



## FASHION GETS A GREEN MAKEOVER!

New age fashion designers and brands are going the sustainable way, keeping in mind the ecological considerations. **Bindu Gopal Rao** explores.

As the world becomes more sensitive to the environment, apparel manufacturers are turning over a green leaf quite literally. Sustainability is a key driver that has ensured that the apparel sector is making this shift. Hand-woven fabrics and apparel are eco-friendly by nature because the spools of thread are woven into the cloth using hand-operated looms (hence handloom), and in handloom apparel, predominantly natural dyes and pigments are used. Also, all khadi garments (saris, salwars, kurtas, material) are not only hand-woven but the threads are also hand-spun from yarns (cotton, silk or linen), so they have a near zero carbon footprint.



**GOING GREEN**

Synthetic fibres such as polyester take a minimum of 20 years (in the most conducive conditions) and mostly up to 200 years to degenerate. Cotton, on the other hand, can biodegrade in one to five months if not blended with polyester. Linen can biodegrade in less than a month given the right conditions, making natural fabrics the right choice for people. Prashanti Alagappa, Founder and Director, Indian Dobby, explains, "Eco-friendly fabrics have different meanings in different parts of the world. For Europe and Japan, which import most (over 80 per cent) of the cotton yarn and fabrics, it is about producing synthetic and man-made fibres in a sustainable manner—like cupro which is made from the fibres left on cottonseed after ginning—or making various fabrics from industrial, plastic or fibre/fabric wastes. But for India with its abundance of cotton availability (being the second largest producer in the world), it is about using eco-friendly natural dyes or producing the fibre/yarn/fabric in a manner which uses the least polluting resources. In this respect, India has been centuries ahead of the world with khadi, handloom and naturally dyed fabrics. New innovations revolve mostly around design sensibilities." Nupur Saxena, Creative Head of House of Primes exclusively available at The Open Trunk, avers, "With the value of the global fashion industry touching US\$3 trillion, an estimated annual consumption of 80 billion pieces of clothing globally, the clothing industry is the second largest polluter in the world. Chemicals from the dyes are polluting fresh water; tonnes

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and tonnes of textile waste from mass production and large quantities of discarded synthetic clothing which are the result of the same supply chain are covering up the landfills. Hence, it is high time we take responsibility of our actions and foresee the repercussions of the choices we make today, over the long run. The pioneers and followers of this cause have just one end goal in mind: to leave this planet in a better shape/condition than we received it in so that the future generations can enjoy the bounty it has to offer."



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RECYCLING OF GOOD QUALITY USED APPAREL IS A NEW TREND ABROAD WHICH IS SLOWLY CATCHING ON IN INDIA.



**CONTEMPORARY CUES**

The current trend is a recent shift towards being organic and healthy. For apparel, that would mean fabrics derived from nature or eco-friendly fabrics. People today are looking for new silhouettes. They are looking for new and trendy cuts, asymmetrical cuts, western cuts, European cuts, etc. Variations in draping are also admired. Backless dresses, knots, soft gathers are also in vogue. Khadi has been used in different ways by the new age designers. They are either using the eco-friendly fabrics in their original styles, like jackets and kurtas, or have adopted a modern take on the same by incorporating them in accessories, dresses and everyday western wear. Jawahar Singh, Co-founder, *Avishya.com* says, "Recycling of good quality used apparel is a new trend abroad which is slowly catching on in India.



If manufacturers back a constructive process for recycling by consumers, it will do a world of good for the environment. Our handcrafting traditions also have an upcycling history. *Kantha* embroidery was traditionally done to give fresh life to used fabric. Designers can build on this to create apparel with contemporary appeal." While most eco-friendly apparel was mostly being designed in the casual wear space, a few labels are experimenting with such fabrics for formal wear as well. With the advancement of modern technology and corresponding developments, there have been simultaneous launches in the eco-friendly fabrics range.

**MATERIALLY SPEAKING**

There is certainly more focus on eco-friendly fabrics the world over, from organic cotton to using fibres which require more controlled usage of chemicals to using lesser water and other natural resources like firewood in the processing to recycled and upcycled fabrics and many more which use technology. Organic materials like bamboo fabric, lotus fabric, hemp fabric, soy fabric, linen, jute silk and ahimsa silk are some of the latest materials being used to make eco-friendly fabrics. Fibres from banana and eucalyptus (known as Lyocell or Tencel) plants and yarns derived from milk proteins and soy proteins are being worked on to arrive at textures like silk and cashmere. An upcoming designer from Manipur, Thanrei Raising, Founder and Creative Head of Thanrei Raising Haute Couture says, "My journey of sustainable fabrics started when I launched an eco-friendly ready-to-wear line collaborating with the sustainable concept store Ethic Attic by Fair Konnect. We use more linen fabrics as this is one of the most biodegradable and stylish fabrics in the fashion industry, known for its natural and classy colours, with high resistance temperature and moisture absorption without holding bacteria."



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**WALLET MATTERS**

Eco-friendly fabrics come in a variety of price points. "It is not very costly to manufacture these natural fabrics, though I wouldn't go so far as to say that it's cheap to produce a durable product of a really good quality. Kovet makes it a priority to focus on both of these issues of critical importance," says Prarthana Kochhar, Founder, Kovet. Mandira Bansal, Proprietor, WeaveinIndia says, "Challenges are definitely related to costs. As of the moment, there is only a niche audience that is ready to go ahead with apparel of eco-friendly origin and its costs. The Indian market has, on the whole, been welcome to newer sustainable fashion. We could see more developments on this front in the time to come." Eco-friendly and sustainable fashion products are more expensive to produce. "The people making the apparel receive fair wages and work in safe, healthy environments (in the case of handloom weavers, usually their own homes) as opposed



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to sweatshops. Because they predominantly use natural materials and dyes, the input cost is much higher. Also, they are currently made in small quantities based on the actual demand or made to order. This will change when more people adopt slow fashion," says Singh.

**CHALLENGE FACTOR**

A big drawback of natural fabrics with natural dyes is the poor colour fastness which is an inherent property of natural dyes. "A large chunk of the population still compares this with the colour fastness of synthetic fabrics and labels the natural dye products as poor in quality. Another big challenge is that a lot of the population looks towards the West for its fashion influences. Most international clothing brands are majorly skewed towards synthetic and man-made fabrics," adds Alagappa. Sangita Kathiwada, Founder, Mélange says, "India is one of the greatest consumers of khadi and cotton. In recent years, it is heartening to know that designers have gone back to the roots of our culture and redefined natural fibres with their identities, making it a viable option for consumers. I believe that the biggest challenge for natural fabrics is the constant increase of supply and consumerism. The low cost and large availability of these synthetic fabrics threatens the use of natural fabrics. Everything is in excess, and this mindless materialism could be the catalyst for destroying planet Earth." Vijayalakshmi Nachiar, Co-Founder, Ethicus, concludes, "People need to become aware. Once there is awareness, change is easy. The main challenge is awareness-building. We have to focus our energies on creating consumer awareness. Availability of such natural products needs to increase. Once people make the change, they have to have enough products to choose from. We believe that each one of us needs to play a part. Change happens because of the actions of us all." So are you ready to make a green shift as far as your apparel is concerned? Think about it—what is good for the environment is also good for you. ■



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