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Recent trends in sustainable and eco-friendly textile and clothing practices in India

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Abstract

The Earth Charter, an ethical framework for building a just and sustainable global society has based one of its principles on ecological integrity. The principle states “Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguards Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being”. The sub-principle says “Reduce, reuse, and recycle the materials used in production and consumption systems, and ensure that residual waste can be assimilated by ecological systems”. Sustainable and eco-friendly textile and clothing practices adhere to these principles of reduce, reuse and recycle. New words are coined almost daily as designers seek acknowledgment and market interest for their products – upcycled, altered garments, remade, reclaimed fashion, recycled style, etc.

Keywords: Sustainable fashion, recycle, refashion, eco-friendly and organic

Introduction

Various consumer surveys indicate that India is set to become the one of the biggest apparel market for sustainable fashion by 2030. As more and more synthetic textile fibres enter India's market, businesses that promote natural fibres stand to be noticed and 76% of Indian consumers are more loyal to brands offering natural fibres like cotton. This gives a huge potential for a study on current trends followed in sustainable and eco-friendly textiles and clothing practices in India (Euromonitor International, 2016).



Fig 1: Cotton Council International and Cotton Incorporated's Global Lifestyle Monitor Survey, a biennial consumer research study. In the 2016 survey, approximately 10,000 consumers (i.e. 1,000 consumers in 10 countries) were surveyed. (Source: Euromonitor International, 2016)

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Going the organic way

While there are several natural fibres such as cotton, bamboo, silk, wool, linen, jute etc, cotton is the most widely cultivated and used of them all. Organic refers to fibers grown according to national organic standards without the use of toxic and persistent pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, or genetic engineering (Organic Trade Association, 2012). Most of us think cotton clothing is cool, healthy and safe, but the story of mass produced commercial cotton is quite the opposite. This includes handlooms and sometimes even *khadi*. Most textiles are not entirely organic or socio-environmentally just with some form of chemical input or social injustice at certain stages of manufacturing. This downfall came about in the 19th century with the onset of the Industrial Revolution followed by mass factory production, capitalism, and the present neoliberal era.

The cotton textile industry continues to flourish in India as a big number to be added to our Gross Domestic Product (GDP), for large corporations to profit from, and to provide employment in factories. However, the story at the starting point of the cotton value chain is grim. Cotton farmer suicides are high due to reasons such as the high agricultural investments required for hybrid and genetically-modified (GM) varieties like Bt cotton, which at times became a debt trap created by local moneylenders, poor yields due to factors like monoculture and climate change. Spinners, weavers and tailors are also often on low daily wages that are not commensurate with the hard work they put in.

A fabric embedded in history, cotton, the oldest fabric invented by humans, was widely cultivated during the Indus Valley Civilization when hand spinning, weaving, and natural dyeing was in vogue. The earliest mention of Indian cotton goes back to 600 BC with its mention in the Rigveda. Much later, and from the 17th century onwards, all of India's foreign traders, travellers, and invaders including the East India Company highly sought after Indian cotton. Home spun and hand woven cotton or *khadi* was made popular by Mahatma Gandhi as a part of the swadeshi (self-sufficiency) movement since 1905, symbolic of the end of dependency on foreign goods during the British rule. The Government of India declared August 7 as National Handloom Day in 2015, to mark the beginning of the *Swadeshi* Movement that started in 1905 on this day.

Recycouture – Upcycling/Refashion

The most earth-friendly form of sustainable fashion uses fabric from garments that are in the post consumer chain. From wardrobe swaps, yard sales, rummage sales and thrift shops these garments and household linens are torn apart, mix and matched, then re-sewn into fabulous new items. Because of their unique combinations these are often one of a kind piece that distinguishes the fashion conscious individual. These garments and accessories appeal to those with a refined sense of personal style and an aesthetic that strives to follow heartfelt ideals that are in harmony with the natural world. This is not as simple as it sounds for it is based on principles of quantum physics (patterns and energy), biology (species diversity and health), environmental science (connectivity of ecosystems), economics (resource values and local production) and mathematics (compounding) (Green wiki, 2017) [7].

Recycouture is the word for garments that have handwork and time-consuming details or are a custom-refashioned garment. Whereas sustainable fashion trends include the new fashions that are made from fibers that are being produced with less

resource abuse, energy and toxins in a socially-just manner, the refashion movement is broadly about lessening waste.

