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THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE: HERITAGE



# THREADS OF LIFE

## *Khadi in Oaxaca*

**The khadi movement is thriving** in the Sierra Sur Mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico. In the remote Zapotec village of San Sebastian Rio Hondo, women spin organic cotton on the Charkha, the wooden spinning wheel that was the embodiment of Gandhi's vision for a new India. Khadi, the fabric of freedom is woven on backstrap and pedal looms with white or pre-Hispanic brown cotton grown on the Pacific Coast. Ponchos and huipiles, the indigenous sleeveless tunics worn by women in Mexico and Central America, are hand-stitched and hand-sewn by trained seamstresses. Khadi Oaxaca's slow-textiles are a state-of-the-art response to environmental issues and the growing demands for handmade goods. Truly honouring the dignity of labour, this dynamic community project is creatively uniting two rich textile traditions under the banner of khadi.

The nonprofit organisation started in 2010 with a spinning course on the charkha for 30 women and is now involved with over 300 people. The co-founders Marcos Cafe and his wife Kalindi share a strong connection with India and have both embraced conscious living. Born in the Berkeley area, California, Kalindi was raised in Krishna Consciousness and lived on the East coast before moving to Mexico 14 years ago. She is the head designer of the brand. Marcos Cafe was born in Minneapolis and was just 7 years old when his family moved to Mexico City. He became interested in magic at the age of 8 and travelled to San Sebastian as a teenage magician hoping to learn indigenous 'magic' for his show. The true magic he came upon was a sustainable traditional lifestyle

that made a lasting impression on him. 'When I first came here everybody had sheep and spun wool on their drop spindles; they wove blankets and ponchos on backstrap looms. This was part of their tradition'. He remained in San Sebastian and shared the life of the Ramirez family until this village life experience took him to India, to Gandhi's Ashram on the Sabarmati River. Travelling with Gandhian old men in Gujarat, he saw empowered villages growing their food, weaving and making their own clothes. This journey came full circle after the New-Delhi premiere of the film *Gandhi* sparked a connection to his life in San Sebastian and made him return to Oaxaca a few years later.

Khadi was thought of as a way of life rather than a business. Inspired by self-sufficient village economy and sustainable development, it is supporting local cooperatives and families, helping to improve techniques, using natural materials and continuing the beauty of hand-spinning. 'Spinning is the symbol of sustainability. It allows people to work from home in their free time and it gives them a certain level of income. It's one of the foundations of village economy throughout the world. Gandhi said it's literally the thread of life'. The revitalisation of spinning reconnected the elders with their old way of life and brought a sense of fulfillment and gratitude to the community. 'A grandmother who lives alone with one grandchild got teary-eyed when she told us spinning and weaving again gave her a purpose to get up in the morning' says Kalindi. Convincing villagers to wear khadi garments that support the village economy instead of buying synthetic clothing that support the toxic

textile industry remains a slow educational process and the long-term goal they plan to achieve.

Marcos, who's a spinner and weaver, brought the first spinning wheel from India. Today, they are made by the local master carpenters and the 200 spinners working for Khadi own their charkha. 'The spinning wheel is five times faster than the native drop spindles and it's very relaxing. With a spinning wheel you are using the left and right brain hemispheres, so you can't really think about anything else. Charkha spinning brings a lot of peace'.

Backstrap woven textiles are more costly due to the slow process. Women who live further away on the ranches use waist looms, but in San Sebastian most of the weaving is done by male weavers on faster pedal looms. It takes weeks or many days to produce one square metre on a backstrap loom and just a day to weave several metres on a standing loom. Out of the twelve pedal loom weavers, only one of them is a woman because the technique is more physically demanding. Training, innovating and the transmission of skills to younger generations are very much discussed with the families and play a key role in the community. Cheo Ramirez, has been involved in the growing of the organisation, teaching charkha spinning, foot pedal weaving and natural dyeing. 'Some granddaughters are making finer textiles than the grandmothers partly because we are helping to develop better techniques with ideas we brought in from other villages. The artisans had to learn new ways of refining their weaving or finishing'. ▶

It's a five to eight hour drive to reach all nine municipios on the Costa Chica where 25 families grow white and naturally coloured brown cotton for Khadi. They practice the Native American companion planting when three crops are planted together in the same plot and benefit from each other. 'Some families plant cotton intercropped with corn while others have it planted in their lime tree orchards. We do not use any chemicals but instead produce plants like neem for pest-control and rely on integrated pest management (IPM) strategies like crop rotation.'

Most cotton growers use the rainfed farming system, planting in August and harvesting between December and February. The cotton arrives in San Sebastian in raw form and is weighed before the women take it home and begin the labour-intensive process of removing the seeds, carding the fibre and spinning it into thread. The shades of browns stay undyed while white cotton is dyed with indigo, cochineal, oak bark and wild marigold.

Khadi Oaxaca has been quietly working on reviving the wool industry and sustaining homestead lifestyles. The next big step will be the opening of a Khadi Centre in Oaxaca City this year. Like the Khadi Emporium in India, it will be used for sales, raw material distribution, and teaching. The nonprofit depends on donations and is working towards sustainability. The majority of profits go back to community projects, funding water systems and a school for local children. ♦♦♦ **Anne Laure Camilleri**  
[www.khadioaxaca.com](http://www.khadioaxaca.com)



