

CLOTH AND INDIA: 1947–2015

edited by  MAYANK MANSINGH KAUL

INTRODUCTION

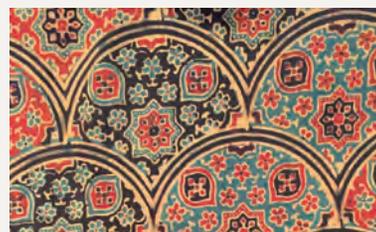
- 12 Towards Recent Histories of Indian Textiles
 MAYANK MANSINGH KAUL



22

PERSPECTIVES

- 22 Shaping Textile Futures:
Those Who Led the Way  RITU SETHI
- 32 Revivalism and Revivalists  LAILA TYABJI
- 42 Textiles in India: Fashioning the Contemporary
 MAYANK MANSINGH KAUL AND MEHER VARMA
- 52 The Enduring Sari and Its Metamorphosis
 SUJATA ASSOMULL



32

CONVERSATIONS

- 60 Jasleen Dhamija, Jyotindra Jain,
Ritu Kumar and Rahul Jain
with MONISHA AHMED AND MAYANK MANSINGH KAUL



52

FOCUS

- 78 Recipes for Re-enchantment:
Natural Dyes and Dyeing  AARTI KAWLRA
- 88 Trends in Embroidery  VANDANA BHANDARI
- 96 The Loom as Ideology:
Suraiya Apa's Legacy  RADHIKA SINGH
- 102 Jadunath Supakar and Design Revival in
Banaras Brocades  ANJAN CHAKRAVERTY



60

BOOK REVIEWS

- 110 *Block Printed Textiles of India: Imprints of Culture*
by Eiluned Edwards  PRAMOD KUMAR K.G.
- Unfolding: Contemporary Indian Textiles*
by Maggie Baxter  MONISHA AHMED



78

113 CONTRIBUTORS

The thematic advertisement portfolio on the inside cover and pages 1–7 features Chizami Weaves of Nagaland and the North East Network.

Caption for pages 8–9: Detail of woollen warp on a handloom at Avani, an organization working in Uttarakhand with natural fibres and dyes. Photograph: Mayank Mansingh Kaul.



88

Towards Recent Histories of Indian Textiles

MAYANK MANSINGH KAUL

IT IS DIFFICULT TO WRITE THIS INTRODUCTION AT A TIME WHEN DELHI IS WITNESSING one of the largest student movements in the country in recent decades, without taking note of how political identity can be expressed through textiles and fashion. If one looks at the volatile and fast-changing opinions expressed in social media, one becomes aware that entire educational institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) are often branded for a certain kind of sartorial aesthetic.



The “kurta-wearing, jhola-carrying-types” have become synonymous with left-wing ideologies and activist tendencies that resist more mainstream notions of the role of the government and state.

The roots of such clichés can be traced to two broad historical moments in India. The first, the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in the early 20th century, which saw khadi—handwoven, handspun cotton cloth—as one of the chief tools for the achievement of India’s economic and political freedom. And the second, the resurgence of Communist, youth-oriented political activism in the 1970s, where a return to grassroots-led development ideology embraced the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi’s critique of Western, colonial civilization and its emphasis on capitalist urbanism. That today these ideologies are often perceived to represent notions of the “anti-national” is worth reflecting on.¹

Gandhi’s struggle for political freedom for India was accompanied by an emphasis on the social transformation of the country, where clan-caste-class and religious identity had consistently allowed the colonial administration to pit communities against each other through a carefully considered “Divide and Rule” policy. In suggesting simple, white/unbleached cotton khadi as a symbolic unifier, Gandhi saw the dissolution of religious and caste differences which was essential towards the building of a new national identity for a free India. The idea was not without its critics, and yet khadi emerged as a powerful, all-encompassing symbol of the freedom struggle, its associations with patriotism being evoked even today.² As politicians across parties, including those of the younger generation, continue to wear white khadi kurtas for public appearances, the association of khadi with public service remains a lasting legacy of the freedom struggle under Gandhi.

Around the world, textile-making traditions and the various manifestations of textile use have historically denoted clan and community distinctiveness. The expressions of colour and pattern, the technical processes involved, and the socio-cultural values that textiles stand for, have represented a complex ecology of makers, consumers, rituals and trade in different regions of India as well. In parts of the country, even today, communities of a certain caste are associated with a particular process—say dyeing—whereas another community may weave, even if all of them work within an interdependent network eventually producing a common finished product. Similarly, certain motifs and ornaments associated with particular castes were meant to communicate such uniqueness. The struggle against the caste system was built into the constitution of independent India adopted in 1950, and suggested an erosion of caste-based identity in favour of a new institutional “equal” and “modern” identity for every Indian citizen. The reinsertion of caste identities into the political mainstream, as evident most recently in the strident efforts by the Jat community in

1 Interior of the Capitol Complex, Chandigarh, 2011–12. Seen in the background is a tapestry designed by Le Corbusier from the 1950s–60s. Photograph: Manuel Bougot.

