



NEW AGE KHADI

Khadi is the only Indian feelgood fabric as it gives employment to thousands as well as boosts the economy and sustains indigenous artisans. Supporting khadi is one way of encouraging the talented artisan to live in his ancestral village rather than give up in despair and flock to an urban slum for an alternative employment. But khadi is far from fading away, thanks to the fillip given to the fabric by the Prime Minister himself. MEHER CASTELINO writes on the state of khadi affairs and how some designers are moulding it anew.

The name may have changed over the centuries but the weft and the warp have not. Khadi, as we call the handwoven fabric made legendary by Mahatma Gandhi, has been around since times immemorial. Its timeline is its own hurrah: among the greatest achievements of the Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro civilisations were the mastery over hand-spinning and hand-weaving. Every pre-Aryan home had its own charkha or spinning wheel. Invaders came and went but khadi wove its way through the Vedic period, the Mughal and Medieval ages. The expertise was so much a part of everyday life that it became a traditional cottage industry. In Andhra Pradesh, a bride was gifted a one-spindle khada charkha as a wedding gift.

Looking back

The story of khadi in contemporary India is a story of India's resurgence as a nation, a vital part of our national revival. What began with Mahatma Gandhi got a recent fillip when Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave the fabric a fresh push up the fashion ladder by wearing the fabric even during his visits abroad.

Gandhi chose khadi as a symbol of his dreams for India when he returned from South Africa. The charkha was selected by him as a sign of non-violence and self-sufficiency and the material woven from it – khadi – epitomised the nation's feelings of patriotism and nationalism. The revival of the charkha was symbolic of the nation's quest for freedom and self-reliance.

In 1921, Gandhi thought of a strategy and came up with the charkha as an icon of the struggle for India's freedom. That revived the moribund hand-spinning and hand-weaving industry, which he called khadi. The movement made popular the concept of spinning yarn indigenously and weaving it into khadi cloth. It also accorded dignity to manual labour. A cloth became an ideology.

Reviving khadi was no cakewalk since much of the technique had faded into oblivion. In the beginning it was believed that the weavers found it impossible to weave a full-length of cotton with the uneven handspun thread and Gandhi is believed to have threatened to wear sackcloth, rather than buy cloth made in a British factory if he could not get a sufficient length to make a khadi dhoti.



Sashikant Naidu

The today story

Thanks to that impetus, things have changed drastically today. Khadi products like dhotis, kurtas, sarees, bedcovers and durries are available in a variety of textures like cotton, silk and wool. The khadi industries have made innovative changes with khadi polyester. Polyester fibre, also a man-made yarn from crude petroleum, feels like cotton and yields itself well if spun alone or in an appropriate blend with cotton. The addition of cotton makes the fabric more suitable for the Indian climate.

Before the establishment of the Khadi and Village Industries Board in 1953, there were only 156 registered institutions. The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) is a statutory body created by an Act of Parliament (No. 61 of 1956). It came into existence in April 1957. The KVIC took over the work of erstwhile All India Khadi and Village Industries Board. Today every village, however remote or small, has its own khadi institution.

The making of khadi

The making of khadi is an interesting but laborious process. The cotton goes through three stages before the yarn reaches the loom. The first stage is taping, where three rolls of cotton are spun together to form one tight tape of cotton. Then, two of these tight cotton tapes are spun together in a process called roaming, to yield a coarse, thickish thread. Finally, the yarn is spun. Today's charkha has six spindles, four more than its traditional ancestor called the ambar charkhas. The yarn from the six spindles charkhas is usually of 30 counts. The number of counts is measured by the number of hanks in one kilo. A thousand metres usually make one hank.

From the spinner, the yarn moves to the bobbin winder, warper, sizer and then the weaver. The spinning and weaving are not necessarily done in the same village. While spinning is organised by the Khadi Board, weaving is done by the weaver at his home. The mud floor is dug out to fit the pit loom. There is a gender twist in the making of khadi. Spinning is done only by the women, while weaving is dominated by men.

