MODEM Dialogues - In conversation with Bandana Tewari

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Bandana Tewari, Culture Journalist & Sustainability Advocate
Portrait Bandana Tewari ® by Wayan Martino
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MODEM:
Spirituality is deeply rooted in your work, not only as a life philosophy but also as an approach to fashion. When did you first sense that these two worlds could nourish each other?

BANDANI TEWARI:
I am a big believer in the sacredness of work. The reason spirituality is so important, not only in the fashion industry but in every kind of work we do, is rooted in a very ancient tradition called Karma Yoga. This form of yoga sees the sacredness in any work we undertake. Whether you're creating beautiful clothes for others, planting cotton seeds that will flourish in verdant land, or designing a graphic or an advertisement that will be consumed by people all across the world, it's essential to imbue the essence of sacredness into whatever we do.

More than ever before, we observe a lack of humanity and interconnectedness that leaves our world torn by war, inequality, and difference. It is crucial to remind ourselves of the ancient wisdom that exists across cultures globally, teaching the ethics of compassion, gratitude, and productivity, rather than focusing solely on consumerism, greed, and the degradation of all that is beautiful around us. I love a beautiful Maori custom called manaakitanga, which is taught in

schools in New Zealand, and embodies ethical principles for work and play.

Manaakitanga translates to kindness, generosity, and care for others-qualities that seem increasingly absent in our lives today. By honouring our work, recognising the impact it has on others, and incorporating the sacred element into our everyday tasks, we can better appreciate the intense connectivity among people, products, processes, and purposes in any industry, including the fashion industry.

MODEM:
You have studied Gandhian principles extensively. How can the concept of non-violence, or Ahimsa, be concretely applied throughout the entire value chain, from idea to finished product in the fashion industry?

BANDANI TEWARI:
Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Non-violence is not a garment that you put on and off at will. It must forever sit in the heart." He emphasised that Ahimsa, or non-violence, should be ingrained in our everyday thoughts, deeds, and actions. In the context of the fashion industry, this principle highlights the inequalities within the value and supply chains.

To embrace non-violence means confronting the violence of inequality evident in issues such as low wages, lack of accountability, and insufficient transparency. The challenges that exist within the supply chain must be addressed with a focus on human beings. When we prioritise humanity in our professional and personal actions, we foster a non-violent and humane approach.

Thus, the ethics of Ahimsa - a profound principle rooted in Gandhian philosophy - must be integrated into the fashion industry. This commitment should originate from both individuals and corporations, ensuring a more equitable and thriving fashion landscape.

MODEM:
During your time at Vogue India, you were among the first voices advocating for ethics, inclusion, and social justice in fashion. What motivated you to speak out back then, and what challenges or difficulties did you face as a result?

BANDANI TEWARI:
Yes, there was a time when words like sustainability, transparency, social justice, and fair wages were not part of the fashion lexicon whatsoever. However, it was becoming evident that the wastefulness of fashion was a conversation that would eventually blow up. My own excessive fashion life was becoming oppressive to me, and professionally, what kick-started my journey as an advocate for sustainability was my invitation to be part of the Global Change Award in Stockholm and to serve as an advisor at the Copenhagen Fashion Summit. Conferences and events like these opened my mind to what my new direction in life would be. I realised that, no matter how small my contribution, I wanted to adhere to the ethics of sustainability and do my best to advocate for this vital cause. One of the biggest challenges was conveying the deeper, resonating stories about the processes and systems of fashion that lead to the degradation of human life and the environment. This raised the question of how to incorporate such serious topics into a fashion magazine.

Another challenge was figuring out how to feature these kinds of editorials in fashion publications consistently. As a writer, I found that the easiest route to discussing people, products, processes, and purpose in the manufacturing of fashion goods was through the

storytelling of craft, community, and environment. This approach became a beautiful segue into highlighting the humanity that we need to embrace within the industry.

MODEM:
Your dedication to showcasing Indian artisanal traditions goes beyond clichés and exoticising views. What responsibility do you think the global fashion system holds in dealing with cultural heritage?

BANDANI TEWARI:
I'm obsessed with cultural heritage, whether it's tangible or intangible. It is not only Indian artisanship that I celebrate in my writing; rather, it is the cultural heritage from different parts of the world and the privilege of discussing it. The reason I assign so much value to cultural heritage is that it stands in stark contrast to fast fashion. Whether it's through the cultures of India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Mexico, or any other part of the globe, it becomes evident that culture provides us with benchmarks and milestones for living with creativity and compassion.

When I visit villages to write about the textile traditions in far-flung rural areas of the world, I am struck by the wealth of ancestral wisdom embedded in creativity. There is a significant emphasis on honouring the past as a vital step toward moving forward. This experience teaches me about the ingenuity of human creativity and the generational wisdom that goes into handcrafted items. I find myself returning to the sacredness of creativity. In our consumer-driven society, when we view items merely as disposable goods, we lose sight of the histories, faces and voices of the people who created them. However, when you purchase something made by hand in a quaint little village - crafted with incredible time, patience, and meditative practice it becomes nearly impossible to discard. With cultural craft comes a depth of memory, nostalgia, artistry, and a profound honouring of ancestral wisdom.

MODEM:
As a global speaker, you often move between different worlds - both geographical and intellectual. How do you manage to maintain your integrity in an industry full of contradictions without losing your energy?

BANDANI TEWARI:
This is quite a compliment you've given me, and I thank you for it. I suppose in my pretty humble life, living amongst the paddy fields in Bali, I have learned to honour the power of choice. I choose the jobs I do, which are imbued with incredible human storytelling, purpose, and the value of ultimately what being human means.

