

Local clothing brands make their mark

MIR FAZLA RABBY

Clothing brands in Bangladesh are drawing in a wider span of consumers over the last decade as they continue to offer fashion-rich items that conform to native tastes.

The affordable pricing range of the clothes has also been a key factor for the local brands' growing popularity, especially among the youth.

Khalid Mahmood Khan, director of Kay Kraft, an emerging local brand, said they stepped into the market to change the cliché that rich people alone dominate clothing fashion.

"We focused on serving the middle-income groups of people with fashion-rich local clothes."

Khan said they have experienced double-digit sales growth on an average over the last decade, and that indicates the increasing popularity of the local clothes -- weaved, stitched, printed and embroidered in Bangladesh.

Kay Kraft currently has 15 outlets, including a recent one in Chittagong. The fashion house is also planning to open an outlet in Montreal, Canada, to satisfy the growing number of consumers abroad.

Cat's Eye, another clothing brand that sells mostly menswear, saw 10-15 percent sales growth on an average in the last decade, said Ashraf Uddin Shiplu, the brand's executive director.

The fashion house produced four lakh pieces of clothes last year, he said. Now, one of the biggest clothing brands, Cats Eye's 37-outlet network covers five district headquarters, including Chittagong, Khulna, Sylhet, Cox's Bazar and Bogra, in addition to the capital.

Local clothing brands, like Cat's Eye, Westec, and Artisti, produce goods with imported fabrics. But brands like Kay Kraft, Aarong and Banglar Mela are different, as they completely depend on local fabrics.

Aarong engages some 37,000 rural artisans and handicrafts producers to produce its fabrics, according to a statement by the leading fashion house. Last year, Aarong's consumption stood at about three million yards of hand-woven fabric.

Aarong's sales in 2010 stood at about Tk 339.5 crore, says Q Pushpita Alam, programme manager (communications). Currently, the fashion house employs 2,113 regular people, she added.

Bangladeshi brands that import fabrics hope



Customers shuffle through items on display at a brand store in Dhaka.

to go global and plan to open outlets abroad. Cat's Eye also mulls exporting its produces, and an outlet will be opened soon in the West, said the Cat's Eye director.

On the other hand, Banglar Mela, a fashion house that depends on local fabrics, has no intention to become an international brand, other than expanding its market in Bangladesh, said Emdad Hoque, product development designer and director of the brand.

In addition to expanding their markets, Bangladeshi clothing brands encounter various other problems, mostly associated with taxing.

Shiplu said the government increased the VAT (value-added tax) on imported fabric from 1.5 percent to 5 percent in June 2010, without any prior notice, which put them in serious trouble.

Moreover, customs duty on imported fabric is around 89 percent, he said.

"If the government allows us to buy fabrics produced by Bangladeshi names, like Beximco or Monno Fabric, we will be able to serve our clientele better."

But according to government restrictions, the garment factories cannot sell more than about three percent of its fabric inside the country and

must export the rest, he said.

The local fashion houses, to share their internal and external problems, have recently decided to form a platform -- Fashion Entrepreneurs Association of Bangladesh (Fahsion Udyog in Bangla).

Khan said primarily, 56 fashion houses are members of the association. "Fashion Udyog will soon come out after the commerce ministry accepts the application submitted this month, and related modalities are finished."

fazla.rabby@thedailystar.net

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Ecotourism offers a feast of opportunities in Asia

Afp, Puerto Princesa, Philippines

Philippine fisherman Abner Abrigo used to enjoy feasting on dolphins and turtles until he realised they were more valuable as tourist attractions.

The wiry 28-year-old said eating dolphin "adobo" style had been his top choice -- a reference to the Spanish-inspired cooking of meat in a thick broth of soya sauce, vinegar and garlic that is popular among all Filipinos.

Now, Abrigo and others from a small fishing community on the dazzling western Philippine island of Palawan help to take visitors dolphin watching.

"The extra money from the dolphin watching makes a big difference to our livelihoods," Abrigo told AFP from a dock in Palawan's capital, Puerto Princesa.

Across Asia, similar types of micro-businesses are offering local communities financial incentives to protect their environments as they take advantage of the region's small but growing "ecotourism" industry.

