

## Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices

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Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are here in the week 7 of our course and this week we will be talking about fashion in the post-independence India.



So, the impact of fashion as we know is a big one. The impact of fashion, as we see, has grown quite a bit in the post-independence era in India. This idea of fashion is something that we can understand in terms of style, preference, and then, of course, taste, and it is related to a particular time or a particular time frame as we can understand it. This is something we have seen that has grown since the late 19th century, mostly in Western Europe. Then, slowly, we see with the interventions in the early 20th century in Western Europe this tendency towards understanding fashion and its relationship to a number of different kinds of materials and objects and mostly predominantly, we see this idea of fashion to be associated with textile has also been influential in India as well. As we have already discussed in the earlier module how, in the colonial period, we found that there

was this idea of new mill-made fabric which was imported from Manchester or, like, I mean, something which was imposed on the Indigenous people or the Indian people by the British were the things that were understood as fashion. Of course, we also see a particular way of draping sarees or jackets, blazers and all those things and combining them with dhoti and things like that for men can also be understood as different fashion statements at this point in time. Now, something happened drastically different when India gained its independence from British rule. So, in 1947, this decisive time, this moment in which we could understand that the nation, the leaders in the nation, would take charge of this newly independent nation in terms of, like I mean, the so-called progress, development and advancement of this nation. So then, what happened? How did these ideas also make a difference or intervene in how we understand the idea of fashion in the field of textiles?

So, we will start our discussion by redefining the traditional meaning and associations of textiles. So by that, what I mean is that there is always this kind of tendency in the field of Indian textile studies where we find that there are the Indian textiles like, I mean, it can be those untailed pieces of fabric that can be saree, that can be different kind of scarves, patka or sash, that can be dhoti, a number of different other kind of fabric like shawl or shoulder cloth or any of those things. So from those things, we definitely see that the designers from the 1950s have sort of pushed the boundaries and tried to understand that if this kind of untailed fabric or like the kind of tailored garments as well like pyjama, jama, angrakha and so many other different kinds of tailored garments, how those can be associated or how those can be redefined according to the taste and requirement of a particular time. And so this is something we need to understand that when we are looking at this particular time after India's independence, we understand that there was a need for a newness, that there was a need for the Indian leaders, not only just the political leaders but the leaders in the field of textile, fashion, culture and many different other sectors all of them they definitely wanted a deliberate break from the material culture, the visual culture which was prevalent in India; but at the same time also did not want to completely deny this long past India had and that could go long back than the colonial period. So, these kinds of aspects we find that there is already a kind of this issue in which some of

those textiles in the Indian context which were looked at were understood as “timeless”, and when I say timeless in quotes, I always say this with caution because this idea of timeless can be a bit tricky. With this idea of timelessness, we see that there is a tendency to understand it as something that remains unchanged over time. But in reality, we cannot really see anything that remains unchanged over time. So maybe the visuality can remain the same; like the Kanjipuram sarees, there are particular kinds of motives which have been woven into those sarees for generations, and that visual outcome can be understood as something that remains unchanged. But then we also need to understand that how the community structure changes, how the making of the yarn changes, how then the dyeing technique and everything else changes. So, it is not really like if we understand something as unchanged, it actually remains unchanged. Many changes may happen behind the visual appearance of the fabrics or the textiles, which usually remain ignored or unacknowledged. So, for that reason, we cannot really call any of the textile or any kind of material culture as timeless. However, regarding the idea of timeless, when I say this with caution then, it is usually predominantly I indicate that this is the visual appearance or the aesthetics of a particular kind of textiles which seem to have retained its earlier forms from the past generations and that is something which is usually understood as timeless. It can be the aesthetics of the Kanjipuram sarees; it can be the aesthetics of the Bengal Jamdanis or any of those kinds of fabric which can be readily recognized by people across generations.

So if that is one of the ways in which we see that the Indian textiles are defined by calling them so-called timeless, then the other aspect was to sort of introduce certain things which would address the transformation, not only in terms of like the transformation in the livelihood and the other sectors of the artisanal communities but also how those transformations can stand for the changing ideologies of a new nation. So that is something we find to be much more important than, of course, acknowledging the transformation in the artisanal communities. So, this duality, we see on one hand that there is a need for establishing that the timelessness of the Indian textile still retains its beauty and at the same time, it still retains its original context and all those words-

beauty, original, these words are kind of contentious. On the other hand, there was also the need to make these so-called timeless and traditional textiles more receptive to the urban audience or the people who would be joining the working sectors of this newly independent nation. So, this duality in terms of understanding something that remains unchanged and then something that needs to be transformed was practised extensively in the field of textile making in post-independence India. This was something that made the fashion industry, or, as I mean, this so-called idea of fashion that has something to do with taste and preferences, become very important and sort of layered if we consider all the socio-political and economic changes after 1947.

