

## Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices

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Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta, and we are here in the fourth installment of a week on fashion in post-independence India. We are already discussing some of these aspects of the new idea of redefining textiles in post-independence India, and we have looked into some of the designer's interventions and how they have put an honest effort in terms of redefining the meaning of certain kinds of textiles which have been generationally practiced in the Indian subcontinent.



Now, with those discussions, let us look into this other example, and that is by Gaurang Shah, this Hyderabad-based designer. He has been experimenting with a number of different weaving styles and then pattern making and everything else from various parts

of southern India and other parts of India. But then this particular collection called Chitravali in which we see that there was a seamless merging of Kanji Puram silk and then also this Kalamkari drawing. So, this is something that came up in this designer collection in Chitravali and this image that we have on screen is from this runway show in 2017. In this one, what we see is that the Kanji silk is utilized for making the base of this material and then stitched into this tailored dress. When we see the Kanji silk, we do not really associate it with tailored fabric, but then, with the designer's intervention, we see how this new meaning is then given to this traditional form of textiles. Then what we also see in this dress is this part of the textile is extensively painted. The painting that we see there is done on silk fabric after the silk fabric is woven in Kanji Puram by the weavers. Then, it is brought to the artisans in Srikalahasti in Andhra Pradesh (Srikalahasti, as I have already mentioned, is well known for making Kalamkari hangings- those temple hangings). So, this is the place where we find that Gaurang Shah as he had noted during an interview, he had worked with more than 40 households and sort of through the trial and error process. This kind of image making (like doing all those extensive figurative drawings on these textiles) and then sort of making them into this tailor-made fabric (I mean textile or dress) is something that takes a lot of different kinds of effort. It is not just about executing the images and wrapping them around the body but also about the tailoring essentials and all the other intricacies that need to go hand in hand with it. So, a number of trial and error experiments that took place before, like I mean, this kind of result emerged. The results that we see in these images that were created by the Kalamkari drawings are actually taken from Ajanta murals and Ajanta murals, which we know to be highly populated with human bodies. A number of those figurative motifs and highly interactive narratives .... are then brought into the folds of this garment. How this merging of one technique of Kalamkari drawing with the Kanchipuram silk ..... come together but then the content of these drawings are also different from both these traditions. So, it adds a different layer to this kind of garment. So, this garment or like I mean this collection, .... sort of gives a unique identity to this kind of dresses, which draw from different sources but is not really confined to any of them. So, these are the other kinds of experiments that we see, and these kinds of experiments also sort of make us think about the perimeters of generational practices and what one can do with them.



people from weaver centre and the artisans but then there were also people who advised certain kind of design interventions, and then there were also group of scientists and other people who would suggest people about the dye recipes to expand the colour scheme which were utilised in the field of natural dyeing. So, all those different kind of interventions took place during this time and some of the people who were involved in this, making these exhibitions possible were Pupul Jayakar and then very importantly Martand Singh or Mapu and then later on we also find that Rajeev Sethi was also involved in it. So, all these three figures we find them to be crucial for making these exhibitions happen. This Master Weaver exhibition or this Vishwakarma exhibitions ... that started from 1981, so all these exhibitions, most of these exhibitions took place outside of India. So, starting with Britain and then 1985, 1986 around that time we see that the Festival of India in USA .... and then in the some of the Scandinavian countries, in Russia and so on. So, we find that a number of textiles which were created during these exhibitions were displayed all across the world and it was a way for proudly proclaiming that what India is able to produce. And we see the term Vishwakarma is also very important in this case because Vishwakarma is considered to be this Hindu god of artisanal practices and of course like craftsmanship and machinery and so on. So, in that case that the Vishwakarma exhibitions (as these exhibitions were dedicated to this Hindu god of craftsmanship) also says something about the quality of the products or like I mean the objects which were displayed in this exhibition. So, the finest of the textiles which were produced out of this ... artisan designer collaborations were displayed as part of this exhibitions.

