Sustainable Design through Up-Cycling Crafts in the Mainstream Fashion Industry of India

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ABSTRACT

Fashion is considered to be the most destructive industry, second only to the oil rigging industry, which has a greater impact on the environment. While fashion today, banks upon fast fashion to generate higher turnover of designs and patterns in apparel and relate accessories, crafts push us towards a more slow and thoughtful approach with culturally identifiably unique work and slow community centred production. Despite this strong link between indigenous crafts and sustainability, it has not been extensively researched and explored upon. In the forthcoming years, the fashion industry will have to re-invent itself to move towards a more holistic and sustainable circular model to balance the harm already caused. And closed loops of the circular economy will help the integration of indigenous craft knowledge which is regenerative. Though sustainability and crafts of a region go hand- in-hand, craft still have to find its standing in the mainstream fashion world; craft practices have a strong local congruence and knowledge that has been passed down generation-to-generation through oration or written materials. This paper aims to explore ways a circular economy can be created by amalgamating fashion and craft while creating a sustainable business model and how this is slowly being created today through brands

KEYWORDS: Circular Economy, Fashion, India, Indigenous Crafts, Slow Fashion, Sustainability, Up-cycling

1 INTRODUCTION

The textile and clothing industry is the second largest industry after oil rigging and one of the most natural-resource consuming one at that. During the last few decades, the awareness of fashion trends has increased manifolds leading to the emergence of the culture of ‘Fast fashion’. The clothing manufacturers have embraced this new ‘buy-and-throw-away’ culture such that people are now heavily underutilizing the clothing that they own while continuing to splurge on new fashionable clothing. According to a report by Ellen McArthur Foundation, the average number of times a garment is worn has decreased by at least 36% in the last 15 years. To this end, there is a need to have increased usage of each piece, recycle textiles, create a non-linear system of production, and adopt steps to minimize the environmental footprint of the industry.
As per a 2020 report by Vogue Business, the concept of a circular and regenerative fashion industry is fast gaining traction among the end users which in turn has added impetus to the efforts being made by brands to become accountable towards the environment leading to the slow fashion movement
Some Indian brands have taken up the mantle of easing the tensions between climate crisis (to which the fashion industry contributes) and consumerism (which is a by-product of ‘Fast Fashion’). In addition to being sustainable and creating ecologically conscious clothing, brands have embraced the age-old tradition of upcycling from India, carrying a part of the tradition and making garments and accessories that are chic and in-trend.

2 DISCUSSION

2.1 Fast Fashion and Slow Fashion

The terms “Fast” and “Slow” till a few decades ago we unlikely to be paired with the term “Fashion”, though today, they denote practices which are utterly varying in their practices. Fast Fashion focuses on producing large volumes of homogenously styled clothing at unbeatable prices using cheap off-shore labour, lower quality material and above all short lead times to appeal to the consumers’ ever-increasing need for novelty. For the consumer who is looking to expand their wardrobe to project a certain level of social standing, high street brands that have embraced the concept of fast fashion have proved to be a beacon of hope that the consumer will get latest trendy designs along with the brand name without burning a huge hole in their pocket. But while this is the shiny side of things, there is any ugly side of the business too. The higher turnover rate has led to higher consumption of raw materials, leading to more mechanization and factory workers losing their job. Since the lead times need to be short, a few brands have resorted to creating automated factories where bots work 24/7 to keep up with the pace of production required. Another dreadful side effect of huge quantities of fabric processing is the contaminants being released into the water bodies. Slow Fashion is at the other end of the spectrum where production of each piece is carefully thought out and planned, designed, curate and produced to have the best quality output. Slow fashion involves small-scale production in a limited space and within a stipulated time. Simply put, slow fashion is a quality and sustainability focused mode of production as opposed to the wonton production pattern the world has experienced during the fast fashion era. Slow fashion garments are made keeping in mind the ideal average life cycle of any garment. That is garment should be of a quality that would last longer than an average
The slow fashion movement launched in the early 2000s was a movement to counter the fast fashion movement and focuses on quality as opposed to the time-based production runs

propagated by the fast fashion movement. Slow fashion as a term was coined by Kate Fletcher where she talked about the critical nature of balance. Slow schedules for production, preferably zero waste; small batch collections and steps towards reducing textile waste are the signs of striving slow fashion brand.

