



# Textiles and Artisans

Daan van Dartel, Lipika Bansal, and Kirit Chitara  
in Conversation with Aarti Kawlra

*The Channel* is the flagship podcast from the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS). Each episode delves into a particular Asian Studies topic from across the social sciences and humanities. Through a mixture of interviews, lectures, discussions, readings, and more, *The Channel* is a platform to connect scholars, activists, artists, and broader publics in sustained conversation about Asia and its place in the contemporary world. Listen and subscribe at <https://iias.asia/the-channel> or on your preferred podcatcher app.



**A**arti Kawlra of *Humanities Across Borders* recently hosted a conversation with three guests: Daan van Dartel, Curator of Popular Culture and Fashion at the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands; Lipika Bansal, a researcher, social designer, and the founder of Textiel Factorij in Amsterdam; and Kirit Chitara, an Indian artist specializing in *Mata ni Pachedi*, a traditional form of painting on cloth. In their conversation, they discuss their various efforts to foster new modes of collaboration in the arts, focusing on questions of curation, attribution, and creative production.

**Aarti Kawlra:** This is a conversation that we wanted to host as part of IIAS's work to really bring in different stakeholders around, for example, the idea of this cloth, *Mata ni Pachedi*, which is a beautiful artistic creation and a tradition from Gujarat. I wanted to ask Lipika to start this story as to how and why you've been working with artisans from India and mediating between the Netherlands and India.

**Lipika Bansal:** I started and founded Textiel Factorij in 2015, when I came to learn about how Indian textiles influenced Dutch traditional costumes. I got really intrigued by this long trade relation between the two countries and especially with textiles. I started investigating this. So first, we visited various museums here in the Netherlands, and then we did research in India and tried to find craftspeople who are still working with these very old techniques. Among them was Kirit Chitara. He works with bamboo-paneled textiles, but their specific tradition is the *Mata ni Pachedi* - "mata" means "goddess," so in their paintings the Mother Goddess is always central. So we asked him whether he would be interested to start this collaboration in 2016, and he was very excited because he would be able to work for the first time in a more international context.

**Kirit Chitara:** Many times we would call and talk about planning when I would go out of the country - for the first time in my family - to show the art. I was very excited, and I was very happy when Lipika told me that we will manage that. I also met Daan, and then I saw my grandfather's paintings in the Tropenmuseum. It was a very emotional moment, so I'm very thankful to Lipika for bringing me there.

**Daan van Dartel:** It started with Lipika approaching the Tropenmuseum with her idea of the Textiel Factorij, and then you started your project with the exchange between artists from India and the Netherlands. You visited our depot with some Indian artists in 2018, and among them was Kirit. That was the first time that I heard that this young guy from India, coming to visit us through Lipika, saw his grandfather's work in our depot, which was amazing! Our museum's intention, of course, is to show the local public information and knowledge from different cultures around the world, but also through the period of decolonization, which we are in now, we have to look at how we can make our collections also work for people where the collections come from. So this was amazing when Kirit visited and said, "Yes, this is my grandfather's work." That's hardly ever the case - that you have a collection and that the family of the maker is actually in your museum. What is also often the case is that makers in ethnographic museums were hardly ever recorded. In this phase of trying to decolonize collections, it's a very important aspect, so I was very thrilled to see Kirit and know now who made these objects.

**Lipika Bansal:** When Kirit visited, he could recognize all the stories. Each painting tells a different mythological story, and then within a painting you have multiple storylines. So for me, it was very exciting that he could share this knowledge directly with

Daan. Also, I feel that after he came to the Netherlands and then went back to India, he got more acknowledged there. He got more possibilities to do workshops across India.

**Daan van Dartel:** The second time Kirit came, I searched again in our collection and tried to find all the *Mata ni Pachedi*. We had about 12 pieces. I just did some research before this conversation, and I found an even older one in the Museum of Ethnology in Leiden collection, which Kirit did not see. I thought it might be interesting to share that cloth [Fig. 2]. That's the oldest one we have - we don't have an exact date, but it's from before 1956 because that is the date the museum acquired it at a Dutch gallery. We see this big red cloth with images that are familiar for the *Mata ni Pachedi*. It's red with black and white motifs, very often humans on horses or women in beautiful outfits. Who do we see in the center?

**Kirit Chitara:** In the center is a protective goddess, Jogani Maa. Jogani is one of the goddesses for protecting family members.

**Aarti Kawlra:** Lipika, it's quite obvious that there is a relationship that you promote as a designer - you call yourself a "social designer." It seems that there are two functions. One is a pedagogical function of educating through the museums, through the workshop that you conducted for us, through your blog piece. It's a kind of educational function, but also there is the function of promoting the work of artists and artisans who come from India in the Western world. What is that inspires you to do this?

**Lipika Bansal:** When I went back to India to find artisans who were still working with these centuries-old techniques, I thought it would be interesting to connect Dutch artists and designers to the craftspeople, and to reinterpret these techniques and maybe make new artwork and designs for museums. But

it was also about the stories of the people. When we did exhibitions in the Netherlands, we also shared the makers' names. It was not only the artist or designer from the Netherlands, but also the makers, so it was a joint collaboration. I tried to emphasize that it's really an equal collaboration. Both are involved in the making process, and based on reciprocity, they worked on it together [Fig. 3].

**Daan van Dartel:** This way of working that Lipika designed - as a social designer - is what we as a museum are moving towards as well. I think the role of a curator is no longer the one person who knew everything about collections and was the one to decide what was to be collected. It's much more collaborative now. In my practice, if I do something with makers, I want to hear what they think is work that would be fit for a museum. I would not choose myself, for example. I would ask, "What is it, from your perspective, that you think is relevant for this museum to have in its collection to be able to talk about your practice?"

**Aarti Kawlra:** I think it's now become very important in the 21st century that we create a new narrative around makers and artefacts in the global context. At least in *Humanities Across Borders*, we are really hoping that we can use artistic practice in a just manner. We have to change the way we even write about knowledge, and institutions like museums are very much implicated. Lipika, as a social designer, you are implicated. And I am implicated as a critical craft scholar. We are all circulating and part of this knowledge production.

This transcript has been heavily edited and abridged. The original audio includes a wealth of further details and discussion. To hear the full conversation, listen and subscribe to *The Channel* podcast: <https://iias.asia/the-channel>

Fig. 1 (above): Participants of HAB's *Textiles and Dyes as Transnational, Global Knowledge* in situ graduate school in the IIAS conference room gather around Gujarati textile artisan Kirit Chitara (located to the left in grey) and Textiel Factorij founder Lipika Bansal (located to the right in blue) as they hold up one of Kirit's textile designs, with him explaining the technique and meaning behind each part of the design. Textiles created by Gujarati artisans such as the *Mata ni Pachedi* are handmade and considered sacred. (Photo courtesy of Aarti Kawlra, 2022)

Fig. 2 (right): A *Mata ni Pachedi* textile depicting mythological imagery. (Image courtesy of Stichting Museum van Wereldculturen, RV-3333-1)

Fig. 3 (far right): Collaborative work created by Kirit Chitara and designer Eline Groeneweg, commissioned by Textiel Factorij. The sleeves were exhibited at Zuiderzeemuseum (Enkhuizen) in 2018 as part of the exhibition "Craft in Costume." (Photo by Gwenn Smit, 2018)

