

EVOLUTION OF KHADI: WEAVING TRADITION INTO MODERN FABRIC

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Abstract:

The word 'Khadi' is synonymous with our Independence struggle, needing to ascertain our Indianness and capability of being swadeshi in the British Raj. Khadi, though a simple hand woven fabric made by our local artisans, has gained prominence in the 21st century. It is garnering much attention for its simplistic nature, sustainability quotient and versatility. The world of fashion has rightly recognized the potential of khadi fabric and are creating a brand value for the same. Positive attempts are underway to bring khadi to the masses by utilizing mass media, setting retail outlets at local levels, participating in exhibitions and shows, delivering talks and conducting workshops to enlighten people about charkha spinning. This paper aims to explore the changing dynamics of man and khadi fabric through the decades. It will further attempt to find out how much of an impact The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) has had in promoting local artisans and connecting them to fashion houses and industries. It aims to understand the benefits and opportunities our country stands to capitalize on with the growth of popularity of this humble clothing material.

Keywords: khadi, fashion, local artisans

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Introduction:

Khadi as a fabric has gained limelight in recent years through its transformative image seen in the 21st century. How the representation of khadi has shaped generations of Indian citizens during the independence movement is noticeable even after decades. KVIC is taking painstaking efforts to take this humble fabric to masses everywhere - from urban cities in our country to global markets abroad. The bright side to this movement of revitalization is the slow and steady growing interest of youngsters to khadi through fashionable transformation in terms of its appeal. The road ahead is filled with promises and optimism for khadi as citizens are waking up to its truly valuable nature.

Objectives:

- To understand the appeal of khadi in 21st century

- To study the changing relationship of khadi and man through the decades
- To gauge the impact of work done by Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) to promote local artisans and connecting them to fashion houses and industries
- To explore viability of khadi in contributing to the Indian economy

Research Methodology:

The research paper is an attempt of exploratory research, based on the secondary data sourced from journals, magazines, articles and media reports. Looking into requirements of the objectives of the study the research design employed for the study is of descriptive type. Available secondary data was extensively used for the study.

Origin and Evolution of Khadi:

Khadi as a fabric is firmly in the spotlight these days with various events and personalities promoting it, and rightly so. The relevance and form of khadi has been changing throughout the years in India. Indians are taught from school days the rich tradition of khadi and its intertwined relationship with the Independence movement. The words 'khadi', 'charkha', 'swadeshi' and 'aatmanirbharta' have been long associated with the khadi tradition in our country.

The word Khadi is derived from the word 'Khaddar', a term used for the handspun fabric of India. The Indus Valley civilization holds evidence of handspun cotton, certifying khadi as an ancient tradition. As the years progressed, it found itself named muslin, chintz, and calico. The process of khadi making begins with the cultivation of cotton. Once cotton grows, it is washed and prepared for further process. After cleaning, it is spun on a charkha to form the yarn. After the yarn is spun, it is wound upon bobbins to proceed to the weaving process. The yarn is then woven on handlooms, and the textile can be sent for dyeing. Khadi textile is rough in texture. It keeps one cool during the summers and warm during winters.

Khadi was revived during the Swadeshi movement and it stood as a powerful weapon for national freedom and employment of the poor. Mahatma Gandhi believed it was integral to India's nationhood and popularized spinning of khadi as a national mission. Indians who believed in the freedom struggle boycotted foreign-made cloth and wore garments made of home-spun khadi, thereby breathing life into a diminished khadi industry.

The Khadi sector's transformation since 2014 reflects sustained growth, job creation, and effective policies. Khadi, or homespun coarse cotton cloth, was one of the most potent symbols of the independence movement. It was first adopted as a viable alternative to mill fabrics, to boycott factory-produced material, which had swamped and destroyed the traditional Indian textile sector, leaving millions across the country destitute.

