

ORGANIC COTTON

With the recent developments in the cotton trade, **Bindu Gopal Rao** examines the fibre's changing role in the textile sector.

@Rajdeep Ranawat

As a fabric that is natural, ecologically sensitive, cool and omnipresent, cotton wins hands down. Cotton is the backbone of the textile industry. In the wake of the environment-friendly wave, organic cotton is changing the way eco-friendly fabrics are being woven. India is one of the biggest suppliers of organic cotton. The country needs to recognize its own traditionally-grown rain-fed cotton which follows organic practices, which is languishing without certifications. This potential needs to be addressed to support thousands of poor cotton farmers. For the uninitiated—organic cotton is grown using methods and materials that have a low impact on the environment. Third-party certification organizations verify that organic producers use only methods and materials allowed in organic production. Organic cotton is grown without the use of toxic and persistent pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. In addition, federal regulations prohibit the use of genetically engineered seed for organic farming.



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COTTON COUNTS

Cotton accounts for more than 70% of the total fibre consumption in the textile sector and more than 35% of the country's exports. Cotton also represents around 35 per cent of the total textile market. China, India and USA grow almost two-thirds of the world's cotton. Organic cotton production is a promising option, especially when it comes to reducing greenhouse emissions, improving soil fertility and biodiversity, and water conservation. Organic Cotton production, therefore, offers an opportunity for environmental protection. Organic Cotton Production has rapidly developed world wide during the last few years and is increasingly finding favour among clothing manufacturers with a green thumb. Organic cotton can be the most commonly fetched fabric for any comfort loving person. According to Designer Lalit Dalmia, Director & Senior Designer, "As far as the industry is faring, it is going ahead at a good pace and it can globally become the most comfortable fabric for all age groups. The new aspects known to me would be the wash and wear prodigy, which would probably save a lot of time for the busy office goers and people with laid back routine. I have travelled the globe and have seen a huge requirement of organic cotton in Asian countries and European countries." As a fabric that works in all seasons, cotton is the most effective. "Organic cottons are the purest forms of cottons as no chemical fertilisers or anything close to manmade materials is used to create the end product for consumers. With the concern for global warming, we would see the growth of breathable organic cottons grow considerably since the chemicals are affecting the earth's atmosphere," says Designer Rajdeep Ranawat. Wearing organic clothing is important, not only for the environment but also



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ORGANIC COTTON SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AS A FABRIC FROM THE SUSTAINABLE LUXE CATEGORY OF FABRICS.

for our health. It is free of all the harmful chemicals that are added to conventional clothing, not to mention the pesticides and chemical fertilizers in the fibre. Apparel companies are developing programs that either use 100 per cent organically grown cotton, or blend small percentages of organic cotton with conventional cotton in their regular range of products.

DO THE NEW

From daily wear, to formal and sleepwear apart from resort and cruise wear, organic cottons are the preferred fabrics for the ones who believe in a sustainable form of living and support a greener earth. "The market for organic cottons has been slowing down with the result of the dip in the economy, the influx of cheaper and readily available materials like polyester and viscose being available and more affordable," says Ranawat. The pros of cotton is that it is a breathable fabric that is soft and comfortable whereas the con is that not many industries support organic cottons as the production turnaround is lesser and slower apart from being a tad bit more expensive than the regular cottons.



@Suneta Narayana

Organic cotton should be considered as a fabric from the sustainable luxe category of fabrics. This will educate the consumer about this kind of fabric and induce more respect for the earth and aim for a better standard of living in the near future.

MARKET IMPETUS

Demand for organic cotton is constantly rising, since more and more buyers are looking for high

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ACCORDING TO THE 2008 ORGANIC EXCHANGE MARKET REPORT, GLOBAL RETAIL SALES OF ORGANIC COTTON PRODUCTS REACHED UP TO 63 PER CENT.

quality cotton that is produced according to strict environmental and social standards. An organic certificate gives organic cotton farmers access to this dynamic market, thus reducing their dependency on the fluctuating world market for conventional cotton and allowing them to get a better price for their product. "Consumers the world over are increasingly becoming both environment and health conscious. Developing concern for protecting ecology and preventing global warming, especially in the western countries, is boosting the demand for organic

and eco-friendly products across all categories. Textile is no exception to this global trend. India is today the largest producer of organic cotton in the world with a production of 15,000 tons but still has a huge opportunity to grow," says Karma Bhutia, Founder & CEO, iShippo. The market for organic cotton clothing continues to pick up pace as more and more people are becoming aware and conscious of the benefits of wearing organic cotton. "This emerging breed of conscious shoppers is snowballing especially through social media. There is still a long way to go for the market to provide more options to choose from in the organic section, but I believe the market for this is growing rapidly," says Designer Sunieta Narayana. Some of the challenges are of course finding legit fair-trade organic cotton suppliers and of course price-points.

NUMBERS & MORE

The organic cotton market is very dynamic. According to the 2008 Organic Exchange market report, global retail sales of organic cotton products reached up to 63 per cent. This shows that, in contrast to the fairly saturated market for conventional cotton, there is great potential for companies investing in organic cotton. "The concept of 'organic cotton' is successfully being marketed to brands and retailers in the fashion industry as being part of their policies for CSR. The new involvement of large brands

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INVOLVEMENT OF LARGE FASHION BRANDS AND RETAILERS IN ORGANIC COTTON USE GENERATES MUCH ATTENTION FROM OTHER PARTS OF THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY, DESIGNERS AND THE MEDIA.

and retailers increases the number of points of sale exponentially, making organic cotton items available to consumers at the usual points of purchase for textiles and clothing. Organic cotton items are increasingly found in regular sale channels such as high-street fashion shops, department stores, and supermarkets,” says Karma. The involvement of large fashion brands and retailers in organic cotton use generates much attention from other parts of the textile industry, designers and the media. This further strengthens consumers’ interest in organic cotton textiles and clothing, and their willingness to purchase.

ODDS & EVENS

In organic production systems, farming input costs are considerably lower, since most of the inputs are produced from local resources at farm level (compost, manure, natural pesticides). An enhanced crop rotation provides farmer families with a range of different food crops, thus improving their food security and reducing their dependency on the cotton market. “At the same time, the risk of crop

failure through unfavourable climatic conditions or pest infestation is considerably reduced due to crop diversification and the cultivation of well-adapted species. Moreover, organic cotton provides extra income thanks to the organic premium. Farmers, traders, retailers and consumers all benefit from the economic, social and ecological advantages of organic cotton projects. Organic cotton is not only cheaper to produce, but it also prevents soil damage, as is caused by the modern synthetic fertilisers and pesticides,” says Karma. However organic cotton is not without challenges. The lack of abundant non-GMO seed is one of the most pressing issues with organic cotton, today. Shortage of organic cotton supply needs to be addressed through improved communication and connections across the supply chain. Better market access for organic farmers in all regions to strengthen sourcing efforts so that organic cotton can come from more areas of the world. It is time that these concerns are addressed at a macro level to ensure that the benefits of organic cotton are seen at the micro level. ■