

# Banarasi Silk-A New Approach

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## Introduction-

*"Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together."* -Mark Twain

Banaras, Varanasi or Kashi is one of the most important pilgrimage centres of India. Being one of the holiest cities of the country, devotees flock into this divine destination from all over the world. It is situated in the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh on the banks of the holy river Ganga. It is believed that whoever dies here attains *moksha*- liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

The evolution of numerous generations of human life has been witnessed by this holy city. Varanasi has witnessed the advancement of human society since antiquity. The city can be rightfully called the cultural capital of India.

The city can be seen as confluence of several cultures. Not only Hinduism and Buddhism, it also has connections with Jainism. The Jains revere this city very much because three of their Tirthankaras were born here.

Since the city was situated on a very important trade route, it flourished as a prominent centre of trade and commerce in the 7th century.

It has the distinction of being the oldest constantly inhabited place in the world, yet there is a seemingly timeless about the city of Varanasi. It has many ghats symbolizing the various facets of life, its countless temples represent an unending sacred poise, its natives a friendly and cheerful bunch and the river Ganges which gives the city its meaning is the cascade of life and stimulation for generations.

About Varanasi, **P.V. Kane** aptly said-

*"There is hardly any city in the world that can claim greater antiquity, greater continuity and greater popular veneration than Banaras. Banaras has been a holy city for at least thirty centuries. No city in India arouses the religious emotions of Hindus as much as Kashi does."*

Varanasi has been a symbol of Hindu renaissance. Knowledge, philosophy, culture, devotion to Gods, Indian arts and crafts all flourished here for centuries. Varanasi has always been a famous centre of arts and crafts and of music and dance. Varanasi is famous for its production of silks and brocades with gold and silver threadwork. A renowned carpet-weaving centre is at Bhadoi. Wooden toys, bangles made of glass, ivory work, and brass ware are also produced in Varanasi.

Apart from being the centre of the country's spiritual compass, the city is equally important as a brocade-weaving centre.

### **Motivation of Study**

Banarsi silk has, for generations fascinated the fashion world and has been a great source of inspiration to the costume connoisseurs all over the globe. This study attempts to analyze how Banarsi silk is now being viewed in a new light. Instead of modernizing this ancient weave, some designers are working for reviving this craft without tampering with the design of the textile. The main motivation of this study has been the efforts of top designers for the revival and preservation of Banarsi silk in its original form.

### **Silk Weaving Tradition in India**

A fabric with a thousand years of history, silk is celebrated for its soft, shimmering texture and comfortable drape. It is considered as the queen of all fabrics. Silk has been interwoven with the life and culture of India. It is always regarded as an item of luxury and one of the most important commodities traded in the ancient world. Silk acquires a very prominent place in the lives of Indian people throughout the length and breadth of the country,

from east to west and from north to south. It is known as 'Paat' in East India, 'Pattu' in South India and 'Resham' in North India.

It is a well known fact that India is the world's second largest producer of silk after China. We Indians are also the largest consumers of silk.

The silk fabrics of India are the best example of the brilliant craftsmanship of the weavers of the country. It is not just the yarn that is woven but the feelings and emotions are also woven along. India has a number of silk weaving centres spread all over the country, having their individual and characteristic styles. For Indian ladies, silk is the ultimate choice. Silk is always woven and interwoven with the way of life and customs of a region.

The Indian weaver puts in his best to translate the motif designs, colours, pattern and versatility into an exclusive piece of silk.

### **Banarasi Silk**

Banarasi silk is a fine variation of silk weaving. Banarasi silk is an unmatched example of excellent artistry. Varanasi boasts of a great force of expert weavers, who have been creating intricately woven designs on silk for generations. The designs are inspired by traditional motifs mainly floral and fauna. The Banarasi silk is distinguished from the silks of other Indian state, in terms of design and weaving distinctiveness.

The most celebrated product of Varanasi's handlooms is the Banarasi silk saree. Banarasi silk saree is an essential item in every Indian woman's wardrobe, traditional or contemporary. From an 80 years old grandmother to a 25 years old grand-daughter, Banarasi silk may have changed its silhouette but the spirit remains the same-regal and opulent. This spectacular silk is amazingly grand and statuesque, and is the perfect representation of the rich textiles bequest of India. The changes in this fabric, over the years, represent the history and cultural exchanges of this diverse nation.

