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Slow Fashion as Resistance: Consumer Behaviour, Design Ethics, and Cultural Sustainability in the Indian Context

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Abstract

The fast fashion industry has engendered an ecological and socio-cultural crisis of global proportions, with India — as both a major textile producer and a rapidly expanding consumer market — occupying a paradoxical position at its centre. This paper critically examines the philosophy of slow fashion as a counter-hegemonic movement, analysing its intersections with Indian consumer behaviour, indigenous craft traditions, and design ethics. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework that incorporates sustainability studies, postcolonial theory, and consumer culture analysis, the paper argues that slow fashion, rather than being a Western luxury import, is intrinsically aligned with India's deep-rooted traditions of frugality, craft heritage, and community-based production. The study explores how movements such as Khadi revivalism, the handloom sector, and zero-waste textile practices represent endogenous forms of slow fashion that predate the contemporary global discourse. It further examines the barriers to its adoption among Indian middle-class and Gen-Z consumers, the role of design philosophy in mediating sustainable choices, and how policy frameworks, including the National Textiles Policy, can amplify or inhibit the slow fashion transition. The paper concludes that repositioning slow fashion through a culturally resonant, indigenised lens is essential for meaningful adoption in the Indian context, and that design education has a central role to play in this transformation.

Keywords: slow fashion, fast fashion critique, Indian textile heritage, consumer sustainability, Khadi, design ethics, postcolonial sustainability

Introduction

The global fashion industry is the second-largest industrial polluter after oil, generating approximately 92 million tonnes of textile waste and consuming 79 trillion litres of water annually (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Within this systemic crisis, fast fashion — characterised by rapid production cycles, disposable clothing, and aggressive price competition — has functioned as the dominant paradigm since the 1990s. The model's success has been built on the exploitation of low-cost labour markets, the suppression of artisanal economies, and the commodification of culture.

India occupies a structurally complex position within this system. On the one hand, it is the world's sixth-largest textile exporter and home to 45 million workers in the textile and garment sector (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2023). On the other hand, its domestic market is increasingly characterised by a growing aspirational consumer class absorbing fast fashion narratives via e-commerce platforms such as Myntra, Ajio, and Shein. This dual reality — of production vulnerability and consumption aspiration — makes India a critical site for examining the possibilities and contradictions of slow fashion.

Slow fashion, broadly defined, is an approach to clothing production and consumption that prioritises quality, craft, ethical labour, environmental sustainability, and longevity over speed and disposability (Fletcher, 2010). While the term was coined in the Western design discourse, the values it encapsulates are far from alien to Indian civilisation. The Gandhian concept of Swadeshi, the philosophy of minimalism embedded in traditional textile practices, and the cultural significance of handwoven fabrics in everyday life all constitute an indigenous grammar of slow fashion.

This paper undertakes a critical analysis of slow fashion as a form of consumer and design resistance, with specific attention to the Indian socio-cultural and economic context. It interrogates the ideological underpinnings of slow fashion discourse, the structural barriers to its adoption among Indian consumers, and the transformative potential of design philosophy as a mediating force. The paper argues that an indigenised, decolonised articulation of slow fashion is not merely desirable but necessary for genuine, scalable adoption in India.

Conceptual Framework: Slow Fashion and its Ideological Foundations

The concept of slow fashion emerged as a deliberate counterpoint to fast fashion, drawing intellectual lineage from the Slow Food Movement pioneered by Carlo Petrini in Italy during the 1980s. Kate Fletcher (2010), one of the movement's foremost theorists, described slow fashion as a mode of engagement that values process, provenance, and people — a systemic critique rather than merely a consumer choice. Unlike ethical fashion, which often focuses narrowly on labour rights, or sustainable fashion, which foregrounds environmental metrics, slow fashion is philosophically expansive: it seeks to restructure the relationship between maker, object, wearer, and ecosystem.

A key theoretical tension in slow fashion discourse is the risk of what Johansson (2010) terms 'eco-colonialism' — the imposition of Northern sustainability norms on Southern production contexts without acknowledging power differentials or cultural specificity. When Western luxury brands market slow fashion credentials by sourcing Indian block-printed fabrics or Banarasi weaves, the economic surplus flows upstream while local weavers retain marginal returns. This critique, embedded in postcolonial theory, demands that any engagement with slow fashion in the Indian context be accompanied by an analysis of global value chains and cultural appropriation dynamics.

Theorists such as Shiva (2016) and Roy (2019) have argued that sustainability in the Global South must be understood not as an innovation but as a recovery — a return to modes of production and consumption that were disrupted by colonial modernity and are now being re-encountered through the language of ecological crisis. In this sense, slow fashion in India is less a new movement than a re-legitimisation of extant cultural practices.