In the process of upcycling something, you do not break anything down. The product may be reworked or reconstructed in a number of different ways but the material stays the same – and is at minimum the same if not better quality than when you started.

Measures such as upcycling, re-using, and creating a garment in such a way that it can be reassembled after being discarded is also crucial. The refashion concept has been around for years. From depression stylists through war shortage seamstress, using fabrics for new purposes has been part of the creative person's repertoire. The most common form of fabric re-use was the quilt.

A self-taught designer and the brainchild behind the upcycled footwear brand Kurio, Mumbai-based Megha Rawat says that "sustainable fashion is not just a concept; it's a habit for her". She was already painting old shoes and repurposing badges and brooches as a child. She would never let her mother throw away anything; she would always make something out of them. As she migrated from one technological job to another, she began toying with the idea of becoming an entrepreneur; Rawat then began Kurio almost two years later. "We did not take a single thing that was used firsthand while creating the shoes," she says, pointing out that old discarded tyres became the rubber soles while used silk sarees formed the uppers of the shoes (Mehta, 2017) [10].

Lakmé India Fashion Week Summer/Resort 2017 held in February this year dedicated its second day to 'Sustainable Fashion and Indian Textiles', displaying several brands who are creating a new vocabulary for sustainable fashion narratives in the country; the show aptly titled "Reincarnations" focused on the various ways fashion can acquire a new life through repurposing, reusing, and recycling.

I was a Sari explored the metamorphosis of a saree into upcycled textile and fashion products (textile jewellery, bags, scarves, and wraps), subsequently reinterpreting the saree; it also significantly focused on providing recurring employment opportunities to economically disadvantaged Indian women by equipping them with a specific skill-set in conjunction with a group of Mumbai-based NGOs. The sarees are sourced from the used saree trade in Mumbai (Mehta, 2017) [10].

The three Rs – recycle, reduce and reuse

The after-life of fashion is extremely necessary to consider given that the fashion and textiles industry is considered the second most polluting one in the world after that of oil. When something is recycled – typically plastics, paper, metals or glass – it is broken down so the basic materials recovered can be remade into something new. These products, however, are usually lower quality than what they were before being recycled. The term "recycle" refers to the process in which an item or its components are used to create something new. Recycling is technically a form of reusing, but it refers more specifically to items that are discarded and broken down into their raw materials. Recycling companies convert the original item and then sell the now-usable material. Some companies buy second hand material and use it to make a new product, which is another form of recycling.

Textile or apparel waste is generally categorized as either pre-consumer or post-consumer waste. The pre-consumer waste consists of by-product materials from the yarn, textile and apparel industries. Post-consumer textile waste mainly originates from household sources and consists of garments or

textiles which the owner no longer needs. In India, among the many recycling plants, recycling of post-consumer wastes of wool and acrylic at Panipat, in northern India, is the world's largest textile recycling hub.

Reduce or keeping purchases to a minimum is an important way of reducing the toll on the Earth's resources. Lowering consumption is the key to the concept of reducing, which can apply to physical objects as well as natural resources, such as gas, electricity and water. Not to be confused with reusing or recycling, reducing means lowering or eradicating use from the start. Cutting back on unnecessary purchases lowers the rate at which materials are used, but also effectively lowers the energy, gas and transportation costs that are accrued when an item is made and sold. The term "reduce" clearly applies to lifestyle. The term slow-fashion is synonymous with reducing purchasing behaviour in sustainable textiles

Reuse is a broad term that combines reusing materials and using items that have reusable qualities. An old shirt may become a car rag. Though reuse is different from reducing use, when an item is reused, consumption is reduced as a by-product. Refashion is synonymous with reuse in terms of sustainable fashion.

Revivalist of traditions

Sustainability is a big part of the creative story of Indian origin designers with presence across the world. An important focus for them is the use of handloom textiles as they have a smaller carbon footprint. They also gain credit for changing the way the west views Indian clothing and textiles. Although they work a lot with sarees and kurtis, their lines and drapes are contemporary and edgy, making them the perfect examples of fusion.

