

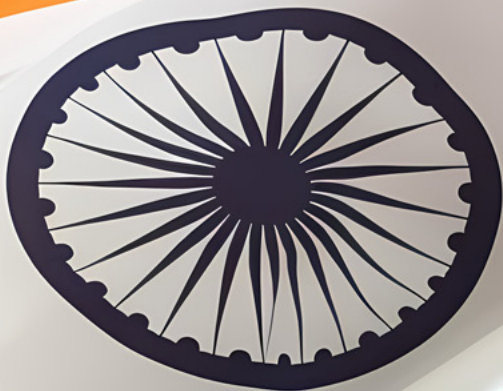


Indian Council for Cultural Relations
New Delhi, India
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High Commission of India, Colombo

Sanskarika

Newsletter of the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre

AUGUST 2024



Baluchari Sarees

The Indian penchant for unstitched garments is undeniable, of this the saree stands out in all its splendour. Chitra Balasubramaniam introduces us to this woven story.

Though detractors might say that turbans and dhotis have their own old fashioned charm, it is undeniably the saree, the six (yards), nine (yards) of Mekhela (the two piece ensemble from Assam – North East part of India), Kasava (white gold bordered saree) and all its other variations which stands out. And amongst the glorious 6 yards (the length of the saree equivalent to 5.5 meters) woven in different parts of the country, the Baluchari has its own regal presence.

Historical Moorings: The saree like countless crafts in India derives its name from a small town called Baluchar in Murshidabad district (approximately 225 kms from Kolkata, West Bengal). And like countless other traditional crafts of India, its origin is not very clear. Historically, it has been traced to around 1757 where there is evidence of such sarees being woven. Baluchar in this period was a well known village whose silk weavers were famous for this indigenous type of weaving. There are plenty of accounts on

how it originated, of which the popular seems to be traced to the Patola (double ikkat) weavers of Gujarat. It is possible that a group of weavers settled in this district and contrived their own versions

of weaving these sarees. The Baluchari sarees flourished under the usual patronage of the rich, the nawabs, royals, Hindu noblemen. Being a status symbol of class and richness, these silk sarees were highly regarded. The craftsmen seem to have been extremely skilled and painstaking in their work to have woven such veritable treasures. The craftsmen developed an indigenous technique, which consisted of a very complex jala system. Jala is the predecessor to the modern day jacquard loom. It is a web like contraption tied by expert specialist tiers. The sarees and fabric were made from very fine quality silk. Fine twisted silk was used on the warp and heavy silk on the weft. It was,



however, the spectacular work done on the pallav (the visible end of the sari which falls on the back when draped – this is roughly 3/4th meter in length) and borders which took one's breath away, which could be called the hallmark of these sarees. This was woven with untwisted silk giving it an extremely rich effect. The old sarees are Museum pieces





and can be seen at the National Museum, New Delhi.

The motifs were a mix of stories from Hindu mythology and recordings of historical happenings, social change to simply artistic motifs. The advent of the British in the country, steam boats set sailing from the area, train services... Natural colours and vegetable colours were used

for dyeing. The weaving, however, ceased by the latter part of the 19th century.

Contemporary weavings

Though efforts were made to revive the craft, the result was not too successful. It could be conjectured that given the painstakingness of the weaving there were not too many craftsmen left to continue with



the weaving. The tying of the jala especially to weave the intricate motifs of the pallav required a tremendous degree of skill and specialist tiers. Also, the saree woven by this time taking process was equally expensive and hence this revival did not meet with much success. The fineness and quality of the weave was difficult to be replicated. The Baluchari sarees woven today, are done on jacquard looms using graphical patterns. What is woven today can be called mere reproductions of those of yore in jacquard looms. Only the designs and the external appearance of the baluchari of old is replicated. Persons who have seen the original say today's versions are nowhere near those woven then. Though for many today, the hand jacquard loom versions are equivalent to

heirlooms for they are equally beautiful and breathtaking. The graph pattern designs are used for the designs on the body, the border and the pallav. The body of the saree is characterised by buttis (small dots), coins, ambis (paisleys) or tiny flowers all over. At times the motif on the border is replicated in the body. The border carries the same theme as that of the pallav.