Complementing this perspective, the framework of 'cultural sustainability' (Soini and Birkeland, 2014) provides a useful lens: it recognises that sustainable development must preserve not only ecological systems but also the cultural knowledge, skills, and social relations embedded in traditional craft production. Indian handloom weaving, block printing, natural dyeing, and zero-waste draping traditions embody this cultural sustainability in their structure and transmission.

Fast Fashion in India: Scale, Impact, and Contradictions

India's textile sector generated a turnover of approximately USD 153 billion in 2022-23, with the domestic apparel market expected to reach USD 190 billion by 2026 (Wazir Advisors, 2023). A significant proportion of this growth is driven by fast fashion consumption, particularly among urban millennials and Generation Z consumers who have been socialised into patterns of style obsolescence via social media and influencer marketing. Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have accelerated trend cycles to the point where micro-trends — with lifespans of weeks rather than seasons — have become normative.

The environmental consequences of this trajectory are already manifesting within India's borders. The Bandi River in Tamil Nadu and the Noyyal River in Tirupur — an industrial hub for knitwear exports — have been severely contaminated by dyehouse effluents, affecting the livelihoods of downstream agricultural communities (Krishnaswamy and Saravanan, 2020). The Ganga basin, home to the Varanasi silk weaving

cluster, faces analogous pressures from chemical processing waste. These localised ecological crises are, at their root, systemic failures of the fast fashion supply chain.

The social impacts are equally severe. The handloom sector, which employs approximately 4.3 million weavers — the second-largest source of rural employment after agriculture — has faced sustained decline due to competition from powerloom and mill-made fabrics (National Handloom Development Corporation, 2022). The average income of a handloom weaver in India is estimated at approximately INR 80–120 per day, well below the national minimum wage threshold, reflecting a structural devaluation of artisanal skill (Sreekumar and Varghese, 2021). Fast fashion's extractive logic, in this context, functions as a form of economic dispossession operating through the market rather than through the state.

Slow Fashion as Indigenous Praxis: Khadi, Handloom, and Craft Heritage

Long before the term 'slow fashion' entered design discourse, India possessed a rich tradition of what might be retrospectively recognised as slow fashion praxis. The most symbolically charged example is Khadi — handspun, hand-woven cloth that was mobilised by Mahatma Gandhi as both an economic strategy of self-reliance and a moral critique of industrial capitalism. Gandhi's spinning wheel (charkha) was not merely a tool of production; it was a philosophical instrument, enacting the values of dignity in labour, simplicity of consumption, and the decentralisation of economic power (Bondurant, 1988).

Khadi's contemporary revival, facilitated by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), has achieved notable commercial milestones — KVIC reported record sales of INR 1.34 lakh crore in 2022-23 (KVIC Annual Report, 2023). However, scholars have noted a tension between Khadi's Gandhian ideological foundation and its current positioning as a premium lifestyle product accessible primarily to urban upper-middle-class consumers (Trivedi, 2020). This commodification risk — the absorption of counter-hegemonic aesthetics into mainstream market logic — is a structural challenge for all slow fashion initiatives.

Beyond Khadi, India's textile cartography is a living repository of slow fashion values. The Chanderi weavers of Madhya Pradesh, the Pochampally ikat artisans of Telangana, the Kutch embroidery communities of Gujarat, and the Jamdani weavers of West Bengal all practise forms of textile production characterised by: (a) ecological material sourcing (silk, cotton, natural dyes); (b) intergenerational knowledge transmission; (c) slow production cycles tied to craft mastery; and (d) cultural specificity that resists commodified homogeneity. These clusters constitute what may be termed 'grounded slow fashion' — embedded in community, ecology, and history.

The concept of zero-waste in Indian textile tradition is equally instructive. The sari, worn by hundreds of millions of Indian women, is an unstitched garment — a single piece of fabric draped and re-draped across the body, producing no cutting waste. The dhoti, the lungi, and the dupatta share this structural logic. As Condra (2013) notes, the draping traditions of South Asia encode a sophisticated relationship between cloth and body that minimises material waste while maximising aesthetic flexibility — principles that contemporary sustainable fashion designers have begun to consciously rediscover.

Consumer Behaviour and the Slow Fashion Gap in India

The Value-Action Gap

Despite evident alignment between Indian cultural values and slow fashion principles, the adoption of slow fashion consumption behaviours remains limited among mainstream Indian consumers. Research consistently identifies a 'value-action gap' — a divergence between stated environmental and ethical attitudes and actual purchasing behaviour (Carrington et al., 2010). In the Indian context, this gap is particularly pronounced due to a confluence of structural, economic, and psychological factors.

