

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices

Dr. Rajarshi Sengupta

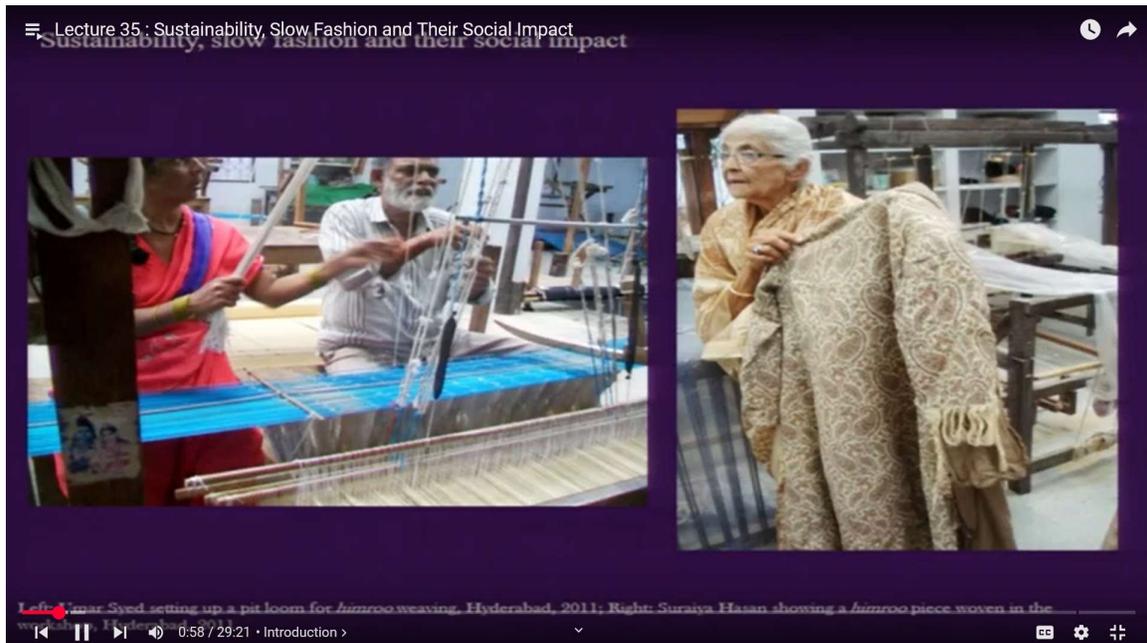
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur (IITK)

Week – 07

Lecture – 35

Hello everyone, we are here in the last installment of our week on Fashion in the Post-Independence India and we have already discussed some of the impact of the Vishwakarma exhibitions and this spirit of experimentations that took place during the 1980s and 1990s. But then apart from the Vishwakarma exhibitions, we also find that there were individuals who were involved in doing certain kind of experiments. Those experiments were perhaps not really directed towards making an impressive textile which would be there for an international audience to think about like the capacity and capability of the Indian artisans. But perhaps to reclaim certain parts of the past or perhaps reclaiming certain parts of the identity which was lost either during the partition of the Indian subcontinent or like some of the developments that took place in the later 20th century. So those things we can find that to be there with some of the individuals. In this installment we will be talking about some of those people here.



The topic that we have for this installment is sustainability, slow fashion and the social impact. When we talk about this idea of sustainability we see that this is something that has to do with a conscious and mindful way of textile making or craft making. So, textile sector as we know that this is one of the largest sectors in India today and also like I mean of course in a number of producer countries. But then textile sector if we think about the factory-based production for textile making is also one of the most polluting sectors that we find in anywhere that has been practiced. So when we think about the traditional way of making textile like the hand spun, hand woven and natural dyed textiles which will certainly be a lot less polluting and then like I mean the water and the other material which are used in this kind of textile making can readily go back to the field and that would not harm the water bodies or the soil or anything else. Whereas we find that the factory-based textile production is something that the production of the fumes, the kind of the residue that goes to the water, the water channels, the rivers and everything else all of them they cause a lot of harm to the environment. Now also we understand the fact that the natural dyed textiles cannot really serve the entire population that we have in our country or the international or the population where India exports. So, for that reason there needs to be an understanding of how to strike a balance between this fast way of production and then like understanding certain responsibility towards sustainability for us. So, we need to understand not just in terms of like the use of material and use of techniques or their impact on the environment is considered as sustainable, but also, we need to understand that what sustains the artisanal livelihood. So those things also need to be considered when we consider this idea about of sustainability.

