

Outlook

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ON A TEXTILE TRAIL

From the highlands of Ladakh to the looms of Maheshwar to the romance of Banarasi silk, a journey through the regions where Indian weaves blossom

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WEAVING A STORY



Anindita Ghosh

THIS OCTOBER, WHEN THE AIR IS REDOLENT WITH THE fragrance of festivity, we bring you our special issue on the textiles of India. And there is no better time than this month of celebrations to pay tribute to those countless weavers who have been toiling in far-flung areas of the country so you can flaunt those crisp Bengal cottons that carry the scent of *kaash phool*, sensuous silks in rich hues that bear the romance of Banaras, and the diaphanous weaves that tell stories of the Narmada in Maheshwar.

In India, every region has its unique textile tradition that is deeply intertwined with the culture and ethos of its people. For instance, as Anuradha Sengupta explains in her story on Indigenous weaves (pg 62), a shawl is not just a shawl for the Dongria Kondh of Odisha. The motifs and colours of the embroidered Kapdaganda signify objects of societal significance, such as the yellow hues of the turmeric that grows abundantly and the green of the Niyamgiri hills where the community lives.

In our cover story (pg 36), we have spoken to the keepers of the craft and other stakeholders in the textile sector and brought you the stories that matter. Whether it is the Kanjivaram of Tamil Nadu, the Shantipuri tant of Bengal, or the ikat whose influence spreads far and wide, transcending regional boundaries, the stories of these traditional handloom textiles are rich in history and cultural context.

On our cover, we feature hand-spun and hand-woven Ladakhi pashmina from the house of Jigmat Couture. Read our story (pg 66) to know more about the husband-wife duo's efforts to preserve Ladakh's textile heritage and the exceptional Jigmat Couture Textile Museum of Ladakh that they founded.

So, this festive season, skip fast fashion and invest in traditional handloom weaves from certified weavers cooperatives and ethical retailers so that the makers of these magical textiles get their due and perhaps, someday, get to wear the fabrics that give so much joy to those who can afford them.

Anindita Ghosh



The Kapdaganda shawl of the Dongria Kondh community (Pg 62)

IN INDIA, EVERY REGION'S UNIQUE TEXTILE TRADITION IS DEEPLY INTERTWINED WITH THE CULTURE AND ETHOS OF ITS PEOPLE

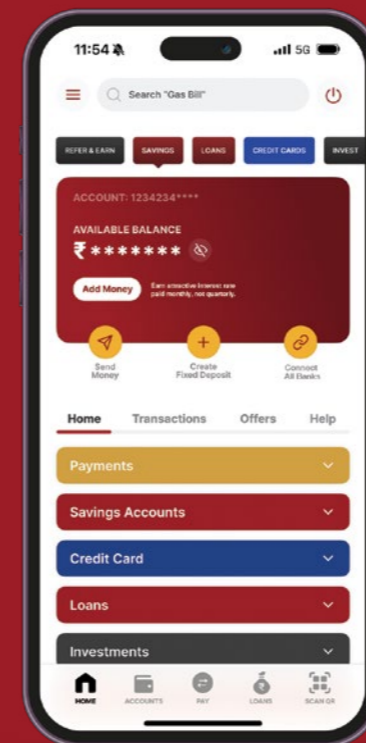


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•
HERE,
THERE, NOW
& SOON

COMPASS



ENDURING THE WAVE

IT IS POPULARLY BELIEVED THAT surfing originated in Hawaii. However, the ancient ceramics housed in Peru's Chan Chan Museum and the Larco Museum, depicting gods using *caballitos* (reed boats) to surf, fish, and transport prisoners, suggest otherwise. For over 3,500 years, fishermen along Peru's coast have been crafting these reed boats to navigate the Pacific waves. In Huanchaco, a northern seaside village, these arched reed boats, which can be traced back to 1400 BCE, still line the beach, their prows facing the ocean.

Made from tightly bound totora reeds, *caballitos* measure around 4 meters in length and can carry up to 100 kg. Today, only 40 fishermen in Huanchaco still use *caballitos*. Encroaching commercial boats and worsening erosion have made this ancient practice less viable. As fewer locals learn to build these boats, this tradition is on the brink of disappearing. Yet, for the people of Huanchaco, these boats remain a symbol of pride, believed by many to be the world's earliest surfboards.

The arched reed boats can be traced back to 1400 BCE

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK



AIR INDIA
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TALES OF INDIA



Explore more





NITIN CHAUDHARY

HOLIDAY OF A DIFFERENT KIND

WHEN PLANNING A vacation, at least for me, a few images come to mind—of hiking through nature or lounging by the pool and reading a book while sipping a drink. But this summer was different.

My day job had extracted every ounce of my energy in the last few months. Moreover, I was living alone, and my wife was away caring for her ailing mother. I had so far thought of myself as an island, capable of surviving alone and taking care of myself and my mental health. But I was wrong.

I wanted to escape the chaos and rush that had enveloped me. Each night, I collapsed into bed, physically drained but mentally restless, craving a break from it all. As summer approached, I longed for a getaway. And no, not to another city. Cities are notorious for adding stress with their inherent chaos. I sought a different escape—one that would counter the mental exhaustion and stress that I

experienced at work. That's when a friend proposed an option that, at other times, I would have laughed at.

"Why not go to this meditation retreat in the forest where they are redoing the place and help them build it," he suggested, "There will be many other volunteers, and you can join them."

The idea compelled me to think differently. A summer spent working with my hands in the sun sounded too far from the idea of a perfect holiday. However, I was ready to explore something completely different from my typical vacation. That's how I ended up at this retreat in the Black Forest, run by a group of volunteers. Some lived there permanently, while others, like me, gathered there sporadically every summer to help.

So, here we were, a bunch of strangers called in to help renovate this meditation retreat and its surroundings. I checked into one of the rooms with elementary facilities, which I had to share. The food was basic—no fancy, elaborate multi-course meals that I would have otherwise opted for on a typical vacation. But I wasn't here seeking luxury. I wanted to use my arms and legs and put them to work, which I used to only do while in the gym back home.

Each morning, we gathered for instructions from the retreat's leader, who assigned us different tasks for the day. The work rotated regularly, not only to prevent boredom but also to give us various experiences. My first assignment? Digging a pool.

I can't recall the last time I picked a shovel, and here I was, grasping the thick wooden handle with both my hands, lifting it up and striking it down on the soft earth. The earth gave in easily as if it had waited for a long time to be quarried. With each stroke, my mind began to quiet. The mental chatter that had plagued me for weeks started to fade, replaced by the rhythmic sound of the shovel hitting the ground. With every strike, the weight of my worries lifted, and a sense of calm settled in. All that mattered was yet another strike of the shovel and one more. ▶OT



Author's depiction of an unlikely vacation

A SUMMER SPENT WORKING WITH MY HANDS IN THE SUN SOUNDED TOO FAR FROM THE IDEA OF A PERFECT HOLIDAY



A glimpse from a craft cluster in Lucknow, working on "The Embroidered Wall," an idea that was conceived by the Tarun Tahiliani Design Studio during COVID-19 to keep artisans busy and reassure them.

COUTURE AND CRAFT

Tarun Tahiliani's studio is renowned for meticulously blending traditional Indian craftsmanship with precise modern tailoring

The world of high fashion holds an irresistible allure, but it also has the potential to champion conservation and nurture art and craft skills. In India, high fashion seamlessly intertwines luxury with its rich cultural heritage, where each piece is carefully handmade, showcasing boundless creativity while preserving traditional skills.

One of the most esteemed figures in Indian fashion, Tarun Tahiliani's studio is renowned for its meticulously detailed collections that effortlessly blend traditional Indian craftsmanship with precise modern tailoring, reflecting India's rich cultural heritage.

NURTURING A LEGACY

Tahiliani, who co-founded Ensemble in 1987, achieved a significant milestone by becoming the first Indian to showcase at Milan FashionWeek in 2003. Tahiliani is celebrated for his distinct approach to fashion, which reflects his deep

appreciation for historical context, culture, and the art of fashion. This ethos is palpable in the brand's unwavering commitment to enriching, preserving, and promoting India's rich crafts culture.

Through its support for local talent, the brand plays a vital role in safeguarding centuries-old handicraft techniques and nurturing regional narratives, skills, and materials. From its inception, Tahiliani's vision has been to honor the country's heritage by upholding the traditional craftsmanship of artisans, which he regards as the true cultural heart of India. However, the proliferation of fast fashion and urban labour has led to a decline in generational crafts.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CRAFT

In an effort to sustain and invigorate the industry, the brand has made a steadfast commitment to bolster craft clusters and has identified the village of Haidergarh, near Lucknow, as a key focus area. Notably,

women in this village have received training and empowerment, which has provided them with meaningful employment opportunities. Furthermore, the brand has established a second training center in Gurugram. The all-female centers empower female artisans by enabling them to leverage their generational skills to earn a living. So far, 97 women have been trained in the centres.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING

The company is making a concerted effort to enhance the skills of its in-house staff. To achieve this, they have rolled out comprehensive training programmes tailored to different staff roles, such as floor managers, supervisors, coordinators, team leaders, and service staff. These initiatives are specifically designed to provide mentoring in a wide array of crucial skills, including but not limited to leadership, effective communication, conflict resolution, adaptability, and team building.



ANAND NEELAKANTAN

MIRAGE OF TIME

STEPPED INTO BHAKTAPUR Durbar Square, and my breath was taken away. Those visiting Nepal often skip this heritage site for the stunning mountain vistas, but a history buff like me was as excited as a kid unwrapping a present. The intricate carvings seemed like an ancient jewel box that had come to life. Ornate wooden structures reached skyward, their tiered roofs adorned with gleaming golden finials. Stone statues of gods and kings stood as silent sentinels, their weathered faces hinting at centuries of history. Erase the few billboards and mobile shops from your vision and you could be standing in a medieval city teeming with life. Thanks to the Chinese, the rebuilding of this city after the earthquake has been spectacular.

As I wandered around the square, my mind drifted to the rich past of this remarkable place. Bhaktapur was once the glittering capital of the Malla kingdom, a powerful dynasty that ruled the Kathmandu Valley for over 300 years. Founded in the 12th century by King Ananda Malla, the city grew into a vital hub along the ancient trade route between India and Tibet. Subsequent rulers, like Yaksha Malla and Bhupatindra Malla, continued to expand and embellish Bhaktapur. Each left their mark through grand building projects and artistic patronage. With its five-tiered roof, the towering Nyatapola Deval Temple stood as a testament to their vision and craftsmanship.

My family, impatient to reach Pokhara, was trailing behind me with indulgent smiles. They bear with me on the condition that the next day, I will bear with their adventures and participate in a few of them. Meanwhile, I

could sit here, in this old town, forever. They rolled their eyes as I prattled on about how this square had witnessed the rise and fall of empires. The Malla dynasty gave way to the Shahs, then the Ranas. Each era brought new influences, yet the heart of Bhaktapur's heritage endured. As I gazed at the Golden Gate of the palace, its gilt metalwork glowing in the afternoon sun, I felt a profound connection to the countless others equally awed by its magnificence. How many merchant caravans carrying fine muslin and cotton, spices and clothes, swords and ornaments would have passed through these streets on their way to Tibet? How many Chinese pilgrims would have stopped to have a few days of rest here on their way to the land of the Buddha?

As I continued my exploration, an unexpected realisation struck me. The intricate wooden carvings and multi-tiered

roofs of Bhaktapur's temples bore a striking resemblance to the wooden temples I had seen in Kerala, thousands of miles away in southern India. The ornate details, the sloping roofs, and the overall architectural style seemed to echo across the vast distance.

I found myself pondering this strange connection. How could two places, separated by such a great expanse of land and distinct cultural influences, share such similar design elements? One was the child of mountains, and the other, the bride of the seas.

Experts may differ and point fine differences, but to my untrained eyes, the resemblances are too striking to be mere quirky coincidences of history. Perhaps it spoke to some ancient, shared heritage or artistic exchange that had long been forgotten. My reflective mood deepened as I wandered through the narrow lanes branching out from the main square. Each



Intricately carved wooden door and stone statues at Bhaktapur Durbar Square



A view of the central part of Durbar Square

PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK

turn revealed new marvels—the Vatsala Temple with its sandstone walls, the imposing statue of Bhupatindra Malla atop a stone column, and the delicate beauty of the Siddhi Laxmi Temple.

The Golden Gate, a masterpiece of repoussé art, held my gaze for long moments with its intricate metalwork depicting deities and mythical creatures.

As the day waned and after I had finished the visit to the 55-window palace, I sat on the steps of an ancient water tank, watching the play of light on the aged stones. The square buzzed with a mix of locals going about their daily lives and fellow tourists drinking in the sights. Past and present seemed to blur at this moment.

As I sat there, my mind wandered to another architectural marvel I had visited years ago—the Padmanabhapuram Palace in Travancore, Kerala. The similarities with the 55 Window Palace and Padmanabhapuram Palace were striking. Of course, Padmanabhapuram Palace is much bigger, but both structures boasted intricate wooden carvings, tiled roofs, ornate pillars, and a harmonious blend of form and function. The craftsmanship in both places spoke of a shared aesthetic sensibility despite being

separated by thousands of kilometres.

The more I pondered, the more connections I saw. The vibrant masks and elaborate costumes of Nepal's festivals reminded me of the Theyyam and Bhuta Kala rituals of North Kerala and Tulu Nadu. The swirling patterns, the bold colours, the air of mysticism—all seemed to echo each other across the vast expanse of the Indian subcontinent.

I found myself speculating about ancient trade routes, shared cultural influences, or common ancestral traditions. Was it the Chinese influence, one through the sea and the other through the mountain passes? The possibility of such deep-rooted connections between these distant regions was intriguing and humbling. It highlighted how much of our shared history remains unexplored.

As the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the ancient square, I felt

a renewed appreciation for the complex tapestry of cultures that make up this part of the world. Whether in Nepal or Kerala, each thread seemed to be part of a larger, intricate design that continues to evolve and inspire to this day.

These unexplored connections invite us to look deeper into our shared history. They challenge us to question our preconceived notions about cultural boundaries and inspire us to seek out the common threads that bind us.

From the intricate woodwork of Bhaktapur's temples to the similar craftsmanship found in Kerala's palaces, from the vibrant festivals of Nepal to the ritualistic performances of North Kerala, stories are waiting to be unravelled.

As travellers, we often seek the exotic and the different. Yet, sometimes, the most profound discoveries lie in recognising the familiar in the foreign. With its medieval charm and rich history, Bhaktapur offers a glimpse into Nepal's past and a mirror reflecting the vast and varied cultural landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

I walked back to the car, where my family waited. The next day was for adventure, but Bhaktapur kept me under its spell. ►OT

I SPECULATED ABOUT ANCIENT TRADE ROUTES, SHARED CULTURAL INFLUENCES, OR COMMON ANCESTRAL TRADITIONS

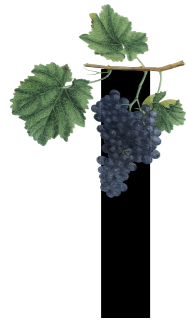
A TWO-WEEK WINE-SOAKED ADVENTURE THROUGH THE MONTALCINO, MONTEPULCIANO, AND CHIANTI REGIONS OF TUSCANY

Words → RANJAN PAL



Sangiovese is the most renowned Tuscan red grape variety

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK



IT HAD LONG BEEN A BUCKET LIST DREAM of mine to visit Tuscany, the heartland of the most excellent Italian wines, during the grape harvest. In August, I realised that dream with a group of close friends. We spent two weeks in a five-bedroom villa just outside San Quirico d'Orcia and conducted several wine excursions to the nearby Montalcino, Montepulciano and Chianti regions.

These regions are home to three of Italy's most famous wines: Brunello di Montalcino, Vino Nobile de Montepulciano, and Chianti Classico. All three are made from Sangiovese, Tuscany's dominant grape. We also wandered the narrow cobbled streets of several ancient towns in the Tuscan countryside, imbibing the fabulous medieval art and architecture, interacting with the friendly locals and sampling the superb cuisine.

THE VILLA PODERE I PERETI

We decided on the villa Podere I Pereti (a country house with pear trees) in San Quirico d'Orcia for both cost and location—it was broadly equidistant from the three major wine regions we wanted to visit. After a long day's drive from Rome, as our convoy of rented cars entered the courtyard of our temporary home, we were immediately enchanted by the villa and the stunning views of the Val d'Orcia. Built by builder Nonno Remo as his family home, it was later beautifully renovated. The property was surrounded by vineyards and olive groves, from which the Remo family used to produce Orcia red wine and green-gold olive oil. The first night, we asked the versatile Alessandro, the caretaker of the olive groves, to serve our first Italian meal out on the porch as dusk settled. He started with a delicious antipasti of pappa al pomodoro—a thick Tuscan bread soup prepared with fresh tomatoes, olive oil, garlic and basil. Shoulder-

cut beef in a pepper sauce followed. Finally, he served the greatest of all Italian desserts, a melt-in-the-mouth tiramisu. Accompanied by a couple of bottles of Vermentino, the light-bodied dry white wine popular in Tuscany, we were transported into bliss under a night sky strewn with stars.

EVERY TOWN HAS A STORY

Each Tuscan town we visited was fascinating. They are typically built on a hill, with the centre around the largest piazza, dominated by the Duomo and campanile on one side, and surrounded by a few grand palazzos on the other. From the piazza, narrow streets radiated outwards, winding through the huddle of tall houses to the town gates built into massive Etruscan walls surrounding the town. This design had a specific purpose—defence against outside enemies—similar to

Rajasthan's fortified cities.

The closest of these towns to us was Pienza, which was elevated from obscurity by Aeneas Piccolomini, who was elected Pope Pius II in 1458. He immediately set about transforming his birthplace with the construction of an impressive Cathedral of the Assumption and a clutch of palaces around the Piazza Pio II. We were charmed by this tiny jewel of a town. That night, we found a terrace restaurant overlooking the Val d'Orcia, where we sampled local specialities like wild boar pasta in tomato sauce and veal filet with porcini mushrooms: accompanied by a couple of bottles of the superb Italian red Brunello di Montalcino and Pienza's famous pecorino cheese made entirely from sheep's milk.

VISIT TO THE POLIZIANO WINERY

We visited three significant wineries, but the



Poliziano winery is a top producer of Vino Nobile De Montepulciano, and has been operating since 1961

COURTESY: AZIENDA AGRICOLA POLIZIANO



San Gimignano's skyline has earned it the nickname "The Medieval Manhattan"

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

best by far was Poliziano, a top producer of Vino Nobile De Montepulciano. Margherita Pallecchi, the export manager, warmly welcomed us and took us outside to view the vineyards stretching away into the distance to the town of Montepulciano. Extreme weather conditions have taken their toll on Italy's grape harvest, and Poliziano suffered a 30 per cent drop in production last year.

In the tasting room, Margherita poured generous helpings of several reds (and one delicious chardonnay called Ambrae) leading up to the grand finale with the flagship Vino Nobile de Montepulciano (minimum 90 per cent Sangiovese). The delightful afternoon was capped off by a visit to the wine shop and a photo-op with the great man Federico Carletti, who has taken his father Dino's vision to such heights.

