Challenges for sustainability in textile craft and fashion design

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ABSTRACT
India is known globally for her rich heritage of textiles and handcrafts. Consistently decreasing number of artisans indicates need to revive the craft of artisans as an important source of livelihood. Vast availability of cheap, low-quality clothing allows fast fashion, conspicuous consumption and premature disposal of fashion products. Therefore, production of sustainable traditional modes of fashion design in affordable price is a challenge. Further, lack of knowledge and tools to build capacity, especially in the areas of skill development, design intervention, technical innovation, productivity enhancement and environmental sustainability; lack of working capital and access to credit/loan facilities and lack of access to markets leaves craftsmen vulnerable to middlemen. Waste is another growing problem associated with environmental and social impacts. Promotion of handcrafted innovative and exclusive fashion designs intrinsically from the use of natural resources with collaboration of designers, technology upgradation, fusion of traditional and contemporary styles, fair trade and other business models, human resource strategies, zero waste system of manufacturing, government policy for safeguarding employment opportunities, e-marketing, eco-labeling and social-labeling are some of the ways to incorporate sustainability and ethics in textile craft and fashion designs. The paper provides a deep insight for all the above aspects.

Key Words: Artisans, Fashion design, Skill development, Sustainability, Textile craft

INTRODUCTION
From ancient times to the today’s modern world textiles and apparel hold an important place in our daily life. The Indian textile and apparel industry is enriched with vivid and prosperous treasure of textile crafts and designs, though the craftsmen may be well skilled and equipped or lacking the both. The rich Indian textile craft sector encompasses a wide range of traditional skills and designs which could lead India in this contemporary industrial and communication designs scenario through the path of changing innovations (Sharma and Kumar, 2012). Great diversity, creativity and uniqueness are noticeable in Indian craft and designs. Influences of different external cultures have added to its vitality synchronized with preserving essence of rich cultural heritage. India’s traditional crafts population forms the second largest employment base after agriculture. According to the 2011 Crafts Economics and Impact Study (CEIS) by the Crafts Council of India around 200 million people are involved in the handicraft sector (CEIS, 2011). For centuries, these rural based traditional
artisan communities hand down their skills from generation to generation, ensuring their viability acquisition of knowledge and has the potential to facilitate innovation and creativity. The artisan communities developed their crafts intrinsically from the use of natural resources readily available in their local environments. For centuries, communities throughout India have specialized in textile traditions that are specific to their region, such as patchwork, block print and embroidery. Consistent interactions with resources endowed with knowledge, budding to innovation and creativity for design promotion intended for sustainability in the ready-to-wear market.

The concept of sustainability, ethical and responsible production and consumption have been at the heart of every marketing campaign in addition to being a part of governments’ economic and social policies in many countries. Textile/clothing sector because of its environmental and social impacts is a focus of sustainability movement (Eco and sustainable textiles for society, 2016). The textile industry is one of the most ecologically damaging industries in the world. Petroleum-based products release dangerous emissions that wreak havoc on our environment, and bleaching and dyeing create toxins that pollute our air and waterways. Sustainability could be explained in many different ways. Yet, for the fashion industry, sustainability means the environmental protection, social justice, economic fairness and cultural validity (Niinimäki, 2011). Sustainability today has become a necessity driven by consumer awareness and preference for sustainable products. Life cycle approach to sustainability is being addressed in the following stages: fibre production, textile manufacturing, garment manufacturing, distribution, retailing, consumption, and after market (Textile resurgence, 2010-2011).

There is a global awakening of the importance of artisans, growth of their cultural economics and recognition of social relationships to a sustainable world that goes beyond monetary value. As a result new urban markets are developing of consumers for the products of traditional artisans because their crafts inherently represent, to the patron of sustainable practice, a connect and concern with material and the environment (Wood, 2011).

**Major challenges for integration of sustainability in textile craft and fashion design**:

India is known globally for her rich heritage of arts and crafts. Despite being one of the most global industries in the world, the exemplary trade practices in the globalizing world are still distorted in favour of advanced economics. Over the past 3-4 decades, trade restrictions, price and quality have come to play a major role in conditioning the patterns of the sector’s development (Tandon and Reddy, 2013), resulting in a decrease in number of Indian artisans by 30%. This indicates the need to revive the craft of artisans to safeguard history, culture and an important source of livelihood. Attempts are needed from the designers, GOs, NGOs and entrepreneurs to explore new avenues through design interventions and collaborative initiatives with crafts people to invigorate indigenous fabrics (Eco and sustainable textiles for society, 2016).

