

DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL TEXTILES IN SIND:

Salima Hashmi,  
+ Idrees Malik.

5000 years ago the people of the Indus Valley grew cotton, spun it and wove it into patterned cotton. Harrapan sites have yielded a fragment of red-dyed cotton cloth, in a simple plain weave. The people of ancient Sind knew the process of dyeing from madder, the process of Manjitha. These are the very earliest signs of the use of cotton and dyed textiles in the sub-continent. And from these early beginnings one continues to trace a tradition which is rich and varied - the result of the creative and diligent processes of weavers spinners, dyers, printers and embroiderers, both men and women who were integrated into the fabric of society.

There are a variety of ancient sources which describe the dyeing processes and textile used in the sub-continent. Panine in the first millenium B.C. writes of cloths which are identified by their colours. Nila was the name of the cloth dyed with "Indigo" Lohitaka was red madder dyed cotton, Laksa was the red of lac, Kalaka was black. These colours were the basic colours of the ancients, with the addition of yellow obtained from pomegranate skin, yellow from tumeric, black from iron shavings. The use of textile from the draping of the body to the development of costumes for ceremonial occasions, decorating walls, floors, and furniture, tents, animal dress, dastar-khans, binding books and the wrapping of carpses has desired the innovation of the artisan through the ages, and we are the inheritors of the creative process of these millions of eyes, minds and hands.

Our knowledge of the costume of the people of ancient Sind is scanty. The figurines and seals tell a story of cloth

worn sparingly. A shawl is worn by a male figure covering the left shoulder and passed under the right arm. The deities wear a thin strip of cotton on their loins, some wear a sort of kilt. The narrow strip of cloth used as a prototype sari, was fastened with a girdle or a Kummerband. Fan shaped head dresses were worn both by men and women. From Gandhara and upto the 4th century A.D. comes the development of the dhoti, the shawl, the turban-tunic, trousers for men. For women, a sort of petticoat, a tunic and a shawl-cum-dupatta.

Cotton Muslin was highly prized in Babylon in Assyria, and was known as Sindhu, a reference perhaps to its specific area of origin. The Roman Empire was a great patron of Indian muslin which was known as nebula. Silk in the form of "patola" (from Gujrat) and Cina, (the origin of which was from China), Aparanatake from Sind and Gujrat are mentioned as well as cloth manufactured from linen and certain fibrous plants.

From the 12th century onwards and with the introduction of Mulsim influences, a new range of colours and forms appear. The moghuls with their background brought a new range of hues, purples, pinks, and musk of the "Fakhta" make their appearance. Forms of fruits and flowers from more temperate climate came into focus. Yet Akbar had a weakness for turbans for Rajastan, which he intorudced into the court, his ladies were partial to the ghagras from the desert, together with the Choli and the odhani. The servants of the courtiers wore a cheaper version of the same dress, replacing cotton and wool for the skils, muslins and brocades of the nobles. Certainly the variety of textiles woven and produced in the sub-continent

was phenomenal. Amir Khusro speaks of harir (silk), the Karpas (cotton) bihari muslin, the gul-e-baqli (flowered jamdani silk) and other fabrics of almost 200 kinds which were available.

With the growth of trade with Europe, came the demand for Indian silks and calico, the printed and painted cottons, a cheaper substitute for the cloth from European manufacturers. The embroideries of Sind and Gujrat had already reached Europe in 1522, brought by the Portuguese. The years from 1670-1700 saw a growth of this trade and the taste of European buyers in turn influenced the indigenous producers after the 18th Century. The colonisation of the Sub-continent by the British and the policy of turning it into a market for their industrial goods gave a grave blow to this, the most ancient of crafts. The weavers, spinners and printers were hard hit by the shoddy machine-made manufacture from Leeds and Manchester. The second blow was the import of synthetic dyes from Europe, and lastly the introduction of power, driven looms completed the suffocation of the traditional textile. However, the craftsman artisan survived even these heavy odds in small pockets, here in Sind where various socio-economic factors saved them to a small extent from the onslaught of colonisation. However, in the last 36 years after independence. We have displayed the most terrible indifference to the plight of our precious traditional textile and have left the craftsman to face a new kind of colonisation with no direction in which to go except that of giving up the craft of their forefathers and the putting to death of a part of our cultural heritage. It is

assumed that the great cultural achievements in textiles come from the patrons of the courts, the nobles, the Rajahs, the elite, the gentry and the standards of taste and excellence permeated down to the poor craftsman in his hut. In fact all crafts, from pottery to fabric, come from the work-man-ship of <sup>the</sup> village, the standards of excellence passed from father to son, from mother to daughter.

In the hand of the peasant artisan there is the, patience to create all manner of delicacy in material in embroidery, in colour. Of course the patrons did influence the design, the choice of colours, the cost of materials, but it was always the lowly craftsmen who wrought the miracles we marvel at today.

