ARBiT
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Invention of the Phonograph

On November 21, 1877, Thomas Edison announced his invention of the phonograph, a revolutionary device that transformed the way humans recorded and experienced sound. The phonograph could capture audio vibrations on a cylinder and reproduce them, allowing music, speeches, and other sounds to be preserved and played back repeatedly. This invention marked the birth of sound recording technology, laying the foundation for the modern music and entertainment industry. Beyond its technical brilliance, the phonograph changed cultural life by making music accessible outside live performances, shaping communication, education, and the global appreciation of recorded sound.

राष्ट्रदूत
SATURDAY
21 November 2026
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#SILK?

How Many Bananas Are in Your Silk Saree?

Chemically different from conventional silk, "Banana silk" generally describes a banana-derived textile with a smooth, soft or silk-like appearance



Banana silk sarees are gaining attention in India, marketed as unusual, sustainable and luxurious fabrics made from material that would otherwise be discarded.

But there is a fascinating question behind the name: How many bananas are actually in your banana silk saree?

The answer is more complicated than you might think.

First, "banana silk" is a popular textile name, not actual silk. The fibre comes from the banana plant's pseudostem, the thick, trunk-like structure supporting its leaves. Botanically, it is not a true woody stem but a tightly packed structure of leaf sheaths.

After a banana bunch is harvested, the pseudostem is usually cut down, creating a large agricultural residue stream. This makes it an attractive source of natural fibre. Banana pseudostem fibre is largely lignocellulosic, with cellulose as its major component.

From Plant Waste to Textile

The pseudostem contains multiple layers, and fibres extracted from different layers can have different characteristics. Some are stronger and coarser, while others may be finer and softer. Fibre properties also vary with the banana variety and processing method.

Before becoming yarn, the fibres must be extracted, cleaned and processed. This can involve significant manual labour, mechanical extraction and, depending on the desired qualities, enzymatic or chemical treatments.

And this is where the term "banana silk" can become misleading. Banana fibre is a plant-derived, cellulose-based fibre. It is not produced by silkworms and is chemically different from conventional silk. "Banana silk" generally describes a banana-derived textile with a smooth, soft or silk-like appearance.

Importantly, a saree labelled banana silk does not necessarily mean the entire saree is made from banana fibre. Banana fibre may be blended with cotton, viscose, silk or other fibres to make yarn easier to spin, weave and wear.

For a fine saree, consistency is critical. Raw banana fibres can be relatively stiff and difficult to process into very fine, uniform yarn. Researchers have therefore explored treatments to soften the fibres and remove non-cellulosic components.

Banana Fibre Is Not Viscose

Another common misconception is that banana fibre is essentially the same as viscose because both contain cellulose.

They are not.

Viscose is a regenerated cellulose fibre: plant-derived cellulose is chemically dissolved and then regenerated into fibres. Banana pseudostem fibre can instead be extracted directly from the plant as a natural lignocellulosic fibre, although it may subsequently undergo mechanical, physical, enzymatic or chemical treatment.

The Real Sustainability Story

Banana fibre's strongest environmental argument is not that it has zero impact. Extraction, washing, bleaching, dyeing, softening and finishing can all require energy, water or chemicals.

Its real promise is that it can turn agricultural residue into a valuable raw material. This could create additional income opportunities for farmers, artisans and fibre processors while making better use of biomass that would otherwise be discarded.

So, when buying a "banana silk" saree, don't just ask whether it contains banana. Ask:

- What is the fibre composition?
- What percentage is banana fibre?
- Is it banana pseudostem fibre or regenerated cellulose?
- Is it blended with other fibres?
- Where was the fibre extracted, yarn spun and saree woven?
- Can the seller provide production or composition details?

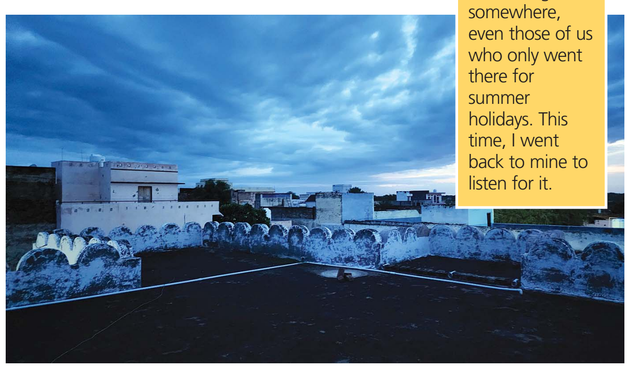




The Sound At Dusk

PART: 1

Every one of us has a village somewhere, even those of us who only went there for summer holidays. This time, I went back to mine to listen for it.