Studies on Indian consumer attitudes toward sustainable fashion reveal that while environmental concern is moderately high among educated urban consumers, price sensitivity and social visibility remain the primary purchase drivers (Kapoor and Kumar, 2019). Fast fashion brands exploit this tension by offering product differentiation at accessible price points, making the 'sustainable' option appear both expensive and socially

unmarked. The aspiration to participate in global consumer culture — a powerful post-liberalisation desire — further compounds the gap.

Generation Z and the Digital Fashion Paradox

Generation Z consumers (born approximately 1997–2012) present a complex and somewhat paradoxical profile in relation to slow fashion. On one hand, global surveys indicate that Gen Z is more likely than older generations to cite sustainability as a purchase criterion (McKinsey, 2021). On the other hand, this generation is also the most avid consumer of ultra-fast fashion platforms such as SHEIN and Myntra's trend drops, which offer garments at price points of INR 200–500 — significantly below the cost of sustainably produced alternatives.

The resolution of this paradox lies partly in what Stanes and Gibson (2017) term 'everyday sustainability' — the negotiation of sustainable values within the constraints of income, identity, and social belonging. For many Indian Gen Z consumers, sustainability is a value aspiration rather than a purchase criterion, mediated by affordability and peer perception. This is not hypocrisy but rather a rational response to structural conditions in which the costs of sustainable consumption are not yet internalised into market prices.

However, there is also evidence of emerging slow fashion communities among Indian youth, particularly in metro cities. Thrift markets, clothing swaps, upcycling collectives, and handloom-wearing campaigns on Instagram have cultivated niche but growing communities of practice (Bahl and Rai, 2022). These communities function as subcultural spaces of resistance to dominant fast fashion norms — what Hebdige (1979) might recognise as 'style as bricolage' repurposed for ecological ends.

Rural and Semi-Urban Consumers: A Different Calculus

Academic discourse on slow fashion consumption in India is disproportionately focused on urban, educated consumers. Rural and semi-urban populations — who constitute approximately 65% of India's population — engage with textile consumption through a substantially different calculus. For many rural households, clothing is a durable asset managed with considerable care: garments are repaired, repurposed, passed between family members, and ultimately used as rags or quilting material. This is not ideological slow fashion, but it is functionally slow fashion — a lived practice of material frugality rooted in economic necessity and cultural norm.

Paradoxically, development-induced aspirational consumption may erode these practices faster than any deliberate sustainability intervention. As disposable incomes rise in rural India, the adoption of cheap synthetic garments — visible markers of modernity — may displace traditional textile practices that were, in ecological terms, far more sustainable. Policymakers and design practitioners must take seriously this developmental irony, wherein economic progress accelerates the loss of de facto sustainable practices.

Design Philosophy as Ethical Practice: Rethinking Fashion Pedagogy in India

If consumer behaviour is one site of slow fashion intervention, design philosophy is another — and arguably more structurally significant. Designers occupy a pivotal position in the fashion system: their choices about material, process, quantity, and meaning shape the possibilities available to consumers. A design philosophy that prioritises longevity, repairability, cultural rootedness, and material transparency is a precondition for sustainable fashion systems.

Indian design education, however, has historically been oriented toward international market standards and production efficiency, with sustainability frameworks introduced relatively recently and often peripherally. The National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), with campuses across 18 cities, serves as the primary institutional vector for fashion design education in India. While NIFT has begun integrating sustainability modules and craft documentation courses into its curriculum, critics argue that the dominant paradigm remains industry-oriented, replicating rather than questioning the fast fashion logic (Balasubramanian, 2020).

The emerging framework of 'design for sustainability' (DfS) offers a more systemic alternative. DfS moves beyond surface-level material choices (organic cotton, recycled fibres) to interrogate the entire lifecycle of a garment — from fibre cultivation to end-of-life disposal — and to engage with the social and cultural contexts

of production. Applied to Indian fashion design, DfS would entail, inter alia: designing for reweaving and repair; collaborating with artisan communities as co-designers rather than skill vendors; adopting natural and low-impact dye processes; and creating collections calibrated to regional climate and cultural contexts rather than global trend cycles.

Papanek's (1985) foundational argument that design is never neutral — that it always encodes social relations and values — is acutely relevant here. When Indian fashion designers adopt the vocabulary of slow fashion while maintaining extractive relationships with craft communities, they replicate a design colonialism that merely aestheticises exploitation. Authentic slow fashion design must therefore be accompanied by structural commitments: fair remuneration, collaborative attribution, and the distribution of intellectual property rights to artisan communities whose knowledge is being commercialised.

The work of designers such as Ritu Kumar, Anavila Misra, and the Grassroot label by Anita Dongre represents nascent but significant moves toward a design philosophy aligned with slow fashion principles. These practitioners combine craft collaboration, natural materials, and restrained seasonal production with commercial viability — demonstrating that design ethics and market success are not mutually exclusive, though the structural conditions enabling such practice remain limited to a premium market segment.

