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Material Aesthetics and Spatial Politics: The Role of Textiles in South Asian Territorial Imaginaries

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Abstract

Textiles in South Asia have functioned as more than utilitarian objects, operating as instruments of spatial storytelling, political assertion, and affective expression. This paper examines the cultural and political work of textiles through a comparative reading of Malik Muhammad Jayasi's Padmavat (1540) and François Bernier's Travels in the Mughal Empire (1670), situating material culture within broader frameworks of space and affect. In Padmavat, cloth imagery weaves love, sovereignty, and sacred longing into poetic geographies, while Bernier depicts textiles as imperial display, exposing colonial anxieties and flattened affective spaces. Juxtaposing these texts illuminates a historical transition from affect-laden spaces to administratively codified geographies, a trajectory further traced in twentieth-century practices such as Khadi, where textile production embodied political resistance, labour, and national imagination. Employing an interdisciplinary methodology that combines close textual analysis with Henri Lefebvre's theory of socially produced space and Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies, the study reconceptualizes textiles as active spatial practices that inscribe territorial, emotional, and political meanings. Drawing on archival sources, including the Calico Museum of Textiles, the paper argues that South Asian textile culture functions as a site of postcolonial memory and affective geography, threading together cartographies of power, resistance, and emotion into a continuous fabric of cultural significance. This approach positions material culture at the intersection of spatial history, aesthetic governance, and emotional economies, demonstrating that textiles are central to understanding the production of social and political space in South Asia.

Keywords: Textiles, Space, Affective Geography, Postcolonial Memory, Material Culture

Introduction

Textiles occupy a complex and often under-theorized position within South Asian studies, traditionally analyzed through the twin lenses of economic history and craft tradition. While their status as premier commodities in regional and global trade networks is indisputable, such a perspective inadvertently confines them to a narrative of objectification and exchange, obscuring their more profound function as agentive forces in the cultural and political imaginary. This analysis proposes a critical shift in perspective: it argues that textiles must be understood as dynamic, discursive instruments central to the production and experience of space. They are not merely artifacts within a pre-existing spatial order but are themselves generative of territory, weaving the very fabric of social, political, and affective life.

This reorientation necessitates examining how cloth operates as a technology of spatial inscription, encoding and naturalizing specific configurations of power, devotion, and community. A close reading of selected literary and travel narratives reveals a pivotal historical shift from a pre-colonial sensibility, in which richly textured environments functioned as expressive, affective terrains integral to the performance of sovereignty, to a colonial paradigm that sought to dematerialize and administratively rationalize space, stripping it of its sensorial and symbolic particularities. The subsequent mobilization of specific cloths in the twentieth century, most notably Khadi, further demonstrates how textiles were strategically deployed to reassemble fragmented communities and articulate a potent politics of anticolonial resistance and memory. Scholarly engagement with South Asian textiles has yielded rich and diverse fields of inquiry, yet a significant conceptual gap persists at the intersection of these discourses. Seminal works in material culture, such as Emma Tarlo's Clothing Matters (1996), have meticulously documented how dress and textiles operate as crucial markers of social identity, negotiating complex relationships between tradition, modernity, and political affiliation.[1] Concurrently, art historical scholarship, exemplified by B.N. Goswamy's The Spirit of Indian Painting (2016), has masterfully decoded the iconography and aesthetic principles embedded within visual representations of textiles, illuminating their symbolic resonance within cultural and courtly life.[2] These approaches, however, often treat space as a static backdrop, the context in which sartorial communication occurs or upon which artistic motifs are displayed. This lacuna points to a precise research gap: the need to analyze textiles not merely as objects in space but as active spatial practices that produce, negotiate, and transform territory. There is a critical absence of work that specifically investigates how the materiality of cloth, its circulation, display, and tactile presence functions as a medium that bridges the abstract, administrative ordering of space (Lefebvre's "conceived space") and the embodied, affective experience of it ("lived space").[3] This study seeks to fill this gap by arguing that textiles are unique and powerful agents in the production of South Asian spatiality, capable of weaving together the emotional geographies of devotion and belonging with the hard cartographies of imperial control and national resistance. It is at this nexus of the affective and the administrative that the central contribution of this inquiry is located.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is underpinned by a tripartite theoretical framework that integrates spatial theory, affect studies, and material historiography to reconceptualize textiles as agentive in spatial production.

