The story of Indian handlooms dates back to the Indus Valley – most active during the period 2500-1700 BC – and stands today at the crossroads of regional traditions and globalised connections. The vibrant and multidimensional world of Indian weaving has a large repository of patterns, techniques and colour that come alive with the skill and adaptability of the traditional weaver.

Handloom is defined as "any loom other than powerloom" under the Handloom (Reservation of Articles Production) Act, 1985. Broadly classified as pit-looms, back-strap looms, draw-looms and jacquard looms, handlooms are, in a sense, machines which rely on the body, rhythm, narrative, and skill of the weaver. Since ancient times, beautiful brocades, luminescent muslins, Kanchipuram saris, the tribal weaves of the Northeast, complex ikats, and many more sophisticated textiles have been woven into indigenous handlooms.

Indian weavers have always occupied a meaningful place in textile production. The variety of weaves and patterns has been influenced by several factors. "The manner in which the genius of the Indian weaver expresses itself (sic) has been determined by the contours of the countryside, the climate, the distribution of the desert and lush forests, the presence of minerals, salts and water and the integration of the nomadic tribes," elaborates cultural czarina Pupul Jayakar, founder of the Handloom and Handicraft Export Corporation (HHEC).
Warp and weft

Weaving is the interlacing of two sets of yarns, called the warp and the weft, placed perpendicular to one another on the loom. The legendary finesse of traditional Indian handwoven textiles and their age-old popularity the world over, are largely due to the traditional knowledge of weaving which creates intricate textures and patterns on fabrics by inserting extra-warp or weft yarns.

Brocade is a generic term for any textile that is richly figured, especially for those with a pattern in gold or silver. The heart of brocade weaving lies in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, which has been a renowned cultural and religious centre for thousands of years. In the weaving of brocade, extra weft threads of different coloured silk or metallic zari are woven into the base fabric in the areas where they are to form a pattern. The most opulent brocade is the kinkhab, which looks like metallic sheets of gold and silver, with the background silk barely visible.

The draw loom, a complex handloom for weaving figured textiles, has an elaborate maze, which includes the naksha attachment. This allows the weavers to weave patterns of great complexity and width. The traditional naksha is gradually being replaced with a jacquard head that allows for faster and easier production.

Across India

The patrons of Varanasi brocade are mainly domestic, but the traditional weavers of the fabulous brocade are in need of newer markets for their skills to survive and develop. While textile specialists like Rahul Jain, and designers like Sabyasachi Mukherjee, and many others attempt to revive markets for the long-established brocade designs, traditional weavers also look to convince customers that despite being priced higher than the powerloom counterpart, the quality of handloom brocade is far superior.

“It is the human component, the mastery of the hand, the localness that makes (crafts) a luxury. Machine-made excellence can’t be compared with something that has a human touch,” says Union minister for commerce and industry, Nirmala Sitharaman, correlating the exclusivity of each handcrafted textile or product to today’s notion of excellence and opulence.

Another beautiful saree is the Chanderi, woven in Chanderi, Madhya Pradesh, as fine as translucent cotton muslins, with coloured silk and zari.
embellishments. It was traditionally woven for the local aristocracy. The designs have continuously evolved. After the mid-20th century, silk warps have been introduced. These add a rich sheen to the chanderis. The buti pattern, regarded as a hallmark of chanderi muslin, was introduced as late as the 19th century.

In 2003, as a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), India implemented the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999. The mark is used as a sign to denote and protect goods that have specific qualities, reputation, or characteristics due to a specific place of origin. The gossamer chanderi weaves were awarded a Geographical Indications (GI) Mark in 2005 and this was a step that has gone a long way in authenticating the chanderi brand.

Also awarded the GI protection mark, maheshwari sarees and fabrics have a royal lineage. The village of Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh, became a thriving weaving centre in the 19th century under the patronage of Ahilyabai Holkar, daughter-in-law of the rulers of Indore. Her designs and patronage led to the development of the unique and popular maheshwari fabric – classical and austere silk/ and cotton blends with a distinct Maharashtrian influence of checks or self-stripes embellished with extra-warp geometric zari patterned borders. The luminous fabric was woven on fly-shuttle pit-looms, though now a dobby attachment is set up for design development. After Independence, with the loss of royal patronage and tariff protection, the handloom industry in Maheshwar went into a steep decline. Rehwa, a society founded by Ahilyabai’s descendants, is credited with reviving the Maheshwari weaving traditions through innovations in designs and products, skill development, marketing and income generation programmes.

Weavers now create accessories like stoles and dupattas using saree patterns for the domestic and international market. They have also started experimenting with materials such as wool, and metallic threads. As with other Indian weaving traditions, the skills of the Maheshwari weavers also adapt to innovation and the designs are breathtaking.

