





LOOM AND BEHOLD!

The famed Banarasi silk is back in vogue, thanks to designers who are reinventing the fabric for inspired outfits.

TEXT **BINDU GOPAL RAO**

When actress Anushka Sharma got married last December, her outfits were under intense media scrutiny. In particular, the red Banarasi saree she wore for her reception received a lot of attention and praise. This saree was the product of the exquisite craftsmanship of Muazzam Ansari and two other craftsmen, who worked day and night for two months to create this piece. While Banarasi silks have been the muse of many designers, these fabrics are also being extensively contemporised not only to create garments, but also for home decor and accessories.

REVIVAL TALES

A number of steps have been taken in recent times by various stakeholders to revive handlooms in general and Banaras handlooms in particular. There has been a large scale design intervention in the Banaras cluster over the past few years, courtesy of many established as well as upcoming design houses.

VIREN DESAI/Shutterstock.com; Courtesy of FabIndia; Naina Jain; Anita Dongre

FASHION



With mechanisation in the limelight, the Government of India is initiating projects and providing incentives to weavers so as to prevent the art of handlooms from dying. Fashion and product designers are revisiting their roots and are incorporating the art of traditional weaves into their collections. "They are developing contemporary weaves, motifs, and innovative designs to bring this craft back to life and provide it with the recognition it deserves. A conscious effort to collaborate and build a mutually beneficial relationship with weavers is being undertaken, not only to revive the craft but also to give back and support the artisans and their families," says Sonam of SVA by Sonam and Paras Modi. Kavya Chandra, Co-Founder, Soulful Hues, adds, "Government support and the Make in India campaign have also popularised this trend. And of course, social media images of celebrities wearing saris and outfits made with these fabrics have done a lot to revive the use of handloom fabrics. Craft councils are also doing a lot by introducing weavers to buyers through exhibitions."

The change is being led by new ideas, collaborations and introduction of diverse weaving techniques, including natural dyeing methods. Designer Gaurang Shah, explains, "To sustain



this art of weaving in every region, we introduce design innovations, yarn fusion, new colour combinations, skill upgradation, and also help weavers find contemporary ways to remain deep-rooted yet connect with originality." A perfect way to keep the craft alive is to keep enriching occasions for its use and utility. Sarees continue to dominate, but the usage of Banarasi fabrics for apparel and home furnishing can give it a much-needed boost. Monica Shah of JADE says, "Through our collections, we

aim to shed more light on the weaving tradition of Varanasi and give it a place of pride in contemporary India as well as global fashion. The more it is seen within a contemporary framework and the more we demonstrate how beautifully Banarasi handlooms can fit into special occasions as well as in everyday life, the better we can ensure the continuity of its legacy along with monetary profits for the communities who have devoted their lives to this craft. It is important for us to not only take care of our weavers, but also to support their children so that they don't feel compelled to give up on this age-old profession just due the lack of money."



