THE MATRIARCH

NEERU KUMAR

Her unwavering quest to succeed proved that all one needs to climb up the ladder is sheer grit. This visionary has changed the landscape of textiles forever.

It has been a relentless journey to popularise weaves. One that began with a small store at New Delhi's Safdarjung Shopping Complex, with one loom and a handful of looms of intricacy. Neeru Kumar is the YSFI of India in many ways. She knew her Bhagalpuri, inspired from African textiles, would be a showstopper. A B.A. graduate Neeru's first assignment was with Sreedhar. She followed it up by creating a collection under the legendary John Bissell, founder of Fabindia, in the '80s, when she learnt all she needed to rev up the languishing textile crafts.

In 1984, she started her own business with a paltry grant of Rs. 20,000 and one loom—both from the Handicrafts and Handlooms Export Corporation of India. Fast forward to 2014, she has 200 looms and an equal number of weavers. Nothing is outsourced, everything is conceptualised, designed and made in-house. "We had a small place in Arjan Nagar, and when I set up my konkanwada, it was too tiny," she recalls. "I moved to Munirka and paid a princely sum of Rs. 30,000; in those days. I managed to pay my bills, the rent, the weavers and buy the raw materials, too."

In 1986, of the Rs.1,000 in her bank, Neeru spent Rs.900 on buying wool to weave shawls, which became a rage. "I was intuitive. I knew what would work," she smiles. "These expensive markets were opening up and I started exporting my shawls, scarves, stole and shawls to the US, Bloomingdale's and Pottery Barn, France, Japan and UK (Harrods). The Japanese loved the texture and the offbeat colour combinations."

Striking a balance between creativity and commercial success, Neeru creates products that speak to a wide audience. Her passion remains collecting vintage textiles—her collection of saris ranges from maheshwaris and woven chanderis to katan, jamdanis, bandhej and more. "They are my prized possessions," she tells us. "The weavers refuse to do the kind of intricate work I get done 20 years ago. I showed at Maison & Objet in Paris, because the West values our craftsmanship."

Neeru launched her clothing label Tadah in 1992, hoping to give the intellectual few a taste of her woven wonders, but she also offered heirloom khadi and khadi-like. "I started doing kanchi by choice, when a weaver came to me from Kanchi in the late '80s," she recalls. "Nobody was ready to go anywhere close to kanchi, but I gave him a length of tussar and told him to work on that. He came back with it, about three months later, and his creation turned into our most admired item."

Gently, Neeru has redefined the space for weavers in a country that has failed to celebrate its essence.
The Gandhi school of dressing

Textile artist Neeru Kumar on the creative footprint of handlooms and their commercial viability

For Neeru Kumar, one of India’s foremost textile innovators, the fashion industry’s renewed interest in handlooms is both timely and vital. She hopes it will provoke a sustained curiosity among younger customers and is waiting to see the commercial returns of this creative footprint.

Her point of view is competing at a time when she completes three decades of working, and the fashion industry is in the throes of what many call a roaring textile comeback. When Kumar began working, revival and conservation were the only justifications of the crafts movement in post-Nehruvian India. But today, work on textiles is not just fashion’s oxymoronic salute to all things gone by. Nor is it only about revival, as it was in the 1980s. This phase is of fierce and bold innovation. Design intervention in handlooms is now as big, as expensive and relevant as it is in couture—exactly what Kumar has been doing all these years. In the present scenario, her work has become a reference point for younger designers keen to add new aspects to the old handloom story.

Meeting Kumar at her store in New Delhi’s Santushti Shopping Complex, as gritty couture and jewellery weeks in New Delhi and Mumbai attract eyeballs, is like getting an instant bleaching treatment. Her repertoire—diaphanous Chanderi kurtis, soft flaxen saris, tunic slit from tiny Banarasi, experimental iridescent, tapestry-like churis and textured Khadi—an antidote to couture’s fussy, ritual excess. She stops to point out the finesse of bandhani on the violet, the flaxen colours of her Shikari range beyond the predictable indigo, a selvedge border on an ikat sare with a bright green acid wash. Kumar is seeped in process and detailing in a grass-roofed sort of way, as a modern couturier would be in a city atelier scattered with crystals. She frets over weaving looms, yarn famine, making Chanderi more gossamer, changing the character of conventional Wakil with dramatic ombre or securing worn-out old textiles with Katha work. “A textile is more important than the decoration on it; the handwoven is intrinsically charming. Functionality is fashion too and nothing needs to be expensive to be fashionable. It is about the price tag versus the character of the garment,” she says.

