

CRAFTING A FUTURE



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Stories of Indian Textiles and Sustainable Practices

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Dedicated to my teachers,
Helena Perhentupa and Mohammadbhai Siddikbhai Khatri
For
young artisans who desire to continue working with their hands
to create products of true value and beauty

In solidarity with activists engaged in fighting for a just, equitable and sustainable future

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FOREWORD

Handlooms are the warp and weft of the Indian subcontinent—our culture, aesthetics and economy are rooted in its threads. Handloom weavers form the major part of our handicraft sector, which, in turn, is the second largest sector of our economy.

Kabir, the 15th-century mystic weaver poet, said God the Almighty is also a weaver. The spinning of yarn and weaving of handloom cloth is a metaphor used over the ages for creation, and for the interplay of genders, cultures, communities and skills that make up our universe. The message in these verses is that the mingling of multiplicity and diversity leads to unity and strength, and that when different strands come together, they create a fabric that is not only beautiful but resilient and durable. This is a vital metaphor for the world today in these increasingly divisive times. Consequently, this is not just an extraordinary book, but one that is much needed. India's present, and our future potential are interconnected to the skillsets and knowledge systems that are part of our past. Sadly, we often forget the most important strands.

Archana Shah's textile journey is a voyage of discovery. Wandering from the Northeast to Kashmir and Uttarakhand, to UP and Bengal and Odisha, to Kutch and Karnataka and Andhra and Telengana; from pashmina rearers in Ladakh to revivalists of *patola* in Rajkot and Ponduru khadi; from the centuries-old family traditions of *benaresi* silks to the new developments in Malkha and Kala cotton, Archana covers the making traditions and techniques of handloom textiles today. The insights and information and vignettes of other lives and people are completely mind-blowing. The social and cultural history, the raw material, the processes, the products... I don't think anything like this has ever been done before.

Archana Shah has been immersed in textiles for over four decades now as an NID student, designer, merchandiser, mentor, researcher and traveller. Through a keenly observed, simply narrated account of her immersive journeys from 2018 to 2020 to weaving centres and handloom projects across the country, which include the landscape, the community, their ways, even food and clothing seen through her eyes, we are gradually led into the details of each weaving style, the raw materials, the complexities of looms and treadles, and the voices, views, perspectives and problems of the people involved. As one reads, one realises their richness, range and huge untapped potential.

This is a scholarly book, not a casual coffee-table conversation piece, but it is also a riveting travelogue (though I wish there were room for more of Archana herself...she is almost too

self-effacing!). Her journey links this huge multilayered, multifaceted and varied sector together. The thread running through the book is her deep love and understanding of our textiles and the people who craft them, as well as the sector's incredible diversity and splendour. An underlying though equally powerful theme is her concern that these age-old, intensely valuable but fragile skillsets and knowledge systems may not survive the onslaught of industrialisation, globalisation and rural migration.

I first met Archana Shah about 25 years ago, though I have been an appreciative shopper at her Bandhej store much longer. I remember an exhibition at a small gallery in Connaught Place in the early 1980s, and buying a wonderful cream tassar dupatta with a black and red *bandhani* sunburst in the middle. Then later, a couple of beautiful Saudagiri block-printed silk sarees from her first small store in Ahmedabad.

Her work has always gone straight to the heart of each craft tradition and made it the inspirational core of her design, while simplifying and contemporising it. Her own personal aesthetic is muted greys, blacks, creams and fawns, with an occasional touch of deep red, but her designs and store are full of classic Indian colours—blazing rani pinks and oranges, the vivid glow of indigo, turquoise and emerald greens, singing saffron and lemon yellows. Bandhej is one of the few craft stores that has remained true to its original vision—classic crafts married to contemporary design.

Something that *Crafting a Future* brings home, lovingly, evocatively, but also starkly, is that textile traditions, however beautiful and integral to our culture, will not survive unless the people who craft them also find their survival worthwhile. Over decades we have taken their existence for granted, without investing in them or giving their makers their true due. Who thinks of a handloom weaver as a highly skilled professional and pays him accordingly? Who accords him the social status of even an office-going white-collar worker? Where are the educational systems that cater for craftspeople's specialised needs? Where are the ancillary services and infrastructure that handloom communities require? For instance, weavers need washing and packing units, and proper facilities for storage, dyeing, dry-cleaning and effluent disposal; people to make spindles and to construct and maintain looms; silk cultivation and the rearing of animals for wool; cotton, indigo, madder and mulberry plantations, and the herbs, roots and other raw materials for making dyes. Developing these would professionalise and increase production, while simultaneously creating new rural employment avenues and earning sources that would curb the rush to our overburdened cities.

Something that I loved about Archana's book is that she recognises that handloom-weaving is part of a whole micro-culture, not just one man or woman sitting at a loom. Each regional handloom cluster, unique in itself, involves multiple skills, processes and people, each with their own skillset and place in the process. A master weaver, however skilled, could not weave without herders and their sheep, silk cocoon rearers, or the cotton and flax farmers who grow the right raw material.

