

## KHADI IN TODAY'S WORLD

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### Introduction :

**Khadi** the hand-spun, hand-woven fabric once synonymous with India's freedom struggle is now finding its place in global fashion narratives, sustainability discussions, and cultural diplomacy. Often romanticized as the "fabric of freedom," Khadi is more than just a textile. It is a symbol of resistance, self-reliance, rural empowerment, and ecological responsibility. Introduced and popularized by Mahatma Gandhi during the early 20th century, Khadi was envisioned as a tool to counter British economic exploitation. By encouraging Indians to spin their own yarn and weave their own clothes, Gandhi transformed Khadi into a powerful act of economic nationalism and spiritual simplicity (Gandhi, 1935).

During the Swadeshi Movement, Khadi became both a political statement and a unifying force. Spinning the charkha was an act of protest — one that inspired not only economic independence but a sense of national identity and pride. People from diverse linguistic, social, and caste backgrounds found common cause through the wearing and production of Khadi. It challenged colonial imports, revitalized local crafts, and gave dignity to manual labor (Chatterjee, 2016). Yet, after independence, Khadi's symbolic value gradually faded, becoming limited to politicians' wardrobes and government emporiums — often perceived as outdated, coarse, and bureaucratically managed.

In the 21st century, however, Khadi is experiencing a remarkable resurgence, riding the waves of global sustainability movements, slow fashion trends, and cultural revivalism. With increasing awareness of the environmental costs of fast fashion — including excessive water use, synthetic fabric pollution, and exploitative labor — consumers worldwide are seeking conscious alternatives. In this context, Khadi's low-carbon footprint, artisanal value, and biodegradable properties offer a compelling alternative (Mehta & Mehta, 2018).

Modern designers and ethical fashion advocates are now reinterpreting Khadi — no longer viewing it merely as a relic of India's past, but as a fabric of the future. Today's Khadi comes in diverse blends like Khadi-silk, Khadi-denim, and Khadi-linen, tailored into chic garments for both daily wear and haute couture. Designers like Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Anavila Misra, and Rahul Mishra have incorporated Khadi into mainstream and luxury collections, presenting it on global runways with elegance and modernity.

Furthermore, government initiatives such as "Khadi for Nation, Khadi for Fashion" and the active promotion by political leaders like Prime Minister Narendra Modi have amplified Khadi's visibility. The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) has also launched initiatives to modernize spinning centers, support artisans, and bring Khadi into e-commerce platforms — thereby bridging the rural-urban divide and offering livelihood opportunities to thousands (KVIC, 2022).

However, despite this growth, Khadi still faces critical challenges in branding, scalability, quality consistency, and global positioning. While urban elites and eco-conscious

consumers are warming up to Khadi, many rural artisans continue to struggle with outdated tools, low market access, and limited knowledge of contemporary fashion trends. Moreover, Khadi's pricing and production timelines often do not match the expectations of a fast-paced consumer market, limiting its competitiveness.

This research paper aims to examine Khadi's evolving role in today's world — beyond nostalgia and nationalism — to explore how it functions as a sustainable, inclusive, and culturally rich textile in modern society. It explores key dimensions such as:

- The perception of Khadi among consumers and designers,
- The production and distribution challenges faced by rural artisans,
- The opportunities for innovation and integration in contemporary fashion,
- In addition, the policy and educational initiatives required to bridge the awareness–application gap.

Through a combination of interviews, field observations, secondary data analysis, and literature review, this study attempts to reposition Khadi not as a static legacy, but as a living tradition, that holds immense relevance for the future of both Indian identity and global sustainable fashion.

As the world grapples with climate change, mass consumerism, and economic inequality, Khadi offers a compelling case for textile circularity, community-cantered production, and dignified livelihoods. It is a reminder that ancient knowledge, when nurtured with modern insight, can create pathways that are not only stylish but soulful, sustainable, and self-reliant.