First, Henri Lefebvre's seminal work, The Production of Space, provides the foundational architecture. Lefebvre's critique posits space not as a passive, empty container but as a social product, actively constituted through practice and representation. His conceptual triad is instrumental:

Spatial Practice (Perceived Space): The physical and material realm of production and reproduction; the routines and networks that structure daily life. Textiles function here as infrastructural elements: as trade goods, architectural adornments (tents, awnings, carpets), and garments that facilitate and shape movement and interaction.

[1] Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 60-95.
[2] B. N. Goswamy, *The Spirit of Indian Painting: Close Encounters with 101 Great Works, 1100–1900* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 110-11.
[3] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 33-39.

Representations of Space (Conceived Space): The conceptualized space of planners, architects, and authorities; space as conceived through maps, plans, and linguistic signs. This is the domain of administrative order. Textiles are implicated here as objects of taxation, sumptuary laws, and economic policy, and as symbols deployed in cartouches or flags to demarcate territory.

Representational Spaces (Lived Space): The space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols; the space of inhabitants and users, which overlays physical space with symbolic meaning. This is the domain of textiles as vessels of emotion, memory, and resistance, the sacred cloth, the heirloom sari, the political banner.[4] Lefebvre's framework allows us to trace how textiles operate across and between these three registers, moving from the administrative to the intimately experiential.

Second, Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies in The Cultural Politics of Emotion, provides the crucial lens for understanding how textiles accumulate and transmit meaning.[5] Ahmed argues that emotions are not private psychological states but social and cultural practices that circulate between subjects and objects, "sticking" to them and shaping their value and significance. Textiles, with their vast surface areas and intimate contact with the body, are particularly potent sites for this process. Devotion, desire, imperial awe, or nationalist sentiment are not merely expressed through cloth but are produced and intensified by it. A piece of Khadi is not a neutral fabric but one "stuck" with associations of swadeshi, sacrifice, and national identity.[6] This concept allows for an analysis of how textiles become saturated with affective value, transforming spaces into emotionally charged territories.

Finally, the methodology of Visual-Material Historiography dictates the treatment of sources. This approach insists that objects and their visual representations are not merely illustrations of historical narratives but are themselves complex documents requiring critical "reading".[7] It involves analyzing the materiality, iconography, and circulation of textiles (and their depictions in art and photography) with the same rigor applied to a textual archive. This method enables the recovery of the spatial and affective logics embedded within material culture, moving beyond the textual record to understand how space was experienced and produced sensorially.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by four principal objectives:

- To reconceptualize South Asian textiles not as passive artifacts but as dynamic spatial practices that enact territorial inscription and aesthetic governance.
- To analyze how Malik Muhammad Jayasi's Padmavat and François Bernier's Travels in the Mughal Empire employ textile imagery to construct distinct affective geographies, mapping emotion and power onto material surfaces.
- To trace the colonial disruption of embodied, textile-centric space-making, whereby sensorial environments were transformed into bureaucratically managed zones.
- To examine contemporary archival and museological efforts to recuperate these geographies, revealing textile aesthetics as material repositories of postcolonial memory.

