Regulating the “Khadi Brand”

What is the issue?

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- Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) has threatened to sue Fabindia for misusing the trademark chakra without proper authentication.
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- While the government is aggressively promoting Khadi, it is also important to nurture a private Khadi ecosystem for the sake of the artisans invovled.
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What has the government done to promote Khadi?

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- Both charkha and khadi have been associated inalienably with Mahatma Gandhi, and are powerful symbols of India’s struggle for Independence.
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- While governments have been keen to ensure that the khadi brand is not used for private profit, the current dispensation has been especially enthusiastic.
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- Notably, KVIC (which functions under the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises), was reconstituted in 2015 with additional powers.
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- As more than 130 lakh people are employed in this sector, various government departments have been instructed to maximise Khadi use in a systematically.
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- Khadi uniforms were proposed for Air India’s cabin crew and hotels run by “Indian Tourism Development Board” were to have Khadi bed-sheets.
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- Stalls for selling khadi products at all government functions was planned, and Khadi was being promoted feverously as a “Fashion Statement”.
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- The government is also working on promoting khadi overseas, and KVIC is

said to be in talks with industry associations abroad to open franchises.
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What exactly is khadi?

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- Mahatma Gandhi popularised the charkha and indigenously produced cloth as a symbol of the Swadeshi boycott of foreign-made goods.
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- Khadi is a fabric that is hand-woven from hand-spun yarn, and was initially thought as a means to provide employment for rural India.
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- After Independence, KVIC was established by an Act of Parliament in 1956.
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- The Act defined khadi as “any cloth woven on handlooms in India from cotton, silk, woollen yarn or a combination of these which is also hand-spun in India”.
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- Since then, KVIC has been using the khadi trademark on its products and displays, but over time, many became oblivious of what Khadi actually meant.
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- In 2013, the government notified “The Khadi Mark Regulations, 2013” for the purpose of authentication of genuine khadi.
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- This mandated that all merchandise that is produced or marketed as khadi would have to bear the “Khadi Mark Tags and Labels” issued by the KVIC.
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- Also, persons or institutions applying for Khadi Mark registration were to be subjected to specified sample tests for verification.
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Which institutions were using the khadi tag without authorisation?

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- Since 2014, KVIC found as many as 176 institutions that were violating the khadi trademark in some way or the other.
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- Among them is Fabindia, which has emerged as the largest private platform for products that are hand-made with traditional techniques and skills.

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- Most of the violators were single-outlet stores and retailers, and have predominantly stopped using the tag on receiving notices form KVIC.
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- But Fabindia chain, whose application for KVIC was rejected, was found to be a repeat offender even after receiving multiple notices.
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- The rejection rooted in the logic that Fabindia is a ‘for profit initiative’, which defeats the intention of the Khadi movement.
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- As the company hasn’t refrained, a legal notice to sue Fabindia for 525 crores, has been initiated recently.
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What are the concerns?

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- As protecting poor artisans is the intention, it should ensure that all produce of such artisans get Khadi tagged, even if it is sold outside the government fold.
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- Besides, the question of whether - regulating the cloth, also means regulating symbols like charkha, and the artisans behind it needs pondering.
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- While the present dispute will be settled in courts, one needs to proceed form the recognition that Khadi as a brand belongs to the people.
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- Khadi as a concept has been around from long before KVIC came into existence, and in a sense, is a generic term as “ayurveda” or “yoga”.
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- But as KVIC approval is mandatory for the using the term “Khadi”, a new terminology needs to be evolved for hand-spun cloths outside KVIC’s ambit.
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Source: Indian Express

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