

Warp & weft of a legacy

India's rich textiles are getting a much-deserved facelift



PHOTOS COURTESY: SAILESH SINGHANIA AND VEAVE'S STUDIO

BINDU GOPAL RAO

THE Kalkaleshwara temple in Gajendragarh, North Karnataka, is interesting as it is not just a place of worship but a destination where local crafts once flourished. The vicinity of the temple has been the hub of handloom manufacturers and there is literature-based evidence saying that weaving in Gajendragarh dates back to 10th century.

There is also evidence of the Patteda Anchu sari being made around the same time. Today, not just Patteda Anchu, but saris like Gomi Teni, Hubli and Lakundi have all been revived through extensive research and an ethnographic study across 10 villages by textile revivalist Hemalatha Jain through her venture, Punarjeevana.

REVIVAL RHETORIC

Textile revival certainly seems the key word driving designers, textile experts and apparel enthusiasts to make a difference.

Designer Sailesh Singhania supports 60 weavers who specialise in the Kadwa and Jamdani weaving technique with motifs unique to these weavers. "We try to provide them proper working conditions and support them right through warping, spinning, dyeing and getting the looms ready for jacquard and jaala. We have been providing these craftsmen with authentic yarns and zaris and have helped them attain technical education. We have provided them 70 handlooms for them to remain employed."

Vatsala Chopra, founder of Veave's Studio, Varanasi, says they are a family of 40 weavers who work on 30 handlooms. "We are all about hand-woven and hand-embroidered textiles. We have always believed in our culture and it is still rich because of our artisans who have carried this gift for generations." Recently, Bengaluru saw the opening of a Museum of Living Textiles whose founder, Pavithra Muddaya, is working hard to ensure that weaves and patterns of the past are not lost by working with weavers to recreate them in saris and textiles.



TOUGH CALL: Revival of traditional textiles is fraught with challenges. The weaving is slow and returns low

FABRIC MATTERS

The textiles that are being revived naturally hold a lot of value and emotions. The Patteda Anchu sari has, for instance, a border inspired by jowar seeds, a crop grown in the region, which also represents a symbol of prosperity. It was mainly gifted to pregnant women and was also worn by married women during Sankranti, the harvest festival. Chopra says she wants people to feel the delicacy and intricacy of each thread that is woven into stoles and fabrics.

On a similar note, embroidery is one such craft that constitutes an important part of the country's rich cultural heritage. However, the craft is losing its lustre and skilled karigars in bigger cities are scarce. "The baton of patronage provided to hand embroidery by the nobles and aristocrats in the past needs to be handed over to the new-age designers," feels Samarjeet.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Revival of traditional and handloom textiles, however, is fraught with challenges. Since the weaving takes some time and is

slow, the next generation is unwilling to carry it forward as the returns are low. The advent of powerlooms has sounded the death knell for traditional handloom crafts as the product can be made faster and cheaper in the machines.

"We have taken up the challenge to bring the vanishing craftsmanship back with the versatility and contemporariness. The revival project of zardozi on pashmina has proven to be an expensive venture. It is extremely challenging as it is done manually by skilled artisans as soft fibre often breaks during the process and cannot be fixed in any other way than by hand. As a skill that is learnt and passed on within families, many people are switching on to the other jobs for better wages. Low wages are not the only threat. Synthetic, machine-made and low-quality fabrics are also available in the market at a much lower price," says Samarjeet.

Textile revival is not easy but it can be made viable by ensuring that, as buyers, we make the right choice which is the best way to support the cause.



The importance of Anna Wintour

OLIVIA PETER

WHEN it comes to fashion industry titans, there are few who elicit respect and notoriety to the degree of Anna Wintour. The American *Vogue* editor is so well-known that she has been fictionalised, parodied and propelled into icon status. But how did she become the fashion industry's most influential and illustrious figure?

Born in London in 1949, Anna Wintour came from a media family. She attended North London Collegiate School in Stanmore, but dropped out aged 16. She soon took a job at cult 1960s' London fashion boutique Biba, before completing a training programme at Harrods and landing a permanent role as editorial assistant at *Harper's & Queen* magazine, now *Harper's Bazaar*. In 1975, Wintour moved across the pond to become junior fashion editor at *Harper's Bazaar* in the US, where she stayed for several years, going on to work at other now defunct titles, including *Viva* and *Savvy*, until the early 1980s.

Following a brief stint as fashion editor at *New York Magazine*, Wintour was headhunted for the role of creative director at American *Vogue*. In 1985, she came back to the UK and was appointed editor-in-chief at *British Vogue*. But her brusque nature and inability to suffer fools resulted in her landing the nickname "Nuclear Wintour" in reference to the prolonged climactic cooling experienced as a result of nuclear war. Wintour returned to New York after two years at the UK publication, and after a short period at *House & Garden*, was appointed editor at American *Vogue*, succeeding Grace Mirabella.

Wintour has been credited for revolutionising the fashion industry ever since her first issue at *Vogue*. The casual ensemble of Guess jeans and a bejewelled Christian Lacroix jumper worn by the cover star, the Israeli model Michaela Bercu, was striking in the industry at a time when glamorous evening gowns were the norm. The image was so out of place that the printers returned the files, assuming there had been some sort of an error in the office and the cover had been a mistake! But Wintour was clearly onto something, going on to restore *Vogue's* subscriber count, boost advertising and produce some of the largest magazine issues in history. The September 2012 edition, for example, ran to a staggering 914 pages. She has also been praised for pioneering the move to bring figures from outside of the fashion world onto the magazine's pages under Wintour's 31-year-long reign.