Ikat, which literally means “to tie”, is an ancient Indian technique of binding and resist-dyeing the warp or weft or both, before weaving the fabric. While there are numerous debates surrounding the origins and dissemination of the technique, in India the ikat weave is said to have originated in Gujarat. Today, it is practiced across India.

The elaborate silk patola in “double-ikat technique” from Gujarat were woven with great finesse and were exclusive garbs of royalty. They were exported as a luxury product to Southeast Asia in the 16th century. Once woven in several regions of western India, only the weavers of the Salvi family in the town of Patan (Gujarat) today weave patola ikats.

From the 12th century, Sambalpur in Orissa has been home to fine ikat textiles woven in cotton and silk using the single (warp or weft), or double (warp and weft) ikat technique. Traditionally worked on cotton, the geometric ‘pagdu bandhu’ ikat from Pochampally, Andhra Pradesh, is a simpler version of the Sambalpuri ikats and Gujarat patola.

Ikat, especially double ikat, requires complex and accurate arithmetic to translate the design to yarn. The move towards incorporating technology and modernisation has increased the production of single ikat saving the weaver’s time, and has also seen vegetable dyes being replaced with chemical dyes. Ikat has diversified from sarees to yardage, accessories, and furnishing, and protection of each type of ikat under the GI mark has led to increased domestic usage and export of ikat to the United States, and countries of Africa and Europe.

Close to the heart
Weaving and the development of regional textile traditions have a profound relationship with religious and ritualistic beliefs of each community. As elaborated by renowned textile historian Jasleen Dhamija, “It is not explicit, it is implicit; for textiles are a form of non-verbal language, and reflect the socio-religious and cultural history of a people.”

The innumerable tribes and communities of the Northeast region of India have, over centuries, perfected crafting techniques. This allows them to use only the natural bounty they are surrounded by into handicraft objects of everyday use and decorate ornamental textiles and accessories. Unlike most of the country, women are the weavers in the states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Assam. While the more commercial and beautifully patterned fabric handwoven in the lowlands of Assam and Manipur are woven on throw-shuttle looms, the boldly patterned textiles of the Northeast are woven on backstrap looms.
a centre for Hindu pilgrimage, as it is for its figured and brocaded silk-woven sarees. Kanchipuram sarees are characterised by their glossy and vibrant silk body and intricately patterned figure-weaving, depicting traditional temple motifs, flowers, creepers, birds, animals, and mythological motifs. A Kanchipuram sari is woven on a throw-shuttle pit loom or a raised-pit loom. Preparing and dyeing the mulberry silk and weaving elaborate patterns by manually lifting warp threads according to the graph on the adal, an indigenous version of the jacquard loom, is a time-consuming and elaborate process. Jacquard and dobby machines have started to replace traditional methods as these are time-saving techniques.

Even though the silk-weaving industry faced serious decline towards the end of the 19th century, domestic patronage has kept the Kanchipuram industry alive. The radiant and shimmering weaves are an important part of every bride’s trousseau in southern India, and with design developments by design houses like Nalli Silks, the relevance of this handloom continues in today’s market.

Jamdani, a Persian word for ‘figured muslin’, is a weaving technique of decorating plain translucent muslin with dense and geometric extra weft patterns. It is said that the Mughal conquest of Bengal was, in part, to capture the centre of the fine gossamer textiles woven in the region. Cultural czarina Pupul Jayakar goes lyrical when she likens the textile craft expression to “a reservoir of an unbroken tradition of design consciousness, in which forms are produced not only to fulfill function but as a joyous affirmation of life.”

With the decline in power of the Mughals in the 18th century, jamdani lost court patronage that had led to the peak of its technical perfection. The weavers left to settle in centres like Awadh, where they were able to develop a strong local patronage for the delicate textile. Over the centuries, the process of weaving jamdani has not changed, but the traditional throw-shuttle loom has been replaced with the fly-shuttle loom. Today, jamdani is available in all colours with the predominant use of cheaper and easily available chemical dyes. Uppada jamdani, woven in Andhra Pradesh, was awarded the GI protection in 2009, but the same protection is yet to be given to the jamdani woven in Bangladesh and other parts of Asia.

The Crafts Council of West Bengal took on the challenge of reviving the age-old technique of jamdani weaving with homespun cotton in the West Bengal town of Kalna by collaborating with weavers and spinners. Foremost among them is master weaver Jyotish Deb Nath, who is relentlessly trying to revive and market the hand-spun khadi jamdani fabric to make the handloom tradition a lucrative profession for young weavers.

Elaborately figured silken brocades of West Bengal called the baluchari sarees are a popular textile originally woven in the Murshidabad/Baluchara area. The tradition of weaving baluchari sarees using the complex ‘jala’ technique started in the 19th century with motifs reflecting Hindu, Muslim, and European aristocratic life.

