

Symbolic Elephant motif in Traditional Indian Textiles and Embroideries

Vibhavari Kumar¹

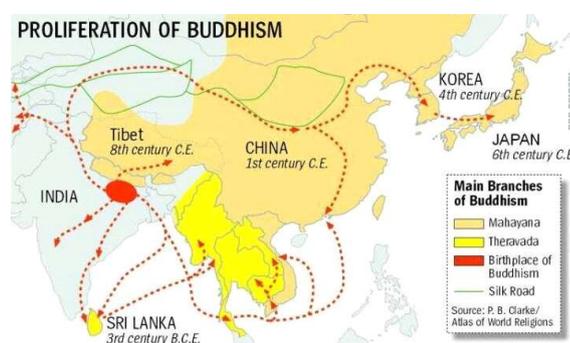
A symbol represents certain concepts or qualities that one group of people wish to convey to other group without words or writing. Symbols can express and give meaning to selected objects, or to concepts of spirituality, identity, nationality, dominance or allegiance. At times a symbol can also be prerogative of certain sections of society, such as the aristocracy and religious or government institutions who wish to preclude the uneducated. A sign is usually composed of lettering, but may also contain a symbol, such as arrow, which will indicate direction. A pattern is a type or style of decoration which relies on the repetition of certain elements to produce the whole; it can include decorative figures, symbols or combinations of markings that occur naturally or by chance. A motif is not the same as a symbol, but a symbol can be used as a motif. The motif can be anything from a single flower to a geometric shape.

In a world of uncertainty, tribal societies are known for the difference in their dresses or by the colours they adopt or by the patterns created by weaves, although these are not symbols, however they become a distinctive mark by which the tribe is known. These symbols also defined the ranking in the tribes and were sacrosanct. These symbols through dressing also defined the stages in life. In societies where few could read or write, some visual method of depicting the symbols of faith was very important. These included stone glyphs as wall paintings, embroidered wall hangings or decorative woven banners. Each form of religion had its own set of rules, and its own set of symbols and methods of storytelling.

Our nation is termed as subcontinent for not just being huge but also for its rich and varied heritage. No other nation can be a better example for unity in diversity. The famous Ajanta wall paintings provide the record of refined nature of Indian textile industries which include resist techniques of painting, tie and dye and ikat as well as brocade weaving. There are three main techniques of traditional textile decoration: (1) loom-weaving and decorating ; (2) resist-dyed work, which includes tying and dyeing, as well as painting and printing processes; and (3) embroidery. However, certain techniques of textile preparation and decoration are now becoming rarer and less refined. This research paper shall focus in capturing few of such languishing crafts along with the famous ones. The objective of this research paper is to document the traditional ways of textile weaves, paintings and embroideries, which have been lost to the contemporary, fast moving and inexpensive ways. The methodology includes understanding the known and the not so known arts and crafts and traditional and contemporary use of

¹National Institute of Fashion Technology, Bengaluru, India.

motifs as visual resources, as an aid in understanding the aesthetics of the traditional Indian textiles and embroideries through visits to the identified places, meeting with artisans and getting secondary information through case studies done by other researchers. It is a descriptive research, focusing on the compilation of study with respect to similarities between weaves, paintings and embroideries that follow the path of proliferation of Buddhism from Bihar to across India and upto Sri Lanka, along with the focus on the similarities with respect to motifs used in all these art forms especially the elephant motif. This research is a study on how this path has the influential effect on its artisans, as this is the period where creativity flourished in India. According to the map the areas influenced where from Bihar to Gujarat in the West, Bengal and Odisha in the East, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in the South and it proceeded to Sri Lanka in the far South.



In India, elephant populations are restricted to four general areas: in the Northwest at the foot of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, ranging from Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary to the Yamuna River; in the Northeast from the eastern border of Nepal in northern West Bengal through western Assam along the Himalaya foothills as far as the Mishmi Hills, extending into eastern Arunachal Pradesh, the plains of upper Assam, and the foothills of Nagaland, to the Garo Hills of Meghalaya through the Khasi Hills, to parts of the lower Brahmaputra plains and Karbi Plateau; isolated herds occur in Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, and in the Barak Valley districts of Assam; in the central part in Orissa, Jharkhand, and in the southern part of West Bengal, with some animals wandering into Chhattisgarh; in the South – eight populations are fragmented from each other in northern Karnataka, in the crestline of Karnataka–Western Ghats, in Bhadra–Malnad, in Brahmagiri–Nilgiris–Eastern Ghats, in Nilambur–Silent Valley–Coimbatore, in Anamalai–Parambikulam, in Periyar–Srivilliputhur, and one in Agasthyamalai¹.