A quick survey of the range of Sindhi traditional textiles, reveals the richness and variety, which struggles to survive even today. This range of textiles, can be roughly classified as: Printed textiles, which include block printing, tie, n dye and mixed processes, woven textiles, and embrodered textiles. Block printing survives in Sukkur, HYderabad Badeen districts, in Tando Mohammad Khan, in Tando Allah Yar, in Hala and Matiari and in Tharparkar at Umerkot and Mithi.

The major problems facing this craft are, very briefly:

1. The death and disappearance of dyes - The traditional vegetable dyes of Sindh have almost disappeared. The import of Alizarin, the red dye from France since 1875, ensured the disappearance of the local red "manjitha" in the last century.

However now this imported Alizarin stopped several years ago. The main markets for Alizarin were India, Malayasia and Pakistan. India started manufacturing Alizarin some years ago and the shrinking market made Alizarin no longer a profitable business for the French manufacturers, who stopped manufacture. The Alizarin now used in Sind is smuggled in from India, over which there is no quality control. The intensity of the colour varies, and the craftsmen are in trouble. No other dye-stuff can replace this dye, the colour most basic to all of block printing in Sind. The city based block printers in Hyderabad etc. started using the new chemical rapid fast colours which can be fixed in sulphuric acid. But the inconvenience of this material is discouraging printing altogether. Industrial dyes are not suitable for block-printing. The other dye used in traditional block-printing is the black dye which comes from hirakash (ferrous sulphate) which was put in a ghara with water, ata and gur and fermented for 8 days. This process has now been given up for the quicker process of mixing the iron with glue. The ancient dyers used the yellow from the skin of the pomegranate, and green was obtained from mixing the yellow with indigo. Today these have been replaced by direct dyes which are not fast.

2. Blocks for printing are also in a state of crisis. There are only one or two block cutters in Sukkur, one in Hyderabad, one in Raddan in Dadu district. The shortage of block cutters has pushed up the prices, where now the price of a set of blocks for Ajrak costs Rs.3,000/-. In Tharparker, traditionally the blocks came from areas which are now in India and no new blocks have reached the printers since 1971. The blocks being used today are 10 years old, they have lost their sharpness and clarity, and the work is not so marketable as it was. The demand for block-printed cloth still continues in rural areas, but the cities no longer support the block printed craft. The material on which block-printing was done was once exclusively hand-woven cotton fabric - Today the cotton comes from the power looms of Faisalabad and Karachi - The craftsman knows no other material but cotton; the disappearance of pure cotton, as opposed to the appearance of mixed cotton and synthetic fibres, is disastrous for the craftsmen, who know and understand no other material than his cotton or in the bygone days when it was also silk on occasions.

The second form of printed textiles which has been a symbol of excellence in craftsmanship is tie'n dye. The centres of this craft are in Mithi, Umerkot, and Hutungo (in Thar) The tie-dyed fabric is used as the odhni, the ghagra and

sometimes as a shirt front for the Gaj. This craft is suffering also from the disappearance of alizarin. The smuggled dye from India is not as intense as the French variety, and more dye is needed to produce the desired effect. 25 grams of Indian Alizarin are equal to 10 grams of the French stuff - "The desired colour is like the red of the Kandhari pomegranate."

The tyeing of the cloth is done by women and the dyeing by men. The system is like a cottage industry with the cloth being farmed out to all the homes, tyed there by women, then collected and dyed by the men. It is difficult to colour then yellow and green because of the loss of vegetable dyes so direct dyes are used which are not fast and are adulterated. There is in fact a case for coming to the rescue of the craftsmen whether printers or weavers and to provide them with the modern equivalents of their traditional dyes to save them from extinction.

In the case of woven textiles, the same problems continue. There are three aspects, firstly the dyeing of the yarn, secondly the selection of different yarns and lastly the uses of different yarns. If, I may compare the case of "Patto" cloth of the North and use it to illustrate the problem here in Sind. The traditional Patto cloth is now being woven in the centres of small industries who instead of leading the way and using handspun woollen yarn to encourage traditional spinners of wool are using woollen factory spun yarn from Valika - The woven fabric is handwoven, but the yarn is machine-spun. The same thing has happened with the weaving of silk here in Sind - Uptil 4 years ago, pure

silk was still being spun by hand and woven into Khes in Sukkur and Nasrpur. Today, there is no weaving of pure silk Khes in Sind. Instead weavers are using art silk factory spun yarn. A craft has died here before our very eyes. There is today only one weaver who still on occasion weaves pure silk.

Sussi, the fabric of a river of colours, the colours of sind, of the cycle of seasons, the festivals, the bloodred of sunsets, yellow of young mango blossoms, blue of the water, the indigo of the monsoon cloud ancient harmonies, and hues now dying an agonising death.