The Woven Word – Textile as Affective Geography in Jayasi's Padmavat

Composed in 1540 CE in Avadhi, Malik Muhammad Jayasi's Padmavat emerges from a specific histori-

[4] Ibid., 33-39.
[5] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8-12.
[6] Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, 60-95.
[7] Goswamy, *Spirit of Indian Painting*, 15-35.

cal and cultural milieu; a North Indian landscape characterized by syncretic Sufi traditions, courtly cultures, and evolving political sovereignties.[8] Far from a straightforward historical account, the poem is a sophisticated Sufi allegory wherein the narrative of Queen Padmavati of Chittor and Sultan Alauddin Khalji's desire for her serves as a metaphysical exploration of the soul's journey (suluk) toward divine unity. Within this framework, geography is never merely physical; it is a psychic and spiritual terrain. Jayasi constructs a sacred geography where earthly domains like Singhal, Chittor, and Delhi are transmuted into allegorical stations on the path to spiritual realization. In this poetic universe, the material world, and textiles specifically becomes the primary medium through which these abstract spiritual and emotional states are rendered tangible, sensuous, and geographically coherent. The texture of Padmavat is profoundly haptic, its universe is felt through cloth. Jayasi employs textile imagery not as decorative simile but as the very substance through which the central emotion of ishq(intense, transformative love) is experienced and communicated. This is evident in the famed description of Padmavati's arrival, where the sensory impact of her presence is mediated through fabric. Jayasi describes the brocade and silks transforming the earth itself into a sacred, receptive space, a prepared ground for a celestial presence. The veil (ghoonghat), a recurrent motif, operates with potent ambiguity. It is simultaneously a marker of seclusion and a medium of revelation; it conceals the physical form to better articulate the luminous essence of the beloved, a core Sufi concept. The tactile language, the softness of silk, the weight of brocade, entangles with the devotee's longing, making the ethereal emotion of ishq physically palpable. The cloth becomes the site where the devotee's yearning and the divine beloved's grace meet, a material interface for mystical experience.

In Padmavat, textiles actively produce the poem's geography, weaving together the landscape, the body, and the architecture into a continuous affective territory. The palace of Singhal is not described through its stone foundations but through its textile adornments: its walls are hung with tapestries, its floors covered in carpets, and its courtyards shaded by silken awnings. This construction creates a seamless environment where the boundary between the self and the world, the interior and the exterior, is dissolved by fabric. The journey of the protagonists is mapped through textile exchanges and encounters. The spaces they inhabit are defined by their textile character: Singhal is a land of luxurious, almost supernatural fabrics, symbolizing self-contained perfection and divine origin. Chittor, by contrast, is a fortress of royal valor, its space produced through martial banners and courtly drapes that signify its sovereign power and the impending threat. Delhi, under Alauddin, is characterized by a covetous gaze that seeks to possess these textiles, thereby appropriating their power. The movement between these realms is a movement through different textile-saturated atmospheres, each constituting a distinct emotional and spiritual state within the poem's sacred. The political logic of Padmavat is inextricable from its material logic. Sovereignty is performed, contested, and solidified through the agency of textiles. The clothed body of the ruler is the primary site of political expression. Ratansen's donning of a yogi's garb is not merely a disguise but a transformative act that enables his passage to Singhal; it recalibrates his identity and relationship to space. Conversely, Padmavati's royal garments are integral to her identity as a queen; their description is a catalogue of her authority and virtue. The exchange of textiles constitutes the primary economy of political relationships. Gifts of precious cloth like silks, muslins, embroidered shawls are not simple courtesies but acts of diplomatic significance, creating bonds of obligation and acknowledgment. When Alauddin Khalji demands not just Padmavati but the

[8] Malik Muhammad Jayasi, *Padmavat* (1540), ed. Vasudev Sharan Agrawal (Chirgaon, Jhansi: Sahitya Sadan, 1944).

treasures of Chittor, his desire fixates on the textiles as much as the queen, for they are metonyms for the kingdom's wealth and sovereignty. To possess the cloth is to lay claim to the territory and its authority. Thus, textiles operate as the material currency of power, weaving a network of allegiance, desire, and conflict that structures the entire political landscape of the epic. In Jayasi's world, to control the cloth is to control the very fabric of the kingdom.