Along with improvement in the spinning technology, the Khadi Commission has introduced many innovations in pre-spinning techniques and processing of yarn and cloth. Semi-automatic looms and power-operated looms have raised the pit loom productivity to ten to twelve metres a day. Better sizing, drying, dyeing and painting facilities, etc, have also been given to the village artisans.

Is it any wonder, then, that the cloth made with such expertise and through such a laborious process, costs what it does?

The designer touch

There was a time when the price and the coarseness of the cloth discouraged the khadi weaver from wearing what he spun. Ironically, at times the village girls and women preferred to wear synthetic clothes as they found them less cumbersome, longer lasting and easier to maintain than khadi. However, khadi cloth is becoming increasingly popular in urban areas. Khadi, which was shunned a few years ago as a poor man's clothing or a politician's garb, has now turned into a fashion garment sought after by designers and fashion houses while the poor wear factory-made polyester. There is such an amazing demand for khadi cloth that despite the million workers all over the country involved in spinning they are unable to meet the demands of the market. Some of the designers who have made khadi their staple fabric have added their individual touch to this fabric. Profiles of some of these designers:

Sashikant Naidu

Khadi has been a substantial part of Sashikant Naidu's decade-long career, but he has only noticed recently how khadi is being accepted as the 'in' fabric in fashion circles. "Nearly 40-50 per cent of my collections comprise khadi and khadi blends. This winter for Lakmé Fashion Week Winter/Festive 2014, I pushed khadi for winterwear by texturing plain khadi to make it thick. I fused it with handpainted panels to create tunics. Buyers were thrilled in spite of the high prices. Khadi has its niche market and packaging and marketing make a difference. We use cotton, wool, silk and linen khadi. In future, I want to study this yarn more carefully and create innovations." In spite of access to several weavers, Naidu, who loves the natural slub and texture of the fabric, doesn't work exclusively with any. He prefers counts of 20s and 100s and wants to go up to 115s while the semi-mechanised process yields up to 500s count.



Purvi Doshi

A khadi loyalist, she won a fashion competition for her khadi creation in 1993. Since then, she has been promoting the fabric at every fashion week. Her innovations are not in the fabric but in the way she presents it. "From a lifeless, boring fabric, I turned it into red carpet gowns and Indo-western garments with hand embroidery." Doshi uses over 200-500 metres per month from khadi shops. She plans to put her textile designing sense to create some new khadi weaves in future. "Right now we use 150 or more counts. Trousers are made of a thicker count." From ghagra cholis to anarkalis, she also showcased gowns at the Bangladesh Fashion Week in November 2014. About 50 per cent of Doshi's collection comprises khadi. Exhibiting no price resistance, she has observed that clients want glamorous clothes. For her, khadi has proved to be a profitable business since it is cheaper than many other fabrics.

Khadi is often confused with handloom but there is a slight difference between the two. Khadi yarn is still spun by hand and is mostly around a coarse 20 counts. Handloom yarn is finer, with 60-80 counts moves upwards to superior variety of 100 and 120 counts. Muslin khadi, in great demand with fashion designers, has 250 counts. Gandhi was not opposed to the handloom industry but he felt that those who depended on spinning mills for their yarn would be controlled by them.

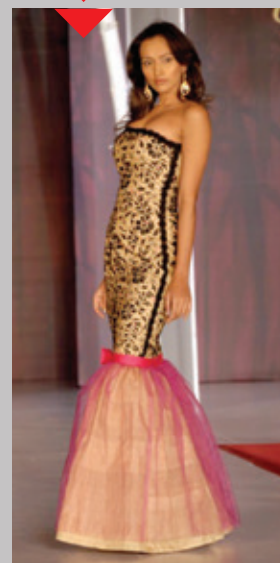
Vaishali Shadangule

The first time Vaishali Shadangule used khadi was for her Autumn/Winter 2012 collection Khwaja. Since then, khadi has been a major part of her collections. Shadangule has blended khadi with linen and jamdani motifs and for her latest line, while working with Assam's traditional wear, the mekhela-chador, she has woven it with woollen motifs. Shadangule's main source of khadi supply comes from Gujarat, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and the Northeast region where weavers work as per her requirements, offering a range from 115s, 120s to 200s counts. Since 2012, nearly every collection from Shadangule has khadi through texturing or as garments. "My latest collection is only khadi and I have created dresses, draped creations, sarees, jackets, tunics and even trench coats. Khadi in the right combination and contemporary silhouettes is a sell-out."