In a recent discussion on how social media influencers are changing the fashion industry, she described *Vogue* as "the biggest influencer of them all". Though many in the industry would say the same about her. When Wintour supports someone or something, people listen, which is why *Vogue* has become such a cultural touchstone for people in the industry. As a trustee of the New York Metropolitan Museum, she also spearheads the annual Met Gala, which sees celebs celebrate the opening of Met's annual costume exhibition.

Wintour's career has not been short of controversy. In 2003, one of her former assistants, Lauren Weisberger, wrote a fictionalised account of her own time at *Vogue*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, which became an acclaimed film. Despite the fact that the character parodied stereotypes based on Wintour, she took it all in her stride, even wearing Prada to the film's premiere in 2006.

Industry insiders have long speculated when Wintour's reign at *Vogue* will come to an end, but rumours amped up last year in the wake of *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter's departure and the death of *Conde Nast* (*Vogue* publisher) chairman Si Newhouse. Speculations reached such heights that the publisher's then CEO released a statement explaining she is "integral" to the company and will continue to work there "indefinitely". Nonetheless, one presumes she will step down eventually. And when she does, her mark on the industry will continue to drive its direction for years to come. — *The Independent*

The legendary fashion editor, said to have revolutionised fashion industry, turns 70

A day to celebrate sisterhood

PAID a visit to my friend Archana and while we were sipping *elaichi chai*, Pari, her 4-year-old daughter walked in from school, flung down her bag and demanded that she be provided a brother.

"Why in the world do you want a brother, honey?" smiled Archana. "You already have a beautiful baby sister."

"Yes, but all my friends put a *bindi* on their brothers and they got money. I also want to put a *bindi* on a brother and get money."

"It's a *tikka*, honey, not a *bindi* and you can apply it on your little sister!"

"Are you allowed to do that?" little Pari enquired. "Oh yes, absolutely! You can celebrate Behan Dooj with her."

"Will she give me money?" Little Pari clearly wanted the rewards policy firmly in place.

"I'm certain she'll give you lots of gifts when she grows up, sweetie. For now, will a chocolate cookie do?"

Little Pari acquiesced with a happy smile and we went through the entire ritual with her highly resistant baby sister.

That got me thinking that while Rakhi and Bhai Dooj are two days dedicated to the celebrations of love between a brother and a sister, which is the day that celebrates the love between sisters?

People (like me) who have sisters, but no brothers, tend to feel a little left out on such occasions wherein you can rejoice only if you have a male sibling. I'm sure women, even if we have brothers, would like to salute their female sibling as well. So,

why isn't there a 'Behan Dooj' as well as 'Bhai Dooj' and why cannot the nation celebrate 'Sakhi' as well as 'Rakhi'? It couldn't be yet another example of patriarchy perpetuated by the system, could it?

The concept of Raksha Bandhan is mainly that of protection. The ritual of tying Rakhi on a brother's wrist symbolises the vow that the brother will look

after the sister, which presupposes that the sister belongs to a (weaker) sex that needs patriarchal protection. In fact, all through history, the central role of women in society has ensured the stability, progress and long-term development of families and nations. In times when gender roles are getting increasingly blurred, they have stepped in to improve livelihoods and overall well-being of their families and take care of their parents in old age, a role that was traditionally assigned solely to males. Thus, it is only seemly that both the sexes be equally celebrated.

Society aside, I know for a fact that the way I can laugh with my sister — that unrestrained, unconditional, tears-pouring-down-the-face laughter — can be shared with no other. I know that it takes a sister to sense your anxiety, discomfort or pain. It is she who is privy to your deepest secrets and will spring to your defence and rescue even if you are completely wrong and even support you through your bad hair days by giving you her favourite hairband. More than just family, a sister is a forever friend.

So, sisters, Happy Behan Dooj!

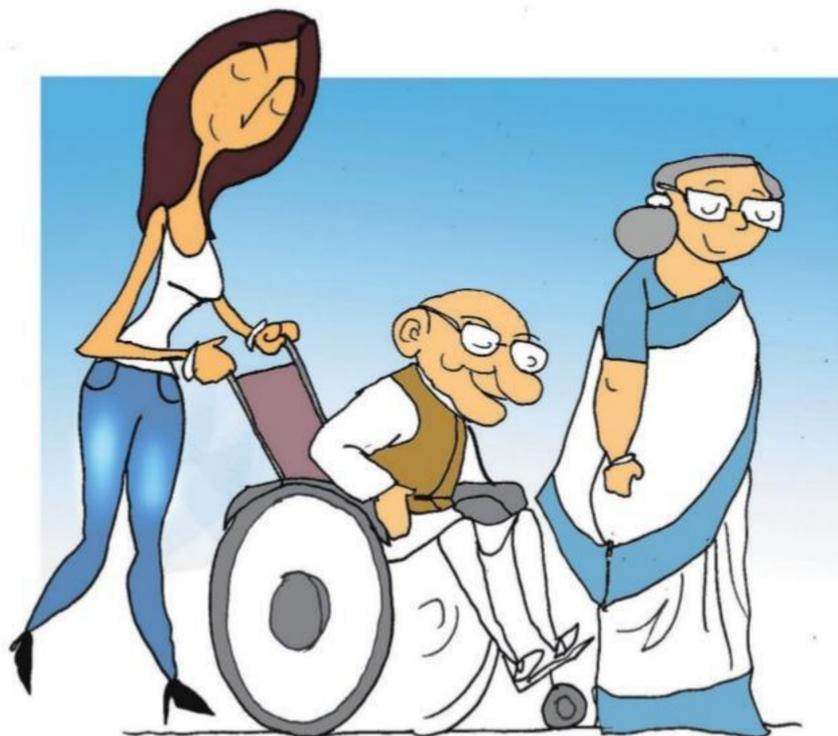


ILLUSTRATION: SANDEEP JOSHI