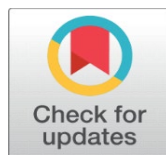


THE REGAL WEAVES OF MADHYA PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Originating in the lively city of Maheshwar Madhya Pradesh, the Maheshwari saree is a classic representation of Indian heritage. This gorgeous fabric has served as a tribute to the rich cultural and artistic traditions of the area. It is made from a harmonious blend of silk and cotton. The saree is a masterwork of artistry because of its elaborate zari work motifs, which depict tales of valor, loyalty, and the natural world. The distinctive reversible style of the Maheshwari saree, which has a solid color on one side and stripes, checks, or floral designs on the other, enhances its regal appeal. It is perfect for both formal and casual use because of its lightweight and breathable material. The motifs on the saree, which stand for harmony, power, and the abundance of nature, reflect the cultural significance of the garment. The Maheshwari saree, renowned for its ethical and ecological production process, is a beloved component of Indian handloom legacy, even in the face of competition from power looms and quick fashion. This paper highlights the Maheshwari saree's ongoing legacy as a regal weave of Madhya Pradesh by delving into its history, meaning, and beauty.

Keywords: Maheshwari Saree, Handloom, Queen Ahilyabai Holkar, REHWA Society, Madhya Pradesh

1. INTRODUCTION

The "Heart of India," Madhya Pradesh, is renowned for its diverse cultural heritage and artistic legacy, both of which are reflected in its rich textile heritage. The state is also known for its beautiful textiles, especially Maheshwari silk, which stands out as one of the region's most famous fabrics. Maheshwari silk, which comes from the town of Maheshwar, is distinguished by its special combination of cotton and silk fibers that are painstakingly woven together. The addition of zari, or metallic thread, to produce exquisite and detailed designs that showcase the region's weaving expertise, adds even more distinction to the fabric. Maheshwari silk sarees are typically embellished with floral motifs, stripes, and geometric

designs that draw inspiration from the surrounding landscape and architecture. Vibrant colors are frequently used in these designs, which adds to the fabric's appeal and adaptability.

The fabric, with its striking borders and pallus, is a rich and sophisticated option for apparel and home decor because of its natural sheen and slightly translucent texture. The history of Maheshwari silk dates back to the 18th century, when Queen Ahilyabai Holkar of the Holkar dynasty popularised the art and promoted it as a representation of imperial sophistication and beauty. This magnificent cloth showcases the creativity and expertise of Madhya Pradesh's artisans, embodying ancient weaving skills passed down through generations. Maheshwari silk has been resurrected and is now famous and relevant in the present era because of groups like Rehwa [Shalvi Fashion. \(2021\)](#). Maheshwari silk is still highly prized today because of its opulent texture, exceptional lightness, and classic elegance [Textiles of Madhya Pradesh: Textile Magazine, Textile News, Apparel News, Fashion News. \(2020\)](#), [Jha \(2024\)](#).

1.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

The goal of the research project is to draw attention to the Maheshwari saree's lasting heritage as a representation of Madhya Pradesh's regal artistry. It traces the history of Maheshwari silk sarees back to the 18th century in Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh, and examines its cultural, historical, and commercial significance. In addition to highlighting Queen Ahilyabai Holkar's sponsorship, the paper explores the history of the saree and the elaborate weaving processes that make them unique. Their changeable borders, pallus, and motifs—which draw inspiration from both local architecture and natural elements—are given particular consideration. The research also discusses the current issues Maheshwari weavers are facing, which have been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has hampered market access and earnings from tourism. It assesses programmes like the Rehwa Society's attempts to provide equitable pay and community support to weavers. The research highlights the significance of conserving Maheshwari silk weaving in order to maintain cultural heritage and promote sustainable livelihoods for craftsmen by recording these endeavours.

