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R. Srinivasan, also known as Ravi Srinivasan, is cursed with a magpie brain, which compels him to peck at anything shiny which catches his eye. Some of the bits turn out to be useful!

R Srinivasan

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Coke pants and pepsi saris

R SRINIVASAN

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China may be the manufacturing factory of the world and India the world's tech support centre, but when it comes to marketing, American companies reign supreme. They are able to take virtually anything, put the perfect spin on it and pitch it customers in such a fashion that customers happily pay a premium for products which others elsewhere have to sell at a discount!

Let me give you an example. Last month, US jeans maker Levi's introduced a new variant of its famous '501' line of classic jeans. Called 'Waste-less', these jeans look pretty much like the classic denim jeans which the company has been churning out for more than a century.

There is one crucial difference, though. Each of these special 'waste-less' jeans contains 29 per cent of polyester fibre manufactured from recycled PET plastic bottles!

Now these 'plastic' jeans were launched with ablaze of publicity, with a promotional pitch by musician and producer Will.I.Am talking about how cool it was to wear 'green' clothes made from recycled material. At upwards of \$90 a pair, these 'Waste-less' jeans also sell at a premium to the regular denim variety.

Since the whole venture is a collaborative effort between the Coca Cola company (soft drink manufacturers are one of the largest generators of PET waste in the form of used bottles on the planet), both companies earned some nice brownie points for being environmentally conscious, added some useful numbers to their Corporate Social Responsibility reports, and, hopefully, added to their bottomlines as well! Now that's the power of marketing!

In India, in contrast, although a substantial amount of recycling happens, few players are reaping any collateral benefits from this. Few, for instance, would have heard of a company called Ganesha Ecosphere (formerly, Ganesh Polytex), which is India's largest recycler of PET waste into polyester fibre. At over 56,000 tonnes per year, it's installed capacity is more than that of Reliance Industries!

Recycled polyester fibre is manufactured by grinding down discarded PET bottles after cleaning and sorting into flakes and then polymerizing them in a reactor and spinning them into fibre.

India's collection of waste PET bottles is also impressive, with around 75% of waste getting collected. This is second only to China, which has a 90% collection rate, but still imports millions of tones of PET waste every year to feed its recyclers.

While recycled fibre is used extensively in textiles – virtually the entire powerloom sector uses this, while Surat weavers have been putting it into saris for years. It is also used in all manner of industrial textiles, in India's huge carpet industry. In fact, 95% of recycled PET is converted into fibre, according to a two year old research report by Reliance Industries (more current data could not be sourced). From teddy bears to pillow stuffing, from scarves and stoles to bullet-proof vests, there's a bit of recycled plastic virtually everywhere.

But almost all of this use is surreptitious, in the sense that this is not disclosed to the customer. Far from trying to cash in on a 'green' premium, Indian apparel makers fight shy of disclosing the recycled content in their products, given the age old prejudices in our society against using 'used' material.

At a policy level, too, the government has little incentive for the use of recycled fibre in textiles, arguably one of the most critical manufacturing sectors and a major export sector.

It is time India's fashionistas and designers changed this. India has several 'fashion weeks' a year put up by rival bodies, where many celebrities have walked the ramp for their favourite designers. Why can't these designers and celebs take a leaf out of Coke and Levi's books and push the cause of recycled clothing?