



Susan Weltman Calcutta, Orissa & Assam Feb 2015

This was my fifth trip to India and the best – though I think I always say that! The last trip, to Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Gujarat and Bombay/Mumbai was also a textile lover/weavers dream come true, especially Gujarat. But this time we had a travel agent, Shilpa Sharma from [BreakawayTravel](#) who really understood my interests and helped facilitate a number of “textile interactions,” wonderful opportunities to meet weavers and designers and see them at their work. She also has a great website for Indian fashions, [jaypore](#) (At the same time, she understood Steve’s tolerance but lack of interest in textiles and arranged a number of other activities that he loved too.)

Part I – Kolkata

We started our trip in Kolkata, a city that Steve had visited years ago and I had never visited. We stayed in a homestay in a “real” neighborhood (rather than a commercial area) which was great for wandering early in the morning and seeing people at market, eating a little breakfast on the street before work; later in the day kids were playing cricket, people

shopping. Easy to walk for dinner in the neighborhood. We also got to “enjoy” the almost constant barking of the stray dogs and the calls to prayer from the local mosque.

After a wonderful lunch and walking tour of “British” Calcutta, we visited a few stores where I exercised extraordinary restraint, not buying anything as I knew how many other opportunities I would have.. And, as usual, I have a “textile regret” about one great dress that I didn’t buy. The next day we began some of the meetings that Shilpa had facilitated. The first was at Sasha, a fair trade, non-profit shop with items, in their Kolkata store, primarily from West Bengal. I did not realize that they’ve been in existence since 1970 and have stores in other cities in India.

The organization has relationships with producers in several villages including weavers in Phulia; there had been a trip to the village the day before we visited the shop but, as is the fate of tourists on limited schedules, we missed it. (However, you can see a video on You-tube of weavers in Phulia.) I fell in love with the KANTHA cloth stitching (on natural dyed, handloomed silk); this is a skill and textile tradition originally from further East, in what is now Bangladesh. We were told that it is now practiced in West Bengal by women whose families moved after Partition. I am including photos of a scarf and a shawl that I bought – the stitches on the scarf, which are often white-on-white, are very difficult to see but add to the beauty of the cloth.

From Sasha we moved to Sujata Weaves and Prints, stopping off on the way for a wonderful mango lassi. Sujata was unable to meet with us so we met with her sister (sorry I didn’t get her name.) She is a young dancer and, during our conversation, we learned that she had known a friend of Steve’s who, with her daughter, had an influential dancing school. (Steve met her, Manjusri Sircar and her husband when teaching in Nigeria in the ‘60’s. They then lived in New Paltz, N.Y. for many years before returning to Kolkata.) So, even India can be a small world. Sujata is a designer who works with weavers to produce beautiful silk sarees, some of which are sold at Fabindia. It was wonderful to view and touch these silks.

Later in the day – giving Steve a chance to have some “non-textile” time – I went to the Weavers Studio, in “our” neighborhood of Ballygunge. I bought two shirts and a scarf – and could have bought oh-so much more. Fabulous, beautiful shop selling only hand-loomed fabric. I am including photos of two things I bought, one a shirt, indigo and shibori dyed. I also bought a double weave cashmere scarf – it is of interest to me

because of the double weave structure, in this instance joined only in the middle. I've never thought of doing that, or seen that before, though it is quite simple to do. I will try to capture it in a photo.

I'm rather losing track of the days (already) but on the last day we spent in Kolkata (though returning there briefly before flying to Katmandu) we visited a wonderful! exhibition at the Rabindranath Tagore Center on Ho Chi Minh Sarani. (Although there have been many name changes of streets from English, there are still Shakespeare and Lenin Streets.) The exhibit – and conference – were called Sutra Natural Dye event; Sutra organizes conferences and prints an occasional book on dyeing and textiles. (The two that I bought were in my daypack that was stolen/lost at Katmandu airport, but more on that later.....) The exhibit included a display of the Thomas Wardle documents, 3,500 natural dyes (indigenous to India) that were collected in the 19th century; there were, I think, three copies made including one in Britain. But the display was from the only remaining copy and was quite fascinating. There was also an exhibit called "Colours of Nature," a painting exhibit, and an exhibit of clothing from local designers. I had, unfortunately, missed by one day some lectures and workshops that were attended by people I met later in the trip, and also I learned later, by a friend from Australia. Again, the disadvantage of being a traveler on a (tight) schedule. The Tagore Center is a lovely, new building and had great facilities for this exhibit.

