



Original Article

Unraveling Heritage: The Cultural Significance of Karvat Kathi Handloom Sarees from Nagpur

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Abstract

The karvat kathi sarees a symbol of celebration & richness originates from the vidarbha region of Maharashtra. Worn at propitious rituals and at weddings in earlier times. This traditional saree entitled Karvati is well known by its exceptional saw-edged pattern on the border. The local weavers in small village of Maharashtra region have skilled in weaving. Karvat Kathi saree is also called as Queen Of Vidarbha Sarees.

The Karvat Kathi saree, also known as Karvati Kinar, is a distinguished handloom tradition of Vidarbha, Maharashtra, celebrated for its unique saw-tooth border inspired by temple architecture. Woven primarily with Tussar silk and mercerized cotton, these sarees embody a rare combination of cultural symbolism, artisanal skill, and sustainable textile practices. This study explores the historical origins, weaving techniques, colour aesthetics, and distinctive motifs that define the Karvat Kathi saree. The research highlights the meticulous three-shuttle weaving process, temple-inspired designs, and eco-friendly dyeing methods that make these sarees a cultural treasure and an heirloom textile. Despite recognition through Geographical Indication (GI) status and government-supported revival programs, challenges such as competition from power looms and synthetic fabrics threaten the livelihood of traditional weavers. The paper argues that consumer awareness, policy support, and innovative adaptations are essential to preserving this heritage craft. By embracing Karvat Kathi sarees, stakeholders not only contribute to sustaining India's handloom legacy but also promote ethical and sustainable fashion for future generations.

Keywords: Culture, Heritage, Handloom Sarees.

Introduction

The Karvat Kathi saree, also known as Karvati Kinar, is a traditional handwoven saree originating from the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, India. The name derives from the Marathi word "Karvat," meaning saw, referring to the unique saw-tooth patterned border that is a distinguishing feature of these sarees. The Karvat Kathi saree represents a rich blend of traditional craftsmanship, cultural heritage, and the livelihoods of skilled weavers in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. The unique saw-tooth border, temple designs, and use of quality Tussar silk make it a distinct and cherished handloom product. Vidarbha region have only two sarees which has got GI. Registration [1] and one of it is Karvat Kathi, Nagpur, Bhandara and Gondia are the main region of source for Tussar silk used in these handcrafted sarees. They are produced on pit looms using three fly shuttles of dissimilar colored yarns. The famous Ramtek temple in the region, from where the saw teeth designs are tailored from the monument seen by weavers. Therefore, moreover the cultural significance, the patterns and the motifs make these sarees propitious in it. The famous weavers of Karvat Kathi Sari and fabrics are speckled over the vidarbha region. The four main districts namely Bhandara, Nagpur, Chandrapur & Gadchiroli are the centers of reeling activities. The weaving takes place in Bhandara and Nagpur districts. The main weaving cluster is in the district Bhandara, Mohadi village, Taluka - Mohadi. Today the weavers of the Karvat Kathi pattern have extended their range beyond sarees which include shirting, dress materials, and dupattas. The famous Ramtek temple in the region, from where the saw teeth designs are tailored from the monument seen by weavers. Therefore, moreover the cultural significance, the patterns and the motifs make these sarees propitious in it.

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Making Process

The creation of a Karvat Kathi saree involves a meticulous, labour-intensive process that transforms raw materials into an exquisite textile. The steps are as follows:

1. **Yarn Preparation:** The process begins with the collection of Tussar silk from cocoons sourced in Vidarbha, particularly Bhandara, known for its high-quality silk due to favourable climate and resources. Reeled fibres are treated on a charka to form yarns, which are then rolled onto pirns. Three separate pirns are prepared: two carrying silk threads for the side borders and one with dyed mercerized cotton yarn for the body.
2. **Warping:** The yarns are set on a warping machine, a cylindrical metal frame that revolves vertically. A standard 40-meter warp is prepared, with threads passed through a condensing dent to the weaver's beam. The warp length is adjusted based on the product requirements.
3. **Loom Setup:** Traditionally woven on pit looms, modern Karvat Kathi weaving often uses frame looms for ergonomic benefits. The warp beam is set on the loom, and yarns are joined to the leftover threads from the previous weave. A Nagpuri wooden lattice dobbie is installed above the weaver's seat to control extra warp threads for intricate patterns.
4. **Weaving:** The saree is woven using a three-shuttle technique, where border weft yarns interlock with body weft yarns to create the signature Karvat saw-tooth pattern. The body is woven with natural-coloured Tussar silk, while borders use dyed cotton yarns. The pallu is manually adorned with stripe patterns or intricate motifs like gomi and ruifool, often using extra warp threads.
5. **Finishing:** After weaving, the saree is washed, stretched, and smoothed (often with a wax ball) to enhance texture and appearance. The final product is a sturdy yet delicate textile, reflecting the artisan's skill and environmental influences.

Colours

Karvat Kathi sarees are renowned for their vibrant yet elegant colour schemes. The body is typically woven in natural Tussar silk hues, such as cream, off-white, or deep yellow-brown, which lend a regal and grainy texture. Borders feature contrasting colours like red, maroon, green, or black, often with 2–3 white sharp lines (8–12 dent) for added definition. The pallu showcases complementary stripe patterns or intricate motifs in colours harmonizing with the border. Natural dyes are traditionally used, enhancing the saree's eco-friendly appeal, though modern productions may incorporate stable chemical dyes for consistency. The interplay of natural silk tones with vivid border colours creates a striking visual contrast, making each saree a unique piece of art.