Now then comes the idea of slow fashion and slow fashion is something that we see that gained momentum from like early 2000s and mostly after 2010 and so on. We see that slow fashion is something that came as a response after this fast fashion in which we see the designer brands all across the world they sort of employ people in the developing countries or in the underprivileged countries for producing clothes which would be produced in a mass production scale and then the workers are given minimum wages but the designer brands and the companies they would have ... maximum profit out of it.

So, in this way we see that there is this mass production and that reaches a wide audience, but then a lot of times we do not really understand what kind of impact it creates when we use them. So, we also take part in this system of value and system of creating certain changes in the livelihood of the people. So instead of thinking about this fast fashion in which this mindless mass production of things that happen, if we think about slow fashion in which the consumers and the producers are both aware of the ill that is created by fast fashion. We [consumer] become aware of our own requirements and instead of buying 10 clothes at one go if we buy one or two which are just required for us then we might be able to sort of think about that how mindfully this fabrics or the clothes can be produced. Instead of buying 10 things which would probably be less expensive than two things and we actually contribute to the money ... for the organizations which exploit labors and exploit resources. So this kind of understanding which is not just there for the producers but also equally for the consumers is something that we find ...[to have been] addressed in this idea of slow fashion. In this we do not really consider that the fast fashion or like I mean the trends the way we understand in the fashion industry that lasts for a very brief period of time and then it sort of like I mean falls out of practice those kind of things are not encouraged and then instead of that we see that the mindful production and being aware of our own requirement is something that is prioritized. So those kind of things we see them to be there in the understanding of slow fashion. So, sustainability slow fashion these two things are integrally connected. We see that this kind of understanding this kind of consciousness also has a huge social impact in terms of ... how it goes back to the producer community. Then if we choose the mindfully produced fabric which are made by the artisanal communities, by the cooperatives and so on we directly benefit them. We also become aware of like the benefits and the ills of different kind of textiles and of course like I mean by that we also become aware of all the things that surround our life, the material culture around us. So, it is not just a way in which we are empowering the livelihood of the artisans but we can also make a huge impact on our own lifestyle as well. So those are the reasons we find that sustainability, slow fashion all those things they are not just about empowering the livelihood or the state of life of the artisanal communities or the producer communities but it is something that impact all our lives.

Now with that I would like to discuss a few case studies and again we are back in Hyderabad and here I want to talk about this one particular workshop which is recently been closed down and that was established by Suraiya Hassan Bose. Suraiya Hassan was someone who came from a family in Hyderabad who were involved in the nationalist struggle and the anti-colonial resistance from early 20th century. Her father was someone who established a cottage industry to promote the craft object from the region the Telugu speaking region mostly from the Deccan region. Then of course we see that the bonfire of foreign clothes something that came up in Gandhi's Khadi movement in 1920s and so on that also took place in their home in 1920s. So, Suraiya Hassan came from this family where she experienced this anti-colonial resistance and then in the 1950s, she extensively worked with Pupul Jayakar and some of the other people in the craft sector and so that is how she expanded her understanding of craft making and its social impact. In the 1980s we see that her uncle Abid Hassan Safrani who was also a freedom fighter and then he donated this land to Suraiya Hassan and then Suraiya apa took up this place and then first established a farm and then ... established a weaving unit in one of the sections of this land which was then situated in this Dargah neighborhood of Hyderabad. I mean of course this weaving unit that was there it lasted at least until 2021 but then ...the land was sold off to someone else and this workshop had its sad demise.

Now what Suraiya apa did during this time in the 1980s was she was interested in sort of reviving certain traditions (textile traditions) which were lost. So, for example she revived Himru textiles which is again an Indo-Persian weave. It's a highly specialized brocade weaving in which we find both the cotton and silk use and then extra weft is added for making these patterns on this Himru textile. So Himru is something we can see in the right side of the image here Suraiya apa she is holding a piece of Himru textile from her collection. So, when she established this workshop in 1980s, she invited master weaver Omer Sayid. Omer Sayid he was responsible for setting up the Himru and Mushru looms in her workshop and eventually like the Paithani border (Paithani is this other silk and Zari weaving tradition that we find in Maharashtra in the Paithan region) and so all those revival projects were taken up in her small workshop in Hyderabad. So

we see that I mean this workshop was not really like a it was not really meant for producing large number of textile but this slow and steady production technique in which we see that this mindful method of reviving certain textile forms which were lost either for partition and for other reasons they were sort of like I mean revived and practiced in this place.