The Indian Elephant goes back to the mythologies. As the Gods (*‘Deva’*) and the demons (*‘Asura’*) churned the oceans during *‘sagar manthan’* (sagar = sea ; manthan = churning) for the elixir of life *‘amrit’* (nectar) that would make them immortal, there surfaced the *‘navratnas’* (nine jewels) and one of these jewels was the elephant. The elephant is, therefore, considered absolutely precious to be preserved and protected like the jewels. The other mythological stories; is in one of her dreams, Buddha’s mother dreamt of a white elephant and then the prophet of peace Gautam Buddha was born. Yet another, is the greatest of all *‘vahanas’* (carriages for Gods) the *‘Airavat’* (elephant).

¹ “Elephant population in India”. Government of India. Retrieved 30 May 2016.

The *Airavat* was the chosen carriage for the God of all Gods 'Indra'. It was regal in size and had ten tusks, not just the usual two. In the epic Mahabharata, there is the legendary story about an elephant named '*Ashvatthama*', who carried the same name as the son of the revered teacher for both the warring families of the Pandavas and the Kauravas. At the battle of all battles Kurukshetra, fought between these two families, an innocuous lie in the middle of the battlefield announcing that *Ashvatthama* was dead was actually meant to upset the Kauravas by giving out the impression that the teacher's son was dead where, in fact, it was the elephant that had got killed. This strategic piece of lie had had the exact desired effect of lowering the enemy's guards². When a rare albino elephant was born in Thailand, it was always presented to the King. In Hindu mythology the white elephant appeared during the churning of the sea of Milk and, having control over the rain clouds, was regarded as a symbol of prosperity. The Buddha was born as a white elephant in one of his many reincarnations, giving the animal a special status³.

Apart from mythology, trained elephants were an important means of transport, both for goods and people. The elephant, a symbol of strength, prudence and power, appears on both painted and woven textiles, as well as in paintings and on temple murals. There was a mingling of symbols, which included Hindu deity Indra riding on Erawan, his seven headed elephant. The history of Indian textiles has prehistoric origins yet none of the wealth of ancient Indian textile manufacture has survived. From within India itself the Hindu epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as Buddhist sources, chart in detail the processes and uses of textiles made of cotton, linen and silk between fifteenth and second century BC. Goods flowed to and from the peninsula of India both overland and by coastal sea routes, and from India to Ceylon and Burma by way of ports of Orissa and Bengal and also to China via Assam and Burma and to West through Arabian Sea and Gulf of Cambay.

The common weaves seen across this path is the Ikat weave. Ikat weaves can be seen as Patola in Gujrat, as Pochampalli in Andhra Pradesh and as Bandha in Orissa. Historically, the art of Double ikat patola weaving dates back to centuries. Paintings in Ajanta caves resemble tie-dye technique of patola, legend indicates that sometimes in the 12th Century AD, King Kumarpal of Solanki dynasty, invited 700 families of patola weavers from Jalna (South Maharashtra) to settle down in Patan in North Gujrat. Salvi family is one of them who has continued this traditional art and has preserved it even today⁴. A precious piece of heirloom, passed down through generations and preserved to be brought out only for the most important occasions, the Patolu, or Patola is one of the most prized and valued textiles. It is revered not just for its religious significance across many faiths, but also for the amazing level of skill and perseverance required to make it. Weaving a Patola sari requires immense amount of precision and patience. The patola loom is one of its kind in many ways. It is tilted to one side and requires two people to sit and work together on one sari and it can take 6 months to a year, or even more, to make one Patola sari. Each of the motifs and colours have different significance in different communities. The elephant (kunjara), flower (phul), girl (nari) and parrot (popat) designs are very common in Patola saris worn by Gujarati women and the elephant and tiger motifs are considered

