

All You Need to Know About Sustainable Fashion

HIYA ISLAM

There is a lot to talk about the fashion industry – unethical practices, unsustainable supply chains, spiralling consumerism and the like. Before you start thinking that turning your wardrobe green suggests ugly and weird, well, it's not and neither is it for minimalists.

What is sustainable fashion? From design to manufacture, from distribution to use, and from use to disposal, sustainable fashion makes sure every step of the way is environmentally friendly. You wouldn't want to wear a shirt that you know came from destructive harvesting or a jacket that'd go on to leach chemicals in the landfill. And much less something that never rots, I hope. Most of us struggle to understand the underlying problems created by fast fashion. When trends shift and evolve every hour, the struggle to keep up overrides any other priority. While it's important for you to be fashionably appropriate, you can still dress the same with a little more effort that would go on to have a huge impact on the welfare of the planet. Here's how.

CHOOSE SUSTAINABLE BRANDS

By buying from these labels, you are way ahead of the game. These brands focus on naturally derived and environmentally conscious fibres like, cotton, linen, wool, silk etc. over petroleum-based polyester, nylon and such. And of course,

use eco-friendly dyes, opt for low/zero waste and minimal water usage. Often, they try to reduce the carbon footprint by using local production and renewable-energy powered facilities. Basically, everything out of your hand has been taken care of.

KNOW WHAT YOU BUY

Many brands are out there bluffing, using buzz words such as "conscious wear", "sustainable style" as marketing tactics. Keep an eye out for greenwashing strategies and do your homework. Read about the brand. How transparent is their supply chain? How eco-friendly are their practices? What certifications do they own? And there are so many specifying different terms and conditions met. And mind you, there is no one-size-fits-all certification for sustainability. Examples include GOTS, Cradle to Cradle, Bluesign, Standard 100, USDA Organic and so on. To an outsider, it indeed is textile jargon. But the key to finding your answer lies in one question: Is this brand sustainable? And the mystery unravels on its own.



hence, the rise of pre-owned luxury fashion. You'd be surprised at the options and how pocket-friendly they can be.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

Say yes to clothing made from recycled fibres. Recycled polyester is better than virgin polyester. Or upcycled fabric – clothes that have been revamped or repurposed.

BUY LESS, WEAR MORE

Invest in classic pieces and not fads. Pick and choose in a way that allows you to create versatile looks. In 2015, Barnado's, a British charity organisation, found that each piece is worn seven times on average before throwing out. Take care of your clothes to make them last longer; sew to repair, fix a button, and wash inside-out. While you may naturally think it applies only to clothes, but no, sustainability goes for everything we wear.

EMBRACE THE "PRE-LOVED"

One man's waste is another man's treasure. Instead of splurging on an outfit that you'd only wear once, try a clothing rental service or a thrift store. Even big names in fashion are following suit and

Hiya loves food that you hate by norm – broccoli, pineapple pizza and Bounty bars. Find her at hiyaislam.11@gmail.com

WHAT IS THE BANGLADESHI AESTHETIC?

AAHIR MRITTIKA

It's hard to think about fashion these days without talking about the rise in subcultures and aesthetics. The aesthetics in question include dark academia, goth, and cottagecore, and they're explored and popularised heavily by platforms like Pinterest, Tumblr, and TikTok.

Aesthetics is defined as a branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of beauty, taste, and art. Looking at all of these examples led me to think about the subcultures in our local context. While they do exist here, we also have some of our own:

THE HIMUCORE

This aesthetic is obviously based on Humayun Ahmed's famous character Himu. It's defined by mustard-yellow *panjabis* and *fatuas*, with a strong disregard for shoes. Accessories could include flowers in your hair and a pair of glasses that you probably don't need. A perpetual Pahela Falgun, reading palms and predicting the future.

THE CHHAYANAUT

Chhayanaut has been the introduction to music for generations of musicians and singers. They play Tagore alongside Bengali rock bands. Their wardrobe is all the earthy tones. Light green *panjabis*. Cotton sarees with clay earrings on week-ends. Brown silk. Red and white colour schemes. Big bold bindis. A little smudge of kohl on the edge of the eyes. Occasion-



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

al pearl studs from their mothers. Fabric satchels filled with notebooks of *sargam*. Wrists of bangles and rustic bracelets. A guitar next to the harmonica.

