

## Rainbow Man



SOUMIK KAR

Jamal Mecklai believes that shirts become your friends over time. His own taste in shirts is unusual—the brighter the better. The CEO of Mecklai Financial likes it loud, as Karthik Krishnan found out recently.

### Karthik Krishnan on Jamal Mecklai

If it's Wednesday, it's got to be green. And Jamal Mecklai's shirt is every bit as bright as the all-clear traffic light. In comparison with some of the multi-coloured gems that he tends to favour, though, it seems almost ordinary. Normal is boring for this 60-year-young maverick, who feels at home in a shirt only when it's got an unusual hue. The louder it is, the more he likes it. This day, he's compensated for the lack of multiple colours in other ways. His socks—he lifts his plain brown pants up to reveal a pair of cottons—are bottle green. The shoes are formal blacks. And his tie crowns the contrast: it has all the shades of the rainbow. To say that the man would stand out in a crowd would be an understatement.

Like his shirts, Mecklai's pig art is a reminder of the exuberance life has in store for him.

The uninformed, of course, would be stunned to learn that this man of many hues is the CEO of a risk advisory firm. The Mecklai Financial boss explains his philosophy once our pupils have returned to their normal size: "My goal has always been to have fun. And one reflection of that is what I wear." But there's also a method behind the colour. Each of the many Hawaiian beach casuals that reside in comfortable co-existence in his wardrobe is there for a reason, he assures us. Apparently, Mecklai likes to wear a particular colour to work each day of the week. From Monday to Sunday, that order is as follows: yellow, pink, green, orange, blue, red and purple. "I took the idea from the people of Thailand. They wear yellow on their King's birthday. He was born on a Monday," he smiles

## Sober Beginnings

It's been a while since his fascination for Hawaiian shirts took root—Mecklai isn't even sure exactly when it all began. "Can't tell you when the spark or trigger happened. When you do something, you forget how it started," he says. On a recent trip to New York, a friend of his was taken aback when she saw Mecklai in a brightly printed shirt. This wasn't the Mecklai she used to know back in the 1970s. Back then, the young graduate was always to be found in sober attire.

Mecklai grew up in Mumbai and got a degree in chemical engineering from IIT Mumbai before moving to the US in 1972 to study biomedical engineering at the Rice University in Houston, Texas. He dropped out of the university after three years of research and began working odd jobs. He returned to India in 1985 and headed Mecklai Financial, an offshoot of his family-run broking business. Somewhere along the way, he says, the fixation for shirts in psychedelic colours took hold.



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The man has never been afraid to flaunt his colours. In fact, they seem so normal on him that his attire has never been the butt of jokes. His shirts have become an intrinsic part of Mecklai's personality. He is what he wears now—people have come to identify him with his sartorial style. And, needless to say, if he was to ever be seen in a normal attire, nobody would recognise him. "If I were to wear a quiet shirt, it would only raise eyebrows," he says.

Just how many such shirts does he own? "I have 35 Hawaiian shirts," says a beaming Mecklai. Barring a few, most aren't expensive, he adds modestly. "Some of them cost just Rs 300." When he was at a party recently, his sister was shocked to discover that most of the other guests probably wore socks that were worth more than the bargain shirt he had on. "It was a Rs 60 shirt," says a proud Mecklai.

The expensive ones, which are only a handful, cost him thousands of rupees; three of them, in particular, are worth a total of Rs 10,000. They are original Hawaiian shirts sent by a friend from the American island state. The shirts were gifts but the import duty burnt a hole in Mecklai's pockets, costing him the Rs 10,000.

## Partner In Colour

But, ask him how much his other shirts cost and he's hard put to put a price tag on most. Reason: his wife Pravina pays for them. "She's the boss," says Mecklai of his partner of 18 years, who indulges his preoccupation with colourful shirts. "She even gets some custom-made for me."

Pravina works with family friend and designer Sabina Singh to create many of Mecklai's outfits. "Sabina knows my style. I let her buy the fabric and stitch something for me," he says. But Mecklai admits that it can get out of hand sometimes. Once, he recalls, Sabina designed a shirt with the shirt pocket stitched upside down. "It looked like an export reject," laughs Pravina.

There are some shirts that he likes but his wife doesn't. Pravina's dislike has nothing to do with her husband's loud self-expression, but everything to do with a shirt's tattered condition. She discards the old ones, especially the cottons that acquire lint and fluff. "But the reality is, our energies are parallel, especially when it comes to my shirts," insists Mecklai. "Otherwise, we wouldn't be married!"

Earlier, he used to pick up some of his shirts from Fashion Street in Mumbai. But when his options there dried out, he began getting them from Malaysia and Thailand. Not just any shirt would do, each had to have a 'snap', an inexpressible quality, he explains. And that's why Mecklai gifted away a Tommy Bahamas piece he bought in the US—it was too staid for his taste. "Each one should have a personality to it. Shirts become your friends over time," Mecklai asserts. Needless to say, he has an aversion for formalwear. But he has a stack of elegantly printed kurtas, which he wears to business gatherings. At funerals, he usually dons a white shirt.

Apart from shirts, Mecklai also collects, of all things, pictures, wall-mounts and artefacts depicting the porcine species. His table is strewn with pig-shaped pens and paperweights. A framed picture of the porcine creature is nailed to his wall. "I have always loved pigs and I am also a Muslim," says Mecklai. Like his shirts, his pig art is a daily reminder of the exuberance life has in store for him.

Clearly, Jamal Mecklai is a many-splendoured man. And, given his penchant to wear all things unusual, it's unlikely he will ever have a boring day at the office. Neither will others around him.

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