A loyal stream of customers, growing with the buzz around textiles, has helped her remain committed to the path she chose when she stepped out of the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, as a young student all those years back. Kumar’s designs are not photowallas but there is an earthiness about them, certainly not the kind you see on mannequins in malls. Her customers adore the handwoven. They would rather copy the Priyanka Gandhi Vadra dressing sensibility (Congress president Sonia Gandhi and her daughter are regular buyers) by being stylish in a minimal, yet impactful manner. By panning a white cotton, sleeveless blouse with a geometric ikat saree the colour of lemon pickles. “Educated, evolved, elite. Like the Gandhis,” says Kumar, describing her customers. Author and activist Arundhati Roy is an example, she adds.

Of the two stores in New Delhi, one at DLF Emporio and the other at Santushti Shopping Complex, one of the oldest fashion playgrounds in the Capital, Kumar prefers the ambience of the latter. “My kind of customers throng here more, those visiting Emporio are luxury-obessed,” she says.

Kumar refuses to be classified as a typical fashion person. “I am not a catwalk fashion person. I like to keep my distance from fashion weeks and I don’t chase the fashion media,” she says. In all those years, she has mounted just one ramp show—in New Delhi in 2010.

Not that it made any difference to her business. She defined her three decades in three phases: inventive Tusar weaving; taking Tusar to Japan and collaborating with well-known Japanese textile expert Chiki Mats; and saving vintage textiles—old brocades from Varanasi, Paithanis from Maharashtra, Patolas from Gujarat—to restore them with the Katha technique. All her work—silks, cotton or Khadi, Indigo dying and printing—is dictated by her desire to work with the hands, a hermetic fascination she picked up at NID. Kumar’s textiles, particularly olives, are not only sold by more than 30 museum stores in the US and Europe but her olives, rugs and home linen is sold in various stores in the West and in Japan, and across Asia.

His most intricate involvement has been with Tusar and Katha, the latter a canvas for men’s jackets, women’s tunics, shawls and bedcovers. Other textile experts in the fashion community emphasize that this indeed defines Kumar’s contribution to the industry.

Over the years, the self-spoken and resilient Kumar has set up 150 weaving units in New Delhi, urging second-generation weavers (mostly children of her older artisans) to set up home and heart near her so that she can mentor them on a one-to-one basis six days a week. The
A stitch in time

Traditionally, kantha work was done to give a fresh lease of life to worn-out cloth. Old sari was quilted together with the help of running stitches.

During the monsoon, village women, who were confined indoors, would sit down to make kanthas. The work was abandoned as soon as the rains ceased, and taken up only as the austerities for completion. Sometimes it would take years to complete.

Quilts were traditionally used for household purposes and for giving as shawls or gifts to daughters.

Charcoal is used to draw outlines of designs. At the centre is a dot or dot, around which a pattern is formed. The various motifs are repeated around the centre-piece and the borders designed, after which the whole is repeated. Designers do not have any link, but once the pattern is formed, the symmetry is not disturbed.

There are some differences in kanthas made by Hindu and Muslim women. In the weaves of the latter the moon, stars, geometric and floral patterns dominate, while the former use more of abstract designs. Kantha was never made for export. Women had also decorated themselves with kantha.

Kanthal now used for scarves, shawls, wall hangings etc. besides quilts. The material may not be old.

Hanut Singh meets up with leading textile designer Neeru Kumar to discuss her craft, her ethos, her colours and textures.
Neeru Kumar's design directory is rife with sophistication. A strong sense of colour and texture tops the priority of this National Institute of Design (NID) alumnus, who is one of the leading and very few exclusive Khadi designers in the country. Her hand-spun and hand-woven fabrics speak the language of quiet grace, and are almost always non-fussy and understated.

