



● Shalini with Sunil Sethi



● Anupama Dayal



● A.D. Singh with Hemant



● Nidhi Ahuja

## Fashion meets style

✓ Fashion designer duo Hemant and Nandita recently launched their spring/summer 2015 collection titled "The Knot" at Kitsch in the presence of their friends and colleagues from the fashion fraternity. Apart from indulging in interesting conversations and retail therapy, these fashion aficionados were also seen appreciating the designer duo's colourful collection. Among those spotted here included Rohit Bal, Sunil Sethi, A.D. Singh, Anupama Dayal, Shabnam Singhal, Fariha Ansari, Reynu Taandon, Nidhi Ahuja, Pallavi Mohan, Shalini of Geisha Designs amongst several others who were seen having a fabulous time at this evening soiree.

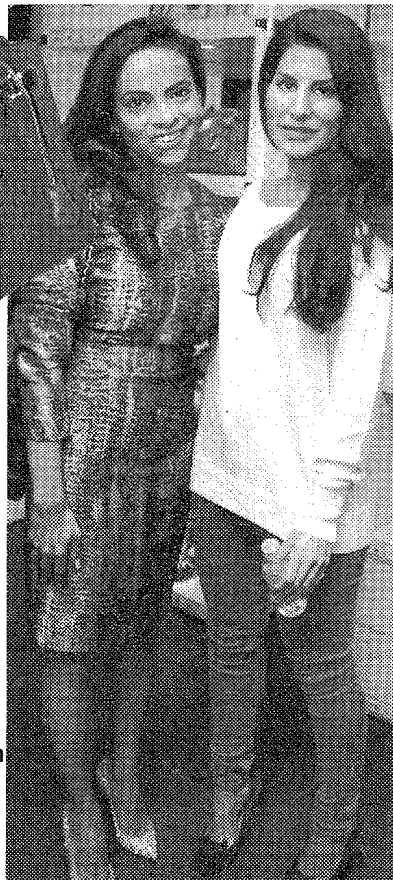


● Rohit Bal and Reynu Taandon



● Shabnam Singhal

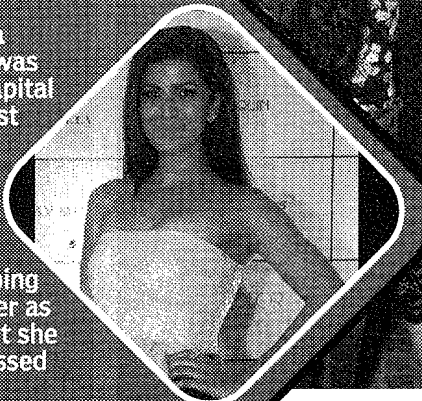
● Pallavi Mohan and Nandita



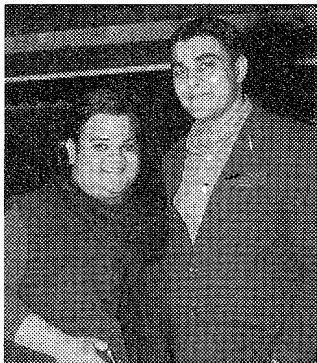
● Fariha Ansari and Charu Sachdev

### Little tattle

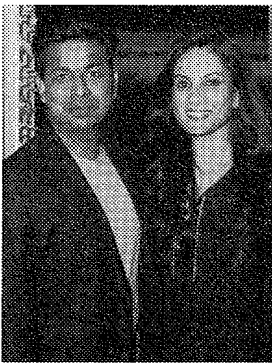
Bollywood diva Nimrat Kaur was spotted in the capital recently. We must add that the actress apart from possessing excellent acting skills is speedily climbing the fashion ladder as well. At the event she was spotted dressed up impeccably.