Jay Ramrakhiani

A decade ago, Jay Ramrakhiani started working with khadi. While he loves the fabric in its original state, he has finetuned it by adding organic silk or wool with the help of weavers from Assam and Gujarat. Together, they have made it user-friendly and attract buyers with unique design, structure, colour and natural dyes. Ramrakhiani gets his fabrics woven to instructions, choosing colour and design. "I blend khadi with silk, linen and wool and currently I am experimenting with weavers in Varanasi to weave khadi fibre with Elastane to give it a stretch that has an ideal feel for trousers, waistcoats, etc." Ramrakhiani normally uses 100s and 115s counts for kurtas, jackets, waistcoats, skirts, gowns, tops, dresses, sarees, blouses and stoles for men and women. "If the consistency in quality is maintained khadi is the fabric of the future," says Ramrakhiani, for whom khadi comprises 10 per cent of his collection which is by order only or custom-made.



Anita Dongre

It has been a long journey for Anita Dongre who started identifying with khadi for her signature eponymous label. She began using khadi in 2007-08 and now it is an integral part of her collections. Using 150s and 200s count yarn, she is working on 300s to 500s counts too for ethnicwear like kurtas. "Khadi will remain our first choice for our brand Grassroot which is completely focused on handspun and handwoven natural fabrics. As a textile revivalist, it is rewarding to work with khadi. People who value the craft are willing to pay a small premium for an intrinsically Indian fabric." Currently, khadi forms a small part of Dongre's collections but with Grassroot, the possibility of a huge collection in khadi is on the cards very soon.

N&S Gaia

Designer Sidharth Sinha started working with khadi in Spring/Summer 2014 for his label N&S Gaia. With 30 per cent of his collection in khadi, he has expanded his exclusive team of weavers from six to 22. They develop customised samples that are outsourced for bulk orders to government or private centres. "We get our supply from government yarn depots. The advantage of khadi is that it is openly available in yarn depots at Bihar, Delhi, Assam or Meghalaya. It is truly a humble yarn and we use as much khadi as possible in 220s count as it is easy to blend for dresses. We plan to mix khadi with eco-friendly fibres to produce state-of-the-art textiles by blending wool and Bhagalpur silk."



Paromita Banerjee

In 2009 Paromita Banerjee's first professional collection was made in khadi and it was one of the easiest for her to source from clusters of weavers in Gujarat and West Bengal who exclusively work for her. "Depending on the season, we use two or three kinds of khadi which ranges from 33s to 100s and 200s counts. We also use malkha throughout the year, which we can call khadi." Banerjee is exploring ways in which khadi can be mixed with silks like Bangalore and Mysore silk and woven into sarees for evening wear. Her collections for Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter 2014 have a khadi base and her three sub-stories are all khadi every year. "We dye, over-dye, embroider and print on a base of khadi." She hopes customers will be willing to pay high prices since many are not aware of what it takes to produce the fine counts of khadi.



Krishna Mehta

From her first collection in 1988, when she bought khadi from a store called Khadi Bhandar in Mumbai to 2005 when she was awarded the *Times of India Award* for using natural and khadi fabrics, Krishna Mehta's love affair with the fabric has been on. Being a trained weaver, her fabrics for men's and women's wear have been handspun and handwoven. Innovating by getting linen from Aditya Birla's Jayshree in Kolkata, she has created special weaves on sample looms in Coimbatore and Bhagalpur silk, which was mixed with muga silk for exciting experiments. She has created collections with fabrics from Manipur which were woven as per her requirements. Getting her supplies from Varanasi, Bhagalpur, Assam and Pochampalli, she uses different counts based on the season for her shirts, kurtas, tunics, jackets, vests, trousers, and sherwanis with 90 per cent of her collection in khadi.

