

Connecting Threads from Tradition to Modern - The SUJANI of Gujarat

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ABSTRACT

Culture is the “lens” through which you view the world.

India features amongst the culturally affluent countries in the world as far as art and culture is concerned. It is a manufacturing hub of varied kinds of handicrafts, which are popular even in international markets and are known for its ethnicity. The country is fortunate enough to possess some highly skilled artisans. Each state of the country has some or other things characteristic to their region. They have augmented the fame of Indian handicrafts around the globe. Many rural people still earn their livelihood from their creative pieces of art. (3)

Gujarat is blessed with rich and vibrant tradition of handicrafts. It is widely differing in its proportions of its patterns to the element of wonderful exquisite artefacts in various forms. It is unique with diverse arts and crafts, merged with aesthetic appeal. Hand woven fabrics of any given time and space reflect and preserve in them the results of centuries of experiments of man under various circumstances; they carry forms and techniques which remain relatively unchanged or unaffected over generations. The state has been popular for its embroidered, woven and printed traditional cloth. Of these “Sujani”- hand woven textiles can be considered as exquisite traditional textile which has its root in the “Bharuch” region of the state. (1)

Bharuch is the main centre of the Sujani craft with regular and continuous production throughout the year. It may be rightly said that handicraft of Sujani weaving is essentially an off-shoot of the handloom industry of Bharuch. It is a woven quilt with double weave technique. The distinctive feature of this fabric is that it is stuffed with cotton fibres in the form of small squares to give a padded effect while it is still on the loom. This makes it different from the other quilts which are stuffed with cotton fibres after the cloth has been removed from the looms and quilted with needle and thread.

This study was undertaken to study the traditional weaving and its popularity. Results revealed that it is dying craft and needs revival.

INTRODUCTION

Handicrafts commonly refer to handmade crafts or art work. Skilled people create varied types of items starting from consumer goods to decorative pieces out of paper, wood, clay, shells, rock, stone, metal, etc. with the help of simple tools. These kinds of items are called handicrafts owing to the fact that these crafted items are solely handmade without the usage of any machine. Handicraft is also known as “craftwork” or simply “craft”. It is a generic term that includes different ethnic and traditional items made and designed entirely by hands or by using simple hand tools. (2)

What is Sujani?

Each state has its own characteristic traditional textile. “Bharuch” city of Gujarat is the production centre of the “SUJANI” which is a type of woven fabric that is made using two or more warp yarns and one or more weft yarns. These extra yarns are called “Filling Yarns”. Now days, the most common combination in this type of fabric is two warp yarns and three weft yarns. A lot of the time, fabrics has no right and no wrong side, as they are made with one set of warp yarn and two weft yarns. These fabrics are known as Double Faced Fabrics, but are a type of Double Cloth. (6)

A Sujani uses no layered sheets or stitching to create the thick, padded texture, it is known for. Instead, this padding comes from the weaver’s filling small woven squares with spun cotton as they go. (6)“Sujanis are classified as double weave fabrics in which cotton is filled in between the two layers during the weaving process. The sujani weaving is made on conventional handlooms. Two weavers sit side by side at the loom and pass a shuttle of two yarn-dyed colors back and forth. A row of small pockets is woven and filled by hand or with a tweezers with cotton batting. The next pass closes the row and the following row of pockets begins. " (8)

Traditional Sujani Swatches:



Plate 5



Plate 4



Plate 3



Plate 2



Plate 1

Looms used for Sujani Weaving:

The looms used for Sujani weaving are the Fly Shuttle looms. Two weavers sit at the either end of the loom. A shuttle of two colours is put in the warp threads with the aim of turning the warp and the weft. The quilt starts taking shape during weaving, when spun cotton is added and woven into squares, giving it a padded look. Unlike other quilts, it is not layered with cotton sheet nor are stitches made with hand or machine. The weaving is called Sujani. (7)



Plate 6: Shuttles used for weaving



Plate 7: Traditional Sujani loom (Fly Shuttle Loom)



Plate 8: Weavers working with the traditional loom

Looking Back into Time...

The name Sujani may come from the Gujarati word sujavu, which means "to strike or conceive".

Another theory is that the name comes from the Persian word sujani, which means "needlework". This suggests that the craft may have been adapted from hand-sewn or embroidered quilting techniques from Bihar.

Another story says that the technique was brought to Bharuch by a man who learned it in an Andaman and Nicobar prison after taking part in the 1857 Indian mutiny.

