SHEFALEE VASUDEV
OPINION

# The Fall Line

## India's premier fashion body is rife with cliques and their dirty designs

FASHION designer Tarun Tahiliani compares the current scenario at FDCI (Fashion Design Council of India) to an Orwellian nightmare straight out of *Animal Farm*. As the council admits to deep fissures, the question is, why is the fashion fraternity playing political satire just when Indian fashion has hit serious ground?

For those who regard fashion as a seasonal media circus and a few trends that change from yellow to mellow or feather to leather, here are some facts. For the last five months and more, an Orwellian script has guided the politics within India's premier fashion body. This is the organisation that holds WLIFW (Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week) in Delhi twice a year, roping in some top designers of the country, business from international fashion buyers, global media attention and has an estimated financial worth of more than Rs 20 crore a season.

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Key characters: director general of the council Rathi Vinay Jha, executive director Sumeet Nair and various lobbies of board members, largely comprising designers. Ashish Soni, president of the council for five months, a bare blip on the radar, resigned recently citing 'dysfunctionality' of the council as reason. Resignations, hacked correspondence, forwards of e-mails between members to the press, humiliations and accusations on integrity in board meetings colour this drama a deep purple. Usually the scapegoat, this once, the press too has been made a pig. "Please check the facts before printing ridiculous accusations sent out by a vocal minority using you for personal vendetta," says a disillusioned Nair, who resigned earlier this week after an audit cleared him of corruption charges. "The FDCI has no future," says the first ED of the 10-year-old council, adding that he will continue to work for the fashion industry.

"Stay above press temptation and stop the daily bleating to the media," growls Tahiliani, unofficial chief of a powerful council clique, unhappy with those who 'leaked' confidential information to journalists. "Accountability, transparency, democracy. As managers, we must be accountable and responsible," asserts Jha, a senior bureaucrat who took over four years ago, and is now trying to save the ailing council.

'Democracy' is curiously the favourite word of those accused of autocratic ambitions. "I wish Rathi Vinay Jha had publicly stood by me and nipped this messy situation in the bud," says Nair. Jha remains diplomatic. "An organisation is more important than any one person. We will go on and soon appoint a new ED," she told *Outlook*. The fashion fraternity is divided like never before. With few objective players left; most have taken sides playing the easy blame game.

So how does it matter to you and me—consumers of fashion or its admirers. Let them fight. What do we gain or lose?

The fashion industry, estimated to be worth between Rs 350 to Rs 500 crore, will surely lose a lot. Reputation with fashion week sponsors, to begin with. After all, this is not FDCI's first big split; it got officially divorced from Lakme a few years ago, leaving Unilever's Anil Chopra to create LFW or what's popularly known as the Bombay Fashion Week.

Now, when it's time for the fraternity to rally and propel India into a future embellished with fashion, these people would rather fight. Just when the common man has begun to look at fashion as more than delicious but unaffordable confectionery in chiffon, some designers would rather rip the fabric. Just when the last two seasons of fashion weeks have generated more business than ever before, garnering attention from the world over, FDCI is stumped with infighting. Just when the entry of global brands gives Indian designers serious competition, we're told not a word on fashion or its future vision has been exchanged in the last five months at India's premier fashion council. "Every board meeting has gone into fights on who got how much space for stalls and who was sent to represent India at big fashion events," reveals an insider.

Thanks but no thanks—that's what fashion's stakeholders must say to those who hold the reins. We live with assumptions that this council is a visionary think tank and works on knowledge exchanges and investments into R&D. That mentoring of talent is an ongoing process. That new textile exploration and pre-empting the needs of the global market will take us to the top. After all that, if we're told it's all about power and politics, it leaves a lot of us who make a song and dance about Indian fashion look out of rhythm.

The price of a new Rohit Bal outfit may not go up, but the doubts of fashion's gennext in India about their career choice will certainly rise. A new council will be floated by Nair & Co with an additional fashion week every season, as some say, creating more platforms. But three fashion weeks in a country? Let's just smile for now.

It's fall and winter in Indian fashion this summer.

A radical new design anyone? ◘