Now Suraiya apa was someone who was also she inherited a lot of this Himru and Mushru and other forms of highly prized brocade textiles from her family collection. Since I have mentioned that I mean her father was responsible to establish this cottage industries in Hyderabad in the 1920s. So, one can imagine that they had collected variety of craft items and then of course like different kind of textiles and their family also owned a lot of textiles. Some of those textiles we find them to be there in Suraiya apa's this cupboard that that lied in the corner of her weaving workshop. So with that what we see that this kind of textiles were sort of like I mean used as archival material and for reference for the Jala maker as master weaver Omer Sayid to sort of see and sort of recreate them and how to sort of ... bring them to life by the intervention of the weavers today.

Now in terms of the weavers what we see that this kind of textile making and in Hyderabad during this time there were not really too many traditional weavers who would be there. The men during this time in the 1980s a lot of them they aspire to work for the factories and the formal sectors instead of working for the unorganized this weaving sectors. So, a lot of them they have already left their jobs or like their occupation. So, Suraiya apa became interested to train women either widowed and also the housewives from the neighborhood and then Omer Sayid was crucial fundamental for training this women from the neighborhood to sort of in this craft of making this highly prized Himru textiles. And we see that I mean this when this training period was there so Suraiya apa provided them with a small incentive or a fellowship (whatever we can understand that) and even later on whenever new people joined in this workshop Suraiya apa made sure to sort of support them during their training period and give them a monthly stipend. Afterwards when they started working for the weaving unit they were

paid on a monthly basis. In the same time there was a school that was established this English medium school in the name of Abid Hassan Safrani, Safrani Memorial School, it is right beside the weaving unit there. So today the weaving unit is demolished but the school still survives. In this school we find that the children from the weavers family they were given education for free. This kind of services we find that I mean Suraiya apa had provided for sustaining this forms of textile making there. So these are some of the things we see how particular kind of interventions like Suraiya apa and some of the other designers or like the textile activists and entrepreneurs they did was not just to think about how to sort of revive certain forms of craft from the past in terms of like reclaiming the cultural past but also when the actual human beings are involved in this forms of textile production then what different ways in which one can support them was also explored. So this kind of activities ... not only just made a healthy working atmosphere in these workshops but also made sure that how to sustain this kind of practices and showed the path to the future generation designers and scholars and entrepreneurs that how one can proceed if one is thinking in terms of the collaboration between artisans and of course like the designers or the other stakeholders.

The other experiment that we find or perhaps like I mean the other form of sort of reclaiming the past was done by Uzramma, again based in Hyderabad. For Uzramma

☰ Lecture 35 : Sustainability, Slow Fashion and Their Social Impact 🔔 ↗



Left: From the cotton processing unit of Malkha, Thangalapally, Photograph: RS; Uzramma in Malkha store, Secunderabad, Image source: <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/DYnGS6AnRMRMHK0ZUI/d11/The-cotton-case.html>

⏪ ⏩ 🔊 16:15 / 29:21 • Case Studies > ⏴ ⚙️ ⏵

what happened was she was more and more interested in terms of like I mean hand

weaving, hand spinning, procurement of cotton and then like I mean utilizing desi cotton for weaving fabric which would be used by common people. So, if we think about Himru, Mushru, Paithani those are all highly specialized forms of textiles but then Uzamma was someone who was interested in utilizing the desi varieties of cotton and for that reason her stress remained on the kind of fabric which are used by people on a daily basis. And then what we see that ... she is also someone who is interested in sort of reconfiguring the bond between different producer communities. So, for example the cotton producers, the jinnars, the spinners, the weavers, the dyers. So ... we see that I mean how this community bond between these people was something that was lost in the factory mode of production was something that was revived by Uzamma's intervention. So, in the early 2000s she established her organization that is Malkha. Before that she had worked with the Dastkar Andhra when Dastkar did extensive documentation in the 1980s and 1990s in the Telugu speaking region (Dastkar Andhra). She travelled with them and was also involved in sort of studying certain kind of weaving techniques and seeing that how these kind of activities can have a lasting effect on the producer communities. During this time we also find that dye specialist Jagada Rajappa was also actively working with dyers and not only just as a consultant for Dastkar Andhra but she was involved and she was instrumental for teaching dyeing techniques especially indigo dyeing and some of the other natural dyeing techniques to a large group of dyers not only in the Telugu speaking and Tamil speaking region but different parts of the country and she continues to do this kind of activities in western India, in northeast and various other parts of the country. So, this kind of interventions we find that it sorts of like brought the focus back to the producer communities. For Uzamma we see that how she had sort of focused on the basic things of production. So, for example procurement of raw cotton. Some of the varieties of cotton which were not really prioritized in the mill made yarn production. ... In the mill certain kind of cotton are prioritized, like which can produce ... long fibers and many desi varieties of cotton (the indigenous varieties of cotton) cannot really produce those long fibers but they have their own qualities. So, for those reasons hand spinning can certainly yield better results. Also, if the cotton producers ... are discouraged of producing the desi varieties of cotton then we also lose out on the diversity of textile production in our country. So like interventions by Uzamma and then

