

Venice and India - a bonded epiphany

“Transnational similarities are unknowingly forged by our diversity”

The year is 1947, and the wake of an independent nation gives rise to budding diplomatic relations between the Republic of India and the Italian Republic. Seventy-five years later, who knew, these two nations would have way more things in common than drooling over each others' rich cuisine!

It's no surprise that India and Italy share mutual interests both- economically and socially. Trade and investment, along with a rich heritage, welcoming people, art, and culture, keep cordial relations between these nations thriving! I recently came across a blog by [Eshe](#) where she voices the opinion of an Indian girl, for whom Italy proved to be a home away from home. This further increased my curiosity to discover the nitty-gritty of similar nations - though far apart but closer in culture.

Masking: *the art of expression sans reveal!*

Masking in both India and Venice dates way back to an average of the 10th century.

Venice, popularly known for its vibrant parades and carnivals since the olden times, has always incorporated masks as a crucial medium to express oneself without really showcasing your true self to the public. Masking during grand festivities was a symbol of *inclusivity, uprooting class*

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differences, mocking aristocracy as well as *supporting traditional artisans*. In the streets of Venice, masks can convey a wide range of emotions - from melancholy to cheerful, from frightening to perplexed, from dreamy to fabulous - emblazoning an integral part of Venetian culture and legacy. Alternatively, India is a world-renowned country for its humongous diversity in its folk dances. These folk dances often include extravagant dressing sense, in a majority of which, wearing face paint or mask proves to be an inherent part of the culture. Ranging from the masks in the North-Indian region - Tribal Bhuta, Paper Mache Tiger masks, Hanuman, Wooden, woollen masks (a lot of masks depicting **gods** and **goddesses** and **mythological** characters) and South-Indian region with their expansive usage of masks in folk dances - Kathakali dancers with their '*kiritams*' (depicting **hunters**, **ceremonies** and **religious figures**). Across the Indian subcontinent, a wide variety of dances that include illustrative use of masks are - Cham, Parulia Chhau, Mukha Bhaona, Therukoothu, and Padayani to name a few. On observing a typical folk dance face mask for the first time, one can notice large eyes, sharp rounded eyebrows, coloured faces and extensive use of *kohl*.

With the cross-cultural essence between Indian states and Venice, both the nations are equally aware of the **expectations, grit** and **hard work** of the local artisans that come along the worldwide fame and recognition. There are such striking similarities when it comes to fine detailing and hand painting every feature on a mask with the same artistry and magic that even a layman can't help but gasp "wow!" without knowing the actual story behind it.

Some pictorial representations of Indian and Venetian masks: (*sourced from Google*)

India:



3. Dangwal



Venice:



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Glass Art: Moulding the artistic visions of serenity

For the longest time, India was known to be the manufacturer of world-class wooden toys and handicrafts due to the sheer intricate skill set of the traditional artisans since pre-independence. However, it was the famous Indus Valley Civilization's Painted Grey Ware (1000 BC) that evidenced the existence of glass beads used by early humans. While maintaining the originality, Indian artisans also created glass art found in many states, each displaying the grandeur of their own artistic creations. Glass art in India ranges from art pieces, bangles and ornaments, paintings, drinking containers and engravings. The art of engraving glass and crafting hukkas & perfume boxes date back to the Mughal era, when foliated designs were created by excellent artisans in form of patronage, luxury and sustenance for the rich. Glass was used extensively in form of decorative material for Mughal rulers' *Sheesh Mahal* (literally translates to a palace made of mirrors and glass).

Firozabad - a magpie's paradise

If I were to label Firozabad in one word, it would be "Suhaag Nagri" (a dream place of married couple) because of its affinity and reputation of being one of the leading districts in Indian Glass Industry. "*Since childhood, I have been working in bangle factory. My father and his father also did the same,*" says Salimuddin, a bangle-maker by profession¹.

¹ <https://smefutures.com/breaking-glass-ceiling-story-firozabad/>

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The culture remaining alive today is a testament to the ancestral legacy, duty, and love they have for their art, even though long exposure to glass particles could damage one's eyesight permanently.

Hats off to them!

When it comes to Venice, it is the Italian Renaissance that gave birth to the **Venetian Glass** (*vetro veneziano*) dominantly used to cater to the luxury needs of the aristocracies. Glass necklaces, beads (especially the famous Murano beads), vases and engravings all form the finest glass art culture of Venice. Today, Murano and Venice are tourist attractions, with many glass factories and artist studios. In the Palazzo Giustinian, there is the **Museo del Vetro (Glass Museum)**, which consists of displays on glass history, as well as glass samples dating back to ancient times. The glass engravings and designs include the *Filigrana, Lattimo and Millefiori*

With Lattimo depicting the scenery of Venice, there have been large pieces of evidence of ancient Indian glass creations (vases, pots) showcasing daily life scenes like figurines, hunting and celebrations. Hence, in a way, glass art can be viewed as an artistic portal to express the worldly views of ancient and modern lives. It is the element of *symmetry* that truly invokes a sense of similar culture.



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(above - Venetian glass art and Indian glass art; images sourced from google)

The culture may have different names but the true essence of craftsmanship in both Indian states and Venice has paved the way to accelerated investment in the arts as well as encouraging artisans. In the creation of that auspicious final piece, hours go into practice and remodelling, resulting in an auspicious sense of belonging and identity that is impossible to explain without the correlation between two beautiful nations. As a result, Venice and India have a deep connection, as well as mutual artistic support and encouragement that ensure the next generations have a good grounding, so they can *flourish!*

References:

1. Paper, Today's et al. *"Stories Behind The Mask"*. *Thehindu.Com*, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/Stories-behind-the-mask/article14515202.ece>.
2. Miazaki, Vinicius. *"The Art Of Venetian Masks For The Carnival Of Venice | Craftsmanship Magazine"*. *The Craftsmanship Initiative*, 2022, <https://craftsmanship.net/the-high-art-of-the-mask/>.
3. *"Masks"*. *Indianetzone.Com*, 2022, <https://www.indianetzone.com/1/masks.htm>.