Actor Vidya Balan, on speaking of her love for sarees during a launch of a silk exhibition at Chennai, said, "It is amazing how the revival of weaving is taking place across the country. Many designers are working with traditional weavers and are actively involved in revival and innovations. We have to make weaving profitable for weavers. Only that can save the tradition. Our weavers need our encouragement, support and better wages. The cost of handloom is high, because it is hand-made, and it takes much more time to create the fabric with intricate designs, most importantly, it is niche (Anantharam, 2017)^[1]. While a consumer survey (Lam, 2017)^[8] indicates that India is set to become the biggest market for the apparel market by 2030, it is also worth focusing on the fact that India is also potentially a huge hub for ethical fashion, being one of the few countries where traditional techniques of dyeing, weaving, stitching, and embroidery are still prevalent. Yet, with aspirations to modernity and swearing by branded labels, handicrafts are often considered to be qualitatively inferior.

Fashion designer Madhu Jain, who has won accolades for her work as a textile revivalist has been working with artisanal livelihoods, reviving and reinventing traditional weaves. One of her primary examples is the bamboo textile, which embodies her sustainability ideal. While talking about Ikat a highly specialized weaving technique, she says "like all traditional art forms, Ikat is passed on from father to son. When I work with weavers, my input is design intervention and a clear idea of what I'd like the finished weave to look like. However, this means that I have to keep their sensibilities in mind, even when I'm trying to reinterpret "their" weave". When asked what was the scope and future of textiles and handlooms in India, Jain said that, each state in India boasts of a tradition of ancient craft form that is

indigenous to the community. And each textile is as different as chalk and cheese. However, to prevent design and weave stagnation, it's important to infuse new design sensibilities to ensure freshness, while sticking to the time-honoured integrity of the textiles' weave. This coupled with experimenting with cuts and silhouettes can ensure longevity for our traditional Indian textiles.

When asked if Indian handloom should be upgraded to luxury and be re-introduced to India and the world, and if the pricing was competitive, Jain replied saying "the price point is what makes handlooms a niche market, not only in India, but everywhere in the world. It is easy to churn out mile after mile of factory-produced cloth but we do not realize or appreciate that each hand-woven textile bears the inimitable stamp of the craftsman who has laboured hours, weeks or months to produce it. A weaver's expertise in an art form has been learnt and carefully fine-tuned through generations. If we have a conscience and a sense of history, we would be happy to pay for such exquisite craftsmanship. Anybody would be happy to shell out a small fortune for a painting by an artist because they realize the worth of that art form. But, having said that, Indian handlooms can sometimes outpace even the deepest of pockets. This is why we need to nurture and grow our artisanal wealth and better their working conditions" (Bamzai, 2017)^[3].

Slow fashion

Rising disposable income has given rise to frequent clothing purchases. Consumers, on an average, buy apparel eight to ten times a year now as compared to a few years ago, when it was lesser than half a dozen times. This is making fast fashion more relevant as retailers change their stock several times a year, and are thus, able to provide latest fashion merchandise all through the year. For responsible fashion to gain traction it is important for retail brands to join the game of slow fashion. Every stage in a garment's life threatens the Earth and its resources in addition to the enormous amounts of waste it generates. For example, it can take more than 20,000 litres of water to produce one kilo of cotton which would be equivalent to a pair of jeans and T-shirt; up to 8,000 litres of chemicals are used to turn raw materials into clothes, resulting in highly dangerous implications for their introduction into the water supply chain. Fast fashion is particularly culpable in this regard with the use of synthetic, oil-based fibres and a rapid turnover rate.

On how consumers can contribute to the sustainable movement, Ambatipuri, the founder of Chetana Organic, says that "Customers need to stop buying cheap garments that don't last long". He advises customers to buy 4-5 good quality garments that will last longer. He says customers also need to start asking for labels on where and how their clothes were made (Mahalaxshmi, 2017)^[9].

