

# Adaptive Clothing for the Elderly of India: Analysis of the Current Market Scenario

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## **Abstract:**

Since the beginning of civilisation, clothing has played a vital role in the lives of mankind. Humans use clothing to express themselves and build a positive relationship with others in the society. However, the fashion business has always concentrated on a narrowly defined retail client based on modern cultural notions of beauty: young, conventionally beautiful, and able bodies, with very little inspirational work done in inclusive fashion clothing (Azer et al., 2012; Carroll, 2015). Most of the elderly people struggle with limited body movements and functions and therefore find it difficult to fit into the clothes made by the fashion retail industry. They require clothing that are adaptive, meaning clothing that are easily accessible, made to fit their body requirements and do not compromise on style. The good news is that there is a noticeable shift in the fashion industry and there are many brands which are working in the domain of adaptive clothing. In the international market there are a number of retail organisations that have a dedicated clothing line for the elderly. However, the adaptive clothing market in India is at a nascent stage. There are just a handful of brands working in this sector. The objective of the research was to study the current market players offering adaptive clothing in India. The data was collected from the social media pages of five home grown brands. An in-depth analysis was done in terms of the product range, their functionality, available sizes, choice of textiles etc. The percentage of elderly population is growing in India but the number of products and choices offered by these Indian brands are limited. Therefore, this sector has a huge potential. Research should be carried out to identify the needs of the consumers and suitable product line should be developed.

**Keywords:** Adaptive Clothing, Inclusive Fashion, Indian Market, Home-grown Brands, Elderly

## **INTRODUCTION**

Clothing is often referred to as second skin. It has the ability to not only impact the wearer's physical appearance, but it has also been associated with one's psychological well being. The retail sector which operates with standard sizes of clothing has been steadily growing and this industry is quick to respond to the demands of the society. However, it is important to note here that the industry has not been able to tap the growing population of the elderly. Survey results indicated that the clothing needs of people living with disabilities and impairments are not being met, the lack of appropriate clothing prevented individuals from fully engaging in social activities and relationships, employment or everyday life events (Kabel et al., 2016). In the global scenario, the population of the elderly is increasing as people are living longer due to advancements in medical technology. According to an article published by WHO, by 2030, 1 in 6 people in the world will be aged 60 years or over (WHO, 2022). With old age, there are many degenerative changes that occur in the human body along with chronic illnesses. Due to

these reasons, there are overall physical and physiological changes in the body, thus creating the need for specially designed products and services.

Extensive research has been undertaken starting from the 1950s in the developed nations that have concluded the need of special apparels for this set of clientele. Problems like donning and doffing of garments, closing of fasteners like zippers etc have been identified and necessary modifications in apparels have been suggested. When it comes to the elderly, certain needs are common for both genders but there are quite a few physical as well as social challenges which are brought about by the gender of the person. Due to the change in body structure and flexibility, ergonomic solutions to these problems can enhance the usability of the apparels making them suitable for the wearer and also help in camouflaging the irregularities in their structure if required. As many people in this age group suffer from many physical ailments, medical textiles which have certain functional properties can not only protect the wearer from the physical environment, but also help in providing the required comfort and recovery. But in the current scenario, majority of medical textiles are used in hospitals in the form of healthcare products like apparels for the patient and medical professionals. Although most of these garments are easy to wear, but a research conducted on hospital garments in Finland concluded that the apparels which should ideally help in recovery of the patients, does the exact opposite. These apparels have a negative psychological effect on the wearer and considered akin to a rite of passage into their new role as a patient. A lot of research is going on in the field of functional textiles and there is a need for the correct application of these textiles for the benefit of the society. Hence, a combination of ergonomically designed aesthetic apparels with functional finishes applied to them can provide a viable solution for the elderly.

There has been considerable amount of research done to identify the needs of the elderly. However, there is very less data available that concerns the apparel needs of the elderly especially in the Indian context. According to the Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections for India and States 2011-2036, there are nearly 138 million elderly persons in India in 2021 comprising of 67 million males and 71 million females. The need of this growing population has to be identified for providing them with the necessary solutions. Although, there are a few home-grown brands that are designing clothing for people with special needs, there is no concrete data supporting the ergonomic considerations or the application of medical textiles or a combination of both for the elderly.

## **CLOTHING AND SELF ESTEEM**

Clothing is a form of non-verbal communication and has a profound impact on the self esteem of the wearer. Self-worth and self-respect are important needs of the elderly and choice of clothing improves the overall appearance. Clothing, thus plays an important role as it promotes positive social interaction which is crucial for the elderly. However, the clothing related barriers are often overlooked. The lack of attractive, functional clothing can be detrimental to overall well-being if individuals are unable to present themselves according to personal standards (Kabel et al., 2016).

