

Malkha: The Freedom Fabric

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Malkha, a pure cotton cloth made directly from raw cotton, is getting itself heard. And admired. Malkha cotton production has its roots in initiatives that followed droughts and consequent impoverishment and trail of suicide deaths of farmers in Andhra Pradesh in the late 1990s and into the middle of the past decade. Indebted farmers and weavers were left burdened with degraded and poisoned land loaded with pesticides while monocropping had resulted in an empty food basket. A combination of agencies and the Malkha Marketing Trust took on the task of preserving traditional techniques and indigenous cottonseed varieties. Malkha is pure cotton cloth made directly from raw cotton in the village close to cotton fields and combines traditional Indian principles of cloth making with modern small-scale technology. Malkha is energy efficient, avoids baling and unbaling of cotton by heavy machinery and unnecessary transport. The lack of heavy and intense industrial processing results in Malkha having a beautiful texture, is soft, and keeps its shape for ages. The name Malkha was made up by combining the first syllables of mulmul and khadi. As Malkha production migrates to other states, the variants have started taking on new names. For example the malkha made at Magan Sangrahalaya, Wardha, wants to call itself Magan Malkha. Malkha, in a sense, continues in the rich tradition of Indian cotton textiles which in their heydays had many different varieties of cotton fabrics. The names were many and varied, and part of the common vocabulary:

[bafta](#), [nainsukh](#), [dosuti](#), [moree](#), [jamdani](#), [mulmul](#), [chint](#)

[Imorphed into](#)

[chintz](#)

[l.](#)

[mashru](#), [himru](#)



and many more. According to the *Malkha Marketing Trust*, Malkha fabrics are woven by skilled weaver families on handlooms in Indian villages from cotton grown by smallholder farmer families. The malkha process puts the intermediate stage of cotton spinning back in the village, making the entire textile chain from cotton to cloth village-based. The newly designed machines put sophisticated modern technology at the service of the village, on a human scale. They handle the delicate cotton fibres gently, avoiding the force and violence of conventional processing, keeping the springiness of the live fibres all the way into the cloth. That's what gives malkha fabric its swing and drape. Malkha fabric is soft, it breathes, absorbs, holds colour, reflects its handmade heritage in its texture. Malkha has become more than a mere quality of cotton fabric. It is fundamentally rooted in scaling up sustainable, ecologically friendly formats of processing cotton and yarn and seeks the ultimate goal of linking producers directly to buyers. Today there are six units producing malkha cotton, styled as the freedom fabric, spread across the four states of Andhra Pradesh (Chirala, Khammam & Karimnaga), Karnataka (Bellary), Maharashtra (Wardha) and Kerala (Balrampuram). The Balarampuram unit is, incidentally, entirely run by women.



[According to its](#)

[blog,](#)

[the original malkha production unit was registered in late 2008 as a micro enterprise, the Kranti Nulu Vastrautpathi Vikraya Kendram which translates roughly as Revolutionary Yarn And Fabric Production And Sale Centre. It leveraged the local handloom culture of Chirala, using the existing skills of sizing, warping and of course the actual weaving. KNVVK is managed by the six machine operators \[one more has been recently inducted\] who buy the lint, turn it into yarn, send the yarn to the dye-houses, get the dyed yarn wound and sized into warps, and distribute warps and weft yarn to weavers. Weavers deliver the fabric to KNVVK who send it to Malkha Marketing Trust each month. KNVVK also handles all its own financial dealings, accounting and documentation, in fact all the business aspects of the enterprise. Malkha, says its chief articulator, Uzramma, is ready to take on the world. "We are going to rule the world of cotton textiles. The way we make Malkha is energy-saving, eco-sensitive, socially responsible, and produces good clothes. What more do you need? We are going to change the world," she says in a recent article by writer-journalist **Shoba Narayan**. Says Uzramma writing in the **Malkha blog**, "The goal of the malkha initiative is to put all aspects of production, including management, in the hands of the producers, the people who do the actual work. In other words, to achieve true democracy in production. Unlike the corporate model, where almost the entire cadre of top executives is drawn from the elite sectors of society, the malkha model can be run and managed by people who do not have access to expensive education, or who do not come from a privileged or business background."](#)



[But the challenge for sustaining Malkha on a larger scale is quite apparent in Uzramma's writings in the Malkha blog. "Malkha has had an easy ride in the market till now, but there are bound to be shoals and quicksands in trying to match rural production, and that too by people unused to manufacture, to sophisticated urban markets that need on-time, quality goods. To add to our problems our own](#)