There is handloom weaving of sussi in Hala, but is now fast going over to power looms - and the hand loom weavers use machine spun yarn, they supply the handicraft market, but they too are going over to mixing synthetic art silk with cotton good quality cotton yarn is scarce<sup>c</sup> today, and fast colours to dye the yarn are expensive and not easily available.

The use of machine spun yarn in Hala is a sad story, so the spinners of yarn disappeared.

Another story of weaving in Sind is the story of the goat hair rugs - Here the wool is thankfully still spun by hand. The Farasi rugs from Karyon Gawar in Badin, the 900 families whose forefathers came from Balochistan, blending a delicate combination of baloch and Sindi motifs and colours. These weavers have lost the tradition of vegetable dyes of their ancestors. The Farasi is almost exclusively woven by women, while the spinning of the yarn is done by both men and women. The dying<sup>e</sup> is done by the

entrepreneur who supplies the family with capital. He collects the yarn, dyes it and returns it to them. The reason for this is an interesting one. Several years ago, all the Farasi rugs coming from Karyon Gawar were suffering from non-fast dyes - A research student from the National College of Arts gave a recipe for dyeing the sheep's wool to the middle man, who instead of passing the recipe on to the families, kept it to himself, dyes the yarn himself and passes it on to the weavers for weaving the Farasis. There is a species of rug weaving in Thar that uses non-dyed wool. The white goat hair is woven with the black and camel colour sometimes mixed with cotton. There are also handspun and hand woven woolen shawls in Thar called Khatha in which recently rayon yarn has been mixed, which is a sad development. A black woolen cloth of the Rabari tribe is sometimes tie dyed also, or embroidered. What is more rare is yarn spun from 'AK' plant or from the bark of trees in Thar. But all this is now almost lost.

The delight in embroidery is an ancient one - but the popularity of the printed synthetic fabrics with their bright vibrating colour and tough materials have seduced the women of Sind, into giving up the crafts learnt through the centuries - Pure silk to embroider with is now too expensive and not so easy to procure; so the craft dies ~~ant~~ The embroideries of Sind once treasured in Europe hundreds of years ago, now survive only in the more remote areas of Tharparkar and Thano Bulu Khan. In India cotton is used to embroider but the stitches are not so fine as those of Sind.

The symbols in embroidery<sup>e</sup>, animals, trees and plants, architecture, human figures, geometric simplifications and simplified landscapes, form the rich tapestry of the vocabulary of the women, but old women are no longer teaching the young these and symbols are being lost. Instead harsh large geometric forms have made their appearance on the instigation of various organizations, handicraft entrepreneurs, colours have lost their muted maturity, and there is a vulgarity and loudness about the embroidery silks. This form of commercial exploitation which is thoughtless and mindless has no roots in the culture of this region and is destroying the sensibilities of the makers.

The "Rilli" or applique, apart from its traditional use in every home is now at the mercy of government and private handicraft promoters. Traditionally old cloth was used for "rilli" with intricate, finely cut patterns in geometric forms. Today people mix synthetics and cotton together, the pieces are large and vulgarised. Pure cotton in fast colours is not available to the makers so we have rabbits and elephants in flat crepe, embroidered over to try to disguise the crude applique work. Villagers still have the delicacy and skill of yesterday but the temperament of "rilli" has altered irrevocably with plastic sequins adorning its appearance in Karachi and Hyderabad.

The textiles related to the adornment of animals, the camel belts and bags, horse food bags, Namdahs for use as horse saddles use leather and wool of different kinds and were traditionally finely decorated, but synthetic wool has put in an appearance here too, in an incongruous marriage between the two.

All this paints a picture of sadness and despair. If we are to act to save what we have inherited after centuries of labour by the artisans of Sind, we owe it to them to act quickly.

What is needed is research, in the training and servicing of the ancient craft of textiles. We cannot reproduce ancient societies, but we can teach skilled and sensitive designers of today to work within the frame-work of today, with the craftsmen, to both learn and to teach. To enable the craftsmen to understand their own precious worth, they must learn to feel proud of their skill, a pride that can only be a part of economic security and a nurturing of their skills.

The craftsmen are living in today's world, new functions, new techniques, new challenges, they must be helped - given the courage not to desert the craft of their forefathers, not to vulgarise nor to compromise - but to understand, to learn, to teach - To ensure that the craftsmen's creative impulse and his unsurpassed skills continue to live and grow.

- Sources:
1. DR. Moti Chandra  
"Costumes Through the Ages"  
Marg. Vol: XXXIII No: 1
  2. Indian Textiles Through The Ages  
Pupul Jayakar
  3. Indo-European textiles - John Irwin
  4. Travel notes by Idrees Malik,