

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 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.

#### Handloom stories of the past

To properly cite history, we must go a long



way back to the Indus Valley 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, the Far East, and even to some parts of Europe, before the Europeans took over India.

A 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 the export of

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 Mahatma 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 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 in Bangladesh

Although many will tell us that it is through the Swadeshi Andolon and Mahatma Gandhi that khadi entered 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 Tantubai Samity was established in Chandina, Cumilla. This was arranged in order to export khadi from Bengal to major cities in India to meet the increase in demand.

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 50 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.

#### Where in the future...

Khadi's past depicts that this very trade has faced numerous upheavals over many centuries, coming out stronger every single time. 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 will always be a niche market for authentic khadi, even in the age of power mills and nylon. Therefore, 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 Mehri Mubdi Chowdhury

Photo: LS Archive/ Sazzad Ibne Sayed

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## KHADI The Future Fabric Show



The Fashion Design Council of Bangladesh (FDCB) recently announced the eagerly awaited Khadi Fest 2024, an annual celebration of Bangladesh's rich cultural heritage — Khadi: The Future Fabric Show."

The exclusive event showcased renowned designers like Jakia, Maysha, Abir, Tajbir, Faiza Ahmed, Tenzing Chakma, Ibalarihun, Afsana Ferdousi, Imam Hasan, Sadia Rashid Chowdhury, Abhisek Roy, Shaibal Saha, Charlee, Maheen Khan, Shah Rukh Amin, Kuhu Plamondon, Nawshin Khair, Sayantan Sarkar, Lipi Khandker, and Chandana Dewan.

There were expert panel discussions, exhibition zones, and artisanal workshops to round up the event. Khadi: The Future Fabric Show, sponsored by BGMEA and powered by HSBC, Berger, Rupayan Group, and Buy Here Now took place at the Aloki Convention Centre on the 19th and 20th January 2024 from 10 AM to 10 PM.