampally, Chirala and Puthupaka in Andhra Pradesh.

Bandhini in Rajasthan, Bandhej in Gujarat, the Sungadi of Andhra all use the technique of tying multiple and intricate dots on to the textile to create intricate, colourful and detailed patterns. With multiple ties and repeated dyeing those areas that are tied reserving their colours to create colourful saris with craftspersons in Jaipur, Jodhpur, Udaipur, Bikaner in Rajasthan and in Jamnagar and Bhuj in Gujarat continue to ply their trade.

The Leheriya, literally the wave patterning on fabrics unique to Rajasthan, where cloth is diagonally rolled and resisted by binding with threads, dyed in a myriad hues and resisted again to create multi coloured lines and chequered patterns, is popularly used for turbans, saris and wraps.

Another form of textile patterning present almost across the country with unique regional and cultural differences is hand block printing. Using intricately carved wooden or metal blocks, with a built-in ingenious system of air vents block printers of the Chippa community pattern sari lengths.

The technique is datable to at least as far back as to the 13th Century with the archaeological finds of printed cotton fragments at a site in Fostat near Cairo believed to have been imported from India. It can safely be assumed that block printed fabrics were being produced and exported from some time before these datable remnants. A vibrant tradition among the Chippas, literally printers, continue to create saris for contemporary usage with traditional techniques. Plying their trade at centres famous for their particular techniques and with an enormous motif directory and a finely tuned and variegated colour palate a range of block printing techniques is used by the craftsperson including resist printing on textiles with wax, mud, lac and mern to mordant dyeing and printing to discharge techniques. The craftsperson manipulate the block within a hair's breadth of the other with deft dexterity to create an explosion of prints and colours for saris of all varieties. An expert block printer could use up to 14 blocks for a motif, gradually layering up to create a completed fabric that could go through 21 process stages and take over two months to produce. Distinct traditions continue till today in centres from Ahmedabad, Surat, Baroda, Deesa, Rajkot, Bhuj, Dhamadka, Ajrakhpur, Jamnagar, Bhawnagar, Jetpur, Mundra in Gujarat to Jaipur, Sanganer, Barmer, Balotra, Pipad, Bagru, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Udaipur, in Rajasthan; Bagh, Indore, Mandsoor, Jawad in Madhya Pradesh. The Kalamkari block prints of Machlipatnam and the hand painting of saris based on the Sri Kalahast tradition of Kalamkari in Andhra Pradesh are separate traditions that form part of the genre. The introduction in the last decade of the Japanese technique of clamp resist and stitch resist Shibori to saris has gained in popularity with tie dye artisans adapting this technique to their repertoire.

No chapter on the sari can be complete without reference to Khadi – hand spun, hand-woven and a potent symbol of the Swadeshi Movement and of the Mahatma. This was a unique protest an indigenous standing up against the might of the British Empire, an emotional rallying point in the fight for India's independence.



The six yard specimen of a museum piece

The list of distinctive embroidered saris is long and distinguished. From the fine white on white Nawabi Chikankari of Lucknow and the Phool-Patti shadow appliqué also of Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh, it continues into the Kasuti embroidery on the Ilkal sari of Karnataka, while no wedding sari can be complete

without the zari and zardozi embroidery. Embroidery additions now adapted to the sari include the Kashida and crewel embroidery of Kashmir to the Banjara embroidery of Sandur in Karnataka. The Kantha of West Bengal has seen a transfer from the quilt to silk and cotton saris. Applique techniques of Barmer in Rajasthan and centres in Gujarat are now fine-tuned for the sari.

While traditions are alive they are under threat, as is the livelihood of textile weavers and textile embellishers. It will require a concerted and sustained effort from all of us to ensure that this essential part of our cultural fabric and these keepers of our tradition are nurtured for the next millennia. So next time you travel anywhere in India remember that a weaver, block printer, a dyer, an embroiderer is somewhere waiting to be discovered as a part of the textile revival journey.

The discourse around how the sari is being replaced by the Punjabi suit has never been more fractious than it is now. But whether you are a traditional or contemporary woman, an actress or a fisher woman, an agriculturist, a teacher or a politician, a high-profile professional or a housewife, it seems the sari does continue to matter!

# The Sari – A Many-Splendoured Thing, a Source of Joy Forever....

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Laila Tyabji

Some years ago, I was doing a workshop at National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), when an aspiring young designer came up and greeted me with, "Wow ma'am, I didn't know anyone with grey hair and a sari could have 'attitude'. A typical

knee-jerk image to saris today – sari wearers are automatically associated with the dull, the passé and the unsuccessful. As a result, you seldom find the sari featured in fashion makeovers or so-called 'lifestyle' ads. In TV commercials, where most Indians



Photo credit: Laila Tyabji/Dastkar



*Chatai kinar reshami paithani shalu*/Mat patterned border, *paithani silk* drape; Material: Silk 20/22 dn; Length: 3.60 m; Width: 1.22 m; Weight: 650 gm; Origin: Burhanpur, East Nimar district



Photo credit: Laila Tyabji/Dastkar

pick up the signals of what's 'in' and what's 'out', the only women shown sari-clad are the obedient *bahu* virtuously frying *puris*, the wicked mother-in-law demanding a Harpik toilet or the plain girl with acne, B.O. and bad breath.

In reality, one of the sari's extraordinary strengths — contributing to its survival as a wearing style with mass Indian appeal, even in an age of globalized culture — is that each sari becomes, uniquely and irreplicably, the person who wears it — lending itself to the shape, style and persona of the wearer. Mandira Bedi can look a sensuous, sex-bomb, Indira Gandhi the epitome power woman who is also Indian. Therefore it is the fashion industry's worst nightmare; a garment that never becomes dated, and therefore never needs be re-invented and 'marketed'. Nevertheless, it is constantly evolving and changing — organically, as society evolves and changes.

The sari, India's magical and unique wearing style, is a 5 ½ metre long strip of cloth that wraps itself into a flowing, versatile and becoming garb. It can be veil, cradle, towel, portmanteau, sunshade, handkerchief, duster, keychain... In its designs and variations are encompassed the motifs and rituals of birth, puberty, betrothal, marriage and death; 5000 years of history and the symbols, colours and wearing styles of India's seasons, religions, flora, fauna, festivals and manifold communities.

So — how do women feel, inheriting this awesome, many layered tradition? Does it burden them, inspire them, inhibit them; mould the way they behave? Why do liberated, educated professional Indian women still make the transition from school uniforms, skirts, and *salwar kamiz* to saris. Is there a choice, is there a conflict? What part does emancipation and economics play in changing wearing styles? At the publication

of the first **Amar Vastra Kosh** documentation of the sari, the textile guru Martand Singh predicted that the sari might survive only as a Versace scarf, or at best a dupatta. Almost three decades later, Versace is no more, but the sari spins triumphantly on – down fashion ramps as well as in rural landscapes.

Since I'm an anarchic type who follows instinct rather than the dictates of a style pundit's sound bites, I've always worn saris. I wear them while bussing it in Bihar, climbing the Eiffel Tower or climbing ladders

doing our DASTKAR displays. I wore a sari all the years I had my mini motor bike and when I crossed the Banni on a camel. I wear a sari when I go out for my early morning business with my *lota* on field trips. I wore one when I danced with the Prince of Wales. (He was already engaged to Diana but didn't mention it!) There's even a picture of me wearing a sari at age two, though I've also worn everything else from bikinis to bell-bottoms!



Photo credit: Laila Tyabji/Dastkar

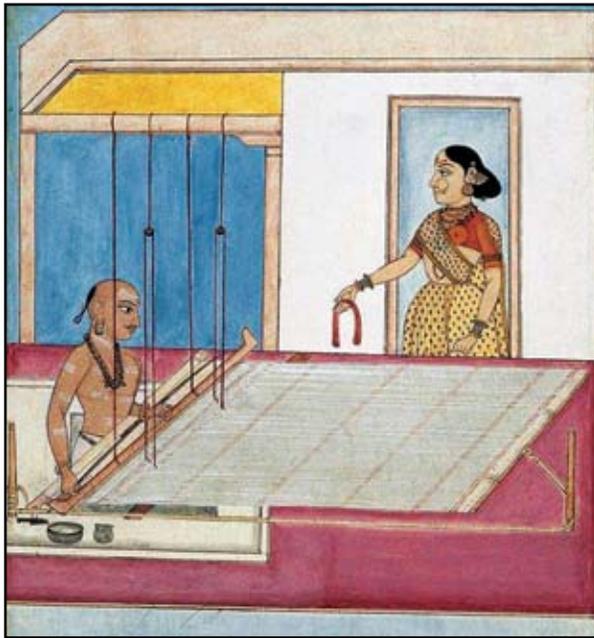


Photo credit: Laila Tyabji/Dastkar

The reasons for wearing or not wearing a sari are as complexly layered as the sari itself. We are all aware of the flirtation of the urban educated young with Western clothing – thinking it makes them more ‘modern’, ‘cool’ or ‘professional’. However, there is a parallel movement of thousands of rural women abandoning their traditional ethnic costumes for the sari. The younger Rabari, Lambani, Ahir, Jat and Meghwal craftswomen I work with in Karnataka, Kutch, Banaskantha, and Rajasthan find the costumes we “ooh” and “aah” over a cage, typecasting them as ‘tribals’ or lower caste, denying them access to restaurants and temples. For them, the sari represents an anonymity, acceptability and freedom that their own flashing mirrors, flaring skirts and embroidery deny. A sari is as liberating and trendy a garment for them as a pair of jeans is to a middle-class teenager. Shifts to the sari as a forward rather than retrograde



Photo credit: Laila Tyabji/Dastkar

step are not only part of the rural experience. In my own family in the 30s, my Suleimani Bohra grandmothers and great aunts gave up wearing their own elaborately worked net and satin *lehnga-ordnis* for *khadi* saris; part of their commitment to the Freedom Movement and Gandhi's India.

Saris are timeless – we inherit them from our mothers and pass them on to our daughters. The fact that they never go out of fashion or stop fitting, makes it possible to keep adding to them while remaining guilt-free. As a result every sari-wearing Indian woman has dozens of saris – cotton for summer, silk for winter; navy blue to look sober for important meetings, a delicate pink for that first date. Gold-bordered for evening wear, brocaded for weddings...

Each area of India has its own distinctive weave and colour combinations, each with its own story. There's the sari your grandmother gave you when you passed your school leaving exam, the sari your mother wore at her wedding, the one you picked up from a Master Weaver just before he died, with the design of parrots and peacocks he explained, meant fulfilment and love. The indigo-blue *kasuti* sari with *raths* and *kalash* and Krishna's *jhula* and other votive symbols, which is the traditional wear for Hindu brides in north Karnataka, but which, interestingly, is embroidered by Muslim village women, and the *bandini* tie-dye that has over 5000 dots, each painstakingly tied and dyed by Kutchi ladies who themselves never wear saris. And the beautiful shadow-work *chikan* voile, now frail but cherished, with 20 different stitches, some on the surface some on the reverse, creating that delicate white-on-white chiaroscuro of embroidery and *jaali*-work.

It is easy to wax romantic over India's glorious saris. To feel that there is something richer in the brocaded spread of a Baluchar sari or a motif called *Bulbulchashm* (Eye of the Nightingale) than spandex bicycle shorts, and that an aesthetic tradition that differentiates between seven shades of white and had names for yellows that ranged from *kusum* (orange

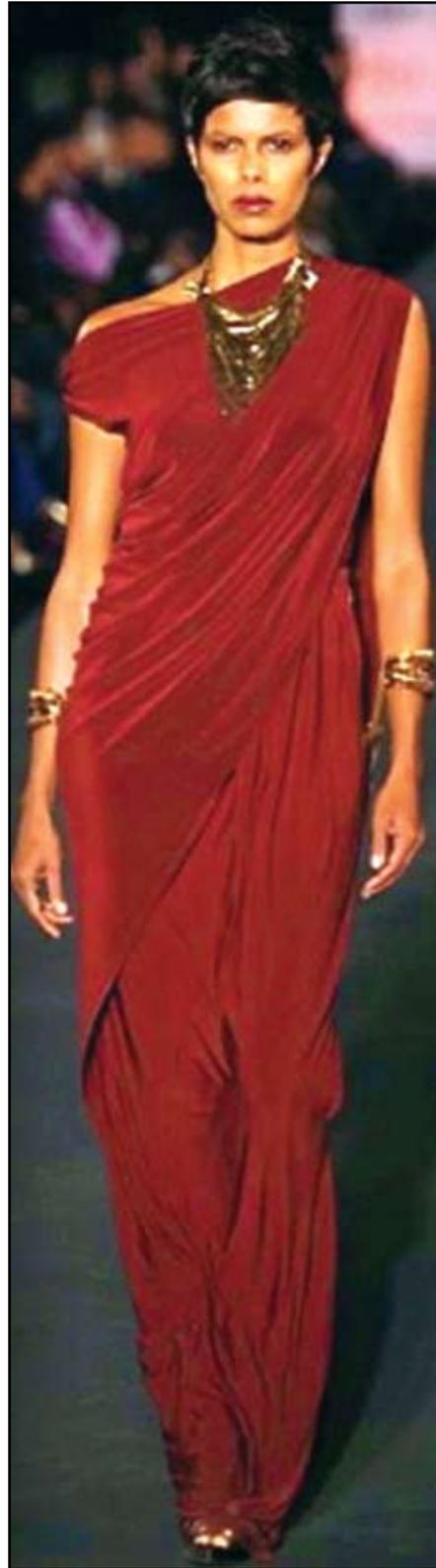


Photo credit: Laila Tyabji/Dastkar



Photo credit: Laila Tyabji/Dastkar

yellow) to *badami* (almond) is as valuable as fizzy drinks and fast food.

The problem these days is that most of the saris around, except in exclusive emporia or special exhibitions, are mill made. This is particularly true in

rural India, where, ironically, women have no access to the handloom weaves made by their peers in other villages all over India. The only saris in their local *haats* and markets are garish floral prints in lurid colours, destroying their natural traditional aesthetic. We need to find new all-India marketing infrastructures for handlooms.

A sari is not just an excuse for nostalgia. Here is where the clothes you wear become economics. Figures vary, but India has approximately 15 to 20 million crafts people. Out of these approximately 10 million are weavers, embroiderers, block printers, dyers, part of the centuries-old textile tradition of India, and an important part of its economy. Wearing products they make, showcasing their unique skills to the world, gives India an edge unsurpassed in any other country and culture. Some years ago the Chinese came to India and carried away 45 Kanjeeveram weavers, to teach their own weavers OUR skills. Today the global market is flooded with

imitation Kanjeeverams, made in China. Trendy Brick Lane in London is full of them. Unwary NRIs and foreign designers are buying them. They are even available here in India. Meanwhile, weavers in India suffer 'starvation deaths', because we do not sufficiently value their traditions, or market them

professionally. Every decade a half-dozen weaving techniques or motif traditions die out, for lack of support and exposure.

Between weavers abandoning age old traditions and the urban young opting for Western wear, people are always predicting the death of the sari! In truth it goes on forever. Of course it changes. Kanjeeveram and Banarasi give way momentarily to chiffon and net, *zardozi* to Swarovski crystals. Then designers like Sanjay Garg and Rajesh Thakore arrive and revive Chanderi and Ikat.

This last week, I attended three of Delhi's most fashionable Page 3 weddings. Most of the young there were in saris – no matter that they were backless, embroidered, crystal and sequin bedecked. Salwar 'suits' seem mercifully out. My goddaughter, who wore only T shirts and jeans for the first 30 years of her life, is now practising handling pleats and *pallavs*. The circle goes round.

Fashionistas today call for the sari to acquire a contemporary edge! Needless to say, no tradition, design or product, (or even wearing style) that is linked to lifestyle can remain static. It has to respond to changing times and, the user's needs and personality. So you have a bustier with a sari, or a diagonally slashed blouse, or a pre-stitched sari, and different edgy ways of draping the sari, or changing the standard *pallav*/border layout of a sari design, and it looks great. I think the sari is capable of infinite variations and not even 10% has been explored.

The reason the young think saris are "fuddy duddy" is not because the saris around are not contemporary and fun, but because of the way saris are projected in advertising and the media! When was the last time you saw one of those popular makeover shows suggest a sari as a stylish and becoming costume to wear? Its outrageous that there are clubs and pubs where people aren't allowed entry if they are wearing saris or so-called "ethnic wear"!

Much of this is a calculated advertising strategy to sell branded products and designer gowns to India's

burgeoning and still unconfident new middle class (who need the validation of a label or a style icon endorsing the product), instead of something they can pick up directly from the producer. Part of this insidious brainstorming is the myth that saris are difficult and impractical to wear (more difficult and impractical than a miniskirt and high heels, or one of those heavily draped and trailing 'gowns' with knee length slits our filmstars wear on red carpet occasions!) Why don't they teach girls how to tie and wear saris in school?

The great thing about the sari IS that, being a straight length of cloth, it can be adapted and adapt itself to the wearers shape, tastes, age, lifestyle. It has endless possibilities and permutations – many unexplored. Rta Kapur Chishti's Sari School can teach 108 different wearing styles! And let's not begin to count the myriad regional weaving styles, or the many many ways of surface ornamentation all over India – embroidery, appliqué, block printing, *kalamkari*, *zardozi*, *mukesh* and sequin work, *khari* stamping, *bandini* and *laheria*...

Meanwhile dozens of regional weaves and techniques are disappearing because they have lost their local market (too expensive and unable to compete with mill-mades and Japanese/Chinese synthetics) and the urban market doesn't have access to them. Some of the tribal weaves of MP, Jharkand, Bihar and Orissa have a very contemporary look and great potential, but are just not known outside their communities. The local traders who commission saris from the weavers make them copy what they think are more 'popular' weaves – Sambalpuri ikats or Kanchipuram or Banarasi styles – because they think that is what is in demand.

The problem today is the lack of connect between the weaver of the sari (generally rural and remote) and the wearer (urban and equally distant) and the vendor in between. They don't have an opportunity to communicate with each other. The weaver doesn't understand the context in which his sari is being worn and the wearer doesn't understand the possibilities

and potential of the technique, loom, and weaving skill. So he/she can't make a specific demand from the vendor — the traders, government agencies, coop societies — who also lack the requisite wisdom and will to interpret what is required.

Of course I am prejudiced, being an NGO myself, but frankly if it wasn't for NGOs sourcing and working

with craftspeople and weavers and bringing their products to the urban market very few people (including designers!) would have known about these skills, let alone have had access to them! It was SEWA Lucknow/Dastkar's revival work with *chikan* that created the buzz that brought it to the attention of Abu Jani and Ritu Kumar, Saly Holkar's REHWA singlehandedly rescued the Maheshwari

sari from oblivion. Dastkar's work with the spinners and weavers of Berozgar Mahila Kalyan Samiti made Bhagalpur tussar a fashion statement,, Shrujjan and Kalaraksha reintroduced Kutchi embroidery, *bandini*, and Bhujodi weaving to the urban imagination, the UNDPs work with block printers of Sanganer and the Oxfam NID project in Mangalgiri literally revived dying communities, and it was NGOs that first started working with *kantha* embroidery, *kasuti* and *kalamkari*, then taken forward by Weavers Studio and Creative Bee and others. And it was CCIC, GURJARI, UTKALIKA, the Weavers Service Centres, the Vishwakarmas, and COOPTEX that sent Martand Singh, Rakesh Thakore, the Parekhs, and many others (including myself!) out into the Indian interior to discover and revitalise our weaving and textile skills. The list goes on and on...

Many young designers ARE now working with new interpretations of the sari. But they need to orient themselves with the motif and weaving tradition of the area in order to successfully use it as a springboard for new innovation, and have the maturity and confidence to motivate the weaver



In a Sari at age two. Photo credit: Laila Tyabji/Dastkar

to make conceptual leaps of his own. It also requires them to understand the technology of weaving, fabric structure, and the loom. Understanding and unlock the book of knowledge that is in the hands and head of the Indian weaver craftsman — a mixture of folklore, technique, economics and art.

Where skilled, sensitive designers/artists have worked with handloom saris (either directly or as part of NGOs or Govt sponsored schemes like Vishwakarma etc) the results have been amazing – both in terms of design innovation and in market response. Prabha Shah, Riten Majumdar, Martand Singh, Rakesh Thakore, Ritu Kumar, Madhvi and Manu Parekh, Meera Mehta, Chelna Desai, Rama Kumar, Neeru Kumar, Sanjay Garg, Tushar Kumar, and many others. And when craftspeople themselves have partnered in these interventions, or been given an opportunity to explore the full potential of their tradition, the results have been electric. Some of the woven, block-printed and *bandini* saris coming out from Judy Frater's Design School for craftspeople in Kutch are amazing. Just realising that they are freed from previous compulsions of saris having to have borders and *pallavs* has been catalytic, and so has exposure to non-traditional colour palettes and abstraction. The pity is that there are so few of these interventions.

The sari is a truly extraordinary tradition - in which a simple strip of cloth has gathered in itself over 5,000 years, the symbols, colours and wearing styles of India's seasons, religions, flora, fauna, festivals and manifold communities. In its designs and variations

are encompassed the motifs and rituals of birth, puberty, betrothal, marriage and death. What's more it makes every woman look wonderful!

To a cynical eye, the frenzied fluctuations of 2,000 years of Western fashion seem an unholy and expensive alliance between the manufacturer, the moralist and the sensualist. Man's attempt to cover up the human body while titillating the eye into mentally uncovering it again! Fortunately, in India's balmy moral and geo-physical climes, clothes were able to more spontaneously be functional and ornamental — adapted to the wearer's age, lifestyle and needs. The sari, in its simplicity and complexity, its oneness and multiplicity, is the supreme example. As Fashion is the microcosm of current social mores and attitudes of mind, so the sari, ever changing yet unchanged, is the microcosm of Indian culture and tradition.

Some years ago I was at a conference in the Phillipines. Every day my colleague and I came down for breakfast in our saris. Four days on, a young Filipino woman came dashing up to us, gave us a big hug, and said, "Never, NEVER, ever give up your wonderful dress! Look at us Filipinos, we've lost everything and become second-class clones of America. Their frocks, skirts, and jeans don't suit our figures, our culture and climate, but we now have nothing else to wear...."

Let's be careful not to go the Filipino, Japanese, Indonesian way, but stick to what suits us and is our strength.

