



Handloom Expo.

Handloom Turns Hip

The conventional is not uncool and vintage is the new alternative has awakened the handloom to a younger, more evolved clientele.

BY ZOFEEEN MAQSOOD

Earlier this year, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which boasts of the world's largest collection of Indian textiles, displayed several rare, never-seen-before pieces in an exhibit. Entitled "The Fabric of India," the showcase had everything from the earliest known Indian weaves dating back to the 1st and the 3rd century to the textile works of contemporary designers. Closer in America, last year the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York displayed an exhibit titled "Sultans of Deccan India," at which textiles belonging to

the 1500-1700 era drew the attention not only of heritage aficionados, but also of hipster New Yorkers.

There is no debating India's rich legacy of exceptional handloom products and its continued fascination in the western world. Even now, two centuries since the Industrial Revolution, handloom remains one of the largest employers after agriculture in India, with 95 percent of the world's hand woven fabric coming from India.

Nevertheless, this sector, which employs 4.3 million people on 2.4 million handlooms, for all the glamorization by designers on national and international runways, is on a

downward spiral. Revivalists have been stressing for some time now that in absence of vanguards to helm the handloom movement, it may be reduced to museums.

The handloom industry has to re-orient itself to meet the challenges posed by economic, social and technological changes. Recently fresh efforts are being made to revitalize this precious sector. To woo the youth and international markets, retail and ecommerce strategies have been adopted to make Indian handlooms a globally respected brand.

The Swedish furniture brand IKEA already works with 400,000 farmers in India to increase its cotton sourc-



Ikat weaver.

ing from India before setting shop in the country by next year and the luxury brand Hermes has been working with artisans from India. However, industry experts insist that unless the sector overcomes its limitations, it faces a bleak future. Interestingly, the new millennium trend in which the conventional is not uncool and vintage is the new alternative has awakened the handloom to its younger, more evolved clientele.

Actor and member of Indian Parliament Kirron Kher, known for her impeccable taste in handloom saris, says: “Handloom is not a segment that interests a certain age group any more. Everywhere in world that I go people are interested to know what weaves I am wearing and from what part of India they come from. It is interesting to have so many stories in a single piece of fabric. I doubt if there can be a richer history than this.”

And it is these stories woven into fabrics that are attracting the neo-

conscious world and revivalists are welcoming new steps to further the handloom enterprise.

One of India’s best-known craft revivalist and textile conservationist in India, Madhu Jain, says: “India has a textile legacy that goes back to the Indus Valley Civilization. The Rig Veda mentions the pashma fabric that was used to cover the Shivalingam. This is none other than the modern-day pashmina.”

She adds, “In more recent times, after partition, India almost lost two craft traditions – the extremely fine and delicate Dhaka muslin and the art of Nakshikantha. I collaborated with Bangladesh’s largest NGO, BRAC, to revive the two and reintroduced both into India. The sheerest of Dhaka muslins, in fact, was a favorite of Empress Noor Jehan.”

A New Lease

The Handloom Export Council of India puts the total value of exported

handloom from India at \$350 million in the 2014-15. According to official figures, the handloom sector recorded production of 7 billion square meters in 2013-14.

Alok Kumar, development commissioner (Handlooms), Ministry of Textiles India, says, “Recent trends have indicated a rapid growth in exports of hand-woven fabric, clothing and accessories, as compared to the traditional overseas requirements that ranged from home furnishings to floor coverings; so we are planning to tap the growing NRI demand through exhibitions, fashion shows and other mediums.”

Keeping in mind the renewed zest, the government has taken new steps, such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi launching the India Handloom Brand last year to endorse the quality of handloom products.

According to experts the areas where Indian textiles continued to lag are in quality and compliance with

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environmental and social factors. The new initiative tries to contain these flaws as the registration under the brand is given only after stringent testing of samples in Government of India labs. The rejection rate at the labs has been close to 65 per cent to ensure premium quality standards. The products granted registration under the India Handloom Brand are made of natural fibers and have fast colors, don't use banned chemicals or employ child labor.

E-commerce is also being increasingly tapped to give the fabrics a global outreach. Several e-commerce platforms and leading retail stores have been engaged for marketing of India Handloom branded products.