## Review of Literature :

The existing body of literature on **Khadi** spans a rich intersection of **textile history, sustainable development, cultural anthropology, and rural economics**. As one of India's most iconic indigenous fabrics, Khadi has been extensively discussed in Gandhian philosophy and nationalist discourse, but only in recent years has it gained scholarly attention in the fields of **sustainable fashion, contemporary design practices, and policy innovation**.

**Mahatma Gandhi's writings** remain the cornerstone for understanding the ideological significance of Khadi. Gandhi viewed Khadi not merely as a piece of cloth but as a **symbol of self-purification, empowerment of the poor, and resistance to industrial capitalism**. In his book *Khadi: Why and How* (1935), Gandhi emphasized that spinning and wearing Khadi represented a return to indigenous economies and the dignity of manual labor. It was meant to foster **economic decentralization**, reduce dependency on foreign goods, and promote **village self-sufficiency** — ideals that still resonate in today's debates on localization and circular economy.

According to **Chatterjee (2016)**, the post-independence era saw Khadi gradually lose its widespread appeal. It transitioned from being a mass movement to a **state-regulated industry**, heavily bureaucratized and reduced to political symbolism. Often associated with white kurtas and government uniforms, Khadi came to be seen as outdated and elitist, rather than aspirational or fashionable. However, Chatterjee notes a **reawakening in the 21st**

century, driven largely by the rise of **slow fashion**, **consumer consciousness**, and **global sustainability movements**.

Environmental studies like those of **Mehta and Mehta (2018)** highlight Khadi's **low environmental impact**. Unlike mill-made or synthetic textiles, Khadi requires no electricity in production, relies on local raw materials, and produces almost **zero industrial waste**. These factors make it an ideal candidate for **carbon-neutral fashion ecosystems**, especially as the textile industry faces scrutiny for being one of the world's highest polluters.

Further research by **Kapadia (2020)** explores Khadi's potential for **rural employment and women empowerment**. With proper support in logistics, e-commerce access, and market linkage, Khadi production can create decentralized job opportunities — a crucial benefit in post-COVID India where reverse migration and unemployment have surged in rural areas. When integrated with modern branding and digital outreach, Khadi can become both a **cultural export and an economic lifeline**.

In the realm of design, leading Indian couturiers such as **Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Anavila Misra, and Ritu Kumar** have played pivotal roles in **reimagining Khadi as a luxury fabric**. Their collections present Khadi in global fashion weeks, displaying its adaptability in silhouettes, dyeing techniques, and cross-cultural fusion. Collaborations with platforms like **Lakmé Fashion Week** and endorsements from Bollywood and political figures have further elevated Khadi's market perception.

Despite this progress, there remains a **notable gap in academic research** — particularly on **urban consumer perceptions**, **branding strategies**, and **cross-sector partnerships** that could scale Khadi globally. Moreover, the **lack of data on how international fashion audiences engage with Khadi** limits our understanding of its export potential. This study attempts to fill that gap by examining both ground-level production and top-level design innovation.

### Research Methodology :

This research employs a **qualitative methodology** to explore the status, challenges, and potential of Khadi in today's world. The aim is to generate **context-rich insights** rather than statistical generalizations, making qualitative methods especially suitable for this study.

### Primary Data Collection :

- **In-depth interviews** were conducted with **10 key stakeholders** to gather experiential, professional, and industry-grounded knowledge. The respondents included:
  - ✓ **Fashion designers** who incorporate Khadi into their collections
  - ✓ **KVIC (Khadi and Village Industries Commission) officials** involved in policymaking and implementation
  - ✓ **Rural weavers and spinning center heads** from Maharashtra and Gujarat, representing grassroots production
  - ✓ **Sustainable fashion educators** and researchers from design institutes in Pune and Delhi

- **These interviews explored themes such as:**
  - ✓ What motivates designers to use Khadi
  - ✓ The lived experiences of rural Khadi workers
  - ✓ Current challenges in production, marketing, and technology adoption
  - ✓ Future possibilities for integrating Khadi into global supply chains
- **Field observations** were also conducted at:
  - ✓ **State-level Khadi exhibitions** and trade fairs in Pune and Delhi, where interactions between artisans and consumers were noted
  - ✓ **Designer boutiques and flagship stores** featuring Khadi-based apparel to study urban presentation and pricing strategies

