

Reviving the katan

A peacock blue katan with paisley motifs, a blushing girl in her pony tails, and a black teep — that about sums up one of my favourite yesteryear pictures of my mother. It was probably taken during her college years, on a bright summer morning back in the '60s. Another favourite picture spots her sitting around a bonfire in a red katan silk with peacock prints, while enjoying a sizzling barbecue with colleagues somewhere in the woodlands of the Middle East.

What about the one that steals the show — the one where she is looking like a demi-goddess sitting beside my father, perhaps for the first time in their lives, looking regal in a magenta katan with all over golden zari work.

With a neatly tucked bun and fresh flowers, she looked nothing short of Tagore's muse, a vivid imagery from his poetry.

My father was certainly lucky, and so am I, to have known someone so elegant, and also someone who has passed down her good taste in katan saris to the next generation.

But that's just a story from the yesteryears that I am obsessed with; I am thankful that mum has handed down all her precious handloom saris, including the majestic katans over to me.

What about my own bequests?

What about the ones that I plan to hand over to my children? Where is the original handloom?

In the age of synthetics and more affordable power loom pieces, pure silk katan have certainly taken a backstage.

A trip to the Benaroshi Polli, and a conversation with a revolutionary fashion enthusiast of our country, my perception became slightly clearer.

THE MUGHAL PATRONAGE

Katan silk originated in Persia, with the advance in trade between countries, the popular silk material had been carried down to India. Women belonging to the royal families indulged in the special Persian silk to make elegant garments of their own.

As recorded by Inayat Khan in Shah Jahan Nama, the Mughal royals were an aficionado of the katan. He also mentions that the royals did not wear one cloth in an entire day of 24 hours, instead they chose to wear three or more, passing down their exquisite garbs to those in the lower ranks.

Most of the clothes were just worn once!

Through this practice, exquisite fabrics such as katan silk were passed down to all the subjects in the empire and became popular throughout the realm. Originally, the kinds of colours and motifs used were not as vibrant or variant as we find them today. Mughal women displayed a penchant for ivory white with floral patterns. Another popular colour was the blood red, with spots of assorted colours in the background.

Then, with the passage of time and innovations, master artisans of the special craft, developed in South East Asia, created their own variety of colours, and motifs on the katan silk.

As time passed, Mughal history faded away, and the British began the process of colonisation.

The weavers of katan centred around Varanasi, also called Benaras. Here, they made finely woven saris of silk decorated with intricate designs

such as the bel, pata, chaad-tara, kolki etc.

WEAVERS OF MIRPUR

In Bangladesh, Muslims who migrated from Benaras during the partition period in 1947 started making Benaroshi katan saris in Mohammadpur, and Mirpur areas of Dhaka since the '50s. Today, the katan industry is still carried by the camp based Urdu speaking people of Bangladesh. There are over 100 outlets at the Mirpur Banaroshi Polli, and the handlooms are in the camp areas.

Talking with the artisans of this special weave, we found dissatisfaction related to the trade conditions, and their explicit desire to change professions, if given the choice.

One Rahim Mia does not want his children to suffer like him. He wants the future generation to move away from the traditional family business of making and selling saris. Shamsul Master, another gifted craftsman, showed his frustration by claiming that people working as house help and in RMG sector get higher wages. He also added, "cheaper copies from China and India puts sustainability of original designs and handloom at risk."

THE PROCESS

Creating katan silk requires a series of meticulous steps, ensuring that the highest quality is achieved.

To start with, yellowed yarns of silk are first steamed and then treated with

chemicals in order to make them soft and malleable. On doing so, three or four plies of the thread are then spun together on a spinning wheel, where they are twisted and made ready for the loom.

Katan silk is created by twisting together two threads, while other forms of silk require different numbers of yarn. Once this is done, graphs are developed for the imitation of patterns, so as not to make any little mistake. The designs are then carved into a frame, and the patterns dyed with precision.

This is only a single step; there are many others like putting in zari work, mina work, into the katan silk that takes up more time before it becomes complete.

TÊTE-À-TÊTE WITH NIHARIKA MOMTAZ

A chartered accountant with a bright career in the world of corporate finance does not actually ring any bell as a die-hard katan enthusiast, does it? But that is exactly how Niharika Momtaz's life sums up.

