

# FIRSTPOST.

## **India's textile industry is seeking innovative solutions to preserve and tap into our heritage**

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India, with a tribal population of 104.28 million, doesn't have a central agency that has managed to map the wealth of its tribal textile design and build a database that can be accessed with ease by retailers, importers and design students.

“In the Northeast (home to over 200 tribes), textile design is more geometric higher up in the hills because the tribes work on simple loin looms. As one descends, a transition to throw shuttle and fly shuttle looms can be seen. Textile design goes beyond aesthetic and becomes a source of identity for them,” Mukti Gogoi, commissioner and secretary — Handloom, Textile, Sericulture Department, Government of Assam said, at the Textiles India

2017 event held earlier at the end of June. This trade fair brought 15,000 Indian textile industry representatives, 2,500 international buyers from 106 nations and hundreds of craft connoisseurs to Mahatma Mandir, a convention-cum-exhibition centre in Gandhinagar, Gujarat.

With an aim to present India's cultural wealth to the world, technology is making a positive intervention. The Bodo dress (Bodos are the single largest group in the Northeast) can be found on Google's virtual exhibition project titled 'We Wear Culture'. Textiles from North-Eastern India (1850-1980), mainly collected during anthropological fieldwork, are on display here. The digital collection also features the Pani Gamcha, a black cotton cloth with white stripes, used by the Meitei women in Manipur and the historic Naga warrior cloth painted with human figures.

*Firstpost* interacted with textile revivalists, designers and retailers present in Gandhinagar to understand how protection and development of design can financially uplift the textile sector that sustains the livelihood of over 45 million and contributes approximately five percent to India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).



Padma Bhushan Rajeev Sethi, founder of Asian Heritage Foundation, a scenographer and art curator who has been representing India internationally since the early '80s, was also at the fair. He stated that along with mapping textiles, the other technical innovation is the protection of intellectual property. He was of the view that “the GI (Geographical Indications) tag is crucial. Many designers are lifting designs. The aborigines of Australia have filed law-suites against Japanese and Canadian firms, and the Aleuts of Alaska have patented their motifs. What India needs to understand is community tribal property, as distinct from individual tribal property.”

In an earlier interview with *Firstpost*, Union minister for Textiles Smriti Irani had said that it's time to realise that India's products are novel and can tickle the fancy of the foreign buyer. “Today, tourists coming from the UK and the EU want to understand the life of a weaver or an artisan, and even international tour operators want to offer that experience. We've had a meeting with the Tourism Ministry and have said that if there's any tourist circuit you want to do in conjunction with all the textile clusters, we are more than happy to do this,” she told us. Today, the US gift, novelty, and souvenir store industry includes about 23,000 stores with combined annual revenue of about \$19 billion. Rajeev Sethi cites the example of a number tag on a handloom mug that is for keeps and can be cherished as a souvenir. In his opinion, mixing and matching handmade and machine-made will ‘dilute India as a destination for the supreme instrument’.

The handloom, handicrafts and sericulture sector is largely unorganised and is operated on a small-scale through traditional tools and methods. “Today, Amazon runs a handloom and handicraft store on its website where big and small sellers can

take their products to the world. It's an anytime, anywhere market that lets sellers reach a wide audience. A year and a half ago, Amazon came out with the movie *India Modern* that captures the confidence of a new India that can stand up for its own design and marry it with what's global," points out Narendra Kumar, designer and creative director at Amazon, who is reaching out to NGOs and big and small manufacturers to curate a quality crafts e-bazaar.

Innovation is another method of preservation. "The confidence level of weavers in innovation is quite low. I persuaded a community in Phulia, which had been weaving stoles for the Japanese market, to start creating linen saris. They kept insisting that the linen is too heavy and that it will certainly break on the loom. In such a situation, the designers have to ensure that they bear all kinds of initial losses," said Anavila Misra, who was recently approached by the Ministry of Textiles to revive the Garhwal textile cluster. Her linen and organic saris have an austere and watered down feel to them and have been worn by Bollywood's Konkona Sen Sharma, Deepti Naval and Vidya Balan. Misra has been working with weavers in West Bengal and *khatwa* (applique) craftswomen from Jharkhand since 2009. The Garhwal sari that was essentially cotton body with a silk *pallu* and border has in the recent times converted into all silk, because as the market forces work, silk commands a higher price. The result was a dilution of their trademark aesthetic and the sarees ended up looking like they could be from anywhere in India; a lack of an understanding of design economics could result in a slash in the price of a craft. "I revived the use of cotton and mixed linens too, and added silver into the zari," explained Misra.



Designer Manish Malhotra also showed up in Gandhinagar in a crisp blue Nehru jacket. He expressed deep resentment at a certain kind of image — of people partying and drinking away — that has become synonymous with the fashion industry. “Fashion is considered a serious entity abroad and even in India, a change in perception is happening for the better.” The designer who calls himself ‘unapologetically glamorous’ brings to mind salmon pink, gold dust, emerald green and deep blue gowns whose gracefully long lines shine like gem stones under stage lights. He feels it is his contemporary twist to traditional crafts like *chikankari* and *phulkari* that has put him on the world map and it is this belief in innovation that will work wonders for Indian design.

The difference between designers in the East and the West is that the latter are ready to invest a great deal of time and energy into

design, because then the end product commands a high price. **Yogesh Chaudhary** of Jaipur Rugs, which retails its luxury hand-knotted rugs to over 40 countries, revealed that his internationally bestselling carpet is 'Antar', which is created by three weavers who live and work together for months and combine their weaves, ergo their values and ideas, into one single rug that costs Rs 1.50 lakh. "India needs to be ahead in design and not just in manufacturing. Five years ago, we used to write 'Bharat mein Nirmaat' in Hindi on our catalogue. A westerner is intrigued by a Hindi message and that is what really builds brand India," he explained, as he stood in the centre of his stall in one of the tents in the 40,000 sq metres of air-conditioned space of the venue.

There are 1,243 ITIs with clothing technology courses, 17 NIFTS, 44 powerloom service centres in India and to improve technical skills in the apparel industry, the government has established 75 apparel training and design centres. But, the apparel growth story is incomplete without ensuring that design skill is passed on from one generation to another not just in families of weavers and artisans but also in industry-friendly ways in design schools. "Retailers, exporters and design houses are the largest pool of employers of design graduates. The Apparel Export Promotion Council has trained students in lakhs and Clothing Manufacturers Association of India (CMAI) has trained about 35,000 students in the last two years," explained Rahul Mehta President, CMAI. Going ahead, a panel discussion that featured Siddharth Bindra, managing director, BIBA and Rakesh Biyani, joint MD, Future Retail Group concluded that one of the reasons for the existence of India's export industry is that the country has recognised as providing design and development support to buyers overseas

much more than competing countries like China, Bangladesh and Vietnam.

The Indian textile industry, which has a long way to go, at least for now, seems to be sync with Modi's formula of 'farm to fibre to fabric to fashion to foreign'. Here's hoping that India is able to strike a chord with its own aesthetic capital as melodiously as the rhythm of that rhetoric.

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