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Agronomic foundations of traditional textiles in the era of slow and handcrafted fashion

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Abstract

As the desire for apparel that is produced sustainably and ethically has increased, there has been a renewed interest in traditional textile processes that integrate agronomy, ecology, and handicraft. The focus of this article, titled "Sowing Sustainability: Agronomic Foundations of Traditional Textiles in the Era of Slow and Handcrafted Fashion," is an examination of the agricultural origins of natural fibres, including cotton, jute, flax, and silk, and how they contribute to the development of a sustainable textile industry. The research underscores the ways in which conventional agricultural systems, organic farming, and the conservation of biodiversity contribute to the development of environmentally friendly raw materials by positioning slow fashion within the context of agroecological practices. It also delves into the cultural importance of textiles that have been spun and woven by hand as vehicles for the transmission of indigenous knowledge, rural livelihoods, and ideas of the circular economy. In contrast to the industrial fast fashion production model, these agronomic underpinnings make it possible to manufacture textiles with a reduced carbon footprint, low chemical inputs, and increased stewardship of land and water. In addition, the examination highlights the social aspects of sustainability by discussing the empowerment of artisan groups, equitable labour practices, and the protection of intangible cultural assets. The study asserts that linking textile manufacturing with its agronomic beginnings not only promotes environmental resilience but also anchors fashion in a philosophy of care, durability, and authenticity. In this way, traditional textiles become important to the worldwide slow fashion movement.

Keywords: Sustainability, foundations, traditional, handcrafted

Introduction

An eco-friendly substitute for the quick-turnaround, mass-produced clothing made by the fast fashion industry is slow fashion. All links in the fashion supply chain are held to a higher standard of quality, longevity, and ethical manufacturing. The core principle of slow fashion is the reduction of environmental effect through the production of garments with a longer lifespan, which in turn reduces the frequency of purchases and disposal. Slow fashion advocates for a balance between consumer requirements and sustainability imperatives, contrasting with fast fashion's promotion of quick consumption cycles without regard for ecological or social implications. The promotion of regional manufacturing and handicrafts is central to the slow fashion movement. By fostering small-scale, often artisanal, manufacturing processes, slow fashion inherently encourages economic models that are less extractive and more socially equitable. These initiatives emphasize the connection between makers and consumers, challenging the impersonal, disjointed structures dominant in fast fashion. This approach aligns with the ideologies underpinning slow fashion such as sustainability, mindful consumption, and appreciation of design longevity which collectively contribute to reducing fashion's environmental footprint and social exploitation^[1].

Furthermore, slow fashion embraces the concept of classics and timeless design, counteracting fast fashion's tendency for rapid obsolescence. This orientation fosters consumer habits grounded in maintenance, repair, and the emotional value of garments, which strengthens individual engagement with clothing and drives higher perceived product value^[2]. On a broader scale, the movement critiques prevailing fashion system values, pushing for a cultural shift towards ethicality and sustainability in production and consumption practices^[3]. Together,

these facets establish slow fashion as a comprehensive framework that promotes environmental stewardship, social justice, and economic resilience in the textile and apparel industries.

Role of Traditional Textile Crafts in Sustainability

Traditional textile crafts provide a foundational blueprint for many principles inherent to slow fashion. These crafts often utilize natural fibers and dyes, support local resource cycles through recycling and reuse, and employ slow, labor-intensive production methods that contrast starkly with industrialized mass manufacturing. Such practices reduce the carbon footprint associated with modern textile production by leveraging locally sourced raw materials, which inherently lowers transportation emissions and supports regional ecosystems.

In India, traditional crafts like Kantha quilting and Madurkathi mat weaving are exemplary cases demonstrating the socio-environmental benefits embedded in craft traditions. Kantha quilting, for instance, has been used over decades not only as a slow, sustainable production technique but also as a tool for empowering marginalized groups such as women refugees, fostering community resilience and economic self-sufficiency [2]. These natural fiber-based crafts illustrate a lasting symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment utilizing water reeds, coir, jute, and other biodegradable materials thereby adhering to and advancing multiple Gender equality, decent employment, and ethical consumerism are all part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [6].



