

## **Khadi: The Indian Fabric** **From Local to the Global Ramp**

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**Abstract:** Khadi, preferably referred to as the "Fabric of India," contains deep cultural, historical and economic significance. The fabric originated as a symbol of self-reliance and resistance during India's struggle for independence, it has evolved into an example of sustainable fashion and rural empowerment. Khadi is made from cotton, but it may also include other fabrics like silk or wool, which are all spun into yarn on a charkha. Khadi is a versatile fabric that remains cool in summer and warm in winter. Presently, Khadi is widely accepted in various fashion arenas. To improve its appearance, the fabric is sometimes starched to give it a stiffer feel.

The production of Khadi provides livelihood opportunities for various rural artisans and weavers, contributing to the local economy and helping to maintain traditional skills and crafts. This paper explores the historical relevance of Khadi, its role in India's independence movement, its socio-economic impact, challenges faced by weavers in its production and marketing, and its contemporary relevance in the global fashion and textile industry. Also seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of Khadi's past, present, and prospects.

**Keywords:** Contemporary, Khadi Fabric, Global Textiles, India, Sustainable fashion

### **1. Introduction**

Khadi, the sustainable fabric, is a hand-spun, handwoven natural fibre cloth, mainly made from cotton, silk, or wool. Khadi has become an emblem of India's Swadeshi movement, pioneered by Mahatma Gandhi, to promote self-reliance and boycott British goods. Today, Khadi continues to play an important role in India's fashion and textile industry, offering employment opportunities, preserving traditional craftsmanship, and promoting sustainable fashion.

It is globally known that Khadi has significant historical, cultural, and economic value. During India's independence movement, Khadi symbolised independence and defiance. Mostly cotton is used to make Khadi, sometimes it may also contain wool or silk, all of which are spun into yarn on a charkha. This multipurpose fabric stays warm in the winter and cool in the summer. To enhance its beauty, Khadi is occasionally starched to strengthen its texture. Khadi is rightly hailed as a fabric which breathes. Today, Khadi represents eco-friendly fashion and rural empowerment. The historical origins of Khadi, its contribution to the Indian freedom movement, its socioeconomic effects, the difficulties rural weavers faced in producing, and its current significance in the global textile industry all need to be reviewed.



Anjali Debnath, 65, has been working with a spinning wheel for the last five decades.  
Photo: Saikat Bhadra

Across India, khadi continues to be a special fabric in many ways. As the world moves towards artificial industrial fashion, Khadi fabric continues to provide incomes for the rural population while reminding India of its legacy of sustainable living and self-reliance.

## 2. Historical Background

The origins of Khadi can be traced back to ancient India, where handwoven fabrics were widely used. When Alexander the Great invaded India, his soldiers wore cotton garments that were far more comfortable in the summers than their traditional woollen garments. Nearchus, Alexander's admiral, recorded that "the cloth worn by Indians is made by cotton grown on trees". Interestingly, a few paintings in the Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra depict the process of separating cotton fibres from seeds and women spinning cotton yarn!

Chanakya's Artha Shastra provides another literary evidence, compiled in the 3rd century BC, which refers to "superintendents of yarn (sutradhyaksha)" who should "get yarn spun out of cotton" and "cause work to be carried out by artisans". Alexander and his successors introduced trade routes to provide cotton to remote parts of Asia and eventually to Europe. However, Khadi gained prominence in the early 20th century as part of India's freedom struggle. Gandhi's call to spin Khadi was a political and economic strategy to break India's dependence on British-manufactured textiles.



The picture represents the true spirit of India's decades-long freedom struggle

Source: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

Mahatma Gandhi revived India's flagging Khadi industry; he made this humble hand-spun fabric the Swadeshi symbol. Gandhi ji encouraged Indians to boycott British-manufactured clothes, spin their yarn and wear khadi apparel to rediscover their pride in cultural heritage while lending their support to the village community.

