

Going Green: Brands take the initiative to make a difference

With growing awareness about organic cotton, global fashion companies are leaving no stone unturned to go green. Treading the same path are a handful of Indian companies who are making a mark with their organic lines. The market is yet to catch up in a big way, find out **Ajay Goswami** and **Perna Sharma**



After receiving flak from activists and concerned people about the harmful impact of cotton on environment, many garment manufacturers from across the globe are now scouting for organically produced cotton to manufacture garments in a more sustainable manner. In fact, 'Going Green' is the buzz word across the globe in the apparel segment, there is a realization about the need for being ecofriendly in every aspect of life.

It's all about reducing carbon footprint, adapting sustainable production practices to save the earth. In garmenting with demand for organic cotton the entire process has become more transparent with companies becoming more responsible, it has also offered customers a new choice to do their bit towards nature by opting for organic.

After seeing a 10 per cent rise in production of organic cotton last year, 2014-15 saw a slight dip of 3.8 per cent, production is set to increase again in 2017-18 when a number of in-conversion programs in India reach certification.

In total, there are currently 19 countries growing organic cotton, though the top five growing countries (India, China, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan and US) account for more than 92 per cent of production. India alone accounts for 67 per cent.

GOING GREEN THE ORGANIC WAY

However, organic is still niche in India but stakeholders say the market is promising and growing consistently. Niharika Verma, Founder, BonOrganik points out organic

- **Organic is still a niche market**
- **As per some estimates, the market is growing at 60 per cent a year**
- **Consumer mindset is changing little by little and they are willing to pay for organic**
- **India is one of the largest producer of organic cotton**
- **Most of it is exported**
- **Very few niche brands offer only organic lines**
- **They are relatively small players**
- **Most of the organic clothing made in India is exported**
- **Domestic demand still low**

segment is growing rapidly and people know they have to be concerned about the environment they dwell in before it's too late. "The market is growing and prospects for an organic brand in India are very bright," he says. Hina Palkar, Founder, I Wear Me Fashions goes on to add, "Organic cotton exports are the highest from India.

While readymade T-shirts may not be as large but organic cotton in its raw form, fabrics etc, see high exports from India."

In fact, Apurva Kothari, Founder, No Nasties, has been seeing a steady rise in demand for organic clothing from the time he started business in 2011. "As more and more customers are becoming conscious of the impact of their purchases and there

is more coverage in the media about the benefits and importance of organic farming, more people are asking for sustainable and ethical clothing." As per some estimates, the market is growing at about 60 per cent every year.

Explaining the benefits Verma, says eco-friendly organic cotton is beneficial for farmers and softer and gentler on the body. It's all about cotton grown without artificial and harmful fertilizers and chemical.

Even at the production level, the factory needs to follow stringent guidelines laid down by GOTS, etc. Some visible differences are it's naturally softer than chemically softened conventional cotton.



Elaborating further, Kothari says “Organic cotton produced, and certified, according to set agricultural standards. One of most important fact is that organic practices prohibit the use of ‘agricultural chemicals’ (artificial pesticides and fertilisers) along with genetically modified (GM) seeds. Instead, cotton is grown as a part of a production system that sustains the health of soil, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and locally adapted inputs in place of chemical inputs, which can have an adverse effect on farmers and the environment. Organic cotton production combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved.”

Moreover, it uses 71 per cent less water and 62 per cent less energy. Growing organic cotton keeps farmers and their families safe.

They are not exposed to toxic chemicals in the field or through their food and water supply. Organic cotton is 80 per cent rain-fed, which reduces pressure on local water sources. The absence of chemicals also means that water is cleaner and safer.

HIGHER PRICES A DETERRENT?

Of course, organic being niche the consumer has to pay a little extra. To this Verma says, “Why pay extra? People pay for the product and if your product is genuine and design is good, people pay for it. Indian audience is underestimated, they are well travelled and educated enough to know what organic is. The problem comes when organic is boring, which we are not.

That’s our USP we are stylishly organic and economical as well. We are organic by choice and pay equal attention to aspects like design and fit.” Some stake holders say, Indian consumers understand the concept of organic T-shirts but they need to be educated more about the material and its advantages. They are willing to pay extra once they understand the importance of using organic. While it is difficult to manage the entire portfolio on the strength of organics but we need to take risk.

Seconding this view Palkar observes, “India is still warming up to the idea of ‘organic’. The organic food category is doing extremely well and a large part of its success is driven by the fact that consumers warmed up to the idea of as it directly affected them. Organic clothing, on the other hand, has little to do with direct impact. The long-term impact of conventional clothing is often missed by consumers.”

There still needs to be a lot of communication, and efforts need to be made at the ground level to make people aware of both sides of organic clothing, farming, manufacturing and consumer side.

“Our brand philosophy, is to make organic clothing accessible and pocket friendly for every consumer. The price of organic clothing shouldn’t be determined by just the term organic but also the overall aesthetic of the product. Organic is economical in terms of production and we see no reason why it cannot be priced at par with conventional clothing,” Palkar opines.

