

Tracing the Emergence of Sustainable Practices in Indian Apparel Industry

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ABSTRACT

This review article examines the emergence and evolution of sustainable practices within the Indian apparel industry. It aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the various factors and initiatives that have contributed to the growth of sustainability in the apparel industry. Furthermore, the article delves into specific sustainable practices implemented by Indian apparel companies, such as organic and eco-friendly materials, ethical sourcing, fair trade, and waste reduction. By providing a comprehensive overview of sustainable practices in the Indian apparel sector, the article aims to contribute to the understanding of the industry's sustainability journey and inspire future efforts in creating a more environmentally, ethically and socially responsible apparel industry in India.

Key Words : Circular Economy, Sustainable Fashion, Environment friendly, Upcycling

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainability has been present in India for centuries, deeply rooted in the country's cultural and traditional practices (Patra, 2009). However, the modern understanding and application of sustainability gained prominence in India during the late 20th century and has continued to evolve since then.

In the 1970s and 1980s, India witnessed significant environmental challenges, including deforestation, water scarcity, pollution, and depletion of natural resources. These issues prompted the Indian government and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to focus on sustainable development and environmental conservation. A key milestone in the emergence of sustainability in India was the establishment of the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1985 (Bhat *et al.*, 2017). This ministry played a crucial role in formulating policies and implementing measures to address environmental concerns and promote sustainable practices across sectors (Sivaramakrishnan, 2015).

In the early 1990s, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit, took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This event brought global attention to the need for sustainable development and had a significant impact on shaping India's

sustainability agenda. Following the summit, India actively participated in various international discussions (Goldman, 1992) and agreements related to sustainable development, including the adoption of the Agenda 21 framework. Since then, sustainability has become an integral part of India's development goals and policies. The Indian government has launched initiatives such as the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) in 2008, which aims to promote sustainable practices, mitigate climate change, and enhance resilience.

Furthermore, Indian businesses, civil society organizations, and individuals have embraced sustainability practices in various sectors, including agriculture, renewable energy, waste management, water conservation, and sustainable urban development. The fashion industry, as mentioned earlier, has also witnessed a growing emphasis on sustainable fashion practices in recent years. Overall, while the concept of sustainability has deep historical roots in India, its modern-day prominence and widespread adoption gained momentum during the late 20th century and continues to shape India's development trajectory.

Sustainability in Indian Textiles and Apparel:

Review of literature reveals examples that demonstrate that sustainability has been an integral part of India's cultural and traditional practices for centuries. These practices reflect a deep understanding and respect for the environment, emphasizing the importance of preserving natural resources and maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature. India has a rich history of sustainable practices in the domains of apparel, crafts, and textiles. Here are some examples of historical sustainable practices in practice in India:

- **Handloom Weaving:** Handloom weaving plays a crucial role in promoting sustainability in the textile industry. Unlike mechanized processes, handloom weaving is a labour-intensive and eco-friendly technique that embraces sustainable practices in several ways. Handloom weaving often utilizes natural fibers like cotton, silk, and wool, which are renewable and biodegradable materials (Goswami and Jain, 2014). By avoiding synthetic fibers, handloom weavers contribute to reducing the environmental impact associated with the production and disposal of synthetic textiles. Also, handloom weaving requires significantly less energy compared to mechanized processes. It is powered manually, eliminating the need for electricity or fossil fuels, thereby reducing carbon emissions and energy consumption. Additionally, handloom weavers employ traditional techniques, such as block printing, tie-dyeing, and hand embroidery, using natural dyes derived from plants. This emphasis on natural dyes promotes eco-friendly and non-toxic alternatives to synthetic dyes, minimizing water pollution and health hazards. Moreover, handloom weaving supports local artisans and sustains traditional craftsmanship. By purchasing handloom products, consumers contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and the livelihoods of skilled weavers (Mamidipudi and Bijker, 2012).
- **Natural Dyes:** Sustainability through the use of natural dyes in textile production is a significant step towards reducing the environmental impact of the fashion industry. Natural dyes are derived from plants, roots, barks, and insects, making them renewable and biodegradable alternatives to synthetic dyes. One of the key advantages of natural dyes is their eco-friendly nature. They are generally non-toxic and do not release harmful chemicals or pollutants into water sources during the dyeing process. This helps to minimize water

