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An overview of traditional wall hanging making craft of Solapur (Maharashtra)

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Abstract

Traditional craft is often associated with intangible heritage. Behind each crafted object lie stories on how a particular culture has lived and flourished depicting their rich heritage. Traditional heritage is a living body of knowledge that is developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural or spiritual identity. Developed from experience gained over the centuries, traditional knowledge of making a craft tends to be collectively owned and transformed as society changes. Solapur in Maharashtra is famous for making Wall hangings that reflects its cultural values, regional sensibilities, beliefs and identity and also helps to preserve many different communities. Solapur wall hanging is a poem in multicolor, written with the warp and weft having long, rich and complex history with indigenous design vocabularies made by the artisans of the Padmasali community. The wall hanging weaving of Solapur has remained unaltered since years from being very basic and monochrome having landscapes and portraits catering only to local market to becoming a potential family income generation tool. This study focuses on the documenting the lesser known craft of Wall hanging from Solapur, Maharashtra before it gets extinct or completely forgotten.

Keywords: Wall hanging, solapur, traditional, sustainable, tapestry

Introduction

Solapur is a city located in the south-western region of the Indian state of Maharashtra. It is the fifth largest urban agglomeration in Maharashtra state. It lies entirely in the basins of rivers the Bhima and its tributaries of Sina, Man, Bhogavati and Nira. The Bhima River demarcates the border between Maharashtra and Karnataka States in Solapur District. Solapur is a city with tri-linguistic and multi-social highlights having a blend of Kannada, Telugu and Marathi culture. Apart from having a thriving industry of machine made towels and bedsheets, Solapur is also famous for decorative articles called Wall hangings. Solapur wall hanging is like multicolour poem, written with the warp and weft having long, rich and complex history with indigenous design vocabularies made by the artisans of the Padmasali community. The tango of warp and weft in many ways than one tells the story of civilization itself and wall hangings of Solapur have proved to be the most precious decorative articles that heighten the grace and beauty of any house. The combination of diversity and skill has produced some of the most breath-taking creations earning a great demand from various parts of the country. This craft is less known and diminishing day by day and there have been lot of efforts to preserve this traditional craft in the contemporary society. The Solapur wall hanging is a completely handmade, low energy craft which typically have a low carbon footprint and which promote use of locally available materials as well as natural and organic materials.

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Fig 1: Solapur Wall Hanging



Fig 2: Contemporary wall hanging designs of Solapur

Methodology

The aim of the study is to document the history, evolution, process, motifs and colors and raw material used for making the Solapur wall hanging. A descriptive research design was undertaken to collect the information. An interview schedule and participatory observation techniques was planned to conduct and get the authentic information. The interview schedule thus planned comprised of open and closed ended which dealt with collecting information regarding artisans profile, demographics details, history and evolution of the wall hanging making apart from questions regarding process, motifs and colors and raw material used in wall hanging. The respondents were mainly taken from ten families engaged in making of wall hanging in Solapur.

History and Evolution

As per the study conducted, it was found that the development of Handloom Weaving in Solapur seems to have commenced in the regime of the Peshwas though there is no written record to prove it. Padmasali, the main community engaged in the weaving of the wall hangings is from Telangana and Andhra Pradesh now settled in Maharashtra. It is believed that migration aroused principally from the difficulty of finding adequate means of livelihood in one's native place as a result of over population, low wages, failure of crops and other natural calamity. The handloom industry in Solapur thus established here around 1950s was prosperous and wages were high, therefore large number of people belonging to Padmasali community start settling here. The organization of local handloom weaving industry have remained fundamentally unaltered since then and there are numerous small independent artisan engaged in weaving of wall hanging in the city. Every artisan household is a small scale craft unit wherein they have one or two handlooms, which are handled by the head of the family whereas the other family members are engaged in preparatory processes and dyeing.

The Padmasali weavers were the traditional weaving community and their main occupation was handloom weaving and they were producing handloom bedsheets, saris and

curries. They have surmounted the distinctive style of weaving work which is done on a wall hanging around 70 years back. It is said that the art weaving a wall hanging peculiar to Solapur was started by Mr Bhumaiya Dudugund who used to work in the Weavers Service Center, Solapur. While working with the indigenous cotton yarns, he experimented with creating a new innovative texture that could be made by bunching of 10-15 yarns instead of single or double yarn as a weft thus creating a thick texture. The yarns used for weaving wall hangings at that time were the left over yarns from the sari weaving unit. The thick textile or surface thus produced can also be used for loom embroidery to enhance the effect further. He left his job at Weaver's Service Centre to work over this idea leading to the practice of making wall hanging craft of Solapur. Mr. Bhumaiya Soma was the great grandfather of Santosh Bhai Soma who has carried on the legacy of making wall hanging craft and has kept it growing further. He became the pioneer in propagating and popularizing the art in 1980-90s. The designs made earlier were very basic and monochrome while now landscape and portraits can be easily converted into wall hangings due to his efforts.