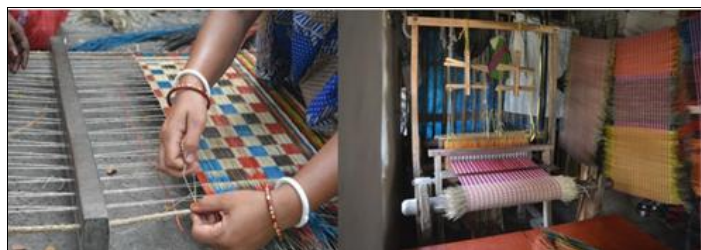
In India, the revival of traditional textile crafts like Dabu prints of Rajasthan (using mordant and resist techniques) ties sustainability to cultural identity and environmental awareness. Historically these crafts shaped global trade but declined during industrialization. Recent efforts to revive and adapt them help conserve natural dye techniques, preserve hand-crafted workmanship, and create economically viable artisanal livelihoods. Such traditional craft revivals function as embodied slow fashion practices where quality, heritage, and ecological respect converge [3]. The slow fashion ethos also extends to circular economy principles, including textile recycling, upcycling, and restoration, which heavily rely on skilled manual craftsmanship to prolong garment life and reduce waste. For example, restoration studios in India creatively repurpose damaged fabrics into unique pieces, blending tradition with innovation to challenge throwaway culture and encourage responsible consumption. These practices embody a holistic sustainability that integrates artisan knowledge, environmental stewardship, and market responsiveness [4]. Consumer awareness of sustainable fashion is crucial, as factors like quality, longevity, and eco-conscious production drive purchasing decisions aligned with slow fashion values. Engaging consumers in understanding handcrafted fashion's role in sustainability

reinforces demand for ethically made traditional textiles and supports systemic change from linear fast fashion models to circular, culturally embedded systems [6]. Thus, in this age of slow fashion, handmade garments are reclaiming sustainability by Culture, identity, and artisanal skill are fostered via the preservation and advancement of traditional textile arts. Models of social enterprises that put an emphasis on community resilience and ethical labour Methods from the circular economy that increase the useful life of clothing by reusing and recycling it Moving consumers away from disposability and towards a value of quality and history All of these things work together to make handmade clothing a sustainable development practice that is based on care, creativity, and tradition, not just a style or economic option. Sustainable fashion is a multi-faceted strategy that integrates cultural preservation, economic growth, and environmental stewardship via the empowerment of communities through craft. Concepts of slow fashion, regional manufacturing, recycling, and reusing are inherent in traditional crafts. One example is the Kantha quilting tradition in India, which has been passed down through generations of women as a way to help rehabilitate refugees. This has had positive effects, such as empowering women and promoting sustainable fashion. This exemplifies how craft traditions benefit communities by sustaining livelihoods, building resilience, and promoting social participation. In a similar vein, natural fibre crafts such as mat weaving using indigenous water reed (Madurkathi) demonstrate strong connections between people and their environs. These crafts also contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals by employing materials and processes that are eco-friendly and available locally [1].



Reviving indigenous crafts aligns closely with the global slow fashion movement, thereby preserving cultural heritage while promoting ecological responsibility. The case of Indian traditional doll crafts demonstrates how these crafts can become sustainable economic activities that empower artisans economically and culturally. Beyond economic benefits, these activities support cultural preservation and provide valuable insights for policymakers aiming to promote community-led development through sustainable fashion [2].

Community empowerment through craft also benefits from integrating skill development and market engagement. The example of Keramat Market in Indonesia showcases how initiatives combining cultural preservation with training in traditional crafts such as bamboo weaving enable especially women to attain economic independence and foster cultural resilience. Such markets act as cultural hubs that balance tradition with modern commerce, proving powerful in sustaining community-led development rooted in local identity and sustainable practices [3]. Community-led sustainable fashion development serves as a vehicle for inclusive growth by leveraging local resources and traditional knowledge. It reinforces skills-based empowerment, especially for marginalized groups, and promotes sustainable consumption patterns aligned with ecological preservation.