2 Various operations of the kalamkari technique depicted by J. Niranjana on cotton cloth, designed by Berenice Ellena, 2013. From the collection at the Mulhouse Museum of Printed Textiles. A collaborative project supported by Hermès, Paris.





Haryana for reservations in government employment and state-run educational programmes, is worth reflecting on as well, through the prism of whether such identities continue to be expressed in material artefacts such as textiles and clothing.

Khadi occupies a prominent place in discourses on the freedom struggle from the perspective of textiles. In keeping with ideas of *swadeshi* and self-manufacture, this fabric was to provide a vital means for non-violent resistance to colonial rule. The arguments against khadi, though, and the other expressions of India's handmade textiles prevalent during the late 19th to the early 20th century, have been given less attention in writings since Independence. Many women had reservations about the use of white khadi, even though Gandhi thought "... (it) was a suitable means of enabling women to enter the political sphere without appearing sexually provocative or immodest". For most women, "the *khadi*-clad image had little appeal. Even Gandhi's wife Kasturba was at first so reluctant to wear the cloth that she helped other women in their protest to Gandhi about the unreasonableness of his expectations."³

Many others—including Nehru's sister Vijayalakshmi, his wife Kamala, and also writer Kamala Das—thought khadi unattractive. Aesthetically, some feared that it would stamp out many of the decorative arts which women enjoyed (just as the widespread use of the Gandhi [khadi] cap replaced to a great extent the wide variety of headgear worn in the country, which stood for distinct community identities). Certain types of embroideries, for example, required the use of Chinese silk, which was clearly contradictory to Gandhi's philosophy. Further, wearing white was associated with widows in the Hindu religious tradition. Experimenting with various colours, women volunteer corps eventually started wearing orange-dyed khadi—instigated by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay—earning them the name of the "Orange Brigade". It was also during this period that the map of India superimposed with the image of a woman in a sari began to appear in popular print media—another enduring legacy of the freedom struggle (figure 3).

Rabindranath Tagore, whose public debates on various issues with Gandhi became legendary through the height of the freedom movement, himself felt that "the Charkha and the Khadi cannot give us the ultimate remedy..."⁴ He wrote, for instance,



about agricultural reforms as a better alternative to the khadi programme. Parallel to such political ideas about cloth were the tastes of India's princely, royal and aristocratic families (figure 4). Patrons of ateliers of fine handcraftsmanship, their participation in the Indian freedom struggle was complex—even while British rule placed them in a position of subordination to itself, which they resented, it still supported them in their rights to titles and certain privileges over the other Indian population, which they enjoyed. It was through them that internationally popular design and art ideas, especially of European Art Deco and Art Nouveau, started filtering into the country (figure 5). Some notable projects of this time in this regard were the Manik Bagh Palace in Indore by German architect Eckart Muthesius in the late 1920s, and the interiors of the Umaid Bhavan Palace in Jodhpur, which were designed by Polish artist Stefan Norblin in the 1940s.

Among the most generous patrons of jewellery of foreign brands like Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels, the luxury luggage of Louis Vuitton, and the footwear and fashion of Italian firms such as Salvatore Ferragamo, this class of Indians was responsible for bringing Western influence into Indian embroideries and crafts to some extent. The main urban centres of the British Empire—Calcutta and Bombay—became the vortex of a dynamic intermingling of élite cosmopolitanism and consumption in the early and mid 20th century.⁵ While the full impact of art-deco influence was to become more visible in India only from the 1950s and '60s onwards, for a number of additional reasons its immediate effect was seen in the mushrooming of embroidery firms which began catering to an aspiring middle class eager to ape such aesthetics.

(In a strangely ironical turn, the uniforms of Indian service-staff to the British started borrowing increasingly from the regalia of Indian princely families. A result of this was that, eventually, as courtly patronage for many of these crafts declined in independent India, the remnants of such trends got absorbed into caricaturist costumes in unexpected ways. The use of synthetic metallic embroidery in costumes for musicians in wedding bands is an example, becoming the intermediary stage for the relevance of zardosi between its high phase of aristocratic patronage before Independence and its revival as an art form for Indian fashion designers in the early 1980s.)

3
Hind Mata, 1930s.
Photo-montage, silver gelatin,
charcoal, watercolours and
glitter dust.
Courtesy Priya Paul.

4
Maharani Vijayraje Scindia
of Gwalior, seen here wearing
a sari with a brocade border
design inspired by European
Art Deco-Art Nouveau.
The photograph was taken at
J. Stara Studio in Paris, 1940s.
Courtesy of the Museum of
Art & Photography (MAP)
(Acc. No. PHY.01709).

5
Detail of a skirt with European
Art Nouveau-inspired motifs,
Silk brocade with silver threads,
1930s.
Courtesy of the Museum of Art
& Photography (MAP)
(Acc. No. TCD.00008.2).