1.2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The Maheshwari saree is emphasised in the research study as a masterwork of artistic and cultural heritage. It highlights Maheshwari sarees' ethical and ecological production methods, their contribution to supporting weaving families financially, and their influence on advancing sustainable fashion. The study promotes the empowerment of artisans, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the advancement of ethically and environmentally acceptable practices for future generations by conserving and promoting traditional crafts like Maheshwari silk. The thorough investigation and preservation of a crucial aspect of India's creative and cultural legacy makes the research on the Maheshwari saree significant. The study highlights the importance of the Maheshwari saree as a representation of Madhya Pradesh's rich textile heritage by delving into its origins, history, and exquisite craftsmanship. It draws attention to the saree's distinctive silk-cotton blend and intricate zari embroidery, which features designs that portray local stories and scenic landscapes.

Additionally, the study looks at how the local weaving community is affected socioeconomically by the manufacture of Maheshwari sarees, highlighting the

opportunities and problems that these skilled workers confront. It promotes the preservation of traditional crafts in the face of contemporary competition and emphasises the significance of ethical and sustainable practices in handloom production. Through chronicling the development and present state of Maheshwari sarees, the study advances the world's acknowledgement and admiration of this magnificent textile, guaranteeing its lasting heritage for posterity. In addition to honouring the Maheshwari weavers' exceptional artistic talent, this study promotes community economic empowerment and cultural continuity.

1.3. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

This research study's methodology focuses on the customary weaving techniques, patterns, and designs of Maheshwari sarees in addition to the socioeconomic factors influencing the community of weavers. The preparation of the yarn, dying, drying, untangling, spinning, warping, and weaving processes—all of which are essential to the manufacturing of Maheshwari sarees—are all thoroughly examined in this paper. Primary and secondary sources were used to collect the data, which also included field trips to weaving centres, expert and weaver interviews, historical text analysis, and reports from the present day. The impact of groups like the Rehwa Society, which played a key role in preserving traditional weaving methods and providing financial support to weavers, is also examined in the study.

To comprehend the handloom industry's larger background, challenges encountered by the weavers—such as unstable finances, little market connections, and rivalry from contemporary textile industries—are investigated. The approach guarantees a thorough comprehension of the artistic, commercial, and cultural aspects of Maheshwari saree weaving, offering important perspectives for safeguarding and advancing this traditional art form.

2. HISTORY OF MAHESHWARI SILK

Maheshwar, a town in Madhya Pradesh, India, is the origin of Maheshwari silk sarees, which have a rich history reaching back to the 18th century. Queen Ahilyabai Holkar, a well-known patron of crafts and the arts, founded this town. She promoted weaving in Maheshwar, which resulted in the production of the renowned Maheshwari silk sarees. These sarees are distinguished by their distinctive reversible borders and pallus, which emphasize the remarkable creativity of the regional weavers and the illustrious history of Indian textiles. Maheshwar became a center for weaving owing in large part to its advantageous location. It encouraged the sharing of ideas with different weaving centers and made raw material transit easier. The ladies from the Maru clan in Maharashtra, who made up the majority of the local weavers, were extremely talented and had passed down their techniques over many years. This attractive and cozy style was created by combining modern and ancient weaving techniques. [Nagi \(2024\)](#)

The evolution of Maheshwari silk sarees was greatly influenced by Queen Ahilyabai Holkar. The origins of the weaving tradition of Maheshwar, which is in the Khargone district of Madhya Pradesh, can be traced back to Queen Ahilyabai Holkar. The Maru community in Surat, who originally came from Baluchistan and moved through Sindh to Gujarat and Rajasthan, provided these skilled artisans. To support the state's economy, these artisans instructed weavers in the area. Regarding migrant workers, Maheshwar's ecology offers a host of advantages. The availability of basic amenities in the weavers' communities, like government school, a handloom

school, and weaving workshops (kaarkhaanas), improves both their living and working conditions. Because of this encouraging atmosphere, Maheshwar has been able to maintain its rich weaving heritage and still making stunning, internationally renowned Maheshwari silk sarees. Maheshwar has continued to draw migrants looking for stable employment because of its status as a hub for handloom saree weaving. More than 200 weavers relocated to Maheshwar between 2012 and 2015, lured by the city's handloom businesses. The renowned Maheshwari sarees are the product of the skill and local customs that migrant weavers brought to the area. As communication grew, even nearby tribes that had previously been boat rowers—the Kewats—took up weaving [Pant \(2023\)](#).