² <http://colorsofindia.com/indianelegant/myth.htm>

³ Textiles of South East Asia

⁴ <http://www.patanpatola.com>

particularly auspicious. The Pan Bhaat (Leaf Design) is one of the most frequent patterns. It is a motif indigenous to India and can be traced back as far as the pottery of the Indus Valley culture. Today, with only four families making Patola sarees, Patola weaving is languishing⁵. Patola is mostly used as wedding saree in Kathiawar and Gujarat.



fig.3 A modern-day single ikat Rajkot Patola featuring elephants and parrots in radiant contemporary colours
fig. 4 A rare double ikat Patan Patola design featuring fighting elephants and tigers from Patan, Gujarat

The commonality in embroideries in this path is the motifs and the stitches used. The common thread used in this research is the elephant motif used in Sujani embroidery of Bihar, Kantha embroidery of Bengal, Pipli work of Odisha and Kasuti embroidery of Karnataka.

The famous embroidery of Odisha differs in stitches but uses the same motif of elephant. The famous appliqué work comes from Pipli village, a few kilometres from Bhubaneswar which was established by the King of Odisha for accommodating the craftsmen who made appliqué umbrellas and canopies for the annual Jagannath Yatra. The appliqué craft reached its peak in the 11th century AD, under the patronage of the king and nobility. A craft that had originated as a temple art, today finds its application in a wide range of household, decorative and ceremonial products. Artisans with their skillful blending of myths, symbolism and imagination provide the craft an appealing dynamism. Appliqué comes from the French word “*appliquer*”, which means to “put on”. In appliqué, one piece of fabric is placed over a base layer and is sewn in place.

The appliqué items are mainly used during processions of the deities in their various ritual outings. The motifs used consist of stylized representations of flora and fauna as well as a few mythical figures. Of the more common of these motifs are the elephant, parrot, peacock, ducks, creepers, trees, flowers like lotus, jasmine, half-moon, the Sun and *Rahu* (a mythical demon who devours the sun). Craftsmen use straight stitch, blind stitch, satin stitch or buttonhole stitch for attaching the pieces of cloth. Sometimes they also make use of decorative stitches and mirror work for more elaborate pieces. A characteristic style of the Orissa appliqué involves three dimensional patterns made by folding of the upper piece of cloth into triangles and attaching them to the base. An interesting new use is the superimposition of appliqué on grass mats and used as partitions⁶. The usual appliqué patchwork items are Garden Umbrellas, Wallets, Wall Hanging, lampshades, Pouches & Bags⁷.

⁵ <http://gaatha.com/patola-patan/>

⁶ www.gaatha.com and text by Sana Karmali

⁷ <http://www.incredibleodisha.org/Pipli-crafts-in-orissa.aspx>



fig 16 Contemporary Version



fig17 Traditional chatti (umbrella)

The embroidery of Karnataka also follows similar stitches as kantha but in an abstract version. Kasuti is a traditional form of folk embroidery practised mainly in Uttara Kanara district of Karnataka. The history of Kasuti dates back to the Chalukya period. The name Kasuti is derived from the words *Kai* (meaning hand) and *Suti* (meaning cotton), indicating an activity that is done using cotton and hands. Kasuti work which is very intricate sometimes involves putting up to 5,000 stitches by hand and is traditionally made on Ilkal sarees, Ravike and Angi or Kurta. The Kasuti embroidery features folk designs influenced by rangoli patterns of Karnataka, mirror work embroidery and gold & silver thread embroidery were mostly used for special occasions like weddings. In Karnataka Sarees embroidered with Kasuti were expected to be a part of the bridal trousseau of which one saree made of black silk with Kasuti embroidery called Chandrakali saree was of premier importance. Kasuti work involves embroidering very intricate patterns like gopura, chariot, palanquin, lamps and conch shells. Locally available materials are used for Kasuti. The pattern to be embroidered is first marked with charcoal or pencil and then proper needles and thread are selected. The work is laborious and involves counting of each thread on the cloth. The patterns are stitched without using knots to ensure that both sides of the cloth look alike⁸. The embroidery is done only by women. Different varieties of stitches are employed to obtain the desired pattern. The two kinds of stitching are *gavanti* (line or double running stitch) and *murgi* (zig-zag lines done with a darning stitch). The two sides are neat and identical. Negi is the ordinary running stitch used in large designs, creating a woven design effect. Menthi is a cross-stitch used for architectural patterns⁹.



