

Sustainable Fashion & India

“Regardless of what your background is, we can all agree on some really basic things—no one should die to make a T-shirt, and we shouldn’t be pouring toxins into our planet.” - —
WHITNEY BAUCK ON GREEN DREAMER PODCAST EPISODE 129

The oldest sacred texts of India, the Vedas, contain several references to environmental protection and ecological balance, indicating that since ancient times, awareness on sustainability has been an Indian way of living. In modern times, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 goals (SDGs) adopted by world leaders in 2015, has seen India take several initiatives to fulfil its commitment to sustainability. The country’s think-tank ‘NITI Aayog’ has been tasked to ensure adoption, monitoring and realisation of the SDGs by states and Union Territories in India. Not just for its own progress, through the India-UN Development Partnership Fund, the country is also supporting other developing nations to fulfil the 2030 agenda as part of its commitment to ‘leave no one behind’.

Whether it be Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment), promoting energy and water saving, reduction of waste, or aiming to reduce single-use plastic, or even a push towards a circular economy optimizing resources, the Country is aiming and taking initiatives to meet sustainable development goals. Since the Textile industry globally is one of the most polluting industries, sustainable techniques while creating Fashion are being considered and adopted. Project SU.RE, which stands for ‘Sustainable Resolution’, is a commitment by India’s apparel industry to set a sustainable pathway for the Indian fashion industry. It was launched by the Textile Ministry together with the Clothing Manufacturers Association of India, United Nations in India and the IMG Reliance. Supporting the intent and global awareness demanding sustainability, Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi during his recent speech at the Parliament, wore a jacket made of fabric produced with recycled pet bottles, subtly indicating sustainable choices as a means to achieving the objectives.

Ethical and sustainable fashion:

When one looks to the heritage and history of Indian textiles and clothing, traces of awareness on sustainability are found from as back as the advent of fashion in the country! Article 21 of the Constitution of India, guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, and has been read by the Supreme Court (the Apex Court) to include right to a clean and healthy environment, and the right to clean water. Statutes such as Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, and the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 are in place to tackle issues emanating viz. the environment, to name a few.

As per a recent study, the Indian sustainable fashion market is expected to reach \$9.81 billion by 2025, highlighting consumer interest and engagement with eco-friendly materials. Often used interchangeably, ethical fashion and sustainable fashion is all about minimising adverse impact on the environment and living beings. Designing and manufacturing clothes in a

manner that cares for people and communities by ensuring minimal negative impact on them and the environment, is on the agenda.

Several designers in India are embracing new and innovative ways to promote sustainability and work in sync with nature. For instance, in a country like India, flowers and herbs offered to worship the deities are considered holy. These flowers go waste the following day and are dumped in rivers/ water bodies in turn polluting them, accounting for one third of the solid waste in the country. According to the figures by the United Nations Climate Change, the river Ganges in India, takes *'more than 8 million metric tonnes of flower waste every year'*. Addressing this problem and giving purpose to such floral waste, designers in India are working with wasted flowers to use them as natural dyes on fabrics. Other entrepreneurs are using them as organic fertilizers, natural incense or even biodegradable packaging material. Floral waste is just one example to highlight the fact that several home grown designers in the country are upcycling and recycling waste to create fashion.

As a land known for its rich cultural heritage and textile traditions, India is home to many textiles with varied fabrics, some going back to ancient age (as early as 5th millennium BC) where handspun cotton was used for weaving garments. Whether it be the famous Indian 'Khadi', a handspun, hand-woven natural fiber cloth, or the beautiful 'Chanderi', a blend of cotton, silk thread and zari, production of which is primarily through traditional looms, or the labour intensive 'PATOLA FABRIC' also known as the 'Queen of Silks', Indian clothing and textiles have historically embraced sustainability as a benchmark. The common traditional clothing 'Saree', known as a nine yard wonder, has been a generational hand-it-down. The quality, prints, fabric of these lasts many generations allowing reuse and recycle of the garment including refurbishing to another creation.

Indian textiles have recycling practises and communities across the country continue to maintain practises to zero down waste through reusing leftover fabrics/ materials in crafts and recreating valued products. For instance, recycled fabrics are used to create accessories such as cushions, bags, footwear, wall hangings to name a few and at some places, to make blankets and rugs. A revival of trend is also seen with use of natural dyes, earlier ignored for chemical dyes. India is also home to 'the global centre for recycling textiles' – Panipat, a city in Haryana, often called as the 'cast-off capital'. Rags of cotton, hosiery, wool are imported at cheaper prices and recycled in the city, converting to yarn used for making handloom products. With several recycling units, India has a huge market for recycling of textiles.

India and Cotton:

As one of the most important crops harvested in India, cotton production in the country accounts for a significant share when compared globally. India is currently the second largest producer of cotton, however, methods of cotton production are considered environmentally unsustainable. One cotton shirt requires 2500 litres of water and research has that India's average water footprint for producing 1 kg cotton is 22,500 litres, as opposed to the global

average of 10,000 litres. As an alternate to severe water consumption, 'organic cotton' or 'preferred cotton' programmes are being adopted. According to the World Wildlife Fund, organic cotton has lesser water footprint when compared to its regular counterpart. As opposed to 2700 litres of water being required to produce enough cotton for a shirt, it reportedly takes only 243 litres of water to produce organic cotton for the same shirt. Per a 2017 report by the Textile Exchange, 91% less 'blue water' is used by organic cotton when compared to conventional cotton.

India has been one of the first countries to adopt the Better Cotton Initiative, which introduced global standards to reduce water footprint of cotton amongst other things. Despite being priced higher than regular cotton, the organic cotton market is growing globally. An interesting report 'Organic Cotton Market, 2021-2028' by Fortuna Business Insights, found that the organic cotton industry is likely to touch USD 6730.9 million by 2028. Statistics from another report in March 2022, revealed that 51% of the worldwide organic cotton production was from India. Per the data released by the Ministry of Textiles in India, production of organic cotton during 2020-21 was 8,10,934 tonnes as compared to 3,35,712 tonnes during 2019-2020. With comparatively reduced footprints, several brands such as H&M, Stella McCartney etc. are working extensively with natural fibre including organic cotton.

Challenges and the way forward:

With a country as diverse, having second highest numbers in terms of population, there are 26,73,891 handloom weavers and 8,48,621 allied workers as per the 4th All India Handloom Census (2019-2020). With much to create with artistic hands, textiles, fabrics, designs and initiatives can be plenty. Some designers are embracing newer techniques that are more environmental friendly. To promote innovation in sustainable fashion, the Fashion Design Council of India, India's apex body of Fashion Design, in partnership with the United Nations in India, launched the Circular Design Challenge in 2018. The winner from the last challenge carved chic designs of scraps of discarded carpets. This is just an example highlighting the initiative to tread a sustainable path, one which may be considered integral to India's culture.

Despite the initiatives, the growth of sustainable fashion is still slow. Not only does it have a small market, the industry is confronted with challenges in the sourcing of sustainable material and supply chain management. Cotton, which is easily available, has a large environmental footprint. Organic cotton on the other hand, is more expensive to come by. Further, growth of slow fashion in India is comparatively behind fast fashion which brings concerns on over production and waste management, including disposal of unsold inventory. This may be due to lack of general awareness on environmental benefits of sustainable fashion and may also be attributed to the fact that sustainable products are priced higher, which at times may be barrier for low income groups. Be that as it may the Designers, the Government and the stakeholders ought to work together on creating a more eco-friendly regime for the apparel community in India. With the right initiatives and effort, it is hoped

that the industry meets it's sustainability goals optimising availability of resources amongst other things.