



Happy Chinese New Year, Natural Health readers. I wish you health, happiness and success in the year of the Snake.

Because it coincides with springtime in China, the CNY is also known as the “Spring Festival”. We’re advised to plan our year in the spring—according to a Chinese saying. A plan has to have a goal. But what’s a good goal? A good one should have a big, positive impact on your life. And I’d like to recommend one to you: Become a lover of sustainable and ethical fashion in the year of the Snake.

Of all the possible goals, why that one? Let me explain.

The goal has, if you will, two dimensions: sustainability and ethicality. I wrote quite a bit about sustainability last year in this magazine, so I don’t wish to belabour the issue here. That leaves us with the issue of ethicality.

Put simply, something which is ethical doesn’t harm people or the environment. There’s plenty one can write about this subject. But because of space constraints, I will focus on the people aspect. And I will answer the key question: Can fashion hurt people?

### **The Changing Fashion World**

Fashion is constantly changing. But change isn’t always obvious. For example, did you know that your new cotton T-shirt could be made from genetically modified (GM) cotton? There are no readily available stats on the local situation, but in the UK, experts estimate that 75% of the cotton clothes on sale there are made from GM cotton.

Indeed, the world’s cotton crop is surreptitiously changing. Today, around 43% of the world’s cotton is GM cotton. But in one country, the percentage is close to 90%. That country is India.

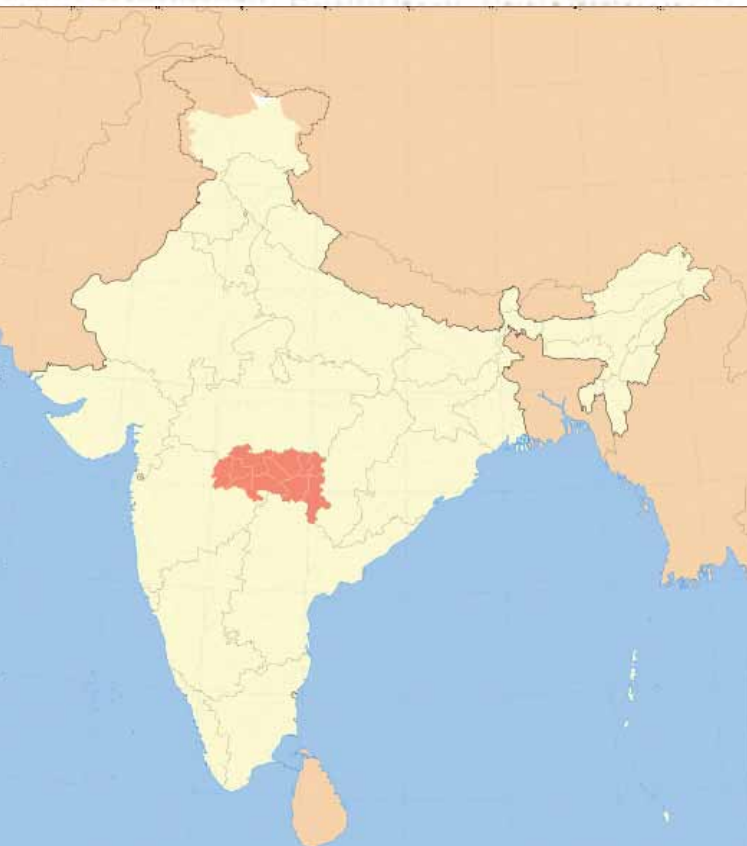


If one looks at the adoption rate, one may think that GM cotton is a great success story in India. Sadly, it is not. Let me tell you a true story about a young Indian woman and her experience with GM cotton.

### **The Aspiring Journalist**

Manjusha Amberwar is an 18-year-old girl. She’s from Telung Takli, a tiny and remote village in Vidarbha. Known as the “White Gold Belt of [the Indian state of] Maharashtra,” Vidarbha is a key cotton production area.





Manjusha's dream is to become a journalist. Her family are, however, against it. They say she's not following tradition. But Manjusha's mind is made up. She believes she has a mission, which is to tell the world about the farmers' predicament. She explains: "Three farmers in my village killed themselves...I'm investigating why they did it."

