

## SUSTAINABILITY

# TURN A NEW LEAF

ICYMI: Cannabis, with its many, *many* uses, has been anointed the saviour crop of our generation. **Bombay Hemp Company** is here to grow an industry – and weed out the myths from fact

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**B**ombay Hemp Company might be barely seven years old, but Head of Business Development & Media Yash Kotak has heard every joke under the sun about hemp. “If I wash this shirt, will I get high?” he rolls his eyes, counting off the most frequently volleyed punchlines. “If I wash these pants, will they dissolve?” (Because *bhaang* does.) Perhaps most outrageous, if marginally more intelligent: “If my house catches fire, will I get stoned?”

“Initially, people even thought we were selling ham, not hemp,” laughs Chirag Tekchandaney, Head of Marketing & Human Resources. “Most of these come up at educative sessions and talks we hold in colleges about the sustainability aspect of hemp. And when these young buds come up and ask these questions, they act as real icebreakers for us.”

“Wait, did you actually call them ‘young buds’?” quips Sanvar Oberoi, Director of Finance & Digital Technology. We’re sitting in Boheco’s tiny loft of an office hiding in a bylane of Mumbai’s money-minded Lower Parel neighbourhood, crammed between a sporting goods retail shop and an automobile workshop. When you spot a giant cannabis leaf drawn on the wall along a staircase, you’ve found the HQ. But considering the immense growth that the company has seen in the past few years, it might be time to move.

Boheco was launched in 2013 by seven guys studying at Mumbai’s HR College, who’d come together to explore how they could “use social entrepreneurship to power rural India.” Its first project focused on developing solar lanterns and lamps made by the disabled, and creating



a channel to supply them to parts of India with little or no access to electricity.

"During our travels across Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, we noticed that the landscape would change entirely every 100km, but for one thing," says Kotak. "Cannabis grew so ubiquitously, and yet it had no economic value except for local subsistence, its fibre extracted to tie cattle or used as fuel."

"Around the same time, I went on holiday to West Australia," chimes in Jahan Peston Jamas, Director of Strategy & Collaborations. He came across a town located along the Margaret River that subsisted entirely on locally produced wine and hemp. "Looking at all that was happening in the world made a lightbulb go off in our collective heads: Are we missing a trick here?"

"The first four years were about identifying the science and policy around hemp, and the last two-and-a-half have been about dialling things up," says Kotak. Today, Boheco is structured around four main verticals: Boheco Textiles, a B2B brand that deals with hemp-based fibre (presently made from raw material sourced from its "partners" in China, Taiwan and Italy); Hemp Fabric Lab, a design-oriented innovation space that's worked with the likes of Anita Dongre, Narendra Kumar, Levi's and more; BLabel, the popular hemp-based clothing and accessories line; and BLife, the consumables category, launched earlier this year.

But to create the demand for a hemp-based lifestyle is only half (or less) of what Boheco believes its mission to be. It's here to grow an industry from scratch, and early on, its founders realised they were going to have to "start with the seed," says Jamas. That's meant holding endless discussions and getting the "buy-in" of multiple stakeholders, from farmer collectives to researchers, government officials to policymakers. "It fundamentally boiled down to how we read the laws of this country," he says, mainly the NDPS Act of 1985, which he calls a "fairly progressive law" – way ahead of the US, where the POTUS removed hemp from a Controlled Substances List only in 2018.

The NDPS Act actually leaves it up to a state government to define, decide and oversee the cultivation of industrial hemp. "In 2014, we pulled together a multi-party meeting: The Ministries of Finance and Forest, scientists from the CSIR and others came to the conclusion that it wasn't a matter of *if* but *when* and *how* we'll enable cannabis to come into play," Jamas says. "And that meant we had to work on everything from a standard seed to licences for farmers from the government to grow it to the equipment required to process it." Uttarakhand became the first state to come on board, and once the certification on a standard seed comes through, it's where the first farming initiatives will be rolled out.

It's certainly helped that by 2013, hemp had been reinstated in most parts of the world as a supercrop whose potential was being rapidly unlocked. Canada, China and the Netherlands had built up mass farming capacities, while the American hemp-products retail industry (apparel, beauty, edibles) was being valued at \$500 million. As the word "sustainability" found

The founding team of  
Bombay Hemp Company



more traction in global conversation, brands such as Patagonia, Zara and H&M had begun to engage with hemp. Suddenly, it was being tested as a building material, and now scientists are researching whether it can replace fossil fuels. "The modern-day hemp industry is about 25 to 30 years old, but hemp as a crop is older than democracy as a concept," says Kotak. "It was very popular up till the 1820s but then it lost currency and got lumped together with marijuana."

A quick science lesson: There are thousands of real-world applications for every part of the plant that is now known as industrial hemp – the low-THC variant of *indica sativa* – but getting high isn't one of them. In fact, claims Jamas, if it were to be grown near a marijuana patch, it might even reduce the latter's THC levels through cross pollination.

It's also one of the most versatile crops mankind has ever encountered. "It gives you the highest biomass per acre per time period. It grows in 100 days, needs less pesticides and 400 times less water than cotton. And gives you four times as much output. It's labour-friendly, it ends up sequestering more carbon per acre per time period than some trees, and it helps in soil remediation. They used it in Fukushima and Chernobyl post the nuclear radiation incidents, and it turned out to be one of the best plants to grow on that land," says Oberoi. Today, Boheco is focusing all its energy on "hemp, the fibre and seed, as an agricultural commodity; and hemp, the flower, as a medical commodity," says Tekchandaney. Even as most of its revenues from BLabel and BLife go into R&D (from finding the right seed, as it pushes for Himalayan hemp to ironing out the legalities of cultivating it), it's begun to see its efforts to educate bear fruit. "Now, we get comments like, 'BLabel clothes look like linen went through detox', or 'hemp seeds are like flax on steroids'," says Kotak.

Where does Boheco hope to see the local hemp industry in five years? "Some of us think it's the next internet," says Oberoi. "But all of us think that, if we do things right, India could capture 5-10 per cent of the global hemp economy." Adds Jamas, "We hope that in the next five years, there are at least 100 more companies, and 1,00,000 farmers find their lives changed. This could be the onset of the second green revolution." ☺