● Mitwa and Shrishti



● Aakash and Varun; Rajan Jindal with Sonal Jindal; Amber Paridhi Sahai



● Somya with Jatin Khatri

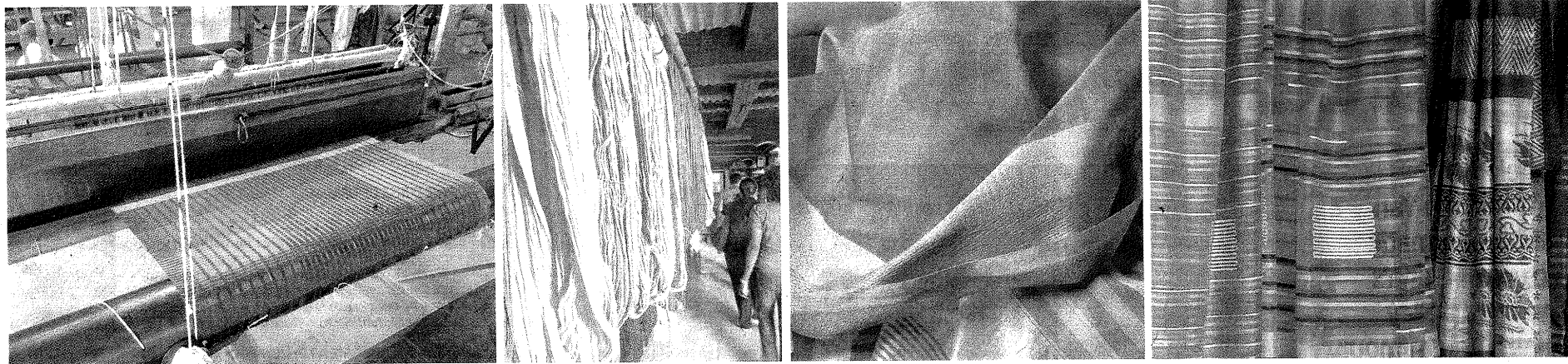
## Buzzing evening with food

✓ Harbir and Jatin Khatri, owners of Tribe restaurant recently hosted a fun-filled evening soiree at Tribe Brunch and Bar in the capital.

Among the guests Suparna Trikhya, Aman Choudhary, Archana Singh, Amber Paridhi Sahai, Niladri Paul, Bharat Upmanyu, etc. were spotted.



## TEXTILE TRAIL



# On the gossamer route

**MALATHI RAMACHANDRAN** goes on a saree trail from Chanderi to Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh to trace the history and the cultural and economic significance of traditional weaves of the region

I recently travelled along a silk route from Chanderi to Maheshwar, two towns in Madhya Pradesh that vie with each other to produce the most exquisite, gossamer-fine sarees and fabrics made on traditional handlooms. It was in a sense a journey back in time because the tradition dates back centuries, and is kept alive today in these two weaving centres.

Chanderi and Maheshwari fabrics seem to have so much in common that they could easily be mistaken for each other. They are woven on traditional looms; they use silk yarn on the warp (length) and cotton yarn on the weft (width), they use *zari* thread on the borders and in the body for *butis* (motifs). But here the similarities cease. For, Chanderi and Maheshwari weaves spring from different cultures, and have unique stories and history behind them, which help their artisans lend their own signature style to the fabrics.

### Old as the hills

Chanderi is a charming little hamlet on the banks of River Betwa. Surrounded by rich forests and the green Vindhya mountains, it lies dreaming of the time it had once been the melting pot of music, weaving, arts and crafts, through the times of the Marathas, the Mughals and the Rajputs.

As far back as the 12th and 13th centuries, traditional cloth weaving was done mostly by Muslims here. In 1350, Koshti weavers from Jhansi migrated to Chanderi and settled there, and gradually, the textile business became a flourishing trade.

The story goes that during Akbar's reign, a length of Chanderi cloth was sent to the emperor in Agra, folded and packed in the hollow of a bamboo. When it was taken out, the court was astounded to see that it could be unfurled to a size that could cover a whole elephant. It was this delicacy

and sophistication of Chanderi weaving that fascinated the Mughal Empire down the centuries.

Chanderi fabric was in demand by many different communities for their traditional wear. It is said that in Jain Gajrath Samarohs, held between 1436 to 1468, turbans made only from Chanderi cloth were worn. Weavers produced fine quality turbans woven on a 6 inch loom for export to Maratha rulers who proudly wore their cocked turbans. Chanderi was also popular among the nobility of Gwalior, Baroda, Nagpur and beyond.

### Woven air

Chanderi was once woven using handspun cotton warps and wefts. It was spun as fine as 300 counts and the yarn left 'degummed'; these processes made the fabric so light and transparent that it was known as 'woven air'. It is said that the maharani of Baroda would identify the cotton quality by just a 'rub on the cheek' and decipher the finer nuances of the motif work and pay accordingly!

