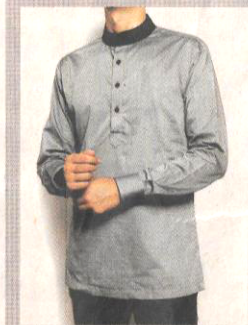




That shirt ON YOUR BACK

Considered to be conservative with their choices, Indian men are embracing quirkier shirts, writes Dhruv Munjal



Down to the last stitch

EXPERTS SAY THAT WHILE MORE PEOPLE ARE TRYING OUT NEWER DESIGNS, men are also looking for greater comfort. In the 1980s, when stores offering ready-made shirts were virtually nonexistent in India, a visit to the local tailor was almost routine. Now, with greater fashion sensibilities and more emphasis on a shirt's fit, the trend of bespoke shirts seems to have made its way back.

Though getting a shirt customised doesn't come cheap, Narvekar believes that very soon the bespoke shirt market will overtake the ready-made one. "Bespoke shirts are the way forward. Some 40-50 years ago, everybody wore bespoke shirts. That vogue is coming back because men have become more fashion-conscious," he says.

Vitruvien is another Mumbai-based company that offers bespoke shirts online. It allows you to design your own shirt — pick a fabric, fill out your measurements and choose a style that suits you best. "No matter where you are — in office or at a party — you need a shirt that fits you perfectly. That's what we try to achieve at Vitruvien," says a company representative. "Also, ready-made sizes vary all the time. Here, you can pick a fabric and leave the rest us," he adds.

In order to cash in on the bespoke trend, stores such as Tailorman and 16 Stitches, along with selling online, have started providing a bespoke home service as well. Designers say that men are becoming increasingly particular about the kind of fabric that is used in manufacturing shirts. More and more men are now opting for premium cotton and linen, the kind of quality that ready-made stores fall woefully short of providing. The average cost of getting your hands on a customised shirt from one of these stores is ₹3,000.

Rikki Kher, the founder of contemporary menswear fashion brand Kardo, likes a good shirt. And, dull, stodgy pieces of men's clothing, according to him, is safe territory. Kher, however, doesn't like to play it safe. Instead, he has an unfamiliar affinity for hip shirts that break the monotony of the tedious designs that we're so accustomed to seeing. His store in New Delhi's Shahpur Jat is a fair reflection of his philosophy. Trendy, off-beat shirts, all crafted by hand, are placed nuzzly on the shelves. Kher fondly talks about the need for inventive styles, more experimentation and why men seem to be taking more risks in picking what they wear.

"Earlier, a standard Polo shirt, a pair of jeans and a Louis Vuitton belt was the look every man aspired for. It was that simple," he says. "Now, men are more confident and are taking bolder risks with fabrics, colours and patterns." At Kardo, Kher merges courtly tradition with modern designs — experimenting with different types of checks, stripes and bold floral prints. Kher says that the reason behind starting Kardo was the lack of options and designs in the market. "I just couldn't find anything that was good enough or to my liking. So I started experimenting." More men, he adds, are taking to his type of designs.

At the Bombay Shirt Company, Akshay Narvekar and his team are doing much of the same. When Narvekar started this venture a little over three years ago, his main focus was on the smart formal category. Now, he explains, they have had to switch to funky, trend-driven shirt designs. "I've realised that men now prefer variety, both in terms of design and fabric. Now, this market is bigger

than the formal category," says the 33-year-old.

Bombay Shirt Company offers both fabrics and ready designs. And, it hasn't limited itself to checks and floral prints. Narvekar likes to go a step further — venturing into idiosyncratic camouflage and spray paint designs. Also available are nifty *bandhgala* shirts. "Things are changing. People have realised that traditional gets a little boring sometimes. The quirkier, the better," he says.

This trend is not limited to young men who wish to break away from the conventional norms of styling. Even middle-aged men, used to putting on a mundane plain blue or white shirt every second day of the week, are gradually becoming a part of the movement. "We make shirts for those aged between 8 and 80 and we're doing well. Such designs are becoming popular across categories," explains Narvekar.

For the England-born Kher, women are the key indicators of how men in India have started to dress up. "You look at the way in which women in India are wearing their clothes now. They are pushing the men to take more risks," he says. "Indian men are inherently conservative when it comes to clothing. But they're picking up."

Pudu, an Australian online store that ships to India, likes to do things differently. Instead of shunning traditional designs completely, the Pudu likes to call its collection "classic with a twist", with a special focus on linen, given the amazing versatility of the fabric. At Pudu, bright colours are blended with off-beat designs. "Our designs are an expression of India. We like to give them a tweak to make them more contemporary," says Michael Piers, who started the company with his brother, Andrew, in 2009. Apart from the online business, the duo also operates stores in Bengaluru and New Delhi.

The range of shirts at Kardo starts at ₹3,000, while the base price at the Bombay Shirt Company is a more reasonable ₹1,990. The prices of shirts at Pudu, which also specialises in kids clothing, start at ₹1,800

'Indian women are pushing the men to take more risks,' says designer Rikki Kher