

Patola – The Mystery Craft : A Case Study of the Salvi Community of the Patan, Western India

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One of the loveliest contributions of the Indian craftsmen to the domain of world fabric-art is the *Patola* - a perfect symphony of weaver-dyer's skill of Western India. *Patolu* (singular), *Patola* (plural) is a kind of double *Ikat* wherein the warp (longitudinal side of the threads) and weft (breadth section) threads are first tie-dyed and subsequently woven together. Thus the dyed areas of the fibres come together wonderfully to create patterns of unmatched richness and subtlety. Intricacies of weaving techniques, preservation of the expertise among a small community of weavers who retained the secrets exclusively among themselves and adherence to traditional patterns in preference to unorthodox innovations— all together gave this fabric an air of mystery, antiquity and sanctity, ¹ so much so that in the popular mind it became symbolic of good luck, happiness and prosperity.

Silk weaving was intimately associated with Gujarat since time immemorial. Patan, about 140 kilometres north of Ahmedabad was the capital of ancient Gujarat. The ruins of what used to be the Patan fort and the busy market places around do not really indicate that the town is actually host to an unparalleled heritage that India can boast of. Apart from the 11th century architectural marvel Rani Ki Vav, an intricately sculptured seven-storey deep step-well for the Queen, the town is also renowned for its unique fabric heritage, the Patan *Patola*.

A great deal of conjecture surrounds the origin of double *Ikat* of India, and many theories have been put forth with regard to its beginning. For this purpose, many historians and textile-connoisseurs have made elaborate research on archeological, historical sources and oral traditions. The word *Patolu* has been examined etymologically and the pattern motifs have been ordered chronologically. Perhaps the oldest known historical evidence of the existence of *Patola* could be found in the Ajanta frescoes. In cave I, dating back to the 6th and 7th century, we see *Ikat* like designs in the dresses of the females and robes of the monks. However, only the 'single *Ikat* technique' appears here.

Etymologically, *Patola* has a wide and varied connotation. Some linked it with *Patta*, the Sanskrit synonym of silk since the 4th century BC. ² It has also been contended that the word *Patola* was an off-shoot of the Sanskrit word *patorna*, which in the *Arthashastra* indicated a leaf fibre, ³ while Susruta called it a kind of silk. ⁴ Another suggestion is that it was derived from the Sanskrit word *Patolika* denoting a colour box, ⁵ a term still in vogue in *Rajasthani* language. According to A. N. Gulati, in Rajputana, in women's paint box, the red make-up are

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