

India's Disappearing Textile Traditions: A Reflection on the Past

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SUMMARY

India's textile heritage is a vibrant tapestry of centuries-old techniques, deeply intertwined with the country's rich cultural identity. The significance of textiles, exploring a range of fabrics, techniques, and traditions that highlight the remarkable diversity found across the subcontinent. It also offers an overview of key concepts, such as the historical evolution, craftsmanship, cultural importance, and regional variations of traditional textiles. Once flourishing across the nation, these textiles were not just ordinary fabrics- they were expressions of artistry, skill, and tradition. However, with the rise of industrialization, globalization, and shifting fashion trends, many of these ancient fabrics and weaving methods are on the edge of extinction. This article explores the forgotten or vanished textiles, shedding light on their history and the ongoing efforts to preserve and revive them for future generations.

INTRODUCTION

India's textile history spans over 5,000 years, with its rich tradition of cloth-making traced back to the ancient Harappan Civilization. Early Indian textiles were created from natural fibres like cotton, silk, and wool, and were crafted using intricate techniques such as handloom weaving, dyeing, and embroidery. These textiles served a purpose far greater than just clothing; they were essential in religious rituals, trade, and even served as symbols of power and wealth. Across various regions, textiles became a reflection of both artistic expression and cultural significance. Certain textiles, like the renowned muslin from Bengal and the exquisite Kanchipuram silk from Tamil Nadu, gained international fame and were exported worldwide. However, many other textiles, though valued within their regions, have remained largely local and are now on the verge of being forgotten.

Vanishing Weaves and Fabrics

1. **Mashru**: a fabulous fabric that originated in Gujarat, was traditionally woven using a blend of silk and cotton, combining the luxurious sheen of silk with the comfort of cotton. The intricate weaving process involved a mix of plain weave and supplementary techniques, creating a unique textile. Historically, Mashru was used to craft garments for royalty and nobility, showcasing its elegance and prestige. However, with the decline in demand for handmade textiles and the rise of synthetic fabrics, the art of Mashru weaving has nearly disappeared.



Mashru

2. **Khadi Jamdani**: a luxurious cotton fabric renowned in Bengal, was crafted by skilled artisans who wove intricate patterns using the unique Jamdani technique. Unlike regular handloom weaving, Jamdani involves adding supplementary weft threads to create delicate, detailed designs. However, with the rise of industrialization and mechanized looms, the delicate craft of Khadi Jamdani has gradually faded, and today, only a few artisans continue to preserve this traditional art form.



Khadi Jamdani

3. Chanderi Silk: a traditional fabric renowned for its lightweight and translucent texture, originates from the town of Chanderi in Madhya Pradesh. The craft of weaving Chanderi dates back to the Mughal period, known for its intricate patterns that once symbolized royalty and grandeur. However, with the rise of power looms and the popularity of synthetic fabrics, the handwoven Chanderi fabric has become increasingly rare. As a result, the once-celebrated weaving techniques are being forgotten by newer generations.



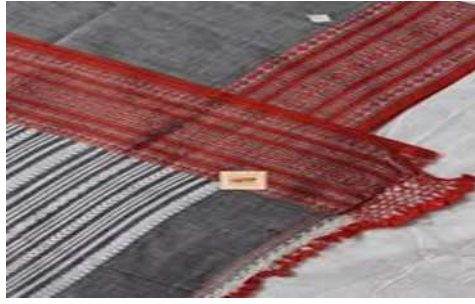
Chanderi Silk

4. Tangaliya Weaving: a unique craft from Gujarat, involves a complex technique where extra-weft yarn is used to create intricate patterns, often featuring geometric shapes and motifs. Traditionally made from wool, this textile was used to create shawls, blankets, and garments. However, in the face of competition from machine-made fabrics, Tangaliya weaving has become a fading craft, with only a few artisans remaining to carry on this once-vibrant tradition.



Tangaliya Weaving

5. Paithani: Paithani, one of Maharashtra's oldest and most revered handloom textiles, is crafted using the finest silk and gold threads. Known for its elaborate borders and intricate motifs, Paithani often features peacocks, floral patterns, and paisleys. Historically, this luxurious fabric was used in ceremonial settings, such as weddings and religious rituals. However, the high cost of production, coupled with the availability of cheaper, mass-produced fabrics, has led to a decline in the fabric's presence in modern-day India.



