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CULTURE, ART & ARCHITECTURE OF
THE MARGINALIZED & THE POOR

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PERVAIZ VANDAL



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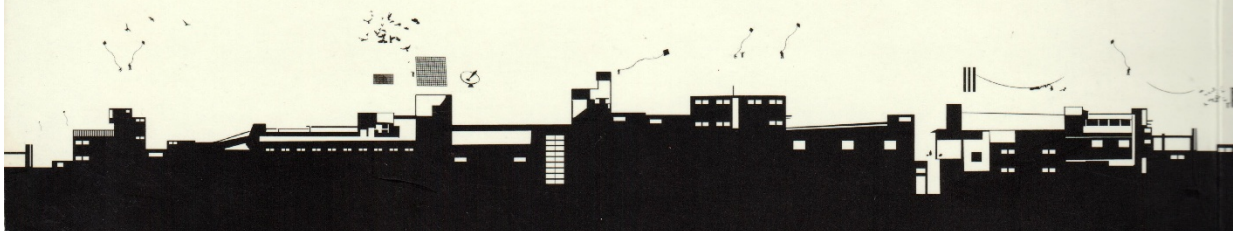
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Ralli : a legendary folklore nurtured by marginalized.

Asna Mubashra

Techniques of textiles evolved historically, these are the links between local arts and ideas of time. Punjab lies in an area where not only the earlier known human civilizations flourished but it also witnessed continued march of the vanguards of various civilizations from central Asia and the Near East. Punjab became the crossroad of many splended cultures. This intermingling of cultures influenced local arts and crafts , including textile arts. The rich heritage of Punjab's art and craft has evolved over a period of 5000 years. The fascinating story of textile arts and crafts of punjab is seen by historians in different manner .The lovely art work of traditional Ralli, a unique delight for the eyes were made at home of poor from recycled cloth for use by the family. An exquisite piece of hand-made wonder comes to life when beautiful patterns developed out of random pieces of reused cloth are artistically and skillfully joined together. Most of the workers in this field are women from rural and low income urban areas who used their time to make rallis to use or to sell. Rallies are now gaining international recognition, even though underprivileged women have been making these for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. Admitting diverse art heritage of the distinctive region of Punjab this paper overviews this unique textile art and technique of marginalized nurtured here. Knowledge of ralli quilts of Punjab will bring into lime light this silent yet strapping art conceptualized and practiced by the poor of this area.

Keywords: textiles, art, recycled, culture, Punjab.

Introduction

Asia has been known throughout history as a place that produced beautiful textiles. The rural areas have been the hub of different handicrafts, which not only helped to provide some significant identities for Pakistanies around the world but the amazing innovative handmade creativeness also helped feeding many mouths of poor families. Ralli quilts are a visual feast of color, pattern and energy (fig 1).



Fig 1: Ralli quilts are a visual feast of color, pattern and energy

Ralli making is one of such skills, one of the extensively used handicrafts in Pakistan. Quilt making is an old tradition here, perhaps dating back to the fourth millennium BC as judged by similar patterns found on ancient pottery. Rallis are traditional quilts made by artisans in the areas of southern provinces of Pakistan including Sindh, Baluchistan, Cholistan desert as well as on the Southern border of Punjab and in the adjoining states of Gujarat and Rajasthan in India. Colorful Ralli quilts with divergent patterns, themes and fabrics have been historically recognized as a cultural symbol. The intricate patterns not only show the creativity, the skill and dexterity of local artisans but also pave way to place our region among the culturally rich lands of the world. The amazing Ralli forms emerge from purely handmade work of art embracing a lot of tough grind of countless days. It is like blending one's soul & self into a piece of textile. There are legends, folk songs and sayings about Rallis. A normal ralli is a textile jewel finished with physical and spiritual labor done with hand and mind putting in almost 180 hours of an artisan doing this job.

Who is practicing it? Who has nurtured this textile folk art over centuries? It is just now that these are gaining international recognition, but artisans have been making these for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. Thousands of women regardless of religion, occupations, tribes and castes living in towns, villages and nomadic settings make Rallis. All actively involved in this textile craft are belonging to the marginalized, unprivileged and poor segment of our society .