The suicides are part of a larger crisis. In August 2012, the Indian Parliament was told that there were 290,740 farmer suicides during 1995 – 2011. That translates into 17,102 suicides per year. At one point during that period, it got as bad as one suicide in every 30 minutes.

The situation is simply tragic. Which is why Manjusha feels compelled to tell the farmers' stories. But something else is also driving her—her father was one of the many Indian cotton farmers who have committed suicide.

The suicides are, however, a rather recent phenomenon. An old-timer informs Manjusha: "In my time, there were no suicides. Even poor people could survive by working hard." Something must have changed. But what is it?

In the course of her investigation, Manjusha discovers that her village no longer employs traditional agricultural practices. One big change is the cotton seeds. Specifically, the villagers are now using GM cotton seeds. Why did they switch?

## The Marketing Juggernaut

One reason is, in the words of CHRJJ (Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice), "aggressive marketing". Consider the following, which is a scene from an actual ad on Indian TV:

A cotton farmer rides a brand new motorcycle home. His children are thrilled: "Dad, Dad, is it ours?" Their excitement, however, dissipates almost instantaneously. "Will it still be around next year?" they glumly add. The farmer proudly declares: "Next year, it'll be a car!"



To us, motorcycles and automobiles aren't a big deal—they're everywhere. But things are different in rural India. In that part of the world, they're luxuries. Which means the farmer in the ad has made it. And he's confident he'll make it big time the following year.

If you're poor and desperate and you see that ad or something similar, chances are you'd want to try whatever the ad's offering. And that's exactly the outcome—thousands upon thousands of farmers have bought GM cottonseeds, the subject of the advertisement.

But do the seeds really work?



Cotton farmers demanding higher price and loan waiver

## The Harsh Reality

Seeds are seeds. They alone can't guarantee a good harvest. Other success factors, such as water and soil fertility, are necessary. Indeed, the product literature states that the seeds can deliver the desired results only if they are protected by expensive pesticides and watered and fertilized according to precise timetables. But many of the seed customers can't afford to do that—they're smallholders with rain-fed fields (i.e. no irrigation).





# ORGANIC & Wholesome

Furthermore, GM seeds are non-renewable. They are sterile by design. Which means the farmers must renew their supply every year. Another old-timer tells Manjusha: “We saved seeds in our farms. There was never a question of paying for the seeds.”

The reality is this: GM cottonseeds aren't the solution for India's resource-poor majority. But nobody told the impoverished and illiterate farmers that. They're only told a dream. They're not told its true cost. And in the pursuit of their dreams, many smallholders go heavily into debt. And when dreams and reality collide, casualties are inevitable. The farmer-suicide crisis is a case in point.

## The Organic Solution

Thankfully, a number of non-governmental organisations, both Indian and international, are taking steps to address the crisis. Their solution: Organic cotton farming.

Organic farming is often badly misunderstood. It's not a throwback to the good old days—doing things our grandfather's way, as some say. Granted, it's similar in some respects to traditional farming. For example, organic farming strictly prohibits the use of genetically modified seeds and synthetic agrochemicals, both of which are relatively recent inventions. Despite the similarities, there are substantial differences. Organic farming is knowledge-intensive and backed up by current, solid science. To maximise crop quality and yield, organic farmers have to understand issues like soil fertility and insect life. So the NGOs are transferring the know-what and know-how to the Indian farming community.

With zero GMOs and agrochemicals, organic cotton farming can help save lives. What's more, it can give farmers a better quality of life.

## The Springtime Resolution

Let's go back to our key question: Can fashion hurt people? I think the answer is clear.

The good news is, you and I can do something to end the pain and suffering. How? Someone's got to buy the organic cotton produced by the farmers. That's us consumers. In fact, the more we buy, the more farmers the NGOs can persuade to switch to organic farming.

I'd like to end with a quote from the environmentalist Anna Lappé: “Every time you spend money, you're casting a vote for the kind of world you want.” So what kind of world do you want? And what will you do for it in the year of the Snake—and beyond?



**CW Tan is the CEO and Director of Nukleusshop – a revolutionary brand for fashionable sustainable and affordable men's and women's underwear and basics.**

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