The true delight is of course the pallav. The beauty of this saree lies in its pallav. A near meter of picturesque drama. The scenes depicted on the saree include those from Hindu mythology, scenes from Ramayana (the great Indian epic) like Sita Swayamvar (marriage of Goddess Sita to Lord Rama), Mahabharata (another Indian epic) like Geetopadesha (Lord Krishna preaching the Bhagwad Geeta to Arjuna), or

modern versions like mounted horsemen, a wedding scene, the famous Bankura (horse), forest scenes come replete with deer, a typical cottage, petting a deer, the stylized swans and peacocks, trees and bushes. ...For example in the wedding scene, the pallav could begin with squares depicting the palanquin bearers carrying the bride. The next line of squares with the bride and groom

facing the fire, the next line of panels shows the bride and groom facing each other. The large box of panel at the centre of the pallav could have them exchanging the garland, the rest of the pallav flows in the same manner as the beginning of the pallav. The border could have musicians playing instruments. The weaving can be compared to a fine painting, so realistic is the

depiction. Each and every aspect of the pose is recorded with infinite grace – the shy bride, the musicians in full rendition... The border continues with the theme of the saree.

With high cost of design creation on the looms, some designs are not changed for years together. This does result in the motifs becoming repetitive but with so many colour combinations available, no one seems to mind. The colours available are a riot and simply add to the charm of the stories. The intricate motifs are brought out to advantage by the spectacular colour combinations. Blue black,

maroon, red, copper blues... almost all colours are available from deep dark shades to pale pastels, double colours, single colours with the pallav in contrast colours. Though it looks the best in deep dark shaded colours. Unlike traditional “heavy sarees” very little of zari (gold & silver) is used. The entire brocading is done with coloured silk threads alone. Though Baluchari sarees with weaving done in zari (gold yarn involving complicated twisting) is available but the cynosure of all eyes is the silken thread weaves. The weaving could be done with a single coloured contrast silk thread or 2-3 can be used. In



very intricate ones, as many as, 7-8 colours are used. In keeping with the times, these saris are being woven in cotton also. The costs are much lower than the silk ones and externally have the same detailed paneled look. Tasar silk is also being used. However, the traditional silk one is a must have. The saree speaks of the dexterity of the weaver. The contrast of the intricate weaving to the colour of the saree is what stuns the onlooker. The colour combinations do not

jar, even when it is in double shades, the contrast colours and theme woven simply blend with one another

If this jacquard version is exquisite for most of us, the sarees of yore would have definitely been one to behold. Now, there seems to be a growing trend towards finding our roots and heritage. Hand crafted products, handwoven material are becoming increasingly popular. May be with this increased demand and the presence of connoisseurs the age old versions of weaving a baluchari, using the jala technique will see the light of the day. Yes, the patrons of yore could be replaced by, today's breed of yuppies, businesswomen and other well-to-do sections of society.

EVENTS CALENDAR – AUGUST 2024

THU	1 7:00 am	On the occasion of World Lung Cancer Day YOGA FOR HEALTHY LUNGS by Dr.Ajay Kumbhar, Yoga Expert from India
TUE	13 7.00 am	On the occasion of International Youth Day YOGA AND YOUTH by Dr.Ajay Kumbhar, Yoga Expert from India
SUN	11 7.00 am	Online Yoga Session “RELAXATION TECHNIQUES AND PRACTICES LEADING TO YOGA MEDITATION” by Dr.Ajay Kumbhar, Yoga Expert from India
THU - SUN	15 to 18	BHARAT – SRI LANKA MAITRI UTSAV <i>Commomaring 78th Independence Day of India</i> Join the carnival of India–Sri Lanka Friendship Handicrafts Fair Food Festival Cultural performances and more Venue: Independence Squar, Colombo FREE ENTRY

THU - SUN	24 to 31	Colombo International theatre Festival Workshops Venue: SVCC Auditorium
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