‘Less is more’ for the NID alumnus whose USP is the use of strong yarn and colour-fast, natural, long-lasting dyes.
stated. “Good design speaks by itself. Adornments and bright colours only shorten the design-span of garments as the eye easily gets tired of such things,” says Kumar.

After graduating from NID in 1980, Kumar worked with Fab India for a year and then freelanced for a while when Manott Singh, who’s singularly responsible for promoting Indian textiles abroad, offered her a project for the Festival of India in Paris. She says her biggest break came 10 years ago, when inspired by Africa, she created a black-gold classic in woven cotton and tussar, with geometric motifs. Her telluric line soon propelled her to either ends of the globe, like the US, UK and Japan. Today, her stuff is on display at top-line stores viz, Liberty, Heeds and Selfridges in UK and Bloomingdales and Pottery Barn in the USA, in upper crust markets of Tokyo, besides her own Tuhi stores in New Delhi.

Her latest store at 1, MG Road, which is soon becoming the Mecca of Indian designers, with everybody from Rohit Bal to Rahul Goel having a retail presence there, is like the other stores in the complex—stylish and minimal. The look here is quite different from her other stores in Delhi’s Hauz Khas village and Santoshi complex, designed by Revathi Ramath, who uses Earthy, Indian textures to create a look that speaks of casual comfort. “Design has to find a context.” 1, MG road is a modern shopping complex designed on the western minimal

Indian Design & Interiors, Feb- March 2003

Hindustan Times, Brunch

‘I always push the envelope’

WONDERING why your wardrobe doesn't reflect the wealth of Indian style? Textile designer Neeru Kumar has the answers
by Pranav Dixit

Her work with hand-woven Indian textiles is showcased in some of the biggest stores around the world. Her clients include Sonia and Priyanka Gandhi, Rekha, Hema Malini and Shabana Azmi. Yet, designer Neeru Kumar who opened the recent Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week in New Delhi says she prefers to keep things simple. “I maintain a low profile,” she says. “I never attend Page 3 parties.” I don’t even have a PR agent.” Over a caper salad at Geoffrey’s, a multi-cuisine restaurant in Gurugram’s Ambience Mall, Kumar chats about the international appeal of her designs and the role of textiles in Indian fashion.

You’ve been a textile designer for 30 years and an FDCI member for 10. Why was this the first time you opened the Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week? I’ve just been extremely busy with my work and a lot of international shows. Frankly, I didn’t think it was necessary to participate in the Fashion Week because they have never been taken seriously before. Plus, it is a lot of extra work. But this time, I thought it would be a good idea to break out of my comfort zone. Also, it was a great opportunity to make my brand stronger in India.

Why have Indian textiles largely been ignored on the Indian fashion circuit? I’ve been trying to find an answer to that myself. It’s sad, because we have such a strong textile tradition and diversity in our fabrics. I think it’s just a matter of contemporizing your designs for people to like them.

You are a bigger name internationally than in India. Isn’t that weird, since you work with Indian textiles? I don’t see it that way because really, we’re taking Indian textiles to the world. We are showing them what we are capable of in terms of design. We didn’t have to tweak designs for the international market, they were accepted as they were. We managed to break out of this perception of being a back-end manufacturing hub where there was no originality in design.

Why do your designs have such an international appeal? I think I always try to push the envelope and be original. We have an R&D team that works seven days a week — their only job is to brainstorm about how we can play around with fabrics, colours, materials, patterns and create something that is simple, stylish, wearable and will still stand out. That’s been the idea all along the way.

ON THE CAT WALK

Models showcase Neeru’s collection at the opening of the Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week recently held in New Delhi.

Tell us about your work with the weavers. I have been working with them since 1984. But let me be clear — I’m not trying to be a saint. I’m not trying to save a dying traditional, because that’s something that I cannot do alone. I need the participation of the entire community. That said, there’s no doubt that it brings awareness to their craft and provides livelihood to a lot of people. That’s especially true for the Katha embroiderers because Katha was virtually unknown outside of rural Bengal before about 10 years ago.