Paithani

The Vanishing Art of Traditional Dyeing Techniques

Dyeing has long been a vital component of India's textile heritage, with distinct regional variations in colors and techniques. Traditional dyes such as indigo, madder, and cochineal were widely used, each imparting unique hues to fabrics. However, over time, these natural dyeing methods have been largely replaced by synthetic dyes, which are quicker, more affordable, and offer greater versatility, leading to a decline in the use of traditional practices.

1. Indigo Dyeing: Indigo dyeing, particularly from Gujarat and Bengal, is one of India's earliest natural dyeing techniques. The vibrant blue derived from indigo plants became a defining feature of Indian textiles and was highly sought after, even being exported to Europe and beyond. However, during the British colonial period, indigenous dyeing methods were suppressed, and the shift toward chemical dyes caused a decline in indigo production. Despite this, efforts are now underway in certain regions to revive this traditional craft.



Indigo Dyeing

2. Bandhani and Leheriya: Bandhani and Leheriya are ancient tie-dye techniques, predominantly practiced in Rajasthan and Gujarat, where artisans meticulously tie and dye fabric to create intricate, beautiful patterns. While Bandhani continues to be practiced in certain regions, the rise of mass production and the appeal of synthetic dyes have pushed traditional hand-dyeing methods to the periphery. Furthermore, the fast fashion industry's demand for quick and inexpensive fabrics has contributed to a decline in the popularity of these hand-dyed traditions.



Bandhani and Leheriya

Impact on Society, Economy and Culture

The decline of traditional textiles represents more than just the loss of craftsmanship; it is a profound blow to India's socio-economic structure. Many of these textile traditions were closely linked to specific communities, reflecting their distinct cultural identities. As these crafts fade, these communities not only lose their livelihoods but also a vital part of their cultural heritage. Women have traditionally played a crucial role in India's textile industry, particularly in weaving communities where they were responsible for key aspects of production, such as dyeing, spinning, and weaving. As traditional textiles fade, many of these women have lost their primary source of income, which has only worsened poverty in rural areas.

Preserving and Reviving Traditional Textiles

In recent years, efforts to revive India's fading textile heritage have gained significant momentum, driven by a new generation of artisans, designers, and NGOs dedicated to preserving traditional craft techniques. Key initiatives in this revival process include:

1. Preservation and Awareness

Organizations such as the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) and the Crafts Council of India have made efforts to document threatened textile practices and highlight their cultural importance. These initiatives are vital in ensuring that these crafts are not lost without a trace.

2. Empowering Artisans

Numerous NGOs are working to empower artisans by providing fair wages, teaching modern design techniques, and ensuring their products reach global markets. By bridging traditional crafts with contemporary design, these organizations are helping artisans stay relevant in today's world.

3. Ethical Fashion and Sustainable Consumption

The rising movement for sustainable fashion is motivating consumers to choose ethical alternatives, such as handwoven textiles. As awareness of the environmental and cultural consequences of fast fashion grows, more consumers are gradually shifting toward supporting traditional textile practices that are both environmentally sustainable and culturally enriching.

4. Partnerships with Designers

Indian designers are increasingly working with artisans to blend traditional textiles with modern fashion. This fusion of contemporary and traditional styles is playing a crucial role in preserving textile practices that might otherwise fade away. Renowned designers like Anita Dongre and Sabyasachi Mukherjee have made significant efforts to feature traditional textiles, such as Banarasi silk, Chikan embroidery, and Kanjivaram silk, in their collections.

CONCLUSION

India's vanishing textile heritage serves as a poignant reminder of the cultural traditions at risk of being lost. While many of these textiles may never regain their former prominence, ongoing efforts to revive and preserve them offer hope. The preservation of this heritage requires a collective effort from artisans, designers, consumers, and policymakers to recognize the significance of these crafts, support the artisans behind them, and raise awareness of India's rich textile history. As we move toward a more sustainable and ethical future, embracing India's diverse textile legacy can help shape a more inclusive and responsible fashion industry.

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