Ecolabel buying

Ecolabelling is one of the tools for sustainable living. Just by looking at a textile product it is difficult to see whether it has been made from conventional or organic cotton, or dyed with non-toxic or harmful dye-stuffs. Hence it is not easy for the consumer to make an environmentally responsible purchase decision as one should ideally consider fibre production, product manufacturing process, as well as what will happen to the product during and after their useful life. Therefore, a class of eco-labels is being introduced with requirements which manufacturers must meet before they can call their products 'green'. Environment-friendly labels or eco-labels

manifest the efforts of an industry to become or be perceived as environment-friendly. Eco-labels are normally issued either by Government supported or private enterprises once it has been proved that the product of the applicant has met the criteria set by them for the label. There are two types of certification, both feeding our sense of well-being: environmental and social impact. While purchasing clothes, looking out for eco-labels will help a long way in purchasing 'green clothes' (Goswami, 2008) [6]. Some of the popular eco-labels to watch for in India are Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), the butterfly Silk mark, India Handloom mark etc.

Sustainable living through fair trade buying

"Sustainable fashion means different things in different countries. In developed countries, it could mean having best practices in place with regard to manufacturing garments, while in India, 'sustainable fashion' is mixed with our textile heritage and preserving it, and because we are an agrarian economy, it is also associated with human capital. It is about ensuring that fair wages and fair practices are in place and the benefits go down to every last member in the supply chain. Even recycling and upcycling are combined into this umbrella term of 'sustainable fashion'," says Jaspreet Chandok, head-Fashion of IMG-Reliance (Mahalaxshmi, 2017) [9].

Socio-environmental injustices often lead to social movements and activism led by those in the community who are determined to make a change. Such movements are a powerful means of achieving transformative change along with civil society to support and champion its objectives. In 2011, three social activists based out of Chennai were concerned about injustices formed a social enterprise by the name Tula. Tula is not just a store that sells fair trade and sustainable cotton garments but as a holistic institution that takes into consideration the entire cotton value chain from crop to garment, with every stage being livelihood sustaining and socio-environmentally just. "Hand spinning and hand weaving are labour intensive and women centric tasks, yet spinners and weavers are paid a pittance of 120-160 rupees a day" one of them Mr. Ananthoo explains. He added that, "The best solution is to have a distributed and decentralized model for the cotton industry with better wages and dignity and with the least number of middlemen involved as possible." The organization uses only desi (indigenous) varieties of ginned cotton slivers to spin their yarn. Tamil Nadu's native variety called 'karunganni' cotton, is one among them (Ganesh, 2017) [5].

Fairtrade India's 'Show Your Label' campaign aimed at getting consumers to question where, how and by whom their garments were made. Abhishek Jani, CEO of Fair Trade India, feels that "consumers need to continue asking who made my clothes and who grew my clothes so that the brands recognize that this is an important issue that consumers care about" (Mahalaxshmi, 2017) [9].

Tips for buying green textiles and clothing

1. Check for clothes with eco-labels and fair trade certifications.
2. Find clothes that are unbleached or bleached with hydrogen peroxide only.
3. Look for clothes colored using organic dyes or low impact dyes.
4. Do not go for clothes with wrinkle-free/ non-iron concept.
5. Shop at vintage or second hand stores.

6. Learn the art of sewing and make your own clothes from sustainable fabrics.
7. Look for clothes that do not require dry cleaning.

Limitations to sustainable fashion

Rawat of Kurio says that while there are many who appreciate the world of sustainable fashion, the market for sustainable fashion goods is still limited. "The consumers ultimately end up buying from Zara," she says, indicating the inclination for fast fashions. Consumers also express concern about the context in which old sarees have been worn or used, for example: "What caste wore it? What circumstances were they used in?" The consumer also questions the cultural dynamics of the saree: who wore the saree? Was it the same caste or a lower one? Such line of thought would absolutely not be the case in western countries, where the primary question would be – is the garment clean or not?

However, in the Indian context, it is a very aspirational society. The fact that you can show off that you are wearing or showcasing a brand, whether it is the car you drive or the watch you wear is very important, one doesn't want to use upcycled products; the middle class in fact is trying to move away from the traditional up cycled products, which were earlier made out of economic necessity.

Funari mentions that while 90 percent of *I was a Sari's* products are sold abroad, items such as bags, necklaces, and accessories do sell in India though. "We are very happy it's picking up. Our clients are sort of young, open minded progressive Indians, not weighed down by traditional mindsets," he says, describing them as having been abroad and familiar with the idea and appreciating the importance of upcycling. "There is interest but there is a long way to go before sustainable fashion is a widely accepted and is a practiced concept," he concludes (Mehta, 2017) [10].

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