THE SIGHTS OF STUNNING SIENA

In any discussion of what to see in Tuscany, one cannot leave out the beautiful city of Siena, second only to Florence, against whom it fought a series of wars during the 13th-16th centuries before finally capitulating in 1555. When you first arrive at the city, don't

miss the classic view from just below the Basilica of San Domenico.

Our guide, Anja, led us up through narrow streets lined with patisseries displaying Siene ricciarelli (sweet almond biscuit) towards the Piazza del Duomo, where the great cathedral built in a Gothic-Romano style sits with its zebra-striped campanile. Inside is the most staggering collection of medieval paintings, sculptures, stained glass and wood carvings by every leading Siene artist of the time. Take note of the magnificent floor referred to as a "marble carpet" consisting of 56 carved panels depicting scenes from Greek and Roman mythology and the Bible.

Just a five-minute walk from the cathedral, one comes across a vast space shaped like a giant cockle shell. This square is the living heart of Siena, called the Piazza del Campo, which is paved with nine sections of red brick divided by lines of white travertine stone pointing directly to the Palazzo Pubblico. The imposing building is the seat of the city government, and it houses the Museo Civico, which displays numerous masterpieces of Siene art. You can also climb to the

top of the Torre del Mangia for the best 360-degree views of Siena.

THE MEDIEVAL MANHATTAN

Our final Tuscan town, San Gimignano, had a skyline with a forest of towers that stuck out like needles above the rest of the town. In the medieval era, these towers symbolised the wealth and power of the noble families that lived in them and were a form of strategic defence. These towers have disappeared from most of Italy except in San Gimignano, where 14 of the original 72 remain, giving it the nickname "Medieval Manhattan."

We climbed to the top of the tallest, named Torre Grossa (54 metres in height), to get a panoramic view of the Tuscan countryside. Back down, lunch was a delicious seafood risotto and a bottle of a crisp white Vernaccia from San Gimignano. Finally, we joined another long queue outside the world-famous Dondoli Gelateria. I chose the Champelmo, made from pink grapefruit and sparkling wine. It lived up entirely to its reputation of being the best ice cream in the world as the flavours exploded in my mouth. ►OT



Golden Buddha inside a temple in Sarnath

THE SACRED CIRCUIT

The Buddhist Circuit in Uttar Pradesh is more than just a journey through ancient ruins and religious sites; it is a path of spiritual discovery **By Rohit Singh**

Not every journey touches your soul in such a profound way. On this expedition, we will uncover Lord Buddha's timeless legacy, exploring the key moments of his life and the remarkable transformation from Prince Siddhartha to Gautama Buddha.

We begin with Kapilvastu, an ancient town that was the heart of the Shakya Empire around 2,500 years ago. It was here that Prince Siddhartha, born in Lumbini (now in Nepal), spent the first 29 years of his early life. At sixteen, he married Yashodhara, and together they had a son.

At the age of twenty-nine, Siddhartha renounced his royal life and all its luxuries to embark on a quest for ultimate wisdom, an event referred to in Buddhist scriptures as the *Mahabhinishkramana*.

Excavations and research conducted between 1971 and 1976 confirmed this town as the homeplace of Prince Siddhartha, and it is now a significant spot on the Buddhist circuit. During these excavations, stupas and ancient structures



Burmese pagoda at Kushinagar

in Piprahwa, Ganwaria, and Salargarh were rediscovered, gaining further prominence.

Our next destination is the world's oldest city, Kashi. Yes, we're headed to Sarnath. In ancient times, Sarnath was known by many names, including Rishipattana, Mrigadava, and Isipatana. One of the most significant events in the Buddhist world, the *Dhammachakra Pravartan*, took place here. Sarnath is where Lord Buddha delivered his first sermon to his five disciples after attaining enlightenment in Bodhgaya, marking the birthplace of Buddhism as

both a philosophy and a region. Today, Sarnath is a vast complex with hundreds of temples, stupas, pillars, and remnants. Its most prominent landmarks include the Dhamek Stupa, Mulagandhakuti Vihara Dharmarajika Stupa, Chaukhandi Stupa and the famous Ashokan Pillar; Sarnath is also home to the "Four Lions," India's national emblem, and a rich museum that brings history to life.

From Sarnath, you can journey to Jetavana in Saheth, located in Shravasti, where Lord Buddha spent much of his time meditating and sharing his teachings on salvation after attaining enlightenment. In Shravasti, several Asian countries have built stupas and pagodas, adding to its cultural and spiritual significance. The world peace bell installed here symbolises the message of global harmony and peace. As you approach Mahamongkol-Chai Dhammaland, a massive gilded statue of Lord Buddha stands tall, visible from afar.

Additionally, Kaushambi and Sankisa are home to more historical sites that narrate the timeless stories of Lord Buddha. Kaushambi reflects the devotion of King Ukdyanana, a fervent follower of Buddha, while Sankisa echoes Buddha's miraculous descent. Our journey culminates at Kushinagar, where Lord Buddha entered *Mahaparinirvana*, his final passing. Here, he delivered his last sermon, *App Deepo Bhava*, encouraging us to become our source of light and strength.

Kushinagar has ancient temples, stupas, monasteries, and pagodas. The Nirvana Temple marks where Buddha took his last breath, while the Ramabhar Stupa marks the exact cremation place of Lord Buddha. Revered as one of the most iconic Buddhist sites, Kushinagar draws visitors from around the globe. Many come to meditate in this serene atmosphere, finding peace and solace. Though Lord Buddha left his physical form, Kushinagar, his spiritual legacy endures. The path he revealed is not merely a way of life but a transformative journey that fosters humanity, compassion, and love.

Rohit Singh is a travel and lifestyle blogger. You can follow him on @rohitsinghaa and @roameorohit

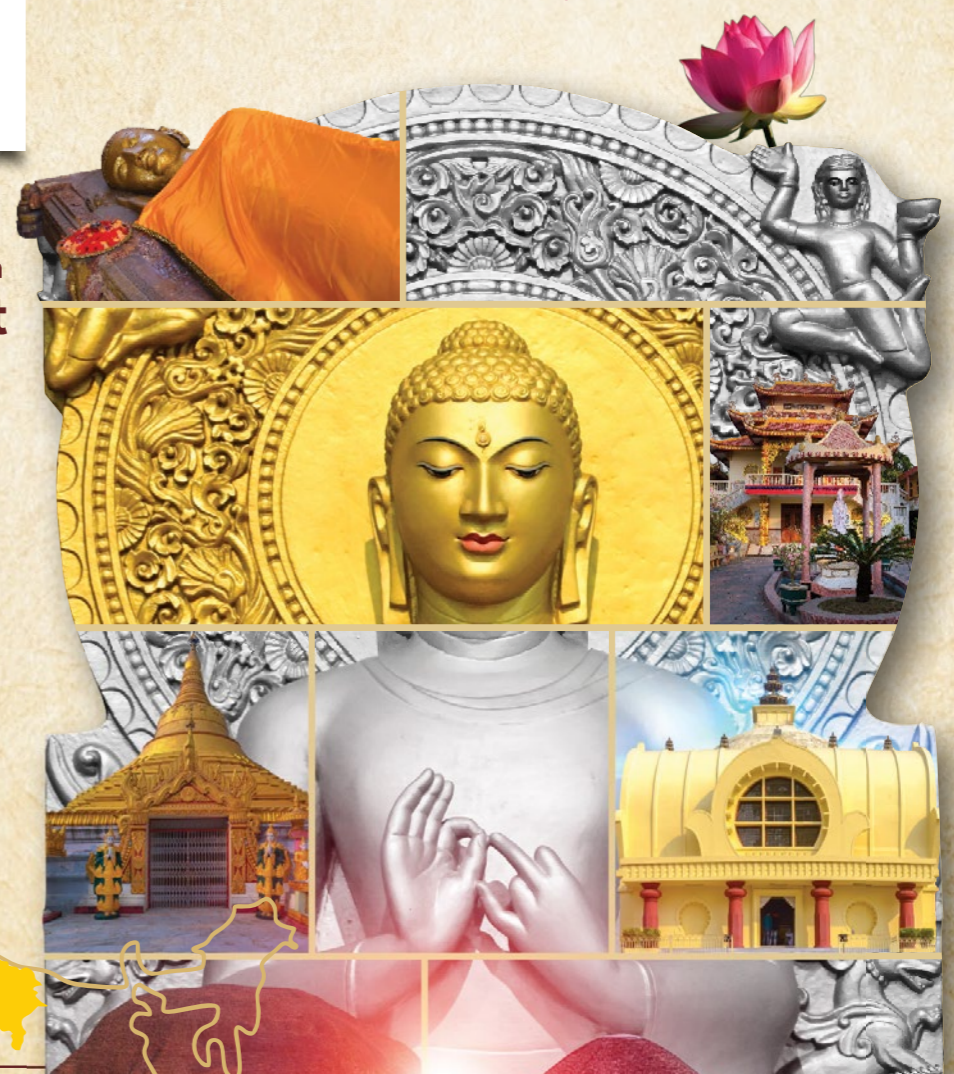


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Where HE descended from heaven after giving a sermon to his mother
- KUSHINAGAR**
The haloed city where the Buddha embraced Mahaparinirvana



THE JEWELS OF COSTA RICA



A LONG-TIME BIRDWATCHER DESCRIBES HIS TRAVELS
TO THE LUSH RAINFORESTS OF COSTA RICA

Words → **ASHISH KOTHARI**

I CAN'T BE," I SAID TO MYSELF. I RUBBED MY eyes and looked through the binoculars again. The apparition was still there—it was moving its head, flicking its tail up and down, and showing that it had no intention of vanishing like a mirage does when one shifts one's position.

I was staring open-mouthed at a resplendent quetzal, about as appropriately named a bird as any bird could be. In the verdant rainforests of Costa Rica, I was lucky to see not one but four individuals of this species, including an adult male with his ridiculously showy tail, another one splendid in his shiny green and shocking red outfit, and a couple of females that were not quite as fancily dressed but nevertheless took my breath away. They did not seem particularly bothered by my group's presence, feasting as they were on wild avocados and flying from one tree to another in search of the tastiest fruit.

A LAND BURSTING WITH BIRDS

In late June 2024, I travelled down the western and southern coast of Costa Rica, visiting fishing communities and nature reserves with my hosts who were members of Coope Solidar. They are a group of professionals who find the balance between conservation issues and development activities by working with local communities.

For decades before this trip, I'd heard that the country was a mecca for birders and naturalists so my expectations were high. I got what I bargained for; no matter where I went on the island, there was something evoking a "Wow," followed by a quick scramble to focus the binoculars or camera, a flip through the bird guidebook I was carrying and a "What is that?" query to my guide. On many occasions, I did not even want to spend time jotting down the names in my notebook, afraid that I would miss something interesting in those few seconds.

The delights of nature can be seen everywhere if one has a keen and observant eye. On a visit to Tárcoles Beach, we watched a flock of wood storks waiting patiently for fish discarded by incoming boats and the magnificent frigatebird (yes, that is its full name), with its deeply forked tail, circling overhead with the same expectation. Nearly everywhere there were great-tailed grackles, the equivalent of our Indian crows whose ubiquity I'm more familiar with. Great kiskadees, with their bandit-like faces, could be spotted on wires and buildings, occasionally revealing a brilliant patch of gold on their head.

My biggest "Wow" however, was reserved for Corcovado National Park and the region of the ominously named Cerro de la Muerta ("mountain

The keel-billed
toucan is found in
tropical jungles



of death"). Upon landing at the national reserve, which is accessed by a rather bumpy motorboat ride from the town of Puerto Jiménez, we came across a small racoon-like animal. Unafraid of our presence, the coati shuffled across the forest floor, smelling the leaf litter and undergrowth for food. Soon after, a family of collared peccary also crossed the path ahead, the tiny babies scampering after their parent. We were also lucky enough to see a couple of Baird's tapirs—their huge size surprised me—and on the trees above us, we spotted troupes of spider monkeys displaying their acrobatics and heard the call of howler monkeys.

NATURE'S MYSTERIES ABOUND

It was, however, the birds that consistently took my breath away. From the brilliant scarlet-rumped tanager, the prehistoric looking crested guan and the massive great curassow, to the species that had the word "ant" in their name—antpitta, barred antshrike, antbird—I could hardly keep track of them all.

A regal looking bare-throated tiger heron showed off on the roof of the national park's Biological Station, while grouchy-faced black vultures stared hopefully at us. The quetzal equivalent here was the northern black-throated trogon, a pigeon-sized bird that nature, in all its mysteries, had given a stunning combination of ochre yellow, blue, shiny green and red. However, the bird that truly left me speechless with delight was a tiny streak-chested antpitta that called out to its mate by puffing out its stomach, pulling it back in and uttering a loud multi-note whistle call. In the distance, its call was returned.

In the midst of all this bird watching, my excellent guide, Carolina Guerrero, would point out other creatures: a golden weaver spider with its expansive web glittering in the sunlight that filtered through the canopy, a huge owl butterfly with its fake eyes flitting by and various species of colourful fungi. Pointing to a red-coloured tree trunk of the species *Bursera simaruba*, she told us that it was called the "naked indigenous tree." I winced at what seemed to be a racist nomenclature but then she pointed to another specimen of the same species, where the red bark was peeling away to reveal a whitish surface, and told us it was called a "naked gringo tree."

No account of Costa Rica's wildlife would be complete without paying homage to those tiny jewels of the air: hummingbirds. At the wonderfully located Paraiso Quetzal Lodge, there was a hummingbird garden with feeders. The frenzy of activity at these sites was mesmerising—imagine four different types of hummingbirds darting in to put their sharp beaks into holes filled with sugar syrup, having their fill, then darting back and hovering close by, awaiting their next turn. Particularly stunning were the fiery-



Top and above: Scarlet-rumped tanager and blackthroated trogon

throated hummingbirds—their throat colours changing from green to an astonishing flaming red in the twinkle of an eye—and the Talamanca hummingbirds with their extra-long beaks. In the well-curated flower garden and forest patch that stretched downhill from the lodge, I saw a wrenthrush with its surprising red-gold cap skulking around. Local guide Jesus Fallas helped me identify an otherwise bewilderingly confusing set of sightings.

My final experience of Costa Rica's wildlife was at the Terra Valiente ("brave earth") retreat and its adjoining Finca Luna Nueva Lodge, near the town of La Fortuna. These ecologically conscious campuses, with their organic food production and sustainable architecture, are worth writing about but I will stick to describing the wildlife I encountered.

Over four days, I watched the very odd-looking and oddly named Montezuma oropendola, the keel-billed toucan with its multi-coloured beak, hundreds of white-crowned parrots, bright yellow-crowned euphantias, the red-legged honeycreeper with its stunning blues, and two species of tanagers sporting a combination of jet black and dark red plumage. Disappointingly, I missed getting a good view of the three-toed sloth that supposedly (and literally) hung around the lodge's premises.

I nearly made up for my loss by catching sight of some amazing creatures on a night walk led by nature guides at the lodge. I was delighted with the fulfillment of a lifelong desire to see the iconic red-eyed tree frog, its astonishing coloured eyes matched by its blood-red toes. A prehistoric helmeted basilisk glared at us with its baleful eyes and I finally saw how damselflies sleep—hanging on the end of tree tendrils.

BELOW THE SURFACE

While I don't want to spoil the image of Costa Rica as a veritable paradise for wildlife lovers that I've painted above, I'd be remiss to not put in a word on the darker side of this thriving country.

The impacts of mass tourism, the invasion of rich investors from the United States and other countries who are buying up land, the resulting displacement of local communities and their lifestyles, the expansion of monocultural African palm plantations for oil, and other such processes are fairly



The flower garden at Paraiso Quetzal Lodge

PHOTOGRAPHS: ASHISH KOTHARI

evident to a casual observer. Several decades of welfare policies and intelligent decision-making on trying to balance development and the value of the environment are being overturned in recent times.

What this means for the many non-human animals that currently co-exist with people is not difficult to foresee. Positively though, there are also voices that are countering this narrative and urging more ecological sanity in decision-making.

As I left to head back to India, where similar struggles are being witnessed, it was with a strange mix of memories. Nothing, however, could take away from that first glimpse of a resplendent quetzal and the moment I came across a red-eyed tree frog.

Nature continues to inspire and provide hope even in a world where doom and gloom seems so pervasive.



A red-eyed tree frog

WHERE TO STAY

The *Sirena Ranger Station* in Corcovado is a seven-to eight-hour drive from San José and has good dormitory accommodation with bunk beds, common washrooms, a dining room and a utility store. Several nature

hikes begin from here. Food and lodging cost approximately INR 10,075 but guide fees, which are mandatory, can vary.

The *Paraiso Quetzal Lodge* is a 90 minute-to two-hour drive from San José. It is beautifully surrounded by rolling hills and offers quetzal and birding tours, hiking opportunities, and other activities. Room rates range from approximately INR 8,396-16,792 per night.

You can also consider the *Tierra Valiente* and *Finca Luna Nueva Lodge*, about half an hour from La Fortuna and about two-and-a-half hours from Juan Santamaría International Airport in San José.

Tierra Valiente's room rates are anywhere between INR 12,593-16,791. The Finca Luna Nueva Lodge offers services like yoga activities and nature hikes. Room rates are anywhere between INR 11,754-23,508. ►OT

EXPERIENCE THE SOUL OF MAHARASHTRA

Explore the hidden gems of Maharashtra and immerse yourself in the pleasures of simple living. With immersive tours of farms and villages, the state offers a slow travel itinerary that lets you experience the region's natural beauty.



Strawberry fields in Mahabaleshwar

Travelling with your family or a large group of people often requires an active plan. If you are visiting Maharashtra, there is a lot of ground to cover and many outdoor experiences to have. When people think of Maharashtra, the big city lights of Mumbai are the dominant image that comes to mind. However, there is more to see in the state than just the glamorous capital. Pune is another beautiful city to visit in Maharashtra, and that's not all. The many lesser-known districts that

encompass beautiful little hamlets are something you shouldn't miss, especially if you are looking for a slow travel experience.

Beautiful trails and lush wildlife sanctuaries offer stunning views and let you catch sight of the vibrant flora and fauna that abound in the forests of Maharashtra. With immersive tours of farms and villages, the state offers a slow travel itinerary that lets you experience nature and the pleasures of simple living. To that end, whenever you decide to visit Maharashtra next, try to include some

offbeat experiences to get a proper feel of the region. Move away from exploring only the capital and the famous attractions and follow the lesser-trodden path. Here are some of the must-have experiences on your next trip to Maharashtra.

THE FLICKERING FORESTS OF BHIMASHANKAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

When it comes to Nature Tourism, India has a wealth of natural attractions to pick from. With many travellers actively seeking vacations to experience nature,

Maharashtra is a good place to start.

The Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary in Pune will enthrall nature lovers and adventure seekers. The wildlife sanctuary spreads across three districts of Maharashtra: Pune, Raigad, and Thane. Covering an area of 131 sq km, the sanctuary encompasses nine tribal villages. It is part of the Western Ghats, which is recognised as one of the 12 biodiversity hotspots of the world. What's more, the forests glow in the dark. This stunning phenomenon is due to the bioluminescent *Mycena* fungi in the monsoon season, illuminating the forests with their eerie green glow. If you want this surreal experience, the best time to visit the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary would be during the monsoon season.