Last month online retail giant, Amazon entered into a partnership with the Development Commissioner of Handloom to not only let the local weavers sell their products directly on their portal, but to also educate and train them to ensure better quality weaves. The partnership allows Amazon India to engage with weavers in Kota in Rajasthan, Nadia in West Bengal, Bargarh in Odisha and Bijoynagar in Assam.

Kumar says, "E-commerce will be playing an increasing role in sale of hand-woven products where quality is assured through credible branding and price range is up to \$125. We need to develop market linkages of handloom producers with retail stores and bulk buyers including garment manufacturers, along with strengthening supply chain."

India Handloom Brand also plans to engage with online retailers, such as Flipkart, eBay, Amazon, Craftsvilla and Gaatha, to increase awareness about Indian handlooms. The government is also launching other initiatives, such as one by Ministry of Women and Child Development in India on Mahila-e-Haat, an online portal, in which women can display their products online at no cost.



Madhu Jain: "An interest in hand-made textiles does not translate into an effective supply chain that ensures artisanal live." Top: Madhu Jain collection.

Zapping the Challenges

Designer Sumona Parekh, who has been closely working with craftsmen and gharanas in Bengal to revive dying textiles, says, "Today a major difficulty for handloom weavers across the country is the non-availability of good quality yarn at affordable prices."

She adds, "The credit facilities currently available to weavers is far from adequate. The ones made available through co-operatives rarely reach the intended."

Industry insiders say while interest,

especially among NRIs and westerners is strong, an infrastructure is necessary to ensure good quality products reach connoisseurs seamlessly.

Kumar agrees, "The biggest challenge is to upgrade skills, mobilize working capital and to access urban markets as traditional local markets crumble due to adoption of power loom for daily clothing needs."

Revivalists urge that many more steps are required. Jain says, "An interest in hand-made textiles does not translate into an effective supply chain that ensures artisanal live-

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lihoods. One of the major reasons for this is that machine-made fabrics are flooding the market and offer cheaper options to customers and retailers, alike. So artisans are seeking unskilled work elsewhere, and migrating.”

According to Kumar, efforts are required to produce defect free, high quality handloom fabrics to meet contemporary consumer preferences, and also to ensure reasonable wages so that younger generation opt for this occupation.

For all the weaknesses, the industry has been able to make a global presence. For centuries, the European market has coveted Indian textiles for its fine quality and exquisite workmanship.

A significant number of the world’s top American and European design houses, from Ralph Lauren to Oscar de la Renta, Jean-Paul Gaultier, have taken inspiration from Indian handwoven weaves and embroidery.

Most recently, luxury footwear giant Christian Louboutain entered the fray, offering bespoke Indian embroidery on his shoes and also on clothes for the Indian bride. NRIs also are huge consumers.

Jain says, “There is a huge Indian diaspora that scans continents, so the market is enormous. And for those who don’t want to wear traditional Indian clothes, then luckily, the boundaries between what is Indian and what is ‘western’ in silhouette is becoming more and more amorphous! For instance, the abstract and geometrical patterns in even the most traditional Ikat work well in an Indo-western outfit.”

Parekh says the reason why handloom industry has been sustained by its enormous legacy: “Millions of looms across the country are engaged in weaving cotton, silk and other natural fibers to bring out India’s precious heritage. There is hardly a vil-



Sumona Parekh: “There is hardly a village where weavers do not exist weaving out the traditional beauty of the region.”

lage where weavers do not exist weaving out the traditional beauty of the region. The skills and activities are passed from one generation to another. Every state has its own weave like Tussar silk from Bihar, Taant from Bengal and intricately worked gold borders from Andhra Pradesh.”

Madhu Jain relates a memory from her years as a revivalist: “I was asked by Indian politician Maneka Gandhi to restore a khadi sari that she wanted to wear during her son, Varun Gandhi’s wedding. Woven in jail by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1941, Maneka

Gandhi had worn this rose-pink sari during her own wedding. I accepted this assignment with a sense of reverence mixed with nervousness. It took a lot of painstaking effort in restoring the yarn strength and requisite stiffness to the sari. Among other things, I used an ancient Ayurveda mixture in the revival process and the results were surreal.”

Perhaps nothing is more gratifying than seeing gossamer weaves hand-spun in a remote Indian village turning heads at fashion hotspots in Paris or Milan. 2