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The language of the sari

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Contemporary prints and patterns on the sari reflect a changing, more interconnected world, says American artist and sari researcher Margaret Lanzetta

Astriking polyester sari printed with emojis, another with Apple logo, others with doodle art, with stripes and polka dots, draped with wonderful nonchalance by women in a Jaipur market is what impressed independent American artist and sari researcher Margaret Lanzetta to conclude that the garment was now a canvas of modern expression and had freed itself from the stereotype made out to be.

The point that one is missing, believes Margaret, is of the continuous and contemporary evolution of the sari, both as a garment and in design. " It's being overlooked. A lot of western and traditional scholars want to look at only the glorious traditional patterns and I believe they are missing what's happening now. The sari patterning is modern and not stuck in a historical time warp," she says.

Margaret has been researching the garment for the last two years. A Fulbright Senior Scholar (Global Flex Award), her research is based on historic Indian trade textiles and involves textiles and fabrics in India, Singapore and Thailand. Her project in the city, *Folded Language* , on at Town House, Fort Kochi, validates her inferences.

Much as donning the sari is being revived by groups such as the #100saree pact and handloom sari activists, Margaret looks at the modernity in design that's taking over the garment. While traditional motifs like the paisley, lotus and *bootis* continue to be popular , other modern designs are appearing commonly, a fallout of globalisation and cultural homogeneity.

"I am focussing on patterns used in contemporary saris and how this reflects a changing, more interconnected world. I saw a woman wearing a sari with yellow smileys on them and I love the idea that people are being free to create and embrace new stuff on an apparently traditional garment," says Margaret.

In the course of her material gathering Margaret travelled to different parts of India- Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Kerala- visiting some looms, and wearing the sari a few times, savouring the experience. In Allahabad, she met a few youngsters who spoke about draping the sari not with the stitched blouse, but over a tee shirt, a tank top or a spaghetti top or even wearing it with a belt at the waist. It is in this novel styling that she finds the garment being an expression of a new mindset.

The shift is also seen in the use of different yarns and in their warp and weft. Pure silk, cotton and chiffon have given way to blended yarns. Polyester, nylon, cotton silk blends and such are being used, a change brought more out of practical functionality.

Of the traditional paisley motif Margaret says that though it has its origin in India, it travelled to England and gets its name from a town in Scotland, where it became hugely popular. "It was formed from impressions of fists dipped in colour and stamped on fabric by women in Gujarat. This was refined over time and the smooth paisley came about thus. The other theory of its origin is that it came from the Tree of Life," she says, adding that patterns travel from one country to another via trade. The blue and white Delft colour scheme and motifs, she says, originated in China. Similarly Indian motifs travelled to Europe but they also moved to Far East and South East Asia, "probably via Kochi and that's why I am here."

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