Engaging communities in the co-creation of craft-based economies aligns with broader goals of participatory development and socio-economic empowerment, creating resilient local economies that honor heritage while addressing contemporary sustainability challenges. In summary, sustainable fashion built on traditional crafts empowers communities by Revitalizing cultural heritage and identity through craft preservation. Enabling skills development and economic self-reliance, particularly among women and vulnerable groups. Promoting environmentally sustainable practices through local materials and slow fashion principles. Creating culturally rooted market opportunities that integrate modern and traditional economic models. These elements collectively contribute to community-led development that is socially inclusive, environmentally sound, and economically viable, highlighting the transformative power of craft in sustainable fashion ^[10, 11].

Case 1: Eco-Print Revival in Rajasthan for Dabu prints

Natural dyeing and eco-printing techniques are making a significant comeback in Rajasthan, a region known for its deep-rooted dye traditions. Dabu prints motifs figure ^[43].

S. No.	Type of Motif	Particulars
1.	Boota	Corn stalk
2.	Surajmukhi	Sunflower
3.	Chakri	Ring
4.	Jali	Sieve or Grid
5.	Bels	Veins
6.	Unth, Ghoda	Camel and Horse
7.	Mor	Peacock
8.	Aam	Mangoes
9.	Patti	Leaves
10.	Kari	Raw Mango

These practices involve the use of plant-based ingredients like marigold, madder, turmeric, and pomegranate rind, creating unique, biodegradable, and non-toxic textiles. Designers such as Rim Zim Dadu and initiatives like Rajasthan Studio have adopted these eco-conscious techniques, bridging heritage with

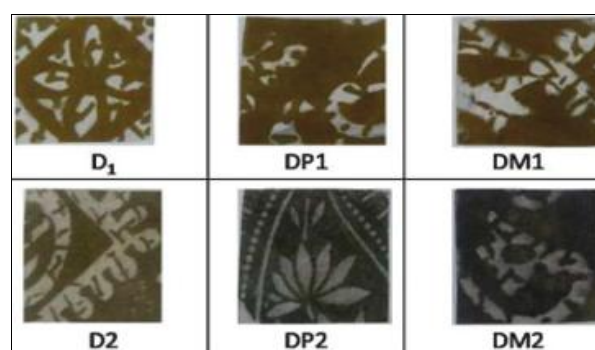
innovation ^[42, 43].

Table 1: Nomenclature of the samples

O	Original cotton fabric
D	Marigold dye source
P	Pomegranate rinds
M	Myrobalan
1	Pre mordanting with alum
2	Post mordanting with alum

Colouring materials

Nature and ancient practices provide the colour inspiration for these products, making them stand out in today's competitive marketplaces. Textiles made of silk or cotton are coloured in dabu printing with pigments or natural dyes. A darker shade, achieved by dyeing the cloth more than twice, gives dabu patterns their life and individuality. This technique is called a double or triple dabu imprint. The craftsmen of Pipad village mostly used the following raw materials: Iron Gud (jaggery), Harada (Myrobalan), alum, kesulaflowers, natural indigo, guar gum, and babool gum. The natural hue and tone of the dye can be altered with the use of mordents and metal salts.



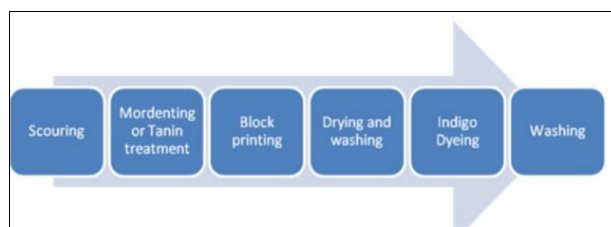
DP fabric printed with dye source paste and pomegranate rinds; DM fabric printed with dye source paste and Myrobalan; D1 printed with marigold flower dye source. The media type (aqueous, organic, acids, or alkalis), pH of the media, temperature, duration, material to liquid ratio, substrate particle size, and other extraction variables determine the extraction effectiveness of colourant components found in natural plant, animal, or mineral sources. One of the most significant classes of natural dyes, indigoid dyes are derived from the leaves of the Indigofera Tinctoria plant and provide a blue hue. The vendors from Andhra Pradesh and Pondicherry supplied the dyes to the artisans. natural paste indigo was utilised for energy.