Cluster and Community

Wall hanging is made by the artisans of the Padmasali community who resides in the main city of Solapur. The weavers of wall hanging mostly resides in Vinkar Nagar, Karnik Nagar, Rangraj Nagar and new Pachcha peth areas of eastern part of Solapur. Presently, there are approximately 60-70 artisans who are working in development of these wall hangings as compared to around 250 artisans twenty five years back.

Raw material used

Solapur Wall hangings are purely made of cotton on handloom. Two different fineness of yarn are used for warp and weft in making of the wall hanging. The warp comprises of black or white cotton yarn of 15s or 10s count wherein, the count of weft yarns is from 10s to 25s. The dyeing process of yarns used in making of wall hanging is done locally in which earlier vegetable dyes were used but now with time chemical dyes such as Direct, Vat and Reactive Dyes are used. Hank dyeing method is used for dyeing of yarns and the local dyers engaged in dyeing approximately dye 100 kg of yarn in a day. Apart from cotton, other yarns like zari, silk and jute yarns are also used at times according to the design of the wall hanging or as per the market requirement.

Wooden bars or sticks used at the start and end of the wall hanging to maintain the proper dimensions of the product are called Patti in the local language and are inserted between the wall hanging at the time of weaving. The Patti is made of Sagwan wood and Teak wood as they are lightweight, delicate and less prone to termites. Lastly, bells, wooden beads, shells and mirrors are also added as a final setup in beautifying the wall hanging hence rendering it complete. Earlier, bells used were made of pure brass which would not rust and gave a very elegant look to the finished product but due to the surge in the price, artisans have started using iron bells instead of pure brass bells.



Fig 3: Raw materials used for making Wall hanging: Yarns, Patti and Bells

Process

The design process starts with the creation of design on graph paper by the master craftsman. Starched cotton cloth or a piece of canvas which has graph-like markings is also used by artisan to render the design or pattern. The designs are first made in the life size on the graph paper to maintain the right proportion and this paper is then placed under warp on the loom so that the weaver can refer to the design and weave accordingly.

The first step of the weaving process is the setting up of the warp yarns, which are generally black or white in color. Depending upon the number of wall hangings that are to be made, upto hundred meters of yarn are used for setting up of the loom. The warp threads are stretched on a loom and act as a grid for weavers to create a pattern with the colored weft threads. The weft threads used are generally in bunch of 10-12 yarns. The key feature of wall hanging weaving is use of tapestry technique wherein most of the weft threads do not run all the way across the warp. Instead the weft runs back and forth across a specific segment of the warp to create a small block of color. This is known as a discontinuous weft. Weavers build up blocks of color to create a pattern or picture. During weaving the weft threads are beaten down hiding the warp to create a weft-faced textile so the design is visible on the front and the back.

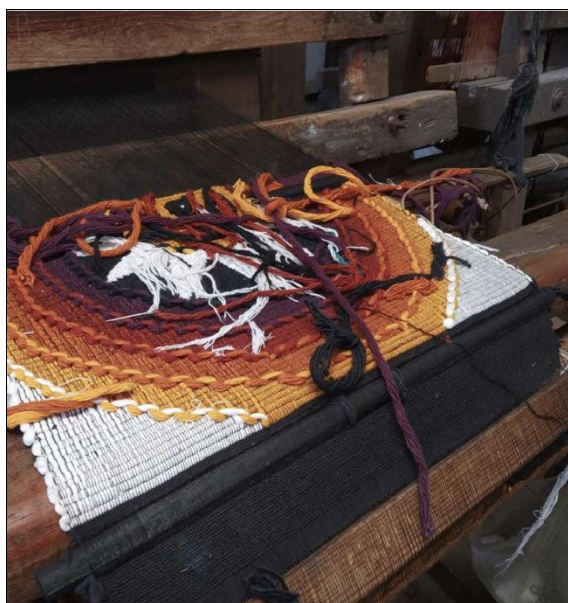


Fig 4: Tapestry weaving method used in wall hanging

The process of making wall hanging begins with weaving an inch or two of plain weave after which a patti is inserted and then again a small length of tapestry weaving before another patti is inserted. Once the base is completed, the weavers create an embossed or a raised effect using extra warp, the process is called Yemrad. On completion, extra threads are cut off of the tapestry after removing it from the loom. To seal the edges, the warp ends are sewn onto the reverse side. A quintessential aspect of the Solapuri wall hangings is the embellishment done by mirrors, cowrie shells, bells and beads. Lastly, a set of thread is attached at the top for hanging them on wall making it a fully handmade product.

