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Ashavali brocades from traditional to modern times

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Abstract

When talking about the heritage of Gujarat, it is imperative to mention the Ashavali brocades. These laid the foundation for brocades in India circa 10th - 11th century. Traditionally royalties bought brocades for their wardrobe and for rewarding their courtiers on ceremonies. People of different communities in Gujarat draped the saris and used pallus and borders to adorn their *odhani*. Over the centuries, the demand for this fabric has declined due to the changing lifestyles and requirements of consumers. Nowadays, the elite wear *kinkhab* only on special occasions or buy it as a souvenir. With the changing times, the brocades have witnessed a number of transformations. This paper focuses on the conventional brocades and contemporizing the end use of these brocades to meet the requirements of the customers.

As discussed in present times the demand for these brocades has declined so, over the years its production got restricted to one household only. Ashavali brocades are being sustained by the third generation of a single household in Ridrol village at Gujarat. The objective of this paper is to understand the varied products that have been developed from Ashavali brocades in earlier times and contemporary approaches adopted over the changing times. So, the respondents comprised all those associated with the making of these brocades and the clients. Primary data was collected by conducting in-depth interviews with the respondents. In addition, secondary sources like books, magazines and journals available in museums and libraries, private collection of designers, photographs, and sculptures were referred to gain insights into the history of Ashavali brocades.

Keywords: Heritage, brocades, contemporary approach

1. Introduction

1.1 Ashavali Brocades in Conventional Times: A Chronological Overview

The fine quality of silk fabric woven in Gujarat was recognized and appreciated all over the world since primitive times. Ali Muhammad Khan (1761), the author of *Mirat-e-Ahmadi* has stated that gradually, a large number of skilled artisans started weaving silk. The varieties made by them such a *Kinkhab* (brocade), *Makhmal* (muslin) etc. turned out to be of a better quality than those produced in other parts of Hindustan, in terms of color and form, on account of a suitable climate. Gujarat silk was praised so much all over the world that the name of the city of Ahmedabad became famous in countries such as Iran, Turan, Egypt and Syria. The work of weaving, coloring, artwork, washing, calendaring etc. was done so good in Ahmedabad that the same work could not be as good even at a place only four miles from the city^[1]. The city, in present times, named as Ahmedabad has undergone many changes in its nomenclature. In ancient times, it was named as Ashaval or Ashapalli in 8th century after the name of King Asha Bhil, followed by Karnavati after the ruler Solanki Karnadev-I in 11th century (AD 1074), followed by Ahmedabad in AD 1411 when under the reign of king Ahmed Shah^[2].

Silk weaving was exclusively done with both gold as well as without gold yarn, in Surat, Ahmedabad and Cambay (presently named as Khambat). The *Mirat-e-Ahmadi* refers not less than three times to the manufacture, in the Royal workshops at Ahmedabad, of the most expensive velvet pavilions and canopies worth a lac of rupees each, which were sent on great occasions to the court of the emperor, and erected on the palace-grounds^[3]. *Kasab* borders, which were sewn on saris and other garments were produced in profusion in Surat and Ahmedabad^[4].

These saris can be identified by the Mughalesque flowering plant and meandering vine patterns, combined with paisley, birds, animals and human figures. For more clarity, the motifs were jeweled or enameled by outlining in the contrasting color named as *minakari*.

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Traditionally the sari was woven on a 105 cm wide pit loom. It had a main field, side border, a *pallu* (end-piece) comprising of a minor panel, a major panel and a cross border. Field of the sari begin after the cross border. The side borders had metallic weft that does not run from selvedge to selvedge. One side border was woven up to the length where the sari is wrapped around the waist. The end-piece and cross borders were woven in two-layer structure. 1/3 twill weave front was combined with a separable plain weave back. These surfaces were further calendered to lay emphasis on the smoothness and thinness. The value and intensity of colors changed with the passage of time. The colors became brighter and flamboyant relating to the Paithani Saris of mid19th century from Aurangabad and Burhanpur. The yarn quality also got inferior in later centuries. Further, the process of weaving was simplified and the saris woven in plain weave were patterned with supplementary weft in 1/3 twill or 1/7 twill. Some saris were woven with metallic ground and patterns in multiple colors of silk, some in twill woven metallic weft while some in the combination of the two. The Ashavali sari woven in present times has coarse patterns entirely in twill woven metallic thread or multiple colors of silk. Two samples in Calico museum also depict 4/1 satin weave foundation of the sari [5].



