

Gunjan Jain: The Seafarer Navigating Odisha Ikat's Cultural Renaissance

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Textile designer **Gunjan Jain** has emerged as a leading voice in preserving and reinventing Odisha's traditional *ikat* weaving, earning widespread acclaim for her deep-rooted engagement with Indian handloom craft and storytelling through textiles. Her exceptional contributions were recognised when she was honoured with the **National Award for Design Excellence 2024** at a prestigious ceremony in Delhi—an accolade that celebrates creativity, cultural depth and lasting impact on artisan livelihoods.

The Journey from Delhi to Odisha's Textile Heartland

Born and raised in Delhi, Jain's fascination with textile history was nurtured early in life by her mother, an art historian. After formal fashion design training at the Pearl Academy, she chose an unconventional path—immersing herself in Odisha's weaving communities from 2007 onwards. Over a decade in the region allowed her to intimately understand not just the craft techniques but also the cultural narratives and community dynamics embedded in the handloom tradition.

In 2008, she founded **Vriksh**, a social design studio whose name evokes resilience, growth and rootedness. Through Vriksh, Jain collaborates with artisan clusters across Odisha, nurturing skills, expanding design vocabularies, and ensuring sustainable livelihoods for weavers.

Crafting Stories Through Ikat and Innovation

Jain's award-winning work reflects both reverence for Odisha's textile heritage and a visionary approach to innovation. She submitted three distinct projects for the National Award that spanned fibre innovation, cultural iconography and historical narratives:

- **Fibre Innovation:** Jain experimented with natural and alternative fibres like nettle and Sabai grass, weaving them into *ikat* textiles and ready-to-wear garments. Her rationale: with rising silk prices, sustainable substitutes are vital for the future of handloom weaves.
- **Mythical Narratives:** Her reinterpretation of the *Navgunjara* motif—as inspired by Vishnu's universal form—blends temple iconography with contemporary design. This piece resonates across saris, tapestries and wall art, linking spiritual depth with textile storytelling.
- **Seafarer Legacy:** In her *Bali Jaatra* project, Jain reflects Odisha's historic maritime contact with regions like Indonesia. Using three distinct *ikat* techniques—including the ancient *jaala* extra-weft method—the fabric

becomes a visual map of trade winds, marine life and cultural exchange.

Her approach treats cloth as much more than material—each weave becomes a narrative of place, myth, ecology and history, elevating the craft into cultural art.

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