

BRAND KHADI

Khadi, the icon of the Swadeshi movement that once symbolized economic empowerment and self reliance, is breaking free from its humble status. The handwoven fabric that came to represent India's freedom struggle is set to go places, with the government trying to make it a part and parcel of its offices, fashion circuits and daily lives.

Actors Sonam Kapoor, Salman Khan and Chitrangada Singh have all walked the ramp clad in khadi. Designers, too, have taken up the mission of promoting khadi. Designers, too, have taken up the mission of promoting the fabric in their collections.

“The Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI) and the entire designer fraternity have been bullish about khadi. We take khadi to be the fabric of the nation and have made it a part of our collections and shows whenever possible,” said Sunil Sethi, president of the FDCI. “Designers like Rajesh Pratap Singh, Samant Chauhan, Rohit Bal, Amit Arora, Anju Modi and many more are all part of the initiative to revive the textile in the country and globally.”

It was back in the 1920s, as India fought for her Independence, that Mahatma Gandhi brought back the process of hand weaving. Khadi is mainly woven in cotton, although silk, wool and blends can also be used. Clothes made of the environment-friendly fabric are cool in summer and warm in winters.

The government reconstituted the Khadi & Village Industries Commission in October last year as the nodal agency to promote the fabric. Sales of khadi products – about 70% of which is fabric – picked up pace in 2015-16, although its share in the country's textile and apparel market is negligible.

“Even in the face of economic slowdown, Khadi & Village Industries Commission has achieved a remarkable growth in the sale of khadi and village industries' products,” said Vinai Kumar Saxena, chairman of KVIC. “As per the provisional estimates for 2015-16, the sale of khadi products has gone up to Rs 1,510 crore, marking a whopping 29% increase from Rs 1,170.38 crore during 2014-15.”

The domestic textile and apparel industry in India is estimated to reach \$141 billion by 2021 from \$67 billion in 2014, according to the India Brand Equity Foundation, a trust set up by the commerce ministry.

For KVIC, there is no better ambassador for khadi than Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself. “He had told us ‘Azadi ke pehle khadi for nation and azadi ke baad khadi for fashion,” Saxena said. (‘Khadi for the nation before Independence, khadi for fashion after Independence.’)

Modi's vow to make khadi fashionable again has taken off well. After dressing the staff of Air India 1, the prime minister's official carrier, with khadi attire including silk sarees, Jodhpuri bandhgala coats, trousers and jackets, the Prime Minister's Office ordered 377 khadi woollen coats, jerseys and socks for its staff. The PMO also ordered 10,000 khadi handmade paper file covers from KVIC.

Other government offices, such as the Department of Posts in Uttarakhand, have decided to use khadi uniforms for their staff. The department placed an order for 7,000 metres of cotton and woollen fabric from KVIC in April.

Impressed by the price point and quality of the textiles, railway minister Suresh Prabhu asked KVIC to supply 6 lakh bedsheets and 8 lakh pillow covers worth Rs 40 crore in January. Taking a cue from the government outfits, private enterprises such as the JK Group decided to use khadi dress material for uniforms in their schools, colleges and factories.

This fetched KVIC an order of 6,200 metres of dress material and 1,000 shoes in April. To promote the fabric, a common signage – Khadi India – has been created and khadi outlets in the country have begun displaying this. KhadiMark, a quality assurance symbol similar to Woolmark, is being developed.

Fashion designer Ritu Beri, who was appointed advisor to KVIC in March, plans to bring an extra finesse to khadi products and widen its appeal overseas.

“I would love to work on designs with khadi that will be accepted globally. I would advise an introduction of state-of-the-art designs and styles in khadi readymade garments and make khadi a global fabric beyond just India,” said Beri. “We plan to do lots of initiatives, including fashion shows showcasing khadi creations. We plan to do shows for kids and adults in khadi. We will be doing impressive promotions and exhibitions related to khadi.”

Beri will leverage her 25 years of experience designing clothes for international and national celebrities to broaden the reach of khadi locally and globally. She intends to reinvent the fabric that has always been associated with politicians, leaders and educators and make it appealing to youngsters who find it boring and unfashionable.

“We shall try to take khadi to colleges and universities. I would like clothes designed in khadi by global designers which are trendy with cutting-edge designs at par with the global designs and brands,” she said. According to Beri, khadi is a breathable, comfortable and ‘Made in India’ organic fabric.

To start with, khadi denim is being developed to make it attractive to youngsters. These denim items would be manufactured in Rajkot and sold both as readymade garments and fabric. While the fabric would cost Rs 400 per metre, readymade garments would range from Rs 700 to Rs 3,000. The 11 in-house designers on board with KVIC have also come up with a range of khadi bridal wear that is available for between Rs 5,000 and Rs 20,000.

The revamp is not limited to khadi products – even stores are in for an upgrade, with KVIC setting aside Rs 300 crore to renovate its 7,036 outlets across the country. New stores at Visakhapatnam, Lucknow, Jaipur and Chennai will open by the end of this year and 12 new franchisee shops are coming up in New Delhi, Chennai and Mumbai.

Khadi Day will be celebrated on September 19 for the very first time, also celebrating Mahatma Gandhi’s return from South Africa. Festivities are on the cards in South Africa itself to promote khadi, followed by a Khadi Parade in New Delhi to celebrate the indigenous

textile.



Some private labels, too, are upbeat about khadi. Fabindia said it is committed to nurturing this fabric and expanding the footprint of its production through interaction with weavers and design innovations.

“With the popularity of the fabric growing rapidly, the focus has been on ensuring that its functionality matches the sensibility and the aspirations of the customers, while keeping the intrinsic qualities of the fabric intact,” said Saurabh Naithani, category head, menswear, Fabindia.

“The interventions have been diverse – while the fabric’s visibility has certainly increased with its use by designers, the exhibitions and awareness generated by various organisations and its strong rootedness in the Indian consciousness has also boosted recognition as a premium and aspirational product. The fabric continues to fire the imagination – from ramps to rallies,” said Anuradha Kumra, creative head, women and kids, Fabindia.