

DENIM PANTS FOR THE INDIAN YOUTH HAS BECOME A PERSONALITY-DEFINING FACTOR. IT UNITES THEM AS BEING COOL BUT DIVIDES THEM ON THE BASIS OF WHO'S WEARING WHICH BRAND...

BY KAUSTAV SENGUPTA

# The Denimisation of Youth

## Denim and youth

More than half of the world's population is under the age group of 30 years. In contemporary Indian cities, youngsters do recognise that they are raised in an affluent world flooded with choices and pampered by brands. For most of them, the question is not how to get something but what to choose that will best show off their AIOs (Attitude, Interest, Opinion) and communicate in a semiotic language known to their peers. The young generation is not only aware of the fact that they are being marketed products but has grown up in an environment full of brands and commercial media. This generation has grown up with cyber revolution just like the other generations who had grown up with green or industrial revolution. Their social DNA is cyber-oriented. Interestingly, they are also very much oriented toward a piece of clothing called denim.

My recent research at INgene ([www.ingene.blogspot.com](http://www.ingene.blogspot.com)) found that other than war, cricket and anti-corruption, being in denim is a common theme which unites all the youth in India irrespective of their cast, culture, economic situation, social status, geographic location, career ideology, skin tones, family values and peer group. There will be at least one pair of denim trousers in the wardrobe of the youth in urban and rural India. The difference may be about the quality of materials, colours, styles and brands.

The right value of the brand in this case, is the name of the product versus status of the wearer. Whether the denim is a limited edition, imported, purchased abroad, the brand that Salman Khan wears, local brand, fake or no-brand makes the statement one wants to be known with while among peers or in public.

## A brief history

According to [twentysomethingyak.com](http://twentysomethingyak.com), jeans are popularly made of denim these days but in 17th century Europe jean material and denim were very different. Jean material seems to have originated in Genoa, Italy, called *bleu de Gênes* in French, and was woven from cotton or linen and sometimes blended with wool. Denim seems to have originated in France and England, named after Nimes, France and generally called *serge de Nimes*.

