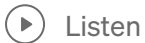Medium   Search

Reweaving the Textile Tapestry for a Circular Future

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by *Sanglap Jana and Anjali Taneja.*

Consumerism in India has taken a big leap over the last few decades with a growing shift towards fast fashion. The Indian fast fashion business will reach a sizeable market value of USD 50 billion by FY31, according to a report by Redseer Strategy Consultants. However, India's fast fashion frenzy is fuelling a textile waste crisis. Fashion for Good reports that the country generates nearly 7,800 kilo tonnes of waste annually, which is either dumped in landfills or incinerated. All three waste streams — pre-consumer, post-consumer, and imported — contribute to the total textile waste of the country. Policies such as the Solid Waste Management Rules (2016) aim to tackle solid waste but leave a glaring gap in handling discarded textiles, with little motivation for businesses to embrace sustainable practices or invest in cutting-edge recycling solutions.

Can India stitch together a plan before the pile becomes unmanageable?

Inadequate guidelines and policies, skill gaps, and a fragmented value chain contribute to the mismanagement of textile and apparel waste. Further, the unorganised nature of the textile value chain makes it difficult to ensure traceability and transparency. As the waste typically ends up in landfills or gets incinerated, hazardous chemicals like phthalates, heavy metals, and flame retardants are released into the environment, destroying flora and fauna and adversely impacting the environment and human health.

Learnings from circular approaches in the Global North and Global South

To overcome these challenges associated with growing textile wastes, the Global North and Global South economies have been exploring different solutions.

In the Global North, the European Union has introduced eco-design requirements and introduced extended producer responsibility (EPR) proposal and schemes. According to Ellen MacArthur Foundation, EPR is a crucial policy mechanism to deliver dedicated, continuous, and sufficient funds to manage waste by placing responsibility on producers to collect, sort, and recycle discarded products. Similarly, through state-level projects such as the Massachusetts textile waste ban and the 2023 Responsible Textile Recovery Act in California, the United States is pushing the adoption of circular practices in the textile sector.

A series of sustainability policies and initiatives, such as the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-Certified Green Factory programme and International Finance Corporation-led Advisory Partnership for Cleaner Textile in Bangladesh; Phnom Penh Waste Management Strategy and Action Plan (2018–2035)

in Cambodia; and the Green Transition Investment Program and Partnership in Indonesia, Philippines, and Vietnam have been undertaken in the Global South to promote textile circularity, waste management, and circular economy initiatives. Such initiatives highlight the importance of sustained policy support, partnerships and collaborations, and technological innovation to promote textile circularity.

As per a report by IDH — the Sustainable Trade Initiative and Sattva Consulting, 59% of the textile waste in India is subject to some form of reuse or recycling, but quality issues prevent most of it from re-entering the global supply chain. The lack of technological innovation and poor infrastructure are major hurdles to textile waste management.

Moreover, the rise of fast fashion, promoting the mass production and sale of cheap trendy garments, has aggravated the waste problem. The Baseline Assessment Report, 2023, by the Centre for Environment Education (CEE) India notes that while clothing production in the country has doubled in the last 15 years, the number of times garments are used before being discarded has reduced by 36%, leading to a pile-up of large volumes of waste clothing. Lack of conscious consumerism and effective waste management are the main obstacles to ensuring circularity in this sector.

Way Forward

At Bharat Tex 2024, India's largest global textile event held in New Delhi, the Textiles Committee (Ministry of Textiles), Government e-Marketplace (GeM), and the Standing Conference of Public Enterprises (Department of Public Enterprises) signed a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to promote the upcycling of textile waste. With this MoU in place, India needs to come up with a **standardised framework and an EPR guideline** for monitoring, reporting, and ensuring accountability of textile waste. Further, investment-friendly schemes and incentives could boost innovation and encourage **research and development** on indigenous recycling technologies. For example, government-sponsored grants, seed funding, and mentorship (especially for micro, small, and medium enterprises and start-ups) will help promote circularity in the sector. Also, the **eco-design** criteria for textile products coupled with stringent environmental regulations need to be strategised and implemented.

A **sustainable business model,** including a viable market for recycled products, will also improve textile waste management. Partnerships and collaborations among relevant stakeholders (essentially B2B or B2G) could enable the development of various business support tools, such as the Circular Design Guide by Ellen MacArthur Foundation, which helps in product design aligning with circular economy principles and tools like EU's digital passport, which ensures transparency and traceability of textile products. Finally, **capacity-building** initiatives, **sensitisation** drives, and focussed **awareness** campaigns can have positive spillovers in knowledge generation and awareness building.

Such initiatives and policy changes can fill the void in the regulations required to manage the burgeoning textile waste and create suitable mechanisms to avoid turning this into an unmanageable crisis. Lastly, as textile waste is piling up, let us all be mindful of our consumption and disposal practices.

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