

HOW COSTUMES AND TEXTILE DESIGNS EVOLVED IN INDIA

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Abstract: *Costumes and Textiles have occupied a prominent place in the world, across geographic regions and climatic conditions, since ancient times. People naturally utilized whatever material was conveniently available. Over time, the designing of textiles and costumes developed in the hands of artisans as they enriched fabric and garments. In fact, contemporary textiles and costumes reflect our spirit, our consciousness and the vibrancy of the society in which we live. This is how Costumes and Textile design have evolved in India.*

Artisans and craftsmen have played a pivotal role in textile designing since prehistoric times. The vision vocabulary of the artisan and functional usage of particular artefacts have led to important contributions in the development of artistic designs. The division of techniques, however, was not clear-cut and quite often one technique could flow into the other, leading to variations in characteristic forms and styles.

The preservation, revival and study of the best of the textiles and costumes are necessary to provide a guide to good craftsmanship. These designs embody the synthesis, over time, of indigenous talents, the new cultural impacts, and the imagery of sign and symbol. Fashion designers and craftsmen today create crafts whose designs and ornamental motifs are truly characteristic of India, and these have become the inspiration for future generations.

The dates when specific patterns in textiles and costumes appear and reappear are illuminating, for they reveal how designs and styles repeat themselves. Often a pattern seems typical of a far later time than that of its actual making. All fashion arises at a particular moment in history. People demonstrate how they belong, where they are in place and time, by shaping the lines and colours of their clothes and furnishings in their homes. A fresh modification of the old motif and style, ornamentation or design is generally how innovation is accepted in designing.

Textiles and costumes go back to mankind's earliest times and belong to a very old tradition of design and symbols. Although reinvented several times, the basic art forms retained their shape and artistic appeal through the centuries. Like other art forms, traditional textiles and costumes also link the past with the present. Through the centuries, the skill of the artisan has been employed for design creation or modification, not for documentation. Accordingly, the burden of documentation has fallen on museums, design centres and archives.

The changing roles of the artisans, craftsmen and designers are emphasized in the context of emerging technology that is capable of facilitating the preservation, dissemination and generation of new designs based on decorative forms, and also offer enhanced capabilities in terms of colour variety and colour differentiation. It is hoped that the influence of emerging technology will lead to a renaissance in the field of decorative designing. Indian textile and costume designs can be innovatively used today by interchanging motifs and their ornamentations for serving the world of fashion and also increasing awareness about our rich cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Costumes, Textiles, Garments, Preservation, Revival, and Dissemination*

1. Introduction

Traditional design is an arrangement of a piece of design form passed down through oral tradition, with the creator often unknownⁱ.

For centuries, Indian Textiles have been admired for their great aesthetic and functional qualities. In ancient times, designers in India belonged to various regional schools throughout the country. It was their fine creative instincts and extraordinary skill that gave Indian Textiles their remarkable beauty.ⁱⁱ

The study of textile design is an independent discipline. It is not merely the copying of patterns drawn by the designer, but the study of the concept of patterns, which reflect the artistic mood of the weaver dealing with traditional designs. The design must be sound artistically; the essential element for its success is the originality of treatment; this is only possible when the designers adopt original designs in production methods.ⁱⁱⁱ

The word 'textile' has been derived from the Latin *textere*, which means to weave, and, therefore, normally by 'textile' we understand those items, which have been prepared by weaving. *Traditional Design* is the method of special treatment of the textile in its usual arrangement and appearance for decoration, which relieves monotony and beautifies the fabric^{iv}.

The design may be made up of the colour and visual appearance of the dyed fabric or it may be figured by weave and coloured threads, or by an imposed design printed on the surface. ^v

Design is the device of special treatment of the textile in its usual structure, appearance, or finish, for the decoration relieves monotony and beautifies the fabric as well.^{vi}

2. Technical details

Costumes and Textile Designs were prepared on paper by the *naqash* (artist), to be subsequently copied by craftsmen and executed in whichever material had been selected. It was a unique quality of Indian textiles that, very often, the separate abilities and skills involved in the design and making of an object were divided between craftsmen of varying degrees of specialization and skill. Thus the master craftsman visualized the complete design indicating details of form, proportion, and colour distribution to be realized by various specialists.^{vii}

Border is probably the oldest way of decorating. Even the Rig Veda refers to the shining gold woven cloaks, fabrics with pearl woven borders. It is formed by arranging ornaments next to each other in horizontal rows, or above or below each other in vertical lines.

A border is focused along one selvedge with a ground extending to the other selvedge. A border fabric is used in garments or draperies with the border around the hem^{viii}.

There were no pattern books or diagrams upto the beginning of the 20th century. Young girls and boys learnt the art from their older generations. Most of the designs were influenced from the life existing all around. The surroundings and weather played a vital role in producing a balanced and harmonious colour composition; thus the birth of different styles of design occurred at different places in India.