Due to its sheer beauty and thriving flora and fauna, this is a preferred weekend getaway for people from Mumbai and Pune. A variety of bird species native to the region, as well as animals such as barking deer, flying squirrel and the Indian Giant Squirrel, are some of the wildlife you will see here. The sanctuary also has some challenging trekking trails, which would be of interest to seasoned trekkers and adventure enthusiasts. Visitors can also visit nearby attractions such as the Chas Kaman Dam and Bhimashankar Jyotirlinga Temple, picnic near Hanuman Lake or explore the Junnar caves.

GETTING THERE: This green paradise, which hides lush forests, gurgling waterfalls, and many trails, is located around 138 km from Pune and is easily accessible. Even though the sanctuary is open throughout, travellers should avoid visiting it after dark.

EXPERIENCE THE JOYS OF RURAL LIFE IN MAHARASHTRA

Maharashtra is a major player when it comes to agriculture in India, with the production of rice, millet, sugarcane, cotton, and peanuts being some of the state's main crops. To promote agrotourism, farmers from all across the state are opening up their homes for discerning travellers who want to come and experience simple rural life.

Various districts of the state have started promoting a more nature-based approach to travel that lets visitors slow



Top and above: International tourists at a village in the Konkan region; Pune's Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary is home to the Giant Red Squirrel

down. If you happen to visit Ratnagiri, be sure to experience the many joys farm life offers. Stay at one of the many homestays in the region and rediscover what it is like to go back to your roots. You can visit various small and picturesque villages in the region, such as Phungus, Malgund and many others, to experience rural life.

You can choose to go on village walks, learn to cook some local dishes from the friendly locals and also partake in farming while staying at one of the homestays in the villages. Visitors can observe all that goes into making a farm work and also participate. Enjoy various outdoor activities besides farming, such as birdwatching, trekking and stargazing.

From Ratnagiri, you can also take day

trips to nearby places. Visit Ganapatipule Beach, Thibaw Palace, Jaigad Fort, and Lighthouse Point. If you are with kids, a visit to the Ratnagiri Marine Museum is a must. Additionally, for a spiritual experience, there are a number of temples you can visit, including the Shree Devi Bhagwati Mandir, Parshuram Temple, and the Patit Pawan Temple. A trip to Ratnagiri is incomplete without sampling the famous mangoes of the region. If you happen to visit the place in summer, do visit the lush organic mango farms and be sure to take back some of the juicy mangoes for your friends and family.

GETTING THERE: You can drive from Pune or Mumbai to Ratnagiri district.

THE PLANTATION LIFE AT VENGURLA

Nestled in the lush and beautiful Singhudurg district, Vengurla is a hidden gem that not a lot of tourists explore when visiting Maharashtra. This is a great location if you want to enjoy some peaceful moments on sandy seashores and slow down. There are various attractions to see in and around Vengurla. Tour Nivti Fort and the beach or hike to Fort Terekhol, located near the Terekhol River, which falls between Sindhudurg District and the North Goa district. The fort was constructed in 1764 by Maharaja Khem Sawant Bhonsle. The beach nearby is serene and is an ideal spot if you are looking to relax and evade the tourist crowd.

There are also other offbeat beaches nearby, such as Bhogwe and Khavane, where you can spend some relaxing hours with family and friends. Take long walks through orchards and jungles, or learn pottery in the nearby village. For travellers wanting to seek the blessings of Lord Ganesh, the Redi Ganpati temple, which is located some 30 km from Vengurla, is a must-visit.

GETTING THERE: You can fly to Vengurla airport from Mumbai.

CHASING FIREFLIES IN PURUSHWADI

Nature has some of the beautiful surprises for us if we are patient and know where to look. To that end, the beautiful village of Purushwadi in Maharashtra is where you should go if you want to chase fireflies. Imagine you are in the middle of a lush, dark forest lit up with thousands of fireflies as if fairy lights are hanging from the sky.

Grassroots is a responsible, community-based rural tourism organisation that organises village walks and tours to see fireflies in Purushwadi. This national award-winning enterprise also organises the Fireflies Festival in May and June. You can also take their experiential tour package, which is community-run and makes the experience authentic and sustainable. Travellers can engage in the local traditions of the village, witness the beauty of nature, go on forest walks and enjoy various other cultural activities on their trip to Purushwadi.

Besides chasing fireflies, travellers can partake in various other activities, such as visiting the nearby villages. You can take walks around the Purushwadi village, speak to the locals, and learn about their lifestyle.



Top and above: Patgaon is a village in Bhudargad Taluka of Kolhapur District, Maharashtra; Go to Purushwadi if you want to chase fireflies

Learn about local Maharashtrian food with the help of the villagefolk and try your hand at cooking some of the dishes. Visit the temple and school in the village and walk to the small dam built over a tributary of the Mula River. If you are feeling adventurous, trek to Harishchandragad Fort (35 km), visit the Kalsubai Peak, which takes around 3-4 hours or visit the hilly hamlet of

Grassroots is a responsible, community-based rural tourism organisation that organises village walks and tours to see fireflies in Purushwadi

Bhandardara (33 km).

GETTING THERE: You can reach Purushwadi from Mumbai in about 5 hours by road. The nearest railway station is in Igatpuri, which is 70 km away.

In conclusion, Maharashtra offers a captivating journey through its diverse landscapes and vibrant traditions. From the dynamic streets of Mumbai to the serene Konkan beaches and majestic Western Ghats forts, travellers are invited to experience its rich cultural heritage. The state's warm hospitality, delicious cuisine, and vibrant festivals leave lasting memories. Whether seeking adventure or history, Maharashtra's charm ensures every moment is an exploration of its essence. Embrace the spirit of this incredible state and let it fuel your wanderlust.



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ESCAPE TO

Taj Bengal's design ethos is a fusion of colonial and modern styles



ELEGANCE

TAJ BENGAL, AN ICON OF MODERN LUXURY AND TIMELESS ELEGANCE IN KOLKATA, IS CELEBRATING ITS 35TH ANNIVERSARY

Words → PIYALI SEN

A

AS YOU DRIVE DOWN BELVEDERE ROAD in Kolkata, passing the National Library and moving towards the Race Course, you can see the elegant structure of Taj Bengal. This iconic Kolkata hotel, which celebrates its 35th anniversary in October, does not tower above the landscape; its height has been deliberately kept at five floors to stay clear of the paths of migratory birds flying to the nearby Alipore Zoo. Many of these birds nest in the Hotel's trees and are tended by security guards when injured.

Taj Bengal famously took five years to build and was inaugurated by the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, on October 10, 1989. Since its opening, Taj Bengal has hosted distinguished guests, including Nobel and Booker Prize winners, heads of state, and film and sports celebrities. Notable visitors include Indra Nooyi, Jeffrey Archer, Jhumpa Lahiri, Mira Nair, and Shah Rukh Khan. Hillary Clinton visited Calcutta twice—once when Mother Teresa passed away and once in 2012—and stayed at Taj Bengal both times. "Taj Bengal has a remarkable legacy. The Hotel was IHCL's first footprint in the East, and there have been many firsts with the Hotel ever since it opened its doors," said Arnab Chatterjee, General Manager, Taj Bengal.

THE ART OF THE MATTER

The legendary establishment, designed by the renowned American architect Bob Fox, is influenced by the city's rich art, culture, and heritage.

"The Hotel's architecture is a fusion of styles; a unique blend of colonial and modern. The building's façade, intricate design with planter beds for each room, its grand entrance, and stunning Atrium Lobby are all testament to the unique luxury feel which the Hotel has offered for the past 35 years," said Chatterjee.

Step inside, and you will come across terracotta statues in the Promenade Lounge, crafted by sculptor-painter Shyamal Roy over five years. They serve as a tribute to this incredible art form of Bengal and emphasise the Hotel's deep connection to the city's rich cultural heritage. The art and culture thread is also evident in the works of prominent Bengali artists, such as Sakti Burman, Paritosh Sen, and Asit Halder, displayed across the Hotel. The Hotel puts a strong emphasis on design, and various areas have undergone design transformations. For example, Cal27, the all-day diner at Taj Bengal, named after the neighbourhood's postal code, 700027, was a cafe called The Esplanade in its 1989 avatar. Later, it was transformed into a trattoria. In 2017, a French designer oversaw the renovation, converting it into Cal27 and drawing inspiration from iconic Kolkata landmarks such as the Marble Palace, Sovabazar Rajbari, and Victoria Memorial. The chequered floor and the louvre windows pay homage to old Kolkata homes.

GLORIOUS FOOD MEMORIES

Taj Bengal's dining establishments are famous and have garnered a loyal following over the years. Several celebrities from Delhi and Mumbai make it a point to dine at Chinoiserie to savour flavours from China's Sichuan and Canton regions. Artist Ganesh Pyne had a favourite corner in the Promenade Lounge, where he would often come and have



Taj Bengal is synonymous with gracious hospitality

tea with his wife. Vidya Balan always made it a point to have her favourite dish, palong shaker chorchori, in Sonargaon.

"The hotel's legacy of its F&B offerings has been unparalleled in the past 35 years and evolved with time," said Chatterjee.

LOOKING AHEAD

As the iconic Hotel completes 35 years this October, there are plans to upgrade the Hotel. "This year, we are upgrading our Club Lounge facility along with our Private Club—The Chambers," said Chatterjee. "Our members will now have the best facilities in The Chambers for a meeting space, lounge, bar and restaurant. Our guests from the Club and Suites will also have access to a renovated Club Lounge with a renewed breakfast and dining experience. We will soon upgrade our spa and salon, which is part of the J Wellness experience and has opened in other key hotels in Mumbai and Delhi."

The Hotel will soon start a new cocktail bar menu at Junction and a new look and experiential menu at The Grill by the Pool.

AN EARTH-FRIENDLY STAY

Taj Bengal's Paathya brings together a bouquet of initiatives to forge a journey focused on environmental stewardship, social responsibility, preserving heritage, and more.

"The hotel has embarked on a decarbonisation journey by reducing its carbon impact and investing in renewable energy production," said Chatterjee. Collaborating with Tata Power, they have provided Electric Vehicle (EV) charging stations at the Hotel. They have stopped using fossil fuel in laundry since August 2024, and all machines are now electrically operated.

"We have been using the Paathya water through our in-house bottling plant and have reduced usage of plastic bottles in the guest rooms, restaurants, and banquet venues. The Hotel is also actively involved in upholding the IHCL's commitment to its project with UNESCO on Intangible Cultural Heritage through its support of Durga Puja and the pattachitra art form of West Bengal." ▶OT

THE INFORMATION

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WHY TRAVEL INSURANCE IS A MUST-HAVE

Whether it's a weekend getaway, a work trip, or an international vacation, travel insurance is often overlooked but crucial

Are you dreaming of your next vacation abroad? Whether it's the serene beaches of Thailand, the cobblestone streets of Europe, or the vibrant markets of Morocco, travel is an exciting experience. But how many of us consider the potential pitfalls amidst all the excitement? From delayed flights to lost baggage and unexpected medical emergencies, a dream vacation can become a nightmare in no time. This is where travel insurance steps in. But is travel insurance worth it? Let's explore seven reasons why it is essential to

your travel checklist.

PROTECTION AGAINST TRIP CANCELLATIONS

Imagine this: you've booked your tickets, secured your hotel rooms, and are excitedly counting down the days to your vacation. Then, an emergency strikes out of nowhere—a family illness, a sudden work commitment, or even jury duty. Without travel insurance, you could lose all the money you've invested in your trip.

Bajaj Allianz's travel insurance plans offer trip cancellation coverage, ensuring that if the unexpected happens, you

won't be left financially stranded. Their plans reimburse non-refundable travel expenses, helping you avoid a financial loss even if your vacation plans fall through due to unforeseen circumstances.

MEDICAL EMERGENCIES ABROAD

Medical emergencies can happen anywhere, anytime. And if you're abroad, medical expenses can be exorbitant, especially in countries like the U.S. or Switzerland. While your regular health insurance might cover you in India, it's unlikely to extend to foreign destinations.

Bajaj Allianz's travel insurance covers

everything from minor injuries to emergency medical evacuations. Whether you need to see a doctor for a sudden illness or require hospitalization after an accident, having travel insurance can save you from hefty medical bills. With Bajaj Allianz, you're covered for medical emergencies, giving you peace of mind that you're protected in an emergency.

LOST LUGGAGE

Few things can ruin the start of a vacation, like lost or delayed luggage. It's frustrating, inconvenient, and costly, especially if you need to replace essentials while waiting for your bags.

Thankfully, Bajaj Allianz travel insurance includes compensation for lost or delayed baggage. Their policies also provide emergency cash advances, ensuring you can buy what you need until your luggage arrives or is replaced. With their comprehensive cover, you'll be able to get back to enjoying your trip, knowing your essentials are taken care of.

TRIP DELAYS

Flight delays are more common than we'd like, and they can throw a wrench in your travel plans. Whether it's due to bad weather, technical issues, or civil unrest, being stuck at an airport for hours can cost you money for meals, accommodation, or transportation you hadn't planned. Depending on the plan, Bajaj Allianz offers compensation for trip delays, ensuring that your out-of-pocket expenses are covered to help cover the cost of accommodations, food, and other necessities during long delays.

LOST PASSPORT

Losing your passport while travelling abroad can be one of the most stressful experiences. Not only do you need to replace the document, but you also have to deal with embassies, authorities, and a lot of red tape, all while trying to enjoy your trip. Bajaj Allianz travel insurance covers the loss of personal documents, including your passport. This benefit helps with the costs of obtaining a new passport, allowing you to minimise the hassle and financial burden of such an



Bajaj Allianz travel insurance covers the loss of personal documents, including your passport

unfortunate event.

PERSONAL LIABILITY

Accidents can happen when we least expect them, and sometimes, they can lead to legal troubles, especially when you're abroad. What if you're held responsible for accidentally damaging property or causing injury to someone else during your travels? Bajaj Allianz's travel insurance includes personal liability coverage, protecting you from financial claims against you. This can be especially important in countries where litigation is common. Bajaj Allianz ensures you have the legal and financial backing to deal with such situations.

HIJACK DISTRESS ALLOWANCE

While it's not something we like to think about, hijackings do happen. Such a situation can be terrifying, and the aftermath can involve a long recovery period. Bajaj Allianz offers a hijack distress allowance for up to six days if you're caught in such a situation. While no one ever expects to need this coverage, it's a small price to pay for the security of knowing you'll be supported in a worst-case scenario.

IS TRAVEL INSURANCE WORTH IT?

Travelling without insurance can leave you vulnerable to unforeseen expenses,

missed opportunities, and unnecessary stress. So before you pack your bags for that next big adventure, consider making travel insurance part of your essentials. With Bajaj Allianz's affordable and customizable plans, enjoy your trip with the confidence that you're protected against the unexpected.

COMMON FAQs ON TRAVEL INSURANCE

- 1. When should I buy travel insurance?**
You should purchase travel insurance as soon as you book your trip. This way, you'll be covered for trip cancellations and other events that may occur before your departure.
- 2. Is travel insurance more expensive for older travellers?**
Yes, travel insurance costs generally increase with age, as older travellers are more likely to file claims. However, Bajaj Allianz offers policies tailored to senior citizens that provide affordable and comprehensive coverage.
- 3. How do I file a claim?**
Filing a claim with Bajaj Allianz is simple. You can submit your claim online or through their 24/7 helpline. To streamline the process, keep all necessary documents, such as receipts, medical records, and a copy of your policy, handy.
Travel smarter, protect your peace of mind, and make the most of your journeys with Bajaj Allianz travel insurance.

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DISCOVER,
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The shades of white, red, and black, symbolise purity, blood, and soil, reflecting the craft's deep cultural significance

EXPLORE



DREAM CATCHERS

MINDANAO, THE PHILIPPINES' second-largest island, boasts a unique ancient tradition of dream-weaving or T'nalak. This art form, practised by the Indigenous T'boli people for centuries, involves creating intricate textiles from the fibres of the abacá plant. The process is inspired by dreams, believed to be visions from the goddess Fu Dalu, and interpreted into patterns by master weavers. The Lang Dulay T'nalak Weaving Centre, located near Lake Sebu, is a key hub for this tradition. Named after the late master weaver Lang Dulay, the centre preserves around 100 unique T'nalak patterns she created, each with its own story. Young weavers usually replicate designs seen by the masters, while only senior weavers can weave their own dreams. The production of T'nalak is labour-intensive, involving the careful extraction, drying, and combing of abacá fibres, followed by precise weaving and natural dyeing.

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

SPINNING STORIES

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JAWAHARLAL NEHRU, INDIA'S FIRST PRIME MINISTER once stated, "The history of India may well be written with textile as its leading motif." And true to his words, our past and our present as a nation have been intricately linked with our native textiles. India's textile history can be traced back to prehistoric times, with evidence of fabric weaving and spinning traditions found as far back as the Harappa, Lothal, and Mohenjo-daro civilisations, with cotton occupying a prominent place among the commercial crops of the Indus Valley. Almost every region in all the four cardinal directions in India has its own signature textile, intertwined closely with the culture and socio-economic situation of the places. Honouring these legacy weaves and the people who are nurturing them today, our cover story explores some of the most vibrant and culturally important textiles in India.

Handwoven
Banarasi sari
by Shanti
Banaras



COURTESY: SHANTI BANARAS



→ The "Roar" silk saree by Shanti Banaras

COURTESY, SHANTI BANARAS



GARB OF THE GODS

THE STORIED BANARASI SILK REMAINS RELEVANT WITH NEW DESIGNERS GIVING IT A MODERN TAKE

Words → **ANTARAA CHATTERJEE**

THE BORDERS WERE A little crumpled but the zari work shined as though brand new. My mother's 30-year-old bridal Banarasi sari was soft against the skin of my palms, the deep magenta with its jade drape still as vibrant, the paisley in gold filigree bringing out a soft sheen synonymous with

the fabric, just as when she wore it on her wedding day in 1994.

To identify an original Banarasi silk from a fake, you need to know what to look for. "We were taught to always check the reverse side. Look at the warps and wefts and a plain patch of silk almost 6-8 inches long on the *pallu*," my grandmother informed me sagely.

There are, of course, authenticity certificates you can ask for from sellers, and the GI tag is the most sensible way to go.

The fabric woven on a traditional handloom will have floats (skipped threads) on the reverse side, and there will be little imperfections, proving that it was woven by hand and marking it separate from machine-produced counterparts.

In Banaras or Varanasi, known to be the hub of the eponymous silk textile, you sit by the ghats steeped in spiritual solace, the amplitude of the *aarti* sounds filling you. You admire the culture, listen to old tales, and spin the yarn back to the roots of this ancient city, which is as old as the scriptures. When you see Varanasi, you learn how it gave birth to the fabric of celebration.

"Royalty," said Khushi Shah of Shanti Banaras when asked what comes to mind when you think of the fabric. "Banarasi

silk evokes thoughts of luxury, intricate weaving, and deep cultural roots. Each sari is a work of art, often woven with gold or silver threads, featuring patterns inspired by Mughal architecture. Its lustre and drape make it a favourite for brides who want to embody elegance and tradition. Unlike other bridal silks, Banarasi offers a unique blend of heritage, opulence, and versatility," she added.

