Confessions of a Red Thread Bandit Queen: Ten Years of Fieldwork with Narrative Embroidery

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To quote the great weaver and poet Kabir,

Do away with the bark, Get hold of the pith
Then you’ll contemplate, Infinite treasures

I confess to living a life full of unexpected experiences trying to remove the bark from the tree of commercialism and finding the ever-fruitful world of contemporary textiles made by traditional artisans. This presentation is a series of confessions brought to light through fieldwork, teaching and working in India and Canada / there and here / two worlds made into one. We begin with the six images connected to confessions or thoughts to live by:

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Figure 1. Gift Exchange: Images tell the stories: thread has a life of its own, 2004.

Always dream that something is possible. I confess that I can be very stubborn when it comes to realizing these dreams. When I first saw sujuni and khatwa I thought of the appliqué wall hangings of Inuit women from Baker Lake in Nunavut, Canada. Memories of childhood visits to TB hospitals in Edmonton and the wonderful dolls the Inuit women made to pass the time. And I wondered from the Santal community in India what it would be like for these women to meet those women. Through the magic of many people it happened in the very building we are standing in today. At Harbourfront Center in Toronto, the York Quay Gallery in the summer of 2004 was the exhibition “Images tell the Stories, Thread has a life of its’ own.

During twenty-five years of teaching in the West, I worked with everything from the practical elements of design, textile technology to material culture history. Since ‘reinvention’ in 2002 I have endeavored to practice meaning in life by working with narrative textiles that tell a meaningful story in real time. I am interested in cloth that reflects the skill of history in the excitement of the present. This is cloth that becomes a teller of tales and a keeper of the important ideas that keep cultures alive.

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Take any situation you find yourself in, and make it work for you. This is the end of a 37-day workshop in Bhusara, Bihar. It is Holi the Hindu festival of colours and we are all looking reasonably happy. For eighteen of those days I was alone with these women, without an interpreter, except for an hour or two each day. We learned how to make every piece of sujuni, their textile art, worth selling. Ten of us also learned how to drive an auto-rickshaw. Everyone has been paid! I have been doused with colour and now, all cleaned up ready to go back to a big city for the next adventure.

It is unbelievably important for people to make things that mean something in their own context. Here is my wonderful friend Usha Prajapati, Textile Designer, Ford Fellow, and fellow faculty member at Judy Frater’s Kala Raksha Vidiayala in Vandr, Kutch Gujarat. She is in a teaching workshop enactment with both humour and pathos. She is the “designer” The two young men are “craftsperson’s” She is trying to get them to make covers for yoga mats for some big American client.

“But, “Madam, what is yoga mat? Why do we need to do this? You say people use these on trains, but Sadhus don’t travel on the trains. Sadhus who do yoga, don’t use yoga mats.” Usha had to persuade the artisans to make something that made no sense in their culture but would make them money in another place. How often does this happen?
Expect the Unexpected, Find things wherever they happen to be. This beautiful object is a water jug purchased and exchanged for an equal amount of water in another jug from a camel driving Rabari woman in Kutch. It was at one time a cooking oil container but has been transformed by quilted cloth into a thermos to keep the water cool and reuse some scraps of clothing. Inside were neem leaves to purify and possibly scent the water.

Rephrase things you learned somewhere else. This is a “Chapatti Chart” derived from the classic pie chart of endless business textbooks. In the village non-literate and innumerate women cannot understand words and numbers. They all know how to make chapattis. If they can see how much is consumed by each part of a product through a chapatti metaphor then they can get an idea of where their work fits in the whole picture. So everywhere I go I make and then cut apart fresh chapattis to explain how a product is priced.

Don’t get too excited by your brilliant ideas. These are the participants in my NABARD sujni workshop in Bhusara in February 2005 looking at that chapatti chart.

