

The Growing Cost of Fast Fashion and Synthetic Clothing

Uditi Kalra



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Issue Brief

The Growing Cost of Fast Fashion and Synthetic Clothing

1. INTRODUCTION

India's textile industry is 5,000 years old and remains the “spinning wheel” of the country's industrial and economic growth. As a global leader in fibre-to-fashion, India accounts for 4 per cent of global textile and apparel trade (Department of Textiles, Government of Maharashtra, and Primus Partners, 2025). Behind those numbers lies a reality of waste: India produces an estimated 7 billion kilograms of waste each year, while the fashion industry continues to drive consumption to new levels (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2026).

Fashion expresses people, their culture, traditions, and needs. As the global population increased, demand for clothing rose significantly, with clothes production doubling between 2000 and 2014 and per capita garment purchases increasing by 60 per cent (“What is Fast Fashion?”, 2025). Many factors besides population growth are considered to have contributed to this increase, from improved purchasing power to greater awareness of cross-cultural traditions due to increased migration to easy access. This growth led to fast fashion, centred on speed, new designs, quick production cycles, high marketing budgets, and easy access to new clothing varieties, driving consumers to keep up with whatever feels new at the moment.

The phrase Fast Fashion became popular in the early 1990s, when the New York Times used Zara's 15-day design-to-store cycle to describe a new, speed-driven model of clothing production (Lai, 2021). Clothing transitioned from dressing people to following fashion or trends, creating an urge among consumers to move towards impulse buying: a concept in which purchases are not made out of need.

Basic economics suggests that when prices are low, demand tends to rise. Fast fashion has taken the advantage of that tendency by offering clothes that feel affordable and easy to pick up, especially when they are tied to the latest trends. Marketers also take advantage of the trend by making fashion look more tempting, making a sale feel urgent, or using the ‘fear of missing out’ (a state of anxiety or distress at the thought of missing out on rewarding experiences) to make an item seem more important than it really is.

For many consumers, it feels more practical to buy a cheap item that may only last a short while than to spend more on something durable that might not stay fashionable for long. Thus, the problem begins here: the model encourages frequent buying, short use, and quick disposal, turning clothing into a fast-moving product rather than something made to last, resulting in not just fuller wardrobes, but also fuller waste streams.

Figure 1: India's Textile Waste Categorization

India's Textile Waste by Stages

India produces an estimated 7 billion kilograms of textile waste each year

■ Post-consumer
■ Pre-consumer

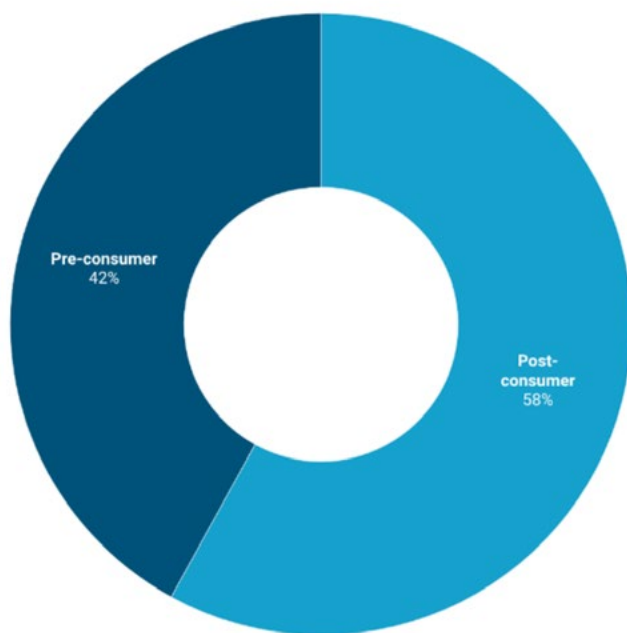


Chart: Udit Kalra • Source: Ministry of Textiles, Government of India • Created with Datawrapper

When clothes are bought quickly and discarded just as fast, the cost does not end with the consumer alone, it does show up later in the form of textile waste. The problem is split across the whole clothing system, cropping up before the garment ever reaches the customer, and some of it comes after the purchase, when clothes are worn briefly and thrown away.

2. THE FOOTPRINT BEGINS WITH THE KIND OF FIBRE

Behind every garment we consume, there is a choice of fibre, and it does matter. Previous work on clothing has highlighted that the carbon footprint of garments varies across the life cycle, depending on fibre type, usage, and how long the item remains in circulation, making material choice an important part of the story (Thomas et al., 2012).

Global fibre production stood at 58 million tonnes in 2000 and is expected to grow 3-fold by 2030, with stronger growth in virgin fossil-based synthetics. Some fibres demand more water, more energy, and more processing than others, which means the environmental impact of clothing begins long before a piece is worn and continues well after it is discarded (Materials Market Report, 2025).

Wool, known for its soft and delicate structure, releases 46.28 tonnes of CO₂e per tonne, while flax linen sits at the bottom at 15 CO₂e per tonne. In between, the other fibres fall into a clear order, with acrylic, viscose, cotton, silk, polyamide, polyester, and polyurethane/polypropylene sitting between those two extremes.

On paper, the conversation around sustainable fabrics sounds promising. In practice, it is less clear whether people are actually moving away from fast fashion in meaningful numbers. A Gen Z lens complicates this picture further. Although younger consumers are often more vocal about sustainability, research shows a gap between their environmental intentions and their actual shopping habits. Affordability, convenience, and trend-driven consumption still pull them toward fast fashion (Panetta & Conversation, 2025).

4. TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

So, the real question is no longer whether the problem exists; it clearly does. The harder question is, what kind of response makes sense now, for an industry that employs a significant number of people and whose contribution to the economy is well known?

India has begun to frame the problem more seriously through policy discussions around circular textiles, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), eco-design, and incentives for cleaner production (Verma, 2025).

While the direction is well intended, its implementation, which actually reduces the environmental damage of fast fashion without ignoring the people and businesses that depend on it, is where the conversation has to move next. The current market still runs on speed, volume, and low prices, more than on durability, restraint, or the actual emissions a garment produces.

To make any real environmental progress, the clothing system will have to change. But that change cannot come at the cost of the MSMEs and small manufacturers that keep the sector alive. Fast fashion may be part of the problem, yet it also supports livelihoods, so policy has to work with the realities of the industry rather than against them. That means encouraging slower production, better material choices, clearer labelling showcasing how much emission has been done to make a product in the same way the food industry promotes showing the calorie intake on each packed product, and incentives such as tax breaks, subsidies for cleaner machinery, support for recycling and repair infrastructure, and grants for sustainable materials, while giving smaller players time and support to adapt.

The goal should not be to punish the sector overnight. It should be to move it steadily toward a model that is cleaner, fairer, and still economically viable.

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