CONTEMPORARY CUES

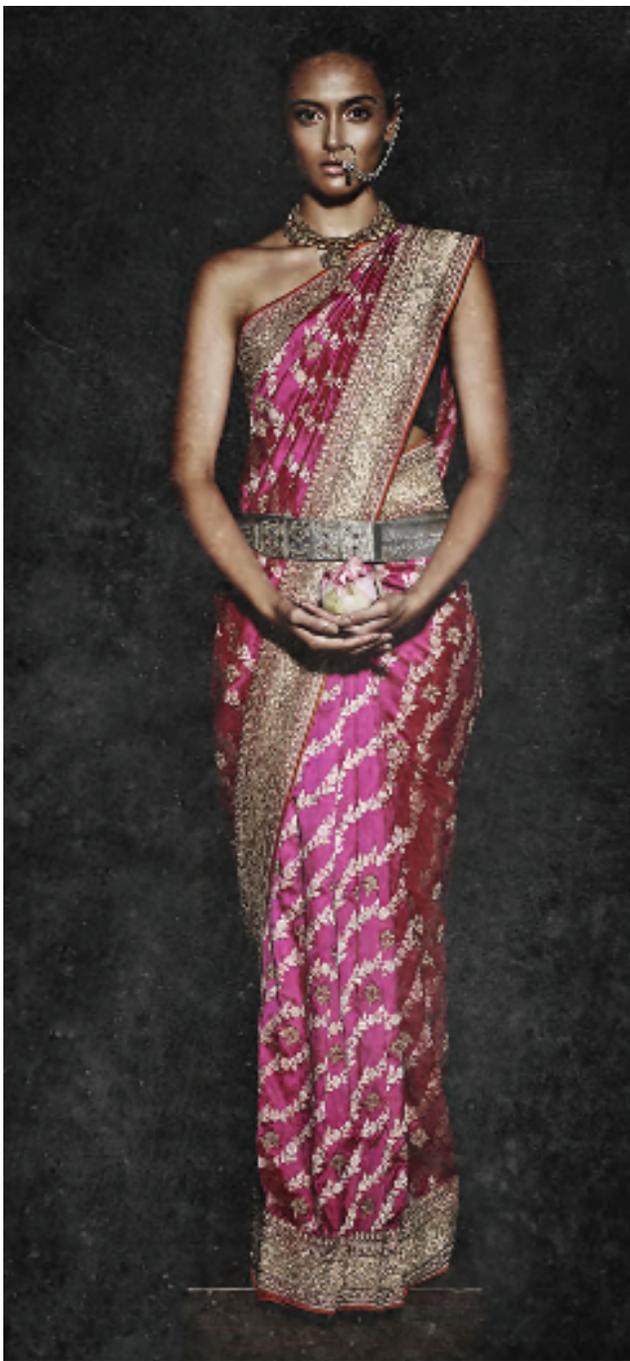
Nikhat Mariyam Neerushaa, costume designer and stylist adds, “We use these fabrics in home decor in the form of curtains and cushions. While lehengas are already famous, Banarasi blazers are now becoming popular.” Designer Shruti Sancheti adds, “These silks are made contemporary and globally suitable not only for weddings or festivities but also as a skirt, jacket or even a gown. It can be used for furnishing and for bags because of its strong element of design.”

WEDDING WEAVES

Banarasi silk is woven from the finest silk, crafted exclusively for a royal feel. It is an unmatched example of artistry and glorifies both its wearer and any decor it is added to. Its signature intricate floral and foliate design, with special gold and silver brocade gives it an antique, elegant feel. “The innovative utilisation of Banarasi silk in decorations strongly embellishes the look, and helps contribute to the revival of the art. The geometric patterns and the rich and vibrant colours go perfectly well with wedding celebrations,” says Rachana Lucknowala, MD, Vivaah & Party Cruisers. With clients constantly looking for innovations and a spark of uniqueness to age-old craft traditions, designers are also

experimenting with combinations. “Combining Paithani with Banarasi in meenakari collections is an example. This inlay work in India, practiced majorly in Agra and Rajasthan, forms the soul of the collection. This decorative and intricate craft is brought to life through intricate and geometric amalgamations of colourful patterns to form beautiful ensembles for the wedding season. What is exciting is the way it is applied in different hues to form striking statements through each garment,” says Naina Jain, a pioneer in the art of *bandhani* in Banarasi silk. Indian brides have, for generations, favoured the regal Banarasi for their wedding look. “Due to the large celebrity following in India and the slowly shifting trend towards more organic weaving, handlooms have attracted the taste of the modern woman,” says Soma Banerjee, Founder, Ur Style File.

Courtesy of Hemant Agarwal, and Anita Dongre



CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

Developing Banarasi textiles is a labour intensive process and with the advent of power looms and other simplified manufacturing processes, there has been a decrease in demand for this craft. Due to power looms, not only is the production cheaper and faster, but the product is also more affordable. "A pure silk handloom Banarasi will cost at least ₹10,000 and a similar-looking sari made on the power loom will often cost as little as ₹1,500. This was the reason that led to decline of the Banarasi handloom craft," says Nishant Malhotra, Founder, Weaverstory.com. Moreover, with synthetic fabrics and textiles taking over the market, Banaras no longer receives the recognition and monetary support that it requires to sustain itself. Apart from this, the lack of proper infrastructure and suitable working environment for weavers has led the

new generation of weavers to turn to other secure jobs. "It may be an unfashionable thing to say but the 'revival' of handlooms or any craft can only be sustained if there is greater economic viability. This economic viability can only be ensured when every member of the supply chain and ecosystem is rewarded and becomes a beneficiary of its economic dividends. A designer or a manufacturer loses incentive to innovate once there a hundred imitations. Likewise, no craft can survive unless there is a popular acceptance and patronage," explains K Radharaman, Founder, CEO & Design Head, House of Angadi. While the steps towards a renewed interest in handlooms may be small right now, they certainly seem to be in the right direction. The movement depends on us. ■

Courtesy of JADE; and Payal Khandwala