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GREEN IS IN FOR BABIES TOO!

Bindu Gopal Rao explores a new segment in the fashion industry — organic kids' wear.

If there is one word that is fast changing the dynamics of the world it has to be 'organic'. After food, the next big idea in the organic world is clothing, and a segment where it is making significant inroads is in the children's space. Planet-conscious parents who seek the best for their children, are today, increasingly opting for organic clothing.

DEMYSTIFYING ORGANIC KIDS' WEAR

Well, simply said, organic clothing refers to apparel made of organic cotton grown without the use of chemical pesticides or fertilisers. This is then dyed using safe chemicals as per the REACH Law of the European Commission with the designs provided by the company's European collaborators. Even in the manufacturing process, the clothes are not subjected to dyes or bleaches, nor are they sprayed with formaldehyde to



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preserve their 'fresh look' before shipping. Since this kind of clothing is manufactured without the use of toxic chemicals that may harm the baby's soft skin, they are becoming a preferred choice. Terminologies like 'hand spun', 'hand woven', 'coloured with natural dyes' and 'brought to the customer directly from producers' (without middlemen), are gaining momentum in this day and age. Again, it is wrong to assume that natural cotton is organic cotton. "When you see cotton products labelled as 'natural', you are getting conventional cotton grown with large inputs of chemicals, pesticides, and herbicides to control weed growth. The only difference between natural and conventional cotton is in the processing, i.e., the natural product is not supposed to be treated with formaldehyde/chlorine bleach and could be dyed using natural dyes. By contrast, organic cotton comes with certification and by being grown on land that is chemical-free, for at least three years, it meets the stringent requirements for operations, prohibiting use of chemicals, pesticides, herbicides; and adheres to organic standards that nurture the soil and the animals," explains Arati T Nagaraja, Managing Director, Zeme Organics Pvt. Ltd.

THE CASE FOR ORGANIC CLOTHING

Used over a period of time, the chemicals used in conventional cotton clothing stick to the skin of a baby. The demand for organic clothing, made from non-allergic, eco-friendly and durable organic cotton, for children, is on the rise due

to an increase in health and environmental awareness. The popularity of organic kids' wear is high in Europe, the US, UK and Japan, and is gaining ground in the country as it is relatively unaffected by the recession which has hit the developed markets. In fact, in Europe, organic cotton wear occupies one third of the market for kids' wear. However, in India, it is quite negligible, which also means that the potential is huge. Incidentally, India is the largest producer of organic cotton in the world after overtaking Turkey and accounts for almost 51 per cent of the global organic cotton production. Organic cotton causes less soil and water contamination and preserves and promotes bio-diversity and soil fertility. The health hazards to farmers growing organic cotton are far fewer. A majority of organic cotton produced in India is processed in the country and is exported only as textile. "We are observing a spike in searches on BabyChakra for organic diapers, swaddles, newborn wear and in-hospital maternity clothing. There is high awareness and inquiries on not just the cloth but also the colours and the method of processing being used," says Naiyya Saggi, CEO and Co-Founder, BabyChakra.com.

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PRODUCT PROFILES

Organic baby clothing is made of natural fibres, which are made without the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and are dyed using organic colours. There are not too many options available in the Indian market as yet. “Kidology was one of the first brands to introduce a range of bamboo and organic cotton baby clothing. We decided to use these materials as they are soft, non-abrasive and free of harsh chemicals and toxins which can either irritate their delicate skin, cause allergies or even asthma in little babies. Moreover, bamboo is also naturally UV-resistant and acts as a natural disinfectant, protecting the little ones from the sun, rashes and germs. It also naturally acts as an insulator in the cold and absorbs sweat quickly in the heat,” explains Karina Rajpal, Co-Founder, Kidology. The brand Love The World Today, a recent entrant in the sustainable clothing space for children, makes clothes for girls which includes tops, skirts, dresses as well as accessories (brooches and rubber bands made of organic cotton fabric), and shirts for boys.

WHY THIS POPULARITY?

As awareness is increasing, some young parents are seeking out quality organic clothing and bedding for their babies. “Currently, the trend to go organic is more for newborns and babies and is not so much prevalent for older kids. As parents understand the benefits of these materials, hopefully, there will be a bigger shift towards such products and more retailers will

offer organic options,” says Rajpal. In India, organic baby clothing is at a very nascent stage. There are a couple of brands available online. However, most are restricted to clothing for infants, swaddles and rompers or knits for most age groups. “Also, now the market here needs to be handheld and educated about the benefits of switching to organic wear. The benefits of wearing organic clothing needs to be understood both ways—why organic for children, as well as, why organic for the environment? Also, organic clothing does have a premium price tag attached to it, given the processes that go into creating organic clothing from end to end. It seems to be taking off slowly and steadily. People are becoming aware of the environmental abuse we are causing. There is obviously no way we can undo the damage. But these little choices we make can help in a big way,” say Dipna Daryanani and Dipti Ahuja, Co-founders, Love The World Today.

THE CHALLENGES FACED

Higher cost of materials compared to synthetic fibres is the biggest challenge. Consumers who understand the benefits are more inclined to purchase organic clothing for their little ones, however, due to higher pricing organic clothing is still not within the reach for all income segments. “Another challenge is that companies are falsely labelling their products as ‘organic’ since we currently do not have certifying agencies that are actively involved in ensuring the authenticity of a manufacturer’s claims,” says Rajpal. According to Nagaraja, “The main challenge is the cost of the product and funding.” Most organic brands are new in the market and they do not have sufficient funds. Venture Capital companies do not support organic clothing brands. To market the product and create awareness, brands lack funds, hence, sales are low. “Organic clothing comes with a notion of being expensive, which is true in a way. Organic cotton can cost anywhere between two to three times the price of conventional cotton. Switching to organic clothing involves a mindset change, a lifestyle change, which is the biggest challenge in itself,” say Daryanani and Ahuja.

As per an ASSOCHAM survey, the retail market has seen an increase in the production of organic clothes. By 2015, the kids’ wear market in India is set to increase to ₹30,000 crore, with organic apparel having a significant contribution. Growing at a CAGR of 15-20 per cent year-on-year, the lucrative mother and child care market in India has gained great exposure amongst organised and unorganised players. With India being home to about 50 million babies in the 0-2 years age group and 304.8 million children in the 0-12 years age group, the country offers immense opportunities to the segment players to tap this growing market, according to a report of RNCOS, an industry research and consultancy firm. The baby care market in India is expected to grow significantly at a CAGR of around 17 per cent in terms of revenue in the years 2014-2019. According to market estimates, the organised baby wear market in India is estimated at around ₹35,000-₹40,000 crore currently, while the overall global organic clothing market is estimated to hit US\$ 18 billion worldwide, the market size of organic baby clothing is very small in India. “However, there are more well-travelled young parents who value and look for organic products for their children and are exposed to brands like The Honest Company and Whole Foods in their travels. This is why we expect the potential to be niche over the next three years. But, high repeat value and the loyalty of consumers will be able to increase this customer base,” opines Saggi. ■

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