



## **UZRAMMA** THE COTTON CREATOR

What differentiates Uzramma, 73, from other textile crusaders is her insistence on the ordinary. A stylish, petite woman with platinum hair and ultramarine eyes, Uzramma, as she prefers to be called, has helped farmers and weavers in Andhra Pradesh for 35 years. While she knows her Chirala cottons and her Narayanpet checks, while she can tell an Andhra jamdani from a Bengali one with her eyes closed, Uzramma's cause isn't the fine weaves that are sold direct by master weavers to connoisseurs. Rather, it is the humble everyday textiles that tell stories of red earth and cloudy cotton along with the rhythms and songs of the shuttles and looms across the varied land of this sunset industry. Adilabad in Telengana, for instance, had these "thick cotton coverings that people folded and used as blankets in the winter," says Uzramma. "They called these dupattlu and it was created for them by them. Now, you don't see them anymore."

Such textiles—the cotton bed sheets that rocked babies on trains; the towels and turbans made to screen heads from a very specific sun—used to be ubiquitous. They were intertwined with the milieu and manners of a particular region, reflected the climate and culture, and were supremely utilitarian. Today, they are almost extinct. "What bothers me is the complete disappearance of ordinary cloth for ordinary people," Uzramma says.

This empathy for the ordinary began in 1989 when Uzra Bilgrami returned **WHERE?** after a decade in England as a trained goldsmith. Born and raised in an aristocratic family **FROM WHERE?**, Uzramma wanted a "life within a community that was outside the family." She had raised kids and set up home in Hyderabad with her husband. Her friends, Laila Tyabji and Bunny Page, who co-founded Dastkar, asked her to start an Andhra chapter. So she did, beginning with just three cooperatives, giving them design inputs and helping them market their textiles. Uzramma loved this life—travelling by bus to villages in interior Andhra Pradesh, bathing in step wells and streams, and eating local village food while working with weavers. "Our strength in diverse small scale production is unmatched," she says. "We have done this for thousands of years."

Indeed, the word cotton comes from the Sanskrit word *karpasi*, which morphed into the Arabic quaitn, and later cotton. From the 1st to the 17th century when the British arrived, India reigned supreme in the world of textiles. "Handwoven cloth was a part of our lives and our traditions for centuries," she says.

Uzramma's deep-dive into the weaving community became her calling: Yarn. Powerlooms require cotton to be transported as "compressed bricks," which destroys the natural springiness of the cotton fibre besides being a huge waste of energy. She wanted to decentralise and localise the whole process, and restore the ancient interdependencies between cotton farmers, ginners, yarn spinners, dyers, weavers and ultimately the wearers of this local fabric. The end result of Uzramma's experiment with decentralisation is malkha—a combination of mulmul and khadi. Malkha is what she wears everyday and what she wants to talk about. The fabric itself is superbly comfortable for tropical India. Available at [malkha.in](http://malkha.in), the saris and stitched clothes look elegant. Malkha promotes and celebrates the small, the local and the handwoven through systems that hark back a few centuries.

Efforts from people like Uzramma may not just save regional weaves from extinction, they may also change the perception of Indian clothes are sequin-laden garish synthetics. **By Shoba Narayan >**