

## Threads

### Fabric of India Life: The 2006–2007 Fulbright Experience


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*Jana Hawley was named professor and department head for Apparel, Textiles, and Interior Design (ATID) at Kansas State University in 2007. She earned her Ph.D. at the University of Missouri and her master's degree from Oklahoma State University in clothing and textiles. She has been on the faculty at Indiana University and the University of North Texas. In 2001, she returned to the University of Missouri where she taught textiles and e-commerce related subjects.*

*Her most recent professional activities include the Higher Education Resource Services (HERS) Bryn Mawr Summer Institute in 2008 and serving on the Executive Entrepreneurship Advisory Board for Kansas State University at the request of the university's provost. She has also just been elected president of the International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA).*

*Hawley's areas of expertise include sustainability, textile recycling, service learning, and global initiatives. Her vision has led ATID students and faculty to work on sustainability, fair trade organizations, and textile recycling initiatives that support women's economic cooperatives, particularly in rural India. She has also forged partnerships between ATID faculty and women's studies.*

*Hawley is a Fulbright Scholar to India and a Global Scholar to Thailand. Her work in sustainability has gained her international recognition, and she has delivered keynote addresses in Korea and Greece. She also serves as a consultant for Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. on their sustainability initiatives.*

For centuries, delicate and colorful Indian fabrics have penetrated the global marketplace. Indian textile traditions have been known and admired all over the world for their beauty, texture, and craftsmanship. Textile craftsmanship and styles vary depending on the region of India and provide tangible evidence that reflects the local ethos including enduring representations of Indian heritage, topography, history, religion, politics, entrepreneurial spirit, and level of global engagement.

With its vast population and rich heritage of religious diversity, socio-political history, global trade, and abundant handicraft traditions, India is primed to be a strategic center for U.S. faculty and students to experience cultural immersion. The **U.S. Educational Foundation in India** (USEFI) noted that India's growing economic success makes for an important real-life laboratory for educational engagement.

The *Fabric of India Life* Fulbright project included six, three-member teams, each consisting of two university faculty and one K–12 teacher. In 2006–2007, these teams were engaged in the *Fabric of India Life* experience in the first Fulbright project of its kind. This arrangement was unique because it engaged members of a professional organization (the **International Textile and Apparel Association**, or ITAA) and K–12 faculty. The purpose of the *Fabric of India Life* Fulbright program was to introduce the rich culture of India to university and K–12 faculty in a year-long faculty development endeavor focused on textiles as the primary cultural icon for understanding India. I was fortunate to be able to participate in the program.

#### Objectives of the Fulbright

The primary goal of the program was to use Indian textiles as a touchstone for understanding Indian culture. Without a doubt, the breadth of Indian history, culture, and socio-politics became evident during the pre-trip preparation and one-month immersion study trip. More specifically, five objectives guided the project:

1. To acquire historic, cultural, ritual, and socio-political knowledge of Indian culture.
2. To understand the significance of textiles as a component of social behavior and world view.
3. To provide multidisciplinary dimension to Asian studies through a perspective of aesthetic, enterprise, and global markets.

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4. To build integrated teams of faculty across university and K–12 programs.
5. To develop international connections with Indian scholars.

### Project Plan

The project consisted of three phases organized across the 2006–2007 academic year. During phase one, team members spent several months reading and studying the history, culture, literature, politics, religion, and arts of India. A seminar was held one month prior to departure to focus on cultural preparation. This seminar used Ferraro's (1998) framework of cultural dimensions, which emphasizes the interdependent dimensions of social behavior, world views, and material artifacts. Using such a framework helped to prepare members for the travel and study stage of the project.

### Travel and Study Immersion Phase

Participants were immersed in India from December 26, 2006, to January 25, 2007. Travels involved both rural and urban areas across the northern and western parts of India including the geographic areas of Rajasthan, Kachchh (or Kutch), Delhi, Agra, Varanasi, and Mumbai. Each of these areas provided uniquely different examples of textile heritage for understanding cultural differences of that region. In each area, participants were able to take part in Indian cultural events and rituals, visit significant historical sites, take part in seminars, engage with master artisans, meet with local families, and associate with Indian scholars. Participants were expected to keep a journal and capture the essence of the experience with photos. The best 50 photos from each member were submitted to a collective archive at the end of the trip. Below are highlights from some of the master textile artists of each region.



#### ◀ Jasleen Dhamaija

Noted textile historian Jasleen Dhamaija was our host in Delhi. She lectured at several important textile centers in Delhi, including the National Textile Museum, the Khadi and Central Cottage Industries, and the Sanskriti Foundation. Jasleen's wealth of knowledge about India's textiles proved invaluable to the Fulbright members.