Technique of Karvati Weaving

The Karvat Kathi weaving technique is distinguished by its three-shuttle, tapestry-style approach, executed on pit looms or modern frame looms equipped with a Nagpuri wooden lattice dobbie. This technique integrates three distinct weaving styles:

- **Leheri:** Creates wave-like patterns, adding fluidity to the design.
- **Jeali:** Produces net-like or lattice patterns, enhancing texture.
- **Karvat:** Forms the iconic saw-tooth border through interlocking weft yarns.
The process involves:
 - Using Tussar silk for the warp and weft in the body, with 2/80s mercerized cotton for borders.
 - Employing three fly shuttles to weave the body and borders simultaneously, with the dobbie controlling extra warp threads for temple motifs and saw-tooth patterns.
 - Interlocking border weft yarns with body weft yarns to create the sharp-edged Karvat design, inspired by Ramtek temple sculptures.
 - Manual pallu designing, incorporating traditional motifs like gomi, ruifool, or stripes, often with extra warp threads for intricate detailing.

This labour-intensive technique, requiring years of skill, results in a delicate yet durable fabric, with each saree taking 2–3 weeks to complete. Innovations like the catch-cord system and fly shuttle technology have increased efficiency, reducing weaving time from 7–8 days to 1 day per saree in some cases.

Karvati Weaving

Three-shuttle weaving:

Karvati sarees are woven using a special three-shuttle technique. In this process, one shuttle is dedicated to the body of the fabric, while the other two are used for weaving borders on both sides. Unlike conventional shuttle weaving, no shuttle boxes are employed. Instead, the border threads are manually interlocked with the threads of the body.

Borders:

The border design is created using a dobbie mechanism. Common motifs include tiny floral and temple patterns arranged in two to three neat rows, divided by distinct lines of brightly colored yarn.

Karvati (Saw-edge) Pattern:

The characteristic *karvat* or saw-tooth pattern appears right next to the borders on either side of the saree's body. This design emerges from the movement of the border shuttle, which interlocks progressively with one, two, and then up to twenty body warp

yarns before reversing the sequence. The repeated process forms a continuous saw-edged motif across the saree. The size of the pattern differs among weavers—some prefer small motifs while others create medium or large designs. A medium pattern usually involves interlocking around twenty body warp yarns.

Pallu (End-piece):

The *pallu* is woven manually without using jacquard or machines, relying entirely on interlocking techniques. Three distinct types are popular:

- **Jala Pallu** – the most intricate, requiring six to eight shuttles for weaving elaborate multicolored designs. It is highly detailed, artistic, and expensive.
- **Devdi Pallu** – moderately elaborate, featuring temple motifs. Some elements are woven while others are added with needlework.
- **Tekri Pallu** – the simplest, decorated with floral and geometric motifs arranged in vertical columns.

Body:

The body of the Karvat Kati saree is usually plain, though some weavers add small buta (motif) embellishments using hand-needle work. After completion, the saree is removed from the loom and prepared for cutting.

Dyeing, Finishing & Printing

In most handloom clusters, yarn dyeing is common, but in this region dyeing is often carried out at the fabric stage. While many sarees are left in their natural Tussar silk color, select fabrics such as dress materials and shirting are sent to dyeing units. Certain Tussar sarees are also enhanced through dyeing and block printing, adding value to the product. High-end sarees are frequently sent to Bagru (Rajasthan) and Mallickpara (West Bengal) for specialized dyeing and printing.

Distinctive Features

The exclusivity of Karvat Kati sarees comes from:

1. The use of **Bhandara Tussar silk** as raw material.
2. Their **unique border and body designs**.
3. The **traditional weaving techniques**.
4. The **saw-edge motifs** that run alongside the borders.

Saw-edge Border

The Karvat Kati saree traces its origin to the town of Regi in Maharashtra. Its name is derived from the *karvat* (saw-tooth) border pattern, which is woven adjacent to the saree body on both sides. This distinctive design is the hallmark of every Karvat Kati saree.

Result

The project reveals the Karvat Kathi saree's significance as a cultural and artistic treasure, blending tradition with craftsmanship. The use of high-quality Tussar silk and mercerized cotton, combined with the unique three-shuttle weaving technique, produces sarees that are both aesthetically striking and durable, ideal as heirloom pieces. The saw-tooth border and temple-inspired motifs distinguish these sarees, making them auspicious for weddings and festivals. Revival efforts by the Maharashtra State government and cooperatives like the Solapur Handloom Weavers' Cooperative Society have redirected over a thousand weavers to their craft, boosting livelihoods and preserving heritage. The Geographical Indication (GI) tag and Silk Mark ensure authenticity, with state-run showrooms like Indrayani promoting genuine products. However, challenges persist, including competition from power looms and synthetic fabrics, which compromise quality and threaten weaver incomes.

Conclusion

Karvat Kathi sarees represent a harmonious blend of tradition, artistry, and sustainability, encapsulating the cultural essence of Vidarbha. The intricate three-shuttle weaving technique, vibrant colour schemes, and temple-inspired designs make these sarees a cherished part of India's textile heritage. While revival initiatives have revitalized the craft, providing economic opportunities for weavers, the industry faces ongoing challenges from mechanization and market shifts. Continued support through government programs, consumer awareness, and modern adaptations (e.g., incorporating Karvat designs in stoles and upholstery) is crucial to sustaining this art form. By investing in Karvat Kathi sarees, consumers not only embrace sustainable fashion but also contribute to preserving a timeless craft that embodies India's cultural legacy.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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