

## **Indian Fashion: The Evolving Conversation On Diversity And Inclusion**

*Author: Bisman Kaur, Of Counsel, Remfry & Sagar*

India writes in over a hundred languages (22 are recognised as major languages) and speaks in many more voices (dialects). It is home to over 700 different tribes, every major religion in the world, a supreme variety in cuisines and crafts, to some of the world's largest cities and also remote regions with almost no people. In these ways, India is an exemplar of diversity, which is strongly manifest in its indigenous arts and fashion. But gaps do exist, which the current global focus on diversity and inclusion (D&I) serves to highlight. This article looks through the prism of fashion to explore facets of the current D&I conversation in India.

### **Diversity And Couture**

Does fashion promote body stereotypes? It's hard to deny that most fashion shows, fashion advertising and catalogues feature thin, statuesque models. It wasn't always so. There are archaeological records of Venus figurines – such as the 'Venus of Willendorf' from the late Stone Age – which suggest that between ten and 100,000 years ago, the ideal female figure was robust and round. This continued until the 19th century with artists like Botticelli, Titian, Rembrandt, and Rubens portraying the ideal woman as voluptuous. Closer home, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Raja Ravi Verma - considered amongst the greatest painters in the history of Indian art – depicted Indian women as they truly looked. However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a more homogenised vision of beauty took hold that promoted a 'slender woman' as an ideal type. The 21st century has refreshingly brought a shift towards celebrating diverse body types in the media and in fashion – a trend that appears to correlate with the use of social media, where diverse types are represented by online users.

Take the example of celebrated Indian couturier Sabyasachi Mukherjee. After gradually promoting plus-size models in his campaigns, he shone the spotlight prominently on size inclusivity in his spring/summer 2020 collection campaign by including several plus-size models in his campaign. The support on social media was tremendous and reflects a wider movement to realign businesses with social objectives. Consider also the FDCI X Lakmé Fashion Week 2022 where several leading Indian designers – Manish Malhotra, Shantanu & Nikhil, Tarun Tahiliani etc. – featured women models that were a far cry from the thin stereotype.

Though questions continue to be asked on whether such developments are mere tokenism, it makes business sense to depart from convention. According to Statista (a German market and consumer data company), the plus-size segment, who wear beyond sizes 0-12, constitutes about half of the total consumers in India. In 2019, the category was projected to grow at 25 per cent per annum, with a 12 per cent share of the overall fashion market. However, there is no 'Indian' size chart and in its absence, most designers continue to look to EU, UK or US measurements for cues, which often do not work for Indian body proportions. The Ministry of Textiles is working with the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) on the 'INDIAsize' project to develop standard body sizes for apparel, but the project is yet to bear fruition. Until the fashion industry devises and implements modalities to cater effectively to diversity among its consumer base, lost opportunities for broadening brand appeal, and expanding profits, will remain.

Another aspect which bears mention is that, so far, the discussions around deconstructing ideal body stereotypes still focus very strongly on women - the narrative must evolve to include male and other body stereotypes and span the entire spectrum of gender.

### **Inclusion: India's Fashion Moment**

When it comes to talking points, Mumbai was the heart of fashion buzz recently. The city's iconic Gateway of India served as a backdrop to a landmark runway show on March 31, 2023, when Dior presented its Pre-Fall 2023 collection on a marigold and diya (lamp) bedecked runway. Models were seen in clothes featuring Madras check and Benarasi brocade fabrics, mirror work, tie dye detailing, Nehru collars and kurta tailoring. Also in the limelight was Mumbai Atelier Chanakya International that Dior's creative director, Maria Grazia Chiuri, has worked closely with for nearly three decades, and which was responsible for many of the embroideries and textiles seen on the runway. Previously, Dior Couture's Spring/Summer 2022 presentation featured a specially commissioned 3,600-square-foot tapestry backdrop based on the work of two prominent Indian artists, Madhvi and Manu Parekh. The entire textile was embroidered (it took 2,00,000 hours) at the Chanakya School of Craft, a non-profit institute run by Chanakya International, and staffed by communities of female textile workers, and prominently credited as such.

The textile connection between France and India is hardly new - the French courts of Marie Antoinette and Joséphine Bonaparte sourced fabrics from India, although, at that point in time, French tailors received the credit for the garments. On the flip side, valuable patronage by famous global patrons has aided the preservation of many Indian traditions over the years.

In fact, the earliest surviving Indian cotton threads are documented as far back as 4000 BC and dyed fabrics from the region date back to 2500 BC. In ancient Greece and Babylon, the very name 'India' was shorthand for 'cotton' - so central have textiles been to India's identity abroad. Textile makers in the country use an astonishing range of skills to process raw materials and produce regionally distinctive dyes, weaves, prints and embroideries (batiks, brocades, ikats, kantha, pashmina, to name a few) that have long driven global trade systems. The hand-making of cloth continues to shape Indian trade today - the country is the second largest textile and clothing exporter in the world (total exports touched US\$ 44.4 billion in FY2021-22). The textile and apparel industry is also the second-highest employer in India with women constituting 60% of the 45 million workforce. Hand embroidery is an important specialist subsector and since the 1980s, luxury brands have been outsourcing much of their embroidery work to India. By some estimates, nearly 90 per cent of all hand embroidery in Paris Couture Week comes from India.

