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Ajith Sankar
PSG Institute of Management

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THE STORY OF *ETHICUS* – INDIA’S FIRST ETHICAL FASHION BRAND*

– Ajith Sankar R.N. Assistant Professor, PSG Institute of Management, Coimbatore, India

“We have got this big problem with our lifestyle, which is not eco-friendly. Ethicus is not just about the fabric, it is not just about organic cotton, it is about a new kind of lifestyle. The very process is organic. In my tenure, I’ve been focusing on socially and environmentally responsible designs. Ethicus was very much related to this ideology; they are socially and environmentally responsible, and are an ideal company that way. I visited their entire set up and it was very encouraging.”

– Rahul Mishra, Fashion Designer (explaining his association with *Ethicus*)

“Once it happened that my entire cotton stock was up in flames, probably sabotage. I was seeing fire all around, and people were trying to extinguish the fire. I did not know what to do and started walking, just like that, without direction. Soon I reached the top of a nearby hill. Then while looking down, it dawned on me that whatever I thought as big and important, all looked so tiny and trivial... The purpose of Ethicus is to sow the seeds of change by sharing our own experience on transformation and innovation. I’m only paying back my debts. One of the learning I had in my life is that whenever I did something only for me, it failed, it had been disastrous. Whatever successes I had, it happened when I went beyond the narrowly defined goals and aspirations. There are some subtle things which we miss, because we think from the head. There are also possibilities from the heart, which is connected to consciousness, which is connected to the Totality...”

– Mani Chinnaswamy, Managing Partner, Appachi Cotton and Co-Founder, *Ethicus*

* Unless mentioned otherwise, all quotations used in this case study were derived through primary research. All characters in the case are real. The case is authored by Ajith Sankar R.N. (Assistant Professor, PSG Institute of Management, Coimbatore, India) under the guidance of Dr. R. Nandagopal (Director, PSG Institute of Management, Coimbatore, India), and with the help of Karthik G. (student, MBA - 2012, PSG Institute of Management, Coimbatore, India). The case author is thankful to Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Chinnaswamy and to Mr. Mani Chinnaswamy (co-founders, *Ethicus*) for their energy, time, and resources as well as to the others who have shared their perspectives about *Ethicus*.

This case is dedicated to Sri Sathya Sai Baba, who visioned a world where education is offered with love and discipline, and free of cost. In line with that Vision, this case study is released to the public domain without cost. While the author holds the copyright to this case study, the reader may reproduce, distribute, publish, and transmit this case study in any form including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods PROVIDED THAT copyright, acknowledgement, gratitude clauses are included.



Introduction

Ethicus, launched in September 2009, in Mumbai, was the first ethical fashion brand in India. The brand was launched by the Appachi Cotton, a textile company based in Pollachi, Tamilnadu, India. Products under the *Ethicus* brand name are made from organic cotton, natural and eco-friendly dyes, and ethical silk. *Ethicus* products were handcrafted using traditional weaving techniques on revived jacquard handlooms of the Pollachi region. The initiative drew positive responses from stakeholders including the media, customers, employees, and even peers. The brand is yet to make any profit. The founders, who express their deeply-held spiritual and ethical values through their business practices, believed that the brand had to be incubated for another 3-5 years before it could generate any profit, holding a stoic belief that everything would go well with the brand.

Appachi Cotton and Integrated Cotton Contract Farming

Appachi Cotton was a three-generation cotton ginning business started in 1948 by L. Mariappa. This business was inherited by Vijayalakshmi Nachiar (Vijayalakshmi) and Mani Chinnaswamy (Mani), a wife-husband duo. Mani was the grandson of Mariappa. Vijayalakshmi had a master's degree in textiles from SNTD Mumbai while Mani had a master's degree in business administration from Philadelphia College of Textiles & Science (Philadelphia University), USA. Following inherited practices, Mani bought cotton from farmers, converted it to cotton bales, and supplied it to textile mills.

Mani pioneered "Integrated Cotton Contract Farming" (ICCF). In the 1990s, a spate of farmer suicides happened in India. While industrialization was driving India, farmers were in distress. As Mani had been in the cotton business for many years, he was aware of the hardships the farmer was experiencing. "I am also living off him (the cotton farmer). The money that I was making was because of his hard work. But, what is that I've done in terms of giving back to the society?" These thoughts used to be there in his mind. It was in 1999 that Mani contracted with Lakshmi Mills, a textile company based at Coimbatore, to supply 1000 bales of cotton. He traveled across India to find farmers who could supply him with cotton on a consistent basis. In 2000, he started ICCF. The ICCF model was inspired by the model of administration followed by the Tibetan Administrative Offices.¹ While traveling, Mani came to Mundgod, a town in the Uttara Kannada district in Karnataka, India which is the largest Buddhist settlement in India. There he saw the Tibetan monks bringing their products to the town for sale. He entered into a discussion with them and found that they followed a co-operative society model and that these co-operative societies, more or less, acted as a government.

Through ICCF, Mani brought together the seed producer, farmer, ginner, spinning industry, and the government. In this model, farmlands were consolidated and the small and marginal farmers were provided with the necessary resources, technologies, and finances. As the industry was working in concert with the farmer, they cultivated cotton as per the needs of the textile mill. The farmer was provided with assured marketing tie-up and monetary support from financial institutions. The ginner/spinner became the Coordinating Agency (CA) and acted as the liaison between farmers, input suppliers, financial institutions offering banking and insurance services, textile mills, and the government. The ICCF model helped Appachi Cotton to receive a consistent supply of cotton. However, there were changes in the

political environment: election manifestos were comprised of political parties promising to waive off bank loans undertaken by farmers. Soon, farmers willfully defaulted. In 2004-05, financial institutions retreated from this model and soon Mani also followed course.

A Note on the Textile Industry

As per the Government of India's Economic Survey of 2010, India maintained a 6.7% GDP growth in 2008-09, despite the financial crisis of 2007-10 that pervaded the world. The growth rate was 7.4% in 2009-10. The 2011 Economic Survey predicted that growth rate for 2010-11 would be 8.6% and also projected a 9% growth rate for 2011-12. Goldman Sachs predicted that "middle class growth in India will accelerate throughout this decade" and "as the middle class grows, consumption becomes more discretionary."² In 2009, Goldman Sachs predicted that India would grow at an average growth rate of 6.5%, 6.4%, 6.6%, and 5.8% respectively during the decades 2011-20, 2021-30, 2031-40 and 2041-50 respectively.³ Table 1 displays indicators related to trends that influence India's textile industry.