The Queen encouraged regional weavers to experiment with new methods and designs because she was a patron of the arts. Her goal was to design a fabric that would appeal to all societal groups while still being elegant, cozy, and affordable. She asked weavers from Malwa and Surat to create a unique nine-yard saree, which was first produced in the colors red, maroon, black, purple, and green, to extend the appeal of Maheshwari sarees. The weavers started adding more elaborate patterns and softer hues over time [Fibre2Fashion. \(2007\)](#).

Maheshwari silk sarees have evolved to meet changing consumer demands for increased accessibility and style. These sarees, which were originally made of pure silk, were costly and mostly worn by the upper class. Weavers began combining silk and cotton as demand increased, which increased the sarees' accessibility and affordability for a wider range of people. Maheshwari sarees are being made today, according to tradition while still meeting to contemporary fashion. To appeal to today's generation, fashion designers experiment with cutting-edge color schemes, modern themes, and fusion designs. This changing appeal has become well-known worldwide, reaching a global audience in addition to domestic needs.

In addition to sarees, Maheshwari silk is increasingly used in kurtas, salwar kameez, and contemporary fusion clothing. Because of the fabric's adaptability and plasticity, designers and fashion fans frequently use it. Compared to other handloom fabrics, Maheshwari sarees can be produced rather quickly. Steady demand has created a stable financial environment. Maheshwar attracts weavers from other economically challenged regions because of its economic stability. Married women get benefited most by from weaving since they can set up looms at home and weave after taking care of household duties.

3. PRODUCTION AND DESIGN

3.1. WEAVING PROCESS

These exquisite sarees, which were originally woven on wooden pit looms, are ideal for both formal and casual attire. Wearing one of these sarees at a family gathering or business function would make all stand out. Weavers now employ lightweight metal frames to create stunning Silk Cotton Sarees with the help of technical breakthroughs. To achieve the elaborate multiple wefts that define a Maheshwari saree, they also use several box sley processes. The basic materials used—cotton, silk, and zari—are acquired from diverse sections of the country.

- 1) **Yarn Preparation** - To get rid of contaminants, the yarns are first cleaned and washed.
- 2) **Dyeing** - In big vessels, a dye solution of the desired color is created based on the weight of the yarn. To obtain the necessary color fastness, the yarns are dipped into the solution and left for a predetermined amount of time. Periodically, they are rotated to guarantee a uniform dyeing effect. The

dyeing process is carried out based on the yarns used and according to the dyes used. The concentrations are prepared based on the weight of the material used and the intensity of the colour shade.

- 3) **Drying** - After dyeing, the yarns are hung on bamboo poles to dry under the sun.
- 4) **Untangling and Spinning** - To wind the yarn around the bobbin, the dried strands are manually untangled and then fastened to a charkha (spinning wheel).

Figure 1



Figure 1 Spinning of Yarn

Source gaatha.org

- 5) **Warping** - Next, the yarns are crisscrossed over a cylindrical frame.
- 6) **Weaving** - "Tana-bana weaving" is the process of starting hand-weaving by tying warp and weft threads together. The cloth is hand-woven using extra strands to provide ornamental designs [Birds of Fabriclore. \(2022\)](#), [Shalvi Fashion. \(2021\)](#).

Figure 2



Figure 2 Tana-Bana Weaving

Source D Source

3.2. DESIGNS AND PATTERNS

The Maheshwari saree is highly regarded for its superb craftsmanship and elegant simplicity. While certain patterns have changed to include features of both the modern and traditional eras, many still maintain their original forms. The

border, which is frequently decorated with patterns are derived from the inscriptions on the historic Maheshwar fort. This is one of its most recognizable aspects. These borders show off the saree's rich ethnic diversity and artisanal skill in addition to enhancing its visual appeal. Maheshwari sarees are divided into groups according to their patterns and borders.

The Maheshwari saree is distinguished by its reversible border, which enables it to be worn on either side. The borders' beautiful zari embroidery enhances this adaptability. The delicate elegance of a saree is enhanced by its body, which is usually plain or has a variety of stripes or checks. Five alternating stripes—two in plain white and three in color—are displayed in the distinctive pallav (pallu), which gives the design a distinctive touch. Maheshwari sarees, in contrast to many others, frequently have geometric designs instead of floral themes, taking their cues from regional architecture and natural features like the Narmada River [Maheshwar Weaving - Craft Archive: Research on Indian Handicrafts & Handloom \(2021\)](#), [Paikaray \(2022\)](#).

