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Re-Defining Tradition: Handweavers to the World

by
Seema Chandna

It is my ongoing attraction for, and love of, Indian textiles that brought me back to my country of birth after spending several years, studying and working, in New York. This paper deals with my research, experience and observations, over the last year, working closely with the hand-weaving industry in India.

At my design studio, in Bangalore, I have a multi-treadle handloom and have employed a local hand-weaver. We create the designs and make sample swatches at the studio. For production of yardage, based on our swatches, we work with various weaving centers, located in different Southern Indian villages. Depending on the techniques and fibers used in the textile, we choose the appropriate center. Presently my clientele and markets are: local Indian high-end fashion designers and International cos. such as NUNO Corporation, Japan; Royal Scandinavia ltd., Denmark.

Textiles have always been an important trade activity in India. Before the arrival of the Europeans to the shores of India- Arab traders had set-up, a trade pattern of gold bullion-for textiles- for spices. In 1498, by the arrival of Vasco de Gama to India, the Portuguese usurped this trade pattern from the Arabs. Between 1550 and 1600 other Europeans began trading along the West African coast and into the Indian Ocean. By 1600, the Portuguese began to feel the competition of the Dutch traders. The English established a trading presence in India in the early 17th century, alongside the Portuguese, French and Dutch. Having arrived to trade, the English increasingly took a hold on the reins of government. This was consolidated over the next 100 years with the spread of British rule over most of the Subcontinent, and then brought to fruition as the all-powerful British Raj of the late nineteenth century.

For the Indian textile industry, the first seventy years of the nineteenth century were dismal, as it suffered from the influx of cheap English mill-made cloth. In response to this trend, the first mechanized cotton mill was established in India in 1854. In the struggle to achieve independence from the British, Mahatma Gandhi seized upon the idea of using the domestic weaving industry as a symbol to bring home to the people the reality and implications of commercial domination by foreign rulers. His revival of *khadi*, cloth handwoven from indigenous handspun cotton, was a stand taken against the importation of Lancashire mill-mades. In the movement towards nationalism, this became an emotionally charged rallying point and *khadi* became the uniform of freedom, a symbol of simple living and freethinking. Yet in the twenties and thirties the mill had already taken root in India. Much of Gandhi's support came from the liberal and enlightened mill-owner.

What happened after freedom in 1947? A nationalistic stand by its nature creates unity and dissolves differences. Yet, in India it is precisely the differences that explain craft survival. These differences are due to the extremely localized traditions, which are firmly secured

within a sense of place, for example, resist dyed *ikats* from Andhra Pradesh, gold *zari* brocades from Tanjore and Kanchipuram. Each village represents a certain skill and tradition. The production of handmade textiles is carrying on. As ever, there are so many levels and types of production; some developing and copying from all sources to match the taste of the domestic and export markets; while others continue to produce commissioned textiles for traditional family purposes. Interested buyers know exactly where to find what they are looking for. If they are traditional buyers, they will have established a long-standing relationship of transaction with a particular craft family.

The first thing that strikes you about the contemporary situation of this live handloom tradition in India is its sheer volume: there are approx. 3.8 million handlooms in India. It is the largest economic activity in the informal sector, after agriculture. The industry is an integral part of rural life and about 10 million people depend on these looms, fully or partially, for their livelihood. Three thousand one hundred million meters of cloth are produced per year. There is only one rather significant factor that is lacking. Quality consistency. Local tradition at its finest can be thought of as a warp that still runs through the country. Running across this 'warp' is the incalculable 'weft' of individual capacity. Quality occurs at that sensitive intersection between an individual master and a particular textile language, whose value is refined by centuries of transfer.

The conditions surrounding the handloom industry, today, are not very promising or optimistic. Towards the future, we must find creative solutions.

Major problems faced by the handloom industry, as per my analysis, are:

1. Poor physical conditions.
2. Unpredictability: due to changing weather conditions.
3. Inefficient pre-loom operations: due to the lack of localization.
4. Low productivity: due to outdated equipment.
5. Competition provided by the power-loom/ mill sector.
6. Lack of new design ideas for a changing market.
7. Poor marketing strategies/ Use of middlemen as agents/ Sustainability.

1. Poor Physical conditions.

The weavers work on either, pit looms or frame looms. Pit looms are dug into the floor of a weaver's house or a community weaving shed. The long warp of these looms is tied to a post or, on the side of a house. The craftsperson sits at ground level with legs extending into the pit where the treadles are. The loom requires an 8 foot square space and is the most prominent feature of his home. The harnesses are operated by the treadles in the pit and the jacquard or doobby that sits on bars across the top of the loom. The weft yarn is thrown across the shed by a fly shuttle operated by a cord pulled by the weaver. Any extra weft yarns are inserted with a shuttle by hand. The weaving rhythm is periodically broken to roll the finished cloth onto the beam. The clack of the beater against the loom is an ever-present sound in these villages. The frame looms operate on similar principles, but are above ground. The weavers often work in unbearably hot weather and with poor lighting, consequently, the eyesight weakens eyes, arms and back ache.