Shailaza Singh
Published Author, Poet and a YouTuber

#THE VILLAGE REMEMBERS

Whenever someone mentions my village, Leelki, I don't know why, but something in me relaxes, no matter where I am. Perhaps, it is those unhurried days I have spent gazing at nothing, basking in the winter sun, eating whatever was put in front of me, and then, a little more because someone insisted. Days with no meetings, no deadlines and no clock. Only the sun to tell you it was time to eat, and the dark to tell you it was time to sleep.

Everywhere else, even my holidays come with a to-do list. In Leelki, doing nothing was the whole plan, and nobody thought it was a waste of time. Not the old men at the chaupal, not the cows dozing in the lanes, and certainly, not me.

I suspect everyone who has ever belonged to a village carries a place like this inside them. A name that loosens your shoulders the moment you hear it.

Mine is called Leelki.

In the city, summer holidays meant homework, tuition and being told not to go out in the sun. In the village, summer holidays meant nobody knew where you were all day, and nobody minded. The journey itself was half the fun. The bags packed with gifts for everybody, the sweets from the city, the endless counting of how many kilometres were left, and that first glimpse of the village rising out of the sand, smaller than you remembered and somehow bigger at the same time.

Dunes With Permanent Residency

I have always been fascinated by sand dunes. The way they form, smooth and flowing like a river, and travel with the wind. In my village, Leelki, which is in Churu near Sadulpur, sand dunes have permanent residency. There was a time my cousins and I would run to them as children, play around and carry half the sand home, much to the chagrin of our mothers, who would grumble while scrubbing our hair and faces clean.

Forty years later, things have changed. The sand dunes are now held captive by the undulating roads and the trees planted by their sides.

I remember once that our old car got stuck in the sand dunes just near Leelki. It was night and our people were expecting us. My parents, my brother and I sat in that cold, moonlit night, waiting for the rescue team to arrive. We weren't worried, because in a village in those days, you didn't have to worry. No cellphones, no worry. Soon, there was a tractor, and the men who pulled the car out helped us drive home and then gave us freshly prepared bajra roti, makhan and sabji. Something no dhaba, no hotel can ever recreate.

But the roads are lovely now, and I am not complaining. They make going to the village easier. They also make leaving it easier.





Dusky Skies, Moonlit Nights

It was almost dusk when we reached Leelki this time. I had come to vote. I pulled a charpai into the courtyard, sat down and waited.

I was waiting for a sound.

When I was a child, evenings in the village always came with the same sound. Children shouting somewhere far away, three or four lanes down, behind walls I could not see. Someone was winning, someone was losing, someone was complaining that it was not fair. Then, a mother would call out a name, once, twice, and the third time with a warning attached.

I sat there till the sky turned grey.

The sound never came.

So, I climbed up to the terrace instead. The sky over Leelki was putting on a show for nobody, dark clouds above and a long strip of orange and pink along the edge of the world. The only thing standing tall against it was the mobile tower.

Then, the lights began to come on in the houses. I counted them. It did not take long.

Later that night, the moon came up behind the clouds, wrapped in a ring of light, the same moon that had kept us company the night our car got stuck in the dunes. It still rises over Leelki every night, looking down at the same lanes, the same rooftops, the same kangura walls. There was a time when standing on the terrace, I could talk to my neighbours, and their neighbours, who had come up to watch the moon too. This time, no one was watching.

Cheenu Baisa

I am the eldest in my extended family, which in a Rajasthani village is not an age, it is a rank. To the children I was Jeeja, or Buasa, or whatever our relation made me. To the whole village, I was Baisa. And to the elders, I was simply Cheenu.

When I was a child, the moment our car stopped in the lane, the children came running. My age, younger, some barely walking, all of them at our door. We played till our knees were brown with sand.

You know what the best thing about village food is? Whenever anyone cooks, the aroma wafts across the village. The desi ghee, the simple sabji, the lasun chutney. Desi fare, but delicious. I felt it was my birthright to go to the house with the strongest aroma and demand food. It didn't matter who they were or what they were. I was Cheenu Baisa, whom no one could refuse. I was made to sit, fed by hand and then delivered safely to my own house. My parents never worried about me.

And no matter how much ghee went into me, I never once knew indigestion. Maybe, it was the water. Maybe, it was all that running around.