# The Parsi Thread Bearer of Delhi

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Varun Rana

**A**shdeen Lilaowala is not your usual fashion designer. After graduating from the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad in 2004, he worked as a journalist with magazines like *Grazia* and *Elle*, as a design consultant and exporter, and as a researcher

for the Parzor Foundation, the India-based UNESCO project dedicated to the preservation of Parsi-Zoroastrian heritage. He is also the author of *Threads of Continuity*, a book on the ancient art of Parsi Kusti (sacred thread) weaving, which he wrote with



The embroidery style of gara handiwork



Turn-of-the-century gara wear

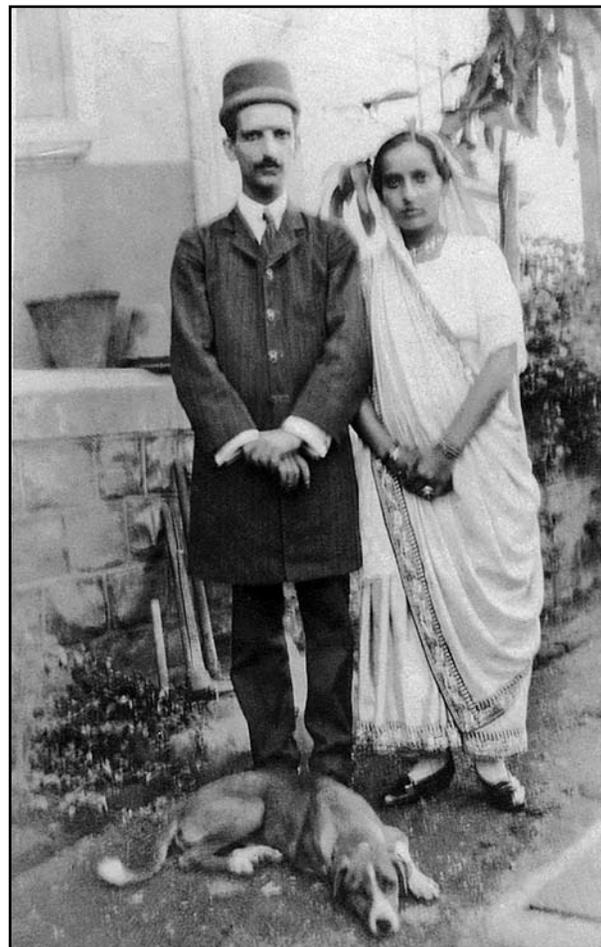
Dr. Shernaz Cama, the director of Parzor. As part of his research for Parzor, he travelled to Iran and China, and participated in Gara embroidery workshops in Ahmedabad, Mumbai, Surat, and Navsari where he mixed with both *kaarigars* and society dames, and taught them about Gara embroidery.

Lilaowala is one of about 700 Parsis who live in Delhi, and today, he is (because of his detailed research and unstinting efforts) at the forefront of the revival of the Parsi Gara saris. He launched his eponymous label in 2012, and has, since then, shown his collection twice to critical acclaim at Lakme Fashion Week in Mumbai. After Naju Davar, who set the wheels of the Parsi Gara renaissance in motion back in the 1960s, Lilaowala has taken on the responsibility of preserving and popularizing this exquisite craft, and making it relevant to the modern woman, Parsi or not.

At his home-studio in New Delhi's Green Park, Lilaowala consults with clients both old and new. The old often bring heirloom Gara saris to be restored

to him, while the new are enticed by his modern renditions of the beautiful embroidery. "When I look at the old Garas and set them next to the work we do today, there is no comparison, of course," says Lilaowala. "But we try and keep the work as neat and intricate as possible, and maintain the sanctity and integrity of the craft." To do this, Lilaowala has to ensure that the sari looks beautiful from both front and back. He's horrified by the Parsi phrase '*agalhira, pachalkeera*,' which means diamonds in the front, and worms at the back. This, he says is the true test of a good Gara, modern or old. "The embroidery has to be perfect, with the back as wonderfully finished as the front."

To the uninitiated, Parsi Gara is the technique of embroidering silk saris with the satin stitch, using silk



A Parsi couple in traditional wear

yarn. Typical Parsi Gara saris come in intense gemstone shades like ruby, purple, emerald, sapphire, and also black. On these backgrounds, the embroiderer uses pale, pastel shades like pistachio, powder blue, lemon, and most often, ivory, to create intricate motifs that seem to have a life of their own. The slant and direction of the embroidery stitches gives the motifs a sheen that adds movement to the designs. And popular motifs are the rooster, the chrysanthemum, peonies, the phoenix, the endless knot, and the deer. Incidentally, these all come from China, where Parsi Gara embroidery originated.

Talking with Lilaowala, I get a crash course. The story begins with the Zoroastrian exodus from Iran during the 10th century. Horrific as it was for a whole community to leave their homeland to escape persecution, the India-bound Iranians found safe haven in and around Gujarat. To this day, they tell a charming tale about the then-ruler of the land, one *Jadi Rana* (who may or may not have been a mythical figure), who allowed the Parsis to settle in Gujarat.



For her special day, gara wear



Display of the kanda motif in a gara sari

You may ask what this bit of history has to do with a particular type of sari. But had the Parsis not come to India, the Gara, as we know it today, would not have been born. It would have stayed as an embroidery in China and died there like many of that glorious ancient culture's techniques and arts that are now lost forever.

Lilaowala recounts the tale of the first Parsis who landed on the shores of Gujarat. "The High Priest of the Parsi community went to meet *Jadi Rana*, who was known as one of the most just and benevolent rulers in India at the time, to ask for asylum. And not wishing to be rude by refusing outright, *Rana* showed them a brass vessel filled to the brim with milk. This signified that his kingdom was full, and a single drop more would make the vessel overflow." This was a seminal moment, and as part of the mythology of Parsi Indians, every Parsi child knows it. "The High Priest, divining the king's meaning, took a pinch of



The family portrait with gara wear a compulsory keepsake

sugar, and slowly sprinkled it onto the milk, and it disappeared into the liquid, symbolizing that the Parsis would only add to the community; proverbially, make the milk sweeter without spilling a drop," explains Lialowala. And so, the Parsis came to live in India.

As a displaced community, the Parsis were naturally an enterprising people. Over time, they carved a niche for themselves as traders, and during the Raj, took their businesses to China to trade in silk, tea, and porcelain. And it was here that the Parsis discovered Gara.

Trading in China, the Parsis began importing lengths of embroidered fabrics as well. These became the first, original Garas. Embellished in the satin stitch with hand-twisted silk yarn, these Garas had a base of handwoven silk that had a naturally ribbed texture, which made them ideal of the embroidery. This fabric the Parsis called 'salligaaj' or piped silk. In the beginning, the salligaaj, now lost to history, was woven on handlooms that had shorter widths than Indian



Donned in gara splendour



The many details of gara wear

looms used for weaving saris. Plus, the fabrics were not woven as saris at all. They were embroidered as dress material, and it was Parsi ladies of Gujarat who began using these exquisite textiles as saris. They would use the short-width fabric and stitch another half width on the upper side to give it the width it required to be tied as a sari. "So from three sari lengths, you got two finished saris," explains Lilaowala.

But why not use them to make dresses? Here, we return to Jaji Rana. One of the conditions he levied on the Parsi community while giving them sanctuary was that the women of the community would dress similar to Gujarati women, in saris. The other two being that the community would speak the local language, and give up bearing arms. And these, over the centuries, became tradition. So, through a combination of benevolent factors, including one kindly king, the seeds of the Parsi Gara were sown, later uniting three countries — Iran, India, and China



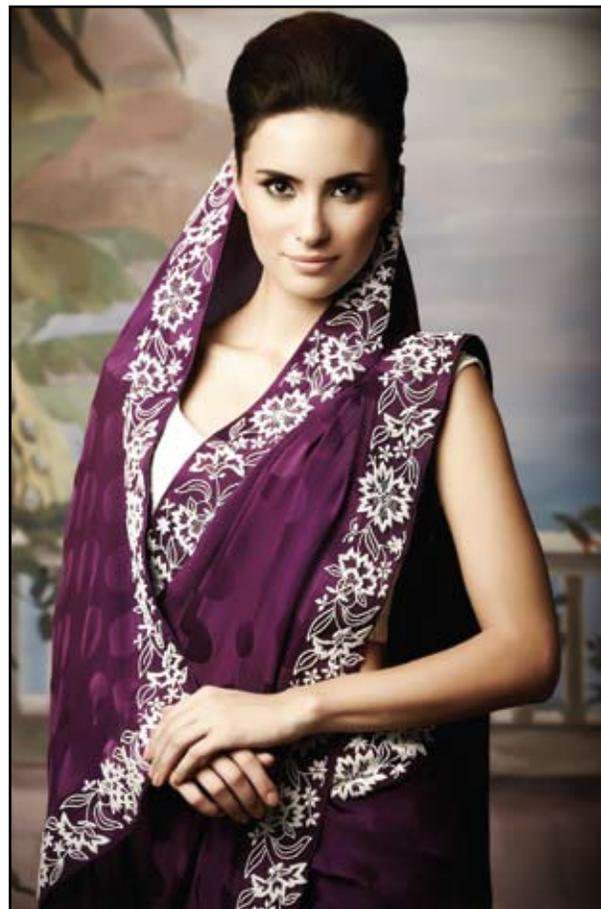
A modern take on the gara motif

— that have been more or less culturally insulated from each other in recent history. Motifs from Persian mythology hand-worked in a Chinese embroidery worn as a sari in India. The thought is enough to give me goosebumps.

Today, thanks to the efforts of Lilaowala and the Parzor Foundation, the Parsi Gara is going through a revival. But in the 18th and 19th centuries in both Bombay (as Mumbai was known then) and Calcutta (today, Kolkata), it was the height of chic. While Calcutta was the first port of entry for the Garas into India, Bombay was one of its favoured destinations because of its flourishing Parsi population. It even had its limelight moments in the court of the Nizam of Hyderabad, where fashionable ladies followed the latest in style from cosmopolitan Bombay. "Parsi women were always treated equal to the men in the community, and were highly educated and well-travelled," says Lilaowala. So that would explain why

Gara was seen as the 'It' thing to wear. Today, women wear it with the usual sari blouse that exposes the midriff, but the traditional way to wear a Parsi Gara is with a sadra, a long muslin tunic. However, the drape has changed little. "The pallu is worn long, and in the front," he adds. "The better to show off the wonderful embroidery." The ideal accompaniment to this ensemble? "Pearls. We Parsis love our pearls."

It's interesting to make a connection between the traditional dress of a small community with modern trends. Recently, the tunic-and-sari combination, though not with Gara saris, has appeared in the rampshows of Abraham & Thakore as well as Kolkata-based designers Dev R Nil. Another bridge from the past to the present: Parsi ladies wore their Garas Gujarati-style, with the pallu draped back-to-front, and covering the head while leaving the left ear



Pearl border embroidery in gara



Parsi family showing ladies sporting gara creations

exposed. In the 18th and 19th centuries, this gave rise to the trend of the single earring. Today, mega-brands like Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior, Chanel, Balenciaga, and Celine have shown the single earring in their shows. Fashion truly moves in cycles.

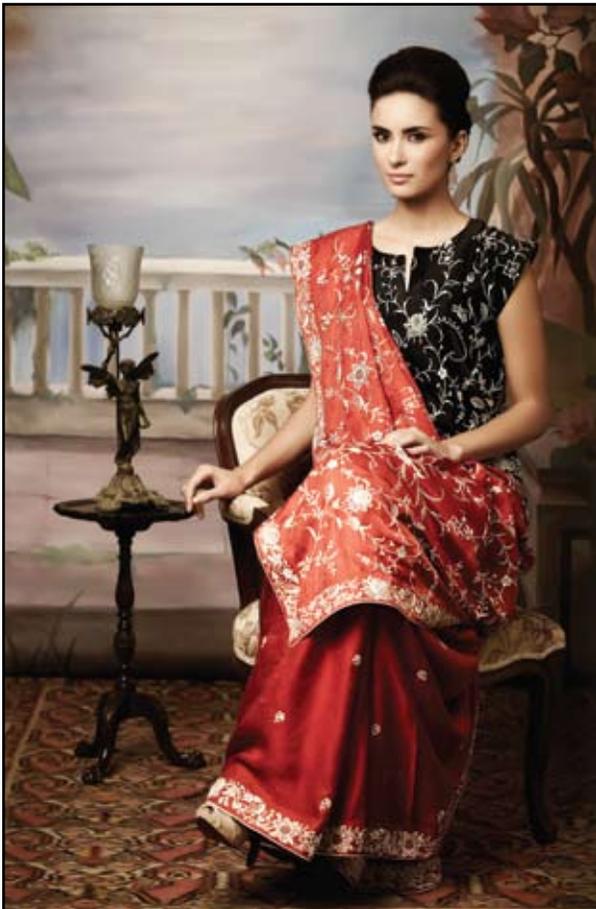
That said, there are signature elements that demarcate the old from the new, especially when it comes to the Gara. "Old Garas were almost always fully-embroidered," explains Lilaowala, adding that a true gara will have the top right corner of the pallu left without embroidery (a triangle of about 3-4 inches long at the vertices). This was done so that Parsi ladies could tuck it into their waistbands without it becoming bulky. As for the embroidery itself, "you could almost see the cranes taking flight, and the chrysanthemums and peonies seemed to sway in the wind". Traditional motifs that depicted everyday life with a Chinese man and woman came to be called

'cheena-cheeni'. Polka dots in an alternating beige-and-ivory colour scheme on a solid-colour backdrop were termed '*kanda-papeta*' or the onion-and-potato motif (so divine was the pairing). And while these motifs came from China (along with a squarish version of the paisley filled in with auspicious Buddhist or Taoist symbols like the phoenix, the willow tree, the never-ending knot, the deer, and the divine fungus), both India and Britain, which ruled India, contributed to the iconography of the Gara.

From the English came designs inspired by bows and ribbons, roses, and floral baskets. And from India the Parsis took the '*ambi*', our version of the paisley that resembles an unripe mango, as well as the peacock and the lotus. From their Persian roots, they added the '*chakla-chakli*' design, depicting two birds among a '*jaal*' or filigree of flowering trees and creepers. They also added the rooster, the Simurgh or bird of

paradise, as well as plants and fish, plus 30 different types of flowers that represent the 30 angels who look over each day of the month in Zoroastrian mythology. "There is no ritualistic role of the Gara," says Lilaowala, "but they have become a cultural identity; worn with much pride."

It is important to note that by the mid-19th century, the Opium Wars between China and England had had an effect on Parsi businesses, and most of the Gara worn by the Parsi ladies of India was being produced in the country by then. This allowed the Parsis to mix motifs with abandon, and they created some of the most complex pieces of symbolic embroideries to be worn as saris. Most of these pieces have not survived. Some have succumbed to the ravages of time and moths. Some were mistakenly or stupidly washed, and the embroidery destroyed in the process (more



Floral jaal gara sari



Bamboo patterned gara

on this later). And in the mid-20th century, when the Parsis grew collectively bored of the Gara (too many cheap Chinese Gara borders flooded the markets, and women began attaching these to plain georgette saris with snap-buttons — a common curse even today), the saris went through a period of genuine unpopularity. "Beautiful, priceless ancestral Garas were cut up and made into cushion covers," says Lilaowala. *Cushion covers?* I ask, incredulous. "Yes. Even dustbin coverlets and curtains," he says ruefully. But the really important pieces, the true heirlooms, have travelled through time, and travelled well.

Lilaowala shows me one such piece. It is an heirloom Gara that he is currently restoring for a client, and its base is a deep maroon salligaaj, the original fabric on which Garas were embroidered. On it, there is a border of deer, the divine fungus, and the never-

ending knot, all hailing from China, while the body of the sari is crammed full of Chinese as well as Indian paisleys ("you almost never see the two together," he says). There are Parsi roosters, flowers, creepers, and roses. And the entire 6-yard sari, which has been hand-embroidered all over, has tiny nips and holes

made possibly when the sari snagged on a nail, or something similar (you can tell that Lilaowala will have to work with magnifying glasses to repair the damage, even though it does not show to the naked eye). It weighs not even 500 grams. The piece is so exquisite that to handle it with bare hands seems a

sacrilege. "I challenge any designer today to embroider an entire sari in silk thread and keep it this light," says Lilaowala. In my mind, I challenge any present-day society doyenne to wear a sari like this with the nonchalance and panache of the Parsi ladies of old.

But unlike single-minded revivalists, Lilaowala is also a designer. Which, given his Parsi heritage, is a fantastic combination. While his Parsi side understands the Gara embroidery deeply — its specialties, intricacies, and also its limitations — his designer side is free to innovate within the box. And that is true creativity. His Garas are not simply a reproduction of the old. He has done versions where he has used metallic zari yarns to mimic traditional motifs which he terms as his 'cocktail saris', and has played with newer motifs like butterflies and exotic birds to make lighter, 'daytime' Garas in unusual combinations. "The technique is sacrosanct, but I try to give it a modern twist so that people can experience the beauty of Parsi Gara embroidery without being tied down by the traditional aspects of it," he says. Thus, the Gara is no longer confined to Navjote (initiation of Parsi children into the Faith) ceremonies and weddings, but has become covetable for its inherent value by any discerning sari connoisseur.



Floral jaal on gara

The many styles of gara wear — 20<sup>th</sup> century

Today, in the third year of his business, he retails from Ekaya and Neel Sutra in New Delhi, Cinnamon in Bengaluru and Cochin, Amethyst in Chennai, 85 Landsdowne in Kolkata, and the Taj Khazana stores as well as Ogaan outlets all over the country. His skilled *kaarigars* work on two different kinds of Garas, one that uses the traditional satin stitch, and the other that is done with the crewel needle to achieve the same effect. His more elaborate designs can be priced above Rs. 300,000/- a piece, while the simpler designs — for example, a jacquard-georgette sari with a flock of butterflies hovering over the shoulder area — begin from Rs. 30,000/- onwards. On special request, he also carries out restoration work on heritage Garas, and such work can often take months to complete.

Lilaowala's *kaarigars* come mostly from West Bengal, and live and work in Delhi's Tughlakabad area, where

his unit is. "Most *kaarigars* come knowing the basic embroidery skills," says Lilaowala. "Some are very good and need no formal training, and some need to understand the flow and movement which is integral to [Gara] hand embroidery." The biggest challenge, adds the designer, is to make the *kaarigars* understand negative spacing, which is often used to give definition to a form or motif. Anywhere between four to eight *kaarigars* work on a single sari at the same time, depending on the complexity of the design, and sit around three-metre long frames on which the sari is stretched. They sit on the ground, with the frame raised to the chest level, resting their elbows on the wooden slats that make up the frame. "One of the most difficult and important things is choosing the thread colour. The threads have to be very carefully selected, and combinations have to be tried on base fabric to check the interaction, and



The crane motif of gara embroidery

then finalized," adds Lilaowala. And so, the Gara is embroidered with the combined labour of a team of artisans who are matched in their skills, execution, finish, and the elegance of their stitches. Nothing less than perfection will do.

"Part of the charm of a Gara comes from the fact that it is a time-consuming technique, so when you buy one, it is a piece of timeless work that you are investing in," he says. And so, it comes as no surprise

that Lilaowala, though he does put up ramp shows at a prominent fashion week, does not factor in colour trends or similar, short-lived fads into his designs. His creative output is not part of the fashion game, and because of that, has already won. "A Parsi Gara is a thing to hold on to forever, and to pass on to the next generation," he says.

It is strange to see a fashion designer propagate long-lasting fashion, because on principle, the fashion industry runs on and is fed by the disposability of clothes. But Lilaowala is not one of those who would make something less than extraordinary to simply boost his sales. His saris are designed to last, and to look beautiful always. In this way, they have even surpassed the original Garas of old. "The old garas were embroidered on deep-coloured silks, and since colours weren't fast at that time — there was no way of 'fixing' colour to fabric back then, no chemical treatment to ensure that the dye wouldn't run — Garas were never washed," he informs. "The saris were simply aired out after each wear, and then folded and kept aside till the next time."

Today, designers like Lilaowala are using the best possible materials to create fabrics and clothes that are works of art. They are not only reviving an ancient craft, but also expanding on its visual vocabulary, and making it relevant, ensuring it continues to live and flourish in the times to come. To all those who rue modern technological advances and their devastating effects on traditional crafts, the efforts of Lilaowala stand as an inspiration. The key lies not in rejecting the march of modernity or pining for a lost past, but to embrace the future and bridge the divide with creative thinking. And that is exactly what Ashdeen Lilaowala has done.