The Cataloguing Gaze – François Bernier and the Proto-Colonial Rationalization of Space

François Bernier, a French physician who resided at the Mughal court from 1658 to 1669, occupies a critical juncture in the European encounter with South Asia. His Travels in the Mughal Empire is not a neutral ethnographic account but a text produced by a specific subjectivity: that of a European empiricist, steeped in nascent mercantilist and rationalist thought, observing a polity he perceives as both magnificently powerful and fundamentally alien.[9] His positionality is that of an internal outsider who was granted access to the inner circles of power yet forever filtered through a lens that compares and contrasts everything with European, particularly French, absolutist models. This gaze transforms the overwhelming material culture of the Mughal court, and textiles specifically, from elements of a lived environment into an object of scrutiny, a spectacle to be dissected, catalogued, and ultimately judged. Bernier does not merely describe Mughal space; he subjects it to an analytical and moralizing audit, prefiguring the administrative impulses of the colonial state that would follow. Bernier's narrative is saturated with meticulous, often astonished, descriptions of textile-driven opulence. He functions less as a poet, like Jayasi, and more as a cartographer of luxury, mapping the empire through its material excess. His accounts of the Mughal court fixate on the sheer volume and value of fabrics:

Courtly Drapery: He describes the Diwan-i-Khas not in terms of its architectural grandeur but as a space defined by textiles: "canopies of gold and silver tissue, [and] carpets of immense value and exquisite workmanship".[10]

Imperial Tents: The mobile city of the imperial camp astounds him, noting it contained "marketplaces…furnished with every necessary and luxury," its temporary palaces made of "richly embroidered cloths," transforming any landscape into a portable, sovereign Mughal territory.[11]

The Clothed Body: The emperor and his nobles are depicted as moving monuments of wealth, their power literally woven into their garments: "The costly dresses of the Emirs… are all covered with embroideries of gold and silver, or with other ornaments of great value".[12]

For Bernier, these textiles are unambiguous signifiers of imperial power, wealth, and sophistication. However, his description is taxonomic. He enumerates, estimates costs, and compares qualities, translating aesthetic and symbolic richness into a lexicon of quantifiable value. This process does not seek to understand the affective or spiritual resonance of these spaces, their lived dimension, but to render them legible to a European audience in terms of economic and political power.

Applying Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies, Bernier's catalogue is not one of pure admiration.[13] The very opulence he describes with such precision generates a palpable undercurrent of anxiety and moral judgment. The textiles become "sticky" objects, accumulating not just gold thread but

[9] François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656–1668*, trans. Irving Brock (London: William Pickering, 1826), vii-x.
[10] Ibid., 112.
[11] Rahul Mehrotra, "Tents: Ephemeral and Enduring," in *Tents: Cities on the Move*, ed. Rahul Mehrotra (The Marg Foundation, 2024), 16-19.
[12] Bernier, *Travels*, 132.
[13] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 44-46.

also associations of Oriental despotism, economic irrationality, and decadence. His gaze betrays a proto-colonial anxiety that this immense concentration of wealth is not a sign of healthy statecraft but of a profound imbalance. He famously critiques the Mughal economic system, arguing that the entire wealth of the land flows to the emperor, leaving the nobility and peasantry in a state of precarious dependency. The spectacular textiles, in this reading, are not just signs of power but evidence of its corrupt and centralized nature. This anxiety manifests as a desire to manage and rationalize the spectacle. Bernier's text is driven by an impulse to quantify the unquantifiable, to bring bureaucratic order to what he perceives as chaotic magnificence. He looks at a beautifully embroidered carpet and sees not artistry but a misallocation of capital and labor. This represents a fundamental shift from a sensory engagement with space to an administrative one. The textile, which in Padmavat was a medium for spiritual longing, becomes in Bernier's account a problem of political economy, an object that demands regulation and control.

