



BEAST to Beauty

The leather industry is important in the area in and around Kolkata in the Indian state of West Bengal. It is home to more than 500 tanners and has a long tradition as a centre of excellence for the design and manufacture of finished leathers. One local leathers brand, Manti Fashion Accessories, is proud of its Kolkata roots and is making an increasing impression on export markets, but it says it has concerns about being able to continue to tap into the talent and expertise of the local workforce.

Young people at a technology exhibition in Kolkata. Everyone wants their children to have the best education and the best possible start in life, but traditional jobs and traditional skills are being undervalued now.
CREDIT: ARINDAMBANERJEE / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



Threats to the eastern promise of West Bengal

Manti is a Kolkata-based leathergoods brand, founded and run by local entrepreneur Amit Dasgupta. He has built up an important network of customers in export markets around the world, with buyers in South Africa, Australia, the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, Italy and Spain investing in the company's collections, with plenty of retailers in the domestic market also placing regular orders.

For practical reasons, as well as questions of taste, there can be important differences in the style of leathergoods consumers want in each of these markets. For example, wallets that sell well in Australia and South Africa are small in size, because the banknotes in circulation in those countries are small. "In Germany, on the contrary, people want big, thick wallets," explains Amit Dasgupta, "with room for them to fit in a lot of cards, their driving licence, everything. So wallets for the German market usually have to be one-and-a-half times bigger than those for Australia or South Africa." He says that, in his experience, the UK market functions differently again. There, it is usually women who buy wallets for their husbands, boyfriends, brothers and so on. "Ladies' purses and handbags sell better there," he observes, "and we are able to serve the market well by adding fashion, colour and bling to what we do. The mass market doesn't appeal to us so much; we prefer fashion."

Always new

Mr Dasgupta has in-depth knowledge of the UK market, thanks to years of experience of sourcing leathergoods on the ground in Kolkata for a company based in Desborough, near Northampton, called Littlestone & Goodwin. This trading company closed in 2013, but was at one time an important source of finished leathergoods for big-name retail groups, including Laura Ashley, Next, River Island and Jane Norman. This experience helped him work with customers in all markets when, around seven years ago, he began to plan Manti. He had extensive experience by this time of interpreting customer requirements, sourcing product from local manufacturing facilities in West Bengal, sending samples for approval and then shipping completed orders in keeping with exacting overseas delivery schedules.

"Working with so many designers was a help too," he says. "I'm not a qualified designer, but I do have something in-built, a knack for design, and I can very easily pick up on new designs, new textures, new ideas to offer to the customers. This is important because, nowadays, what we are seeing is that everyone is asking for something new every season, new shapes, new styles, new textures, new colours, everything. So, we have to be on our toes the whole time and to keep fresh what we are presenting."



Men's wallets for the German market have to be big.
ALL CREDITS: MANTI FASHION ACCESSORIES

Vitruvian Manti

Examples in the autumn-winter 2014-2015 Manti collection include a series of leathergoods designs that incorporate a motif of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, including the famous drawing of a man inside a circle with his arms and legs shown in two positions, plus some of the accompanying text from the original, extolling the co-relation between the workings of the body and the workings of the universe. "It is absolutely our design," the Manti founder insists; "it is our intellectual property and we have the rights on it."

Another component of the collection that he highlights is a unisex computer bag with a distressed leather look in slate grey, using burnished calf leather tanned in West Bengal. The bag is handmade and has a sloping, angled flap that is shortest at the top-left and longest at the bottom-right. "Nowhere in the world will you find this kind of design," its creator claims. The burnishing effect comes during a special hand-finishing process after product construction is complete. This creativity is helping to open the path to new markets: at a special buyer-seller meet event, held in parallel with the India International Leather Fair in Chennai at the start of February, buyers from Uzbekistan made a positive impression on the Manti founder. "It's a developing economy," he says. "They have GDP growth there of 8% and people want quality products." Another interesting recent development is that German buyers used to act as middlemen for markets in eastern Europe.



(Left) Vitruvian Manti. Kolkata-based Manti Fashion Accessories has incorporated a famous drawing by Leonardo da Vinci into its leathersgoods design.

(Right) A unisex computer bag, handmade by skilled leathersgoods workers.

Now buyers from places such as the Czech Republic and Poland are approaching manufacturing partners in India directly.

Skilled workforce

Around 40 people are on the pay-roll at Manti's own factory in Kolkata and there are another 80 local leathersgoods artisans that are contract workers there. Output at the moment is in the region of 10,000 bags per month, in addition to 25,000 small leathersgoods pieces per month. "We still consider ourselves to be a small company," Mr Dasgupta says. "We do have minimum order sizes: 100 pieces for small leathersgoods and 50 for bags, but we try to be flexible and we try to put the focus on the quality of our products." He says the Kolkata people who work for Manti have learned "over generations" how to make bags and other products from leather, with skills in pattern-making, cutting, stitching and so on still strong among local people, for the moment, at least.

"There is a big difference between workers in India and those in China," Mr Dasgupta continues. "Workers in China are more organised, they have big machines and would rather go with automation than cut patterns, and it's all about volumes. In

Kolkata, what happens is we do it by hand and we can be more flexible on volumes. There is a lot of precision our way also because people are so skilled, but it's done by hand. I prefer this, because our people really understand which part of a bag needs something extra, such as a little bit of roundness on a corner. This cannot be done by machine, but by hand our people can do it."

Problems with perceived value

Manti's founder has concerns about how long West Bengal can keep its skilled artisan leathersgoods producers. As well as having concerns about all the usual things a leathersgoods brand has to worry about, such as the competition and how the high price of hides is affecting the price of the finished leather he buys, Amit Dasgupta admits that he wonders if these traditional skills can last for much more than another five years. "I'll tell you exactly what is happening," he says. "It's quite alarming. Most of our skilled workers didn't really go to school and don't have much in the way of an educational background, so they work with their hands. But they work hard to make sure their children do go to school and then university and then get a white-collar job in consumer electronics or other

industries. We all want the best for our children, but the downside is that in this industry, the skills will not be passed on and we will not be able to find them any more."

In other words, India has advantages in the availability of raw material, the creativity of its people and its skilled workforce. Social responsibility audits by international auditing groups, to check companies are paying minimum wages at least and that the health and safety of workers is safeguarded and that there is no child labour, present no problem to the leathersgoods manufacturing sector in West Bengal, Mr Dasgupta says, or, at least, not at the level operators such as Manti work at. He views as a much more serious threat the loss of traditional skills and a generations-old love of and respect for leather because the perceived value of a traditional artisan leather worker's knowledge and talent is too low to attract younger workers. "It's already happening," Mr Dasgupta warns.

It's unclear what solution he and other leathersgoods manufacturers in West Bengal will be able to find, but one thing Amit Dasgupta is certain of is that he will not switch his production to synthetic materials. "Only leather will do," he says. ☉