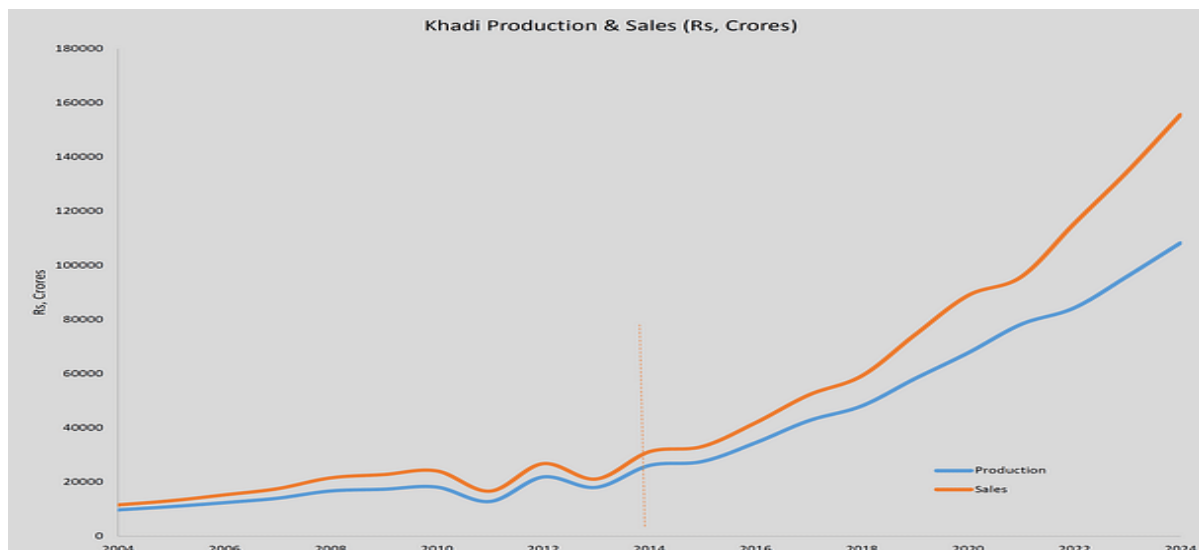
While the results were not as effective as expected, Khadi gained a charm that has endured for over a century. What started as a revolutionary, anti-colonial totem evolved after independence when homespun was dyed in socialist hues. Artisanal weaves were expected to attract higher priority than corporate cloth.

A Khadi Board was established, sops and subsidies were allocated, and textile outlets of most provincial governments offered decent-quality Khadi products at remarkably low prices. However, despite these efforts, the sector continued to wallow in abject disarray for decades, heavily sidelined by synthetics and factory textiles, until a truly revolutionary turnaround began in 2014.

Today, the Khadi sector, formally known as the Khadi and Village Industries sector, is booming. New jobs are being created. Production is up. So are sales, productivity, and earnings.