Bernier's Travels thus represents a pivotal moment in the transition toward the colonial reordering of South Asian space. His textual practice foreshadows the later colonial administrative project that would seek to flatten Lefebvrian "lived space" into "conceived space".[14] Bernier begins this process discursively by imposing a utilitarian and economic rationality onto a sensorial, affective environment. He evaluates Mughal spatial production not by its aesthetic or symbolic coherence but by its efficiency, its fiscal prudence, and its alignment with European models of statehood. The lavish use of textiles in court ceremony, for instance, is interpreted not as a necessary performance of sovereignty but as a wasteful spectacle. The intricate craftsmanship of Kashmiri shawls is noted, but within a framework that already imagines its potential for profitable export under more "rational" management. In this way, Bernier's writing enacts a conceptual dematerialization of space. The rich, textured, multi-sensory environment of the Mughal court is stripped of its embodied meaning and re-presented as a series of commodities and fiscal liabilities. His text serves as a discursive precursor to the physical and administrative transformations of the colonial era, where the logic of the survey, the map, and the revenue assessment would systematically dismantle the very textile-saturated spatial order he so ambivalently describes.

Colonial Disruption and Administrative Rationalization

The preceding analyses of Jayasi's Padmavat and Bernier's Travels illuminate a profound epistemic shift in the relationship between textiles and space on the subcontinent. Jayasi's 16th-century Sufi epic presents a worldview where space is produced through embodied, affective engagement with material culture. Textiles are the active, constitutive medium of a sacred geography, weaving together the emotional, spiritual, and political into an inseparable whole. The palace, the landscape, and the body are interconnected through the haptic and symbolic logic of cloth, creating a Lefebvrian lived space par excellence. In stark contrast, Bernier's 17th-century account represents an incipient but decisive re-orientation. His gaze, while captivated by Mughal opulence, is ultimately surveillant and cataloguing. He translates the sensorial richness of the Mughal court, its textile-saturated environments into a lexicon of quantifiable value, economic potential, and political critique. This represents a move towards Lefebvre's conceived space; space is no longer primarily experienced but is beginning to be abstracted, planned, and managed through a detached, rationalizing lens. Bernier's text thus stands as a discursive hinge, marking the transition from an indigenous paradigm of embodied space-making to a colonial

[14] Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 38-39.

logic of administrative territoriality. The colonial project that followed Bernier's travels operationalized this abstracting impulse on an unprecedented scale, systematically dismantling the textured, sensorial geographies of precolonial South Asia and replacing them with flattened, administratively legible units. This was achieved through a triad of bureaucratic instruments:

- Cartographic Surveys: Initiatives like the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India did not merely map the land; they recreated it epistemologically. They imposed a uniform grid, erasing local place names, sacred geographies, and seasonal pathways in favor of standardized coordinates, district boundaries, and property lines. The map became the ultimate representation of space, superseding the textured, narrative mappings found in texts like Padmavat.
- Economic Policies: The colonial state systematically dismantled India's textile manufacturing sector through deindustrialization policies, turning the subcontinent into a supplier of raw cotton for British mills and a market for their finished, machine-made goods.[15] This not only destroyed a vast artisanal economy but also severed the deep connection between local communities, their craft practices, and the spatial identities those practices produced.
- Legal and Sumptuary Codification: The colonial administration codified dress and textile usage through laws, using clothing as a marker of identity for surveillance and control (e.g., targeting specific communities through sumptuary codes). This stripped textiles of their fluid, context-dependent meanings and fixed them within a rigid, state-conceived taxonomy.

