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Designer Pieces Together Sustainable Fashion

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By Cindy Atoji Keene

In a “eco-friendly” episode of Bravo TV’s [Project Runway](#), designers were forced to think green as guest judge Natalie Portman rates their creations, made from everything from peacock feathers to cotton, linen, silk, and bamboo. In another challenge, contestants had to compose outfits from “waste” material such as plastic bags and peanut sacks.

But greening the catwalk is nothing new to [Shubhra Bhattacharya Chandra](#), a Lexington, Mass., fashion designer who fuses Indo-Western outfits with sustainable business practices, including organic fabrics, recycled paper hangtags, and cloth bags for shipping. “I saw a lot of waste in the corporate fashion,” said Chandra, a fashion veteran who designed and developed product lines for Talbots, The Limited, and Sigrid Olson. “The labor intensive process of the global clothing industry takes a toll on the environment. Why can’t fashion be thoughtful?”

Chandra's "recycle and reuse" mantra was sparked when she saw the stacks of hand-dyed saris in her mother's closet, beautiful fabric gathered from travels to India and Asia. One of her first collections, a line of spaghetti strap dresses were made from antique cotton Kota saris, cut up to make one-of-a-kind frocks or pants. She went on to design the entire bridal party for the 2009 Tex-India [wedding](#) for Channel 7 news anchor Sorboni Banerjee and her husband Jarrod Holbrooke of Channel 5 news. The final ensembles were created from yards of Benarasi saris and hand-loomed, cut and redesigned Baluchari scarves. "I was invited to wedding, and it was nail-biting experience. As a designer, you worry about every last detail, but the wedding went off beautifully," said Chandra. "Not a single button popped, even though everyone was dancing like crazy."

Q: Did you train or apprentice with another designer?

A: I spent a summer doing an internship worked with one of the largest garment manufacturers in New Delhi, India, including working with designer Gloria Vanderbilt. It was a very grounding experience, because when you go to design school, you come out thinking you're going to be the next Coco Chanel. But walking around a factory sample room is a very different experience from being in a classroom in college, especially when you're told that a buyer is arriving tomorrow, and you need to immediately get your sketchbook, choose fabrics from the mill, figure out measurements, and have the sample maker convert your drawing into a sample, for a presentation the next day. There's a huge amount of technical knowledge you can learn from working in a dye or fabric mill.

Q: What does it take to be a fashion designer?

A: Fashion designers have a rigorous training in pattern making, draping, and couture. Get the necessary education first, and do as many internships as you can, so you find out what the field is all about. It's highly competitive, so you need to network like crazy.

Q: Do you wear the clothes that you design?

A: I do wear my own clothes, all the time. If the clothes don't work for my life, it wouldn't work for my clients either. My favorite piece right now is the 'Aah Taj!' black and white embroidered dress. It's a simple graphic piece with embroidery on the neckline, and made of silk chiffon lined with 100 percent cotton.

Q: What does your name, Shubhra, mean?

A: The good path. I like to think I'm leading shoppers down the progressive road of the green revolution.