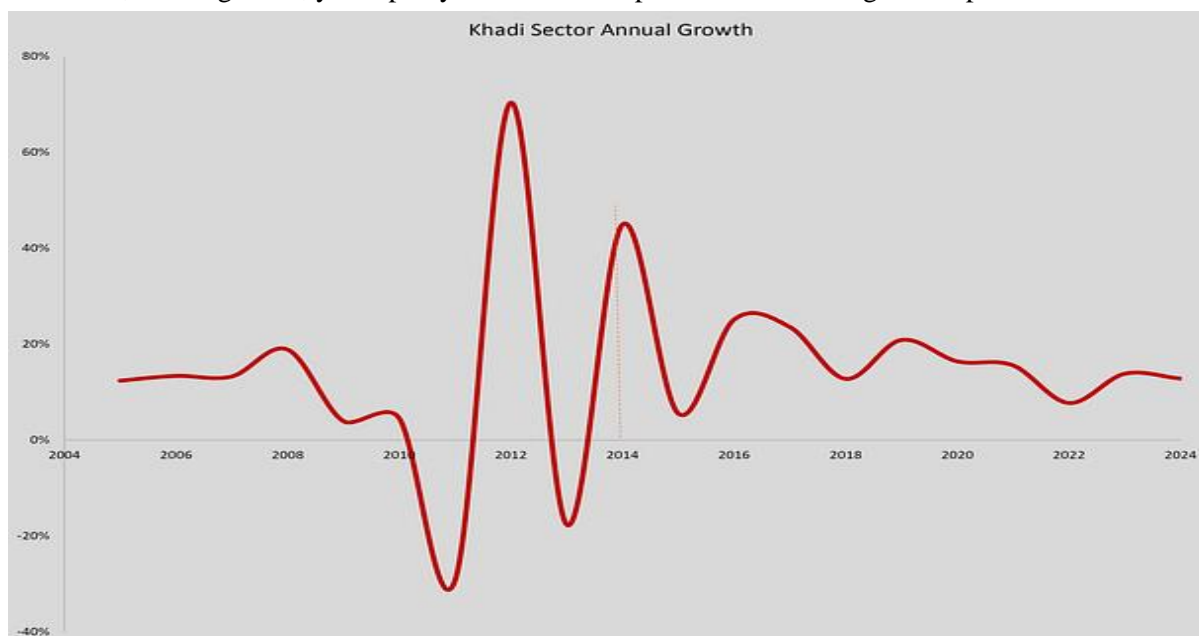
Hard-nosed policy-making and implementation, effectively driven by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, have not only revived the sector but also addressed the issues created by the institutional sloth of mindless socialism.

The numbers speak for themselves.



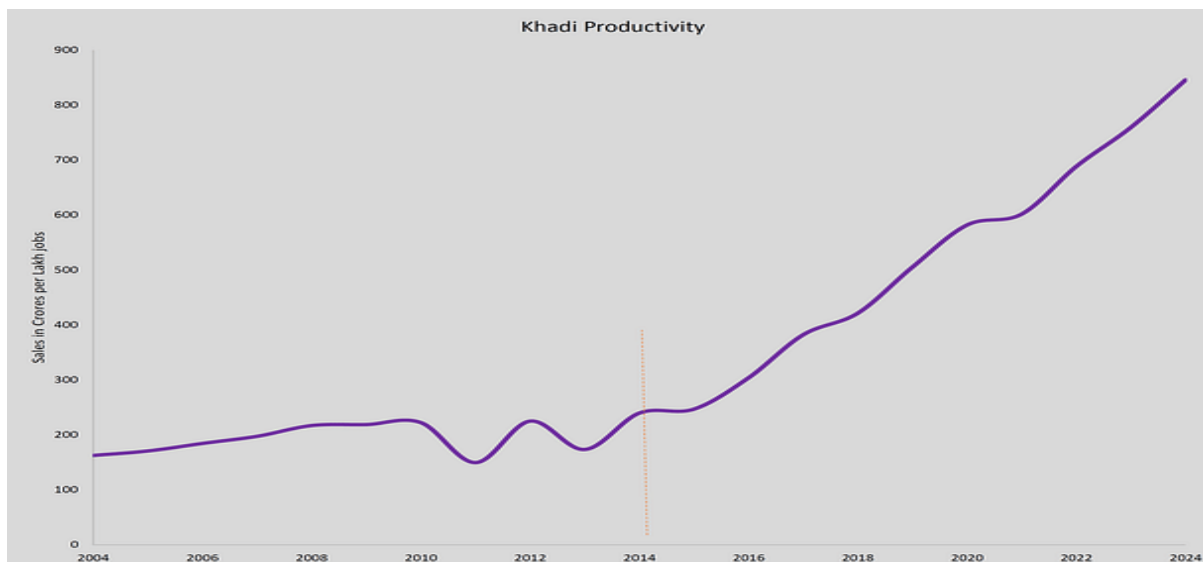
The value of production in the Khadi sector has increased by over 300 per cent in the past decade, while sales have risen by 400 per cent during the same period. This is a truly staggering achievement, not least because the beneficiaries are precisely those tiny, forgotten, weaving communities, whose sufferings and poverty were periodically romanticised by those with a fixed idea of India.