Yet, as mentioned earlier, India's role in shaping global aesthetics and fashion has not always received its due. In what is a fascinating development, an exhibition titled '*India in Fashion: The Impact of Indian Dress and Textiles on the Fashionable Imagination*' has been launched at the newly inaugurated Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre in Mumbai, that aims to capture India's relationship and influence on fashion and style from the 18th century to present day. Starting from the work of the House of Worth, one of the foremost fashion houses of the 19th and early 20th centuries, to the innovative patterns of Spanish couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga, the narrative also explores Indian influence and contribution to the works of Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, Alexander McQueen, Dries van Noten and many others including Yves Saint Laurent whose entire collections drew from the vibrancy of India. Several pieces that feature here are on loan from The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Also showcased

are specially commissioned pieces from veteran Indian designers including Abu Jani, Sandeep Khosla, Anamika Khanna, Anuradha Vakil and Manish Malhotra and works from the archives of Ritu Kumar, Tarun Tahiliani, Sanjay Garg of Raw Mango, Rahul Mishra and Sabyasachi Mukherjee.

This exhibition is a powerful adjustment of the lens through which Indian influence on global fashion is sometimes seen. It is also reflective of the broader evolution in the fashion industry across the world to become a more diverse space.

It would not be amiss to mention here a French regulation that took effect on January 1, 2023, making it mandatory for fashion's biggest companies to give shoppers detailed information about environmental characteristics like the proportion of recycled material in a product, as well as where garments are sewn, and materials woven. Though the focus of this regulation might be ethical and transparent business practices, it is bound to have a positive bearing on the global conversation surrounding diversity in textiles and fashion as well.

### **A Synergistic Blend**

A compelling study in diversity, inclusion and fashion also comes from Jaisalmer, a desert town in Rajasthan, which houses the 'Gyaan Centre'. This is a campus that includes an award-winning girls' school (Rajkumari Ratnavati Girl's School) designed by renowned New York architect Diana Kellogg, a women's cooperative building for local enterprise, and a library facility that also houses a textile museum and performance space. It has been conceived by US based non-profit CITTA with the aim to harness the energy of art, education, and culture to help end poverty and increase gender parity. To lend context, in rural Jaisalmer, girls are culturally and economically disadvantaged when it comes to receiving an education. The Gyaan Centre aims to become a foundation where girls and women use education and training in local crafts such as 'ajrakh' to thrive in an environment that protects and celebrates the vibrant local culture. Uniforms for the Rajkumari Ratnavati Girl's School have been designed by Sabyasachi Mukherjee and, fittingly, feature an 'ajrakh' print. 'Ajrakh' is a unique form of woodblock printing from the Thar and Sindh, with anything between nine to 21 stages of printing and dyeing, that dates back to the Harappa civilisation of the Indus valley.

### **What More Can Be Done**

India is making significant progress when it comes to D&I, but it does not have a specific anti-discrimination legislation in place. This is an area that needs attention from policy makers and the government alike. And though discrimination – arising from body size, age, skin colour or gender - can be addressed through Constitutional guarantees, these can be invoked against the state, but not private parties. To elaborate, Article 14 of the Constitution of India guarantees the right to equality and Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on certain protected characteristics, including race, religion, and sex. Further, Article 21 of the Constitution of India guarantees the right to life and liberty, which has been interpreted to include the right to dignity and self-respect. Other statutes such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, The Code on Wages, 2019, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, also include anti-discrimination provisions, which could potentially provide relief. But certainly, more anti-discrimination regulation is required.

Legal remedies aside, given the positive correlation between D&I indices and the financial performance of organisations, the fashion industry must look beyond legislation to create a

ecosystems that are both diverse (where individuals from different backgrounds - religions, gender, sexual orientation or socio-economic – comprise the workforce) and inclusive (where all people are embraced and have equal access and opportunities). Such a workplace is certain to augment brand value and function as a brand differentiator. This is particularly relevant in the context of ‘conscious consumerism’, and in the hyper competitive world of fashion, a truly diverse and inclusive brand is likely to enjoy a significant competitive advantage.

India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru once famously said, “*The history of India may well be written with textile as its leading motif.*” He was referring to the fact that India won her freedom struggle in home-spun and home-woven ‘khadi’ cloth. Recent conversations on diversity and inclusion in the country – which the examples discussed above serve to highlight – are ensuring that textiles (and by extension, fashion) are leading India’s march into the future.