Throughout the centuries, the Vedic texts have referenced a golden cloth or "*hiranya vastra*" that is worn by the Gods. The sage Patanjali spoke of another superior cloth, calling it the "*Kasika vastra*" in the 2nd Century BC. In all the stories, the repeatedly mentioned sacred and special cloth is said to be the Banarasi silk.

The fabric of celebration, the Banarasi silk, is known for its timeless elegance and gorgeous zari work with traditional motifs and a well-documented history intertwining the fabric with its place of birth.

Jataka tales place the Kashi kingdom as a prominent cotton and silk production centre in the 5th and 6th century BCE. The cotton fabrics from Kashi were renowned for their fine weaving, smooth texture, and pristine whiteness.

According to literature from the Maha Bodhi Society, which dates back over 2,000 years, Buddha's remains were treated with balm and wrapped in exquisite cloth woven in Sarnath, a place now selling some of the finest Banarasi saris.

The technique of hand-weaving the silk into the masterful saris that you wear is one of intense labour. The Banarasi silk saris are meticulously crafted on jacquard pit looms. The *tana*, or warp threads, are carefully stretched and held taut on the loom, while

the *bana*, or weft threads, are positioned in a shuttle. As the shuttle glides back and forth, it interlaces the warp and weft threads, creating the intricate patterns and textures that define these exquisite saris.

However, with machine-made products cutting off time and labour intensity, the handloom weaving traditions have somewhat dwindled.

"Bunkar: The Last Of The Varanasi Weavers" is a 2018 documentary that covers the city of Varanasi and the plight of the weavers. The *bunkars*, or the weavers of Banarasi Silk, talk about how the power loom is the biggest threat to their craft. A finely woven sari that takes nearly three months to complete on a handloom could be replicated in merely a day in a power loom.

Recent demand resurgence driven by a growing appreciation for handmade, sustainable products has let the struggling weavers of Varanasi breathe a sigh of relief. "While the pandemic posed challenges, there's been a steady increase as people return to traditional, high-quality fashion for weddings and special occasions," said Shah. "We collaborate with traditional weaving clusters in Varanasi, where artisans have honed their craft for generations. Their expertise ensures each sari is a masterpiece. We are committed to supporting these artisans through fair wages and preserving centuries-old techniques," she said.

The appeal of Banarasi silk is not limited to bridal trousseau, as Shah points out. With more designers incorporating it into contemporary fashion and sustainable brands upcycling old saris into new outfits, the Banarasi silk remains steadfast in its enduring elegance.



Linen
Kanjivaram sari
by Advaya



— COVER STORY —

→ EXPLORE ●

LEGACY LOOM



BEYOND THEIR EXQUISITE CRAFTSMANSHIP, THE APPEAL OF
KANJIVARAM SARIS LIES IN THEIR TIMELESSNESS

Words → **SATARUPA PAUL**

ANANYA MUKHERJEE vividly remembers the day she wore her mother's Kanjivaram sari to her first job interview. "I needed something simple but elegant," recalls the Hospitality PR and marketing professional, "It was my mother who suggested one of her

Kanjivaram saris—an Indian lotus-pink with a maroon and gold zari border." She has now amassed a collection of over 60 such saris, many of which have been handed down from her mother and grandmother.

Originating from the temple town of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, the Kanjivaram is a testament to the enduring legacy of one of India's most prized textiles. The tradition of weaving these saris began during the reign of the Chola Dynasty (9th to 13th centuries), but the craft truly flourished under the Vijayanagara Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries. Introduced by the Padmasaliyas, a Telugu-speaking silk-weaving community, Kanjivaram weaving became synonymous with quality and craftsmanship.

Kanjivaram saris are celebrated for their luxurious silk, traditionally sourced from the mulberry silkworms of Karnataka, and their intricate motifs, inspired by nature, mythology, and the temple architecture of the region. The use of gold zari, made with

pure silver thread coated in gold, adds to the weave's opulence.

What sets Kanjivaram saris apart is their weaving techniques, especially the *korvai* and *petni* methods. *Korvai*, which translates to "contrast" in Tamil, allows for the distinct separation of the sari's body and border, enabling the weaver to incorporate vivid contrasting colours seamlessly. Meanwhile, the *petni* technique is used to create the *pallu* by attaching a separate portion of silk to the main body using an elaborate weaving method, resulting in bold aesthetics.

Beyond their exquisite craftsmanship, the appeal of Kanjivaram saris lies in their timelessness. Recent innovations in the textile have made them more acceptable among modern women as daily wear.

Brands like Advaya, for instance, are leading this trend. Founded in 2010, Advaya was born from a desire to innovate within the traditional space of handloom textiles.

"We have a history of being court weavers to royal families for centuries," says K.H. Radharaman, Founder and Creative Director, Advaya. "It was only natural that we would continue to push the boundaries of what could be done with Kanjivaram."

One of their key innovations has been the introduction of linen-blended Kanjivaram saris, which made the traditionally heavy weave more wearable for daily use. Other innovations by Advaya include the use of khadi and organza.

Their "The Eternal Series" collection from 2020 features elaborate motifs and innovative weaving techniques that push the boundaries of what has traditionally been seen in Kanjivarams.

"We wanted to introduce elements that had never been seen before, like large-scale motifs and spaced-out designs," says Radharaman. These saris, while modern in their aesthetic, still retain the core of what makes a Kanjivaram special—its rich silk, vibrant colours, and intricate detailing.

The evolution of the Kanjivaram is a testament to their enduring charm. However, purists aren't too excited. "As a purist, I don't like the blending of fabrics in traditional saris, particularly Kanjivarams," says Kamayani Jalan, President, Delhi Crafts Council. "I understand that modern designers experiment with combining different fabrics and yarns to create contemporary saris; many people get excited about these modern combinations, and they do well in the market. But those of us who promote authenticity, don't consider it the best approach. I wouldn't go for a blend in a traditional sari, though I do appreciate linen saris, which are very popular right now and have their own tradition. But when it comes to Kanjivarams, I prefer to keep it traditional."

For her, as for countless other women, the Kanjivaram is more than just a sari—it's a symbol of her identity, heritage, and the timeless beauty of Indian craftsmanship.

EVERYDAY ELEGANCE

THE SHANTIPURI TANT IS ON THE VERGE OF BEING
LOST TO TIME. BUT HOPE IS ON THE HORIZON

Words → ANURADHA SENGUPTA



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HE SHANTIPURI SARI, IN A way, can be compared to today's denim," said Amitra Sudan Saha, revivalist at Ssahaworks Studio. "It was for everyday use. The sari was worn by Brahmo Samaj girls as a customary school and college uniform."

The legendary Shantipuri sari is a centuries-old tant derived from Shantipur in the Nadia district of West Bengal. This ancient handloom industry has been mentioned in manuscripts that glorify the life of Advaita Acharya and Bengali folklore.

A LEGACY LOST

"The traditional art of weaving in Shantipur in Bengal is said to have begun in 1409 AD during the reign of Gaur Ganesh Danu Mardhandev," said Saha. This sari-weaving practice flourished in the late 17th century under the rule of the Nadia king, Rudra Roy, and has continued ever since.

The craft gained prominence during the Mughal-era, when sari production became systematised, leading to their export to countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Arabia, Greece, and Türkiye. The unique quality of Shantipur saris, woven from hand-spun yarn of 200-300s, distinguished them in the market, and they could easily compete with imported Manchester cotton yarn.

THE VOCABULARY OF THE SARI

Despite their elegant simplicity, a Shantipur sari is deceptively complex. "The *anchal*, or *pallava*, of the Shantipur sari, often features *butis* or jamdani designs in extra weft, beautifully arranged alongside various stripes," said Saha. Eye-catching Shantipur varieties include Ganga-Jamuna, Benkipar, Bhomra, Rajmahal, Anspar, Do-Rookha, Visva-Bharati, and Brindamani Mour-Par. The renowned Nilambari sari of Shantipur is known for its deep navy-blue colour—a result of indigo, and it is reminiscent of the night sky on a new moon. Some Nilambaris have borders fringed with silver zari stars.

Traditional Shantipur saris often have *pallavas* decorated with stripes of varying thicknesses, called *sajanshoi*, in colours complementing the border. The ground of the sari often features fine checks, stripes, or textures created by coloured threads or a combination of fine and thick yarn counts. The sari borders, or *paars*, have picturesque names like *bhomra* (bumblebee), *tabij* (amulet), *rajmahal* (royal palace), *ardha-chandra* (half moon), *chandmala* (garland of moons), *ansh* (fish scale), *hathi* (elephant), *retan chock* (gem-eyed), *benki* (spiral), *tara* (star), and *phool* (flower).

Historically, Shantipur saris were smoother due to a unique sizing technique for the yarn. Both warp and weft were sized, a practice rarely followed today.



A tant *dhuti* from Parama Calcutta, a brand focused on Bengal's traditional textiles

COURTESY: PARAMA CALCUTTA

The decline in this craft is attributed to the influx of cheap, machine-made products.

THE REVIVAL

The revival project for Shantipur tant began by chance. Saha's studio had been focused on reviving the Bengal muslin jamdani, until they stumbled upon a fine muslin sari with intricate borders. Further research revealed this was an old Shantipur sari, a rare find from a bygone era.

Saha's team is collaborating with artisans and experts to replicate the feats of weaving achieved hundreds of years ago. The intricate project involved finding traditional weavers, gaining their trust, and reigniting their pride in the craft. Extensive fieldwork identified weavers who were knowledgeable about Shantipur's unique weaving techniques. The work also entailed in-depth design research to reimagine traditional motifs for the modern market, alongside a technical

understanding of the complex creation process. One of the most challenging aspects of the revival was resurrecting the lost technique of sizing and treating handspun yarn, a technique critical to the softness that defines Shantipur saris. "Through trial, error, and collaboration with older weavers, we successfully brought this technique back, ensuring that the revived saris would have the same delicate feel," said Saha.

The revival project was officially launched

in 2024 at the Birla Academy with the support of the Crafts Council of West Bengal.

In August, Shantipur tant basked in the glory of an exclusive event, "The Threads of Time," which artfully narrated the story of resuscitating the centuries-old Shantipur textile. "By honouring the past while adapting to the present, we have created a platform where the craft of Shantipur can once again thrive, ensuring that this rich cultural heritage is preserved for generations to come."



The ikat trench coat by Boito



WORLD'S WEAVE

WHILE IKAT CONTINUES TO ENCHANT CONSUMERS AND DESIGNERS, ITS MAKERS ENDURE A GRIM REALITY

Words → **SHREYA CHEEMA**

FIRST, THE WASHED WARP thread is strung onto the backstrap loom placed on the ground, on which, with steady hands, a pattern is sketched. The thread is then tied with a string or straw so that certain sections resist the dye. Depending on the design, the tied thread is soaked in different dye baths; after which the bindings may be reorganised, and the thread is dyed again to form a different pattern. In the final stage, the bindings are removed, and the thread returns to the warp of the loom to be weaved.

"It is the complexity and mathematical precision of ikat that has always fascinated me. Even my diploma project at NID, Ahmedabad, was on the Telia Rimal of Chirala, Andhra Pradesh," recounts fashion designer Rakesh Thakore, who, along with David Abraham, has proudly held the mantle for making ikat haute.

However, the atelier is not where Thakore's love for the ancient weave developed. Instead, it was alongside the hunched artisans who toiled through the humidity and heat in the dim, tight spaces.

"I spent a lot of time with artisans in the villages of Koyalagudem and Puttapaka in Nalgonda (known for Pochampalli ikat). It was interesting to watch the weavers work out the design patterns in their heads and

to be able to tie the yarns in warp and weft repeatedly with such calculated precision. And all this was in a weaver's hut, where the rain would pierce through the makeshift roof or a wandering animal could easily break the yarns set up outside for spinning or dyeing," says Thakore.

GROUND REALITIES

All this was in the '70s. It has been five decades since, and while ikat continues to be the muse for many global fashion designers—such as the late Issey Miyake, who collaborated with Thakore to develop the iconic black-and-white pattern—the ground reality of artisans remains grim.

Richa Maheshwari, founder of Boito, a high-fashion label highlighting Odisha's textiles, including the Sambalpuri ikat, says, "Working conditions are often less than desirable and heavily dependent on good weather. This is particularly true among communities like the Gadabas and Habaspuri weavers, who set up looms in the open. Meanwhile, Kotpad's Mirgan community use the largest room in their homes to set up their pit looms, but they are often poorly lit and have little ventilation. In addition, power cuts are rampant."

While these challenges persist, it is ikat's ingenuity that keeps it in vogue. "The fact that ikat's origins are not tied to a single place is a big part of what makes it so versatile and appealing for contemporary designs," says Thakore, who admits to drawing inspiration

from Rothko for his latest designs with leaf motif patterns.

Meanwhile, for Maheshwari, inspiration is in the craft's fascinating heritage. "The oldest surviving fragments of ikat from Odisha were found in a 5,000-year-old Pharaoh's tomb in Egypt, which is a testament to its artistry and desirability. What makes it truly unique is that Odisha is the only state practising curvilinear ikat instead of pure geometric patterns. Entire village scenes are tie-dyed on yarn and woven into fabric. These motifs are derivative of nature and are telling of their customs. Mythology also plays a big role; for example, the Nabagunjara motif, representing nine creatures, is unique to the Khandua textile and is believed to have been derived from the Buddhist weaving traditions developed during Ashoka's reign."

LUXURY IS THE LAW

The future of ikat stands at interesting crossroads. While the weave continues to gain fame in the hands of conscious couturiers and demands soar, the fact is that the artisans are abandoning their craft to make ends meet. Echoing Maheshwari's hope that the ikat's revival benefits the ones who safeguard them, Thakore insists that the key to keeping ikat in the game is to "Elevate it to the true luxury space, where educated consumers realise the value and intricacies of this very complex craft and are willing to pay the price for it."



Dyed silk threads used to weave Paithani

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

HUES OF ROYALTY

PAITHANI SARIS DAZZLE WITH THEIR COLOURS, BUT THEIR FUTURE IS UNDER THREAT

Words → EISHA GUPTA

IN 1989, A YOUNG BALKRISHNA

Kapse was hired to work at a Paithani sari shop in Yeola, Maharashtra. While learning the ropes of buying and selling hand-woven sarees, Kapse felt a passion arise inside him to preserve the age-old craft and improve the living conditions of the artisans, most of whom lacked even basic facilities like housing and toilets.

Twelve years later, Kapse decided to leave the job to set up his own company. Naming it Kapse Paithani, his company started to produce high-quality Paithani sarees while simultaneously changing the lives

of the artisans who made it. Today, a pool of 2,500 artisans from nearly 28 villages in Maharashtra are involved in the various stages of producing Paithani sarees, out of which 200 to 300 hearing and speech impaired craftspeople have developed exceptional skills.

A LABORIOUS PROCESS

The name Paithani comes from the royal dynasty that lived in Paithan town in Aurangabad district, where the sari was first made by hand. The tradition is at least 2,200 years old and its legacy can be traced back to the 2nd century BCE.

Making these beautiful saris is a time-

consuming process: first, artisans collect the silk threads, known as zari, and dye them in vibrant colours like *neelgunji* (blue), *kalichandrakala* (pure black sari with red border), *aboli* (peach pink), *firozi* (white, red, and pale green), and mustard. Then, the dyed threads are meticulously threaded onto a loom to set the base for weaving. The threads are spun using a charkha so that the process of designing can begin. These are often inspired by traditional motifs like peacocks, lotuses, and geometrical patterns. Using a shuttle, the designs are woven into the fabric to bring the intricate patterns and motifs to life. Next, the *pallu* is carefully woven with detailed patterns, while the border is added to give the sari its final touch. The completed product is then removed from the loom.

According to Kapse, one of the unique markers distinguishing Paithani saris from the rest of India's textile traditions is that the weave is crafted from the back, resulting in a mirror effect where both the front and back look identical. "The art form has been passed down through generations, so each Paithani sari is not simply a garment but part of a cultural heritage that represents the skill, patience, and creativity of the artists and the people who wear them," he says.

ARTISANS LEFT BEHIND

But beneath the glossy veneer of Paithani sari production lies a harsher reality. Shubha Mahajan is the director of the MGM Khadi and Paithani Research Centre in Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar (formerly known as Aurangabad). She wrote a 2021 paper titled "Challenges and Scope of Development: A Case Study of Paithani Weavers of Maharashtra (India)" that was published in the peer-reviewed journal "Textile." Her research found that the economic conditions of Paithani weavers in Maharashtra remained precarious as they faced growing challenges such as low wages, market competition, irregular work, and high production costs. Weavers received relatively low wages for their work that could take weeks or months to complete, making it difficult for them to sustain a livelihood solely through their craft.

The raw materials used in Paithani weaving, such as the silk and gold threads, were expensive and further squeezed

profit margins. Many Paithani weavers in Maharashtra had limited access to broader markets, often relying on local or regional buyers who restricted their ability to reach a wider audience. Finally, the abundant supply of duplicate machine-made Paithani saris in the market—often sold at throwaway prices—and customers' ignorance in recognising the difference between fake and original products exacerbated artisans' economic vulnerability.

As a result, the younger generation of weavers were often reluctant to continue in the profession due to the low financial returns. This decline in the number of skilled artisans threatens the economic viability of Paithani weaving in Maharashtra. "If we focus on the current situation then the art form is at the verge of diminishing," says Mahajan.

ENSURING A SECURE FUTURE

There are various measures the state government can take to improve the lot of Paithani artisans and ensure that Paithani saris have a secure future, says Mahajan. She recommends starting with improving direct market access to weavers to reduce their dependency on middlemen. By increasing awareness of the cultural value of Paithani saris and intervening to take action against fake products, like designing an online platform where original handloom weavers can sell their work, the government can assure customers about the authenticity of their purchase and increase artisans' financial stability through a guaranteed regular income.

Kapse agrees with some of these ideas. "In my opinion, if the Paithani is to be preserved for future generations, there needs to be more efforts pointed toward the welfare of the artists involved in weaving these masterpieces," he says.

"Better facilities, fair wages, and modern tools or technology that can make their jobs easier while not affecting the richness in quality are all items on the checklist. Moreover, attempts to espouse the cultural values of the Paithani sari and showcase it on various international platforms could go a long way in making this craft even more sustainable. Incentives should also be given to the young generation to take this craft up so that this knowledge is passed on."



Designer Samant Chauhan's collection featuring Bhagalpuri silk

A TALE OF TEXTURES



BHAGALPURI SILK'S NATURAL SHEEN REFLECTS THE HANDS OF SKILLED ARTISANS WHO HAVE PERFECTED THEIR CRAFT OVER GENERATIONS

Words → **KARTIKEYA SHANKAR**

FOR KAMAYANI JALAN, true sari connoisseur and President of the Delhi Crafts Council, Bhagalpuri silk saris hold a special place—"These saris are comfortable to wear, wrinkle-resistant, and perfect for both office and casual occasions."

Originating from the Bhagalpur district in Bihar, the renowned wild tussar silk fabric or Bhagalpuri silk (often used interchangeably) is distinguished by its slightly coarse texture, patterned stripes and checks of varying densities. The fabric is woven exclusively from flat yarn spun from the cocoons of the tussar silkworm *Antheraea mylitta*, a native species that feeds on local forest leaves.