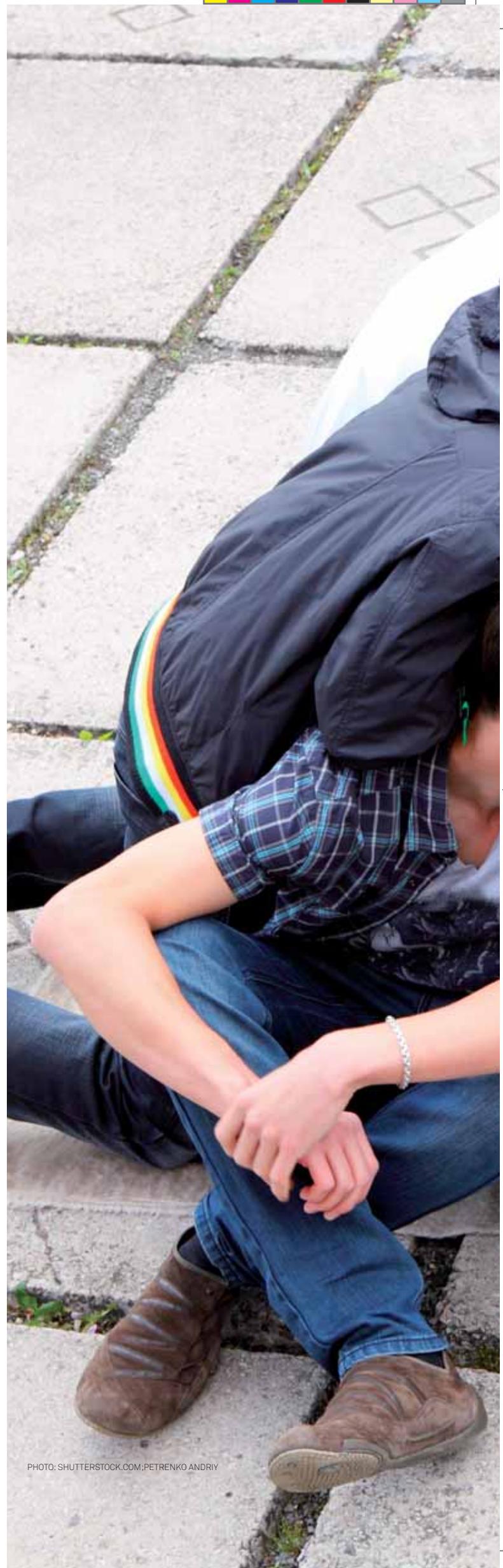


PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM:PETRENKO ANDRIY



Unlike the jean fabric the early denim was woven of silk and wool. However, the denim fabric used a coloured thread and a white thread in the weave, similar to today's denim fabric, while the jean fabric used only coloured threads. As time passed the denim material evolved into a cotton twill weave instead of a wool blend, and it retained its characteristic coloured warp thread and white fill thread. Its signature blue colour became popular when indigo dye was used in the processing. In the 19th century the California Gold Rush miners needed strong pants that did not tear easily. A Bavarian-born immigrant named Loeb Strauss ( who had changed his name to Levi) produced some sturdy pants for the gold miners. Eventually he along with a tailor Jacob Davis reinforced the pockets and weak points of the pants with copper rivets. In 1873 Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis received a patent for the copper rivet reinforcements and the pants now known as Levi's became popular among working men. In the thirties and forties denim pants grew in popularity with real and movie cowboys. Soldiers during World War II favoured wearing denim pants when they were off duty. Factory workers during the era also preferred them. In the fifties denims became associated with rebellious young people. James Dean popularised them in the movie, *Rebel Without a Cause*. In the sixties and seventies blue jeans became well accepted for casualwear and became part of general fashion. The hippy movement embraced them and the trend to personalise and embellish jeans began. During the period different styles of jeans were created to match the imaginative fashions. For example, stone-washed, embroidered, painted and psychedelic jeans were a few of the styles that young people were buying from an increased number of manufacturers. In the nineties the

history of blue jeans was transformed forever. Denim debuted as high fashion. The term designer jeans was coined. Sergio Valente, Jordache, Calvin Klein were amongst the first to create slimmer, tight, butt-hugging jeans. Now into the 2000s blue jeans survive as a utility pant for much of the population. It is said that the average American owns about seven pairs of jeans.

The entry of denim or jeans as young, hip and tough fashionwear in Indian wearer's socio-psychological perception was through the Bollywood and regional movies made in sixties, which as always were mirroring the Western look borrowed from Hollywood. In those days the most happening heroes used to wear bell bottom jeans and ride a scooter which was actually the imported stereotype visual representation of hippies from West. The gender blender was yet to happen in denim, which actually took place in eighties where the denims of heroes and heroines on Indian silver screen were almost androgynous in colour and in overall style (even the zip of the women's denim shifted from the side to the middle). Though denim was never a part of officewear in India but recently thanks to the IT industry and their Americanism, denim is creeping in as Friday dressing.

#### Psychology of denim in India: what's so cool about it?

The most amazing part of denim is the fact that though denim is a thick twill fabric, regardless of geographic and climatic factors in various Indian regions, it is worn as a staple bottomwear among the youth. The probable causes are several, right from the physical property of denim fabric to the longevity and product personality. As denim is made in cotton yarns, the final products are very comfortable in any

humid geographic location. It absorbs sweat, allows the air to pass and protect the skin from getting burnt due to heat. That's why it was first worn as workwear by the American gold miners. Although I feel the most powerful property of denim fabric or trouser is its product personality. The rebellious attitude and coolness is instantly built in the mind of the young wearer when they wear a pair of denim.

Just like owning a mobile phone, bike (for boys) and going on dates, wearing denim is one of the very early teenage must-haves in urban India. Teenage brains are very flexible and emotional. It is the visual stimuli as denim helps them to create a stereotype of a rebel in their mind through the constant visual experience their brain receives by means of myths (of past heroes), movies, novels, ad campaigns, celebrities and peers. This visual stimulus upgrades with idols such as Che Guevara and those protagonists who fought against the establishments for common good. The recent anti-corruption movement is another example of common good among the youth in India where the "I am Anna" cap became the visual stimulus for them to show solidarity across the social and geographic barriers.