fig.5 Chandrakali saree with kasuti pallu



fig. 6 Kasuti pallu with depicted scenes

Lastly lets discuss about the variations and similarities in paintings of these regions. For study the research covers the paintings Manjusha, Mithila and Madhubani painting of Bihar, Pattachitra

⁸ <http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/art/kasuti.htm>

⁹ <http://www.craftandartisans.com/kasuti-embroidery-of-karnataka.html>

of Odisha and Kalamkari of Andhra Pradesh. Paintings are the reflections of various aspects of human life. It is the artistic manifestation of his social, cultural, religious and economic life. Through various paintings we can dig into the past societies. The ancient men generally drew paintings about the various event of his daily life. He used to draw pictures of natural phenomena, trees, animals, birds, rivers, his religious beliefs and economic activities. Like other art and craft, India has been the home to paintings since primitive times. Indians knew the art of painting since prehistoric times. Earliest cave paintings depicting various scenes are the ample testimony of this fact. Caves of Bhimbetka and Ajanta are the milestones which Indian Painting's heritage. We have varieties of painting such as Ajanta painting, Miniature Painting, Madhubani Painting, Rajput Painting, Mughal Painting, Mysore Painting, Tanjore Painting, and the Bengal school of painting, each having its own identity¹⁰.

As Bihar was the cradle of many ancient civilizations it has rich heritage and antiquities of paintings. It seems that Bihar's own style of painting was developed during Gupta era. During the Palas a new method of painting on manuscripts was evolved commonly known as illustrated manuscripts. This new form of painting is different from Ajanta paintings but was a continuation of Gupta era's paintings. It is quite evident from the archeological excavation site of Nalanda. In the modern times Bihar is known for several styles of world class paintings like Patna Kalam, Madhubani Painting and Traditional Wall Paintings. These paintings are a combination of ancient style of paintings with modern theme, technologies and colours. Artists of Bihar use deep fast colors for these paintings, such as deep red, green, blue, black, etc. Besides these other colours like yellow, pink, lemon is also used in these paintings¹¹.

After the Battle of Buxar (1764), the British East India Company obtained the *diwani* rights (rights to administer and collect revenue, or tax administration / collection) for Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. From this point onwards, Bihar remained a part the Bengal Presidency of the British Raj until 1912, when Bihar was carved out as a separate province. In 1935, certain portions of Bihar were reorganised into the separate province of Orissa. Again, in 2000, 18 administrative districts of Bihar were separated to form the state of Jharkhand¹².

One great example of not so known heritage is Manjusha painting of the ancient "Angapradesh". Today Angapradesh stands divided in the parts of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal, which was once famous for its Art, literature and commerce till Srilanka. Manjusha are temple type structure made out of bamboo jute and colour papers on which mythological characters are inscribed. Generally they are used in the rituals and offerings made to Goddess Vishahari, and this craft is prevalent in Champanagar, which is situated in the Bhagalpur district of Bihar, India.

This art was earlier done by only two families the Kumbhakar caste and the Malakar caste. The Kumbhakar caste used to make the pots on which the manjusa art is painted and worshipped during the festival. The Malakar caste makes the actual "manjushas" and paint the manjusa art on these

¹⁰ <http://www.bharatonline.com/bihar/art-craft/painting.html>

¹¹ <http://www.bharatonline.com/bihar/art-craft/painting.html>

¹² <http://www.bodhgayatourism.com>

structures. There are only two families left who still practice this art. Smt.Chakravathy Devi and Jyothi Chand Sharma came into the picture and helped revive this craft. Smt.Chakravathy Devi was one of the most traditional artisans and belonged to one of the two families who have started this art. She has worked tirelessly in reviving this craft. During the same time Smt.Nirmala Devi also started working in this field and has come to be known and honoured for her efforts to revive this craft. In 1992, an artisan by name Mr.Manoj Pandit started experimenting with different materials and started painting on silk and other fabrics which helped take this art to the next level. From being just an art done for religious purposes, the artisans were able to use it in products more suited to the market¹³.