Table 1

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Fertilizer Consumption (kg per hectare of arable land)	100.6	105.1	115.4	127.8	136.4	142.8	153.5	*
Agricultural Land (% of land area)	60.6	60.6	60.6	60.5	60.5	60.4	60.4	*
Rural Population (% of total population)	72	72	72	71	71	70	70	*
GDP per capita (current US\$)	484	563	668	762	857	1105	1067	1192
CO2 emissions (metric tonnes per capita)	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.4	*	*
CO2 emissions (Kilotonnes)	1,225,787.5	1,280,864.8	1,345,494.1	1,409,973.2	1,503,115.7	1,611,042.5	*	*

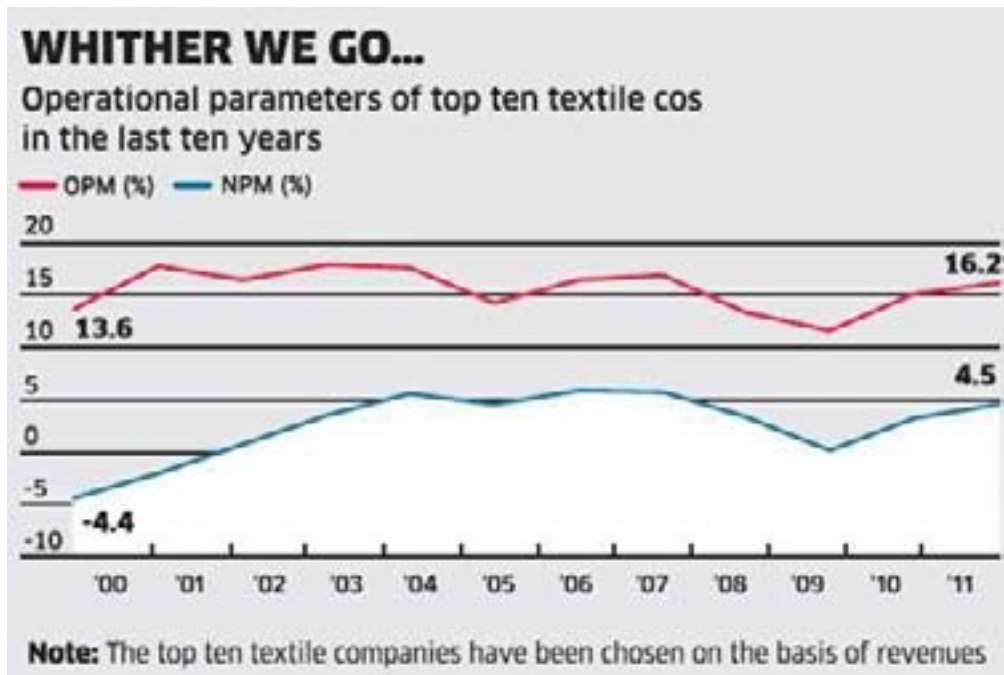
Source: World Bank (* indicates non-availability of data)

According to the 2009-10 annual report released by the India's Ministry of Textiles, the country's textile industry contributed approximately 4% to India's GDP, 17% of the country's export earning, and a contribution of 14% to industrial production. The sector also provided direct employment to more than 35 million people, serving as the second largest employment provider in India after agriculture. As per the Ministry of Textiles, India's textile industry, domestic and exports combined, is expected to grow from USD 70 billion in 2011 to USD 220 billion by 2020.⁴ Technopak, a consulting firm, indicated⁵ that India's export potential in textiles and apparels would gross USD 44 billion by 2015 and USD 80 billion by 2020. They also suggested that India's textile and apparel domestic market would increase to USD 89 billion by 2015 and USD 140 billion by 2020. Reports⁶ also indicate that some of the leading apparel exporters of the country are focusing more on the domestic market.



“[W]ith the domestic market growing at 15-20 per cent, even the larger, organised apparel exporters are increasing their presence within the country,” said Rahul Mehta, president of the Clothing Manufacturers' Association of India (CMAI). For the five years ending FY 2011, the top ten textile companies in India, in terms of revenues, charted a compounded annual growth rate of 23%.⁷

Chart 1: Operating Profit Margin and Net Profit Margin (revenues) for the top ten textile companies in India⁸



Source: http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-05-23/news/29574073_1_textileindustry-tufs-technology-upgradation-fund-scheme. Accessed on 6/20/ 2011.

Cotton is one of the major raw materials for the textile industry in India. India has the largest cotton cultivation area in the world, at 9 million hectares, and constitutes 25% of the world's total cotton cultivation area. It is the second largest cotton producing nation in the world (after China), with a production of 240,000,000 480-pound bales.⁹ It is also the second largest exporter of cotton (after United States).

India's Ministry of Textiles indicates that the cultivation area of Bt Cotton (Genetically Modified Cotton or GM Cotton) in 2008-09 increased by 7% at 68.18 lakh (6.818 million) from the previous year. In 2008-09, the area under Bt Cotton occupied 73% of the total acreage of 93.73 lakh (9.373 million) hectares under cotton cultivation.¹⁰ Another report,¹¹ released by the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications (ISAAA),¹² stated that the usage of Bt Cotton increased to 8.4 million hectares in 2009 from 50,000 hectares in 2002. According to this report, 87% of the total cultivated area in India in 2009 was under GM Cotton, with 9.6 million hectares represented the total cultivated area for cotton. Supporters of Bt Cotton opined that this increase in usage could be attributed to a combination of increased farm income and a reduction in pesticide use to control the cotton bollworm.