THE CHARUKOLA

This is for the artists and art enthusiasts. Everyone's hair is in a bun, probably held in place with a pencil. Casual outfits with a plethora of accessories. An infinite colour scheme. A brush tucked behind the ear. Paint splattered shabby jeans with faded T-shirts. Scarves around the neck.

Long, jute satchels hanging with every paint brush from New Market. A strong urgency in the air, to create something new.

CULTURE'S GIRL

The fashion aspect of this aesthetic includes loads of thrifted pieces and hand me downs. Wearing your mother's watch for "sentiment" or your brother's worn in oversized jacket for warmth. Western outfits with eastern elements: throwing a denim jacket over the threaded *kurti* in

winter and wrapping a shawl over T-shirts. Silver jewellery with everything. Bindis with any outfit. Intricate mehendi designs. Roaming around Shilpakala Academy for art exhibitions, and Bangla Academy for the book festivals. Dressing up at home for no reason. Curfew at sunrise.

BENGALI ACADEMIA

This list is incomplete without including the scholars and students whose most prominent accessories are eyebags from staying up late. Who carry fully annotated books with pages falling off, that they bargained for in the sun at Nilkhet. Who are STEM majors but secretly write novels. Discussing politics over endless cups of tea and sitting on campus yards with roasted peanuts. Coffee and tea stains on their freshly ironed clothes. School uniforms with a blue tint. Pashmina shawls over white *panjabis* and *kurtis*. Messy unkempt hair falling over thick glasses.

The Bangladeshi aesthetic spans over boats and rickshaws, alleys and foot over-bridges, street foods and *tong er cha*, *natoks* and Matir Moina – an article can't possibly encompass it. Fashion has always been an extension of culture. That's why food, film, music, and language inspire us in the ways we express ourselves through style.

Aahir Mrittika likes to believe she's a Mohammadpur local, but she's actually a nerd. Catch her studying at mrittikaahir@gmail.com

Fashion: Self-expression or consumerism?

AANILA KISHWAR TARANNUM

1

As I write this piece sitting on my table with the laptop, I am wearing a black hoodie, dotted with dandruff-like remnants of cream I whipped for a dessert the previous day. I haven't washed this hoodie since the beginning of winter. The foods [and dirt] on it are layered, just like the dessert I mentioned.

It is when I put on this old, dirty hoodie and wear my hair in a tight bun that I feel the least like a person. I feel quite invisible in this outfit, sitting inside my room with nobody but the FBI agent on the other side of the webcam watching me work. Few people have seen me looking like this, because this is not the self I typically want to express to the world (not to be confused with the self I am ashamed or embarrassed to express to the world).

The version of myself that I quite like expressing is when I'm in clothes that excite me. The accessories work right. Colours go together. Eyeliner wings are at that perfect angle. The lipstick works without overwhelming my usually print-heavy, colourful wardrobe.

Fashion and style is a journey, I feel. Quite a few women in my mother's side of the family are gifted designers. They paid attention to every detail, head to toe. They'd grown up making their own clothes and it became an interesting extension of their personality. As I grew older and began creating my own wardrobe, I became more aware of myself.

Most of all, I feel that clothing ends up becoming a vehicle of self-expression because it makes you more aware of yourself. Regardless of your level of investment in your outward appearance and denial of social constructs, fashion can become a vehicle of dissent, it can be symbolic for religions, cultures, regions, movements.

To dismiss fashion as purely utilitarian and label it vain would be denying the many messages, meanings and moments that clothing has delivered throughout history. It is omnipresent, everywhere we go, every era you live in. Che Guevara and Billie Eilish and Mosharraf Karim are all fashion icons – a sentence I never thought I would write, but the point I want to make demands it.

I saw an uncle walking at Shyamoli today. He was wearing a bright orange topcoat and red earmuffs, and he had a huge moustache. At that moment, he too was

making a statement with his clothes.

(The statement is that he is a fashion icon.)

Every person chooses to express their gender with their clothing, even people who claim to put zero effort into dressing themselves. Clothing carries undeniable meaning, and that is why it can become a strong vehicle for self-expression.

2

If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is there to hear it, did it even make a sound? If you wear a fire outfit and don't post about it on Instagram, was your outfit even fire?