pollution and protect the health of textile workers and surrounding communities. Additionally, natural dyes often require less energy for processing compared to synthetic dyes, as they can be extracted through simpler techniques (Saxena and Raja, 2014). This reduces the carbon footprint and energy consumption associated with dye production. Furthermore, natural dyes support biodiversity conservation and promote sustainable farming practices. Many natural dye sources are derived from plants grown in agroforestry systems or obtained as by-products from agricultural activities (Merdan *et al.*, 2017). By utilizing natural dyes, the demand for these plants encourages their cultivation and helps to preserve ecosystems and traditional agricultural practices. Moreover, natural dyes offer a wide range of beautiful and unique colours, contributing to the creation of distinctive and sustainable textiles. Their variability adds to the charm and individuality of handmade and artisanal products, promoting a shift towards slow fashion and reducing the reliance on mass-produced, synthetic-dye garments.

- **Upcycling and Recycling:** Upcycling and recycling practices in India contribute significantly to sustainability in the fashion and textile industry (Sung, 2015). These practices focus on repurposing and transforming discarded materials, reducing waste, and extending the lifespan of products. One aspect of sustainability in upcycling and recycling is the diversion of waste from landfills (Oyenuga *et al.*, 2017). Instead of discarding used garments, textiles, or materials, they are creatively repurposed into new products. This reduces the demand for virgin resources and decreases the environmental impact associated with the production of new textiles. Upcycling and recycling also promote circular economy principles by closing the loop of textile production (Wegener, 2016). By giving new life to old or unwanted items, these practices minimize the need for new materials and reduce the energy, water, and chemical inputs required for manufacturing processes. In India, artisans and designers have embraced upcycling and recycling techniques to create unique and sustainable products. For example, old garments can be transformed into patchwork quilts, accessories, or home decor items. Textile scraps can be used for weaving rugs or creating embellishments. An important example is Kantha products which has its emergence in utilisation of old and worn out scraps. This not only reduces waste but also preserves traditional craftsmanship and promotes employment opportunities for artisans. Moreover, upcycling and recycling promote conscious consumption and encourage consumers to adopt more sustainable habits. By choosing upcycled or recycled products, individuals can support sustainable fashion practices, reduce their environmental footprint, and contribute to a more circular and sustainable textile industry.
- **Hand Embroidery:** Sustainability in hand embroidery encompasses various practices that prioritize environmental consciousness, social responsibility, and the preservation of traditional craftsmanship (Kapur, 2016). Hand embroidery is an age-old art form that relies on skilled artisans who have inherited their techniques and knowledge through generations. By supporting hand embroider, individuals help preserve traditional craftsmanship, preventing the loss of cultural heritage and promoting sustainable livelihoods for artisans. Since hand embroidery is a labor-intensive process that emphasizes quality over quantity, aligning with the principles of slow fashion. By valuing the time and effort invested in each piece, hand embroidery promotes a more sustainable and conscious approach to fashion, encouraging

consumers to appreciate and cherish handmade garments and accessories. Further, supporting hand embroidery leads to direct economic empowerment of artisan communities (Lantry, 2015), often in rural or marginalized areas. This empowerment helps to preserve traditional skills and craftsmanship, alleviate poverty, and create sustainable livelihoods within these communities.