Fig 1: Layout of the traditional Ashavali Sari

Jaykar (1955) discussed particularly about the decline of handloom sector in Gujarat and has mentioned that weavers from Gujarat migrated to various regions to escape the big fire that happened in 1300 AD. The migrated weavers settled in Agra, Ajmer, Delhi, Varanasi and Chennai and started weaving at these places. Thus, the brocade weaving extended to other places in India.

3. Ashavali Brocades from 18th to 20th century

During the Mughal era, the royalties wore *kinkhab* sash across

2. Ashavali Brocades from 11th to 17th Century

There is a dearth of literature and evidences about the origin of brocades in Ashaval. During this period there were 500-600 looms in Ahmedabad, which employed a number of master weavers. Shahpur, one of the suburbs of Ahmedabad, was the main center for weaving in the city. The weavers of Ashavali brocades wove for the religious sect of Pushti Marg, a Vaishnav tradition followed by many prominent and affluent families of the merchant community. They wove Pichhwais in brocade comprising of figures as well as a range of object for the household temples of the worshipers of Shri Nathji. Collection of these pieces can be seen at the Calico Museum of textile, Ahmedabad as well as the Baroda Museum and in various temples, as household shrines [6].

Moravej, 2016 in the Comparative study of Graphic aspects of textiles in Indian Gurakani and Iranian Safavid eras, stated identical visual features in the brocades of India and those found in Iran. For instance, a scarf designed with flowers in green, yellow, light blue on ivory background had narrow stripes with abstract designs. Also the robes, waistbands were decorated with bushes of flowers and continuous patterns of creepers. The layout of the scarf included a field, cross border, end-panel, fringes and side panels; which is very similar to the Ashavali Sari. It is evident that the flamboyant Indian *kinkhab* reached Iran and was worn by the muslim rulers.

the waist. These Mughal *patkas* were perhaps woven on the Indian draw-looms in the *karkhana* at Ahmedabad in Gujarat. These sashes were 21/4 to 4 meters long and 48-62 cms wide, narrower when compared to 45-47 inches width of Ashavali Sari but had the similar motifs, construction technique and layout. Master weavers of Ashaval wove in *zari* the conspicuous patterns like stylized paisleys, floral borders, creeping vines [7].

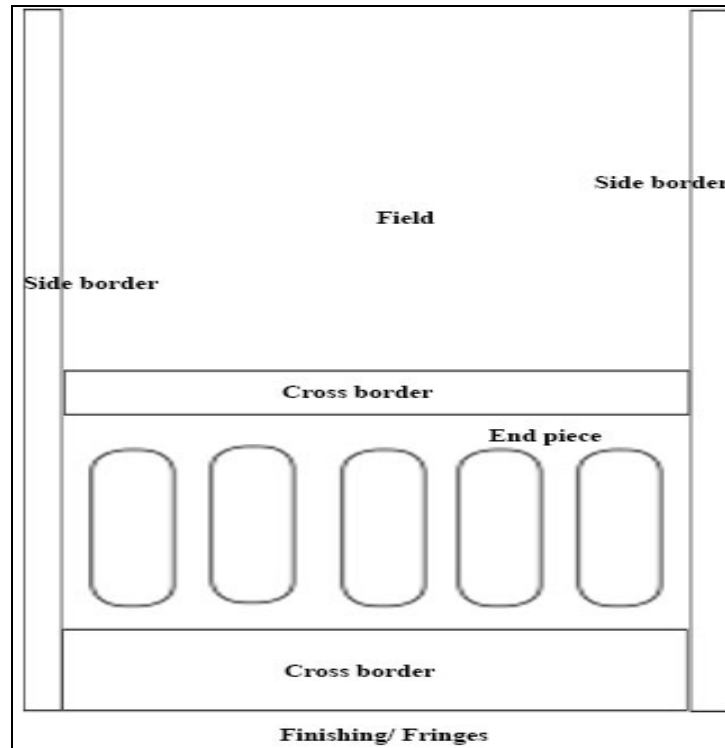


Fig 2: Layout of the Mughal Patka

Apart from the *patkas*, the brocades were woven to develop canopies, floor spreads, hangings, yardages, saddlecloths, bags and fans. The yardages were used to stitch the garments. *Kinkhab* is the type of brocade in which the motif is woven with gold or silver zari (extra weft) to create a luster on the silk fabric surface. The silk base is sparsely visible on the surface. *Kinkhab* was used to develop the blouse piece 22 - 27 inches wide, exclusively for the Saurashtra market to stitch the front of the blouse [8]. The saris woven in 19th and 20th

century were simplified in style and process as compared to the complex weaving patterns in the 17th and 18th century.