Costumes and Textile design is an art complete in itself. Therefore, a full understanding of the technique of weaving or printing is essential. Various elements ranging from raw materials to finishing processes play their part. Indian weavers in the 17th Century understood the correlation of the Costume design with the material, intricately woven tissues and richly patterned gold brocades and flowered muslins were their monopoly.^{ix}

The basis of woven brocade designs was gold and silver, or silver-gilt wire drawn to an extreme tenacity, and worked up either as round wire, or flattened into bands and thongs. In textile designs, floral motifs played an important part. Such motifs included flowers, creepers, sprays, sprigs, plants, etc. which were suitably stylised in keeping with the nature of the fabric or technique used.

For the development of Traditional Design, the understanding of Art, which is the product of a deep-rooted urge to give expression to one's emotions through rhythmic patterns in painting, dance, music, song and literature, is very important. Man observed nature and tried to understand how nature absorbed various units into one homogenous unit. After studying nature, he tried to apply the laws of nature to decorate his clothing and other articles of use.

The history of decorating the different fabrics worn by man follows very closely the history of man from the time he first took shelter in caves.^x

Nature in all its winsomeness surrounds the rural man and woman, helping them to fulfil their urge for expressing their love for beauty. The sparkle of the green fields, the colour and grace of dancing birds, animals moving in the woods are all redolent with bright inspiration and give the design consciousness a special character.^{xi}

The Indian costumes and design, of unimaginable antiquity, have over the millennia and up till the present day, evinced a continuity that has survived every historical, socio-economic and political development to produce an art that is specifically Indian. In this process, the history and characteristic features of design were seen to have played a singularly important role. Its origins go back to the art of primitive society, Traditional art, as it is known, bears the unmistakable stamp of an achievement that is not only ancient and indigenous, but also notably creative.

Costumes have been produced in India since antiquity. The creation and development of textiles has a pre-historic origin. However, very few of the old designs still exist. One reason is that cloth has long been regarded solely as an article of consumption, rather than as an art form.

3. Scopes and Significance of the Subject

In India, cotton, silk and wool are the major raw materials used for hand-woven textiles right from the period of the Indus Valley Civilisation (circa 2700-1500 B.C). Needles, spindles, and a madder-dyed cotton fragment from Mohenjodaro are the earliest evidences of cotton and silk.^{xii} The early references to woollen fabrics come from Vedic literature (circa 1500-900 B.C.). However, depiction of stylistic drapery on a stone sculpture of a bearded priest found from Mohenjodaro is the important evidence of a shawl.^{xiii} Besides excavations, literary references (epic; Buddhist and Jain texts, Harashaeharita, Ain-e-Akbari, etc.), travellers' accounts (Chinese, Tibetan, Greek, European), epigraphic inscriptions, along with Ajanta murals, miniature paintings and stone, bronze and terracotta sculptures, are clear evidence of the continuity of the Indian textile tradition. The important discovery of painted and printed resist-dyed cotton textiles from Fustat, Egypt,

confirm the trade connections between India and Egypt during the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries A.D. From literary references dating back to the sixth century B.C., to royal *Kharkhanas* established in the reign of Emperor Akbar, 1556--1605, textile weaving goes a long way in terms of texture of fabrics, its colour chemistry and variety of innovative designs and styles^{xiv}.

Several factors facilitated the production of quality textiles, one of the most important being the structure of India's ancient caste system and the traditional joint family, which bound people to specific occupations and thus ensured the continuity of the textile craft, like all other crafts. Besides the social structure, the religious sentiments, rituals, ceremonies and festivals, also helped in the manufacture of certain textiles for specific occasions. Practically every social group has its own preferences and norms in colour, design and fabric. Colours always had a special place in India's weaves. Besides decoration, they are suffused with emotional meaning and also richly associated with customs^{xv}.

For creating the variety of motifs, weavers were always inspired by their environment. This is reflected in their creation of fish and flowing streams with Orissan weaving, *chinar* tree with Kashmir, parrot with Gujarat, and court scenes, boats and steam engines with Bengal weavers. To adopt these vivid patterns in their weaving or in a specialized form of dyeing, these textile craftsmen had always adopted several techniques to enrich their art and craft. As a result, there is a great variety of textiles available in India, often with a long continuous tradition behind them. Interestingly, sometimes the same techniques were followed in different states of India with slightly changed forms. For instance, *ikat* techniques, which were used in Gujarat, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, differ from each other, in terms of material, dyes, colours and patterns.

Such a vast field of Indian textiles can be divided technically into two groups—woven and plain. In woven textiles, the patterns are created by transfixing the warp in between the weft on the loom itself. Indian weavers are masters at weaving the desired patterns with cotton in the form of *Jamdani*, with silk known as *Baluchari* or *ikat* with *Zari*, as *Zari* brocade and on wool, in the form of shawl. Plain textiles are those which are woven plain, and get their decoration later in the form of printing, dyeing or embroidering, as in *Kalamkari*, resist-dyeing and different types of regional embroideries.

Historically, India has been the germinating ground of a variety of aesthetic expressions. It saw the growth of important schools in the fine arts. Besides, it experienced a constant flow of ideas between northern and southern India. Today, these attributes intermingle and are now being recognized as the strong form of traditional designs for textiles^{xvi}.

The beautiful colours and designs of Traditional Indian textiles would hold a special appeal for the modern generation.

