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# The Silent Magnificence of Mangalagiri Fabrics

A small village in Andhra Pradesh, Mangalagiri is known for its eponymous handloom craft that continues to thrive despite several hardships. **Bindu Gopal Rao** writes.

Located between the cities of Vijayawada and Guntur is the tiny town of Mangalagiri, which is known for its fine cotton textiles. Almost every home here is involved in fabric-related activities. In Mangalagiri, it is common to hear the collective sound of handlooms emanating from weaving workshops, where artisans work away religiously. They sit with their feet firmly on the ground to craft these weaves so that they are tight and have a sturdy texture.

## AN INTRIGUING WEAVE

If there is one thing that is inherently magnificent about traditional Indian textiles, it is the unparalleled attention given to delivering the highest handcrafted quality possible. The soft and pristine Mangalagiri cottons are one such example. It is one of those Indian weaves that have been slowly seeing resurgence, what with designers increasingly adapting it for contemporary times.

Puneet Jain, Director, ODHNI, an ethnic wear brand, says, “The Mangalagiri weave is a fine cotton fabric that is handcrafted in the weaving town of Mangalagiri, Andhra Pradesh. Here, close to 5,000 weavers work for wholesalers and 50 other local outlets in order to make pure cotton yarns. This fine yarn (with a thread count of 80x80s) is tightly woven over pit looms to get a distinct texture. These weaves are intentionally kept plain, with a thick zari border superimposed as another woven element on the body of the fabric. The base cotton is boiled to remove impurities, dried, and then woven into the fabric. This is then dyed in vats, followed by the weaving of the zari border.” This is precisely the most distinguishing quality of Mangalagiri fabrics—the lack of embroidery and heavy designs. The thick gold or silver zari border, tribal motifs on the pallu, and the inverted chequered patterns make it easy to differentiate this weave from the others. The fabric is then sold either as finished saris or fabric cuts for salwar suits and other dressing material. The delicate zari border in gold on extra-fine cotton makes this fabric extremely exquisite and enchanting.

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**TECHNICAL TALES**

The weavers in Mangalagiri work on pit looms, whose rhythmic clatter is almost unmissable. There are over 10 looms in each of the weaving centres that are scattered across the town. The yarns for the weave are combed and readied in the small alleys that surround these centres. Mangalagiri saris are usually woven with pure cotton yarns that are largely sourced from neighbouring Guntur; they are coloured using both natural and synthetic dyes. The yarns are washed and dipped in coloured boiling water—to have them acquire an even tone—and then dried in the shade. While zari borders are most commonly used in these saris, some stores even retail saris with thread borders. The plain body of the sari is, at times, adorned with striped or chequered patterns. The saris are great for all seasons as they are light in summer months and help in keeping warm in winter months. The recent interest in traditional attire has spiked the demand for these saris. This, in turn, has ensured that the villagers who work on the looms have



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## FABRIC SPEAK

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a steady source of income. The Padmashali community predominantly works on these weaves, and has been doing so for generations.

### REVIVAL CUES

The Mangalagiri fabric is such a human-intensive operation, that its very existence depends on more and more weavers taking to the handcrafted textile. This, unfortunately, is not the case as few weavers actually receive their due, especially when one looks at the sheer effort involved in creating the textile. “Fewer weavers

are taking to the profession, resorting to odd jobs or even quitting the profession altogether. This is also where patronage from the Government and design houses comes into play. Many designers are now supporting traditional Indian textiles and artisans to help fuel India’s textile traditions. For instance, A-listers such as Sabyasachi, Anita Dongre, and Gaurang Shah have been using traditional Indian weaves to craft their latest collections,” says Yatin Jain, Co-director at ODHNI. Many e-commerce platforms also offer new wings to traditional textiles by stocking these handloom weaves at affordable costs. They also help in offering finished garments from these weaves, giving urban buyers a chance to access these prized textiles. Puneet adds, “Using Mangalagiri and other traditional textiles as a base, more brands can decidedly go indie in their approach, the way Anita Dongre does, for example, with her label, Grassroot.

“Apart from using the soft cotton yarn to create scarves, stoles, and dupattas, the fabric can be moulded into loose tops, tunics, wrap dresses, and other summery delights. The all-season fabric





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can also be used to fashion culottes, trousers, and wide palazzo pants.”

Many Indian fashion designers of international fame are promoting Mangalagiri textiles through their creations that reminisce the designs and cultures of the 16th century. Nidhi Yadav, Creative Head and Founder, AKS Clothings, said, “The Government is taking some initiatives to preserve this handloom art. Various Bollywood celebrities, too, are endorsing this South Indian fabric, which is not just light but also immensely graceful.” Apart from saris, weavers now also make salwar kameez, yardages, stoles, and dupattas from the fabric that appeal to a broader spectrum

of consumers. Another attractive factor about Mangalagiri fabrics is the sheer array of colours it is available in, from bright reds and yellows to muted shades such as grey and beige.

**CHALLENGES GALORE**

The fabric received its Geographical Indication (GI) status in 2013, thanks to the efforts of the Mangalagiri Master Weavers’ Association (MMWA). However, a few challenges persist. “Working on traditional looms is a tedious process, and even after dedicating two full days to weaving a sari, the weaver makes not more than ₹400. So the young generation is not quite keen on carrying forward the 500-year-old legacy of their forefathers. Hence, the Government’s support is mandatory to conserve this endangered profession,” says Yadav. It is also the long gestation period that forms a part of each sari, which makes the profession less desirable for the younger generation, most of which lacks the patience to work on handlooms.

Mangalagiri fabrics have caught the fancy of not only big designers but also textile revivalists, who are now doing their bit to breathe new life into it. In doing so, they are bringing the weave back to the masses in fresher ways, which will hopefully enable it to thrive with vigour in the years to come. ■