

Khadi diaries

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Sadly, everything looked rusty; the charkas collecting dust, sitting idle in the far corner of rooms with thatched roofs. The wooden looms replaced by enormous modern machines of steel and cast iron; cotton spinners, 'katunis' completely absent from the scene — probably employed at the local garments factory, earning a much higher salary compared to the meagre amount of Tk 10 to Tk 30 per hour assigned to cotton spinners on an average.

"How can we offer more? The midlemen don't want to pay one taka extra for our efforts! If we raise the wages, the end price would spike and that means a lot of good fabric would be wasted because no one wants to pay for them," said Chintaharan Debnath while revealing the complex situation.

entire day weaving exceptional, time consuming pieces on the 'hathkargha,' producing a coarse material that breathes on its own; providing warmth to the wearer in winter and coolness in summer.

Nowadays, what we get in the name of khadi are fine cotton clothes, produced in mills in Narayanganj, with thousands of exact copies of every single design. These clothes, although comfortable and good looking, cannot be termed as the same khadi brought to Bangladesh by the 'Swadeshi Andolon' or Mahatma Gandhi himself," said Prabir Shaha.

HISTORY OF HANDLOOM AND KHADI

To properly cite history, we must go a long way back to the Indus Valley

huge amounts of yarn to Britain causing countrywide scarcity and an additional influx of cheaper imported material from Lancashire mills, the production of khadi, a contemporary social fabric, had been viciously disrupted, along with many other handloom fabrics of the Indian subcontinent.

However, the 1920s saw a revival of khadi again, thanks to Gandhi, who had the vision to boycott foreign goods, and provide a unique opportunity to every man, woman, and child of greater India to maintain self-discipline and self-sacrifice as part of the nationalistic movement, Swadeshi Andolon.

Acharya Vinoba Bhave, chosen as the first 'Satyagrahi' by Gandhi himself, had once articulated that if Gandhi did not come up with the idea of non-violence and non-cooperation, someone else

The first cotton mill in greater India began operating in 1854 in Bombay (present day Mumbai). The 1920s saw a revival of khadi again.



Bengal, historians have cited that even in the 6th century, a local variation of a coarse cotton fabric resembling khadi had been described by travellers.

The Tripura Gazetteer depicts that the khadi weaves from Cumilla, Mainamati, Gouripur, and Muradnagar had been renowned even during the Mughal period, as valuable textiles with distinctive characteristics.

Khadi, however, did gain momentum in Bengal after the Swadeshi Andolon, and the winds of change in greater India. Mahatma Gandhi encouraged the local weavers to support khadi, and consequently, in 1921, a branch of Nikhil Bharat Tantabali Samity had been established in Chandina, Cumilla. This was arranged in order to export khadi from Bengal to major cities in India to meet with the increase in demands.

Later, in 1952, Dr Akhter Hamid Khan and Governor Firoz Khan Noon established The Khadi Cottage Industry Association, and a khadi specialist was brought in from India along with 400 charkhas to train, improve and assist in production.

However, all the initiatives were dampened after the Indian independence and the following Pakistani rule. Sadly, today, even after 40 years of the sovereignty of Bangladesh, designers and retailers have failed to restore and resurrect the production of khadi, transforming it into an almost forgotten craft.

THE FUTURE

Khadi's past depicts that this very trade has faced numerous upheavals over many centuries, coming out stronger every single time. Competition from power looms is not new, ever more so in the future, especially with the emergence of Artificial Intelligence.

But yet again, Chintaharan Debnath's words remain — "No matter what, exquisite heritage products must not be manipulated with or forgotten completely, because heritage is the backbone of a nation, it defines its very existence".

There would always be a niche market for the authentic khadi, even in the age of power mills and nylon. Thereby, those of us who care for authentic products must be ready to pay the proper price to value the entire chain of production. Otherwise, unique crafts like the khadi weave will soon be forgotten; lost to the pages of history, and only passed down as stories.

With this valuable trip to Chandina, we learnt that with our combined awareness, the soon-to-be-dead industry of the authentic khadi could be sustained — at least for connoisseurs of everything vintage.

By Mehrin Mubdi Chowdhury
Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed
Location: Debidwar, Chandina, Cumilla



Prabir Shaha also narrated the sad story of how he had to let go of his father's handloom khadi factory, and incorporate power looms into the system to get on with earning a living. "It's not my fault, the world has moved on, and so must we — if we are to live!" he said.

What people are ready to pay for is what power looms supply, but that is not khadi! Even the threads are imported from abroad — formerly, the cotton was produced in Bangladesh, often collected from the wastage of cotton mills and then churned into thread by the ultra-poor, using a charka.

Expert artisans would later spend an

Civilisation, where cotton textiles and weaving looms had a strong presence. These facts have been confirmed by archaeologists, from the evidence they discovered at the excavated sites of Mohenjo-Daro.

Fast forward to the 13th century, cotton textiles were exported from greater India to China, Indonesia, Far East, and even to some parts of Europe, before the Europeans actually took over India.

Few centuries later, the first cotton mill in greater India began operating in 1854 in Bombay (present day Mumbai). But just a few years later, due to export of

would have on a later date, because it was a historical necessity, but if 'Bapu' had not promoted or thought of khadi as an instrument to fight back, if he did not endorse Khadi so intensely, no one in the world would have imagined it...it got a second life only because 'Bapu' wanted Khadi as a permanent solution to poverty alleviation, employment, national reliance, dignity and so much more.

KHADI CULTURE IN BANGLADESH
Although many will tell us that it is through the Swadeshi Andolon and Mahatma Gandhi that khadi entered

Biased for a cause

"In this coarse thread given by Mother, I see boundless love foster, We are stone fools, hence brother, We beg at doors of some other."

-- Translation of the song "Mayer Deoa Mota Kapor."

The cuckoo's call is ushering Spring, our favourite season. Once again, the premises of Charukola will fill with activities; cheerful women with garlands around their necks and gerbera blooms neatly tucked behind their ears will become a common sight.

Men too do not fall behind — they shall put on their Spring garbs, and some take it way further to getting a 'bhodrolok' look.

Truly, we do love Spring. The pleasure of the season is just one reason; maybe it's just another excuse for us Bengalis to celebrate. We also rejoice at Pahela Falgun because it takes us back to a glorious past, now almost hijacked by boutiques and their fusion attires, telecos with their new campaigns with fine prints that puzzle even the most seasoned cryptogram enthusiasts.

This was not the case even a few decades ago. Traditionally, Pahela

Falgun was somewhat of a homely affair where friends would meet, sing songs and read poetry over a cup of steaming hot tea and some pitas, fresh from the bounty of Nobanno.

The norm to wear something traditional was still there, but no one would really think of buying something

Pabna beetis and other pieces, that we now term, heritage!

There was no need for anything new, because the previous generation already had the 'traditionals' covered!

Our parents slipped into the folds of the six-yard fabric every morning



new for the occasion, and why would they? — every woman's closet back then had a good run of hand-loomed khadis made from hand-spun threads. Northern Bengal had its own signature taant saris, and women had plenty of

People are quick to compare products of Bangladesh with neighbouring India, but fail to consider that the Indian domestic market is far larger than Bangladesh. The demand of mass produced fabric has an undeniable greater appeal, for its affordability.

and moved with ease as they worked around the house, or out in offices. Most of our grandmothers never abandoned their saris, even as octogenarians.

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