

Talismanic Textiles of the Indian Subcontinent

Image no: 1

Caption: *Fragment*, c. 19th century Brocade, silk, gold and silver threads, 21.3 x 60.2 cm, 1925.679, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund.

Link:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India,_Benares_%3F,_19th_century_-_Fragment_-_1925.679_-_Cleveland_Museum_of_Art.tif

Image no: 2

Caption: *Bagh Phulkari*, c. 20th century, Handspun cotton plain weave (khaddar) with silk embroidery in darning, pattern darning, running, chain and cross stitches, 253.4 x 151.1 cm, 2017-9-12, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania. The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Phulkari Collection.

Link: <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/323472>

Image no: 3

Caption: *Hanging (India)*, 19th century, Cotton, silk, mirrors, 171 x 80 cm, 1967-85-12, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York.

Link: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hanging_\(India\),_19th_century_\(CH_18459721\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hanging_(India),_19th_century_(CH_18459721).jpg)

Image no: 4

Caption: Briana Blasko, *Mr Murali Working on a Kalamkari Textile*, March 2010, Digital photograph, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: N/A

IMAGE CREDITS**Image no: 5**

Caption: Kamal Venkit, *Weaver of Kanchipuram sarees at Kanchipuram Tamil Nadu*, 2012, Digital photograph, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY 2.0](#).

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Weaver_of_Kanchipuram_sarees_at_Kanchipuram_Tamil_Nadu_\(7642280114\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Weaver_of_Kanchipuram_sarees_at_Kanchipuram_Tamil_Nadu_(7642280114).jpg)

Image no: 6

Caption: Charvi Mathur, *Nazar Battu- Evil to Keep Away the Evil*, 2020, Digital photograph, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nazar_Battu-_Evil_to_keep_away_the_evil.jpg

Image no: 7

Caption: Ishan Khosla, *A Garment Factory*, 2013, Digital photograph, Flickr, [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

Link: <https://flic.kr/p/ehcX2c>

Image no: 8

Caption: Manducus, *Tuch Meqwar*, 50 x 50 cm, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tuch_meqwar.jpg

Image no: 9

Caption: *Animal Adornment*, 20th century, Cotton, mirrors, plastic sequins, glass beads, plastic beads, silk, 38 x 36 cm, TXT.01693, Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru. Gifted by Michael Abbott.

Link: N/A

Image no: 10

Caption: *Wall Hanging with Ari Stitch Applique*, Mid 20th Century, Cotton fabric, cotton thread, glass mirror pieces, 28 x 23 cm, 2011.01.56, Weavers Studio Resource Centre, Kolkata.

Link: N/A

Image no: 11

Caption: *Bagh Phulkari*, 20th century, Cotton, floss silk, 252 x 142 cm, TXT 00172, Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Image no: 12

Caption: *Thirma Bagh Phulkari*, c. 1900, Cotton, floss, silk, 245 x 115 cm, TXT.00167, Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Image no: 13

Caption: Detail, *Ashavali Sari*, 20th century, Silk, synthetic fibres, gilt metal, silk organza, 432 x 115.5 cm, TXT.01100, Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Image no: 14

IMAGE CREDITS

Caption: *Patolu with Elephant Design*, Late 18th century, Silk double-ikat (resist-dyed), 109.2 x 462.3 cm, 2012.164, The Metropolitan Museum Of Art, New York. Purchase, Friends of Asian Art Gifts, 2012.

Link: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/77871>

Image no: 15

Caption: Mary Martin, *Textile Artists Demonstrate Double Ikat Weaving at the 2002 Smithsonian Folklife Festival Featuring The Silk Road*, 2002, Digital photograph, 2002-09952, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections.

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Description-Textile_artists_demonstrate_double_ikat_weaving_at_the_2002_Smithsonian_Folklife_Festival_featuring_The_Silk_Road._\(2548928970\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Description-Textile_artists_demonstrate_double_ikat_weaving_at_the_2002_Smithsonian_Folklife_Festival_featuring_The_Silk_Road._(2548928970).jpg)

Image no: 16

Caption: *Fragment*, 18th century, linen warp, cotton weft, 43.2 x 38.5 cm, 1973-29-18, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York. Gift of Elinor Merrell.

Link: https://www.si.edu/object/fragment:chndm_1973-29-18

Image no: 17

Caption: *Silk Patolu Sari*, c. 19th century, Tabby weave, double ikat, silk, 419.1 x 103.2 cm, 1940.607, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio. Bequest of James Parmelee.