Part II – Assam

In the morning we flew to Guwahati, a two hour flight (and on most flights, even short ones, there is a lovely little vegetarian meal. Plus prompt and friendly service. And very well functioning airports.) From there, immediately we set off on a six-hour drive with a wonderful, very competent driver. His competence did not make the roads any better. We were treated (?) to his choice of music, which was mainly US Country and Western, and 70's and 80's American pop music. I did occasionally ask for a change. This ride, which was not very lovely, was notable for Steve getting seriously yelled at when he was eating a piece of chicken on the porch of a VERY seriously veg restaurant. Of course, by the time we figured out why he was getting excoriated, he had finished eating.

I did not know what to expect of weaving in Assam, an area not often on the tourist trail, with not a whole lot of information available. Assam is in the far north east of India, with many "tribal" areas where we were warned

we might expect “unrest.” What does the term “tribal” mean? Poor? unassimilated? Non-Hindu? All of the above. There are so many languages in India that it is not just language difference that is meant by this term. Wikipedia defines tribal groups as a “group of people that have lived in a particular place from time immemorial.” In the 2001 Census, tribals made up 8.14% of the total population of the country, so at that time that was 84.51 million people. There are a lot of people in India! We in the U.S. are more accustomed to this group being called “scheduled caste.”

Anyway, after this diversion, we did not travel in many areas where we interacted with the tribal people. So most of the weaving we saw was aimed at the middle class woman who was buying a handloomed saree or dupatta (large shawl.) I did see some wonderful handwoven bags carried by men, was told we could find a weaver who would sell me one, but did not have the time to pursue that. The ones I saw in the shop seemed very inferior and made for the tourist trade. We stayed at a tea plantation for several nights; Assamese tea is, of course, famous for its quality. As Steve and I are not very dedicated tea drinkers we could not tell the difference between Darjeeling tea of tea from Munnar (both areas we have visited) I’m embarrassed to say.

When our guide at the tea plantation knew I was interested in weaving he said he would take me to meet a local weaver, in Tezpur. This was considered nearby but, given roads, traffic, cows it was still more than an hour away. Turned out we were visiting his sister-in-law and niece! The niece, Mithu Laxmi Borah, has a business weaving, designing and running a small workshop in the family garage. (She was the only weaver we met who was not running a non-profit.) She has 5 or 6 weavers, all women, working for her. None of them were there when we visited. She uses the various kinds of Assamese silk (Assam is famous for its silk) but does not do her own spinning.

The looms used are locally made, easy to repair, two and four harness with locally made thread heddles. Some of the looms had an attachment for Jacquard weaving. I really didn’t look carefully at the looms, unfortunately. Too much in a need of the tea and cookies we were generously offered. There is a large military base in Tezpur so she has plenty of business. She does not need to worry about local tastes particularly as her customers are from all over India. I bought a white scarf woven in Eri or Endi silk which is the product of domesticated silk worms

and produced – I think – only in Assam. It is thicker and rougher than other silks. So I now have a beautiful scarf, white with yellow details – one of the few things not lost at Katmandu airport. Steve was also “gifted” a wonderful white and red cotton scarf, worn by men for visits to the temple. That, sadly, was lost.