The Rules Nobody Wrote Down

If you have ever woken up in a village, you will know that the day does not begin with an alarm. It begins with sounds. It begins with a bhajan being played in the mandir. A cow asking for her breakfast. A bucket knocking against stone. Women's voices, already half a day ahead of you. You lie under a razai that almost becomes your second home (my father calls it razaipur) and realise you are perfectly, stupidly happy.

Then, there are the rules that nobody ever wrote down but everybody followed. You touch the feet of every elder, whether you can place them or not. Many of them hold a quiz of sorts, and you look around for someone to mouth the answer from afar, and then, you act as if you remembered all along. You eat whatever is put in front of you, and then, you eat the second helping that arrives whether you asked for it or not. You never say no to a glass of chaas. And when it is time to leave, some old aunty presses a crumpled note into your palm and folds your fingers over it so that your mother cannot see. Every village in India runs on these rules. Leelki was no different.

Lantern Nights

I remember when there was no electricity in the village. We loved going there because in the evening, no one could force us to study by the light of the lanterns. But that is exactly what I loved doing: watching the shadows play on the walls while Janki dadi, who had come with my grandmother as part of her entourage when she married, cooked in the old degchi on the chulha. On cold winter nights, we loved sitting around that chulha and eating hot bajra rotis and kadhi.

The summers had their own magic. Before India ever knew air conditioning, there were jharokhas in our village haveli. Small windows, large enough that the residents, especially the women, could see outside and small enough that no one could peek inside. The pardah was always there, but with a cool breeze. Open two facing windows in a room and the breeze flowed in, and the room became cold enough for a Jaipuri razai in summer. Fresh air with no voltage and no AC in those days.

We, children, would lie on the cool floor in the afternoons, when the whole village slept, and listen to the loo howling outside like it wanted to be let in. It never was. The old houses knew how to keep the desert out. They were built by people who had never heard the word architect, and not one of those houses ever needed an AC mechanic.

The Kund

There are no wells in Leelki. What we have instead is the kund.

Every house has one, a covered tank built into the courtyard, with a small mouth and a heavy lid. It stores water for the summers, when the desert does its worst and every drop has to be counted. The kund in our house has been there since 1947. It is as old as independence. It was dug when the country was being divided and a new life was being built out of whatever was left, and it has outlived almost everyone who stood around it that year. It has seen every generation of our family, the ones I knew and the ones I only know from faded photographs.

When I was a child, the kund was the quiet centre of the house. A bucket went down on a rope, hit the water with a hollow splash that echoed back up, and came out heavy and cold. I would lean over the edge to peer into the dark, and somebody would always pull me back by my frock. To this day, I am convinced that the water from that kund was sweeter than anything that has ever come out of a tap in Jaipur.

Bucket in, bucket out. Year after year, the kund gave and the house took. In the desert, water is not something you waste. You learn that before you learn your tables. Not a drop was thrown away carelessly.

Think of everything it must have heard. The weddings, with the whole courtyard singing. The deaths, with the whole courtyard silent. Babies crying for the first time. Daughters crying on the day they left for their in-laws. Arguments, gossip, secrets whispered by women who thought nobody was listening.

Somebody was always listening. The haveli has its jharokhas and the courtyard has its chulha, but if any one thing in Leelki knows the whole story of my family, it is the kund.

It has been listening since 1947.

To be continued...

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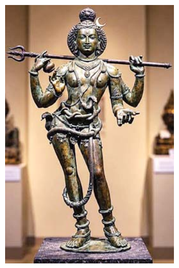






#BHIKSHATANA

When Lord Shiva Became a Wandering Beggar



His journey continued until he reached Varanasi, where he was finally released from the burden of the skull

One of the most fascinating and unconventional representations of Lord Shiva in Indian religious art is Bhikshatana, the divine mendicant who wanders from place to place seeking alms. In this extraordinary manifestation, the Supreme Lord, who is believed to possess the entire universe, appears as a naked ascetic, carrying a human skull as a begging bowl. The image challenges conventional ideas of divinity, power and wealth, presenting renunciation as the highest form of spiritual freedom.

The story of Bhikshatana is rooted in Shaivite mythology. According to a popular tradition, Lord Shiva severed the fifth head of Lord Brahma, who originally had five heads. The act was associated with Brahma's arrogance and pride. However, the severed skull became attached to Shiva's hand, and he incurred the consequence of Brahmahatya, the sin of killing a Brahmin. To atone for this act, Shiva was condemned to wander across the world as a mendicant, carrying Brahma's skull, known as the Kapala, as his begging bowl.