Link:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India,_Gujarat,_19th_century_-_Silk_Patolu_Sari_-_1940.607_-_Cleveland_Museum_of_Art.tif

Image no: 18

Caption: *Lambani Women Employed by Sabala Working on Embroidery*, 2008, Digital photograph, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lambani_embroidery.JPG

Image no: 19

Caption: *Rack focuses on silk being woven on a loom in the Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan*, Videvo.

Link: <https://www.videvo.net/video/weaving-silk-focus-pull/458081/>

Image no: 20

Caption: *Parsi Navjote (initiation into the Zoroastrian Faith)*, 2006, Digital photograph, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Link: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Parsi-navjote-sitting.jpg>

Image no: 21

Caption: *Parsi Navjote (initiation into the Zoroastrian Faith)*, 2006, Digital photograph, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Link: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Parsi-navjote-standing.jpg>

Image no: 22

Caption: Jyoti Bhatt, *Parsi Navjot Ceremony*, Baroda, c. 1970, Silver gelatin print, image: 19.5 x 28.5 cm, paper: 20.8 x 29.5 cm, PHY.05097, Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Image no: 23

Caption: *Talismanic Shirt*, 15th–early 16th century, Cotton, ink, gold, plain weave, painted, image: 63.5 x 98.4 cm, mount: 63.5 x 98.4 cm, 1998.199, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Friends of Islamic Art Gifts, 1998.

Link: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/453498>

Image no: 24

Caption: *Toran*, 20th century, Cotton, mirror disk, needlework, 46.04 x 97.16 cm, 2002.191.1, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota. Gift of Lynn Swanson.

Link: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/61259/toran-india>

Image no: 25

Caption: Jyoti Bhatt, *A Rajput Bridegroom*, Saurashtra, 1981, Silver gelatin print, image: 15.2 x 22.5 cm, paper: 18 x 24 cm, PHY.01891, Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Image no: 26

Caption: *Embroidered Toran*, 20th century, Cotton, mirrors, silk, 24 x 108 cm, Avg. Flap L. 19.5 cm, TXT.01832, Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru. Gifted by Michael Abbott.

Link: N/A

Image no: 27

Caption: Afifa Afrin, *Polialthia Longifolia (Weeping Ashoka) tree in RDA*, Bogra, 2020, Digital photograph, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Polialthia_longifolia_\(Weeping_Ashoka\)_tree_in_RDA,_Bo
gra_01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Polialthia_longifolia_(Weeping_Ashoka)_tree_in_RDA,_Bogra_01.jpg)

Image no: 28

Caption: Jyoti Bhatt, *Rajasthan*, 1985, Silver gelatin print, image: 20.2 x 29.5 cm, paper: 21.3 x 30.4 cm, PHY.00298, Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Image no: 29

Caption: Jyoti Bhatt, *A Roadside Platform*, Rajasthan, 1975, Silver gelatin print, image: 34.8 x 50.4 cm, paper: 34.8 x 50.4 cm, PHY00403, Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Image no: 30

Caption: *Brocade Toran*, 20th century, Silk, gilt metal, cotton, 119 x 19 cm, avg. flap. 6 cm tassel, 9 cm flap tying string 23 cm, TXT.01141, Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Image no: 31

Caption: Briana Blasko, *Mr. Chetty Working on a Kalamkari Textile*, March 2010, Photograph, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: N/A

Image no: 32

Caption: *Brocade Textile*, late 19th century-early 20th century, Silk, gilt metal, 120 x 59 cm, TXT.01479, Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Image no: 33

Caption: *Bagh Phulkari*, late 19th-early 20th century, Cotton plain weave with silk embroidery in darning, running, herringbone and buttonhole stitches, 238.1 x 127.6 cm, 2005-78-1, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania. Purchased with funds contributed by the estate of Myrna Brind, 2005.

Link: <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/291823>

Image no: 34

Caption: *Kantha (Ceremonial Quilt)*, c. 19th century, Embroidery, Cotton thread on cotton tabby ground, 184.8 x 118.7 cm, 1960.274, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio. Gift of The Textile Arts Club.

