



In this photo fashion designer Anita Dongre gestures as she speaks during an interview with AFP at her factory on the outskirts of Mumbai. — AFP photos



The logo of fashion designer Anita Dongre is seen at her store in Mumbai.



Fashion designer Anita Dongre (left) interacts with a worker at her factory on the outskirts of Mumbai.



Bridal dresses and accessories of fashion designer Anita Dongre are displayed at her store in Mumbai.



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Textile workers make clothes at the factory of fashion designer Anita Dongre on the outskirts of Mumbai.

Feminist, fashionable and fighting for sustainability: India's Anita Dongre

With stores in India and New York, multiple clothing brands and a global celebrity following, fashion designer Anita Dongre is a feminist powerhouse in a male-dominated industry. But her true ambition is to create an environmentally sustainable company, she says. "Sometimes I wish I could just give up design and focus on sustainability full-time," the Mumbai-based Dongre tells AFP during an interview at her factory outside India's financial capital. "Time is running out. Climate change is right at our doorstep and we all have to do something," says the 56-year-old, whose clothes have been worn by some of the world's most high-profile women including Hillary Clinton, Kate Middleton, Ivanka Trump, Priyanka Chopra Jonas, and Beyonce.

Turning a company with an annual turnover of \$105 million into a carbon-neutral enterprise is a daunting proposition, but Dongre has never been one to shy away from challenges. When she started her business aged 23, armed with two sewing machines and a staff of two male tailors perched on the balcony of the bedroom she shared with her sisters, she was the first woman in her conservative family to work. Today, she says that of all her accomplishments, she is proudest of her commitment that no woman seeking work will ever be turned away from the gates of the four-storey factory she runs. "I see my journey reflected in theirs," she says, emphasizing her belief that "economic empowerment is the only way a woman can assert herself". Besides producing five clothing lines, handcrafted fine jewelry and accessories, her foundation provides training and jobs to more than 250 rural women, with plans to cover 30 villages by 2025.

Greenwashing risks

Feminist values have been at the heart of her brand: her clothing has always been size-inclusive, going up to an XXL. Even when she ventured into bridal wear, her advertising campaigns challenged traditional norms and featured women sporting tat-

toos, enjoying their wine, and paying for their weddings. "It is very important for me to show a woman who is not coy or veiled—someone bold and sassy. I was that girl. I drove a jeep. I proposed to my husband," she says. "The world has never been fair to women... and I am not comfortable promoting regressive ideas to sell clothes," she adds. Her decision to focus on the urban professional woman has seen the brand reap dividends as female spending power increases in India.

"It's so rewarding to walk into stores and meet the women who buy my clothes. When a customer tells me, 'I wore your blazer to my first job interview 15 years ago and I got the job', it's thrilling," she says. She will need to rely on that goodwill to convince customers to shop in a wholly different way than they are used to: prioritizing sustainability and slow fashion over instant gratification. On the one hand, Dongre's task has never been easier—when she spoke about environmentally-friendly design more than a decade ago, few paid attention. Today, she says drolly, "I am glad it's finally fashionable to be green". On the other hand, greenwashing remains a huge risk, she explains. "You can't take a sustainable fabric, cover it with plastic sequins and still call it sustainable."

'Do more and more'

She is the only Indian designer to join the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC), a global alliance of retailers, brands, suppliers, campaigners and labor groups that provides members with the tools to measure the environmental impact of their activities. The SAC is a non-binding organization, meaning members are largely responsible for their own efforts towards sustainability and transparency.

For her part, Dongre says she feels a drive "to do more and more" on the environmental front. At her factory, cafeteria food waste is composted or used to make biogas while the water utilized in clothing production is recycled and pumped back into the bathrooms. Her lower-priced

brands AND and globaldesi use fabrics such as sustainably-produced tencel—a biodegradable fibre made of wood pulp—while the slow fashion luxury label Grassroot showcases hand-woven, hand-embroidered designs created by Indian artisans.



A man works on an embroidery at the factory of fashion designer Anita Dongre on the outskirts of Mumbai.