A report¹³ by the Environmental Justice Foundation¹⁴ and Pesticide Action Network (UK)¹⁵ indicated that cultivation of cotton was responsible for the release of 16% of insecticides in the world, despite covering only 2.5% of world's cultivated land. Cotton cultivation consumed more insecticides than any other crop. The Organic Trade Association¹⁶ stated that 25% of the world's insecticides and 10% of pesticides were utilized for cotton cultivation. In India, more than 3000 tonnes of Endosulfan was used for cotton cultivation (*photographs related to the ill-effects of using Endosulfan in cashew farming in Kerala, India can be found at <http://www.endosulphanvictims.org/gallery.htm>. These images may be disturbing*). Farmers lacked protective gear while using the hazardous pesticides. The report indicated serious health symptoms in many Indian farmers who were exposed to pesticides while growing cotton. "With no less than 99% of the world's cotton farmers living in the developing world, the pesticides are applied in fields where illiteracy is high and safety awareness is low, putting both the environment and lives at risk. The dangers faced by poor illiterate children and farmers, to keep our clothes cheap, is unacceptable," said Steve Trent, Director, the Environmental Justice Foundation.¹⁷

India was also the leading producer of organic cotton. The "Organic Cotton Market Report 2009"¹⁸ stated that there had been a 35% increase in the worldwide sales of organic cotton apparel and home textile products reaching \$4.3 billion in 2009. "Today, only 0.15% of the world's cotton is guaranteed to be pesticide free. This means that the majority of the cotton we wear is likely to have contributed to the poisoning of lives and the environment in some of the world's most vulnerable communities. If the fashion industry is truly concerned about its impact in this world, then it needs to clean up its act and demand organic cotton," said Linda Craig, Director of Pesticide Action Network, UK."¹⁹

India had been the second largest producer of silk in the world, after China. Some organizations have also produced Ahimsa Silk — a process through which silk is made without the killing of silk worms. The word "Ahimsa" means non-violence. The main producers of Ahimsa Silk are Andhra Pradesh Handloom Weavers' Cooperative Society,²⁰ based at Hyderabad and Ahimsa Peace Silk Pvt Ltd., based at Pune.

The Evolution of *Ethicus*

"Think about the thousands of artisans India has. If they are not revived, the craft will die."

— Prasad Bidappa, fashion designer/choreographer, while launching *Ethicus* at Mumbai.²¹

While the ICCF model lost its steam, Mani did not want the linkages to similarly expire. He started enquiring whether farmers would be requiring marketing support. Mani said, "We went to Karnataka. The region that I choose was Kabini.²² It's all in the forest periphery of Nagarhole,²³ Bandipur. This is also an elephant corridor. The farmers have given way for the dam to be built there and the farmers are settled on the banks of the dam where they were growing crops. Cotton is a crop that elephants do not like. So the farmer is forced to grow a mono-crop of cotton every season. After the fertility of the soil is gone, the farmer is pumping more fertilizers so that the crop is sustainable. But the fertilizer runs off to the Kabini dam, contaminating the surrounding. This is where I needed to reinvent." Mani thus started moving to the organic farming of cotton in 2004. During the process of manufacturing cotton, neither chemical fertilizers nor pesticides were used.



The engagement with ICCF and travels to farmlands across India gave Mani input on various aspects of farming. In 2004-05, Mani converted their 25 acre vanilla farm to an organic farm. In few years, he understood that this practice was a “total disaster” due to the mono-cropping practice. During this period, Mani and Vijayalakshmi received advice on growing food for themselves without utilizing pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Thus, they started growing coconuts and various types of vegetables on their farm. This was one of the experiences that helped Mani and Vijayalakshmi in their journey of creating a sustainable enterprise dealing with organic cotton.

“We thought we needed a healthy lifestyle for doing ethical business. So we had to bring about a change in our business. We stopped dealing with regular cotton, which was cultivated using pesticides, as it clashed with our ideology,” explains Vijayalakshmi.²⁴ This was in 2007. “We were doing pretty well – about 40 crores of turnover, and it was a conscious decision to stop my conventional business and totally get into organic cotton business.” During that period, the organic business of the company only contributed 10% of the revenues of Appachi Cotton. Mani and Vijayalakshmi converted the enterprise into a 100% organic firm, and their cotton products were termed as Appachi Eco-logic Cotton.

The yield of organic cotton was less than conventional cotton in the initial years as the chemical fertilizers were no longer in use. It was expected that the land would take three to five years to revitalize. “It’s difficult until the farm reaches a balance, until it sheds the chemicals it has and is ready to take care of itself. Once that happens, around the fifth year, it becomes cheaper to grow organic cotton and its productivity is comparable to, if not higher than, normal cotton,” said Balaji, brother of Mani.²⁵

In 2006, the company associated itself with an organic farmers group named “Savayava Krushikara Sangha,” which was incubated by the Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA)²⁶ and partnered with them in the organic certification process. The process was called “SKS Appachi Eco-Logic,” and was certified organic by IMO Control, a Switzerland based, certified agency.

During this period of transition/conversion from a fertilizer-driven production operation to organic cultivation, Appachi Cotton paid the farmers a premium of 10% from the prevalent market price. “We kept paying contract farmers during that time. You have to raise a couple of crops before your cotton meets certification standards” said Mani.²⁷ In 2009, the Control Union (formerly SKAL) based in the Netherlands offered the Global Organic Textile Standards (GOTS) certification for the textile production of Appachi. In 2007, IMO Control certified Appachi’s farm and ginning operations.

While the company started sourcing and stockpiling organic cotton, there was a dilemma about the course the company should take in the changed paradigm. “[For] two years we were toying with the idea of what to do,” explains Mani. He was not keen in supplying all of the organic cotton to textile mills. Mani believed that every player in the textile value chain must have his own individual identity and respect. He did not have the desire to sell the cotton into the conventional market as it would be an exact replica of what their family had been practicing. “Mani would always quip that the conventional cotton value chain was a thankless operation. The ginner never appreciated what the farmer did; the mill owners never appreciated what the ginner did; the fabric people never appreciated what the mills did; the retailers never appreciated what the fabric people did; and finally the end customer



never even cared to recognize what the farmer, ginner, mill owner, fabric producer, or the retailer did. One can understand from the above, why he was so adamant not to sell the cotton to the conventional operators,” mentioned Vijayalakshmi. Initially, he thought about exporting. However, the yarn produced from this cotton was too exclusive for foreign buyers to absorb. Their preference was in the 30-40 count while the cotton produced by Mani had a count of 100-120. Vijayalakshmi understood that what they were having was one of the most exclusive yarns in the organic world. She said, “I knew at the very moment, the right utilization for them — in the handlooms. Traditionally Indian handloom weavers had been used to handling very fine cotton yarns for over centuries.” Mani concluded that *Ethicus* was the creative vision of Vijayalakshmi.