While Bhagalpuri tussar was once a coveted export to Europe during the British Raj, the advent of cheaper, synthetic alternatives and the rise of mill-produced silks in the 20th century led to a decline in production.

This is where Niranjan Kumar Poddar's story begins. "In 1985, as a teenager, I had to leave school when my father lost his job. I started working at a Khadi Bhandar, where I learned to spin yarn," says Poddar, founder of Berozgar Mahila Kalyan Sanstha (BMKS), a prominent silk weavers' cooperative in Bihar.

Established in 1993, Poddar's non-profit organisation has helped revive tussar weaving in the Godda district in

Jharkhand (65 km from Bhagalpur) through employment programmes and technical and design inputs. These efforts have led to experimental initiatives, such as the Ahimsa silk yarn, which spun from fibre extracted without killing silkworms.

While the Bhagalpuri silk received the Geographical Indication (GI) status in 2013, its producers face many challenges. One of them are the middlemen who often exploit weavers with unfair prices. To address this, Poddar suggests establishing "cloth banks." "These banks would eliminate middlemen, allowing weavers to directly supply their products to major showrooms in cities like Delhi. This would ensure weavers receive fair compensation for their work," he says.

This is where designer Samant Chauhan comes into the picture. After joining the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) in the early 2000s, Chauhan was surprised to find little information about this unique silk. "People often referred to it as tussar silk. The question was, if silk from Bangalore is called Bangalore silk and silk from Banaras is called Banaras silk, then why not Bhagalpuri silk? I knew I had to raise awareness about the silk we produce," says Chauhan, who hails from Munger, 60km from Bhagalpur.

"When I started creating designs with the silk, people couldn't believe it came from Bhagalpur. That's when I realised its huge potential," he added.

According to Chauhan, the textile's distinct texture and sheen can only be achieved only by experienced weavers, who know the precise techniques.

By working with weavers and offering fair prices, Chauhan's efforts have not only supported the local community but also helped to revitalise the Bhagalpuri textile industry. "We measure our success by the work we've created for our hometown. For instance, if a gown requires 20 metres of fabric and we've made nearly 1,000 gowns in a year, you can imagine the number of people engaged."

Convincing people to experiment was the biggest challenge Chauhan faced. "Bhagalpur lacks the integrated ecosystem that places like Rajasthan have, where weaving and various forms of printing coexist and thrive. It took significant effort to bring in resources and develop the industry. Today, the city boasts a vibrant textile sector, but this transformation was a gradual process," he said.

After nearly two decades of work, Chauhan modestly downplays his role in reviving the Bhagalpuri silk industry. "People often say I made a significant contribution, but I view it differently. It was the fabric that brought the recognition. I might not have received the same acknowledgement if I had worked with another material. The industry wasn't benefiting from my actions; in fact, I was the one who benefited from the industry," he concluded.



COURTESY: UTKALAMRITA



B E D A Z Z L E D B Y B O M K A I

THIS CELEBRATED HANDLOOM SARI FROM ODISHA IS KNOWN FOR ITS CLEVER USE OF AN EXTRA WEFT TO CREATE UNIQUE MOTIFS

Words → **UTTARA GANGOPADHYAY**

ALTHOUGH MANY SARI lovers know Odisha's Bomkai by name, often it gets overshadowed by the more popular Sambalpuri sari," said Dr Anita Sabat. Sabat is a heritage enthusiast and cultural researcher, who works for Odisha handloom promotion and advocated for its Geographical Indication (GI) tag.

In 2012, the GI Registry, Ministry of Commerce and Industry of the Government of India awarded the GI tag to the Bomkai sari and fabrics, which has helped the handloom to find a niche of its own. The sari takes its name from the village of Bomkai in the Ganjam district of Odisha.

"Although little is known about its origin, the sari woven in the past was of coarse cotton. The weavers used the clever method of introducing an extra weft design using the *jalla* technique," said Sabat.

Usually, the extra weft is used in the *anchal* or *pallu*. The extra weft may be of a different coloured yarn, which heightens the attraction of the pattern. According to a note on the government's GI website, the uniqueness of the Bomkai sari lies in the fact that "There is no fixed layout for the *anchal* panels brought out by extra wefts' colours."

This is what makes Bomkai unique, that

each sari has a unique pattern. Although a few weavers are still weaving the eponymous sari in the village of Bomkai, over the past few decades, the bulk of weaving is being done in Subarnapur (Sonepur) district and select blocks of a few other districts of Odisha, which have been duly classified under the GI tag.

Thus, Bomkai saris are also being called "Sonepuri" now. While cotton yarn was used to make Ganjam Bomkai, silk is also being used in Sonepur over the past few decades. This has increased the popularity of the handloom among buyers, according to many sellers. Some of the best handlooms are woven by the Bhulia community of Sonepur.

Usually, the sari is woven on fly shuttle pit looms but the use of frame looms may also be found. In the past, weavers used natural colours to dye the yarn. But this limited the range of colours to blue, black, maroon, yellow, orange, etc. The introduction of chemical dyes broadened the colour palette, allowing the weavers to introduce contrasting shades and patterns into the design. Popular motifs include a variety of flowers, animals (especially fish and peacocks) and geometric patterns. One of the popularly seen motifs on borders is the *kumbha* or the pot seen on temple spires.

However, like most handloom products, Bomkai weaving is also on the wane. The children of present weavers are not very

keen to carry on the family profession as handloom weaving is a time-consuming job which does not pay enough. The making of a Bomkai sari involves several processes, including preparing the yarn, sizing, preparing the warp and weft, and weaving. Depending on the intricacy of the design, it may take a few days to a few months to weave a sari.

While the government is trying to boost the sale of Bomkai and other handlooms of Odisha by enabling weavers to showcase their products at national and international fairs and festivals, it is also necessary for the citizens to come forward, said Sabat. According to her, the Bomkai sari, with its gorgeous colour pattern and motifs, makes for excellent wedding and festive wear, which can also boost the sale of this special handloom sari.

Designers have also been experimenting with the motifs and patterns of the Bomkai. Although, the traditional ikat (or *bandha kala* as the tie and dye technique is known as in Odisha) was not seen on Bomkai saris of yesteryears, one may find it on the sari borders now, especially those with temple designs. To cater to a wide range of buyers, weavers in Sonepur have also been producing fabrics for *dupattas* and dress materials. So if you are travelling to Odisha, and looking for something unique, a Bomkai sari would be a good choice.

Bomkai silk sari
by Utkalamrita



THE LURE OF LUSTRE



COVER STORY

EXPLORE



COURTESY: VAISHALI S

THE GOSSAMER-THIN CHANDERI REMAINS CENTRAL TO INDIAN FASHION AS WEAVERS ADAPT TO INCLUDE NEW DESIGNS

Words → HIMAKSHI PANWAR

THE LORE OF THE LUSTROUS Chanderi sari has been woven intricately over time, with its roots spanning centuries, from mentions in Vedic scriptures like the Mahabharata to its royal revival. In 1910, a gold thread motif was added to the cotton muslin saris under the patronage of Madho

Rao Scindia, the Maharaja of the erstwhile princely state of Gwalior. This golden thread that the world knows as zari not only accentuated the beauty of the saris but transformed them into luxury wearables.

An authentic handwoven Chanderi sari, known widely for its gauzy texture, has another significant tell: the motifs.

When I travelled to Chanderi, the textile town in Madhya Pradesh where these GI-tagged saris are made, a small-scale weaver named Bhagwan Das explained how the unique motifs or *butas* define an original Chanderi masterpiece.

"The Chanderi motifs can't be copied on a power loom," said textile revivalist Jaya Jaitly. "Chanderi weavers are content with their handlooms because technology can't replicate the labyrinthine details of a handwoven piece." Designer Vaishali Shadangule who has worked extensively with Chanderi reiterated what Jaitly said. "These meticulously woven designs bring life to the fabric and signify slow fashion."

THE YARN

We may identify the Chanderi region with its silk, but the area has a history of various weaves dating back to colonial times. The weavers initially spun khadi yarn by hand, but the Industrial Revolution acquainted them with an alternative in Japanese silk around the 1930s. These inexpensive, gossamer-thin yarns prompted the artisans to replace the cotton warps with silk and weave their first silk saris.

Post-Independence, the Chanderi weavers' cluster further restored the sheen of the fabric by integrating a silk warp with a cotton weft to present the world with "Chanderi cotton silk," a combination of silk and cotton fabric crafted using multiple-weft shuttles.

"From Chanderi cotton, pure silk to now cotton silk drapes, we make saris and other garments using these three yarns," said Das.

REIMAGINING MOTIFS

While few small-scale weavers like Rana Khan believe that the authentic beauty lies in the handwoven designs inspired by flora, fauna and celestial bodies, Chanderi's weavers are open to exploring new motifs and contemporary designs like geometric patterns. They incorporate these in Indo-Western fusion ensembles, co-ords, and home décor. Such modern patterns are often a result of encouragement from designers like Shadangule.

"We try to blend traditional styles like Chanderi floral art with trendy patterns

like linear gradients, ensuring a mix of sustainability and what's in vogue," she said.

Likewise, Pratima Pandey's fashion label Pramaa revives the old *butas* with fresh structures and bright colours. "We figure out old motifs created by the forefathers of traditional weavers and meld them in our apparel, ensuring they resonate with contemporary needs."

WOVEN AIR

Master weaver Mohammad Anwar tells me how the fabric is often called "woven air," a testament to its feather-light weight and lustre. "The beauty lies in its sheerness," he says, "which is achieved through degumming." This procedure is done before the fabric is dyed to prevent thread breakage during weaving.

Anwar explained the degumming process to me as he demonstrated his weaving skills using *tana* (warp mechanism), *ruchh* (wooden frames), jacquard (dobby/design plate), *charkha* (wheel to weft threads) and dyeing apparatus.

With cotton, silk and zari, these weavers create saris that range from INR 2,000 to INR 2 lakh. But the question is whether they are compensated enough. Their living conditions said otherwise as they told me about their inability to make ends meet during off-season. Financial security, job opportunities and pension for old age would go a long way in making the lives of the weavers better.

Vaishali S is known for showcasing Chanderi's beauty through modern designs





PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK

Muga silk is known for its naturally lustrous gold sheen



GOLDEN SILK

THE PROPERTIES THAT MAKE MUGA SILK UNIQUE COULD SEE IT BEING USED IN THE BIOFUELS AND MEDICINES OF THE FUTURE

Words → EISHA GUPTA

T

HE BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOT OF ASSAM is home to a curious silkworm that founded a textile heritage as far back as 321 BCE. Its creations spawned an industry alluded to in the pages of the Ramayana, where travelling east took you through “the country of cocoon rears,” and the accounts of French traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier from 1662.

This is none other than *Antheraea assamensis*, known as the Muga silkworm in larval form and the Assam silk moth as an adult. Munching on the leaves of the som, sualu, and mejankari plants, the green larvae produces a natural golden-yellow fibre that is of high durability and a shimmering glossy texture—Muga silk, a cloth so renowned that it graced the closets of Ahom royalty and was reserved for them alone. Royal houses supervised *rajagharia* looms where state-appointed experts weaved luxurious silks. Chanakya, a scholar of the Mauryan court, described the surface of Muga silk to be as smooth as the surface of a gem in his manuscript. However, this thriving industry entered a period of decline with British expansion and the colonisation of Assam.

Today, the garment has widespread appeal. Due to its protective quality against ultraviolet light, Muga silk umbrellas register a high demand and are exported to various places around the world. That’s not all—in a 2023 book by Elsevier titled “Advanced Materials from Recycled Waste,” researchers Manasi Buzar Baruah and Pranjal Kalita wrote that Muga silk was a “competent candidate for biomaterials, medicines, food and food supplements, and biofuel synthesis” due to its “outstanding quality like biocompatibility, biodegradability, renewability, inexpensive, non-toxicity, UV-resistant, and moisture-friendly behaviour.”

THE PRIDE OF ASSAM

To see Muga silk production in action, you will have to travel to Sualkuchi village, also known as the “Manchester of the East.” Here, men and women produce Pat, Eri and Muga silks, following in a long line of weavers who were brought to this place in the 11th century under the patronage of Ahom kings.

For Kajori Rajkhowa, the head of the Directorate of Sericulture in the Assam government, Muga silk’s association with the state is a point of pride. She cites the example of Hemoprova Chutia, a handloom weaver who was awarded India’s Padma Shri in 2023 for her unique creations.

“Since time immemorial, Muga silk rearing and weaving has been the largest and oldest rural-based household industry in Assam, along with Eri silk. It is almost a family heirloom for us,” she says.

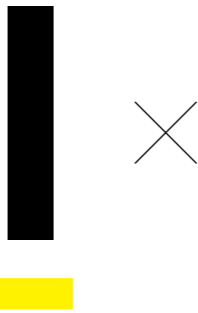
Rajkhowa has noticed demand for this natural fibre rise due to its eco-friendly quality. But the changing climate and the lack of an organised marketing facility, among a host of reasons, threatens the viability of Muga silk production.

The state government is doing what it can to combat these issues, such as installing silkworm plants; conducting genetic studies of Muga silk with the Assam Agricultural University and other relevant stakeholders; promoting silkworm plantations with local representatives on the back of the Indian government’s grant of a Geographical Indication tag for Muga silk; proposing Muga crop insurance schemes and subsidies of Muga seeds for farmers; and setting up a Golden Silk Park and commercial hub in Guwahati—all to spur the textile onto greater heights.

ON THE GRID

THE VIBRANT MADRAS CHECKS, NATIVE TO SOUTHEASTERN INDIA, HAS NOT JUST TRANSCENDED BORDERS BUT ALSO TRADITIONS AND STYLES

Words → NEETI JAYCHANDER



IN SOUTHEASTERN INDIA, A VIBRANT fabric has thrived for almost 900 years, long before it was given its moniker in the 1600s—befittingly after the romantic seaside city of its birth. With its origins in present-day Chennai, "Madras checks" has transcended borders and encountered a glorious global trajectory that continues to adapt. As far back as the 12th century, Madras Checks were worn by the fisherfolk and peasant community of coastal Madraspatnam (later Madras) as a lungi or a local sarong.

Ajay Agarwal, a second-generation entrepreneur and the owner of RK Industries, which has exported authentic Madras checks to global brands, explains, "Madras checks is a miracle lightweight cotton fabric with a plaid design, perfect for the hot, humid climate of the city. Madras checks can be single or multi-coloured, symmetrical or asymmetrical, and big repeat or small repeat designs. 'Bleeding Madras' became a rage during the late '60s and early '70s; every time you washed this colourful fabric, it would bleed because of its hand-dyed nature, and the colours would change."

But much before "Bleeding Madras" was coined sometime in the last century, the fabric found its way to the Middle East and Northern/Western Africa in the 1300s and was known as "Injiri," meaning "real India."

"In fact, for centuries, African brides would have their gowns fashioned out of Madras checks for the added allure of a 'foreign' fabric," says Chennai-based heritage revivalist and influencer Shalini Muthukumar.

"Earlier, it would be available in primary colours like indigo, brick red, and turmeric yellow because only natural dyes were

used. With the onset of the 16th century, Dutch, Portuguese, and British influences slowly found their way into and around the city. This led to the mass production of Madras Checks as the colonial powers saw an opportunity to export and commercialise this unique fabric."

CHECKMATE

But what makes it unique, setting it apart from the other universally available plaids? Agarwal explains its special weaving and manufacturing process to provide an answer.

"Authentic Indian Madras check is still woven in age-old power loom machines. Raw yarn in hank form is procured from various spinning mills. Traditionally, this yarn was hand-dyed in tubs, but given the requirement of colour fastness and other practicalities, it has now been replaced by mechanical dyeing. Next, warping is done on bamboo frames, one strand at a time. The process is done in the morning to avoid the hot sun. The yarn now goes through the process of sizing, where starch is applied with brushes and then burnished with bamboo sticks to give them a smooth, even finish for weaving. This also gives yarn strength to withstand the weaving process."

Agarwal adds, "Traditionally, this fabric would be washed in a local river or spring and dried on the shore. Given the environmental conditions, it is now washed in tubs and hung in bamboo sheds to dry. This fabric will continuously become softer as you wear it and wash it."

Madras Checks also has significant links to the United States, which purportedly began with the inception of Yale University in 1718. When the college was opening, they requested donations from wealthy philanthropists. Among them was Elihu Yale, who had previously served as President of Madras. When Yale was asked for a donation from the University that is now named after him, he sent them 417 books,

FOR CENTURIES, AFRICAN BRIDES WOULD HAVE THEIR GOWNS FASHIONED OUT OF MADRAS CHECKS FOR THE ADDED ALLURE OF A 'FOREIGN' FABRIC

a portrait of King George I of Great Britain, and several bales of Madras Checks that the school sold for a massive amount. This was when Americans first experienced the soft, handwoven weave of the fabric.

However, it took more than a century for Sears to advertise the product in its catalogue in 1897, giving it pride of place in American retail. It wasn't until the 1950s that William Jacobson discovered that an American brand could be crafted hinging on Madras checks. "Jacobson was a textile importer," explains Muthukumar. "He travelled to India to meet with Captain CP Krishnan Nair, a retired Army officer who helped establish the All India Handloom Board and began exporting Indian handlooms overseas. In 1958, he was instrumental in selling 10,000 yards of Madras checks at the cost of a dollar per yard to Jacobson, who in turn convinced Brooks Brothers to launch a range of garments for men and women with the fabric. Obviously, the fabrics bled colour, but their advertising agency Ogilvy turned it around by using the tagline 'Guaranteed to Bleed' as an assurance of authenticity rather than a defect."