2.2 Slow Fashion, Consumer Awareness and Sentiment

The pandemic has led to an increase in the customer engagement with regards to awareness, social responsibility and environmental impact of actions. According to a research survey carried out by McKinsey consumers have begun switching to eco friendly options, putting in additional efforts to recycle, upcycle and into purchasing environmental packaged products. The world-wide crisis has also paved the way for a slower fashion movement, supported by the millennials and gen-Z who have admitted to buying from local and sustainable brands. The survey also indicates that the fashion cycle does not affect the buying cycle of the consumer and that consumers consider newness as one of the least important factors while purchasing clothing.
Another industry report published by textile value chain reports that 74.5% of the respondents were aware of the concept of recycling and upcycling as opposed to 12.7% of the people knew about the concept but do not understand it. It also sheds light on the contribution of social media to disseminate the knowledge of this concept on a world platform.
61% of respondents have not bought sustainable clothing but for 48% respondents it is on their wish list and 47% would prefer to buy recycled clothing over a new set of clothes. The balance respondents feel that there are drawbacks to buying upcycled clothing such as – clothing being second hand, they may be out of style, the clothing may lack durability and quality, they are also concerned about the hygiene and cleanliness of the clothing in addition to paying a premium to buy recycled clothes.

2.3 India, Crafts and Slow Fashion

Crafts are scattered across the fabric of the country and are an important part of the culture and lineage of any geographical region practicing it. India has been home to various empires - the rulers and the ruled have had complicated relationships each assimilating influences from the other. Distinct cultural, traditional influences can be observed in each state. As these cottage industries are re-energized we observe the divide between the “creatives” and “skilled” artisans, the creatives being more open to ideas and experimentation in terms of design, process, and introduction of new materials or finishes while the skilled artisans prefer to stick to the traditional methods, designs and materials.
Irrespective, whether an artisan is a creative one or a skilled one, they both take equal pains and commitment to produce the end product which is labour-intensive, one-of-a-kind and time-consuming to produce (some handloom pieces may take up to 3-6 months to reach the finish product stage). Essentially making them slow fashion and almost always sustainable and eco-friendly because they use materials that are naturally available with little or no synthetic chemical processing involved.
More recently, with the awareness for sustainable fashion and eco-friendly garments increasing the handloom industry work and workers working conditions and good-will has come to the fore. Brands are making an effort to work closely with artisan group and co-operative to create commercially viable designs while keeping the traditional aesthetic alive.

2.4 Upcycling

The term upcycling was coined by the Belgian economist Gunter Pauli in his book “UpSizing The Road to Zero Emissions: More Jobs, More Income and No Pollution” in the scope of consumer-based modern day society. While, the term was officially coined in 1998, Indians and possibly people of various other descents had been practicing creative reuse for years and not realizing that this trend would be a huge fashion movement in the years to come.
Even today when the world is leaning towards upcycling and recycling in a big way to reduce the carbon footprint and move towards a greener, more sustainable future, it may not be surprising that a parent creating a garment out of some heirloom piece of clothing for their child is not aware that they’re contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals in their own way.
In India, most homes have a sewing machine and the inhabitants have a certain level of proficiency with needle and thread, for others, India is home to a plethora of small businesses who have taken up the mantle to make the world a better place one garment and one piece at a time, while also aligning themselves to the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations

3 METHODOLOGY

The objective was to speak to Indian start-up brands and find out what drove them to pursue their journey towards sustainable fashion, to understand their motivation and alignment with the UN SDGs.
Brands were contacted through brand emails present on their websites or through their social media pages. Two telephonic interviews were also conducted where in the founders of the brand shared a few insights about the industry and covered a few more points that were not mentioned in their answers to the questionnaire.
An open-ended questionnaire was shared with each brand to enable qualitative exploratory research with purposive convenience sampling. The telephonic interviews covered all the questionnaire topics but were not limited to it.
Secondary exploratory research was also conducted by studying other brands and social media listening which also involved studying and observing production patterns, sourcing, timelines, designs and methods of production of brands belonging to the global fabric.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Upcycling Brands in India

As mentioned earlier, India has a plethora of small sustainable fashion businesses, while researching upcycling trends in India these brands were contacted and their background and brand offerings studied. A total of 15 brands were contacted and response from 9 of these brands were recorded, including Doodlage, Grandma would approve, I was a Sari, Kaizen, LataSita, Pero, Pomogrenade, Punah:.

