



eco fashion

Being ecologically sustainable can also go hand-in-hand with preserving traditions, while making a cheeky statement. Meet **Jem Bendell**, the man behind the denim *sherwani*

INDIAN DENIM RECLAIMED

This picture was taken by award-winning photographer Paulo Pellegrin as part of an exhibition on sustainable fashion

and sustainable textile entrepreneur Rubina Ansari. When I saw the organic hand-woven and plant-dyed denims that Rubina makes, and the Indo-French fashion that Prema designs for Rangoli Fashion House, I had an idea for a new piece of clothing.

Why denim?

I've read that the original blue denim was from India, from the sailors called Dhunga, who wore 'dungarees'. They passed it on to sailors from Genoa, where the name 'jeans' comes from. It seems they passed the popularity of the tough cotton fabric on to the people in Nimes. Hence, the name 'denim' or de Nimes. But neither Genoa or Nimes had the cotton or indigo plants – they were from India. Although the contemporary feel of denim is youthful and casual due to Hollywood films, denim is actually the result of an exchange of ideas across the globe, with origins in India. I wanted to reclaim denim for India!

How did the *sherwani* come about?

I asked Prema if she could design an Indian-style coat using Rubina's sustainable denim. "I think you mean a *sherwani*," she said. I loved the idea – it combines and challenges the formal and casual, the Hollywood and the Bollywood. We got to work creating the world's first denim *sherwani*, made in a sustainable way. It uses organic cotton, where the cotton grows in fields with other plants, not in a chemical-induced monoculture. Because it uses natural plant dyes, it does not pollute water resources. Because it was made on a handloom, it supports dignified and almost zero-carbon village employment, and maintains a traditional craft. The sustainable denim *sherwani* is a piece of transmodern fashion. ■

By wearing this denim *sherwani*, you're helping the cause of ethical fashion while also restoring a fabric culture that began in India centuries ago. Conceived by social innovator Jem Bendell and made in collaboration with designers from Auroville, Tamil Nadu, this organic, hand-woven and natural indigo-dyed piece is a novel take on tradition. But saving tradition is not the only thing on Dr Bendell's mind. He has also been campaigning for sustainable development, and is the founder of Authentic Luxury Network, which brings together eco-minded luxury professionals, and Lifeworth, a consulting collective. His efforts have helped inspire the Marine Stewardship Council and the United Nations Global Compact. This year, he conceived the United Nations' first fashion show, celebrating eco-fashion during the 2010 International

Year of Biodiversity. Excerpts from an interview with him:

When did you start working towards sustainable fashion?

My journey started in 2006 when I realised that we need to raise awareness of the social and environmental consequences of consumption. I think prestige brands, celebrities and advertisers can do their bit to promote ethical shopping and sustainable lifestyles. Sustainability needs to become aspirational, and luxury fashion brands have the power to help or hinder that perspective.

How did you land up in Auroville?

My exploration of a new purpose for 'luxury' took me to the spiritual community of Auroville. I explored the relationship between beauty and divinity, matter and spirit, desire and contentment, for my new book on sustainable luxury. While there, I met fashion designer Prema Florence Isaac,