

# Weaver and the Woven

*A pursuit to discover meanings of motifs*

*Roopa Roshan Sahoo*

“Things are not what they seem”, is the first wisdom, any sociological pursuit should have.

Social reality that we live has layers of meanings.

To engage in the act of deciphering art, consciously and unconsciously, perception of the art has to be guided by training. One element of this training is to understand the conditions that made the art, to relate to the experience of the people who created it.

To be able to recapture the work through the artist’s intention and beholders perception is a spiritual journey.

I have in a limited way attempted to decipher the meaning and conditions of motifs used in handlooms weaves (Ikat) in Odisha. This article attempts to bring to the reader the ‘weave’ as a cultural good. As a work of art that is a social reality constructed by a particular society in a given time.

Thus, it allows me to explore the meaning attached to the work.

I see the weaver as seeking for a meaning of Life, seeking an experience which is reflected in the woven, in his design, in choice of motifs.

Each motif, each design, pattern, hence will have the resonances of the reality, of the weavers socio-cultural milieu.

On a visit to Barpalli, Surendra Meher and his family extend undescribable warmth and affection. They with a magnanimity beyond words, take me as daughter. I am handed, a treasure beyond measure, which is

“ବାଈଶିଞ୍ଜାର ସାଧନା”  
କୁଞ୍ଜ ବିହାରୀ ମେହର

Padmashree Kunja Bihari Meher’s book is a celebration of the weave and the weaver’s life.

The woven piece of fabric is the mirror to the minds chamber, to the thought processes of the weaver.

Weaving was a medium for him to pour his abundant creativity. The exploration of his inner consciousness woven with the weave he has created, excites the mind, dares the imagination of a scholar.

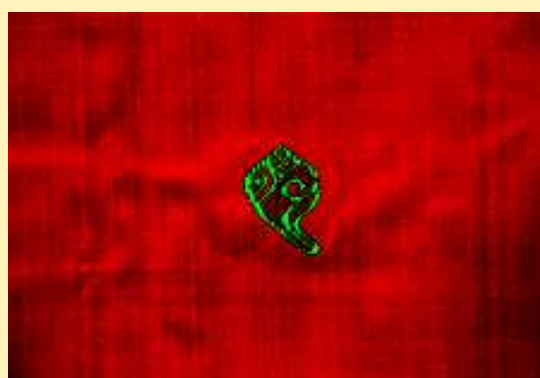
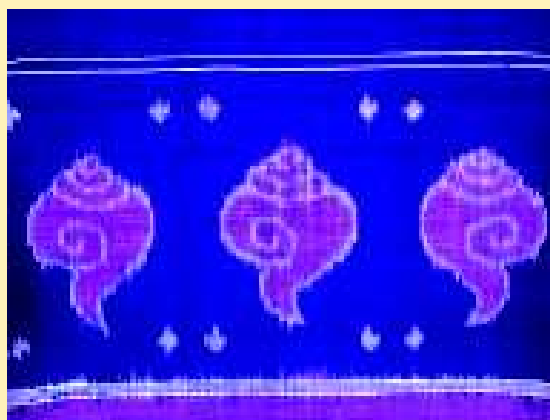
ଶଙ୍କା :-

“ଶଙ୍କା କମ୍ବର ତାପ୍ତର୍ଯ୍ୟ ଶୁଭ ସୂଚକ ହୋଇଥାଏ।”

The conch symbolises something auspicious. From being used in temple for, “aradhana”, of Gods and Goddesses to auspicious occasions such as marriage, the Sankha is a sacred symbol of religious significance.

In the case of ‘Sankha’ Motif the craftsmans experience plays a vital role in the way it is represented. It is the skill of the craftsman that comes to decide on the way threads are tied to bring out the ‘Sankha’, it also reflects his thought.

**Plat**



ମାଛ —

The fish motif is woven on the fabric that women wear.