Due to Chanderi's proximity to trade routes, supply of handspun cotton threads was never interrupted. However, in the 19th century, the British imported cheaper 120 to 200 count cotton from Manchester, which brought down the market for the more expensive Chanderi, and traditional weavers started to use mill spun thread. Then in the 1930s, Chanderi weavers began substituting Japanese silk in the warp, and also developed a silk-by-silk variety in which their profit margins were higher. But even this did not give the translucence of cotton, so they finally switched to silk-by-cotton weaving, and this is what we know as Chanderi cotton today.

The clackety clack of looms greets me as I wander down the dirt tracks of Pran-



THREADS OF HISTORY Weavers carry on the tradition of creating exquisite Chanderi & Maheshwari sarees.

“CHANDERI AND MAHESHWARI WEAVES SPRING FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES, AND HAVE UNIQUE STORIES & HISTORY BEHIND THEM...”

pur village near Chanderi. Ducking into the low doorways of a lime-washed brick house, my eyes take a few moments to get accustomed to the darkness within. Then I can see the outline of a wooden structure rising out of the floor, and realise that it is a pit loom, an old and traditional mechanism that rests in a rectangular pit dug about three feet into the floor of a house.

Jagmohan sits at floor level, his legs dangling below. I watch the master weaver's hands as they clatter the fly shuttle from side to side, press the treadle and tug at the rope to complete a line. The timing is flawless; the hand and foot

co-ordination perfect, otherwise there would be a knot of threads before you know it!

### A river sutra

Maheshwar is a small town on the banks of the Narmada and traces its history back to the times of the *Mahabharata*, wherein it is mentioned as Mahishmati, a centre of thriving art and culture. It was in the late 18th century that Rani Ahilyabai created the Maheshwari saree that has become a geographical index today. The story goes that the queen asked the craftsmen of Surat and Malwa to weave exquisite silk

sarees of nine yard length to be gifted to her guests and dignitaries. In fact, it is said that she designed the first saree herself. At first, all Maheshwari sarees were made only of pure silk, but over a course of time, they began to be woven in pure cotton, and later in cotton-silk combinations. The designs were inspired by the grandeur of the forts of Madhya Pradesh and these were reflected in the borders and motifs. The sarees are usually either plain in the body with exquisitely designed borders, or have checks and stripes in different variations. Pastel shades, unusual colour combinations and innovative designing have made the Maheshwari saree a collector's item today.

### Weaving on the banks

Along the banks of the quiet flowing Narmada, nearly 3,000 looms, some in the village and some inside the Ahilya Fort, weave the magical Maheshwari saree of the Malwa region. In 1976, the NGO Rehwa brought in a weaving renaissance to Maheshwar; and looms were set up in village homes, women trained, prices fixed for the products, and free education and medical facilities assured for weavers' families.

In her spotless little house, Deepa, one of the village women who is a part of the Looms Revival Programme, works for up to 10 hours a day to produce one saree at a time. "I get about Rs 300 per saree, depending on border width," she says with a shy smile. "People from the NGO prepare the looms for us, stretching the yarn and setting the design. So weaving is simple, though time consuming."

There is steady income in the house. Deepa is content to weave the fabrics and her dreams, as do hundreds of women along the banks of the Narmada.



# Designs on Varanasi

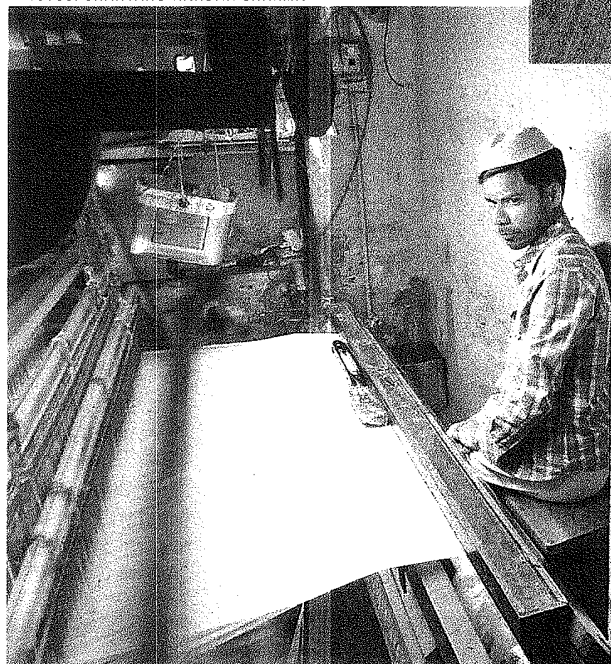
The Modi government wants to bring handloom products back into fashion. First step: the prime minister's constituency, home to 25,000 active weavers

**A :: Shantanu Nandan Sharma** zizur Rahman recently parted with his entire life savings – a princely sum of a lakh and a half rupees – to buy a powerloom. Rahman and his family of handloom weavers in Varanasi had long yearned for the machine. And there it was in his dingy house in the dusty, cramped bylanes of Pilikothi, its half horsepower motor chugging tirelessly. Rahman is pleased. Manual labour has fallen. Output has multiplied. Electricity expenses rose too, no doubt, but a subsidy scheme offered by the government of Uttar Pradesh ensures that they do not pinch.