They are dependent too on the carpenters who construct the correct, appropriately aligned loom, the women who prepare the raw cotton or wool, spin it, wind bobbins and prepare the warp, the starchers, the dyers, the washermen... Those multiple hands and skills that form the vital before-and-after of the textile process are generally forgotten by bureaucrats and economists when planning for and enumerating it.

Over the years, I have seen numerous handloom communities abandon their craft for lack of the right tassar cocoons, or someone with the expertise to repair their looms. Those eager officials and NGOs anxious to install semi-automated frame looms in every handloom district have no idea that regional weaving styles, textures and motifs depend on specially constructed looms, and that each area has its own distinctive style of loom. A loom for weaving *jamawar* or a *benaresi* brocade is vastly different from a pit loom for weaving a Bhujodi *durrie*!

When Archana was an NID student, having her first experience of textile and craft in Kutch, I was also making that same journey in parallel. Six months in Kutch as visiting designer for Gurjari in the 1970s not only made me a lifelong friend but shaped my understanding of textile traditions and the people who made them. I learnt the correlation between a good product and the producer who is paid well enough to make it worthwhile to do his best. Also, the importance of craftspeople knowing their customers, and consumers knowing the power, potential and value of craft traditions. It's important to remember that Indian textiles may occasionally become art, but they are primarily means of livelihood arising from a traditional skillset and technology—the largest single source of employment after agriculture, geared to produce a market-driven consumer product.

Though its creators are anonymous, the motifs, techniques and styles are incredibly diverse. Woven, waxed, embroidered, appliquéd, brocaded, block-printed, painted, patch-worked, tie-dyed, tinselled, they are an integral part of our lifestyles, culture and economy. The Indian handloom sector is also the one area of acknowledged skill, creativity and expertise where India is not just at par with others, but uniquely ahead of the rest of the world. Paradoxically, successive governments continue to call it 'a sunset industry' instead of a gold mine to be invested in. Few value its real worth and potential.

So, what is the future of handloom textiles? It goes totally against other manufacturing and consumption trends today where metres and metres of identical-looking, cheaply and quickly manufactured fabric are made into identical products to be distributed and sold worldwide, worn for a single season and then discarded. Archana tells us there can be as many as 52 micro collections produced by a brand each year! The USP of handloom on the other hand is that each metre of fabric can be different, that it cannot be made in thousands or even hundreds of metres; and that it is a slow process, shaped by the individual art and skill of its maker, which means that each piece is unique, and carries its own corresponding value. We have done great damage to this

unique attribute by insisting that handlooms follow the same quality control, quantity and pricing parameters as other fabrics. Handloom is meant to be an heirloom and one of a kind.

The current ongoing Covid pandemic and its attendant economic slowdown have caused untold hardship and unemployment to thousands of handloom weavers across India. The silver lining to this global cloud is that it gives the world time to pause and reflect. If we can go back to an age when clothes did not have to be changed seasonally, with consumers across continents rushing like lemmings to buy the exact same thing at the exact same time; if we can cherish the ability to wear fabrics that reflect our individual aesthetic, colour sensibility and style, and are made locally, with the craftsperson, motif tradition and technique labelled as proudly as a designer brand, and teach this to millennial consumers, then there is hope. India could once again, as in the 17th century, clothe the world. Francois Pyrad de Laval wrote in the 17th century, 'Everyone from the Cape of Good Hope to China, man and woman, is clothed from head to foot in the product of Indian Looms.' Five million yards of cloth was dispatched annually from just one port in Coromandel, and India grew fabulously rich on the proceeds.

Archana's *Crafting a Future* eloquently directs us to this great potential. I urge that we see it as a roadmap, not an elegy, and view handloom textiles not as a part of the past but a central part of our future.

LAILA TYABJI



Meghwal girls in Kutch embroidering cushion covers for the urban market to help supplement the family's income

INTRODUCTION

I grew up seeing my grandmother spin cotton yarn on her *peti* (box) charkha. Like millions of her generation, she was completely enthralled by Gandhiji, who was in the thick of the non-violent struggle he had initiated for India's independence from the British rule. When he started the Swadeshi Movement by taking up the charkha and calling on Indians to reject imported fabrics, spin their own cloth and wear indigenous khadi, she responded with single-minded dedication. She was so steadfast in her principles that long after India had won its independence, and till she passed away at the age of 92, my grandmother wore only cotton khadi. She used to spin for an hour or so every afternoon till she was in her early eighties, and when she had collected enough hanks of yarn she took them to the Gandhi Ashram at Ahmedabad, where she would exchange them for khadi sarees and other fabrics of her choice, and also buy the extras she needed. She belonged to a wealthy family but Gandhiji had inspired people of her generation to give up opulence and lead a simple life, and all sections of the society followed his call to embrace ethical values, and to spin and wear khadi. Even as a young child, I was intrigued by what she was doing. I often tried my hand at spinning but lacked the patience to make much progress. Nevertheless, these memories are ingrained in me, and have blossomed into a deep and abiding interest in all things handcrafted, particularly textiles.