Maheshwari sarees are distinguishable from one another owing to their unique patterns and decorations. Based on Border Style - (i) Maheshwar Bugdi Kinar - reversible border design, (ii) Zari Patti - sarees with intricate zari stitching around the border, (iii) Rui Phool Kinar - the flower-inspired border design, (iv) Phool Kinar - The border of the sarees are embellished with floral patterns, and (v) Chatai Kinar - These sarees border design is inspired by mat-like patterns, giving them a unique texture and striking appearance. Based on the body type it is classified as Chandrakala, Baingani Chandrakala, Chandratata, Beli, and Parbi.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Maheshwari Saree Designs

Source India mart

Figure 4



Figure 4 Maheshwari Saree Designs

Source Flipkart.com

Maheshwari silk's rich decorations, vivid colors, and elaborate motifs give it a unique aesthetic appeal. Celebrated for its distinctive and visually striking properties, this fabric is incredibly flexible and leaves a lasting impression. The buildings and surrounding landscape of Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh, serve as inspiration for the exquisite simplicity and elaborate embellishments of traditional Maheshwari sarees. Typical designs consist of the following,

- 1) Geometric Patterns** like (i) Brick-like Design - Reflects brick patterns in Maheshwar's forts and palaces, (ii) Heera (Diamonds) - Features diamond shapes, and (iii) Chatai (Mat) - Mimics a woven mat.
- 2) Floral and Faunal Motifs** like (i) Guldasta - Which showcases a bouquet, (ii) Karnphool - Which displays various leaves and flowers on the border, and (iii) Avian and Animal Motifs - which draw inspiration from local birds and animals.
- 3) Architectural Elements** like (i) Lehar (Waves and Ghats) - Inspired by the Narmada river waves and Maheshwar ghats, (ii) Motifs from Maheshwar Fort - Derived from the fort's detailed carvings.

Originally, Maheshwari sarees were crafted in earthy hues like maroon, red, green, purple, and black, using natural vegetable dyes which also include Angoori (Grape Green), Dalimbi (Deep Pink), Gul Bakshi (Magenta), Jaamla (Purple), Tapkeer (Deep Brown), Aamrak (Golden Yellow). The palette has since expanded to include jewel tones like blue, mauve, pink, yellow, and orange, often combined with gold or silver zari threads [Dey \(2021b\)](#).

4. WEAVERS COMMUNITY - CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

After visiting the Maheshwar Fort in 1978, Richard and Sally Holkar, who are descended from Ahilya Bai Holkar [Goyal \(2022\)](#), realized how important it was to bring back the ancient weaving technique. The Rehwa Society, named after the Narmada River, was established with the help of an initial grant and started with 12 weavers on 12 looms. An early member, Ganesh recruited his mother and grandmother to instruct the women in warp preparation and weaving skills. Due to the women's perseverance, Rehwa's warehouse quickly became full of sarees. Selling these sarees in Fabindia's Delhi store, John Bissell of Fabindia became one of the first benefactors. Rehwa was also helped by the well-known Indian textile historian Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, who arranged the inaugural show at Cottage Industries in Delhi. This was the start of a forty-year journey that is still going strong. Rehwa's main objective was to bring back the fading trade to support weaving families financially and provide jobs. It eventually grew to include housing, health, and education programs for the Maheshwar weavers. Rehwa has taught almost 2,000 weaver families that have established their units, and it currently employs 110 weavers.

Many of the Maheshwari silk weavers suffer financially, with support from groups like the Women Weave Charitable Trust and the Rehwa Society. Many of them make inadequate pay. These situations became worse with the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for daily wage people. Some aid has been offered, though, by programs like Rehwa's sponsorship program, which enables consumers to purchase REHWA credit to support weavers. The Maheshwari silk weavers have proven to be resilient and adaptable in the face of these difficulties. In Maheshwar, there are more than 3,000 weavers as of 2023 and a basic sari with plain border costs about Rs. 800.