The challenges in front of textile craft and fashion industry are:

**Globalization and fashion trends**:

Globalization has made a dramatic change in production-consumption patterns of the world’s fashion. Global textile industry is facing challenges for sustainability efforts as fashion has become a throw-away commodity and rapid phase production of short-lived products have become normality. Influenced by global trends, cultural flavour of fashion has diminished and vast availability of cheap, low-quality clothing allows overconsumption and premature disposal of fashion products (Niinimäki, 2011). The hi-tech gadgets drift the most recent fashion modes in one corner of the world to the
other side in no time and readily incorporated in the latest fashion trend round the globe.

**Threatening to India’s handloom and handicraft sector:**

The largest cottage industry in India is comprise of artisans and handicraftsmen in the field of textile and apparel production, who produce textiles by hand spinning - handloom weaving and embellish them through various manual artistic crafts viz., natural dyeing and printing, embroidery, mirror work, bead work, patchwork, quilting, painting, etc. It is an integral part of rural community life and a major source of employment and income generation for a large number of artisans and their families as well. However, in recent years, many crafts have been endangered—even some of them are on the verge of extinction. Indian consumers always have a psyche to follow western culture – their dresses, fashion and designs too. The poverty and lower income status compels them to purchase cheap ready-made products with low grade, substandard artwork. Even the buyers who can afford to pay high for good quality artistic textiles are not ready to pay extra for the artisan’s labour. Hand-crafted items are time and labour consuming, therefore highly priced. But unfortunately artisans suffer by receiving less money for their work. The increase in the cost of raw materials has severely impacted upon the Indian handcrafted textile industries. Today the local Indian markets are abandoned with inferior quality textiles and there is a steady decline in the demand for handicrafts. Consequently artisans are compelled to leave their villages and craft traditions in search of employment.

**Lack of knowledge and education among the Artisans:**

In this era of technological advancement, lack of knowledge and tools to build capacity, especially in the areas of skill development, design intervention, technical innovation, productivity enhancement and environmental sustainability, low level of education, rural orientation and lack of access to markets leaves craftsmen vulnerable to exploitation by middlemen who are their only means of access to distant markets. The hitch due to language differences, geographic distances and bureaucratic constraints can perplex the artisans who want to be directly in contact with their customers. Artisans’ role is of only producers and they are unknown to their consumer market and current trends of the urban and global markets. Deficiency of working capital and inability to access to credit/loan facilities, the artisans are incapable to purchase raw material in bulk. Changing dress preferences and competition from machine-made products also has affected the incomes of the artisans. Many artisans work from their homes and are both dependent on middlemen and unaware of true market prices (Emmett, 2014).

**Poor infrastructure and transportation facilities:**

Most of the traditional artisans are working in very unhealthy and unhygienic environment. They do not have adequate spaces to live in or work in. They have to work in their ruined houses, lacking even the basic infrastructure facilities. Inadequate and irregular electric supply, lack of proper tools, inability to purchase newer tools turns into low rate of production. Reoccurrence of health problems and other severe illnesses caused by poor sanitary habits add into it. In addition to this damaged or poor quality roads and absence of transportation and communication channels present major hurdles for craftsmen to keep in touch with and supply in time to their customers.

**Lack of recognition or reward for skill:**

In India, production of handicrafts is linked to the caste status and most of the handicrafts
Artisans belong to the castes that are considered as lower in the society. Hence, there is a lack of professional respect for these artisan communities among Indian society. There is utmost need of social and professional recognition of these artisans and respect and reward for master craftsmen for their skills. For this Government, NGOs and designers can come together and provide required platform and recognition to their crafts. A person who is entrepreneurial and well respected in an artisan community can direct the group’s success in engaging with external markets. They have an overview of the whole process and use that capacity to connect with particular artisan’s individual expertise. Designers in turn benefit from these facilitators’ understanding of their craft and problem-solving ability when developing products (Dickson and Marsha, 2010).

**Problem of waste generation:**

Waste is growing problem associated with environmental and social impacts. Waste is generated due to inefficient production and consumption processes, causes monitory loss, several environmental and health issues. Textile and apparel industry uses tremendous amount of materials and energy resources and produces a massive quantity of waste, leaving a huge negative environmental impact when goes for landfill. It is essential to reduce the waste not only for economic benefits but also to minimize environmental impact conserve resources. In response to the waste issue, zero-waste approach has been introduced - prevention of waste is more desirable than treatment of waste. Therefore, achieving zero material waste is one of the greatest challenges to conserve resources.

