

BY STUTI AGARWAL IN DELHI AND
VARANASI

OUT on the sunny lawns of Delhi's Lodhi Garden, against the dulling walls of the tomb of Mohammad Shah, young fashion designer Sneha Singhal is getting herself photographed in an extravagant handloom Jamdani drape. The purple sari, a lucky find, is embellished with an intricately woven elephant pattern, similar to the one that, at almost that precise moment, Salman Bagaar is hunched over to weave on his handloom, in a dingy room tucked away in Lohta village, six kilometres from the heart of Varanasi. The 16-year-old, whose work has anonymously made it to the racks of fashion boutiques, is busy weaving and toiling away to earn his daily wage. Photoshoot done, Singhal too begins weaving—with words—for her next blog, fashionably hashtagged #iwearhandloom, rendered famous by Union Textile Minister Smriti Irani to promote Indian handloom. The cause was since taken up by the Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI), which in Amazon India Fashion Week (AIFW) 2015 began with a focus on Banarasi weaves, and this year dedicated the first two days to handloom, with a special tribute to Chanderi. Without a doubt, handloom is the new buzzword—designers swear by it, journalists do long stories on the coming handloom revolution, and buyers are rushing to it. Handloom is the new start-up with unending scalability.

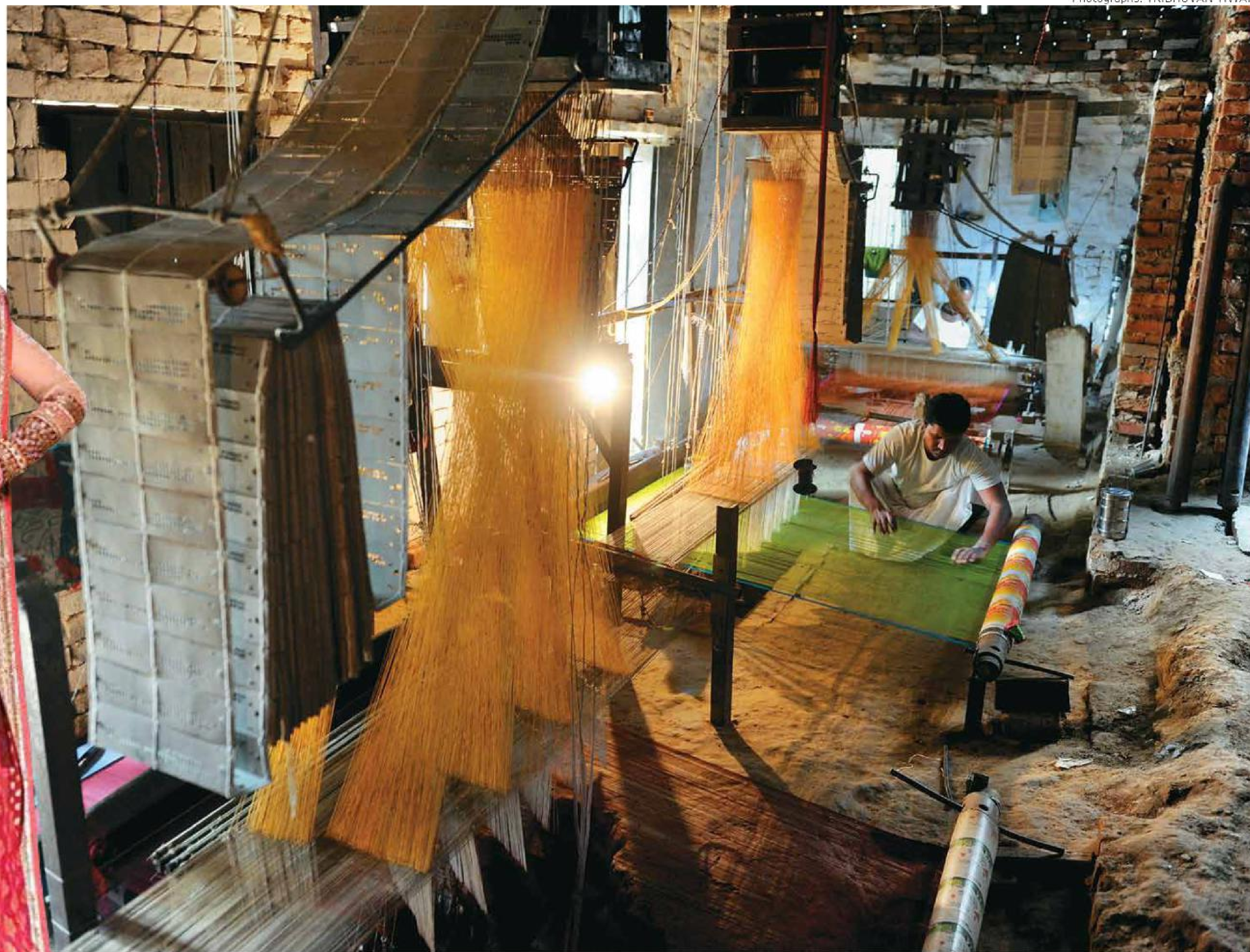
Or is it? How much is the hype behind handloom? Despite such exertions over the resuscitation of the Indian handloom, many in the industry wonder whether all this fuss is a passing fad. There are those who believe that handloom is hardly a fashion trend, and this “greatly imbalanced upheaval” of the Indian craft story comes with a short expiry date; given that knowledge about the craft is low,