2. Unpredictability.

Weaving has a seasonal rhythm. The monsoon rains hamper work. Dampness makes the yarns more difficult to work with. A leaky roof can damage the weaving and the pit itself can flood. Often, especially at this time of the year, weavers are unable to keep to time deadlines.

3. Inefficient pre-loom operations.

A typical chain of operations once the order is received by a master weaver (who often acts as coordinator/ middleman) is as follows. He assigns to weavers the designs to be woven, supplying them with materials and advancing money when needed. He takes the yarns to the dye houses, to scour, bleach and dye the yarn. From there, he takes the dyed yarn to the bobbin winder who winds it onto bobbins for warp preparation. The wound bobbins are taken to the warp winder who measures the yarn into the correct length and color order. The sizer then stretches the yarn on a frame and applies starch to strengthen and smooth the yarn for the stress it must take on the loom. The sized yarn is then brought to the weaver who draws the threads through the heddles and the reed and starts weaving the pattern.

As is evident, there are many possibilities of errors and inaccuracies in the above chain. It would be helpful if all the processes could be localized at a single center or unit.

4. Low productivity.

The productivity is low and inconsistent due to outdated equipment used at practically every stage:

- 1) Dyeing- Hanks are dyed using outdated methods of open beck dyeing. The problem is that the material is liable to be dyed unevenly, as the dye liquid is stationary while the hanks are moved using sticks.
- 2) Warp bobbin winding- Presently a *charkha* or hand-spindle is used. Winding of each bobbin is done individually. This is a low-efficiency method and also adds strain to the yarn.
- 3) Looms- Multi treadle looms, for production, have an inherent disadvantage of slow speed, complicated tie-up and a possibility of human error in following the correct treadle sequence. Dobby looms have a flimsy construction of various components. This prevents the lifting of multi-shafts, limiting design possibilities. Also, the heavier operation process tires the weaver and lowers the productivity.

5. Competition provided by the power-loom/ mill sector.

Comparison for handloom output always seems to be drawn with the mill and power-loom sectors. Of the three thousand one hundred million meters that unroll annually, on the handlooms, less than 1 percent are of high unit value, in comparison to mill-made fabrics. To ensure quality, you must convince a master-weaver that what he does is of relevance. And more importantly, that it can be marketed for sustenance. Post-independent India has opened options. However, these can be double-edged. A master-weaver can consider becoming a clerk or a postman, for instance. He must therefore be convinced that what he knows best is his finest asset. What is required is sustained and discerning public awareness. As importantly, a viable earning. The master-weaver, after a hard day's work sweating in the hot sun, and with an aching back and tired eyes; looks about him and sees

his neighbor, a fellow weaver- far less skilled doing rather well for himself. He owns a number of power-looms that churn out shirting, competent stuff, but ordinary. Then why, the master-weaver thinks to himself, should he be slaving over that one 'high-quality', superlative *sari*? And for what? He looks at his neighbor's son with his television, VCR and polyester shirt. He looks back at his own family. Firmly persuaded that what he should do is increase his volume of production, he trades his handloom for some power-looms- higher productivity, better income and less taxing on his health and physical condition. If he does so, we may confidently expect more shirting. And a loss of a valuable skill.

6. Lack of new design ideas for a changing market.

The weavers are relying on age-old patterns, weaves, designs and colors in the production of *saris* and textiles. With the changing times, people's lifestyles are changing. It is important to constantly innovate and update the designs. Weavers depend on the sales from plain fabrics. Unfortunately, hand-woven plain fabrics cannot compete with mill-woven plain fabrics in price or quality. Therefore, value-addition is very important to the survival of hand-wovens. There must be a co-relation between designer and the weaver. As importantly, for the contemporary designer, he must have an understanding of and respect for the traditional design before displacing it. The act of design must responsibly extend to the systems of inter-relationships that support structures. With a thought to sustenance, not only to the changing whims of fashion and trend. Loom, lifestyle, earnings, supply, and the right kind of attentiveness.

7. Poor marketing strategies/ Use of middlemen as agents/ Sustainability.

Textiles/ *saris* woven by the weavers are for two purposes: either for the domestic market or for export.

