



## TCRC First Public Lecture on 'Indian Heritage Textiles', New Delhi, June 22, 2017

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**Hello everyone,**

I would like to introduce myself and talk about the work my company "Abraham & Thakore" has done for well over 20 years now. I launched this company with Rakesh Thakore, a batchmate of mine from the Textile Design discipline of the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. We were joined soon after our start up by Kevin Nigli who is an early graduate of the Fashion Design department of NIFT. Like most designer startups, A&T started as a very small design studio housed in my bedroom in my apartment in Defence Colony. We began by designing and manufacturing tiny batches of textile and fashion product that were manufactured mostly in the handloom and the small-scale sector, as well as in tiny printing and embroidery sheds. And indeed over 20 years on, we still use many of these small workshops.

We were very fortunate in that when we started that we had excellent connections with weavers and printers in this sector as Rakesh had been closely connected with some of the best Indian artisans and craftspeople who had worked for the textile exhibitions and projects that were developed by him, along with Martand Singh, for the early Festivals of India. We initially started our business by developing small collections of loungewear and scarves, by designing our own fabrics that were woven in Andhra Pradesh in Mangalagiri and Pochampally, where we found the handloom sector to be the perfect match for our modest business requirements. The small production runs allowed to us by the handloom sector meant we could weave just 10 to 12 pieces of a unique design without any problems. We realized that the handloom and craft industry of India with its small decentralized workshops was in many ways the ideal R & D laboratory, as well as being an efficient production centre, for every design professional who is dependent on small batch production. I strongly believe that nowhere else in the world, is the designer/entrepreneur as spoilt for choice, as here in India. Here a highly skilled craftsman can convert a new idea into product, taking a concept from the drawing board to a prototype, with rapidity and economy. This incredible infrastructure gave us, at A&T, extraordinary flexibility and a unique advantage as a tiny design company with very limited capital.

We started by launching Abraham & Thakore branded scarves and kimonos, all largely handmade, at The Conran Shop in London where our innovations and flexibility in design, and our ability to handle low product multiples, were perfectly matched to the requirements of an exclusive, high end retailer who is willing to pay higher prices and also demands product exclusivity.

From here, the brand developed a retail presence rapidly over the next few years in the UK, as well as in Europe though to a lesser extent, as top end stores like Liberty, Selfridges and Harrods in London and Le Bon Marche in Paris started carrying Abraham & Thakore collections. While working with these retailers we also found that the advantage of small production runs of hand woven and handmade product allowed us to develop exclusive product ranges for a particular retailer whenever required. This model is the diametric opposite of the mass scale garment industry, which was heavily promoted in India. The handloom and craft sector can provide an unrivalled advantage for top end and luxury manufactures in retail markets where product exclusivity commands higher prices and is essential.

The first 10 years of the A&T brand was also a period when the Indian retail industry was slowly creeping into a changing landscape that was being wrought by the liberalized economy. At the time we launched the brand, there was no real organized fashion retail sector for our type of product, except for a smattering of very small boutiques, so we were compelled to build our business with a focus on the Western market and therefore, exports drove our sales. It was only after the great economic recession of 2008 and the resultant slowdown in the West, that we turned our focus back onto the domestic market, which was now increasingly dynamic and growing very rapidly.

In this context, we presented our first fashion show in 2010 at the India Fashion Week to help grow awareness for the brand. This also marked the beginning of a slow shift in our design approach as we were now designing product for consumers with different requirements and distinctly different cultural attitudes from the Western consumer, and we found we were learning a great deal in the process. And as the handloom sector still allowed us tremendous production flexibility, we could develop separate product ranges for the home market that was less bound to the tastes, trends and requirements of Western markets. To illustrate this point, an important example is the European colour and trend forecast which so relevant to us in the export market, proved largely irrelevant to the Indian consumer. This is a market where a sizable majority of customers wear the salwar kameez and the sari, and where winter is often a sunny and pleasant season in large swathes of the country, and heavy woollens and winter overcoats are not required. Terms like Autumn and Fall are also irrelevant in a market where festivals like Diwali and Dussehra have the greatest effect on clothing choices and consumption. And not to forget, this is also a market where Bollywood can shape opinion and fashion trends. These were some of the initial design challenges we faced as we reoriented our design direction and product ranges towards the domestic market. We realized that both the attitudes and the design approach conditioned by our earlier experience with consumers would need to change.