some of the recent textile activists as Nagendra Satish Polludas and the other people so we find that they sort of brought our attention back to the basics of textile making. It is not a romantic sort of retrieval of the past but then there are sociological meanings or sociological factors which are involved [so that] these desi varieties of cotton need to be sustained. It's not just about ... going back to the pre-colonial ideals but then certain kind of cotton production can happen in the barren lands and if we do not have those cotton produced in those places and then there are other kind of cottons which are water intensive. So those kind of cotton should not be cultivated in the barren areas. So those kinds of environmental factors also need to be taken care of when we think about like what cotton needs to be prioritized. So for those reasons the desi varieties of cotton which can grow in barren places they also need to be folded into the production sectors. These kinds of interventions in which we see that all varieties of cotton can be utilized in textile making, sort of makes this more inclusive way of production where more cotton farmers and jinner, spinners, hand spinners especially can be involved. I mean of course today that Malkha has like I mean few spinning units in which we see that a half-mechanized form of production is also introduced. But then like some of the ideals upon which Malkha was established and then some of the other craft activists like Nagendra Satish Paludas and other people they still focus on hand spinning and its deep impact in society. Now we see that I mean with this kind of activities that some of the brands also today we

☰ Lecture 35 : Sustainability, Slow Fashion and Their Social Impact 🔔 ↗



Left: A worker at the Brown-Boy clothing factory poses for a campaign, Kolkata, <https://sustainablefashiondirectory.com/directory/entry/brown-boy/> ; Right: Malkha cotton featured in a patchwork jacket by Goodearth https://www.goodearth.in/collection/women_sarrakeeb_458/

