

Fashion events have emerged as important milestones in the social calendar of cities like Mumbai and Delhi, reflecting the blossoming of a new industry, as demand for designer-wear soars.

A report by **Aradhana**.

FASHION SHOWS

Coming of age

India's fashion calendar is witnessing increased activity with several shows being held in Delhi and Mumbai, as a growing number of designers launch their labels. Demand for designer-wear is also expanding, as affluent buyers throng the shows for that gorgeous gown or an exquisite dress for a high-profile wedding.

The fashion season kicked off with a series of events in Delhi and Mumbai in October this year. India's commercial capital, Mumbai, hosted the Lakme India Fashion Week and a new India Couture Week, organised by the Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI). The council also staged its flagship Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week in Delhi. The national capital also saw the inaugural edition of the Delhi Fashion Week, hosted by the Fashion Foundation of India, a new outfit.

Apparently, declining fortunes caused by a sharp fall in stock market indices and a failing global economy, do not seem to have had much of an impact on the fashion scenario in India, if one is to go by the number of fashion shows that are being held and the increasing number of buyers attending them.

"The economic slowdown is a fact none of us can deny," says Paras Bairoliya of Geisha Designs. "But at the same time we have to accept that festivals, celebrations, weddings, parties and holidays are happening as before. The only change that we are observing now is that the buyer is looking out for the best value for his money. Rather than investing in one-time wear he is looking out for attires that can be repeated on a number of occasions. But he is continuing to place big orders with us."

Sabyasachi Mukherjee, another leading designer, says that "buyers of designer clothes comprise a small segment of society. They might cut down on jewellery or delay buying a car, but they will not compromise with their clothes."

According to Anjanaa Soni, owner of MAI, a luxury store in Delhi that houses labels such as Manish Malhotra, Falguni and Shane Peacock, Rohit Bal, Surily Goel and Malini Ramani, "Consumers have become super conscious about what they wear. What is interesting is that fashion is now percolating to even B-class towns."

The annual Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week, the premier event in the country

for fashion designers, saw the presence of the largest number of buyers (over 160) and deals worth about \$16 million were learnt to have been concluded. Nearly 80 designers presented their garments. In addition to the buoyant domestic market, a large number of foreign buyers are keen to buy Indian designer clothes. The Middle East had always been a market for the Indian designers, but now buyers from Europe are looking at deals with designers here. India's fashion design sector is expected to cross the US\$150 million mark by 2012; exports will account for less than 10 per cent.

Says Erica Harp, a buyer from the Netherlands: "I plan to start a distributorship, so I am talking to designers now and hoping to build a strong relationship." Adds an elated Sunil Sethi, president, FDCI: "I'm overwhelmed with the response we've got this time. Each and every designer is busy with orders. Designers are happy, buyers are satisfied and visitors are enjoying the shows to the hilt. What else can one dream of?"

Fashion shows are increasingly getting huge backing from corporate sponsors. The Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week,



FASHION SCENE IN INDIA

The first fashion shows were staged in Delhi, the hub of chic, designer-wear, less than a decade ago. But Mumbai, the country's financial, commercial and entertainment capital, caught on soon, hosting its own set of shows.

The fashion calendar in India is dominated by two major bi-annual events – the Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week organised by the Fashion Design Council of India and held in Delhi, and the Lakme India Fashion Week held in Mumbai.

Two other events are now being held in the two fashion-conscious cities: the Delhi Fashion Week and the Couture India Week (also organised by the FDCI). Each of the events attracts between 50 and 100 designers and about 150 buyers, including 50 to 75 overseas buyers.

International buyers of Indian designer-wear have started showing interest in fashion shows being held in the country. These include the likes of Anthropologie, Selfridges, Liberty, MC2, Marie Perron, Rendez-Vous, Showroom Romeo, Ulf Haineas, Harvey Nichols, Viva, La Rinascente and Villa Moda.

Top designers such as Manish Arora, Satya Paul, Tarun Tahiliani, Malini Ramani, Rohit Bal, Ritu Kumar and Anamika Khanna participate in the fashion shows, displaying their



collections for the forthcoming season.

A majority of the designer-wear is, however, bought by Indian fashionistas, including celebrities. Many foreign buyers attend the shows to monitor developments in the Indian fashion industry, which is attracting a lot of buzz around the world.

The Indian designer-wear industry is worth around \$60 million, but is expected to top \$150 million in just about four years, according to industry estimates. And with growing affluence and improved standards of living, fashion designers can expect busier seasons in the future.

There are many more celebrities willing to be part of fashion shows. Organisers want to invite the right kind of people for maximum impact.

for instance, was co-sponsored by almost 10 brands including Hewlett Packard (HP), Yahoo, Chivas, Audi and Elle. Shubhodip Pal, head of HP's consumer marketing division, says his firm's association was a perfect blend of technology meeting style. HP brought international designer Vivienne Tam, who designed its special edition notebooks, for the event.

The maturing Indian fashion industry is also getting less dependent on Bollywood celebrities to attract patrons to shows. "Today there are many more celebrities willing to be part of fashion shows," points out Soni. "Organisers want to invite the right kind of people to make the maximum impact." Consequently, apart from celebrities, boxer Akhil Kumar walked the ramp at the India Fashion Week and Olympic medal winner, boxer Vijendra Kumar, sashayed down the ramp wearing a Rohit Bal creation at the HDIL India Couture Week.

Designers are moving away from focussing only on clothes for weddings, though demand for designer-wear peaks during the season. "My store focused on evening-wear for high-profile parties and events," explains Soni. "I stock clothes for these events as designer wear is no longer limited to the wedding season."

Designer Kavita Bharti notes that "things are looking up for the fashion industry and designers are becoming more market savvy." Consequently, many



are launching accessories including bags in metallic shades and geometric silhouettes apart from sling bags, *jholas*, elegant leather clutches and embellished *batuas*. Big chunky bangles, acrylic jewellery and beaded jewellery are also getting popular. In footwear, pencil heels are being replaced by cone heels, and flip flops and flat-strappy sandals, *kolhapuri chappals* and canvas shoes continue to do well.

While technology and sports met style at this year's fashion shows, could social causes be left behind? While the Wills India Lifestyle Fashion Week is expressly a trade show, attempts are being made to package it with social causes. Actress Devika Bhojwani, a breast cancer survivor and vice-president of Savera, a women's cancer initiative, walked the ramp at the event along with actresses Minnisha Lamba and Sameera Reddy for designers Falguni and Shane Peacock. Designer Ashish Soni points out that couture fashion shows aren't just about clothes. A designer has to take care of the message that the show sends out. "Though the focus of the week is on generating business for the fashion fraternity, highlighting a social cause like this gives it the attention it deserves," adds Soni.

Growing fashion consciousness will see more such events being held in the future. And not just in the top metros, but even in smaller cities, untapped so far by the designers. 🌈