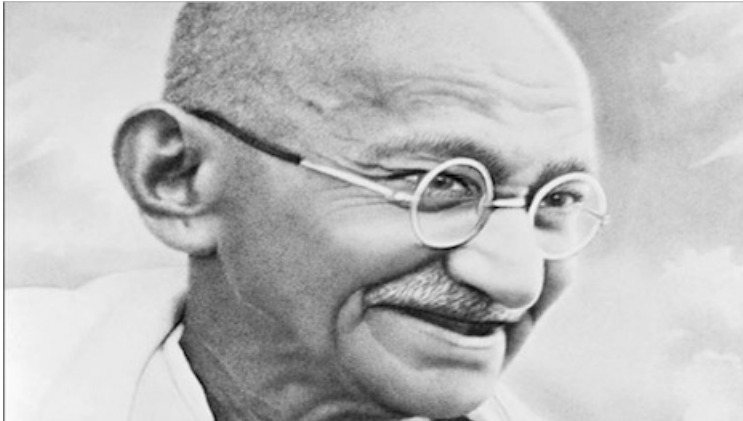


APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Gandhi's lessons for the fashion industry

April 6, 2017



Mahatma Gandhi

By DANNY PARISI

MUSCAT, Oman While Gandhi and high-fashion may seem like an incongruous pair, the two actually have quite a tangled history, one that offers important lessons for the modern luxury business.

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Speaking at the Conde Nast International Luxury Conference on April 5, the editor at large of Vogue India traced Gandhi's own sartorial journey from his interest in western-style clothes in his youth to his adoption of traditional Indian garb later. Along the way, she spoke about how Gandhi's lessons can teach luxury brands to make a positive social impact in their manufacturing stage.

"In the luxury business, we put handmade at the top of the pyramid," said Bandana Tewari, editor at large at **Vogue India**. "But the cult of the handmade puts the village economy right in the center.

"We cannot talk about handmade goods without talking about where they come from. There are entire communities that supply the world with handmade textile goods."

Truth through clothing

When people think of Gandhi, the image that likely comes to mind is a kindly older man wearing humble white clothes, big round glasses and a walking stick.

But this iconic image is not how the beloved civil rights leader always dressed. In her talk, "Fashion, Luxury and Gandhi," Ms. Tewari related how as a young man from a relatively wealthy Indian family and studying law in England, Gandhi fashioned himself a dandy, wearing smart British suits and accessories in an effort to fit in.

While his choice of clothing helped some, he found it did not alleviate the prejudice he often felt in England, India and South Africa, where he practiced law for a time.



As a young man, Gandhi wore western clothes in an attempt to fit in abroad

Upon returning to India and becoming involved in the independence movement, Gandhi had an awakening when he realized that his change in lifestyle was not coherent with his dress.

To remedy this, as he became more interested in Indian independence, he eschewed his western clothing for the traditional Indian attire he is most well-known for.

This transformation showed how clothes can affect a person's perception of themselves and help them better reflect and express their internal self as well.

Commitment to dignity

But Gandhi's lessons for the fashion world extend beyond just a simple platitude about how clothes can relate to identity.

During British rule of India, the colonizers would often buy large swaths of handmade textiles from India, ship it to England to be made into factory-crafted clothing and then sell it back to the Indians at exorbitant prices.

Gandhi saw this as an injustice and a corruption of the deep tradition of handmade goods in India. In response, he called on Indians to burn all of their British factory-made clothing and make their own.

Ms. Tewari believes this is Gandhi's most vital message for the fashion world. His idea of self-reliance went beyond freedom from colonization. It also meant freedom from factory-made goods that deny the livelihoods of craftspeople around the world.



India has a long tradition of handmade textiles

Handmade goods are an essential part of the luxury business for their high-quality and aesthetic appeal ([see story](#)).

Fashion houses have the unique opportunity, with their focus on craft and high-quality fabric, to improve the lives of the workers who make their goods and not drive them out with the constant use of underpaid labor and automated manufacturing.

"We have forgotten to give credit to the craftspeople of the world," Ms. Tewari said. "Brands like yours, with massive budgets, can give dignity back to the laborers of the world.

"If you do that, that's a Gandhian approach to the luxury business."

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