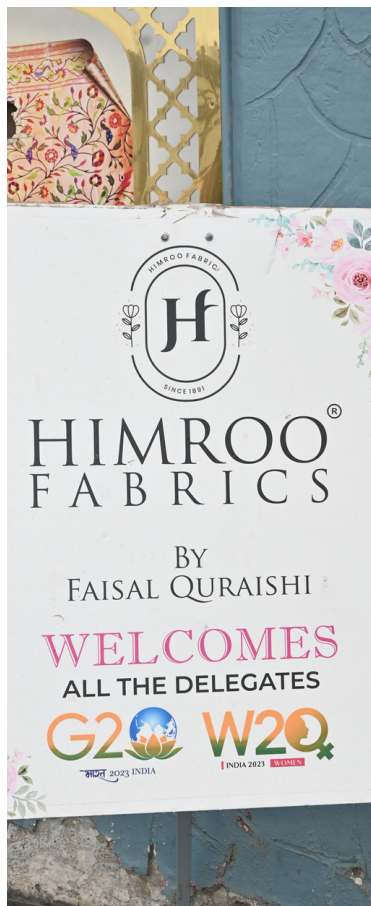


The Himroo Story

-Nisha Ghosh

'Saving the art and the craft is saving a memory'



Aurangabad in India is the home of the famed Himroo – a way of weaving shawls and luxury home goods. Hand made with silk, cotton, chiffon, fine wool, or a subtle blend of these with zari (gold thread) were once described as “fine as a spider’s web”!

Faisal Quraishi is the sixth generation, descendant of a weaving centre that began in 1891. Faisal is a man with a vision for the Himroo. He wants to bring this to global customers, all the while training local women to become part of his futuristic plans for Himroo.

The weaving section here has earned the title of being the oldest Himroo factory in India. The origins of Himroo are unknown as no records exist - but what is certain is that the Himroo shawls and stoles were prized possessions of the royalty down the ages. The fine threads on the weft and the warp intricately alternated, to produce that which will be the cynosure wedding trousseau or fetch a handsome price in India and some may be in high end stores overseas.



Who are these silent workers, simple women drawn from the lower rungs of India's complex social structure? These women have little formal education or none at all. They entered the textile world for economic reasons but for most handloom workers, it is continuing a family tradition. A family of weavers passes on the craft to the next generation. In some communities, education is considered unnecessary for women and unacceptable for women to work outside the home.

As Najmunissa Sheikh, a woman weaver told me, "My great grandmother who is now over 100 years and still does weaving told us -if you weave two and half inches and have enough food for a day -why should you go out to work." The craft of weaving stayed in families. Their role is crucial in sustaining this traditional handloom sector. By learning the art of handloom from each other, women have shown that a vibrant and sustainable enterprise is possible even in the most difficult of circumstances.

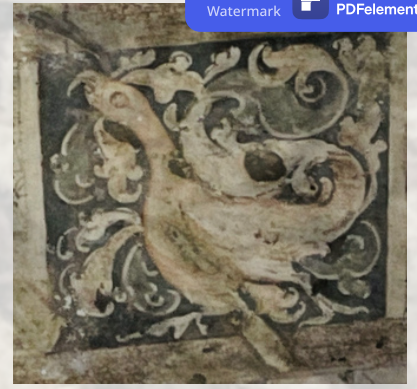
As I walked into Faisal's factory it felt like seeing a sepia tinted photograph- where time has blurred the clear outlines of that once clear picture. One which has taken on a hue, where colours whisper, not shout, and an air of forgotten days where luxury prevailed.