For the domestic market: there is usually a master-weaver who acts as the middle- man between the weaver and the local shops or co-operatives. He takes a percentage on sales. The product produced is of low quality and is cheap. Lower returns to the weaver, but everything he weaves is absorbed by the market.

For the export market: the chain is larger. There is the international buyer- that has an import-agent in his country- that deals with an export-agent in India - who deals with the master-weaver - who deals with the weaver. The price of the fabric is multiplied many times between the weaver's price and the international buyer's cost. The quality expected is much higher, so rejection rate is also higher. Exporters tend to exploit the weaving community. Taking more for themselves. The average salary of a weaver in rural India today, for eight hours' work, is between \$1-\$2. He can produce upto five meters a day, depending on the complexity of the design. To promote the handicraft industry, worldwide import-export laws, favor the use of hand-woven fabrics. As a result, many Indian exporters use hand-woven fabrics, not for their aesthetic and value-additive properties, but to get better export incentives. They look for cheap textiles that can compare in cost and value to power-loomed textiles. Eventually, this tactic only lowers the quality standards of the industry. Export, especially to the fashion industry, usually is seasonal. There is therefore a 'down-time' on the looms. More thought must be given to better planning for full utilization and sustenance.

Now that we are aware of some of the problems... What about solutions?

There are various government organizations and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) that are working towards solutions.

In the early '60s, networks of 'Weaver's Service centers' were established, all across the country, by the Development Commission of Handicrafts, Government of India. Their purpose is developing designs, production aids, marketing strategies, etc. to help the weaving community. Each center focuses on the villages and techniques in its vicinity. They continue to be a tremendous support to the industry.

The NGOs are funded by individuals and trusts, within the country and overseas. These are non-profit organizations whose chief aims are to provide employment, rural advancement and better working environments. They often get technological support from various government agencies. The work is done by groups of dedicated individuals.

I get a lot of the production of yardage, based on my designs, done at one such NGO, called 'Development Alternatives' located in a village called Sathanur, approximately 80 kms South of Bangalore city. This village is not a traditional weaving village; the main occupation of the villagers was as agricultural workers. The initial investment, which was privately raised, was Rs. 15 Lakhs (\$60,000). Started in 1990, it is now self-sustaining. They have 20 handlooms and they train 70-women/ year to weave and reel silk. A point to note here is the fact that traditionally weaving has been a male-dominated profession. Today in India, new weaving centers that are being established train women to weave as they find the women more responsible and attentive. The men tend to use the money earned on drinking, which leads to its own social problems. The focus of this particular NGO has been to develop and modernize the handloom to help hand-weavers to achieve the quality consistency of power-loom output. Towards this end, they have developed an economical dobby frame-loom and pit-loom with lightweight aluminum frames that can weave jute, silk and cotton fibers. At their center, they hire master-weavers to train the women. In addition to technical training, the trainees are exposed to functional literacy classes, information sharing by reading newspapers, health and hygiene and leadership training. Once the women are trained in weaving, they help them with loans to buy their own looms to eventually become self-sufficient. They also aid in the marketing process by providing design input and acting as a liaison between the industry and the weavers.

Such organizations are an encouraging start... but given the volume of the industry, we still have a long way to go.

The design aspect is a little harder to tackle. The structure of Indian textile design today has changed. In pre-mechanized India, the weaver or the craftsman was the 'designer' and producer of his designs. The craft traditions of the villages dictated the fashion and design trends of the towns and the cities. Modernization has led to a rapid breakdown of the norms that had directed craft traditions. The introduction of the alien, western concept of the 'designer' as distinct from the craftsman has destroyed the craftsman's natural response.

This has led to increasing tensions and confusions in the craft tradition. That it happened accidentally has only tended to produce greater chaos. The Indian craftsman is faced with the situation where on one side he is forced to turn 'back to the past' and on the other he is thrust with incomprehensible ideas evolved in the West. To go back to the past is impossible, as it has no meaning in today's terms. The mere absorption of Western ideas equally has no meaning as they have no link to the craftsman's comprehension. What then is the solution? There is no easy solution. We need to re-educate the craftsman and clear his blurred vision to allow the incredible creative force that still lies deep within his eyes and hands to be unearthed. In so doing to create a new re-defined tradition for the India of today and the future.

It is my dream through my work to use my knowledge and exposure, to be a link for the craftsperson. To be able to help her or him on the long journey of re-defining this tradition towards the creation of beautiful, functional, contemporary Indian textiles.

My present mode of work is to create woven designs in my studio, using silk, cotton, jute, wool and coir fibers. Once the samples are made and approved by my clients, I work with the craftsperson in the village to produce yardage of my design, according to my quality requirement.

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