



Management consultant Harminder Sahni analyses the highs and lows of the fashion retail industry. Covering a spectrum of topics, each month he looks at the need of the hour for India.

I was at the InFashion conference organised by FAITMA and IMAGES Group last week in Mumbai. It was an amazing experience to see hundreds of textile retailers, wholesalers and mill owners not only mingling around dozens of stalls that were showcasing their wares but also the enthusiastic participation at interactive knowledge sessions.

The excitement was palpable and infectious, the interactions were interesting and engaging and the discussion was mature and lighthearted.

I saw some truly native intelligence being applied to answer some very complex questions that are facing the industry. Above all, I was really impressed to see the level of humility that prevailed throughout the proceedings. It was nice to see some of the young mill owners and wholesalers (sometimes bigger in size than mills), refusing to accept the accolades and insisting that their success should be attributed to their elders be it father, uncle or even an elder brother. I haven't come across such level of honesty,

humility and practical business sense in one room for a very long time.

It was the first-ever conference at this scale that brought in all stakeholders of textile industry on one single platform to not only showcase their capabilities but also to discuss and debate the issues and challenges facing the industry.

As expected, there were many who were over optimistic about the future of the industry and were of the opinion that the textile industry has seen many threats in its lifetime and has always come back stronger. On the other extreme there were pessimists who were quite aggressive in predicting the demise of the industry as it exists today. However, like all situations in life, I believe the answer lies somewhere in between. Both these extremes have a major role to play in the evolution and growth of any industry. On one side someone has to create the sense of urgency so as to provoke players to not be complacent and act faster and not letting their pessimistic predictions come true. And on the other side, the optimists are needed to provide the belief to fence sitters that all will remain well as long as we pull together in the right direction.

I was silently observing all these interactions and even when I participated in two panel discussions, I was for a change keener on listening to what these

people had to say. I came back with some interesting thoughts about the textile trade in India.

The first and foremost thought that stuck me was that business of fabric sales be it for menswear or womenswear isn't going to disappear in our lifetimes at least and may last even beyond that. The major components of textile trade are dress

Textile Trade

Not the bottom but the foundation of the fashion industry pyramid



material for salwar kameez, saris and cut piece for men's shirt and trousers.

In our country, half the population doesn't have the purchasing power to buy a new set of clothes in their lifetime. For some men and women the only time they ever get a new set of clothes is when they get married and unfortunately for some even that doesn't happen.

With slower but steady trickle down effect of the economic growth, it is inevitable

that millions of people's income will come up to the level wherein they may consider buying new clothes for the first time and continue to do the same subsequently.

These masses are most certainly at the bottom of the pyramid and are best served by the unbelievable prices at which textile trade is able to bring clothing to them. Whether it is a sari below ₹100 or a pant-shirt set for less than ₹150, the textile trade has managed to give majority of Indians their "nano wardrobe" consistently over the decades and is well poised

wondering why such a big deal is being made out of it!

A 1,50,000 sq. ft. cash-and-carry format for wholesale of textiles makes it the biggest in that format offering a single product category in the segment whereas Walmart and Metro are setting up less than half of that store size serving hundreds of categories.

The people behind this excellent innovation to take wholesale out of narrow streets of sadar bazaars to out of town big box format and making it a huge success though they weren't inspired by Walmart, still they are absolutely open-minded about learning from such large and hugely successful companies. Again, their humility seems to be their best attribute and I believe it will keep them ahead of the game for long.

We are all in the awe of fast fashion retailers who have become case studies across the world, but even they can learn a thing or two from Surat's super fast fashion machine that churns out hundreds of new designs every day. The world is waking up to the power of "crowd sourcing of design" by harnessing the power of internet and other technologies. Surat seems to have mastered it many years ago without those modern technologies. Like we wonder how pyramids were built without even a chain-pulley, western fast fashion retailers may scratch their heads trying to figure out the mystery of Surat's design power.

I reckon that while textile trade is serving the bottom market of the pyramid, along with all other layers of fashion consumers – offering less than ₹100 sari to ₹40 lakh sari, retailing less than ₹150 pant-shirt set to ₹50,000 per meter suit lengths – but more than that it creates new consumers and spreads the fashion consciousness among masses. Hence it may not be an exaggeration to say that the very foundation of the fashion industry pyramid is created, sustained and developed by the humble but huge, invisible but innovative textile trade of India. **BoF**

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to do so for times to come. The interesting part is that these nano wardrobes aren't "no frills" basic offers but are picked from a wide range that's much bigger than what is offered by leading brands.

That brings me to another thought that while innovation is the buzz word in the business world these days, the real innovations are taking place every single day in the textile trade. Many of these innovations in product development, fast fashion, packaging or even retail have far reaching consequences for consumers, traders and mills and even on the development of future textile technology. And since these innovations are not brought about by individuals or well-known companies, these don't receive media attention or coverage.

However, most of these are part of the folklore of textile trade and many of these innovators were picked out for praise during the conference and they seem to blush