Origin of the word Ralli

The word Ralli is mainly derived from the local word called “Ralanna”, which means mixing and connecting (fig 2). The name also comes with different pronunciations around the country depending on the regions and languages. The levels of the people, who make these textiles, are woven into each piece. The symbols of flowers and animals used in the decoration and colors are imaginative and exotic. Every ralli quilt tells a story. It tells of the natural creativity and love of color and design of the woman who creates them. Every ralli tells the story of the strength of tradition and motifs of rallis which have been passed from mother to daughter and woman-to-woman may be for thousands of years.



Fig 2: Ralli is derived from local word “Ralanna”, which means mixing and connecting

Owning many ralli quilts is a gauge of assets. Yet the Ralli is a humble craft, made of worn out clothing like shalwar qameez and other discarded fabric. Rallis are made from scraps of cotton fabric (fig 3) dyed to the desired color and then cut into geometrical shaped pieces which are joined together later to create long quilts.

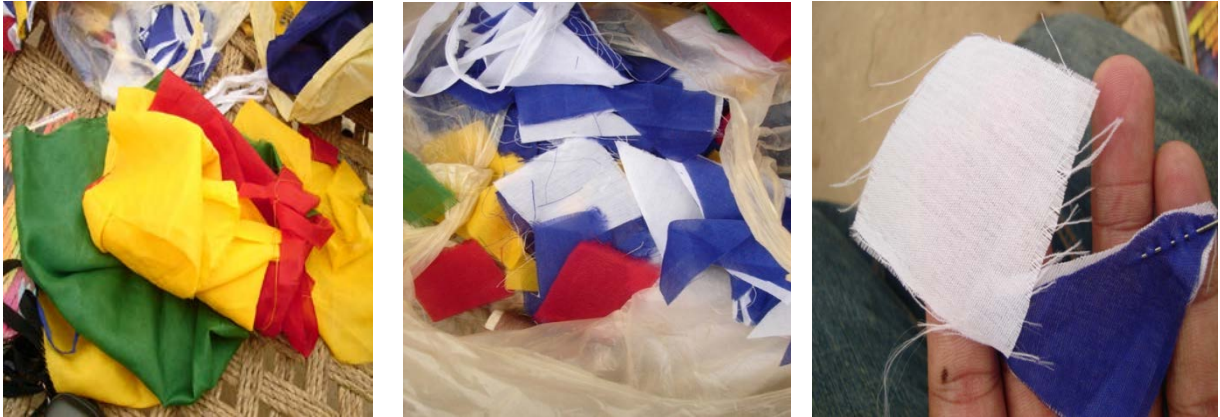


Fig 3: Rallis are made from scraps of cotton fabric

Much of the fabric comes from old and worn clothing and textile items of the family. Often, the quilt makers use fabric pieces that are no longer in use for the top layer; they also use an old shawl either a worn tie and dye, ajrak or other as a base for the fabric patches that are sewed on the top of it later. Ralli quilts also have a few layers of old fabric or cotton fibers between the top and bottom layers. All layers are held together by thick colored thread stitched in straight lines.

History of ralli patterns

The variety of ralli patterns is fascinating. The motifs appear to have originated far back in the history of the Indus Region. The carvings of the desert tombs of Sindh and Baluchistan (covering about 400 years starting in the middle of the fifteenth century AD) have many similar motifs. The geometric designs in the blocks of carved stone are very similar to quilt blocks. Some of the lines in the stone look to some like lines of stitching. However, going back farther than this are clear similarities between ralli designs and ancient painted pottery of the region (most from about 2000-800 BC). The majority of the patterns are based on a geometric grid but there are also patterns based on circles, stars or flowers. Some of the designs that are shared by the rallis and pottery are simple including checkerboards, lines and triangles, yet others are complicated patterns using many shapes and design elements together. One of the interesting aspects of the ancient pottery is that archaeologists think that the pots may have been painted by women as there are some small fingerprints still visible in the paint. Scholars report pottery with painted motifs seemed to have been replaced in the first millennium BC by plain, undecorated pottery yet the old designs continue in ralli and embroidery designs today. Even though ancient records are scarce, we know that quilting is an old tradition in the region. (Quilts are listed as an export item from western India to Europe on trade records from the early 1500s.) Could the women have passed on the traditional cultural designs from mother to