The only rub is that Rahman now makes far less money per product. One handloom saree can fetch up to ₹20,000. A saree created by a powerloom sells for about ₹2,500-3,000, of which he earns only a fraction owing to the presence of a middleman, or *gaddedar* (trader in local parlance) who supplies material including cards, yarns, dyes and even design. "In powerloom, as the work is less laborious, it becomes a volume game," says Rahman, as he weaves a Sherwani fabric.

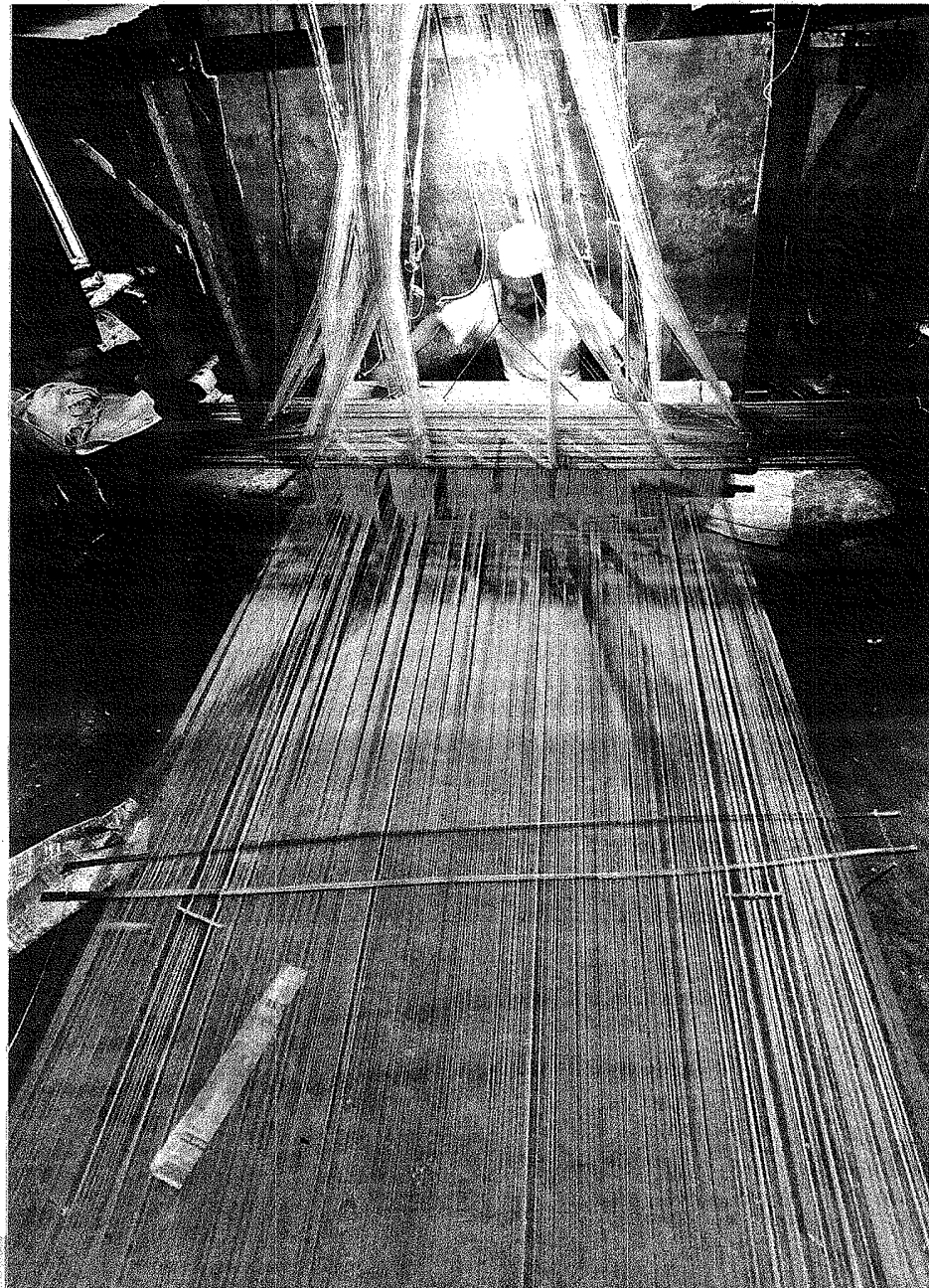
That means Rahman and his brothers work 24x7 shifts. The *gad-dedars* offer a buyback guarantee at ₹22 per metre of the woven product. A full shift produces 25 metres and yields a net income of ₹550. That is not a patch on the price of a handloom saree, but he would have had to devote six months and greater toil to produce that saree. Playing the volumes game has guaranteed that Rahman's overall earnings have increased.