From these six revelations I will tell in words and images stories that have led me to describe myself as a “Red Thread Bandit Queen” or ‘lal sutra gunda rani’. The phrase comes from a group of women who are working with other women all on the margins of society in order to assist them in making embroidery a viable livelihood. Red or ‘Lal’ is a colour of power, love and energy. ‘Rani’ means queen and also another type of red … the brilliant magenta of India, a colour from flowers to powders used to contrast the dryness of the desert. It is
remarkable that ‘thread’ or the tie that binds is such a powerful force in the empowerment of women. It transcends time and space in creating possibilities for new experiences.

I confess to great fear of teaching an exclusively male group of young artisans in Kutch Gujarat. Most of my work has been with women embroiderers and weavers. At Kala Raksha Vidayalaya in December 2005 Usha Prajapati (of the ‘Sadhus don’t make yoga mats fame), Krishna Patel and I were the first faculty to work with fourteen young men who were traditional artisans. They were Hindu weavers, the Vankars and Muslim dyers, printers and bandhani artists, the Khatris. I did not know what to expect. It became one of the most thrilling and enlightening teaching experiences of my life. We started with my great friend “the kite.” Making small kites using Japanese paper and dyes and producing a limited edition. Then the students had to trade a kite and find what its’ ‘intrinsic’ value was … a set of headphones … or two oranges. In two weeks we covered a lot of ground … first thought to be crazy by the students because we asked them to listen to music and make marks or blind taste things and then mix colours to describe them. By the end of the second week they were designing coordinated rooms. As a way to get to know them and to give back something for the next group of faculty, we created profiles of each student…. The excerpts here give you a flavor of their intensity, skill and variety of experiences. It was magic.
From Juned Ismail Khatri “following in his father’s footsteps,” they send emails like “Dear Skye, I love you, can you tell me how to do bandhani on wood?” and they mastered the digital camera so that they can send pictures of their graduate collections to Canada. They have become global designers in the space of one year, a remarkable accomplishment assisted by their peers and teachers.

Figure 9. Rabari Artisans at the Beach in Mandvi, December 2005.

Teaching traditional artisans in Kutch led me to understand the difference between education (of the weavers and dyers) and exposure (of the Rabari embroiderers). What is most remarkable about these artisans is how deeply committed to their traditions they are and at the same time how open to new ideas they can be. Their work speaks for itself. Following the Vankars and Khatris we had two weeks with Rabari women embroiderers. Steeped in a conservative society in transition from nomadic to sedentary life, they hang on to many rituals and traditions connected to their nomadic identity. They have not attended school, are used to multitasking and were very rigid about their ‘way of doing things’. As you can see, they were a force to be reckoned with on the beach in Mandvi. We tried to make a metaphor of the Rabari women’s continuous work of embroidery.

Figure 10. A simple idea, Rabari Artisans at KRV field experience, 2005.
Pick up a shell and call it your needle
Think of your arm as a thread
And use the sand as a piece of cloth
The large sand drawings were like looking at a young women’s dowry only written large
We made portraits of the women’s personal work
Tried to see how it compared with the work they did for wages
And gave them a change to design their own worlds using the stitches they knew.
This was their reaction to being freed on the beach.

Most of my work in India has been in Bihar and Jharkhand two states in the Northeast of India. When I started fieldwork in 1997 it was all one state but in 1999, the division was made. In traditional wall paintings of Mithila (a region of north Bihar with an ancient practice of women painting the walls of the nuptial chamber), the act of drawing has always been separate from that of painting. An outline was first drawn and colours filled in subsequently; the whole tradition of painting in Mithila may therefore be described as “coloured drawings.” ‘Drawing Nirmila’ was my guide to the world of drawing the village and the view of the twenty-first century. I cherish her quiet demeanor and sure hand. She left us very recently and now we have only her work and memory in our lives.

Figure 11. Drawing Nirmila, departed 15 November 2006.

Sujuni is a term Bihari women use for straight running stitch embroidery on layered cotton, sometimes accented with chain stitch. It is known in other parts of India, particularly in Bengal and Bangladesh, as kantha. Traditionally made by women in their homes, old worn out saris were layered and held together by fine coloured threads pulled from the sari's edges. Religious and secular narrative themes were illustrated in old Bihari sujunis as well as geometric patterns, flowers, and local life. Sujunis were made for births and marriages, and to give as gifts to family members. Sujuni was revived as an income-generating project in Bhusara a village in Muzzafupur district of Bihar.