*The author is Fashion Features Director at Harper's Bazaar India*

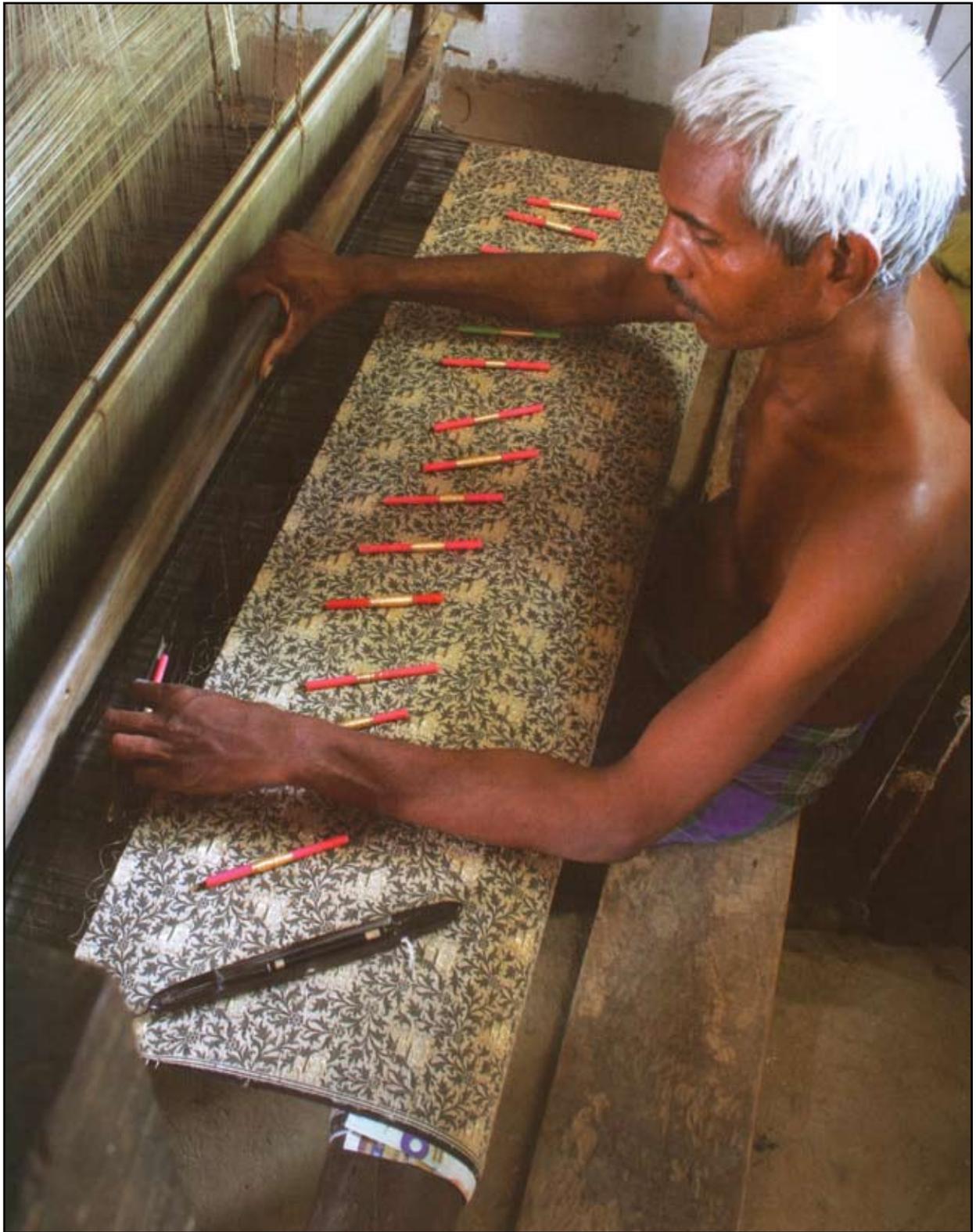
# Photo Essay: The Benaras Sari Weave

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Compiled by Anup Kumar Das



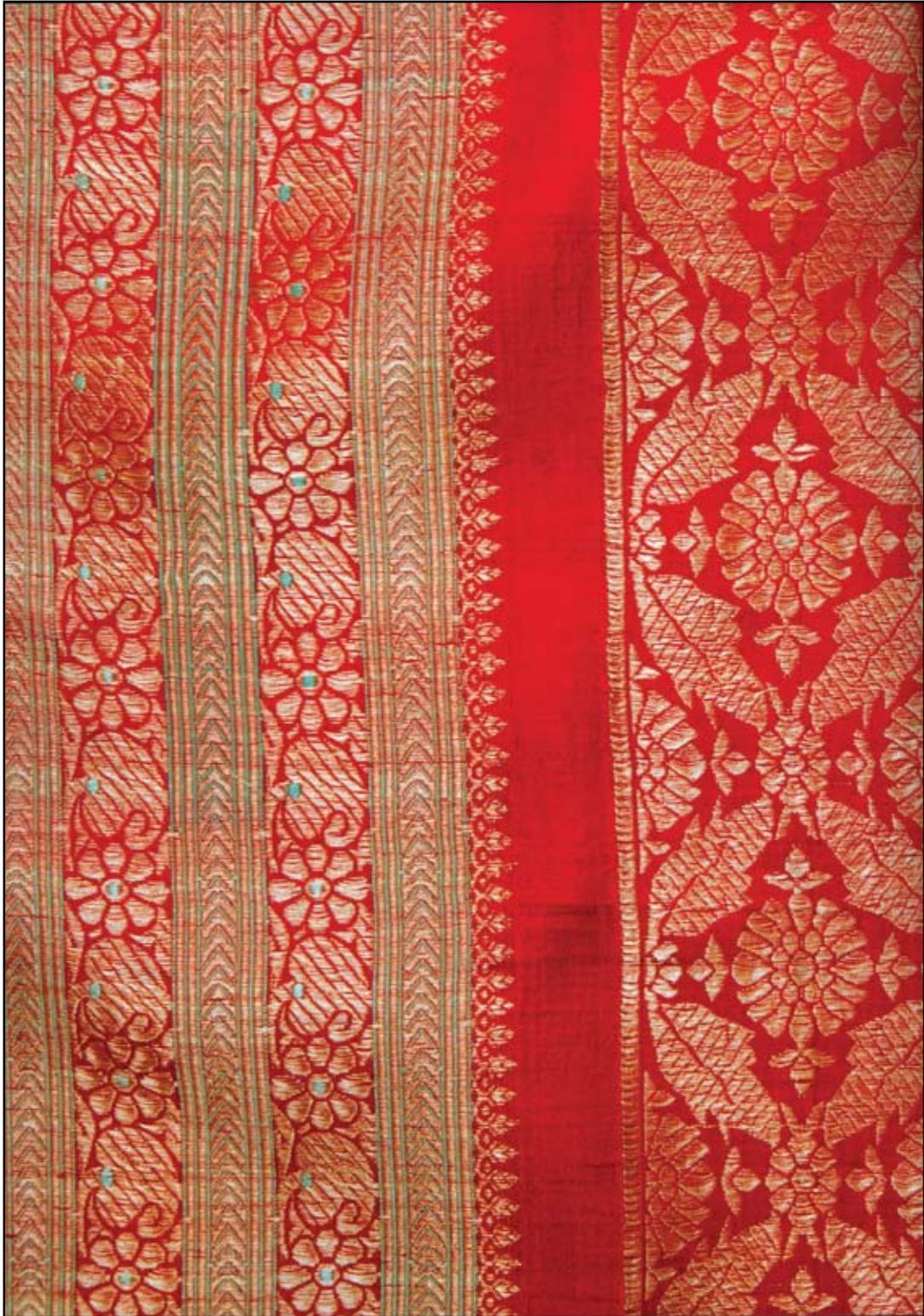
Gyaser, the heavily inlaid cloth used by Buddhists for monasteries, ceremonial dressing and other ornamentation, including the framing of tankha paintings, has been traditionally made in Varanasi  
Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"



Bobbins indicate the weaver is preparing a sari in the kadua technique  
Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"



An orange silk tissue sari with borders and a fine checked pattern in zari has a border and pallu in what is termed a chaudani pattern, woven in the early 19th century  
Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"



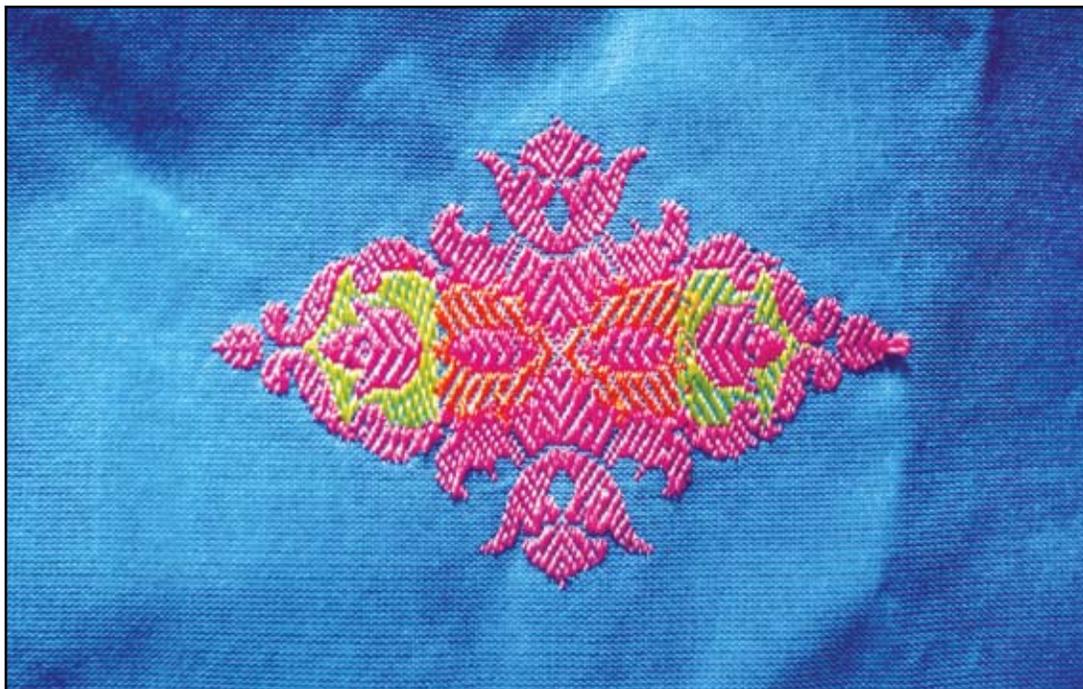
An all-over brocade and zari sari, combining stylized flower and paisley motifs. The Pattern was created during the British period. It is one of the design that is now no longer woven because of its elaborate character  
Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"



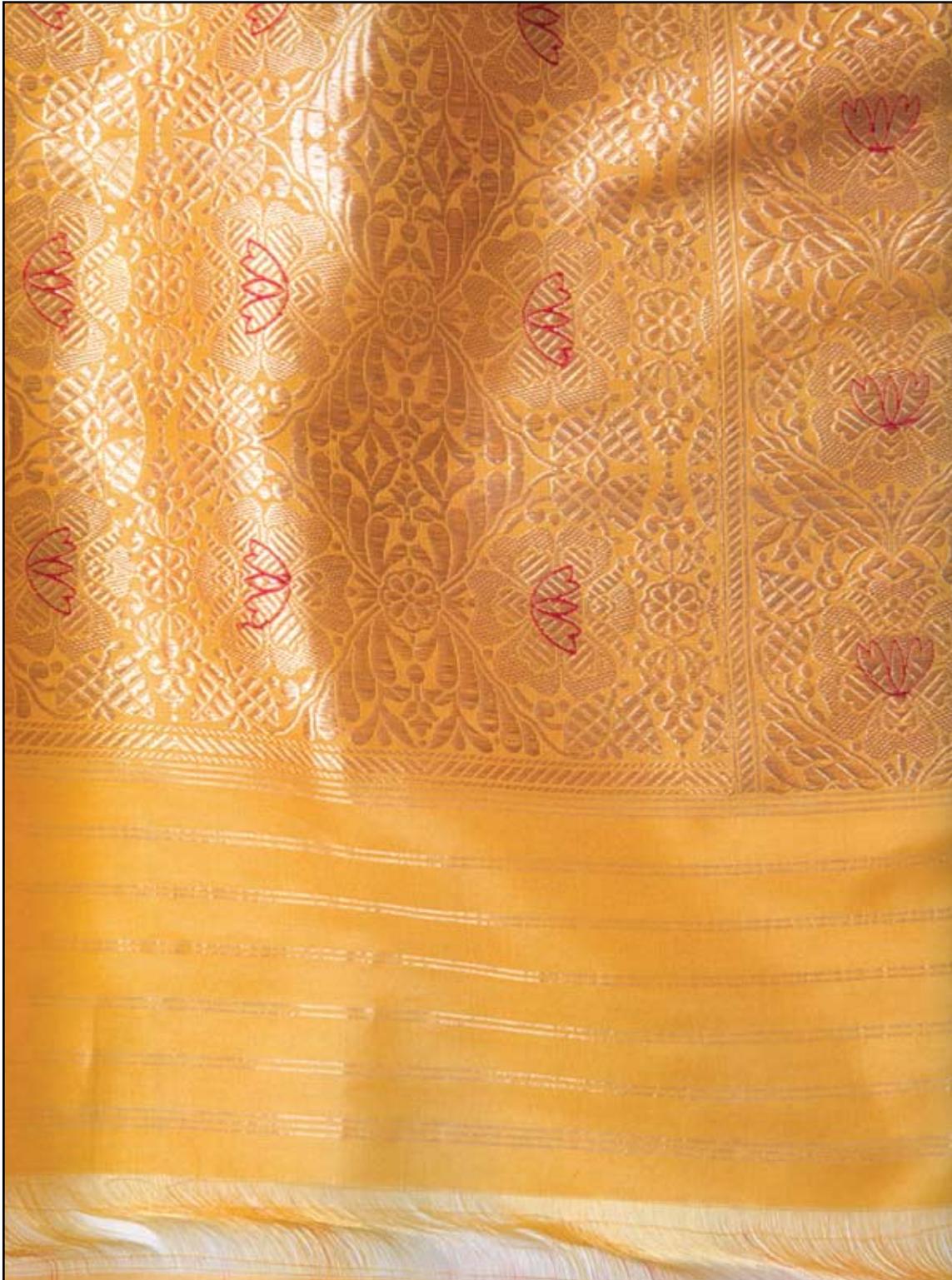
Handlooms from the famed city of Varanasi will survive as long as they are re-invented, re-vitalized and keep ahead of cheaper imitations. Contemporary innovations have enticed many fashion-conscious women who tend to look to the west for acceptability to return to the sari. Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"



Tibetan symbols, borders and patterns are used by Varanasi weavers to create thousands of metres of fabric for Buddhists around the world for centuries. Today, skilled weavers are in short supply  
Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"



The traditional pattern artist is called a naqshaband. He plots the layout for motif on graph paper and sometimes has a small version made on a frame  
Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"



The effective contemporary layouts are those that closely follow traditional techniques and motif. Here the weaver has placed the lotus flower at odds with the flow of the body pattern  
Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"



Women of all ages are part of the process of handloom weaving  
Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"



Detail of lehnga panel woven in the early 19th century and combines the kunia, peacock, parrot, tiger, deer, trellis, fruit, flower and emblem-like patterns probably commissioned by courtly patrons  
Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"



The influence of chinoiserie made an appearance in a sari woven in the mid-20th century  
Photo courtesy: Niyogi Books "Woven Textiles of Varanasi"

# The Golden Splendour of the Bhagalpur Tassar Sari

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Varsha Rani

**B**hagalpur the home of the golden *Tassar* silk sari is a small town situated 250 kms east of Patna the capital city of Bihar. Silk weaving engaging thousands of weavers for generations here has been a popular profession since times immemorial. The mere mention of the Bhagalpur *Tassar* sari conjures splendid images of a luxurious, elegant, graceful and gorgeous fabric which amazingly combines the rich and warm golden hues of the glowing Sun, ripe paddy fields and the bountiful bright earth. Soft as flowers and light as feathers, these sturdy silken threads are created within a cocoon as mysteriously as a pearl is created inside an oyster. Nature's unique gift to

women to adorn their form the Bhagalpur *Tassar* sari — a rage in the domestic markets of India — has catapulted Bhagalpur prominently on the fashion map of the country today and as fabric, has become a part of international haute couture.

The *Tassar* silkworm *Antheraea Mylitta Paphia* belongs to the *Saturniidae* family of silkworms and feeds on the leaves of the *Terminalia Arjuna* or *Arjuna* or *Terminalia Tomentosa* or *Asan* tree weaving a protective sheath around itself on maturity. From the fibres derived from this shell is produced the exquisite *Tassar* yarn of which India is one of the largest producers in the



A view of Bhagalpur city across the river Ganges



The beautiful Tassar silkworm feeding on the Arjuna leaves

world. In Nevasa, Maharashtra the discovery of a child's skeleton which has been dated to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. wearing a necklace of copper beads strung on a silk thread takes the use of silk in India as far back as its origins in China, where silk is said to have been first discovered in the wild and Sericulture or systematic cultivation of silkworms begun later. The use of Chinese silk, derived from *Bombyx Mori* which belongs to the other group of silkworms the *Bombyciidae* feeding on the leaves of the *Mulberry* or *Morus Alba* tree arrived in India at a later date and was referred to differently as *Cinansuka*, *Chinakauseya*, *Chinapatta*, *Cinamsuya* etc.

In ancient times the silkworm grew wild in the forests — *Vanas* — of India and its cocoons were collected by the forest dwellers or tribals who sold it to the village weavers who processed it into yarn for weaving. This pure silk cloth or *Kauseya* derived from cocoon or *Kosha* was considered sacred and auspicious and

its weaving as a craft finds mention in the hymns of the *Rigveda* the ancient Indian text with a divine origin, transmitted orally for generations before being composed around 1800 B.C.E.

According to traditions the great weaver saint Sage Grithsamadh a prominent composer of the *Rigveda* while singing celestial hymns first wove the *Kauseya* on his loom. Another ancient text the *Manusmriti*, Epics *Valmiki Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* also refer frequently to the usage of wild silk drapes among the recluses, royalty and aristocracy equally because of its purity, colour and texture. The legendary hero of *Ayodhya*, *Rama's* wife *Sita's* trousseau is said to comprise of several such silk saris. The *Mahabharata* refers to the *Pandava* princes receiving drapes made of yarn derived from creatures during their exile in the jungles. Thus this raiment of Bhagalpur or *Champa* the capital of the ancient city of *Angadesha* bounded by river *Champa* on the west and ruled by the epic



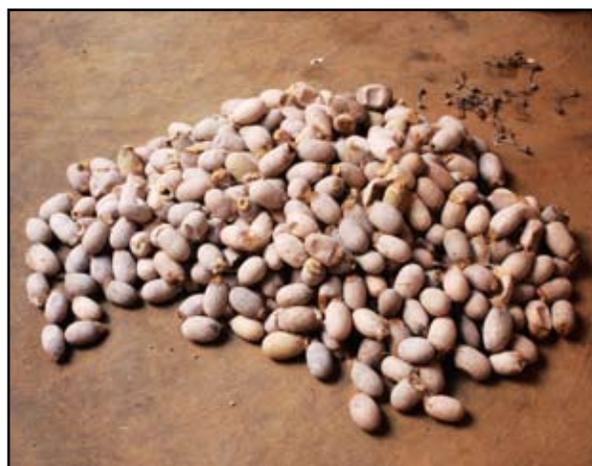
The female silkmoth laying eggs which resemble okra seeds

hero *Karna* of *Mahabharata* fame thus claims great antiquity. Kautilya the prime minister of the *Mauryan* Empire in his 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. text *Arthashastra* presents a graphic description of wild silks called *Krimitana* derived from worms and a soft *Suvarna Dukula* or golden wrap derived from *Patrona* or leaves produced in Magadha-Bihar and Vanga-Bengal and its adjoining areas. Born in c. 90 A.D. *Ptolemy* the Greek geographer refers to the Silk Route from China to India which passed through the *Mauryan* capital of *Pataliputra* in the Gangetic Delta — an ancient international mart from where silk was carried to many parts of the world. The Buddhist traditions around the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. refer to the weaving of silk mantles as the Buddha had permitted the monks to use this *Kauseya Pravara*. The 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Chinese scholar Hieun Tsang thus refers to *Kauseya* or silk clothing made from cocoons. Around the 12<sup>th</sup> century



Dyed hanks of yarn drying in the winding lanes of Champanagar

A.D. under the Islamic rulers the production of silk began to shift to Bhagalpur closer to its source of raw materials procured easily from the neighbouring tribal areas of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas now part of Jharkhand state. Called *Jangal Mahal* by the British they were part of undivided Bihar which was renowned as the Tassar belt. The word Tassar is derived from "*Tahassar*" meaning wild cloth in the *Ho tribal* language of Chotanagpur. The early 17<sup>th</sup> century European traders in Eastern India who saw *Tassar* cocoons in the wild for the first time thought it was a pod produced by the tree and called it *Herba* and the end products as *Herba* goods or spun from the herbs. The best of Tassar and Cotton silk blends of striped



The Tassar silk cocoons whose fibres create the magic of Bhagalpur Saris

and checked *Ginghams* and the occasionally flowered *Nillaes* or *blue* fabrics were exported extensively from here in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to the European markets. The East India Company records regards the fabrics made in Bhagalpur as much superior and popular both among natives and Europeans to those made in Patna and Gaya.

Thus Bhagalpur flanked by the river Ganga on the south gradually became a major centre of spinning, weaving, finishing, dyeing, printing and trading in the country. To this important silk hub housing weavers, contractors, wholesalers and retailers flocked traders from far off Punjab, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Delhi and Bombay looking for quality silk goods. While



Women drawing yarn from boiled cocoons on their thighs

Bhagalpur surged ahead weavers from other parts of Bihar were struggling to survive and their numbers steadily decreased with the coming of the British and especially the Partition. The book "*The saris of India: Bihar and West Bengal*," by Rta Kapur Chishti and Amba Sanyal, 1995, provides comprehensive information on the extinction of the traditional saris of Bihar revealing how their production ebbed by the 40's and stopped completely by 1956 due to escalating silk prices and shortage of yarn which made them totally unaffordable. They were replaced by Banarasi Brocades and cheaper mill printed mixed fabric saris from Bombay and Kanpur. Thus dwindling demand affected the *Tassar* silk sari industry adversely. In the midst of all these odds Bhagalpur alone reinvented its products switching from saris to fabric and fabric to other products for survival. Produced in bulk as yardage the *Tassar* silk fabric often blended with Mulberry silk and cotton to make it cheaper catered largely to export markets. Weavers from other parts of Bihar migrated to Bhagalpur in search of ample work and better wages which further augmented Bhagalpur's position in the trade.

To the women in Bihar the word *Tassar* sari has always spelt magic. Any auspicious occasion — social or religious — a wedding, the birth of a child, change of seasons, entering a new house, the sacred thread ceremony, a family feast or important festivals, any ritual or ceremony would become an excuse for them to acquire a piece of the finely knit and textured *Desi Tassar* or Raw Silk sari. After a few acquisitions of this simple natural golden drape with a plain body and end pieces or pallus beautifully fringed, new targets would be set for acquiring a range of colourful check or striped saris with contrast borders multicoloured end pieces and short colour effects. Washed and worn comfortably the *Tassar* Saris lent itself to draping very well and were very warm especially in cold weather. As they aged with usage the softer and shinier they became. Hence they were prized possessions for a lifetime and were handed down with pride to the



The finesse of screen printing on Tassar sari

next generation as heirlooms. The traditional saris enumerated in the book *Saris of India* include the *Maldehi* and *Laldehi* which bore multiple golden yellow and red stripes in its body with either a yellow, green or red border, their end pieces displaying chequered pattern with dots, or diamond designs. Woven especially in the marriage seasons from *Phagun* to *Jeth* i.e February to June and priced between Rs 5-6 they were a part of every bride's trousseau. Worn by women of all communities a marriage ceremony was incomplete without the *Maldehi*. The *Sundari* sari had a pink body and yellow border or red body and gold border. The *Pote* had a yellow body and red or green border. They further refer to the names of many more extinct saris woven in the 50's and 60's e.g the — *Mataria*, *Salamkhania*, *Kirkiri*, *Tabija*, *Morkanthi*, *Nauranji*, *Paarwala* and *Farmaishi* named after their myriad colour combinations, textures, patterns and weaving techniques. Dyed with various natural

colours derived from flowers like *Harsingar*, *Kusum*, *Palash*, *Mahua*, lotus seed and the bark of fruit trees like *Mango*, *Jamun*, *Amla* and *Banana*, and condiments like Catechu and Turmeric some of the most popular designs included motifs like *chataiyya* or mat, *kanghi* or comb, *sakarpala* — or circle, *pan* or betel leaf, *inta* or brick pattern and the *kenchua* or the worm etc.

Post independence the formation of the Central Silk Board by the Government of India under the Ministry of Textiles in 1948, for the development of the Silk Industry was a landmark step. The silk trade received great impetus with better accessibility to raw materials and ready markets due to improved communication and transportation yet the sari industry in Bhagalpur was not satisfactorily revived. When the great craft revivalist Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya in her 'Discovery of India Crafts Yatra' visited Bhagalpur in the 50's she found no Tassar silk saris worth mentioning, in the local markets. She pitched for government sponsored



Men outdoors preparing the length or warp of the Bhagalpur Sari

revival programmes and worked relentlessly researching the long lost traditions insisting on training new hands and other strategies to revive this extinct craft. After a long hiatus the 20<sup>th</sup> century finally heralded the revival of the sari industry began through Five Year Plans and the constitution of the Central Silk Board which initiated various schemes for systematic cultivation of silk or sericulture, formulating standards for quality control of silk, assisting and encouraging scientific, technological and economic research and providing financial assistance to various states and non-governmental organisations for all round promotion of this craft. To improve the quality and production of the wild silks especially in keeping with market demand, the Silk Board also embarked on a UNDP assisted sub-programme in 1999-2000. Various programmes initiated by both the Central and State government to empower the self-help groups, cooperatives and federations of silk producers, by way of skill upgradation, better accessibility to raw materials and markets, mechanised and modernised reeling, spinning and weaving facilities, availability of working capital as loans from cooperatives and nationalised banks, through government grants and subsidies, marketing, sale, exhibition and export promotion drives had far reaching effects. The Sericulture Institute, at Bhagalpur which imparts technical knowhow of this industry, the Spun Silk Mill which recycles silk waste yarn by spinning it, the establishment of the Weaver Service Centre in Bhagalpur in 1974, the individual designers, entrepreneurs and NGO's all experimenting with new yarns, weaves and designs endeavoured simultaneously to revive the forgotten tradition without killing the creativity of the weavers. This concerted effort to save the sari revived this industry considerably ensuring a sustainable means of livelihood to the marginalized rural masses especially the Tribals and women. The Bhagalpur based Berozgar Mahila Kalyan Sanstha formed in 1985, is one such name which heralded the new age of quality, designer, high fashion Tassar Sari. Its exquisite creations are a rage in the markets today from the commoners to the

glitterati. Bhagalpur Cluster is the highest producer of silk goods in the state and second highest in silk production and exports after Karnataka.