Banarasi sarees have unparalleled place and magnificence. This is because of the high quality silk, which is used to create extremely eye-catching, elaborate woven patterns on the sarees.

### **Brocade of Varanasi**

The word Brocade is derived from the Latin word "*brochus*" denoting to transfix. Fine heavy gauge silk yarns are woven intricately as warp and weft along with gold and silver threads (zari) to create elaborate brocade designs. In detail, the weft thread passes over and under the warp thread, weaving the silk base of the saree where gold and silver threads are transfixed in between by skipping the passage of the regular weft over a certain number of warp threads as per the design.

The brocade textiles of Varanasi are known for their appealing patterns, precious materials and complex techniques of production.

A characteristic feature is the use of gold or silver zari along with coloured silk threads to create various motifs. The zari used for weaving is of a special kind and has been produced in Varanasi for centuries.

### **Varieties of Banarsi Silk**

In Varanasi, two weaving sectors are very prominent *Alaipura* and *Madanpura*. There is a visible distinction between their weaving techniques and both have their own composition of motifs. While the *Madanpura* weavers stick to traditional fine and delicate patterns, the weavers of *Alaipura* are known for innovating new techniques and designs. The *Madanpura* fabric is finer in comparison to that of *Alaipura*, in terms of finish. Apart from these two areas other weaving centres are-*Pilikothi*, *Lohta*, *Lallapura*, *Bajardiha*, *Khojwan* and *Rewaritalab*, etc.

***Kalabattu*** is a specially prepared silk thread with metallic mounting of silver and gold. ***Kinkhab*** is the most well known variety of Banarasi brocade. It abundantly uses gold and silver threads making the silk background almost invisible. It is a heavy fabric and mostly used for furnishings. ***Alfi***, ***Tashi***, ***Baftan/Katan*** or ***Pot Than***, ***Himru/Amru*** are the different varieties of ***kinkhab*** depending on the technique and amount of gold and silver threads used.

***Amru***, ***Jamadani***, ***Tanchhou***, ***Cut work***, ***Katan***, ***Kora***, ***Mashru***, ***Rangkat*** are some other varieties of Banarasi brocade.

### **Patterns & Colours**

Most motifs of Banarasi silk get their inspiration from nature. Single motifs are called *butis* or *butas*. These motifs are arranged in various forms like-*badambuti*, *kairi buti*, *chaand buti*, *asharfi buti*, *paan buti* and *pankha buti*.

Persian influence can be seen in *jangla* pattern making use of the most colour silk threads. Intricate *jangla* patterns and motifs of vegetation are spread throughout the fabric, with embellished gold or silver creepers of flowers. Another adaptation from the Persian prototype which became the speciality of Varanasi is *latifa buti*.

In the past only vegetable dyes were used, the colours were fast and lasted for generations. Today, chemical dyes are in vogue as they are cheaper, less time consuming and have a variety of palette.

### **Crisis in Banarasi Silk Industry**

In the mid-1980s, the first signs of trouble began to emerge with the growing popularity of power looms. Power loom weaving competition has rapidly increased since then. Though machines have reduced the time taken by a weaver to less than one fifth, but they still haven't been able to replace the quality and the intricacy of handwork.

Since it is not easy to distinguish between the two, consumers often opt for the cheaper variants.

The downfall began when Surat developed the technique for copying traditional handloom designs on power looms. Banarasi sarees are still woven with natural yarns. These are expensive as well as do not lend themselves to experiments. In contrast, the spinning mills in Surat are capable of producing large volumes of synthetic and polyester yarns which look just like the pure silk produced by Banaras.

Handloom is expensive as it involves more time and much more accuracy and precision, in comparison to the power loom weaving so, handloom brocade is less in demand. Handloom is now associated to only a few high end costumers, who can afford it. The price of raw silk has also increased in the recent past, making it

costlier than ever. Cheaper silk import from China has worsened the poverty of Varanasi silk weavers.