PHOTOS: SHANTANU NANDAN SHARMA



"In powerloom, as the work is less laborious, it becomes a volume game. If I work for 24 hours at a stretch, I will get some ₹550"

Azizur Rahman, weaver



GETTY IMAGES

## The Blueprint...

Develop a **new range of handloom products** by introducing fashion and market-driven designs

Reward **design houses to prepare designs** for weavers of Varanasi (pilot project)

Products with "**India Handloom**" brand to be promoted aggressively through online platforms. Partnership with Flipkart already underway

**NIFT curriculum to include more chapters on handloom.** Students to undertake field visits to nearby handloom clusters

## ...and the Ground Reality

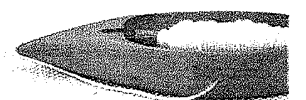
Fashion will give more value only to a limited range of handloom products; **scalability a concern**

In the first phase, although **22,000 Varanasi weavers will get 2,200 modern designs**, there is no ready market

The work of reputed designers can be easily **copied in machine-driven powerlooms**

Cold response so far to online sale of handloom products.

Buyers like to "**touch and feel**" while buying an expensive saree



"The government is serious about **linking fashion to handloom**. That will appeal to rich customers in cities and benefit the weavers"

**SK Panda**, secretary, ministry of textiles

Rahman's family is hardly the only neo-powerloom convert in Varanasi (also called Kashi and Banaras). A thousand other families at Pilikothi in the heart of the holy city, synonymous with the renowned hand-woven Banarasi saree, now swear by powerlooms.

## Migration Worries

This exodus of Varanasi weavers from traditional handloom to machine-driven powerloom – in the last five years, the number of handloom households in the city has dropped to about 25,000 from 40,000 – has caused dismay among policymakers in New Delhi's Udyog Bhawan, which houses the ministry of textiles. They fear that the famous Banarasi saree



## Make in Varanasi: The Process

(its handmade origin lends its superior, embellished and exquisite character) is facing an unprecedented survival crisis of sorts.

News of the troubles of Varanasi's handloom weavers reached the Prime Minister's Office. Prime minister Narendra Modi is the Varanasi MP and during the election campaign, he had promised to revive the sector. In his first review meeting of the textile sector on June 27, 2014, Modi asked bureaucrats to find ways to link handloom with fashion. Modi believes that it is the answer to increasing the price of handloom products and inflating the earnings of weavers. The move is significant nationally because handloom weaving is the second largest economic activity in the country after farming, employing 43 lakh weavers, besides indirectly benefiting another one crore people, according to statistics available with the textiles ministry.

"The government is serious about linking fashion and modern designs to handloom. That will appeal to rich customers in cities and benefit the weavers", says SK Panda, Union textiles secretary.

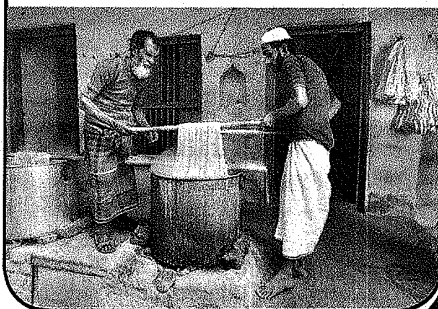
### New Action Plan

As part of the plan, the government will create a new brand named "India Handloom" to differentiate the superior handloom products from powerloom products. In Varanasi, it has chosen through a tendering process two design houses – Sai Creation and Rinku Sobti Fashions – which have to work closely with Varanasi weavers and provide them at least 2,200 new designs in the next two years, in addition to a buyback guarantee of products worth ₹4.4 crore. The selected design houses in turn will receive a fee from the government, according to a textile ministry official not willing to be named. This is now a pilot project, which will be eventually expanded nationally.