Re-weaving the Nation – Textiles, Resistance, and Postcolonial Memory

The Khadi movement, orchestrated by Mahatma Gandhi, stands as the most potent and deliberate reclamation of textile as a spatial and political practice in the face of colonial domination. It was a direct, material counter-assault on the economic and spatial logics of the British Empire. Gandhi did not merely advocate for homespun cloth as an economic alternative; he strategically re-coded Khadi as the primary symbol of Swaraj (self-rule). This recoding operated on three interconnected levels:

- Economic Self-Sufficiency: Khadi directly attacked the foundation of colonial economics: the system that turned India into a supplier of raw cotton and a consumer of British manufactured goods. The spinning wheel (charkha) became a tool of economic defiance, a means to reactivate decentralized local economies and break the cycle of colonial dependency. It was a literal and symbolic re-weaving of the national economic fabric from the village upward.
- Political Resistance: Wearing Khadi was a uniform of dissent. It performed a visible, collective rejection of foreign cloth and, by extension, foreign rule. It created a new, homogenized national space of solidarity that cut across regional, religious, and caste differences, while simultaneously being produced in the intimate, decentralized space of the home and village. It was a powerful spatial paradox: a nationally unifying symbol produced through hyper-localized practice.
- National Identity: Gandhi infused Khadi with moral and ascetic value, positioning it as the authentic fabric of the Indian nation, in stark opposition to the morally corrupting and decadent industrially produced textiles of the West.[16] The rough texture of Khadi was not a mark of poverty but a badge of honor, symbolizing purity, self-sufficiency, and a return to an idealized indigenous essence. It

[15] Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 38-42.
[16] Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, 60-95

became a "sticky" object in Sara Ahmed's terms, accumulating intense affective associations of sacrifice, patriotism, and national becoming.[17]

While Khadi provided a pan-Indian fabric of resistance, other textile traditions persisted as powerful indices of regional identity, functioning as portable homelands and repositories of craft knowledge resistant to national and global homogenization.

a. Chintz: Originally referring to hand-block printed or painted cotton from the Coromandel Coast, Chintz's global appropriation and mechanized imitation by European mills makes its continued artisanal production in India an act of resilience. It carries the memory of a pre-colonial global trade dominance and sophisticated chemical knowledge (mordants, dyes).
b. Ajrakh: The intricate block-printed textiles from Sindh and Kutch, often in deep indigo and madder red, are deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual life of pastoralist communities. The geometric patterns are not merely decorative; they reflect cosmic order and Islamic sacred geometry. The wearing of Ajrakh is a powerful statement of regional and community belonging.
c. Jamdani: The exquisite translucent muslin of Bengal, woven with discontinuous supplementary weft patterns, represents the apex of subcontinental weaving skill, a craft so fine it was mythologized in Europe. Its revival after near-extinction under colonial policy is a recuperation of both technical mastery and Bengali cultural heritage.

These textiles, among countless others, constitute what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai might term "hard cultural forms."[18] They maintain their distinctive patterns, techniques, and meanings despite the pressures of modernity, acting as durable archives of regional identity and embodied knowledge.

Museums and archival initiatives across South Asia play a crucial role in sustaining and rearticulating the affective and symbolic geographies embedded in textile traditions. The Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad, for instance, is one of the foremost institutions that frames textiles not merely as artifacts but as repositories of labor histories, regional identities, and political memory. Its collections include Mughal court textiles, delicate muslin weaves from Bengal, and village crafts such as Bandhani from Rajasthan, each accompanied by documentation that preserves the socio-economic, ritual, and aesthetic contexts in which these forms were produced. Rosemary Crill, a noted scholar and former Senior Curator of the South and Southeast Asian Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, has emphasized how textiles function as vital cultural artifacts that encapsulate histories and identities of communities. Her works, including Indian Ikat Textiles (1998), Indian Embroidery (1999), and Chintz: Indian Textiles for the West (2008), explore the intersections of technique, trade, and cultural exchange, while exhibitions such as The Indian Portrait 1560–1860 reflect her commitment to integrating textile studies with broader art historical narratives. Her co-authored publication Trade, Temple and Court: Indian Textiles from the TAPI Collection (2002) further underscores how textiles reveal socio-economic and ritual frameworks that risk erasure in dominant histories.[19] Tapati Guha-Thakurta similarly underscores the role of craft collections as archives of lived experience, where histories of marginal