ମାଛ ବାନ୍ଧ କମ୍ ନାରୀମାନଙ୍କ ପରିଧେୟ ବସ୍ତ୍ର ଉପରେ ବୁଣାଯାଇଥାଏ ।

Women have been adored with having physical attributes similar to the grace of a fish. ‘Meenakshi’ fish eyed goddess has been often used to eulogise.

Fish also represents the unconscious, of a higher-aware self, as a metaphor of thought-processes that are representative of the realm of deeper knowledge.

“ମନ ମାନ ଓ ଚୈତନ୍ୟ ଏକତ୍ର.... ଦୃଢ଼ ଜିଜ୍ଞାସୁଙ୍କର କର୍ମ ଫଳପ୍ରଦ ହୁଏ।”

*Matsyah kurmo Varahas-cha  
Narasimhas-Cha Vamana.  
Ramo Ramas-cha Ramas-cha Buddha  
Kalki-cha te dasa.*

Sanctum entrance,

Adivaraha cave (7<sup>th</sup> century)  
Mahabalipuram.

In the order of the ‘Dashavataras’ which describe the evolutionary cycle, Matsya symbolizes the beginning.

“ଭଗବାନଙ୍କର ଦଶ ଅବତାର ମଧ୍ୟରେ ପ୍ରଥମ ଅବତାର ମାନ ।”

As George M. Williams, in his “Handbook of Hindu Mythology” would write, “there are many versions of the Myth of Matsya in the Puranas, with many interesting paradoxes and twists in the storyline.”

The essence in all but remains as the Matsya as all incarnations (avataras) of Vishnu as the saviour, to save the earth from deluge and from being engulfed in spiritual darkness.

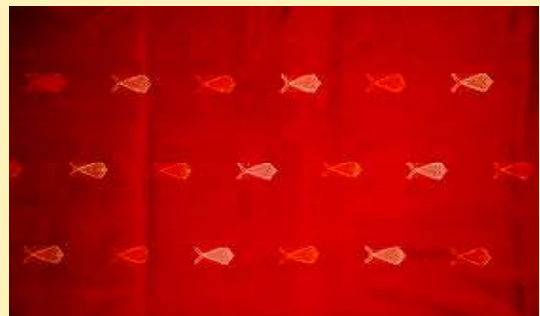
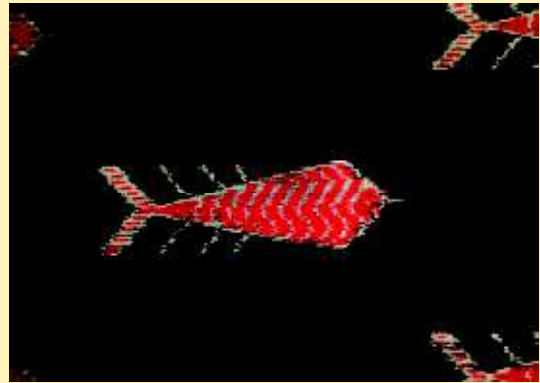
The word used by Padmashree Kunja Meher to describe the symbolism inherent in the fish motif, is ‘tattva’. This suggests that the use of the motif has been thus, to indicate a much higher level of the

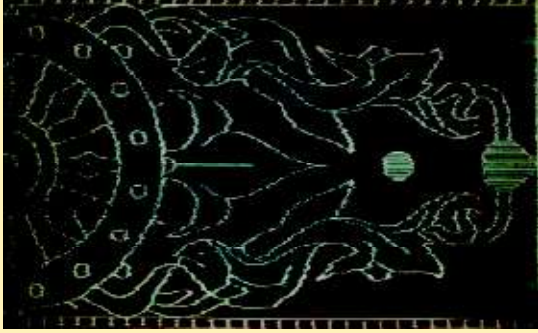
aspect of reality. Of duality, life, consciousness, liberation, abundance and saviour.