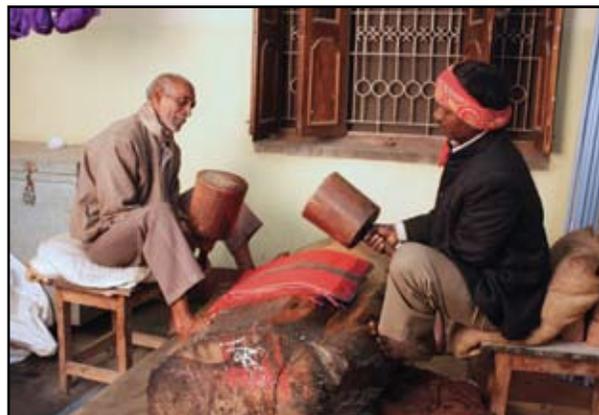
The delicate golden Tassar threads yielding once again to the creative touch of the best traditional craftsmen has reincarnated the Bhagalpur Tassar Sari which in its new Avatar combines several elements of the past and like a fresh canvas is open to immense creative innovations and this accounts for its ever increasing appeal. The Bhagalpur town and the neighbouring villages are now buzzing with great activity once again. More than 30,000, weavers and their families derive their livelihood from this single craft which demands great skill and effort. Throughout the length and breadth of the Bhagalpur town and its environs, countless small home based workshops utilising agro resources and local labour is sustaining the rural masses relentlessly by creating the magic of the Bhagalpur Tassar sari. There is no looking back for this cottage industry. Even power looms have stepped up production to make the saris more cost effective and meet the ever increasing needs of the urban national markets and wider international markets. The weavers work in individual capacity or through wholesalers not depending, solely on the government for subsidies or securing regular orders and raw materials or selling back their finished goods. They have immense opportunities now to sell indirectly to traders and directly to the consumers in their local *Haats* and *Melas* and their urban counterparts like the *Dilli Haat* and *Pragati Maidan* Trade Expos in Delhi and other metros, besides Handloom and Handicraft fairs held throughout the country and Festivals of India abroad taking the *Tassar* sari industry to great heights. Buyers of the Bhagalpur Sari are spoilt for choice today and have the privilege to choose from a vivid collection comprising of handcrafted heavier and exclusive designer weaves, to plain and textured lighter weaves. Its countless varieties and designs which defy description reveal the technical, creative and aesthetic skill of its weavers. Tassar cocoons of the best quality today are grown in the forest belts of India on large scales to cater to heavy national and



The weavers inside the house filling weft threads on the warp

international demand of *Tassar* silk not only as saris but dress material and furnishings.

It is fascinating to see the much sought after Bhagalpur *Tassar* Sari originate in a small worm feeding ravenously on tender leaves and naturally spinning cocoons in the wild basically to protect itself. From egg, larvae, pupa and adult moth the silkworm completes its life cycle in approximately 53 days producing the cocoon at the end. Vagaries of the weather, infectious diseases, pests and predators the silkworm has to be protected on numerous counts to procure good quality silk yarn. Disturbance in any way hinders the production of silk. Bhagalpur uses yarn from all varieties of cocoons brought in from Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Jharkhand. These include Bogai, Naria, Mongia, Dhaba, Reli and Sarian to name a few. Dhaba the commercial variety with the largest sized cocoons yields bulk quantities. The most expensive and premium quality producing the longest filaments



The ready saris being pounded to shape with Kundis or wooden mallets

are the Reli and Sarian costing Rs 5,000 per kilo fit enough to make two saris measuring five and a half metres. The quality, quantity and colour of the silk varies depending on the soil, season, environment, species and feed of the silkworm and processing of the cocoons. The handspun yarn is uneven but lustrous as compared to the mill finished local and imported

Korean and Chinese yarns which are uniform and have greater fibre length and elasticity.

One autumn visit to the tribal areas of Bahupara near Dumka, visiting Dheka Murmu's home, I had the chance to see the lifecycle of the silkworm which produces the magical Tassar yarn. Murmu's entire family was involved in nurturing these extraordinary worms whose spinnings are a craze among the sari connoisseurs of the fashion world today. In a wicker basket pairs of male and female moths are placed for about eight to ten hours to mate. Following which they are separated and the beautiful maroon and yellow female moth is placed on a bunch of leaves tied to a wooden pole in a quiet corner of the courtyard. "Each moth lays about 200 eggs if undisturbed," says Murmu's 80-year old father. Bunches of eggs each the size of an okra seed are removed to a wooden box where they are placed on a bed of leaves again. Murmu's young brother leads us to the backyard where we see the newly hatched white larvae busily

feeding on a number of *Arjuna* trees. This process will continue till about forty days when they become mature after which they convert into 10-12 cms long lovely pale green caterpillars bearing bright red spots, which should ideally weigh about 50 gms each. This is the period when they need to be protected from pests and predators such as crows, squirrels, kites, lizards, mice and monkeys. As they feed they go through the process of moulting four times. Their



An elegant natural dyed Tassar sari



Myriad Bhagalpur saris and varied Tassar yarn



Imprint of Heritage-Hand Block printing on Tassar sari

marathon eating stops by the fourth moult. Preparing for hibernation they start weaving their protective sheaths around themselves for the next ten or twelve days. The silk filament called Bave or *Fibril* is actually large quantities of proteins produced in their silk glands which appears in a liquid form or *Fibroin* as two parallel strands or Brins along with a gum sericin which rapidly glues them together as one thread. Once ready Murmu and his family collect the crop and take them to the nearest rural wholesale markets where yarn dealers come and buy the cocoons i.e *Koa* or *Gotis* in bulk through auction picking them up in *Kahans*. Approximately 1280 cocoons or *Gotis* make a *Kahan* or *Khari*.

The cocoons are graded and the perfect ones which yield good quality long filaments are sorted out for boiling separately. This prevents the pupa or *Chrysalid* from damaging the yarn while escaping as silk moth after it completes its life cycle by moistening the

edges of the cocoons. The weavers who buy them boil the cocoons in large earthen pots in water mixed with washing soda for about 4-5 hours. This process dissolves the natural gum sericin surrounding the cocoons softening them enough for women to find the filament ends which become visible in a continuous line forming compact layers as the floss covering the cocoons is cleaned. Each cocoon yields between 2-10 filaments. Cocoons can be reeled right up till the core barring the layer covering the pupa. 500 cocoons can be approx reeled in 8 hours. If hand *Charkhas* yield 400 metres of yarn, machines yield 4000 metres of yarn in the same time. A perfect cocoon yields approx 60-70% fine quality continuous Tassar filament measuring between 500-1200 metres. 1000 *kilos* of fresh cocoons of the Multivoltine race yields only 125 *kilos* of raw silk and 35 *kilos* of waste silk. In Univoltine or Biovoltine races 8 or 9 *kilos* of fresh cocoons yield one *kilos* of raw silk. The perfect cocoons also produce 25-30% waste silk. Pierced cocoons where the pupa



Thread on thread-adorning the Tassar sari with embroidery

has escaped yielding shorter lengths of yarn along with flimsy and wrinkled cocoons and the *Balkal* yarn derived from the peduncle or the stem — the first two strands of silk produced by the silkworm to anchor itself to the tree securely are all considered to be waste silk or *Jhuri*. All of this waste is spun and woven back as designer saris today resulting in some of the most exotic and expensive varieties costing more than Rs 5000 each. Ideally, lighter the weight the purest and finest the quality of the silk. 900 gms of cocoon each yielding less than a gm of silk goes into the making of a plain *Desi* natural *Tassar* sari which should ideally weigh up to 450 gms and costs around Rs 4000.

After reeling the yarn is boiled again in soap water and washed to remove the Serecin and straighten the tangled fibres which are further softened with the help of a little cornflour and castor oil. The pure *Tassar* silk thread is so fine that several strands normally between

4-20 have to be drawn together from several cocoons, rolled and twisted as single, double, four or eight ply to increase its elasticity and produce the correct denier or thickness, strong enough for weaving. This yarn is then, washed, bleached and dyed if necessary before men take to weaving them. West of Bhagalpur city flanking the river *Champa* the weaving families still reside in *Champanagar, Nathnagar, Maskand, Narga* etc and recall trade with Dhaka on this river in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Countless weaving villages like *Katoria, Puraini, Amarpur, Bhagahiya, Akbarnagar, Godda*, surround Bhagalpur. For the Muslim *Momin* and *Ansari* or the Hindu *Tanti* and *Patua* weavers their craft is not only a means of livelihood in which their entire family is involved but also a medium of their creative expression. Winding dusty roads and serpentine lanes and by-lanes are dotted with their modest households which wake up to the clatter of the looms. From early childhood we caught frequent glimpses of the weaving families at work

from our school bus every day. While visiting some of our friends here or taking eager visitors on a buying spree, warm smiles greeted us and beckoned us inside. In practically every household along daily chores and minding the young ones women could be seen boiling cocoons, spinning or drawing thread from inside the cocoon by hand on charkhas, inverted earthen pots or their thighs, producing different kinds of *Tassar* yarn- from the smooth and even *Tassar* to the coarser and uneven waste silks of *Ghiccha*, *Katia*, *Balkal*, *Tassarate*, *Jhuri*, etc.

The filament is finally wound on to bobbins and sent to weavers who commence the tedious process of preparing the required length of the sari called warp stretched in their long lanes on wooden poles. Inside their homes others deftly weft or fill intricate designs and patterns on these ready warps mounted on handlooms viz. the *domestic* throw shuttle pitloom used to weave close knit, strong and heavy fabrics and the *commerical* fly shuttle pitloom meant for faster, lighter and wider fabrics. Depending on the design one sari may take up to 3 days for which the weaver gets Rs 300-500 as wages. Dry weather is imperative for weaving, dyeing and printing the absence of which leads to many weaving defects as the threads break, the tension becomes loose, the weight is not right, the consumption of the yarn is more and the colours smudge. The influx of Korean and Chinese silk which are mill finished and more even and smooth has augmented the use of power looms in Bhagalpur as the weavers find the *Desi Tassar* yarn or Raw silk uneven and hence more difficult to weave. The clatter of the handlooms resounding till late at night creates some of the most mesmerizing handcrafted saris.

If the need for dyeing arises hanks of natural yarn or ready saris are both bleached and washed so that they shed the natural starch and absorb the colourful dyes better. Only skilled hands can match accurate shades and give a varied colour range. Acid, Direct, Napthol, Vat and Sulphur dyes are all used for dyeing and

rapid, reactive and pigment colours used for printing the *Tassar* saris. The introduction of synthetic dyes by the British in 1856, destroyed the traditional practice of using natural colours completely in Bhagalpur. However vegetable dyes used in the olden times find reference in *Arthsastra* which mentions the extensive cultivation of *Aal* and *Safflower* known for their dye qualities. Indigo from India called *Indicum* which was immensely popular among the Greeks and Romans and the English later was cultivated on large scales in Champaran in North Bihar. Sporadic efforts have been made to revive this practice by some entrepreneurs and NGO's engaged in craft promotion. Saris sent for vegetable dyeing and printing to Rajasthan, Gujarat or Madhya Pradesh and back to Bhagalpur for finishing makes the final product fairly expensive but the connoisseurs are ready to pay any price for it. The need of the hour however is to revive this forgotten technique of adorning the beautiful natural fabric with natural colours not only because of their universal demand but to counter the adverse effects of synthetic dyes on human health and environment. The cultivation of natural dyes and their usage in both dyeing and printing the Bhagalpur saris will also sustain many more lives.

Weavers either get dyed yarn from the market or dye it at home in large copper utensils by hand or use vats immersing hanks of silk yarn hung on wooden sticks in the bath of the liquid dye, turning it at regular intervals for even dyeing. Spread out for drying in the courtyards, boundary walls, rooftops and neighbouring fields – their myriad shades make every inch of space a riot of colours. *Tassar* silk yields itself to all colours beautifully. Dyed and printed in synthetic colours it acquires fairly brilliant and vibrant hues and in vegetable colours acquires rich earthy tones. But the most unique feature is that it does not lose its own golden sheen which imparts sheer luxury and grandeur to the Bhagalpuri sari. For colourfastness and tonal brilliance the printed saris are wrapped in thick cotton sheets and placed on an iron stand immersed in a covered can of boiling water and steamed. The saris are immediately spread out



Expressions of fine art- Madhubani Painted Tassar sari

for drying once the bundle is opened. The ready saris are then washed for the excess colour to run out and starched before final finishing. Originally the saris were washed with *Reetha* or soap nut in the flowing Ganges water whose neutral pH level was ideal to make the silks softer and shinier. The final finishing ends with the unique process of *Kundi* or pounding with heavy wooden mallets weighing 7-8 kilos each on a wooden cylindrical base to make the weaving even. This process binds the threads closer, stretching the fabric to its maximum capacity enhancing its softness and sheen manifold. All damages are also detected and darned at this stage by pulling out threads from the fabric itself. The saris are finally roller pressed or calendared and placed under heavy weights overnight for the creases to even out.

Available in myriad forms today the multicoloured and attractive Bhagalpur *Tassar* Sari need not be acquired only for ceremonial occasions but they are welcome and desired for all reasons and all seasons. From the finest to the coarsest, from the most expensive pure forms to affordable blends with Mulberry and Eri silks, Cotton, Rayon, Linen, Viscose, Wool, Jute, Gold, Silver and Copper metallic threads, from natural gold, to bleached white or the different

colours of the rainbow – the women are spoilt for choice as there is a sari to suit all tastes and pockets and to celebrate every occasion. What adds to its charm and increases its demand manifold is the fact that it lends to draping very well in all traditional Indian ways viz. the Bihari - Seedha and Ulta Palla to the Coorgi, Bengali, Marathi, and Tamilian styles to name only a few. It also adapts beautifully to the contemporary glamorous western styles of the *Dhoti sari*, *Gown sari* and pre-stitched sari with fixed pleats and narrow end pieces worn as garments with trousers, tank tops or

traditional or modern blouses. From plain to textures, from subtle pastels to brilliant hues especially gold the colour of the season, it has become a classic fashion statement all the way. The Bhagalpur Sari can be embellished superbly in endless ways viz. handpainted with *Madhubani* and *Worli* paintings, embroidered in *Sujani*, *Kantha*, *Phulkari*, *Chikankari* and *Kasuti* styles. Adorned with Applique and patchwork, tie and dyed as *Bandhini* in brilliant colours, resist dyed as *Batik* and *Dabu*, hand block, screen, embossed, computerised printing, 3D embroidery — there is no end to enhancing its looks.

To test the purity of Tassar, burn a shred of the fabric if it reduces to a small hard bead it is not pure and if it turns into ash, smelling like burnt human hair it is pure. Like a true Bhagalpuri, I too treasure my old and new Tassar saris forever looking for an occasion to enhance my collection. Whenever I drape one of them, I always remember the small and beautiful caterpillar from which such an enormous industry is born. Like the people of India have discovered the joys of wearing this sari with an ancient past people across the globe are beginning to do so. The perennial appeal of the enigmatic Bhagalpur Tassar sari can never be obliterated.

# The Sari - Personal Reminiscences

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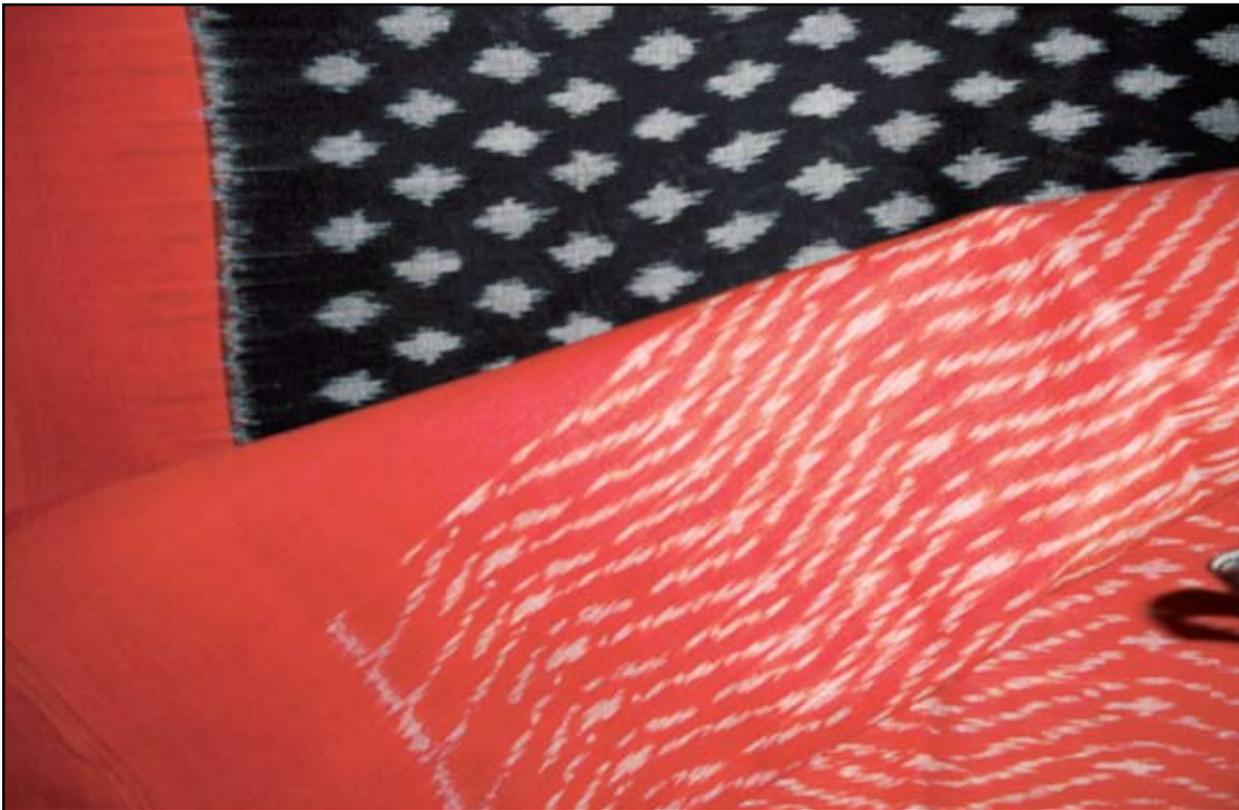
Purnima Rai

The sari is a simple, practical yet sophisticated garment, quintessentially Indian in concept. It is suitable for wearing not only as a hardy everyday garment but also cherished as an heirloom on which the Indian artisan has lavished the most exquisite and complex of techniques.

Yet, in the style commonly worn now, it is a comparatively recent construct echoing other regional

styles worn around the country. In its present form, it is also believed to have been designed with the accompanying *blouse* and *petticoat* to enable Indian women to present themselves in *polite* society in accordance with the Victorian sentiments prevalent during the British era in the early 1900s.

Throughout this entire metamorphosis it has retained its essential nature, that of being an unstitched



Ikat sari with contemporary layout and colours

garment, without problems of sizing and fitting and with an almost infinite potential for adaptation.

The other critical point we must bear in mind about the sari is that its production has for centuries given sustainable employment to a large section of our population. Even now, according to recent statistics, handloom weaving which includes saris, is the second largest source of employment after agriculture.

This millennia-old chain of production and distribution was sought to be systematically destroyed by the British and soon after independence, it became apparent that the highly developed skills of weaving, printing and dyeing exemplified through the sari were seriously threatened. To address these issues, pioneers like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay set up institutions which, within a few years and inspired by the other

notable personalities like Pupul Jayakar and Martand Singh played stellar roles in discovering, holding together, and bringing forth some unusually creative programmes.

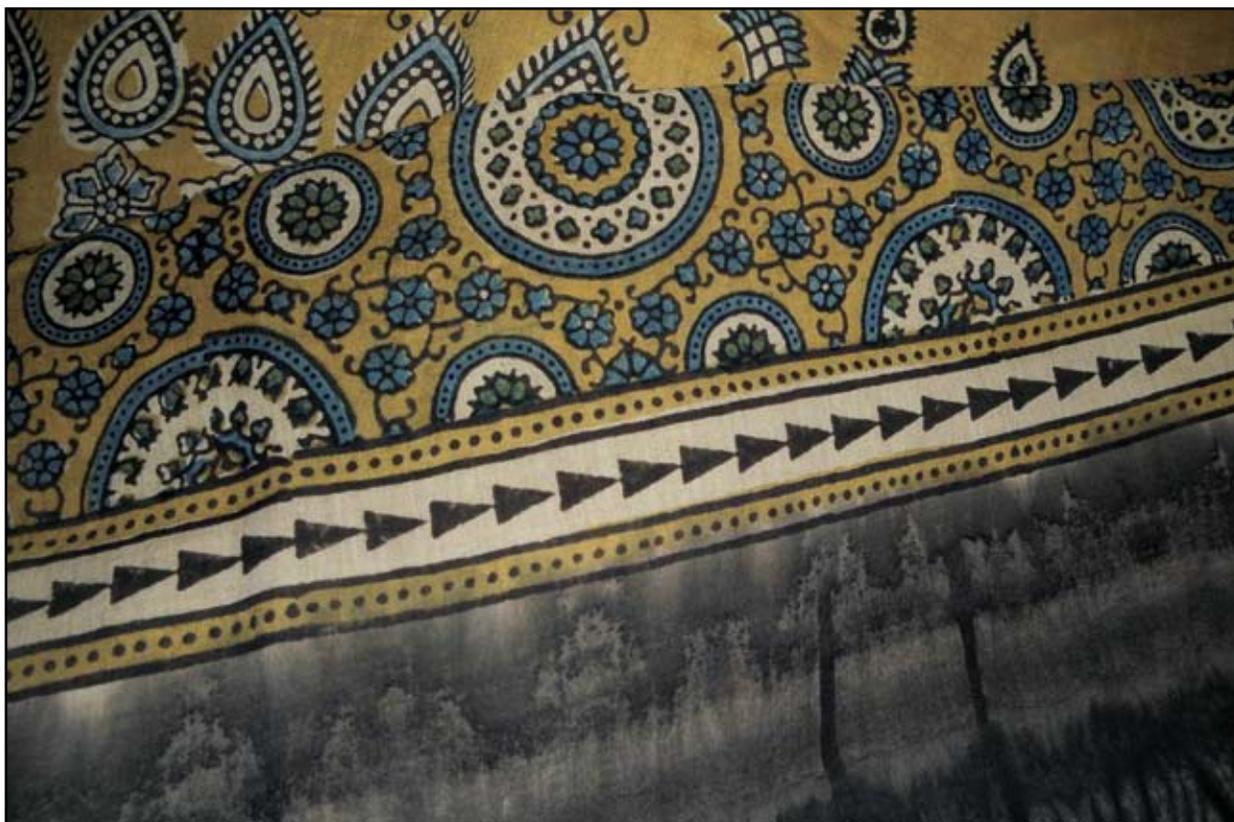
Vividly etched in my memory, in the nineties, some of these included dazzling exhibitions like *Vishwakarma*, *Dhari*, and *Kalinga Vastra*.