Even more significantly, the wild fluctuations which used to afflict the Khadi sector are now firmly in the past. Instead, there is sustained, robust growth, year upon year. This is the power of monitoring and implementation at work.



In the chart above, note how the sector used to slump periodically, wiping out any meagre gains made in the preceding years. But also note how, since 2014, growth has remained in the extremely buoyant double digits.

As a result, productivity in the Khadi sector has soared in the past decade by over 250 per cent. These are unbelievable numbers.



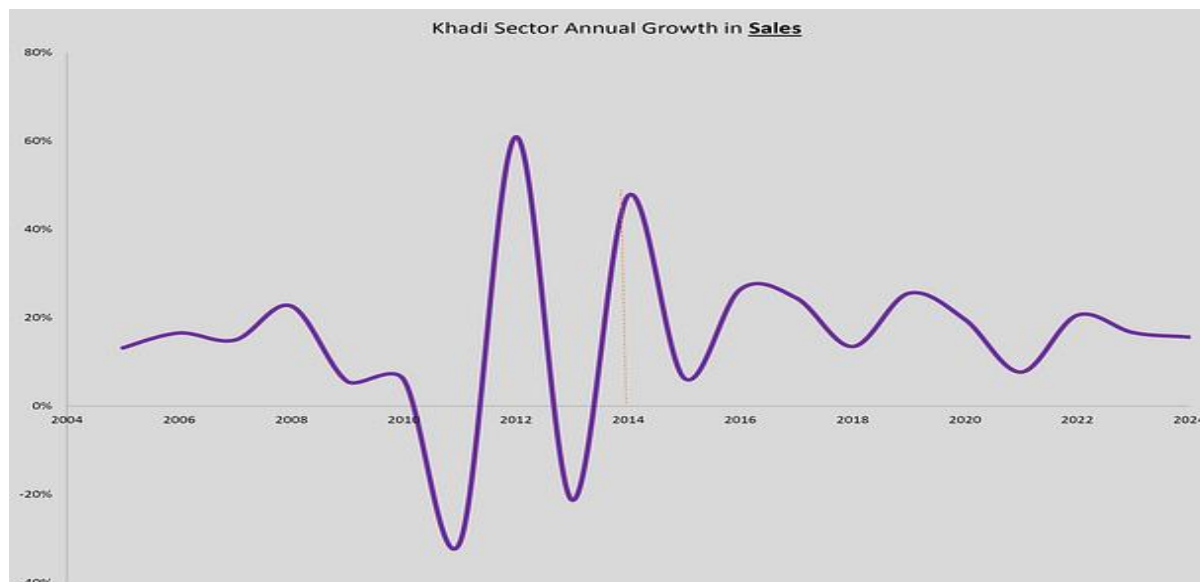
Just look at how the productivity curve takes off post-2014. And the best part is that this rise in productivity has led to the generation of lakhs and lakhs of new jobs.



Cumulative employment in the Khadi sector rose from 1.3 crores in 2014 to over 1.8 crores in 2024, meaning that over 50 Lakh new jobs were generated in this one sector alone, within a decade.

Obviously, profitable policies not only have their own attraction but also quickly gain critical mass to become self-sustaining, thereby reducing the burden on the exchequer. This is how nations are built — by the profit motive, in an organised manner.

And to press the point home, here is a final chart showing annual growth in sales. Once again, note how the wild fluctuations that were so common before 2014 have ceased, and observe how the curve has remained in the black without dipping into the red since then.