Table 2: Types of Colorants Used in Dabu Printing

S. No	Natural Dyes	Colours Produced	Process	Mordants Used
1.	Black dyes	Yellow colours. Obtained from Harda or <i>Terminalia chebula</i> (plant fruits).	The seeds of harda are first wetted in cold water for 24 hours and the next day converted into smooth paste with mortar.	Ferrous sulphate
2.	Orange colours	Plant <i>Bougainvillea glabra</i> and <i>Dahlia</i> species.	-	Stannous chloride with acid, alum or chrome
3.	Yellow colours	Flower of marigold and <i>Bougainvillea glabra</i> .	-	Alum and tin mordant

Fabrics treated with a mordant will retain their colour longer, even after repeated washings and exposure to light. The three sorts of materials that pests utilise include oil, tannic acid (myrobalan), and metallic salts of aluminium, chromium, iron, tin, or copper. on page 34 notates that these renaissances play an

essential role in sustainability by preserving indigenous knowledge systems and lowering environmental impact. The eco-printed textiles made in Rajasthan employ natural dyes, which promote craft ethics and environmental responsibility, instead of synthetic dyes, which hurt workers and pollute rivers.

**Table 3:** Tools Used in Dabu Printing Fabrics

S. No	Tool Name	Particulars
1.	Block or Bhaant	As per design and colours, different types of blocks made by wood, etc.
2.	Paatia	Table for printing
3.	Kambalkigaddi	A gunny cloth and woolen felt used as base layer
4.	Chipri	A spliced mesh made by bamboo

Method for production

To print decorative designs on fabric, it employs time-honoured techniques such traditional dye mixture preparation and pre- and post-treatment. Only crimson, maroon, and black are allowed for the colour shade. Desert states typically employ black and red hues. To prepare the base fabric for printing, it is treated to make it more absorbent or responsive. What followed were the respective procedures.

Scouring: The grey cloth is submerged in a solution containing a blend of cow and sheep manure for a whole day. Natural and artificial contaminants including starch, oil, and dust are eliminated in this procedure. Afterwards, wash with water. After that, the cloth is let to dry in the sun, ideally stretched out on grass or bamboos in direct sunshine. For subsequent processing, this method increases the fabric's permeability. As a result, the grey cloth becomes more absorbent and the size paste is removed.

Mordating or Tanin treatment: A subsequent step involves treating the cleaned cloth with either harda or myrobolan. This method utilised fifteen to twenty percent Myroblan. Once the treated fabric dries, it will turn yellow. Fabrics of this shade of yellow are collected for use in subsequent operations. Because of the tannic acid it contains, harda turns iron into a dark shade.

Black Shade: Rusty iron, old juggery, and horse shoe nails are the ingredients for this mixture. The mixture is left in earthen pots in a shady spot for fifteen to twenty-five days, depending on the weather. This gum-and-black-color combination is used for printing.

Red Shade: Alum is used as a treatment for the cloth. In the case of printing that is approximately 5 to 10 percent alum powder from a paste with gum that is utilised in the development of the red colour, The paste is applied to the cloth and printed directly on it.

Yellow colour: In order to obtain a variety of yellow hues, some flowers like as kesulais are mixed with alum, which acts as a mordant.

Block Printing: The cloth was stamped with the pattern that was made using wooden blocks. The hardwood blocks that are carved at the bottom into the needed shapes and designs are primarily sourced from the Jaipur area. Keri, buti's leaf, and animal motifs such as peacock, lion, horse, camel, and swan are

some of the motifs used, with variations in size and colour. Depending on the design and patterns used, the dimensions of these blocks might vary.

Drying and washing: Shukhai is the term for the process of drying or ageing cloth with natural colours. After the fabric has been printed, it is left for two to three days so that the print may seep into the structure of the fibres. In order to get rid of any mordant that is in excess, the printed cloth is rinsed in running water.

Fixing of colour: It is a method in which a single dye interacts with two mordants at two separate places, resulting in two different colour combinations. Alizarin dyes are able to generate red and black colours when they react with alum and ferrous, respectively. The dyeing is performed in large pots that are heated by burning wood. The pitcher is filled with the dye alizarin, and the fabric is soaked in it. The "Dhawadiphoool," which is a flower that is native to the area, is utilised in order to prevent the formation of spots and stains.

