



## *The shocking environmental cost of making a pair of jeans*

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**From the water-polluting process of creating denim to eco-conscious labels attempting to change this, we delve into the ‘distressed’ truth about the fabric**

How many times have you grabbed your favourite pair of jeans when you couldn't decide what to wear? Denims, one of the most hard-working pieces of clothing in every closet, are like that reliable friend who always has your back. The blue jeans have been a wardrobe staple since the mid-19th century, thanks to Levi Strauss who brought a fabric that was used for tents, wagon covers and blankets into everyday work-wear in 1873. The popularity of denim has only grown since then.

According to Statista, in 2020, the value of the denim market worldwide was estimated at approximately US\$21.8 billion. While the United States remains the biggest consumer of denims worldwide, China comes a close second with the market size estimated to reach US\$15.5 billion by 2026. A pair of classic Levi's jeans still remains a favourite among most of us, especially consumers in the US, according to a 2018 survey by Statista. With the brand's iconic 501s having a cult-like following, Levi Strauss' net sales reached approximately US\$5.76 billion in 2021. Other brands that rival the popularity of Levi's are Wrangler and Lee, both of which are owned by Kontoor Brands with net revenues of US\$2.1 billion in 2020.

their closet, it is clear that people love denim. There are many brands catering to this growing loyalty towards denim wear, be it premium labels like 7 For All Mankind and Diesel or fast fashion brands such as Gap and Guess. While there has always been a demand for denim, the environmental and human cost that go into making them is shockingly alarming.



Bengaluru-based brand The Summer House makes denim fabric on handloom, recreated from older denims, and khadi denim which is non-dyed.



With the brand's iconic 501s having a cult-like following, Levi Strauss' net sales reached approximately US\$5.76 billion in 2021. Image: Instagram.com/levis

## **RED FLAGS OVER BLUE JEANS**

Denim is a fabric that is resource-heavy, which, in turn, is environmentally damaging. Here's how: denim is a durable cotton or cotton-blend twill textile. Cotton is a crop that typically uses large amounts of water and is heavily irrigated and fertilised. Furthermore, the finished product that you see in the store with different colours, wash and effects, also consumes vast quantities of water, leaving the manufacturing of denim with a high-water footprint. So to put it in numbers, a single pair of jeans uses about 7,600 litres of water to make through the production line, including dyeing, treatment, texturing and manufacturing.

The staggering amount of water pollution that denim causes can be seen in a documentary called *The RiverBlue* (2017). This water-intensive and water-polluting process of creating denim is worrying, especially given the fact that the world is going through a freshwater crisis, thanks to climate change. A survey by Central Groundwater Board shows that India is seeing a 52 per cent decline in groundwater levels across all states. The chemicals used to make denim are highly poisonous too. "The indigo that is used to dye it blue is made from very poisonous chemicals that are derived from oil and used in rat poison," says Mohsin Sajid, a designer and a denim expert, in BBC's short-form docu-series called *Fashion Conscious* (2019). To top that, a pair of jeans also produces as much greenhouse gases as driving a car for more than 80 miles does.



## *Shivangini Parihar*

Admittedly, jeans do have a bad reputation when it comes to the environmental cost they are responsible for. Despite being aware of this, we still love our jeans dearly and own at least two to three pairs, if not more. So how can we feel less guilty about our love for denim, without harming the environment? Is it even possible to make denim sustainably?

### *ORIGIN OF A BETTER JEAN*

Many brands are trying to find answers to these questions with innovative technology and mindful practices. A 2021 denim market and products trend report by The Edited observed that retailers have been making strides to prioritise recycled, responsible and regenerated denim. Market-wide, 39 per cent of denim assortments have had a sustainable transformation, up from 16 per cent in 2019. International brands like Warp + Weft, Boyish, Frame, and Agolde are doing their bit for the environment by using recycled water and cotton, vegetable dyes, e-flow technology and even cold temperature processes that save more energy, water and gas. Even iconic brands like Levi's have sustainable enterprises with their WellThread initiative, Water<Less technology, use of cottonised hemp and other production techniques which use less resources and generate less waste.





making denim wear. Image: Instagram/korrajeans

In India, homegrown slow fashion label Korra has been making conscious decisions since 2013 when it comes to making denim wear. “Our fabrics are only sourced from sustainable mills around the world that use less groundwater compared to other mills. We also have quite a few denims woven with blends of recycled polyester, post-consumer waste cotton and better or organic cotton fibres, all of which help manifest our belief in a better future,” says Shyam Sukhmarani, founder of Korra. Additionally, Korra, as a zero-waste brand, ensures that waste cuttings and fabrics are re-used in their packaging or repurposed to make notebooks, bags and laptop sleeves, among other accessories. Bengaluru-based brand The Summer House makes denim fabric entirely on handloom, recreated from older denims, and khadi denim which is non-dyed.

But innovation is not without its own set of challenges. “The biggest challenge we face with denim is that we're unable to make form-fitting, figure-hugging, shaping denims because we don't use any mix in our fibres. There is no elastane involved, which is essential in giving the figure-hugging shape,” says Shivangini Parihar, founder of The Summer House. While finding the style quotient and getting the silhouette right may be a struggle, these brands are taking the right steps towards attempting to build a mindful, sustainable and a better ecosystem of creating denims by inflicting less harm on our surroundings.



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## ***THE LAST-YOUR-JEANS-LONGER CHECKLIST***



jeans to your online cart. Ask questions, and do your research about the process it has gone through and the environmental cost it has paid to appease the latest trends. Parihar has a simple guide to help you become more of a mindful shopper. “The more finishes or effects that denim has, the more water and energy it has used. The cleaner and simpler the denim, the better it is,” she says.

Denim is a fabric that can survive for years. Hence, your post-purchase denim care is also important from the point of view of sustainability. Here’s the news flash: “You don’t need to wash your denim very often or after each wear,” says Parihar. According to Levi Strauss and Co. Report, washing your jeans after 10 uses instead of two reduces energy use, climate change impact and water intake by up to 80 per cent. Secondly, read the wash-and-care labels; does it say cold wash or warm, machine-wash or hand-wash, tumble-dry or air-dry? And thirdly, pull your jeans inside out before you put them for washing in order to uphold their colour for longer.

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