



# INDIAN TEXTILE, GLOBAL WRAP

Discovery of Indian textiles at Egyptian sites has established export of cloth from the 9th to the 17th century. The influence of Indian cottons in Europe had seized the fashion world such that India was virtually clothing the world

JASVINDER KAUR

INDIA has a 4,000-year old history of producing textiles. During most of this time, it had a thriving export market. Although different types of textiles have been traded at different times, the most important has been that of cotton, which was the new fabric that arrived in Europe around the 17th century. Compared to wool and linen that Europe knew, it had its advantages. It was light in weight, comfortable, washable and had bright and fast colours.

From the Indus Valley Civilization, spindle whorls and needles have been found at Mohenjodaro. Romans called Indian cottons 'woven air'. After the fall of the Roman Empire, cloth continued to flow westward, especially to Iran, Arabia and Egypt. With discoveries at the Egyptian sites of Quseir-al-Qadim and Fustat, it was established that Indian textiles were exported to Egypt from the 9th to the 17th century. These were all from Gujarat. The site of the Red Sea town of Quseir-al-Qadim was used as a harbour in both Roman and Islamic times. Discovery of 68 cotton fragments confirms that block-printed and resist-dyed fabrics were traded. These findings are significant as they confirm antiquity of Indian trade and are samples of early surviving Indian cloth.

By the end of the 15th century, a complex network of trade had spread from Africa to China. India led the world in production of cotton textiles and millions of yards of cloth was exported. The geographical location was ideal for trading to both east and west, exporting to Japan, South-East Asia, West Asia and Europe. The eastern trade followed the barter system. As people had confidence in Indian cloth, this practice continued even after the money system was well established. The antiquity of Indian textile trade to the east is difficult to put down to a date, but there is evidence that it was well established by the 1st century AD. Contacts were over both land and

sea. To quantum of trade to the east is also hard to assess, as only European records survive, which have been documented in detail. However, large volumes of textiles were carried by Asian merchants and Asian ships. Textiles have a central role in the ceremonial and ritual life of most Asian societies. As these textiles were essentially for export, they left the shores and remained largely unrepresented in museums in India, but for those in private collections.

## History preserved

An exhibition of Indian textiles entitled "Patterns of trade: Indian textiles for export 1400-1900" is currently showing at the Asian Civilization Museum, Singapore (November 15, 2011, to June 3, 2012). It has showcased over 70 textiles that are part of a collection recently acquired by the museum. These date from as early as the 13th century, and trace the history of trade and cultural exchanges. On display are textiles exported to Asia and Europe and many of these textiles have been carbon dated to verify their vintage.

Indian textiles in Southeast Asia became precious heirlooms and were preserved in isolated traditional communities. This exhibition traces the impact of Indian textiles on trade and cultural exchange through four main sections that examine the key production centres in India, key production techniques, markets for their textiles and their wide influence on later designs.

The main production and trade centres were Gujarat and the western Coromandel coast (derived from Choramandalam or 'land of the Cholas') of south-east India. Gujarati ships customarily stopped at eastern ports to collect cloth, which went to many Asian countries, notably Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan and China.

Resist and mordant-dyed textiles, together with patola or double ikat silk of Gujarat, dominated textile trade to Asia. Predominately, these techniques

## DYED IN HERITAGE

- Patola follows a technique of double ikat, where all threads are laid out on a frame and arranged into bundles that are tightly tied with resist-strings or cloth. This prevents the dye from absorption. This procedure is followed with each colour. Both warp and weft are patterned to create a crisp pattern.
- Silk patola trousers were exclusively used by the nobility in Indonesia and each royal house had its own unique design.
- Indian dyed fabrics were either Indigo-dyed (blue) or mordant dyed (shades of red) from Morinda, Sappan, Chayroot, etc.
- Printing is with blocks and painting is with a use of "kalams (pen)", like in kalamkari. Painted fabric designs are more intricate than block printed.
- Chintz (from "chitta", or spotted) were mordant and resist-dyed Indian cottons.
- Palampore (from "palangposh", or bed cover) were used as spreads or hangings in Europe. The flowering tree motif is associated with it.
- In 1734, ship officer M. de Beaulieu recorded the Indian methods of cotton printing. This manuscript with real samples of dyed cloth is preserved at Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris.