4.2 Doodlage

Figure 1 – Cloudwalker Appliqué Denim by Doodlage

Founded by Kriti Tula and Paras Arora in 2012, Doodlage is a eco-friendly fashion brand that champions the cause for zero waste. Inspired to reduce the fabric wastage in the fabric industry their raw material is sourced from manufacturing units and exporters around the national capital. All their raw material goes through various checks and processes before being sent to the production team where they are sewn together with a seam allowance of over 3 inches to facilitate alteration and thereby give more uses to the garment.
The waste produced after their production cycle is shredded and used in their accessory collection to add texture, cotton waste is decomposed to create their stationary collection. They are also in the working towards collecting their garments at the end of its life and reuse them in different ways.
As a brand, Doodlage has a small team in place and partner with artisan groups and non-profit organizations to outsource their production.

4.3 Grandma Would Approve

Figure 2 - The Drip blazer has been constructed using a Vintage Ralph lauren blazer and is reversible, the dual tone pants are made using 2 trousers by Grandma Would Approve

Grandma would approve was born during a conversation between 2 best friends - Anugrah Samuel Phillips and Priyanka Muniyappa in early 2018 enthusiastic to bring a change in ideology with regarding to production practices, circular design and slow fashion. Their philosophy is to mend and fix every piece and help make these products last longer and to breathe into them new life and longevity.
Their product offerings are divided in 3 categories – Vintage, Restored and Reconstructed Vintage garments fall into the category based on design, print, construction, pattern, silhouette, material, buttons and embellishments. Restored garments are all garments that come damaged, worn out or stained. These are fixed, giving those new panels, inner lining, new zips, elastic, buttons etc. While Reconstructed garments fall in the High End Couture range they are more labour intensive garments, it takes a minimum of 6 days to create one

garment, the team take apart already existing vintage garments and stitch them back together, Reconstructed garments are made using a minimum of 5-10 garments, containing as many as 100 panels stitched together to create a print or design using fabric.
According to Priyanka, “For Reconstructed pieces we realised if we used the garments belonging to families and create custom pieces for them from that material that they have available with them, the value they have towards the product, the fact that the product is only unique to them and their aesthetics, is made from people they know and love and through this they will never discard that special piece made for them and we can take people back to the culture of cherishing.”
Their raw material is sourced from vendors that they have built a connection with over the past decade. They arrange a special preview of their warehouses and find the oldest stock aka dead stock sitting in the back of their warehouses and search through the piles of clothing to find the garments that can be restored. They also encourage families to donate their old apparel and textiles so that the life cycle increases and garments are kept circulating so they don’t rot or decompose as those garments have already stood the test of time.

4.4 I was a Sari

Figure 3 – I was a Sari at Lakme Fashion Week

I was a Sari is a social enterprise founded in 2013 by Stefano Funari that reinvests 100% of its profits into the development of the business and in other women empowerment projects. Since the most sustainable item is one that already exists, the brand chose to work with pre-loved or post-consumer waste saris, which helps reduce their carbon footprint and save gallons of water.
They source second- hand saris from Chor Bazaar in Mumbai, one of the largest thrift markets in India. The Wagri community, who barter clothes and go from door-to-door exchanging clothes with kitchenware. These clothes are sold every day at Chor Bazaar and we source the saris from there. These saris come in bundles and are in a mix of colours and prints. These Saris get transformed into bags, shoes, jewellery, accessories, and ready to wear. The saris get a second life; they again become a part of the wardrobe of someone and even walk the streets of Milan or Paris! The founder is mindful not to waste, and the left-over sari or chindi is donated to Goonj, a leading NGO that creates sanitary pads and toys out of it. It is a small team handling sourcing, pattern making, design & product development, marketing and logistics. They work in collaboration with two NGO's - Community Outreach Programme and Animedh Charitable Trust and work with over 170 local women.

As a brand they strongly believe that the only solution is to make all fashion, sustainable fashion. And with the rise of conscious consumer voices, the demand will come from the consumer side, leaving little choices for the brands but to re-imagine their processes and operations with green solutions.

4.5 Kaizen

Kaizen was founded by Namrata Gohain in 2016 with a goal of bridging gaps among craft communities & urban cultures. The inspiration was to avoid the pre and post consumer waste and unnecessary textile waste, Namrata mentions that “When I started my label, I was sure, without a question, that it would be a low-waste business”
The brand uses the fabric scraps created during their garment construction along with good quality handloom dead stock from the handloom organizations. First, the discarded textiles are sorted, according to size and shape. Then, they are checked further for flaws like holes, etc. Third, according to the scraps available, the products are designed. Currently, the last use of the scraps is to use it to tie garment tags, etc.
Namrata describes herself as a solopreneur, working with artisans, fair trade organizations & work in collaborations with local talented artists & creative professionals. She considers her collaborators as her team.