- **Block Printing:** Block printing, a traditional textile printing technique, can contribute to sustainability in several ways. The technique often involves the use of natural dyes derived from plants, roots, and minerals. By avoiding synthetic chemical dyes, block printing minimizes water pollution and reduces the overall environmental impact associated with textile printing (Agnihotri, *et al.*). Moreover, Block printing is an ancient art form that has been passed down through generations. By supporting block printing, individuals contribute to the preservation of traditional craftsmanship and cultural heritage (Gupta *et al.*, 2017). This helps sustain the livelihoods of artisans and encourages the transmission of knowledge and skills to future generations. Review of literature shows that Block printing typically utilizes locally sourced materials, such as cotton or linen fabrics. This promotes local agriculture and supports sustainable farming practices. By using materials that are produced locally, the carbon footprint associated with transportation and importation of textiles is reduced.
- **Ahimsa Silk:** Sustainability is a key aspect of Ahimsa silk production, also known as non-violent or peace silk. Ahimsa silk promotes ethical and humane practices while minimizing environmental impact (Deshmukh, 2009). Ethical Sericulture or Ahimsa silk production involves a process that ensures the well-being of silk-producing insects, such as silkworms. Unlike conventional silk production, where silkworms are killed to extract the silk thread, Ahimsa silk allows the silkworms to complete their life cycle. This ethical approach promotes compassion towards animals and eliminates harm to the insects (Karthik and Rathinamoorthy, 2017). It focuses on feeding silkworms with organic mulberry leaves, free from chemical pesticides or fertilizers. This promotes sustainable agriculture practices and reduces the environmental impact of silk production.

Further, Ahimsa silk production often takes place in rural areas, supporting local communities and providing sustainable livelihoods. It helps in preserving traditional skills, creating employment opportunities, and empowering artisans and weavers.

These historical sustainable practices in apparel, crafts and textiles in India highlight the country's commitment to eco-friendly and culturally rich production methods. Many contemporary Indian brands and artisans continue to embrace these traditional practices, combining them with modern designs to create sustainable and unique products.

Contemporary Indian Apparel Brands Promoting Sustainable Practices:

Several companies are dedicated to promoting sustainable practices in the apparel and textiles industry. These companies prioritize the use of organic and natural materials, adopt eco-friendly manufacturing processes, and promote fair trade and ethical sourcing (Choi and Li, 2015). They emphasize transparency in their supply chains, ensuring workers' rights and reducing environmental impacts. Through innovative approaches like upcycling, recycling, and the use of renewable energy, these companies strive to minimize waste and carbon footprints. By raising awareness about the importance of sustainability and offering stylish, eco-conscious options, these companies play a

pivotal role in transforming the fashion industry into a more ethical and environmentally friendly sector (Raj *et al.*, 2017).

Review of literature and secondary data reveals some apparel companies that have been promoting sustainable fashion. Here are a few notable examples:

- **Fabindia:** Fabindia is a well-known Indian retail brand that specializes in handcrafted products made by artisans across India. They have been championing sustainable fashion by promoting traditional crafts and employing sustainable production practices. Fabindia focuses on using natural materials, organic dyes, and traditional techniques to create their clothing and accessories.
- **Anita Dongre:** Anita Dongre is a renowned Indian fashion designer who has been at the forefront of sustainable fashion in the country. She has incorporated eco-friendly practices into her designs, using organic fabrics, natural dyes, and promoting fair trade. Anita Dongre's sustainable fashion label called Grassroot focuses on empowering rural artisans and reviving traditional crafts.
- **The Doodlage:** The Doodlage is an Indian fashion label that is committed to sustainability and upcycling. They create their garments by using textile waste and repurposed materials, giving a new life to discarded fabrics. The brand focuses on creating unique, fashionable pieces while minimizing environmental impact.
- **Bhu:sattva:** Bhu:sattva is an Indian organic clothing brand that promotes sustainable and ethical fashion. They use organic cotton, natural dyes, and fair-trade practices in their production. Bhu:sattva is known for their comfortable and stylish clothing for men, women, and children, with a focus on sustainability throughout the supply chain.
- **No Nasties:** No Nasties is an Indian organic and fair-trade clothing brand that emphasizes ethical and sustainable practices. They use 100% organic cotton, non-toxic dyes, and ensure fair wages for farmers and workers involved in the production process. No Nasties is known for their minimalist designs and transparency in their supply chain.

These are few examples of Indian companies that are involved in sustainable fashion. The sustainable fashion movement has continued to grow since, with more companies adopting eco-friendly practices and promoting ethical fashion.

Conclusion:

The article traces the significant progress and developments in the adoption of sustainable practices within the Indian apparel industry. Further research may be undertaken to study the role of global sustainability movements, consumer demand and regulatory measures in driving the industry's transformation. By tracing the emergence of sustainable practices, the article paves way towards future achievements and brighter prospects of creating a more environmentally and socially conscious apparel industry in India.

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