**Fashion Beyond Borders**

**Title: The Autonomous Indian Fashion Agenda**

**Key Words:** Key Words: Fashion, Indian, Identity, Promotion

The story of Indian Fashion going Global has meandered through unchartered pathways two decades ago basing its foundation on the Indian textile heritage. Since then it has developed into a known fashion destination while achieving professional standards along with improving business practices. The growth was helped along by apex forums of fashion design which promoted, nurtured and propagated the business of fashion.

On the international front, India laid claim to the piece of fashion business pie, by incorporating into the global fashion development and business cycles. Fashion weeks meant to showcase the developments have been the cog in the global fashion wheel. The effort to take Indian Fashion global has over the years found its own autonomous path, somewhat off tangent to the usual international fashion cycle. Fashion promotion has found its nuance in events, published imagery and advertisements and films uniquely Indian, quite different from the international imagery. A leading fashion designer opines that the fashion weeks not being in sync with the international fashion fairs has on the face drawn a lot of criticism, but in the long run has evolved into strengthening its autonomous mandate, in the race to Internationalize fashion.

The research studies the development of the Indian Fashion identity, the fashion consumers and its influence on the image of Indian fashion and further reflects on the development of forms of fashion & promotion. The designers have developed directions for the industry, strongly identifying themselves to the ‘real Indian consumer’. In this scenario what are the influences that shape the Indian fashion consumer and what is the nature of fashion promotion & communication that works. The study reveals a new Indian consumer, who has acquired autonomy in the way he/she understands, consumes and communicates fashion.

The research data has been gathered from literature review and is supported by interviews with experts in design, industry, promotion and media.

Introduction

The story of Indian fashion can be equated to a Bollywood film. It is full of action, drama, romance, miracles, tragedy, and humour. When the movie-goer purchases a ticket he is sure to get the value of the purchase, notwithstanding the overtly, excessive story line supported by overacting. It satisfies the mental craving built-up in the mind-set of the consumer who is expecting to enter a different world, who wants to lose him/herself in the magical world of expectations. In a similar vein the development of fashion market, its rise and further expectations by its consumers display similar responses, and aspirations.

India is a land of diversity, with a multitude of cultures, languages, religions, festivals, colours and aesthetic sensibilities. The paper presents a study of the Indian fashion market and factors that make it different from other emerging markets. At present the Indian economy is thriving in the service sector, as an IT hub, as centre for research and development, as an upcoming centre for creativity, growth is predicted at 8% for the next few years. The Indian middle class is expanding while the luxury products segment has grown at 22% despite the recession. (Siao 2011). With an urban population of 280 millions, India has 28 million rich and upwardly mobile making up 10% of the urban population. Of these 1 million are luxury consumers, 6-7 million are very affluent, 9-10 million are mid-affluent, while another 11-12 million are the mass affluent. (Source: Technopak)

Promotional efforts by Designer brands, supported by fashion councils and the industry have contributed to building image of designers as larger than life role models and affirming their status of aspirational labels. While some prominent designer labels acquired the status of luxury brands others have been establishing themselves at various niches working towards an aspirational image. (Siao 2011).

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**Research Method**

The research collected data from secondary sources to understand the Indian Fashion industry and market. Interviews with experts from the fashion design and promotion industry provided views and information on what they perceive as Indian Fashion identity. The study also collected data and material from literature, internet and trade publications.

**The Rise of Fashion in India**

The last two decades of fashion has been a story of meteoric rise of an industry that was perceived with great trepidation to begin with but found its niche as an aspirational aspect of ‘India Shining’. The industry experienced growth but also various upheavals in the way the apparel export business interests shifted across the globe. Globalization as a buzz concept brought about flattening in many aspects including flattening and dilution of indigenous, aesthetic sensibilities aided by rapid communication through electronic, virtual, digital mediums. There were voices raised in parts to preserve what was indigenous, local, of cultural uniqueness so that differentiation still would survive for a healthy, synergetic dynamism. Fashion, design, craft and other art forms were in danger of getting integrated leading to homogeneity.

In such a scenario as in other developments, clarity of an Indian fashion identity was equated to the ways of thinking, practices and its outward expressions linked to the social, cultural environment, …..the unique and peculiar role that clothing plays in perception of identity. For clothes are frequently perceived as expressions and even extensions of the people who wear them. (cf. Wilson 1987)

**Support of Training and Education**

In order to cater to the export apparel industry and fledgling domestic industry the Govt. of India took initiatives to set up fashion training institutes to train and provide international standard professionals for the export oriented industry. Many private initiatives across the country led to a synergy of competitive developments and in a short time India was soon considered to be a hub of innovation. The creative expressions of the talents from institutes soon found acceptance in the immediate environment, with growing business opportunities. The burgeoning domestic market soon replaced the declining apparel exports. They were aided in this process by the developing digital and television media. As the aspiration spread across the country, heeding to the need of varied profile of students applicant, a foundation year was introduced as part of the curriculum to bring about parity in the skill and understanding.

