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## Exploring the patterns and colours of religious textiles

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### Abstract

India has historically been a place of diverse cultures characterised by diverse religious practises, beliefs, rites, rituals, and ideologies. Despite being ethnic, multilingual, and multifaceted, its essence has been "unity in diversity." People of many different faiths and beliefs, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, and Jains, coexist in peace and harmony. Nearly every religious tradition includes the practise of presenting an ornamented textile to a deity or wrapping a sacred text as an expression of love, devotion, and respect. Some examples include the offering of a green or blue textile called a Chaddar to a Dargah or Peer, a red or orange Chunri to the Goddess, an Altar cloth in a Church, or a colourful Rumala Sahib to encase the Guru Granth Sahib. Textiles are commonly used for developing wall hangings that can be hung either at religious places or at home with depictions from folklore, mythology, and religious scriptures. These scriptures convey or release positivity. Many religious practises or rituals involve the use of embellished textiles. Each of these textiles' ornamental techniques, themes, and even colours all communicate a unique meaning and expression. Worshiping their deities or supremacy through offering ornamental textiles is an excellent way to communicate with God. The purpose of this study is to examine the diverse patterns and colours of the textiles that are offered at various holy places. The study will also explore the symbolic significance of these motifs and colours.

**Keywords:** Textiles, ornamentation, religion, symbolic

### 1. Introduction

For centuries, religious diversity has been a defining characteristic of India's population with different ceremonies, festivals, faiths and rituals, pilgrimages and religious traditions. Every major faith, Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity etc., uses textiles and materials in their worship. Some of them utilise the textiles as wall hangings to adorn their sacred sanctuaries, some as wrappings for their holy books, and yet others as offerings to their deity's statues.



Fig 1: Goddess's idol draped with Red chunri



Fig 2: Holy book wrapped in Textile

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"Every religious ceremony and rituals involve textiles." Esoteric philosophic concepts like Buddhist sutra, grantha and tantra owe their origin to textile where sutra means "to weave" and tantra means "to spread the thread" (Dhamija, 2014)<sup>[7]</sup>.

In the current research, an attempt has been made to investigate the numerous motifs or symbols, patterns, and colours used in religious textiles, as well as the beliefs or symbolism associated with them.

Motifs are the smallest component of a pattern or design. Same or different motifs are repeated multiple times to create a pattern on textile. In Indian textiles, motifs act as conduits for transmitting the related belief system and values between generations. The traditional concepts and deep layers of meaning give the unique identity to a textile and symbolise the extent to which we are deep rooted in our tradition. Each design used on textiles has a distinct story to tell and is associated with diverse religions. Each motif and colour of a textile's design has its own symbolic interpretation (Bisht, 2020) <sup>[1]</sup>.

## 2. Patterns in Religious Textiles

Religious or sacred textiles are often adorned with specific symbols and designs that have specific significance. Frequent usage of the Krishna figure motif may be seen in Hindu religious textiles. In Gujarati folk embroidery, figures of Lord Ganesh are used. It is thought that Ganesh removes impediments to happiness, hence his image is stitched in the centre of Ganeshtapana (a pentagonal wall hanging), often with a dish of sweets and his companion rat. Peacock as the chariot of Goddess Sarasvati, the goddess of arts and learning is also common in religious textiles. Such motif finds its place in on a bridal dress in many cultures as it signifies completeness of being women. It is also believed that a sense of energy is carried which comes from its renewal of feathers every year. A motif of a parrot represents passion and courting and is also known as the vahana of Kamadeva, the God of love and desire, in India. It is also adopted as a sign of good fortune in Chinese art. Banyan and peepal trees are represented on several sacred textiles because they are revered in Hindu ceremonies. Mahatma Buddha also attained enlightenment under a peepal tree (Prajapati & Tiwari, 2021) <sup>[15]</sup>.

