



The Maheshwari weavers

Brinda Gill looks at how the sacred Narmada river inspires a town and its woven fabric

FOR CENTURIES INDIA has been seen as a land of sacred natural sites interwoven with age-old stories. One belief tells us that the Hindu god Shiva once meditated so intensely that beads of sweat flowed from him. These drops formed a pool that in turn overflowed to form the sacred Narmada river, which still flows across the plains of central India.

Faith in the Narmada river has endured over millennia: devotees pray by its banks and take a dip in the waters, prayers are performed at the riverside and in island temples, and pilgrims undertake an arduous journey following the river's course. It flows gracefully across 1,312 kilometres, and along its course are many scenic spots and sacred sites. One of these is the lovely temple town of Maheshwar, in Madhya Pradesh state. Here the waterfront is graced with temples and *ghats* (broad steps that lead down into the water). The textiles created here are known as Maheshwari weaves. They are widely appreciated for their delicate check and stripe patterns and their exquisite metal-yarn borders with motifs and patterns inspired by the surface patterns of the river and by carvings in the temples.

Above:
Maheshwar on the Narmada river.



Right:
The Narmada river viewed through a Mughal-style archway.



Top:
Sally Holkar with one of the
Maheshwari weavers.

Top right:
Skeins of dyed threads drying in
the open air.

Above:
Working on a complex loom.

Below:
Winding threads from skein to bobbin.



Royal patronage

While the beginnings of Maheshwar go back several centuries, the town is indelibly linked with the rule of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–95), a pious and visionary woman ruler. She moved her capital from Indore to Maheshwar where she lived within a fort beside the river. A devotee of Lord Shiva, she was deeply religious and rituals held in her time continue to this day.

Devi Ahilyabai invited weavers from different centres to settle in Maheshwar. She took a deep interest in the weaves and their motifs and her sponsorship led to the weaving of exquisite Maheshwari saris and turban cloths. These were given to dignitaries and royal figures of other states – cloth was regarded as a very special gift. The tradition of weaving has continued, although there was a decline in demand for the textiles in the second half of the 20th century.

The REHWA Society

Richard Holkar, who is a descendant of the royal Holkar family, learned about the decline of Maheshwari weaves. In 1978 he and his wife Sally established the REHWA Society (*Rehwa* is another name for the Narmada river) as a non-profit organisation aimed at preserving and nurturing the Maheshwari weaving tradition. The society set up training and weaving centres within the fort, and promoted the special Maheshwari weaves in stores and exhibitions held in other cities. It collaborated with designers and established brands to create customised weaves for patrons both in India and abroad.



Over the past four decades the REHWA Society has supported weavers by providing them and their families with housing in the Ahilya Vihar colony within the fort, and also providing healthcare and education – the Ahilya School within the fort teaches weaving to students. There are a number of areas in Maheshwar fort where visitors can see weavers at work on the Maheshwari saris, shawls, stoles, scarves and *dupattas* (long drapes). Woven into these pieces are both traditional and contemporary motifs and patterns.

Maheshwari weaves

Maheshwari textiles were traditionally woven on a pit loom. That practice continues, but weaving is now also done on frame looms which are easier to use. ‘Maheshwari textiles are famous for their fineness. They are woven with single-ply mulberry [silk] yarns in the warp and 80-count fine cotton in the weft, which gives the textiles lightness and a fluid drape,’ says Hemendra Sharma, CEO of REHWA and WomenWeave. ‘The age-old dobby technique is used to weave beautiful narrow borders whose patterns and motifs are inspired by the carvings on the fort walls, the waves of the Narmada river, and the cotton flower.’

Beautiful pastel colours are also a distinctive aspect of the weaves, as is the soft shimmer of metal yarns used for motifs and patterns in the borders and narrow stripes within the fabric. The yarns are dyed before weaving, sometimes with natural dyes. Hemendra adds: ‘Maheshwari weaves have evolved over time and weavers now blend silk and cotton yarns with other yarns such as linen and wool to meet the customised requirement of high-end fashion.’

For a sari, more than 4000 yarns are set in the warp, reflecting the fineness of the silk yarns and the skill of the weavers in working with yarns of such superlative fineness. ‘Maheshwari handloom



Top left:
A mother and son working together.

Top right:
Setting up the warp threads on a loom.

Centre:
Stitching a tag onto a finished piece of cloth.

Right:
Dipping skeins of thread into a dye bath.





weaving requires great concentration as the weaver has to handle so many silk yarns on the warp, which are laid out in a specific manner. The warp threads move up and down by pressure on foot pedals. All this requires careful coordination between the eye, hand and foot, ensuring a rhythmic movement of the weft,' says Hemendra.

The cadence of looms

Walking through the fort and parts of the town outside the fort, the rhythmic sound of looms at work can be heard. One especially busy place is WomenWeave, a charitable trust founded in 2002 by Sally Holkar. It supports women weavers and in 2008 initiated the Gudi Mudi (literally 'scrunched cotton') project, which involves working with cotton growers in Madhya Pradesh who supply cotton to WomenWeave, where it is hand-spun, hand-dyed and hand-woven. WomenWeave includes The Handloom School, established in 2015, within the fort to train young people from the traditional weaving families in contemporary skills of entrepreneurship, business English, use of computer and internet, and contemporary designing, to enable them to connect with the market directly.

Amba (yet another name for the Narmada river) is a social enterprise founded in 1999 by textile designer Hema Shroff Patel, who also works with weavers to create hand-woven Maheshwari textiles and textile art. Hema wrote *Amba Twenty-one Threads*, a personal narrative of her journey in hand-crafted textiles, with a focus on Maheshwari weaves.

As one moves around the weaving units and textile stores in Maheshwar one senses how deeply enmeshed weaving is within the soul of Maheshwar – and too how Maheshwari weaves have expanded their repertoire. It's heartening to meet young weavers who are committed to the craft, who have technical knowledge of weaving, an understanding of urban and international markets and enjoy collaborating with designers from India and from other countries.

Mentors and designers have guided skilled weavers to create a wonderful spectrum of weaves that are today being appreciated by textile lovers across the country and overseas, and by customers of all ages who wear both traditional and Western attire. As the Narmada river proceeds on its never-ceasing journey, it continues to inspire the weavers and designers of Maheshwar and uplifts the soul.

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For more information about Maheshwari textiles and their weavers, see:

- ✦ REHWA Society: <https://REHWAcommunity.org/>
- ✦ WomenWeave: www.womenweave.org/
- ✦ Amba Weave: www.ambagallery.com/



Top:
Setting a design.

Above:
A skilled weaver at work.

Below:
Inside the workshop.

