



A Study of Khadi's Historical Development

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Abstract

The pre-independence symbolism of khadi was closely linked to self-sufficiency and home rule, or Swaraj and Swadeshi. This essay explores the history of Khadi, starting with its ancient ancestors who produced coarse hand-spun cloth in India during the Vedic and Mughal eras and continuing through the British colonial and post-independence periods. It looks at the different connections between Khadi and Mahatma Gandhi's freedom fight, as well as the reasons behind its collapse in the years following independence and its current resurgence. An in-depth analysis of the literature and an interview with textile specialist Sabita Radhakrishna were done for this aim. The benefits of utilizing khadi will be discussed in this essay, along with the different challenges the khadi industry encountered in raising awareness and increasing sales of the fabric and ready-made khadi clothing. It also looks at how khadi changed over time from being a 'Freedom Fabric' to a 'Fashionable Fabric,' why modern designers are incorporating it into their newest collections, and offers suggestions for raising awareness of khadi as the solution to sustainable fashion.

Keywords: swaraj, swadeshi, khadi, hand spun, hand woven, sustainable fashion.

Introduction

As the digital era advances, national identities are quickly being replaced by global ones in a world where social perspectives, education, food, fashion, and lifestyle are all rapidly diminishing. The traditional Indian outfit of a khadi kurta-pyjamas and a saree is no longer relevant. Thus, in a nation that was once united by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, or Gandhiji as he was fondly called by the millions of Indians who looked up to him as the "Father of the Nation," how can a national identity shown in clothing? "*Like Swaraj, Khadi is our birth right, and it is our lifelong duty to use that only. Anyone who does not fulfil that duty is totally ignorant of what swaraj is.*" ("Importance of Khadi | Gandhiji on KHADI | Swadeshi - Khadi," n.d.). The well-known statement by Gandhi is really self-explanatory. He compared having home rule, or swaraj, and being free to the spinning and dawning of the khadi garment. Spinning and wearing khadi was made into an Indian duty because it was believed that



emancipation from colonial oppression was strongly linked to the Indian birth right. Gandhi believed that these two identities were inseparable. The khadi movement changed as India moved from a pre-colonial to a post-colonial state, reflecting changing socioeconomic conditions and ensuing fashion trends.

Through the lens of literature reviews, this paper aims to trace the historical evolution of Khadi and investigate its survival in postcolonial India, from its early association with nationalism to its contemporary designer reincarnation. Along with discussing how the perception of khadi has changed from pre- to post-independence, which has affected its production and sales, it also covers the revival tactics that have helped propel khadi sales in recent years. Sabita Radha-Krishna, a handloom and textile expert and spokesperson, was contacted via email. Her quotes are used throughout the paper to support the research on the current state of khadi's place in the minds of Indians and its continued significance as a symbol of national identity.

The Hand-Spun Fabric's Ancient History in India Up to the Colonial Era

The history of ancient Indian weaving right from the Vedic period and explains how from consequent and significant periods of ancient Indian history references are made to the weaver, the implements used and the cloth. Buddhist Literature refers to weaving and mentions subsequent texts from the Jaina period that talk of cotton thread (Pandey, 2005). Indian grammarian, Panini, also talked of weaving in his texts. Panini's grammar texts can be traced to between the 4th and 6th century BCE. Hence, the existence of a weaving sector dates back to a very ancient period. Proof of India's ancient weaving history is also seen in references by historians like Herodotus who talks of ancient Indians of the time wearing clothes woven from cotton. The Mauryan period in Indian history saw the textile sector show great development according to Kautilya or Chanakya. Both men and women are seen to have been part of the spinning and weaving industry in the Mauryan period as seen earlier in ancient Indian Vedic periods (Pandey, 2005).

Patanjali, the ancient sage famous for his 'Yoga Sutras' has mentioned about the quality of cloth woven in India at the time. This points to the fact that as early as 200 BCE which is when the Yoga Sutra is said to have been written, the cotton weaving industry was in existence and was thriving in India (Pandey, 2005).

As documented history moved towards the Mughal period, Varanasi, which was the capital of Kasi and a religious city became the capital of the brocade and silk weaving industry. In the ancient Jatakas of the Buddhist period, Kasi is mentioned as the centre for cotton and silk weaving. During the Mughal period which lasted until approximately 1720,



textiles were considered to be significantly important. Emperor Akbar gave great prominence to the textiles, their designing, weaving, printing and embroidery as seen in this statement, “Akbar set up royal workshops (*karkhanas*) patterned on the workshops of the Safavid Persian court, over much of his empire” (Dey, 1970). Through the entire Mughal period great innovations were made to the industry and intricate weaves that were highly sought after by the nobility were produced. During this period two types of weaving industries were seen to develop. One that was independent and was owned and financed by the weaver or artisan and the other was the ‘Karkhana’ as mentioned earlier. The Karkhanas were controlled by the rulers. Large Karkhanas were spread all over Mughal controlled India and hence when the Mughal empire’s control over India waned so did the Karkhanas and so did the weaving industry (Dey, 1970).

