

Delhi Textile Trail: A Journey Through Threads, Textures, and Time

2016/12/24 Jitaditya Narzary

The first leg of the Textile Trail, was at a place that had a lot to do with indigo. This repeatedly kept reminding of another walk I did back in February through the alleys of Old Delhi. During that trail I came across the history of Katra Nil, the alley of indigo merchants of Shahjahanabad. It is probably just a coincidence, but for someone not at all related to this field, indigo keeps coming back to me. I remember reading about Dinabandhu Mitra's Nil Darpan during my school days but my first proper introduction to the economic importance of indigo was probably a certain episode of Bharat Ek Khoj. And I managed to find it online too. Watch it below.

Sorry for meandering but I couldn't control my train of thought. Coming back to the actual trail, it was another of those Delhi trails organized by Travel Correspondents and Bloggers Group, this time in collaboration with Breakaway Trails, which focuses on offbeat, eclectic, art and craft tours all over India. The guide for the day was Shilpa Sharma, the founder of Breakaway, who is also the co-founder Jaypore, the online store for India's finest craft-based designs. It was a small group of bloggers where males were in minority. However, having experienced and suffered exactly the opposite during my engineering days, I was fine with it.

Indigo City:

So, it was something that I had not done before. I generally associate any walk in Delhi to some of its thousand monuments. However, there is a lot of history associated with various types of textiles and designs but I'd never got an opportunity to explore the same... till this point.

We started the day at the office cum workshop of Mura Collective in Maidan Garhi, one of those areas of Delhi one seldom explores. It was

just another mundane building from outside but as we entered inside, a completely different world opened up. The founders Kusum and Prabha gave us a quick brief about what they do. They primarily focus on Shibori, Japanese resist dyeing technique to create unique patterns, and they primarily use indigo, which sparked my earlier ruminations about indigo.

After the brief, we proceeded to have a look at how actually things are done. We walked around multiple floors of the workshop looking at trained artisans at work. Eventually we were led to the terrace where indigo dye was being prepared through a complex chemical process. Pieces of clothes were being dried in the sun. They looked same from a distance however a closer look displayed unique patterns on each of them. Indigo apparels against the azure sky remained the lasting image in my mind from that leg.

Crafts Cornucopia

The next stop was a completely different affair. From the dusty alleys of Maindan Garhi, we were transported to the smooth streets of Anand Lok. The target here was a store called Kamayani. There was no signboard outside and no way of knowing what is inside unless somebody tells you. But we were informed that it was one of the best kept secrets of Delhi and indeed it was! We met Kamayani and Saloni who run the store. Soon, they started unraveling their treasures one by one.

The first thing they pulled out was a Chamba rumal. Back in 2012, while walking around the market adjacent to the chaugan in Chamba, I'd come across a workshop making these intricately woven handkerchiefs. So, yet again, for the second time in the day, I began reminiscing about an older trip.

However, this did it stop there. We saw some great examples of pichwai paintings, followed by several other carefully chosen and preserved examples of various indigenous crafts such as sujani embroidery, ajrak prints, suf embroidery, and many more. I am not exactly an expert in any of these so I think I should rather show some pictures.

Kutchchi Pastoral

When I visited Kutch a couple of years ago, my primary target was Dholavira. This region fascinates me because it used to be the seat of the earliest metropolis of the subcontinent. Even the ruins of Dholavira looked more robust than our any modern day buildings. In comparison the primitive lifestyle of the nomadic people that now inhabit these land hints at various mysteries and missing links. So, the final round was an exhibition going on at the IGNCA called Living Lightly: Journeys with Pastoralists. It was about the nomadic people in Kutch, their culture, traditions, and of course, textiles made of wool that they produce in those difficult terrains. We were guided by Meera, one of the curators. There was a lot to see and learn out there... More than I could manage in that session. It was sad because it was coming to an end. I'd been travelling in Rajasthan and had missed out on it earlier. Nevertheless, this session packed as much information as possible and we learnt to look at these people through a new perspective.

We saw how these communities have been instrumental in developing indigenous cattle breeds and how they have played a major role in developing the Indic agrarian system. We saw not only their apparel and handicraft but also experienced their poetry and music. If you want to know more about this project or get involved somehow, check the Living Lightly website or this IGNCA document. I did not click too many photographs here because I was overcome by an urge to rush to the actual location. After returning from the trip, I tried to find studies about genetics of Rabari people but could not find anything useful. I think they need some more research while I need another trip to the region.