Besides the support provided by the government, in the early years, there were many visionary individuals who worked on reviving and popularising different types of saris. These included the revival of Maheshwari saris by Sally Holkar and khadi and cotton saris in natural dyes from Andhra Pradesh by Uzamma.

Personally, a passionate love of Indian textiles was the background of my own involvement with the sari when, in the 1990s, I joined the Delhi Crafts Council



Pure linen sari with zari borders



Sari with Ajrak handblock printing and shibori tie and dye in natural colours

which is a voluntary registered society founded by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay with the mission of working towards the development of traditional Indian crafts. Textiles is such a large part of this legacy that inevitably our thoughts turned to the question of how to popularise the many lovely types of saris available in the country.

We started modestly by conceiving an annual exhibition and sale devoted exclusively to the sari. We held the first sari exhibition fifteen years ago, in 1999. It was before the advent of liberalisation and the threat to the sari at that time came mostly from stitched garments like the salwar kameez and this too was mostly noticeable in the north.

Despite our initial fears about the survival of the sari and its popularity with the younger generation; fifteen years on, we are still somewhat surprised to find that the sari seems to have held its own! It has not only reinvented itself but has also been able to incorporate

many innovations into its fold. This essentially is the inherent strength of this marvellous garment.

It is interesting to look at how innovations in the design of the sari have come about. I would split it broadly into two categories. One part of it happened gradually and organically through an intelligent interaction between the artisan, resource persons and the customers.

For example, I remember the time when we started getting the famous *ajrak* handblock printing from Sind and Gujarat on saris. Earlier done on thick cotton for bedsheets and lungis, some of the first mulmul *ajrak* printed saris were brought for one of our exhibitions by the famous Khatris of Bhuj. Printing on saris has opened a whole new vista of possibilities for them and now you can find beautiful *ajrak* printed saris on all kinds of materials ranging from Kota, Gajji silk, Tussor, Maheshwari, Mangalgiri and south cottons.

Similar is the case with the *shibori* technique of tie and dye which initially was done mostly on garments. The group was encouraged by us to design a simple range of saris for one of our exhibitions and I don't think they have looked back ever since! Shibori saris, in innovative colours and materials continue to be highly popular.

The elegant weaves from Phulia in West Bengal were introduced to the Delhi market quite late in one of the exhibitions. Ideal for summer, these light weight saris were woven with plain borders and pallus in natural muga silk.

An important initiative by Laila Tyabji of Dastkar which is regularly featured in our exhibitions is the pure tussor sari from Bhagalpur in Bihar. Woven in

beautiful, vibrant colours these saris continue to be popular to this day.

The traditional technique of mud-resist printing in natural dyes called *Dabu* from Rajasthan has also been translated beautifully on to saris. Initially done only on cottons, this technique of over printing is now being done on silks, tussors and several other materials.

In the last few years, *kalamkari* hand painting has again been successfully introduced on saris by groups working in Srikalahasti in Andhra Pradesh. Each sari is unique and special being handpainted individually.

The second kind of innovation in sari design has come about with the interventions of trained textile designers from institutions like NIFT and NID with



Shibori tie and dye sari in natural dyes

an interest in traditional weaves and handskills. The more sensitive and creative of them have been able to sustain themselves and sometimes a large number of weavers. Chanderi, Bengal, Benaras and Andhra Pradesh are weaving-intensive regions where such initiatives have been successful.

An interesting development introduced by the designers is that of using new raw materials and blends in weaving. Linen is one such material which has a special textured look which is very attractive on saris. Currently popular also are blends with linen, wool, tussor and jute which provide unusually subtle textures in saris.

The traditional *ikat* technique seems to have an appeal to modern sensibilities as well and quite a few designers have started using this technique. Other techniques currently being explored on saris are *zardozi* and *jamdani*.

A noteworthy design input has been the mixing not only of raw materials but also different techniques together in one sari — for example, *ajrak* printing mixed with tie and dye, *kalamkari* with *ikat*, weaves with embroideries; this kind of juxtaposition produces a visually rich and unusual look on the sari.

Despite all these exciting developments, most of us working in the field are aware that the picture is confusing and chaotic.

Many of the finer techniques which are laborious have simply disappeared. The *kancheevaram* silk sari was known for its contrasting borders which were woven using a special technique called *korvai*. Very few weavers are now willing to do this.

The thicker variety of cotton saris from Bastar or Chettinaad are no longer popular and are being woven in significantly fewer numbers.

Unnervingly, a very common complaint that we hear from senior artisans is that the next generation is unwilling to take up artisanal work. The reasons are not difficult to understand. The artisan is still not treated with a status in society which is commensurate with the highly skilled nature of his work. Many feel that the returns from this laborious handwork are not sufficient. The younger generation with a higher level of education, now also have a choice of jobs, and in the scale of importance, even a clerical job is perceived to be more desirable than weaving.

The customer profile and their choice of saris has also changed radically. Interesting new developments created by designers come at a huge price and are popular mostly with a niche urban clientele. The everyday sari which can be worn at home seems to be simply disappearing because it is no longer being worn or has been replaced by cheaper synthetic options.

Governmental institutions set up for monitoring and supporting the sector are mired in indifference and seem to be without any kind of vision or means of addressing these complex challenges. It is in such a context that many disturbing questions arise in our minds.

Will the sari go the Kimono way and only be worn for formal occasions, for parties and for marriages? Is this the future we would like to see for the garment that we are fortunate enough to have with us as a living heritage and which serves as a unique mark of our cultural identity?

In our frenetic race to embrace modernity, let us not forget what has been bestowed to us across centuries. Let each one of us cherish and feel proud of what ultimately is a beautiful expression of the human hand and spirit — the handwoven sari.

# The Sari and the Cotton Textile Trade in India

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Amba Sanyal

The Sari today is regarded as a 'power suit' in the boardroom, as more and more Indian women wearing this attire can be spotted amongst management rungs across bureaucracy and industry. Yet this intriguing six yard unstitched Indian garment for women has only recently been elevated to such heights of recognition. The journey of the sari from just a mode of dressing to a cultural statement, an

economic milestone and a fashionista's dream wear, has seen centuries of evolution to reach its present status. Moreover, the story of sari gains has not been a clear-cut path with well marked signposts along the way. Rather, it has been a convoluted journey across the centuries, wound up with commerce, wars, economic and political upmanship and trading opportunities. Being essentially of cotton cloth the



Brahmin couple – Shringeri – in traditional attire



Brahmin couple – Shringeri – in traditional attire



Costumes of ancient India

history of the sari in the past has always been tied up with the cotton trade in India. The fabled cotton exports from India date back to the cotton textile industry at Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley around 3000 B.C., and when Alexander the Great had landed in India he was struck by the gossamer muslins and the gold and silk embroidered robes of the nobility.

Across these early centuries, the cotton cloth, of which the sari was an integral garment, was a lucrative trade item to the distant empires of yore. According to research today, it has been established

that cotton textiles from India, traveling from the great cotton weaving centres of western India were exported to ancient Egypt and were used as the cloth found in the tombs of the royalty. They are now precious exhibits in the Forstat Museum, Egypt. Thus mummies unearthed in the last century have been found draped in shreds of cotton cloth, a cloth which is block printed in indigo, vegetable dyes and mud print, a speciality of the south western regions of India till date. Made on looms according to an intricate weaving technique where the yarn thread is dyed according to the colours of the final product, the ancient Egyptian preference was for indigo and vegetable dyes and mud cloth, which still wear their original sheen as a reminder of their glorious past. In the later centuries, Marco Polo in his accounts left detailed accounts of the people and industries of the coastal regions of India in the late thirteenth century. He made a note of the cloth he had seen from the Coromandel Coast 'like the tissues of spider webs'. He too had made a mention of the dyeing techniques prevalent with indigo, at Cambay and the spinning techniques prevalent in Gujarat.

The romance of Indian weaves had continued through the early Muslim and Moghul reigns in India in an entirely novel way. Whereas in the past, cotton cloth from India was a symbol of our industrial prowess, during the time of the European entry on our shores, cotton textiles became emboldened as an alternative to counter the supremacy of the spice trade. In fact, the motive behind Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea route to India by sailing around Africa, was to break the monopoly enjoyed by Venice and the Arab merchants over the Indian spice trade. After arrival in India the Portuguese controlled the Asian trade market by taking over the Strait of Malacca. In their encounter with Chinese merchants in their junks in Malacca, the cotton 'pintados' or printed cloth from India became their alternative for the trade in spices. Besides Portuguese merchants, the Dutch traders in India had begun to thrive on the cotton textile trade from India in a lucrative way. Their ships arrived from their home country loaded with bullion, which they

exchanged for Indian textiles and which in turn was sold in the Malay Archipelago for a profit as the Dutch gained a monopoly over trade, centring their activities in Java..

In the midst of this ongoing search for items to trade, the French and the English did not take a back seat. They too, realized the need to branch out into fresh avenues of trade instead of keeping themselves limited to the spice trade in India. Of course, they did not arrive at the cotton textile target at the outset. In fact, the English merchants at first set up trading stations at port cities and christened these outlets as 'factories'. Their intention at the start, was to sell woollens from England in India but they soon abandoned the idea when they realized that broadcloth was never more than a novelty in India. Thus giving a hard look at the potential of home-grown merchandise for trading possibilities, became imperative. The legendary chintz or printed cloth thus became a hot export item and calicos were carried in shiploads to London. On arrival in London, they were



A Rajput sari wearer



Shringeri – in traditional attire

sold to the Royal Africa Company for the market in West Africa. On African soil, the Indian calico acquired a dubious reputation as 'guinea cloth' as the cloth was essentially an item of barter for procuring slaves from West Africa. The clutch of human beings from Africa was then shipped on their onward journey to the West Indies and were exchanged for sugar, cotton and tobacco, for the home country.

Meanwhile the French trading company in India had targeted their attention on the finer textiles and homed on to the Kashmiri Jamawar shawl. As the hand worked specimens were expensive, they began a mill produced alternative of jacquard weave, wherein the patterns of the jamawar were woven and the cloth prized for its intricacy and artistic get-up. In England on the other hand, the Kashmir fever was not long in catching up. Soldiers returning from duty in the northern regions took back these shawls and before long, the East India Company was importing them for trading purposes. In imitation of the French initiative, shawls were woven in the town of Paisley in



Hindu couple 1857

Renfrewshire in Scotland with the addition of jacquard looms that allowed the weaving of five colours on the loom products, making them prized possessions.

An even more vigorous and ambitious thrust to the Indian textile trade from India came about with the initiative of one Forbes Watson, a surveyor in the East India Company who carried out a detailed survey into the price of textiles woven in the country, when he was reporting on the products of India to the Secretary of State for India. He published his findings in volumes titled 'The Textile Manufacturers and Costumes of the People of India', alongside swatches of his products mentioned. He called his labour 'Twenty Industrial Museums' as he was focused on product marketing strategies. His persuasive argument was: 'If we attempt to induce as individuals or a nation to become a customer, we endeavour to make the articles which we know to be liked and needed, and

these we offer for sale. We do not make an effort to impose on others our own tastes and needs but we produce what will please the customer and what he wants. The British manufacturers follow this rule generally; but he seems to have failed to do so in the case of India or to have done it with so little success that it would almost appear as if he were incapable of appreciating Oriental tastes and habits.'

Such plainspeak did a world of good for the India textile weavers as the British explored the possibility of converting handloom products from India for export to the British colonies in Africa. Thus it was that the 'Asia Rumal' a handloom product of the Carnatic region of Andhra, became known. In particular, Forbes' vision had given a boost to the local rumal variety known also as the 'telia rumal'. This was a stretch of cloth woven in the ikat weave of today, with geometric designs of birds, flowers and



Malabar fisher folk

animals woven on its surface. It had a broad border lining its ends and was generally woven in a red and black combination of colours.

What distinguished these products from other handlooms was the finishing touches given to the cloth by its weavers. While the weaving was also along the lines of the *paddu bandhu* technique, the finished product had an eye catching lustrous sheen principally because in the final stage, the yarn was dipped in an emulsion of sweet oil and alkaline earth, for days on end. Then the yarn was taken for dyeing and in readiness for weaving. This oiling process gave the cloth a favoured market among the fishermen community of Goa and along the Surat coast, where

they found that when they went into the water in these oiled lungis, their skins were protected from the harmful effects of the salt water. A ready customer base, existed as popular buys among customers in Arab countries, where they were used as towels and the oily effect rubbed off on the skin, acting as a protective deterrent to the effects of the harsh sun. It thus became a versatile accessory for them.

Further into the trading initiative, this oiled cloth found its way into African markets where it became a part of the iconic collection for a new bride. Worn around the upper body it served the purpose of a scarf and below the waist it was a lungi. Distinguishing it from its original Indian avatar was the techniques superimposed on the imported material when it reached Africa. The yarn was selectively cut along the weft to create patterns, making a shadowy effect. The manner of cutting was unique and was according to Islamic and cult specifications. Thus the cloth from India acquired a unique African identity, not simply because the wearers wanted to look different but because a garment worn by them needed to carry its individuality through an amalgam of its cultural roots.

The subtle link between a people and their textiles impacted on the weaving community closer home. Before long, folklore, festivities and story telling became some of the activities that were influenced by the textile making in the country. It was not an idle patterning that weavers began to create but into the threads of their weaves; they included their thought processes and their social ties. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the story telling tradition of the villages of Bengal and Odisha, where the worship of *Tapoi* is prevalent. The folkloric link of this festival is that the little girl, *Tapoi*, was ill treated by her seven sisters-in-law while the seven brothers had sailed to Indonesia to trade in textiles. *Tapoi* was cast away into the forests where the animals befriended her and cared for her. On the return of her brothers she presented herself in her bedraggled condition, leading to a gruesome follow-up for the sisters-in law.

Their noses, tongues etc were cut off and the story is commemorated till date with a graphic rendering of the story using painted images of the happenings crafted in the form of a pata chitra.

Taken in isolation the story is just an insignificant myth of no consequence, but when examined closely, in its many layers one can trace the presence of a regular trade route in textiles between the Malay Archipelago and India, venerated today through a legendary overlay. As pointed out by scholars like Amba Sanyal that authors writing on Malaysian textiles make a mention on the Ikat textile trade between the coastal states and the regions of South East Asia. Thus textiles imbue not the present day conditions but are revived through folkloric memories, mythological linkages and lifestyle and trader practices that are



Daily wear

commemorated not just in the home country but carried across to the lands of their trading partners, as the Tapoi details illustrate.. 'It is like putting the dots together that embed the past,' claims Amba Sanyal, 'links that have no historical archeological, manuscript weightage, but which are stories around textiles from India preserved to date through fragments of human imagination and the story tellers' art.'

Coming back to the more concrete evidence of Indian textiles and their importance in the international market, one must refer back to the Forbes connection. Unfortunately, according to Sanyal, 'though the trade in the Asia rumaal has finished one comes across remains of it with weavers or museum collections' The answer lies in the changing socio-economic factors that guided Company trade preferences in the subcontinent. With the arrival of better looms in the home country, manufacturing processes underwent a change and the handwoven rumaal lost its ground to the more attractive loom alternative. As the shuttle loom was replaced by the fly shuttle process of weaving, textiles saw greater output and were pushed into the market for larger profits. The handloom sari too, became a victim to this overflow, although the throw shuttle loom was not wide enough to create the general sari width, the smaller version of the sari, produced in the handloom could be offered to the gods for ritualistic purposes.

Indeed so overriding was the mill produced cloth that the Asia rumaal and other handloom products became a museum piece confined in the present century to the vaults of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. It was researcher Lakshmi Narayan, according to Sanyal who had chanced upon these specimens on the V & A premises while she was doing a research project there. Not only was this museum unaware of the historicity of these specimens but also its relevance in the scenario which was largely driven by the trade in textiles.

The continuing impact that textiles have made on the sociological economic and cultural practices in India



Daily wear

is nowhere more marked than in the region of the sari trade. While the throw shuttle produce had given rise to the smaller garment meant to drape the goddess, the entry of the fly shuttle looms was catering to the regular width garment wearer. A still greater blow was received by the sari trade by the arrival of the China silk into India. The popularity of the tussar sari, once the universal ritualistic wear in every household across Odisha, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, its market was diminished as the better-off classes who had donned tussar varieties as a must in their wardrobes for both ritual and non-ritual wear. The social fabric was less regimented to formal ritual practices being observed in the daily routine of the household. This orientation had its effect on tussar wearing for household rituals. Women were no longer duty bound to wear tussar compulsorily, for ritual cooking or daily observances in their

prayer rooms. They now preferred to sport the shiny, shimmering China silk sari, on occasions.

The downside of the handloom sari in both silk and cotton wear continued into the years of the Independence struggle. At that time, the recommended option for the Indian sari wearer was the khadi handspun product, under the influence of the Mahatma and his concept of Swaraj. It was a symbol of patriotic fervour, irrespective of the fact that it was heavy, required maintenance, and was not recommended for any ritualistic or other purpose. In short, it was a garment that had invented its own history, linked itself with every Indian woman and yet had no backdrop of folklore to stand on not to say that the handspun yarn was not being used for the sari, as tussar was in fact, a handspun. But its economic and political credentials bore the gold standard and as the movement gathered momentum, more and more users of this product emerged, making it a pan-Indian garment. It was a symbol of pride in being Indian, a concept that was hitherto unknown among sari wearers before, for earlier the sari was regarded as personal adornment creating a tryst between the wearer and its maker.

The overall alteration of the Indian understanding of the sari came from other sources as well. The colonial masters had begun to look beyond the parameters of trade and were esconced, in their changed role as administrators, as being responsible for every aspect of Indian life. Instead of looking at Indian crafts as items of trade or as items of mere utility as was the Indian attitude towards arts and crafts, including weaving, the altered vision was to promote the arts and crafts of India as exhibits at international exhibitions. Individuals such as George Watts, who began a survey for creating a catalogue of skills and crafts in India. This collection was exhibited by the arts and crafts exhibitions organised by the Imperial power as a way to exercise the British interest in India's handicrafts. This trend fueled the need for better productivity in this domain. Thus Arts and Crafts institutions were set up in the provincial capitals at Calcutta,

Bombay and Madras, to fine tune the sensibilities of artisans and chisel out better output from their hands that could find acceptance among a growing British clientele. Thus calico prints became the rage in European households, even while Khadi was growing steadfastly as a symbol of nationalism.

On the other hand, influenced by the British sensibility, the elite Indian sari wearer in the cities had abandoned its rustic beginnings on the weaver's loom and had adopted instead imported georgette and chiffon yardage which was then stylized with borders, embroidery and brocade work into fashionable saris. The sari thus became a demarcating point between the village and the city and events like durbars, gatherings of royalty and occasions like garden parties and dinners, found Indian women sporting floral, prints in gossamer material embellished by the craftsmen of India. Not satisfied with sari wearing in their homes, where the garment was tied in a manner that allowed ease of movement for doing one's household chores, the elite club among its wearers began experimenting with different styles of sari wear. One of the foremost among the pioneers of sari fashions were the women of the Tagore household, who propagated a sari wearing technique fashioned after the European included into the new sari wearing tradition and what is now the standard manner of sari wear in India, was the evolved product that had emerged from those experimental years. But the tale of sari evolution would remain incomplete without taking into account the tremendous contribution of stalwarts like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. During her several pada yatra tours around the countryside along with Mahatma Gandhi, she was struck by the treasure of regional designs she came across among the rural sari wearers throughout the country. Prior to her, sari wearing for every Indian woman was confined

to her particular region and the elitist choices of chiffon and georgette among the top rungs. It was Kamaladevi who realized the minor cultural streams that flowed out of the sari yardage across India and which identified the women of each part of the country.

Her tremendous efforts to promote the arts of India made the sari blossom into maturity. It was her efforts that brought into Indian markets weaves and styles that few were aware of and a minuscule had ever worn. The new kind of sari from Indian cultural roots became a rage and every Indian woman adopted the sari as her personal style statement. In short, India was transformed overnight into a sari wearing country, where regional differences were celebrated and their styles and traditions were adopted and imitated with open arms.

Even the weavers, who had till then been starved of their livelihoods, as they continued to uphold their traditions, were imbued with a new energy. They formed themselves into weavers' cooperatives and supplied markets for this cottage industry. They propagated a change in Indian tastes as more and more women opted for the handloom weave instead of the imported georgette. Other pioneers also added their bit to the sari wave such as Pupul Jayakar, who introduced the idea of sari as a designer offer and thus made the Indian woman's sari wardrobe more than just a collection of arts and crafts. The journey of the sari is still evolving and as any Indian wearer would like to say..."the story of the sari in a long one..." stretching through the threads and strands of nine to six yard divisions. Worn and produced across lakhs of looms into a mind boggling multiplicity it is yet rooted to the personal, the preferential, the historical, social and economic fabric of India.



## Art Reviews: Azad Bhavan Gallery

When one sets out on an experience of searching, finding or for that matter revitalizing what is in existence, one is bound to home on to the art scene in India. As one views exhibitions and sees artists create their forms as expositions of the thought process within their minds, one realizes all too poignantly how little one really knows about the circumstances from which that core art has emerged. Thus each exhibition on display is a new challenge to the viewer to measure and decipher the specific extent of the artistic skill, the depth of his thoughts and the final outcome in terms of one's understanding and aesthetics. Thus the whole process of viewing art on the walls is itself of traversing trajectories with the painting in front of us as a vocal contact between two minds. That is why an art exhibition provides a win-win situation to both the artist producer of the art and the audience viewer of the same. A tete-a-tete with the artistic community at the gallery or studio, therefore, provides the thrill of a pleasant journey during the course of which one picks up nuggets of

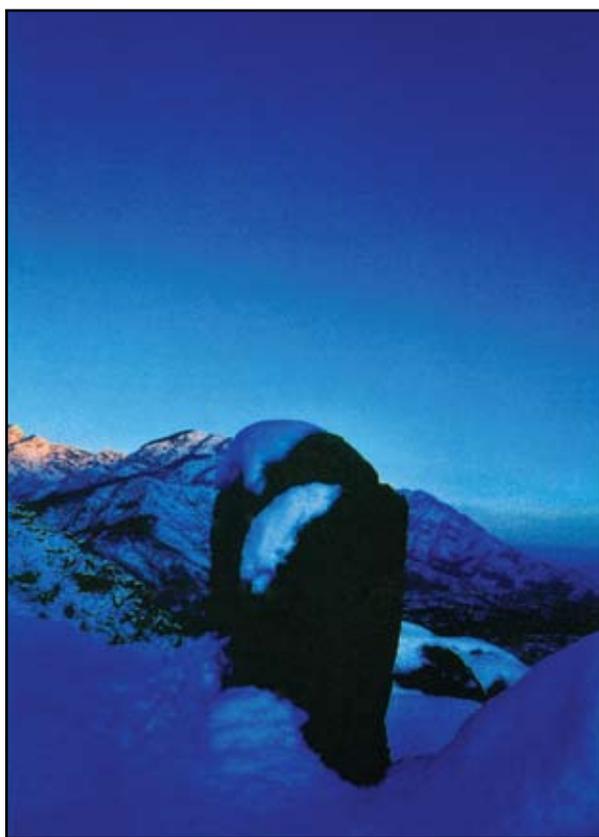


Silenced Grace

artistic essence, by putting together the snippets that are exchanged, making the entire experience nothing short of rewarding. Thus galleries like the Azad Bhavan Gallery of the ICCR located in Delhi is the ideal spot for such assimilations and discussions, for the artist is readily at hand for exchanges, and viewers are eager participants, who are keen to learn about the sources from which the art has emerged.