**Early Promotion**

Soon a synergy between corporate, media, designers led to promotion of fashion which established itself as marketing strategy. One of the earliest fashion event, in the early 90’s was a sponsored event by a liquor company inviting young fashion graduates for participation. Women oriented magazine such as ‘ Femina’ covered fashion shows to communicate and explain fashion as understood by the journalists. Understanding fashion, its technicalities, its needs and the excitement of what such an event could lead to was itself an enigma. The publication initially carried coverage of Rohit Khosla, an early pioneer of fashion in India, along with others who promoted their labels by presenting their photo-shoots paid by the designers themselves to the magazine for coverage. An 8-international designers coverage in the early publications in its process was an exercise in fashion awareness. Fashion as a subject was getting to be more interesting to write about and the readership responded with equal enthusiasm. The resultant impact of popularity through the published magazines / medium brought about a huge change in the perspectives of parents who now had an informed point of view on this new career so aspired by the youngsters.

**Fashion Forum**

Fashion Design Council of India came into existence with eminent designers, journalists on board its advisory to take fashion to the next level. The opening of various fashion institute branches was seen as an opportunity with many professionals being trained, entering the industry hence the council was a platform to address its growth, challenges and to offer support. FDCI’s partnership in the initial years with a cosmetic conglomerate was seen as synergy of related industry. Over the years, debate about Delhi vs Mumbai fashion, established vs new comers, individual designers pitted against the other became news, leading to birth of key-hole journalism, with the focus changing from serious writing to socialite issues. It needed to be seen as a serious business.

**The Progression of Indian Traditional to Fusion to Western wear**

India has developed a strong cultural identity which has translated to all outward forms of expressions including clothing, attributing a flavor that is quite outstanding. Traditionally the Indian women wore saree, kurta, lehnga – choli and their derivatives. Along the way these were transformed to affiliated shapes and surfaces and popularized by designers. The phenomenon of world fashion integrates the aspect of ethnic dress and its evolution. Factors encouraging rapid change in the dress of many people, including the adoption of non-indigenous items, occurs along with factors encouraging continued adherence to indigenous forms and styles of dress. (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995; Eicher, B.J. 1995)

# Clothing traditions have always existed culturally and socially where the society evolved norms which formed the basis of how society will live and within it the place for man, woman and their behaviours and responsibilities. This in turn formed a system / structure which defined all activities, ways of living, the food or the ways of dressing. In traditional India a Nayar man informed the anthropologist Kathleen Gough:”When I put on my shirt to go to the office, I take off my caste and when I come home and take off my shirt, I put on my caste.’ (cited in Srinivas 1968:123) On similar note for a woman the erogenous zones were not perceived in the same way as for western body form. Décolletage was not acceptable, *dupatta* and *pallu* formed modesty blanket and took on the function of covering the female forms from strange eyes. Ideals associated with the body is a cultural perspective. How the body is considered by the individual varies from culture to culture (Benthall in “A Prospectus” Benthall and Polhemus, 1975). This could include ideals related to modesty, size and importance of various body parts- which are covered and which are not and how much of the body is covered. It was common for a man employed in an urban setting to wear European dress in the city, but revert to Indian clothes when returning to his natal village, a custom not uncommon even today. Tarlo:http://books.google.co.in/books/about/Clothing\_matters.html?id=8wyM5heEc9gC 1996

However there exist especially in urban environment, pockets of well travelled population who wear western clothes. This 1 % does not however represent most of the fashion consumers in the country.

The Indian designer wear industry estimated at US $ 125 million is accepted as the top end segment of the market. It caters to the traditional wear, sarees and designer wear segment of the market. Weddings, once in a life events for many Indian families are opportunities for consumers to acquire the aspirational Indian designer wears for traditional clothing and accessories from the international brands. The Indian Designer brands are adapt at creating aesthetics that suit the Indian sensibilities which may vary across the country. However media promotion and Bollywood films are gradually influencing aesthetics, so much so that the panorama of fashion is acquiring a cohesive silhouette. The ‘anarkali’ an outfit inspired from the Mughal India, more popular in north was found to be equally popular in the southern part of the country after it was worn in the Tollywood (Tamil Nadu film industry) film ‘Ethiran’. Perhaps such phenomena will set the stage for a more systematic fashion consumption, facilitating trend forecasting and fashion distribution and logistics.