They met with Sally Holkar from *Women Weave*, Mumbai, who was instrumental in reviving the Maheshwari sarees from the state of Madhya Pradesh. With the help of Holkar, they delivered their yarns to weavers from North India. However, the time taken to deliver the fabrics was about six months, which was challenging for Mani, whose cotton stock situation was on an upward spiral with more farmers joining the organic movement in Kabini. “There was a big learning for me in the above episode. In our pursuit to get anything done, we at times take quick emotional decisions that does not necessarily be practical. And we keep pursuing it, even after we would have realized that it is not a long term solution. In that process, we fail to recognize/realize the opportunities that lay hidden in our vicinity... Nature has its own mechanism, it gives you a long rope to work things out yourself, and when it realizes that you are wandering too off from your destined path it gives you a tug and makes you realize your chosen path. We wandered aimlessly, in creating our value chain, but the ‘tug’ came 6 months later. Whenever we had our foreign friends visit us, we have been taking them around our villages around Pollachi, showing them the occupation — particularly the handloom weaving of Pollachi. Never once did it occur to us that we should utilize the services of our local weavers to covert our yarns into fabrics,” reminisces Vijayalakshmi. Pollachi, the town from where they were operating, and the villages nearby, used to be the home for thousands of handloom weavers and they used very fine cotton, which was similar to the cotton that Appachi was stocking. For a year, Vijayalakshmi and Mani visited people and places requesting conversion



Source: *Ethicus* Facebook home page. Looms used in making *Ethicus* products. Accessed 6- 3-2011.

of the cotton to yarns, but the effort was in vain. Then, the duo discovered in Chennimalai, a panchayat town in the Erode district in the state of Tamil Nadu, where 2800 looms were dismantled and piled up in a godown, and were kept for sale. Some of the looms were made of 50-year-old wood. “It was a really pathetic sight. What is happening to our heritage? This is something which we should be proud of, and sustain.” They selected 42 looms, brought them to Pollachi, refurbished them, and brought in weavers.



Vijayalakshmi and Mani also set up a design and weaving studio. “If a designer wants to



Source: http://www.leiweb.it/iodonna/guardo/10gindia-cotone-organico-ecologia_6.shtml#center, Accessed 6/3/11.

design something we have the whole set up ready over there. We have an in-house person who can recreate the design on computer. Since the entire design development happens under one roof, there is no way that it can be copied or made a sample of ensuring that designs are in safe hands,” added Vijayalakshmi.²⁸ *Ethicus* assures the designers that their work will not be replicated until the design is released in the market. At Appachi Cotton, each loom was product specific — there were looms that wove only bed linen, or curtains, or salwar kameez materials. Such a process ensures that the cloth is not wasted. In addition to natural/vegetable dyes, the

company also uses other organically-certified dyes — the dyes that did not have heavy metals, were azo-free,²⁹ and met compliant norms. Vijayalakshmi acknowledges that: “Natural dyes are more expensive.”³⁰

Two percent of the proceeds from the sale of *Ethicus*-branded goods are dedicated to educating a weaver’s child. The children of weavers are given free education at Nachiar Vidyalayam (www.nachiarvidyalayam.org), a school run by Appachi Cotton. In India, traditional crafts and professions like weaving and farming were moving out of popularity. The community members who were engaged in these professions did not show interest in the next generation continuing these professions. “In many of the villages, youngsters are sacrificing their traditional knowledge because they are paid more for working in other sectors,” said Mani.³¹ “These are hard jobs with poor returns. Neither farmers nor weavers want their children to follow them into the profession, but if we lose their skills, we lose an important part of our heritage,” opines Mani.³² “While India is growing, the heritage sector is going out, because there are not enough young weavers anymore. When India is arriving, I want the farmer and my weaver to arrive,” mentioned Mani. Mani started a community college at Nachiar Vidyalayam. The community college was run in association with Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), located in New Delhi. He continued, “I am trying to educate my weaver’s child through the community college that is run in my school. We are giving training in apparel design and embroidery and they do not have to go back to the loom. If one girl is educated as a textile designer, she will sustain the whole village, the whole cluster. That is what we trying to do in inclusive growth.” In addition to the regular curriculum, Nachiar Vidyalayam also instructs traditional art forms like Mallakhamb, the ancient Indian art of pole gymnastics. The school also integrates dance, drama, music, yoga, and karate into its curriculum. “We are building our own curriculum of weaving, hand spinning, and even designing. So youngsters from the weaver community can become designers rather than weavers and they can sustain the future generation,” said Mani.³³ The school and community college also provide environmental education and values, thereby

empowering future generations to respect the environment. “If living and working conditions are made attractive enough, the next generation will also take up weaving. Weaving is in their blood. With training and exposure they can make a viable living out of it,” said Vijayalakshmi.³⁴

Going organic ensures the promotion of sustainable agriculture in the Pollachi and Kabini regions, which otherwise could have adopted the cultivation of genetically-modified cotton. “Is Bt Cotton necessary everywhere? There are not many studies assessing how Bt Cotton has impacted the flora and fauna of the region. We should at least have a minimum buffer zone of 20 kms outside the wildlife region where permission is not given for the usage of Bt cotton. There is a possibility that Bt may affect the food-chain of elephants,” cautioned Mani. The Eco-logic program initiated by Appachi Cotton encouraged the farmers to grow traditional varieties of cotton like Suvin. “India had more than 1000 varieties of cotton,” quoted Mani. The company had also entered into a relationship with the University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad³⁵ to maintain a gene bank for conserving many of the indigenous seeds. “I can say unequivocally that my farmers are the real winners. Their quality of life has improved. With a healthy farm environment, there is much less sickness, and yields have improved,” said Mani,³⁶ who believes that India’s tradition had been rooted in organic farming. In 2011, the company has a connection with 185 cotton farmers who grow organic cotton in approximately 444 hectares.

The organisation adopted the fair trade philosophy. “I pay above the minimum wages to my employees; no child labour is involved; farmers are paid a premium over the market price while purchasing cotton; and the processes are environment-friendly. Effluent discharge is treated,” explains Mani. “The weavers traditionally work their looms in the cramped confines of their homes all day. But, here in a well-ventilated, clean, and bright environment, they have a chance to move out of their homes and work for fixed hours,” said Mani.³⁷ Appachi Cotton employs 35 people exclusively for *Ethicus* – 25 in handloom and 10 at the garmenting unit. Appachi Cotton employs another 35-40 people for its EcoLogic cotton, which is mainly exported, as the extra-long staple cotton³⁸ produced by Appachi Cotton had a strong international demand. Appachi Cotton adopted the “Slow Fiber” movement, akin to the “Slow Food” movement,³⁹ and also conducted workshops on this theme for people taking the “Cotton Trail (explained *infra*).”