With those things in mind, we also find that indigenous textiles and the designer's interventions were very important in this area. That's because if we see that there are certain kinds of transformations happening in the textile sector, it means that designers' interventions were involved. How those Indigenous textile forms, which have been practised by the communities for centuries or even millennia, with the arrival of these urban educated designers and with their design interventions, made a difference in terms of how these traditional textiles were perceived by the viewers and at the same time how those traditional textiles were sort of being researched and collected and so on. Also, how they were made or absorbed as part of these newly made societies in the newly independent country.

Now, the other thing we'll be looking at this week would be those very important Vishwakarma exhibitions and those exhibitions we can understand in the field of textile studies to be path-breaking. That's because they are considered to be artisan, designer, and researcher collaborators in the field of textile studies. In these kinds of interventions, we see that many different stakeholders are coming together, and this is not something we can see as something that was just conceived and then went ahead with the flow. But it was very well organized and thought out, and its impact was long-lasting. Even today, some of the textile practitioners that we see in our country recall their memories of the Vishwakarma exhibitions and how the conversations, experiments and the exposure they

have received during these exhibitions have made a huge impact on the kind of practice they still do.

Now, we'll also look into the idea of sustainability, slow fashion, and its social impact. If you remember, in week one, I sort of mentioned why my stress has been on handmade things, like hand-spun, hand-woven, and handloom textiles. Perhaps in many of these cases today, we do not really see hand-spun textiles. However, the handloom textiles or the textiles made by the weavers and, of course, with the intervention of many different people (I mean from the agricultural sectors to washer people to the dyers and so on) [are relevant]. So that kind of production technique and their social impact is something we'll be focusing on this week as well. Some of those ideas that were seen as being relevant in the very early times are still relevant today. At this juncture when we are increasingly sort of going in the digital platform not only in terms of making knowledge available or producing knowledge but also at the same time, like in the market sector and everything in which we do see that there is a disconnect between how the production of objects are at there and then where we are situated. So, understanding the details of the production techniques and the people who are involved in production can make an impact on how we perceive textiles and how we appreciate them. So those kinds of aspects will also be looked at in this week. Of course, sustainability, when we see this word, we kind of look back at certain ideas we have already discussed so far in terms of ecology, environment and then, of course, also like sustainment of particular kind of community livelihoods of people. So those issues will be looked at this week.



of those issues, like I mean technology and then, of course, the advancement in the field of science, also in the field of humanities, to support the societal cause and what technology can do to the society, all those things were given priority. That is how we find that during this time, a number of projects were taken up, and some of the projects would certainly be in terms of setting up some of the institutes, as I have mentioned. Here on screen (on the left side of the screen), we see the photograph of Dr. Homi Bhabha, Jawaharlal Nehru, and others in the Department of Atomic Energy in 1954. This was actually in the formative stage so a number of models and then ideas were discussed those can be then sort of developed full-fledgedly in the later times. If this is one of the aspects we find and of course like I mean some of the famous statements by Nehru that also emphasize that I mean how the dams and the silos would be like I mean those new sites of the nation like the dams would be the new temples that are required in India instead of like I mean thinking about temple to be something that is just related to religion. So these kinds of ideas we see that I mean there is already a proclamation about the change in the society and then like also what kind of change is required in the society, culture and everything else for us to sort of move forward and leave behind the colonial legacy. Of course, we are still fighting [against] the colonial legacy today also, but those are the kind of ideas we see them to be there prominently featured in Nehru and some of the other leaders conceptualization of this new nation.

Now, if this is one of the things we find that there was a push towards technology and so-called development, then the other thing would be to think in terms of craft sectors. As I have mentioned in the earlier module, the craft sectors and the artisanal sectors are, perhaps, I mean, the second largest unorganized occupational sector in the Indian subcontinent and in India, of course. So why is it the second largest? (Of course, if we think about the agricultural sector and sometimes we definitely see that agricultural sectors and the craft sectors they have overlappings, as we have already seen in terms of understanding dying, in terms of procuring the raw material for weaving and everything else). But then, if we think about agriculture as a separate sector from the artisanal sector, then perhaps the agricultural sector will be the first and foremost occupational sector in India, then the craft sector. The craft sector can include various kinds of textile making