Payal Khandwala

Artist and fashion designer Payal Khandwala started working with khadi in 2012. With nearly 80 per cent of her collection made from khadi either sourced or woven to her specifications, the garments are a sell-out. Her brand DNA is also supporting skilled craftsmen. Khandwala works with different weaves in silk khadi to change textures and transparencies and tries to integrate more than one variety of fibre with one textile. Working with silk, cotton and linen, khadi from West Bengal, Bhagalpur and Bangalore, she uses different counts to make borders, drapes and textures for sarees and western silhouettes. Her sarees, blouses, fluid trousers, skirts and maxis in jewel tones of silk khadi have Zen-like silhouettes. Khandwala has given the fabric a new fashion dimension. She is now planning on mixing cotton, linen and silk khadi to create a new version. Her customers hope it will not be long before the fabric leaves the R&D stage to dress the shelves.



Wendell Rodricks

Wendell Rodricks first worked with khadi in 1991 for shirts, blouses and tunics but since 1998 he has been seriously doing annual khadi collections for the Kasturba Gandhi Trust, Goa. His creations are eagerly awaited by Goa's fashion-conscious. For his annual sale, Rodricks gets his khadi from the Kasturba Gandhi Trust. "For our own production, we get khadi from the Khadi Board," says he. His innovations include different fibres in a single garment – cotton, khadi with tussar silk hems, adding surface ornamentation with appliqués, bias strip edges and silk piping. He goes by weaves and textures and not by counts. "I am a designer. I don't get involved in developing weaves or counts. At times, we ask for a certain kind of khadi according to the colours we need. But beyond that, I leave the weavers and weave experts or developers to do their part and leave us to do the designing of silhouettes and styles. There is a big fan following and people buy khadi for its cultural history." Rodricks feels it is profitable to work with khadi as compared to silk as it is a fraction of the cost.



Gaurang Shah

In the 1990s, Gaurang Shah was searching for an alternative to silk and discovered khadi sarees, which proved to be cheaper, longer lasting and a better drape than silk. The weavers added Shah's jamdani designs, which gave him a new impetus to use the fabric. His innovations have been in 80s to 100s counts to make the fabric softer. He has added ornamentation by way of floral blooms, birds, butterflies and foliage and has combined khadi with Indian fabrics and fused the three-shuttle technique to get different colours in each border. His khadi sarees in purple and deep red with tree, branch, flower and butterfly motifs have found favour with customers. He works with over 500 weavers across India and attunes them to understand his design sensibilities. But this success was not instant. Initially, Shah found it difficult to sell the khadi saree. "It took over three years to convince customers, but now they sell as soon as they hit the racks. After my successful Berlin Eco show, I want to tap international markets."



Daniel Syiem

He is a designer who works with handspun, handwoven heritage fabric called ryndia (eri silk) since 2010. This khadi of the Northeast region is woven by women in Meghalaya. Syiem is trying to revive this tradition passed down generations. "Since ryndia is natural, organic and it depends on climatic conditions in the state, too much or too little rain has a direct impact on its production. There are differences in vegetable colours from weaver to weaver too. But the fabric is skin-friendly, has unique thermal properties and soothes the skin due to its medicinal properties." Syiem's major supply is from Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya and parts of Assam. Using the silk version or muga, he plans to add cotton and linen for shawls, stoles, dresses, sarongs, wrap-tops and flared pants. "I have taken the dailywear outfits of the Khasis – the jainsem and jainkynshah – and turned them into western silhouettes." Syiem recycles fabric waste as it is hard work to weave the yardage, but the future looks promising. "Khadi is re-emerging slowly and we retail from Good Earth, Mumbai and Twist Boutique in Shillong and will soon be available in boutiques in London."