An article in the Economist called ‘**Looming Extinction**’ highlights the decline of the traditional silk weaving industry in Varanasi, sighting Western-style dress influence as one of the causes in falling demand, and the fact that women often now prefer the cheaper, brighter machine-made sarees.

The weavers have to depend on middle men for the sale of their products, who have little concern for their plight. As the cost of production is very high, with the earning very low, it is difficult to maintain a huge business. In a cyclic process, they fall prey to the brokers. Majority of them are uneducated. They have very little networking, negotiating, organizational skills. Being in an unorganized sector where accounts aren’t efficiently maintained, most work is undertaken on the basis of trust alone.

The artisans are not in touch with fashion trends. They are totally unaware of the fashion industry and the demand of the saree they weave for national and international consumers. Electricity crisis is another big problem for both power loom as well as for handloom. Most of the weaving is done at tiny palaces in villages and there is not enough space for display and storage. Noise of handlooms and power looms also create health hazards like hearing impairments, irritation and stress etc.

### **Fashion Renaissance**

The queen of all fabrics is still very gorgeous, but there is a dearth of her lovers. Younger beauties have taken over as they are more alluring and ever-changing. But now it is time for the queen to assert her power again and with a little help from all quarters, she will shine and gleam like never before.

For the past years the entire market is on a path of revival and there have been innovations in this front. Top Indian as well as International designers are putting in a lot of efforts to employ traditional Banarasi silk weaving and patterns in the creation of renowned pieces or collections.

In the last few fashion seasons, the industry witnessed many technically inventive and impactful designs from Varanasi.

In 2009, 'Banaras Brocades and Sarees' secured **Geographical Indication (GI)** rights, a notification that covered silk brocades, textile goods, silk sarees, dress materials and silk embroideries.

Many designers are trying to modernize the designs of Banarsi silk, they are introducing new patterns and weaves. A lot is being done in terms of trendy motifs, compact weaving, metallic visual effects, placements and colour schemes that to make it relevant to today's wardrobe. In this process, this prized possession is losing much of its artistry and character. In the recent past many top designers have asserted again and again there is the need to make a traditional textile contemporary but there is no need to move away from its special motifs and characters. The time has come to go back to the roots and reclaim the lost heritage. Renowned designers like **Sabyasachi Mukherjee**, **Manish Malhotra**, **Ritu Kumar**, **Anita Dogri** and many others are making efforts to bring the traditional weaves back into the limelight to revive this old world charm.

Modern designers have been known to employ traditional brocade weaving and patterns in the creation of renowned pieces or collections. **Alexander McQueen's** saree-esque dresses with Banarasi borders and **Marc Jacobs** for Louis Vuitton's created beautiful saree-dresses inspired by the Banarasi weave. **Salvatore Ferragamo** created Banarasi brocade shoes for **Project Renaissance**.

Internationally acclaimed Indian designers **Abraham & Thakore** collaborated with the Ministry of Textiles to put out a contemporary bridal line using Banarasi brocade at the **Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week** in New Delhi. (Pi 3.)

Lakme Fashion Week, along with designer-politician **Shaina N C** launched an initiative called '**Reinvent Banaras**', to revive Banarasi handlooms.

At Lakmé Fashion Week Winter/Festive 2015 leading designer **Ritu Kumar**, India's most prolific and internationally well-known textile revivalist, presented "**Varanasi Weaves**", incorporating old *naksha* and vintage designs. She brought back

traditional motifs like, *Kyari*, *Shikargah* and floral *butis* in her unique collection of timeless designs.

In line with **Anita Dongre's** philosophy of reviving, sustaining and empowering this craft, her collection, **Banaras: A Woven Story** presented at Lakme Fashion Week, Winter/Festive 2015 included handwoven lehengas in breathtaking Banarasi weaves, exquisite Banaras brocades in gold and silver amidst lehengas in hues of reds and peaches with signature flamingo motifs. She also presented a small documentary with the same name.