Another attractive side of viewing art is that the viewer finds welcoming doors as the artist has that rare capacity to include his audience as one of his own and names, symbols, patterns, forms and more jargon are explained and exchanged with a smooth flourish.. Even when artists have a reticent attitude, it does not take them long to open up when they realise that their viewer is an eager customer, attracted by the elegance of his art and thoroughly appreciative of his skill and artistry. Soon the technical and aesthetic virtuosity of the art rationale is laid bare. One comes away from the meeting a little humbled by the fact that art in any form is larger than all of us and which is kept alive and throbbing by makers that we generally overlook as anonymous and who are our real well wishers for art to a human soul provides the viable healing touch that we need at some time or other.

This thought came graphically to the fore when seeing the photographic exhibition of **Basit Ali**



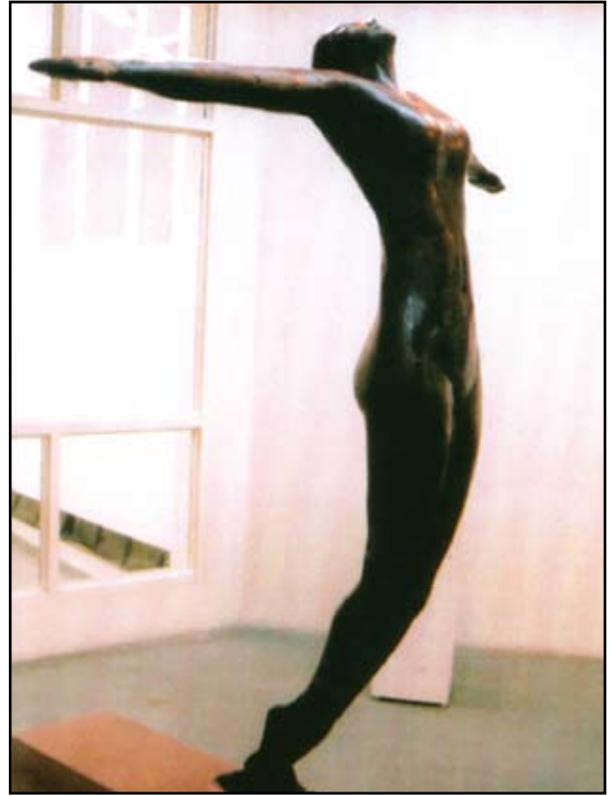
The Rising

from Kashmir. Titled *Stories from Chinar*, the works brought under the Horizon series of the ICCR, had captured moments in the valley's history that speak in a three dimensional orbit of the past the present and a future ahead. The striking landscape of a denuded forest, a pebbled bank and a trickle in place of a flowing river, asserts a vocabulary that is voiceless in terms of words but no less striking than the gripping details of the famed portraiture of *The Scream*. by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, for in both the works it is the impoverished landscape that symbolizes the state of humanity in our world. The scene is a wide angled spread and thus allows the viewer to take in the scene inch by inch, soaking in the details and realise the force of destruction that human hands are capable of.

As a cameraman, Basit Ali has earned his stripes. Not only has he chosen his spots carefully, he has also titled each of his frames with inspiration and accuracy. Thus a backdrop of a morning sky with a leafless tree in the foreground, with the cumulus clouds providing an audience has been aptly christened, 'life when no 1 understands'. The gripping loneliness of the scene, is symbolic of a state of despondency that one experiences during a dark phase of life, and which has been aptly conveyed to everyone of the gallery audience through this telling moment caught on camera. Even the dazzling array of houseboats parked on the Dal Lake, is no longer a scene of mirth as economic activity has ground to a halt. Despite its altered circumstances, these boats continue to attract the lensman for their lighted fronts reflected in the water suggest an attempt to fight the odds and present a brave front before their patrons. Ali's works also encompass daily living in the valley through the snapshot of a little girl bearing a pot on her head, her face brimming with an innocent smile oblivious of the current circumstances, providing a cheerful interface with the scenes that have rocked her home state. Another 'people' shot shows a long queue battling against the odds by braving the snow, providing a perfect visual contrast between the snowy landscape and the dark outlines of the queue alongside.



The fascination with momentum has always gripped the imagination of artists everywhere. Once again it was evident in the sculptural display of artist **Amit Kumar Gaur**, whose works in bronze by and large were an interesting study into the bodily postures of human forms, the towering growth of high-rise buildings, or in the world of nature in general. Though single figures dominate his exhibition there are groups of forms that contort and gyrate in athletic contortions that underline a mental image of



The Art of Moving

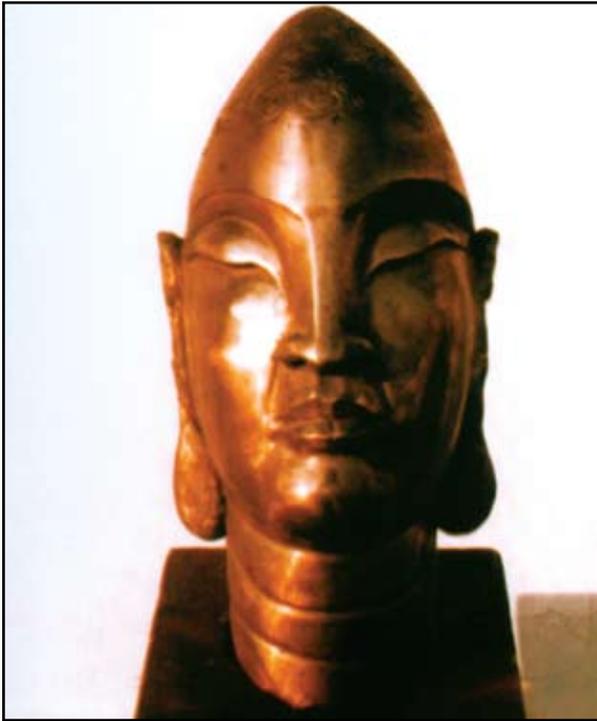


The Art of Moving



The Art of Moving

movement like none other. Of course his single figure works titled '*The Art of Moving*' are complete show stealers as they express the abandon and confidence that usually accompanies a forward surge, whether physical or otherwise. The figures perched on the stands at the moment of take-off make viewers miss a heart beat anticipating the take-off of the form. In another composition, the form emerges from a



Buddha portrait

walled enclosure, striving towards freedom, the pain of his imprisoned state clearly written across his features. In contrast the flexibility of the gymnasts doing hand stands with the blitheness of birds in flight and the convolutions of their bodies with a semblance of elasticity that would be the envy of a circus acrobat, adds further drama to the composition. A caged figure emerging from a well-like structure offers much food for diverse interpretation. While these forms lend themselves to easy interpretation, the display challenges the viewers in the series titled 'Nature', where the greenish patina of bronze reflects abstract concepts with remarkable ease. The wing-like extensions of some of these forms suggest flight while the mushroom-like conglomerate of others seem to contain their ideas into a nutshell of their own making.

In terms of technique, too, this exhibition provided several attractions. Ranging from a smooth finish suggestive of serenity, it was the ideal way of depicting images of the Buddha figure. The smooth angularity of the physical forms gave out the essence of proportion

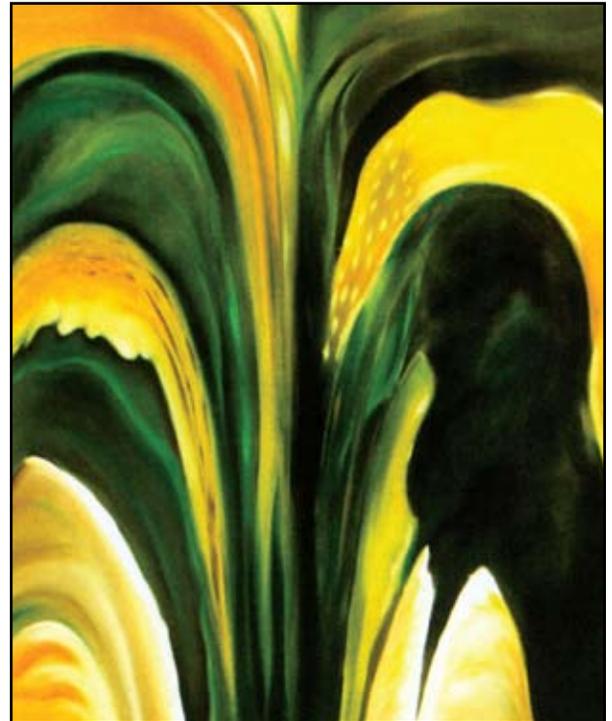
through their finish in figures titled 'the Art of Moving' while a free flow of thought and structure seemed to delight viewers in the abstract series. The postural content of the latter figures harked back to Grecian models, particularly the Victory of Samothrace, replicating a feeling of action, though not necessarily of triumph, as does the Grecian figure in the British Museum. Besides texturisation in his forms, there is a distinct underlay of emotion behind the forms which suffuse these creations and transform them from being mere models to those that are bespoke art. Expressive of themes in sizes both large and small, they bring to the surface feelings energy, physical prowess and futuristic contemplation, through their vocabulary.



Nature



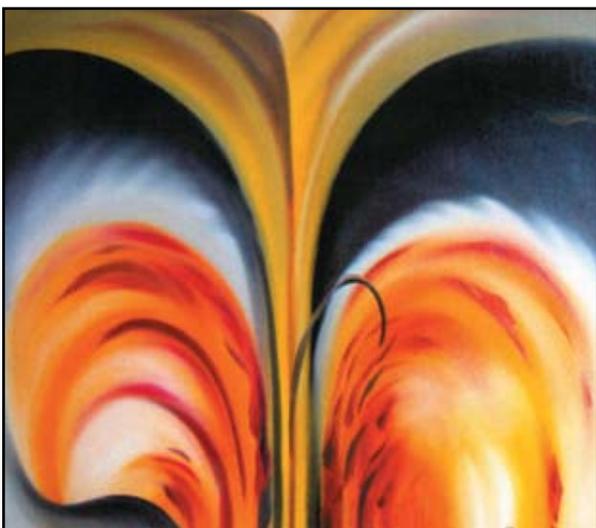
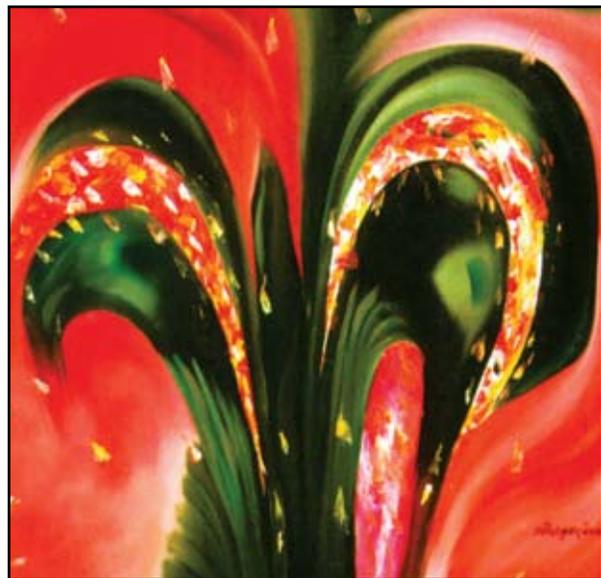
For artist **Manoj Kumar Bachchan**, flowers take on yet another dimension that is definitely beyond the conventional. His exhibition titled '*Flower*', veered away largely from formal depictions of flowers and instead interpreted artistic thought through swirls and strokes that outlined the floral contours in vibrant paints and free brush strokes. The stylistic treatment of his forms shows innovation and exuberance in his approach which naturally is best expressed through the form of flowers. These creations are not exact depictions of any one or other kind of flower but have in their core element a format that is indisputably floral. Though in some cases the floral contours wear a graphic outline, in most cases they seem to emerge from a central stamen to affloresce into striking colourful petal formations that cascade downwards, much in the way of a spray of water in a fountain. Thus the central link with their core essence is never disturbed while they blossom forth in different directions, still tethered to their beginnings. Also there is a suggestion of a womb-like protectiveness contained in each of these images, giving a heightened contemplative angle to the thought behind each of these works.





In terms of technique, the artist obviously has a great love for a rich palette dipped in the hues of pinks, deep blues and crimson, diluted and intermingled across the entire range within these parameters. What is classic and captivating in his colouration is his ability to mass the pigment into stylistic circles that create a complex rhythm within the focus of the painting. The central formation of the flower

becomes his source of an artistic statement and is both expressive and realistic in some cases. The pigments are not blurred, but stand out in their freshness and occupy foreground and background with equal ease. The highs and lows of the movement within each work is explicit and confident so that one comes away from the display feeling elated with the riot of colour, the uplifting theme and the original approach to floral concepts. Altogether, the works offer a fresh insight into the power of this form which has been elaborated by masters such as Monet and colourists like the early Dutch School, where flowers were painted in an arranged setting, unlike Bachchan's conceptualisation, of floral compositions as depictions of a natural exuberance.





Birth of Siddhartha

The works of **Malvika Raj** are a unique construct. Taking her cue from the meticulous art forms of the Warli tribes, the circular format of the Vrindavan miniaturists, the detailing of the Mithila kalam and other distinct representations from other areas, she has devised a grammar of her own to create Buddha imagery. Thus her art is a linkage with the familiar with the innovative leading on to variations where the boundaries between these two schools of artistry are blended to create an entirely novel genre. While her work at first sight might point one to the commonalities of tribal and other art in the making, there is considerable overlap into her own ingenuity before long. The 'Birth of Siddhartha' for instance though conceived in the Mithila format, with inclusions of playfulness, motherly care and a sense of springtime in the air, is superimposed with an allegorical symbolism which when taken into account, sloughs off any hint of imitativeness that may arise.

Perhaps the stylistic and innovative capacities of this artist come forth in full excellence in her portrayals of the Buddha, where he is a meditative monk



Untitled

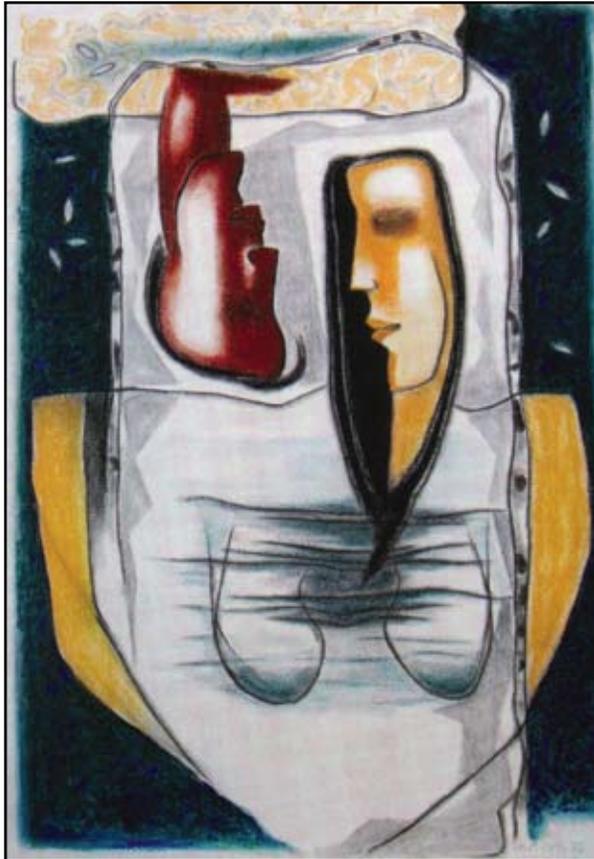


Maa

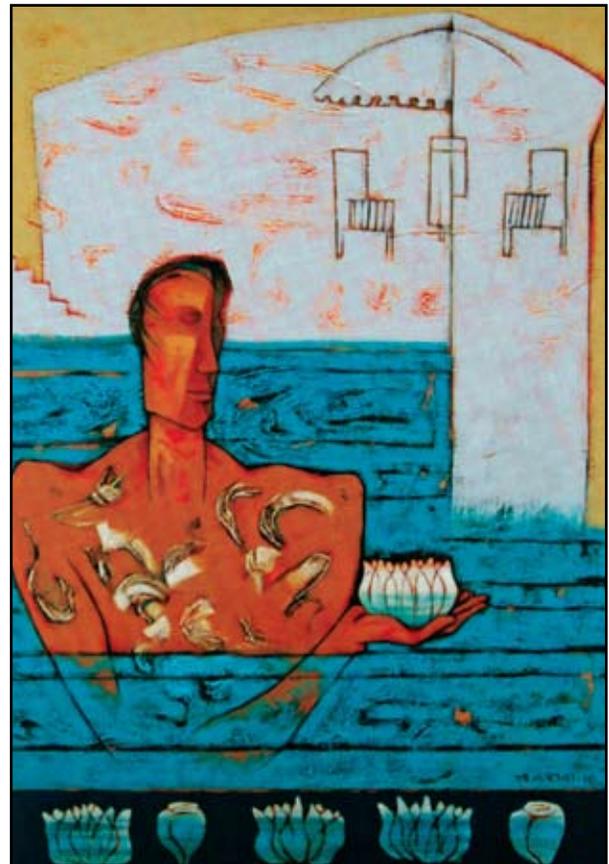
centre stage but all round him there is a dimension of breathless activity in the form of devotees, both human and animal, vying for his protective blessings as he is seated unruffled and serene beneath a mythical tree form, overshadowed by a monstrous demon of many heads. The works though decorative in intent wear a reflective and philosophical patina reminding us of the mythological baggage alongside. The minutia of a tribal artwork is not lost in these works and colours too, though non traditional, belong to the same subdued palette in most cases. Where the artist has managed to cut the umbilical cord and assert her own artistic stamp is in the arrangement of her forms Through a busy layout of tree forms, animal miniatures and towering Buddha figures domineering over the scene, their positioning, particularly the

central Buddha image, bears testimony to her individuality. In each of these works the Buddha figure expresses religious symbolism in much the same way as did Hans Memling's 'Vase of Flowers, where each petal of nature was a coinage for elevating the immediate subject to a higher level of understanding. That the Buddhist persona was not one of a lonely ascetic is aptly conveyed through his centralization of it amidst a multitude. These group studies are varied and range from a herd of cows at the twilight hour to the monkhood that the Buddha established, or the many devotees that follow the faith till this day. In some of the works ascetic and monarch, sages in a supplication, are themed to express the amplitude of Buddhist doctrine while the canvas space is exquisitely detailed with motifs from the tribal art treasury.

In vibrant contrast were the works of artist **L.N. Rana**, an out and out modernist whose figures wear a structural solidity though the mood they express is somewhat mystical and contemplative. Like the Romantics, he too is a forager into the world of colour, form and through a medium that is geared to abstractionism. Thus his works are refreshing, original and a connoisseur's delight. One needs to stop at each of his works and sort out the myriad meanings that seem to suggest themselves as one peers into the block-like solidity of his female figures or into the structural and modern-day worldly objects that jostle for attention within the same canvas space. Thus the works are not definitive themes on worldly issues, such as the destruction of our environment or the coming of the seasons, but convey the sensation of feelings, the ecstasy of feelings and the man-woman relationship in its varied aspects. His works move on twin levels where on the one hand one sees the

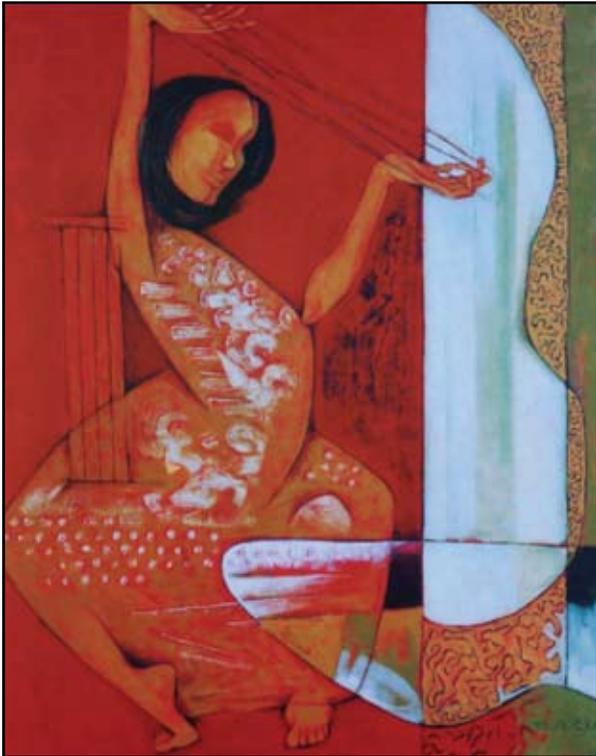


Feelings, dry pastel on acid free paper: 24x36 inches

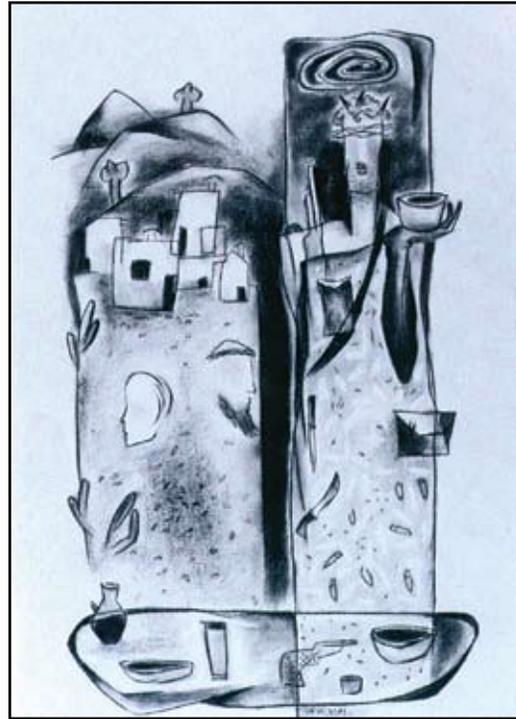


Search of Feelings-II, oil on canvas: 32x44 inches

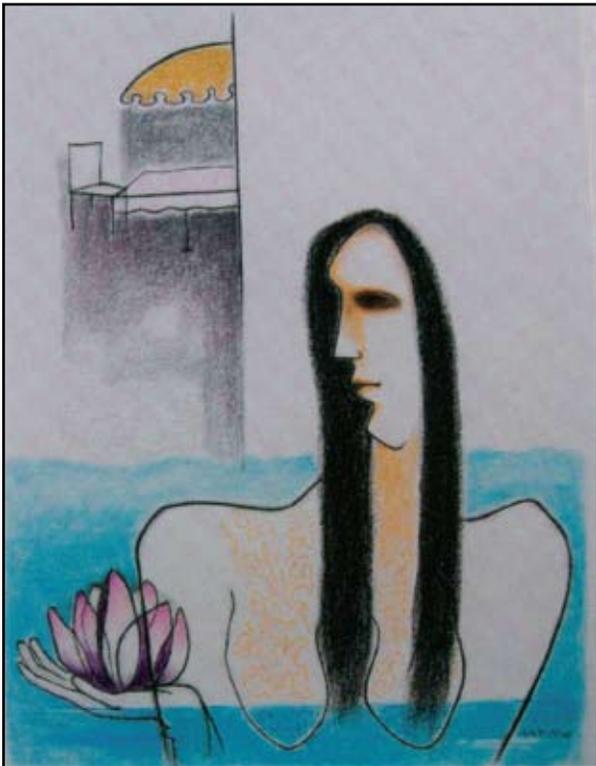
outline of a definite human form, and on the other the textural manipulation of the backdrop, as the treatment of his space contains add-ons that highlight inner feelings, rather than a concrete incident. This dual approach hidden within the layers of his thought process while creating art at once uplifts it from the



Mood, oil on canvas: 36x48 inches



Drawing-VI, conte on paper: 36x30 inches



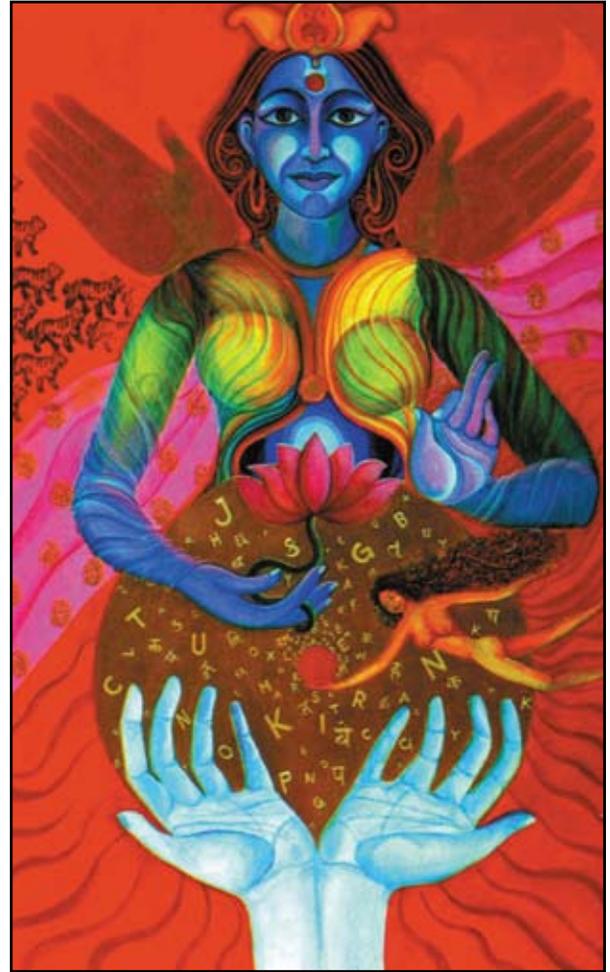
Untitled, dry pastel on acid free paper: 24x30 inches (Approx)

mundane and the ordinary to one of inquisitiveness and even self-examination.