She stepped into the world of fashion designing at the tender age of 18. After a brief period of pursuing her passion, life and career took her to different directions with Articleship with KPMG Bangladesh, and a revered post as the Head of Finance of Acid Survivors Foundation Bangladesh.

"I actually thank this career path of mine acting as blessing in disguise," said the fashion devotee. "While working at Acid Survivors Foundation, I had the responsibility of arranging many fund raisers, including painting auctions, fashion shows, photography exhibitions and much more."

"All these added to my experience and encouraged me to work further in the field of fashion and design — arranging trunk shows and exclusive fashion shows. Because of my connections, from sourcing premium quality items to exclusive clientele, I was encouraged to establish my own business in the jewellery trade," said Niharika.

Delving further into her life story, we learned that she is more interested in metal — pure silver and semi-silver — than the more precious heavy golds and diamonds.

"My idea is to encourage people to wear silver and metals, in addition to gold and diamonds. I try giving them the same royal touch, with exquisite finishing, as they would get from any upscale jeweller," said Niharika.

As the conversation got more intense, she explained how her interests now include 'deshi fabrics' and products by 'local artisans.'

"Selling curated jewellery from all over the world, and my own personal designs, was what I was mostly known for. But then, I got involved with making saris in Sri Lanka and India, having failed to connect with any local artisans over here. With success in these countries, I realised my life story would never be

In November, 2018, Niharika Mumtaz began her own line called 'Prerona,' focusing only on heritage saris, especially the Mirpur Benaroshi katan.

"I have a plan to work only with handloom, and my vision is to see Bangladeshi girls wear the beautiful garb as our mothers' did once upon a time. A recent visit to the Polli has gotten me very motivated because if we do not take the reins right now, the famous tradition will be lost in a few years' time," revealed the designer.

"I also work with Jamdani and other types of handloom saris, but I am particularly fascinated with the katan silk because not many people are working with it at the moment. Speaking to the artisans, I have learnt that in the age of synthetics and cheaper copies, the handloom katan silk industry is almost on the verge of dying."

"The artisan weavers are extremely unhappy with the results; they remain underpaid and nameless, without any sort of recognition. I certainly want to make a change on that note," confessed the fashion entrepreneur.

A cup of tea and a few samosas later, we learned that Niharika plans to revisit the age-old designs from '50s and '60s, and embed the past into the current katan silk backdrop.

"My saris are handwoven, and each carries the name of its artisan. I am going to let the world know of their hard work. If I ever get recognised for a particular sari, in the many fashion shows that I take part in, I am going to make sure that the artisan comes with me on the global stage and receive the recognition along with me."

"Without their hard work, perseverance and knowledge I'd be nowhere," she added.

During our conversation, we also put forward the fact that handloom saris are extremely expensive, and quite often, out of reach of regular customers.

"We are not looking at the regular customer here," she explained. "We are looking at art lovers, heritage lovers, and those who know the true value of an authentic handwoven sari, and are willing to pay a high price just to own one."

"I have the perfect clientele for these saris, people who would value the heritage looms just as they are meant to be. If that means I charge a bit extra and pay back to the artisans a fair share, restoring their livelihoods and willingness to work in the field, then why not? I am more than happy to pursue such an exclusive client list," she confessed.

We concluded our rendezvous by asking the designer why she pursues both local heritage looms and international.

Niharika Momtaz answered with a grin and a positive nod.

"In today's global stage, I don't expect anyone to wear only 'deshi.' No one does! Not anyone from India, nor from America. But that should not deter us from owning, wearing and flaunting purely 'deshi' stuff. There should be at least one Jamdani, Muslim, khadi, katan, Tangail silk, etc. in all our wardrobes. There's just no way around it."

"If we don't patronise our own materials, then they'd ultimately be lost, and we'd lose our heritage in the process. The basic idea is to own the best of everything — local and international," reiterated the entrepreneur, as she shared her vision of what our attitude should be regarding style, and fashion statements.

The traditions may be dying, and the situation may appear grim on the outside, but with emergence of enthusiasts like Niharika Momtaz, the future does not seem bleak.

As she said, "The time is not over yet; it is on the verge, but if we work together to revive our heritage, we still can."

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Wardrobe and Jewellery: Deshi Katan, Niharika Momtaz
Make-up: Farzana Shakil's Makeover Salon
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