

Sustainable Fashion in India - in conversation with Tanushri Shukla, Mehndi Shivdasani and Neha Rao.

Tanushri Shukla is the founder of Chindi, a social enterprise that finds design solutions for textile waste in order to clean up the fashion industry. It empowers low-income and slum-based craftspeople through the recycling, upcycling, sewing, and crochet of accessories.

Mehndi Shivdasani is a Talent Advisor who runs a blog on Zero Waste living on Instagram and Facebook under the name Conscious Chokri.

Neha Rao is a sustainable textile designer running a project called 'SOOT'. It is a 'study of emotionally durable design and textile colorants' which seeks to explore the 'emotional connection a consumer has with the product using an innovative method of printing with an air pollutant'

1. Is affordability a goal to aim for in the Indian 'slow fashion' scene? Is it possible to make slow sustainable fashion affordable while also ensuring we don't compromise on the sustainability factor? Is it possible to be sustainable on a budget?

Tanushri :

It comes down to how you define affordability. While the price of every single other commodity has increased, clothing prices have only been decreasing. So today when someone can get a t-shirt for Rs 300 from H&M, why would they want to spend more on something sustainable? This is where you have to consider the unethical and unsustainable practices that these fast fashion brands use to make clothing so affordable. It is relative to these extremely low prices that sustainable products are perceived as expensive. You also need to take into consideration the quality, custom design, durability and ethical labour wage you're paying for.

Mehndi :

Sustainability and eco friendly alternatives are generally expensive which is a warped reality, unfortunately. There are a lot of brands promoting organic, local made, Indian clothes which are really expensive. However given the country we live in, we're very lucky to have access to different kinds of fabrics at cloth shops and tailors who can stitch a variety of clothes for you, which we could really take advantage of. Conversely, it's cheaper abroad to buy a new garment than getting an old one repaired or refurbished. There's also this whole world of borrowing, exchanging clothes, thrift stores, second hand buying which isn't too prominent in India but I do see it coming up in the form of Facebook sale groups, OLXs of the world etc. In these ways, sustainable doesn't have to be expensive.

Neha :

Affordability is one of the biggest problems with sustainability and that it tends to cater to certain classes. My aim was to create something that was more accessible to the masses.

There's also a need to simplify the language and the tone of sustainability, we tend to overload consumers with information that leaves them overwhelmed.

Affordability is only going to come with time as with demand comes supply. For this, it's important for general awareness to exist among both consumers and producers because the audience is very limited at the moment. For example, khadi is a sustainable material and it is cheap, but how many of us wear it?

2. How can we scale sustainable fashion practices while preventing them from becoming part of fast fashion?

Tanushri :

It is a challenge to scale sustainable industries without it becoming another fast fashion industry. While we want to make it more affordable, and be able to supply it many people but at the same time we need to consider a lot of other factors. Even when there are opportunities to scale it it comes down to your individual ethical principles and your moral compass. One of the biggest challenges we face at Chindi, is the fact that we're not just competing with other sustainable brands, but every single brand out there in the fashion industry, including the fast fashion ones. We have to compete in terms of quality, design, marketing, and of course price.

Mehndi :

There are a lot of companies that have global businesses that are able to scale business while ensuring social impact and ethical way of. So it comes down to whether fashion brands consider these to be driving factors for their business. Scaling doesn't only have to be looked in terms of the enormity of it, but the longevity as well. Fabindia is a good example of a brand that uses organic material, employs local craftsmen and has still been able to scale their business. However, when it comes to enterprises using local community manpower or local materials, it's important to realise that not all businesses are designed to be scaled and not all businesses have to scale, you can very well be a small player in your own city and still be making an impact, it comes down to how you position and market yourself.

Neha :

Scaling these practices to cater to the masses is a complex process because the whole supply chain changes. There's also a complex dynamic between sustainability, affordability and scalability.

However, mass production to lower prices is not the answer to sustainability, it's most important that we reduce consumption. Even if we walked into H&M and all the polyester t-shirts were replaced with organic cotton garments, we would still be using so much of cotton that we don't need. Sustainability isn't just a single aspect, it's sort of like a domino effect. Mass production is simply the base point, which needs to stop.

3. Are there any local Indian sustainable clothing practices that we can draw from?

Tanushri :

The biggest problem presently is the western concept of fashion trends which keep changing. If we look at our grandparents and even our parents, they wore particular garments till it could not be used anymore. They also used organic textile materials, there was no artificial material like polyester. So simply shopping more consciously and making full use of clothing is something we can do.

Mehndi :

There are a lot of videos online demonstrating how you can wear one garment in 5 different ways, which isn't something new but has been done for years. I think our mothers and grandmothers grew up with very limited number of clothing in their cupboards and were somehow able to repurpose and refashion clothing which is something we seem to have forgotten. Also, things block printing on dupattas yourself for example is something that can

be done quite easily. People have been getting clothes stitched cost-effectively for decades in India, it's only now that we've been engulfed by this high brand - fast fashion mindset. This is closely tied to the instant gratification of ordering something online, from the comfort of your home.

Neha : Looking back at our grandparents, everything they came home with was recyclable, whether it was bags or clothes. Trends would have a high lifetime, with clothes being passed on from one sibling to the other or it would be used as cleaning material, there was no use and throw. Today we decide not wear something because we get bored of it. We need to look back at our roots and draw inspiration from the mindful consumption and being aware of what you need. Resources are not directed in the right direction, all clothes end up in one landfill, when it could be used by someone else.

4. How does it work after customers buy these sustainable clothing products - how can they reuse and dispose wisely after they wear out?

Tanushri :

At Chindi, we actually work with different kinds of textile waste to upcycle it into a new product which is an effective way to tackle clothing that cannot be worn any longer. It is challenging as unlike most other industries we work to create solutions based on the raw material we get, but we've been able to create home decor items and now accessories using this waste material. We are currently designing a take back program where customers can give back their Chindi items after they are worn out or if they don't want to use them anymore, so they can be recycled completely to create a new product.

Mehndi :

There are various ways - through upcycling, donating or even selling the material. I had a bathrobe which wasn't in use, so I got it cut up into smaller reusable napkins. I chopped the rope that goes around the waist into smaller pieces which I now use as replacement to cotton to remove any kind of makeup or apply any facial product. For example, there's a social enterprise called Dwij in Bombay that converts old jeans into affordable and trendy multi-purpose bags. These are just ways in which you can reduce and avoid waste going into landfills.

Neha :

At SOOT for one project, I tried to increase the life of use of the garment. For example, converting people's travel stories into motifs and the fabric was actually made into a memory cloth. Like that, if it's customised to be your story, you would want to keep it for a longer duration. With the textiles I make, only after a good 80-100 washes will the print come off. If you compare that to a fast-fashion t-shirt where the print would come off in 50 washes So the print shows promise of durability and does not bleed colour or fade.

I do encourage my customers to reuse, a top can be reused into a bag which is something I try to promote on my page. Personally, I try to recycle cloth from garments into books or collaborate with other companies who recycle cloth and upcycle it.