

By Shefalee Vasudev

When an old story is retold, it never remains the same. New retailing is retelling the story of Indian handloom and hand-crafts. The trade has changed. So has the warp and the weave. Handloom has shrugged off the ornamental, rustic look. Designer interest, wearability and affordability have turned it into a chic option. The weaves are now spiked with understated colours, the textures are softer, sexier, the designs minimalistic, the styles many and myriad. Name them and they are there on the shelves—wrap-around skirts, short-sleeved tops, spaghetti kurtis, reversible jackets—all in handloom weaves.

At the annual Fashion Council of India (FCI) Meet 2003, Bhagalpuri silk, spun by a weaver group in Bihar, won the Fashion Fabric of the year award. This women's group is a rare success story, considering that just 15 years ago, the members were bonded labourers. At Dastkar's Nature Bazaar held last November in Delhi, the Berozgar Mahila Kalyan Samiti alone made a profit of Rs 21 lakh, besides netting designer and export orders. Their achievement is just one thread of the larger story being spun all over India. Dastkar, which has been holding regular Nature Bazars in major Indian cities for the last decade, has recorded increase in profits every year. In January 2002, their Delhi bazaar alone made Rs 1 crore, which jumped to Rs 2.5 crore in 2003.

While arts and crafts were always successful as exports, their big buzz as moneymakers in the Indian market is recent. "India has stopped looking to the West for elegance and sophistication," says Laila Tyabji, chairperson of Dastkar. She believes that style magazines projecting fine lifestyles through the use of handloom have defined this trend. "Earlier, at the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIPT), students didn't want to touch handlooms and chose fabrics like spandex and lycra. Now, 75 per cent show their annual designs in handloom," she adds.

To say that handloom fabrics have arrived would be belittling the boom that has grown slowly but so steadily

DISTINCTIVE DESIGNS: Unusual khadi outfits by Jattinn Kochhar

TRENDY THREADS

Indian handloom has shrugged off its regional, rustic look to turn into a sophisticated option and now co-exists as a parallel to big fashion brands



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that it now provides competition and co-exists as a parallel to big fashion brands. If you must have a Benetton or a Tommy Hilfiger in your wardrobe, then you cannot do without a jamavar or a khadi silk jacket. Textile conservationist Martand Singh agrees. "The major market for handloom fabrics is India itself."

In 1997, Priyanka Gandhi made an unusual choice when she wore a red and gold, hand-woven Kashmiri sari from her grandmother's collection for her wedding. Because even in those days, women from the urban elite chose crepe and chiffon over handloom silks for the most important occasions of their life. But now loyalties are shifting. The search for exclusivity has brought people back to the roots. "Exclusivity was seriously challenged with globalisation and people shopping abroad. The modernistic handloom fabrics are a boon—they help prevent everyone from looking the same," says Mumbai-based designer Haresh Shah, consultant with the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC).

Undeniably, it is the designers who have given Indian crafts a buoyancy. Handloom ensembles and accessories have been seen scorching the ramp. Designer Ritu Kumar, whose fondness for Indian textiles is well known, also stocks young and upbeat garments all in Indian textiles. "A good way to conserve the rich repertoire of our textiles is to revive and contemporarise them," says Kumar, who is also working on her second book on textiles.

The popularity has been underlined by design houses like Anokhi and FabIndia. Anokhi, associated with the best in vegetable dyes and western wear in textiles, was started by Faith and John Singh with one outlet in Jaipur in 1970. Now, it has eight shops across India. "More than 25 per cent of the total base fabric consumed by us is handloom and we intend to increase this to 50 per cent very soon," says Kavita Madhok, Jaipur-based director of Anokhi. Similarly, FabIndia's first retail outlet was started by American John Bisell in 1976 in Delhi. Now it has shops in nine major cities in India.

The word "revival" deserves a little flashback. It



WOVEN SUCCESS: FabIndia (above) promotes a handloom lifestyle; a silk bag by Shah (right); elegant handloom outfits



SIPRA DAS



was during the time of Indira Gandhi and Pупul Jayakar that handloom got its first big boost through revival projects. Later, it became less of a saleable idea. Those who wore them were dubbed either "nationalist" or "patriotic". Actors Jaya Bachchan and Shabana Azmi, Martand Singh, Rajeev Sethi and politician Jaya Jaitly got linked with the revival story of handloom but big sales were a long way off. Jaitly's attempt at contemporarising the Gujarat government emporium, Gurjari, between 1978 and 1988 made her realise how keen people were for rapidly changing designs. But it was her concept of Dilli Haat in Delhi that finally turned the tide. Dilli Haat now makes annual profits of Rs 10-12 crore. "There has been a multiplier effect. From the sunset industry that Indian handloom was considered a decade back, it is now a worldwide statement," says Jaitly.

Silently but surely, the complimentary co-existence between NGOs, the Government and the high-end designers is helping. Khadi Gramodyog Bhavan has brought fashion designers on its board and is reworking its display setting. Weavers are being w to redefine their USP to arket needs.

he 17 million craftspeople, is good news. But there are knots that must be disengled. While the Ministry of xtiles is exploring credit l schemes for weavers so ey can finance the orders he Government exhibitions es don't have the backup or bulk supplies. Also, while ops like Cottage Industries im rake in foreign e, crafts needs to be into the mainstream. "I nderstand why hand-made re and home accessories l be sidelined in an empo- Why can't they be in a market?" asks Tyabji.

tylised supermarkets for and crafts which stock the st weaves in the world with largest variety in textures d utilitarian handicrafts ppear to be an idea whose me has come. And then this ry will be retailed again. ■