Embroidered banners, canopies and umbrellas are very popular for the festival processions in Orissa. Bihar's appliqué work is well-known for its usage in canopies (shamianas), wall enclosures (kanats), and tents for ceremonial reasons, including Sujanis - quilts produced by Bihar's womenfolk that are used as a wrap or cover, but were also sometimes used to cover books or musical instruments. Chamba- a state of Himachal Pradesh, holds a special place for Rumals (known as Chamba *Rumals*) which were used in temples and homes as a backdrop to, or canopy for a deity. Gifts were wrapped with the coverings of square *rumals* specially when an offering was made to temple Gods, or gifts were exchanged between the families of a bride and groom (Gillow and Barnard, 2008) <sup>[9]</sup>. The most common motifs on these *rumals* were wedding scenes. The *rumal* was an essential part of the bride's dowry and she was expected to have learnt this craft at a very tender age. On the *rumals*, needlework also depicted Lord Shiva's great deeds: the destruction of the elephant demon often known as *Gajantaka*, which means "end of *Gaja*" or elephant. Various events from Hindu epics, particularly the stories of Krishna, were also portrayed. These *rumals* were used to cover offerings to the deities (Paine and Paine, 2010) <sup>[13]</sup>.

A life-size statue of Lord Krishna sculptured from a single piece of black marble in the Temple located at Nathdwara, popularly known as Temple of Srinath ji is exclusively decorated with expensive jewels, rubies, pearls and stones on various occasions. There, Thakur Ji wears a variety of

headgears like *Paga*, *Pheta*, *Dumala*, *Mukut*, *Morshikha*, *Tipara*, *Gokurna* etc. Even the fabric and ornamentation are changed as per the season. For example, during the month of Vaisakh i.e., April to May, bright and colourful mulmul fabric is used and for shringar seep, *moti* (pearl) and *chandan* (sandal) is used. Jewellery slightly studded with diamonds is used in the months of Ashad i.e., June-July. During Phalguna (February—March) white cotton clothes with golden silver laces are used. The *shringar* in only gold and *meena* are used throughout this month. As the month of Kartika (October-November) is marked by the presence of Navratri, use of heavy brocade in silk and precious stones is done for jewellery (Sachdeva, 2020) <sup>[17]</sup>.

Hand painted and block printed shrine cloths done by a wandering caste Vaghris from Gujarat are known as '*mata-ni-pachedi*' or '*mata- no- chandarvo*' that always have an image of the '*Mata*' – the mother goddess in her fearsome aspect- sitting on her throne, or on an animal, brandishing in her hands the weapons needed to kill demons (Gillow and Barnard, 2008) <sup>[9]</sup>.

The connection between the *Rudraksham* motif and the holy land of Kanchipuram is undeniable. *Rudraksham* is a bead resembling a dried blueberry, it is obtained from a tree grown in the foothills of Himalayas. The bead is used as prayer bead because of its medicinal and spiritual properties. The bead is called the tears of Lord Shiva because the word '*Rudra*' means "to cry" and '*Aksha*' means "eye" in Sanskrit. The sacred beads of Lord Shiva have an aesthetic appeal and are adopted by weavers to create subtle and intricate motifs on Kanchipuram textiles. Several patterns: geometrical, curved or free flowing are created by weavers using this motif with Zari. In most of the pieces this motif is placed on border of the textile but in some special ones, rudraksha is used in centre too. It is believed to be the oldest motif of our civilisation and believed to protect the wearer from all evils imparting a sense of spirituality (Sundari Silks, 2020) <sup>[18]</sup>.

Doorway hangings popularly known as torans frequently seen in northwest India are not used just for decoration purpose but there are some ritual and symbolic meanings attached to it. *Torans* signify devotion, fertility, regeneration and prosperity. The torans are made in colourful fabrics with their leaf-like pointed embroidered and mirror embellished pendants attached to a horizontal band. It is believed that torans when placed at the door, neutralize the harmful effects penetrating the inside of the home or compound from outside. *Torans* divert the evil eye and also convey auspicious blessings. A special types of wall hangings called Pichhavai hangings (devotional pictures on cloth) are famous that are embroidered by mochis for temples illustrating the Lord Krishna (Gillow and Barnard, 2008) <sup>[9]</sup>.

In Ladakhi textiles, several motifs are used with different symbolic significance like *Swastika* represents good fortune, dorge or thunderbolts depicts stability and Enis knot shows compassion. The *khataq* - a ceremonial scarf usually white in colour and woven from cotton or silk is used as a sacred symbol shared by both Buddhist and Muslim communities. They are offered to deities and the clergy, to the bride and her groom, too newly- born babies, to visiting officials and respected elders (Rao, 2010) <sup>[16]</sup>.

