

## Market Realities<sup>1</sup>

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SO many of the best things happen by chance - and my experiences of India and its fabulous textile crafts have been no exception. A textile historian turned exporter, I had all kinds of pre-conceived notions. These have mostly been turned on their head. I can only hope I am, perhaps, just a little wiser now.

*Patti-ka-kam* is a traditional work where patches of cloth (patti means leaf) are cut into motifs, usually floral, and stitched onto a background of organdie. This is a fine, transparent, stiffened fabric. Formerly this was achieved by an application of starch, and more recently by a mechanical process which ensures that the stiffness is retained after washing. This is much beloved by the ladies of certain parts of UP, particularly in the Rampur area, for their saris and dupattas.

*Bari-patti* (or the application of big leaves as opposed to the smaller leaves *choti-patti* appreciated in Lucknow) was introduced to us by a friend, an art historian, who was involved in research into the miniature paintings in the Royal Library at Rampur. She had organdie curtains made in the same way as a dupatta shown to her in a shop in the bazaar. Floating and transparent, with a shadowy design of swirling leaves and stems, these were glamorous in the extreme. A French friend who happened to be staying fell into raptures: 'This will be a huge success in France,' she said. 'Go for it.' So off we went, driving several hours eastwards to the elegant, charming, if dilapidated city of Rampur. This was to be the first of many visits.

Here, in the depths of the bazaar, was the source. Into a tiny space were squeezed the owners, several blackly veiled ladies and a few smartly dressed customers. Bari-patti was what had brought us all here. Ravi, the owner, commissioned it from the veiled ladies who took it home to make, and brought it back for him to sell to the smart ladies. We were there to see if we could start a production unit.

Some hours later a deal had been struck, several pieces of bari-patti curtains, tablecloths and napkins in different designs ordered, and delivery promised within an agreed time. Weeks later part of the order arrived. With the enthusiasm of beginners, we had taken a large order for organdie bari-patti napkins from one of New York's most elegant shops. There was no time to be lost; the shipment was already late; the napkins had to be cleaned, labelled and packed immediately. The whole company (then numbering about ten people including us) knuckled down to work. But oh dear. Each napkin was different in design and, worse, in size. The sides were not straight, the hems worse, the stitches unbelievably uneven. We gulped; go ahead and risk ridicule, or cancel the order and lose face? Either way we lost. But as these products were so very unusual and new, perhaps, just perhaps, our clients would accept them. This seemed the only hope.

We sent the shipment to London for handing over to the agents there who would send it on to the US. But again, oh dear no. Goods of non-European origin cannot be sent via Europe to America, but only from the country of origin. I myself brought the whole lot back again to Delhi. They had not improved during their absence, and were perhaps more shockingly inadequate than ever. However, here was a chance to redeem ourselves and our otherwise surely lost reputation.

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They were straightened out, re-stitched, the worst of the patches put on again. Out they went again, to a delighted reception in New York. Our future, from unlikely beginnings, seemed set. But this was not to be. We worked away improving quality, doing new designs and consolidating our market for about a year and a half. Competition then presented itself in a major way, with several companies copying our work - in one case down to the packaging and labels. The only difference was that our name had been substituted by another one. Our creation had been taken over, the copyists selling at much lower prices than we could do ourselves. We had gone through the development, the costs of all our mistakes, the running up and down from Rampur improving design and quality, the smooth running of Ravi's workshop. Above all we had created a voracious market. It was easy for others to move in.

This, however, was in many ways the great opportunity for many Indian companies. Organdie is cheap, easy to work; if not too bothered about quality, then it is possible to feed the demands of foreign buyers at a good price, and make a handsome profit oneself.

But I sought perfection, high quality, and a product that was just right. Ravi and his ladies were being propelled into an industry far from the small, laid back cottage craft for a small, not overly quality discerning local market. Yet it worked. They grew into their roles, they performed and got it right, and Ravi's workshop went from strength to strength. This in itself was an achievement.

By education and experience I am a historian of textiles. Inevitably, living in India, I became more and more interested in textiles as part of a deeply ancient but living tradition. I wanted to look at all this, to study the past through the present. Soon it was the present that became the study. With my former journalist husband David, I established a company called Shades of India, the philosophy of which was to work with the best of traditional textile craft skills to create textiles for the home, for a contemporary minded, up-market customer. I believed that I could carry my historian past into the present.

I had always been fascinated by the so-called Fostat textiles, hand painted and block printed fragments excavated from the rubbish dumps of old Cairo. These were believed to have been made in western India for the Egyptian market. Carbon dating has shown some of them to be as early as the 12th century. As it happened, Mohammad Bhai Siddiqui the famous master from Kutch in Gujarat of *ajrak*, double sided block printing in natural colours, was working for a month in the demonstration area of the Crafts Museum in Delhi. I showed him illustrations of some of the Fostat pieces in museums about the world. He studied these with great interest and announced that although he had no such blocks now, these designs were very much part of his tradition, and he could certainly recreate them. He was as good as his word. In the allotted time, a parcel arrived from Damadhka in Kutch and inside, in the original indigos, madders and yellows, were some Fostat tablecloths. I was thrilled, certain that our buyers would be likewise. But it was not to be. This was ten years ago, when the West's perception of India was still that it was cheap and cheerful.

