SHEFALEE VASUDEV
OPINION

Fashion Malfunction

Soaked through with Bollywood, the big shows are doing soggily

FASHION may be fashionable but Bollywood is the most successful designer. An engrossing game of chess is being played between designers and Bollywood with boxers, singers, models, injured cricketers, veejays, fame managers, sisters and brothers of everyone as the pieces. It may be easy to spot the King and Queen, but bishops, rooks and knights are unrecognisable in their new costumes. Fashion is the biggest pawn.

Fade in, Salmanbhai. "I don't know anything about fashion, I walked the ramp for charity," the bored, bleary-eyed star had told NDTV. A blazing constellation of stars had walked the ramp at the couture week in Mumbai to support Khan's organisation called 'Being Human'. Next day, the buzz shifted to Gauri and Shahrukh Khan walking for Karan Johar and Varun Bahl. By then couture week, which should have officially been named Bollywood Fashion Week, became the big story of the week.

SANJAY RAWAT

Oh, bon vivant Riya on the ramp

Bollywood's styled a new role for itself—that of the Showstopper. It uses (and misuses) the ramp to promote itself, its films and friendships, some social causes to look worthy, and even to display recent weight loss! Undoubtedly, film stars attract commoners to fashion. As true validators of style, they have propelled the careers of some designers. But in their pursuit, many designers are reduced to becoming supporting actors in their own shows.

Fashion is a spectator sport with sponsors as referees. They insist on celebrity showstoppers as a precondition. Mostly, the pairing of a designer with a celebrity has nothing to do with clothing sensibilities. There is no connect, sometimes no familiarity. At Kolkata Fashion Week in September, Virender Sehwag walked the ramp for Rocky S. But the two looked away from each other later at the airport. Sehwag was the sponsors' choice and Rocky S. had to accept it. Last season, cashing in on *Slumdog Millionaire*'s Oscar frenzy, designer duo Ashima-Leena got Rubina Ali and Azharuddin Mohammed Ismail to walk the ramp for them. Everyone looked silly because the designers don't even make children's clothes.

Celebrity agents routinely send e-mails to designers before fashion week seasons 'offering' their clients as showstoppers 'depending on price and availability'. The rest depends on negotiation. Stars like Jiah Khan and Kunal Kapoor agree to walk for for Rs 4-6 lakhs but for a Lara Dutta, Genelia D'Souza, Dia Mirza, Raima or Riya Sen, you have to spend twice as much. Whereas for the Khans, Akshay Kumar or Priyanka Chopra, it means many, many more lakhs, enough to pay for more than 20 shows in a fashion week.

If it is not money or publicity, then it is personal favours. SRK walked for 'friend' Manish Malhotra at LFW after acquiring Kolkata Knight Riders for the much-needed attention. In return, Malhotra's gold and black collection was inspired by the cricketers' uniforms. Kareena Kapoor's current ramp accessory is Saif Ali Khan. But Shahid Kapoor, Kareena's ex, has fallen out of favour with her favourite designers too.

Salman Khan walks for anyone, especially damsel-in-distress varieties, as long as a new film of his is round the corner. Known to otherwise do serious charity out of the prying eyes of the media, he didn't do himself a favour by walking for Sanjana Jon, at the WLIFW last week. As didn't Sushmita Sen. Sanjana, the sister of Anand Jon, the Indian-American designer convicted for 59 counts of sexual harassment, has morphed into a designer, with a sponsor in tow. All this, while some big daddies of Indian fashion wait and watch. Most designers were against Jon, but nobody did anything. Who is Sanjana Jon on the Indian fashion or retail scene anyway? "It's a sponsor show, who am I to say no if they bring in stars as well as money enough to pay for 10 shows?" asks FDCI chief Sunil Sethi. "Don't forget, the only question journalists ask me every day is which star is going to walk the ramp today?"

Bollywood chases fashion; fashion weeks chase money; sponsors chase stars; designers chase media; media chases dead stories. The real stories lie unexplored. Few in the media question why stars wearing clothes worth lakhs must walk to raise money for the homeless. You cannot sit down for a five-course gourmet meal and pledge to abolish hunger. You cannot wear Juicy Couture and run a marathon for Vrindavan widows. There has to be some sensitivity in manner. After stars collect for a cause, why don't journalists seek the details of such funds from the organisations? After the much-hyped Mai Mumbai show at the LFW earlier this year, which brought in Naomi Campbell and other stars and socialities to raise money for 26/11 victims, nobody found out how much money was collected and given to victims' families.

The Girl Child may be in fashion. But fashion remains impoverished. ◘