Being yourself in real life is rarely enough anymore – there's the added pressure of curating your life for social media. Fashion starts out as a creative medium, but it can be counteractive. The older, fashion-conscious women in my family, fell prey to the abundance of choice in the market. For us, that consumerism is supplemented by the presence of social media.

Under late capitalism, hobbies that involve material things are a slippery slope, be it clothing, makeup, gaming consoles or watches. The internet can meet every specific demand. Spending a few hundred taka impulse buying T-shirts online doesn't even require a second thought.

This is not to say the internet has had an entirely negative effect on fashion as a hobby – like everything else, the internet has provided more opportunities to people for expressing themselves than ever before. People who cannot express their queer identities within their communities have an outlet to do so through social platforms, and they make excellent use of fashion.

My personal gripe is less with the internet, and more with the way it aids rampant consumerism. If your personal style is Pakistani dressy *kameez*, you can keep collecting them endlessly – one for every *dawaat*. If you enjoy logos on clothes, there are enough brands for you to wear new clothes every day.

If you're a leftist, Instagram will advertise you businesses selling leftist merch. (They almost got me.)

The fashion industry hadn't been headed in the right direction even before the internet completely took over our shopping habits, thanks to the pandemic. Marc Jacobs said in a *Vogue* interview in April 2020, "We've done everything to such excess that there is no consumer for all of it."

The pressure to keep up with trends mounts on consumers as they keep buying one article of clothing after another, piling up their closets with clothes that will never be worn to its full capacity.

Having as many clothes in your closet as an



average-sized store is only a matter of time when nearly every store in the world is accessible. Influencers may convince you to tie to your self-worth to social media validation on #OOTD posts, but buying more than one new piece is an unsustainable, wasteful habit.

Meanwhile, the environment gets irreversibly damaged. The fashion industry produces over 92 million tonnes of waste per year and uses 1.5 trillion litres of water, alongside chemical pollution and high levels of carbon dioxide emissions, found a report published in Nature Research Journal.

Hasan Minhaj covered this better than I can, so I'd suggest a rewatch of *The Patriot Act*.

3

But clothes are fun, expressive, and exciting. Style is inseparable from its material manifestation. One cannot simply give up fashion when it carries so much meaning – so how does one strike a balance?

Consumerism, self-expression, and the journey in between – New York City-based Bangladeshi blogger Amiya Dewan has been there and done that. She studied fashion at Parsons School of Design, and the impact of fast fashion and consumerist practices on the environment made her notice the amount of waste we create through our wardrobes.

Last year, she set a rule for herself that she would only buy second-hand clothing, and donate one item of clothing against each purchase. She had been even stricter the previous year, allowing herself to buy only four articles of clothing throughout.

"For the industry to stop harming the environment, the industry will have to slow down its rates of production. On the other hand, the industry is creating so many jobs, evidently here in Bangladesh," Amiya pointed out.

Fast fashion's harm on the environment can only be minimised through a concerted global effort that also accounts for lost jobs in the industry, but our individual consumerist habits are easier to solve. A wardrobe that has too many choices cancels out the purpose of each article of clothing, and prevents full use of your favourite pieces.

Amiya's advice is to ask a simple question, "Does this outfit excite me?" Mortified after carrying five suitcases full of stuff to Bangladesh after her undergraduate studies ended, Amiya figured out strategies for purging her closet to build one where every piece of clothing has a purpose and expresses her personal style.

"The consideration of space should always be on your mind. There are unlimited clothes online but your space isn't unlimited," she said. "The trouble is letting go of things of sentimental value. You'll probably never wear that jewellery your aunt got you years ago but you think it's wrong to not keep it."

"But you can always take a picture, keep the memory. Memories are precious, things are not," Amiya said.

Amiya advises people to reuse their clothes to the fullest, and create wardrobes where the pieces are easy to style together. A few items of clothing can be used to create multiple looks – all it takes is a little creativity.

"Convincing yourself to get one slightly more expensive pair of pants instead of three pairs of cheaper quality ones is often a good way to motivate yourself to get the best use out of your clothes. You get your money's worth the more you wear them," Amiya said.

Brands should grow slowly and thoughtfully, and so should your wardrobe. Instead of relying on over-consumption to find our purpose as humans, let us be more responsible with our purchases, and let our choices express our best selves.

Aanila Kishwar Tarannum is a journalist and writer. Email: aanila.tarannum27@gmail.com