and then of course the other kinds of object making (that can be in the field of metal wood and so on), all those things we see to be unorganized, they are definitely not centralized. We see that the weavers and then, like the other groups of the communities of craft makers, they might have local guilds or like, I mean associations to sort of operate or like the cooperatives. But then we do not really see them to be usually there under one umbrella, that a centralized body that can .... take charge of all different craft people in the Indian subcontinent. So, this is something we find that I mean, the craft sector was very unorganized, but at the same time, during the colonial period, we saw this high relevance of craft, especially textiles. It is something that cannot be ignored ... for the trade relations, for building culture, at the same time ... keeping the strength of the society intact craft is indispensable. That is the reason we find that there were a number of craft activists for example Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and later on Pupul Jayakar and so on they have stressed the idea of prioritizing craft. So, what we see during this time that Jawaharlal Nehru also have sort of spoken to Pupul Jayakar and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (mostly Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay). Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay convinced him to set up the All India Handicrafts Board in 1952. So, this is something we find that was perhaps the first attempt to bring the craft sector under one umbrella. Even today, we see that ... the majority of the craft sectors still operate as unorganized sectors, but ... having their representation at the governmental level enables different kinds of ... facilities that could not be given to people beforehand. So, these things we [observe] to be ... prominently presented in Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's idea. We have spoken about Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay [briefly] in the earlier module as she was someone whom we see as a follower of Gandhi and who has also taken up the cause and of sort spoken in favour of handloom, handwoven textiles. Not for her love for textiles, but it was for the betterment, for making the country self-sustainable (... to practice this self-sufficiency, something that Gandhiji has also stressed). Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was also jailed in the late 1930s, and she was a prominent freedom fighter and social activist who worked extensively in the 1930s and 1940s. So, after the independence of India, we find her to be ... more prominently presented in the ministry. That was for the first time .... she was able to bring the attention of the government towards the craft sector and in 1952, when All India Handicrafts Board or AIHB was established, Chattopadhyay was selected as the

Chairperson of [the board]. After her selection as the chairperson of this handicraft board, she had extensively travelled all across the country for meeting craftspeople everywhere



and ..... this kind of ... travels .... [were done] to gain an idea about what kind of craft making are still there and what kind of craft making needs ... motivation and support and everything else. .... [during this time] we definitely see that ... the Pupul Jayakar had also stepped in, and she had also travelled extensively ... in order to revitalize the craft sector. Now, for Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, we find that I mean she was instrumental in terms of not only just travelling to those places but also understanding and being sensible to the requirements of the craftspeople. Some of the craftspeople we still see today or their forefathers still talk about Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. For example, we see the late master Kalamkari painter Gurappa Chetty garu and his father Lakshmaiah garu, who directly benefited from Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. So those kinds of aspects we definitely see that I mean how the artisans who are there today (either their family or their teachers and so on) they have directly benefited from Chattopadhyay's intervention in the craft sector. That is how we see that eventually, in 1956-1957, the weaver service centers were established in India. After the establishment of the All India Handicrafts Board (which eventually became the All India Handicrafts and Handloom Board), slowly there ... were plans to .... sort of implement the idea of extending the governmental support to the artisanal sectors and was sort of materialized by establishing the Weaver Service

Centers. Regional weaver service centres were... established all over the country in various sectors, for example .... in Delhi, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Madras or Chennai, Varanasi and many other places. How those weaver service centres .... functioned in terms of ... providing training, at the same time also sort of increasing sales and then sort of ... extending support to the local weavers and textile makers in the country. So, we see those aspects as being there by the kind of steps that were taken in the 1950s.

Now, the other kind of activities that we also find, for example, in 1948, the Calico Museum of Textile was established in Ahmedabad, and Gautam Sarabhai and Girah Sarabhai were responsible for sort of establishing this museum after art historian and master interpreter Ananda Coomaraswamy's advice. The Sarabhai collection (I mean, they already had an extensive collection of textiles) and other artefacts and objects as collections were then made into the Calico Museum. [Initially] .... the Sarabhai collection and ..... the textile collection (as the Calico Museum) was ... situated elsewhere. Then both these collections were .... relocated to the premise of the Sarabhai's. So, this kind of making of the institutions was also instrumental, [for example] from the 1950s, the Calico Museum invited international scholars like John Irwin and, of course, Margaret Hall and other people too. Then [how] they were also associated with people like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and others. So, all of them sort of got together and started doing research on the textiles that... are primarily from the Indian collections. So, we did not see this to be there earlier. Then, in 1946, we see this prolific Marg Magazine was also being published, and then people like Mulk Raj Anand and other prominent craft activists and craft scholars were part of the editorial board of this magazine. So, this is how we find that a number of different activities started shaping up after the independence of India. On one hand we see the establishment of these museums and ... the magazines and different platforms for promoting craft; but then also we find that some of those governmental measures were instrumental for providing support to the artisanal sectors which was equally important. That is how we find that there was a revitalization of the craft sectors especially the textile sectors in the Indian subcontinent. We will continue on this discussion more in the next lecture thank you.