

## **Weaving Change: How the Kadike Trust in Udupi is Stitching Together Climate Action, Culture, and Empowerment**

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### **Abstract**

In the quiet lanes of coastal Karnataka, the Kadike Trust is weaving more than just sarees—it's crafting a scalable solution for rural revival. What began in 2018 as a couple's effort to save the dying Udupi saree has become a replicable model for sustainable livelihoods, women's empowerment, and cultural regeneration, without compromising on climate goals.

Kadike Trust's revival of the Udupi cotton saree is more than a cultural rescue mission; it's a blueprint for grassroots development. By combining zero-electricity weaving, natural dyeing, fair wages, and direct-to-consumer access, Kadike has created a self-sustaining ecosystem that empowers rural women and preserves traditional knowledge. Its low-cost, high-impact model is easily adaptable to other crafts and communities across India, proving that heritage can scale—and lead the way toward climate-resilient, community-driven economies.



Mamatha Rai (right), founder and president of Kadike Trust, showcasing the Udupi Saree.

Image credit: [www.kadiktrust.org](http://www.kadiktrust.org)

## **Reviving Threads of Tradition: The Story of Udupi Sarees and the Kadike Trust**

Across India, dozens of handloom traditions teeter on the edge of extinction, casualties of synthetic fabrics, mass production, and neglected rural economies. The question isn't just how to preserve these crafts, but how to make them viable again. Where and how? In the quiet coastal districts of Karnataka, where coconut palms sway under monsoon skies and temple bells echo through narrow lanes, lived a tradition nearly forgotten—*the Udupi saree*. Known for its soft cotton, breathable weave, and understated elegance, this handloom textile was once a staple across the region.

The once-thriving weaving communities, who had passed down skills over generations, watched helplessly as their looms fell silent. With no market, no young weavers, and no clear path to survival, the Udupi saree seemed destined to vanish.

Then, in 2017, a quiet but determined revolution began—not in government offices or corporate CSR departments, but in the living room of Mamatha Rai and her husband in Karkala, a town in the Udupi district. Mamatha, a former lecturer, along with her husband, Mr. B. C. Shetty, was deeply committed to a way of life rooted in earth-friendly values.

### **A Conscious Lifestyle Turned into Collective Action**

Mamatha Rai and her husband had long embraced a conscious lifestyle—eating local, reducing waste, and making mindful choices. Passionate about growing climate-tolerant plants like edible weeds and root vegetables, Mamatha has also inspired others to adopt simple, eco-conscious living through gardening, home cooking, and using handmade products. It was this commitment to a low-waste lifestyle that led them to stumble upon the story of the fading Udupi saree: an art native to the region, which was natural and sustainable, and yet close to extinction.

They were stunned—not just by the beauty of the fabric's history, but by how close it had come to being lost forever.

What began as curiosity quickly evolved into something more urgent. As they explored the fabric's history, they travelled across Udupi and Dakshina Kannada to meet the last remaining weavers—some elderly, some disheartened, most convinced the saree had no future. What they found was heartbreaking: an entire craft on the brink, with no apprentices, no demand, and no recognition.

But Mamatha and her partner thought otherwise. They saw something different: a living tradition that could only be **revived, reimaged, and returned to relevance** while rebuilding livelihoods and redefining sustainability through tradition. They decided to act.

## **Kadike Trust: Revival Rooted in Responsibility**

Driven by this conviction, they immersed themselves in the local weaving landscape—building trust with artisans, gathering stories from elders, and piecing together forgotten techniques. Their approach was patient and personal, grounded in humility and mutual respect. In 2018, with no institutional backing and only personal savings, they formally launched the **Kadike Trust**.<sup>i</sup> It was slow, grassroots work: restoring trust within the community, collecting knowledge from older weavers, and slowly training a new generation in the art. Their goals were clear: revive the Udupi saree tradition, create sustainable livelihoods for artisans, especially women, and build a self-sustaining ecosystem rooted in local knowledge and eco-friendly practices. They created a direct-to-consumer model, ensuring transparency and better returns for artisans. They reimagined what revival could look like in today's world—anchored in **sustainability, equity, and community empowerment**.

But Kadike wasn't just trying to **rescue an art form**. It was building a **replicable, resilient system**—one that tackled the climate crisis, revived dying crafts, and empowered rural communities, particularly women.

Their revival model is elegant in its simplicity, yet powerful in its outcomes:

- Identify lost or endangered craft traditions.
- Engage remaining artisans to document and transfer knowledge.
- Train new weavers, especially women and youth.
- Eliminate toxic production methods.
- Build a direct-to-consumer platform.
- Keep it local, low-waste, electricity-free, and economically viable.