“In seas that rage as the aeon of chaos Collapses. You keep the holy Veda like a ship straight on course. You take form as the Fish, Krishna, Triumph, Hari, Lord of the World !”

*The Gita Govinda of Jayadeva  
Love song of the Dark Lord*

-Barbara Stoler Miller





ହଂସ :-

Swan, a symbol of discernment and detachment, the flight of the swan.

The swan motif is indicative of both spiritual and decorative elements.

It is the (Vahana) vehicle of Saraswati a goddess of learning, the arts and scholarship.

The swan is also the associate of Lord Brahma, the Creator, possessing the sacred knowledge of the Brahman.

The various attributes associated with Hansa and evoked through the usage as the Motif, speak of the perfect bliss, union and balance of elements, material and sacred.

Where there is no fear of pain, no longing for pleasure, where man forsakes material desire, no attachment to the pleasant nor to the unpleasant Man is firmly fixed in knowledge, the self is content.

*I quote the following lines from,  
The wild Swans at Coole-  
By-William Butler Yeats.*

“Under the October twilight the water  
Mirrors a still sky,

Upon the brimming water, among the stones.  
Are nine-and-fifty swans”

“Mysterious, beautiful;  
among what; rushes will they build,  
By what lakes edge or pool”.

The virtuous lady as she walks leaves auspicious marks, she is also destiny, powerful in her symbolism. This has been compared to the way a ‘Hansa’ moves, the grace personified.

From here emanates, the abundant usage of ମରାଳଗମନୀ in literature.

As the ମରାଳଗମନୀ – it symbolizes grace, elegance and strength.

“ପାଦଚାଳନା ହଂସର ଗମନ ଭଙ୍ଗୀ ସହିତ ସାଦୃଶ୍ୟ  
ଲକ୍ଷଣାୟ ହୋଇଥାଏ । ତେଣୁ ତାଙ୍କୁ ମରାଳଗମନୀ ରୂପେ  
କାବ୍ୟ କବିତାରେ ଚିତ୍ରଣ କରିଛନ୍ତି ।”





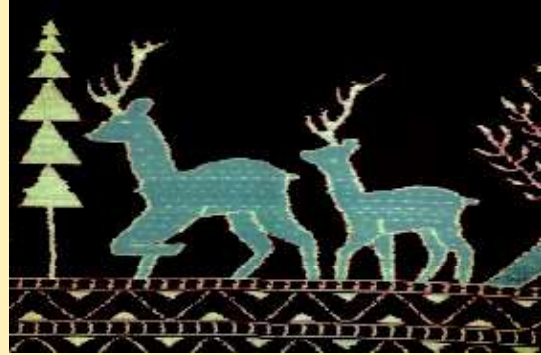
**ମୃଗନୟନୀ :-**

The deer in mythology has been an object of worship an animal of power, incarnation of deities, object of heroic quests and deeds, of disguise, enchantment, a mystical being, supernatural, a totem representing intuition.

The deer is a sacred animal with the spirit of gentleness and softness, a messenger, a shaman, maize and femininity personified. In cultures, the deer is a symbol of spiritual authority, also of femininity, and grace.

Thus, a deer related to tradition in both sacred ways and also for celebrating physical characteristics of stare, agility, speed. It thus suits the imagination in myriad ways through its metaphorical nature.

“ଚତୁରତା, ଚଞ୍ଚଳ ଚାହାଣୀ, ନୟନର ସୌନ୍ଦର୍ଯ୍ୟ, ମୃଗନୟନୀ...”



**ଗଜଗାମିନୀ :-**

ଗଜର ପଦଚାଳନା ମନୋରମ । ..... ଗଜଗାମିନୀ ଥାଖ୍ୟା..... ଗଜବସ୍ତ୍ରଳୀ, ପୁଣି ଜନ୍ତୁରାଜାଙ୍କ ବାହନ ଐରାବତ ହସ୍ତୀ.....

