

Evolution of Maheshwari Designs: Traditional Patterns vs. Contemporary Adaptations

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Citation: Namdev, K. (2026). *Evolution of Maheshwari Designs: Traditional Patterns vs. Contemporary Adaptations*. *Journal of Commerce, Economics & Computer Science*, 12(03), 34–37.

Abstract

Maheshwari textile has been woven in Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh, since the 18th century, when Rani Ahilyabai Holkar first encouraged local weavers to take it up. It's best known for its checks, stripes, and especially its reversible borders, a feature that still sets it apart from other Indian handlooms. But the designs haven't stayed the same over time. They've shifted with changing patronage, market demands, and more recently, the influence of fashion designers and online retail. This paper traces that shift from traditional motifs, rooted in temple architecture and royal symbolism, to today's adaptations shaped by urban and global market tastes. Drawing on existing literature, a comparison of older and newer patterns, the study looks at key turning points: the impact of the Geographical Indication (GI) tag, and recent fashion collaborations. The core weaving technique and signature reversible border have largely stayed intact, while colours, motifs, and design complexity have evolved to suit modern tastes. This balance between tradition and adaptation seems central to how the craft has survived. The paper ends by reflecting on what this means for preserving traditional crafts amid ongoing pressure to innovate.

Keywords: Maheshwari Textiles, Ahilyabai Holkar, Design Evolution, Traditional Motifs, Contemporary adaptation, Geographical Indication (GI), Handloom Heritage, Reversible Border, Craft Preservation.

Introduction

Handloom fabrics in India tell a lot about our history, trade and changing taste. Maheshwari saree is one of those examples. It is woven in town of Maheshwar on the banks of Narmada River. It has changed a lot over time.

The problem is simple: Maheshwari fabric is continuously being pushed to change due to new fashion trends, online selling and designer collaborations, but it's the old and authentic part of the fabric, the cotton-silk blends and its reversible border which gives it its authenticity and legal protection. If the designers change it too little, the fabric feels old fashioned and stops selling among newer generations. And if they change it too much, it loses its authenticity. Most of the research work and writings discuss this problem but a very few studies test it against real weaver survey.

Work Done in this Area

There has been a lot written on Maheshwari textiles from different perspectives. Dr. Reena Bhairam directly surveyed fifty weaver families, half of them are young weavers (20-30 years) and half of them are old weavers (50-60 years). I found this as the only documents which actually compares different generations of weavers. Another study by Dr. Shruti Tiwari outlines the transformation of Maheshwari

Sarees from the queen's wardrobe to national and international markets through the trainings, globalization and designer collaborations. It tells us how designers have added contemporary designs to help the weavers reach new consumers. Also, a study from 2024 examined how the GI tag has affected its production and market access. In my research paper, I have also written about the Rehwa society and how the revival of the craft helped the local community. What's missing is a study that connects it all together.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify which elements of design such as colour, border, motif have changed historically over time and which have not changed. This will help designers to determine where to concentrate their design effects.
- To study the impact of modern design interventions on the livelihoods of Maheshwari weavers.

Hypotheses

Based on the sources reviewed, this paper tests two simple ideas:

- **Hypotheses 1:** Younger and older weavers give different reasons for design change, younger weavers are more likely to say it is because of fashion trends, while older weavers are more likely to say the design lost its balance or harmony.
- **Hypotheses 2:** The GI tag, and designer collaborations have let colour and pattern change a lot, while the basic weave and border have stayed largely the same.

Literature Review

Since this paper uses only existing sources, each one is explained below in terms of what it tells us about the two ideas being tested.

Bhairam (2020), *International Journal of Home Science*

Dr Reena Bhairam surveyed fifty weaver families in Maheshwar, half of them are younger weavers and half of them are older weavers, and asked them simple questions. Almost everyone agreed that the design has changed. But the reasons were different: most younger weavers believed that these changes occurred due to changing fashion trends and demands, while the older weavers felt a loss of balance and harmony in the designs. Both groups agreed that the old fort-pattern border is still used today, but with an updated style. They also agreed that Maheshwari weaving has to making different products like stoles, suits, and home furnishings, not just saris.

GI-Impact Study, *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research* (2024)

This study looks at how the 2010 GI tag has affected Maheshwari fabric. It helped in protecting the identity of Maheshwari textile. The Maheshwari fabric is considered authentic because of its reversible border and silk-cotton weaving technique. The study also found that the GI tag has helped Maheshwari weavers have gained better recognition and access to larger markets. From this data the main finding concludes that GI tag protects weaving technique and craftsmanship, not any fixed type of design pattern.