During our struggle for independence, this Swadeshi movement took the freedom call beyond the circles of the educated elite and out to the general urban and rural masses. This was also Mahatma Gandhi's way of highlighting Britain's exploitative policies in the legitimacy of British rule in India. The establishment of the All-India Spinners Association in 1925 further strengthened the Khadi movement. Beyond economic independence, Khadi played an important role in uniting India's diverse population and bridging class differences.

## 3. Evolution of Khadi in India's Independence Movement

Mahatma Gandhi encouraged Indians across the country to be self-reliant and spin their cloth using the charkha (spinning wheel) as a form of passive resistance against British rule. Soon, Khadi became synonymous with India's freedom struggle. Truly, Khadi represented self-reliance, economic independence, and absolute rejection of foreign domination. Khadi, the fabric of India, united people from diverse backgrounds in a common cause, symbolizing nationalism and resilience. The widespread adoption of the Khadi demonstrated the power of unity, collective action, strength and self-sufficiency, laying the foundation for India's economic policies in independent India.

## 4. Economic and Social Impact

By establishing the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) in 1956, the Indian government continued promoting Khadi after independence. Millions of people have been employed in the industry, especially in rural areas, empowering weavers and craftspeople. Khadi fabric is a sustainable substitute for mass-produced fabrics due to its production process, which uses little energy and natural resources. The government of India has ensured

the survival and expansion of Khadi industries by providing various policies and incentives. Khadi, which symbolises India's rich textile legacy, is also a significant cultural identifier.

### 5. Marketing and Production of Khadi

Since its inception, Khadi has confronted several obstacles despite its innumerable benefits, such as competition from automated textile manufacturing, high production costs, and a lack of information among younger generations. The lack of mechanisation results in slower and more expensive Khadi production. Additionally, many weavers and artisans struggle with meagre wages and easy market access. The marketing of Khadi remains another challenge, as traditional branding has often failed to appeal to the modern youth. Efforts from all the stakeholders be made to integrate contemporary design elements while maintaining the essence of Khadi's heritage.

### 6. Challenges in Khadi Production and Marketing

Despite its numerous benefits, Khadi still faces several challenges, including competition from mill-produced textiles, high production costs, and a lack of awareness among the young generation. In the absence of a large-scale mechanism, Khadi production is slower and costlier than factory-produced fabrics, affecting its competitiveness. Additionally, many weavers and artisans struggle with extremely low wages and absolutely no market access. The marketing of Khadi remains another challenge, as traditional branding and marketing have often failed to appeal to modern customers. The designers' and policymaker's efforts must be made to integrate contemporary design elements while maintaining the essence of Khadi's heritage.

From dresses and jackets to bridal lehengas and deconstructed local silhouettes, several leading designers (like Sabyasachi, Wendell Rodricks and Rajesh Pratap Singh) have taken on the fashion challenge to reinvent the humble fabric into high-fashion wear.

For example, Kolkata-based designer Debarun Mukherjee feels that fashion and sustainability go together and has thus made Khadi the leitmotif of his bridal collection (called Khadi Resplendent). “Khadi has always been associated with the old; I wanted to change this mindset. I wanted to promote khadi for power dressing. If styled well, khadi (be it cotton or silk) could work for any occasion. My clothing line fits anyone who is not just looking for pretty clothes but a soul or a story in what they wear, a strong Indian identity, aesthetics and a conscience. The colour and textures of khadi are such that it becomes an inspirational fabric. It is not decorative, but a fabric which breathes.



Source: Fabindia

Also, khadi is the most natural, organic fabric. Ideal for Indian weather conditions, it keeps the wearer cool in summers and warm in winters,” he said during an interview. While the latest khadi products in India are not what you would call cheap (e.g. dyed raw khadi silk fabric is priced very expensively), it is not exclusive either. At KVIC stores, anyone can purchase a small charkha for ₹ 550 while a bundle of raw, unprocessed cotton costs ₹ 40. In short, it provides villagers the choice of making their hand-spun yarn at home.