Male members of the royal family attired themselves in *Choga*, *Achkan*, *Shervani* whereas females wore the *chaniya-choli* with *odhani*. The few conventional silhouettes depict that the garments were fitted with asymmetric style-lines, overlapping, variations in length of the garment, sleeves and necklines [9].

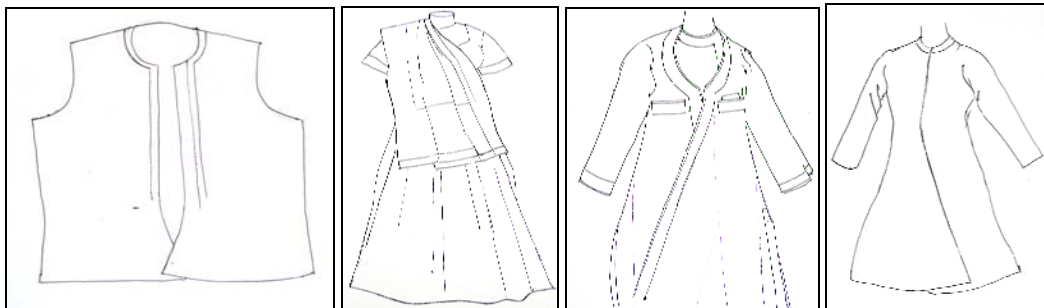


Fig 3: A few conventional silhouettes

Jhala (1992) [8, 22] has mentioned the description given by George Watt about Gujarati textiles as vibrant textiles because of the lively color schemes, bright and pleasing tones. The floral designs have been outlined in black, blue or other dark contrasting color. This unique technique of outlining the motifs is called as inlay work or *minakari*. Ashavali brocades were woven in various product categories to meet the requirements of consumers of different communities. The loom on which the brocades were woven also varied from product to product. Jhala has mentioned the following products that were developed –

- Borders were woven on narrow looms using the extra warp or extra weft. The border was 2-4 inches wide. *Zari* was used as extra warp/ extra weft. The Rabari and

Bharward communities of Kutch and Surendranagar wore brocaded *pallus* and borders. Patels, Kanbis and other communities traditionally used borders.

- End-piece of the sari, locally called as *pallu*, was woven using extra weft technique. The mechanism used for weaving the *pallu* was similar to that of *Mashru* weaving. Females of Rabari community in Surendranagar attached this *pallu* to the *odhani*. Rabari communities in Saurashtra stitched these *pallus* with maroon colored *odhanis*.
- *Kinkhab* was woven on a draw loom using the *jala* technology, with metallic yarns as extra weft, continuous from selvage to selvage on a silk warp and weft base.



Fig 4: Antique extra warp border and *Kinkhab*

4. Ashavali Brocades post 20th century

Change, being the law of nature, placed many challenges before the weavers of Ashaval. Lynton (1995) mentioned that demand for the ethnic brocades declined after late 1950s when Indian mills started producing high volumes of low priced mass market textiles. These fine aristocratic saris started disappearing in early 20th century because of change in upper class fashion demands. The brocades of Gujarat fell victim to this change in demands of upper class from Mughal *kinkhab* to plainer fabrics. Moreover, after independence in 1947, much of the traditional muslim clients who used these brocades migrated to Pakistan leading to decline in demand of brocades. Government, however, encouraged weavers to weave the traditional regional saris.

Due to migration of weavers and setup of Mills in Ahmedabad, new brocade weaving clusters developed in different parts of India but weaving of brocades declined at Ashaval. The weavers also migrated from Ashaval to nearby villages named Ridrol, Nardipur, Upera, Gajhariaya and Charda in Mehsana District, where new weaving clusters were developed^[10]. Till 1920, there were around 150 looms in all the villages. Gradually, the traditional textile declined at these clusters as well because of deficiency of labor, underprivileged socio-economic condition of weavers, financial crisis, and migration of educated youth to urban areas.