#### **Secondary Data Collection :**

- **Policy documents** and **annual reports** from KVIC and the Ministry of MSME were reviewed to understand government schemes, budgets, and vision documents.
- Academic sources including **books, journal articles, white papers, and case studies** were analysed to contextualize Khadi within broader sustainable fashion frameworks.
- **Online platforms** such as Amazon India, Jaypore, and Fabindia were analysed for product presentation, customer reviews, pricing trends, and product descriptions to understand how Khadi is currently positioned in e-commerce.
- Trend analysis reports from industry portals like **WGSN, Business of Fashion, and Textile Value Chain** were used to capture contemporary fashion movements involving heritage fabrics.

#### **Data Analysis Approach :**

All qualitative data — from interview transcripts to observation notes — was analysed using **thematic coding**. Key categories identified included:

- Perceptions of Khadi among various stakeholders
- Identified barriers to growth
- Innovation trends in design and production
- Strategies for brand repositioning and consumer outreach

This methodology ensures a **holistic and triangulated understanding** of Khadi's relevance, evolution, and strategic direction in contemporary fashion and sustainable development.

#### **Data Analysis & Interpretation :**

##### **1. Perception Shift :**

- Urban consumers increasingly view Khadi as “**cool and conscious**”, thanks to influencer campaigns and designer styling.

- For rural artisans, Khadi remains a **source of livelihood**, though many still associate it with low margins and seasonal demand.

## 2. Challenges Identified :

- **Marketing and branding gap:** Many artisans lack skills to sell directly to modern consumers.
- **Lack of innovation:** Traditional Khadi often struggles to match the finesse of mill-made fabric.
- **Supply chain bottlenecks:** Inconsistent quality, delayed production cycles, and limited dye options.

## 3. Trends Observed :

- **Blended Khadi fabrics** (e.g., Khadi-silk, Khadi-denim) gaining popularity.
- Use of **natural dyes** and **zero-waste patterns** in Khadi garments.
- Increase in **Khadi e-commerce platforms** offering direct-to-consumer channels.

## 4. Government Push :

- Campaigns like “**Khadi for Nation, Khadi for Fashion**” have rejuvenated interest.
- KVIC has introduced training centers, subsidies, and design competitions to promote innovation.

## Findings & Discussion :

The research reveals that Khadi is not just surviving — it is evolving. From its symbolic role during the independence movement, it is now repositioned as a sustainable luxury fabric. Its inherent strengths — handmade, eco-friendly, employment generating — are exactly what the global fashion industry seeks today.

Yet, there remains a gap between artisan production and urban market needs. If not addressed, Khadi risks being stuck between nostalgia and novelty. Innovations in design, better storytelling, and integrated rural-urban collaborations are essential.

Importantly, Khadi offers a unique Indian solution to global problems — climate change, fast fashion, and economic disparity. It blends culture, conscience, and commerce like few fabrics can.

## Suggestions :

### 1. Design School Integration

- Introduce *Khadi design labs* and textile innovation workshops in fashion curricula.

### 2. Digital Empowerment

- Provide training to artisans in **online selling, branding, and packaging**.



3. **Global Marketing Strategy**

- Position Khadi as an **eco-luxury brand** in international fashion weeks and expos.

4. **Innovation Investment**

- Support start-ups using Khadi in **athleisure, formal wear, and accessories**.

5. **Public-Private Partnerships**

- Collaborate with NGOs, design houses, and government bodies to create **Khadi entrepreneurship hubs**.

**Conclusion :**

Khadi, once a symbol of political resistance, is now emerging as a symbol of **sustainable resilience**. In a time when fashion faces moral and environmental reckoning, Khadi offers a path rooted in heritage but facing forward.

This humble handwoven cloth is more than a fabric — it is a **philosophy of living**, a model of decentralized production, and a story of empowerment. Its journey from charkha to catwalk reflects India's own transformation.

If supported with vision, innovation, and integrity, **Khadi can once again become a global movement — not just of fashion, but of values.**

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