Data from Press Information Bureau (PIB): <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2031853>

This is the change that can occur when the informal becomes formal. It is a revolution sans revolutionaries. In conclusion, it is heartening to see that Khadi, once a powerful symbol of the freedom struggle, has quietly transformed into a potent symbol for Amrit Kaal.¹

Benefits of Khadi Fabric

1. Eco-Friendly and Sustainable:

- **Minimal Environmental Impact:** Khadi production involves hand-spinning and hand-weaving, which eliminates need for electricity or large machinery, reducing carbon emissions.
- **Biodegradable:** Since it is made from natural fibers like cotton, silk, or wool, khadi is biodegradable, making it an environmentally friendly choice.

2. Durable and Long-Lasting:

- **High Durability:** The hand-woven nature of khadi gives it strength, making it more durable than machine-made fabrics.
- **Improves with Age:** Khadi becomes softer and more comfortable with each wash, enhancing its appeal over time.¹

3. Breathable and Comfortable:

- **Natural Ventilation:** Khadi being a loosely woven fabric, allows air to pass through easily, making it ideal for hot and humid climates.
- **Soft on Skin:** The natural fibers are gentle, hence reducing the risk of skin irritation.

4. Versatile and Adaptable:

- **Seasonal Suitability:** Khadi keeps one cool in summer and warm in winter due to its natural insulating properties.
- **Diverse Applications:** It is used to make clothing, home décor items, and accessories, showcasing its versatility.

¹ <https://swarajyamag.com/culture/khadi-a-quiet-revolution-weaving-indias-future#:~:text=The%20Khadi%20sector%27s%20transform>

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5. Promotes Local Economy:

- **Supports Artisans:** Purchasing khadi directly supports rural artisans and weavers, helping sustain traditional crafts and livelihoods.
- **Encourages Small-Scale Industries:** Khadi production boosts local economies by encouraging cottage industries.

6. Cultural and Historical Significance:

- **Symbol of Freedom:** Khadi played a pivotal role in India's independence movement, symbolizing self-reliance and resistance against colonial rule.
- **Cultural Heritage:** Wearing khadi connects one to a rich tradition and history.

7. Natural Ingredients:

- **Chemical-Free Production:** Khadi is often produced without use of harmful chemicals or synthetic dyes, making it suitable for people with sensitive skin or allergies.

8. Stylish and Unique:

- **Handcrafted Appeal:** Each piece of khadi fabric is unique due to its handcrafted nature, offering a distinctive aesthetic.
- **Fashionable Choices:** Modern designers are incorporating khadi into contemporary fashion, blending tradition with style.

By choosing khadi, one not only enjoys a high-quality, comfortable fabric but also contributes to environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and economic empowerment.

Evolution of Khadi:

Khadi has evolved significantly over the years once from being a symbol of India's independence to self-reliance. From being a humble hand-spun fabric to a globally recognized sustainable textile, its journey reflects India's changing socio-economic and cultural landscape. Let us take a look at how khadi has evolved through the decades:-

1. Origins and Pre-Independence Era

- **Traditional Roots:** Khadi has been part of Indian culture for centuries, primarily used in rural areas for everyday wear.
- **Mahatma Gandhi's Influence:** During India's independence movement, Mahatma Gandhi promoted khadi as a symbol of self-reliance and resistance against British industrial goods. It became a political tool, representing swadeshi (local) production and economic independence.
- **Mass Adoption:** People across India began spinning and wearing khadi to support the freedom struggle, making it a unifying symbol.

2. Post-Independence Period

- **From Symbol to Commodity:** After independence, khadi lost its revolutionary symbolism but remained associated with simplicity and nationalism.
- **Government Support:** The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) was established in 1956 to promote and regulate khadi production, ensuring livelihood for rural artisans.
- **Limited Appeal:** During this period, khadi was often perceived as coarse and outdated material, primarily worn by politicians and rural communities.

3. Revival and Modernization (1980s–1990s)

- **Introduction of New Designs:** Efforts were made to improve the quality and design of khadi to appeal to urban consumers.
- **Designer Collaborations:** Indian designers began experimenting with khadi, incorporating it into contemporary fashion, making it more attractive to younger generations.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Initiatives highlighting khadi's cultural and environmental significance provoked renewed interest.