4.6 LataSita

LataSita is a pioneering zero-waste studio founded by Meghna Nayak in 2012 creating garments made using textile sourced from Indian women’s wardrobes - a local, untapped resource with great aesthetic and emotional value. The brand believes that there are millions of saris tucked away in wardrobes across the country, being worn less and less. Sometimes brand new saris lie unused in wardrobes for decades, or are worn only once or twice. This treasure trove of fabric could not be allowed to decompose unseen and unused even as more and more cloth was being created to satisfy booming demand.
The brand has two lines, prêt and custom. To break down the process a bit, Meghna is a collector of sustainable textile, specifically old textile, and with this, they create the prêt line. This is something Meghna is always working on, and constantly creating new designs and planning future collections. Their custom “Send Us Your Sari” campaign has been running for five years and asks women to send in their saris to rework into brand new pieces of clothing instead of buying new garments. The idea is to turn people on to a process where they are highly engaged rather than mindlessly shopping online, for instance
When asked about her team - . I supervise the cutting minutely and cut the initial paper pattern myself. I have a team of 3 tailors in-house and an offsite unit as a backup. I might have to hire

Figure 4 – Design by LataSita

assistant designers in the future, but this is the part of the job I enjoy the most so I'd like to continue making my patterns.
The project is an intimate process that allows an anthropological glimpse into a very personal space - the wardrobes of women over the years. These self-curated spaces are incredibly interesting and the sheer variety of heritage textiles exposed to is mind-boggling.

4.7 Pero

'Péro' creates simple clothing, utilizing indigenous skills and knowledge of ancient textile and clothing traditions of India and the world over. Péro means 'to wear' in Marwari which is the local language of Rajasthan. Most garments are inspired by the local dressing styles that one comes across in the remotest of areas. 'Péro' recreates and adapts these styles for the modern consumer who seeks a similar aesthetic, at the same time looking for ease, comfort, and pleasure in their clothes.

Figure 5 – Design by Pero

The inception of péro was in 2009, with the USP of making their own handcrafted textiles in different parts of India, with an aim to make a global product that connects with people, wherever in the world, it is placed. The brand's focus has always been on research and innovation of fabrics, using traditional Indian techniques and crafts. In the last 10 years, The brand has worked in close collaboration with more than 1000 weavers/craftspeople across various regions in the country to innovate hand-woven, dyed and printed textiles, with the skilled craftspeople of Gujarat, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu, and Kashmir, etc.
The Indianness of 'péro rests in the textile process, where materials pass through the hands of one craftsperson to the other, belonging to different parts of India carrying forward the Indian tradition of the hand made, and creating pieces that are at once unique. The resulting garment evokes a sense of culture from which it originates, this culture communicates internationally in such a way that the wearer looks equally at ease in the streets of Paris or London, as she does here in India

4.8 Pomogrenade

With a view to create affordable ethical clothing that's equally fun and functional, Pomogrenade was founded by Aiswarya Kutty & Madhulikha Umapathy in 2015. While

planning the brand they wanted to ensure an ethical brand and researched different ways they could approach sustainability.
The sourcing takes place through various channels, a wonderful network of likeminded brands and businesses who are conscious of their production. Producers and suppliers with dead stock fabrics/trims to best utilize the stock. And they are also in constant contact with various artisan groups, other producers, and local suppliers to absorb their waste/scraps or dead stock.
Pomogrenade works on a collaborative model, constantly tying up with various organisations to source and produce various products. The brand creates more products with the post production waste. They become part of other products or smaller accessories like fabric buttons, brooch pins, embellishments on bags, etc. The waste generated by the production is next to nothing.

4.9 Punah:

A very nascent brand founded by Aashita Jain in 2019 aims to create a brand revolving around ideology of circularity, sustainability and fair trade. They want to use upcycling and zero waste as a tool to promote sustainability.