The bari-patti had done little to change that perception, except that it is was glamorous and new. Organdie is inexpensive, and fairly unskilled hands can do the appliqué work of leaves. But block prints were also expected to be cheap, even if these were quite different from the usual, and in natural dyes. Colours should be exactly the same each time, never mind the different weather conditions during dyeing, the difficulties in removing the cloth from the indigo bath at exactly the same moment for every batch, the vagaries of the alternative technology of Ismail Bhai, one of the sons of Mohammad Bhai, who used a weed killer spray to apply turmeric to his cloth as it lay on the ground in his field. Specialist shops approved, but for the main the market did not respond because they judged the prices too high, and we did not get the orders we had hoped for.

I had had a wonderful time over two or three visits to Kutch, learning about natural dye methods and block printing techniques. But commercially it did not work; I had not succeeded in increasing the income of this wonderful family, and had thus wasted its time.

Since that time the Gujarat earthquake has struck, killing Ismail's mother and daughter. Their home, their workshop and many blocks were destroyed. The communal riots have raged. Yet recently Ismail was in Iowa in the US where, I have heard, he was given an honorary doctorate, and has been lecturing on his work and on natural dyes. His father died some years ago, but he and his brothers have taken on his business and achieved the fame that their work richly merits. I am full of admiration, and of gratitude for all they taught me, not only in terms of craft but also for their kindness, humanity, their warmth and impeccable manners. Also for their determination to rebuild their lives when all must have seemed so hopeless.

Two very different stories, and there are of course many more. Travelling widely in different parts of the country, I came across many wonderful things, which I tried to develop into products for an upmarket, discerning clientele. I moved through many different areas, each one with wonderfully exciting textile craft skills. But I was not there to follow everything up, to encourage, to get orders out on time, and working long distance, my efforts never really took off. Orders have to be delivered on time or else they are cancelled, and then everyone is worse off than they were before.

Finally, I had to agree that trying to organise and keep production going in widespread parts of India, despite my best efforts, was really not possible to manage. This was probably my own fault. My standards of quality and timing were doubtless unrealistically high. No matter if there was a wedding, a celebration or whatever else, so much part of the fabric of Indian life, work had to go on, the delivery had to be there on time, adjustments would have to be made so that the work was completed. I was constantly frustrated! Little by little I learned patience; let us allow all the time needed to accommodate these inevitable disruptions, let us be realistic. But it still did not work; even where there seems to be a lot of it, time remains elastic. The company was losing money in these delays, inconsistent quality, and cancelled orders.

Now Shades of India, like many other companies here, does most of its work in and around Delhi. We created embroidery centres in villages in Haryana where previously there had existed no employment for women; in one village it worked so well that we were approached by the *pradhan* in a neighbouring village, a formidable lady whose role was to protect the rights of women, to ask if we might set up a centre in her village also. This we did, and now she runs it completely. Otherwise cutters, tailors, stitchers, *ari* embroiderers and others, are all in and around the city. Everything is beautifully made, by hand, in a manner that is relatively easy to organise and control. Some handloom fabrics come from different parts of rural Madhya Pradesh. Production is certainly easier, but it lacks the extraordinary diversity of techniques that would have been so exciting to incorporate.

A couple of years ago, I embarked on another venture together with a Kashmiri friend of longstanding, Asaf Ali, and his two brothers. This, for me, meant going right back into the grassroots of craft. The family in Kashmir has long been involved in handicrafts, particularly in textiles. We decided to pool our talents, and establish the Kashmir Loom Company, with the aim of reviving and developing traditional weaving and embroidery in Kashmir, and to bring to these new life with a contemporary look. At the same time we seek to help restore to Kashmir its once unrivalled reputation as the home of the best shawls the world has ever known.

This is completely fascinating. Here we are concentrating on just one region - though each time we think we have surely seen everything, another ravishing technique appears. The sheer artistry that craftsmen bring to their work and their ability to adapt to new ideas while remaining true to their ancient traditions, whether in weaving or embroidery, is astounding. This is a remote

land, cut off from the rest of India by high mountain ranges, and so it has always had an isolated existence.

Kashmir has long been famed for its extraordinary shawls. The Emperor Akbar owned several. The export of these started in the second half of the 18th century; the Empress Josephine, wife of Napoleon of France, had a large collection, and many portraits depict her draped in a shawl, with others cut up to form her dress. The fashion continued until the 1870s to the extent that no lady of taste would dream of going out without one draped over her shoulders. By this time European style insisted on ornate, elaborate patterns and thicker textures which show a marked departure from the earlier, Kashmiri style with borders of elegant Mughal type flowering plants.