His treatment of the form has a childlike simplicity in it. There is no hint of unnecessary elaboration of elegance in the works but a naked forthrightness in conveying the mood, without using an aggressive stance to express it. Aptly titled 'Emotions' the works provoke self-examination and a novel way of envisioning the world around us. Though the shapes are solid and distinct, the moods and emotions that are contained and disseminated through them are blurred yet definitive. This is the magical quality that Rana has explicated in his art and today has become a foremost spokesman for this genre among the Indian art fraternity. Taking human forms and expressions through an abstract vocabulary it may be argued, has been tried out and considered to death, but what Rana has managed is to express our condition today, where we live in isolated cages surrounded by our emotions and where the figures are not photographic studies but intrinsic tools of self-search in a modern take.

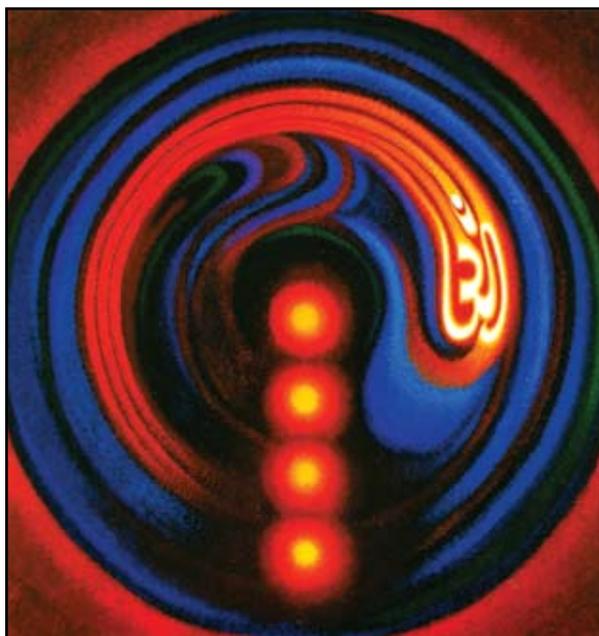


When one uses an issue-based platform to create purposes, the importance and urgency of the subject under consideration becomes relevant. This is seen in fellow artists **Jayesh Kansara** and **Mudra Kansara's**, exhibition titled '**Women Empowerment**'. Instead of using the feminine form for their portrayal, these creative artists offered their viewpoints through art in a variegated choice of forms. The symbolic orb, like a blazing sun in the sky, offered food for contemplation, for while the sun in its glory lights up the universe, this glowing symbol of womanhood recreates the same feelings in the minds of viewers by its vibrant colour scheme, its perfect circular shape and its heightened backdrop where the orange and gold tinges seem to singe one's sensitivity into a shocking realization of the condition of womanhood and the need for empowerment among women. Elsewhere, the celestial feminine form gliding across an expanse of blue, symbolic of the open skies, serves as an ideal conduit to suggest that a woman empowered is perfectly capable of living her life on her own



Women Empowerment, acrylic medium on canvas: 36x48 inches

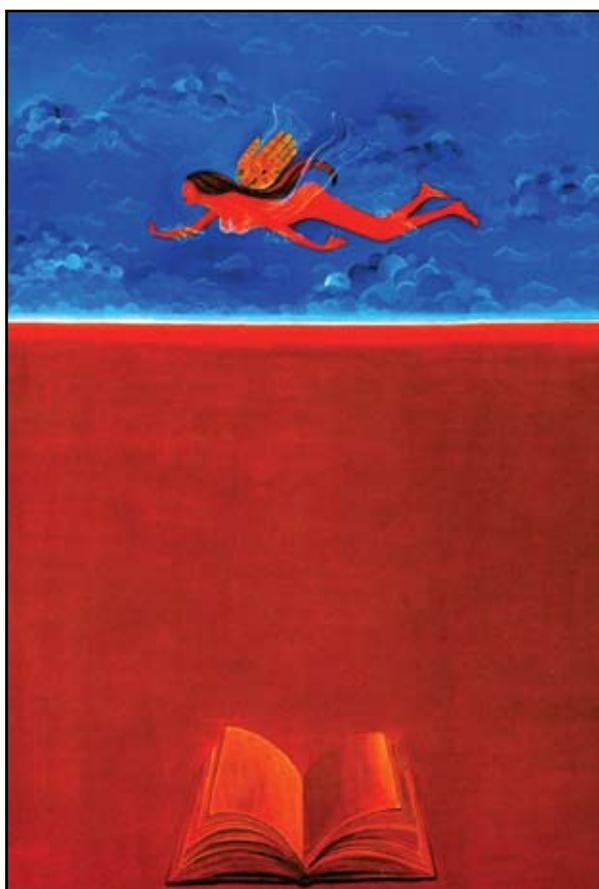
terms and which in turn, is for the betterment of society as a whole. Thus empowering women, the work seems to suggest, is the best way of bringing about peace and harmony in our troubled society. Even more telling is the image of an open book on the canvas space, occupying most of the foreground. This message-riddled artwork has more than just artistry to commend it. The brushwork on the canvas wears a smooth and unruffled finish elaborating the place of education in the upliftment of women. Even the unwritten pages of the open book realise an insight into the unfathomable potential of a woman empowered. Similarly the philosophic take off on the close links between the idea behind the Vedas and the womb is aptly conveyed through a circular form swirling in a merging of colours and contours.



The Womb of all Vedas is AUM, acrylic on canvas: 67x67 inches



AUM, is Omnipresent, acrylic on canvas: 54x54 inches



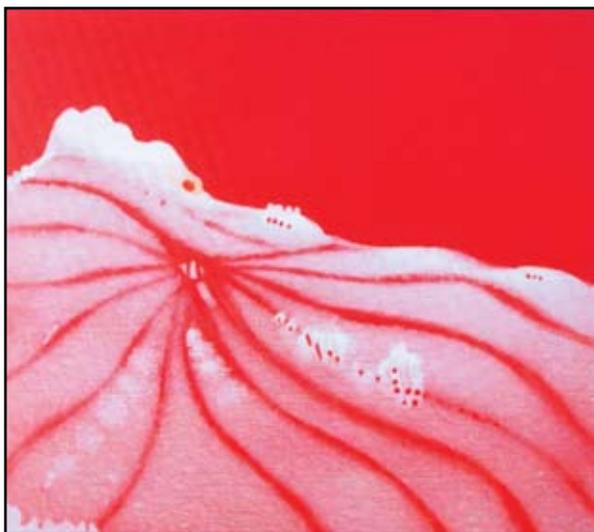
Women Empowerment, acrylic medium on canvas: 36x48 inches

The playfulness of the conceptualization is another point recommending these works. Instead of simple graphic details, there is a merger of splashes on the canvas to create the symbolic 'Aum' written in a merged but definitive form on the canvas. The works therefore are well conceived, intelligently conceptualised and focused on the topic of woman and her empowerment. The use of giclee printing on silk gives the works a new dimension in regard to the use of mediums. It has also allowed the artists to vary the dimensions of their prints and customise a combination of forms in an almost miniature format, thereby creating a narrative underlay corresponding with their central idea about empowering women. Elsewhere the mythical aspect of womanhood is given a tweak by the artists, to explain the multi-faceted persona of women and hint at their versatility and ingenuity born of their hands, a miraculous conceiving in the womb, and the focus of their mindset depicted through their deep-set eyes. The works have a finished and balanced overview, where the artists have desisted from avante-garde experimentation and yet given off their individual talents. It is a mature exhibition, where each work has been accomplished after it has been thought over deeply from conceptualisation to completion.

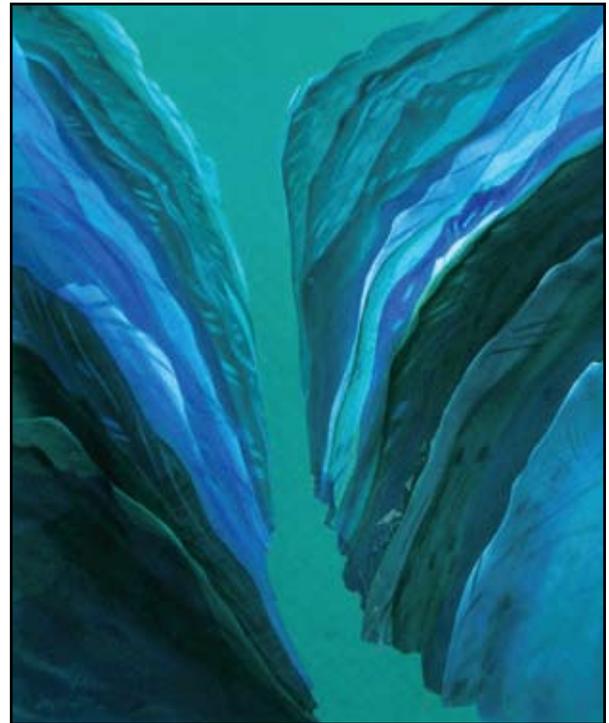
The veteran artist **Umesh Saxena** always manages to make a striking statement with each of his exhibitions. The latest one in Delhi, at the Azad Bhavan Gallery, therefore is no exception. Titled '*My Window*', the works ooze with maturity in the handling of his chosen medium, and colour control. Titled '*poetry of colours*', Saxena has depicted the vastness of the



Civilization-I



Snow



Valley

universe in surreal forms, the expansive range of the Himalayas, or even the starkness of a glacial panorama. Indeed so effective is his confidence with colours that not only does he depict the physical panorama, but also infuses mood, depth and sensitivity of the highest order through his daubs and dashes across

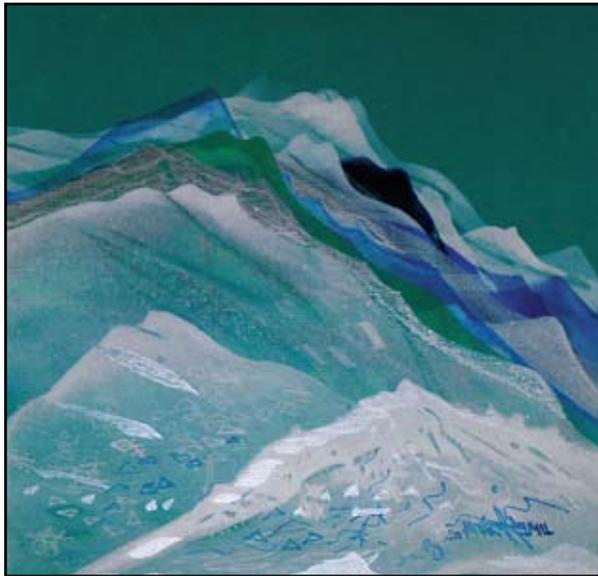


Himalaya

the canvas. The works are thus reminders of a well orchestrated play of introspective experiences rather



Heaven



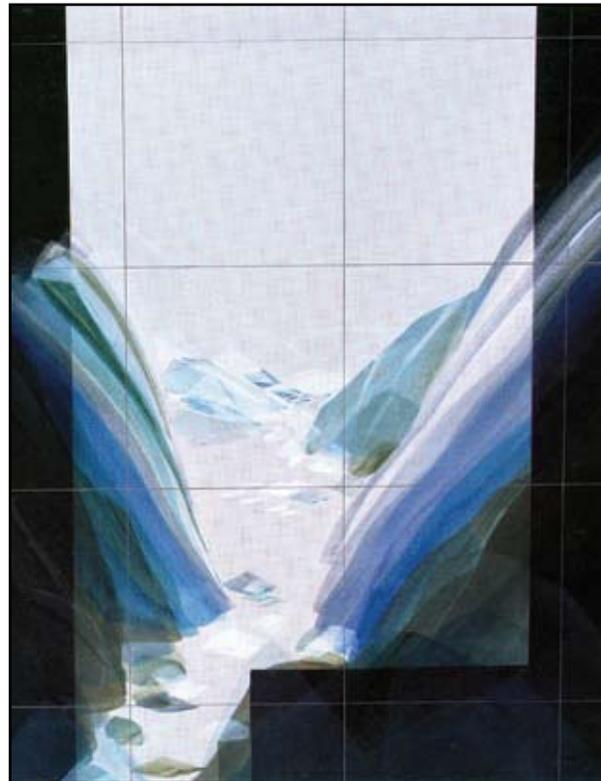
Himalayas



Himalayas

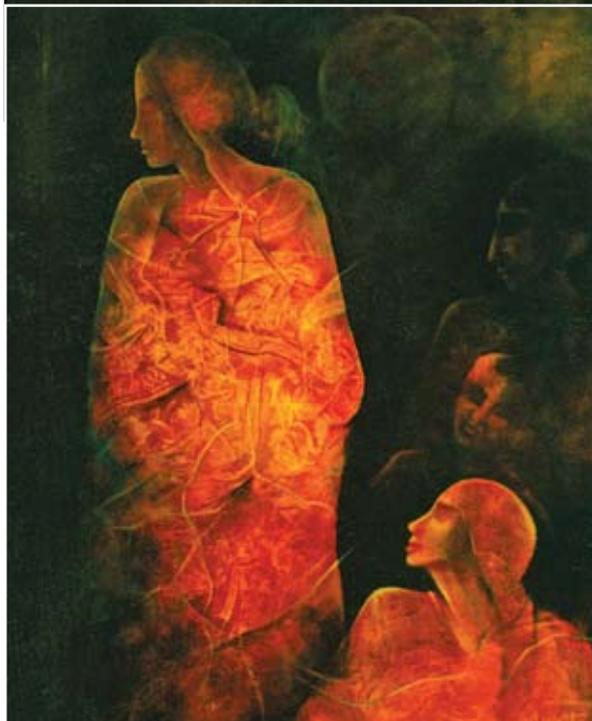
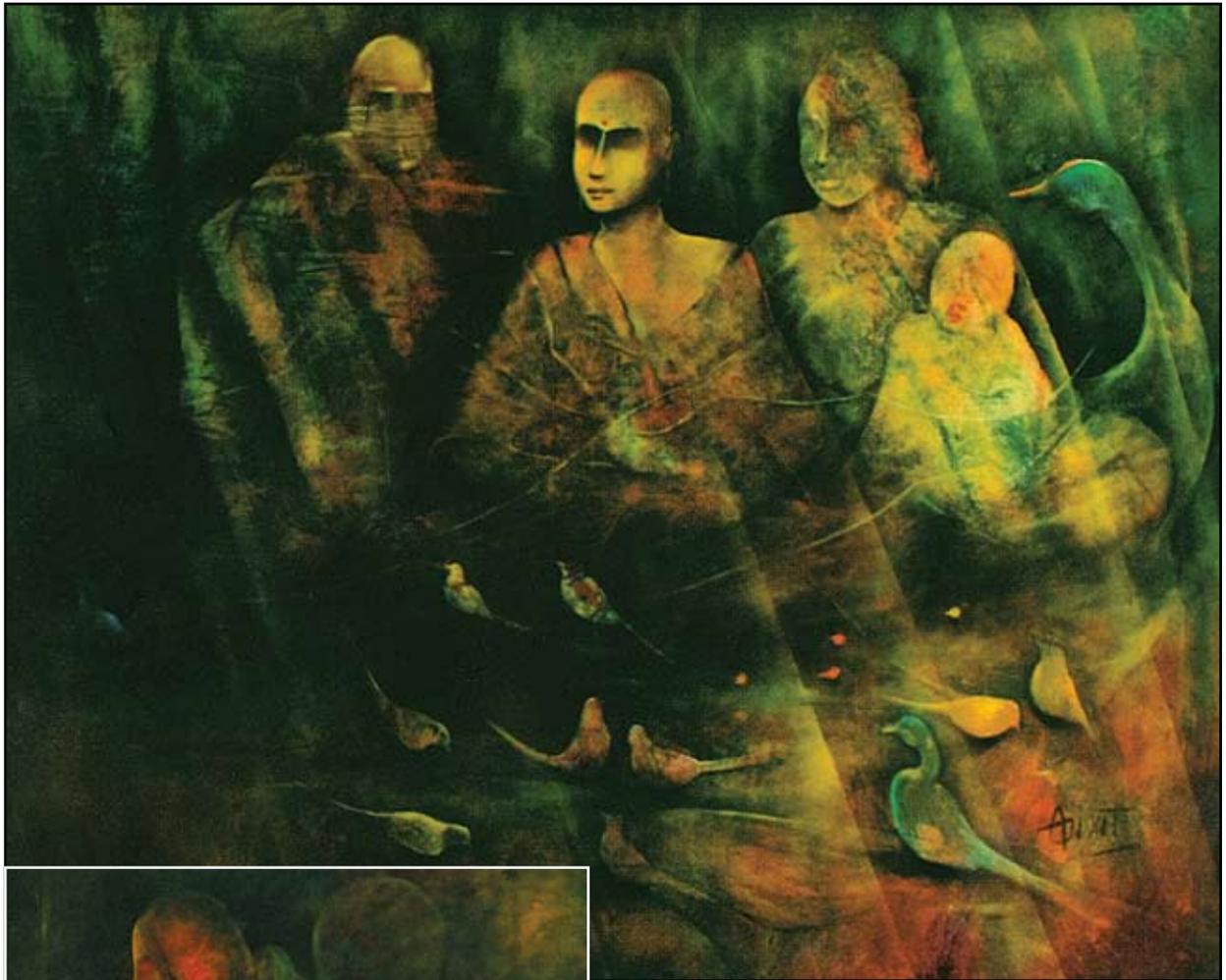
than a mere visual treat designed to fascinate and arouse wonder.

Going beyond the luminosity and richness of his pigments, one must also commend this artist's command over perspective. In particular, his Himalayan studies in monotonous of wispy tan and taupe, or a range of sea greens, leave one holding one's breath by their finesse. The tonal effects of light as it tinges the window views of the snowy peaks, gives the naturalistic connection a delightful turn, indicating mature experimentation, giving the works an intrinsic novelty and originality as well. Even when the works deal with a semblance of still life conceptualisation, there is the same richness of thought process and detail of colouration coupled with brush work that defines colour control of much maturity. Saxena's works are thus a delight to view



Himalaya

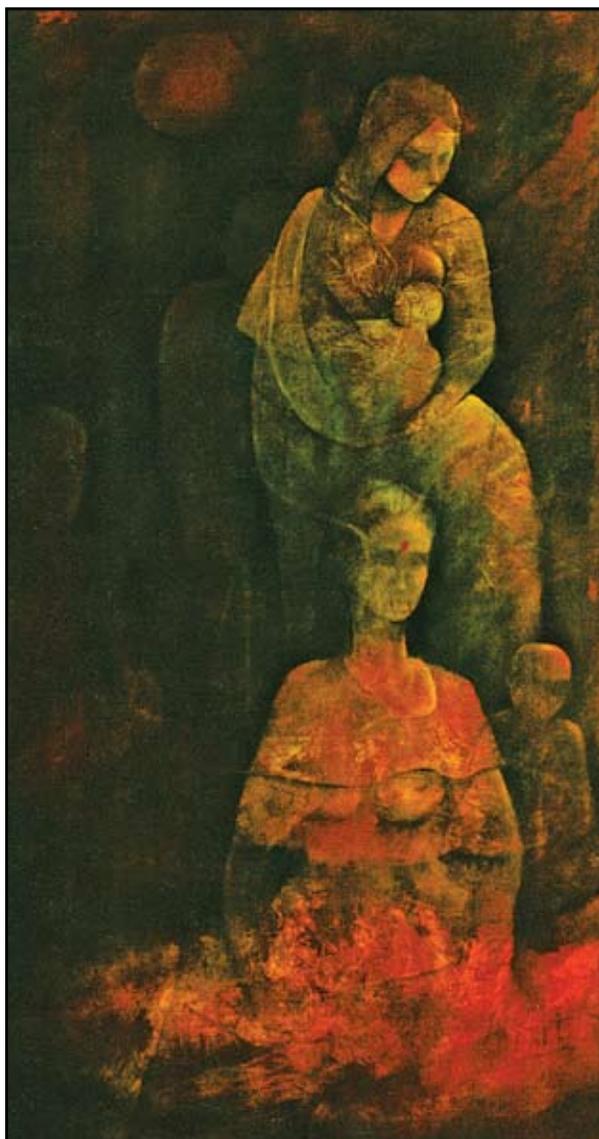
not just for the casual visitor at his exhibitions but also for his critics and fans who look forward to his events with much anticipation.



Untitled-3, oil on canvas

Another artistic creator who envisions art in terms of light, colour and purity, is artist **Ashok Kumar Dixit**, whose works were a popular draw at the gallery. Titled '*Seraphic Journey*' the works centred around figures painted in angelic forms depicting his concept through a palette of greens, golds and a mingling of deep tones of browns, reds and black.