Swaraj and Swadeshi by Introducing Khadi

Mahatma Gandhi played a pivotal role in popularizing and promoting khadi during the Indian independence movement. He saw khadi, a handspun and handwoven fabric, as a potent tool to promote self-sufficiency and economic independence for the Indian populace. Gandhi believed that by producing their own cloth, Indians could reduce their economic dependence on British-manufactured textiles and thus weaken the economic backbone of British colonialism.

In 1918, Gandhi began promoting khadi as a means of protest against the unjust British-imposed taxes on salt and textiles. He emphasized its simplicity, affordability, and traditional craftsmanship, urging Indians to spin their own cloth as a way to boycott British goods and create self-employment opportunities, especially in rural areas. This movement was a key aspect of his broader vision for India's independence, encouraging a return to indigenous industries and reviving village economies.

Gandhi himself often spun khadi and wore it as a symbolic statement of his principles. He inspired people across India to embrace khadi, not just as a fabric but as a way of life, promoting self-reliance and self-respect. Khadi became a symbol of the struggle for independence, a reminder of the movement's grassroots origins, and an enduring icon of India's fight for freedom.

Gandhi’s goal of having Khadi become the preferred fabric for all Indians was never accomplished after independence. The public's memory is always short, and initially, with the fervour of fighting for independence and khadi being the ‘freedom fabric,’ people thought it was important to flaunt their ‘Indianism,’ but this decreased after independence was gained, according to Radhakrishna. As a result, interest in khadi waned after independence. India



started to rapidly advance its industrialization after 1947. Indian entrepreneurs established large mills and industries for large-scale textile production of goods. These mills produced textiles in bulk at lower costs. Indian machine-made fabric, which became the popular choice, was a competitor for Khadi.

By 1956, AISA was closed to start the Khadi and Village Industries or the KVIC. The aim of the KVIC was to promote the production of Khadi and the other cottage or village industrial sectors. However, government aid as subsidies, grants and discounts were not sufficient to fully establish the khadi industry as a profitable entity and the liberalisation of the Indian economy from the 1990's did not help the Khadi industry either. Research revealed the drop in the production of khadi from the year of 1997 to the year 2002. This could also be attributed to the low volume of sales that led to the accumulation of khadi stocks that were never sold. This trend has also seen a sharp decline in the number of people working in an industry that is very labour-oriented and needs to attract people to work for its high ethics and preservation of khadi production.

Conclusion

This article traces the origins of khadi from India's Vedic period to the present day and addresses the deep connection between khadi and the rise of nationalism in India. Khadi's schism with post-colonial nationalism has made it difficult for KVIC to promote and sell the fabric as liberalism and globalization spread rapidly in India. This is a concern because it is important to preserve khadi, a symbol of India's ancient heritage.

After freedom in 1947, media representation strategies were changed to encourage sales with the Khadi sector continuously declining, both in terms of production and sales. This turned out to be because the growing middle class was experiencing wealth and Western culture was deeply embedded in the social fabric. A number of obstacles to the popularization of khadi, considered a 'Stone Age' fad, have emerged as well as problems faced by rural khadi manufacturing industries, who are unaware of Subsidies and subsidies lead to accumulation of unsold inventory. So, with the aim of revitalizing the khadi sector, KVIC has spearheaded the khadi revival movement. After that, the media began to present khadi less as a symbol of nationalism and focus more on khadi as the choice of new-age designers to create fashionable clothes.

Over the past few years, KVIC's efforts to collaborate with new-age designers and high-fashion moguls have been successful in improving khadi's image, but it turns out the strategy is aimed at the elite Pursue fashion and sustainability trends. It is important to take into account the choices of the growing middle class, which represents an extremely large



segment of India's urban society. The aim is to sell khadi to this class and for KVIC to showcase the benefits of khadi as a clothing choice by focusing on moderate and competitive prices so that they can choose khadi instead of tailored clothes Available from factory. Interviewing industry spokesperson and textile expert Sabita Radhakrishna, it becomes clear that hype and strategy play a key role in maintaining interest in what she calls 'heritage Castle'. She also felt that sustainable fashion and carbon emissions did not seem to be important factors for the middle class and in an interview that was part of a research paper, she felt that it was Easy accessibility, beautiful design, low cost and low maintenance with long-term durability becoming their top priority. Therefore, this article concludes with this strategy as a focus point for the future, besides creating awareness about preserving the planet through the simple yet trendy choice of khadi.

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