

Human Fashion

Baluchari Sarees of Bishnupur

Gautam Patel

Working in Gujarat in social development



The aanchal or pallu of the saree depicts festive mood. Some women are engaged in several musical activities. Some are playing on Veenas (A musical instrument), Some are blowing on conches and some are involved in dancing with instruments in hands.

Baluchari sarees are hand-woven in richly dyed silk, depicting stories from ancient India, including from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The famous characters of Ram, Sita, Krishna and Gopis are displayed exuberantly along the borders, and whole scenes are presented on the large *pallus*. Some designs include kings, noblemen and graceful dancing girls with celebratory scenes and ceremonies.

The tradition of Baluchari Sarees originates from a village called Baluchar in Murshidabad District in West Bengal. Over two hundred years ago Murshidkuli Khan, the Nawab of Bengal patronized this weaving tradition and the Baluchari art flourished. Over the years there was decline in Baluchar and many weavers gave up the profession. In the twentieth century, Subho Tagore, a famous artist, made efforts to revitalise the rich tradition of Baluchari weaving. He showed Akshay Kumar Das, a weaver of Bishnupur, the technique of jacquard machine weaving. Akshay Kumar Das then began using the Baluchari designs to weave sarees in

Bishnupur with jacquard looms.

Baluchari styles are now part of the weaving tradition of the town Bishnupur. Bishnupur was the capital of the Malla dynasty and different kinds of crafts flourished under the patronage of the Kings. Bishnupur is also famous for the terracotta



The making of Baluchari saree

Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design, Vol. 1, No. 1, April, 2011

URL of the Issue: www.chitrolekha.com/v1n1.php

URL of *Baluchari Sarees* : www.chitrolekha.com/V1/n1/05-Baluchari-Sarees-of-Bishnupur.pdf

Kolkata, India

temples of the Malla Kings. The temples are covered in detailed scenes that are a major influence for the designs and motifs of Baluchari sarees.



The bottom row of the pallu represents the custom of "Khoi porano" (sacrificing puffed rice) by bride and groom together. The second row from the bottom shows the 'sindoor daan' (marking the bride with vermilion by groom) which is the most important part of Hindu marriage. The third row which surrounds the centre of the pallu depicts the auspicious "sankha Baadan" (blowing conches) by girls. The centre of the pallu shows the preparation of "Mala badal" (exchange of garlands) by bride and groom together which marks the ceremonial union.



The body of the saree (left) is covered with the motif of conch blowing girl alternately with a tiny floral motif.

The saree border depicts the departure of bride from her father's house by 'palki' (palanquin) accompanied by a group of musicians with Dhaak (a kind of drum), dhol (same) and sanai (a kind of bugle).



The motifs in the terracotta temples had a decisive influence on Baluchari designs



In this saree (left) the pallu describes the chronological steps towards the great Kurukshetra war. The outermost row tells the story of "paasha khela" (playing at dice) between Durjodhan and Judhisthir. The next row depicts the harassment of Droupodi (*Droupodir Bastra haran*) by Duhshasan. The third row shows the battle of archery in the war of Kurukshetra. The forth shows "Gada juddha" (club fighting). The centre of the pallu shows the motif of Arjun's Ratha (the chariot), driven by Lord Sri Krishna who teaches disappointed Arjun the "Srimad Vagabad Geeta" to arouse him for the war.

The Baluchari saree designs are first sketched and then copied on to punching cards which are used in the jacquard loom to weave the pattern. The cards have punched holes which correspond to the design. Thousands of punched cards are required for one saree design. Where there is a hole punched this raises a hook



carrying the warp thread to be woven with the weft thread. These hooks can be connected to more than one thread, allowing multiple weaving of a repeat of a pattern.

The vivid colours, intricate fine silk designs and deep traditions combine to create the elegant beauty of the unique Baluchari Sarees.

This is a beautiful instance of a bright red Baluchori saree. The body of the sari is decorated with tiny peacock motifs.

Note

Photographs by the author.

Gautam Patel graduated from London School of Economics in Development Management, which included a study of local governance in rural West Bengal. Currently working in Gujarat in social development. Email gaukhnh@gmail.com