In the right corner of the screen we have an image that is from this recent exhibition that



is called *Vignette Vishwakarma*

*Clothing Art and Artistry* and this was

an exhibition that took place in Bangalore in 2022 and in this exhibition some 25

textiles which were originally displayed as part of the Vishwakarma exhibitions were re-displayed and for people to see them. And my intention for adding this image here is just to give a sense of the scale of these textiles. So, in terms of the experiments what we see that this was certainly one of the concern that the designers, artisans and the other stakeholders that they had is to sort of display the scale in a particular kind of scale sort of which is magnificent, which also sort of encompasses the viewers within its fold. So this one, I mean this large Kalamkari hanging in which Buddha is shown at the centre stage and meditating under this Bodhi tree and then we see all the narratives which are sort of surrounding him and it is a gigantic (as we can see by sort of comparing the viewers scale to the textile's) is something that was made something that was



experimented with the scale extensively in this exhibitions. Some of the other textiles that we see there in this exhibitions would be like this. The one that we have in the .... left side of the screen ... we see the screen printed images of birds ... and again we see that screen printing is something that was coming up in the textile sectors more and more in the 20th century. So in this one we see that experiments with screen printing and also that the kind of images of these birds that we see on this textile in the left side are with those hatch drawings and then of course that it has this very drawing like quality almost that smudging of the pencil ... and also like using hatch line with fence. All those qualities are then brought to textile by the mean of silkscreen printing. Except for silkscreen

printing, perhaps copper plate printing could have been incorporated to create this kind of effect which is otherwise not possible to create on textiles. So this is something we find that how the drawings from natural history collections were then sort of like mapped back on the textiles whereas we find that the images of birds, animals, creepers, flowers and vegetal motifs are fairly common on textile but this kind of execution, this kind of treatment of the images are something we mostly associate with paper and not with textile is something then that is again experimented with. So, the boundary between like natural history archive (the works on paper) are .... brought them back to textile. So, all those boundaries are then sort of overlapped and instead of finding a conclusive answer for it we find that to be left open to the viewers interpretation and how the viewers want to perceive them or for the artisans to think about the further possibilities of taking this exhibitions or like this kind of experiments.

The other textile that we have in the right side of the screen is this is a very again it's an atypical Kalamkari hanging that we find but even in this one we find that blocks and silkscreen are then sort of incorporated for making this Kalamkari pieces. These are again gigantic Kalamkari hangings which were produced. On one hand we find that some of those gigantic Kalamkari hangings which are there in some of the museum collections, unfortunately not in India but in the museum collections in Europe, in Japan and in USA. So some of those textiles were almost sort of brought in live by this contemporary interventions during this exhibition and it was again it's a proud proclamation as I have mentioned earlier to show that what India is able to produce. This time from 1981 to 1991 is also very important because this was also the time like by the late 1980s that India was opening up its market for the global audience and then with the new liberal economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we find that India was certainly attracting the global investors in the Indian production sectors. So this kind of display of skill and this kind of display of experiments even though it is there in the field of craft, but in this field, ... the very specialized way of textile making it shows or it gives the message to the global audience that what India is capable of doing in terms of its dedication to making things, in terms of like this highly skilled way of producing things and of course with the spirit of experimentation. So, it is a blend between the traditional aesthetics that is there, that is established in the Indian subcontinent and that had been practiced for centuries but

then also with the contemporary sensibilities something that we see that was emergent after this designer's interventions in the late 20th century. So, it is a mix of both ... and it was definitely displayed with great effort and this message was conveyed successfully to the global audience about what the Indian craft sector and especially the textile sector is able to produce and contribute to.