The technique of ikat, known as patola or bandha, involving the tying of threads with dye-resistant material and then dyeing them is known as a powerful textile. Because ikat was considered imbued with the ability to cure, to heal, to purify and to protect. It was believed that it protected the child in its mother's womb, guided its steps from birth to puberty rites

and marriage, and finally helped the spirit on its last journey to rest with the ancestors (Dhamija, 2014) [7].

In the 'textile-conscious' heritage of Tibetan culture, the history of adorning and dignifying Buddha's temple with exquisitely draped fabric is well-known. The holy area of Buddhist structures is defined by religious hangings such as baldachins, round silk banners, triple banderols, and thangkas. The pillars, doors, and ceilings are adorned with silk brocade woven with golden and silver threads in hues associated with rituals. On the occasion of some significant events, even the clay statues of deities adorning the walls are 'dressed' in rich silk materials. Consecration rituals and Buddhist devotional practices were depicted in Tabo wall paintings of deities and heavenly thrones embellished with textiles (Kalantari, 2018) [10].

In ancient times, flags, royal tents, and other symbols of authority were imprinted by hand with silver stamping, also known as *Chandi ki Chhapai*, to symbolise the position and grandeur of the holder. This art is also known as "Varak Gold or Silver Leaf Printing" because it employs *varaks* manufactured by flattening gold or silver into a paper-like consistency. It is a common ornamentation in sacred shrines and temples (Chakrabarti, 2018) [3].

Religious textiles have the highest value, serve and continue to serve to honour the holy places in Mecca and Madina and the burial chamber of the Prophet Mohammed in Madina. Even the calligraphic motifs are specially selected to reflect a religious textile's function and location. Motifs are taken from Holy Quran that have special place in Muslim rituals and culture. One of the most interesting examples is green silk bag with its words in golden that is used to hold the key of the Kabba. Every year a special bag is prepared to put the key and the bag is gifted to the most senior representative of the Banu Shayba, the man chosen by the Prophet Mohammed to guard the Kabba keys "until the days of judgement" (Ghazal, 2021) [8].

Among the Muslims, it is a common practice to spread a small carpet (*sajjada*) at the time of Prayer, because they believe that the place of prayer should be ritually pure or free from any polluting substances (Katz, N.D.). The prayer niche, a recess in the wall indicating the direction of Mecca, a lamp depicting a reference to God as well as the flowers and trees that symbolize the abundance of nature in God's paradise were the common motifs and symbols used in weaving of these carpets. They were used to wrap their praying stone-*Mohr* with the small cloth made by the Shiite Hazara of Afghanistan. This cloth was considered as a Holy object and was not used for any other purpose.

Even Guru Granth Sahib- the holy book of Sikhism is also always wrapped in white cotton sheet and then by colourful embroidered sheets known as 'Rumala Sahib'. A variety of fabrics (cotton, silk, velvet, net, chiffon, crepe, brocade and many more) decorated with different techniques (embroidery, *Gotta*, beads, sequins, *zardosi*, Ari work, hand painting, *dori* work etc.) are used for Rumala Sahib. Fabric of Rumala Sahib is even selected as per the season like in winter, usually heavy velvet or Blanket Rumala sahib are used and cotton, net or light material is selected for summers because Guru Granth Sahib is respected as Living Guru by the Sikh people. A Sloka from Gurbani is mostly embroidered on front panel of Chandoa Sahib- a canopy under which Guru Granth Sahib lies (figure 3). *Ek Oankar* and *Khanda* are the common motifs to be embroidered. The *khanda* (☯) is the symbol of the Sikh faith which attained its current form around the 1930s during the Ghadar movement. The *khanda* is like a "coat of

arms' for Sikhs. It was introduced by the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind Singh. Another symbol of Sikhism *Ek Oankar* (ੴ) represents the one supreme reality and is a central belief of Sikh religious philosophy. Meaning of *Ek Oankar* is that there is only one God or one creator or one Om-maker.



Fig 3: Guru Granth Sahib covered with Rumala Sahib under the canopy- Chandoa



<https://unsplash.com/s/photos/church-altar>, N.D.