TRANSCENDING TRADITIONS

Today, Madras Checks is used by brands worldwide, who have recognised its potential as a unique, sustainable handloom fabric that bridges a centuries-old tradition with contemporary aesthetics. "Madras Checks are often synonymous only with shirts or dresses now, but they shouldn't be," says Muthukumar. "They have been popularised as fabric for handkerchiefs in India and Africa, as well as headscarves and turbans, and of course, it continues to find its place among native lungi-wearers. But more importantly, Madras checks is synonymous with the sari today. Even South Indian brides don't hesitate to walk down the proverbial aisle in a colourful silk sari with Madras checks. This elegant, vintage design called *paazhum pazhamum* (milk and fruit) celebrates the symmetry of life in different colour palettes, embellished with a zari border. Vividly-hued cotton saris from Chettinad called '*kattam*' (grid) also use the motif. This is the true success of this textile—not only to stand the test of time, but also to transcend cultures, occasions, and appeal to virtually everyone in some form or manner." ▶OT

THROUGH HER TEXTILE EXPLORATIONS ACROSS INDIA, DR PRITHA DASMAHAPATRA HAS BEEN PRESERVING ANCIENT CRAFTS, EMPOWERING ARTISANS, AND INSPIRING TRAVELLERS TO DISCOVER THE BEAUTY OF HYPERLOCAL EXPERIENCES

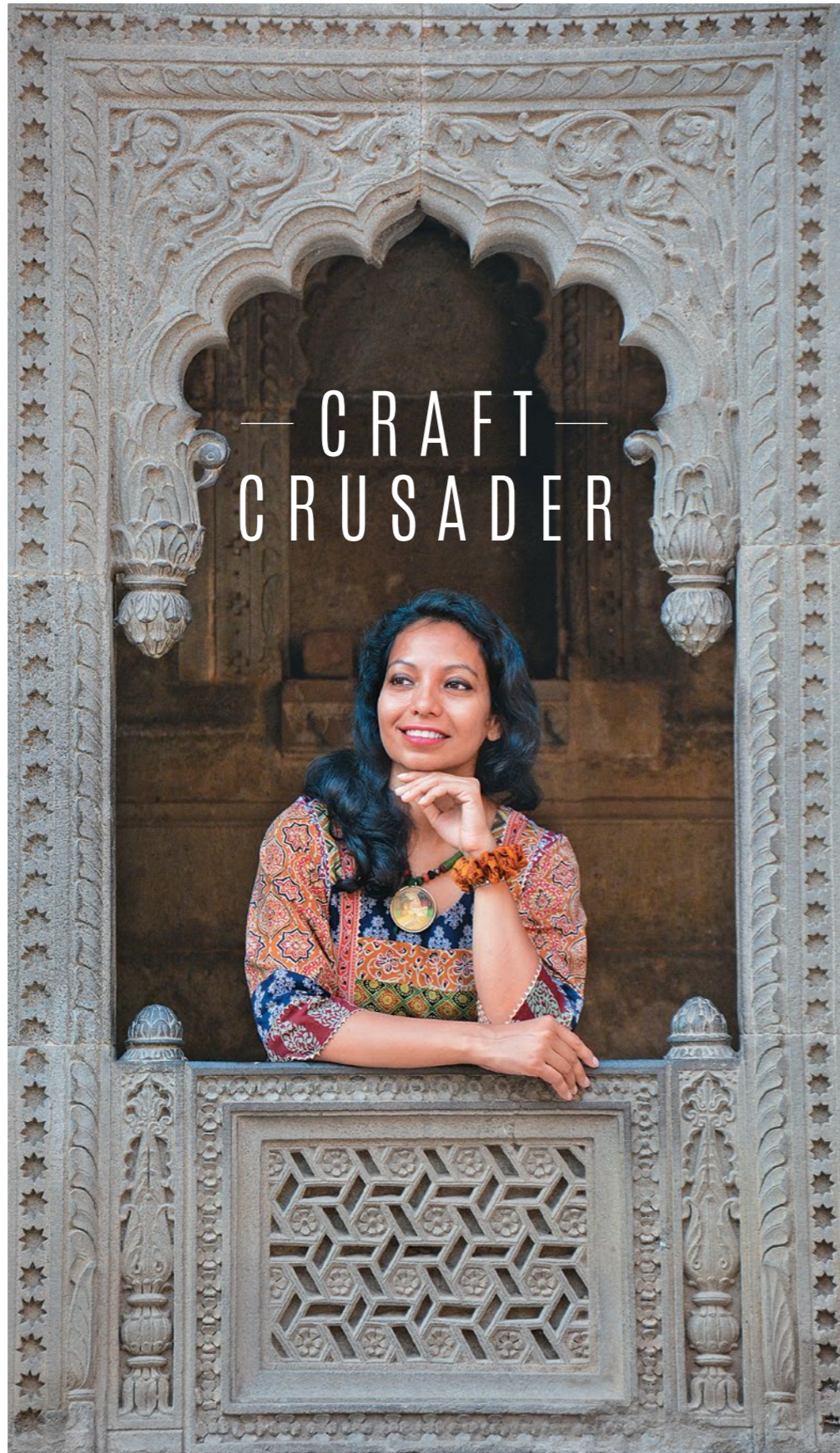
Words →

KARTIKEYA SHANKAR

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ON INDIA'S 74TH REPUBLIC DAY, TWO unassuming heroes from opposite corners of the country found themselves thrust into the national spotlight. Kapil Dev Prasad, a 70-year-old handloom weaver from Bihar, and Neihunuo Sorhie, a master weaver from Nagaland, were conferred the prestigious Padma Shri award, recognising their contribution to preserving their respective textile traditions. However, the achievements of these weavers does not quite portray the ground realities of the countless artisans who toil tirelessly in relative obscurity.

Dr Pritha Dasmahapatra, a UK-based, Kolkata-born gynaecologist and passionate explorer, has dedicated her efforts to unravelling the history and heritage of Indian textiles. Embarking on textile-based journeys



Dasmahapatra at Ahilya Bai's weaving town of Maheshwar

CRAFT CRUSADER

across the country, she has engaged with artisans, documented their crafts, and ignited interest in hyperlocal tours.

In an exclusive interview with Dasmahapatra, we delve into her journey and vision for the future of Indian textiles.

> **What are some of the significant takeaways from your interactions with textile artisans?**

We do not often realise how much the economy of India is reliant on textiles. It is the second largest employer after agriculture and is a massive source of sustenance for a large part of the rural population. It takes a village to produce one piece of fabric. When we discuss handloom products, we tend to only think of the weaver. There are many other steps in the process, like spinning and dyeing, which are almost always undertaken by other members of the weaver's family. During my travels, I found entire communities involved in textile production in different capacities. It is fascinating to watch.

> **How can mediums like photography and social media be leveraged to promote textile heritage and traditions effectively?**

When I started documenting my craft trails on social media, I did not expect them to be so well received. I always mention the contact details of the artisans I visit, and without exception, every single one of them has reported accelerated sales since my videos were published. Social media is a powerful tool of the modern world, and when effectively used, it can have significant benefits.

> **What are the challenges faced by these communities and how can textile craft empower them?**

Poor pay is undoubtedly the most significant challenge they face. A tribal weaver in the remote Kotpad region of Odisha told me they cannot afford the fabrics they make, which is immensely tragic—not just economically but culturally, too. The tribals originally made Kotpad for their consumption. However, because of rising costs, they must be content with polyester fabrics whilst their products are sold for a premium in urban markets. Handloom and handicrafts can uplift communities financially, but a fair trade system has to be implemented.

Dasmahapatra with Ilkal weaver PK Guled in Karnataka



PHOTOGRAPHS: PRITHA DASMAHAPATRA



In India, handmade objects are considered commonplace, and producers struggle to find consumers willing to pay decent prices. This is partly because the tradition of handicrafts and handloom has been well-established in India for a long time, and these products are widely available. Hence, Indians may struggle to consider them as something special. But times are changing, and many customers now actively seek handmade textiles. There is also a massive market outside India that must be effectively explored.

> **What are some of the most valuable lessons you've learned about sustainability, ethical practices, and cultural preservation?**

Through my travels and history lessons, I learned that artisans are the true protectors of traditions and environments. Craft knowledge is transferred through generations in communities that understand and love nature. They should be allowed to decide what is best. Traditional methods are almost always sustainable and ethical. But, traditional methods cannot cater to the

demands of a fast fashion economy.

> **How do textiles reflect the unique cultural and traditional aspects of their place of origin?**

Local sensibilities heavily inspire the design vocabulary of Indian textiles. Kanjivaram sarees, for example, bear motifs from stone carvings found in the many temples of the region. Tribal textiles have geometric patterns of flora and fauna that form an integral part of their lives. One can trace a place's history and geography by studying its textiles.

> **What role does textile tourism play in raising awareness and appreciation for India's textile heritage?**

Based on the responses I have received for my craft-based travel content, textile tourism has a huge potential. Many textile centres in Rajasthan and Kutch have been doing it for a while. They are trendy among foreign tourists. It helps to create awareness and bring business. To encourage large-scale textile tourism, however, state governments have to step in to develop infrastructure. ▶ OT

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Toda embroidery is native to the Toda pastoral people of the Nilgiris

WITH INDIGENOUS TEXTILES FACING THE WRATH OF FAST FASHION AND CLIMATE CHANGE, INDIAN DESIGNERS ARE RALLYING TO REVIVE AND PRESERVE THESE PRECIOUS WEAVES

Words → **ANURADHA SENGUPTA**



IN THE LUSH AND DENSE FORESTS OF the Niyamgiri hills in Odisha, there resides a remarkable tribe known as the Dongria Kondhs. They gained international recognition when they fought against a mega conglomerate to protect their sacred hill from bauxite mining. To the Dongria Kondhs, the Niyamgiri hill represents a deep reverence for nature, intricately woven into their textiles' visual language, particularly exemplified by the revered Kapdaganda shawl.

This sacred cloth symbolises their profound connection with their environment and relationship with the Niyamgiri hills. However, their fight extends beyond environmental conservation. The tribe has been diligently combating the misappropriation of Kapdaganda motifs by various textile brands and design labels. The Kapdaganda shawl, primarily crafted and embroidered by the women of the Dongria Kondh community,

SONGS OF THE SOIL

has recently secured a Geographical Indication (GI) tag, acknowledging its cultural significance.

"Tribal communities in the Odisha region have a rich legacy of weaves," said Anuradha Kandala, a social entrepreneur whose enterprise Folkweave works with the weavers of South Odisha. Kandala is one of the many people who are working towards the revival and preservation of the textile heritage of tribal communities in India.

ROOT OF THE MATTER

India's rich tradition of tribal textiles is endangered by contemporary fast fashion trends and factors such as climate change, affecting the natural dyes and fibres used to make these textiles.

Apart from grassroots individuals like Kandala, multiple designers who have roots in tribal communities are working to preserve their textile heritage. They create pieces that pay homage to their heritage by skillfully blending traditional techniques

and practices with contemporary design.

Delhi-based designer Jenjum Gadi is renowned for his unique, handcrafted designs incorporating tribal motifs and culture. A member of the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, Gadi finds inspiration in his culture's intricate motifs and patterns.

STREET CRED

The task of revival sometimes involves reimagining and reshaping the narrative of indigenous textiles to express contemporary style. Founded by designer Ashish Satyavrat Sahu, a graduate of NIFT, Gandhinagar, Johargram collaborates with the weavers of Jharkhand to reimagine textiles into cutting-edge streetwear.

"We are working on tribal textiles on primitive handlooms in Jharkhand," said Sahu, "and creating streetwear garments using tribal saris, shawls and *gamchhas*."

These designers and brands are leveraging the power of social media and YouTube to raise awareness and share valuable insights

on tribal textile culture and traditions.

You will find the Johargram social media platforms discussing how tribal textiles in the state are characterised by the use of red and white colours, where "red" depicts sacrifice and "white" denotes tranquillity. Sahu describes the motifs reflected in Johargram's distinctive products, "If we talk about the motifs of Jharkhand's tribal textiles, these are chiefly inspired by nature. They draw inspiration from our surroundings and day-to-day objects. Some of the motifs which are used are *dati* (saw teeth), *jalri pati* (bamboo mat), *ipil* (star), *buruba* (mountains), *chaapa* (bamboo comb), *rigdi* (raised close by), *chuda* (mountain height) and *machila* (short stool)."

Similarly, Kandala's posts talk about the Parenga Paraja community of the Koraput region, whose textile colours are primarily white and green, symbolising peace and the environment. These textiles used to be commonly found in daily markets when each community was involved in weaving



The Kapdaganda shawl is primarily crafted by the women of the Dongria Kondh community

COURTESY: SAHAPEDIA



COURTESY: JOHARGRAM



COURTESY: WOVEN THREADS

Clockwise from top right: Streetwear by Johargram; nettle yarn is more environment-friendly than cotton; Woven Threads preserves textile traditions of Nagaland

before fast fashion and power looms became predominant.

THE BIG PICTURE

Indigenous textiles hold great significance globally, as they play a crucial role in representing cultural identity, boosting tourism, driving innovation, and contributing to the creative economy of different communities. However, the knowledge and skills associated with indigenous textile production are at risk of

THESE TRANSFERS OF TEXTILE KNOWLEDGE ARE CRUCIAL FOR ENSURING THE PERPETUATION OF THE CULTURAL LEGACIES OF THE TRIBES

being lost due to various factors, including the detrimental effects of climate change and extreme weather events. This situation necessitates collective action to preserve these invaluable traditions and ensure their continuation for future generations.

Upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that the resurgence of indigenous textiles is also an effort to safeguard the environment and natural resources of the region while enhancing the livelihoods of the local community.

In most of these textiles, natural fibres from plants and trees are used for spinning and dyeing. Kevisedenuo Margaret Zinyu, a designer based in Kohima, Nagaland, talks about the process of procuring nettle fibre from the Noklak district of Nagaland, a forgotten craft.

She founded Woven Threads, a design initiative established in 2014 to encourage women to sustain their roots by preserving

the unique weaving tradition. The initiative produces home furnishing products, contemporary textiles, and more.

The National Institute of Design graduate, a member of the Angami Naga community, is also a coordinator for the Tribal Design Forum in Nagaland, a community of creative professionals. Her design studio collaborates with cooperative societies and like-minded individuals in sustainable handloom and handicraft sectors, as well as livelihood skills involving the younger generation. She is one of the many designers who ardently emphasise the vital role of imparting textile knowledge and skills.

These transfers are crucial for ensuring the perpetuation of the cultural legacies of the tribes. Their designs are not just patterns; they encapsulate narratives interwoven into the fabric, preserving stories and traditions for generations to come. ►OT

KEEPERS OF THE CRAFT

Jigmat Couture preserves Ladakh's textile heritage with designs that feature locally crafted weaves



FROM REVIVING TRADITIONAL WEAVES TO CONTEMPORISING THEM WITH MODERN SILHOUETTES, THESE DESIGNERS ARE COMMITTED TO KEEPING THE LOOM TURNING WITH A FRESH TAKE ON HERITAGE TEXTILES

Words → SHREYA CHEEMA



JIGMAT COUTURE

THE DEPICTION OF A Mahasiddha Tantipa (weaver) working a type of foot loom in the rock-cut Gon-Nila-Phuk Caves, located in a village called Saspol, is evidence that weaving in Ladakh can be traced to the 12th century. And that is just the tip of the iceberg. Various historical and socio-economic factors have shaped Ladakh's weaving practices. While being vital crossroads on the Silk Route meant the prestigious silk brocade flourished under the royal family's patronage, the nomadic pastoralists of Changthang fought the biting cold by giving the world "soft gold" or pashmina.

Despite this longstanding history, when Jigmat Couture's founders, Jigmat Norbu and Jigmat Wangmo, returned to Ladakh in 2008 after studying textile design, they realised that the region's legacy was still a secret. "When we were designing custom pieces for our wedding, I had to get most of the silk brocade fabric during my travels in China. I realised the beautiful local textiles, traditionally used domestically, weren't being commercially explored. There were not a lot of tailors or design studios working with them," says Norbu.

As a result, after two years of research, the husband-wife duo set up their eponymous

label. Committed to preserving and reviving Ladakh's textile heritage, their designs are not just made using locally crafted weaves but are also inspired by traditional silhouettes.

For example, the overlays from the "Lungmar" collection are fashioned after the traditional Shanglak robe (made using sheep skin) worn by the Changpas. Like the traditional garb, these also feature elegant Tibetan silk brocade and felt applique. Even more contemporary silhouettes like trousers, vests, and dresses feature hand-embroidered traditional patterns on native woollen textiles that are naturally dyed.

The process of creating such a line is long-drawn. "My wife designs while I focus on the textile unit, which operates as a self-sustained ecosystem. Our process begins by sourcing wool directly from nomads, ensuring they receive a fair price. We carefully select the finest wool based on its colour, fineness, and source, often travelling to meet with nomads. The wool is then hand-spun by our weavers, primarily composed of women, using traditional techniques, followed by natural dyeing with plants and minerals, and finally woven on different types of looms to achieve the desired fabric," Norbu explains.

Since most of the textile heritage only exists as oral history, the couple is also determined to archive it, which led them to establish the

Jigmat Couture Textile Museum of Ladakh.

Norbu says, "People have become increasingly interested in Ladakh and want to learn more about its art, craft, and culture. Since we were already involved in textiles, we decided to contribute by creating a resource centre. With the support of well-wishers like Dr Monisha Ahmed and Dr Alka Pande, both renowned historians who have published extensively on textiles, we were encouraged to make the most of our centrally located property. Over time, we accumulated a significant collection of textiles, including family pieces and donated items, which led us to establish a subject-oriented museum."

While their label has garnered international acclaim and their creations hang on the walls of prominent museums, such as Delhi's National Museum, Norbu is most proud of the impact on the next generation. He says, "In Ladakh, the situation is quite different because it's a small community. One success story can inspire others. Around four or five new brands have emerged in the last five years. We also run a residency where we encourage young artists to come and work with us. New graduates often face financial pressure but still have a fresh, creative mindset. We offer them a space to explore. So things are changing for us, and we're happy to be a part of it."



The pattu weave from Kullu

PÉRO

IF YOU SPOT SOMEBODY wearing a wispy, yellow jamdani top to brunch in London, it is probably from Péro. With 35 stores worldwide, Péro's bohemian, bright and playful designs have travelled far and wide. Yet, they are firmly rooted in India.

Even the label's first collection, which debuted in 2010, featured checkered weaves from different regions. "While raw silk was my first significant encounter during my student years at NID, I was drawn to checkered fabrics. I realised that every region in India has its own version of checks, whether it's in *lungis*, *gamchhas*, or saris. I started working with gamchha checks from West Bengal and gradually incorporated various techniques from different regions," says founder Aneeth Arora.

It has been 14 years since then, and Arora's fascination with Indian textiles remains intact. Every collection features at least five traditional textiles. This has led her to explore all that there is, from the popular chanderi to the lesser-known pattu weave from Kullu. What sets Péro's designs apart is Arora's inimitable skill of putting a fun spin on traditional patterns and motifs, such as creating polka dots using traditional weaving styles like ikat and jamdani.

But it is her team of artisans that have instilled this confidence to experiment in her. She says, "We've worked with the same craftspeople for over 15 years. It's about mutual growth—we depend on each other to thrive in this ecosystem. While it may be challenging to change the traditional designs, they're quick learners and are open to adapting when they see the results."

It is then no surprise that Arora has always been vocal about the effort that goes into handwoven creations and why they must be deemed as "luxury."

Arora even reveals that, at Péro, the work for each collection begins two years in advance to suit the artisans' pace. "They need to have that kind of time to produce good work. Even if they don't have enough time to celebrate their festivals, it is reflected in their work. It is our way of showing respect for their skill," she says.

While the fashion landscape looked Westwards over a decade ago, Arora, one of the first few designers to make Indian textiles cool, pleasantly acknowledges that consumers and designers have come a long way, but there are more miles to cover.

She says, "When we started in 2009, there were very few designers working with Indian textiles. Now, customers are not only willing to pay for these textiles, but they also know the techniques behind them. More Indian crafts are gaining global recognition, and with that visibility, the perception of luxury has evolved. People appreciate the effort and skill behind these textiles, so they're willing to invest in them."



Péro's 2019 collection featuring pattu weave



COURTESY: PÉRO

Péro blends heritage textiles with vibrant and whimsical designs

MANJUSHREE SAIKIA HAILS from Naruathan, a small village located on the edge of Assam. She grew up observing her grandparents create eri silk, from start to finish: from rearing the silkworms to separating the fibres from the cocoon to weaving the yarn.