daughter for many thousand years and at some point used them in quilts? There is a good example in the region where an ancient tradition survives today. In old graves from the time of painted pottery, women were buried wearing many white bangles. Women in the same rural areas today still wear multiple white bangles. Perhaps the ancient motifs have survived in their quilts as the tradition of bangle jewelry has survived on their arms. Mostly abstract patterns are made with pieces of clothes, but one can also find other normal objects made with them. These objects include flowers, ducks, leaves and other such objects. If we look at the history of this art work, then we will get to know that this work is as old as South-Asian history.

Methodology of rally making

Owning many ralli quilts is a gauge of assets. Yet the Ralli is a humble craft, made of worn out clothing like shalwar qameez and other discarded fabric. Often, the quilt makers use worn and old fabric pieces that are no longer in use; they also use a worn tie and dye, ajrak or othershawls as a base for the fabric patches that are sewed on the top of it later. Ralli quilts also have a few layers of worn fabric or cotton fibers between the top and bottom layers. The layers are held together by thick colored thread stitched in straight lines

Rallis are made in a simple way with only fabric, thread, needles and scissors. A typical ralli is about seven by four or five feet. The top of the quilt (the decorated portion) is usually the work of one woman. The women carefully form patterns and symbols from cloth, some simple and some complex. The women making the quilts rely on their own memories and the memories of their mothers and older women to teach them the patterns. They do not use paper or any tools to make their patterns. There could be a great variety of patterns and styles of rallis even in a small village or community. The women have a large “mental portfolio” of quilt patterns they have made, known or have seen. They often describe them historically as “old patterns” or “new patterns.” She generally will work on the blocks as she gets time between the chores of the day. Rallis are made from scraps of cotton fabric dyed to the desired color and then cut into geometrical shaped pieces which are joined together later to create long quilts.

The color combinations and unique patterns speak for the aesthetic sense of its creator. The traditional colors of rallis are called “satrangi” or seven colors of rainbow (white, black, red, yellow orange, dark green, blue and purple.) Some communities prefer other colors; like pink and light green or brown and orange. The designs vary from floral motifs, waves and images of animals or trees. The number of patterns used on ralli quilts seems to be almost endless, as there is much individual expression and spontaneity in color within the traditional patterns.

When the top portion is all pieced and sewn, she will start to sew it together. She calls on female family and friends to help with stitching the quilt together when she is ready. This is a time of talking, news sharing and singing for the women. A reed mat is placed on the ground. The cloth that is to be the back or bottom of the quilt is placed on the

mat. On top of that is placed small scraps of fabric (usually 3-5 layers) that will be the filling of the quilt. These are basted to the bottom with large stitches. The top fabric is then positioned and sewn. Often a group of women sit on opposite sides of quilt and work on sewing a quilt together. The layers are sewed together by thick colored thread stitched in straight, parallel lines. Depending on the thickness of the quilt and the skill of the quilters, the stitches may be as close as 1/8 inch apart. No quilting frame is used.

Styles / Types

The rallis come in three categories of design

Ralli: Patchwork Patterns

Patchwork made from pieces of cloth cut or torn into squares, triangles or other geometrical shapes and then stitched together. Patchwork is the most common and is found on most village beds. Many of the designs are very complex. The designs are not written down but are held in the women's memories and are passed down from mother to daughter. The patterns are often bold with frequent use of triangles or squares on point to give movement to the design. Some patterns have practical uses such as a game board. One pattern is used for a chess type game (tukri) and another game uses the spaces in a cross pattern (chopar). Overall geometric patterns are called farsh or tile floor. Often the borders on patchwork quilts are fairly simple. In the Punjab, patchwork is often alternated with appliqué work.