ମାର୍ଗଶିର ମାସ ଗୁରୁବାର ଦିନ ଲକ୍ଷ୍ମୀଙ୍କ ପୂଜା.....

**(Kalidas, Meghaduta, The Cloud Messenger.)**

‘When with Asharha’s glooms the air was hung,  
And one dark cloud around the Mountain clung,  
In form some elephant, whose sportive rage,  
Ramparts, scarce, equal to his might engage.’

Again,

‘The ponderous Elephant who prop  
the skies’.

Here elephant features many times in ways more than one.

‘Gajagamini’, an image complex when compared to lived realities (the woman who walks like elephants!)

The colour of earth, strong, generous,  
her gait, deliberate, measured each foot placed

before the other, powered by impeccable calculation, slow, swaying, in determined grace.

The strength, the power that makes her invincible, beyond reach.

Walk in silence indicating control, safe, deliberate, aware of the predator, in the jungle.

Then, **Airavata**, a white elephant who carries the deity Indra. Born when Brahma sang sacred hymns, also meaning, the ‘One who knits or binds the clouds’.

Also, “A fine elephant”. An elephant produced at the churning of the ocean, and appropriated by the god Indra. The derivation of this name is referred to the word Iravat, signifying ‘produced from water’.

Associated with god of rain. In poetic imagination, elephants look like clouds.

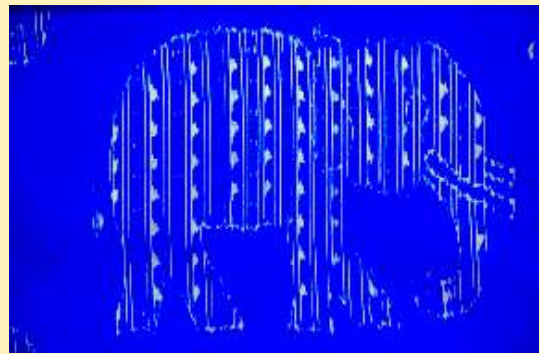
The elephant image is found in poems of renunciation, also embodies might and power. It has survived in the weaves, in religious and cultural lore. Its resonances in literature, art, sacred text, whose imagery as part of tradition continues to the contemporary times.

“The elephant washed my hearts sorrows and quelled the dust of sadness on my brow.

It’s body a cloud, it’s voice thunder, it’s gait lightning, its trunk is a spout for the rain of mercy.”

-Nimat Khan

(Courtier of Emperor Aurangzeb)



“To discover the source of this inspiration and to comprehend the inherent significance of the vast field of Indian Fabrics, they should be seen in context, against the social and historical background from which they have emerged and on the dark toned bodies of the people for whom they are made.

For in India, . . . garments have always been only one part of a complex ritual of life, one aspect of a pre-ordained milieu in which man is born, grows to stature, and dies.

- Pupul Jayakar

The “Bandha” of Odisha is an expression of its native identity, drawing inspiration, assimilating the folk and classical traditions, owned by people belonging to different social strata. It is a living tradition .

The above is the first in the series of Weaver and Woven.

The following are the Books and Journals referred to,

୧. ବାନ୍ଧଶିଳ୍ପର ସାଧନା

– କୁଞ୍ଜବିହାରୀ ମେହେର

2. **Sacred Animals of India**

– NANDITHA KRISHNA

3. **Handbook of Hindu Mythology**

– George M. Williams

4. **The Gita Govinda of Jayadeva  
Love Song of the Dark Lord**

– Barbara Stoler Miller

5. **The Museum of Modern Art**

No. 27

April 12, 1955

Press Review

Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India on view at Museum of Modern Art.

6. **The Social Construction of Reality  
A Treatise in the Sociology of  
knowledge.**

-Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann

7. **A Classical Dictionary of Hindu  
Mythology and Religion, Geography,  
History and Literature.**

- John Dowson, MRAS

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