**Sabyasachi Mukherjee** is among the first Indian designers to experiment with these traditional weaves. He has extensively included vintage banarsi silk in his collections. He is of the view that these timeless beauties do not need to be modernized; they should be used in their original type. His spring summer collection 2016 '**Banarasi Bride**', showcased some of the most exquisite and intricate designs of rich hues of like Crimson, Teal, Green, Blue, etc. His creations push the designs by improving quality and infrastructure. But his label never claims to be designed by Sabyasachi, it always says 'handpicked and curated by Sabyasachi. According to him "weavers have already done them so beautifully, why should I add to that and disrupt their creativity?"

In November 2016, Vogue India, featured actor Deepika Padukone in Sabyasachi creations all in Banarasi brocade.

**Sanjay Garg**, the founder of **Raw Mango** has been working in close association with the weavers of Varanasi. Collections are developed using the peculiar *kadwa* brocade technique of Varanasi. Kadwa implies to the ornamentation of motifs using extra weft. The patterns, etched in gold against silk background achieved a remarkable clarity of pattern and forms with gem like enameling. His collection called **Mashru**, comprised of sarees, lehengas, wide sleeved blouses, long kurtas and salwars in bright hues like magenta, green and red. The silhouettes were clean and simple, embroidery was limited to motifs, the centerpiece of the collection was the woven fabric itself – Mashru, silk woven with cotton, and traditionally worn by Muslim men.

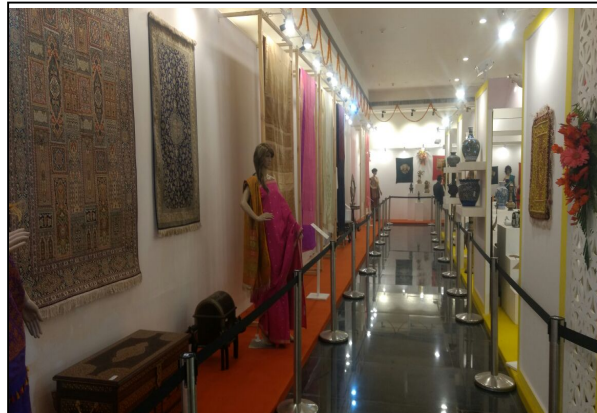
In his 2016 collection **Regal Threads**, designer **Manish Malhotra** has made use of handcrafted Banarasi silk. Then this fabric is beautifully embraced by elegant sarees in bold checks, voluminous lehengas and feminine blouses with high-waisted skirts and flowy kalidars. With this collection Manish has experimented with bold colours instead of muted ones, normally associated with his designs.

He believes in not only promoting Indian crafts, but also showing the world what India has to offer. Speaking about the revival of Banarasi silk, he says, “Silks and our traditional weaves depict the richness of India. I want to maintain the old charm and essence of the Banarasi saree but revive it to suit today’s world.”

Delhi based designer **Rinku Sobti**, working with Bajardiya weaving cluster in Varanasi, showcased her latest collection, **Tassels**, at the Lakmé Fashion Week. She finds the weavers of Varanasi very receptive to incorporate any suggestions.

In 2017, an exhibition organized by **Abeer Gupta, Suchitra Balasubramanyam** and **Dr. Anamika Pathak**, at National museum in collaboration with India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore, has displayed over hundreds of weaves of Banaras under six sections including artifacts from the private collections.

Recently inaugurated **Trade Facilitation Centre (TFC)** is a 200-crore project spread over an eight-acre space that promises advisory services, as well as a skill development centre to encourage the next generation to carry forth the legacy. Banaras is also part of the 28 weaver service centers functioning across the country (Pic.1).



*Pic 1.Exhibition area of Handloom, Handicrafts & Carpets “Traditional to Contemporary Style, Weaves & Fashion” at Trade Facilitation Centre (source:handicrafts.nic.in)*

All the efforts and dedication is not going unnoticed. The costumer's approach is already changing. Perception and awareness of designers, who are collaborating with master weavers, is definitely paving the path for translating India's prized crafts into a contemporary, engaging and lasting experience. Banarasi silk exudes majestic charisma. The consistent efforts of the designers and weavers have put Varanasi back on the map. The rich Indian heritage fabric is making headlines and taking centre stage in high fashion.

A lot is still to be done. Hope that it will reach higher limits; efforts are being put continuously towards its glorification.

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