While we found that the fashion industry here still looked up to the West as a source of trend and more importantly, design validation, we began to realize that it was far more relevant for the Indian designer to question the existing hierarchies of taste and trend that were shaped by a Western fashion ecosystem. We would need to formulate independent criteria to propose relevant design solutions and we needed to create an alternative approach to trend and taste. We found it important for A&T to re-evaluate its basic design vocabulary, which had been shaped through the long engagement with the Western market, and adapt it to the different market and a new customer. Since formal fashion education in India was (and is) primarily defined by a design construct developed in Western fashion education, we were seeking answers to questions that were still in the process of articulation since the very concept and construct of Indian fashion itself was still in the process of development. The fashion media and the industry as well, essentially worked within the traditional constructs leading to anomalies such as Indian fashion and clothing being termed "ethnic dressing", in India itself situating our clothing traditions outside the mainstream fashion space.

These are some of the issues and questions that we try to examine as we develop new collections. There are many interesting and challenging issues for us to resolve as we try to find a relevant voice to straddle the different spaces and the different markets. Another important challenge in India is that the market is also in a constant state of flux. Social and economic change is so rapid now with tastes evolving rapidly as urban and metro areas are exploding with new fashion consumers. While this is responsible for creating exciting new business opportunities, design criteria should be assessed and evaluated constantly along with the evolution of the needs of the customer.

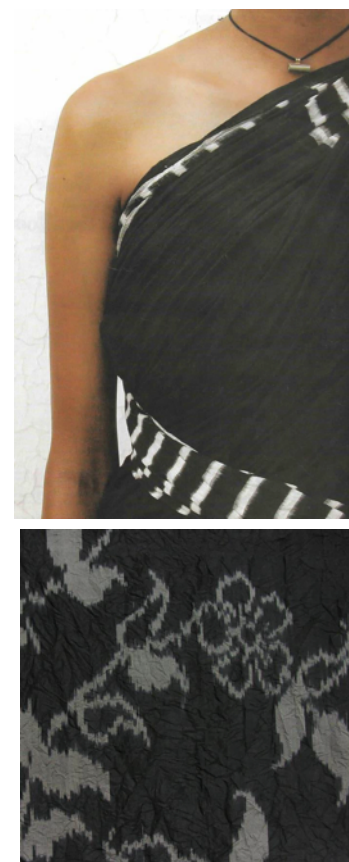


Figure 1: Ikat Courtesy: Author

As we developed new collections we looked at varying textile resources from the Jamdani weavers of West Bengal, to weavers from Maheshwar, block printers from Barmer and Bandhini craftspeople from Bhuj. Simultaneously as we increased our engagement with different textile traditions, craftspeople and weavers, our design vocabulary also grew more diverse as we sought to find ways to create contemporary expressions while using the traditional language in simple and direct ways. Our somewhat minimalistic design ethos also directs us to constantly try to evolve a design language that is reductive without losing the essence. Few examples of traditional textiles that have inspired us, are from John Forbes Watson's incredible documentation in the late 1800's which we dip into periodically, while the others are from the many books on traditional textiles in our office library. Such examples depict how contemporary and relevant these fabrics always are, and how their design language has enriched and influenced A&T over the years and continues to do so. Also a variety of clothing ideas generate from how we dress today in urban India which is the fashion in India not seen in the glossies. This demonstrates how our clothing requirements are culture specific, whether we wear chose to wear the sari or a pair of blue jeans. In many cases, the "Western" dress becomes a kurta and is simply worn over pants. A menswear shirt, even a T-shirt can be either adapted to become a sari blouse, or an upper garment for a lehenga. The scarf gets repurposed as a dupatta, and vice versa, showing us how an item of clothing is adapted to our needs. Importantly too, as the human body is perceived differently in different cultures, some Western fashion trends for women may be inappropriate and conflict with local taboos. Sometimes, these very taboos can throw up a creative new fashion solution, such as a very short mini dress, which becomes a tunic and is worn with leggings to keep the legs covered. In some cases, the deep revealing neckline of a dress can be covered by a dupatta. We also observe that colour has different meanings and plays different roles which are relevant to very particular occasions. Religion and community also shape attitudes to colour. In the most obvious of these, the North Indian bride rarely wears white, she wears red; while in Kerala white is the traditional colour. The urban uniform of big city London or New York which usually consists of layers of anonymous dark fabrics, gives way to yards of colorful cotton in urban India. In hairstyling and grooming too, a well-oiled plait adorned with a string of scented flowers is an elegant alternative to a contemporary cut and blow dry.