"Every household had their own farm and loom set-up. The textiles that were made were often exchanged as gifts or bartered. It is a way of life there," she says.

Considered to be one of the most expensive textiles in India, the creation of the eri silk was so deeply embedded into her daily life that Saikia didn't really understand its value till she moved to Mumbai to study textile design at NIFT. "When one is immersed in a process, it's easy to take it for granted. Moving to the city from my rural village opened my eyes to their complexity. I realised that weaving the eri silk

is a skill only a few have," reflects Saikia.

Moving away to another city brought Saikia closer to her home, inspiring her to start her own label, Ura Maku, in 2018. "As a student, I realised that when we talk about Indian textiles, Northeastern textiles are barely represented. And since this is a part of me and my family legacy, I wanted to embrace it and make people aware through my designs," says Saikia.

For the young designer, who was then fresh out of college, the goal was simple and personal: to give the eri, mulberry, and muga silks a place in a modern woman's closet. Saikia even points out how that inspired the name—in Assamese, "Ura" means "to fly," and "Maku" translates to the shuttle tool.

"Our brand symbolises someone who dares to fly high but remains rooted, which is why our silhouettes are minimal, structured and modern even though we use traditional

textiles," says Saikia. The eri silk crop jacket and godet skirt from Ura Maku's latest collection are brilliant examples of this duality. While the ivory white jacket features traditional, naturally dyed, deep-red weft motifs, the skirt is an eye-catcher with its fluid fall on the sides. Saikia, who is inspired by the minimalism of Japanese fashion and, in particular, designer Yohji Yamamoto, says, "I want to ensure that our designs are timeless and not trend-driven, but also unique, which is why I like to study the historical evidence of fashion."

While the brand has gained international attention in these six years, Saikia continues to work with the artisans from her village, including her aunt and other family members. This close association with them has made Saikia rethink her approach to growing Ura Maku. "At one point, I aspired to become a big designer, but I've realised that slow fashion doesn't align with the goals of large brands. I've learned that when you're based in a region where weaving is a way of life, pushing people to produce more or become professional weavers can dilute the authenticity. If I try to break that harmony, it's no longer slow fashion," she says.

Ura Maku reimagines Assam's traditional textiles into timeless, modern silhouettes

URA MAKU



COURTESY: URA MAKU

COURTESY: ERODE CLOTHING



Erode Clothing adds a trendy flair to Jammakkalam

ERODE CLOTHING

WHEN WE MOVED TO Erode twenty years ago, our neighbourhood was surrounded by looms. The noise they produced was so loud that, for the first three or four months, I couldn't sleep. But gradually, that sound became a melody to me and a part of my life. If I had to summarise my childhood, it would be with the sounds of the looms," says Mayank Bhutra of Erode Clothing.

Founded in early 2023, the label has quickly become a head-turner with its contemporary designs using the GI-tagged Bhavani Jammakkalam, a centuries-old craft of carpet weaving. The brand's striped "little wing" overall was also seen on the British designer Tan France recently.

However, for Bhutra, who has no formal education in fashion, the decision to centre a high-street fashion brand on a textile typically used to make carpets was an emotional one. The idea came to Bhutra when

he returned to Bhavani to buy Jammakkalam but was met with officials unwilling to take his order. He says, "Growing up, I had always seen my family gift Jammakkalam that were made to order. But when I returned after so many years, things were different. I was told that there were simply not enough weavers left anymore to make them." It was Bhutra's chance meeting with a weaver named Pandiyan and his son that gave him confidence. "One of the biggest challenges I've faced is convincing the weavers to continue. Many are demoralised and ready to give up, but Pandiyan's energy and optimism were a turning point for me, and we're still working with him to this day. At 44, he's one of the younger weavers," he says.

While the label's vibrant, fresh, androgynous silhouettes using the coarse Jammakkalam break the mould, Bhutra believes it will take much more to ensure the craft survives even after releasing three successful collections in a year. "When I first started working with Jammakkalam weavers, many weavers told me that they had been documented and written about for years, but nothing had changed for them. What was once a community of 1,500 people is now reduced to just 70 or 80 weavers. And this number will only dwindle in the next few years. Younger generations need to see the value in these crafts, but societal perceptions also need to change. Even if a weaver earns more than a white-collar professional, they will still be considered less successful."

Other reasons Bhutra identified for Jammakkalam's decline are the lack of experimentation and the interference of middlemen. He believes that there is light at the end of the tunnel if designers form a long-term partnership with the weavers.

"In terms of the trend of brands using heritage textiles with a modern twist, I don't think that alone will help in the long term. It may raise awareness, but it doesn't necessarily ensure the craft's survival. We need to ensure that weavers earn a sustainable income. Without this, there's little motivation for them to continue their work. Many weavers who have faced hardships don't want their children to experience the same. Our focus is on in-depth collaboration with the craftspeople, ensuring the survival and growth of these crafts. That's the core of Erode Clothing." ▶ **OT**

RIVER SUTRA

THE QUIANT TOWN OF Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh, relatively untouched by the throng of noisy tourists, lies some 95 km from Indore and, at first glance, does not betray the wealth of handloom history

it hides. Mainly a pilgrim destination, the main square retains the looks of a regular small-town market, bustling with shops and commercial buildings. But as you go inwards, the town's face changes. Cobbled streets open up to the Ahilya Ghat, flanked by exquisite stone temples and the Ahilya Fort.

As I walked down the steps of one of the stone temples on the pier, the small town sounds, children diving into the cool waters, women washing clothes and men praying greeted me. A little over an hour away is Omkareshwar, another important temple town and a *jyotirlinga* site. The very first time I visited Maheshwar, nearly two years ago, I remembered taking back three authentic Maheshwari silk saris for my family. And that was before I had much knowledge about the legacy of this eponymous textile that is the town's leading identity.

"The REHWA society was established in 1978 by Richard Holkar and his wife Sally Holkar," said Sandip Soni, the project manager at REHWA, a non-profit organisation promoting the local craft of weaving and empowering mostly women weavers. "We do traditional Maheshwari weave here, in which

IN MAHESHWAR, MARATHA QUEEN AHILYA BAI HOLKAR'S LEGACY LIVES ON IN ITS THRIVING WEAVING COMMUNITY

Words → **ANTARAA CHATTERJEE**

The Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel overlooks the serene waters of the Narmada



COURTESY: AHILYA FORT HERITAGE HOTEL

the warp is silk, and the weft is cotton."

I walked around the first unit, making my way through the rows of women of different ages working heavy looms. "We have a total of 70 looms across four units," Soni explained, leading the way. "The core of this initiative has always been to empower local women through employment."

Spools of fabric were being stretched and worked on, with rolls of colours flecked in all directions at the REHWA unit. As I learned more about the organisation upholding the centuries-old weaving traditions of this temple town, I realised that at the heart of it all was the Maratha warrior queen Ahilya Bai Holkar, whose former residence-turned-heritage hotel I was being hosted at.

At the Queen's former fort, now known as the Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel, the beauty and royal roots of the small town of Maheshwar can be easily found in every little detail. With 19 beautifully appointed rooms and different sections in the hotel, all with



a touch of history, staying at the heritage hotel was as close to royalty as I could get. The dining area, called Poshakwada, used to be the room for keeping royal costumes and still possessed some of the original furnishings and decorations.

Ahilya Bai Holkar, who ruled here from 1765 to 1796, built Ahilya Wada, her personal residences, offices, and durbar audience hall, within the fort. A patron of the arts and crafts, she welcomed poets, scholars, and artists and even established a thriving textile industry in the city. This marked the beginning of the Maheshwar's handloom weaving tradition, which flourished in the late 1700s.

It is no wonder then that it was her descendants who revived the weaving traditions of Maheshwar. "At its core, REHWA Society ensures our artisan weavers have a dignified source of employment," said Yeshwantrao Holkar, partner at Ahilya Experiences and Board Member of REHWA Society. Established by his parents, the

organisation, along with the handloom school, is run to preserve and promote the very highest form of the Maheshwari handloom textile and its artisan community.

"We want to support this community through our social outreach programmes, which include The Ahilya School, our housing colony, our medical and insurance programmes and various other health and empowerment camps. We do camps for women's health, including reproductive and menstrual health, as well as women's empowerment camps to assist them around issues of finances and self-defence," Holkar added.

Every evening during my stay in Maheshwar, as I sat on the hotel's terrace that overlooked the Narmada River and viewed the *aarti* on the ghats, I could picture the Holkars on that one evening in 1978, taking a stroll that would lead to the beginning of a textile foundation.

As the lore goes, Richard Holkar and his wife Sally encountered a man with a piece of fabric draped over his arm while visiting Maheshwar one evening. He shared the struggles of his community, devastated by the decline of their cherished handloom industry. The man's heartfelt plea was simple yet profound: all he asked them was to help his people regain their source of income.

The Holkars, deeply touched by the request, felt a growing determination to make a difference.

Their efforts breathed new life into Maheshwar's handloom tradition, turning their initial empathy into a lasting legacy. The Handloom School and Women Weave are where women are trained to earn their livelihood. You can pick out beautiful silk and Merino wool scarves, silk stoles, dupattas and Maheshwari silk saris here. Now, everywhere you go in Maheshwar, its narrow bylanes are crawling with outlets selling Maheshwari saris. Many of them supply to big brands like Fabindia and Anokhi.

THE MAN'S HEARTFELT PLEA WAS SIMPLE YET PROFOUND: ALL HE ASKED OF THEM WAS TO HELP HIS PEOPLE REGAIN THEIR SOURCE OF INCOME



The REHWA Society empowers women through upskilling and employment, teaching their women weavers to create stunning Maheshwari sarees, silk stoles, scarves and dupattas

"I have been working here since the last 44 years," said Suman Chauhan, one of the weavers at REHWA. Draped in a simple red cotton sari, she worked diligently at the heavy wooden loom while beneath her fingers, a striking sari fit for a queen was taking shape. It takes more than 15 days to make a premium sari, according to Soni. The feather-light quality comes from the proportionate mixing of cotton and silk, which also gives the finished product a lovely shine. I could see only one man among the women weavers, working at the widest loom.

"This is the widest loom measuring 72 inches. This one is different from the sari

looms which are all 46 inches. This is for weaving home furnishings, curtains and the like," said Soni.

Before I departed, I took many pictures of all the lovely, smiling women weavers who had been working hard over the years to attain a source of income through their skills and courage. As I sat and took in the views of the Narmada on my last evening in Maheshwar, the bursting twilight hues over the river reflected the colours of the town. Maheshwar, in my mind, is as much a textile town as it is popular as a temple town. I ended up taking back home more saris than the handful of decent pictures on my phone. ▶ **OT**



Top and above: The feather-light quality of Maheshwari sari comes from the proportionate mixing of cotton and silk; The ghats of Maheshwar reflect colours as vibrant as the silk saris the town weaves

PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK

COURTESY: REHWA SOCIETY

THE LOOMINARIES

Below and left: Rukmini Devi Arundale, founder of Kalakshetra; Pupul Jayakar (center) with Freid Otto (left) and Jamshed Bhabha (right)



COURTESY: TS ARCHIVES, NETHERLANDS



COURTESY: NID ARCHIVES, AHMEDABAD

A



THE ROLE OF THE GREAT REVIVALISTS WHO GAVE INDIA'S TEXTILES A NEW LEASE ON LIFE CANNOT BE STATED ENOUGH. WE TRACE THEIR CELEBRATED LEGACY

Words → **BUTOOL JAMAL**

AS MUCH AS WE PRIDE OURSELVES on upholding tradition, this institutional endorsement of handwoven textiles is not to be taken for granted. It's the result of dedicated work on the part of a number of advocates, many of whom have worked behind the scenes to ensure that the rhythm of the loom doesn't disappear.

Two foundational figures of post-Independent India paved the path: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Pupul Jayakar. While Chattopadhyay was a staunch Gandhian, Jayakar was known as the "tsarina of culture." The former was appointed the

head of the All India Handicraft Board in 1952, and the latter was simultaneously given the responsibility of the All India Handloom Board. They would work extensively within the bureaucracy, setting up and leading institutions to ensure that traditional weaving and other crafts were seen as valuable, sustainable enterprises. Jayakar's legacy included the Weavers Service Centres, training grounds for countless artisans and revivalists, and the Handloom and Handicrafts Export Corporation of India (HHEC).

Under her tutelage at the HHEC in the 1970s, another eminent figure in Indian

textile history found his footing—Martand Singh. Jayakar tasked Singh, or Mapu as he was known, with putting together the now seminal Vishwakarma textile exhibitions of the 1980s. An ambitious, decade-long project, it focused on the revival of traditional weaves—encompassing everything from patola and kanjivaram to tanchoi and block printing—and took Indian textiles to a global audience.

Until he passed away in 2017, the scion of the royal family of Kapurthala worked tirelessly to bring a new dynamism to India's textiles. "In the '80s and '90s, Martand Singh initiated multiple projects across

textile clusters in India that explored the cross-pollination of traditional Indian textiles with contemporary design ideas. This was responsible for rejuvenating traditional Indian textiles and bringing a fresh perspective into the design lexicon. "Today, his legacy is visible everywhere," says designer Rakesh Thakore.

Mayank Mansingh Kaul, a New Delhi-based textile designer and curator, says, "He was able to pursue excellence in aesthetics and craftsmanship while managing large central institutions. Very few have also cultivated the next generation and empowered others as he did."

For those working now, Mapu began decolonising in design thinking. He encouraged the development of a contemporary language of textiles, one that expressed a modern India.

Mapu's collaborators in the Vishwakarma exhibitions and other projects have continued his vision in their work. Take, for instance, the grand damme of the sari, Rta Kapur Chishti. Author of "Saris of India:

Tradition and Beyond," along with countless more books and lectures, Chishti has dedicated her life to writing and teaching about the life of the Indian weaver. Her label, Taanbaan, specialises in saris and home furnishings made from limited quantities of organic desi cotton or silk.

At The Sari School, set up in 2008, she teaches a new generation the countless playful ways textiles can be draped and worn. Rakesh Thakore was also a mentee of Mapu, and his Delhi-based label Abraham & Thakore reflects that influence.

While Mapu is the most renowned, there are countless others Jayakar inspired to further the cause of handloom. In the 1950s, Hyderabad-born Suraiya Hasan Bose worked at the HHEC. After two decades in Delhi, the khadi-wearing Cambridge graduate returned to her home city to start her handloom unit. Her work with master weaver Syed Omar resurrected himroo and mashru, two lustrous weaves nearly extinct in Andhra Pradesh.

Another key figure was Bengaluru-based Chimy Nanjappa, who worked with Jayakar

on the sari curations for the World's Fair in New York and Montreal in the 1960s. The experience shaped Nanjappa's passion for textiles. Together with her daughter Pavithra Muddaya, who trained at the Weavers Service Centres, she founded the brand Vimor in 1974. Dedicated to documenting and reviving traditional korvai handloom saris that they first discovered through temple auctions, the Vimor Foundation has since broadened its scope to include mentorship, employment generation, and skill development for its weavers.

Two key figures who cannot be missed in any discussion of Indian handloom are Laila Tyabji and Jaya Jaitley. Both worked towards developing the urban market for traditional crafts, bridging the gap between artisan and consumer. Tyabji is one of the co-founders of Dastkar, an NGO whose annual bazaars across the country are a popular stalking ground for designers and shoppers alike. Jaitley, meanwhile, is the president of Dastkari Haat Samiti, a national association of craftspeople. One of the foundation's key projects was Dilli



COURTESY: INTACH

Martand "Mapu" Singh was an Indian textile conservator, curator, and cultural historian

Haat, the popular crafts market that opened in 1994 in New Delhi. It is even now the first stop on any tourist's itinerary.

"The idea for Dilli Haat was conceived six years before its inauguration in 1994. It resulted from a realisation that the socio-cultural-economic system of village *haats* was a perfect ecosystem for craftspeople. They were stuck in their homes, not knowing the real value of their work, and, therefore, would get shortchanged by exporters retailing abroad," said Jaitley.

"I felt that their wonderful skills needed a place of dignity. And especially in 1990, when we advocated globalisation and talked about opening up markets for companies from the rest of the world, I thought it would be a good argument to say, 'Let's open the markets for our rural people in the cities where the purchasing power lies.'"

EMPOWERING WOMEN

The handloom revival movement was formed against the backdrop of women's liberation. When given its true worth, weaving can empower countless people, particularly women, who are engaged in the process of creation. That understanding started Gujarat-based organisations like SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) and Shrujan, founded in 1972 and 1969. Driven by Ela Bhatt and Chandra Shroff, respectively, both women saw the possibility of changing livelihoods through weaving, embroidery, and applique. A little later, activist Monisha

Behal was inspired by Bhatt to address issues such as domestic violence and abuse by helping women find independence through weaving at home. In 1994, she founded the North Eastern Network in Nagaland. The organisation has helped local communities develop contemporary designs woven on the waist strap or loin loom. Products made from natural fibres like nettle, which grows naturally in the lower ranges of the Himalayas, have also found fresh lease.

Heirloom Naga is another brand from the region that focuses on providing employment opportunities for women. Founded in 1993 by Jesmina Zeliang, their loin loom-woven cushion covers, table runners, and bed throws in a black and white palette are sold worldwide at stores like Crate & Barrel and Anthropologie. Last year, Zeliang opened the doors to the Heirloom Naga Centre in Dimapur, which houses a design studio, classrooms, gallery, café and a guesthouse for visiting design students.

A journey around the country reveals other forces of fashionable change. In Madhya Pradesh, gossamer-like Maheshwari cotton was saved from extinction by the work of Sally Holkar. The Stanford graduate who married into the royal family of Holkar founded the Rehwa Society in 1978 and, over four decades, went on to establish the WomenWeave Charitable Trust in 2003 and The Handloom School in 2013. Another American who set up a base in India was Judy Frater, who spent more than 30 years documenting the textiles of the nomadic

Rabari people of Kutch. Her research led her to found the Somaiya Kala Vidya, a unique design school for artisans, in 2014.

If you travel east to Andhra Pradesh, textile crusader Uzamma has worked with weavers for over 35 years. Her cause was to bring the cotton production process back into the hands of the people doing the work—the farmers, ginners, dyers and weavers rather than the middlemen.

One of the notable results of her work to make handloom an accessible, everyday fabric is the creation of malka. This versatile, hot-weather-ready textile combines mulmul and khadi. Further North, Ruby Palchoudhuri, President of the Crafts Council of West Bengal, was encouraged by Chattopadhyay to visit craft centres across Bengal. One of her key successes was nurturing the finest Jamdani cloth with master weaver Jyotish Debnath and his family.

Along with the initiatives already mentioned, it was also when legacy brands like Anokhi and Fabindia were founded. The first was the work of John and Faith Singh, who, in 1970, dedicated themselves to reviving Jaipur's dwindling block printing industry. The second was founded in 1975 by American textile buyer John Bissell, who opened his first Fabindia store in Greater Kailash, New Delhi. Bissell, famously spartan in his style and generous with knowledge, introduced a generation of designers and manufacturers to a wider global market. People like Suraiya Hasan Bose, Sally Holkar, and Jesmina Zeliang found their first audiences through Fabindia stores.