Government organisations like The Khadi & Village Industries Commission (KVIC) and the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) have been giving the Khadi industry a calculated push since 2018, showcasing the Khadi internationally and signing MOUs with academic institutions like NIFT for better design development and training.

As per KVIC, the total average khadi sale was Rs 914.07 crore from 2004 to 2014 and has jumped to Rs 1,828.3 crore between 2015 to 2018, highlighting over a 100 per cent increase. The number of stores has also grown from 7050 in 2017 to 8087 in 2018, with new formats like shop-in-shops.

## 7. Khadi: The Sustainable Fabric

It's noteworthy that while Khadi has many sustainable and eco-friendly qualities, its overall impact depends on various important factors, including the cotton farming process, dyeing methods, transportation, and many more. Khadi is made using traditional methods of spinning and weaving, often done by skilled artisans in rural areas. The process involves using a spinning wheel (charkha) to create yarn and then handweaving the fabric. This labour-intensive process reduces the carbon footprint associated with machinery-driven textile production. Unlike mechanized textile production, which requires substantial energy input, the production of Khadi relies on human power. This reduces the environmental impact and energy consumption associated with the fabric's production.

Khadi fabric is made from many natural fibres such as cotton, wool, and silk. These fibres are renewable resources that can be grown and harvested annually, reducing the reliance on non-renewable resources like synthetic textiles. Due to its manual production nature on Charkha, the carbon emissions associated with Khadi are extremely lower compared to large-scale textile production in mills. It's noteworthy to know that the natural fibres used in Khadi production generally require less water compared to synthetic fibres.

Also, the dyeing process used for Khadi fabric often involves natural dyes that require less water and have a lower environmental impact. We all know that Khadi is a natural fibre fabric, which means it is biodegradable and decomposes easily when discarded, unlike synthetic fabrics that contribute to microplastic pollution.

## 8. Innovations & Contemporary Relevance

Today, Khadi has regained popularity as a sustainable fabric. Fashion Designers in India and globally have incorporated Khadi into mainstream fashion, blending Indian tradition with contemporary styles. Government initiatives and global movements advocating slow fashion and discarding fast fashion have further enhanced its appeal. The fabric's organic nature, breathability, and durability make it a preferred choice for environmentally conscious consumers across the globe. Khadi is now being marketed all over as a luxury fabric, with high-end fashion brands and designers incorporating it into their apparel collections. Technological advancements such as the Solar Charkha, improved dyeing techniques, and digital marketing strategies have also contributed to its renewed popularity, resulting in financial gain.



Source: [www.hindustantimes.com](http://www.hindustantimes.com)

source: [www.patrika.com](http://www.patrika.com)

Big fashion brands have been working with clusters to release fashionable khadi collections, and Arvind Mills Ltd, the world's number one producer of Denim fabric, has invested heavily to create khadi denim, one of the most sustainable denim variants, acknowledged globally. Now, fashion designers are going out of their way to bring khadi in their designs, thus giving it a contemporary avatar.

Eminent fashion Designer Ritu Kumar has been designing khadi for over a decade and is known to have been praised for its eco-friendly properties, matte texture and ability to dye beautifully. However, it's fair to say that the brightest proponent of khadi fabric is fashion designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee, who has used it in almost all his collections. Sabyasachi Mukherjee used this "poor man's fabric" to craft bridal ensembles that looked like they could be worn by royalty. On his Instagram account, he says, "As a bridal designer, I keep thinking, 'What's next?', and I keep coming back to khadi. For me, Khadi is the equivalent of wellness, and nothing can be more luxurious than that." Few know that early in his career, Sabyasachi Mukherjee won best designer at a contest

called Khadi Goes International, which won him a scholarship to go to London (also his first international trip) and an internship with the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Today, Indian fashion designers and Indian apparel brands are embracing Khadi fabric wholeheartedly to bring their innovative designs to life. From high-street fashion to ramp-ready apparel, the spotlight is on khadi fabric, but fashion designer Gaurav Gupta insists that this is not a comeback; it's been there all along.