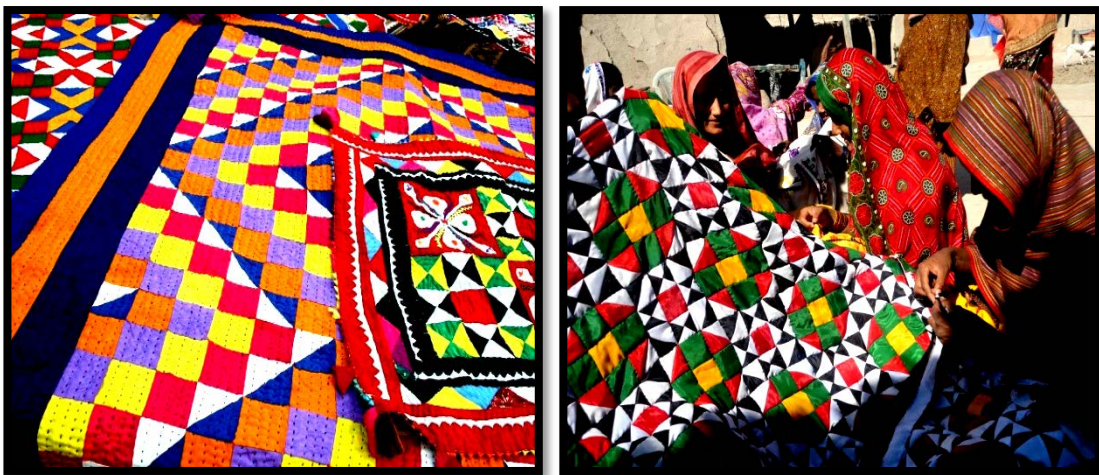


Fig 4: Patchwork ralli pattern

Ralli: Appliqué Patterns

Applique made from intricate cut out patterns in a variety of shapes. Appliqué like patch work doesn't restrict to certain shapes as it can be made through any shape or pattern as the creator likes. Applique designs are also found throughout the ralli region. Small squares of fabric are cut out (similar to a paper "snowflake"), edges are turned under and sewn onto the block fabric. Appliqué patterns came in a wide variety

of abstract shapes. Ralli makers are proficient at appliqué work including many very fine lined appliqué designs.

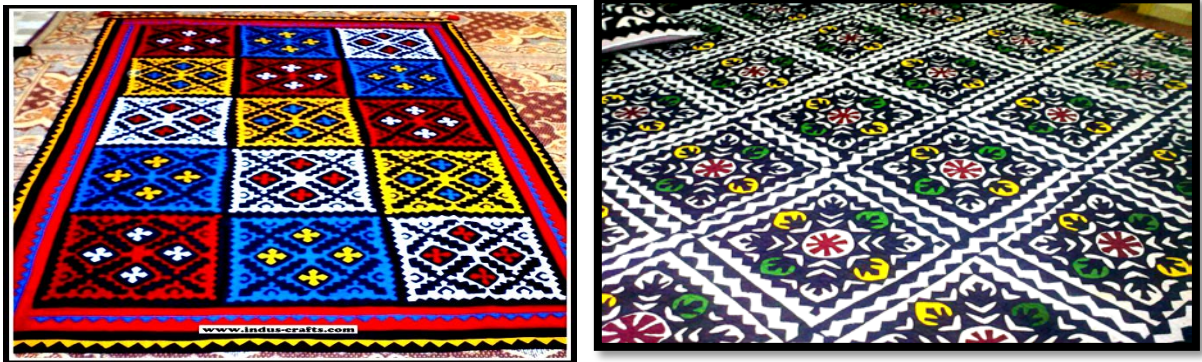


Fig 5: Applique rilli patterns

Ralli: Embroidered

Embroidered quilts where the embroidery stitches form patterns on solid colored fabric. Embroidery quilts are the specialty of a few nomadic groups. These quilts generally use a large piece of whole or patched cloth and using colored thread, have stitching in embroidery designs go through all the layers of the cloth. A distinguishing feature of rilli patterning is the diagonal placement of similar blocks as well as a variety of embellishments including mirrors, sequins, beads, tassels, shells and embroidery stitches. The stitches include running stitch, chain stitch, double chain stitch, feather stitch, herringbone stitch, interlacing stitch and others.