THREADS OF KASHI

Born in Banaras by
Sabyasachi
Mukherji

LABOUR CRAFT

Master weaver Mohsin Ansari
works on his handloom



Photographs: TRIBHUVAN TIWARI

The Potholed Catwalk Of Banaras

Beyond the glamour and hype of celebrity designers, handloom is still a dying craft of poor weavers

and it doesn't quite benefit the handloom weavers themselves. "Handloom will never be a trend. The impression being created about a 'handloom revolution' is exaggerated, and the idea that weavers from Kashmir to Mangalgi, from West Bengal to Kutch, are neck-deep in work, is ill-founded," says Paromita Banerjee, a Kolkata-based designer who works closely with handloom, and recently showcased her work at the AIFW. Senior fashion designer Suneet Varma agrees. "Some slick marketing has hyped it up as a fashion trend. The truth is that almost everyone involved is more interested in it being 'current', and less in the intricacies of the craft itself," he says.

It isn't just buyers who are afflicted by a lack of understanding; many of the designers working with handloom textile too are clueless about its uses. "It can take years to understand a textile and the weavers who craft it; and even longer to strike a balance between what a designer wants, and what they can deliver," says David Abraham, one half of the designer duo Abraham & Thakore, one of the very few who was working extensively with handloom much before the 'trend' started. Paromita Banerjee flags the "commercialisation of handloom", which she says is so rampant that many designers and entrepreneurs, trying to keep up with the hype, move away from their personal design sensibilities, unable to translate them into handloom. "So abysmal is the understanding that some designers just pick up pre-woven fabric from the weavers, or allot a colour palette for the textile," she laments. Varma, however, does not see it as a problem. "If revival of handloom is the concern, it shouldn't matter how the designers are making use of the textile," he says. In any case, Varma does not believe this is a revival at all. "Fashion is changing every season, handloom isn't here to stay," he says.

Given the transitional nature of the handloom industry, work for the weavers becomes seasonal too. Gaurav Jai Gupta, perhaps the only designer who has worked solely with handloom, says that securing consistent work is a problem for Indian weavers. "I work with only 10 weavers, but ensure that they have work all year round," he says. Baaran Ijlal, a textile artist, says that most weavers complain of unstable work graphs due to changing demands in the industry. "We worked with Manish Malhotra for one of his collections. We'd hoped he would return, and offered to

make any design he wanted, but he only took our material once," says a disappointed Feroz Haider, a handloom weaver from Mubarakpur, Azamgarh.

"A big problem, also, is the lack of understanding between the designer and the weavers," says Ijlal. "Only when the two work in tandem will they be able to bring designs and textile together," she says. Aftab Ansari, another weaver from Lohta in Varanasi, talks about his one-time employment for Gupta's label Akaaro. "We worked on one of Akaaro's collection in 2013. His designs were a mix of textiles and we couldn't come to an understanding after that," recalls 40-year-old Ansari. Anita Dongre, another designer who has worked with handloom, says a year-round interaction between the designers and his selected weavers would be ideal, but it doesn't look like that's happening anytime soon.

Sunil Sethi, president FDCI, doesn't want to exaggerate the direness of the situation. "We cannot forget that we are in the business of fashion. It is seasonal, and depends on demand and supply, as does any other business," he says. Sethi adds that as a fashion council they are responsible for making an effort and it is a designer's personal choice to take it up. Seasonality may be woven into the weavers' job description, but the perennial problem is of low wages for the craftsmen. "Weavers get paid per sari. A sari that takes a week to 15 days to make will get the weaver anywhere between Rs1,400 and Rs 2,500," says Shamshad Alam, a master weaver in Varanasi, who employs many other weavers. On an average, that is as low as Rs 200 per day, and that's in Varanasi, whose silk weave is perhaps the most popular indigenous textile. In other parts of the country, the situation is worse and the pay even lower. "We hear of designers working with handloom but no one has come to us. Our

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daily wage during a good season is about Rs 150, even an unskilled labourer nowadays makes more than that" says Mohammad Rafi, a handloom weaver from Barabanki. And it is not that the textile fetches less money in the market. "There's a long line of people involved in the sale of handloom, and it is the middlemen who make most of the money, leaving little for the weavers," says Sashi Kant, Manager at Varanasi Weavers' Hub, a part of the All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association (AIACA). First, the master weavers take a 20 per cent cut says Ansari. Then the middlemen negotiate a deal with the designers or the shops, after which comes the final price for the buyers. Ijlal calls it sheer exploitation. "The weaver gets paid Rs 2,500 for a sari that will sell for Rs 25,000, if not more," she says. Anjali Bhatnagar, Manager at the Enterprise Support Program of AIACA, says that the situation of handloom is so adverse that their focus is not on bad pay, but on getting them consistent work.