Peacock motifs, human figures riding a train or smoking a hookah appear in boxes that resemble fresco panels of the terracotta temples in Bishnupur.

This weaving tradition declined at the end of the 19th century, but was revived again by the famed naksha-band of Varanasi. Ali Hasan, today, the weaving industry produces beautiful patterned fabrics with jacquard looms, though the earlier baluchari butidar sarees remain unmatched.

National Award winner Naseem Ahmed, great-grandson of Ali Hasan, is the last of the weavers from Varanasi who can weave a baluchari saree using the traditional ‘jala’. As custodian of this legacy, he laments the working conditions faced by handloom weavers. Despite the Geographical Identification mark, the baluchari textiles are facing a problem with the lack of new weavers learning the complex technique.

Re-warping them handloom

India is blessed with a multi-layered and culturally rich legacy of craft skills imbibed through the ebb and flow of historical events, societal practices, and most importantly, constant changes in
patronage and market environments. Every textile has a story with a rich past, developing alongside socio-political changes in society.

One thing common to all their stories is a present that battles with demand and strains of increasing urbanisation and globalisation. The lure of a textile industry driven by powerlooms and chemical dyes is seen as a logical progression from handspun, handloom traditions. In this struggle between man and machine, the handloom weavers, their ancestral knowledge and traditions, and the regional identities defined by handwoven textiles need to be revitalised.

The intricate dana or tangalia weaving of Gujarat that emulates fine beadwork, or the beautifully ornate bomkai sarees of Odisha are now rarely woven for local consumption. Where handloom pashmina shawls of Kashmir have been revitalised by designers and weavers to regain a strong foothold in the global market, the unique balalosh perfumed quilt, woven using local scent or attar from West Bengal is now a lost technique.

Numerous schemes have been projected and implemented by the central and state governments, but it is the designers, craft NGOs, and other private institutions that need to take the lead and work in tandem with existing policies and structures. The challenge for them is to ensure fair wages for the weaving community, and provide the marketing and knowledge-sharing platform for artisans to empower themselves and learn to navigate the meandering waves of contemporary needs and relentless competition.

Design intervention or artisan empowerment programmes must root themselves in protecting and reinforcing identities in a market that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

The government of Madhya Pradesh joined hands with UNIDO in a project to work with the chanderi. Using the cluster development module, their aim was to make the weaving community of Chanderi more dynamic, an effort that has intensified the camaraderie among weavers to cooperate and take their business and the legacy of Chanderi weaves forward. As a part of the programme, designers like Sanjay Garg were brought in to help weavers take traditional designs to the modern-day customers. Garg’s label ‘Raw Mango’ is a brand that has emerged from this collaboration between design and traditional skills.

In some instances, weavers and artisans have already started taking matters into their own hands and are reviving their traditional practices. Armed with a patola ikat legacy about 300 years old, the Salvi family has opened a private museum in Patan in Gujarat, to show the world the rich patola heritage and through textile tourism, to increase the respect and demand for their elaborately woven double ikat textiles.

William Bissel, managing director of Fabindia, says, “We are seeing a return to people caring about the deeper intrinsic value of an item – its material, technique, the quality of life for the craftsmen. As cost of natural raw material of good quality is increasing by the day, prices of handloom textiles are rising. Technological enhancements, easy procurement of raw material, and awareness campaigns can bring customers directly to the weaver. Efforts of organisations like Crafts Council of India, Dastkar, AIACA, Avani, Sahaj, Khamir, Shruja, and numerous others have created awareness and appreciation among consumers of the history, heritage and sustainable future that handloom textiles represent.

According to the Press Information Bureau, the government of India and Flipkart have signed a memorandum of understanding so that handloom weavers gain an online marketing platform to help them earn the right price for their products and to scale up their business. In the extreme corners of the Northeast, multiple livelihood projects by designers and craft activists are now creating sustainable livelihoods for the indigenous tribes by helping them document and preserve their existing design repertoire and adapt their everyday textile practices to a marketable venture.

“The household mode of production is the cradle of these handloom skills and needs to be supported and nurtured as such. With a fraction of the support that the state extends to other branches of industry, the handloom weaving industry can be the powerhouse of rural revitalisation in the 21st century,” says Uzramma, founder of Dastkar Andhra and Malikha fabrics.

In a world where handcrafting traditions are likened to artistic expressions and hobby-crafts, India still has large number of people, weavers and their families, earning a livelihood from handwoven textiles. The survival and innovation of handloom traditions is dependent on inculcating the creative ability to react to ever-evolving sensibilities of a globalised society. With combined efforts of farmers, dyers, spinners, weavers, NGOs, producer companies, designers, craft activists, policymakers, retailers, scientists and engineers, India has the opportunity to weave a new, more powerful handloom legacy.

Assisted by: Jahnvi Singh

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