Fig 4: Altar cloth with sign of cross

Altars cloths are used in Churches by Christians during celebrations and are generally used to cover the surface when not in use. Formally precious stones studded altar cloths were used but at present linen or hemp material is used because of its whiteness, cleanliness and firmness. Altar covers are usually finished with laces and embroidered with applique or some other techniques. A sign of cross is embroidered as the main motif along with others like scenes depicting priests officiating at an altar. Birds and dancing figures are also used (Paine and Paine, 2010) [13].

### 3. Colours associated with the Religious Textiles

Colors have a significant role in our lives. They have a significant impact on how we view and interact with the environment. Each colour impacts our physical, emotional, and psychological states via the emission of distinct signals.

Additionally, colours impact moods, sentiments, and emotions. Colours have a great association with religious textiles.

Colours have profound meaning in Hinduism and so in their religious textiles. Hindu artisans use hues to the deities and their garments to symbolise their characteristics. Some of the main colours used in religious ceremonies are red, yellow (turmeric), green from leaves, white from wheat flour etc.

The colour red represents positive concepts and strong emotions like passion, power, and strength. Gods and Goddesses who are revered for their virtuous attributes and their ability to vanquish evil, are traditionally depicted in red like Goddess Durga. The colour red is associated with purity and is also symbolic of being married, hence it is traditional for brides to wear red bridal dress; a red coloured powder *sindhoor*, and a red dot or *bindi* is worn on foreheads by married women. Given that soil or mother earth which is represented by red is considered to be very fertile, it's no surprise that the colour red has come to symbolise plenty in culture. Associated with the colour of fire, saffron is a blend of shades of golden-yellow and orange. Saffron is symbolic of the cleansing and purity that comes from burning objects as well as it represents lightness and wisdom. Saffron-coloured robes are worn by Hindu monks to represent their mission to cleanse and eliminate impurities and evil from the world.

The colour blue is also associated with the qualities or characteristics that so many deities possess, such as courage, kindness, determination, and protection like Lord Krishna, Vishnu, and Shiva, and hence are invariably represented with blue. In the Middle East blue coloured mosques can be found as it is believed as a protective colour. There are several renowned Blue Mosques in Afghanistan, Malaysia, Egypt, etc. In Catholicism, blue colour is mostly taken as closely related with Mother Mary and the heavenly realm.

Yellow is symbolic of learning and knowledge and often found in sacred textiles and clothing of Hindu deities, such as Lord Vishnu, Krishna and Ganesh. Like the colour of the sun, yellow represents the characteristics of the sun, light, warmth and happiness. Due to the abundant presence of the sun during spring, it represents new beginnings and developments (Crandall, 2017) [6].

Orange and Navy-Blue colours are traditional colours of Sikh Khalsa that are worn on days of religious observance or special commemorative events. Royal blue or navy-blue turbans being the colour of warrior and of protection are often used among Sikh ministers and Gyanis, especially in India (Neeru, 2015) [12]. Orange appears in the form of Nishan Sahibs in Gurudwaras, the cholas worn by Panj Payaras and Sikh turbans being the representative of deep joy and bliss. It absorbs shocks, nasty experiences and trauma. Orange is the colour of connection, a sense of community, belonging and social aspects of being.

White is a mixture of seven different colours, so it represents a little bit of the quality of each colour. It is believed to represent purity, cleanliness, peace and knowledge. Goddess Sarasvati- the Goddess of knowledge is always represented wearing a white clothes, seated on a lotus. As white is associated with purity, the priests of temples and the Brahmins often clad in white. In Christianity also white is used for the garments of angels, and the throne of judgment, purity and joy. In Western Culture also white is used to symbolize purity and peace.

In Islam, green is the most prominent colour and is symbolic of springtime renewal, joy, success, and happiness. Green colour represents the triumph of life over death. Green in the

Bible is usually a reference to growth, vegetation or fertility. Green being a sacred colour of Islam is used for the bindings of the Qur'an-the Holy book of Islam and in the silken covers of the Sufi saints. It has been suggested that green is revered because it was worn by Muhammad and it depicts life and nature.

#### 4. Conclusion

The motifs used in religious textiles whether embroidered, painted, printed or woven, are symbolic of diverse faiths and beliefs that may vary from one region or religion to another but are interconnected with same essence. As devotees or people's feelings, beliefs, and rituals are intertwined with this, people of almost every faith and area have utilised adorned textiles of various hues as a sacred object to be dedicated to God. Every motif and colour has a distinct traditional significance, and particular patterns are associated with traditional practises.

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