SHEFALEE VASUDEV
OPINION

Made in India

This brand reeks of power. It's range and variations are unparalleled.

OVER a lunch hosted by representatives of an international fashion brand that launched its store recently at Emporio, Delhi's new luxury destination, I was asked what it was like to be the editor of a fashion magazine from an emerging market. The question was served with salt and pepper: earlier the western fashion press would get front-row seats at fashion weeks abroad, while the Indian press would stand behind. Now Indian editors get all the attention—front-row seats, business class trips abroad to visit brand headquarters, meet creative heads and get pampered (read free, designer stuff). Luxury brand representatives visiting India seek us out. It must feel really nice, they said.

I always found the buffet at 360, the coffeeshop at The Oberoi, Delhi, insanely expensive. But I didn't realise a meal would cost me my cool. Like control freak Bree Van de Kamp in *Desperate Housewives*, I wanted to stand up and screech, "You didn't just say that!" To be fair to these saudagars of luxury, they did not mean to offend me. They were courteous hosts.

SORIT

I make no bones about it. I edit a fashion magazine that features international fashion brands (yes, yes, and advertisements). I love the work of some international designers and get gooseflesh while watching their shows (from the front row). Admittedly, India is still exotic and decorative. Embellishment yes, high fashion no. Despite the growing popularity of Indian fashion in the West, it is still viewed as the "Other" and is a foil to the West.

But I stand up for India's fashion potential with all rigour. The history and heritage of Indian textiles and crafts is incomparable. Where else do you meet a family working on one sari for months, as they do on the Patola in Patan, Gujarat? You have heard this before, only, then it came from NGOs. Now fashion magazines must voice it.

As the world flocks here to sell luxury, we must change the way we look at ourselves. This is not patriotism. It's good business strategy to worry about the fact that very few want to spend a couple of lakhs on a Patan Patola, while they'll gladly spend more on a Made in Paris 'It Bag'. Time to tell young Indians how Indian designers, having absorbed the western gaze, are tweaking textiles into glocal wear. To be a fashion centre is to be commercially powerful, as fashion is about authority. You cannot have definitive fashion from a disempowered people. The Ikat weave has been transposed on easy-to-wear, wash-pack-and-carry knitted fabric. Khadi is softened before dyeing to make it fall and drape like crepe. You can find kantha and kalamkari jackets or bandhini harem pants; chikankari tube tops and phulkari trousers. Rohit Bal for Kashmiri embroidery, Abu Jani-Sandeep Khosla for chikankari, Deepika Govind for ikat, Pranavi Kapur for softened tussar khadi, Ritu Kumar for kalamkari, Sabysachi Mukherjee on the idea of India through garments... numerous designers do admirable work by reviving and interpreting weaves and textiles in a global way. If Jean Paul Gaultier for Hermes must be applauded for a sari-inspired collection, why not an Indian designer for phulkari pants?

These attempts to carve out a niche cannot be written off as comprador fashion or be seen merely as passive and traditional. That's why I can't help smiling when an Italian tries to convince me about "the exclusivity of a handmade bag". You want to sell handmade to an Indian? I repeat. Everything is handmade in India, boss, because craftsmen don't have machines. And mothers handmake frocks for babies.

Is this politics? Fashion is political. Is this a die-hard positioning Indian fashion must take? No. Instead, it should learn strategies of production, display and retail from global fashion brands. To coexist, it must compete. This is not a brand war. It's marketing sensibility at a time when the same luxury malls can be used to showcase an Assamese Geecha or the royal splendour of a jamaavar.

Made in India is a powerful term. It's now a label from the hungriest, largest and most important emerging market in the world. Not something you cringe at when you spot it on a linen shirt at Macy's, New York. Good enough to give the masterweavers—the underbelly of Indian fashion—photo-ops in style magazines. It's not about giving livelihood to the downtrodden at the cost of fashion. It's about long overdue success for designers and weavers because fashion is now fashionable in India.

That's just one of the reasons why the *Marie Claire* Fashion Awards will honour Indian designers, including those who have revived craft techniques and explored new textiles. Its first edition will walk the green carpet this month. It's branded Made In India. ◘