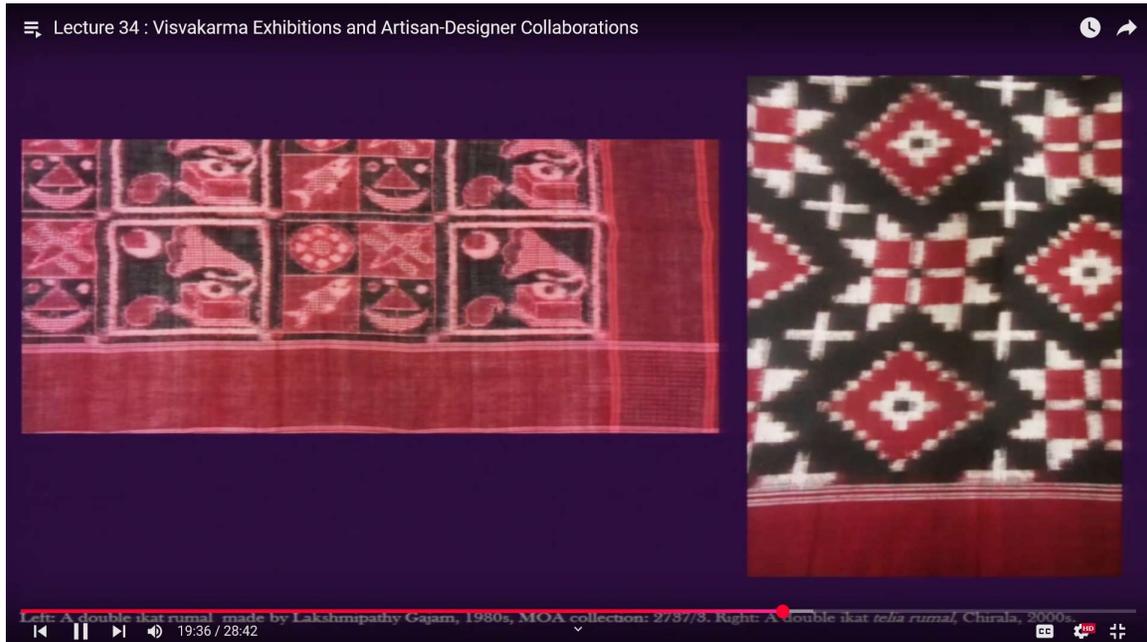


Now when we think about this Vishwakarma exhibitions we can certainly think in terms of like the perspectives which we can draw from these larger narratives. But then this kind of exhibitions or these perspectives would also have their high impact in the artisanal sectors. So, for example here I want to talk about little bit on this one Konya chakra textile and that is this Kalamkari block printed textile that was produced in Polavaram in Machilipatnam. From the same workshop that we have studied earlier in the module on Kalamkari making and is the workshop of late master Dyer Mulkantieswarudu Rao. ....This Konya chakra textile which we see in the right side of the screen that is catalogued as part of the master weaver catalogue in 1981. The Konya chakra as I have already mentioned that means that there are those corner motifs in this four corners and then there is a chakra or a circular motif or a lotus motif at the centre. So, this is the Konya chakra pattern that we find in this textile (in this squarish textile). So, few of these textiles were produced during this preparation for the festival of India in Britain and one of the textiles is still there with the workshop members in Polavaram

(which is displayed in the left side of the screen). This also gives a sense of the scale of it, the scale which we have been constantly talking about. But then apart from the scale and the spirit of experimentation what we also find is that some of the new dye recipes were given or like at least communicated to the dyers in Polavaram during this time. As the master dyer late master dyer Mukkantieswarudu Rao and his son Nageswara Rao they recall that a truckload of wooden blocks were brought to Polavaram and then a number of those blocks which were earlier not available to them were sort of like I mean given to this dyers and the printers to experiment with. That is how this fine designs were created and then the block makers and the dyers and the printers ... also could take reference from what kind of blocks can be utilized for their practice in the future. Then some of the dye recipes which were sort of brought by the dye specialists, as well as like the officials of the weaver service center Hyderabad to Polavaram they were still being experimented with and they are still being practiced in this workshop in Polavaram. As they stick to natural dyeing and as they have mentioned that those dye recipes that certainly help them to expand the range of colors which are achievable by using natural dyes and mordants. So, this kind of impact we certainly see. How ... these kinds of interventions they not only drew attention of the global audience to the Indian textiles but then it also has its impact in the grass root level in the artisanal communities and they got to learn different things from them and those things were then experimented with and some of the traces of those experiments we can still find in these artisanal workshops today. This is not just an exclusive example of how this kind of impact was created by this exhibition but then the other artisans many other people for example late Kalamkari painter Gurappa Chetty garu and then Kalamkari artist Ajit Das all of them they have recalled that how their interaction with the people especially with Martand Singh that this kind of interventions and which were then showed them the way to continue this experiments further.

Now some of the other experiments we also see during this time from 1980s are probably not directly connected to the Master Weaver's exhibition but then like I mean the traces of it or perhaps like I mean this spirit of exhibition or the spirit of experimentations which were introduced to the artisanal communities during this time and as I have mentioned that it is not just like a one year intervention or one year project but it was a ten year project for that reason this prolonged time during which the Weaver service center the

governmental bodies, the scholars, the researchers would work with the artisans so it opened up a lot of different avenues for the artisans to experiment with newer forms in image making. That resulted in refreshing experiments that we see in this traditional textile sectors. So, one of the experiments we can find in the sector of making Telia Rumal.