So, whether I intellectualise my adventures or not, the fact remains that I'm only drawn to stories that have depth, a devotion to creativity, and respect for the people who make them. I am particularly drawn to what I call the origin stories - going to the roots of where creativity begins and understanding what makes a story resonate.
What makes me feel fulfilled within me is essential. When I feel fulfilled, I can be a better person for others, contributing positively to the narratives we share and the connections we build.

MODEM:
It’s often said that talking about fashion should also involve karma. What does ethical consumption look like to you when it is both spiritual and socially engaged?

BANDANI TEWARI:
I'm a Nepali woman born in a small and quaint mountain region called Sikkim in the Himalayas,

which was once an independent Buddhist kingdom and later became part of India. Growing up in this environment, I have been deeply influenced by the ideals of Karma and Dharma that are embedded in ancient Indian, Nepali, and Buddhist philosophies. These concepts are deeply ingrained in my upbringing, shaping the way I perceive the world around me. For me, understanding the consequences of my actions is a fundamental aspect of the choices I make.

Suppose we were to apply these ideals universally. In that case, it's clear that the specific job we hold does not alter the underlying principles of cause and effect, which are essentially the principles of Karma and Dharma. It becomes crucial to be mindful of the choices we make in our lives, as they inevitably yield ramifications, both good and bad, depending on the decisions we take. Consequently, approaching my job from a philosophical standpoint has heightened my awareness regarding the potential impacts and repercussions of my actions. For me, it’s pretty simple: if I consume more than I need, I dispose of things more mindlessly, which in turn pollutes our earth.

Mahatma Gandhi believed in individual change as a means to achieve collective change. Thanks to him, I remind myself to strive to be a better version of myself every day through the choices I make. As a result, I find myself drawn to stories that are slow-paced, humane, and that honour both people and the planet. I also consume less, and when I do, I hope I do so mindfully.

MODEM:
When deeply committed to others, it’s easy to feel overwhelmed. Which practices help maintain a balance between compassion for others and protecting oneself?

BANDANI TEWARI:
Like many others, I have also faced numerous challenges in my professional life as a storyteller. Sometimes these challenges are financial, but at other times they stem from more complex issues, such as the sabotage of creativity by individuals with a myopic perspective. These people create hurdles not out of necessity, but due to their egos. Navigating these emotional challenges has taught me an important lesson: to believe in my passion project, stay focused, and get the job done.

I know it may sound like I am a fearless woman, but I'm not. I am vulnerable, emotional, and deeply invested in my stories. Whenever a challenge arises, I hold on to the belief that the universe is looking out for me because I am telling an authentic story. I strive to be egoless in my pursuit of storytelling, focusing on the true essence of the narratives I wish to convey.

MODEM:
How do you define self-care - not as a luxury, but as a quiet act of resistance in a field where appearance often dominates?

BANDANI TEWARI:
What a wonderful question. For me, self-care, at this point in my life, is about being consistent in my spiritual quest. I've come to believe that I am a seeker, and the pursuit of a better version of myself must encompass every aspect of my life, both personally and professionally. After all, I can only be one person, so if I am to develop an ideology of care and compassion, it must infiltrate every facet of my life and the choices I make.

This self-care nourishes me today, allowing me to feel settled within myself when I engage in my everyday rituals, which may seem trivial to most people. My home is filled with incense and

candles, accompanied by the sounds of chants and the offerings of flowers to various mythological gods and goddesses. These practices exemplify the spirit world both within ourselves and outside of ourselves. Although this doesn't necessarily make me religious, my self-care is increasingly centred on a spiritual resonance that provides me with a sense of calm, kindness, and inner peace.

MODEM:
If a young person were seeking an “inner compass” to navigate today’s fashion world, which three directions would be essential to highlight?

BANDANI TEWARI:
This inner compass that you speak of should be a thriving engine within ourselves, no matter which job we do. The first important thing to remember is acknowledging and honouring the power of humility. We must recognise that many have come before us and many will come after us, and that we are beautiful, creative blips in a vast universe. Thus, the humility of our transient lives on this beautiful Earth must not be taken for granted.

The second essential aspect is integrity. More than ever before, the need for integrity in our lives is paramount, especially in a world surrounded by wars, misinformation, and technological advancements that can erode our humanity. We must not forget that with integrity comes truth, and nothing can topple truth. Being truthful to ourselves and our jobs is crucial. Furthermore, being passionately driven and genuinely honest about why we love what we do, or why we don’t, should define the course of our lives.

Without inner integrity, we risk losing that sense of purpose, which extends beyond ourselves to encompass other people and, indeed, our planet. Purpose is my third inner compass. By what we do, whose life are you changing for the better? For me, it’s a vital driving force.

MODEM:
Your name means "connection" in Sanskrit, and a bandana is a cloth that can be tied, worn, or removed. Looking back on your journey, which connections have remained important, and what have you chosen to let go of?

BANDANI TEWARI:
You've just made me realise how profound the meaning of the name my parents gave me is. Yes, you're right. "Bandan" is the binding. It could be the binding of something philosophical, something loving - a binding of people and emotions. In Nepali, "Bandana" also means prayer. It refers to a prayer said before any familial or cultural event, a call to the sacred nature of creativity and a call for guidance from the universe.

I am very grateful my parents chose this name for me. However, this realisation also brings a little tear to my eye because I recognise how many wonderful people I have let go of as I have grown older. It's not that they didn't serve any purpose in my life; instead, we simply went on divergent paths. In my journey toward self-improvement and self-protection, I have had to say goodbye to many beloved connections.
I hope that I said those goodbyes kindly, and I am truly thankful for the ones I still cherish. Those individuals have been so persistent in their kindness and love that I feel forever indebted to them. I am tied to them not just by memory, but by love itself.