4. Global Recognition and Sustainable Fashion (2000s–Present)

- **Focus on Sustainability:** With growing awareness of sustainable and ethical fashion, khadi gained prominence as an eco-friendly fabric.
- **Innovative Blends:** Khadi is now blended with other materials like silk, wool, and synthetic fibers to create diverse textures and styles.
- **Luxury and Global Markets:** Indian and international designers have showcased khadi on global platforms, positioning it as a luxury fabric.
- **Digital Transformation:** E-commerce platforms and social media have made khadi more accessible, expanding its reach to global consumers.

Review of Literature:

Shloka Sriram (2023) in her research focused on understanding the evolution of khadi fabric from “Freedom Fabric” to “Fashionable Fabric”. Post Independence, KVIC has focused on reinventing the khadi industry by changing the perspective of people towards khadi in essence. The media also shifted its focus from portraying khadi as a nationalistic symbol to khadi being a choice of new age fashion designers for creating fashionable clothing. The paper concludes with focus on marketing khadi as being a better alternative for the planet in terms of sustainability and at the same time keeping the fabric trendy in fashion world will keep up the relevance of it among people.

Dhawale & Khot (2023) state in their research that khadi is a way of life, not just a type of fabric. KVIC has made a substantial contribution to the economic growth of rural areas in India by supporting the Khadi and village industries there. Additionally, it has greatly benefited India's cultural heritage by preserving and promoting the nation's traditional arts and crafts. As a result, Khadi is a durable, green, and adaptable fabric

that offers numerous advantages to both the person and the environment. It is both a sustainable option for clothing and other products and a representation of India's cultural history.

Rastogi & Gupta (2023) through their research aim at assessing and exploring sustainable and environmentally friendly approaches in Khadi manufacturing. Based on the assessment of sustainable methods in Khadi manufacturing, the conclusion provides recommendations for the adoption and implementation of environmentally friendly approaches. These recommendations may include specific actions for Khadi manufacturers, policymakers, and consumers to promote sustainable practices. The conclusion also emphasizes the potential of sustainable methods to enhance the overall sustainability, competitiveness, and cultural integrity of Khadi manufacturing.

Kaur & Kashyap (2022) in their research highlighted ways to make khadi appealing to modern consumers. According to them, there is a need to attract more customers towards khadi in order to increase the sales of khadi readymade apparel. Distribution of products, staff, pricing of the products, utilization of the space, proper lighting and location play an integral role in attracting customers and increasing sales. Proper advertisements and improved marketing techniques should be adopted by KVIC to promote khadi and make it accessible to the mass population. There is a great need to train the people associated with Khadi in order to provide better customer service and experience. Customer feedback should be taken seriously and implemented in order to improve customer dealings and add more satisfied customers towards Khadi.

Conclusion:

Khadi has transitioned from being a symbol of India's freedom struggle to a multifaceted fabric that aligns with contemporary values of sustainability, cultural pride, and economic empowerment. Its role today is

shaped by global trends, environmental awareness, and evolving consumer preferences. Its evolution reflects India's journey of innovation, sustainability, and cultural pride. As it continues to adapt, khadi remains a timeless representation of India's heritage and resilience. As the world moves toward greener and more ethical practices, khadi stands as a beacon of hope, blending heritage with innovation. Its unique qualities, cultural significance, and eco-friendly production methods have positioned it as a premium fabric with global appeal.

However, the path ahead is surely not easy. While challenges like cost and awareness remain, strategic branding, innovation, and collaborations can propel khadi into the mainstream international market. Its story of tradition, craftsmanship, and sustainability makes it a fabric of the future, resonating with global consumers seeking meaningful and eco-conscious choices.

Awareness of khadi among youth has grown significantly in recent years, driven by sustainability movements, government initiatives, and modern branding efforts. However, there are significant

challenges in making khadi more relatable and desirable to younger generations. Only time will tell what future awaits for khadi as a fabric.

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