LESSON 1  INTRODUCTION TO WOVEN TEXTILES

STRUCTURE

1.0 OBJECTIVES
1.1 INTRODUCTION
1.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
1.3 DEVELOPMENT OF WOVEN COTTON, SILK AND WOOLLEN TEXTILES
1.4 THE KHADI TRADITION
1.5 ASSIGNMENTS
   1.5.1 CLASS ASSIGNMENTS
   1.5.2 HOME ASSIGNMENTS
1.6 SUMMING UP
1.7 POSSIBLE ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK QUESTIONS
1.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS
1.9 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED FURTHER READING
1.10 GLOSSARY
1. **INTRODUCTION TO WOVEN TEXTILES**

The basic needs of man comprise of food, clothing and shelter. Textiles have fascinated mankind since ancient times. All the developed civilizations had their own tradition of textiles depending on the raw materials available in the region such as cotton, wool or silk and also the patterns and weaving techniques they had developed. India has a long and glorious tradition of woven textiles dating back to 2500 B.C. In this lesson you will study the origin and development of woven textiles in Northern and Southern India. In the next two lessons you will be introduced to two well known traditional woven fabrics produced in India, viz., Banaras Brocades and Chanderi.

---

1.0 **Objectives**

After going through this lesson you will:

- Obtain an overview of the history of the development of woven textiles in India.
- Become familiar with different weaving techniques developed in different regions of India according to the raw materials available and the needs of the people.

1.1 **Introduction**

The origins of Indian Textiles are hidden in history. India has one of the richest traditions of woven textiles made from different materials, and a variety of techniques are used for weaving.

Yarns made from natural fibres like cotton, wool or silk are woven to make cloth or textile that can be embellished by painting, printing or embroidery. Banaras Brocade (Fig. 1.1) represents one such woven textile.

Cotton cultivation and its use in weaving originated in India. The very nature of the cotton fibre allowed the fibre to be spun into very fine yarn which led to the
development of a highly refined technique of superfine cotton fabrics being woven. The Indian craftsmen have practised diverse arts such as weaving, dyeing and decorating textiles for nearly 5000 years since Indus valley civilization. Different regions of the country have their distinctive style and technique. Even within the region there are variations in styles of weaving and designs, which have been retained because the distinct cultural traditions.

The manner in which the genius of the Indian weaver was to express itself in cotton, silk and wool has been determined by different types of countryside, the climate which made certain crops possible, the distribution of desert, forests and the presence of minerals, salts and water. To this must be added the patronage of kings and the skills of immigrant artists.

1.2 Historical Background

According to ancient Sanskrit texts there were four kinds of textile fabrics. They were made from four different fibre classes viz.,

1. Bark fibres: Flax, Jute and hemp
2. Seed fibres: Cotton
3. Cocoon fibres: Silk, and
4. Animal hair fibres: Wool

Cotton and Silk were the foremost fabrics of the subcontinent surpassing even the fine woollens from Kashmir.

The production of textiles in India has a prehistoric origin. The earliest textile finds were made at Mohenjo–daro of 3rd century B.C. on the Indus River. There woven and dyed cotton fragments wrapped around a silver pot have been found. Spindles were found and bronze needles were also found at this site. This suggests that they embellished their woven cloth with embroidery.

The famous Ajanta wall paintings of the fifth to the eight centuries AD also provide an invaluable record of the refined nature of the textiles during that time. The cave frescoes clearly depict dancers, nobles, servants and musicians clothed in loin cloth and blouses, patterned by the resist techniques of printing tie and dye and ikat and brocade weaving. There is a difference between the clothing of the wealthy and the poor and of the priestly classes.

The glorious tradition of Indian textiles continued for about fifty centuries, changing with the outside influences, trade and cultural contacts and the demands of Kings and society. Up to the 18th century no other country in the world produced such a wide variety of textiles.
In the Mughal period (16th and 17th centuries A.D.), many exquisite textiles of woven materials were produced (Fig. 1.3). It is said that the delicate fabrics of India became famous in the royal palace at Rome, and they were also called by the poetic name of “woven winds.” In India itself, these marvellous materials were known as “King's Muslin” (Mulmul Khas), and had various picturesque names to denote their many qualities, such as Pushpa Pattas (flower cloths) and Chitra Virali (picture muslins); while in Moghul times they were often referred to as Abrawan (running water) and Shabnam (morning dew).