**Fashion Development &** business **cycle**

Experts and fashion commentators are of the opinion that India has huge scope in design, management and entrepreneurial talent. But the potential can only be fully realized when these skills will synergize to deliver fashion business in a professional manner.

Designs from India do not espouse the European aesthetics as desired by the European client. Nonetheless many designers stand by their aesthetic sensibilities, quoting the exemplar of the development of Japanese fashion movement in the 90’s, where the western world embraced the interpretation of Japanese designers.

**Development of Fashion Promotion**

It is well known that only 3Cs sell /work on Indian television: Cricket, Cinema and Crime. Fashion too has found success on the television. Bollywood and Indian television channels have been instrumental in bringing the Indian popular culture to the forefront, across the sub-continent and to the continents where a large diasporas of Indian population immigrated. According to Sudha Ramachandran of Asia Times (Online), for decades Bollywood and Indian television channels were banned in Pakistan to keep out Indian popular culture; partly prompted by political protectionism against a more seductive and popular Indian counterpart.

There is an emerging print media with almost 60 fashion and lifestyle publications now vying for eyeballs. Fashion shows, fancy store launches / events and end of season sales help create awareness and promote fashion brands equally. FDCI, Fashion Design Council of India, the forum that promotes fashion in the country since 1998, has expanded its basket of shows from two regular seasonal ones to include fashion weeks on menswear and couture wear. The fashion industry has been co-partnering with the growing media formats in the quest to reach out to masses and to help it project an image as promotion. The India Fashion week, held bi-annually is one of the most important fashion trade events. In tune with the international fashion trade events it follows the London, Paris, Milan and New York fashion weeks as a tail-end event, finishing the events calendar for every season. Over a decade this event organized by the Fashion Design Council of India the forum which promotes the interests of the fashion industry gained experience and in turn reputation as an effective trade event.

Banking on the ability of fashion to draw in crowds, attention and eye-balls, fashion shows could be used as strong, impressionable promotion for corporate. In a short time Corporates were sponsoring events of individual designers, building up a symbiotic relationship. It seemed the advent of fashion, the phenomena taking root in India was at an opportune time. Fashion designers needed the hype, the projections, the image building as much as these Corporates who needed to reach across to masses, in some cases due to bans on product advertising of some nature, found the fashion show as a convenient vehicle to promote their brands in an indirect way, projected them as glamorous and aspirational. These were extended to fashion-designers-in-training through competitions organized by these brands to identify the best and the most talented.

Multi-designers-Exhibitions on the other hand were the B2C vehicles for the beginners, not- yet well- known, who could not afford retail spaces and hence found the sale point convenient to generate liquid cash. These were mostly business initiatives of private entrepreneurs and provided services on a smaller scale. What these exhibitions delivered in real sale sense did not translate into advancing the cause of the fashion industry over all. It was a bazaar and transactions happened accordingly with not much effort to build individual brands. However few of these exhibitions transcended the commercialization tag to become prestigious trade and sales events. Amongst them, ‘Bridal Asia, Vivah, Wedding Sutra etc. aimed at the Wedding market were successful. Most Designer brands have major share of their business in the Indian wedding market.

Over the years designer brands, luxury market, prêt, and its differentiations are getting more defined, more structured, yet very much Indian in its characteristics.

The most effective promotional formats domestically no doubt is films as it reaches out to a large number of fashion sensitive people. Fashion weeks and events which seem to have a fashion show at the drop of a hat also have been effective. These two mediums have caught the popular imagination. Publications have played a supporting if limited role in this. Films and events have contributed to making Indian fashion truly unique and indigenous. In both the cases, the ambience can be developed in line with the Indian ethos. This helps in presenting the garment in the Indian perspective. In addition both these mediums are at the cutting edge in trying to be more daring and different so as to bring out new looks and creativity while still being anchored to Indian sensitivities.