Shruti Sancheti

For her graduation collection, Indian Renaissance, Shruti Sancheti used khadi and since then, it has been a major part of her collection. Working with the Maharashtra State Handloom Corporation, she also gets all her fabrics through weavers of Vidharbha but her designs are exclusive. "I have introduced thread counts up to 200, which is superfine, transparent, luxurious fabric. However, I feel 120 thread counts is ideal as very fragile fabrics cannot stand machines." Sancheti creates shifts, tunics, palazzos, pants, sarees and dresses. She has observed that many customers admire khadi as a piece of art but it doesn't find place in wardrobes as it is a high maintenance fabric. She favours khadi from Maharashtra, Bengal and Bihar. "At times, khadi is more costly so it's difficult to offer trendy solutions at affordable prices."



Mangala Wagle

Enterprising and active social worker Mangala Wagle started working with khadi in 1992-93 when khadi garments were kept for sale at the AIWC's Panjim outlet. They were tailored and embroidered by local women. Stationed in Goa, Wagle admits that khadi is expensive compared to other materials and difficult to get, so the supplies are mainly from the Khadi Gramodyog, Mumbai. Wagle often gets the fabrics from Bihar, Gujarat, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Dealing only in 100 per cent khadi garments, her products fly off the shelf as soon as they arrive.



Khadder

Co-founder of the brand Khadder, Arup Datta started working with khadi in 2001. Innovations have played an important part for Datta who has blended khadi with Tencel, which was the first of its kind fabric spun globally in 2007. In 2009 it was khadi Modal and he is now working on fabrics which are a mix of denim and khadi yarn. That should re-define casualwear.

The advantages of khadi are that it is insular in nature and washing enhances the look and texture of khadi fabric like the ones made on an ambar charkha. Also, vegetable dyeing on khadi fabrics throws up unusual textures, which cannot be pre-empted via design or range plans. Every alternate village among the 6.6 million villages in India will have handlooms and some folk who will have genealogical expertise in weaving or spinning."

However, Datta believes that there are problems when it comes to the supply of khadi. Unstructured setups, lack of focused governmental assistance, lack of awareness among the target clientele are some of them. "There is a lack of a systematic, nationwide tax structure on khadi and handloom products. Another disadvantage is that it needs daily ironing. It cannot be dry-washed without destroying its natural texture and it needs careful handling."

The brand makes men's and women's wear, which comprises kurtas, kameez, kurtis, shirts, sarees, dupattas, scarves and shawls. "We have the khadi fabric woven or sourced from the places where khadi is naturally made. Access depends on what you want, how badly you want it and what you are prepared to do to get it. We are terribly passionate in this area and hence have access to places and fabrics where market leaders have not even stepped in the last 40 years." Datta sources from Rajasthan, Western UP, Eastern UP, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal. "Every region has a speciality, which is the best of its kind. Thus, we cannot identify khadi with one region only. The erstwhile Malwa region had some great coarse textured khadi fabric, which included Manda near Allahabad, Kalna in West Bengal, Bargad in Orissa."

Datta works on a variety of fabrics that range from 20s, 40s or 60s yarn on a single or double ply. He has observed that the reaction to khadi could range from the ridiculous to the sublime. Prices don't seem to worry customers and he finds that it is a profitable business. With one outlet in Kolkata, the production consists of 30 per cent khadi with a 62-day shelf life. "It is very popular with students, Occidentals and senior citizens. Women are increasingly looking at the khadi silk sarees with no embellishments as a style statement, which reflects dignity, fashion, exclusivity, all bundled into one."

Types of khadi

The three popular varieties of khadi are cotton, silk and woollen. The prices for cotton range from ₹14 to ₹100 per metre for muslin khadi. The coarse khadi could be between ₹15 and ₹30 per metre while bed linen durries could vary from ₹45 to ₹250, depending on the size.