The Indian craftsmen associated with the ornamentation of the woven textiles, were greatly influenced by nature. Shrines and temples in early times were the first known places where artists wove the fabrics. This helped to achieve great artistic results, as they ornamented the interiors and exteriors of temples in many beautiful ways. Temple cloths were created to ornament the inner walls of the shrines and the inside of the Rathas (temple chariots). The great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the Puranas were used as perfect subjects for decoration; some depicting highly stylised gods and goddesses (Fig. 1.4), flowers, birds and animals.
Self-check Questions

1. By what poetic name was the delicate woven fabric of India known?

2. Name the four different textile fabrics made from four different fibre classes according to ancient Sanskrit texts?

1.3 Development of Woven Cotton, Silk and Woollen Textiles

Muslins formed only a part of the Indian Textiles. Traditionally the processing and manufacture of textiles was the second largest occupation after agriculture. From the banks of the Ganges in the North to Kanyakumari in the South, from Gujarat in the west to Bengal in the east, thousands of families spun and wove, dyed, painted and embroidered. The range consisted of the finest of cottons and silks for kings and nobles and a variety of cheap and coarse cloth for everyday use. Cloth was used for an astonishing variety of purposes for garments, painted wall hangings, travelling tents, as bed spreads, cushions and floor covers. For head gear and robes, woven brocades were used in the temples for gods.

Cotton weaving in India was done across the country in a number of towns and villages. Among these the most important were Dacca, Varanasi, Kota, Chanderi, Gwalior in north and Venkatgiri, Madurai and Tanjore in South India. Apart from muslins, a great variety of other fabrics of cotton and cotton silk were also produced by the end of the 19th century. They were used as dhotis, saris, dupattas, lungis, chaddars etc.

While cotton was the mainstay of Indian textiles, silk was the fibre of choice used for religious and secular purposes. Silk was considered a ‘pure’ fabric appropriate for religious ritual and ceremonial occasions. Silk garments were worn at weddings and festivals. Finely woven silk was offered to temple deities. This led to the development of silk weaving centres around temple towns like Benaras and Kanchipuram.

![Intricately woven figure of Vishnu in Blue Silk](image-url)
In South India, rich and ornamental woven temple Saris were worn on ritualistic occasions by the Devdasis (the temple dancers), when they attended the ceremonies and danced before the deities. These Saris were woven in heavy silk in contrasting colours with golden embossed woven flowers, mythological figures, birds like the peacock and swan (Fig. 1.5), and animals like the elephant and tiger. Clothes with their particular ornamentation began to take significance during ceremonial occasions such as marriage or births. Certain colours were associated with specific occasions and, accordingly, the motifs were applied to bring out the importance of these types of fabrics. Environment influenced the nature of motifs. Particular colour combinations were used through different modes of traditional ornamentation.

**Self-check Questions**

3. Who wore the temple Saris of South India?

4. Give two examples of famous woven fabrics of North India.

The Salvis of Patan wove different styles of sarees for their Gujarati clients, preparing auspicious motifs on the body of the saree for the Hindu communities and geometric designs for the Vohras. For the Maharashtrians of the Deccan, they wove the nine-yard saree with a plain striped body carrying a rich border and pallu. South Indian sarees have a quality and character distinctly of their own. They are famous for both silk and cotton saris, generally in dark shades. The best known saris came from Arui and Dharmavaram in Andhra Pradesh, Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu (Fig. 1.5), Irkal in Mysore, and Trivandrum in Kerala. They produced sarees in very fine cotton with gold borders and ‘Palloos’. Other known centres of woven saris in the South were Bangalore, Tanjore and Chennai. The sarees of Karnataka were mostly in dark colours, and had borders in red with small designs in white. In contrast, the Shahpur sarees of Mysore were generally in pastel shades. Cotton sarees from Venkatgiri were of unbleached material with borders of Zari work. The motifs were mostly floral, birds and beasts, both in the field as well as palloos. Travancore sarees were usually white with pleasing borders in colour and Zari work. Checks and stripes are as popular as floral designs. Some of the finest sarees are from Coimbatore, Madurai, and Salem, mostly in cotton with small Zari borders.
In North India, among the most treasured designed fabrics were the brocades woven in gold thread with splendid and detailed patterns in contrasting silk threads, produced at Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh). These brocades known as Kin-khab (Fig. 1.6) became famous throughout the world for the excellence of weave, combining a magic world of flowers, birds, animals, foliage and sometimes human figures that were composite and carefully combined in multiple colours to emphasize the richness of the basic material.

The poppy, rose, jasmine, lily, swan, bulbul (nightingale), hunting scenes (Shikarharan), the deer (Fig. 1.8), the tiger and elephant or Krishna and the gopis (milkmaids), the mango, flame (Kalka), scrolls and flowers often combined with flowing stems and leaves were among the popular motifs. There were other Nature themes also, such as chand-tara or the moon and stars (Mazchar), ‘Sunshine and Shade’ (Dhup-Chaun), ‘Nightingale’s eyes and Pigeon’s eyes’ (Bulbul-chashm and Halimtarakshi) and Peacock’s neck’ (Murgala).

Coming to finer weaves, there were the delicate semi-transparent saris from Chanderi, a historic city in Madhya Pradesh, known as Asavali Saris. Made in pastel shades and white and cream, they have floral woven patterns and matching borders on pallavs with extra warp and weft. Craftsmen have been able to produce a marvellous effect that appears jewel-like on the surface, borders and pallav-ends. Lines, flowers, buds and leaves, dots and geometrical patterns are often seen on these saris.