[17] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 120-123.
[18] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 90. Appadurai uses the terms "hard" and "soft" cultural forms to describe the differential ability of cultural practices to survive the pressures of globalization. "Hard" forms are those that are able to maintain their core principles and structure with minimal change, while "soft" forms are more permeable and adaptable.
[19] Rosemary Crill, *Indian Ikat Textiles* (London: V&A Publishing, 1998); Rosemary Crill, *Indian Embroidery* (London: V&A Publishing, 1999); Rosemary Crill, *Chintz: Indian Textiles for the West* (London: V&A Publishing, 2008); Rosemary Crill and Jane O'Brien, *Trade, Temple and Court: Indian Textiles from the TAPI Collection* (London: V&A Publishing, 2002).

communities, women's labor, and regional economies are encoded through patterns and techniques.[20] The postcolonial project of recovering the spatial and affective histories of textiles has found a primary venue in the museum. Institutions like the Calico Museum and the scholarly work of figures like B. N. Goswamy represent a concerted effort to reassemble the "lost sensuous geographies" fragmented by colonialism.[21] This curatorial practice is an act of epistemological recovery, involving three interrelated strategies:

1. Re-attribution: Restoring provenance and artistry to objects previously classified in Western museums as "anonymous" or "exotic," thereby returning dignity and authorship to overlooked artisans.
2. Re-contextualization: Displaying textiles not as isolated aesthetic objects but within reconstructed settings of use—ceremonial, royal, or devotional—thus restoring their social, spatial, and affective meanings.
3. Historiography: Goswamy's methodology, especially in works like The Spirit of Indian Painting, traces depictions of textiles in visual art as documents that reveal the material and emotional life of the past.[22] This visual-material historiography attempts to access lived spaces that written colonial records ignored or misunderstood.

The Art and People of India (TAPI) Collection, founded informally by Praful and Shilpa Shah in the 1980s and formalized in 2000, is another exemplary archive. Born from a desire "to celebrate the richness of India's textile traditions and at the same time to serve as a resource bank for design," the TAPI Collection today holds exceptional examples of historic textiles such as shawls, pichhwais, chintz, woven silks, and intricate embroideries.[23] By preserving regional crafts from across the subcontinent including Ajrakh textiles from Ajrakhpur in Kutch, the collection foregrounds the continuity of cultural memory while providing contemporary designers and researchers access to historically significant techniques. The Ajrakh tradition itself, with its resist-dyed block prints and deep indigo and madder palettes, encodes cosmological motifs and desert ecologies, offering insights into labor-intensive, intergenerational craft practices shaped by environmental knowledge and communal storytelling. These museums and archives thus become more than repositories; they are sites where the affective and symbolic geographies analyzed in Padmavat are made visible and tangible again, positioning textiles as crucial non-textual archives of memory and belonging. The historical layers of meaning embedded in textiles continue to actively inform contemporary South Asian expression. Artists like Nalini Malani draw on textile metaphors, particularly the motif of the woven thread, to speak of histories of violence, fragmentation, and repair[24], transforming inherited craft languages into contemporary expressions of collective trauma and healing. Designers like Rahul Mishra and Sabyasachi Mukherjee similarly engage heritage techniques in their fashion collections, incorporating Chikankari embroidery and Brocade weaving to valorize traditional craftsmanship while recontextualizing it within global luxury markets.[25]

[20] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New "Indian" Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67–70.
[21] Goswamy, *The Spirit of Indian Painting*, 54.
[22] Ibid., 112–16.
[23] TAPI Collection, "About Us," accessed September 13, 2025, https://tapicollection.org/about/
[24] Nalini Malani, *In Search of Vanished Blood* (New Delhi: Gallery Chemould, 2015).
[25] Rahul Mishra, *Rahul Mishra Autumn/Winter Collection* (New Delhi: Lakmé Fashion Week Archive, 2018); Sabyasachi Mukherjee, *Sabyasachi: Tradition and Craft* (Kolkata: Sabyasachi Archive, 2019).