Members of the ethnic Qiang minority in mountainous southwest China are selling meals made from organic produce to visitors, while in Indonesia locals are taking tourists from rainforest eco-lodges to meet endangered orangutans.

The travel industry and governments are also responding to the rising demand for "green" travel, with Cambodia recently becoming the first Southeast Asian nation to commit to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council's principles.

On the Internet, travellers have a myriad of choices from tour operators promoting "sustainable" holidays, including offers to buy carbon credits to offset air travel and to stay at high-end resorts that embrace green practices.

"Ecotourism is a still a niche market but interest is rising," John Koldowski, deputy chief executive officer of the Pacific Asia Travel Association, told



A tourist rides a zipline descending from the summit of the Ugong Rock located in Puerto Princesa on the western Philippine island of Palawan.

AFP

"This is driven by an awareness generally in the environment and being green and sustainable, but also in something that's becoming in short supply in the world -- peace, quiet and solitude."

Government leaders, local communities and non-government organisa-

tions on Palawan, one of the Philippines' most beautiful and biologically diverse islands, have been among the most enthusiastic adopters of ecotourism in Asia.

Abrigo's fishing community -- as part of an ecotourism programme called Bayanijuan run by the Puerto Princesa government and Philippine

media company ABS-CBN -- has run dolphin and whale watching tours for about two years.

Abrigo and some of his neighbours act as spotters for the tourist vessel while out fishing themselves in their small outrigger boats.

If they are the spotter that finds the dolphins or whales for the tourist boat, they get paid 25 pesos (about 60 cents) for each passenger on the boat.

"Sometimes there are more than 20 people on the boat... jackpot," Abrigo said with a smile.

While Abrigo still needs to fish to guarantee enough money to survive, other former fishermen elsewhere on Palawan have given up their old jobs altogether to cater for the growing number of tourists.

Edwin Bermejo, 43, confessed to having performed trawl net fishing in Puerto Princesa's stunning Honda Bay for many years.

Trawl net and other destructive methods of fishing, such as using dynamite and cyanide, have ruined many of Palawan's precious coral reefs over the past few decades.

"We didn't understand the results of what we were doing," he said.

But as fish catches started to dry up and tourists began to arrive in the 1990s, Bermejo said he and other fishermen around Honda Bay realised they needed to change their way of living if they were to survive.

With the help of local non-government organisations and more recently the Bayanijuan programme, they turned their fishing vessels into island hopping boats.

They also worked with the Puerto Princesa government to enforce a ban on destructive fishing practices, doing volunteer patrols and reporting any offences to authorities.

"Our fish stocks have slowly recovered," Bermejo told AFP from aboard a boat in Honda Bay that takes tourists to the beaches of some of the area's

tiny islands, as well as snorkelling and diving in the remaining coral reefs.

His community association is now intending to take out a loan to nearly double its current fleet of 66 boats in an effort to meet a recent boom in tourist numbers.

"This would never have happened if we kept on fishing the way we did," Bermejo said.

The mayor of Puerto Princesa, Edward Hagedorn, is one of the driving forces behind the ecotourism effort, according to many environment activists on Palawan who regard him as an ally in their campaign to protect its ecosystems.

Hagedorn said that after first becoming mayor in 1992 he banned mining, logging and factories, confident that in the long-run more jobs would be created by preserving the area's natural wonders and attracting tourists.

Tourist numbers to Puerto Princesa jumped from 12,000 in 1992 to 425,000 in 2010, and many more are expected as the area gains global fame -- National Geographic named Palawan as one of its top-20 destinations this year.

"Now with the number of visitors rising, it's giving more and more income to the people. But if we allowed mining and logging... those jobs would have been just temporary," he said.

For Anthony Cuvinar, 27, the tourism boom has turned him from a struggling handicraft maker into a boatman and tour guide for a fireflies tour who can now earn up to 20,000 pesos (470 dollars) a month -- a good wage in local terms.

But when asked while paddling his kayak along the Iwahig River at dusk what he liked most about his job, Cuvinar did not mention the money.

"When I got into this I learnt to love nature and I enjoy helping other people to understand the importance of nature," he said, as nine egrets flew past in formation.

"Ecotourism is a still a niche market but interest is rising. It is driven by an awareness generally in the environment and being green and sustainable, but also in something that's becoming in short supply in the world -- peace, quiet and solitude"