Though graphically defined, there is a certain lightness in his strokes so that the definitive lines do not make a bold statement but simply define the physical proportions of his central figure. In fact, there is largely a monotonal underplay contained in his space and the hints of lightness and depth come forth as artistic technique used by the artist to good effect. Also, the textural play of his canvas draws viewers closer to his works. Superimposed with the

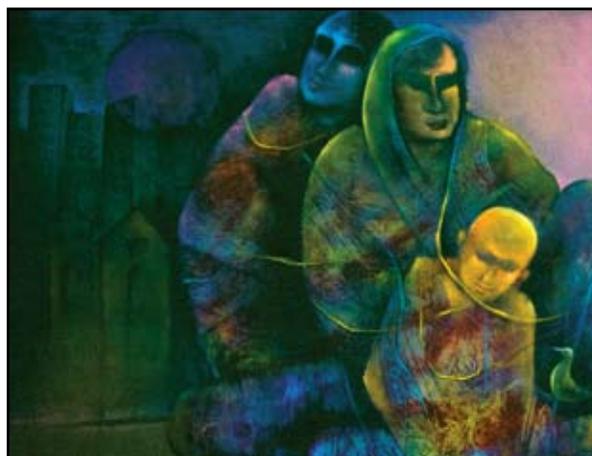


Untitled-1, oil on canvas

seraphic figures, the works bear an other-worldly imagery that at once excites the viewer's sensibility. Also, the forms induce a floating sensation thereby enhancing their other worldly imagery. The serene mood of the works is another of his master strokes so that visitors who have walked into the gallery drawn by curiosity, continue to stay and gaze closely at his works, instigated into making a private contact with his art, on personal terms.

The subject of his studies are largely linked to human situations and his figures are kept within

a proportionate size giving his works a strong connectivity with contemporary issues. The contemplative air about each work seems like photo studies caught at the right moment, and providing a new avenue to express the artistic genius within him. His tonal strategies employed to highlight his forms, draw the viewer ever closer to the work and create the mystic look of the angelic seraphs, a concept that is effective and alluring. Thus works such as these, require the viewer to make a comeback and revisit the art to understand the many layers of tones, the variation of textures and the novelty of the seraphic theme, in order to understand the depth of perceptivity that are contained in the art of Ashok Kumar Dixit.



Untitled-2, oil on canvas



Untitled-5, oil on canvas

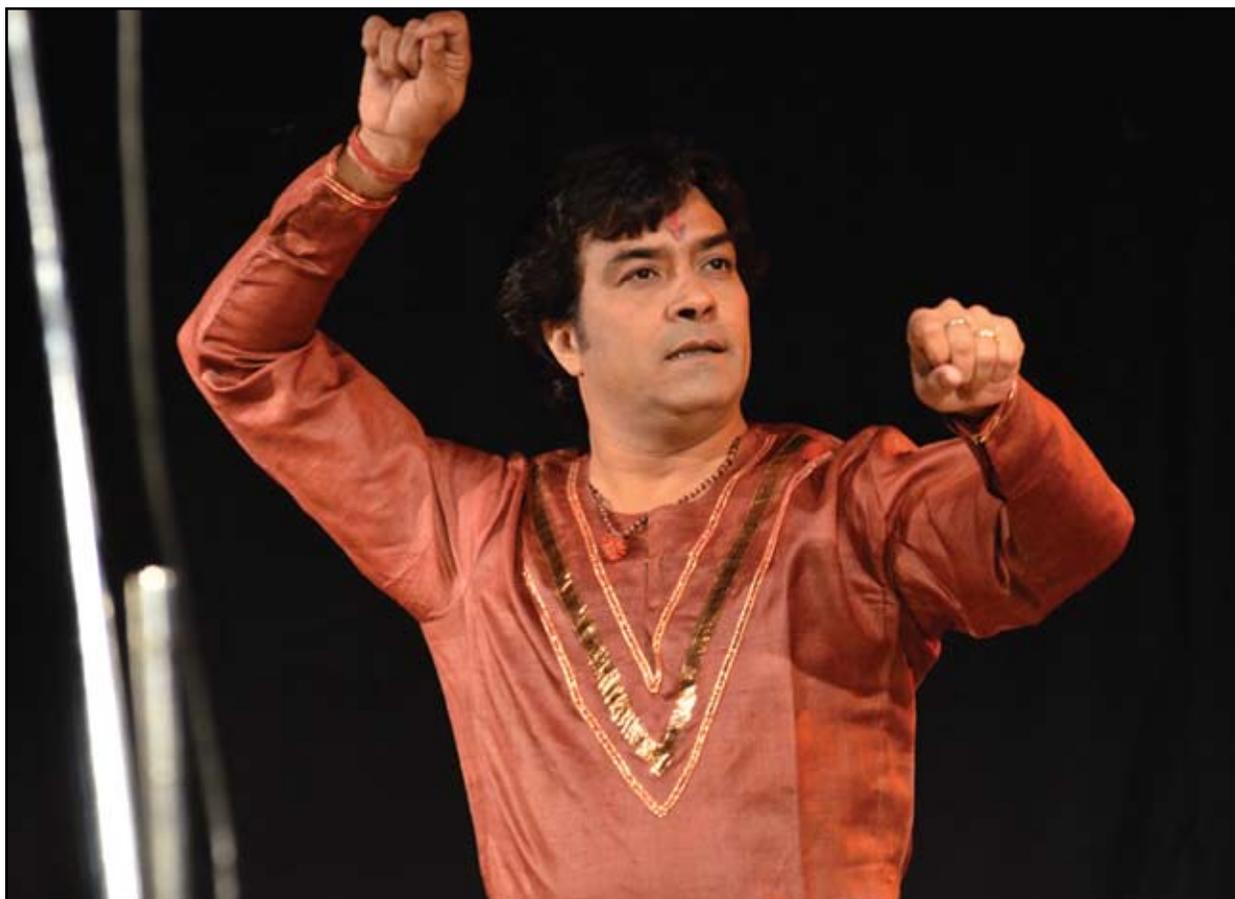


Shri Dinkar Asthana, Deputy Director General, ICCR felicitating Shri Gangani



Shri Harish Gangani performing at Azad Bhavan during performance on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2014 under Horizon Series

Of the many live performances that were offered to the city's connoisseurs, the lively kathak performance held during this quarter was much applauded. Featuring Guru Harish Gangani who had recently come back from his assignment of tutoring at the Indian Cultural Centre at Moscow, and his able senior disciples Tanushri, Sanjiv and Bhavish Gangani, the stage was electrified by their impeccable chakkars, the split second timeliness of their tihais and the perfect footwork of their tukras. The coordinated accompanists on the tabla by Yogesh Gangani, the sarangi and vocal support by an able vocalist, made the entire performance on stage a holistic feast for the senses even as it was an eye-ful to behold. The essential bhava filled content of their dance overlay gave audiences much more than a simple layout of techniques and their variations. The accuracy of their coordination and the extent of tayyari of the entire troupe made it a perfect display of the essential principles of the guru-shishya parampara.



Shri Harish Gangani performing at Azad Bhavan during performance on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2014 under Horizon Series

The dancers displayed the essence of the Jaipur gharana with flourish. In fact, viewers who had come with a casual interest in dance went back fully entrenched in their knowledge of the finer points of not just the dance form, but also the intricacies of the Jaipur school of kathak. By including the guru and his disciples, viewers were able to see the mature finesse of this dance school and the tradition in its pure and effective form. The staccato beats of the tabla and the innovative manner of the upaj was much appreciated. The nuances of the dance form, the energetic approach to the concert, where several aspects of the art were encapsulated in a short span of time, showed that Guru Gangani is an expert choreographer who can reveal the essence of his art with a few touches, both for the studied eye as well as the amateur fascinated by the expertise of laya,



Shri Harish Gangani performing at Azad Bhavan during performance on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2014 under Horizon Series

bhava, mukhra and footwork in a kathak performance spearheaded by Guru Harish Gangani.

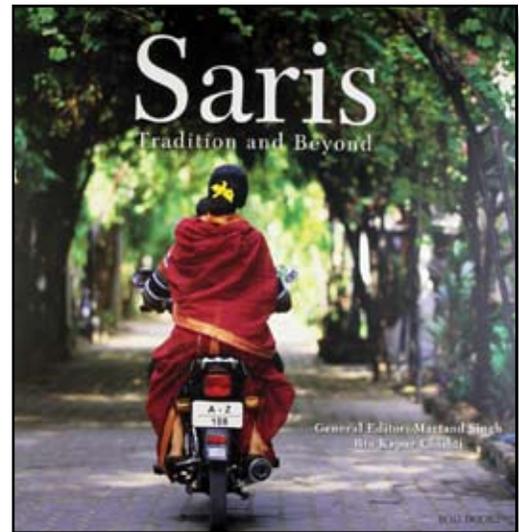
# Saris Tradition and Beyond

Rta Kapur Chishti

General editor: Martand Singh

Publishers: Roli Books. Lustre Press

Pages: 275



Review by Vaskar Das

The dust cover of the volume *Saris: Tradition and Beyond*, bears a succinct message. The image of a moped rider clad in a nine-yard sari rides with the ease of a bird taking wing thereby underscoring the message that the sari is a garment of bespoke elegance

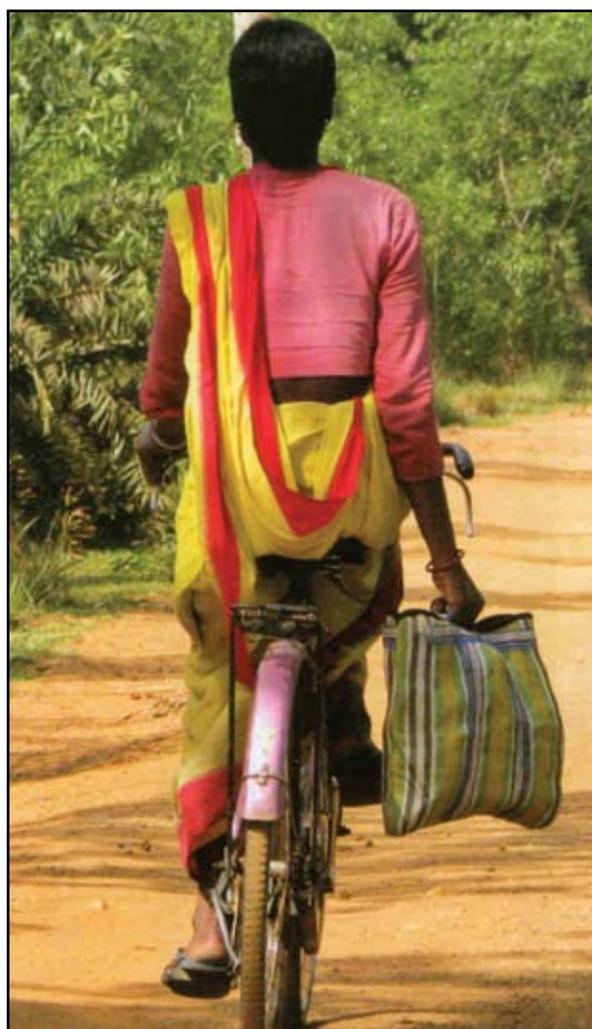
and complete comfort and mind boggling versatility. As one scans through the pages of this profusely illustrated 275-page kauphy table top treasure, it is evident that the contents are both the connoisseur's delight as well as a casual reader's introduction on

STATE	NO OF STYLES OF WEARING THE SARI AND NAMES OF SOME	NOS OF VARIETIES OF SARI WEAVIES/SPECIALITY
TAMILNADU	6 styles ; * Madirasu between the leg/Bharatnatyam dance style	93
ANDHRA PRADESH	12 styles : * Kuchipudi dance style; * newly married woman's style * and <sup>new</sup> cloth style	88
ODISHA	7 styles : *Santhal Community * between the legs;Odissi dance style	74
WEST BENGAL	4 Styles * Santhal two piece * Nadia before the advent of hot iron (unique)	55
JHARKHAND	6 Styles : *Hazaribagh/North Jharkhand * Santhal Pargana * Palamau	19
BIHAR	4 Styles * Munger * East Champaran (Gandhiji's first successful satyagraha)* Purnia Madhubani (paintings)	31
UTAR PRADESH & UTTARA KHAND	4 Styles * Sidha palla * Lapetawali (without blouse)* Khasauta : between the legs style * Rural Skirt drape	46 * Chikan Embroidery
CHATTISGARH	8 Styles * Bastar * Surcuja	25
MADHYA PRADESH	2 Styles * Jhabua Totally Ethnic * Between the legs	34 Cotton * Silk Zari Weaving
GUJARAT	6:4Between the legs styles. 1 Seedha Palla * 1 wearing style of Parsi community	62 :(Little Rann of kutch has no weavers)

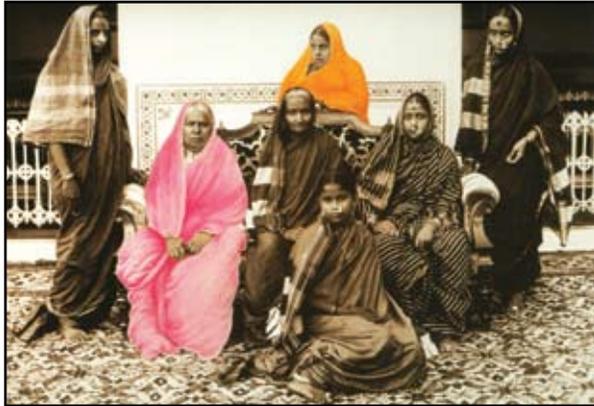
STATE	NO OF STYLES OF SARI WEARING AND SOME NAMES	NOS OF VARIETIES/IN SARI WEAVES/ SPECIALITY.
MAHARASHTRA (Districts of Raigarh, Ratna Giri, Sindhudurg have no weaves )	8 Styles : * Koli fisherwoman * Maratha wearing * Konkani wearing * Lavani dancing * salt harvester, * plus variations	57 : Paithan Interlocked tapestry/brocade
GOA Sari production banned when a colony of Portugal	5 Styles * Koli fisherwomen * Christian farm labour * Variations	10 :
Karnataka (Every district has weaves)	11 Styles * Yakshagana <del>Opera</del> theatre style for males *(females shown in picture and * Line sketches) * Coorg * Iyyengar & Madhava between the legs * Mysore Shaili	92 Bangalore / Mysore / Mangalore Silk * Plain/Patterned/striped / checked
Kerala	5 Styles * Mohiniattam * Chata Mundu (Christians) * Under Arm & waist 2 piece drape (shoulders bare)	33
15 States	89 Styles	723 Varieties

this representative garment of all the women of India. Each page, whether one is engaged in going through the print reading, admiring the photographic details or the unique inclusion of line drawings, brings to the fore that this regular women's apparel is a complete culture. The weaving techniques, the knitting, designing, colouring and the iconic summation that there are 108 methods of draping this garment brings home some amazing facts and figures which in a manner has met the approval of the most scintillating of critics and designers. Indeed 'Saris' is an exhaustive overview of this fascinating unstitched garment and a cutting edge of documentation of design and all that supports it socially, culturally and economically.

The author Rta Kapur Chishti and her team while tackling this gargantuan task of chronicling India's sari culture, have toured 14 prominent sari states of the country examining not just the finished garment on the shelves but across its entire range of structures, design, colours, technology, and format, thereby giving the sari its very own 'lingua' and making it a living experience not just for the proud wearer of the sari but also for its weaving and printing community. The economic viability and market system affecting the sari and the predicament of its producers in an age of transition, when the sari is one among other garments in the wardrobe is also given a thought in its content.



The simplicity and practical comfort of the sari is demonstrated by this woman from Ballavpur, West Bengal who is at complete ease in carrying out her daily chores wearing one



A partially tinted photograph showing the family retainers of the Gwalior royal family dressed in traditional Navari style saris (nine yard) favoured by Maratha women. Both the young and the older women working within the palace complex seem to have worn this traditional style of draping the sari

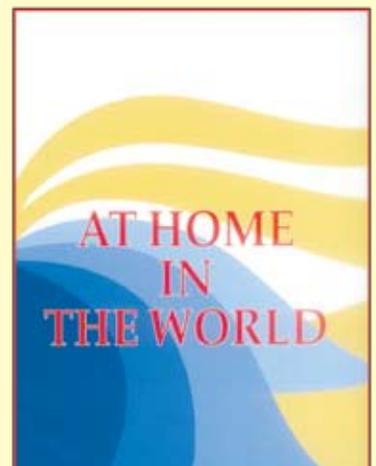
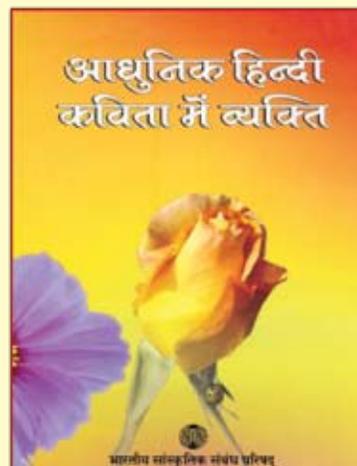
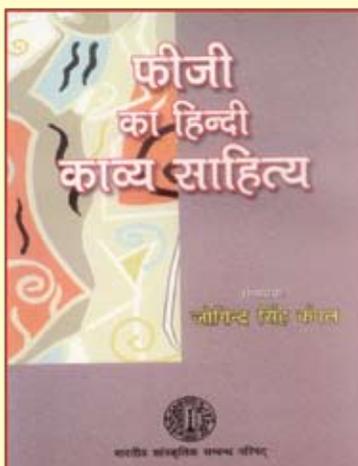
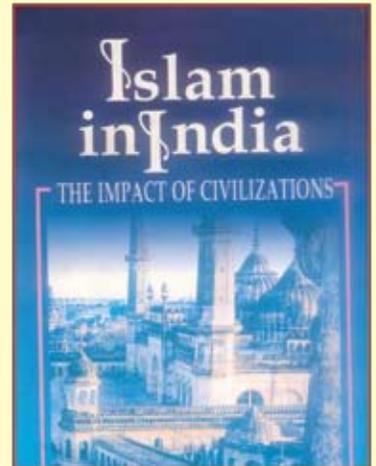
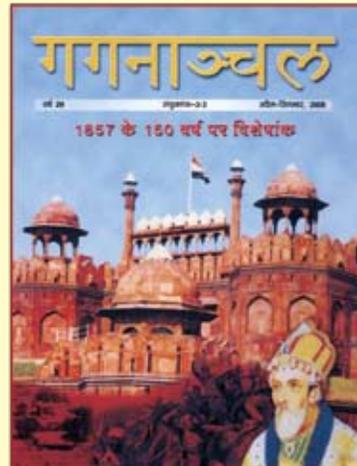
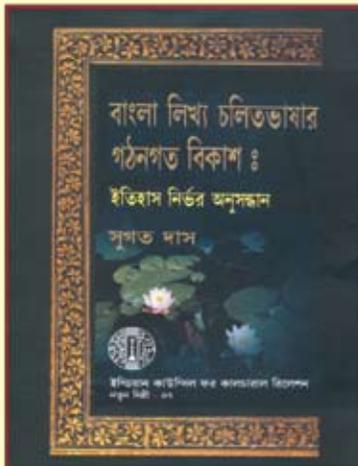
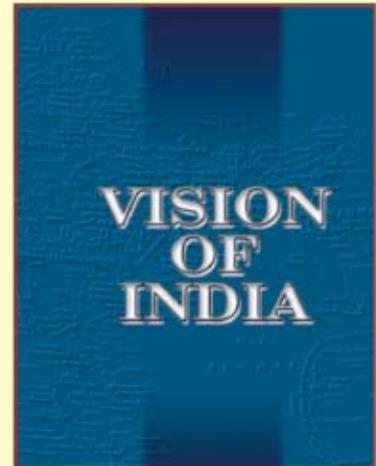
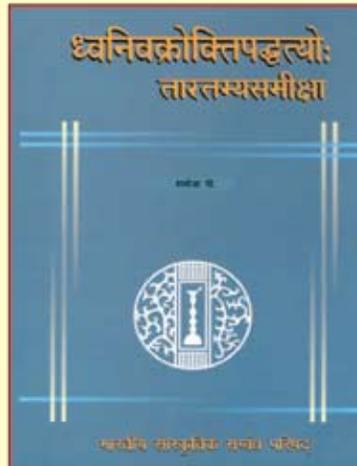
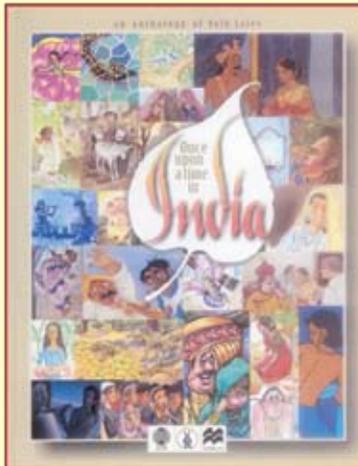
In its attempt to be an all-inclusive study the researchers have stayed away from a ramp like attitude towards the sari. The snapshots of the women in saris are from real-life situations, while working on farms, in the Adivasi areas, among nomadic performers, on the theatre stage, besides nine-yard ensembles and wedding wear. It thus creates the right ground for assimilating that according to this team there are 108 styles of sari wearing recorded and, aptly demonstrated for readers through a series of line drawings. Even more fascinating to its readers are details about the manner of folding the finished product, measurement codes that are based on hand spans and arm lengths instead of geometrical tools. The coloured pages illustrating borders of saris is a mind boggling variety of combinations with stripes, squares and colours and are bound to make readers ponder over the pages simply to assimilate the varied ways in which sari makers have exploited the potency of the line as a means of expressing one's artistic inclinations.

The trajectory followed by the author in tracking the story of the sari displays an organized approach. A

detailed map of the state four which the sari reference is being made transports readers right into the heart of the sari centres in the state. The social signals that vibrate in the state are thus incorporated in the subject of the sari thereby introducing to the reader a distinct yet homogenous understanding of the sari of a particular region. That the designer of the sari takes his cues from his surroundings is aptly brought forth through images of temple spires, or the brick laid borders of the houses, or the design surrounding an entryway to a mosque in granite, in one instance. The volume is also laced with snippets of commonplace sayings to bring home a point, adding interest to matters around the sari. The glossary at the end is a miniature thesaurus where the weave words read like a prayer or invocation. The folding techniques of saris as covered in the book is a treat to a puzzle maker for it is not just flattened into a square or rectangle but rolled and folded, or even tied in a large knot like a noose!

Though the volume is a magnificent synopsis of sari details, a veritable researcher's delight through its coverage of sari weaving centres and styles, the volume makes no mention of the contribution of its wearers to the evolution of modern-day sari wearing and weaving. The 19th century has seen the rise of women stylists who have taken sari wearing to the domain of society wear, while fashion designers today are reaching newer highs with this apparel. A chapter on their contributions would have given the work a richer grounding.

Nevertheless, the commendable efforts of Rta Kapur Chishti and the managing editor Martand Singh have tuned our senses towards a new look at this everyday garment. They have handled the sari not as a research chore but as a labour of love and through the many weaves of their contents that shows through.



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