(Above) Caparisoned elephants on Silk patola-double ikat (Gujarat; late 18th or early 19th century), and (right) a cotton block-printed, resist and mordant-dyed hanging depicting women with veena and parrots (Gujarat, 15th to 17th century).

are showcased at this exhibition. Among the hangings is a patola with elephant design from the late 18th or early 19th century. Such cloths are believed to have been especially commissioned by the Dutch East India Company for gifts. Interestingly, there is another piece shown with a similar design made by Vinayak Salvi in 2005. His is one of the few families remaining who practise this technique. Another patola shoulder cloth has flower basket design, or "chhabdi bhat". In Java, this design is considered a 'forbidden pattern' as it was meant only for royalty. However, imitations of these were made in block-printed cotton (also in India) shoulder cloth. One of them has a VOC stamp that was used by the Dutch East India Company, and therefore dated before 1798.

Among the exhibits are hangings, garments, ritual hangings, ceremonial cloth, and table or floor coverings. The oldest piece is from Gujarat, 13th or 14th century, block printed with three women warriors, and has scenes from stories of brave women, or "nayikas"

and carbon dated 1285-1365. Many pieces exhibited have been acquired from Sri Lanka, Indonesia-Java, Sulawesi, South Sumatra, Malaysia, Thailand and Europe. A group of piece goods from Sulawesi are long banners 5-6 m long called "Ma'a by Torajas", some as old as 600 years. Torajas hang these ceremonial textiles from tall tree-shaped bamboo structures during the course of their rituals to ward off evil spirits. Officiating priests wear them as head cloths. These precious textiles are stored as family heirlooms. As the price of the Indian cloth was high, clubbed with their scarcity, imitations were produced locally. Today they have the same importance in the Sulawesi culture.

Trade to east was dominated by Arab and Indian merchants. Quest for spices drew European traders into the Indian Ocean. By the 16th century, trade controls had passed onto the European trading companies. First the Portuguese, and later the Dutch, the English and the French. While European bullion was worth little to the economies of the East, Indian cloth



was well known and commanded a high value. For European companies commercial success in the Indian Ocean trade depended on barter and sale of Indian cloth. In the East, Indian textiles were considered equal to storing wealth and European traders were willing to trade gold and silver for them. They were used for costumes for the royalty, hangings, gift offerings, and were often ascribed magical properties. As they were preserved as heirlooms and were carefully stored, they have survived many centuries.

## India craze

Initially, Indian textiles came to Europe as novelties and in small quantities. Later, India emerged as the biggest supplier of high quality cotton textiles. Indian cottons influenced European fashion and India craze seized the fashion world. Printed cottons — chintz, palampore and later yardage material were all exported to Europe. India was virtually clothing the world. Presence of a large volume of printed cottons in Europe by the

third quarter of the 17th century and its ever increasing demand played an important role in the development of the European printing industry.

Indian textiles not only affected the patterns of European prints, but initially they also took the technical knowhow. At this time mordant dyeing was unknown in Europe as they printed with a single block using black pigment. Additional colours were added later, none of which were washable. So when cottons arrived with bright colours and a variety of designs, it took Europe by storm. India craze seized the fashion world as Indian cottons penetrated every home by way of furnishing or clothing. There were many attempts in Europe to imitate the Indian cottons. It first started in 1676 when a calico printer William Sherwin took out a patent. From London, the industry spread to Berlin, Bremen, Frankfurt, the Swiss towns of Neuchatel (1688), Lausanne (1698), Geneva (1691) and to many places in

France. These printed fabrics came to be known as Indiennes. As more and more Europeans started using Indian cottons, there was resistance in England, France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. In 1686, France declared a ban on imported chintz in order to save its silk industry.

Mastery of traditional techniques by Indian craftsmen and the capacity of Indian masters to adapt to the needs of different communities made India the biggest producer of textiles. It was commonly said that Indian textiles fade but not tear. India was the biggest supplier of textiles, a position it lost only in the 19th century, when Europe developed faster printing techniques. Let us hope that with India now emerging as a big economic power, we can regain that position not only in textiles but in other fields of business too.

(The writer is a textile researcher who has worked at National Museum, New Delhi, and Musee d'Art et d'Histoire and Musee d'Ethnographie, Geneva, Switzerland)