This wasn't just cultural conservation. **This was climate action. This was women's empowerment. This was a blueprint for sustainable rural development.**

## **Empowering Women Through the Loom**

From the outset, Kadike's approach was inclusive and human-centered. They identified master weavers who still held traditional knowledge and began training a new generation—especially young people—by showing them the craft's creative and economic value. The approach was distinct: fair wages, flexible hours, and autonomy for artisans. Unlike many other weaving clusters where wages are meagre and autonomy is limited, Kadike offers **higher remuneration**, a platform for creative expression, and a respected, financially viable career.

Over **80% of the artisans trained and employed by Kadike today are women**, many of whom had never worked outside their homes. With skill training, financial independence, and community support, they're not just earning incomes; they're **gaining agency**.

This grassroots employment model, focused on **skill-building, dignity, and decentralization**, can be easily replicated in other rural areas. It not only preserves culture but also empowers

women. This approach didn't just bring income into homes—it brought **autonomy, confidence, and cultural pride** back into the lives of rural women.

Through Kadike, the women artisans receive:

- Flexible, dignified work close to home
- Fair wages that exceed those in many government-run weaving centers
- Training in both hand-weaving and natural dyeing techniques
- Access to a support system that values them as artists and as individuals

### **A Climate-Conscious Craft**

Kadike Trust's revival is deeply entwined with environmental consciousness. In an era where **the fashion industry is the second-largest global polluter**,<sup>ii</sup> Kadike is proving that tradition can lead the way to a cleaner future.

Their sarees are:

- **Woven entirely by hand**, using no electricity
- Made with **locally sourced, biodegradable cotton**
- Dyed using **plant-based colors** from turmeric, indigo, madder, and pomegranate.
- **Low-waste** in design and production

One of their most important innovations has been **the reintroduction and modernization of natural dyeing techniques**. These methods, once common in Indian villages, had nearly disappeared under the weight of chemical alternatives. Kadike not only brought them back—they made them scalable and safe for today's weavers. They made the process viable by standardizing recipes for natural dyes, using locally available plant materials. This helped the dyers to adopt these techniques with confidence. Unlike the chemical contemporaries, which are hazardous and toxic, natural dyeing eliminates these issues, removing health risks for the artisans and the ecology alike.

### **Turning the GI Tag into a Tool, Not a Trophy**

Though the Udupi saree had received its Geographical Indication (GI)<sup>iii</sup> tag long ago in 2016, it remained largely symbolic—a formal recognition with little real-world impact. A GI tag is a special label given to products that come from a specific region and possess unique qualities tied to that place. It helps protect traditional knowledge, prevents imitation, and supports local artisans by enhancing the product's authenticity and value. However, many local weavers didn't know how to benefit from it. Kadike stepped in to **educate and guide local weaving societies**, helping them secure **official user authorization**, a crucial step in protecting both the product and the producer. It bridged this critical gap between the weavers and the market by enabling local artisans to legally produce, label, and market their products as authentic Udupi weaves. This was a turning point. It gave artisans **legal protection, regional identity, and increased market credibility**, empowering them to reclaim ownership of their heritage.

## **Why It Matters More Than Ever**

In a world rapidly waking up to the impacts of climate change, deforestation, and pollution, Kadike Trust's work offers a quiet yet powerful answer: **tradition doesn't have to be a relic—it can be a solution.**

The environmental impact of today's fashion industry is staggering. Synthetic dyes poison rivers, textile mills consume staggering amounts of electricity and water, and fast fashion churns out clothing destined to become waste long before its time. The environmental cost is immense, and the need for change is urgent.

That's where Kadike's model stands apart.

With the reintroduction of natural dyed techniques, Kadike-trained artisans use completely **safe plant-based dyes**, which eliminate chemical runoff, reduce water usage, and bring back the vibrant colours of tradition in a way that is safe for both people and the planet.

Today, their philosophy is simple yet revolutionary: tradition and sustainability must go hand in hand. The Kadike Trust is deeply aware of the climate crisis—not as a distant theory, but as a daily concern that shapes every decision they make. They don't just talk about sustainability—they live it, weaving it into every thread, every saree, and every training session. Their revival efforts aren't just cultural—they are **ecological acts of resistance and renewal.**

## **Kadike Handmade: A Platform for Stories, Not Just Sales**

To sustain the ecosystem, Kadike launched **Kadike Handmade**, a direct-to-consumer platform that connects conscious buyers with authentic, handmade Udupi sarees. A sales and outreach wing that not only bypasses middlemen but creates a storytelling platform.

Through digital storytelling on Instagram, WhatsApp, and community events, Kadike Handmade sells:

- Handwoven, naturally dyed sarees
- Custom orders
- Artisan-led workshops
- Ethical fashion pop-ups and exhibitions

Each purchase contributes directly to the artisans' livelihoods and to sustaining the ecosystem that surrounds the craft.