Under the *Ethicus* brand, Appachi cotton also sells products made from “Ahimsa Silk,” a term used for the silk that is manufactured without killing the silkworm. “There are some segments of people who’ve stopped wearing silk because of religious reasons or sentiments. We have created Ahmisa Silk for them,” explains Vijayalakshmi, who belongs to a Jain⁴⁰ community.

“The Cotton Trail,” a 12-day journey between Kabini and Pollachi, was started to communicate the essence of what *Ethicus* connotes. The trail covers those regions closely associated with the creation of *Ethicus* products, starting with the farming of organic cotton – the raw material used in *Ethicus* products. The trail begins at the Kabini Elephant Corridor and extends to the foothills of the Anaimalai Tiger Reserve. It shares its borders with the states of Tamilnadu, Karnataka, and Kerala. The trail covers locations like Bangalore, Mysore, Kabini, Pollachi, and Anaimalai. This trail was a retro-experience, starting with city life in Bangalore and going back 300 years to experience the Indian royalty as expressed in



the palaces of Mysore, visits to organic farmlands and pristine forest regions, and an introduction to spirituality.

Figure 1: The “Cotton Trail” Journey



(Adapted from the image available at <http://www.asian-connections.net/news/india-cotton-trail.php>, Accessed on June 15, 2011).

Day 1	Arrival at Bangalore; Pick-up and Check-in; Day to explore the city
Day 2	Travel to Mysore after breakfast; Visit to Mysore Palace; Explore the city in the evening
Days 3, 4, and 5	Exploring Kabini Region (Jungle, Safari, Boating)
Day 6	Interaction with farmers growing organic cotton; Visit to Sathyamangalam forests
Day 7	Introduction to the philosophical and spiritual teachings from India; Workshop - Introduction to Organic Farming
Day 8	Continuation of sessions related to the philosophical and spiritual teachings from India; Visit to weaver's village
Day 9	Visiting Annamalai Tiger Reserve
Day 10	Workshop on weaving techniques and handloom at <i>Ethicus</i> Studio, Pollachi
Day 11	Interaction with students of Nachiar Vidyalayam and return to Bangalore

“Of late, there have been a lot of questions raised by international buyers about certification integrity issues in India. Their apprehensions are genuine, as some projects in India were blacklisted for their fraudulent organic claims. The concept of the ‘Cotton Trail’ started when our clients, who happened to be Italians, wanted to check [the authenticity of] our claims. We told the clients, ‘Forget the certificates, talk to the farmer, see what he is doing, and then you believe it.’” This assessment journey soon became a structured trail when word of mouth communication aroused interest in people. Thus, the Cotton Trail was started. *Ethicus* had entered into the promotion of this Cotton Trail and made investments in a tour website and in forming connections with foreign tour operators, conducting test tours for tour operators and producing related promotional material. The project will break even in three years if Cotton Trail can bring in 5 groups per year. The per person charges amount to USD 2,570 – USD 3,778, depending on the number of people taking the trip, with the minimum being six people in a group. One of the tour appeals was, “At the end of The Cotton

Trail, our guests would have traveled the shortest footprint area recorded for high fashion textiles that measures only about 300 kilometers and would have witnessed the only such sustainable organic model of textiles in the world.”⁴¹

The founders of *Ethicus* had been telling “The Cotton Trail: the Eco-Logic Story” to as many people as possible. “Their story must be told” said Mani and Vijayalakshmi.⁴² “We will not stock up our product where the story is not told. We’ll create our own ethical consumers. The people who’ve traveled as part of the Cotton Trail – they’ve seen the whole chain.” The partners cited the example of 14 ladies from abroad who traveled the Cotton Trail and then visited the *Ethicus* stockroom and conducted a business transaction of two lakh rupees within two hours: “It touches them; they feel affiliated to the product, and the design is appealing. We are using the Cotton Trail as a window of opportunity. We have a completely different perspective of marketing,” said Mani. He also added that some of these members sponsored amenities that improved the infrastructural conditions of the school run by Appachi Cotton. “We have to create our own identity. People from abroad ask us, “What is India and what is ethnic to the country? Also, if I replicate something done elsewhere, I am taking away jobs from that region. So we have to create something that is indigenous.”

Ethical Consumerism and Market Performance

*Both contemporary and organic, the brand is testimony to the fact that fashion can, and should be, responsible and aware. Style needs to take into account circumstances and opportunities, which is what this duo has done.*⁴³

— Nandhini Parthib, Principal Correspondent, *India Today*

Ethicus is a combination of “Ethics” and “Us.” “As we desired to create our own Identity involving farmers, us and the weavers, we also felt that may be the final customer is also longing for an Identity in this faceless world. May be he is looking for an opportunity to establish it, by making a style statement that would amplify his belief system. So if we earnestly



Image Source: <http://www.indiaretailing.com/upload/newsimage/ethicus2.jpg>, Accessed on 6-3-2011.

Brand Logo of Ethicus



Image Source: <http://eddicompany.com/?cat=21>, Accessed on 6-3-2011.

pursued ‘ethical’ business practices at Appachi Cotton, we felt the need to extend the platform to the final customer. We have to help them join and share our ‘ethics,’ as he/she is an integral part of ‘us.’ ‘Ethics’ and ‘Us’ thus became *Ethicus*” said Vijayalakshmi. During the Mumbai launch,⁴⁴ *Ethicus* gave a cotton sapling to all the visitors to its exhibition. The visitors were asked to grow that cotton, harvest it, and send to *Ethicus*, to be gifted with an *Ethicus* handkerchief. Through this initiative, *Ethicus* wanted to communicate the challenges met by the cotton farmer during the growing of cotton. The company received more than 50 responses. The website of *Ethicus*⁴⁵ quotes: “When you take home an *Ethicus* product, you do more than just buy a brand...you buy a cause.” “There is a growing sense of ethical consumerism. Customers want to know the origins of the products that they are buying and hence do their bit for the environment in whatever small way they can,” states Mani.⁴⁶ Mani



felt that for a city-dweller, one of the simplest ways to help the environment was to choose a product that is produced responsibly. “By wearing organic cotton, one shows one’s commitment to the environment,” mentioned Mani.⁴⁷

Each *Ethicus* product has a tag bearing a stamp-sized photograph of the weaver. “When we tied this, he (the weaver) had tears in his eyes. He has been doing this for many years, and nobody knew who he was in the value chain,” said Mani. In addition to the photograph, the name of the weaver and the time taken to produce the work was also mentioned in the tag.