Politically, the choice of cloth remains potent. The Gandhian revival of Khadi as a symbol of anti-colonial self-reliance continues to inform nationalist narratives, even as its contemporary appropriation invites debate over cultural ownership and authenticity.[26] Wearing regional weaves such as Ajrakh from Kutch becomes an assertion of ethnic pride and resistance, while mass-produced variants raise questions about labor exploitation and cultural commodification. The appropriation of Khadi by political parties remains a contested attempt to claim nationalist authenticity, as contemporary Indian political scenario highlights how textiles remain a critical field where identity, memory, and power are negotiated, underscoring how sartorial choices operate as political statements in everyday life.

These curatorial and contemporary engagements collectively demonstrate that textiles are neither static remnants of tradition nor purely aesthetic objects; they are dynamic and contested mediums, their threads continuously woven and rewoven into the evolving spatial and political imaginaries of the modern South Asian nation. By foregrounding collections such as the Calico Museum, the TAPI Collection, and Ajrakh traditions, alongside the creative practices of artists and designers who reinterpret these legacies, this study underscores how textiles function as non-textual archives, preserving memory, mediating affect, and shaping both local and global narratives of belonging. In line with Henri Lefebvre's theory of socially produced space and Sara Ahmed's affective economies, these material practices reveal how fabric forms mediate lived experience, structure collective memory, and sustain political imaginaries across generations.

Conclusion

This analysis has traced a profound historical trajectory through the lens of cloth, demonstrating that textiles constitute a central thread in the production of South Asian space. The journey began within the affective geographies of Malik Muhammad Jayasi's Padmavat, where textiles functioned as the primary medium for weaving a sacred, poetic territory of devotion and sovereignty. The focus then shifted to the proto-colonial gaze of François Bernier, whose travelogue captured a pivotal moment of transition, translating the sensorial richness of the Mughal court into a spectacle of quantifiable excess, thereby prefiguring an administrative rationality. The subsequent colonial project systematically operationalized this logic, unraveling embodied space-making through surveys, economic policies, and deindustrialization, flattening sensorial environments into administered units and reducing textiles to mere commodities. Finally, the examination turned to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, revealing how movements like Khadi and the preservation of regional weaves re-appropriated cloth as a tool of anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial memory, while contemporary archival and artistic practices continue to recuperate these layered histories. Throughout this arc, the central claim is reinforced: textiles are not peripheral artifacts but fundamental, agentive forces in the constitution of South Asian spatiality.

This study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by forging a critical nexus between material culture studies, spatial theory, and affect theory. It moves beyond traditional analyses of textiles as economic or artisanal objects by theorizing them as dynamic spatial practices. By applying Lefebvre's triad of spatial production and Ahmed's affective economies to the South Asian context, the paper provides a novel framework for understanding how material culture actively produces territory, embedding political power, emotional resonance, and social memory into the very fabric of everyday

[26] Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 145–48.

life. It thus offers a more nuanced and materially-grounded model for analyzing the historical and ongoing production of space in the region. This investigation opens several productive avenues for future research. A deeper inquiry into the gendered labor of space-making could explore how the predominantly female work of spinning, weaving, and embroidery underpinned the production of both domestic and civic realms. The creation of digital archives of textiles presents an opportunity to map the circulation of patterns and techniques, creating a digital geography of cultural exchange. Furthermore, an analysis of South Asian textiles within contemporary global fashion markets could examine how heritage weaves are commodified, re-signified, or resisted in neocolonial circuits of capital and culture. From the sacred couplets of the Sufi epic to the ledgers of the colonial state and the hand-spun fabric of the nation, textiles have endured as the most material and yet most symbolic of mediums. They are the enduring thread that weaves together the complex and often contradictory cartographies of South Asia—connecting the divine to the political, the body to the empire, and the memory of the past to the ongoing struggle for identity in the present. To study this history is to understand that space is not a given; it is spun, drawn, dyed, woven, and perpetually rewoven into existence.

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