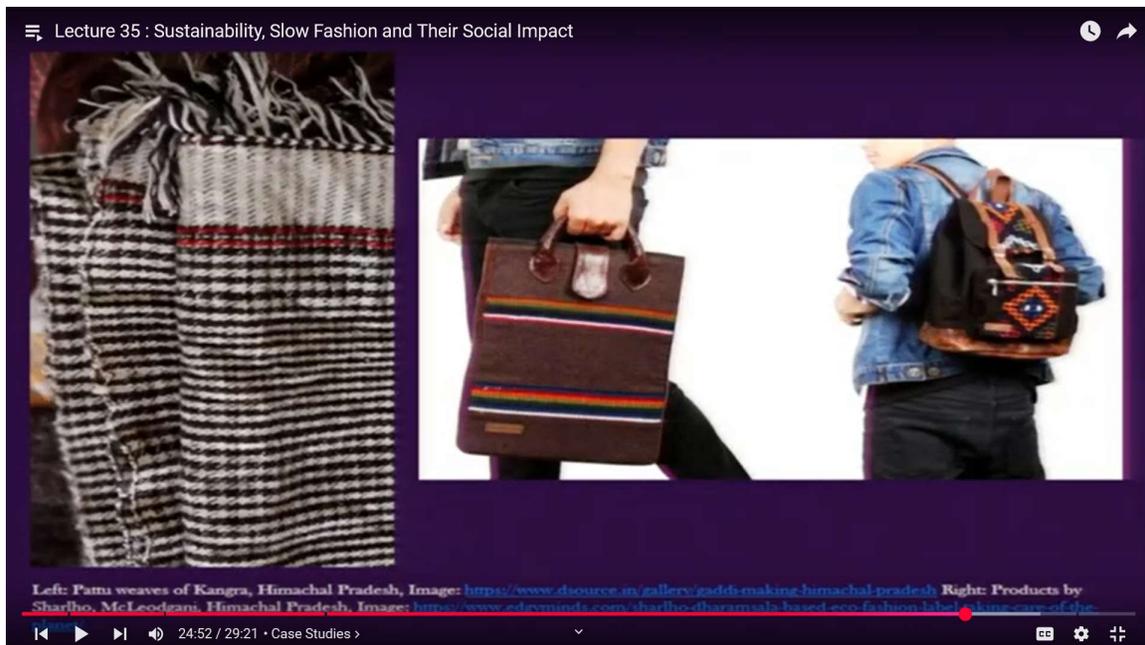
⏪ ⏩ 🔊 22:19 / 29:21 • Case Studies >

see that more and more brands come forward to the acknowledgement of materials, techniques and people who are involved in the production. So, for example, here there are two examples, and one comes from this organization called *Brown Boy* in which like the images of the workers who work in this factory set up to sort of like manufacture the goods (like I mean the t-shirts and other things) then they are sort of acknowledged in their promotional. Then, of course, we also see the other kind of acknowledgement [that] comes in terms of acknowledging the material, and that comes from this other campaign in *Good Earth*. In which we see the use of Malka cotton, so, for example this jacket and its trouser [which] is then readily acknowledged when these are tailored into wearable fabrics, wearable clothes. So, this kind of acknowledgement sort of brings our attention back to the intricacies of material, the processes, the people who are involved in it, some of the things which we tend to ignore when we focus on the final product and that is the wearable fabric or clothes.



The other form of acknowledgement we see is when the artisans are also sort of acknowledged in the promotions, and this comes from this organization, Janapada Khadi from Karnataka, in which we see the artisans who work particular textiles. So, for example, the weaver here we see her wear the saree that she had woven in her loom, and

then her image was shared in the digital lookbook of Janapada Khadi for the sort of like, I mean, for the consumers to sort of buy these sarees. And then we also see that the spinner who was involved in like spinning the fabric here is also there and weaver and then this kind of acknowledgement we see that how the artisans who usually come in the background are then acknowledged and sort of like brought to the foreground as a conscious strategy to acknowledge them [and] their contribution. Also sort of like I mean how this consciousness in terms of like the slow fashion, sustaining livelihood and also that our responsibilities all those things are churned by the use of this very consciously created visuals.



The other example of this kind of slow and sustainable clothing making we find to be there in this brand called *Sharlho*. It was initiated by Tenor Sharlho, and he (Tenor Sharlho) is presently based in McLeodganj and in the Dharamshala area of Himachal Pradesh. He came to India at a very young age as a Tibetan refugee. What we see is that there is already a struggle about finding his identity. Of course, in the Dharamshala area, we find a concentration of Tibetan refugees (staying there), but in terms of like I mean finding his identity not only through his use of language or the other culture but then also through the making of textiles is something that is exemplified in this brand (that is

Sharlho). So he works with the Pattu Weavers in Himachal Pradesh in which we see this particular form of textile (here this twill wool textile)is made in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh and other parts of Himachal Pradesh as well. So this Pattu Weavers is something that was slowly losing its context and relevance among the young weavers and only few are left there to make this kind of weaves. To reclaim this Pattu Weaves is something that a Tenor Sharlho had done and making use of this weave into like I mean making into wearable fabric also sort of using particular motifs in bags and other accessories is something that he had consciously done. It is not just a revival of a particular material but we see that there is a parallel between his own experience and the experience of this textile both of them that I mean how he is someone who is displaced from his motherland and then also sort of like I mean whether like this distance can actually sort of contribute to lose of a particular identity that he had and then like I mean with this textile what we see that I mean this kind of textile is losing its context because of the disinterest of the younger generation also of the consumers. So in both cases we find there is an aspect of loss and when Tenor sort of looks back at the Pattu weaving and then like I mean this aspect of loss is then sort of not taken further but then it is the revival is something that we find it's a symbolic retrieval of the identity that it's in the verge of sort of disappearing. So, this kind of like I mean different aspects we find them to be there as involved in the producing sustainable and slow fashion goods.



So to conclude this thing I'd say that I mean when we see the fashion in terms of like in the post-independence context we see that I mean again that there are certain issues we find that how a traditional and contemporary textiles like so called timeless textiles and the contemporary ones are brought in conversation with each other and then redefinition of particular kind of textiles which have existed in the South Asian context for a long period of time was also something that was made possible in the late 20th century. And the other thing that also comes here very prominently is that our responsibility towards the textile makers, our responsibility towards the producers and our responsibility towards the environment and how our conscious choices can make a huge deal of difference in terms of how we understand fashion and its impact on our lives. Thank you.