## **CLOTHING REQUIREMENTS FOR THE ELDERLY**

Due to the phenomenon of population ageing, the percentage of elderly population is increasing. According to an article published by WHO, between 2015 and 2050, the proportion of the world's population over 60 years will nearly double from 12% to 22% (WHO, 2022).

The retail market today offers 'ready-to-wear' garments which runs on the philosophy of standard sizes and mass production. Research shows that these standard garments are non-inclusive. A need exists in the retail market for apparel products with wide appeal and potential for usage by consumers with diverse physical abilities (Caroll & Kincade, 2007). Research shows that the needs of the elderly are not met by the standard size garments available in the market both in terms of fit as well as functionality.

With old age, there are both anatomical as well as physiological changes that occur in the body. Due to physical changes in the body of the elderly and the disabled, their body measurements may differ substantially from the standard body sizes, and their body figures may also not be of the right proportions or are asymmetrical (Sau-Fun et al., 2011). Changes like narrowing of shoulder, widening of pelvic area, protruding abdomen, slouching of back etc are commonly seen in the elderly. Apart from the changes in the body structure, elderly people experience difficulty in the physical movements like slowing down of muscle movements, balance disorder and other functional restrictions. As a result, the elderly face various clothing related problems like, fastening buttons, snaps, or zippers; putting on clothes over one's head; putting on socks, shoes, or stockings; and tying shoelaces, bows, and neckties (Garner & Douglas, 1992). Hence, the elderly require apparels that can help them to dress up with ease and help them set up new social connections, create an image and, especially, hide the imperfections that result from the physical changes caused by old age.

## ADAPTIVE CLOTHING

Initially normal clothing was altered to fit the needs of the users who couldn't use the regular clothing available. Then, researchers started studying the needs of people with disabilities and the term 'adaptive clothing' came into existence. Adaptive clothing, also known as functional clothing is clothing designed specifically for people who face challenges in dressing themselves. Therefore, this segment of clothing includes a wide array of individuals ranging from elderly to people having physical or sensory disabilities of all age groups. Adaptive apparel focusses on facilitating easy-to-wear, comfortable and accessible dressing while retaining the dignity and confidence of the wearer. Adaptive clothing falls under 'inclusive fashion' which aims to cater to individuals of all abilities and disabilities, the elderly being one such group.

With advancement in technology, adaptive clothing is performing additional functions like biometric monitoring and tracking. Sometimes, these apparels also come with protective mechanisms.

At the International level, there are many organisations that are actively working with adaptive clothing. Big retail brands like Kozie Clothes, NBZ apparel, Target and Tommy Hilfiger have dedicated clothing lines developed for people with specific disabilities. Adaptive brands cater to specific needs of the consumers like innerwear, shoes, apparels for post surgery etc. However, there are few brands like Silverts, Buck and Buck etc that have a dedicated line of attractive clothing for the elderly, which cater to both men and women.

## FEATURES OF ADAPTIVE CLOTHING FOR THE ELDERLY

It has been realized that anthropometric changes and mobility issues need to be addressed while designing apparels for the elderly. To cater to the specific needs of the elderly, the following modifications have been suggested as per literature:

- 1. Modifications in the pattern:** The patterns of the garments need to be altered in areas according to the physical structure of the elderly. The pattern should be modified for changes like narrowed

shoulders, the protruding belly, the slouched back etc. The crotch has been identified as a significant concern area for fit in protective and functional garments in previous research investigations. Therefore, the pattern should be modified accordingly. Additionally, elderly with specific disabilities may need even more specialized patterns. For example, if there are any medical devices and related accessories, the pattern of the garment should be such that it should be able to hide it. Designs with full sleeves, pleats and folds have been found to be useful in concealing devices. The overall pattern should be according to the measurements of the elderly and should be able to conceal any deformity or attached medical devices.

- 2. Easy access:** Donning and doffing of garments is one of the major concerns of the elderly. Openings should be such that they are easily accessible even with limited mobility. Garments can be designed which can be worn while lying down if required. Unconventional openings like a bra which opens in the front have been found to be useful. Sometimes, multiple openings may be required for easy donning and doffing.
- 3. Seams and fasteners:** Placement of the seams should be analysed. Inside seam openings allows the wearer to take care of personal needs without having to undress. Seams should be flat as much as possible so as not to irritate the soft skin. Heavier textiles tend to make thicker seams which thus should be avoided.