So Telia Rumal is this again highly specialized form of double Ikath weaving and in Ikath weaving as we know that the yarns are first like resist dyed they are tied with thread like I mean in the bhandini technique if we think that the woven fabric is then like I mean tied with this yarn or the threads and then it is dip dyed. then in the Ikath technique we see the yarn itself is then like tie dyed and then for double Ikath both the warp and the weft would be tie dyed and that is how this solid blocks of color are created. So, if there is white color in the weft and then white color in the warp then the overlapping between them can only create this solid white color or else it would be a merge between like I mean two different colors. So in this entire pattern what we see in the right side of the screen in this detail from Telia Rumal we see all these solid colors which are produced that can be black, white, red and so on all of them are produced because of this warp and weft Ikath. So this highly specialized again this double Ikath weaving is something that was produced in the coastal town of Chirala and part of Andhra Pradesh for centuries.

This Telia Rumal which is a square format Rumal was used as turban cloth or shoulder cloth and mostly it was used in the Middle East in the desert climate. This Telia Rumal is something that we see that it was sort of like the yarn was treated with particular kind of oil and soda ash and it was sort .... continually being treated this way. So it gives particular kind of consistency to the fiber and which is also believed to soothe the head or like the body when it is worn as a turban cloth or as a shoulder cloth. So those are the reasons we find this Telia Rumals were significant historically. From the 1970s we find that certain people for example Lakshmipati Gajam and then Gajam Govardhana so all of them they took the effort to sort of taking this knowledge of Ikath weaving not only in the parts of Andhra Pradesh but also disseminating it to parts of Telangana, today (I mean it was also Andhra Pradesh in the 1970s and 1980s). But then what we see that today some of the well known Ikath weaving centers like Puttapaka, Koyyalagudem and so on all of them are sort of ... thrived because of some of those interventions by Gajam Govardhana and the other people in the 1970s. Of course like I mean some form of Ikath weaving they existed there before that as well but ... this large scale dissemination of knowledge that took place during this time that certainly encouraged a lot of artisanal communities to sort of take charge of this kind of production and continuing them to make new kind of experiments.

Now some of the experiments we also see in the visuals that emerged in them. So this is this other Telia Rumal that we have and it was woven by Lakshmipati Gajam and in this one we see that even though this form of making Telia Rumal for example this solid border and then this checkered motif in the corner all of them are continued and with this stripe borders here but then at the center of the Rumal (in this square Rumal) we see that the space is then divided into smaller squares. The squares within the squares ... have motifs which are not traditionally utilized in the Telia Rumals. The Telia Rumal would have a non figurative geometric motifs whereas this motifs we clearly see that I mean how gramophone and then airplane, fish and then like I mean of course boat and so on all those motifs are then incorporated as part of like this new design scheme. So this kind of interventions we find that came from the artisanal community when they have observed and studied this new form of experimentation those were taking place as part of this

Vishwakarma exhibitions and also like with the spirit of experimentation that was going on in the artisanal sectors during this time in the country. So we see that the artisans themselves also took charge of it. It is not just like the designers conveyed certain kind of ideals or image making processes and then they were absorbed by the artisans. But then in some cases we find that the artisans also took charge of their own practice and then they sort of redefined the practice that they have been practicing for generations. Perhaps



example would be from this very well known family of the Khatri who are the Ajrak printers in Gujarat, in Dhamdka and also today in Ajrakhpur. So, one of the foremost important Ajrak printer would be Siddiqui Mohammed Bhai Khatri. He was someone who was working in the post-independence India and was responsible for bringing back certain fineness in Ajrak printing. So Ajrak printing as I have mentioned that this highly specialized resist and block printed textile is printed in both side of the fabric. So, it needs minute calculations and since it goes through several processes of preparing it, so one needs to be highly careful in terms of executing it. So, for that what we see that with Mohammed Bhai Khatri and then his sons like Abdul Jabbar Khatri and then Ismail Khatri and so on. So, all of them they sort of continued this spirit of making this Ajrak as fine as possible and sort of like I mean which can be associated with the earlier form of Ajrak there in the museum collections. So both Abdul Jabbar Khatri and Ismail Khatri they have extensively studied the museum collections, they have reached out to the

international audience and with the intervention of the collectors and patrons in India and abroad we find them to have empowered themselves. In this image what we see that Adam Khatri is standing here wearing this Ajrak Kurta. Ajrak Kurta is something we definitely do not see in the context of making this a traditional Ajrak fabrics but here the difference is it is not really the designer who is making this intervention but the Ajrak printers themselves they take charge of this newness of utilizing Ajrak also with the different kind of design intervention and sort of redefining them when they are in charge of this newness. So, all this kind of experiments we see them to take place and how we can see them to sort of go back to the spirit of experimentations in the 1980s with the Vishwakarma exhibitions.

We will continue more on this topic in the next lecture. Thank you.