



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.

Indian ethnic is one of the most remarkable comeback stories of our times. Unlike most of the other countries or societies where ethnicwear has lost its position completely over the last few decades and overall wardrobes have become totally Westernised, Indian consumers have shown preference for ethnicwear for various occasions and reasons. Whether it was government-mandated changeover as in case of China and Turkey or consumers own preference for simpler and more practical clothing as in case of Japan, the demise of ethnicwear is seen as inevitable reality by most social scientists.

One of the biggest reasons for the replacement of ethnicwear with Westernwear clothing is the widely accepted popular belief that Westernwear is a sign of modernisation. This perception is possibly a part of colonial baggage that most developing countries carry and is further perpetuated by the general acceptance of Westernwear as more formal presentation of self across the globe. Hence, any society that starts

Return of the Ethnic

developing in terms of rising urbanisation, growth of middle class and stable incomes, and above all getting more organised business and professions to hire more people, Westernwear becomes the norm.

And India is no different. While we all are aware and appreciative of our independence movement's unique feature, in the context of our point of deliberation here, I reckon that the khadi movement did provide Indian ethnicwear some amount of legitimacy and place of pride in the general public's mind. However, post independence Indian masses followed the same path. So, over the next few decades till the nineties, Indian men for sure became as Westernised in clothing as any other market. The extent of Westernisation of wardrobe became so deep rooted that till recently the most preferred wedding attire for the groom used to be a three-piece suit even in peak summers. Whether it was a big industrialist's son getting married or the same industrialist's driver's son getting married, the groom's dress had to be a three-piece suit!

The saving grace was that women were still wearing ethnicwear, such as saris and salwar kameez for their daily routine and during special occasions. The gap between the men's and women's market is the outcome of a developing market wherein men tend to go out for work and women stay at home. Hence the need for men to fit in with the modern clothing culture was far more pressing. However, the eighties started a change and denim jeans was the first piece of Western attire for Indian



girls. Once the wardrobe opened, tops, skirts and pants, et cetera, weren't too far behind.

Whether it was the opening up of the economy or success of Indian IT companies or the recognition of Indian market potential by MNCs, India started becoming the preferred flavour around the nineties. With this belief of "happy to be Indian," the Indian consumers embraced two things whole heartedly - Indian movies and music and Indian ethnicwear at least for special occasions. Suddenly it was cool to be watching a Bollywood movie or wearing a cotton kurta to a dinner party, as compared to making fun of someone who dared to accept that he watched (and God forbid liked) a Hindi movie or wore a kurta for a puja at home (didn't still dare to come out of his home wearing the same). All this belief is the basis for the demand but for the real consumption to happen, the marketers need to make the product available too. That's where retailers such as Fabindia have made a big difference to the overall market. Though Fabindia started as a company exporting ethnicwear and textiles to consumers in the U.S. and Europe, it found a lot of acceptance of its product in the Indian market and today is a 140-store chain.

Another major fillip to ethnicwear has been the growth of organised retail that made many companies look for opportunities to create new businesses in fashion industry beyond the men's clothing. Brands such as W and Biba came into being along with many private label brands of Shoppers Stop, Westside and Pantaloons. But neither did it happen overnight nor without its share of resistance and naysayers. I still remember



working with one of the department stores in the late nineties and debating for weeks whether they should have ethnicwear in their stores or not. The one single argument from the client team was that they are a modern retailer serving modern Indian consumers so where is the need or reason for retailing ethnicwear. Finally, they did try it in one of their stores. I won't be surprised if today ethnicwear is the largest and probably the most profitable category in that store. I would give lot of credit to not only that client team but to many other retail players who took a leap of faith and gave Indian ethnicwear a place of pride in their stores.

My point is, while Indian consumers have shown that they are keen to have ethnicwear in their wardrobes whether for everyday wear or for occasions and are also willing to pay a premium for better quality product and some more for better brands of ethnicwear, it is up to the retailers and brands to create products,

brands and retail formats that can service this growing market opportunity.

While everyone was focused on Indian women for ethnicwear and on Indian men for Westernwear, at one of the conferences some 10 years ago, I had presented the opportunity to have a men's ethnicwear store. It was probably taken as an idea from a dreamer consultant. I am really pleased to see that Manyavar has brought that dream to reality and has opened more than 100 stores across India. At another conference I had provoked the gathering by saying that maybe we were waiting for a Liz Claiborne to come and create better salwar kameez for modern Indian women. But I was proved wrong; Anita Dongre has created Global Desi - an Indian ethnicwear brand using Western silhouettes with Indian print, fabrics and cuts, and has already opened more than 25 stores in less than 2 years.

Indian ethnicwear has opportunities across many dimensions be it across gender segmentation or occasion specificity or raw material diversity. On top of it Indian ethnicwear offers itself to tremendous amount of adaptability and that probably is the major reason for its survival despite the onslaught of Westernwear. These unique features provide for a fertile ground for creating more Fabindias, Ws, Global Desis and Manyavars. 

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