I was first introduced to the remarkable range and diversity of Indian textiles when I was a textile design student at the National Institute of Design (NID) in Ahmedabad. There, Helena Perhentupa, our teacher from Finland, was able to transfer her enthusiasm and great interest in heritage Indian textiles to her students. She encouraged us to travel to craft centres to study artisans who worked with their hands to create textiles of great beauty. The internationally acclaimed Calico Museum of Textiles was within walking distance of the NID campus, which further exposed us to India's rich textile traditions. She created classroom exercises using traditional textile pieces for reference, and this helped us to look deeper and understand the nuances of a particular piece. We would often resist going on these visits to the museum, little realising then that the experience of engaging with traditional textiles early on would have a lasting impact on our professional lives. The genesis of our indigenous design vocabulary can be traced to our traditional crafts and textiles, and the exposure to a vast variety of textiles taught us many different things about



Helena Perhentupa



Mohammadbhai with his three sons, Rajak, Jabbar and Ismail, at Dhamadka, 1977

traditions, patterns, craft and techniques and the use of colours and textures. The impressions I gathered then continue to inform my work today and have helped it to remain rooted in an Indian ethos.

My journey through the world of handcrafted textiles began in 1977 in Kutch when, as part of a student project commissioned by the Gujarat State Handloom and Handicraft Development Corporation Ltd. (GSHHDC), Sulekha, my senior, and I were sent to Dhamadka village, a major centre for block printing. We were to live and work with Khatri Mohammadbhai Siddikbhai for two weeks, to study and document the features of their textile craft, and based on this, design a

collection of block prints for the Gurjari stores set up by GSHHDC in urban centres to help artisans market their products. Dhamadka is known for its *ajrakh*, the block-printed textiles used by the Maldhari men. Until then, the printers printed fabrics only for the local rural communities. We were among the first outsiders who had reached this village to work with a printer to produce textiles for an alternative market. Our collection of prints was greatly appreciated, and from then onwards the family received regular orders from Gurjari, and this changed their financial situation. Our stay in Dhamadka was an enriching experience, and became the basis of my future work in this area. In many ways I consider Mohammadbhai my mentor, and through my many interactions with him, I have been able to develop a deeper understanding of the traditions associated with the craft.

My fascination for handcrafted fabrics increased as I travelled to remote corners of the country to study and understand a diverse range of weaving, dyeing, printing and embroidery techniques practised by artisans in different regions. Often, I stayed with the artisan's family, when there were no other facilities available in the neighbourhood. This allowed for a close interaction with them and I was able to observe their production processes carefully. I enjoy observing artisans working with their hands, creating objects of great beauty, and the time I spent with them allowed me to study their



The author sampling fabric with Rajak, 1981

technique as well as listen to their myths and stories about their life and work. This has helped me comprehend how techniques and processes have evolved, understand how patterns have developed and appreciate why they do things in a particular manner. Through my extensive travels, I have discovered that each region in India offers its own unique skills, distinctive range of textiles, colour palettes and motifs. It has been a rewarding journey and a great learning experience, and has deeply influenced my design practice.

During my first trip to Kutch in 1976, while wandering through the market at Mandavi, I had met Ismailbhai Nironawala, a *bandhani* artisan who was busy tying knots on a piece of fabric at his shop. He showed us some *bandhani* textiles, mostly *odhanas*, or veils, worn by the local communities. *Bandhani* is a resist-dye technique where single dots are tied following a predetermined pattern to resist penetration of the colour when the fabric is dyed. Once the cloth is



Women tying minute bandhani dots with string, following a predetermined pattern

dried, it is stretched on a cross grain to gently remove the tied threads, creating a multi-dot pattern. I was completely fascinated by the resist-dye technique of *bandhani*, referred to as 'bandhej' in Hindi. So when I decided to start my clothing company in the early 1980s, I named the company Bandhej, which also means a bond. The word seemed appropriate as it signified my close bonds with the artisan community and my commitment to their craft.

Bandhej was started with the vision of upholding, preserving and sustaining the precious hand skills and inherent knowledge of indigenous artisans through collaborative design intervention. The first Bandhej store opened in 1985, when retail in India for women's clothing was practically non-existent. Bandhej was one of the first labels in the country which, while drawing upon the Indian heritage in textiles, also reflected a very contemporary sensibility in the designs of its fabrics, and has been able to create a distinctive idiom in its designs and a unique identity for itself.

Even as the main business of Bandhej has been to design and produce a range of clothing for its retail outlets catering to urban markets, the underlying concern has always been with the diverse traditions of fabric making and embellishing in India. Apart from our involvement with printers, dyers and weavers in Kutch, as the business grew we expanded our association to include weavers in Champa, Chanderi and Maheshwari in Madhya Pradesh, Mangalgiri and Puttapaka in