The community's prosperity is ascribed to the amalgamation of Indigenous and immigrant weaving customs, royal endorsement, and assistance from institutions like as Rehwa and WomenWeave. These groups have helped with advocacy, skill development, community building, equitable salaries, and market access [Shalvi Fashion. \(2021\)](#), [Pant \(2023\)](#), [Dange \(2020\)](#), [Goyal \(2022\)](#).

Significant economic difficulties are faced by the Maheshwari silk weavers, mainly as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak and the lockdowns that followed. Among these difficulties are:

- 1) **Loss of Livelihood:** As a result of the pandemic's sudden disruption of international trade, traditional and modern markets for craftspeople were forced to close. Weavers in isolated and rural locations consequently lost their means of subsistence as orders were either cancelled or postponed indefinitely.
- 2) **Diminished Income:** These expert weavers, who depend on their daily wages, were unemployed, which resulted in a sharp decline in their earnings.
- 3) **Limited Market Linkages:** The weavers' financial troubles were made worse by the handloom industry's high investment costs and the dearth of efficient market linkages.
- 4) **Dependency on Tourism:** The handloom sector, which is greatly aided by tourism, is a major source of income for the Maheshwari weavers. Due to the pandemic's devastating effects on tourism, there was a significant drop in the market for their items, which made it difficult for them to make a living.
- 5) **Limited Alternative Income Sources:** The weavers are especially vulnerable to the economic downturn brought on by the pandemic since they have few alternative sources of income.
- 6) **Intense rivalry:** Maheshwari weavers find it difficult to hold onto their market share and profitability in the handloom business due to fierce rivalry from other textile manufacturers.
- 7) **Limited Government Support:** While the Indian government has helped the handloom sector to some extent, it frequently does not go far enough to solve the financial difficulties that the weavers face [Pant \(2023\)](#).

5. CONCLUSION

Maheshwari silk sarees' evolution and history demonstrate a striking fusion of ingenuity, tradition, and tenacity. These sarees have their roots in the 18th century in Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh, and have been influenced by Queen Ahilyabai Holkar's patronage as well as the artistic ability of the Maru clan weavers. Queen Ahilyabai Holkar's influence helped Maheshwar develop into a thriving hub for weaving. Reversible borders and elaborate pallus, two characteristics that set Maheshwari sarees apart, are examples of the skill of the region's weavers, many of whom are members of the Maru tribe. These artists are creating beautiful and cozy sarees for decades by combining traditional and modern techniques.

Maheshwar's strategic location and the influx of migrant weavers, notably those from Surat's Maru community, contributed to the expansion of the region's weaving industry. Workshops and schools provided infrastructure for the weaving community, bringing in talent from around the country and enhancing regional customs. A silk and cotton blend was incorporated into this evolution, opening up the saree to a wider range of wearers and making them more approachable for daily wear.

The adaptability of Maheshwari silk goes beyond sarees to include contemporary clothing items like kurtas and salwar kameez. The weavers have proven to be remarkably resilient, particularly in the face of financial difficulties like as the COVID-19 pandemic. Important help has been given by groups like the Women Weave Charitable Trust and the Rehwa Society, which promote fair salaries, skill development, market access, and campaigning. Maheshwari silk sarees are now renowned throughout the world for their grace, ease, and versatility. The fabric's distinctive charm is enhanced by its elaborate patterns, vivid hues, and rich motifs that draw inspiration from Maheshwar's architecture and scenery. Maheshwari silk weaving is a living example of the resilience of the weavers and the classic elegance of Indian fabrics, and it is still evolving today.

India's rich history and variety can only be fully appreciated by future generations if traditional crafts like Maheshwari silk are preserved and promoted. Second, it gives craftsmen economic leverage, preserving their livelihoods and communities. Maheshwari Silk also promotes sustainable fashion by utilizing environmentally friendly materials and methods. Preserving these trades also ensures that the special abilities and methods that have been created over generations are protected and continue to develop. Finally, it promotes cross-cultural exchange and cultural tourism. In general, preserving traditional crafts like Maheshwari silk helps to empower artisans, preserve the cultural legacy, and advance morally and sustainably responsible behavior for future generations.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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