Resist Printing: The "Dabu" unique resist paste is a natural substance consisting of clay, lime, and gum that is used as mud. A speciality of traditional printing of state, the specific resist paste (clay-lime-gum-insect chewed wheat combination) method is popularly referred to as "Dabu." During dyeing, Dabu serves as a mechanical resist, which means that it keeps dye from penetrating the parts that are covered.

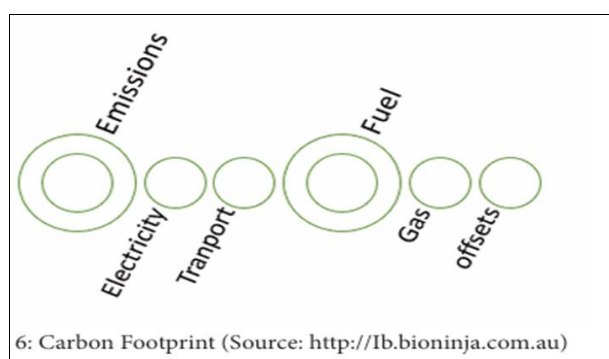
Indigo dyeing: The process of producing the indigo bath is a painstaking one; but, once the vat is ready for use, it is maintained "alive" via the regular addition of indigo, lime, and jiggery. He includes the precise amount of each item necessary because he has gained knowledge from his previous experiences. Hydro (sodium hydrosulfite) was employed for the purpose of reducing vat dye in this case. Indigo is a component in recipes that is not written down, and each indigo family has its unique method of handling the ingredient. After being folded with pleats, the printed cloth is carefully dropped into the indigo vat. After completely submerging the cloth in the vat, the dyer continues to keep it submerged in the liquid dye, opening up each pleat in order to ensure that the fabric is saturated with the indigo dye in an equitable manner. Because indigo does not react when exposed to air, any air that becomes trapped in the folds or pleats will result in dyeing that appears "patchy." The cloth is removed from the tank, compressed, then spread out thereafter in order to react with the oxygen that is present in the atmosphere in order to oxidise the colours. Indigo may be transformed from its reduced form to its oxidised form by a process called oxidation. The cloth is once again submerged in the tank, removed, and oxidised in order to get deeper tones. This procedure is continued until the required deep colour has been attained. After a long time, the fabric has finally dried and is now laying level on the ground. It is ensured that the "Dabu" is not fractured or cracked during the process of dyeing or drying.

Washing: The cloth is washed in order to remove the resist paste, known as Dabu, and the surface dye that have both been physically affixed to the fabric. The cloth that has been coloured is kept in large tanks for a minimum of three to four hours, or until the resist paste has a smooth consistency. Beating the fabric against a big, flat stone slab was the technique used to remove the surplus paste and colour. The beating of the fabric is usually

carried out in an area where there is a flow of water.

Challenges Facing Handcrafted Fashion

Although handcrafted fashion is praised for its ecological sustainability, cultural richness, and potential to benefit marginalised groups, the growth of the industry is still constrained owing to structural and market-based limitations. This section examines the most important challenges that the handcrafted fashion ecosystem in India is now facing: financial viability, a lack of creative innovation, and the generational reduction in craftsman engagement. Scholarly ideas and field-based research provide the foundation for each one of these difficulties. The absence of inventive design solutions in the area of handcrafted goods is another issue that persists. A large number of traditional crafts are in danger of becoming pigeonholed as "ethnic" or "antiquated" unless they are modified to conform to contemporary ways of living. Handcrafted items frequently fall short in appealing to younger or foreign customers that are looking for modern aesthetics if such interventions do not take place ^[43].



Results

The findings of the study highlight the strong interconnections between agronomic practices, traditional textile crafts, and the contemporary movement of slow fashion. Results reveal that traditional crafts, rooted in sustainable farming and natural resource utilization, contribute significantly to ecological balance, community empowerment, and cultural preservation. One of the key results is the demonstration that natural fibers and dyes, derived from agronomic inputs such as cotton, jute, indigo, marigold, turmeric, and pomegranate rind, offer a sustainable alternative to synthetic materials. These practices not only reduce dependency on chemicals and fossil-fuel-based fibers but also promote biodegradable and low-carbon textile systems. For instance, the revival of Dabu prints in Rajasthan, using natural mordants and dyes, illustrates the successful adaptation of agronomic resources into eco-conscious fashion practices. Similarly, traditions like Kantha quilting and Madurkathi mat weaving demonstrate how local plant-based materials can serve as renewable raw resources while ensuring the sustainability of rural livelihoods.