General Background Sources

In the year 1767, Rani Ahilyabai Holkar made Maheshwar the capital of Malwa territory. She had invited weavers from various places such as Surat, Hyderabad, Mandava etc. and settled them in Maheshwar. The traditional designs of Maheshwar are geometric and linear. Queen herself instructed the weavers to take design inspiration from the temple, stone carvings of fort walls and ghats of Narmada.

Maheshwari sarees faced a decline due to industrialization during British rule. Its revival is generally credited to Prince Richard Holkar and his wife Sally Holkar. They decided to revive this textile as a source of employment and income for women in Maheshwar. They both founded Rehwa society in 1978-1979 as a non-profit organization.

The Study

The paper does not include a new survey, it is based on secondary data, published papers, articles. Two types of information are used in the study. First, there's a straightforward side-by-side comparison of old and new design features, shown in Table 1. Second, there are the actual weaver survey numbers that Bhairam collected in 2020, presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Old vs. New Maheshwari Design Features

Design Element	Traditional Form (18th–mid 20th c.)	Contemporary Adaptation (1980s–present)
Border (Kor/Bugdi)	Reversible, 2–2.5-inch geometric borders showing the Maheshwar Fort lattice; woven on dobby weave	Reversible border retained as the signature feature; widths and contrast altered for kurtas, stoles, and other products
Motifs	Chatai (mat) checks, temple-spire and lattice forms, peacocks, narrow stripes named after the Narmada	Abstracted geometrics, fusion florals, minimalist checks designed for export and digital catalogues
Colour Palette	Earthy tones: deep brown, golden yellow, angoori green, peacock blue, aal red, made with natural dyes	Pastels, indigo-based shades, and synthetic dyes selected to match seasonal urban trends
Yarn / Weave	Silk warp, hand-spun cotton weft; pit looms; nine-yard nauvari format for court wear	Same warp-weft logic retained, but cotton and silk sourced from wider supply chains; six-yard saris, dupattas along with stitched garments

Hypothesis Analysis

H1: Do Younger and Older Weavers Give Different Reasons for Change?

It states- most of the younger weaver believes that the design has changed mainly because of change in fashion trends, while older weavers think that the design has lost its traditional balance and harmony. The survey done by Dr. Reena Bhairam supports this. All the weavers agreed that the designs have changed over time.

The table below shows the data collected in this survey.

Table 2: Information about Maheshwari Design Adaptations

Survey Item	Young Weavers (20–30 yrs)	Aged Weavers (60–70 yrs)
Report that design has changed	100%	100%
Change attributed to shift in fashion	48%	30%
Change attributed to loss of design harmony	34%	48%
Change attributed to attracting new consumers	18%	22%
Border redesigned for a different look	36%	74%
Border redesigned to follow fashion change	64%	26%

Source: adapted from Bhairam, Dr Reena. Study on design of Maheshwari textile. International Journal of Home Science, 2020, 6(3), 543–548.

H2: Do GI Tag and Designer Collaborations Encourage Design Innovation While Preserving Traditional Weaving Elements?

H2 said that cooperatives, the GI tag, and designer work have let colour and pattern change a lot while the weave and border stayed the same. The sources reviewed support this too. The GI-impact study suggests that Maheshwari's protected identity is based on the border and weave, not on fixed patterns. This is why colour and pattern can change every season but the border and weave remains the same. Tiwari and Tewary's book show designers actively using this flexibility to reach new markets. Bhairam's data supports this from the weavers side as well: 100% of both age groups said the old fort-pattern border is still used today. So H2 is supported by both the studies.

Conclusion

For a fashion designer, the lesson here is simple: the border and the silk-cotton weave are fixed identity of Maheshwari fabric, protected by the GI tag that makes the fabric genuine. Colour, pattern, and shape are the safe space for new ideas and experiments each season. Both ideas presented in this paper are supported by existing literature data. Younger and older weavers explain change differently, but neither group rejects it, and institutions like the GI tag and weaver cooperatives have made room for new colours and patterns without losing the fabric's core identity. This balance between new designs while keeping the core same, seems to be the main reason Maheshwari fabric has survived more than

two hundred years of change. For a designer, the practical takeaway is: feel free to experiment with colour, pattern, and cut, but treat the border and the weave as something to preserve, not something to redesign. Since this paper only uses existing sources and not a new survey, its findings should be seen as well-supported ideas rather than final proof.

Future Studies

Future research could test both ideas with a fresh survey of weavers and designers to verify these findings.

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