## 9. Contemporary Indian Labels That Flaunt Khadi Beautifully

### 9.1. Greenwear.in

Mr Abhishek Pathak, founder of Solar Charkha has revolutionised the making process of Khadi. Through solar energy, artisans produce more fabric with less effort and time.



Source: Greenwear. in

Label Greenwear also provides forward market linkages to solar charkha yarns hand spun by village women in different textile clusters of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar by producing a variety of fabrics, including Khadi woven on solar looms and handlooms, and creating different types of garments using these sustainable fabrics. While yarns are spun by rural women in their households (hence they are also called homespun), the fabrics are woven by traditional weavers or newly trained loom operators. Since there is no drudgery in operating solar charkhas, one woman can easily run two machines simultaneously and earn up to Rs 12,000.

### 9.2. 11.11 / eleven eleven

Founded by fashion designer and graphic designer Shani Himanshu and Mia Morikawa's label 11.11 is committed to going the khadi way. An ethical design house, 11.11's use of khadi hopes to bridge the gap between farmers and weavers, and vegetable dyeing and block printing traditions, in addition to modernising the way the fabric is perceived

### 9.3. Akaaro by Gaurav Jai Gupta

Designer Gaurav Jai Gupta's relentless love for handloom and inspiration is brought to life as urban separates that have me saving up – tailored jackets, dramatic capes, engineered saris and resplendent lehenga tops – in moody charcoal black, festive reds pinks and even glazed metal.

### 9.4. The Pot Plant

The Pot Plant, a sight for sore eyes in the concrete fast fashion jungle, is rooted in its love for 'natural fabrics and congenial clothing.' Founded in 2014 by Resham Karmchandani and Sanya Suri, one of the most famous labels.

### 9.5. Runaway Bicycle

'With a passion to make art for everyday life', Runaway Bicycle was established in 2013. Here sustainable production practices and the use of khadi go together. The label works closely with weavers to make their fabric, has ensured that all their fabric is certified by the Better Cotton Initiative and primarily uses natural dyes.





Source: [www.iasexam.com](http://www.iasexam.com)



source: [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net)

## 10. Prospects and Recommendations

We know that the future of Khadi depends on its ability to balance cultural heritage and tradition with innovation. Effective efforts should be made to contemporise and modernise the production process without compromising the handcrafted weaving nature of the fabric. We insist that the Government support, in terms of various subsidies and financial assistance, should continue to ensure sustainable livelihoods for Khadi weavers and artisans. Additionally, digital platforms can play a crucial role in increasing Khadi's visibility and accessibility to international consumers and audiences. Global collaborations with fashion designers, technological enhancements, and consumer awareness campaigns on social, print and digital media can help Khadi maintain its relevance in the competitive fashion and textile industry. Educational institutions such as NIFTs and NIDs should also incorporate textile heritage studies to create awareness about Khadi's significance among younger students and consumers.

## 11. Conclusion

It can be concluded with the statement, "Khadi is more than just a fabric; it is a symbol of India's heritage, resilience, and sustainable future". From being a mere tool of political resistance to becoming a fashion statement, Khadi has witnessed a tremendously remarkable transformation. With continued support from policymakers, fashion and textile designers, and global consumers, Khadi can contribute to economic development as well as environmental sustainability. The need of the hour is to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, ensuring that Khadi remains a viable and globally recognized textile and fashion fabric.

As India stepped into the 21st century, a new breed of Indian fashion and textile designers began experimenting with this versatile fabric, ensuring that khadi remained in vogue and the international fashion arena. While the eco-friendly fabric was already known for its rugged texture, comfortable feel and ability to keep people warm in winter as well as cool in summer, its new-age reinterpretation as a modern yet quintessentially Indian textile has made it very appealing to the millennial generation.

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