Despite the importance of cotton textiles as the clothing of people and that of silk in religious and court uses, several types of animal hair and wool have also played an
important role in India’s textile heritage. They served as the principal fibres for clothing of people in the Himalayan region and the nomadic communities of the plains.

Among the earliest woollen textiles to survive, are fragments of the famous Kani Shawls of Kashmir. They were woven from the fine yarns from the fleece of the pashmina goat. The designs were of beautiful flowering plants and vines.

By early 19th century pashmina wool was used in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh for weaving plain shawls and fabrics. They also produced a wide variety of woollen textiles. The thick blankets of the region are known for their warm pile.

The woollen weaves of the plains are associated with semi – nomadic people who move with their cattle, sheep and camels. In Kutch the women wear odhnis made of wool with embroidered patterns and tie and dye patterns. The men carry a woollen white shawl with rows of geometric pattern.

**Self-check Questions**

5. Name the chief sari weaving centres of South India.

6. What were the different motifs used by the weavers?

---

### 1.4 The Khadi Tradition

During the struggle for independence from the British, Mahatma Gandhi used the domestic weaving industry as a weapon. ‘Khadi’ (cloth hand woven from hand spun cotton) was the symbol of homespun independence and self sufficiency within the village unit. By doing this Gandhiji gave a new life to the handloom industry of India. This led to highly successful commercial developments such as co-operatives of production and marketing throughout the traditional weaving, printing and painted textile centres and states of India. The Khadi tradition continues to hold a key position in our national life.

### 1.5 Assignments

#### 1.5.1 Class assignments

i) Make a replica in a drawing sheet of any one woven textile of India.

ii) Draw sketches of various motifs used on different woven textiles.

#### 1.5.2 Home assignments
i) Find samples of woven fabrics in your house, which represent different weaving styles and techniques. Paste them neatly on clear pages with labels under each photo or picture.

1.6 Summing Up

India has a long tradition of woven textiles which dates back to 2500 B.C. The Indian craftsmen associated with woven textiles were greatly influenced by nature. In early times the fabric was woven in temples and shrines. Temple cloths were created to decorate the inner walls of the shrines. Devadasis wore rich ornamental woven temple saris made of heavy silk when dancing before Deities. Various states of India produce woven saris with their characteristic colours and ornamentation. Of these, Banaras Brocades of Varanasi and Chanderi of Madhya Pradesh are well known.

1.7 Possible Answers to Self-check Questions

1. Woven winds were the poetic name given to the delicate woven fabric from India.

2. According to ancient Sanskrit texts, the four kinds of textile fabrics made from four different fibre classes are flax, jute and hemp from bark fibres; cotton from seed fibres; silk from cocoon fibres; and wool from animal hair fibres.

3. Devdasis (the temple dancers) wore the temple Saris of South India.

4. Banaras Brocades and Chanderi Saris are famous woven fabrics of North India.

5. The chief sari weaving centres of South India are – Arui and Dharmavaram in Andhra Pradesh, Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, Irkal in Mysore and Trivandrum in Kerala.

6. The poppy, rose, jasmine, lily, swan, bulbul, hunting scenes, the deer, the tiger and elephant, Krishna and the gopis, the mango, flame, scrolls and flowers often combined with flowing stems and leaves were among the popular motifs used by the weavers. Other nature theme motifs such as chand-tara or the moon and stars (Mazchar), ‘Sunshine and Shade’ (Dhup-Chaun), ‘Nightingale’s eyes and Pigeon’s eyes’ (Bulbul-chashm and Halimtarakshi) and Peacock’s neck’ (Murgala) were also used.

1.8 Terminal Questions

1. What are the characteristics of woven Temple saris?
2. What are Asavali saris?
3. What are characteristic features of Banaras Brocade?
4. Mention the main features of Chanderi saris?
5. Fill in the blanks:
   i) Delicate, semi-transparent saris from Madhya Pradesh are known as ________________.
   ii) In India, the marvellous woven materials were known as ________________.
   iii) Cotton saris from Venkatagiri have a border of ________________.
   iv) Chanderi is a historic city in ____________________.
   v) In Mughal time, the woven textiles were often referred to as ________________.
   vi) The Indian craftsmen have practiced ornamentation of woven fabric since ________________.
   vii) The other name of Banaras Brocade is ________________.
   viii) Cotton cultivation and weaving originated in ________________.

6. Discuss the woven saris of South India.

7. Write a brief account of the history of Woven Textiles.

1.9 References and Suggested Further Reading

1.10 Glossary

1. Brocade A rich fabric with a silky finish woven with a raised pattern
2. Epic A long poem narrating the deeds of heroic or legendary figures
3. Exquisite Extremely beautiful or delicate
4. Fascinate Capture the interest of, attract
5. Ornamentation Adornment, beautification
6. Picturesque Beautiful or striking
7. Ritualistic Regular or excessive practice of prescribed procedures, mainly on religious or similar occasions
8. Stylize Paint, draw, etc. a subject in a conventional, non-realistic style
9. Wove Past tense of weave

Woven Textiles Textile fabrics made of interlacement of yarn