Policy Dimensions: Enabling the Slow Fashion Transition in India

The transition to slow fashion at scale requires enabling policy environments that alter the incentive structures governing production and consumption. India's policy framework for textiles is extensive but has historically prioritised export competitiveness and sectoral employment over ecological sustainability or artisanal preservation.

The National Textiles Policy 2000 and its successive iterations have focused primarily on modernisation, productivity enhancement, and FDI attraction. The Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for textiles, launched in 2021 with an outlay of INR 10,683 crore, targets man-made fibre and technical textile sectors — segments that are structurally oriented toward fast production rather than slow craft. While this may be justified on employment and export grounds, it represents a policy bet against the slow fashion transition (Choudhary, 2022).

In contrast, schemes such as the Scheme for Integrated Textile Parks (SITP), the Handloom Mark programme, and the India Handloom Brand initiative represent policy recognition of the artisanal sector's value. The 'One District One Product' (ODOP) scheme, while primarily focused on exports and rural livelihoods, has the potential to function as a geographic branding mechanism for slow fashion products — analogous to European Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) frameworks for traditional food products.

A more robust policy framework for slow fashion in India would need to address several interconnected dimensions: Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) regulations mandating take-back schemes from apparel brands; standardised labelling for craft origin and process transparency; integration of handloom and craft education into school curricula; preferential procurement of handloom products by government institutions; and research and development support for natural dye and organic fibre cultivation. Some of these measures find partial precedent in the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) textile strand, but implementation has been inconsistent.

Discussion: Indigenising Slow Fashion — Beyond Trend and Tokenism

The central argument of this paper is that the adoption of slow fashion in India cannot be meaningful if it merely replicates Western sustainability discourse in an Indian setting. A decolonised slow fashion framework must do at least three things differently: it must locate its genealogy within Indian traditions rather than treating Indian craft as raw material for global design; it must address the structural economic conditions that make fast fashion the rational choice for most Indian consumers; and it must engage with design education and practice as a site of systemic change rather than individual virtue.

The risk of 'green-washing' — the superficial adoption of slow fashion aesthetics without structural commitment — is substantial. Several fast fashion brands operating in India have launched 'sustainable collections' featuring handblock prints or organic cotton blends while maintaining the fundamental logic of

rapid trend turnover, volume production, and opacity in supply chains. This aesthetic appropriation without structural transformation is, as Banet-Weiser (2012) argues in a related context, a form of 'commodity activism' that neutralises critique by domesticating it.

Conversely, the risk of romanticising Indian textile traditions — treating them as static repositories of authenticity rather than living, evolving practices — must also be avoided. Artisan communities have their own aspirations for income growth, social mobility, and technological adaptation. A slow fashion framework that prescribes pre-industrial austerity onto communities whose poverty it does not address is not liberatory; it is paternalistic. Genuine slow fashion engagement must negotiate the complexity of tradition and aspiration, craft and capital, ecology and equity.

The most promising sites of slow fashion practice in India are those that successfully hold these tensions: cooperatives that guarantee living wages to weavers while creating market access; design labels that attribute and share intellectual property with craft communities; consumer movements that build emotional connection to textile provenance; and educational institutions that train designers to see themselves as custodians of material culture rather than trend innovators.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that slow fashion, properly indigenised, represents not an import but a retrieval — a recovery of values and practices that were marginalised by colonial modernity and its post-independence developmental successor. India's textile heritage, its philosophical traditions of simplicity and sufficiency, and its craft communities collectively constitute a foundation for slow fashion that is more substantive and more ecologically grounded than much of what passes for sustainable fashion in the global market.

The barriers to slow fashion adoption in India are real and structural: they include price differentials, aspiration dynamics, policy misalignment, and the inadequacy of design education. These cannot be addressed through consumer nudging alone. What is required is a systemic intervention that combines policy reform, design education transformation, craft community empowerment, and the construction of new narratives of desirability around slow fashion consumption.

For Indian academia and policy, the implications are clear. Research must move beyond descriptive analyses of consumer attitudes toward systemic examinations of supply chain economics, design pedagogy, and cultural policy. Practice must move beyond premium market experiments toward scalable models of slow fashion that are financially accessible to middle and lower-income consumers. And discourse must move beyond the language of Western sustainability toward a vocabulary rooted in India's own intellectual and material heritage.

Slow fashion, in this reading, is not merely a design choice — it is a form of civilisational reclamation. Its full realisation in India will require not only better cotton and fairer wages, but a fundamental reimagination of what fashion is for, and whose values it serves.

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