We left the tea plantation much later than planned – we had expected to spend the night and a day in the capital of Assam, Guhawati but, because of a bandh (strike) called because of electioneering, we were warned to stay off the roads until after 5:00 PM. (The alternative was to leave at 5:00 AM; that was never an option!) So our next destination was Kaziranga National Park, known for its one-horned rhinos, wild elephants, and – with luck – tigers. We were very lucky – we got to see two tigers, but not the same two. I saw one chasing a buffalo (those things are big, especially when they seem to be heading straight towards your jeep!) Steve missed it – but a few minutes later there was another tiger racing by and I missed that one. So it goes. Very exciting. We also had, as a guide, the only female guide in the Park, a wonderfully informed woman.



I was quite thrilled (not just by the animals) to find a demonstration of weaving at our hotel! We met a lovely young woman, Rupjyoti Saikia Gagoi who lives in Kaziranga with her husband, a ranger at the park and a painter and wood carver, and their two sons. She was a school teacher with some knowledge of weaving who started an NGO several years ago. She and her mother teach weaving to local women, including some “tribals” who have not been to school and generally have not been involved in the local economy. They also do their own spinning of locally “harvested” silk. I met some of the weavers who were working that day; amazingly, for the first time in my adult life, I was the tallest. They are working on a number of different projects including table runners using the tape from discarded audio tapes! Don’t feel good but look good. Also weaving sarees, dupattas woven with patterns that are meaningful to their local communities. They sell to local women and the tourist trade. Unfortunately, the lovely saree I bought here was lost. Hope someone in Katmandu is enjoying wearing it.



We also briefly visited a Mishing tribal village; this is the largest indigenous community in North Western India. Every home (all on stilts) had a weaving loom underneath; reminded me of northern Thailand. People in the village (of about 100 people) ignored our visit, going about their daily lives; no effort to show us any of their work, or to sell us anything. Would have liked to see the work, which I didn’t see displayed anywhere else, but also liked the non-commercial aspect of the visit.

We spent little time in Guwahati – and from the little we saw of it, didn't miss much. But did have time to buy some local silk (made into a lovely shirt by a tailor in Katmandu) and visit one of the local folk art museums. Wonderful display of Assamese "costumes" which were unlike clothing I'd seen anywhere else in India – and unlike anything I saw people during during our short stay in Assam. We spent the night at a beautiful homestay in Guwahati where we also spent our last night in Assam. Would have loved to look through the closet of our hostess – but resisted the impulse! (Besides, their apartment was locked.....) The next day, on our way to Cherrapunji in Meghalaya (the state next to Assam) we visited the Don Bosco Museum in Shillong (which we learned is the hip hop capital of India – who knew? They also have a yearly Bob Dylan festival.) They had interesting displays of local weaving and attire, none of which we saw worn during our brief visit.



What we did see were women dressed in attire we'd never see anywhere else in India. Or at least, have never seen anywhere else. (See accompanying photo.) This area is deeply Christian – Protestant (Methodist!) and Catholic. The owner of the Cherrapunji Holiday Resort lent me a book about the influence of the Welsh who had proselytized in this area – hymns are still sung in Welsh! On our drive through this lovely area which has been compared to Scotland and Wales, we stopped for some fruit; the woman selling by the road was terribly disappointed that we were not Christian – believe me, we did not bother to say we were Jewish! She was wearing a gingham checked piece of cloth, a rectangle tied at each shoulder. When it gets cold both men and women wear brightly checked woolen shawls that look as if they could have come from Scotland. We did not see any local weaving there – were told that people

in this area had not been weavers but had traded honey and pepper for cloth woven nearby.

The people in this area are Khasia, a matrilineal society; their language was essentially oral only until the arrival of Western missionaries. Education has been highly valued and traditionally in English but, we were told, there are now some Khasi schools. We were treated to a concert of Khasia hip hop; unusual, we thought. I also tried a duet of Amazing Grace with our guide singing Khasi while I sang in English. My inability to keep the tune was a hindrance. Despite the deep influence of Christianity, many traditional religious practices are followed; clans membership is very important. A couple must be of differing clans to marry. It was interesting to see that, at the Catholic Church next to our hotel, there were several graves that had very large rectangular stones with no inscriptions (and no crosses.) I was told that this was out of respect for traditional burial rites. Unusual, I'd say.