The government will also encourage fashion school students to undertake more field visits to handloom clusters and include more chapters on handloom

**Design:** Weavers bank on about 300 neighbourhood designers spread across the city. One designer usually makes 75 designs a year. Once selected, a design fetches about ₹300

**Dyeing:** Dyeing of yarn takes place from dyers' households. There are 300 to 500 neighbourhood dyers in Varanasi. One unit with two *chulhas* can dye 25 kg of yarn a day. Net income after expenses is ₹25 per kg



**Card Making:** Designs are placed on cards which are hung from the top of the loom. Cards guide the thread and thereby weaving. A card maker usually makes 200 cards a day and earns about ₹200 a day

**Weaving:** A handloom weaver typically earns ₹100 per day; the *gaddedars* (traders) play a key role in giving weavers both the raw materials and some sort of a buyback guarantee



in their curriculum.

In theory, linking modern designs to the Banarasi saree is not a bad idea (on his first visit to Varanasi in November after becoming PM, Modi urged weavers to embrace modern platforms and adapt to the changing needs of clients). That might guarantee acceptability in the market, better prices and thereby more income for the weaver – unjustifiably, the smallest cog in the textile value chain.

But in practice, it's not as simple. "Reputed designers often come to Varanasi, but they cover only a few handloom households. They do place orders, but only a few weavers become beneficiaries," says Syed Hasan Ansari, a *gaddedar* in Varanasi.

Then there is the matter of copycats. Designs supplied by fashion school graduates can be copied easily in powerloom, say weavers. Syed Haminuddin, who is holding the fort with handlooms, says weavers like him need designs that are exclusive to handloom.

Haminuddin takes immense pride in his work. He showed this writer photos of a German woman designer who spent several days at his loom, learning the nuances of Banarasi saree designs.

Now, the weavers in Varanasi depend largely on designs created by neighbourhood designers. According to a study undertaken by Ahmedabad-based Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India, there are up to 500 such designers. One designer gets about ₹300 for a design and the job is not exactly lucrative. After all, it's creative work, and no designer can produce more than 75 worthy designs a year. Designers branch out to allied work such as card-making to earn extra money. Cards placed on the loom guide the thread and thereby weaving.

Dr Smriti Yadav, an associate professor of National Institute of Fashion Technology's (NIFT's) Raebareli campus, says her students do visit Varanasi and interact with weavers. But she insists good designs alone will not help a weaver earn a decent living. "A weaver may get the right design, but ultimately he has to hit the right channel to sell the product at an appropriate price," she argues.

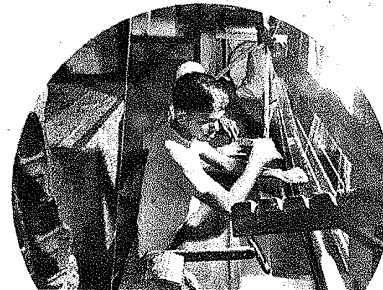
Here, weavers can only turn to *gaddedars* or another group of people called master weavers. Master weavers are quasi-traders who directly engage with weavers, giving them the design, raw materials and inputs in weaving too. *Gaddedars*, on the other hand, are pure traders (some are exporters too) and they keep off the day-to-day affairs of weaving. Typ-

## NUMBERSPEAK

### Varanasi Handloom Market

**25,000**

The total number of active weavers (excludes traders, dyers, designers, card-makers and the like)



**37%**

Percentage decline in number of active handloom weavers in the last 5 years

**90%**

Share of Banarasi sarees in value of total output; furnishing fabric and fashion accessories like stoles and scarves are the other products

**₹400 Cr**

The annual turnover of handloom market in Varanasi

**₹5,000-₹75,000**

Price range of Banarasi sarees

**₹100**

Approximate per-day earning of a handloom weaver; can double earnings with a powerloom