Denim is always considered as a non-executive wear in India. A teenager grows with the visuals of adults (whoever is related to politics, government and establishments) wearing non-denim trousers (even the school discourages denim as a part of uniform). Hence, denim automatically becomes a symbol of anti-establishment wear and this perception made denim a staple in the teenager's wardrobe. My research revealed that the thrill of riding a roller coaster or smoking the first cigarette (without the knowledge of parents) are exactly same as wearing a pair of faded denim to show off their coolness (to the opposite sex or friends) for the first time. Social networks, such as Facebook became the space to show off coolness by adding more photos of the individual in denim. Also, for this pressure cooker generation (as market strategist and expert in consumer behaviour Rama Bijapurkar rightly stated) who are always under constant pressure to perform for parent's ambition, denim works as a anti-distress wear.

Considering the colonial history of India, denim appeals to our age-old aspiration of becoming Westernised and in the process, being considered as more hip, forward thinking and smarter than the non-Westernised Indians (majorly in rural India).

#### The denim purchase behaviour and induction pattern among the youth

The Indian youth can be broadly categorised (socio-psychologically) into three categories - the Bharatiyas, the Indians and the Ingliodians. The Bharatiyas estimating 67 per cent of the



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM: DMITRIY SHIRONOSOV



Rebellious cool freedom

Easy to maintain tough and durable no need to press

Cotton twill classic clues authentic Western

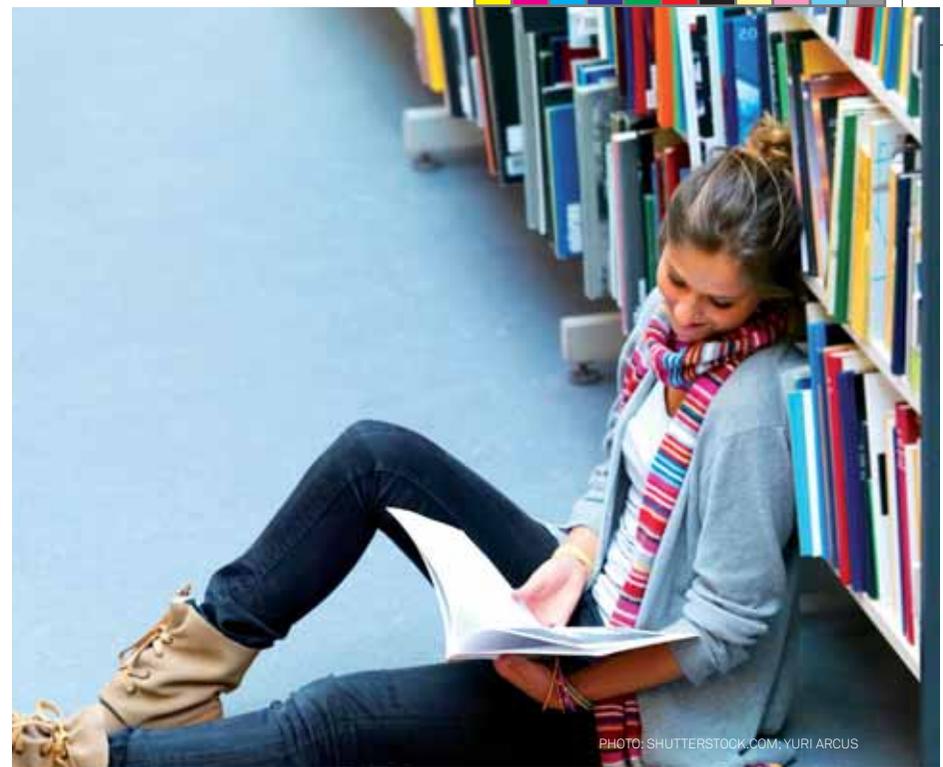
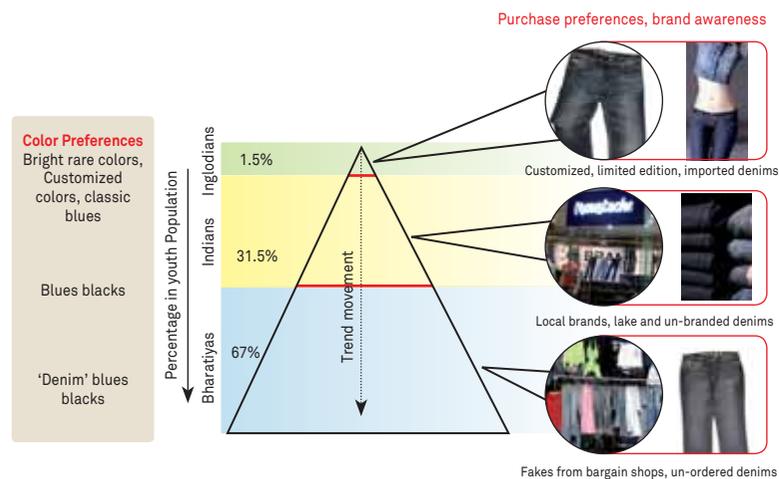


PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM, YURI ARCUS



young population lives in the rural (R1, R2 to R4 SEC) areas with least influence of globalisation, high traditional values and higher parental surveillance. Most of them are least economically privileged, most family-oriented Bollywood influenced generation. The Indians constitute 31.5 per cent (A, B, C, D and E SEC) and have moderate global influence. They are well aware of global trends but rooted to the Indian family values, customs and ethos. They are highly target-oriented and pressured by the parents' ever-growing ambition for socio-economical success. The Ingloadians are basically the creamy layers (A1, A SEC) and marginal (1.5 per cent or roughly three million) in number though they are strongly growing at 70 per cent annually. Ingloadians are affluent and consume most of the trendy and luxury items. They are internet savvy and the believers of global village (a place where there is no difference between East and West, developing and developed countries, et cetera.), highly influenced by the Western music, food, fashion and culture yet Indian at heart. Interestingly, most of the purchases the Ingloadians indulge in are either imported or purchased from abroad to maintain the exclusive otherness from rest of the clusters.

The denim infographic shown below explains the denim induction pattern of each of the above mentioned youth clusters in India:



The denim induction infographics

As the above infographic shows, the Bharatiyas mostly purchase the counterfeit denim brands from bargain shops at various markets (such as Sarojini Nagar market in Delhi or Fashion Street in Mumbai). Some of them get their denims tailor-made as per the latest Bollywood styles. The Indians wear domestic brands such as Moustache or Spyker, which are price competitive and affordable or wear the unbranded tailored denims. Also, they wear the mid-segment products of authentic denim brands such as Signature by Levi's or the counterfeits (locally produced or sourced). The Ingloadians mostly buy their denims from abroad or only wear authentic brands such as Levi's Red or Diesel. A segment of Ingloadians wear limited edition or custom-made denims of brands such as Ed Hardy, Billy Cock, Australia, et cetera.

Today, the main challenge for a denim brand (catering to Indians and Ingloadians) is the crucial uniqueness that will differentiate it from the rest of the local brands as well as counterfeits. Unless, their products are visually distinguishable (not just the inherent quality of the product or brand value) the brand will face challenges not only from the rivals but also from its own counterfeits (mostly produced locally or in the neighbourhood countries). The sudden rise and fall of Ed Hardy Denim was due to the rampant counterfeiting of its products which lacked visual uniqueness. The customisation facility (colours, shapes and detailing) can also become another USP for the brand.

Moreover, the growing awareness about the corporate social responsibility among the youth in India denotes that the denim brands can utilise this factor to add value to the product as a pride factor for common good which are already being practised by international brands such as Levi's Red and H&M's Fashion against AIDS collection.

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