



WEAVING A LEGACY

The handloom weavers of Maheshwar work tirelessly to keep the town's tradition of weaves alive. **Bindu Gopal Rao** explores the history of Maheshwar, its rich heritage and the exquisiteness of the fabric

Ask a *sari* lover about Maheshwari *sisis* and you are likely to get a nod in favour of the famed airy, colourful silk-cotton fabric that displays intricate designs. Originating in the ancient city of Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh, the town, which once struggled to survive in an ever-developing technological world, today, has weavers everywhere spearheaded by the Rehwa Society.

ROYAL CONNECTIONS

Maheshwar has a handloom weaving history that dates back to the fifth century. The weavers were given a boost when Rani Ahilya Bai Holkar reigned between 1765 and 1795. It is believed that she had weavers from Surat and Malwa work on exclusive nine yard *sisis* that were gifted to her relatives and guests. It is also believed that

she conceived and designed the first Maheshwari *sari* herself. Under her patronage, the weaver's community of Maheshwar prospered and found many takers among the wealthy local families. However, post-independence, there was a marked decline in the craft and in 1979, the heirs of the royal families established the Rehwa Society to give the Maheshwari weave a new lease of life. Today, the center employs over 150 men and women who work diligently on the handlooms to create exquisitely woven *saris*, *dupattas*, stoles and yardage for domestic and international markets. The fabric is woven using silk and cotton in warp and weft respectively, and is a fine handloom material. The handlooms used in Maheshwar include older pit looms as well as the newer frame looms with lightweight metal frames. Ila Kapoor Chaddah, Founder, Ziba by Hand says, "Organisations like Rehwa have been working hard to revive the traditional Maheshwaris since the 1970s by creating new patterns with pure fabrics and natural colours. The fabric is also being used to create dresses for young women. Last year one of these brands took a Maheshwari inspired collection to the New York Fashion week too!"

PROCESS

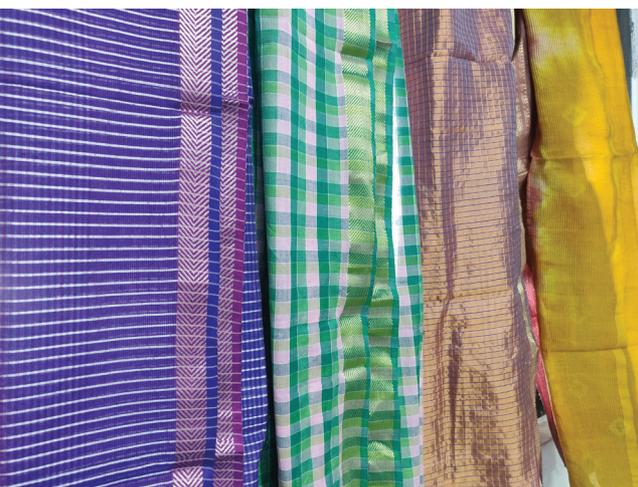
The process of Maheshwar weaves involves sourcing base fabrics from different places and dyeing the yarn (using organic and chemical colours). The thread has to be detangled and stretched and reeled using a *charkha* to make smaller rolls. Since the warp is in silk, the warping of these threads is done using an octagonal cylindrical frame and hooks. Maheshwari *saris* have bright colours and patterns like stripes, checks and floral borders. Traditional designs especially on the border and *pallu* are inspired by temples, palaces and forts of the region. Look out for the *chattai pattern* (mat design), *Chameli*

LOOK OUT FOR THE *CHATTAI* PATTERN (MAT DESIGN), *CHAMELI KA PHOOL* (JASMINE), *EENT* (BRICK) AND THE *HEERA* (DIAMOND) PATTERNS THAT CAN ALSO BE SEEN ON THE WALLS OF THE MAHESHWAR FORT.

ka phool (jasmine), *eent* (brick) and the *heera* (diamond) patterns that can also be seen on the walls of the Maheshwar Fort. These *saris* come with a border embellished in *zari*. Some *saris* also have a reversible border called *bugdi* which can be worn both sides.

HANDLOOM HUES

What makes these *saris* so popular is their modern take to ensure a contemporary look and feel. "A lot of effort goes into creating new design innovations that make *saris* relevant in an urban market. But an equal amount of effort also goes into creating designs that echo from an aesthetic followed since the times of Ahilya





Ma Saab. Rehwa continues this tradition by locally sourcing fine qualities of cotton, silk, and wool. All yarns and fabric dye are assuredly Azo-free and the water used in the process is treated responsibly before being let out into the Rehwa garden,” says Shamika Pradhan, Head Of Fashion Department, INIFD Institute of Fashion and Interior Designing, Deccan Pune. It is best not to wash your Maheshwari sari in detergent at first. Using a mild detergent is recommended after two or three plain washes. Also, do not keep the sari soaked in detergent for long and iron at a low or medium heat. Designer, Gautam Gupta, says, “The Maheshwari sari is a cotton and pure silk fabric woven with zari or brocade in varied designs. These designs include stripes, checks and floral borders. Now-a-days we can see light Maheshwari silk fabric and light Maheshwari cotton fabric with soft colours too. The textile is used in saris with contemporary blouses, dupattas and stoles, anarkali suits, salwar kameez, jumpsuit and even stylish tops. Handloom fabric is known for its flexibility,

versatility and innovation. The strength of handloom mainly lies in the easy introduction to new designs, something that cannot be replicated by the power loom sector.” Today, besides saris, Maheshwari weaves are used to create kurtas, shirts, stoles, jackets, dupattas as well as home linen. “They are also mixed with silk and wool and used to make shawls, drapes and scarves. These fabrics help support the local economy and sustain the livelihood of a large rural population. They are also ideal for hot Indian summers and above all sustainable and environment-friendly,” explains Chaddah.

DESIGNER DREAMS

Designers like Soham Dave, Amrich and Eka are a few of the frontrunners in the Indian handloom movement incorporating a lot of textiles from Madhya Pradesh in their collection, including Maheshwari saris. Veteran fashion designer Krishna Mehta showcased a contemporary line of age-old Maheshwari weaves from Madhya Pradesh at the Lakme Fashion Week in 2014.

Fashion designer, Rahul Mishra, had his signature traditional techniques and handloom embroidery broadly inspired by the departing monsoon. His collection included the use of Chanderi, Maheshwari and Benarasi Silks. Designers like Urvashi Kaur showed her deep thoughts, fabric research, and great artistry, in a collection named 'Masira' at the Lakme Fashion Week Winter/ Festive 2019. The selection of fabrics involved handwoven *khes* from Punjab, detailed *shibori* work and Maheshwari silks from Maheshwar that support and empower women artisans in Madhya Pradesh. She very gracefully also implemented Maheshwari silks in engineered and structured styles. The show gave us a sneak peek into how fashion can change lives if it becomes sustainable. Traditional fabrics and weaves are in urgent need of revival and the story of weavers in Maheshwar have become an inspiration for other weavers. ■

FUN FACTS

- Maheshwari *saris* come in five variants - *Chandrakala*, *Baingani Chandrakala*, *Chandratara*, *Beli* and *Parbi*. The first two are plain designs with a focus on the shade and border. The latter varieties are designed with small motifs, checks or stripes.
- Authentic Maheshwari *saris* come in colours such as Red, Purple, Maroon, Black or Green.
- They are dyed using natural colors and therefore must be dry-cleaned before the first wash.
- Maheshwari *saris* have either golden or silver *zari* thus making them perfect occasion wears.
- The borders of these *saris* are reversible. So one can wear the *sari* from either side.