Stakeholders were much appreciative of the concept. Pankaja Srinivasan (Pankaja), Assistant Editor, *The Hindu*, met Vijayalakshmi and Mani at one of the fashion shows and learned about the organic endeavor of Appachi Cotton. She visited the *Ethicus* workshop at Pollachi and subsequently, wrote a cover story in the *Hindu MetroPlus* weekend edition. Pankaja said, “I was floored by their effort to give the farmers and weavers their due recognition and make it a point to include them in the marketing of their final product. I was charmed by the tags on their products that had the picture and details of the weaver and how long he took to weave that particular product. It was great value addition to the product in my opinion and a great incentive and boost to the weaver who would otherwise have gone unrecognised and faceless.” Hansdak Shuchi, Textile Designer, *Reid & Taylor*, choose to do her four-month internship with *Ethicus* while she was a textile design student the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), New Delhi. Commenting on her experience, Shuchi noted: “I have always wanted to work with clusters dealing with traditional textiles as well as an organisation working for causes. *Ethicus* is one of those organisations which works with the traditional handlooms that I have a fascination for. It also empowers the diminishing craft of handwovens as well as supports the cause of green, which is most demanding in the current times.”



Ethicus tag displaying weaver's photograph and the amount of time used to create the product

The products under the *Ethicus* brand name include saris, stoles, skirts, jackets, kurtas, shirts, tops, scarves, duppattas, knitted T-shirts, infant clothing and accessories, bed and table linens, curtains, cushions, and yoga mats. *Ethicus* ventured into markets like Mumbai, Coimbatore, Kochi, Chennai, and Hyderabad, primarily through exhibitions. “This is a living example of how design goes beyond boundaries; it’s not just about motifs or dyes,” said Chelna Desai, a Mumbai-based fashion designer.⁴⁸ The media has given positive reviews about their products. An article in *The Hindu* asserted: “If clothing with conscience is your mantra, then the *Ethicus* brand should well be a part of your wardrobe. For here, *Ethics* meets *Us...*”⁴⁹ *Ethicus* products are also featured in fashion boutiques in Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune, Mumbai, Goa, New Delhi, and Kolkatta. *Ethicus* evoked good response in exhibitions with sales charting above INR 10 lakhs (typically, sales averaged five lakhs in such exhibitions for other brands). The first exhibition itself netted INR 17 lakhs. In the first year of its operations, *Ethicus* generated revenue of INR 60 lakhs. “The customer is open to the idea of spending a little more to make a responsible choice,” said Mani.⁵⁰ However, as the company incurred significant expenses in the initial year due to brand building expenses related to the launch of *Ethicus*, the brand is yet to achieve a surplus. It

was the profits from Appachi Cotton that subsidized the launch of *Ethicus*. Absorbing the losses of *Ethicus*, Appachi Cotton broke even in 2010.

The founders have nurtured their idea into a brand. “We have a number of Italian designers who are interested in us. And we ourselves felt that handloom is our country’s strong point, something that we need to tap into. So, instead of focusing on the export market, we nurtured it into a brand,” said Vijayalakshmi.⁵¹ “The customer wouldn’t pay a premium on a product that looks just like a conventional textile product,” said Mani.⁵² Mani and Vijayalakshmi felt that *Ethicus* should be a synonym for exemplary quality, and being eco-friendly was a value addition. They wanted the customers to buy *Ethicus* products as satisfied customers – not driven by a feeling of guilt or concern. Mani and Vijayalakshmi were of the opinion that the organic movement will not sustain if it was built on fear and guilt. While the company wanted to promote organic products, it was also focused on quality fashion. Tripti Aiyar (Aiyar), one of the earliest customers of *Ethicus*, said to the case author, “I liked the weaves and the colors offered by *Ethicus*. They seemed very Banarasi,⁵³ – not usually seen in cotton. In addition to the fabric, I also liked the people associated with the product. I bought four or five of all the types they had.” Sanjeev Manglani, Managing Director, *Kalpna*, a New Delhi-based outlet focusing on sari retail, said that the customers were asking for more designs, colours, and textures in *Ethicus*. He also asked for thematic collections, better blouses, and more favorable pricing.

Hisam Usman, who runs Silkworm Boutique, a Chennai-based, stand-alone designer apparel store for women, said that everything about *Ethicus* is positive. “That’s why I have it in my store.” He said that customers are curious about the product and they appreciate the designs and feel of the fabric. His store also witnessed repeat customers for *Ethicus*, albeit in a small number. Similar sentiments were echoed by other retailers who displayed the newly-launched *Ethicus* products alongside established designer labels. This included *Bombay Electric* and *Melange* (based in Mumbai), *Rudraaksh* (based in Pune), *Amethyst and Collage* (based in Chennai), and *Elahi* (based in Hyderabad). Nalli Silks, a chain of apparel stores based in Chennai and considered a synonym for quality saris, took design and manufacturing help from *Ethicus* for creating a sari during the high-profile marriage of Lakshmi Venu (daughter of Venu Srinivasan, Chairman, *TVS Motors*) and Rohan Murthy (son of N. R. Narayana Murthy, Chairman Emeritus, *Infosys Technologies*).

Prabha Nagarajan, Regional Director – India, Textile Exchange (formerly, *Organic Exchange*), an international non-profit organisation that supports the growth of organic cotton, stated that *Ethicus* is a good business model demonstrating “how long-term partnerships can benefit all stakeholders...By branding organic cotton grown sustainably, by making the links to the value chain visible, and by producing innovative and beautiful handloom garments and home textiles, Mani and Viji Chinnaswamy have created something for the domestic market in India that should inspire many more.” She continued: “*Ethicus* represents what they (the government) should aspire for, and include in policy. Organic does not permit BT seeds. The GOI (Government of India) has promoted BT Cotton in such a big way that non BT Cotton in the country is almost extinct.”

