

# About wearing Gods

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Visakhapatnam was the latest town hit by a string of attacks on cultural expression. Last week, groups protested against the very first Vizag Fashion Week, for carrying images of gods on clothing. After just two days, the show had to down shutters, the models went home and "celeb showstoppers" just disappeared.

Organiser Gaurav Sharma, of Storm Fashion Company, surprisingly, agrees with the protesting groups. "Now that we look back, the imprint on the clothes evoked a natural response from the groups. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to have an open dialogue with these groups and we could not explain our intention.

Consequently, there was violence. "Henceforth, we have decided to steer clear of usage of any religious symbols. We need to keep in mind the cultural sensibilities, even if they are against creative freedom of the designers. There are evolved markets, there are new markets and then there are established markets. India is going to take a lot more time evolve," he adds.

This stance has enraged designers, including Anand Kabra. "The protests by the groups was ridiculous. It just shows how ignorant they are of religion and how much of a contradiction their actions are to what they believe they are protecting. Gods and god dresses have always been a part of Indian handloom. Even Kalamkari, among many other techniques, has religious motifs. Such misguided protests must not be encouraged." He's right. Bishnupur sarees too, for instance, have entire episodes from the Mahabharata woven into their borders and pallus.

But the right-wing Vishwa Hindu Parishad, leading the string of protests against the show, refuses to budge. "These images are not just symbols. They hold religious significance and people worship these forms. Not only the models, youngsters wearing these images on their clothes need to understand sentiments associated with them. We are not only protecting Hindu imagery, we are saying that no other religious symbol should be insulted. Even Western countries and

foreigners need to be educated on the significance of such imagery." Imagery or symbols? India has also been exporting these symbols and the Om is one of the most recognised 'designs' beside Coca-Cola and Hinduism, currently, is embedded in the minds of a world experimenting with yoga.

Professor B.V . Sharma, from HCU's anthropology department, explains this 'crossing of oceans'. "Over the years there have been attempts to get economic mileage from cultural symbols. So they are re-packaged, appropriated and sold in various forms, one of them being in the form of fashion. So there are two sides to the 'moral' dilemma here. When you think of it as a purely commercial endeavour, it is justified, but when sentiments come in, it is not justified."

In other words, money and minds may never match for Indian fashion.

After decades in art, senior artist Thota Vaikuntam reminds us of another lesson - with great freedom comes great responsibility. "If you talk about individual artistic freedom, it does exist, and so does sentiment. As an artist, you should also think if you want to face the consequences of stirring something up. And there are always markets for everything. Take Europe, for example. Everything is acceptable under artistic freedom there. So take your products there. We've never had any clarity on this debate. It is always better to stay away from touching any sentiments."

Designer James Ferreira, whose design stirred up the Vizag row, points out the dual nature of India. A god is okay on a sari in the kitchen, but not on the ramp. "If you look at Indian kitchen, it derives itself from the renaissance. I then portrayed angels from the Renaissance period and showed them playing with the Ganesh as a baby . And I have showcased these lines in Delhi before and there were no issues. Gods and goddesses have always been a part of Indian fabric and why should it suddenly turn into a disrespect. Will the VHP protest against all of that? Also, why is a fashion show where models are selling clothes being seen as a slur on Indian women?"

Answers, anybody?

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