His journey continued until he reached Varanasi, where he was finally released from the burden of the skull. This episode is closely associated with the sacred traditions of Kashi, where Shiva is worshipped as the liberator from worldly bondage and the cycle of birth and death.

The Bhikshatana form is particularly interesting because it presents Shiva in a manner very different from his familiar image as the cosmic dancer, the meditating yogi or the powerful destroyer. Here, he is a wandering ascetic, seemingly stripped of everything except his divine identity.

The Symbolism of Bhikshatana

The bronze sculptures of Bhikshatana, particularly those produced during the Chola period in South India, are remarkable examples of the artistic imagination of ancient Indian sculptors. Shiva is generally depicted with four arms, a slender and youthful body, flowing matted hair and a crescent moon adorning his head. His posture suggests movement, as though he is walking through the world on his endless journey.

One of his hands holds the skull bowl, while other attributes reflect his divine and ascetic nature. A serpent often appears around his waist, symbolising his mastery over fear, death and the forces of nature. His matted locks represent his identity as the supreme yogi, while the crescent moon connects him with cosmic time and the rhythms of creation.

His unclothed appearance is especially significant. It represents complete renunciation, freedom from material possessions and the absence of worldly inhibitions. He has nothing to own, nothing to protect and nothing to desire. The skull bowl is perhaps the most powerful element of the representation. It reminds devotees of mortality and the impermanence of the physical body. Even the greatest earthly achievements eventually disappear, while spiritual truth remains beyond material existence.

The Artistic Brilliance of the Cholas

The Bhikshatana image acquired remarkable artistic expression during the Chola dynasty, particularly between the 10th and 12th centuries CE. Chola bronze sculptures are celebrated for their sophisticated proportions, graceful movements and exceptional attention to detail. Using the traditional lost-wax casting technique, known as Muchhishta Vidhana, artisans created bronze images that combined religious devotion with extraordinary craftsmanship. The technique allowed sculptors to produce intricate details, delicate ornaments, flowing hair and naturalistic body movements.

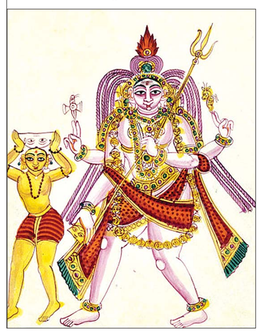
Unlike monumental stone sculptures that remained fixed within temples, bronze images were often carried in religious processions. The Bhikshatana form, with its distinctive walking posture, was particularly suited to the idea of a wandering deity moving among devotees. These sculptures demonstrate how Indian artists translated complex philosophical ideas into visual forms. Every detail, from the skull bowl to the flowing locks, contributes to the larger narrative of renunciation and spiritual liberation.

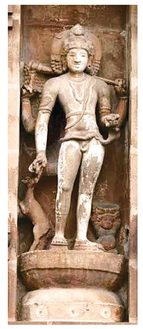
The Paradox of the Supreme Beggar

The greatest philosophical message of Bhikshatana lies in its apparent contradiction. Shiva is the supreme being, the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe, yet, he chooses to appear as someone who owns nothing and asks others for alms.

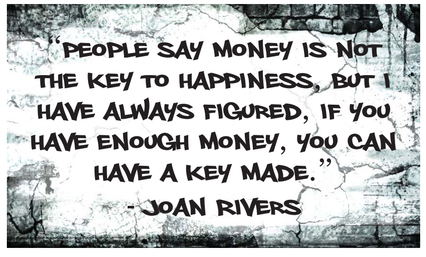
Why would the Lord who can grant every possible blessing need to beg? The answer lies in the spiritual philosophy of renunciation. Bhikshatana teaches that true greatness does not come from wealth, authority or possessions. It comes from freedom from attachment. By appearing as a beggar, Shiva reminds humanity that material abundance is temporary and that the pursuit of possessions cannot provide lasting fulfilment.

He is simultaneously the giver and the seeker, the supreme authority and the wandering ascetic. This paradox makes Bhikshatana one of the most profound representations of Shiva in Indian art. The image ultimately conveys a timeless message: the one who possesses everything can willingly live without anything. In becoming a beggar, Shiva demonstrates that true divinity lies not in acquiring the world, but in transcending it.





THE WALL



BABY BLUES By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott



ZITS By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman

