

Harvard academic studies Indian fashion industry

New Delhi - An Indian American academic at Harvard is conducting a seminal study of India's burgeoning fashion industry in a bid to understand what makes it tick.

Mukti Khaire, assistant professor of entrepreneurship at Harvard Business School, is conducting a study of the estimated Rs.80 billion (\$1.7 billion) worth Indian fashion industry.

'I'm going to apply theories of economic sociology to try and understand how the industry has evolved, how entrepreneurs have dealt with the uncertainty of being entrepreneurs. Added to that is the uncertainty of being in a new industry, where there are no templates, where a code of conduct is still evolving, and where the rules of the game are not clear,' Khaire told IANS on the sidelines of the Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week (WIFW).

'I essentially study the founding of firms and how they grow. More specifically, my research interests lies in entrepreneurship in the creative field. My Ph.D. thesis was on ad agencies (in the US) but I'm equally interested in entrepreneurship in areas like fashion design and interior design.

'What I am very interested in are firms that are largely dependant on the founder. In fashion design firms here for instance, the product is essentially that of the founder. These firms find it much harder than other entrepreneurial ventures to grow, to scale up, to do anything which requires delegation of work to others,' Khaire pointed out.

Noting that one way Indian designers could to get past this hurdle was to adopt the templates of large fashion houses of the West, she said: 'What I'm studying in the Indian fashion industry is what templates are being adopted because here, designers don't have role models as such, though there are a few cases where the newer designers can look up to the older ones to gauge the templates they are adopting.'

In this context, she pointed to a just concluded deal between eclectic designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee and linen major Bombay Dyeing for an 'Art in the Bedroom' range of bedsheets/pillowcases and towels.

'Till very recently, this would have been unheard of by a senior designer. There's some sort of an evolution taking place; that is essentially my interest,' Khaire maintained.

Khaire's project began in May and she was in India in July on a three-week visit to meet with designers across the spectrum. That effort is continuing during the ongoing fashion week.

'One of the interesting things about the industry is that it is new enough in that it is still not completely formed and institutionalised, and yet it is old enough that you can see a pattern of evolution,' she maintained.

'It's evolving very fast. The trajectory is much faster than in the West and one reason is that they (Indian designers) can observe successive models in the West. The question is how much do you adopt directly from existing models and how much do you adapt?' she observed.

According to Khaire, Indian designers were very open to her project.

'In fact, I've found them extremely open. My advantage is that I have no design background as such, and am purely approaching (the issue) from the business model end. I am looking at the issue only in as much as the design-end will affect the business-end,' she added.

At the same time, Khaire said she was trying to understand the 'ecosystem' of the industry.

'There's NIFT (National Institute of Fashion Technology), NID (National Institute of Design) and FDCI (Fashion Design Council of India) which give institutional support, there's the designers themselves, and there's the buyers for the domestic and international markets. I'm going to study the dynamics of their working,' she said.

'The fashion week itself is a big institutional movement that can take the industry forward,' she added.

Born in Mumbai, Khaire 'studied all over' India as her father was in the government. Graduating from a Pune college, she obtained a masters in environmental science from Bombay University and a masters in management from the Indian Institute of Technology. After obtaining her doctorate from Columbia University, Khaire joined Harvard a little over a year ago.

She teaches a required course that is compulsory for all first year MBA students.

'It's called the entrepreneurial manager and essentially takes you through the process of founding a firm, trying to develop a business model, growing it, finding funding and marketing your product,' she explained.

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