Yet this commitment to sustainability and to preserving dying crafts comes with risks attached, as Dongre realizes. "The biggest challenge is educating the consumer to support our efforts," she says. Moreover, it is hard to imagine how a huge company that employs 2,700 people and works with thousands of artisans can be environmentally responsible without compromising on profits. It is a price she is willing to pay. "Companies cannot be driven only by profits... this idea of making money in whatever way possible and then giving large sums to charity, it's not sustainable. Why not make contribution to your community a focus of your business to begin with?" "It's high time companies measured their success in terms of sustainability, not just profit and loss," she says. — AFP

Bali prays as virus hits tourism on Island of the Gods

Bali's Galungan festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil, but a new enemy was threatening that cosmic balance this year—coronavirus. Temples across the Island of the Gods were filled with faithful who hoped incense-and-flower offerings would get Hindu-majority Bali back on its feet after a drastic slump in Chinese visitors hammered the key tourism sector.

"We're praying for good things in this universe and that the virus is gone soon so Bali's tourism can bounce back," priest Made Langgeng Buwana told AFP during the recent February Galungan celebration in the capital Denpasar.

Concerns over the rapidly-spreading outbreak prompted Indonesia to shut down all flights to and from China last month, dealing a body blow to scores of Bali businesses including restaurants, hotels, travel agents, wedding

planners and Mandarin-speaking interpreters. Around a million Chinese tourists visit the holiday island each year—the second-largest group of foreign arrivals after Australians—and inject hundreds of millions of dollars into the local economy. "Thousands travelled there from the mainland for last month's Lunar New Year holiday just as the virus outbreak was beginning to snowball, prompting the lockdown of China's Hubei province where the infection was first detected.

Ghost town?

In Bali, some China-focused businesses have closed and others say they're on the brink of bankruptcy. Management at one upscale hotel was so desperate to cut costs they told employees to wear street clothes on the job to reduce uniform cleaning expenses, according to staff. Bali's tourism industry has suffered—

and recovered—before, including when volcano Mount Agung erupted in 2018. "There was a drop then but not something like this," said Robin, 29, an Indonesian interpreter who used to guide wealthy Chinese around the island.

Jakarta has announced more than \$700 million in stimulus to bolster Southeast Asia's biggest economy as its tourism sector takes a hit, while Bali officials hope social media influencers can help draw more visitors. The island's tourism agency head Putu Astawa—barely two months into his new job—acknowledged that losing 100,000 Chinese visitors a month has stung. But the number of visitors from Australia, Japan, North America and Europe is stable, despite unfounded reports that Bali is a ghost town, he insisted. "I don't worry about the virus," Astawa said in an interview. "I worry about social media hoaxes hurting the image of our tourism sector. I'm tired of fighting it."

'Fatally impacted'

The ghost-town image isn't fake news at Dream Island Bali Beach Club, however. Chinese tourists used to roll in for wedding photos, massages in thatched huts, beachside camel rides and a \$17 'Dream Dinner' package with a fire-dance show. The now-empty operation also ferried mainly Chinese visitors on boats to company-run restaurants nearby. Those eateries are now closed, the ferries are beached and Dream Island is headed for bankruptcy with half the staff on leave, said manager Wayan Tirta.

"Now we're trying to get local students to come here because there aren't any tourists," he said, plunging his hand downward to show the drop in business. "We've been fatally impacted by the outbreak and are just trying to stay afloat." At Dream Island's deserted Mermaid Bay restaurant, Arik and two other

staff played with their smartphones as a pair of unemployed camels lay in the sand nearby. "We don't have anything to do. Hopefully we'll get some more guests," she said.

In Denpasar, OYO 1992 China Town Hotel—draped in bilingual signage and a huge lobby painting of a woman with a Chinese-style fan—is also feeling the pinch. The hotel once employed scores of massage therapists who relied on mainland tourists, but that crucial moneymaker has dried up. "Before coronavirus we were planning to add more massage beds," said manager Vincent Fonda in the hotel's empty Chinese food restaurant. "At the end of the day, we're probably going to close down." —AFP



Balinese people gathering for a prayer event during the Galungan holiday at Jagatnata temple in Denpasar, Indonesia's resort island of Bali.— AFP photos