Making the Idea Viable

The current price for an *Ethicus* cotton sari ranges from between INR 3500 to 7000 and for



a silk sari, INR 8,000 to 19,000. Saris also exhibited the highest turnover. The target market for the *Ethicus* product is for the late 20s to 40s age category. Customers like Aiyar believe that the products of *Ethicus* were somewhat steeply priced and that the company should introduce more colours and textures. A similar sentiment was echoed by Pankaja, who said, “I understand that the fact that everything is organic and so adds to the cost of the final product. Still, if the *Ethicus* products along with their story were accessible to a larger section of the people, maybe the awareness and the desire to support such causes would be more widespread. At the moment the products can only be bought by the high-end customers.” Appachi Cotton has now planned to start a sari range in *Ethicus* starting at INR 2500. *Ethicus* developed a *Facebook* page to communicate its organisational developments and to receive customer feedback. In less than two years, the company has connected with almost 2000 fans through *Facebook*. *Ethicus* is also exploring the possibility of selling its products online.

“*Ethicus* is at their nascent stage. So they may be having difficulty in understanding markets. However, all weaknesses are windows of opportunities. They are the right place, at the right time. They are not big, and they are not starting fashion apparel in big way. So they can easily clear the hurdles. They can get into markets that nobody else would know about,” said Rahul Mishra (Mishra), a known fashion designer in India. Mishra believes that Appachi Cotton must continue to focus on their ideology. He added, “In my opinion, starting a brand is like starting a religion. It takes time. Soon, there will be followers. The founders of *Ethicus* need to believe in themselves. Troubles are windows of opportunities. Having troubles mean that you will be guaranteed a good future. They have to stress on their ideology in as simplistic a way as possible. Simplicity that is visible in their product and lifestyle. Process can be complex, but the product needs to be simple.”

“*Ethicus* is still at a state of incubation. We are investing for the future. It will take another 3-5 years to make this venture sustainable. Brand building is a slow process and customer interest is gradually picking up,” said Mani. Out of the 42 looms at the *Ethicus* studio, only 22 looms were utilized at a given point of time. Mani’s idea was to run a business where each of those 42 looms manufactured six saris a month. “Then, I would like to adopt a weaver’s village, where all the weaving will be done, and this space (where weaving is currently done), will be converted to a full-fledged design studio,” added Mani. Vijayalakshmi had been focusing on ensuring that their vision would be manifested into visible and tangible results: “You cannot ride on a dream. Production planning is necessary. My brother is helping us with the business aspects of the endeavor. We have also hired a consultant, who has experience in fashion and retail, to help us out with the pricing aspects of *Ethicus* branded products.” More integration was brought into the company. Ginning and garmenting were done in-house while functions like spinning and processing were done with the help of other family-owned businesses. Spinning was done by Pollachi-based Ace Tex, a GOTS certified spinning unit owned by Lakshmanan, cousin of Mani. Wet processing was performed by Premier Fine Fabrics Ltd, a unit of Premier Mills, a GOTS Certified unit based at Perundurai.

Values and Beliefs of the Founders

Mani remembered, “Once my entire stock of cotton, worth 60 lakhs, was up in flames. I was doomed. There was a message, ‘Stop! This is not for you. Turn back and go elsewhere.’



However, I pursued. I said, ‘Ok, I’ll have better insurance next time!’ Then I went to Madhya Pradesh and bought the entire cotton stock, thinking that markets would rise and I’ll be a billionaire overnight. The markets tanked. The mills refused to buy. My friends refused to buy. After stocking the cotton for a year, I sold it, at half the price. There are very subtle things that we need to keep a track of. These are messages from above. It is all in us. If we can fine-tune to that frequency, the message is very subtle, but very sure.” He believed that guidance would drive business decisions as long as the individual could fine-tune to that frequency.

Mani and Vijayalakshmi considered Vethathiri Maharishi⁵⁴ as their spiritual guide. They considered themselves to be a “tool” in the hands of a higher power. “How else can you explain about my journey to a no-man’s land in Madhya Pradesh, without me having expertise in their language, and still getting the support of 3000 farmers?,” asked Mani. He continued, “Vethathiri Maharishi was also a weaver, by profession. He used to say that our actions should not hurt anyone at the level of body or soul.” In order to create an enterprise that aligns with such an ethos, Mani and Vijayalakshmi worked 16-18 hours every day, seven days a week. “Vethathiri Maharishi says, ‘When you eat a handful of rice from your plate, do you realize the efforts of so many people that have gone to that handful?’” mentioned Vijayalakshmi. *Ethicus* was a steep learning curve for the duo. Mani believes that a business needs to be socially-conscious, should evolve keeping society’s needs in mind, and should not benefit by harming others. He cited the example of the dyeing industry in the Tiruppur region of Tamilnadu that had suffered major losses as a large number of dyeing factories had been closed. This happened after a court ordered the closure of dyeing units that discharged untreated effluents into the river Noyyal, thereby killing the river’s ecosystem and made farming impossible.^{55 56} *Ethicus* was one of the few organizations that broke that trend and continued to move forward. “At no point of time did I have a dilemma of this business not being financially sustainable,” asserts Mani. As the case author bid good-bye to the partners, he thought: “Will this enterprise be financially sustainable? If yes, it would certainly be raising the bar on how a business, especially textile [-based], could be run.”

Endnotes

¹ In 1959, Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Indian Prime Minister, gave permission for Tibetan refugees to settle in various regions across India.

² <http://www2.goldmansachs.com/ideas/brics/brics-decade-doc.pdf>, Accessed on June 18, 2011.

³ <http://www2.goldmansachs.com/ideas/brics/brics-at-8/BRICS-doc.pdf>, Accessed on June 18, 2011.

⁴ http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-02-02/news/28426670_1_textiles-industry-textiles-and-clothing-bn-industry. Accessed on June 7, 2011.

⁵ Presentation at World Textile Conference May 6, 2011.

⁶ <http://businessstandard.com/india/news/domestic-market-beckons-garment-exporters/436139>. Accessed on June 7, 2011.

⁷ http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-05-23/news/29574073_1_textile-industry-tufs-technology-upgradation-fund-scheme/2. Accessed on June 20, 2011.

⁸ CMAI, based at Mumbai, is an association representing more than 20,000 companies from the Indian apparel industry.

⁹ <http://www.cotton.org/econ/cropinfo/cropdata/rankings.cfm>.

¹⁰ http://texmin.nic.in/sector/note_cotton.pdf,. Accessed on May 31, 2011.

¹¹ <http://www.isaaa.org/resources/publications/briefs/41/executivesummary/default.asp>. Accessed on May 31, 2011.



