

“There has always been a parallel track for contesting the notion that faster is better – a countercurrent for slow. Thoreau going to Walden pond, Nietzsche talking about too much speed, Bertrand Russell, the hippies. Then in the eighties the Slow Food movement came along and took back the word ‘slow,’ which has become a four-letter word in our culture, and said fast food was detrimental. They were focused on food, but since then that slow moniker or tag has become a global shorthand for a better, more balanced way of doing everything.”

Carl Honoré, Canadian journalist and author of books on the Slow Movement

The Slow Movement emerged from a desire to dial down the pace of our modern lives and the consumerism entrenched in these. When it is used in reference to food, SLOW sometimes becomes an acronym – Sustainable, Local, Organic, Whole – that symbolizes a more balanced, mindful and healthy approach to consumption.

How strong is the Slow Movement in India? We talk to Shilpa Sharma, the founder of several successful lifestyle brands spanning textiles, apparel & lifestyle products, food and travel, to try and understand the future of this trend – if it can be termed one yet – in the country.

Shilpa Sharma on India’s Slow Movement....

A recent Mint article on the impact of climate change, predicted that we will have no shoreline left in thirty to forty years. Yet, there is very little discussion of this grim scenario even within scientific circles in India. This just goes to how far we need to go in order to trigger a public awakening on this issue — one that will eventually lead to a change in habits. We shouldn’t have any delusions about the nature of the ‘slow movement’ in our country.

On the one hand, this is perfectly understandable given that the average middle class household is still struggling to make ends meet and doesn’t have the luxury of slowing down to examine their lifestyle choices. If pyaaz and roti were a basic food staple at one point, even that is now partly out of reach for many people.

In urban enclaves and amongst the privileged class, we are seeing a level of consciousness creeping in at the individual level. But at this point, it is little more than an elitist movement, restricted to those with the mindspace and means to think about how they want to eat, dress, travel, and more.

And it’s not clear if these choices really add up to much in terms of impact. People talk about reducing their carbon footprint in the same breath as they talk about time being the new money.

They can make sacrifices as long as it doesn’t inconvenience them too much. I realize that is true for myself. Wholesome and sustainable are great to aim for as long as they don’t require me to rearrange my life in any major way. To take a train when a flight is so much more convenient, or use a car pool instead of a solo uber...these choices require significant effort and commitment. It is heartwarming to

sit around a bonfire and talk about all these new clothing popups that wear their eco-consciousness on their labels. But I am very sceptical as to whether these trends are actually leading to new habits or driving a movement that really matters.

It's also hard to gauge the sincerity of a business based on its marketing speak. I am part of a leadership group at MIT on Circular Design and Economy and have been studying the slow fashion space to see how it fares in this area. I believe that there is a lot of greenwashing happening here. In my opinion, greenwashing is a segment agnostic term and some of the big clothing brands are as guilty of it as their smaller counterparts when they talk about their eco-conscious approach for one collection but don't really pause to explain how it makes up for their misdeeds with the rest of their collections. I don't want to be dismissive of the efforts being made. But they are not quite enough.

Cost is a big part of the equation.

In the indigenous textile space, handloom and handcrafted products are rapidly becoming a privilege of the rich. Designers who are doing outstanding work using traditional and handspun textiles are targeting international markets, replete with deep pockets. The middle class, however mindful and conscious they may seek to be, is automatically priced out of this kind of quality and authenticity.

Food is another area where the math quickly becomes complicated. Organic products are starting to fill up grocery store shelves but consumers have no way of verifying whether they are truly organic. Certification is a costly process and small-scale practitioners of organic farming don't want to be burdened with this expense. They feel that the onus should be on non-compliant producers to meet these standards.

But food is also where there is the greatest potential for a mindset and habit shift. As a country, we pride ourselves on the versatility and diversity of our food. Every state has its own cuisine with numerous community-based nuances.

We have finally woken up to the realization that regional cuisine deserves its place in the sun. Thanks to this awakening and various online platforms, home chefs across the country are able to serve up an array of personal and local specialties — authentic 'khaana' from the Mathur household, Kathiawadi Gujarati food, Konkani Brahmin Maharashtrian fare, and more.

In short, there is a commercial approach to food and then there is an unpretentious, honest approach to it. We are rediscovering the potential of our own food thanks to the movement in the West that is focused on the magic of age old Indian ingredients. The world is going gaga over haldi and moringa leaves at the same time that we are trying to add kale and quinoa to our menus. But there is clearly a positive movement here — featuring local, simple and delicious food that does not have to be astronomically priced.

Still, for the most part, given where the country is in terms of economic development, the slow movement can certainly be a parallel track for now but not a mainstream one as yet. It is great to be walking the talk when you have the means to be able to

afford this shift in lifestyle. But it's not an option for everybody. And that is something that we need to be aware of.

(As communicated to Viewpoint)



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