One weaver, Somabhai Patel, flourished the Ridrol cluster again in around 1940s with a set-up of 5 looms at his home. The weaving declined due to the reduced demand for *kinkhab*. Gradually, over the years, the production of this traditional textile reduced once again. VishnuBhai Patel, eldest son of Somabhai Patel, spent his childhood witnessing the hard work of his father and growth and fall of these brocades. He learned this skill of weaving brocades from his father after completing his diploma in Civil Engineering. Following the footsteps of his father, in 1984, he started weaving on one loom at the present Ridrol cluster in Mansa district. Earlier *Jala* technology was being used for weaving intricate patterns since past 40 years but in 1986, he replaced the primitive *jala* system with jacquard mechanism. 12 new looms with jacquard mechanism were set-up. Later, more weavers for Varanasi, both Hindu as well as Muslim, came to Ridrol and started weaving. At present the size of Ridrol cluster has grown upto 100 looms^[11].

5. Contemporary approaches

In modern times, when the pace of life has fastened up and consumers prefer to wear Ashavali Sari only on special occasions, the weavers are facing a big challenge of sustaining this traditional textile further. PareshBhai Patel has adopted the following contemporary approaches to revive the brocades:

- Conventional motifs of Ashavali brocades are adorned with multiple colors through *minakari* technique. A sari is woven with the base color in the field, borders and *pallu* comprise of buta-butis filled and outlined in varied colors of silk along with *zari*. Nowadays, natural dyes are being used to dye the silk yarns. A collection of indigo saris with contemporary color palette for motifs is developed so as to achieve a modern aesthetic appeal to the sari.



Fig 5: Indigo sari with *minakari* border in natural dyed yarns



Fig 6: Range of colors developed with natural dyes

- Urbanization has led to a fast lifestyle. Demand for ready-to-wear (RTW) apparel is increasing because of the working culture in urban areas. Consumers prefer to add stylish and elegant RTW garments in their wardrobe. A range of formal wear is developed from the traditional brocade yardages considering the requirements of the women in modern times.



Fig 7: Kurta with asymmetric style-line



Fig 8: Palazzo



Fig 9: Kurta with placket on princess line



Fig 10: Slim Pants with waist coat



Fig 11: Top with princess panels

- A unique combination of *ikat* and *bandhani* field with the traditional Ashavali borders is woven to develop these flamboyant silk saris. Apart from its glorious aesthetic appeal, this combination is enriching the *ikat* as well as brocade weaving. The yarns are dyed by the skilled dyers of *ikat* technique and then woven by the brocade weavers. A very strong skill-set of both the intricate techniques is required to create these splendid pieces.

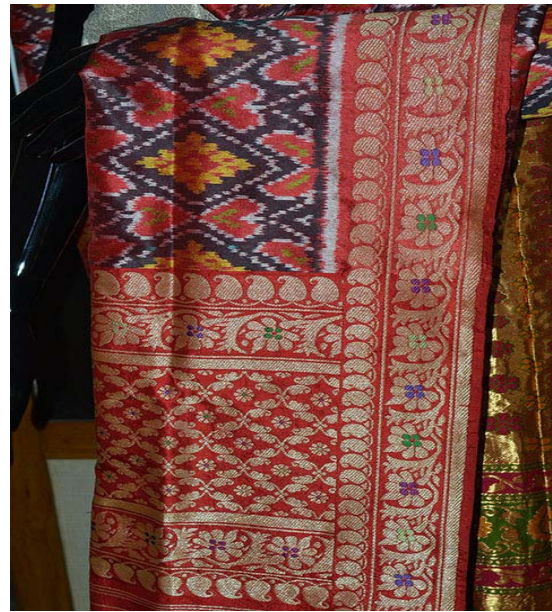


Fig 12: Ashavali border and pallu with ikat field

6. Conclusion

These brocades have gone through enormous changes over the centuries. From the exclusive combination of satin-twill to the plain-twill, comparatively lighter fabric to the natural dyeing and combination of different techniques, these brocades are still magnificent and enriching many wardrobes. An attempt has been made to re-introduce the concept of developing ready-to-wear garments, although with the styles and silhouettes of the modern times. The royal hands that picked up these brocades as their attire have been replaced by not so royal, but the elite clients. The revivalists are also adapting to the demands of the modern society to sustain the Ashavali brocades for future generations.

Note: All the pictures and sketches where source is not mentioned is the original work done by the author

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