- ¹² <http://www.isaaa.org/default.asp>. Accessed on May 31, 2011.
- ¹³ http://www.eifoundation.org/pdf/the_deadly_chemicals_in_cotton.pdf. Accessed on June 4, 2011.
- ¹⁴ A UK-based charity that campaigns for human dignity and environmental issues.
- ¹⁵ Pesticide Action Network is coalition of more than 600 NGOs and individuals from more than 90 countries.
- ¹⁶ A North American association of organic businesses.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.eifoundation.org/page324.html>. Accessed on June 4, 2011.
- ¹⁸ Released by Organic Exchange in May 2010.
- ¹⁹ <http://www.eifoundation.org/page324.html>. Accessed on June 4, 2011.
- ²⁰ <http://www.ahimsasilks.com>.
- ²¹ Shilpa Shree, Talk fashion, think environment, <http://www.mydigitalfc.com/leisure-writing/talk-fashion-think-environment-119>. Sep 29, 2009, Accessed on December 7, 2010.
- ²² Kabini, in Karnataka, is also one of the popular wildlife destinations.
- ²³ Nagarhole National Park is located 94 kilometers from Mysore in Karnataka in South India. It is located to the northwest of Bandipur National Park. It is spread between the Kodagu district and the Mysore district. Kabini reservoir separates the two districts.
- ²⁴ Manu Vipin, The organic revolution in fashion, <http://expressbuzz.com/entertainment/fashion/the-organic-revolution-in-fashion/197589.html>. August 13, 2010. Accessed on November 28, 2010.
- ²⁵ Sriram Srinivasan. Seeking organic growth. *Outlook Magazine*, Aug 09, 2008. <http://business.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?101363>. Accessed on November 28, 2010.
- ²⁶ MYRADA has experience in rural credit programmes in Southern India. It also works in areas related to Micro-watersheds, Forestry, and Resettlement.
- ²⁷ Shalini Umachandran, Swati Anand. Slip into a shirt, save the earth. October 23, 2010, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/fashion/trends/Slip-into-a-shirt-save-the-earth-/articleshow/6180590.cms>. Accessed on November 28, 2010.
- ²⁸ Shilpa Shree, Talk fashion, think environment. <http://www.mydigitalfc.com/leisure-writing/talk-fashion-think-environment-119>. Sept. 29, 2009. Accessed on December 7, 2010.
- ²⁹ Azo dyes may be mutagenic, carcinogenic, allergic, and are not biodegradable.
- ³⁰ Meera S, Organic is the way to go, June 20, 2010, <http://www.hindu.com/rp/2010/06/20/stories/2010062050020100.htm>, Accessed on November 28, 2010.
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- ³⁴ Pankaja Srinivasan, Common Threads, uncommon people. *The Hindu*, January 23, 2010. <http://www.hindu.com/mp/2010/01/23/stories/2010012353510600.htm>. Accessed on November 28, 2010.
- ³⁵ Located in Karnataka, India.
- ³⁶ Pushpa Chari. Going Organi. <http://www.hindu.com/fr/2010/06/25/stories/2010062550900100.htm>. June 25, 2010. Accessed on November 28, 2010.
- ³⁷ Pankaja Srinivasan. Common Threads, uncommon people. *The Hindu*, January 23, 2010. <http://www.hindu.com/mp/2010/01/23/stories/2010012353510600.htm>. Accessed on November 28, 2010.
- ³⁸ Also known as Pima cotton, Egyptian cotton, etc. Extra Staple Cotton has a staple length of 1-3/8" or more.
- ³⁹ This is an international movement founded by Carlo Petrini in 1986 that strives to preserve traditional and regional cuisine and is considered an alternative to fast food. It encourages foods characteristic of the local ecosystem. The "Slow Fiber" movement is considered to be a "thoughtful approach of textile making and textile design." For more details, refer to <http://shiboriorg.wordpress.com/projects/slow-fiber/>.
- ⁴⁰ Jainism is a religion that prescribes pacifism and a path of non-violence towards all living beings.
- ⁴¹ <http://www.asian-connections.net/news/COTTON-TRAIL-PROPOSAL.pdf>. Accessed on June 23, 2011.

- ⁴²Pankaja Srinivasan. Common Threads, uncommon people. *The Hindu*, January 23, 2010. <http://www.hindu.com/mp/2010/01/23/stories/2010012353510600.htm>. Accessed on November 28, 2010.
- ⁴³ <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/site/story/ethical-designs/1/104358.html>. Accessed on June 8, 2011.
- ⁴⁴ For a copy of the invitation, please access <http://www.box.net/shared/tdqyl7fjqzdtpyvasasx>.
- ⁴⁵ <http://www.ethicus.in>. (Also refer to <http://appachicotton.com>).
- ⁴⁶ Nandhini Parthib. Ethical designs, July 19, 2010. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/site/Story/104358/SUPPLEMENTS/ethical-designs.html>. Accessed on November 28, 2010.
- ⁴⁷ Meera S. Organic is the way to go. June 20, 2010, <http://www.hindu.com/rp/2010/06/20/stories/2010062050020100.htm>., Accessed on November 28, 2010.
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- ⁵³ Benares, or Varanasi, is known for its saris. *Banaras Brocades and Sarees* have Geographical Indication Rights.
- ⁵⁴ Vethathiri Maharishi had founded over 300 yoga centres around the world and was the founder-trustee of World Community Service Center.
- ⁵⁵ In early 2011, the Madras High Court ordered to shut down 752 dyeing and bleaching units in Tirupur for failing to conform to zero discharge of effluents and releasing toxic effluents into the Noyyal River.
- ⁵⁶ <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/tirupur-dyeing-units-told-close>. Accessed June 2, 2011.

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Author Biography

AJITH SANKAR R.N. is an Assistant Professor, PSG Institute of Management, Coimbatore, India. He co-authored the book, *Indian Ethos and Values in Management*, published by Tata McGraw Hill. He has worked in the verticals of Retailing, Media, and Business and Equity Research, and is associated with two start-up companies. His case studies and caselets have been published in various national and international journals, and several are considered best-sellers. He has completed all the three exam levels of the “Chartered Market Technician” programme offered by Market Technicians Association, NY, U.S. His doctoral research is in the area of spirituality and organizations. He earned his MBA from the University of Hyderabad, focusing on Environmental Management and Human Resources Management. Ajith also holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology from Annamalai University and a three year, full-time diploma in Hotel Management from IHMCTAN, Mumbai.

Ajith can be reached at ajithsrn@ecologyfund.net.