As fashion designers, we are shaped by our environments, and our design sensibilities are informed by what we see around us. As we search for relevance in design, we need to tread a path between our contemporary and modern aspirations, without losing our anchors. Some of us live very international lifestyles now, with modern technology, smartphones and streaming television influencing change. Channeling different, and seemingly opposite influences into a coherent modern voice, occupies the work of many Indian designers as we work on the development of alternative perspectives and changing vocabularies.

**Syncretism:** While the conundrum of the modern Indian fashion designer is the reconciliation of opposing cultures and traditions, we look at the history of Indian textiles where this was dealt with efficiently, and practically, by the traditional artisan and craftsman.

We cannot forget that, and I quote here from the V&A website, "India was at one point the greatest exporter of textiles the world has ever known, with the trade reaching its height in the 18th and 19th centuries." This was achieved through a marketing strategy that was simple and effective, which was, "adapt to the taste of the client". This allowed the Indian textile craftsman to absorb and interpret ideas and techniques from all over the world with a keen non-judgmental eye and this simultaneously reinforced the craft and led the textile industry to the forefront of world trade.

**Benares Brocade:** Benares the centre for the traditional "kinkhabs", is also famed for the "gyasar" brocades for which sources say, the designs were probably introduced by Tibetan traders to replace the brocades woven in China. Buddhist motifs and symbols pattern the cloth with depictions of clouds, flames and scrolling flowers. The Tibetan Buddhist community was and still is an important market for these textiles. However, now there are contemporary usages for gyasar brocades in home furnishings and also in fashion.

**Chintz:** Another well-known example is the celebrated chintz fabrics of the Coromandel coast which were highly in demand in English, French and Dutch markets and used both for clothing as well as furnishings. Here I quote, "foreign motifs were interpreted by the artisan using his own style and decorative ideas, and his interpretation of Western fashion and popular culture combined with his own sense of aesthetics made chintz a coveted commodity all over the world."

**Kashmiri Shawls:** A further example of the syncretic nature of traditional Indian textiles, is the Kashmiri shawl. The motifs which could be traced to early Persian textiles eventually travelled across the world, and inspired copies in Scotland and Lyon with great commercial success, giving birth to the famed "paisley" so common in design and fashion terminology.

**Madras Checks:** And last and not least, the famed Madras Check that first travelled from Tamilnadu to Nigeria where it became an important symbol of identity and culture. Later, the Madras Check also travelled West to America where the first Madras shirt was apparently offered by the Sears catalogue in 1897. Madras plaids later became symbolic of preppy Ivy League fashion in the US and are still identified as such.

### Abraham & Thakore Design Interventions

In continuation to this legacy I will show the following images, which are from various Abraham & Thakore fashion collections designed over the years. They show the role traditional textile sources have played in our designs as how we are inspired by the vocabulary, and technique. We have also borrowed ideas and concepts from all over and we also interpret a traditional language by tweaking the vocabulary, playing with proportion, and changing the context of elements. They are roughly organized to demonstrate fabrics we developed from the following textile centres such as Mangalagiri, Ikat, Brocade, Block print, Kantha and Jamdani. (Figure 2)



Figure 2: Abraham & Thakore Design Interventions Courtesy: Author

### Stitched and Unstitched-The Influence of Traditional Clothing

The next set of images that I am showing are also from our collections over the years. They demonstrate our explorations into the meaning of fashion as situated from our vantage point here in India. At a conceptual level, we have always been fascinated by gender specific clothing, and by the role menswear has played in womens wear all over the world and in India. We are increasingly interested in experimenting with fashion in this space as traditional definitions are beginning to be re defined as society's attitudes towards gender roles change. As more and more women move into the workplace these changes affect fashion tremendously. In India, the adoption of the salwar, with the long kameez by women marks a very important change. The spread of the salwar kameez in contemporary times to areas in South India for example, where women had never traditionally worn pants represents an important shift in Indian fashion and in mindset. Now almost considered the national costume of India, we see versions of the salwar kameez in small towns in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, this revolution brought the freedom of trousers to many women. For many women, the adoption of the salwar kameez then became a stepping-stone to the wearing of trousers, and in turn, jeans and leggings. The modern hybrids of tunics and leggings that are now available at ready to wear stores across the country at all price ranges are simply a continuation of this fashion journey for the Indian woman. As a part of our exploration of the codes of menswear and womens wear we designed a series of fabrics based on traditional menswear woven patterns such as the hounds-tooth and the herringbone, re interpreting them in traditional techniques like double ikat from Pochampally to block printing in Sanganer. This hounds-tooth patterned ikat sari that was used to open The Fabric of India exhibition at the Victoria and Albert museum a couple of years ago played with these concepts. We were investigating notions of gender and uniform dressing and created this belted sari and shirt ensemble as a somewhat tongue in cheek play on the conventions attached to the menswear formal suit. Similarly, this ensemble of block printed chiffon in a herringbone pattern was teamed with a kota doria shirt printed with the same block and it makes a reference to the herringbone suits worn by men.