Kothari says people are willing to pay

extra but they also need to know that as demand for organic clothing increases and it becomes mainstream prices will drop due to efficiencies of scale. “Right now, the supply chain is limited to smaller niche brands like ours working with smaller size mills and the costs are higher due to that. Moreover, if you realise that in the end, someone is paying for cheap, fast fashion (and it’s usually the cotton farmers and factory workers who have to take on this burden), it’s not fair to be only looking at the financial cost and ignoring the social and environmental costs of your purchase.”

COMPLEXITIES OF PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT

In the race to strike a balance between environment and being effectively priced, brands are finding it tough to convince and get customers to buy for this concept. However, extremely confident of their offerings, companies most brands are going ahead with their organic launches to entice consumers. As Verma says, “our strength is concept of being India’s first brand to offer matching outfits.

Organic is a choice that we as a brand have opted as we care for the environment. We dwell in and people love our brand and we are getting noticed globally for our work.” Palkar feels organic is still in very nascent stage in India, even from the manufacturing side. “Small and boutique brands who do not have large requirements face a lot of difficulties when it comes to procurement and finding suppliers at optimum costs. Only a handful of manufacturing companies are willing to work with smaller brands.”

Currently Tier I, II cities are driving demand of such products but as consumers become more aware, it will go beyond that, say stakeholders. According to Palkar, there are a number of other cotton sustainability initiatives, each with a slightly different approach, geography and focus area. For example, Fairtrade prioritises trade, organisational structures and community development; Cotton made in Africa (CmiA) focusses on livelihood improvement in Africa; and the Better Cotton Initiative aims to make the mainstream better.

Talking about India, Kothari says “India is the leading producer of organic cotton and supplies around 66.9 per cent of the world’s

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organic cotton. Apart from cotton, other materials that are getting into the production process are – Bamboo, Modal, Tencel, to name a few.” He goes on to add there are other sources such as hemp and bamboo as alternative to cotton but still in early stages of technology use and are not usually ‘certified organic’.

NEW LAUNCHES & EXPANSION PLANS

The concept of organic clothing in India is fairly new and hasn’t really caught the attention of consumers. Only a few brands offer full range of organic clothing and most of them operate on a small scale, which



often limits the brand’s reach. Manufacturers often cater only to export market because of the huge demand abroad and also because of subsidies provided by the government for exports.

They often end up neglecting domestic market and brands who normally work on smaller numbers and quantities as compared to big brands.

Yet, there are brands like BonOrganick, I Wear Me et al, who are satiating the demand of domestic customers with their collections. Buoyed by growth potential, BonOrganik for example, is planning organic hoodies and use of soft weaves for its woven collection.

The colour palette has been inspired by northern lights and styles are kept flowy and effortless. Something that everybody shape would be comfortable wearing and will not make winters look too bulky. I Wear Me is looking to launch an all new women’s category in the coming season, which will

include dresses, tops, comfy pants made from 100 per cent organic cotton, and it also plans to introduce more eco-friendly fabrics, like Peace silk, linen, Modal, etc.

No Nasties will be launching new product categories such as kids clothing, bags & accessories, and perhaps home products. “We are primarily an online brand and will continue to expand that. Having said that, we are also planning increasing our presence in Goa, which is our headquarters and may open our own retail store by the end of the season,” informs Kothari.

BonOrganik has been doing great ever since inception and forthcoming season, it expects 100 per cent growth with the launch of winter wear similar clothing for family. I Wear Me is focussing on bulk exports over the last few years, which has done well, however the company plans to enter e-retail for the forthcoming seasons. No Nasties has seen steady growth since inception and intends to carry on the same growth over the years.

As far as retail strategy is concerned, BonOrganik has been selective as the concept they are working on needs right projection. “We plan to tie up with a MBO this year and provide exclusivity in terms offline retail presence,” says Verma. I Wear Me currently retails exclusively through its own website along with other online retail partners like Flipkart, etc.

“We do not have plans to retail through traditional offline formats yet. Our key focus is India, and we are planning to target tier I and II cities. We are also planning to expand our product portfolio and offer more than just



T-shirts. The aim is to cater to audiences right from kids to adults. Again the focus is not to go out and out on organics but the aesthetic part of the brand that is unique to us. Organic concept has to be subtle and weave into the entire communication while talking to our audiences,” asserts Palkar.

PROSPECTS AHEAD

Organic cotton is currently at a critical juncture up to 2009, there was steep growth, with farmers planting large amounts of organic cotton. However, when the economic crisis hit, sustainability initiatives were also hit hard.

In addition, cotton in general is experiencing competition from other crops. Demand for organic cotton is without doubt growing and more & more brands have committed to use 100 per cent organic cotton. This growth in demand will create opportunities to improve organic cotton supply chains, and incentivise farmers to increase production.

Palkar also believes clothing is an ever-growing category. “If organic concept is done right, it will find takers and believers in the concept. Government intervention of making organics mandatory can take the concept a long way and help build a sustainable clothing ecosystem. The market will grow steadily but the category will stand out for players who bring in clear innovations in terms of fabrics, patterns, etc. with utmost positivity,”. Kothari concludes on an optimistic note, “The indicators look positive – looks like 2017-18 will be a positive year and the future is bright.”

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