Fig 6: Embroidered rilli patterns

There is much individual expression and spontaneity in color within the traditional patterns resulting in a seemingly endless variety in rallis

Ralli: Regional Variations

There are many regional variations in rilli designs. Sometimes it is possible to know where a rilli is made purely by its design.



Fig 7: regional variations in rilli

Uses

The fascinating fabric called ralli or rilli is a remarkable textile artwork converted into quilts to be utilized in many respects. Rallis are commonly used as a covering for wooden sleeping cots, as a floor covering, storage bag, or padding for workers or animals. In the villages, rilli quilts are an important part of a girl's dowry. Many rallis are made for dowries to this day. Women start making rilli in early ages as part of their dowry. It is not usually bought or sold but made by women for use in their family. Occasionally, women will make rallis for sale. In other cases, the poor artisans offer these products as gifts to elite families on occasion of marriages or births and in return get an animal like cow, buffalo or a goat.



Research Work on Rilli Making / Ralli Quilts

In addition to creating beautiful designs with colors and shapes, they have developed a textile craft with universal appeal touching the senses of those far beyond their community and culture.

Cecilia Eddy

Celia Eddy, an English author and teacher of quilting, has made detailed study of ralli quilts. She has written about ralli quilts in her book *quilted planet*. Of ralli quilts, she says that their patterns and colors “embody all the romance and exoticism of the East.”

Patricia Stoddard

Patricia Ormsby Stoddard, Ph.D. is an American quilt researcher, lecturer and museum curator. She and her husband lived in Pakistan for several years, where she came to collect and conduct primary research on ralli quilts. She wrote the book "Ralli Quilts: Traditional Textiles of Pakistan and India" in 2003 Stoddard worked to bring the beauty of rallis to the attention of the world

Ironically, this fascinating cultural product, gaining recognition abroad, but failed to acquire its appropriate importance back home.

A lot of skilled artisans are leaving their profession because of a lack of patronage. This work of art is exclusively handmade and cannot be duplicated. The skill travels from generation to generation but due to dearth of proper avenues for young artisans, new generation has not much interest in learning the trade of their forefathers. Their priorities too have changed. This's why this centuries old art is on decline. For a revival and preservation of the handicrafts support is needed from the concerned quarters of the society. New markets need to be explored within the country as well as internationally.

AHAN stepped in...

To solve the problems and to tackle on-ground issues, due credits go to AHAN (aik hunar aik nagar) project of the Ministry of Industries, Govt. of Pakistan, who with a three pronged strategy initiated a pilot project for the craftswomen of Sukkur (Sindh). During first phase of this pilot, a large number of designs were reviewed by the designers. They observed that different geographic locations have different ralli designs having their own history and tradition, hence different geographic clusters and craftswomen were identified by AHAN. They were then trained as master trainers. About five clusters of 12 master craftswomen were given one month on-job training at designers' training centers in Karachi. The training course provided skills in product development with different themes and tones. The object of this pilot project is that by training the 'masters' they will then work further at their villages to train more women.

Renowned Pakistani designer Deepak Perwani was involved to provide his expertise in product development and training. He has now trained a group of female artisans at

his factory in Karachi. The idea behind such trainings is to add value to this village craft by turning out different ralli products like fashion apparel, handbags, embellishments on shawls and bedroom accessories that include table lamps shades, cushions and toys. The women participants were also trained on modern designs and guided on different marketing channels. Their products were also displayed at a women expo to get the market feedback.

Conclusion

Overview of unique textile art and technique of Ralli has brought into lime light this silent yet strapping legendary folk art which is conceptualized, nurtured and practiced by the marginalized and the poor of our land. For a revival and preservation of the handicrafts support is needed from the concerned quarters of the society. New markets need to be explored within the country as well as internationally to fully utilize the potential of this legendary folklor.

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