

# BEING

## The ethical

# CONSUMER



Rokeya Sultana, an artisan skilled at making embroidered quilts (nakshi kanthas), hails from Faridpur. Although tremendously skilled at what she makes, Sultana is unaware of the concept of fair trade, ethical purchase, or even natural fibres! All she cares about is putting food on the table for her children with her daily income.

For that, she works day in and day out, catering to orders placed by various fashion stores from the capital; ones that seem to utilise her strengths during their times of need, peak seasons like Baishakh and Eid, and cuts her off for the rest of the year, when she needs them.

By cutting her off, we mean not paying her enough, or even on time. Sultana has to make quite a few rounds to the local offices set up by these elusive fashion houses before getting her settlements, which often barely covers her daily expenses.

There's a parallel narrative to Sultana's story, and here's how it goes: Eid is approaching fast, and the so called, hard-to-trace fashion houses are having a tough time keeping up with their stocks. Good for them, we say! These companies are in for a lot of luck, as sales have been skyrocketing. It gives them more reason to pressure the likes of Rokeya Sultana to produce more, in order to reap additional benefits.

Meanwhile, in the capital, Sultana's work is highly appreciated by the clients, and her stitched kanthas go off the racks in a whiff. The customers praise the fashion house for all the finesse, and have zero idea about the maker, and her tribulations.

The marked-up price attached to the kanthas are hefty, and customers are willing to pay for it, just for the flair of the embroidery.

The irony lies in the fact that this very money does not reach Sultana at all, and her feet still turns sore, walking to and fro to the local office of these unnamed fashion brands, just to collect her meagre monthly pay-check.

So where did all the profits go?

Into the pockets of the capitalist manipulators perhaps! But we are as much a part of it as they are.

Our fault? Did we ask once whether the company was fair trade or not? We did not even feel the obligation to check on their activities when we had the chance.

We did not want to know about the stories of the people who made our quilts? We did not care...we never do!

The only thing that mattered to us was



our selfish benefits from the purchase. In simple words, these unnamed, unjust organisations only exist, and act the way they do because we, the consumers, let them.

#### ETHICAL – OR IS IT?

The term is vague and can mean so many different things. But in general, what it

#### LET'S RE-EDUCATE OURSELVES FAIR TRADE – WHAT'S SO FAIR ABOUT TRADE?

Brands tackling poverty, or alleviating it by paying a fair price at every step of the supply chain for its goods and services, are said to be practicing fair trade.

Fair trade requires the manufacturers to produce sustainably, maintaining descent working conditions, and paying employees reasonably, based on their efforts — making their livelihood better than before.

signifies is that the produce did not harm the environment in any way, and fairly supported the suppliers and producers associated with the product.

An easy way to judge whether a company is ethical or not, is to look at the transparency of the production process, supply chain, even staffing. The more public the information, the more likely that the company is being ethical in their production process.

#### ORGANIC CLOTHING /ECO CLOTHING – HOW CAN CLOTHES BE ORGANIC?

Organic clothing means clothes that have been made with a minimum use of chemicals, and with minimum damage to the environment

#### CHECKING THE FACTS

The facts are worse than we can possibly imagine. Each year, more than 120 million trees are cut down to support our textile industry. This certainly creates a snowball effect, because trees are the major source to impounding carbon dioxide, and such mindless felling of trees not only reduc-

es our forest space, playing havoc with habitats for wild life, but also destroys the planet's reliable way of combatting greenhouse gases.

We can lower our personal carbon footprints by looking for certified organic fabrics, purchasing less of fast-fashion items, and looking for durable and timeless fashion items instead.

The dyeing process is also something to look out for in the world of fashion. During any sort of dyeing process, 80 percent of the pigments are retained, and the rest are flushed out into the environment, causing around 23,000 kilograms of dye to enter the water systems every year.

Research has been able to prove that the chemical dyes are carcinogenic, and may cause long term health issues if not dealt with properly; the best way to avoid chemical dyes getting into our waterways is by replacing them with organic dyes, where the pigments are sourced from natural items such as onions, indigo, betel nut, etc.

In short, what we are proposing is that we need to grow a conscience before time runs out. Thinking that a company's production policies are never our duty is similar to owning an escapist personality.

#### IT'S JUST NOT RIGHT!

If a certain company is reaping benefits off its suppliers, it's only because we let them. It is about time we needed to educate ourselves on the basics of organic purchase, fair trade, and refrained from mindlessly buying fast fashion items. Because with this small change in ourselves, maybe there will come a day when there's zero carbon footprints, and the likes of people such as Rokeya Sultana would not have to worry about how to live through the next day, and we could sleep better with a clear conscience.

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