Silks differ depending on the weight and width. White silk could be from ₹80 to ₹100. Printed sarees could range from ₹350 to over ₹2,000. The most expensive khadi silk saree is the baluchari from Vishnupur in West Bengal. The art of baluchari weaving is a closely guarded secret. It requires four people to work for 15 days to weave one saree. Two weavers sit below the loom and two are on top to keep changing the patterns. Depending on the amount of design in the sarees, the price could range upwards from ₹2,000.

Woollen khadi starts from ₹80 and goes up to ₹3,000 for the pashmina wool while the prices of blankets, shawls, coats and phiran or Kashmiri kurta depend on the quality of the wool and the designs of the garments.

Where to get khadi

Organisations like the Khadi Gram Udyog Bhavans provide different varieties of khadi across India. Many designers source their material from weavers in Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Gujarat. Retail outlets also sell khadi. According to Gaurang Shah, the best markets for silk khadi are West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and the Northeast states. For cotton, it is Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. Khadi poly is spun in Gujarat and Rajasthan while Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Karnataka are known for the woollen variety.

Heads, khadi wins

Khadi is handmade, handspun, handwoven – a natural fabric which is eco-friendly, breathes well and can be cool for summer and warm for winter. Blended with natural fibres, it has a whole new texture in fall and feel. A couple of washes removes the starch and makes it light and airy. Smaller runs in khadi with mixed materials in different permutations and combinations is a dream come true for designers like Krishna Mehta. For designers like Payal Khandwala, it's the romance of something handwoven untouched by machines and factories along with the fabric's inherent imperfections that make it unique and unmatched.

It is virtually the only Indian feelgood fabric as it gives employment to thousands as well as boosts the economy and sustains indigenous artisans in a country where there is a plethora of skilled labour. Supporting khadi is one way of encouraging the talented artisan to live in his ancestral village rather than give up in despair and flock to an urban slum for alternative employment.

The flipside of khadi

The golden girl of Indian fabric comes with a few minuses. Comparatively high-maintenance, the natural dyes require a cold water wash and cannot withstand harsh detergents, machine washes and harsh ironing. Sometimes, clients cannot fathom why there are gaps in the thread. What they need to comprehend is that is actually the beauty of khadi. Designers like Anita Dongre want fine, soft fabrics for womenswear but khadi is often only available in coarser, heavier weights. Khadi, if promoted by the rich and famous, would have a great future but since it lacks the finesse of wool or silk it's a drawback.

Khadi may lack gloss which is why it often gets overlooked for eveningwear. Being a natural fibre, there is no guarantee against shrinkage and fast colour or the weave loosening with several washes. The fabric is highly starched, so designers like Rodricks wash it to eliminate the shrinkage that buyers may experience later. At times, its thickness prevents easy draping. Like most manmade products, there is little guarantee on consistency in shades or patta (bands). Slow, unpredictable production is a big challenge. Since the manufacturing process is laborious, it may be difficult to get large quantities, so Rodricks makes small capsule collections.

To stay afloat, weavers need guidance to innovate if khadi is going to morph from being a fabric for the Indian politician into a couture product. Marketing and promotion of khadi needs to be ramped up if it is to find shelf space in the mainstream market. The only time it is promoted aggressively is on October 2, the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi.

Khadi patent war

India's treasures have drawn a lot of attention. Basmati rice, neem and turmeric were some of the foods synonymous with India but now the West wants to patent them. Khadi is the latest entrant in the patent war list. The Indian government had been planning to register the Khadi trademark for years but without any progress. KVIC has moved to register it as a word mark to check further violation. The government has taken action against a German company called Khadi Naturprodukte and contacted the Organisation for Harmonization in the Internal Markets of the EU trademark office to stop any IPR violation. Apparently, Spain and Hungary have also applied for the registration of khadi. The German company is selling consumer products like shampoo, soap, lipstick and kaajal, which are products that KVIC, an arm of the ministry of micro small and medium enterprises (MSME) also sells. Hopefully, with this violation by the German firm, KVIC will move quicker to claim what is ours. ■

