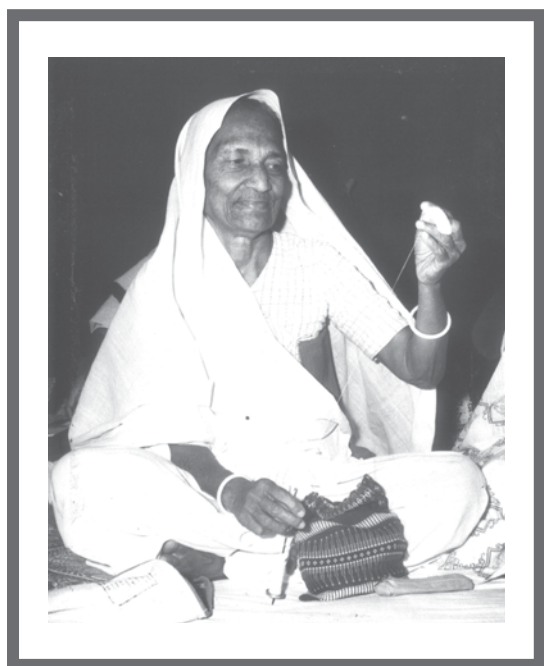




Capturing The Essence of Freedom



Jankidevi Bajaj, a strong supporter of Khadi and charkha

Swadheen, a retrospective exhibition held at Kamalnayan Bajaj Art Gallery, Mumbai, celebrated the life and times of **Jankidevi Bajaj**, a proponent of Gandhian values and staunch supporter of Khadi.

Text  Sudeepta Vyas

As the curtain rose on January 7, 2024 at Mumbai's Kamalnayan Bajaj Art Gallery, it unfolded a dream spanning over 30 years. Kiran Bajaj, inspired by the legacy of Jankidevi Bajaj, brought forth a unique Khadi exhibition, not merely as a platform for weavers' designs but as a reintroduction to the 'Fabric of Freedom'. Swadheen was inaugurated by Dr Pheroza Godrej, art historian, environmentalist and writer along with Kiran Bajaj. It brought together the historical, social and economic contexts in which the Fabric of Freedom



Kiran Bajaj with her daughter-in-law Pooja Bajaj

has developed and continues to exist. The three-day event included textile art installations, guided walkthroughs, a tribute to Jankidevi Bajaj, panel discussions and lecture sessions, and a curated exhibition-cum-sale by entrepreneurs and artisan-led initiatives showcasing wearables and lifestyle products. The eminent speakers were Sushma Veerappa-Udaanta Trust; Venkata Krishna-Discovering Roots; Dr Suman Koulagi; Ravikiran-Metaphor Racha and Paresh Patel-Royal Brocades. The exhibition participants were Metaphor Racha, Tula Organic, Magan Khadi, Kullvi Whims, Amoda, Discovering Roots, Bunkar Bihar, The Charkha, Manas by Manas Ghorai, Little Bee Charitable Trust and Rajiben Vankar.



A busy stall at Swadheen exhibition



(L-R) Shekhar Bajaj-Chairman, Bajaj Electricals; Amrita Somaiya-President, IMC Ladies' Wing; Chief Guest Dr Pheroza Godrej-Chairperson, Godrej Archives Council; Prasoon Joshi-Chairman, McCann Worldgroup, Asia Pacific; Kiran Bajaj-Past President, IMC Ladies' Wing; Radhika Nath-Chairperson, 30th JDBP Committee; Savitha Suri-Curator, Swadheen; and Pooja Bajaj-Committee Member, IMC Ladies' Wing

The genesis of Swadheen traces back to the 1970s when Kiran Bajaj, a young bride, met her grandmother-in-law Jankidevi Bajaj, a freedom fighter and social reformer. Over her interactions and time spent in Wardha, she learned more about Jankidevi, a rich Marwari woman who gave up her luxuries in a matter of seconds. She was influenced by her husband Jamnalal Bajaj and Mahatma Gandhi and embraced their stringent lifestyle. For Jankidevi, this was an act of resolute acceptance and understanding of the Swadeshi movement.

In 1921, at the age of 28, Jankidevi burnt all her rich silks as an act of rebellion against the British. She spun her own Khadi and adopted it as her lifelong attire. She clad everyone in Khadi including the temple deities! Through day and night, she worked on the *charkha* and went from house to house teaching *sui-katai* to hundreds of people. This sense of purpose and sacrifice combined with her profound influence ignited Kiran Bajaj's vision to present Jankidevi's persona to the people of India.

The opportunity presented itself many years later. As President IMC Ladies Wing, 1992-93, Kiran Bajaj dedicated her tenure to the theme 'Discover the Entrepreneur in You'. In 1993, at the birth centenary of Padma Vibhushan Jankidevi Bajaj, she instituted the Ladies Wing Jankidevi Bajaj Puraskar for the Rural Woman Entrepreneur. This set the stage for an event that would emerge 30 years later as Swadheen.



The exhibition, led by Kiran Bajaj and curated by Savitha Suri, is not just a showcase but homage to Jankidevi's life and sacrifices for freedom. In collaboration with the IMC Ladies' Wing and the team at Bajaj Electricals, Kiran Bajaj's dream is now a reality, patiently waiting in the wings to explore new avenues.

Why Khadi?

Kiran Bajaj believes Khadi is not just a fabric. It pays tribute to all those who fought for our freedom and epitomises our love for our nation. Beyond its cultural significance, Khadi serves as a source of employment and opportunities, impacting millions of lives including unemployed individuals, young mothers, and widows, defining a dignified way of living. She believes instilling a sense of pride, particularly among the younger generation, in something woven on Indian soil is necessary. Each rupee spent on this fabric contributes to feeding a hungry soul and plays a role in social progress. The possibilities are vast, extending from clothes, textile furnishings, bags, and towels to various accessories. Bajaj envisions a collective impact and believes that if everyone invested in a single *rumaal*, it could significantly contribute to India's economy.

Above all, she sees Khadi as a unifying force, connecting the diverse people of India. It is not just a fabric; it should also stand as the pride and glory of the nation, embodying its rich heritage and limitless potential. *



Clockwise: A charkha displayed at the exhibition; A craftsman working on the charkha; Members of the IMC Ladies' Wing Committee



Meet Kiran Bajaj

A writer, poet, and environmentalist, Kiran Bajaj hails from a Vaishnav business family in Kolkata and is married to the Gandhian Bajaj family. She served as the Managing Director of Hind Musafir agency for 26 years and, as the youngest President of the IMC Ladies' Wing, instituted the Jankidevi Bajaj Puraskar for Rural Women Entrepreneurs in 1993-94.



She founded the NGOs—Shabdham and Paryavaran Mitra, dedicated to promoting Indian arts, literature, culture and languages, and environmental conservation, respectively. For the past 19 years, Shabdham has brought various forms of the performing arts to diverse audiences, while Paryavaran Mitra has actively engaged with students, schools, farmers, and communities advocating for environmental conservation and organic farming.