"But even after the low pay, shopkeepers who keep samples of the weavers' work resort to under-cutting," adds Kant. Alam Gir, another master weaver in Lohta, laments about the payment process,

which is heavily weighted against them. "We're given post-dated cheques, and in case our saris don't get sold, the shopkeeper can reverse the payment. If we want immediate payment, they take a fee of 10 per cent and an additional 10 per cent deduction during the 'off' season," he says. Many designers allegedly run their creations on powerlooms, after showcasing handloom on the ramps. "Going to powerlooms for production depends on multiples—whether it is the cost, time, or copies required. We must be practical, not holy about it," says Abraham. But some, like Banerjee, are sticklers about how the fabric is woven. She says that bringing out a handloom collection can take six months at least, but refuses to compromise on her ethics.

Even though there is a perceived craze for handloom in the spin put out both by designers and the textile ministry, the number of handloom weavers in the country has plunged in recent years. According to recent data, Varanasi has only 67,000 weavers now. "That's down from three to four lakh just a few years ago," says Kant. Most weavers, who started young, want their kids to try alternative professions. Many have already sent them for low-skill work in the city,

PAST STRANDS Peer Mohammad stands behind his obsolete handloom

"The truth is that a job at a construction site pays more," says Ijlal. And even those that stay on in the weaving business are changing the mechanics of work. The rattle of machinery that dominates what was earlier the silent handloom village of Lohta bears testimony to the creeping takeover of powerlooms. Almost all of the thousand houses in the village have a powerloom at least, along with handlooms; some have given up handlooms completely.

This is perhaps for making a better living, even though a craft may be vanishing. The government subsidies for adopting powerlooms accelerated this transition. "It was the subsidy for buying machinery, and then for electricity, that drew us to powerlooms," says Mohammad Iqlaq, a weaver in Lohta, who now runs three powerlooms and works on two handlooms, while two obsolete handlooms lie stacked up in the corner. NGOs like AIACA have helped them obtain power subsidies for handlooms as well (for lighting etc), but the speed of the powerloom is still a lure. Rafi Mohammad, 22, who prefers the quiet of the handloom,

points out the pay disparity between the handloom and the powerloom, which most of his friends operate. "They get paid Rs 300 as daily wage. Ours is uncertain, and given only once a sari is complete," he says.

The cluster scheme introduced by the UPA, followed by the mega cluster scheme implemented by the NDA, has worked to some extent. Many clusters have held workshops to get weavers acquainted with the current trends.

OTHER initiatives haven't quite taken off. "The government built a crafts market in our vicinity with 150 shops. It was completed five months ago, but has not opened yet," says a dismayed Haider. "A big problem that needs fixing is the wrongful tagging of textiles," says Varma. Kant procured the handloom tag issued by the government for many weavers in Lohta, but it became a problem with export orders that did not want distinguishing tags. "Export orders are a mix of handloom and powerloom, but they sell everything as handloom. So a tag that differentiates the two is a loss for the businessmen," says Kant.

Since 2015, there has been a substantial increase in the availability of what is labelled handloom in the market. So large is the demand that even stores like Westside have brought exclusive collections of handloom. But how many can tell a real from a fake? "That is a task which perhaps not even two per cent of the population can complete," rues Sethi.

Sure, there may be a revival of Indian handloom led by a handful of designers who have in fact "adopted-a-loom". But the it has been attempted many times before; and there have always been those few designers like Abraham & Thakore, just like the current Gaurav Jai Gupta and Samant Chauhan, who go the handloom way. That does not make it a trend.

Many in the fashion industry say that it is the government's role to ensure sustained development. Others like Banerjee believe that as trendsetters, they make the difference. Then there are the likes of Varma, who understand #iwearhandloom is not a trend (the hashtag, launched in August 2016, has been used only 7,262 times on Instagram, as opposed to the AIFW Spring/Summer 2017 hashtag, which has been used 29,248 times). "At the most it will last another season or two," he says. Fashion weeks may be dedicated to the handloom, but its staying power as the fabric of the decade is clearly in doubt. 