Figure 6 – Design by Punah:

The idea of Punah: started while the founder was working as a buyer and merchandiser. She realized the amount of waste generated during the process of production and how most of it ends up in the landfill. She started upcycling her friends' and colleagues' old jeans and jackets so that they are refurbished to extend their life.
Now Punah: happily provides 360° upcycling and utilizes all kinds of textile waste they find.
Punah: sources their materials from factories and different production units across the country. Sourcing material is a difficult task as there is still not much awareness about sustainability and it is difficult to find vendors to even give their cut & sew waste. Instead of following conventional methods of working on the design first, the material is sourced first. At times there are piles of factory rejects and scraps and handpicked by the team. Once the sourced textile is received, they are cleaned, sorted according to colour, size, type and usability.
Punah: reuses all the fabric scraps generated during the process and turn them into trims for garments like buttons, tassels or small accessories. They also use scraps in packaging and make brooches, masks and pouches out of it.
According to Aashita, "We are nothing without our small army of seamstresses and local craftsmen. They help us turn our ideas into well-made pieces. We also try to collaborate with different artisans from different states of India. In the past, we've collaborated with block print artisans from Sanganer and dabu block print artists from Bagru. Last year we saved more than 150 kilograms of textile and by the end of this year, we aim to save 450 kilograms of textile waste. We make sure not just our outfits but even our packaging is eco friendly. Our plant able seed papers tags have all the garment details, including details of every person who

has worked on that outfit. We also send a small repair kit made out of leftover fabric pieces that contains fabric swatches, a needle, threads, trims and spare buttons."

5 CONCLUSION

Sustainable fashion has gained a lot of attention in the last few years but there is still a long way to go . It's a growing niche compared to where the movement started, when terms like up-cycling, slow fashion, ethical fashion were lesser known.. Many consumers are now sensitive towards what impact we create and genuinely invest in smaller more ethical labels but a lot of the audience is still looking for chic dresses and purchases the product purely for its aesthetic and quality. A large part of the market is still stuck to the idea of fast fashion because of the affordability and variety available.
The responsibility as the generation of Now, for the waste we generate is the only action that matters, at this intersection in time, where we are clearly recognising climate change as a risk to all life every single part of the world is going to get exhausted and depleted if we continue acting like we are still functioning from an industrial revolution mindset where we are extracting more and more from the body of the earth. It's time to slow down and to bring awareness within ourselves.
With a goal to making the world better and more sustainable the Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieving that future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice being the primary issues addressed by these measurable goals.
Each of the brands is working towards the same goal of creating a more nourished earth while also aligning themselves to various sustainable development goals like

Goal 1: No Poverty – To end extreme poverty in all forms by 2030, working towards this goals, the brands are doing their bit by working with self-help organizations. Providing a respectable occupation and employment to various artisans.

Goal 5: Gender Equality – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, this is of prime importance in a patriarchy based social system prevalent in India. Home-grown fashion brands collaborate and enlist the support of the women thereby achieving the twin goals of creating gender equality and creating sustainable fashion.

Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. An important part of economic growth is that people have jobs that pay enough to support themselves and their families, the brands have provided employment and a way to improve the economic standing of the employed families.

Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation. This has been evident in the founding and working of each of the brands mentioned above which have been beacons of innovation and sustainable production of garments.

Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities – Reduce inequalities within and among countries, India and a few other countries in the sub-continent are a hub for garment production owing to the low labour cost and abundant availability of the raw material. Though a hub for production, the

labour is not adequately compensated, these Indian brands working with smaller artisan groups have been trying to reverse this practice.

Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production - Some people use a lot of stuff, and some people use very little—in fact, a big share of the world population is consuming too little to meet even their basic needs. Instead, we can have a world where everybody gets what they need to survive and thrive. And we can consume in a way that preserves our natural resources so that our children can enjoy them, and their children and their children after that.

These upcycling brands have been instrumental in reducing the carbon footprint for themselves and their consumers. They have also set the stage for new brands who would like to take up the mantle and promote similar causes.
And this where and how the thought matters, it is imperative to make empathetic choices towards our consumption in some way. It is about the ability to sustain a garment through its life- cycle is in consumer hands and need to pass it on to future generations responsibly.

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7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to show my gratitude to the brands for sharing their pearls of wisdom with us during the course of this research. I am also immensely grateful to Ms. Fareha Iqbal (Doodlage), Ms. Priyanka Muniyappa (Grandma would Approve), Team I was a Sari, Ms. Namrata Gohain (Kaizen), Ms. Meghana Nayak and Team LataSita, Team Pero, Ms. Aiswarya Kutty (Pomogrenade) and Ms. Aashita Jain (Punah:) for taking time from their hectic schedules and giving detailed answers to the questions. I would also thank them for their comments on an earlier version of the manuscript, although any errors are our own and should not tarnish the reputations of these esteemed persons.

8 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Author declares no conflict of interest.