Part III – Odisha

We flew from Assam to Odisha (formerly Orissa) which is south of both Assam (has to be because Assam's borders are with Bangladesh, Burma, Bhutan and Tibet) and Kolkata. Bhubaneshwar is often called the "Temple City of India and together with Puri and Konark – which we visited – forms the "golden triangle" of temples frequently visited..

(We did, of course, visit these temples; see Steve's writeup for some photos). In Bhubaneshwar I had one of the best "interactions" of our trip. Shilpa had arranged for me to meet with Gunjan Jain, a textile designer. After stopping briefly at our (beautiful, wonderful) hotel, the driver took me to her home. Believe me, no taxi driver could have found it without being in constant phone contact. Gunjan and her husband, Surya Shankar Dash, (a filmmaker and political activist) welcomed me to their lovely home. Gunjan is from Delhi (or, as people say "belongs" to Delhi) and grew up speaking Hindi. The language in Odisha is totally different! so in moving there she had to learn a whole new language. Although educated people know English there is – almost always – a "home" language that is deeply important.

Gunjan was trained as a textile designer and originally worked in industry in Delhi but left that life to design and work with indigenous weavers in Odisha. The work they produce is – to my eyes – beyond belief in its beauty and sophistication. (You can look at her website, [vrikshdesigns](http://vrikshdesigns.com); you

can also see some her husband's videos and interviews at [videorepublic](#) Gunjan and her weavers are using some natural dyes but with caution as natural dyeing is a complex and intensive process and care must be made to replenish the dye plants used (a fact often overlooked by those who love natural dyes.) The work the weavers do includes pricey silk sarees for the national market and other designs for the local market. Gunjan is very serious about the place of handloomed garments in the lives and economy of India.

Amazingly, I left without buying anything, too overwhelmed by the beauty to even contemplate what I would want to own for myself. The next day, thinking of what fun Gunjan and Surya and I had together – talking of natural dyes, politics, Occupy Wall Street, anti-fracking rallies with my son, the whole range of topics in our lives – I thought what fun it would be to have dinner with them and Steve. Luckily, we were able to arrange this and returned to their home where I chose a fabulous, ikat saree, naturally dyed, with a tree of life ikat pattern – one of the most beautiful pieces of cloth I've ever seen – or owned. Also, a wonderful silk shawl in a traditional Odisha pattern. I should point out for the weavers among my readers, the work I'm describing is woven at 150 threads per inch, on two harness looms – which we might describe as "primitive" – with pickup! (These two pieces were in my stolen backpack!! Through the miracles of email I was able to contact Gunjan and she was able to send a very, very similar saree and shawl to Delhi so my broken heart could mend.)



We had a wonderful dinner with Gunjan and Surya at a local restaurant. During our conversations the “six degrees of separation” reared its head. Surya mentioned to Steve that one of his political idols is a Nigerian activist who was executed by the government in the 1990’s; Steve told him that Ken Saro-Wiwa had been a colleague and friend of his when Steve taught in Nigeria. Well, I’m pretty sure Surya never dreamed that this old man (because, let’s face it, we’re old) sitting across from him would have been a colleague of Saro-Wiwa’s! Later, when Steve was asking about one of HIS heroes, Arundhati Roy, we were told that the last time Gunjan and Surya were eating at this very restaurant, at this very table, they were having dinner with Roy! And they confirmed that she is as committed, as wonderful as Steve had read. So that meeting was definitely a high point in the trip – plus the meal was great!