Source: News reports, study by EDII, Ahmedabad

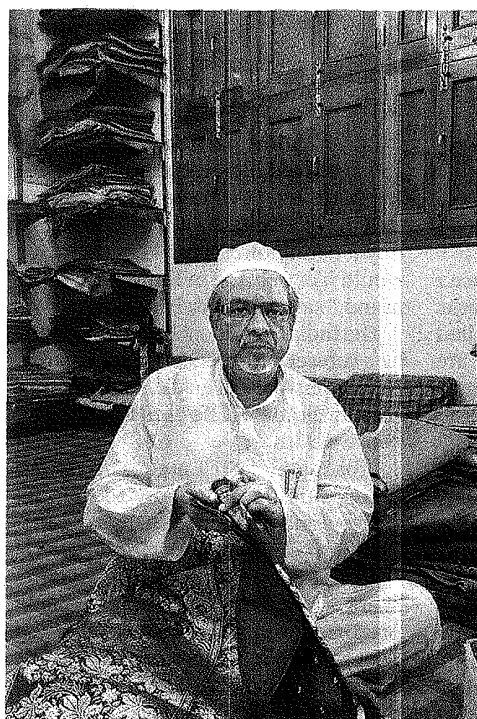
"The problem with the weavers is not design but the inability to get the right marketing channel to sell their product at the right price"

Dr Smriti Yadav, associate professor, NIFT, Raebareli



**"The crisis in the Eurozone has its aftershock in Varanasi even today. Exports have not picked up"**

Syed Hasan Ansari, *gaddedar* (trader) who exports fashion fabric to Europe





## All in the Family

In the '70s and early '80s, Abdul Gaffar Sardar was a highly influential person in Varanasi's Pilikothi locality. Living in a multi-storied *pucca* building in the heart of the city, he mentored his sons and grandsons in the nuances of weaving Varanasi sarees. Many a *gaddedar* used to come to his house to place orders for weaving sarees, and sometimes even pay a premium.

Thirty years after Gaffar Sardar's death, his grandsons and great grandsons are still practising the art of weaving, but with a heavy heart. For them, it's a catch-22 situation. They can't leave the profession altogether, but continuing weaving means getting themselves trapped in debts.

It's a household of 100 members – 60 men and 40 women. Gaffar Sardar's grandson Abdul Matim, now 65, is the eldest of the six brothers living in the same building. In the basement, there are eight looms – six handlooms and two powerlooms. His brother Samsud Doha, 55, says: "Weaving is no longer an attractive business. Whatever we earn, we spend. There is no saving. So, how can we buy another plot? We are trapped."

Despite staying in the same house, the families of six brothers maintain separate accounts. They have one kitchen with six separate gas connections. They know which loom belongs to which brother. "It's such a large family that there are marriages every year. There are also medical emergencies. In those circumstances, one brother's family rescues the other," Doha adds.

Another brother Altafur Rahman, 45, was busy weaving one saree for the last 15 days when *ET Magazine* met him. He has spent money in design, dyeing, card-making and yarn. His target: ₹4,500 for the saree. The man who has been weaving sarees for the last 30 years knows the *gaddedar* may sell the final product in the market for as high as ₹10,000. "But what can I do?" laments Rahman. "The *gaddedar* won't pay me more than ₹4,500."



**Altafur Rahman, 45, can be seen weaving a saree for which he expects to get some ₹4,500. But he knows the trader might sell it for ₹10,000 or more.**

ically, both these groups are stingy with passing margins to weavers.

Despite the mounting odds in handloom, there are still some weavers in Varanasi who are resisting the migration to powerloom. A few families like Ram Lal Maurya's of Bazar Diha locality in the city are not even willing to experiment with new designs by reputed designers. Maurya, for example, is a fourth-generation weaver who sells only heavily embellished Banarasi sarees. He quotes a fixed price of ₹75,000 for one saree. The price has no bearing on bookings, with all his 10 looms booked for the next six months (one handloom costs about ₹15,000). He avoids the *gaddedar* route, selling directly to a limited set of clients based in Kolkata, Mumbai and Ahmedabad. The product is couriered and money is transferred electronically through banks.

"Our clients are ready to pay us a good amount even as we have been using just one design for over three decades now. Our only experimentation has been a

## Other Handloom Hubs

Barabanki (Uttar Pradesh)  
**SCARVES**

Bijnore (Uttar Pradesh)  
**HOME FURNISHING**

Kullu (Himachal Pradesh)  
**SHAWLS**

Sonepur (Odisha)  
**IKAT SAREE**

Bargarh (Odisha)  
**IKAT SAREE**

Chanderi (Madhya Pradesh)  
**COTTON SAREE**

Madhavaram (Andhra Pradesh)  
**SILK SAREE**

Trichy (Tamil Nadu)  
**SILK SAREE**

Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala)  
**DHOTIS**

Gadag (Karnataka)  
**SILK SAREE,  
COTTON BED SHEETS**

government has now decided to make this workshop on promotion of handloom with fashion an annual event where one NIFT campus will actively involve with weavers of the nearby handloom clusters.