#### Silk Brocade Weaving of Varanasi ▶

Since ancient times, the silk weavers of Varanasi have produced exquisite hand-loomed silks and have been an important cultural and economic force. Threatened by technology and globalization, the government has raised import taxes on silks in an attempt to protect this industry, yet many of the weavers are experiencing extreme poverty.



#### ◀ Ritu Kumar

Rita Kumar is one of India's most recognized names in contemporary Indian fashion design. She is noted for reestablishing the gold embroidery industry and combines the traditional artisan styles of bandhani, zardozi, and chikan with creative styling and embellishments to make her signature looks.

#### Globus ▶

Based in Mumbai, Globus is one of the most advanced and modern specialty retailers of the Indian apparel industry. Its mission is to provide both house brands and international men's, women's, and children's fashions at affordable prices. With a focus on product design, signature store experiences, and modern marketing strategy, Globus is in stark contrast to many of the village textile artisan sites we visited as well as the roadside retailers found all over India, but provides evidence that India is a solid player in the global apparel marketplace.



#### ◀ Marketplace: Handwork of India

A fair trade organization, Marketplace enables artisans, mostly women, to produce clothing and accessories for the Western market. Located in the slums of Mumbai, Marketplace women learn dyeing techniques, sewing skills, and

embellishments that honor Indian traditions. The goal of the cooperative is to empower the women with skills in both craftsmanship and business practices. The Fulbright teams spent time in cross-cultural sharing of families, rituals, and traditions with the workshop members. For more information on Marketplace, refer to Littrell and Dickson's (2006) work.

#### Kala Raksha Trust of Kachchh ►

The Fulbright teams spent several days in the villages of the Bhuj region. Each village was uniquely different from the next in terms of artisan expertise or cultural traditions. The Kala Raksha Trust, founded by Asian Studies scholar Judy Frater, focused on Rabari culture and textile arts. The unique contemporary work made at this grassroots cooperative uses only natural dyes and fibers. Proceeds from the cooperative have helped the Rabari people establish health care and schools.



#### ◄ Ali Mahammed Isha

Master tie dye-bandhani artist Ali Mahammed Isha generously shared his fine techniques with the group. Using a handmade brass tool that resembles a thimble, and with the skill of a true artist, Isha is able to tie hundreds of tiny knots on silk fabric to create fabulous results.



#### Vanka Kana ►

Rabari textile trader Vanka Kana and his wife Ramiben have established a successful international textile trade business that features traditional Rabari embroideries and other textiles from the region. Their expert reputation has gained them

access to some of the best museums in the world. It was evident that Rabari heritage is in camel herding, because Mr. Kana had several textiles that were used for camels.



#### ◄ Lachhuben Raja

Master mirror embroiderer, Lachhuben Raja spent the afternoon teaching the Fulbright teams how to do mirror embroidery. Lachhuben is from the Rabari region; her masterful embroidery is colorful, dramatic, and vibrant.



#### Ismail Khatri: Block Printing, Dhamadka ►

Dr. Ismail Khatri is an award winning designer and block printer. He has established block printing settlements throughout India including the Ajrakhpur settlement in the Gujarat village of Dhamadka, where master block printers patiently showed Fulbright team members how

to block print. Typical designs of the region are predominantly madder and indigo in geometric designs. The fabrics are known as Ajrakh and use ancient natural dye recipes. This village had been destroyed during the 2001 earthquake. Many of the artisans were killed and their homes leveled. We did not meet Dr. Khatri but were able to see the results of his work.



#### Post-Trip Phase

After the study tour, each team was expected to infuse their India experience into their classrooms or across their respective universities or school curricula. In addition, each team submitted photos and shared the infusion projects on the group's Web site. The project was also presented at the national meeting of the International Textile and Apparel Association. Interestingly, India impacted each individual differently, thus resulting in a wide variety of infusion projects ranging from library exhibits to campus lectures to children's math lessons. All 21 scholars who traveled on the Fulbright-Hayes/ITAA *Fabric of India Life* continue to be fascinated by the beauty of the people and the culture, the varieties of the textiles, and all the enigmas that this land offers.

#### Fabric of India Life: A Reflection on the Fulbright Experience

India is a memory maker. If you try to escape from the noise of the Indian streets and the acrid smells of the city, it is nearly impossible. That is exactly the reason why India becomes wonderfully etched into your mind and soul. Each time I reflect on the massive number of photographic images we took while in India, the memories and sensations come back to life. The photographs cannot possibly capture the smells of the streets, the constant noises of the city, or the stark call to worship at dawn in the rural villages. Nor can they depict the detail of the henna tattoos etched on the hands that embellished the fabric, the quality of the stitchery, or the clicking sounds of the looms. But for those of us who traveled on the *Fabric of India Life* project in 2006–07, Indian textiles became tangible evidence of Indian culture and all that it imbues: the weavers' universe, the religious rituals, and the symbolism of the motifs. Indian textile handicrafts are truly a testimony to the fabric of Indian life.

**References**

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