**Indianness, A unique identity: ‘We Are Like That Only’**

Artists and intellectuals have always been fascinated by India, however distinct from this respectful veneration is an ‘Indomania’ that has gripped fashion and design in recent years, filtering down to people in the street. (Schneiter, G.B.-2004). Posters, home décor mags and even haute couture fashion shows (showcased as in Karl Lagefeld’s collection for Chanel) have reinvented a colourful, festive India, however based on fantasy than reality. The Indian Fashion Identity has developed over the last ten years and is a fusion of the classical Indian look with Western convenience. This most often gets presented with Indian fabrics and surface work but with Western silhouettes or modifications of the same. It is smart and chic and yet warm and homely. Canali, the Italian luxury men’swear experimented with the Nawab Collection inspired by the rich, elegant history of the Maharajas which was a runaway success. **Manish Arora, Sabyasachi** are fine examples of how as designers they have interpreted and given flavor of India in their works. **NITYA**, the Indian brand straddles the two worlds comfortably, showing the best of 2 worlds, use of Indian fabrics. Nitya is a unique interpretation of contemporary and traditional styles, blending Eastern refinement with Western elegance and sophistication. **Rahul Mishra**’s prime sources of inspiration are the weavers of traditional Indian fabrics. Aneeth Arora GABA had the perfect blend of Indian crafts, fabrics and styling to appeal to a wide audience who appreciates the beauty of traditional work.



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Ritu Kumar, has almost for a long time been seen as the ambassador of the Indian identity, by consciously applying vision and strategy in an effort to make her designs Indian. Many designers promoting Bhagalpur, Kota sarees but do not take the development commitment all the way through.

Designers are not using the advantage that is its strength in the use of its Indian fabrics though at Couture week, more and more we see incorporation of fluid drapes on ramp, more sarees being shown. Indianness in films, advertisements have helped to reach the phenomena to masses.

Chanel’s ‘Paris- Bombay’ collection was a blend of interesting contrasts. Flowing diaphanous fabrics on one side representing Indian visuals & structured tweeds on the other.

Hermès launches a collection of saris especially catered to the Indian market, Hermès’s foray into this tight-knit fraternity reigned over by a few designers, Prices for Hermès saris range from $6,100 to $8,400, apparently a “wink” to Indian customers, said Patrick Thomas, the chief executive of Hermès International.

[](http://blogs-images.forbes.com/worldviews/files/2011/10/Hermes-sari.jpg)

Hermès’ new saris

http://blogs-images.forbes.com/worldviews/files/2011/10/Hermes-sari.jpg

Symbols of Indianness have survived globalization India’s myriad traditions, religious beliefs, colourful festivals, caste and community systems along with democratic political system presents a complex maze of background that shapes an Indian consumer.

Indian have always placed the highest value on education, basing their caste system on the hierarchy formed by the level of education. For eg. Scholars were placed at the top of the caste system.

Today India’s economic resurgence is linked to knowledge –based industries, creating a segment of ‘educated new money’. (Chadha R, Husband P; 2006)

Religion and spirituality form the core of India’s daily life and is deeply ingrained in everything that dictates life. There is a lot faith in karma and there is very little that may be attributed to an individual’s ambition or achievement.

Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and a multitude of other religions have a following here, leading to a potpourri of festivals, customs and dress.

In India luxury brands have to find a way to blend in with the milieu of local traditions. While Indians are adopting western clothing, they continue to wear ethnic outfits with a sense of pride.

Longevity, exclusive characteristics and value for money, equate it to an investment that upgrades personal image and holds value in the eyes of beholder. An innate sense of value for money is observed in very young consumers

**Conclusions and Suggestions:**

There is a need to take the Indian consumer along while customizing strategies to local conditions and requirements. Colour and design choices for different regions will be specific to their aesthetics, intricate embroidery and embellishment, vibrant colours and rich fabrics on clothes are preferred, where as western prêt-a-porter ranges are simpler, emphasizing silhouette, cut and styling. Wedding is an important event and the wedding market is huge, Diwali and other festivals are equally important for clothes and gifts. the Indian consumer is extremely price conscious and will have high expectations. The Indian identity is finally making some dent on the International platform with well known designers borrowing from its unique form. This is primarily from classic Indian looks. The uniquely Indian fashion fusion still has to be accepted internationally.

Fashion education is an imported discipline of learning, now we are trying to articulate a response, develop a language and a vocabulary. The movement has just begun and soon will be able to evolve a formula. There is a dire need to have studies that will record the transition across the period as it is so much quicker. Analysis of Indian popular cultures and its uniqueness needs to be studied if only and because its impact and influence on future developments can be strategized. Fashion writing needs to be taken seriously with improved quality of editorial

The Govt. and corporate needs to take more initiative and provide support to the industry. People all across the world are noticing Indian designers / designs and this is the right time and opportune moment for the fashion industry to evolve an identity that will help it grow with pride and a unique identity.

The author of this paper is grateful to the following members of the industry who provided support for this paper:

Mr. David Abraham

Mr. Divyam Mehta

Ms. Nida Mahmood

Ms. Sathya Saran

Mr. Sunil Sethi

Mr. Vinod Kaul

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