**How to meet these challenges:**

Economic recession has its impact on global economy as many brands suffered a great loss. But the Indian craft sector survived because of its traditional designs and skills possessing unique and exclusive features. Sustainability is soon changing from an option to a necessity. As the global demand for sustainable and ethical products surge, application of sustainable and ethical aspects in developing textile handloom products would help to improve the recognition and market share in the local and global markets. Some of the ways to meet these challenges are mentioned below:

**Blending conventional and contemporary fashion:**

Production of traditional textiles often tends to become too traditional and old-fashioned separating from our lives and social life. However they are made of natural materials in safe and good quality, so-called earth-friendly materials. Reexamining such traditional textiles are going to be significant for the sustainable life and society because they contain aspects both old and new, past and future, and tradition and innovation (Fukatsu). Possible integration of hand crafts and contemporary fashion can lead towards ethical and sustainable fashion in terms of both production and consumption. Gradual development of local fashion craft industry not only generates economy but also promotes sustainable production and slow consumption resulting in promoting well-being of the local producers and craft communities towards a sustainable lifestyle (Dissanayake *et al.*, 2017). India is likely to emerge as one stop source for creative textiles, offering a formidable combination of product development skills and infrastructure for the contemporary, high-value products across every fibre group (Sohani, 2004).

**Empowering Artisans:**

Artisans can take an active role in the design process and represent themselves in the virtual marketplace to preserve threatened craft traditions by linking them to the global sustainable fashion
movement. They can seek funding from various national and international organizations and look for grants under government schemes for upliftment of crafts. Education and training enable them to utilize web and social networking technologies to facilitate a global dialogue that will boost development in the handicraft and handloom sector. The knowledge increases designer awareness thereby providing a catalyst for innovation and sustainable production brought about by a holistic craft-based approach in which form, construction and material are considered in parallel (Pinski et al., 2017). Interactive e-commerce site links artisans with buyers all over the world, showcasing their artistry. It empowers artisans to take control of their own business, thereby creating a strong, mutually beneficial professional relationship. Social network of buyers, designers and artisans enhances personalized communication and opportunity to connect with each other, share common problems and common solutions, thus dramatically increasing access to knowledge of their craft.

Promotion of handlooms and slow fashion concept:

Handloom is a traditional weaving craft, practiced by generations of artisans to make attractive textile designs. The textile handcraft product is an excellent example of the sustainable product in various ways namely the recycling, the use of raw material available in each region and the re-gain of other materials to create unique pieces from local traditions (Ferreira et al., 2012). It is a highly labour- incentive and a decentralized sector of which the most of the manufacturing units are located in rural areas. Indian rural artisans are using handicrafts as tools for self-reliance and cultural integrity. It is also an environmentally friendly, low energy-driven sector where fair-trade manufacturing practices are appreciated and encouraged. These handloom textiles need to be recognized for their premium quality, traditional craftsmanship and exclusively novel design trends. The products must be offered to global niche markets where handcrafted items of high value are preferred. A concept of ‘slow fashion’— valuing quality over quantity, organic and handmade over cheap and disposable should be developed among consumers as slow fashion places priority on well-made garments that are ethnically and environmentally produced.

Zero waste strategy:

Zero waste strategy aims at designing products and processes to avoid waste, i.e. eliminations of all discharges to land and conservation of resources. Zero waste system reuses discarded materials to make new products. This process reduces the exploitation of natural resources, avoids pollution and saves the environment. Unfortunately, zero waste, potentially a preventive approach, is often misunderstood as unrealistic and impossible target to achieve within the boundary of today’s economic conditions. However, if zero-waste system is properly implemented, apparel manufacturing industry could possibly convert waste into something useful and economical.

Development of fair trade and other business models:

Globally, the green movement and fair labour movement are steadily getting momentum as an ethical approach to alleviate poverty to build a socially and environmentally sustainable international trade. Fair trade aims to support craftsmen who are socially and economically marginalized. Community improvement, women empowerment and mitigation of environmental impact of the production process are some of the key aspects of fair trade. A set of compliance criteria is followed based on ten fair-trade principles that focus on fair prices, good working conditions and minimizing environmental impacts. Online and innovative business frameworks bolster preservation of threatened handicrafts in India by improving their commercial viability and socio-environmental
practices, as the location of the work can vary from the artisans’ homes (45% are women) to workshops or small factories. These businesses are often unregistered or registered as local businesses without export licences. New marketing strategies encourage users to form long-term buying relationships with craft communities in a culturally appropriate manner, while boosting transparency throughout the supply chain. These facilitate collaboration among disparate agencies in the craft sector—artisans, researchers, policy makers, buyers—to streamline the craft development process (www.changemakers.com).