## **The Experience Center: A Prototype for Rural Innovation**

Kadike's next step is the ambitious and transformative "**The Experience Center**", a vibrant, multifunctional space located at the very heart of the weaving community.

Once completed, the Experience Center will:

- Offer **hands-on training** in weaving and natural dyeing.
- Host **cultural storytelling events and exhibitions.**
- Serve as a **community gathering space.**
- Operate as a rural model for climate-conscious entrepreneurship.
- Function as a permanent exhibition and sales space.

Funds are currently being raised for:

- Installing handlooms and dyeing units.
- Procuring high-quality raw materials.
- Building storage, classrooms, and display areas.
- Furnishing the space for community use and exhibitions.

Importantly, **100% of the profits from Kadike Handmade are reinvested into the weaving ecosystem.** This means the money goes directly back to support the artisans, improve infrastructure, train new weavers, and source sustainable materials, rather than being diverted to middlemen or external stakeholders. By keeping the entire value chain within the community, Kadike ensures that the project remains self-sustaining, community-owned, and impact-driven. It empowers weavers to take charge of their craft and livelihoods, strengthens traditional skills, and creates a model where growth benefits everyone involved, not just a few.

### **A Blueprint for Replication**

What makes Kadike Trust's model powerful is its **scalability.** It offers a **replicable model** for dozens of other crafts at risk across India.

The revival roadmap—**identify, empower, train, and connect**—can be applied to countless other crafts facing extinction across India.

Their revival blueprint is simple but powerful:

- **Identify** endangered art forms
- **Reconnect** with artisan communities
- **Train** new generations
- **Innovate** with eco-friendly methods
- **Build direct market linkages**
- **Empower women** as cultural and economic leaders

What makes it special?

- No electricity is used in weaving
- 100% natural dyeing processes
- Locally sourced cotton
- Direct sales, avoiding middlemen
- No middlemen, no greenwashing
- A lean, low-overhead operation focused on equity and ecology

Their model proves:

- Heritage **can** be economically viable
- Ecological methods **can** be commercially sustainable
- Traditional knowledge **can** build future resilience
- Local economies **can** thrive and flourish

This isn't just preservation—it's **climate action through culture**. By combining **natural, local materials, zero-electricity production**, and a **direct-to-consumer** model, Kadike is making sure that sustainability isn't just a buzzword—it's the foundation of everything they do.

### **Sustainability Isn't Just a Trend, it's a Way of Life**

Kadike Trust refuses to accept corporate partnerships that conflict with its values. Their financial model is lean, self-sustaining, and mission-aligned:

- Revenue comes from saree sales, custom orders, and hands-on workshops
- Overhead is kept low through community partnerships
- Artisans are paid fair wages and offered ongoing training
- Workshops and products emphasize zero-waste production
- Natural dyeing units avoid chemical runoff entirely

Their upcoming Experience Center is not just a cultural institution—it's a **prototype for rural innovation**, showing how tradition, ecology, and livelihood can come together.

### **Vision for the Next 3–5 Years**

- Train **100+ new weavers**, focusing on women and youth.
- Fully operationalize the **Experience Center**.
- Expand **Kadike Handmade** into new eco-conscious markets.
- Build a **recognized, community-led brand** that is proudly local and globally respected.
- Inspire more rural youth to see **craft as a meaningful livelihood**.

## Kadike Isn't Just Reviving a Fabric—They're Reimagining the Future

As synthetic fabrics choke rivers and landfills, and fast fashion fuels climate collapse, Kadike stands as a reminder: **the answers may not lie in high-tech labs—they may be in the looms of our villages.**

Their model shows that **sustainability is not a luxury—it's the only way forward.** Tradition, if revived thoughtfully, can create climate solutions. Culture, if treated with respect, can build careers. And women, if empowered, can carry entire ecosystems forward.



Image Credit: [www.kadiketrust.org](http://www.kadiketrust.org)

As Mamatha Rai says,

*“We don't just want to save a weave; we want to build a way of life that's beautiful, responsible, and rooted in who we are.”*

So, the next time you drape a saree or choose what to wear, ask yourself:

Does it tell a story?

Does it support a community?

Does it tread lightly on the Earth?

If the answer is “yes,” you're already part of the change Kadike Trust is weaving.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup>[www.kadiketrust.org](http://www.kadiketrust.org) or as spoken with Mamatha Rai

<sup>ii</sup>UN Environment Programme 2019 or  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340635670\\_The\\_environmental\\_price\\_of\\_fast\\_fashion](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340635670_The_environmental_price_of_fast_fashion)

<sup>iii</sup><https://www.nabard.org/gi/GIPProductDetails.aspx?Id=70> or [www.nabard.org](http://www.nabard.org)