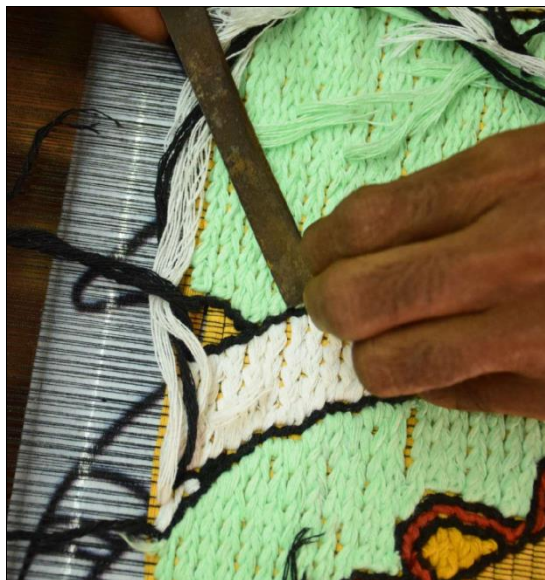


Fig 5: Embossing process (Yemrad) used in making of Wall hanging

Motifs

The artisans have started their weaving journey with simple motifs like flowers, basic geometric shapes, animals, landscape etc. They have started weaving intricate designs with time and started making complicated motifs with the help of naksha. Traditional motifs inspired from nature and mythology are popular. The traditional colour palette of wall hangings is simple earthy tones and primary colours but nowadays, a variety of shades like pastel, neon and bright colours are also incorporated as per the market demands. Despite the changing colours of the weft with time, the colour of the warp has remained constant, that is black, as it makes the colourful weft look bright and lively against the black backdrop of the warp. The weavers insist on the fact that changing the colour of the warp might compromise with the originality of the wall hangings.

Product Range

Wall hangings of different sizes are made in Solapur ranging from 14"X21", 18"X36", 22"X42", 24"X45" and 30"X48". The other products made by these artisans using same technique as wall hangings are door curtains and torans. The size of the door curtain is 36"X72" and the size of the toran is 36"X 10".

Scenario at present

Making of Solapur wall hanging is a the low energy process since production processes used typically have a low carbon footprint and it also promotes use of locally available material as well as natural and organic materials wherever possible. It is a totally handmade product which is durable, sustainable

and ethical giving no major health hazards to people involved in producing it. It also provides a source of earning and employment to a lot of households. It was due to the sheer dedication and immense skill of the artisan that they are now able to recreate about anything onto the wall hangings.

It can also be concluded from the study that over the centuries, as communities and culture have changed and evolved no section of the Indian society has remained unaffected. The last fifty years has witnessed a tremendous change in every sphere of life, be it economic, social, technological or aesthetic. These changes have a major influence on the traditional handicraft sector. These overwhelming changes have broken down systems and contexts in which these traditional cultures functioned and sustained themselves. More and more old techniques, design structures and patterns are disappearing or losing integrity as a result of transition into other regional and cultural contexts. As far as wall hangings are concerned, they were traditionally produced and managed by the craftsmen themselves. Once their lifestyle came in touch with the urban living, their lifestyle have changed. The Padmasali community is now keen that the younger generation acquires higher education, which they feel is the only means for their social and economic upliftment.

Conclusion

The main challenges faced by artisans in creating sustainable livelihoods in today's economy are low productivity, inadequate design inputs, fragmented and unorganised value chain and lack of enabling environment by way of official neglect. Even if the artisans tried to hold on to their ancient beliefs and practices which give them strength and identity, it is essential for cooperatives, non-governmental organizations and textile designers to collaborate towards popularizing this craft by procuring orders from suppliers, retailers and exporters. It is also observed that it is essential to develop design extensions of the present product line to include a greater variety and a wider range for both utilitarian and non-utilitarian use. This unique art has a potential to flourish if it can draw appreciation from all quarters.

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