A popular story says that merchant and weaver Nabubhai created the first Sujani quilt around 1860.

The history of Sujani weaving dates back to the 1860's when a Bharuch native learnt this craft form from a

fellow Assamese convict in the Andaman jail and later taught it to his villagers. This meticulous technique involves two weavers per loom who place cotton between two layers of thread and weave them all together. Soft colored checks in contrast with bright colored stripes in a textured surface define the feel of the Sujani fabric, which is both warm and durable.

Sujani originated in 1860 and enjoyed royal patronage and appreciation. Three families involved in the craft were: the Sujniwalas, the Chistiyas and Miya Mustafa's family. All the families were engaged in different activities; one was completely into production, the other into trading and the third one was carrying out both simultaneously. There is immense competition amongst the families, as each one of them claimed to be the descendants of the originator of the craft. This craft has been the livelihood for them for generations. Due to the modern technology, the value of handicrafts has deteriorated and people are now looking for look-alikes and cheaper products. (8)

So, this study was undertaken to study factors affecting its popularity and suggest steps for its revival.

A systematic market survey and case study of the weaver was planned.

From the case study and market survey, it was found that artisans are traditionally an essential part of the village economy producing everyday utilitarian objects catered towards local market using designs and motifs that were of significance to their communities.

However, with the advent of industrialization and increasing urbanization of markets for crafts the historical artisan- consumer relationship has broken down, and largely been replaced by traders. This has rendered artisan's knowledge and skill, acquired over generations, virtually useless and made crafts an unsustainable source of livelihood. (Crafting a livelihood –building sustainability for Indian Artisans, William Bissel, Managing Director, Fab India).

The fabric does not have a demanding market because of its limited use to only quilts. In a state like Gujarat, where winters are mild, quilts are not used much and secondly, it's not a product for which a consumer would prefer to possess multiples due to its limited design availability. Earning from the Sujani weaving is not fetching the money to feed the family. The weavers have switched over to other jobs such as diamond cutting, machine embroidery, etc. for supplementing their income and earn lucrative amount of money to support their families. Since it is a very time-consuming and tedious process, it is shunned by the next generation of weavers. There is a need to popularize the craft and design intervention was tried out to attain them.

Design Intervention

Design intervention was planned in several categories like home furnishing, upholstery and accessories. Design intervention was also carried out by collaborating various other well-known crafts of Gujarat state itself.

Proposed Products:

Category 1: (Home Furnishing / Upholstery)



Cushion Covers

1) Table mat set



2) Decorative Runner for Table



• Category 2: (Accessories)

1) A bag



2) Laptop sleeve



Category 3: (Collaboration with other crafts)

Exploration with Ajrakh Craft



Exploration done with Block printing



The present study is taken up with the focus of studying the weaver and craft products in detail which will ultimately help in bringing it to the people. Thus, will be a step towards the preservation of our age-old traditional textile.

Implementation of this study will help in preserving and popularizing the art of SUJANI which is on the verge of extinction. This is one of the unique arts of weaving fabric on handloom.

Based on the market survey, product intervention was planned keeping in mind the following aspects:

- 1) Increase in variety will increase the clientele.
- 2) Smaller products will be more affordable.
- 3) Introduction of new product categories.
- 4) Collaborating with designers to create fusion designs while keeping the craft's authenticity.
- 5) Providing training on modern techniques without compromising heritage craftsmanship.

CONCLUSION

In the recent past, globalization has brought great changes across the world. The key characteristics of today's global market is the speed with which the demand for a product and change in its lifestyle, design, and color, offer greater opportunities as well as threats to producers.

The precarious nature of handmade craft markets invites strategic approaches to reach global consumers. But delayed response can push these deep-rooted traditional handmade products out, replacing them with mass factory made products, machine crafts.

Sujani weaving of Bharuch was woven by the Muslim community. Sujani was a quilt which was basically used as a means to cover the human body. Later on attempts were made to give it a different look but it was not fruitful. It was concluded from the study that Sujani weaving does not have a demanding market. The craft is very precious and identity of Indian culture. During the study, the researcher came to know that at present only the elder weavers of the family are engaged in weaving. The younger generation has no interest in taking the weaving craft forward as they were not getting respectable family income through weaving. From the study it was concluded that the product diversification of Sujani weaving would be helpful to weavers in gaining market and increase their socio-economic status.

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