The history of this painting traces back to the 6th century where the worship of the snake deity Naga was not revered. The painting mostly is of religious importance. It focuses mostly on the significance of worship of the Nag deities. It depicts the history and significance of the snake deities and rituals and customs pertaining to them. Today they make different type of products likes, jute bag, pen stand, silk saree, light stand, wall hanging, flower stand season's card greeting card jute executive folder etc.



fig.7 & 8 Manjusha Art has restriction to use three colours: Pink, Green and Yellow

Centuries ago, folk singers and painters used to wander from one village to other, narrating stories of Hindu mythology to the village people. But with course of time, the process of telling tales transformed into canvas painting and that's when Kalamkari art first saw the light of day. This colorful art dates back to more than 3000 B.C. According to the historians, fabric samples depicting Kalamkari art was found at the archeological sites of Mohenjo-daro.

But, it was during the Mughal era when this style of painting got recognition. Mughals promoted this art in the Golconda and Coromandel province where skillful craftsmen (known as *Qualamkars*) used to practice this art. Under the Golconda sultanate, this art flourished at Machilipatnam in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh and further was promoted during the 18th century, as a decorative design on clothing by Britishers in India¹⁴. Till today, many families in Andhra Pradesh continue to practice this art and this has served as the prime source of livelihood for them, over the generations.

The word Kalamkari is derived from a Persian word where '*kalam*' means pen and '*kari*' refers to craftsmanship. This art involves 23 tedious steps of dyeing, bleaching, hand painting,

¹³ <http://www.manjushakala.in/>

¹⁴ <http://www.utsavpedia.com/motifs-embroideries/kalamkari-art/>

block printing, starching, cleaning and more. There are two identifiable styles of Kalamkari art in India: Srikalahasti style and Machilipatnam style. In the Machilipatnam style of Kalamkari, motifs are essentially printed with hand-carved traditional blocks with intricate detailing painted by hands. On the other hand, Srikalahasti style of painting draws inspiration from the Hindu mythology describing scenes from the epics and folklore. This style holds a strong religious connect because of its origin in the temples. Kalamkari during 18th century was practised all over the Coromandal coast stretching from Machalipatnam at the north to southern parts of India, especially in areas like kalahasti, Salem, Madura, Palakolu, Machalipatnam, Tanjore, Eleimbedu in Chengalpet, and in Cocanada districts.

Motifs drawn in Kalamkari spans from flowers, peacock, and paisleys to divine characters of Hindu epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana. Nowadays, this art is primarily done to create Kalamkari sarees. All India Handicrafts Board under president ship of late Dr. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya started the Kalamkari Training and Production Centre at Srikalahasti in the year 1957. Mr.Kora Ramamurthy pioneered on revival of Kalamkari and other languishing crafts of Andhra Pradesh. Today there are 150 craftsmen practicing this ancient craft¹⁵.



fig.9 Traditional Kalamkari saree

fig.10 Contemporary Kalamkari saree

This project comprehensively integrates my academic art historical interests with my desire to explore art as an active agent for social change along with my work passion in craft, embroideries and textiles. In my search I stepped upon one solid example of such heritage that is “Angapradesh” which is today divided in the parts of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. Once Angapradesh was famous for its Art literature and commerce and it spread till Sri Lanka.

This research would be beneficial to bring in light the dying traditional motifs along with the famous and well known arts and crafts along the path of spread of Buddhism. This research has been spread over a year with studies in regions of Bihar, Odisha, Bengal, Gujarat and Karnataka.

¹⁵ <http://www.india1001.com/blogs/news/6307188-kalamkari-an-introduction>

References

- Thompson Angela, *Textiles of South-East Asia*, The Crowood Press, Wiltshire
Gillow John & Nicholas Barnard, *Indian textiles*, Thames & Hudson
Watt Sir George and Percy Brown, *Arts and Crafts of India: A Descriptive Study*, New Delhi, 1903
D Shailaja, *Traditional Embroideries of India*, Naik Ashish, 1 January 2010
<https://www.quora.com/In-the-book-Valmiki's-Ramayana-it-talks-about-4-tusked-elephants-and-flying-lions-which-are-strong-enough-to-take-away-even-elephants-Do-these-animals-exist-in-present-day-times>
<http://decodehindumythology.blogspot.in/2012/11/rama-history-behind-legend.html>
<http://blog.parisera.com/>
<http://www.bodhgayatourism.com/history-of-bihar.html>
<http://www.connectiveone.com/painting/madhubani-painting-forest-of-creative-arts/>
<http://gov.bih.nic.in/Profile/history.htm>
<http://www.craftandartisans.com/textile>