India is very rich in its cultural heritage. Despite this, our traditional art forms are facing a slow death. The popular view is not of living with our traditions; instead there are efforts to copy the western culture.

Western artists, on the other hand, look to our traditional art for ideas and utilise them to cross-fertilise their existing art forms. However, in doing so, they do not contribute to our traditional art and culture, and may actually be digressing from the basic expression or pattern of Indian traditional art.

This rather small palampore is flowering-tree designs made around 1760 A.D. in India for export to Europe. The background and the delicate, airy pattern suggest that this hand-painted cotton hanging was may be made for France or England^{xvii}.

The mezzaro was an Italian block-printed imitation of the Indian palampore, but square, whereas the palampore was rectangular. This example, like most surviving pieces, is from the second quarter of the

nineteenth century. It appears that the designer was so intent on faithfully copying an actual palampore that he failed to adapt the flowering tree to the proportions of a mezzaro, thereby cutting off the topmost branches^{xviii}.

Another characteristic factor, which has played an equally important role in the Evolution of Costume and Textile designs of India over several thousand years of development, is the country's geography. In the cultural and historical sense, India constitutes a vast subcontinent of strongly contrasting physical features and corresponding variations in climate, agronomy and settlement potential. Thousands of kilometres separate the Himalayas at the northern extremity from Kanya Kumari, the southernmost tip of the subcontinent that is laterally intersected by great rivers, most of which flow from west to east. It is similarly divided into northern and southern zones by mountain ranges, the north deriving its character from the Ganges and the extensive plain formed by that river, while the south is divided longitudinally by mountain ranges into a central tableland flanked by coastal strips to east and west. Yet physical barriers in the shape of mountains and oceans have to a large extent preserved India's geographical unity and integrity. By comparison with neighbouring countries, it has acquired a relatively stable and independent civilization thanks to five thousand years of urban cultural development since the Harappan period and to the infinitely longer space of time that has elapsed since the cultural phases of the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic eras^{xix}.

Many of the early accounts are far from accurate and poorly illustrated, but due to a number of more recent publications, we have some fairly reliable material. One of the earliest groups of pictures, painted on the walls of rock shelters, is devoted in its initial phase exclusively to representations on a vast scale of such animals as the elephant and the wild ox. Before long, however, these creatures were joined by human figures, for the most part depicted in the form of simple line drawings and, by virtue of their association with the animals, probably intended to represent hunters. The earlier phases are distinguished by drawings casually outlined in subdued reddish brown paint. Later on, a white border appeared. The inner surfaces, initially left blank, were subsequently filled with abstract combinations of geometrical lines, men with their primitive hunting implements, their stones, axes, rowing-sticks, clubs, harpoons, bows and arrows.^{xx}

Changes in a society's mode of existence also brought about changes in the content and import of the pictures. All we have for purposes of comparison are a few means of expression, determined by the form of representation, the artistic characteristics of which recur at a later date, though adapted to changes of subject matter. On examining the early rock paintings with a view to discovering details of this nature, what strikes us first is the predominance of certain animals, the Indian elephant, for example, which to this day has remained the favorite of the Indian designer. Also in evidence is a predilection for one species of bird, the peacock. In the case of other typically Indian animal motifs, continuity tends to be limited. The buffalo and tiger, for instance, so much favored by the early rock painters, begin, in course of time, to lose their popularity.

There are also numerous so-called X-ray pictures in which, within the outline of one animal, we may discern the figure of another. Commonly, these are line drawings of triangles and other geometrical motifs. Other repeat designs, consisting of swastikas and rows of I-shaped motifs, cannot unfortunately be dated with any accuracy. We may assume that they belong to the later phase of primitive rock art, as do some isolated renderings of the swastika, the extremities of which are occasionally given animal's heads. A very fine double labyrinth would be of the utmost interest if it could be accurately dated. Other patterns worthy of note are opposed triangles as well as a comb-like motif^{xxi}.

4. Conclusion

The visual tradition has not remained uninfluenced by social developments. As educational standards rose, the conventions of the verbal traditions inevitably impinged on the visual traditions. The result has been a gradual transition to a kind of illustrative presentation. While the earlier elements of the visual tradition are still in evidence, they have become incidental, mere decorative adjuncts to the composition, and are transformed into apparently arbitrary, unconsidered forms, many of them of an almost abstract nature. Thus they constitute the earliest and most enduring stock of Indian artistic forms.

The changing roles of the artisans and designers are emphasized in the context of emerging technology that is capable of facilitating the preservation, dissemination and generation of new Costumes and Textile design, also offer enhanced capabilities in terms of colour variety and colour differentiation. It is hoped that the influence of emerging technology will lead to a renaissance in the field of decorative designing. Indian textile

and costume designs can be innovatively used today by interchanging styles and their ornamentations for serving the world of fashion and also increasing awareness about our rich cultural heritage. During this study, a digital record of Costumes and textile designs has been created on CD-ROM to have readily accessible information in this area. This may be useful to future generations of fashion designers or textile artists who may wish to see and learn from the great artistic endeavour of our ancestors.

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