We have explored other areas in fashion silhouettes looking at shapes like the angarkha, the dhoti and the kediyā amongst others. In our last collection, we played once again with male and female dressing and stitched classically cut suits for men in lightweight handloom fabrics that are normally used for shirts and women's blouses. We wanted to question some of the conventions of menswear. For example, in the corporate sector the Indian male follows impractical clothing conventions that have imposed by colonial rule and attitudes making them spend the long, hot summer days in polyester blended suits with their necks bound by ties. We also looked at the lungi as fashion inspiration for menswear, this being a garment so exceptionally well suited to hot Indian summers.

### Looking Ahead (Street Style)

To conclude, fashion today is what's sported in the malls and the streets of our big cities. In the digital worlds that we live in, we are now connected by technology across oceans, cultures, and across worlds. Trends move from Tokyo to Mumbai on Instagram immediately and what Kangana Ranaut wears can be as relevant to the fashion industry as what Kim Kardashian does too. I am no fortune teller, and I have no idea how this is going to pan out in the long run, but what I have been observing is that with increasing sense of globalization, local culture is also getting reinforced and strengthened simultaneously. The local community gets closer, and fashion communicates identity and the aspiration within the group even as ideas are borrowed and incorporated from across the world of the internet. Just as the Indian craftsman did in the past new influences are incorporated with ingenuity. But there are great differences. The very rate of change is so fast that ideas move and shift with immediacy, shape changing before our eyes. In the somewhat rarefied world of the Indian high fashion, there has also been a heartening resurgence of interest in the hand woven and handcrafted textile sector as designers are increasingly engaged with traditional craft. The sari has become "cool" again, with young fashionist as finding new ways to wear it. The fashion media devotes a lot of column space to the sari, and even Vogue India, a glossy not known for a relevant perspective on Indian fashion, chose to celebrate 10 years of the Indian issue with a fashion show devoted to the sari in March 2017. There is, however, a somewhat deadly inescapable downside to the processes of trend and fashion, because what is "in" will also eventually be "out". But as the ready to wear market for fashion grows exponentially in this country the opportunities for traditional Indian textiles are enormous. However, many challenges remain to be resolved. Several of these are technical and relate to the structure of hand woven fabric. Many structures of handloom cloth were traditionally woven to be worn as saris, dhotis and other items of unstitched apparel. The structure of these fabrics is pliable and drapes beautifully, but it can be unstable in many cases when it is stitched into constructed garments and can cause problems of seam slippage and tearing. If hand woven fabric is to be extensively utilized in the manufacture of stitched garments as demand in the ready to wear industry grows in leaps and bounds, it becomes crucial for the weaver and the designer to develop better woven structures that will be resilient and stable in constructed garments and hopefully survive the rigors of the washing machine cycle. Cutting along the warp requires a different construction of fabric to be mounted on a handloom for structural stability. And here, design vocabularies may change too. For example, the heavier construction of a woven border as it is in the case of a sari, which is crucial in the drape of an unstitched garment will play no structural role in a tailored garment that is cut along the warp, and it becomes a purely ornamental feature. And in a length of fabric woven for a sari but used for a stitched garment, nor is the pallu required too. This is bringing new challenges to the weaver, the designer and to traditional design vocabularies. In such instances, the designer must be the link between the craftsperson and the changing demands of the market.



### David Abraham,

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### About the Author

*Abraham &Thakore Exports Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi is one of the India's most successful and respected design resources for fashion and accessories as well as textile products for home. The design label was initially established by David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore, graduates of the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad.*