A variety of events conspired to the demise of the 19th century Kashmir shawl; high taxes imposed by its rulers, fierce competition from the doobby and then the Jacquard looms of Europe, of which Paisley is the most famous since it gave its name to that very traditional of Indian motifs, the *boteh*, a kind of cone with its top curled over; European wars, which made importing very difficult. But most devastating of all, the fashion for shawls died. This spelt the death of the beautiful, hand woven *kani* shawl that had fed a greedy market for over a hundred years. Now, more than a century later, the Kashmir Loom Company is having a small hand in reviving this extraordinary technique, and kani shawls are once again being woven. Even if the weavers are not willing to undertake the production of shawls as fine as the best of the past, the achievement is considerable. Such shawls are extremely expensive; it takes two weavers over a year to complete one shawl, each pattern detail painstakingly worked by hand. Yet there is a market, both within India and outside. There are wealthy customers who want the very best, the most beautiful, who have the means and, more, are ready to spend it on items of great beauty and rarity.

Shawls made for the lower and middle markets have been enjoying a huge demand. But once again, the fickle fashion in the West for shawls has recently much diminished. Clever producers in Nepal came up with a fabric woven with pashmina mixed with silk. This could be dyed in every colour. They were expensive, but silk/pashmina shawls ruled the market; no buyer could get enough of them. The market soon saturated; the shawls were produced more and more cheaply, now in India as well as in Nepal, the content more and more doubtful. Then bang. The fashion was finished, demand stopped, and no buyer will now touch them. Pashmina has become a dirty word through absolutely no fault of its own but because of greedy, foolish marketing. I saw a street side booth in London the other day selling shawls advertised as 'pure pashmina: 100% acrylic.'

Pashmina is a wonderful, soft wool, combed by hand from the *changra* goat. They are reared in herds at over 14,000 ft in the arid, high altitude plateaux of Ladakh and Tibet, as also in Mongolia. It is also known as *cashmere*, the old spelling of the name of the region. It could only be spun and woven in Kashmir - no other part of the world has the appropriate skills to do this - and thus, although the wool itself does not come from Kashmir, this alternative name has also stuck. Foreign buyers now want only cashmere, as though it was totally different and not tainted by the word pashmina. Few know that these are in fact the same! A gossamer fine pashmina yarn can only be spun by hand. In other places, where there is only mechanical spinning, it has to be mixed, with silk, wool or a synthetic yarn that can be carbonized after weaving. It is thus never the same. All of us who spin and weave pashmina in Kashmir should do our best to get together to form an organization to protect the processing and the reputation of this delicious fibre. To make it official, register pure pashmina as a trademark, and only items that bear the appropriate stamp should be deemed the real thing.

But is this possible? Is it possible in a state devastated by years of strife? Where Kashmiri craftsmen, even master embroiderers who have been awarded major prizes, sell alongside their own wares cheaper imitations from Amritsar and elsewhere? The wheel has gone full circle. In the

19th century it was the Jacquard looms of Paisley and elsewhere in Europe that had such a hand in killing the Kashmir handloom industry. Today, it is the Jacquard looms of Amritsar that are churning out machine woven copies. The merchants who order and sell them are often themselves Kashmiri, and assure their customers that these are the real thing, hand woven in Kashmir. They are destroying the reputation of Kashmiri hand products and their market. Alongside the Jacquard shawls there are also cheap embroideries made goodness knows where, masquerading likewise under the famous name.

Thus Kashmir needs all the help it can get to protect and maintain its crafts and its craftspeople. Life goes on in the region in spite of terrible unrest, problems and depression. Many hands are still hard at work. Master craftsmen are highly respected, many of them carrying on the ancient Sufi tradition where their craft is their meditation. Young men are coming into the business because even now a good livelihood can be made. This is all very encouraging in a state where for most other reasons the future seems so insecure.

There is still huge talent in craft skills all over India. What is needed is a transformation in marketing strategy. No attempt should be made to revive craft without this; NGOs and other organisations can no longer dig their heads into the sand. The days of association of craft with charity are long past. People buy hand made things because they are beautiful, individual, and unique. There is a huge market. But much of it needs educating. Hand made does not mean cheap; it means beautiful, well made, individual, different. It can afford to be expensive. Crafts people should not be frightened of charging good prices for their work. If they are to stay where they are and not move to other activities, then they have to ensure a good standard of living, and one in which their children will be happy to follow. Otherwise it will surely die, as it has done in most of the rest of the world.

*The final word should be that of a lady in one of our village embroidery centres in Haryana: 'We are all so relieved that you are a private, commercial company,' she informed me, 'because you have to make money, and therefore so will we.'*