DESIGNING A LEGACY

The work of designer-revivalists also deserves special mention. For example, Ritu Kumar has created couture-level designs by harnessing the power of handloom, Rahul Jain's work with silk weaving pushes the boundaries of what is possible in textile art, and in the new guard, names like Sanjay Garg or Gaurang Shah, who have built aspirational brands based entirely on the magic of handloom.

As one of the first voices to nudge the Indian fashion industry to consider indigenous crafts, Jaitly takes pride in how far we've come and believes there are more miles to cover. "When we were trying to follow the West, I believed we had to turn to the craft sector to define our identity. And today, it has happened. Sustainability should involve the



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Jaya Jaitly, founder of Dastkari Haat Samiti, has been at the forefront of crafts revival in India

craftspeople's culture, lifestyle, rituals and daily living practices. I read very nice stories of young people renewing and recycling, making beautiful designs and building in a value system, which is what sustainability is. While challenges regarding adequate funding persist, in my 40 years, there has been increased confidence, self-reliance and pride among artisans about their craft," said Jaitly.

THE CURATORS

In the last few years, a flurry of exhibitions in the textile ecosphere has brought the work of revivalists firmly into the spotlight. Take, for instance, "Sutr Santati: Then. Now. Next,"

'WHEN WE WERE TRYING TO FOLLOW THE WEST, I BELIEVED WE HAD TO TURN TO THE CRAFT SECTOR TO DEFINE OUR IDENTITY. AND TODAY, IT HAS HAPPENED'

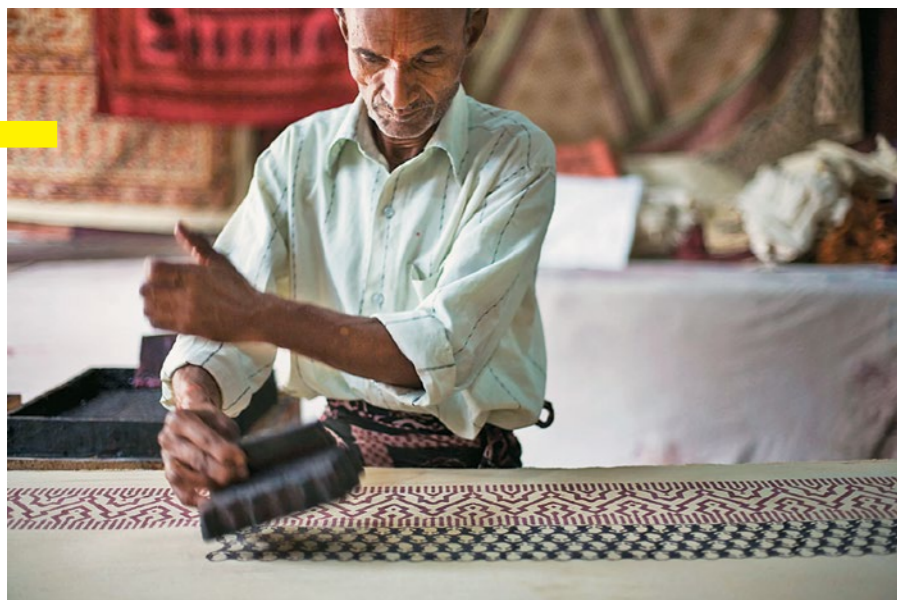
by curator Lavina Baldota, that's travelled to Mumbai, Delhi, and Melbourne. Another show on the textile lovers' calendar was "Red Lilies, Water Birds," an exhibition that was held first at Aneundi, Hampi, in 2022 and then at Bengaluru in 2023. The 108 textiles included rare patolas from Kerala, exquisite khadi cotton shot with metallic thread and sumptuous brocades of the Deccan.

What makes the New Guard particularly unique is their willingness to take their shows beyond the major urban hubs to a new audience. In the last few years, designer, curator, and researcher Mayank Mansingh Kaul has helmed shows on ikat (New Delhi), paithani (Paithan, Maharashtra), and khadi (Chirala, Andhra Pradesh and Coimbatore). His key approach has been "to take exhibitions and archives to the actual weaving centres. These can then become libraries for the craftspeople themselves. This is important because often the next generation doesn't have access to the archives of their forefathers whose work might have gone into the closets of people miles away."

Any discussion of textile art is incomplete if it doesn't mention the weavers. Figures like Rahul Salvi and his family have kept the craft of Patan Patola sari weaving alive. The Debnath family from West Bengal did the same for jamdani. B. Krishnamoorthy, a fourth-generation Kanjivaram weaver, has meticulously documented the numerous designs, patterns and motifs inherent to the craft. Gajam Govardhan from Telangana, a master weaver in ikat textiles and Padma Shri awardee, is a frequent collaborator with Abraham & Thakore, whose exquisite works have found a permanent home in the Victoria & Albert Museum.

The names mentioned here are just a few of the proactive, passionate individuals who have set the foundation for much of the work happening today. It does not include the educators, museum owners, private patrons and countless grassroots-level workers who are all part of the warp and weft of this textile ecology. ▶ **OT**

Butool Jamal is senior fashion journalist. She is currently fashion editor at The Nod



Jaipur's block printing was revived by Faith Singh

The Coral Triangle has the highest coral diversity

GREEN LIVING



IN DEEP WATER

ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE experiences anyone can have in Bali is diving underwater to see the Coral Triangle, an area of the ocean that supports the greatest diversity of coral species in the world. The reefs around this Indonesian island provide food and shelter to more than 800 species of fish as well as other creatures like anemones and urchins. This stunning nature preserve is under threat due to the frequency of coral bleaching events. In late 2023, 90 per cent of the corals near Bondalem village in Bali had turned a ghostly white, according to conservationists. Coral bleaching occurs when coral expels the colourful algae living in their tissues, without whom the coral becomes pale and dies.

It's predicted that coral bleaching will occur more often now—between one or two years—if ocean temperatures remain at their current levels.

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

●
TRAVEL
LIGHT,
LIVE CLEAN



ANANDA BANERJEE

WINGED WONDERS

The story of migrating birds is the story of a promise to return, flying thousands of miles beset with dangers. Since the second half of September, flocks of waders, ducks, songbirds, cranes and raptors have started arriving in the Indian subcontinent to escape the cold and snow of the northern latitudes.

In the second half of October, the annual congregation of Amur Falcons over the Doyang landscape in Nagaland will be a sight to behold—a pit stop before the onward journey to South Africa. If you can't make the trip to Doyang, visit the village of Khichan in Rajasthan, the wintering home of Demoiselle cranes. Gujarat is another birding wonderland in the winter months—from Nal Sarovar in Ahmedabad and the Rann of Kutch (Great and Little Rann), to the Jamnagar coastline along the Marine National Park.

Waders or shorebirds are among the record holders of longest solo flights. Like the Bar-tailed godwits, flying 7,000-plus miles non-stop is a regular affair. Species of godwits, sandpipers, snipes, stints and plovers are some of the avian kingdom's most accomplished fliers visiting us year after year.

The diversity of waders is stunning; numbering hundreds of thousands, they spend the winter (arriving in autumn) on our coastal beaches, mudflats and shallow inland lakes before departing in spring for distant breeding grounds in Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Tibet and Siberia (Russia).

In June, birder Caroline Pickett from Gann Estuary, Pembrokeshire, England, posted a picture of an adult Curlew sandpiper with a black leg flag that read "MAB." The said bird was ringed (a scientific exercise to catch, tag and release birds to study) in November 2022 at Puthalam Saltpans, Kanyakumari. Imagine its astonishing journey from the

southern tip of India to one corner of Wales! And lest we forget, from recent memory, the epic migration of Onno, an oriental cuckoo, in 2020. When the coronavirus lockdowns brought humanity to a standstill, the cuckoo's 16,000 miles round trip through Mongolia, China, India, and Africa went viral on social media. This was also one of the longest journeys recorded by any land bird. More recently, the sighting of the rare Arctic tern (spotted in India after 96 years), White-cheeked tern, and masked booby in Mumbai got birders thronging the Sassoon Dock in early September. However, the climate crisis is resetting the bird migration compass and calendar, with untold consequences for biodiversity. Other notable important bird habitats in the country indicate an overall population decline. Most wetlands and lakes in the country have either shrunk or been obliterated due to encroachment.

The population declines in species like Ruff, Eastern curlew, Spoon-billed sandpiper, Asian dowitcher, and Black-tailed godwit are of great concern to ornithologists and wildlife conservationists. The decline of migratory and resident wader species has been noticed across the subcontinent. For example, at Point Calimere, Tamil Nadu (also a must-visit place), the decline is conspicuous to ornithologists and the average nature enthusiast. The disappearance of the "clouds" of waders is a visible indicator of the decline. In the 1980s, over 5,00,000 waders wintered at Point Calimere but were down to 1,00,000 by 2008, as per the Bombay Natural History Society.

Today, the future of bird migration is at stake as rapid urbanisation shrinks natural habitats. It is time to stop and ask: What's in store for our avian community? ▶ **OT**

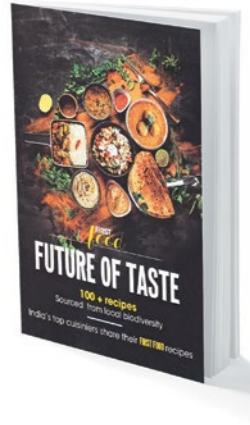


Bar-tailed godwit are migratory shorebirds

PHILIPP PLEIN



THE \$KELETON ECOCERAMIC



"First Food: Future of Taste" Edited by Sunita Narain (Centre for Science and Environment)

EATING × MINDFULLY



SUNITA NARAIN FROM THE CENTRE FOR SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT DISCUSSES HER NEW BOOK WHICH COMBINES THE JOYS OF EATING WITH CARE FOR THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE WHO TILL THEM

Words → EISHA GUPTA

T TO SAY THAT INDIANS love their food would be a gross understatement. Whether we are tucking into Hyderabadi biryani, a masala dosa or any of the varieties of street food like chaat and vada pav, we eat not only to satisfy our taste buds and hunger but also to connect with others and reinforce our cultural identities. But will the foods we love outlast a climate crisis that is disrupting our agricultural system and impacting the nutrients and flavour profiles of the crops we grow?

A new book by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) demonstrates how the colours, flavours and joys of eating locally-grown dishes goes hand in hand with preserving the ecology and biodiversity of the regions where they are grown. "First Food: Future of Taste" showcases over 100 recipes from across India so that readers can learn how to cook nourishing and delicious three-course meals to be served alongside tasty drinks and chutneys.

We spoke with Sunita Narain, director general of the CSE and editor of Down to Earth magazine who presided over the creation of the book, on the challenges of making our agricultural systems more climate-resilient, how changing your diet can impact farmer incomes, and the future of veganism.

> Should we reassess the Green Revolution's impact in light of the biodiversity loss and climate breakdown?

There is already a push towards agroecological practices such as organic farming and climate-resilient agriculture in the country. Millets, which are water-prudent, have been promoted, too. Farmers are also taking up natural or zero-budget farming. These farming methods can be as productive as conventional farming if practised correctly. CSE has been promoting the inclusion of more biodiversity on the plate to increase resilience to crop failure, disasters and climate change. The four volumes in the First Food series provide individuals with ways to include biodiversity on their plate.

> What are the barriers to overhauling our present agricultural system in order to benefit the living planet?



Fields of Finger Millet, commonly known as Ragi in India

Modern cultivation systems rely heavily on farm machinery, and changing to a more labour-intensive system might be difficult. In the case of biodiversity-based foods, over the last few decades, we have not invested in preserving the knowledge of how these ingredients could be used as food. Efforts have not been made to protect the local environments/niches where this biodiversity thrives. Additionally, the seeds and planting materials needed to include these ingredients in the fields are unavailable.

> What practical actions can we take to signal to farmers to change what they grow?

Increasing the demand for food is the biggest signal for the farmer. The popularity of millet is a clear example of this. There are specialised markets across Delhi that sell ingredients from different states. These establishments exist because demand can drive businesses. Over the recent years, we have seen ingredients such as lettuce, rocket, quinoa, moringa, sabja, and chia become popular in the country as they became global fads. What we need to do is push local ingredients in the same way.

> How can we make millets more affordable to consumers while benefiting their growers financially and materially?

We're fortunate to maintain a culture that embraces millets in our diet, which is

FARMERS ARE TAKING UP NATURAL OR ZERO BUDGET FARMING. THESE FARMING METHODS CAN BE AS PRODUCTIVE AS CONVENTIONAL FARMING IF PRACTICED CORRECTLY

evident in festivals and exclusive recipes. However, over the past 50 years, reliance on major grains like wheat and rice has marginalised millets.

Lack of technological investment in harvesting and processing, relying on antiquated methods, exacerbates this decline. To mainstream millets, this must change. Moreover, insufficient high-quality seeds hinder increased production. Addressing these challenges, the government should support millet farmers, possibly by integrating millets into public distribution systems or school meals for guaranteed market access.

> Do you see a future for veganism in this country?

Veganism is one of the one of the many emerging fads and diets that have become popular across the globe. A lot of Indian food is vegan and the shift is easy. Practitioners would be the best judge of whether veganism works for them or not. ▶OT

CAN THE HIMALAYAS OUTLAST TOURISM?

LOVE THE HIMALAYAS,
BUT WORRIED ABOUT
ITS FUTURE? HEAR
FROM THREE EXPERTS
ON THE FUTURE OF THE
REGION AND HOW IT
CAN BE PROTECTED

Words → EISHA GUPTA



Sustainable tourism with the involvement of local communities, is the only long-term solution

W

WHETHER YOU'RE A ROOKIE TRAVELLER

or a seasoned explorer, chances are you haven't escaped the pull of advertisements and social media posts on trekking in the Himalayas. With millions of tourists arriving in the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), tour operators and hospitality businesses have their hands full with customers looking to get the most bang for their buck. However, the glossy videos and posters usually skip the mounting waste crisis in the Himalayas, and the rapid infrastructural development currently underway to facilitate the transportation of military personnel and tourists. These activities are exacerbating climate pressures in the region, now characterised by retreating glaciers, heavy rainfall and erratic snowfall. This begs the question: Can the Himalayas survive the tourism industry?

A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

According to a 2018 NITI Aayog report, titled "Report of Working Group II: Sustainable Tourism in the Himalayan Region," tourism in the IHR was predicted to grow at an average annual rate of 7.9 per cent from 2013 to 2023. For the local communities who have called the place home for centuries, tourism means economic opportunities and jobs. For state governments and private entrepreneurs, it's an opportunity to increase their revenues. The Uttarakhand government, for instance, wants tourism to make up at least 15 per cent of the state's GDP by 2030.

According to scientist Ghazala Shahabuddin, a visiting professor at the environmental studies department in Ashoka University, rampant infrastructural development in the form of highways, dams, housing complexes and powerlines are threats to people, forests, natural hydrological flows, and biodiversity in the IHR. Just last year, a section of the under-

construction Char Dham National Highway collapsed, trapping 41 workers in a tunnel. The rescue effort took 17 days.

Shahabuddin's fieldwork is concentrated in the middle Himalayas around the Mukteshwar landscape. She fears that a recurrence of landslides due to improper construction activities and deforestation could make the Himalayas dangerous to live in. "Extreme weather events, such as long-drawn out rainstorms, can make the soil loose, causing landslides. In the event of earthquakes that frequently occur in the Himalayan region, large-scale subsidence and landslides are expected," she says.

SHOULD THERE BE LIMITS?

Could strict restrictions on admitting tourists into the IHR preserve the landscape and its inhabitants? Would staying in homestays and engaging in low-intensity activities, like hiking in nature trails, be the way forward?

Keerty Nakray is a legal and ethics expert at the Institute of Social Sciences and Yenepoya University, Karnataka. She says that sustainable tourism, when practiced

JUST LAST YEAR, A SECTION OF THE UNDER-CONSTRUCTION CHAR DHAM NATIONAL HIGHWAY COLLAPSED, TRAPPING 41 WORKERS IN A TUNNEL

with the involvement of local communities and environmental and social experts, is the only long-term solution, which respects the ecology and customs of a place like the IHR without hurting the coffers of private businesses and governments. She believes that the decision to restrict tourists should lie with the communities, administration, and tour operators involved. Furthermore, she says that travellers should also be educated about the region's cultural norms—something that policymakers should take an active hand in.

"Often, travellers approach destinations with preconceived notions, leading to ethnocentric viewpoints. Policymakers should prioritise cultural sensitivity training for travellers, encouraging them to embrace and appreciate the differences they

encounter," she says.

According to Nakray, one of the ways governments can encourage sustainable tourism is by subsidising eco-friendly tourism initiatives and implementing a circular economy, where materials and products are kept in circulation for as long as possible to reduce waste and environmental impacts. But would this risk a two-tier system where the rich can get away with polluting a destination because they have the means to do so? For Nakray, there is a way out.

"Unless local communities stand up for their environmental and social rights, people will get away with bad behaviour. The idea of 'dignity' is not appreciated in India. The rich must understand that tourism is a cultural, social, and economic exchange," she says.

"There's also a need to address issues of irresponsible behaviour among tourists, such as drug abuse and alcohol consumption. Take, for example, Sikkim, which is known for its pristine environment and peace-loving people. However, the influx of tourists, particularly mountaineers, engaging in disruptive behaviour like substance abuse poses a threat to the community's wellbeing."

A LOCAL'S PERSPECTIVE

Bina Nitwal is a resident of Munsiyari, a scenic hill station in Uttarakhand. She runs a homestay along with other residents as part of a community-owned rural tourism business, called Himalayan Ark. The group of 15-16 residents make anywhere from INR 1,00,000-3,00,000 per year.

She says that tourism has been good for the development of her community. It has enabled her to give her children a quality education and have a comfortable house, as well as pad her finances. Despite the benefits, she says that tourism should have reasonable limits.

"Earlier there used to be fewer cars but now there are many. Waste has increased in our community, especially dry waste like plastic and glass bottles. Parasites and bugs live off the waste. We have dustbins but the waste is everywhere," she says.

She has also noticed how weather has become more erratic in the two decades since she moved to Munsiyari. "The snow is less now. Rainfall comes out of season and has reduced. The government promotes tourism, but the needs of local communities should also be heard." ►OT



THE GREAT TRIUMPH



PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK



BETWEEN SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER, colours swirl in a dance of celebration in the village of Kulasekarapattinam in Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu: A horde of celestial deities out on the seashore, enacting their roles, presiding over demon slayings. This scene greets you every year here, where the festival of Dasara is celebrated with a lot of pomp and show. Kulasekarapattinam turns into a

kaleidoscope of colours with lakhs of devotees visiting the storied Arulmigu Mutharamman Devi Temple, dressed in striking costumes. Built during the reign of King Maravarman Kulasekaran, the 300-year-old temple has Goddess Mutharamman as its main deity, who is believed to be looking over the village and guarding the residents from harm. Devotees dress up as the Goddess Kali or as

kings, monkeys, and gypsies. Often wearing body paint and bold makeup, they act as though possessed by the divine powers of the cosmic deity they are portraying. On the day of Vijayadashami, the festivities culminate in a grand finale marking the triumph of good over evil with one of the costumed Goddesses slaying the demon King Mahisha on the seashore of Kulasai, amidst uproarious songs and celebrations. ▶ **OT**



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Z 6 III



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