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India,_East_Bengal,_19th_century_-_Kantha_\(Ceremonial_Quilt\)_-1960.274_-_Cleveland_Museum_of_Art.tif](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India,_East_Bengal,_19th_century_-_Kantha_(Ceremonial_Quilt)_-1960.274_-_Cleveland_Museum_of_Art.tif)

Image no: 35

Caption: *Hanging from India*, Gujarat, Kutch, Late 19th-early 20th century, Silk, metallic thread, twill weave and embroidery, 2015-12-01, Honolulu Museum of Art, Hawaii.

Link:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hanging_from_India,_Gujarat,_Kutch,_Honolulu_Museum_of_Art_2015-12-01.JPG

Image no: 36

Caption: *Bridal Shawl (Phulkari) from Punjab*, India, 20th century, Khadi (hand-spun, hand-woven cotton), Silk, plain weave, embroidery, Honolulu Museum of Art, Hawaii.

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bridal_shawl_\(phulkari\)_from_Punjab,_khadi_\(hand-spun,_hand-woven_cotton\),_silk,_plain_weave,_embroidery,_Honolulu_Museum_of_Art.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bridal_shawl_(phulkari)_from_Punjab,_khadi_(hand-spun,_hand-woven_cotton),_silk,_plain_weave,_embroidery,_Honolulu_Museum_of_Art.JPG)

Image no: 37

Caption: *Patola*, Late 19th century-early 20th century, Silk, 324 x 134 cm, TXT.00580, Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Across India, fabrics are often imbued with special qualities through which they are believed to protect the body and soul. These attributes, whether in the form of minute visual details or technical processes, enable textiles to shield their makers and users from bad omens, diseases and other forms of danger.

In many South Asian cultures, excessive admiration, as well as unwarranted attention are associated with Nazar, the malicious gaze of onlookers, which is believed to bring bad luck. Textiles are often created using specific materials, designs or ritualistic processes that can ward off this gaze, and protect individuals and communities from harm.

Design and Protection

Artisans use a variety of imagery and techniques to imbue textiles with talismanic properties. For instance, the intricate mirror work we see in Shisha or Abhla Bharat embroidery practised in Gujarat, Sindh and Rajasthan, is said to dazzle the evil eye through the use of reflective surfaces.

In addition, textile makers often incorporate the Nazar Battu — an icon that wards off the envious gaze. This involves consciously adding slight blemishes to the finished fabric to ensure it doesn't attract too much attention. As you can see here, the Nazar Battu is commonly found on Phulkari embroidery, where a small portion of the fabric is embellished with a different coloured thread. On brocades, such as this Ashavali saree, it takes the form of the conspicuous black threads used for the lion's eye, which stands out starkly from the gold zari work in the body.

In contrast to the imperfection associated with the Nazar Battu, the Patan Patola from Gujarat derives talismanic powers from their perceived flawlessness. The complex process of the patola weave results in precise motifs and patterns, in comparison to other ikat textiles that feature blurry designs. Historically, patola has been used in various ceremonies and rituals to protect pregnant women, infants, bridegrooms and other individuals.

In the Name of God

While specialised materials and techniques are commonly used to instil protective powers in textiles, this is also achieved by invoking God's name during their creation.

For instance, the stitching of Sudreh, an undershirt worn by members of the Zoroastrian community, is accompanied by the recitation of holy verses that bestow purity on this hand-stitched, white garment. Often referred to as the 'armour of a Zoroastrian soul,' this is believed to protect wearers from evil and temptation.

In some cases like the Islamic Talismanic shirts of the 15th and 16th centuries, the word of God, considered to be a powerful force, was also directly inscribed on the fabric. These textiles were worn by royalty and nobility of Islamic dynasties under their armour during times of war. This particular example includes the entire text of the Quran, inscribed using intricate calligraphy.

Guarding the Home

In addition to protecting the body and soul, certain textiles are specifically created to guard homes and sacred spaces.

If you visit Hindu or Jain homes, especially in Rajasthan and Gujarat, you might see a string of textile flaps hung across their main entrances. These ornaments, or torans, are thought to prevent any form of evil from entering the house. They are usually heavily embroidered and often feature mirror work. The flaps on a toran symbolise the leaves of an Ashoka or a mango tree, believed to possess healing properties in Hindu scriptures. These trees were traditionally planted at the entrance of households to keep away malevolent spirits. In their absence, torans perform the same functions.

The process of imbuing textiles with protective powers in India is deeply rooted in age-old beliefs sustained by religious practices, myths and rituals. For several communities, textiles continue to play an integral role in protecting and guarding families and homes.

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