The results further indicate that traditional crafts align with the principles of the circular economy by promoting reuse, recycling, and restoration. Community-driven initiatives involving restoration studios and eco-printing techniques extend the life cycle of garments, reducing fashion waste and encouraging responsible consumer behavior. This creates not only environmental benefits but also social and cultural value, as it strengthens the connection between artisans and consumers. Social empowerment outcomes were also evident. The study highlights how craft-based economies, particularly those involving marginalized groups such as rural women, generate

inclusive growth. For example, Kantha quilting has historically been a livelihood strategy for refugee women, demonstrating the role of craft in fostering resilience, self-reliance, and empowerment. Similarly, skill development initiatives in traditional weaving and eco-print revival projects provide artisans with cultural pride, economic independence, and market participation. From a cultural perspective, the results show that the revival of indigenous crafts preserves intangible heritage while simultaneously appealing to modern sustainability-conscious markets. Traditional motifs, natural colors, and hand-spun processes are increasingly valued by consumers seeking authenticity and ethical production, thereby contributing to the global positioning of Indian crafts in the slow fashion movement. The findings also point out that such revivals integrate heritage with innovation, ensuring the survival of ancestral knowledge systems in a rapidly industrializing world.

Conclusion

Handcrafted fashion holds the potential to transform not just wardrobes but value systems. It emphasizes care over speed, quality over quantity, and relationships over transactions. Yet, for this transformation to be durable, structural support is essential. Collaboration among designers, policymakers, and artisans must be institutionalized. Market mechanisms must be recalibrated to value time, skill, and ethics. Most importantly, consumers must be educated and inspired to participate in this cultural and environmental shift. Only then can handcrafted fashion evolve from a niche alternative to a resilient model of sustainable living. The revival of traditional textile practices through slow and handcrafted fashion is not simply a design-led trend; it is an imperative rooted in ecological urgency, cultural preservation, and ethical production. In confronting the overwhelming environmental and social costs of fast fashion, the handcrafted alternative presents itself as a regenerative model—one that honors the labor of artisans, the integrity of materials, and the wisdom of cultural heritage. As Fletcher (2007) argues, slow fashion redefines success not through speed and scalability, but through depth, durability, and ethical responsibility, thereby encouraging a holistic reevaluation of fashion systems. Textile production has reached alarming proportions in terms of its negative effects on the environment. The industrial fashion industry contributes substantially to water pollution, overproduction, and the emission of greenhouse gases because of its dependence on synthetic processes, chemical dyes, and machinery that requires a lot of energy, according to Niinimäki *et al.* (2020). In contrast, traditional handcrafted techniques such as natural dyeing, hand-spinning, and weaving are inherently low-impact and ecologically sound. These methods, practiced for generations across diverse regions in India and beyond, significantly reduce energy consumption, chemical waste, and synthetic dependency, offering environmentally responsible solutions embedded within cultural traditions. Such innovation ensures the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems and strengthens cultural identity in an increasingly homogenized global landscape. Handcrafted fashion is also fundamentally linked to social equity and development. Roy and Sengupta (2020) argue that empowering artisans particularly rural women through sustainable fashion can serve as a powerful social enterprise model. Initiatives like cooperatives and fair-trade collaborations not only preserve craft skills but also create meaningful livelihoods that are locally embedded and ethically structured. This model counters the exploitative labor practices of fast fashion by offering artisans dignity, agency, and financial inclusion. Furthermore, by encouraging artisans to take creative

control, these frameworks reframe traditional craft not as passive labor but as a form of cultural and economic capital. Nevertheless, the mainstreaming of handcrafted fashion faces significant obstacles. The time-intensive nature of artisanal production and its associated higher costs limit scalability in a market dominated by mass production.

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