The choice of fastener also helps in minimizing the effort in donning and doffing of the garments especially while facing challenges with dexterity. Velcro, zippers with a wide pull tab, snap buttons or magnetic buttons have all been found to be good choice of fasteners. Elasticated openings are also preferred as it aids easy dressing and undressing.

- 4. Use of functional textiles:** Medical textiles can be used for making apparels for people with medical problems and/or medical professionals for protection and treatment. Although these garments can provide protection from bacteria, biological pollution etc, the usage of these textiles is generally used in hospital gowns etc and therefore lack aesthetic appeal. Since the elderly are more prone to infections, the usage of these textiles can be very helpful. Apart from protection from microbes and pollution, these textiles can be used for features like thermal comfort, adequate circulation, insulation etc that can be beneficial.
- 5. Aesthetics:** There is a lot of stigma associated with adaptive clothing because traditionally adaptive clothing for people with disabilities could not achieve the desired ready-to-wear styles. Therefore, people need adaptive clothes that are stylish and look like normal clothing. For example, the Velcro plackets by some brands are decorated with beautiful buttons on top. Colours, prints and embellishments that are in trend are used in these garments so as to elevate the aesthetic appeal.

## ADAPTIVE CLOTHING INITIATIVES IN INDIA

In India, the adaptive clothing sector is comparatively new. Till date, no big retail brands have entered this segment. In the year 2014, two well known designers labels namely Shivan and Naresh and Nidhi Munim came up with intimate wear for women who had undergone mastectomy. However, no recent listings of these products were available.

Another brand which was mentioned in a few articles is 'Cocoon' by the 'Old is Gold Store'. However, apparels are no longer available in their store.

Ekansh Trust, a Pune based organization had launched a competition in 2019 for designing of adaptive clothing. Their aim was to create a product catalogue to promote adaptive clothing in India's mainstream

clothing industry, catering to senior citizens, PwDs and individuals facing clothing challenges after surgery.

Today, there are a couple of home grown brands that are making adaptive clothing. 'Moveability Clothing' from Kottayam, 'Cur8abilty' from Mumbai and 'Zyenika' from Kolkata are some of the brands that are catering to the needs of the elderly and people with disability. The brand 'Aaraam Se' from Kerala makes apparels exclusively for the elderly. One of the latest brand to join the list is 'Haxor', which aims at making apparels for the elderly.

These brands have incorporated majority of the adaptive features like pattern modifications, easy access, different fasteners etc. Garments designed by these brands have very loose silhouettes that can provide a relaxed fit. The brands have incorporated fasteners like velcros, etc and have alternate openings like shoulder openings etc so that the garments can be easily worn. For example, the brand Zyenika has sarees that are stitched and can be worn even while lying down.

However, these initiatives are small scale and do not have a vast catalogue of designs to choose from. One brand that has a variety of clothing for the elderly men both in terms of functionality, print and silhouette choices etc is 'Haxor' but their women's line has limited options.

Majority of these brands do not have a website till date. Also, there are hardly any advertisements or promotional activities undertaken by these brands. Therefore, there is a lack of brand awareness of these initiatives.

One point to note is that majority of these brands have not incorporated functional textiles in their clothing. Additionally, no sizing chart has been developed or being followed specifically for the elderly of India.

## CONCLUSION

The population of elderly in India is on the rise. With age, the requirements of the people also change. However, there is a lack of clothing offered by the retail market that addresses the needs of this segment. The goal of the brands should be to create ready-to-wear clothing with adaptive features in order to address the functional, expressive and aesthetic needs of the elderly while also eliminating the stigma of adaptive clothing. This will bring a positive change in the lives of the elderly. There are very few brands in India that are designing, manufacturing and selling adaptive clothing. The products offered as well as the reach of these brands are limited. There is a huge scope in the Indian market to design and develop need based clothing for the elderly. In general, pattern modifications, easy accessibility, appropriate choice of fasteners, seams and textiles should be looked into for both genders. However, there are certain gender specific needs also that are not being addressed. For females, intimate apparel is one such area which has very specific demands as dependence on others while dressing intimate wear has been related to loss of dignity. Donning and doffing off undergarments especially with rear fasteners like hooks etc is a primary concern. (Garner & Douglas, 1992) reported that in their study, one particular request was reinforced by several participants: panties and pantyhose which would provide immediate access to toileting facilities. One feature of adaptive clothing that has a lot of potential is the use of functional textiles. These textiles can provide additional benefits like protection for microbes, insulation, thermal comfort etc. However, the use of these textiles is only limited to hospital gowns. Functional textiles is a rapidly growing industry and using these textiles will give an added advantage for the elderly. India has a strong manufacturing industry and therefore it is high time that retail brands should explore this market.

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