SHEFALEE VASUDEV
OPINION

INDIA FASHION WEAK

Elitist fashion is old hat, now it's spectator sport for one and all

FASHION, the great discriminator, is becoming the great equaliser. Call it the ultimate celebration of the wannabe, or the triumph of the idiot box. It has erased the difference between the bounce and the flounce, the silhouette and the cut, the submissive and the aggressive in design. A palace coup is upsetting the hemlines of Indian fashion, and Karol Bagh has begun queuing up for Rohit Bal.

Voice becomes noise as "Can I use your press card to get in?" or "Do you have an extra pass?" helps eager gatecrashers brush aside the autocracy of the fashionistas. Front-row politics has become even more contentious. You are not just competing with editors of fashion magazines or the rich and the royal. A designer's neighbour, a cousin of a buyer, a city reporter who can't tell a bolero from a shrug are all jostling for the same space.

It's very tempting to say that "real fashion" turns up its nose at chham-chham designer wear from Chandni Chowk. That there's no room for the lazy salwar kameez in a drama where actors wear bubble silhouettes, nude colours, gaucho bags and lace. That stick-thin models, arrogant but mediocre designers, busy buyers from abroad and the oh-so-important international press make no difference to the lives of chalta-hai Indians. But it's true no more.

"Elitist fashion" is a worn-out cliche. India's new fashion politics now allows entry to the Pappis of Pitampura. Politics is a great leveller. Rumour, gossip, tattle and wardrobe disasters have made fashion accessible to all. The exclusive lexicon of fashion has been well and truly dethroned. The vernacular rules.

Even so, the tale of two cities is a bit different. Mumbai wannabes arrive wearing the attitude of celebs; blurring the distinction between the real and the fake. Money in Mumbai is the big solvent. Everyone is glamorous. Have cash, will carry Ferragamo. I mean, if you don't thumb through the daily Page 3 guides of city supplements, how on earth would you know that one is a Ramona Garware and the other a Lata from Lokhandwala? They're all so "with it". In Delhi, the wannabes come on like bulldozers. "I better get in, or else." Dress: canary yellow embroidered kurti or gathered lime-green ghaghris with Anokhi tops. Who cares if black is the new black?

Interesting and funny. How both (all three?) genders reveal cleavage. Equally interesting, how Tarun Tahiliani's clients drown in the sea of nobodies. How the guy with the "Look At Me, I'm Waiting To Be Discovered" stance places himself before Fish Fry chef Manish Malhotra. How Suneet Varma's "Hi, I am Suneet" suddenly makes sense because there are so many with spiked hair like him. Thank God he tells you who he is.

Worse, the "more is merrier" media. Bigger bites than drinks were mixed at the Kingfisher Cafe at Delhi's Grand Hotel, venue for the Wills India Fashion Week. "*Mike ko seedha karo, shot lena hai*," shouts a cameraman. Or, "What did you think of Salman Khan walking the ramp for Surily Goel?" asks a glazed-with-makeup TV reporter as if she had finally found a question to corner Condoleezza Rice with. In another corridor near the Fashion Cafe on Mumbai's NCPA grounds, *Indian Idol* anchor Mini Mathur and pretty TV type Simone Singh are trying to get a simple shot right. "Oh God, I've suddenly forgotten everything," wails Mini. "Take it three lines at a time," shouts a production hand.

Three lines at a time is about the only way you can absorb the Fashion Weeks.

But don't brush all this away with a snigger. India's date with fashion may have nothing to do with style. And yet it is the one spectator sport that tells us more about the life and times of urban Indians than a Kitab Festival or a Big Bazaar discount day.

In the blinding whites and the soothing blacks that the designers unveiled, in every measured U-turn that Jesse Randhawa took on the ramp, in the bashfulness of designers when they took a bow, in the "innocent stunted" tales of master story-tailor Sabyasachi, there are multi-coloured specks of this new India.

Fashion may not have made ordinary Indians couture-conscious, but it's lent the illusion of decadence many are in search of. The boom of Bollywood, the mixing of the muse with the maverick and the Miss India make this a heady mocktail. It gives life to writer Diana Crane's words, who in *Fashion and Its Social Agenda* said, "Fashion creates an altogether new class."

The fashion designers deserve a big hug. They have done the social scientists a service by adding a hyperlink to understand the aspirations of a country that wants to become the new El Dorado. They have lived up to the Marquis De Sade school of salesmanship which boils down to just one tenet—You don't deserve to shop here: so you must shop here.

Didn't someone say "the most important thing you can wear anywhere is not a Gucci bag or a ruffle skirt, but an open mind"? That's what India wore at the Fashion Weeks. Never mind if the Fashion itself was weak. ◘

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Politics is a great leveller. Gossip, tattle, wardrobe disaster make it accessible to all.