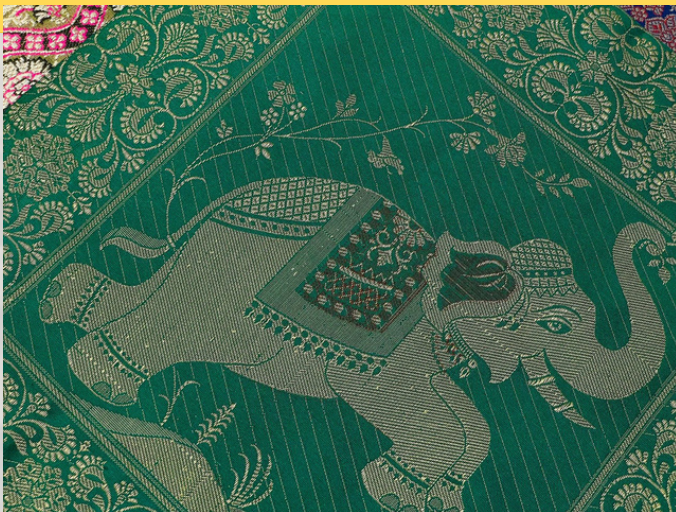
At the looms sat women laboriously working on designs – 2 women in a room- but there was place for three as there is another loom packed into the room. They all work silently with an array of colourful silk threads at their work spot, following a pattern detailed for that piece. Except for the sound of the wooden beater hand tree the work room is quiet.



The silent workers of the textile industry at their looms weave stories that will be passed on to future generations. The pieces of art produced on the wooden handlooms are keeping alive a tradition. The women working here are the keepers of that craft the tradition of which goes back almost a thousand years.



Designs taken from the sixth century Ellora caves of this region, one recognizes the Mandala, the birds, the floral variety and the vines, the paisley inspired by this mango rich area etc. The colour palette taken from nature remains always evergreen are sources of inspiration.



Shakira Anjum has been at the handloom crafting beautiful pieces. She does not come from a weavers' family but learnt it at the weaving centre in Paithan- a village-grown into a town, that has handlooms in practically every home.





Her skills and her interest took her ahead and she smiles and says, "This is very fine hard work, but see without a degree I became a madam!" Yes, Shakira is the madam that trains the newcomers and guides the others in all weaving matters.

She has empowered herself by learning this craft and is able to support her daughter's education too. Would her daughter take up this line later? "I don't think so- today the girls have to spend time on studies and there are so many other well- paying options."

Mehwish Rashid has found salvation at the looms. Also, a single parent, she works hard to bring up her 9-year-old daughter.

On the other hand, Rupali More, who is only 35 years has worked at the looms for 15 years. She is the solo weaver at home and in this span has mastered a paper design onto the shawl.



Her hennaed fingernails pick the fine silk threads while confidently handling the shuttles of the loom. Very conscious of improving the lives of the women weavers.

Najmunissa Sheikh has worked on handlooms since the age of 10 – the family, all 5 generations are at the looms. At 48, she has progressed from weaving Khadi (a hand spun natural fibre that Gandhi promoted during the freedom movement as a national fabric) to being a veteran of very fine silk embellished with intricate designs.

The government has started centres in most Indian states to support and training of local crafts and new generation of artisans. These have opened up newer opportunities providing some measure of economic empowerment for the women.



Aarti Chautmal is an example of one who has stood firm as a single parent -learnt to weave -so she could provide for her two children. Trained by Shakira, Aarti is taking small steps to improve her skills.





Small steps as these signal change: women are standing up for themselves. In a male dominated and strictly hierarchical society like ours, this is the real challenge. Women here have internalized submission and a secondary role for themselves. To radically change that is matter of time.

Conscious of improving the lives of the women weavers, Faisal Quraishi has collaborated with Women Forward International to set up a crafts village and training center for women in Aurangabad.



Together with WFI, Faisal envisions a craft village that will focus on women artisans. There will be a structured training programme, manufacturing, a sales outlet, with other facilities to make it one of a kind.

Here the artisans will be trained and remunerated to make weaving a profitable avenue of work. The interns will be encouraged to think in innovative ways so as to provide women with sustainable livelihoods linked to global markets. Imagine the empowerment of the women—indeed of whole communities in this corner of India.

Through a change in attitude and a unity of purpose, the women will be able to guide and mentor the next generation. As they empower themselves, they do not lose their identity and continue to weave stories on the looms.



Faisal Quraishi looks forward to evolving the heritage of Himroo weaving for a wider global audience.