The next day we left for a short drive to see the Sun Temple in Konark and then for a short drive to Puri, home of a Jagannath Temple that is visited by thousands of people on pilgrimage from all of India. Non-Hindus are not allowed in so we viewed the Temple – and the throngs – from above. In the evening we walked along the beach (Puri is on the Bay of Bengal – lovely beaches but much too rough for swimming) which was literally thronged, again, with thousands of people. But of note, there was not a

moment where I felt unsafe or uncomfortable. We – two of the very few white people – were ignored – or treated in the same respectful manner as everyone else. Lots of families out, young men, teenagers, couples – and no drunkenness or disorderly behavior at all. I was a little hesitant to go to the beach at 6:30 AM, afraid it might be deserted or unsafe but, again, lots of families out playing, beach totally clean! Something to be learned there, I thought.

After two nights in Puri we drove back to the airport and flew to Kolkata for one night. Spent the afternoon on a third walk organized through Calcutta Walks, seeing a whole other side of the city – and a fabulous lunch. Next morning, left for Katmandu! Only a two hour, uneventful flight. Met our friends Deidre and Joe from Denver. Cousin Vivian, from Portland, had arrived two days before. And it was at the Katmandu Airport that I put down my daypack as we put luggage into the crowded car, and remembered only when we were at our hotel a half hour later. Of course, on return trip to airport, it was no longer there! So, a disappointed thief got a few sarees and some books.

Part IV – Nepal

This was my fifth trip to Nepal, Steve's sixth, having taught there in 1992. It was great to be back, to find Katmandu with less air pollution – thanks to getting rid of many of the 2-cycle three wheelers used for local transportation. After a few days in Katmandu (shopping, visiting Patan Dhurbar Square and Buddhist and Hindu temples, shopping, wandering, finding a new tailor to make some clothes for me) we took the long drive to Pokhara to begin our seven day trek (which sometimes felt like a year-long trek!) How could we have forgotten how much up and down there is, even on a rather moderate trek. We had chosen to go to the Annapurna region as neither Steve nor I had ever trekked there. Though we did not go to Base Camp or do the whole circuit we were accompanied every day by views of the Annapurnas, Dhaulagiri, and Machupachure. Quite a sight! The high point (both in views and altitude) was, at 5:00 AM, climbing Poon Hill (our highest elevation, but only 10,000') for a fabulous sun rise view.

One of the terrific and unexpected treats on the trek (other than the good food, helpfulness of our guides and everyone we met on trek, cleanliness of teahouses and of the whole trail) was meeting a charming young weaver on our first day. He was weaving at a 4 harness loom while

rocking his 4 week old baby. The Nepali weaving with which I'm familiar is called "dhaka cloth;" in Katmandu I've seen shawls woven with this technique (though I've never seen a Nepali wearing one. They seem to be woven for the tourist trade although maybe at one time they were used for sarees. But the cloth is ubiquitous in the little hats that many Nepali men wear. The technique used in these cotton shawls is a supplementary-weft inlay. This young man, whose English was quite good, explained that he and his wife are not only weaving for the hikers who pass by (this is the busiest trekking route in Nepal) but also teaching weaving to others in their village. Later that day we saw a woman weaving with a backstrap loom; she spoke no English so we did not have a conversation.



We returned to Katmandu, by plane this time, on Yeti Air, for two more days. This was an opportunity for Steve to give a lecture; our good friend, Professor Shreedar Lohani, does not let Steve visit without giving a lecture. This time the topic was Mummery,, Mallory and Mystery (of Everest); it was well-attended and I think Steve had a good time preparing it. We also had a wonderful opportunity to visit with Shreedar's family who we know well from Nepal and the US, where his two daughters live. We said goodbye, until our next visit, to the Lohanis and other faculty members we've known for years. We also said goodbye to our friend Phurba Sherpa who runs the trekking agency that planned our hike. (For those who are wondering, our Sherpa, Passang, (who has summited Everest twice) was not at Everest during the recent tragedy. He and some of the other

Sherpas who work for Phurba have been sent to Europe for advanced training in safety and saving lives on the high peaks. Phurba informed us that some of these men were involved in the rescues on Everest. As we were leaving Katmandu we were “gifted” with pashmina shawls and white, silk prayer shawls. A wonderful experience.