**The Government initiatives:**

The Government policy has changed from earlier objective of maintaining the initial export growth momentum to promoting rich heritage of handlooms and handicrafts, institutional strengthening and safeguarding employment opportunities. A range of projects has been initiated to address multifaceted challenges, such as Technology Upgradation Fund Scheme (TUFS), e-Marketing, Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP), marketing Initiatives like handloom week, crafts fairs and exhibitions, The Scheme for Integrated Textile Parks (SITP), School of Textiles and Business, Export Promotion, National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), skill upgradation of handicraft artisans, Welfare Schemes, Migrant Labour, etc. (Tandon and Reddy, 2013). The Indian government has supported handicraft development by shifting its focus from marketing within India to granting NGOs with assistance for artisan enterprise development including design and technical input, the focus being in developing exports for this sector. This has included the development of new platforms for exposure to foreign markets (Dickson and Marsha, 2010). The government’s ‘Make in India’ initiative is breathing life into some relatively unknown varieties of indigenous fabrics.

**Branding and labeling:**

There are different certification schemes available for textiles. Especially due to high cost of such labels, the textile manufacturers instead develop an umbrella brand that communicates product sustainability. In order to promote sustainable textiles eco-labels and social labels are issued on basis of certain norms/criteria, developed on analyzing the product’s entire life cycle commencing with the extraction of raw materials, progressing through the stages of production, distribution and utilization and disposal after use. These labels can be either mandatory or voluntary. Mandatory labels are government-backed and voluntary labels may be funded and supervised by the private sector. Better Cotton Initiative, Craft Mark, EcoMark-India, The Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), Oeko-Tex Standard, Silk Mark, The Blue sign are some of the labels give surety regarding sustainability. Information on certification, eco-labels, plays a major role in giving credible assurance to retailers and end consumers that products comply with standards based on social, ecological and environmental criteria (Eco and sustainable textiles for society, 2016).

**Role of fashion designers and NGOs:**

Fashion designers should attempt to understand and respect the historical, cultural and social contexts of the artisan communities with whom they interact. The need for the designer to act as an intermediary between the artisan and the consumer, ‘bridge’ between the artisans’ know-how and his knowledge of what to make (Vencatachellum, 2005). They should work with artisans to up design handmade crafts into the high-end fashion industry, emphasizing the unique artistry and cultural value of each handmade product. There are several designers, NGOs and entrepreneurs who explore new avenues through design interventions and collaborative initiatives with crafts
people. NGOs promote sustainability through research, trainings, dissemination activities, and outreach by bringing together technical service providers and textile producer groups to provide low cost technological solutions to strengthen cleaner production, reduce pollution and occupational health hazards in the textile production.

**Recognition to the Artisans:**

There is a need to bring recognition to the practicing artisans and connecting them to contemporary markets, by linking them to designers and other experts to guide them for sustainable production methods, as the handicrafts sector has a low carbon footprint since it is essentially driven by human power. A database of Government agencies, buyers (global), designers and NGOs who deal with textile crafts in India should be fabricated. The Government of India has a program where the title of Master Craftsman is bestowed upon eligible artisans whose products are included in the exhibitions.

**Digitization:**

Digitization is a process to capture an analog signal into digital form. Digitization has started to play a major role in sustainability of rare traditional Indian textile designs. Global factors like Modernization, Globalization and Technology upgradation have led to the destruction of traditional crafts. Hence, the need to preserve the designs has become the need of the hour. It has become an essence to gain knowledge on the concepts such as, defining digitization, examining process, assessing archival concerns and dissemination compression techniques. The purpose of digitization, Strategies behind digitization, its benefits, issues and challenges of digitization has become very important in the sustainability of Traditional Indian textile designs (Kumar and Sathya, 2015). Digital library uses an open source format that encourages academics and field practitioners to contribute to an up-to-date comprehensive database.

**Conclusion:**

Global fashion industry has bitterly evidenced the social and environmental implications associated with fast production cycles, overuse of resources, waste generation, environmental pollution and unethical labour conditions. Growing consumer awareness regarding social and environmental impacts of fashion products has led to create a new marketplace for sustainable and ethical products. Facing the changes in life styles and consumer habits, only craft has the potential to create products that are ecological, ethical, original, personal, customized, beautiful, different and exclusive. But due to lack of knowledge and direct contact with the end consumers, many of the traditional textile artisans are unacquainted about the market conditions, latest techniques, fashion trends and designs. Consequently, they are living in very adverse conditions with lowest wages despite rising living costs in an emerging Indian economy. To compete with machine produced goods and fast fashion, the artisans need to be involved in every aspect of market research, design, production, costing and marketing, and also need to understand the adaptations and changes in the form, function, usage and sale of the product that they are making. Only after that the fashion craft industry can step towards poverty alleviation, employment generation, enhancement of rural entrepreneurship and the development of new business opportunities to address the three pillars of sustainability: social, economic and environment.
REFERENCES


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