With my friend and colleague Dorothy Caldwell I traveled to Bihar and first saw sujuni in 1996. We decided that the work was so exciting that we had to bring it to the Textile Museum of Canada. After hearing the feminist economist Marilyn Waring talk about cow dung as a design commodity in front of 800 industrial designers at a conference in Toronto, I was inspired to
commission the women to make a sujuni about cow dung and its uses. They said” you gave us the idea but the cow dung is ours. You don’t have this in Canada, do you?” When a very young sujuni artist, Archana Kumari traveled alone to New York City in 1998, I commissioned her to make a sujuni about her trip. Little did I know that it would be a prophetic symbol of the twin towers and the beginning of Archana’s journey to study textile design at NIFT in New Delhi.

Figure 12. New York City Sujuni, 220 Stitch Bed Quilt, Archana Kumari, February 1999.

The true stories of the makers of narrative textiles are far different from what appears on the walls of a museum or in the shops and stalls where the work is sold. A new group of Santal tribal women in Jharkhand (working for the same NGO as the sujuni workers) began to make khatwa in 2004. Though able to exhibit work internationally the Santal workers’ salaries for two years of work forming women’s self-help groups and non-formal education centers have not been paid. Santal craftswomen keep the group together without capital and with pressure to disband from their founding NGO. The work they do is exceptional in depicting their lives while still being marketable.


Real empowerment, fair trade, sustainability and authenticity are all critical to the success of these groups. By telling their stories through their work we will gain awareness of the story underneath the stitches. The work needs to be given a fair price, a viewing in urban communities and an understanding by the audience of global humanists. In order to sustain the work the women must make their own decisions about what they need and how it is to be achieved.
The success of a collaboration between aboriginal communities at opposite ends of the world gives a lesson to everyone. A film about this experience is shared between the two communities.\(^2\)

*Be willing to try something you have never done before.* Blind stitching gives you the sense of an activity without knowing the result.

Relating one world experience to another is a great way to share travel without going.

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\(^2\) "Thread has a life of its own: Aboriginal Women’s Stitched Stories,” Executive Producer: Dr. Skye Morrison, Director: Dr. Brenda Beck. DVD available from Dr. Skye Morrison skye.morrison@sympatico.ca Production House: Soft Science Associates Ltd., Gores Landing, Ontario softsci@eagle.ca.
And the results of an unpredictable collaboration can lead to new idea. Take your ideas and your connections wherever they lead you. Dorothy Caldwell is a friend,

Retain your own context for the work you do. Dorothy Caldwell is my inspirational, persiant and qualified judge of the projects, the women and their work. She is the second Canadian Red Thread Bandit Queen as she takes “the stitch” around the world with respect and an intensely personal world-view.

It is important to appreciate the fortune you have of colleagues and collaborators. Pankaja Sethi, my Delhi-based research assistant, NIFT graduate textile designer and champion of tribal women artisans in Orissa gives me hope for the next generation of Red Thread Bandit Queens. Dr. Dipak Malik, Director of the Gandhian an Institute of Studies in Varanasi has offered sage advice and a deep perspective of the struggles of the groups I am working with. He gives a ‘big picture’ to the small group.
The work must continue. The makers need to read the cloth and be inspired by the ‘big picture’ behind each piece. At the same time they must move forward in their lives on a practical level. The need housing, a reliable income, food security and a sense of the value of their world view in the global landscape. All of the ‘Red Thread Bandit Queens’ must be prepared to take on the world and overcome every obstacle.

Fieldwork is an unpredictable experience, full of wonders and unexpected delights. It is equally frustrating and exhilarating, a human exercise in contrasts. Good ideas are better when you are able to introduce them and then leave them alone to be amazed by the results. In order to see what the possibilities are, you must be willing to work on something through ‘thick and thin’ over many years in order to let it grow and change. This is the commitment I have made to the sujuni workers in Bhusara, Bihar and the Santal Khatwa workers in Jarmondi, Jharkhand. Thank you for sharing the story.