

The art of slow fashion

Kanupriya Mundhra, Co-Founder of the lifestyle brand 'aastey', in conversation with **Kanishka Ramchandani** about blurring the lines between function, fashion, comfort, size and fitness with sustainable and size-inclusive clothing.





Jeevika Tyagi and Kanupriya Mundhra are founders of aasteey.

Tyagi began her career in the financial industry working for a Wall Street firm in their New York headquarters. After working for companies such as JP Morgan, Chase, and the New York Film Academy in New York, as well as Zee5 in Mumbai, she discovered her inner entrepreneur. Mundhra comes with experience in a variety of fields. She was the chief of marketing communications at Eduaura after working at the United Nations and Vogue. She holds an MSc in Communications from Columbia University in New York. Having struggled with body image issues themselves, and the negativity that surrounded people during the pandemic, Tyagi and Mundhra got together to start a slow fashion athleisure wear brand where women can find comfort in their clothing. Thus, in 2020, aasteey was established as India's first size-inclusive and sustainable athleisure, activewear and necessities company for women.



Kanupriya Mundhra in an exclusive interaction with Apparel...

What got you started on your entrepreneurial journey?

Our combined backgrounds are a good mix of fashion, marketing, technology and finance.

I have directed communication for a company and also have a creative background with fashion experience. Jeevika has served as a CXO for several technology businesses, with a focus on finance and marketing. As entrepreneurs, we share the same enthusiasm for creating enterprises, and both of us are passionate marketers at heart.

We met a few years ago when one of us came to interview the other and we hit it off right away. In 2020, we happened to meet on a project while working for different firms. The hours we spent on bringing the project to reality were rigorous. We began by discussing how the number of screen hours throughout Covid had grown. There was no work-life balance and as a result, our mental health suffered. We realised that we were not generating enough moments of enjoyment or tranquillity.

So, to keep each other going, we developed the phrase 'living aasteey,' which

meant taking time to do little things that brought us joy like doing yoga or going for a morning walk. Once we started doing that, we began to see the limitations in the fashion options we had in India. They were little and made us ladies feel deplorable about ourselves, especially if we did not want to compromise on comfort and style.

We instantly recognised the necessity. In India, there was no size-inclusive brand. Clothes were preventing us from living aasteey and making us feel like we weren't the appropriate size when it should have been the other way around. After interacting with 100 women we realised there was an unmet gap and we immediately began to build aasteey.

Why did you choose the garment industry and why specifically this category?

As I mentioned, even after the fashion sector in India being as cramped as it is, we found a niche and a need in activewear and athleisure.

The existing fashion industry in India did not allow you to live aasteey because we didn't have enough options to make us feel comfortable. There were hardly any homegrown size-inclusive brands in this space. Clothes were lowering our confidence and making us feel like we weren't the right size.

When we saw that this sentiment was much more bigger than us, we chose to provide an alternative way; the aasteey way through the clothes.

What is the thought process behind the garments you create? What kind of technology is used in designing and creating them?

The thought is to create comfortable, sustainable clothes that reflect your authentic selves and this provides the basis of our manufacturing and production process.

We use eco-friendly, sustainable fabrics, as well as cutting-edge designs



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that are gentle on the skin and provide seamless movement. Fabric innovation is at the heart of developing activewear, and everything we design is good for both performance and comfort. Our focus is on minimising unnecessary friction and enhancing movement that looks good on all body types.

Take us through the journey of the garments you make. Also tell us about the non-apparel products that you have in your portfolio?

We invest in sourcing materials ethically and maintaining fair trade practices to make sure their clothes are good for the environment and the body. Our in-house fabrics have been created after a lot of time, effort, and innovation. We avoid using plastic and use recycled plastic wherever necessary. We also avoid using metal in our manufacturing processes which makes them easier to recycle.

In our non-apparel collection, which is the club collection, we have a range of products including the fine crafted aasteey yoga mat, made with organic cotton, which makes it sustainable, and the Zen candle, which is 100 per cent vegan, and soy candles that are hand-poured in reusable tin boxes.

How did you work out the distribution channels and retailers for your product?

We ensure that we source materials ethically and our vendors have a verifiable certificate of the Global Recycle Standard (GRS 4.0), which is an international, voluntary and full product standard.

What is your marketing and sales strategy?

We are looking to build a community. We refer to our customers as our 'tribe'. We don't want to just create customers and sell products to them, we want to build a community where everyone resonates with the same thoughts and feelings and connects with us. We value our tribe members, incentivise them every time they engage with aasteey, and understand their issues. We use our tribe's demands and problems to develop solutions through our collections. This is

not feedback through a bot after studying big data. These are real human beings, sharing problems, and for us, that's the best way to increase our CLV. So the community is super important for us.

We personally message every tribe member who has a complaint or is unhappy. As a founder, you should know where the problem ignites. Community building, UGC, and influencer economy are all proof that companies need to adopt a human-first approach. For us, we know our community building is our success formula because something very interesting has been happening. People think 'live aasteey' is also our brand name. The brand is actually called aasteey, but 'live aasteey' is the movement through which the community resonates with the brand's vision. We have had videos of individuals saying, I am feeling good, I am wearing live aasteey, and that is how we have developed our community-first approach.





How strong are you digitally?

In today’s climate, an online digital communication strategy is very essential. The rapid digitization in the country during the lockdown has been crucial for the rise of young homegrown brands, not just in the fashion sector but across all sectors. It allows us to reach customers beyond the tier 1 cities as well.

Our logistics and supply chains are spread across the country and we offer last-mile delivery all over India. We are available on aastey.com currently but have plans to expand to other affiliate platforms which will make our products more accessible.

Tell us about your target customer. What is the demographic - age, location, income bracket?

Our community is for everyone who wants to let go of all comparisons and enjoy more profound, rewarding moments of bliss or calm. Having said that, we want to eliminate all biases regarding women’s sizes. We are proud to be India’s first sustainable size-inclusive women’s apparel company, offering clothing in the athleisure, activewear, and necessities sectors. We are not just focusing on

women living in one specific city. It’s for all women who truly want to take ownership of their life and live *aastey*, happier, more mindful lives. Women who feel they can do anything. Women who have stopped comparing themselves to others and are ready to embrace their life to the fullest.

We want to create solutions for women who are fighting societal stereotypes every day; stereotypes about body type, size, what they should wear, or how they should feel. Our focus is to prioritise their comfort so that they do not feel the need to fit into a certain size or a certain box just to be themselves.

What are your plans for the future? What was your initial investment in the business and how are you planning on scaling it?

For months, we failed to connect with the investors and were trapped in the first dialogue stage. After several meetings, the conclusion would be the same: construct and then return. We believed that no one was paying attention to us. On the other hand, giving up was not an option. But now, we have secured 10 crores in a seed capital round at the seeding stage from CXXO by Kalaari Capital to develop