Part V - Delhi

Our next, and last, destination was Delhi where we finally got an opportunity to meet Shilpa! We stayed at a lovely place, Lutyens Bungalow, an oasis of green in the city, a large family home with swimming pool, large yard, great breakfasts and dinner on request, and four or five rooms for guests. Highly recommended! Also, in walking distance of a lovely park, a destination for walkers, yoga practitioners, and families even early in the morning. I should comment that we never felt unsafe anywhere in India. We were not out much in the evening; if we were, we usually were in a car with a driver or in the neighborhood where we were staying. It didn't feel much different from our neighborhood in Brooklyn where there are always people on the street – except in India there are always A LOT more people on the street!

In Delhi Shilpa had again done her magic. We had dinner at the home of an engineer and his wife; he loves to cook and occasionally has private dinner parties. We went on a cycle rickshaw tour of Old Delhi, four of us went on a very early bike ride of Delhi, a high point. We also visited a beautiful museum that I'd never seen before – the Sanskriti Foundation where, in addition to seeing their wonderful collection, we met a young textile artist (name unfortunately forgotten) from Philadelphia who was doing an internship there.

We had a great time looking at textiles and clothing in Delhi. I was reunited with my beautiful saree from Odisha which had been sent to Shilpa. We were fortunate to be able to visit a “trunk sale” given by Women Weave,” and visit with Sally Holkar who I first met in Bali, and have seen in the US at various meetings. It was a treat to see the fabulous work of the men and women with whom she works. Sally and her team have recently started a Handloom School and are very dedicated to supporting handloom weavers. (I was happy to buy a beautiful silk saree and some cotton yardage which I plan to sew into garments. Someday! We were also “gifted” by Shilpa with scarves from Women Weave, gifts we were very

happy to receive; I, of course, quickly appropriated the cotton scarf that was intended for Steve. I may allow him to wear it sometimes.

Among the other places we visited in Delhi, which we would not have found on our own, were Kamayani ([kamayani](#)), located in the owner's home, chock full of textiles (both saree and yardage) from all over India. I bought a cotton saree, ikat woven, from Odisha, to replace one of my stolen sarees. We also visited the Mura Collective organized by two sisters who have an NGO that teaches natural dyeing and shibori (a Japanese resist technique) and markets the work of the women with whom they work. One of the sisters is moving back to the Himalaya, where they were raised, as it is easier to work with natural dyes there than in the city. And, of course, I wanted to be supportive so bought a wonderful silk blouse that I've worn frequently since I returned home.

The last visit – and unfortunately, a hurried one – was to Aditi Desai, a collector and textile historian who is especially interested in Kashmiri weaving (our next trip??) though her home is filled with textiles from all over the world! (If you're interested in her and in pashminas. We met her at her home (it is always a special treat to visit and see people at home!) where we were offered the best coffee I'd had in India! Her collection and knowledge are incredible; unfortunately we had time for only a very short visit.

Our last evening in Delhi (on this trip anyway) was supposed to be a "special" treat; Joe had met a fellow on the plane to Katmandu who works for the US Embassy, luckily as a technician and not publically representing the American government. He kindly invited all of us (Vivian had the sense to stay at the hotel) for dinner with their "wonderful" Indian cook. Sadly, he forgot to mention that he and his wife, Evangelical Christians, hate Indian food, and hate India (except for its Christian minority.) We should have been warned as their email to Joe confirming dinner was signed "Yours in Christ." I thought, at least a drink would help me survive the evening until I saw that the only drinks served were a bottle of water each. AND the food served was "phoney" Mexican, meaning no spice at all. There was worse to come, including a very Jesus-centered prayer. I was polite, as we all were, and did not walk out. But I wish I had. I could at least have found a great Indian meal!

Oh, yes – Steve, Vivian and I did get in a visit to our favorite bookstore in Delhi, Bahrison's, where we, regretfully, exercised great control. And then went back to pack!