

RETAIL

Independence Day: Peter D'Ascoli reflects on the future of Indian crafts and their tryst with destiny

The founder of D'Ascoli, and Talianna Studio pens a special essay for us, on the history of craftsmanship in textiles since Indian Independence

By Peter D'Ascoli
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A weaver trimming an oriental rug. Photo credit: Edwin Remsburg/ Getty Images

Today we celebrate seventy-three years of Indian Independence from Great Britain amidst a global pandemic that has closed or limited access to the shopping malls, fast-food outlets, and fast-fashion stores that have come to characterise contemporary India. These trappings of consumer life in this fast developing land have filled many with aspirations of affluence and entertainment as millions have risen out of poverty in search of better living standards. And yet, as the world pauses during this public health crisis and, as India reflects on and celebrates her freedom, there is widespread anxiety and an increased questioning of the cost of the mass production of goods that enables our consumer economies to generate so much material wealth throughout the industrialised world. At the forefront of these concerns are questions of environmental degradation and a loss of cultural diversity as the regional markers of identity and traditions of all kinds are threatened with extinction by the homogenising effects of globalisation.



Peter D'Ascoli

Since antiquity Indian handmade cotton textiles dominated the world with their superior technical and aesthetic quality. However, in the 19th century this dominance that had lasted millennia gave way as the European industrial revolution allowed Britain to make her Indian colony a captive market for the new, less expensive, mass-produced, mill made cotton textiles from Manchester and Liverpool. In Britain the dehumanising consequences of machines was quickly felt by workers, and early on thinkers such as the designer William Morris looked to Indian craft as an example of an alternative to the changing production methods. As the century progressed handmade textiles in India suffered and, by 1905 when Viceroy Curzon partitioned Bengal, the Swadeshi movement was born, and its leaders called Indians to boycott foreign goods as part of the freedom movement. More than a century later this struggle between hand and machine is still playing out, not as a matter of national sovereignty but rather, as a matter of preserving the planet as over-production, waste, and pollution threaten life as we know it. And nowhere are these tensions more apparent than in India where ancient traditions, joint families, and handicrafts have remained remarkably well preserved, set mostly in an agrarian context.

In India's villages we can still find a way of life that moves in rhythm with the natural world—places where time passes in pace with the seasons, where work, religious festivals, and even shopping is synchronised with the moon and with the planting and harvesting of crops. And it is in these places, in craft clusters spread across the subcontinent, that farmers, weavers, printers, and embroiderers are still practicing the old, pre-industrial textile crafts. The Indian handloom industry remains the largest in the world and, with over 4.3 million people involved in the production; the handloom industry is India's second-largest employment provider for the rural population after agriculture. This is a remarkable fact that represents an opportunity for India and the world to embrace this sustainable, low carbon, eco-friendly alternative to one of the planet's most polluting industries.



In 1929, as the freedom struggle and the Swadeshi movement gained strength, the Indian National Congress called for a nationwide boycott of British cotton goods, and heaps of English cloth was burned during the Non Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements. When Mahatma Gandhi visited England in 1931 to discuss India's future at the second Round Table conference, he famously visited the mill workers of Lancashire who had been suffering because of the Indian boycott. The labourers welcomed Gandhi warmly, and it is this outpouring of affection and solidarity by the suffering workers of England that I am thinking about on this Independence Day. Could it be that India's preindustrial handloom supply chain has been preserved for such a time as this? Could this be the moment Indian craft has a tryst with destiny? During this pandemic, as we pause and reflect on Indian Independence and the state of the world, it is my hope that we will see and appreciate the potential that Indian Craft offers all of us. Today we should celebrate India's freedom as well as her artisans who offer sustainable production methods that preserve worker dignity and add value and meaning to the products they make.



10 Visit to Lancashire Cotton Mill