[organization the Malkha Marketing Trust is seriously understaffed, and still in the learning stage."](#)

["While urban customers have to juggle their deadlines and margins, rural malkha suppliers have to cope with transport strikes, the vagaries of the indigo vat, unexpected glitches in the newly minted pre-spinning machinery and the effects of 'development': The Dastkar Andhra master dyer tells us that pomegranate skin now comes from hybrid varieties which give a paler yellow than the desi. Unlike mass-production systems, malkha deals with people working independently at each stage: cotton farmers, yarn makers, weavers and dyers, all living and working in their own cycles that include seasonal variations – handweaving and natural dyeing are both affected by heat and humidity," she says. She also points out that the greatest disadvantage which KNVVK and all the other Malkha production centres face is the lack of reliable electrical power. Not only are there long stretches of the day with no power, but there is no time-table for the power cuts, so that it is impossible to plan production.](#)



["It's a long way to our ultimate goal of linking producers directly to buyers, and the first step is to get to know each other better," Uzamma writes. Malkha has received financial support from the Andhra Pradesh Government's](#)

[Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty](#)

[\(SERP\) for Mini Spinning Units in Punukula, Paloncha Mandal of Khammam District, Chirala of Prakasam district and Sircilla of Karimnagar district. The Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty \(SERP\) is an autonomous society of the Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh. The Decentralized Cotton Yarn Trust \(DCYT\) worked in collaboration with Vortex Engineering, Chennai, which has developed the "Micro Spinning" the technology and fabricated the micro-spinning machinery. Apart from creating rural employment, it is providing a profitable marketing outlet for cotton farmers of the area. SERP believes that scaling up of this project will create sustainable livelihoods in different production centers located in rural areas.](#)



[However, the challenge of converting a business to scale remains, given that there isn't enough financial support. Writing in the **Malkha blog**, Uzamma points out, "Now here is the problem: Any business venture involving new technology needs a long period of support before it becomes self-supporting. In the conventional business world, this support is provided by venture capitalists, who look for eventual financial returns on their investments. But what Malkha needs is social investment, from investors who look for social rather than financial returns, who are prepared to invest their money in developing a just and equitable society...and that is what the malkha enterprise is searching for. The Gramaspinner technology is at the take-off stage: Only those familiar with the spinning process can appreciate the magnitude of the achievement. Now Malkha is waiting for a social investor who will see its potential and share its vision." A portion of Malkha fabric is exported to Italy, France, Norway, the UK and the US, says Shoba Narayan, in her article in the \[Live Mint\]\(#\)](#)

["Weaving a revolution, one piece at a time"](#)

[. A French buyer for Hermès says in a letter posted on the blog," As a designer, I have been very attracted by the texture and aspect of the Malkha textiles, as well as the natural colors that you managed to blend in a very smart way, the subtil chiné effects. The fact that in Malkha, the cotton does not travel extensively, creating more pollution in India, but is treated locally, adds to the value of the product, its exclusiveness. Samples of the garments sent to Paris last month fair met a good response, so i will develop more of these products, as top-of-the-range creations are our niche. Congratulation to the Malka cotton developers for having created a line of products that meets our requirements, as far as quality, esthetic and ethics are concerned."](#)



Indian fashion designer Mayank Mansingh Kaul is quoted by Shoba saying, "Malkha takes an interesting position because they are about handwoven cotton, not hand-spun. Hand-spinning is unsustainable. It costs Rs1,000 a metre and as a designer, it is hard for me to build that cost into my clothes. Malkha takes the best of both processes and creates a reasonably priced fabric that is getting rave reviews from international buyers but is also affordable for the local villagers who create it." Writes Shoba, while India is among the world's largest producers of organic cotton, the problem, according to fashion designer Peter D'Ascoli, is that there are only three Dutch agencies which certify organic cotton and most of the cotton farmers cannot afford this certification. D'Ascoli worked in New York with Diane von Furstenberg for many years before relocating to Delhi. He is part of Kaul's collective. "As a New York designer, I am so attracted to Malkha because it addresses two huge fashion trends that we need to focus on," he says. "The desire for sustainable production; and the whole notion of fair trade and nurturing ancient crafts and ways. Malkha addresses both these trends in an authentic way. Two weeks ago, in New York, I showed Malkha fabric to Diane (von Furstenberg) and she had the same reaction as I." Photo Credits: *Malkha Marketing Trust, Malkha*

[Blog, SERP](#)

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