

Maheshwari

It is a women textile. A brief history
 This saree, as revealed by its name, has its origin in the town of Maheshwar, established by the queen Ahilya Bai Holkar of Madhya Pradesh and has been traditionally woven for more than 200 years. A blend of cotton and silk, the body of the sari may be plain, checked or striped. The pallu, or the end section which falls behind over the shoulder, is splendid with five stripes (three coloured and two white) while the reversible borders have floral design. The intricately carved stone walls of her palace and temple are the inspiration for the elaborate patterns and borders of the Maheshwari Saree.

The saree woven from pure silk is famous for its strength, elasticity and a unique luster of the fabric. The use of zari and particular texture and sheen of the "garbh-reshmi" saree of Maheshwari give it a distinct identity amongst the wealth of Indian sarees and made it a much-coveted item even in time as far back as 18th century India.

COLORS AND DESIGN MOTIFS

As is normally the case with any long regional tradition, the language of the Maheshwari sari evokes images of serene fruitful nature. The hues and shades of the fabric are referred to in the vernacular as Anjori (grape green), Dalimbi (deep pink), Gul Bakhshi (magenta), Rani (deep mauve pink), Kaasni (light violet), Jaamla (purple), Dhaani (green), Chintamani (peacock blue), Aamrak (golden), Tapkeeree (deep brown). etc.

The use of zari and kinari is also unique to the Maheshwari saree. The golden thread is used to weave exotic motifs and designs on the ~~flower~~ (body) kinar (border) and the ~~anchra~~ (pallu) of the saree. Especially lovely are motifs like Guldasta, Aambuta, Ghungroo, ~~Chaitani~~, Bel phool, and Jai phool, Hansa, Mayur, Baila Ankhi, Ambi Buti and Chandtara.

Once patronised by the royal house of this region, the magnificent Maheshwari was worn by the queens and the princesses along with Tussar and Chanderi sarees. Today, fortunately with efforts of organisations like Mrignayani, this exquisite saree is available to all those women who appreciate beauty and understand the dignified

elegance, be it a marriage, a festival or a formal party.

The story of the Maheshwari fabric is as romantic the sari itself. When you wear a Maheshwari sari, you're wearing history. Because in its every weft there is as much of the 1,500-year tradition and the story of a maharani, as much as in its warp are its gossamer threads. A dwindling tradition revived with modern human incentives of health and education and the infusion of contemporary design.

Today, over 1,500 looms are owned by villagers of the fortress town of Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh. The weavers continue to be predominantly women. In the inner courtyard of the Maharani Ahilya Bai Holkar's qila or fort, under the old neem trees and in the airy rooms of the ancient Mughal style fort, the sound of the busy shuttles melts into the soothing breezes from the Narmada.

The fabrics are all in natural dyes, weaves and prints with earthy rusts, oranges, browns, off-whites and indigo blues dominating the collection.

For two centuries the weavers prospered under the benign patronage of Maharani Ahilya Bai, for there was the royal tradition of gifting saris and turban yardage as a mark of friendship. Ahilya Bai imported the first weavers from Surat and Mandu in 1760, at which time the saris were of the purest and finest cotton, with Maharashtrian weaving influences.

This glorious tradition almost died out with the coming of the mills and power looms, post-Independence. But in the early 1970s Sreemant Maharajkumar Shivajirao Yashwantrao Richard Holkar, the Indore royal scion, returned home after graduating from Stanford, with his American wife Sally.

A chance meeting between three starving weavers and the Holkar couple on the banks of the Narmada was the turning point in this textile fairytale. The weavers implored the couple to work on reviving the art — after all it was a Holkar tradition. Thus was born the Rehwa Society. 'Rehwa' is the Sanskrit name for the holy Narmada river. Richard and Sally Holkar dedicated themselves to uplifting the lot of starving weavers. That is, the few weavers who had not migrated to urban mills, recounts Jaya Mani of Amabara.

For design inspiration, Richard searched the textile collections of his ancestors and today there are two trained textile designers who lend a contemporary flavour to old designs.

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Appropriately enough, Rehwa began its operations with just eight looms and eight women weavers from the Maru community at Ahilya Bai's fort.

Besides saris and yardage, dupattas, scarves, salwar kameez sets, western dress materials, home products like dhurees and mats and table linen are also woven. The textiles are now a blend of silk and cotton with silk yarn, bought from Bangalore and Varanasi, for the warp and fine cotton from Coimbatore for the weft. This gives the textile the alluring, gossamer look for which it is legendary. On either side the border is usually 2.5 inches of geometric designs. The pallav is woven separately on dobby looms rather than jacquard looms

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