"We are planning to digitalise traditional handloom designs, and create a brand for high-value handloom cloth," says Panda, explaining a series of initiatives to revive the handloom sector.

In August last year, the development commissioner for handlooms, under the aegis of the textile ministry joined hands with online retailer Flipkart India to provide an online marketing platform and market intelligence to boost Indian handloom weavers. "Through this exclusive agreement, Flipkart will provide weavers in India online marketing platform, infrastructural support in data analytics and customer acquisition to help them get remunerative prices for their products and scale up their business," a press statement issued then said. Seven months later, online sales, particularly the high-valued handloom products, are faltering. "Customers are still unwilling to spend ₹5,000 or ₹10,000 to buy a handloom saree. That's why we would like to bring in Handloom India brand," says secretary Panda.

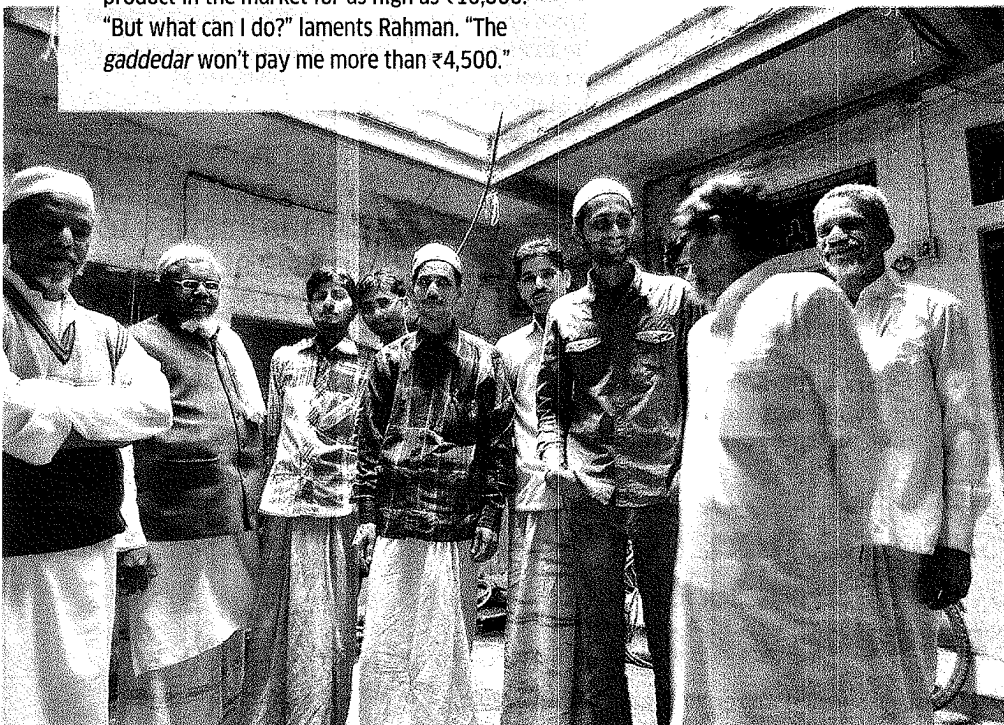
The India Handloom brand is likely to be a sub-set of the existing brand called Handloom Mark. The difference is that the new brand will be used for more expensive cloth.

Prof Yadav of NIFT argues that eliminating middlemen is key to helping weavers and reviving the handloom sector. "Introduction of market designs is important, but what will be a game-changer is to bring customers to online platforms (despite the initial challenge). That will minimise the role of *gaddedars* and give more money into the pocket of the weavers," she says. ■

change of colours. Why will we embrace a new design if the existing one works well?" asks Maurya. His designs called Nilambari, Shetambari, Pitambari etc are actually one design with different hues.

### Small Crowd

Problem is such weavers are a minority. The government firmly believes that only linking market-driven modern designs with handloom can save traditional handloom weaving in Varanasi and other clusters (See box on *Other Handloom Hubs*). In January, a national workshop on promoting handloom in fashion was held in NIFT's campus in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. Officials said it was a great beginning. The



Some members of the 100-member-strong Gaffar Sardar family