

**W**hen I was a young student, we all wished to have three things in our wardrobe – a pair of jeans, a denim jacket and a couple of cool tees. While many of us could afford to buy jeans, the denim jacket remained elusive for most. The primary reason was lack of availability but the bigger reason was price. Somehow I couldn't muster enough money (and courage) to spend that kind of money on the jacket. I still regret that some times. However, tees were never a problem as Janpath Market in Delhi served thousands of young students like me every day. Janpath was the most frequented market place for younger Indians and in terms of footfall could beat any modern mall hands down. It was like a pilgrimage and upcountry students would make this pilgrimage at least twice a year to replenish our stock of tees. The prices were incredibly low as most of the stocks were export surplus with minute defects here and there but nothing major. Even though these were surpluses, the "export"

element added to the cool factor. Even today, Janpath and Sarojini Nagar in Delhi and many such markets around India are serving young crowds fulfill their fashion desire and satisfy their appetite for cool and new in a very affordable manner.

However, we all know that India has changed in the last 20 years (since I stopped being a student in 1992) and the profile of consumers thronging these export surplus markets have changed quite a bit. Just to put things in context, allow me to refer to another personal experience. When I bought a scooter in 1988, I was amongst the 10-15 students who owned one, out of around 500 students in our engineering college campus. (The motorcycle revolution started a bit later in 1990 or so.) It meant that only 2 to 3 per cent students out of the fortunate ones whose families were well off enough to send them to engineering colleges, could afford to own a two-wheeler. Let us fast-forward to 2012, and every single driver in our residential complex in Gurgaon or for that matter in NCR owns a motorcycle

to commute to and from work. This is not a surprise because where else all these motorcycle companies be selling their 35,000 motorcycles a day. So it is the same motorcycle (or a much better one) but the target segment has moved from students of upper middle-class background to working class. Similarly, the tees market has also expanded from export surplus only to Ed Hardy and Armani.

You can't help but notice in real life as well as in movies, TV ads and shows that how many young people are wearing tees (and denim). If you look closely you'll notice how different these tees look and these aren't carrying too many brand logos any more. For a very long time international brands have managed to make people advertise for free. But this seems to be changing quite rapidly and now the trend is to have unique tee to match with the mood of the day or

# A Humble Tee for Young India



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## ■ HARD TALK ■

moment. Tees have become like message boards and hence need to be changed and updated very frequently if not as frequently as your Facebook status. This trend is quite revolutionary and has expanded the market enormously in recent years. However, we don't see major brands and players paying much attention to this huge segment. It's not that they don't have tees in their offering but it is always treated as an add-on and supplementary item. Maybe the approach is driven more by the smaller ticket size of a tee as compared to a jeans or a shirt. However, if we look at the overall value



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of tees in a young consumer's wardrobe during a year, I am quite certain that the total value of all tees may not be any less than other categories. How often does a student buy a pair of denim as against the dozens of tees in the same period? So the humble tee certainly is valuable from a life-time value of young consumers. Also, this is an item that brings these consumers back to stores more often than anything else. Having become almost a disposable item, tees have also become item of impulse purchase. Remember Sid in *Wake up Sid* buying tees randomly from each and every store he visited with friends?

Online retailers such as Inkfruit have built an enviable brand reputation around tees only. Their model is to let consumers post their designs and also rank designs posted by others. The best designs are put on the tees that are sold over the internet as well as through select stores. They have built a consumer base of lakhs of loyal consumers who buy tees all the time from Inkfruit. I believe there is a room for many more players such as Inkfruit in this growing and exciting market. The opportunity for well-established brands to reach out to younger consumers through

this category is tremendous and the ones who will be able to do so will reap rewards in their other categories too. For the brands that retail only through their own outlets, this category offers an opportunity to distribute through wholesales too and widen the reach of the brand.

However, I see one big challenge for some of the brands in the area of design and fashion ability of tees. The fashion cycle of tees is much faster compared to other categories of clothing. Also, the number of offers or designs adds to the complexity when put on top of frequency of offers. Thus, it may not be possible or easy for all brands to tap this opportunity. I expect them to think of innovative ways to overcome these challenges, as the rewards certainly seem worth the effort.

Despite stupendous growth over the

recent years, tees have tapped only very limited markets and still have a lot of potential to grow beyond top 25 cities. However, to tap these markets and also to keep growing the overall market, brands need to work at the cost front too. Recent price hikes in cotton have taken the prices to a much higher level and the tee may not be able to absorb that and its potential may be hurt in the short run. I recall a project by one of the leading knitwear and innerwear companies in the U.S. to sew a tee in two minutes flat. The whole idea was to shave off few cents from the cost from this highly competitive item. I believe Indian companies too must accept that this category will always remain very sensitive and thus should invest time and energy in creating efficiencies at every stage of supply chain. **BOF**



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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.

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